



Title

A one-woman confessional

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A one-woman confessional

by Sarah Messerschmidt • 26.03.2021

It is a gift when the work of an unknown artist becomes available to new audiences. Such is the case with the film-maker Cecilia Mangini, whose work, at least in predominantly English-speaking countries, has remained relatively hidden until recent years.¹ Accounts from several practitioners in the fields of art and film tell similar stories: Mangini's work is an overlooked gem in the history of Italian cinema, and it is only with the recent digital restoration of her films that they have been able to emerge in a contemporary context.² *A One-Woman Confessional* – the inaugural film programme of *Another Screen*, a subsidiary of the feminist film journal *Another Gaze* – brings together eight of Mangini's short films from the years 1960–74, recently restored and subtitled for non-Italian audiences.

Mangini, who died in January 2021, was a pioneering documentary film-maker and a strong female voice in cinema. Although her interests were varied, the breadth of *A One-Woman Confessional* demonstrates that she consistently advocated for the underclasses in post-War Italy – for which many of her films suffered at the hands of the Italian state. The censorship it enforced had a significant impact on Mangini's legacy and is at least partly responsible for the limited circulation of her films outside the country. Her anti-capitalist principles and commitment to exposing unequal social and political realities in Italy lent her a sharp, humanitarian voice; she was a threat to the political class, which mostly fostered an uneasy relationship between state and culture. As Italy rapidly developed from a largely agrarian country into one dominated by industrial manufacturing, Mangini turned her lens toward the effects of industrialisation on provincial communities. She set out to capture how ritual and tradition were overtaken by the 'sacrosanct name of big industry and the law of profit', in particular addressing systemic gender disparity in rural areas during a period of rapid economic change.³

For the first three minutes of Mangini's 1965 film *Essere Donne* (*Being Women*), the camera pans over photographs of women in fashion and lifestyle magazines, decrying mass consumerism and 'the myth of well-being' that equates beauty with happiness through relentless advertising. These images are occasionally interspersed with video footage of nuclear explosions – a visual tactic not uncommon in 1960s experimental film-making, a period in which artists drew clear connections between mass

consumerism and modern warfare (consider Harun Farocki's 1969 film *Inextinguishable Fire*). The film quickly turns, however, to the lived realities of Italian women at the time: they are shown constantly at work, both in domestic settings and as line workers in newly built factories **FIG. 1**. Mangini exposes the connection between these divergent experiences of womanhood as flimsy at best. Although several of her films focus on dying regional traditions – particularly rituals performed by woman, such as the funeral rites as seen in *Stendali: Suonano Ancora* **FIG. 2** – Mangini does not suggest that a woman's place in traditional Italian culture was particularly fair or happy. Instead, she emphasises how the rapid industrialisation of the Italian countryside not only exploited the underclass but also how it doubly subordinated women, who were economically disadvantaged as labourers yet also beholden to the domestic labour traditionally assigned to women **FIG. 3**. On the subject of bearing children, one woman interviewed in *Essere Donne* confesses she was advised by her priest never to 'deny a soul to the Lord'.

In *Brindisi '65*, Mangini once again concerns herself with the modernisation of Italy, here focusing on the newly constructed Monteshell petrochemical plant **FIG. 4**. The film's beginning intercuts images of Brindisi **FIG. 5**, a region once dominated by agriculture, with footage of a snake carved from stone, which comes to act as a portent of the seductive force of modernisation. Wide shots of geometric infrastructure depict the scale and alienation of the factory's industrial facilities. In later scenes, Monteshell workers are gathered in a small room **FIG. 6**. Chronically underpaid yet cowed by necessity, they are reluctant to speak honestly about the conditions of work in the factory, aware that challenging the power structures would jeopardise their already precarious employment. Evidencing the scale of social stratification, Mangini contrasts this with scenes of Monteshell's elites, as they gorge themselves on food and drink. The men pass sexist remarks between one another – 'Have you ever eaten fruit that isn't mature?' – while bemoaning rising labour costs. Mangini's close up footage renders these characters cruel and buffoonish. Here, the present reviewer is reminded of Renée Falconetti as Jeanne de Arc – the antithesis to these creatures – in Carl Theodore Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928). Such intimate shots can both distort and exaggerate facial features, wordlessly conveying details about inner character. The juxtaposition of socio-political groups in *Brindisi '65* recalls the opposition between Jeanne de Arc and her merciless jury.

La Briglia sul Collo (The Bridle on the Neck) follows the schoolboy Fabio Spada, who has been labelled a misfit and a deviant by his small community **FIG. 7**. The film begins with an inventory of Fabio's life: his father's profession; the Roman suburb where he lives with his family; the lack of public parks in his area; the size and uniformity of the family flat; and the single transport connection between the suburb and the city. This is all vocalised over an

extended shot of Fabio as he idly picks at the outside wall of his building. His body is pressed into a corner in the way that children often do when they have been dismissed or forgotten. Later in the film, Mangini interviews Fabio, as well as his parents, headmaster and neighbour, to formulate a nuanced portrait of a badly behaved and misunderstood child. Though never explicitly stated, the narrative suggests that Fabio's lively temperament is a consequence of his highly constrained circumstances, indirectly criticising the society that raised him, rather than the boy himself. Although he pulls faces and sticks out his tongue at anyone who will dare lock eyes with him, the film proposes that within young, rebellious nonconformists lie potential social revolutionaries **FIG. 8**. Indeed, this aligns with the qualities we often ascribe to artists: speaking truth to power, rebelling against oppressive systems, truth-telling and revealing social ills that necessitate action. Mangini herself fits this archetype, as a film-maker who was regularly and systematically censored for her confrontational analysis of social issues.

The resurrection of Mangini's material is well-timed. What is clear throughout the programme is that the subjects she addressed in the 1960s and 1970s are strikingly recognisable in our contemporary era: growing social inequality, mass consumerism, limited or non-existent social services, a prejudiced undervaluation of women's work and a deep disenchantment with prevailing political systems. In 2011, Mangini met the Belgian documentarian Agnès Varda, and their filmed conversation appropriately drew this programme to a close. The two film-makers talked while clasping each other's hands, conceding that to make documentary is to reflect on and mediate reality, using the form in service of the subject. They spoke of an expanded notion of the discipline – one that can be subjective, story-like and artistic, insisting that these qualities do not necessarily corrupt what is considered 'true' or 'real'.

Although the renewed availability of Mangini's films is certainly cause for a resurgent interest in her work, it might also provide an opportunity to reflect on socially engaged art practice in the current era, particularly when documentary and art enjoy such close convergence. Hito Steyerl's essay documentaries, for instance, are almost exclusively exhibited in museum or gallery settings. 'Why do I like cinema?' Varda asks, 'Because I think it's the only profession that injects image, sound, voice, commentary, the taste for arts and music, with the same energy. That's to say that I think it's the art form of our era'.⁴ Mangini's films adopt a similarly ambiguous position between the categories of art and documentary, which is one of many reasons they remain so relevant today. Their elegance and poetry, and her politically inquisitive film-making are early examples of qualities that have since come to define so much of contemporary art. In the case of Mangini, this is not art for the sake of art, but art for the sake of

understanding – perhaps even art for the sake of change.



Fig. 6 Still from *Brindisi '65*, by Cecilia Mangini. 1966. Duration 15 minutes. (Courtesy Another Gaze; © Cineteca Bologna).



Fig. 7 Still from *La Briglia sul Collo*, by Cecilia Mangini. 1974. Duration 14 minutes. (Courtesy Another Gaze; © Cineteca Bologna).



Fig. 8 Still from *La Briglia sul Collo*, by Cecilia Mangini. 1974. Duration 14 minutes. (Courtesy Another Gaze; © Cineteca Bologna).

Exhibitions details A One-Woman Confessional: Eight Films
by Cecilia Mangini
www.another-screen.com
www.anothergaze.com
12th–22nd March 2021

Stendali: Suonano Ancora (1960)

Essere Donne (1965)

Tommaso (1965)

La Briglia Sul Collo (1974)

Maria E I Giorni (1960)

Divino Amore (1963)

Brindisi '65 (1966)

La Canta Delle Marane (1962)

Footnotes

- 1** R. McCann: 'A chance to catch eight shorts by documentary pioneer and poet Cecilia Mangini', *BFI: Sight and Sound*, 19th March 2021, available at <https://www.bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound/features/cecilia-mangini-radical-italian-documentaries>, accessed 24th March 2021.

- 2** N. Cunningham: 'Remembering Cecilia Mangini', *Business Doc Europe*, 28th January 2021, available at <https://businessdoceurope.com/remembering-cecilia-mangini/>, accessed 24th March 2021.
- 3** Quotation from *Essere Donne (Being Women)*, by Cecilia Mangini, 1965, spoken in the film's voiceover.
- 4** Agnès Varda quoted in conversation with Cecilia Mangini in 2011, available at <https://vimeo.com/336552029>, accessed 24th March 2021.

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