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# The Darkened Cinema of Elvira Notari: In and Out of the Archives

*Bianca Callegaro*

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In recent years, a process of historical revision (by way of re-evaluating archival materials) has uncovered the stories of silent cinema's women pioneers, whose legacies and contributions had previously gone uncredited. Amongst these figures is Elvira Notari, Italy's first woman director and production company founder. Her taking on of different roles led to a rich production catalogue of which only a few traces remain. In examining the features and contexts of Notari's cinema, and the causes for its subsequent neglect, this paper argues for her central importance in Italian cinema as a director and considers how her omission from the archives can be addressed.

Director, actress, screenwriter, producer, and distributor, Elvira Notari (born in 1875 near Salerno), is celebrated as the first, and most prolific, Italian female director, with an extremely rich production catalogue that amounts to approximately sixty feature films and over a hundred short films and documentaries, realised between 1906 and 1930.<sup>1</sup> In addition to directing films, she founded the Dora Film production company, which quickly became one of the most important film companies in Italy, even opening a branch in New York City to cater to the Italian community living there. However, little of her production has survived to this day, with just the extant films *È piccerella* (1922), *A santanotte* (1922), *Fantasia 'e surdate* (1927) stored in the Cineteca Nazionale, the Italian national film archive. According to Bruno, the extensive production of Elvira Notari 'has not only been forgotten but lost to the historical archive.'<sup>2</sup>

This essay will argue for the central importance of Notari's incredibly prolific production and legacy in Italian cinema, particularly in consideration of the director's omission from the archives. Notari's exclusion from the histories of Italian cinema,

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1 Giuliana Bruno, *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map: Cultural Theory and the City Films of Elvira Notari* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), 3.

2 *Ibidem*.

starting with the 1940 text on silent cinema written by Eugenio Palmieri, (in which regional film production is marginalised)<sup>3</sup> culminates with the position taken by scholar Roberto Paoletta, who, despite the extensive discussion of Dora Film in his book *Storia del Cinema Muto* (1956), credits Nicola Notari, Elvira's husband, and work partner, as the director of the production company. An analysis and evaluation of this seminal figure will allow for a more complete, unbiased understanding of film history, uncovering the deep-rooted mechanisms of oppression that predate women's filmmaking, the neglect of female creators' agency, and the denial of an equal visibility to their male counterparts. By exploring the case of Notari, and the recent wave of attention directed to her work, it is hoped, looking towards the future, to possibly encourage women's entry into production in the contemporary film scene. The paper will open with a theoretical introduction on the marginalisation of women directors in film archives, with particular attention to the silent period. Then, a case study will follow, presenting Elvira Notari through biographical information and considering the themes and style of her production through the analysis of her film *A santanotte* (1922). Finally, the (lack of) promotion of Notari in the film archives scene in recent years will be examined, along with wider consideration of the archival treatment of female directors, in arguing for the archive's potential to give greater space to marginalised voices.

Feminism, as defined by Amelia Jones, is a 'political or ethical engagement with questions of culture.'<sup>4</sup> Indeed, both the cinema and feminism historically represent new ways of seeing the world and, as such, the cinematic metaphor is key to the feminist agenda, proving that feminist theory and film history are closely linked with one another.<sup>5</sup> This idea was at the core of Laura Mulvey's seminal work, *Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema* (1975), in which the author exposed cinema's codification of the gaze as being constructed for the male viewpoint. Through scopophilia, the objectification of passive female characters, women are conceived of as images, or icons, of visual pleasure. Mulvey considers the aesthetic political, underlining the need to break up the patriarchal order, by adopting new methods of representation, informed by feminism and avant-garde cinema, to discuss questions of representation and sexuality, 'freeing the camera look into its time and space

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3 Palmieri, *Vecchio Cinema* (1940).

4 Vicki Callahan, 'Introduction: Reclaiming the Archive', in *Reclaiming the Archive: Feminism and Film History*, ed. by Vicki Callahan (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010), 14

5 *Ibid.*, 16.

materiality and the audience look into dialectics, passionate detachments.<sup>6</sup>

Central to feminist reflection on the historical oppression of women in film is the silent period, as the early phase of the medium appears to be a 'rich terrain for assessing women's participation in the aesthetic, industrial, and cultural shape of the cinema.'<sup>7</sup> Thanks to the increased digitisation of historical materials, collaboration among members of the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAP) and public interest in silent cinema, there has been renewed attention to the role of women in the early development of the film industry, allowing for the work of women producers, directors and screenwriters to finally become visible, as evidenced by the research of Jennifer M. Bean, Diane Negra, Amelie Hastie, and Jane M. Gaines on early cinema female filmmakers.<sup>8</sup> Going beyond textual analysis to use a wider range of historiographic materials, these 'marginalized filmmakers are being excavated from the footnotes of film history,'<sup>9</sup> as their contribution to cinema's development is recognised. Indeed, the pre-studio era allowed for greater female participation in the industry, characterised by greater experimentation and innovation. Although it makes it difficult for contemporary film historians to officially recognise their roles, given the relative scarcity of surviving films and the often-missing crew designations, the lack of a fixed system of credits in the silent era seems, on the other hand, to have fostered women's practices of filmmaking, as they were able to take on more demanding positions given the less hierarchically dominated systems of production.<sup>10</sup>

However, early women filmmakers were barely mentioned in filmographies and historical documents.<sup>11</sup> As stated beforehand, it is therefore essential to move away from this partial, gendered vision of history, which posits women's contributions to filmmaking as qualitatively inferior. Recent shifts in critical historiography have increasingly challenged dominant power relations, seeking to recentre the directors

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6 Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen* (1975), 16.3: 18.

7 Jennifer M. Bean, 'Introduction: Toward a Feminist Historiography of Early Cinema' in *Feminist Reader in Early Cinema*, ed. by Jennifer M. Bean and Diane Negra (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2002), 2.

8 These scholars collaborated in the editing of the volume *Feminist Reader in Early Cinema* (2002).

9 Radha Vatsal, 'Reevaluating Footnotes. Women Directors of the Silent Era', in *Feminist Reader in Early Cinema*, ed. by Jennifer M. Bean and Diane Negra (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2002), 19.

10 *Ibid.*, 123.

11 *Ibid.*, 128.

that have been marginalised, laying on the margins of film history, studying, in the words of Jane Gaines, ‘an unfortunate object, misused and left alone, the subject of earlier neglect’.<sup>12</sup> As filmmakers, women actively become subjects of the gaze, and the cinema therefore grants them the possibility of representing themselves in a such a way that ‘their own bodies, their own individual beings, defined and sexed, can be looked at and recognised without being subsumed into a need or idealised dream’,<sup>13</sup> therefore adopting a female gaze that seeks to subvert established gender roles, echoing Mulvey’s influential 1975 text.

In 1970s Italy, feminism experimented with a political practice closely connected with the female experience of knowledge, both individual and collective, questioning subjectivity, identity, sexual difference, and pleasure, and thus necessarily involving a discussion of the cinematic apparatus, by considering how women filmmakers had been eclipsed by sole virtue of their gender. In the case of Italian cinema history, ‘zones of repression and suppressed knowledge’<sup>14</sup> are to be found in relation to documenting women’s filmmaking, with a particularly glaring lacuna regarding the figure of Elvira Notari: not only have most of her films and writings been lost, partly due to the historical context and insufficient film preservation strategies, but there is also a quasi-total lack of analytic studies and information on this pioneering director. In this context, a rewriting of film history highlighting women’s perspective proves necessary, in order to underscore ‘the existence of a film pioneer lost in a male-dominated culture’ and shed light on her contribution to the cinematic art, amidst a fragmentary textual body and the silence surrounding her work.<sup>15</sup>

In the attempt to present a tentative picture of film pioneer Elvira Notari using the fragmentary evidence that is available nowadays, a biographical introduction can foster an understanding of her position within the Neapolitan filmmaking scene, as well as in the national film industry and history as a whole. Elvira Coda, unlike many women of the time particularly outside upper-class circles, was sent to school to receive an education, and her entrance into filmmaking did not depend on class

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12 Sarah Hill and Keith M. Johnston, ‘Making Women Amateur Filmmakers Visible: Reclaiming Women’s Work Through the Film Archive’, *Women’s History Review* (2020), 29.5: 876.

13 Giuliana Bruno and Maria Nadotti, *Off Screen: Women and Film in Italy* (London: Routledge, 1988), 26.

14 *Ibid.*, 152.

15 Bruno, *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map*, 4.

privilege or previous involvement in acting.<sup>16</sup> After moving to Naples for work, she met Nicola Notari, whom she married in 1902, subsequently starting to work with him in the photographic colouring business.<sup>17</sup> Soon, they turned to colouring moving pictures, thereby entering the burgeoning Neapolitan film industry and, from 1906, they started to make their own films: these were initially opening or closing shorts for cinematographic shows, and they later expanded the production to short and feature films. By 1912 they had become a fully-fledged production company, with their own studio (which included a laboratory and an acting school), thereby competing with Naples' biggest production houses, Lombardo Film and Partenope Film. The division of work at Dora Film was very clearly demarcated: nicknamed 'The General', Elvira wrote the scripts and directed the films, as well as leading the acting school, while Nicola took on the technical side of production as cameraman, sharing responsibility with Elvira for production and editing. Notari's extremely prolific oeuvre was so successful that it crossed national borders, reaching the Italian community in the USA with great commercial success. However, Dora Film would see its end in 1930, due to the advent of sound film, as well as the (imposed) popularity of a new filmmaking style brought about by the Fascist regime.<sup>18</sup>

In terms of production, style and content, Elvira Notari's practice embodies a different vision, one which stands in stark opposition to the extremely successful historical and epic narratives of the super-spectacles produced in the North. Vis-à-vis the dominant studio and star system, Notari favoured an artisanal filmmaking, creating independent street films shot on location which employed local types and nonprofessional actors, including members of her family, like her son Edoardo, who features as one of the lead actors in *È piccerella* (1922). A popular production house, the moving pictures of Dora Film presented women's stories *dal vero*, using landscape as a 'predominant element of formal structure and as a component of dramatic action'.<sup>19</sup> This aspect, together with filmic improvisation and a natural acting style opposed to the mannerism and grandiosity of the divas in studio productions, granted Notari the label of 'unheralded inventor of neorealist cinema'.<sup>20</sup> Realistic modes of representation were indeed rooted

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16 Ibid., 80.

17 Ibid., 83.

18 Maria Procino, 'Elvira Notari,' in *Enciclopedia delle Donne* <https://www.enciclopediadelledonne.it/biografie/elvira-notari/> [Accessed 28 February 2022]

19 Mira Liehm, 'First Encounters (Before 1942)', in *Passion and Defiance: Film in Italy from 1942 to the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 12.

20 Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, *Women Film Directors: An International Bio-Critical Dictionary*

in Neapolitan cinema, whose popular aesthetic was 'grounded in the economics of production: the poverty of means led to an imaginative use of the city's natural resources'.<sup>21</sup> Extremely sensitive towards the woman's condition, Notari 'articulated a female address to the narrative [...], operating within the shadow of the Italian film industry',<sup>22</sup> amidst a history in which women remained out of sight. She exposed the values of local, regional and popular culture, using dialect and the vulgar language of the common people in melodramas that centred on the condition of women and the underprivileged, exposing the poverty, neglect and abuse they experienced. The women of Notari's films refuse to conform to societal standards of behaviour and are often depicted as mad, violent, and erotic, involved in crimes of passion, betrayal, and torment - characteristics embodied in Margaretella, the protagonist of *È piccerella*. In Notari's narratives, a dualism of women's image is prominent: 'woman as occasion of sin and woman as creator of organised society coexist in her imaginary world as a polarisation of forces which seem to tear the feminine essence to pieces'.<sup>23</sup> It appears that she played out this conflict and dualism herself, oscillating between a longing for creative freedom and her matriarchal role in the family.

These features can be best examined in one of Notari's extant films, *À santanotte*, dating to 1922. Inspired by a popular Neapolitan song with the same title, the film is a particularly representative example of Notari's production, as it encapsulates the director's *leitmotifs* and recurring formal approaches. As the film's subtitle states, this 'popular passionate drama' centres around the character of Nanninella, a working-class girl that is exploited by her father and faces the tragedy of his murder. Her lover, Tore, is imprisoned after being accused of the killing by Carluccio, Tore's love rival who seeks to marry her. To find out the truth, Nanninella is forced to become Carluccio's wife, a choice that will come at a high cost for her, following the tradition of the Neapolitan *sceneggiata*. In *À santanotte*, the acting style mirrors the narrative's melodramatic tone, with highly stylised facial expressions, accentuated by make-up, which are nonetheless combined with an authentic performance, as the lead actors are accompanied by non-professional actors that form a realistic background to the story, a choice forerunning the Italian Neorealist movement of the 1940s. Moreover, the recurring presence of actors such as Elvira's son Edoardo helps to reinforce

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(London: Greenwood Press, 1995), 282.

21 Bruno, *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map*, 20.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

23 Bruno and Nadotti, *Off Screen*, 153.

the characters' familiarity and humanity, consequently bringing them closer to the audience.

Almost a character in and of itself, the Neapolitan landscape serving as the drama's backdrop is also realistically depicted. The scenes shot on location have a verisimilar, documentary feel, and they help situate the story in the city's context of the period. The most significant aspect of the film, however, is the unique perspective it adopts in portraying the daily reality of women from the poorer strata of the population, revealing and denouncing the exploitative conditions and the entrenched patriarchal violence to which they are exposed. Refusing to conform to society's gendered codes of behaviour, Nanninella is depicted as a woman with agency, as she consciously exploits her position of 'power,' manipulating Carluccio to discover the truth. Despite this, the film's ending reveals what appears to be the ineluctable destiny of women, especially those who are destitute, namely their murder enacted by men. Often justified on the grounds of jealousy and love issues, the phenomenon of *femminicidio* still represents a significant issue in modern-day Italy, mirroring the deep-rooted and institutionalised sexism. Therefore, despite the different historical context characterising the period of Elvira's filmmaking activity, her portrayal of female characters and social issues can powerfully speak to contemporary audiences, exposing the patriarchal system of oppression that is still pervading.

Given the issues addressed by her innovative filmic work, Notari's films encountered great resistance. Whilst not being explicitly politically committed, the realist texture of her work, which clearly displayed the poverty of Italy's underclass, clashed with the Fascist commitment of disseminating an image of national order and wellbeing.<sup>24</sup> Opposing autonomous regional traditions in favour of a standardised linguistic and cultural unity, the Fascist regime realised the potential of the film medium, exploiting it to promote a national identity cleansed of the regionalism and the issues of sexuality, violence, and poverty so prominent in Notari's cinema. Indeed, the Fascist regime sought to address the cinema industry's crisis with subsidies to national production and the restricted distribution of foreign films, a policy that culminated with the establishment of the LUCE Institute (1924), aimed at the production of propaganda documentaries, and of the Venice Film Festival (1932), intended to showcase the highlights of national film production. Examples of this propagandistic control of

<sup>24</sup> Liehm, 'First Encounters', 16.



the medium are the films *Vecchia Guardia* (Blasetti, 1933), *Lo squadrone bianco* (Genina, 1936), *Scipione l'Africano* (Gallone, 1937) and *1860* (Blasetti, 1934).

The subsequent development of a centralised film industry, whose monopoly was held by Rome and the North, facilitated the marginalisation of Southern cinema, causing the decline of the Neapolitan school and the disappearance of early regional production companies. Because of their popular ideology, iconography and linguistics, her films were increasingly scrutinised by the censors, and Notari's economic survival in the 1920s was ultimately guaranteed by the emigration of her cinema to America, where it sustained 'displaced southern cultures in their transition to a new territorial identity'.<sup>25</sup> The films produced for the Italian-American community in New York mostly belonged to the *sceneggiata* genre, popular Neapolitan tragedy, and presented the stories of characters attempting to negotiate social survival, a relatable subject matter that echoed the immigrant condition experienced by the films' intended audience. This way, Notari's films bypassed the Fascist regime's censorship to reach an international audience, representing a full-fledged transnational phenomenon that helped cement an emerging hybrid identity for Italian émigrés, particularly prominent in the American context, through cinematic products that aimed to entertain the public but also expose through realism the struggles that immigrants themselves experienced. Together with the sexist nature of film criticism that encouraged a 'monolithic view of male-dominated Italian cinema'<sup>26</sup> these factors all contributed to the effective erasure of Notari's oeuvre. Foster equates Notari's omission from film history to the suppression of the work by Alice Guy-Blaché in France, stating that her films 'document an alternative cinematic history of personal filmmaking, community filmmaking, and an important cultural moment of Neapolitan filmic counter history'.<sup>27</sup>

A process of re-evaluation to enhance the visibility of pioneer women filmmakers can be initiated from current archival practices; as Sobchack stated, 'we cannot engage in either the past or the future of feminism in relation to media unless we begin in the present'.<sup>28</sup> In relation to this, the archive plays a fundamental role, representing not

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25 Bruno, *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map*, 18.

26 Foster, 283.

27 *Ibid.*, 284.

28 Quoted in Callahan, 12.

a passive receiver of history but rather, with a view to the future, 'a dynamic agent of change and space of becoming'.<sup>29</sup> As the constitution of archives is largely determined by conflicting discourses and institutions of power, there appears to exist a symbiotic, interdependent relationship between the archive and the construction of history.<sup>30</sup> Archiving should therefore be seen as a feminist issue, as its practices 'affect and produce the kinds of histories that can be written' to uncover the invisible voices of women filmmakers that have contributed to cinema's development.<sup>31</sup> Alongside this, the ongoing shift towards archives' digitisation has prompted greater audience engagement online, thereby overturning traditional demarcations between archivists as gatekeepers and a (passive) receiving public, which is now called on to actively investigate the materials and footage present in archives. This in turn has altered established boundaries in the consumption of knowledge, giving agency to the public and permitting audiences to freely access archives' materials and discover overlooked histories and figures.

However, despite greater accessibility to archives, improvements should still be made on the part of archivists, whose urgent responsibility is to uncover more work by women filmmakers and make it visible, revising preservation, cataloguing, and presentation policies to be more inclusive and challenge reductive canonisations. For example, Hill and Johnston (2020) suggest including metadata and search fields that allow for the identification of thematic categories (such as women filmmakers), a practice already adopted by the Moving Image Archive, which dedicates several sections of its digital portal to Scottish female filmmakers. Another way to address the lack of minorities' representation in archives is to organise retrospectives that, rather than isolating the filmmakers' works by virtue of their 'diversity' (for example, for having been directed by a woman), instead stress the connections with the wider historical context and highlight the parallels and differences with the work of their contemporaries. In addition to that, a point should be made in regard to archives' access: despite being theoretically open and available to anyone with an Internet connection, social barriers still significantly limit the archives' fruition to a reduced portion of the population. Therefore, archives should prioritise their communication strategies to target as wide an audience as possible, through initiatives that, for

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29 Callahan, 18.

30 Jan Christopher Horak, 'Constructing History: Archives, Film Programming and Preservation', in *Journal of Film Preservation*, 102 (2020), 27.

31 Hill and Johnston, 877.

example, engage the youth with the national film heritage, alongside a large-scale promotion of their programmes, by collaborating with other cultural and political institutions.

In the specific context of this paper's case study, as Bruno states, 'the configuration of discourses in this ruined map reveals various levels of suppression':<sup>32</sup> firstly, the scholarly neglect of Italian silent cinema until the 1980s, which then involved a disregard towards regional film production and the suppression of Elvira Notari's work. As a result, the 'eclipse of Notari takes shape as an act of subjugation vis-à-vis the hegemonic culture and [...] vis-à-vis the dominant historical and literary epics and the national film industry - forces that became instrumental in the formation of fascist cinema.'<sup>33</sup> Repressing social memory, a whole production of national silent cinema has been transmitted through a limited number of historiographic sources, which only included canonised works and excluded popular filmmaking, thus reflecting the institutionalisation and legitimisation of cinema as part of the state's cultural politics.<sup>34</sup> Film criticism and the patriarchal culture equally share responsibility for the obscuration of Notari's work, the former through disdainful reviews from the Northern press, and the latter through the attribution, in official records, of the directing credits to her husband.

However, after over thirty years of critical silence, a remapping of the period is currently being pursued by contemporary Italian historians, thereby attracting greater interest towards the pioneering figure of Notari, a trend demonstrated in several academic publications by Giuliana Bruno (1993), Monica Dell'Asta (2008) and Kimberly V. Tomadjoglou (2013). In practice, this has taken the shape of retrospectives and dedicated film programmes not only in Italy, but also in other European film archives. In 2018, for the Festival del Cinema Ritrovato in Bologna, the film programme *Napoli che canta: Omaggio a Elvira Notari e Vittorio Martinelli* presented live musical accompaniments with the screenings of two Notari films, one of which had been digitally restored in 2008.<sup>35</sup> This programme continued the work surrounding Notari that began the year before in Frankfurt by the Kinothek Asta

<sup>32</sup> Bruno, *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map*, 12.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>35</sup> Il Cinema Ritrovato (Film Festival in Bologna), Retrospective in the 2018 edition titled 'Naples Singing: Homage to Elvira Notari and Vittorio Martinelli', <https://festival.ilcinemaritrovato.it/sezione/napoli-che-canta-omaggio-a-elvira-notari-e-vittorio-martinelli/>.

Nielsen: with the festival programme *Transito: Elvira Notari, Cinema of Passage*, the archive screened her three surviving feature-length films, accompanying them with specifically composed scores, followed by a dedicated academic conference.<sup>36</sup> The film *È piccerella* was screened once again this year at Sound for Silents festival in Rome, which centred on women in early cinema, either in the role of filmmakers or actresses<sup>37</sup>; this is clear evidence of increasing attention being directed to the extant work of Elvira Notari. However, what is yet to be realised is the production, with the mediation of film scholars, of a more comprehensive account of women's contribution to cinema in the role of directors, particularly with regard to the silent period. This would help the public to gain greater insight into the history of Italian cinema, to visualise and overcome the gendered biases that have accompanied it until its recent revision.

In summary, this essay has explored how, despite the shared mission for access and preservation of collective memory, archive practices are 'as complex and contradictory as the discursive relations that govern' them.<sup>38</sup> As a woman, Elvira Notari 'managed, between the forces of customary external denial and internal self-censorship within the rules of a production house, to appropriate discourse and even its means of production and circulation',<sup>39</sup> thus representing one of numerous cases of women filmmakers active in the silent era that have been effectively removed from filmographies and history, despite their outstanding contribution to the development of the medium. Ultimately, it appears that Notari's work is increasingly coming to the forefront of cinematic discourses, as arises from her growing presence in the public programming of several film archives. However, this seeming visibility is still relegated to niche initiatives that do not attract a wider range of audiences, but instead target a more specialised, scholarly public. As such, further projects could be implemented to share the work and history of Notari (and other women pioneers), to increase her visibility on a national scale, recognising her role amongst the other milestones of Italian cinema.

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<sup>36</sup> The Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, Italy's national film school, published an article about this retrospective in 2017: <https://www.fondazioneesc.it/la-cineteca-nazionale-a-franco-forte-con-una-rassegna-su-elvira-notari-3/>.

<sup>37</sup> Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia (2021), <https://www.fondazioneesc.it/evento/sound-for-silent/>

<sup>38</sup> Horak, 28.

<sup>39</sup> Bruno, *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map*, 138.

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## Filmography

*A santanotte*. Dir. Elvira Notari. Dora Film, 1922

*È piccerella*. Dir. Elvira Notari. Dora Film, 1922