

111

10.2024

# Journal of Film Preservation



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111 • 10.2024

FIAF – International Federation of Film Archives  
Dedicated to the preservation of, and access to, the world's film heritage since 1938

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## JOURNAL OF FILM PRESERVATION

Half-yearly  
ISSN 1609-2694  
© FIAF 2024

Issue price: 25€

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Base Design (Brussels)

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## PRINTER

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This journal is abstracted and indexed by the *International Index to Film Periodicals*.

The views expressed herein are those of the individual authors and do not necessarily represent the views or policies of the editorial staff or the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF).

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Couverture: Une partie des collections de projecteurs 35mm au rez-de-chaussée des nouvelles réserves d'appareils de la Cinémathèque française à Orly.  
Photo: Stéphane Dabrowski © La Cinémathèque française.

Back cover: Wolfgang Klaue, then FIAF President, at the 1984 FIAF Congress in Vienna.  
Photo: Karl Reiberger. Collection Austrian Film Museum.

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Maria Adriana Prolo at the 1957 FIAF Congress in Antibes.



Maria Adriana Prolo in her office at Palazzo Chiabrese during the filming of *Occhi che video* in 1988.

# Eyes That Saw: The Pioneering Gaze of Maria Adriana Prolo

Elena Dagrada

**Elena Dagrada** is currently Professor of Cinema Studies at the Alma Mater Studiorum – Università di Bologna. A member of the Executive Committee of Domitor from 1993 to 1997, she compiled the second edition of their *International Bibliography on Early Cinema* (1995). From 2015 to 2021, she was President of the AIRSC (Italian Association for Research in Cinema History). Her publications include *Le varianti trasparenti. I film con Ingrid Bergman di Roberto Rossellini* (2005; 2nd ed. 2008), and *Between the Eye and the World. The Emergence of the Point-of-View Shot* (2014).

In *Occhi che videro*,<sup>1</sup> a sensitive and touching documentary about Maria Adriana Prolo and her Museo, the woman who had conceived of a cinema museum in Turin as far back as 1941 answers questions from film director Daniele Segre. At some point, Segre exclaims, “Anyway, your dream came true.” Prolo immediately replies, “I wouldn’t call it a dream. Rather a project. A commitment.”

Just two words: project, commitment. If it were possible to condense the life of a human being into a couple of words – if they made sense and served to enable one to grasp a person’s very essence – these would perhaps most suitably describe Prolo.

Born on 20 May 1908 in Romagnano Sesia, in the Piedmontese province of Novara, Maria Adriana was the youngest of three sisters

from a cultured and wealthy bourgeois family. Guided by her mother, during her early years she studied languages and violin, played sports, and cultivated a passion for poetry which she never completely abandoned. In 1929, she graduated, with top marks in the literary curriculum, with a specialty in history, from Turin’s Istituto Superiore di Magistero. Her thesis on the 18th-century Piedmontese economist Count Ignazio Donaudi delle Mallere was part-published in a Milanese economics journal in 1931.<sup>2</sup> She subsequently started working at the Biblioteca Reale di Torino (Royal Library of Turin), collaborating with its director general Nicola Brancaccio on a book about the history of the Savoy dynasty; this, published in 1930, includes more than 400 photographs, all carefully selected by Prolo.<sup>3</sup>

1. *Occhi che videro* (*Eyes that Saw*, 1989), made by Daniel Segre on the occasion of Prolo’s 80th birthday, was shown at the inauguration of the Massimo Multiplex, the cinema of the Museo Nazionale del Cinema. *Gli occhi che videro!* (Ubaldo Pittei, 1914) is the title of one of the first films Prolo remembered seeing.

2. Maria Adriana Prolo, “Il conte Ignazio Donaudi delle Mallere economista torinese del sec. XVIII”, *Giornale degli Economisti. Rivista di statistica*, Vol. 71, Year 46, No. 7, July 1931. Her original thesis was called *Il Conte Ignazio Donaudi delle Mallere economista piemontese del sec. XVIII*.

3. Nicola Brancaccio and Maria Adriana Prolo, *Dal nido savoiano al trono d’Italia. Vita, ritratti e politica dei Savoia dall’anno 1000 al 1870*. Milan: Edizioni Libri Fecondi, 1930.

During these formative years, she also attended courses in library science, archival science, and palaeography, and conducted source analysis at some of Turin's most prestigious cultural institutions (the Biblioteca Nazionale and the Archivio di Stato). Awarded the Premio di Perfezionamento Principe di Piemonte by the Rotary Club of Turin, during the summer of 1935 she was able to study documents on the history of the Italian Risorgimento preserved at London's Public Record Office. These activities helped nurture her ideas<sup>4</sup> and familiarise her with the workings of libraries and archives. Apparently set on the path to be a scholar of the Risorgimento, she was encouraged in this by numerous teachers. At the same time, she became quietly feminist.<sup>5</sup>

It was, in fact, looking at women's cultural roles that led Prolo towards cinema studies, with a cutting-edge perspective – especially for the Italy of the time – of which we would now call cultural history. She also cultivated her parallel passion for literature, writing poems and planning to publish them. In 1937, she edited a collection of published and unpublished poems by Frenchwoman Agathe-Sophie Sasserno (1810-1860) to which she added an extensive introduction on subalpine female culture from its origins to 1860.<sup>6</sup> During the summer of 1938, she co-edited, with Francesco Pastonchi, a collection of materials on the history of Piedmontese literature from the end of the 19th century to 1914.<sup>7</sup>

As a result of these endeavours, Prolo discovered that, at the turn of the 20th century, cinema had become a field of great interest for many Piedmontese intellectuals and writers. Poet Carlo Chiaves and man of letters Guido Volante both wrote screenplays. Ernesto Maria Pasquali quit journalism and theatre in favour of producing and directing films. Arrigo Frusta did the same, leaving behind journalism and poetry to become a screenwriter. Evidently, cinema had played a significant role in the Turin of that period, and Prolo decided to investigate further.

At first, her research was complicated as she could find no relevant documentation, but she then began to leaf through the silent film magazines at the National Library with her trained historian's eye. The result developed into an article in which she created a kind of historical map of Turin's production companies and the film periodicals of the time. At a time when there were no retrospective screenings or histories of Italian cinema to make this type of research available to scholars, Luigi Chiarini, director of the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia (CSC), immediately grasped the importance of her text and published it in the October 1938 issue of *Bianco e nero*.<sup>8</sup> Around 1940, Prolo undertook to write a history of Italian cinema, working with the CSC and Chiarini, who helped her contact the protagonists of the early film industry in Turin – people like Giovanni Pastrone (with whom she developed a close friendship), Arrigo Frusta, Charles Lépine, and others. She met and interviewed the pioneers of Turin cinema: actors, actresses, screenwriters, and people from production companies, herself becoming a pioneer in the practice of oral history. This was the beginning of a long journey of in-depth research, destined to develop over the years, and to proceed in parallel with another most important project: the creation of a cinema museum, which became her *raison d'être*.

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4. Carlo Dionisotti, "Dedicato a Maria Adriana Prolo", *Museo Nazionale del Cinema, Notiziario*, No. 47, 1996.  
 5. Maria Luisa Bertotto, "La zia Adri agli occhi del nipote e delle pro-nipoti", in Claudia Gianetto and Silvio Alovio (with the collaboration of Gianna Chiappello), eds., *Una pioniera per la storia del cinema: Maria Adriana Prolo*. Turin: Museo Nazionale del Cinema / Savigliano (CN): L'Artistica di Savigliano, 2023.  
 6. Agata Sofia Sassernò, *Poesie*, edited and with an essay (*La cultura femminile piemontese dalle origini al 1860*) by Maria Adriana Prolo. Milan: Treves, 1937.  
 7. Donata Pesenti Campagnoni, *Maria Adriana Prolo*. Turin: Museo Nazionale del Cinema, Fondazione Maria Adriana Prolo, 2002; and "Dalla biblioteca al museo. Il viaggio di formazione di Maria Adriana Prolo", in Gianetto and Alovio, *op.cit.*

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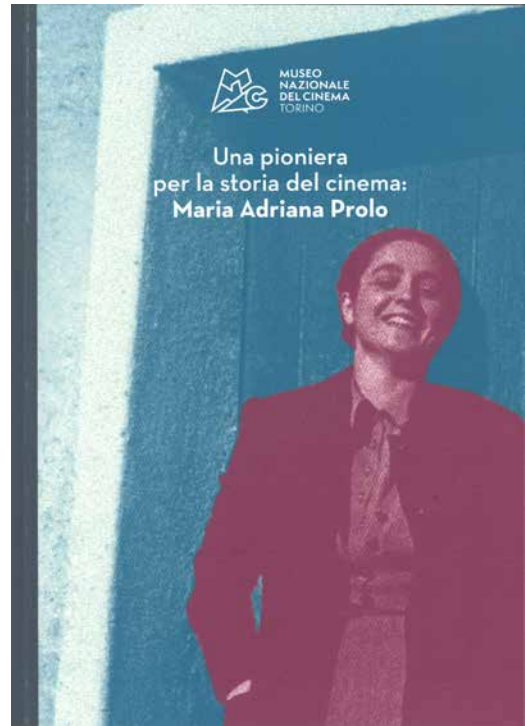
8. Maria Adriana Prolo, "Torino cinematografica prima e durante la guerra (Appunti)", *Bianco e Nero*, Year 2, No. 10, 31 October 1938.



The two volumes of the Maria Adriana Prolo box set (2023).

It was here that Prolo's research for a history of the early years of Italian cinema – the first volume of her *Storia del cinema muto italiano* (History of Italian Silent Cinema) covered 1896 to 1915 – began. Brought out in 1951 by Poligono, it was intended as the first of two volumes, though the second (1916 to 1930), written later, remained unpublished. At the same time, this was also when Prolo began to collect material for a cinema museum. Through her contacts with the Turin pioneers, she found cameras and projectors, films and photographs, posters and advertising materials, sets and costumes, heirlooms and memorabilia. On 8 June 1941, she noted in her diary, "Museum is conceived".

This is how her project was born. The rest was commitment, pursued on multiple fronts and beset by both economic difficulties and bureaucratic obstacles. It was courageous and visionary, far-sighted and, in the end, successful, but at the time it was too innovative and, crucially, too expensive. Sponsors and funding were hard to find, and premises were difficult to obtain. To help



raise money for her collection, in 1943, she worked as a schoolteacher and, years later, as an announcer at EIAR (Ente Italiano per le Audizioni Radiofoniche), the precursor to RAI (Italy's national broadcaster). The refined scholar turned into a cinema aficionada, known by Turin's antique dealers as the "cinema lady". With a collector's taste and the skills of a trader, she became a regular buyer at the city's Balon flea market, making what are now regarded as legendary purchases. Combining a relish for the vintage with the expertise of an historian, she conceived and created an original collection incorporating materials that testified not only to the birth of cinema, but also to the history of the optical machines that preceded it: optical views, optical games, magic lanterns, shadow theatres, photographic equipment, ancient engravings, prints, 18th-century Venetian *mondi nuovi* peepshows... She amassed an extraordinary collection, among the most important in the world, which she organised with an inventive spirit, giving it scientific,

historical, and educational interpretations, her original contribution to the history and the very idea of a cinema museum.<sup>9</sup>

Prolo's inventive spirit was shared by Henri Langlois, one of the founders of the Cinémathèque française, with whom she established a sincere friendship and mutual esteem, and a nearly three-decade correspondence. Published in 1992 by the Cineteca Nazionale,<sup>10</sup> this reveals much of interest, not least Prolo's friendship with other female archivists and programmers of the time, Lotte Eisner and Marie Epstein. It also captures her thoughts on the difficulties that she faced as a woman, dealing with men who were not always willing to recognise her role. Her strong character shines through: she comes across as a fighter, a non-conformist woman, determined to defend her project of a national cinema museum, and in Turin, not Milan or Rome as prominent personalities, intellectuals, and politicians from those cities would have liked.

This determination was ultimately crowned with success, and the result gave her the most satisfaction of her long life. In 1953, the Associazione Culturale Museo del Cinema was founded by people like Mario Gromo, Arrigo Frusta, Leonardo Mosso, Giovanni Pastrone, and Giordano Bruno Ventavoli, and it immediately joined FIAF. The following year, the Museo was given public prominence through an exhibition mounted in Paris in collaboration with Langlois. In 1955, the city offered the Palazzo Chiabrese as the Museum's first home, and it was inaugurated in 1958. Twenty years later, the Museo hosted the 1975 FIAF Congress, where the Symposium topic was the work of Giovanni Pastrone and D. W. Griffith.<sup>11</sup> One year earlier,

Prolo had received a gold medal from Rome's Centro Studi di Cultura Cinematografica, the first of many official endorsements, culminating in her elevation to the position of *Chevalier de l'ordre des Arts et des Lettres* – the first time this had been awarded to an Italian – and being given the Premio Jean Mitry by Pordenone's Giornate del Cinema Muto in 1989. Since Prolo's death in her home town in 1991, there have been many initiatives to celebrate her important role in preserving and giving status to cinema and pre-cinema, and the activities of her museum.

### MARIA ADRIANA PROLO – THE BOX SET (2023)

Prolo's academic career – as an historian of the Risorgimento and a scholar of literature and women's culture – is less well known than her role of archivist, and seemingly gave her much less satisfaction. A recent initiative, completed in 2023 to mark the 70th anniversary of the Museum becoming a FIAF affiliate, tries to fill this gap. In collaboration with the Centro Ricerche Cinema Muto Italiano Giovanni Pastrone, the University of Turin, and the Associazione Museo Nazionale del Cinema, the Museum has completed its long-standing project of republishing Prolo's history of Italian silent cinema, out of print for many years. This initiative is now offered as part of a box set consisting of two volumes: a facsimile edition (scanned at high resolution) of *Storia del cinema muto italiano* and a collection of essays on lesser-known aspects of her life and work.

Hard copy of the facsimile edition is not for sale, but the digital version is freely available online in the three official FIAF languages, English, French, and Spanish.<sup>12</sup> The accompanying volume, *Una pioniera per la storia del cinema: Maria Adriana Prolo*, edited by Claudia Gianetto and Silvio Alovio (in Italian and English versions), consists of unpublished essays and other studies on her life, her education, and her historical studies, reflecting on why these deserve more serious

9. Prolo's detailed catalogue of the collections, *Il Museo Nazionale del Cinema*, was compiled, with Luigi Carluccio, in 1978. Turin: Cassa di Risparmio di Torino.

10. Sergio Toffetti, ed., *Le dragon et l'alouette. Maria Adriana Prolo, Henri Langlois, Correspondance 1948-1979*. Turin: Museo Nazionale del Cinema, 1992 (2nd ed. 2002). Reviewed by Roland Cosandey in *Bulletin FIAF*, No. 45, October 1992, pp. 50-55.

11. Guido Cincotti, ed., *Pastrone e Griffith. L'ipotesi e la storia*, Collezione Studi Monografici di Bianco e Nero. Rome: Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, 1975.

12. See <<https://www.museocinema.it/it/maria-adriana-prolo>>.



Maria Adriana Prolo on a beach (unknown date, unknown location).

consideration. Altogether, this wonderful project brings back to life Prolo's own writing – and in welcome translations – as well as offering new perspectives on her work. The Museum is to be congratulated on this remarkable undertaking.

Re-read – or read – today, Prolo's *History* stands out as a courageous work, especially because it decidedly goes against the grain of its contemporary world. As Alovisio and Gianetto note in their own essay "Un libro da riscoprire", when it was originally published in 1951, there were few other works on this subject, and those that did exist were often impressionistic, incomplete, gleaned from people's unreliable memories or created through incorrect interpretations of data. (See, for example, Prolo's exhortation not to establish causal links between the progressive numbering system of Italian censorship records and the production date of the film.) Consequently, she included a filmography of almost 80 pages, entitled *Elenco delle pellicole mute realizzate in Italia dal 1904 al 1915* (List of Silent Films Made in Italy from 1904 to 1915), ordered by year and by production company. Though inevitably superseded by subsequent research, this list, which Prolo called the *Corpus Italicorum Filmorum*, remains exemplary in its rigour and scientific humility. No-one was more aware of its impermanence than she; nevertheless, she generously made it available as a contribution to the history of cinema, while conscious of her pioneering originality in the field, and urging readers and scholars to contribute to its correction, improvement, and expansion.

Prolo also demonstrated the rigorous historical methodology she applied when documenting and analysing her sources, something developed during her university historical studies. She claimed it was not possible to study Italian silent cinema without consulting, verifying, and citing one's sources. Though an obvious consideration for us today, that was not so for everyone at the time, and the results she achieved – as noted by Giulia Carluccio in her essay, were particularly

appreciated by Georges Sadoul, who regarded Prolo's volume as the most accurate, well-documented, and complete known to him.

Prolo also adopted an original methodology in relation to her sources. There were already published versions of some oral sources, but as noted above, she herself interviewed pioneers, especially those who had worked in Turin; together these comprised a unique oral history of Italian cinema, wherever possible supported by original documents. Here she did not limit herself to cinema magazines (which were often ignored by writers at the time), but reviewed the entire press: newspapers, cultural journals, scientific bulletins, photography magazines, military periodicals, and so on, the inclusive and non-film-specialist nature of which allowed cross-checking of their reliability. Once again, this approach derived from her multidisciplinary training, employing the skills of a methodical and scrupulous researcher, capable of cross-referencing sources and venturing into pioneering comparative analyses on documents drawn from different fields.

What is particularly striking, when looking at her upbringing and education, is her variety of interests and the breadth of her views, and how these help her – right from the first page of her introduction – to place cinema in the context of cultural history. Naturally, this approach produces an equally original idea of cinema, one outside the normal run of contemporary thought, but in tune with the extraordinary museum collection that she was putting together, not just films, but materials of many other kinds to be studied and subjected to both scientific and historical interpretation.

Again going against the norms of the time, Prolo conceived of cinema not only as an art, but also as an industry, a craft, and a social phenomenon. She sketched out a first attempt at a census of cinemas themselves, and dedicated several pages to scientific films, to the didactic use of films, to censorship, and to the role of writers and intellectuals in general (an article by

philosopher Giovanni Papini, published in *La Stampa* in 1907, is reproduced here for the first time), paying attention to the impact on society of each of these practices. She even wrote about the “cinematographies” of the families of the soldiers fighting in Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, sent as “cine post-cards” by Roman production company Cines: she was the first and, for a long time, the only person to do so. At the same time, she did not ignore the aesthetic value of films, reflecting on themes such as acting, not only from a national but also an international perspective, in comparison with foreign productions.

Throughout the volume, the importance given to *Cabiria* (1914) and Giovanni Pastrone stands out, representing, perhaps, an

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Maria Adriana Prolo a consacré l'essentiel du travail d'une vie à la création d'un musée du cinéma à Turin. Sa formation l'avait conduite vers des études d'histoire, dont certaines ont nourri un ouvrage qu'elle a consacré à la culture féminine dans sa région du Piémont subalpin, et vers la découverte du cinéma en tant que sujet d'intérêt intellectuel durant la première moitié du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Son étude plus approfondie du phénomène a abouti à la publication en 1938 d'une étude sur les sociétés de production et périodiques consacrés au cinéma à Turin, publiée par le Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia (CSC) de Rome. Quelques années plus tard, en collaboration avec le directeur du CSC, Prolo entreprend la rédaction d'une histoire du cinéma muet italien, dont le premier volume est publié en 1951. Pour en réunir la matière, elle interroge le plus grand nombre possible de pionniers du cinéma et consulte les périodiques et les journaux pour en extraire les informations pertinentes. Ce faisant, elle prend conscience de l'existence de caméras et de projecteurs, de photos, de programmes de salles, etc. et commence à en acquérir dans les limites de ses moyens dans le but d'ouvrir. Son rêve devient réalité en 1953.

À l'occasion de son 70<sup>e</sup> anniversaire, le Museo Nazionale del Cinema de Turin produit un coffret contenant une belle édition en fac-similé de son *Storia del cinema muto italiano* et un volume d'essais rédigés par des personnes l'ayant connue ou ayant travaillé avec elle. Le volume en fac-similé existe en version papier, mais n'est pas disponible à la vente. En revanche, il est disponible gratuitement en ligne dans sa version originale en italien ainsi qu'en anglais, français et espagnol (les trois langues officielles de la FIAF). Le volume d'essais est publié en italien et en anglais. Des documents supplémentaires sont disponibles en ligne, dont un résumé des deux publications et un récit de la genèse du volume en fac-similé.

instinctive desire to attribute primacy to Turin and the films produced by its film companies. It's worth noting that the first item in the *Corpus Italicorum Filmorum* is a non-fiction film from 1904, produced in Turin by Ambrosio. What really stands out, however, is Prolo's effort to combine her scholarly scientific rigour with personal passion. Far from confining her to a provincial dimension, this produced a fruitful combination between her ties with her own region and her international vision. She applied her excellent academic training to the benefit of all Italian silent cinema, bringing to fruition, with exceptional commitment, an innovative project in the field of cinema history.

Once again: project, commitment.

es

El principal objetivo de la vida de Maria Adriana Prolo fue la creación de un museo del cine en Turin. Su formación la llevó a realizar estudios históricos, algunos de los cuales dieron lugar a un libro sobre la cultura femenina en su región del Piemonte subalpino, y a descubrir el cine como tema de interés intelectual a principios del siglo XX. En 1938, el Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia (CSC) de Roma publicó un estudio sobre las empresas cinematográficas y las publicaciones periódicas de Turin. Un par de años más tarde, en colaboración con el director del CSC, Prolo emprendió la redacción de una historia del cine mudo italiano, cuyo primer volumen se publicó en 1951. Para ello, entrevistó a todos los pioneros de la industria que pudo y consultó revistas y periódicos en busca de información relevante. En el proceso, se dio cuenta de la existencia de cámaras y proyectores, fotografías, programas de cine, etc., y empezó a adquirir lo que pudo con el fin de crear un museo. Este sueño se hizo realidad en 1953.

Con motivo de su 70 aniversario, el Museo Nazionale del Cinema de Turin ha publicado un estuche que contiene una preciosa edición facsimil de su *Storia del cinema muto italiano* y un volumen de ensayos de personas que la conocieron a ella y/o a su obra. El facsimil existe en papel, pero no está a la venta. En su lugar, está disponible gratuitamente en línea en versión original italiana, así como en inglés, francés y español (las tres lenguas oficiales de la FIAF). El volumen de ensayos aparece en italiano y en inglés. El material adicional en línea incluye un resumen de las dos publicaciones y una descripción de cómo se produjo el volumen facsimil.

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