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# Esterina Zuccarone

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**Lived:**

July 7, 1904 - September 24, 1998

**Worked as:**

editor, forewoman, laboratory worker, metalworker, seamstress, technician

**Worked In:**

Italy

**by Alessandra Chiarini**

Esterina Zuccarone was born in Foggia, in southern Italy, into a family of seven daughters and one son. In 1912 her family moved to Turin, joining the flow of migrants from the South to the North of Italy that, in those years, involved many people. The transition from a rural to an industrial society allowed Esterina to grow up with more emancipated female role models, starting with her older sisters who, in the new urban environment, decided to leave home to find work (de Miro d’Ayeta 2007, 229). In particular, one of her sisters started working in one of the numerous local textile mills, allowing the young Esterina to familiarize herself with skills such as precision, sense of proportion, and attention to detail, which were necessary to produce good quality and stylish garments.

In Turin, the young girl was witness to the development of modern life and came into contact with the latest technological innovations of the time—cars and railways, gramophones and buses, cameras and sewing machines, to name just a few. There was also the emerging cinematographic industry, a sector that made use of the manual ability of seamstresses for film developing, printing, and editing, allowing many women to get involved with the fascinating world of cinema—its glamour, its stories, its magnificent settings—and, consequently, to imagine new aspirations and ways of life (de Miro d’Ayeta 230).

Despite her father’s resistance—as a typical conservative Southern Italian man—Esterina, too, became a seamstress at the age of twelve. A few years later, at the age of fourteen, she found a job at La Positiva, the development and printing section of Giovanni Pastrone’s Itala Film. As Esterina remarked about her work in those early years:

Il lavoro era duro, dodici, quattordici ore di lavoro e la paga era bassa. Che ero brava lo capirono subito, a diciassette anni ero la capo reparto di una bella squadra di dieci uomini e tutti mi davano retta! [Trans.: The work was hard, twelve, fourteen hours of

work and the pay was low. They understood immediately that I was good, so at seventeen I was the forewoman of a beautiful ten-men team and all of them gave heed to me!] (Cossu 2008, 21).

Esterina demonstrated from the beginning a remarkable practical intelligence: she received many production awards and was soon assigned to a Moviola to work at film editing. She did not care much for the more spectacular and glamorous side of cinema; her main interests were in the technical and physical aspects. In an interview with her before she died, as part of the documentary *La storia di Esterina* (Milli Toja, 1995), she tells us that as a specialized worker, she knew projectors and other equipment perfectly and followed their technological evolution over time.

During the 1920's, Esterina also developed a political consciousness, participating in the women editors' strike held in Turin's Vittorio Veneto Square (de Miro d'Ayeta 231). After the First World War Italian cinema was in crisis: the birth of UCI (Unione Cinematografica Italiana), an organization that comprised most Italian production companies, ended up absorbing Itala Film, with Rome gradually replacing Turin as the national "cinema city." As Esterina affirms in Toja's documentary, she struggled to accept this change because it meant that an important future for cinema in Turin was unthinkable.

Nonetheless, Esterina continued her professional activity in that city. She divided her employment between La Positiva and FERT (Fiori Enrico Roma Torino), a company set up in 1919, which, together with La Positiva, came under Stefano Pittaluga's control in 1925. At FERT, she further improved her technical skills, met and worked with one of the founders of Arri, designers and suppliers of motion picture film equipment, and, with the advent of sound film, specialized in sound synchronization (de Miro d'Ayeta 232). Despite the outbreak of World War II, Esterina did not stop working and, in that period, started giving lessons in editing to a young Franco Cristaldi, the future producer and editor of *Nuovo Cinema Paradiso* (1988).

After the end of the war, FERT's new owner, Catalucci, dismantled the Turin studios to move them to Rome. Esterina and other workers formed a cooperative to continue their careers, but because of economic difficulties the company was forced to close in 1951. Left unemployed, Esterina found a job in the FIAT automobile factory. Shortly afterwards, the firm decided to create a cinema department designed to produce documentaries and advertisements to promote itself. Esterina was called upon to plan and organize this new sector. Here she coordinated the works commissioned to directors such as Alessandro Blasetti, and personally met Walt Disney, who congratulated her on her skills and competence, as she recalled in the 1995 documentary.

Despite her many accolades and her huge responsibilities, her title was always that of metalworker. Nevertheless, she was satisfied: Esterina's concern was not so much her career, but the possibility of contributing to the art of cinema and learning about new machines and innovative technical solutions.

# Bibliography

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de Miro d'Ayeta, Ester. "Cucire nastri di celluloide. L'oscuro iter di montatrice di Esterina Zuccarone, 'operaia' a Torino." In *Non solo dive: Pioniere del cinema italiano*. Ed. Monica Dall'Asta. Bologna: Cineteca di Bologna, 2008. 229-233.

# Filmography

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## D. Streamed Media:

*La storie di Esterina*. (Dir. Milli Toja, 1995): <https://vimeo.com/107245140>

# Citation

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