



**Screening Collins in (and out of) Italy:  
from *The Woman in White* to *La donna in bianco***

**Saverio Tomaiuolo**

**Abstract**

*The Woman in White* is an intrinsically visual narrative, in which images are as excessive as its themes. In light of the impact and influence of theatricality and of melodrama on Collins's novel, visuality and sensation are thus constantly aligned in this narrative, which addresses its audience through a constant reference to the powerful appeal on the mind (and imagination) of the sensorial organ of sight. The first-rate value attributed by Collins to optical perception may be considered one of the reasons why many of his texts, and in particular *The Woman in White*, have had a fruitful visual afterlife on TV and cinema. After introducing a selection of movies and of TV renditions of Collins's most famous novel, my essay will focus on its Italian adaptation, broadcast with the title of *La donna in bianco* on the National Public Broadcasting Company (RAI) in 1980. A common denominator in almost all screen translations of Collins's story is their focusing on marital brutality, women's legal imbalance, and female assertiveness. In this sense, my analysis aims at showing that Collins's visual narrative succeeded in addressing its Italian audience in a specific historical, political and cultural phase of the nation's history, during which divorce as well as social and domestic violence (including the inhumane treatment of the insane) were still cogent issues.

**Key Words**

Wilkie Collins; *The Woman in White*; divorce; domestic violence; *La donna in bianco*; Italian television; adaptation; treatment of the insane; RAI; BBC.

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## Screening Collins in (and out of) Italy: from *The Woman in White* to *La donna in bianco*

**Saverio Tomaiuolo**

### Introduction

In his book *Inventing the Victorians*, Matthew Sweet imagines that sensation novelist Mary Elizabeth Braddon watches a two-reeler silent movie adaptation of *Aurora Floyd* (1863) produced in 1913 by Thanhouser American Company, directed by Theodore Marson and starring Florence La Badie. Braddon is comfortably sitting on a chair in a London cinema, and “gazes up at the flickering screen as the heroine raises her horsewhip and sinks it into the flesh of her enemy” (Sweet 2001: 25-6). This scene reproduces one of the novel’s most sensational and visually striking episodes, featuring Aurora in a stable yard whipping Steeve Hargraves, a servant known as “The Softy” who is later discovered to be a murderer. “The Softy” has just kicked Aurora’s dog Bow-wow in an act of displaced violence aimed at her:

Aurora sprang upon him like a beautiful tigress, and catching the collar of his fustian jacket in her slight hands, rooted him to the spot upon which he stood. The grasp of those slender hands, convulsed by passion, was not to be easily shaken off; and Steeve Hargraves, taken completely off his guard, stared aghast at his assailant. Taller than the stable-man by a foot and a half, she towered above him, her cheeks white with rage, her eyes flashing fury, her hat fallen off, and her black hair tumbling about her shoulders, sublime in her passion.

The man crouched beneath the grasp of the imperious creature.

(Braddon [1863] 1999: 138)

Braddon lived long enough to enjoy, as she probably did, other adaptations of her sensation novels (including a movie version of *Lady Audley’s Secret*, filmed in 1912), witnessing the transition first from the page to the stage – since many of her works were almost immediately turned into dramatic pieces – and finally to the screen. Although Wilkie Collins was not as lucky as Mary Braddon (he died in 1889, before cinema started to spread over Europe), he would have probably loved to watch movies based upon his own novels, not least because visuality is an important element in his fictions too.

Indeed, *The Woman in White* (1860) is a profoundly visual narrative, in which images are as excessive as its themes. Visuality and sensation are thus mutually dependent in this tale of shocking discoveries, which addresses its audience through a constant reference to the powerful appeal on the mind (and imagination) of the sensorial organ of sight. Whereas many Victorian critics such as Henry Longueville Mansel blamed sensation narratives for their attractiveness “to the nerves instead of the judgement” and for their morally dangerous inclination “to supply the cravings of a diseased appetite” (Mansel 1863: 482), Wilkie Collins replaced ‘terror’ (as a feeling of fear preceding the actual vision of something scary) with an updated version of Gothic ‘horror,’ which is based on an actual sensorial experience, in which

visual perception plays a major role. Alongside the well-known image of Laura Fairlie's tombstone (in which Anne Catherick is buried), the most shocking scenes are explicitly connected to forms of visual revelation: from Walter's meeting with the white-dressed woman on his way to London to his encounter with the female heroine of the story, Marian Halcombe. Anne's "apparition" dressed "from head to foot in white garments" and with her hand "pointing to the dark cloud over London" (Collins [1860] 1994: 14),<sup>1</sup> is equally as striking to Walter as his encounter with Laura Fairlie's half-sister:

The instant my eyes rested on her, I was struck by the rare beauty of her form, and by the unaffected grace of her attitude [...] She turned towards me immediately. The easy elegance of every movement of her limbs and body as soon as she began to advance from the far end of the room, set me in a flutter of expectation to see her face clearly. She left the window – and I said to myself, The lady is dark. She moved forward a few steps – and I said to myself, The lady is young. She approached nearer – and I said to myself (with a sense of surprise which words fail me to express), The lady is ugly! [...].

The lady's complexion was almost swarthy, and the dark down on her upper lip was almost a moustache. She had a large, firm, masculine mouth and jaw; prominent, piercing, resolute brown eyes; and thick, coal-black hair, growing unusually low down on her forehead.

(Collins [1860] 1994: 24-5)

Collins's interest in visuality is related to the impact of nineteenth-century optical technologies on the imagination and on the perception of reality. Following the success of magic lanterns, of Sir Charles Wheatstone's "stereoscope" (1833), and of William George Horner's "zoetrope" (1833), "seeing" was not associated by Victorians with "believing" anymore, because these visual devices created a more complex relationship between the perceiving subject and the material world.<sup>2</sup> An example in this sense is offered by Collins's *Basil* (1852), whose main character is afraid of being deceived by the ghostly image of the villain, Robert Mannion, under a flash of lighting, which "gave [him] such a hideously livid hue, such a spectral look of ghastliness and distortion to his features" that Basil has to convince himself that his eyes "must have been only dazzled by an *optical illusion* produced by the lightning" (Collins [1852] 2008: 105, my italics).<sup>3</sup> The first-rate value attributed by Collins to optical perception, both in *Basil* and his successive works, may be viewed as one of the reasons why many of his novels, and in particular *The Woman in White*, have had a fruitful visual afterlife on the screen. After introducing a selection of movies and of TV renditions of Collins's most famous novel, my essay will focus on its Italian adaptation, broadcast with the title *La donna in bianco* on the National Public Broadcasting Company RAI in 1980. A common denominator in almost all transpositions of Collins's story is their focus on marital brutality and female assertiveness. My analysis aims to show that the audiovisual translation of Collins's novel succeeded in addressing the Italian audience in a specific historical, political and cultural phase of the nation's history, during which divorce as well as social and domestic violence (including the inhumane treatment of the insane) were still cogent issues.

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<sup>1</sup> For Richard Collins, "Hartright's investigations are inspired by two originating 'shock' events in each of which he meets a woman, and each of which has a dreamlike quality" (2003: 134).

<sup>2</sup> For recent studies on Victorian visuality, see Willis 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Laurence Talairach-Vielmas argues that Collins "fleshes out the significance of modern culture by using visual technologies to fashion his hero's haunted self" in *Basil*. Therefore, "Collins's resort to the trope of optical illusion to shape his Gothic narrative is revealing of the ways in which, throughout the nineteenth century, optical devices figured as instruments of imagination even as they extended the faculty of sight" (Talairach-Vielmas 2009: 29).

## The Re-Invention of Victorians in TV Versions of *The Woman in White*

Generally speaking, the contemporary public seeks the same visual pleasures and entertainment that its forefathers sought, although we have new technologies and materials at our disposal. For instance, the typical nineteenth-century thrilling stage effects have been replaced by (tele)visual effects, and the debates over the sensationalism and immorality of certain novels find their counterparts in the contemporary tirades on the deleterious effects of sensational, criminally-oriented and sexually explicit TV series such as *Game of Thrones* or *Breaking Bad* on younger generations. In Matthew Sweet's words, the Victorians "enjoyed first [...] [most] of the pleasures we imagined to be our own," such as the theme park, the shopping mall, the roller coaster, and technologically-enhanced visuality. Therefore, if on the one hand the Victorians "invented us," on the other hand we "invented the Victorians" by re-figuring and adapting their works (Sweet 2001: 10, 12). In this sense, writers, dramatists and screenwriters have constantly "invented" and re-invented Collins's texts in multiple ways through their adaptations. Before being transposed on cinema and TV in the twentieth century, Collins's major novel was subjected to other forms of textual transcodification, since the novelist himself was busily engaged in adapting *The Woman in White* for the stage only a decade after it was published, partly as a countermeasure against the spurious and unauthorized staged versions that proliferated after, and even during, its serialization in *All the Year Round* (1859-60). Collins wrote in the programme for the Olympic Theatre production, which opened in October 1871 and was an enormous success, that the author "has not hesitated, while presenting the original story in substance, materially to alter it in form" (Pykett 2005: 193). To start with, he moved forward the original setting for the story from 1850-1851 to 1861, a few years after the passing of the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 (which represented the premise for many of the themes treated in his narrative). Moreover, in the awareness that his public was already familiar with the plot of *The Woman in White*, he deliberately anticipated the novel's principal mysteries (namely that Anne Catherick is Laura and Marian's half-sister, and that Sir Percival Glyde's baronetcy is illegitimate). However, the most striking change is represented by Collins's characterisation of the two main female characters, with Laura turned from a passive victim into a rebellious woman and with Marian making explicit use of the rhetoric of the women's rights movement (two elements that many of the successive TV and movie adaptations would retain). Like twentieth- and twenty-first-century screen versions of *The Woman in White*, Collins's stage translation was thus "framed in a context – a time and a place, a society and a culture," as Linda Hutcheon puts it, because context inevitably "conditions meaning" (2006: 142, 145).

There are manifold adaptations of Collins's novel, including at least four American silent movies shot between 1912 and 1917 (the latter filmed by Thanhauser and starring movie celebrity Florence La Badie, who also played the leading role in the movie version of Mary Braddon's *Aurora Floyd*), and an Austrian silent film dated 1921; it was only in 1929 that the novel was turned into a silent movie in Britain. It is necessary here to underline the impact that nineteenth-century dramatic adaptations of *The Woman in White* had on the first (silent) movie versions of Collins's story, characterized as they were by an evident theatricality. Indeed, Victorian playwrights "established a language, theory and practice of adaptation that was fundamental to the development of narrative cinema," in Karen E. Laird's words (2015: 2). Some of these adaptations tend to revise Collins's original plot and characterisation: Tod Slaughter plays the role of the main villain (who kills and replaces the 'real' Sir Percival in Australia) in the British horror movie *Crimes at the Dark House*, directed in 1940 by George King, whereas the Hollywood production of *The Woman in White* dated 1948, on which we will focus later, introduces various changes to the source text. The choice of Tod Slaughter,

who was known for playing maniacal villains, suggests that adaptations have to operate within different economies and practices of production. The same happens with the 1948 Hollywood version featuring Sydney Greenstreet playing Fosco, another famous actor. The presence of huge movie stars who, in a way, may condition, influence and even alter the film script (and therefore the actual transposition) brings into question the criterion of faithfulness/fidelity so frequently discussed in adaptation studies, since this criterion does not consider these relevant and influential ‘variables.’ Alongside a 1971 German miniseries and a Russian movie adaptation in 1982, an interesting case is represented by the BBC series composed of five episodes, adapted by Ray Jenkins and directed by John Bruce, which aired from 12 April 1982. This TV version is a typical product of Thatcherism, conveying, as Christiana Salah notices, a “vision of strong, admirable English men and women at a moment when the country was eager to recuperate comfortable values and a self-image of greatness” (2010: 39). In fact, this adaptation was produced when Thatcherism was in crisis, a problem for the government which was resolved (successfully from its point of view) with the declaration of war in the Falkland Islands on 2 April, just ten days before the first episode was broadcast. Through a faithful reproduction of costumes and dialogues, this rendition – which falls within the politically conservative agenda of many heritage movies and series – offered a pictorially nostalgic and reassuring view of Victorian Britain.

As for the 1997 BBC miniseries of *The Woman in White*, adapted by David Pirie, directed by Tim Fywell and broadcast on 28-29 December, Marian is played by the attractive actress Tara Fitzgerald (who shows no sign of a moustache). Laura’s strong-willed sister is here at the centre of the narration, to the point that she introduces the main events (replacing Walter as the main narrator). Speaking in front of a tombstone, Marian says: “The bad dreams always come back like unwanted friends, and last night I found myself in Limmeridge churchyard. Normally people who are dead stay dead [...], but then, there was nothing normal that happened to us, except perhaps the beginning” (*The Woman in White* [1997] 2014. ep. 1: min. 3:30). Apart from the accidental irony of the sentence “Normally people who are dead stay dead” – because Andrew Lincoln, who plays Walter Hartright, would be later the protagonist of the 2010 American horror TV series *The Walking Dead* in the role of the zombie-fighter Rick Grimes – Marian’s allusion to the fact that “nothing normal” happened to them reflects the paroxysmal and frenzied atmosphere of this adaptation, in line with a certain revisionary approach towards nineteenth-century novels which was typical of the 1990s (with examples ranging from Kenneth Branagh’s gory *Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein* in 1994 to Francis Ford Coppola’s *Dracula* in 1992). Unlike Collins’s novel, here Laura and Marian share the same father, whose sexual degeneracy – alongside Sir Percival’s marital violence (towards Laura) and child abuse (of Anne) – represents the real sensational secret of this new version. Moreover, Fosco (played by Simon Callow, who would later reprise his role in the 2004 musical by Andrew Lloyd Webber)<sup>4</sup> is not depicted as the seductive Italian schemer of *The Woman in White* but rather as a repulsive individual. Marian’s relevance is enhanced when she rescues Walter, finding him in a seedy London pub, and turns him into an active collaborator in the solution of the mystery. The focus on domestic brutality in this screen version is a strategy to create a dialogue between nineteenth-century and contemporary jurisdiction, especially concerning the legal impossibility of rape within marriage, a law declined in English courts only in 1991 and finally abolished three years after. The ‘topicality’ of *The Woman in White*, now and then, is confirmed

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<sup>4</sup> For Christiana Salah, Andrew Lloyd Webber “treats the nineteenth century as a vast prop and costume room,” borrowing the “Victorian fascination with high-tech stage effects,” mixing melodramatic and comic tones, especially in the characterization of Count Fosco (2010: 48). Domestic violence (Sir Percival not only beats Laura but rapes Anne and kills his own child) is also at the center of Andrew Lloyd Webber’s musical.

by the fact that famous cases of marital violence (and female reaction) such as Sara Thornton's stabbing of her brutal husband in 1989 had an enormous cultural impact on the press, inspiring the publication of the bestselling non-fiction *Sara Thornton: The Story of a Woman Who Killed* (1993) by Jennifer Nadel, adapted into a movie entitled *Killing Me Softly* in 1996.<sup>5</sup> The final scene of this 1997 BBC adaptation returns cyclically to its opening, showing a stonemason who is changing the letters on Laura Fairlie's grave to those of Anne Catherick. What Marian calls the "cruel cycle" of violence and brutality "that began so long ago" (*The Woman in White* [1997] 2014. ep. 2: min. 1:50:48) has now been broken. Lyn Pykett remarks that this translation for the small screen "updates some of the novel's social concerns," since this Victorian story of "domestic imprisonment and asylum abuse also becomes a story of domestic violence and child abuse" (2005: 202).<sup>6</sup>

Written by Fiona Seres and directed by Carl Tibbets, the latest BBC five-episode version of *The Woman in White* (aired from 22 April to 7 May 2018) reintroduces assertive female figures, in line with almost all stage and movie versions of Collins's text. The real novelty is the presence of a detective figure, named Erasmus Nash (played by Art Malik), who replaces Walter's investigations in the novel. By doing so, Seres and Tibbets succeed in reproducing the fragmentary and puzzle-like structure of the original tale by assembling the various testimonies and witnesses of the events, who are interviewed by Nash. The series opens *in medias res* with Marian (Jessie Buckley) telling her story to Erasmus Nash: "How is it men crush women time and time again and go unpunished? [...] We need to show to the world who these men really are" (*The Woman in White* 2018. ep. 1: min. 1:06). The hermeneutical perspective of this adaptation is topically related to the "Me Too" movement against violence towards and harassment of women. This movement came to the forefront after the exposure of film producer Harvey Weinstein's sexual abuses in October 2017, although in this version Percival Glyde (Dougray Scott) appears as a more tormented and intimately torn character than in the other adaptations. Unlike Collins, who described Fosco as "immensely fat" (Collins [1860] 1994: 193), here Collins's villain is played by the Italian actor Riccardo Scamarcio, who is certainly not "fat"; Fosco flirts with Marian, who is physically attracted to him, kissing her in Blackwater park. "What about your *own* desires?" (*The Woman in White* 2018. ep. 3: min. 35:55) he asks her. The last episode devotes much space to Laura's terrible experience (as a victim of Glyde's brutality, and because of her asylum incarceration), offering a further comment on the violence suffered by twenty-first century women subjected to abuse. Depressed and traumatized, Laura contemplates suicide because, she says, "there's something imprisoned in this darkness with me" (*The Woman in White* 2018. ep. 5: min. 8:41). There are two major plot changes in this recent adaptation, which suggest its intention to deliberately alter traditional adaptations: apart from neglecting the novel's well-known tombstone scenes, the series ends with Marian's words, included in a letter sent to Laura (who is now married to Walter, played by Ben Hardy): "the sights of travel have freed my burdened heart and opened

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<sup>5</sup> Stefani Brusberg-Kiermeier relates the "topicality" of Collins's novel and of its adaptations to the modes of production and distribution of texts, respectively, in the nineteenth-century editorial market and in contemporary television. "This topicality can be easily made apparent when one reminds oneself how closely every television series today still adheres to [Collins's] techniques [...]. Like Collins's novels, TV series' dramatic dialogues and actions [...] prolong and heighten their process of perception by the use of 'cliff hangers'" (Brusberg-Kiermeier 2007: 237).

<sup>6</sup> According to Rachel Malik, the decision to broadcast this series during the Christmas holidays "diverges distinctly from conventions of teatime family viewing, despite occupying the same big-budget, period-drama Christmas slot," adding that this adaptation is "strongly modernizing and reworks the sensational tropes in the light of current definitions and anxieties," replacing illegitimacy with child sexual abuse as "the crucial secret" (Malik 2006: 189, 188).

my mind to the true wonderment of this world. Know that I think of you always, but out here I've never felt so free. It has been my greatest adventure yet" (*The Woman in White* 2018. ep. 5: min. 55:20). The last image shows Marian in the desert, probably in Egypt, having fulfilled her desire for female independence. In this latter case, the decision to focus on her rather than on the happy domestic couple of Walter and Laura reinforces the theme of female autonomy.

As these adaptations have shown, the notion of 'fidelity' to the source text is a wrongly-stated assertion, since the transition from a certain system of signs (in our case Collins's novel) to another system of signs (represented by the various TV and screen transpositions of *The Woman in White*) implies inevitable changes and alternations. Furthermore, every adaptation is a product of specific cultural, historical, political and economic conditions that inevitably alter the way its source text is re-read, in order to address certain issues that are reputed important by screenwriters and directors. Another fundamental element is therefore represented by the public, who watches, reads and interprets these transpositions in light of the context in which they are created and produced.

### ***La donna in bianco* Between Excess and Restraint**

Excess and restraint are two terms that may be easily applied to Collins's writing style and poetics, and, in a way, also to the Italian TV version of *The Woman in White*, a text which is liminally poised between these two extremes. According to Pykett, Collins "was both an insider and an outsider, or perhaps more accurately, he was neither an insider nor an outsider, but occupied a position somewhere in between – a liminal position" (2005: 2). *La donna in bianco*, directed by Mario Morini, with screenplay by Giovannella Gaipa and Idalberto Fei, and broadcast in four episodes on the Second Channel (later renamed RAI 2) from 12 September 1980, may be similarly described as a 'liminal' translation for the screen, featuring both excess and restraint. As a matter of fact, this was not the first adaptation of a novel penned by Collins on the Italian National Public Broadcasting Company (RAI), because in 1972 *The Moonstone* was adapted for the screen by Anton Giulio Majano (with the collaboration of Carlo Fruttero and Franco Lucentini), who also directed it, and was broadcast in six episodes. *La pietra di luna* included all the traits of the 'classical' RAI adaptations, whose model was represented by the BBC. The educational project of the RAI (which began with classical radio renditions) was modelled upon Sir John Reith's own idea of public television. The BBC first Director-General from 1923 to 1937, Reith believed that the radio, and television after it, "should inform, educate, and entertain, and that a significant part of that objective would be delivered by bringing culture to a mass audience" (Butt 2014: 160). Sarah Cardwell remarks that this kind of approach partially explains "television adaptations' preoccupation with fidelity. If the public is to depend upon these representations of great literature for their educative and informative value, then the adaptations must provide a fair representation of the source novels" (2007: 188). As Italian television historians such as Aldo Grasso have remarked, the "Reithian" style of the BBC had an enormous impact first on the post-war radio schedules, and then on the future television schedule, which alternated explicitly educational programs (on history, art, culture etc.) and television adaptations from the classics (Grasso 2011). Majano was the most representative figure of a certain canonical approach to adaptation, as proved by his renditions of novels ranging from *Little Women* (*Piccole donne*, 1955) to *Jane Eyre* (1957), from *Treasure Island* (*L'isola del tesoro*, 1959) to *The Black Arrow* (*La freccia nera*, 1968) and *David Copperfield* (1965), probably his most famous and successful transposition for the screen (Gerosa 2016; De Fornari 2011). Mario Morini, who directed *La donna in bianco*, did not want to replicate either the 'classical' style of Majano or the more 'experimental' one adopted by Ugo Gregoretti, whose Italian adaptation of *The Pickwick Papers* (1968) was presented in the

form of interviews by a twentieth-century Italian journalist (Gregoretti himself) with Dickens's characters. As Idalberto Fei remarks in an interview, Morini's version "did not aim to be something like Majano's, or like Gregoretti's [...]; we were interested to treat the text as if it were belonging to one of our popular novels" (Garambois 1980: 10, my translation). As Fei's words suggest, *La donna in bianco* may be seen as a 'liminal' adaptation of *The Woman in White* moving between (thematic) excess and (representational) restraint.



Figure 1. Opening Credits, *La donna in bianco*. Copyright RAI.

All the episodes of *La donna in bianco* open by showing a theatrical backdrop with classical Baroque music, and two actors (dressed in eighteenth-century costumes) who slowly move away the curtains to introduce the scene (Figure 1.). The whole series deliberately resorts to 'theatricality' and to 'meta-theatricality.' Morini, alongside screenwriters Fei and Gaipa (the latter translated the novel and published it in 1981 with the publisher Garzanti in what is probably the first unabridged edition of *The Woman in White* in Italy) were forced to abandon the initial project of shooting in a villa in Veneto or Lombardy for budget reasons, and had to work in the Centro di Produzione RAI in Milan. In a 2012 interview Idalberto Fei evokes in humorous tones his and Giovannella Gaipa's frustration after their initial project of a big-budget production was rejected (with some scenes that were meant to be shot in London). A few days after they had sent the Centro di Produzione RAI their script, the scenography office called back and asked if they had got drunk, such were their mad aspirations (Fei 2012: 12).<sup>7</sup> Mario

<sup>7</sup> I am extremely grateful to Idalberto Fei for his support and solicitude in sending me newspaper articles and materials on *La donna in bianco*. In a personal interview, Fei has recounted that Giovannella Gaipa had a passion for melodrama and opera (personal interview, Idalberto Fei, 13 November 2019);

Morini had already enjoyed a long experience with dramas and theatre, thus knowing how to operate within budget constraints; for this reason he gave this *sceneggiato televisivo*, as TV dramas were called at the time, a ‘cold’ and ‘restrained’ tone, an element that is emphasized by the decision to shoot all scenes in the Milan studios to save money. As for the music score, it was composed by Pino Massara, who had worked for national and international music stars such as Mina, one of the most popular Italian female singers, as well as for Nat King Cole and Dean Martin. In the case of characters such as Sir Percival Glyde (played by Paolo Bonacelli), Massara succeeds in translating in musical terms his ‘villainous’ nature, with string instruments played in a frenzied rhythm which reflects his brutality and lack of scruples.

The first episode opens with Walter Hartright (Lou Castel) as the narrative voice, speaking directly to the audience and therefore creating a sort of Brechtian ‘effect of estrangement’ which reinforces the deliberate meta-dramatic and fictive nature of this adaptation. A relevant difference is that (unlike the novel) Walter admits he is not English, whereas in *The Woman in White* we are told that Walter is English “to the bone of his back” (Collins [1860] 1994: 8).

Incominciò così la mia avventura. Io mi chiamo Walter Hartright. [...] [Sebbene] mio padre fosse cittadino britannico, io sono nato in Germania, in riva al mar Baltico. Mi sono trasferito in Inghilterra solo da pochi mesi, e parlo inglese con un accento straniero mostruoso. Forse sarà anche per questo che non riesco ad avere successo come pittore. “Troppo anticonformista,” dicono. Cioè troppo straniero. Ed è stato appunto uno straniero, un professore italiano emigrato, un certo Pesca, a trovarmi lavoro. Non più pittore, ma maestro di disegno.

(*La donna in bianco* 1980. ep. 1: min. 03:32)

And so my adventure began. My name is Walter Hartright [...] Despite the fact that my father was British, I was born in Germany, on the banks of the Baltic river. I moved to England only a few months ago, and I speak English with a terrible foreign accent. Perhaps this is the reason why I am not a successful painter. “Too much of a nonconformist,” they say. That is to say, too much of a foreigner. And it was actually an Italian foreign emigrant, a certain Pesca, who found me a job. Not as a painter, but as a drawing master.<sup>8</sup>

The choice of depicting Walter as a foreigner reinforces the idea that he is a sort of intruder in this purely English family. The main theme is that of alienation and of feeling different from others, which echoes the theme of female alienation and legal dispossession that characterizes Collins’s novel.

Whereas this TV drama is characterized by an atmosphere of dramatic and acting ‘restraint’ (the recitation is never paroxysmal or exaggerated, and the setting is clearly ‘fictive’ and unnatural), to the point of appearing almost ‘cold’ in its narrative detachment, the themes treated in *La donna in bianco* are ‘excessive’ in their direct reference to nineteenth-century culture and literature, and in their indirect allusion to the Italian (rather than just British) social and historical context. Sir Percival Glyde is depicted as an unscrupulous and sadistic husband, who – soon after his marriage and before leaving Limmeridge at the end of Episode 1 – addresses Laura Fairlie (Micaela Esdra, who also plays Anne Catherick) in sarcastic terms: “Non vi preoccupate. Non sapete quante gioie può donare un vero matrimonio d’amore” (Figure 2. *La donna in bianco* 1980. ep. 1: min. 1:03:00. “Don’t worry. You still don’t know the joys that a marriage based on love can bring”). Probably, the most emblematic expression of Glyde’s marital villainy is included in Episode 3. After Laura’s rejection of Glyde’s sexual advances, he speaks to her in the following terms: “Ricordatevi che fin quando siete mia

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moreover, all reviewers at the time remarked that this adaptation possessed a theatrical imprint thanks to Armando Nobili, who worked on its scenography.

<sup>8</sup> All translations are the author’s.

moglie, siete obbligata. Se avete qualche difficoltà, chiudete gli occhi e pensate di farlo col vostro pittore l'amore. Vi verrà più facile" (*La donna in bianco* 1980. ep. 3: min. 33:42; "Since you are my wife, remember that you are obliged to. If you have some difficulties, imagine you are making love with your painter. It will be easier for you"). Soon after, we are shown Laura who slowly undresses herself, as if to remark on her state of legal submission and defencelessness. These explicit depictions of marital oppression in *La donna in bianco* create a cultural short-circuit with Italian social history, especially as regarded marriage and divorce in the years that preceded the broadcasting of this adaptation.



Figure 2. Laura and Percival. Copyright RAI.

In Italy domestic violence was widely accepted (and was legally unpunished) as a ‘corrective practice’ at least until the mid-1960s, and the so-called *delitto d’onore* (“honour killing”), which justified the murder of a wife by her husband because she was only suspected of unfaithfulness, was admitted (and prosecuted) by Italian legislation only in 1981. To offer an example, the last mitigating measure was applied to an “honour killing” that took place in the small town of Misilmeri in Sicily just a few months before the previous law on the *delitto d’onore* was repealed. As for “conjugal rape” – to which *La donna in bianco* alludes in the third episode – it was reputed a crime, and accordingly punished, only in 1976. These social attitudes, defined by Italian historian Marco Cavina as “the dark soul of marriage” (Cavina 2011: x, my translation), were widely discussed on TV and in the Italian press, and represented a spur that led to the very slow and complicated approval of divorce in Italy. The Fortuna-Baslini Law – from the name of the two politicians that supported it – was originally approved by the Italian Parliament in 1971; however, the anti-divorce Parliamentary supporters proposed an abrogative referendum that slowed down the application of the law for 3 years. Only on 12

May 1974, with a percentage of 59.3% votes against the repeal, divorce in Italy finally entered into force. For this reason, *La donna in bianco* refers to the debates that were animating the Italian political and public debate only a few years before. At the same time, this TV drama – through the examples represented by Marian and by Laura – offered to the Italian audience gathering on Sundays (when *sceneggiati televisivi* were usually broadcast) new declinations of femininity that were alternative to, or rather represented an evolution of, previous televisual predecessors such as Becky Sharp in Anton Giulio Majano's adaptation of *Vanity Fair*, broadcast in 1967 with enormous success (featuring a sort of pre-feminist manifesto of nineteenth-century female assertiveness). Screen versions such as *La donna in bianco* prove that TV reflected a certain culture but also reflected *on* a certain culture, suggesting at the same time further forms of evolution. In John Corner's opinion, television provides "both a centrifugal and centripetal action in relation to culture-at-large." It is centripetal "in so far as it is an unprecedented device for pulling in and processing a wide range of established and emerging cultural features manifest in other areas"; at the same time it is centrifugal "in so far as its own cultural reach and impact extend to the widest boundaries of the culture." This is the reason why "[this] repeated action of ingestion and projection provides television with an extraordinary cultural dynamics" (Corner 1999: 5).

In a recent personal online interview he granted me, Idalberto Fei confesses that the idea for an Italian adaptation of *The Woman in White* was originally suggested by Giovannella Gaipa, who well remembered Hollywood's 1948 Gothic adaptation of Collins's novel directed by Peter Godfrey, with screenplay by Stephen Morehouse Avery (Fei 2019). Given now the clear inspiration of the 1948 version, it is worth exploring that film in some detail to enable us to identify similarities or differences. Unlike *La donna in bianco* (which basically follows Collins's storyline) Godfrey's screen version is extremely free in changing the plot and the roles of the characters: for instance, apart from being "fat", Count Fosco (played by Sydney Greenstreet) plays a major role from the beginning of the movie, and possesses mesmeric powers. As for Sir Percival Glyde (John Emery), he is almost non-existent in the plot, whereas Marian (Alexis Smith) is only a cousin to Laura, and Walter (Gig Young) is in love both with Laura and Marian, the latter of whom he marries at the end. Finally, the real mystery of this screen version revolves around Fosco's wife (Agnes Moorehead), who is the sister of Sir Frederick Fairlie (John Abbott) and Anne's mother, born out of wedlock in Sorrento. It is the Countess who stabs Fosco out of jealousy for Marian, and in the last scene Fosco's wife – whose intermittent madness her daughter Anne Catherick has inherited – is locked up in an asylum. This plot twist creates an intertextual relationship<sup>9</sup> with Mary Elizabeth Braddon's sensational bestseller *Lady Audley's Secret* (1861), a novel which similarly featured a bigamous woman affected by intermittent madness, who tried to kill her (first) husband. Another element that creates a connection between Braddon's novel and Godfrey's movie is the centrality of paintings in both texts. *Lady Audley's Secret* included an ekphrastic description of a Pre-Raphaelite portrait which is fundamental in the deployment of the plot (revealing Lady Audley's real identity as Helen Talboys); in turn, in the 1948 movie adaptation of *The Woman in White*, Walter Hartright paints a picture entitled "The Woman in White" and the Countess herself is portrayed in a weird and mysterious portrait, which Frederick Fairlie (who is a collector of coins, paintings and etchings) keeps concealed. As far as the similarities between *La donna in bianco* and the 1948 movie version are concerned, Gaipa and Fei derived the Gothic atmosphere that pervades this adaptation from Godfrey's movie; moreover Fosco's physical attraction towards Marian – which represents one of the novelties of Morini's TV

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Leitch underlines the importance of intertextuality in adaptation, because this "is a subtext of intertextuality – all adaptations are obviously intertexts, but it is much less obvious that all intertexts are adaptations" (Leitch 2014: 89).

version – is another element that recalls the previous Hollywood film. In Godfrey’s film, at a certain point Fosco confesses his feelings for Marian, asking her to become his ally, and his lover: “What a combination, what an existence, your courage and your indomitable character [...]. We: think about it, there is no hurry” (Godfrey [1948] 2016: min. 1:00:08).

*The Woman in White*, like its Italian adaptation, is an expression of what Tamar Heller, drawing on Ellen Moers’s ideas, has defined as “the female Gothic,” because Collins “uses the Gothic not only to tell a story about female victimization but also to encode a plot of feminine subversion that resembles a narrative pattern feminist critics have identified in nineteenth-century women’s writing” (Heller 1992: 3). This *sceneggiato televisivo* implicitly connects the difficult condition of contemporary Italian women to that of their nineteenth-century counterparts, with no distinction of rank or social class. Laura in *La donna in bianco* is depicted in slightly different terms from Collins’s victimized character, to the point that Morini’s adaptation falls within Heller’s definition of the “female Gothic” in its alternative depiction of female victimization and reaction, especially when Laura has to face Glyde’s decision to force her to sign her matrimonial contract (which, according to the Common Law, will leave the entire property in the hands of her husband):

“Sign there,” he repeated, turning suddenly on Laura, and pointing once more to the place on the parchment.

“What is it I am to sign?” she asked quietly.

“I have no time to explain,” he answered. “The dog-cart is at the door, and I must go directly. Besides, if I had time, you wouldn’t understand. It is a purely formal document, full of legal technicalities, and all that sort of thing. Come! come! sign your name, and let us have done as soon as possible.”

“I ought surely to know what I am signing, Sir Percival, before I write my name?”

“Nonsense! What have women to do with business? I tell you again, you can’t understand it.”  
(Collins [1860] 1994: 217)

In *La donna in bianco* Sir Percival, after noticing Laura’s doubts and perplexities, orders her: “Firma. È una faccenda d’affari, e gli affari non sono cose da donne” (*La donna in bianco* 1980. ep. 2: min. 24:05; “Sign it. It is business, and business is not something for women”), and then in peremptory tones: “Sono il padrone (“I am the master”), to which Laura reacts with “Non sono la vostra serva” (*La donna in bianco* 1980. ep. 2: min. 24:31; “I’m not your servant”). In Collins’s novel she is not as direct as in its Italian adaptation, since she replies “I am *not* obliged” (Collins [1860] 1994: 217). Laura in the Italian version is a typically modern woman, who acts with confidence and is supported by Marian Halcombe, who also intervenes in order to regulate this imbalance in family and legislative dynamics. By doing so, Morini in *La donna in bianco* develops some aspects of the “female Gothic” that in the case of Laura Fairlie were only introduced in *nuce*. Alongside Laura, Marian (played by Anna Maria Gherardi) in *La donna in bianco* represents another fundamental character, with Walter reduced to a secondary, and almost evanescent, role relegated to the margins of the narration (see Figure 3.). Laura’s half-sister is an assertive individual and a sexually desiring and desirable woman for Count Fosco (played by Lino Troisi), who in this version is a middle-aged decadent nobleman, constantly prey to spleen.<sup>10</sup> What emerges most is Fosco’s sexual appetite (towards his wife and Marian), rather than his villainy. For instance, when Marian arrives (interrupting his passionate kissing of Mrs Fosco), he mentions Donizzetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835): “Ma ti vidi ... in cor mi nacque, altro affetto ... e l’ira tacque” (Morini 1980. Episode 2: min.

<sup>10</sup> It goes without saying that Fosco’s ‘foreignness’ and racial alterity is not so evident in this TV version because all characters speak Italian, without any specific accent.



Figure 3. Walter and Marian. Copyright RAI

28:40; “But I saw you...and in my heart came other affections... and my rage was silenced”). As a tribute to the 1948 Hollywood adaptation, here too Fosco courts Marian, who somewhat reciprocates his attentions with a mixture of attraction and fear. When he is about to kiss her (Figure 4), Marian reacts to his courtship by saying that “Sulle vostre labbra la parola amore ha un altro suono. Sembra quasi una bestemmia” (ep. 2, min. 37:12; “On your lips the word ‘love’ has another sound. It seems almost a blasphemy”).

Laura’s forced incarceration in a private asylum (in place of Anne Catherick) is one of the most sensational episodes of *The Woman in White*. Collins’s novel was certainly influenced by Maurice Méjan’s *Recueil des causes célèbres*, a collection of French legal cases published at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Moreover, Collins discussed with Dickens and Bryan Waller Procter, a poet and a member of the Commission created after the Lunacy Act of 1845 (to whom he dedicated *The Woman in White*), the sad vicissitudes of Rosina Wheeler, Edward Bulwer Lytton’s wife, who was incarcerated by her husband for some time in a private asylum in 1858. Edward Bulwer Lytton, a renowned Victorian novelist and Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s literary mentor, certainly asked for the advice of one of the most famous alienists of the time, John Conolly. Conolly’s methods of incarceration without mechanical restraints were based on his idea of a domestication of insanity (as illustrated in *The Construction and Government of Lunatic Asylums*, published in 1847), according to which madwomen had to be educated, first and foremost, to be good and submissive wives. It is thus clear that what has been defined as the Victorian “lunacy panic” (Lycett 2014: 187-207), including its ambivalent policy on the treatment of madwomen, had an evident impact on the composition of Collins’s text.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> On Collins’s links to Conolly through Dickens (and John Forster), see Leavy 1982.



Figure 4. Fosco and Marian. Copyright RAI.

In the same way, the debates over the management of the insane in Italy during the late 1970s were influential on the choice to adapt *The Woman in White* in that particular phase of Italian social history. Reputed as the most representative Italian medical figure of the twentieth century, Franco Basaglia was a psychiatrist and neurologist who succeeded – through the promulgation on 13 May 1978 of the Law 180, commonly known as the Legge Basaglia (the “Basaglia Law”) – in abolishing traditional psychiatric hospitals, in order to identify alternative and more humane structures. Until the late seventies, the situation in Italian mental hospitals was terrible, with inmates living in inhuman conditions, and in indescribable degradation. Inspired by John Conolly’s model (in turn based upon Philippe Pinel’s system, first introduced in France at the end of the eighteenth century), Basaglia aimed to ‘free’ inmates both physically and mentally from restraints. Basaglia was also the founder of the Democratic Psychiatry, a left-oriented political movement which included social workers, psychiatrists and sociologists, who questioned the previous treatment of mental illnesses. Basaglia blamed what he saw as the ‘clinical’ reproduction of political structures of power in the roles of the doctor (the oppressor) and of the patient (the oppressed). To quote from Basaglia himself, “abbiamo liberato le persone dalla violenza dei manicomi [...] ma lo stesso problema della malattia mentale rimarrà virtuale finché tutti gli altri esseri umani non saranno liberati” (“we have liberated people from the violence of madhouses. But the problem of mental illness is going to remain a virtual one until all other human beings are liberated” [Babini 2009: 8, my translation]). Laura Fairlie in *La donna in bianco* represents a Victorian victim of those forms of institutional power that Franco Basaglia criticised in his own Italian culture, and which director Morini, and

screenwriters Gaipa and Fei perhaps unknowingly transposed and dislocated into the mid-nineteenth century. In addressing Marian, who is trying to meet Anne Catherick in the asylum, the director of the institution defines her as a very interesting ‘case’ (“un caso interessantissimo”) because of her intelligence and acumen, suggesting that Marian exemplifies in his view another example of feminine alterity: “Non mi capita spesso di parlare con una donna che non sia proprio un caso clinico” (*La donna in bianco* 1980. ep. 3: min. 54:40; “I’m not used to talking to women who are not clinic cases”). The alliance between Laura and Marian (who has finally discovered Percival Glyde’s plans) is remarked in the following dialogue between the two, who – in realizing their nonentity in the Victorian legal system – also acknowledge the importance of fighting together and of sororal alliance: “Io non sono nessuno” (“I am nobody”) says Laura; to which Marian replies: “Allora siamo in due” (Figure 5. *La donna in bianco* 1980. ep. 3: min. 57:24; “Then we are two”). In order to escape, Laura and Marian hit one of the female guards, whereas in the novel Marian pays a nurse to help her. This further difference between Collins’s source text and its Italian adaptation emphasises Marian and Laura’s more active roles and collaboration in reacting against violence, legal discrimination and social injustice.



Figure 5. Laura and Marian. Copyright RAI

Most of all, through these multiple references to marital brutality, female oppression and incarceration, *La donna in bianco* depicts the dissolution of the symbols of the patriarchal family and of traditional family models not just in the Victorian age, but also in Italy. In her study on feminist movements in Italy, Fiamma Lusanna defines the family in Italy as “l’indicatore più attendibile della trasformazione della società” (“the most reliable marker of social transformation”) because, according to her, “il nucleo familiare reproduce i meccanismi

e le contraddizioni del cambiamento economico e sociale” (“the family unit reproduces the mechanisms and the contradictions of social and economic change” [2012: 23, my translation]). Whereas society in Italy had drastically changed during the 1960s and 1970s, with women becoming more and more economically independent and with new cultural dynamics that characterized the relationships between husbands, wives, and the other members of the family, at the same time the decision to adapt a novel such as *The Woman in White* indicates the necessity to evoke all the antinomies and paradoxes of the idealized old family model that somehow continued to survive. This “strange family story” (Collins [1960] 1994: 3), as Walter Hartright defines his tale at the beginning of Collins’s novel, is thus centred – as Laila Silvana May states – on a “family that is not a family at all. There is neither a mother nor a father: only the two half-sisters and, hidden away in a different wing of the house, the hypochondriacal, egocentric uncle of one of the sisters” (May 1995: 83).<sup>12</sup> Marian’s assertive role in *La donna in bianco* is reiterated at the end of the last episode, when she goes to Fosco’s house to discover the truth, and seduces him. When Marian menaces him with a gun, Fosco admits his defeat: “Battuto. E ora, bella traditrice?” (*La donna in bianco* 1980. ep. 4: min. 47:36; “Beaten. And now, beautiful traitor?”); and is forced to write his confession. Contrastingly, in Collins’s novel it is Walter who extorts this confession (pp. 535-536).

Like *The Woman in White*, *La donna in bianco* repeatedly alludes to melodrama. In particular, in order to characterize Fosco as the typically fascinating, refined and cunning Italian villain, he is described as an Italian opera lover; whereas in *The Woman in White* Fosco sings an aria from Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s *Le nozze di Figaro* (p. 202), in the Italian adaptation he prefers to sing songs from Gaetano Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor* (1835), an opera based upon Walter Scott’s *The Bride of Lammermoor* (1819). Moreover, in order to relieve Laura’s suffering and anxiety, in the Italian TV version Pesca suggests that they go out and watch, again, *Lucia di Lammermoor*. Laura casually notices Fosco and his wife in the audience, whereas in Collins it is Walter who suggests they go out and watch Donizetti’s *Lucrezia Borgia* (1833) with Pesca, who recognises Count Fosco. In the course of the *sceneggiato* there are other references to melodrama, and to the relationship between novels, opera and ‘life’. For Walter they both depict and describe ‘excessive’ emotions which are sometimes ‘real’ and ‘true’: “Che cosa terribile soffrire come un tenore d’opera o come il protagonista di un romanzo sentimentale. Ma l’opera e il romanzo somigliano talvolta stranamente alla verità. Odiavo Laura e l’amavo come non mai” (“What a terrible thing is to suffer like an opera tenor or like the protagonist of a sentimental novel. But, strangely enough, novels and opera resemble truth. I hated Laura and I loved her passionately at the same time”; ep. 1, min. 29:57). Finally, at the end of *La donna in bianco* Walter and Laura are seen watching Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor*, a melodrama which recounts a tormented love story (featuring, among the other things, ghostly hallucinations, male violence and female madness),<sup>13</sup> and which is coherent with many of the themes included in *The Woman in White*.

<sup>12</sup> The ‘strangeness’ and ‘alterity’ of this peculiar family finds a further expression in Sir Frederick Fairlie, who appears as a feminized character because of his constitutional weakness and of his “neurasthenia”, two pathologies that were traditionally attributed to women during the Victorian age. In many other screen and movie versions his homosexuality is only alluded to; in *La donna in bianco* Sir Frederick (played by Renato De Carmine) is explicitly described as an eccentric nobleman who has a homosexual relationship with Louis, his servant (played by Alessandro Quasimodo), showing tenderness towards him, and constantly caressing his hands (see in particular Morini 1980. ep. 4: min. 4:22).

<sup>13</sup> Screenwriter Giovannella Gaipa had a great passion for Maria Callas, one of the greatest Italian opera singers who was also a great interpreter of *Lucia di Lammermoor*; the multiple references to Donizetti’s melodrama in *La donna in bianco* may be interpreted as an indirect homage paid by Gaipa to Callas.

This reference suggests a textual dialogue between melodramatic forms and Collins's sensation novel, which derived many elements from what Peter Brooks described as "the melodramatic imagination" (1995), characterized by emotional excess and by the secularized juxtaposition between good and evil. The fact that the last scenes are set in a theatre, with Walter and Laura watching an opera (*Lucia di Lammermoor*) that is being played on a stage which is identical to the one that opens and closes each episode of the series, highlights the inherent 'theatricality' and 'meta-theatricality' of this *sceneggiato*. The closing words are by Walter, who looks at the camera in a meta-narrative gesture: "La giustizia trionfa. I cattivi sono puniti. Nella vita succede il contrario: nessuno è mai campato di giustizia" ("Justice triumphs. The bad ones are punished. In life the opposite happens: nobody has ever lived thanks to justice"). Then he adds, however, that in these stories "tutto va come per incanto. Forse questo è il loro fascino" (*La donna in bianco* 1980. ep. 4: min. 1:04:30; "everything goes as if by magic. Perhaps this is its fascination").

## Conclusion

The *sceneggiati televisivi* had an enormous impact on Italian culture, since they sometimes represented the only way for the public to access a certain (foreign) text or author. At the same time, transpositions became not only a way to reflect on cogent contemporary issues (such as the condition of women and the treatment of insane, as in *La donna in bianco*) but also a way to anticipate future political and cultural developments. Indeed, the words used by Walter at the end of the episode ("Justice triumphs. The bad ones are punished. In life the opposite happens: nobody has ever lived thanks to justice") seem to point to something 'beyond' the chronology of *The Woman in White*, projected into contemporary Italy. In the same episode Fosco during his confession described "The Brotherhood" as "un gruppo di [...] sognatori, pazzi e sanguinari" (*La donna in bianco* 1980. ep. 4: min. 51:33; "a group of [...] dreamers, mad and bloodthirsty"). Behind Fosco's (and Walter's) remarks it is possible to retrace an indirect allusion to Italian terrorism, and to what was happening during the so-called Years of Lead ("Anni di piombo"), characterized by social and political tensions. Only a month before *La donna in bianco* was broadcast on TV, on 2 August 1980 a bomb had exploded at Bologna railway station, killing 87, in an action that was carried out by a group of "pazzi e sanguinari," in Fosco's words, who aimed at destabilizing Italian institutions through terror. In Italy, a country plagued by violence, the need for "justice" and the punishment of "the bad ones" (according to Walter Hartright's desire) represented a commonly-shared feeling, which this TV version transposed in fictional terms. Accordingly, *La donna in bianco* does not only offer a visual representation of social brutality but also refers to episodes of violence projected in the present (and in the future) of Italian history, given that terrorism would be defeated in a few years. The potential adaptability of *The Woman in White* is therefore apparent in this tendency to update its main themes and in the allusions to contemporary Italian history and social life. Behind Victorian costumes, and behind Collins's visually striking story of "endurance" against injustice, other forms of terror were storming Italy, with the present and the past mirroring each other on and off the screen.

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