

## A Tale of Two Women in Two Countries: Suzanne Chantal and Paola Ojetti's Professional Careers in the Film Press (1930s–mid 1940s)

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Submitted: February 5, 2023 – Published: July 20, 2023

### Abstract

This essay compares the professional experiences of Suzanne Chantal and Paola Ojetti in 1930s France and in 1930s and early-1940s Italy, respectively. Beyond their very different political, national, and cultural contexts, these women both occupied central positions within some of the most influential film periodicals of the era: Suzanne Chantal for *Cinéma* and Paola Ojetti for *Film*. This study is mainly based on sources which enable us to take a closer look at their activities, their working conditions, and their feelings regarding the treatment they received while working for these periodicals. Sources include Suzanne Chantal's memoirs and her personal diaries from the late 1930s, kept by her family, and Paola Ojetti's extensive working correspondence, preserved in the Fondo Mino Doletti of the Biblioteca Renzo Renzi at the Cineteca di Bologna, as well as other correspondence documents preserved in Italian archives. This paper explores the working trajectories and social positioning made by these two largely forgotten but powerfully significant figures in order to establish themselves in a predominantly male professional and cultural environment, while at the same time questioning the limits of their integration. By shedding light on microhistory and questioning gender issues, this article turns its attention primarily to working practices, women's paths, and social networks of film press and film criticism history.

**Keywords:** Film Criticism; Film Journalism; Gender History; Suzanne Chantal; Paola Ojetti.

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## Introduction

In the footsteps of the numerous topical studies on the work of women in cinema, this essay focuses on Suzanne Chantal and Paola Ojetti's roles in film criticism and film press, in 1930s France and Fascist Italy (1930s-1940s).<sup>1</sup> Drawing on new archival sources, such as correspondence, work and editorial materials, diaries and ephemera, it aims to shed light on microhistory and question gender issues. This article lends particular attention to the working paths and behind-the-scenes activities of women protagonists in film criticism and journalism, and to their social networks, as already addressed for film criticism in general in recent studies edited by Michele Guerra and Sara Martin (2019a, 2019b, 2020). It can be placed within the "new cinema history" group, as well as the cultural history of cinema that is attentive to the social actors behind the interactions that shape, transmit, modify, and perpetuate film culture.<sup>2</sup> This paper compares two personalities established in different national contexts, in order to better identify, and potentially lend greater nuance to, not only the convergences but also the specificities of their experiences.

In the Anglo-American context, the anthology compiled by Antonia Lant and Ingrid Periz covering the first fifty years of cinema (2006), and Melanie Bell's research (2011a, 2011b) on the period after the Second World War, are the starting point for a study of women film critics. Bell utilises administrative and working documents alongside correspondence to trace the paths of these female journalists in Britain, underlining how the questioning of gender issues changes the way film history is constructed. Indeed, she emphasizes that this perspective takes into account more ordinary professions and professional routines, as well as relationships with other cultural fields.

Research on female journalists in France has mainly focused on the general daily press, as well as on the feminist press, and, to a lesser extent, on the women's press (Thérenty 2019; Stewart 2018). But with the exception of a few strongly legitimated personalities, such as Germaine Dulac or Colette (Dulac 2020; Palma 2015 and 2023; Virmaux 2004) and a note on Lucie Derain (Vichi 2017), women who have written on cinema have not received much attention from researchers. On the one hand, the history of film criticism, like that of cinema, has since its beginnings been conceived as a history of great men. On the other hand, it "has largely been written, in recent years, according to the methodological foundations of the history of ideas" (Laurent Le Forestier 2013). The work of women and their extremely diverse writings have therefore been made invisible.

Likewise in Italy, as we will see in greater detail in the following paragraph, there are few studies on women film critics of the 1930s and 1940s, with the exception of Lucia Cardone's research, which has comprehensively investigated the presence of female writers and journalists in the film press of this period (Cardone 2011, 2020a, 2020b). Yet, the perspective outlined here connects with the most recent research path regarding the study of gender as it was regulated during the fascist period. This research traces a complex and contradictory history for women during the decades of the fascist dictatorship (1922–1943) in which the regime's patriarchal and repressive ideology coexisted and clashed with new opportunities and societal changes.<sup>3</sup> Lorenzo Benadusi (2014) distinguishes "micro-sectoral" studies, such as investigations on the popular press, as the most capable tool for offering a more complex picture of gender history during this period.

This article adopts an original comparative perspective between two personalities. Suzanne Chantal and Paola Ojetti come from very different social backgrounds, and worked in two distinct historical contexts. But beyond these differences, their situations in the world of journalism and criticism present several similarities that have caught our attention. The aim of this study is to examine these convergences, in order to both evaluate the ways in which the specific national contexts experienced by these two women have played a role in their

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1. Myriam Juan's research on Suzanne Chantal is part of a more global project on women film journalists in France before the Second World War, for which she has obtained a delegation at the Institut universitaire de France. Stella Scabelli's study on Paola Ojetti was funded by the Progetto di Rilevante Interesse Nazionale (PRIN 2017), "Per una storia privata della critica cinematografica italiana. Ruoli pubblici e relazioni private: l'istituzionalizzazione della critica cinematografica in Italia tra Anni Trenta e Settanta", Università di Bologna (PI: Paolo Noto Prot. 2017XB2Y7B).

2. See Noto 2019, Andreazza 2014, Abel 2015; Frey 2015; Mariani and Noto 2020; Dotto and Mariani 2021.

3. On the work of the cultural and publishing sectors see Bonsaver 2013: 141–158; De Grazia 1993; Ferrando 2021; Mondello 1987; and on the subject of female journalists in the film press: Cardone 2011, 2020a, 2020b.

careers, and to question the possibility of a history of women film journalists on a broader scale (in Europe and globally).

Suzanne Chantal's career as a film journalist occurred between the late 1920s and the late 1960s. Our study explores the period up to 1940, during which Chantal quickly gained the partial recognition of her peers, which led her to assume the position of editor-in-chief of the weekly publication *Cinéma*. In contrast to her responsibilities and intense activity, after the First World War France promoted a pro-natalist policy that underscored the housewife's role. Women's work did develop in the tertiary sector, but it was mainly confined to office jobs perceived as "feminine", which had very limited career prospects (Battagliola 2008: 57–70). Moreover, the 1930s were a period of crisis for the feminist movement (Bard 1995), which failed to obtain the right to vote, despite the historic appointment of three women as under-secretaries of state in the Front Populaire government. Yet the interwar period also saw the emergence of a new generation of women writers (Milligan 1997) and a diversification of women's participation in the press, as they became more versatile (Thérenty 2019). The sources used for this research, which are as close as possible to Suzanne Chantal's experience, include her memoirs focused on the 1930s (Chantal 1977), and her personal diaries dating from the last years of this decade<sup>4</sup> (Fig. 1). Marie-Chantal Dos Santos, Suzanne Chantal's daughter, shared these diaries with us, and we thank her warmly for her help and confidence.

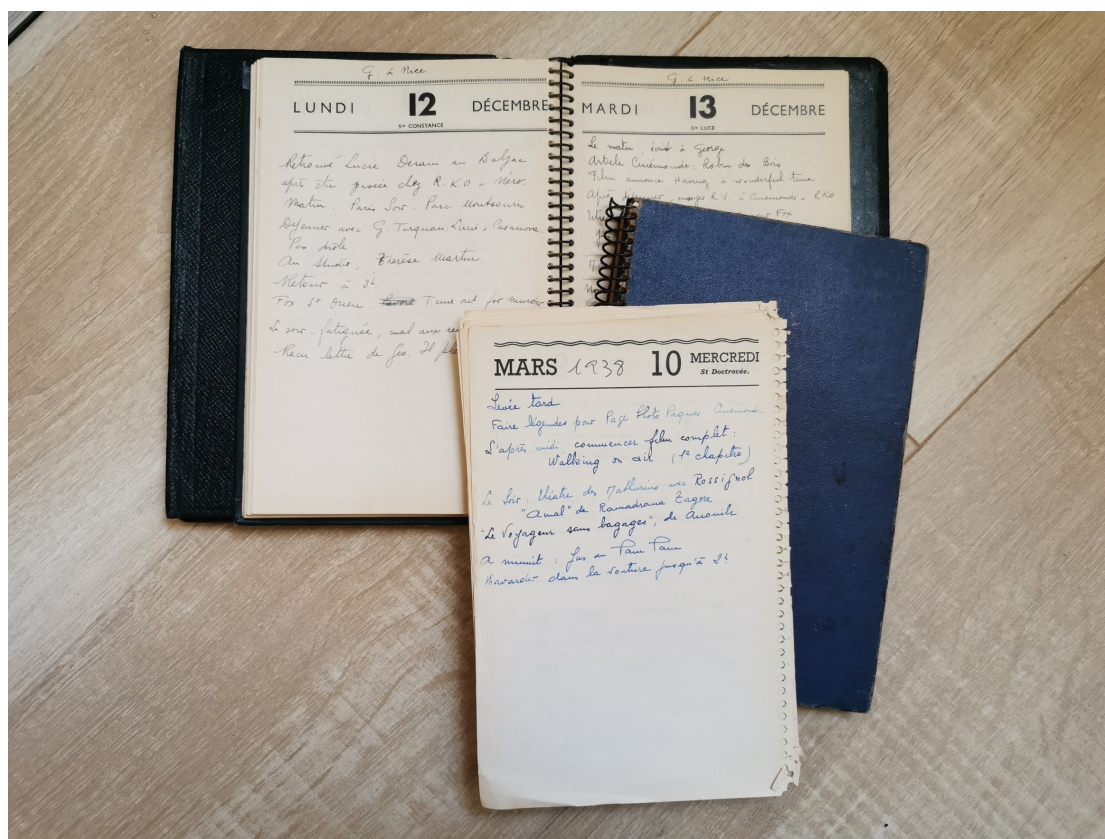


Fig. 1. Suzanne Chantal's personal diaries (private collection)

As regards Paola Ojetti, the research is being carried out mainly, but not exclusively, with the Fondo Mino Doletti's resources at the Renzo Renzi Library of Cineteca di Bologna Foundation,<sup>5</sup> which preserves correspondence related to the *Film: Settimanale di Cinematografo Teatro e Radio* editorial office. Within the "uniquely

4. These diaries cover the period from July 1938 to June 1939. Some loose sheets also date from 1937 and early 1938. Suzanne Chantal's archives are a private collection, still maintained by her family.
5. Now referred to in this paper as FMD.

hostile environment for the employment of women” (De Grazia 1993: 181) that was Fascist Italy, intellectual professions were scarcely accessible to female workers. At the same time, during these years, there was a significant growth in women’s magazines and the number of women journalists due to complex social changes and new opportunities. A key aspect was the fact that intellectual work could be undertaken in the domestic realm. Nevertheless, these journalists often only contributed to the women’s press or wrote about topics intended for a female audience (Salvatici 2004, 110–126; De Grazia 1993, 195–196, 325). Silvia Salvatici (2004: 110–126) underscores the close connection between women’s magazine production not only with “letteratura rosa” but also with cinema, especially in terms of stardom and the photographic image’s allure. However, it is difficult to find women among Italian film critics. In his overview of 1930s professionals, Orio Caldiron (2006: 483) identifies only Guglielmina Setti, reviewer for the Genoa daily newspaper *Il lavoro*.<sup>6</sup> It is highly significant, though hardly surprising, that at the 1940 film critics’ conference in Cortina d’Ampezzo, organized by Gherardo Casini, the Director of the FIPRESCI (The International Federation of Film Press), no women were invited (Favre 1940; Càllari 1940). For her part, Lucia Cardone (2020b, 115–138) identifies many female names, recognisable even on the pages of *Film* itself, who gravitated around the cinema-related press, largely in their roles as authors of serialized novels, star stories, reportages or columns linked to ‘female themes.’<sup>7</sup>

Consequently, certain forms of journalism seem to have been relatively accessible to women in France and in Italy, in spite of the cultural contexts that were unfavourable to women’s work. The aim of this essay is to study the emblematic and singular careers of Suzanne Chantal and Paola Ojetti in film journalism and criticism, in order to understand how and to what extent these women managed to transgress the limits of their professional milieux.

## 1 Initiation into the film press

Suzanne Chantal and Paola Ojetti both achieved key editorial roles for high-circulation film magazines in their respective countries. Although their social backgrounds and career paths differed in many ways, they shared some of the same qualities and skills.

### 1.1 Before entering the editorial profession

Following a prologue connected to her previous book, *Le cœur battant*,<sup>8</sup> Suzanne Chantal began writing her memoirs in 1926 while she was 18 years old and bored in the bank where she worked, which led her to apply for a position as a secretary for the French branch of the First National. Nothing in her family background or upbringing predestined her for cinema. Born Suzanne Beaujoin, she lived in the northern suburbs of Paris. Although her family was humble (her parents were modest employees from the middle class), she received a thorough and surprisingly liberal education for the time (Chantal 1977: 28–29).

She confesses she knew nothing about cinema when she was recruited to the advertising department of First National (*Ibid.*: 23). She discovered it through the documents that she provided to journalists, which constituted her first contact with the press. Gradually, she was entrusted with other tasks: writing publicity texts, star biographies, reports on films, interviews, and headlines. It is not known how she learned English, but it is certain that her marriage in the late 1920s to George Grace, then head of technical services at First National, helped her become bilingual. Until their definitive separation during the war, the two were a couple without children, giving each other a lot of freedom. Each was careful not to hinder the other’s career, which led Suzanne to adopt a pseudonym so as not to sign her articles with the name of her husband who had become an editor (*Ibid.*: 48).

6. See also Bertieri 1994: 13–32 and Berruti 2015. The figure, albeit with a very different profile from Ojetti, of an Italian woman film critic and cultural mediator who commenced this activity in those years, such as Giulia Veronesi, was also investigated by Jennifer Malvezzi (2021). In the Italian context, mention should be made also of the exceptional case of Matilde Serao, who, until her death in 1927, was reviewer of the daily newspaper she founded and directed *Il Giorno* (Annunziata 2008).

7. Between 1933 and 1937, Luciana Peverelli was editor of the magazine *Stelle*, a periodical dedicated to stardom and aimed at a female audience (Saponari 2017).

8. *Le cœur battant* tells the love story between Josette Clotis, Suzanne Chantal’s best friend, and the writer André Malraux.

With the arrival of talkies, Warner Bros. swallowed up First National and she resigned. A journalist then suggested she write for *Cinémonde*. On 24 October 1929 she published her first article, a presentation of Frank Lloyd's *The Divine Lady* (Chantal 1929). It was followed by a few weeks of secretarial work, translation of intertitles for a film export agency in the Middle East, and other tasks for a short-lived production company, all punctuated by occasional publications in *Cinémonde*. Finally, Chantal joined the magazine's team for good in March 1930 when its director changed.

As Emmanuelle Champomier notes: "The number of female editors in the film press in the 1920s and 1930s was not very high and much lower than the number of male contributors" (Champomier 2018: 249). In the annual directories entitled *Le Tout Cinéma*, the heading "journalists and film critics" increased by two-thirds between 1929 and 1939, while the percentage of women remained starkly low, at around 7%. At *Cinémonde*, 27 women published at least five articles during the same period, compared to 191 men, i.e. 12,5% of the film periodical's journalists. This difference is probably due to fan magazines' greater openness to female authored articles, by comparison to the corporate press, which reflected its larger female readership. At *Cinémonde*, the two most productive journalists until the war were women: Odile D. Cambier (636 texts) and Suzanne Chantal (571 texts), followed by Maurice Bessy (410 texts).<sup>9</sup>

Paola Ojetti's background was certainly different from Chantal's, having grown up in a family at the centre of Italian cultural life. She was the daughter of Ugo Ojetti, an important Italian art critic, journalist, and member of the Accademia d'Italia. For decades the historic villa in Fiesole, Il Salviatino, where Ugo Ojetti and his wife Fernanda Gobba settled in the early 1910s with their infant daughter Paola Ojetti (1911–1978), was a prestigious social salon for Fascist Italy's artistic, intellectual and political elite (De Angelis 2020; U. Ojetti 1954). Paola Ojetti's upbringing was thus characterised by her inclusion in a very prestigious social network and by a high-profile education, which favoured music and foreign languages, among other things (Moretti, 1960). Thanks also to her father's apex role in the Florentine and Italian cultural context, in the early 1930s she was commissioned to write translations of Shakespeare for Max Reinhardt's productions at major festivals (Ruggiero 2016–2017). Furthermore, Ojetti's knowledge of foreign languages prompted her to enter the field of film production, working as a translator of dialogues for dubbing.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, she assumed a crucial role at one of the most important editorial offices of the late 1930s and early 1940s in the cinematographic press. Nonetheless, Mino Doletti was appointed director of *Film*, while Ojetti was assigned the role of editorial secretary, which was unlike the case of Suzanne Chantal, whose title within the editorial team — although unofficial — reflected the recognition of the centrality of her role. Moreover, although Ojetti's signature had a constant presence in *Film*, the *Almanacco della donna italiana*'s lists of women workers at the end of its 1941–1942 issues included Ojetti among the *pubbliciste*, who were non-professional journal collaborators. Finally, if Paola Ojetti became central to the editorial office (Fig. 2) and in *Film*'s self-positioning within the contemporaneous elite cultural context, we have to emphasize that a whole series of other names of female collaborators emerged from the pages of the periodical and from the correspondence of the Fondo Mino Doletti, confirming a far more varied working universe than can be expected.

## 1.2 Commitment in the launch of a new major film magazine

*Cinémonde* and *Film* have a lot in common. They were both mainstream film magazines devoting space to film criticism, as well as to serial novels, attractive illustrations, and competitions among readers. They offered surveys and interviews, historical and cinephile insights, testimonials from stars and directors, columns on various topics, and even, in the case of *Film*, fascist propaganda. *Cinémonde* was founded in 1928 by Gaston Thierry and Nath Imbert.<sup>11</sup> It was a large format weekly, offering twenty illustrated pages with a high-quality heliogravure printing: "a great modern magazine"<sup>12</sup> for its time. Sponsored by *Le Petit Parisien*, one of the

9. These figures are based on the magazine's index compiled by Calindex (<https://calindex.eu/>).

10. FMD, V/1366, letter from P. Ojetti to A. Cavalcanti, 20/11/1938; see also Biarese, Camerini 1986. For an in-depth look at Paola Ojetti's background and eclectic path in the cultural sector in the 1930s and 1940s, see Guarneri, Scabelli 2023.

11. It disappeared in 1971, with an interruption between 1940 and 1946.

12. *Un grand illustré moderne* [A Great Modern Magazine] is the title of a film report made by Pierre Chenal in 1928 on the making of *Cinémonde* (copy kept at the Archives françaises du film).



Fig. 2. Page 7 of *Film* no. 7, 1942 (source: Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, Roma), caricature made by Nino Zà of the *Film* editorial staff with Paola Ojetti as the only woman. We remain at the disposal of any rights holder.

largest daily newspapers of the time, its printing is estimated at 100 000 copies during the 1930s (Beylie 1993). In 1930 Jean-Michel Pagès, journalist at *Le Petit Parisien*, was appointed director of the publication and Maurice Bourdet became editor-in-chief. Bourdet was not a film specialist and, at the end of the year, he handed over his responsibilities to Suzanne Chantal, who was only twenty-two years old at the time.

Unlike Paola Ojetti, Suzanne Chantal did not take part in the founding of *Cinéma*, though she was an early contributor. Although chance played a major role in it, her beginning was not unusual. In 1922, G. Michel Coissac, president of the Professional Association of the Film Press declared: “Journalism [...] requires what we will call a vocation in the etymological sense of the term, and above all a training. One can be born a poet, one becomes a journalist” (Reusse: 1922<sup>13</sup>). Journalism then remained a profession that was largely learned in the field, sometimes by vocation and above all, like Suzanne Chantal, through networks. It was her enthusiasm for the cinema, her appetite for writing, her great capacity for work, her availability, and finally her interpersonal skills — “You get on well with everyone” said Bourdet according to her memories (Chantal 1977: 65) — that led to her meteoric rise. The fact that the magazine was in its infancy also played a decisive role, since it presented the task of putting together a new team.

*Film* was founded ten years after *Cinéma*, at the beginning of 1938. The weekly magazine was born from and developed under the auspices of the Fascist regime, even if in its pages we also find contradictory elements to the dictatorship’s ideology (Bisoni 2010: 519–520; Holdaway, Manzoli 2020: 108–114). In a letter to Ojetti dated April 1939, Giuseppe Vittorio Sampieri explained how the newspaper project came about. First there had been a friendship between him and Paola Ojetti, backed by her illustrious father Ugo Ojetti, whom in the same letter Sampieri defined as a legend of his youth. Only later did Mino Doletti, the official director of *Film*, joined their ‘team’, and the idea of a film periodical emerged.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the long list of letters sent by the

13. All English translations have been made by the authors. The original quotes have been included in the footnotes when they were longer than three lines.  
 14. FMD, XXV/6971, letter from G.V. Sampieri to P. Ojetti, 21/04/1939.

editorial secretary between late 1937 and early 1938 reveals her essential role in the foundation of *Film*.

A closer look at the first months' correspondence demonstrates not only Ojetti's dense activity and her relevant social network, but also a vision, an editorial line, planned and devised by the editorial secretary for the magazine. In particular, the column "Trenta righe di..." [Thirty Lines of...] provides a key example of her role: in the very first pages of *Film*, an intellectual would offer, in a few lines, her or his thoughts about cinema, with the inclusion of a handwritten signature at the end. In the first issue of the magazine Ugo Ojetti himself shared his idea about cinema for this column, while, in those that followed, many prestigious figures connected to the cultural and powerful salon of the Salviatino participated thanks to Paola Ojetti's mediation. In the third issue, Ada Negri answered the Florentine journalist's request, written with her "old and much devoted friendship" in order to offer cinematography "proof of seriousness."<sup>15</sup> Despite her worries about her own lack of expertise and negative prejudices about the theme, the acclaimed poetess finally submitted her piece for publication, pending on Ojetti's approval: "If you don't like it, you can throw it in the bin."<sup>16</sup> Again, in the subsequent issue, the *Corriere della sera* journalist Guelfo Civini, a colleague, and friend of her father, took up another affectionate epistolary request sent from the editorial secretary by proposing the short article "Noi grigioni" — title that could be translated as "we, the grey-haired people" — which offered the 'hoary' generation's view of cinema.<sup>17</sup>

Through the voices of frequent visitors of the Salviatino, referential figures from multiple cultural fields, as well as her father's generation, Paola Ojetti aimed to assert the cultural legitimacy of cinema to both general and educated readers, and to demonstrate that her periodical was "very serious, not the usual movie stories that interest only house-maids."<sup>18</sup>

## 2 Their Girls Friday and much more

Suzanne Chantal and Paola Ojetti continued to play central roles in these magazines after their launch. The sources studied enable us to appreciate their manifold activities, though largely invisible or rendered so.

### 2.1 Official and unofficial activities in the editorial office

At the time, Suzanne Chantal's appointment as editor-in-chief of *Cinémonde* was an exceptional promotion for a woman in France. However, it remained largely unofficial. As she points out: "There was never a 'title'. I never signed a contract. No name ever appeared in the newspaper, not even the boss's. Oh yes, the graphic artist's name, and the signatures on articles..." (Chantal 1977: 187). However, there is evidence that the young woman did indeed assume the position. For example, she is referred to as "editor-in-chief of *Cinémonde*" on a photograph published in June 1933<sup>19</sup> (Fig. 3). The use of the masculine term "rédacteur en chef" in French reveals both the mentality and the sociological realities of this position at the time. The absence of an official title reflects the magazine's artisanal operation. Suzanne Chantal remembers: "*Cinémonde* wraps up quite late. We only work there in the morning, a very small team, where everyone does a bit of everything. To send texts and layouts to the printer, I wait for Maurice Bessy, who sends captions, titles and headlines with me" (*Ibid.*: 55). In addition to this small team, Chantal was responsible for coordinating the activities of dozens of occasional contributors. She herself published a lot. Finally, she guaranteed the magazine's attractiveness through the organization of games, like the "Most Beautiful Blonde in France" competition, which took her and the winner to the United States in order to meet Jean Harlow (*Ibid.*: 139–154<sup>20</sup>). The youth of many contributors and their passion seemed to be the driving force behind the magazine. Maurice Bessy, who assisted Suzanne Chantal

15. FMD, XV/4212, letter from P. Ojetti to A. Negri, 03/01/1938.

16. FMD, XV/4212–4215, correspondence between P. Ojetti and A. Negri, 03/01/1938–31/01/1938.

17. FMD, VI/1663, letter from P. Ojetti to G. Civinini, 24/12/1937; XV/4241, letter from P. Ojetti to A.S. Novaro, 11/02/1938; I/101, letter from P. Ojetti to F. Alfano, 14/03/1938; XVIII/5063, letter from P. Ojetti to R. Romanelli, 14/03/1938.

18. FMD, I/26, P. Ojetti to M. Reinhardt's secretary A. Adler, 27/11/1937 (original in English).

19. *Cinémonde* (1933) (245): 535.

20. See also *Cinémonde* (238, 240, 241, 244 and 245).

before succeeding her as editor-in-chief, was two years younger than her. In his own memoirs, he writes: “We only survived thanks to the common passion that united us, the love of cinema” (Bessy 1977: 40).

At the end of 1934 Suzanne Chantal suffered a miscarriage. She was still in bed when Maurice Bessy told her that Jean-Michel Pagès had decided to entrust him with the organization of the magazine: “the boss thought that you couldn’t take care of everything at once...” (Chantal 1977: 187). The violence of this decision, full of sexist undertones, did not put an end to Suzanne Chantal’s collaboration. She published less but remained very active in *Cinémonde* (Graph.1). She even participated in its fabrication, writing the captions for the illustrations of an Easter issue for example.<sup>21</sup> Her diaries reveal that despite ten years of activity she did not have a professional journalist’s card in 1939.<sup>22</sup> Her exasperation with film journalism seemed to be growing: “I have decided to quit *Cinémonde* and film journalism”, she wrote on 18 April 1939, before reporting the next day: “I am going to *Cinémonde* to quit. Long discussion with Maurice Bessy, who tells me that I can do whatever I want at *Cinémonde*, and refuse anything I don’t like. And it all ended without result, as usual”. In 1939 Suzanne Chantal published only 23 articles in the magazine. This is partly due to the fact that in June she embarked on a long journey to cover President Salazar’s tour of the Portuguese colonies for *L’Excelsior* (a newspaper belonging to the same group as *Le Petit Parisien*). On her return, war was declared. Like its main competitors, *Cinémonde* disappeared in June 1940.

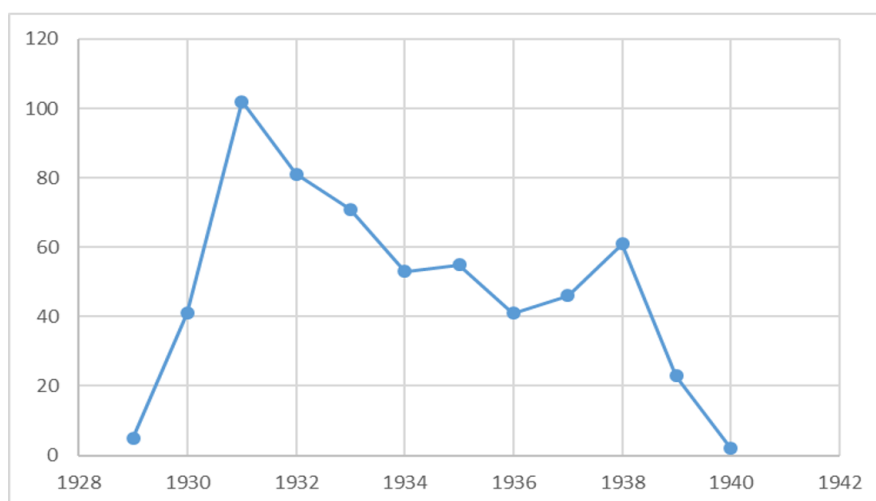


Fig. 3. Suzanne Chantal (with a leaf and a bouquet in the centre of the picture) returning from a trip to the United States, photograph published in *Cinémonde* (245) on 29 June 1933

21. Suzanne Chantal’s personal diary, 10 March 1938 (private collection).

22. *Ibid.*, 14 January 1939.





Graph. 1. Articles written by Suzanne Chantal in *Cinémonde* between 1929 and 1940

Paola Ojetti also took on multiple tasks and roles within the editorial team of *Film*. In a special coverage for the magazine's celebration of its four years in 1942, she describes herself as the magazine's "watchdog"<sup>23</sup>: a secretary always agreeing with the director, whose occupations were limited to responding to readers and soliciting late contributors, "serving" the newspaper for sixteen hours a day without filling a single column. However, as already pointed out for the early months of the magazine after the foundation, the same correspondence referred to by Ojetti herself in her ironic piece, along with the perusal of the magazine, reveal far more than that. In addition to responding to Doletti's indications, she carried out her own activity as a critic and journalist, offered to translate and revise articles, provided a cultural exchange to her collaborators, managed columns or proposed them, and, above all, she was the core of a fundamental network of contacts. The importance of her role often seems to clash with her official title of "editorial secretary" and in two different correspondences she is even referred to as *Film*'s director: "la direttrice di *Film*."<sup>24</sup> Paola Ojetti's connections and skills (such as her knowledge of English and French, and her operational experience in film production, music, and theatre), developed through her eclectic work in the field, were of fundamental importance for *Film*.

As far as her personal initiative is concerned, her education and passion in the field of music have been fundamental. First, she had strategic acquaintances and opportunities of cultural exchanges and collaborations with composers and musicians.<sup>25</sup> Already in 1937, Paola Ojetti had published an article on music's relationship with cinema for the film press periodical *Lo schermo*. Interestingly, her text also focuses on the defence of cinema, as often emerges in her editorial correspondence, celebrating it as an "art without borders" (Ojetti 1937). Moreover, this strong interest led her to elaborate, propose and manage the column on records in *Film* with Renato Levi. Levi, who died tragically in 1944 in the Auschwitz death camp, was the owner of Magazzino Musicale in Milan, a well-known record store and small record producer. Between 1933 and 1937 he had even been the editor of a monthly record bulletin that was notable for its progressive and cultured thinking (Zucconi 2015). In her letter dated January 14<sup>th</sup> 1938, Ojetti asked Levi to take charge of a column that she had planned. He was supposed to write about a record that originated from a film or that had a close connection to a movie currently screening in cinemas. In issue no. 5 we find, for the first time, this column on records that, as in several subsequent ones, was signed with the pseudonym "La puntina" (Levi 1938). Ojetti's correspondence with

23. The very title of this article by Ojetti about her work experience in the editorial team was "Io, cane da guardia", that would be "I, watchdog" (Ojetti 1942).

24. FMD, XVII/4903, letter from S. Ricciardi to P. Ojetti, 02/01/1938; FMD, XVII/4905, letter from P. Ojetti to S. Ricciardi, 04/01/1938; FMD, I/100, letter from R. Alessi to P. Ojetti, 04/04/1942.

25. In regard to contacts with composers and musicians, see various correspondence from the Mino Doletti fund and also the letters preserved in Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale of Florence, Carteggi vari, Nucleo Ojetti-Gatti. Ojetti even published a music-themed children's novel in 1938 and co-directed with musicologist Guido Gatti a collection of music textbooks in 1937–1938.

Levi continues up to November 1938 and shows their constant exchanges regarding these articles, the result of Ojetti's conception and initiative.<sup>26</sup>

## 2.2 From personal to professional life

Both Suzanne Chantal and Paola Ojetti dedicated themselves with great energy and passion to the running of these two magazines. Their commitment and numerous activities led their professional and personal lives to intertwine in different ways and at various levels. Suzanne Chantal's work enabled her to achieve comfortable financial independence. Pagès offered her 3,500 francs a month as editor-in-chief of *Cinémonde* (Chantal 1977: 65), when the average salary of a worker in France was 722 francs a month (Pikety 2001: 679). We can see in her diaries that by the end of the decade she had become freelance by choice: "He [J.M. Pagès] tells me that I can come back to *Cinémonde* whenever I want and for a salary that I will set myself."<sup>27</sup> She earned less from *Cinémonde* at the time, but much more overall from her multiple activities, as the balance sheets she drew up at the end of each month testify (Fig. 4). Within her relationship, she had the largest and most secure income, while her husband regularly faced unemployment.

Yet her income did not provide her with any personal stability, partly because it was not guaranteed every month once she became a freelance worker, and above all because her activities took over her life, even causing her health problems (Chantal 1977: 208–213). Suzanne Chantal was constantly on the move, searching for information, investigating, interviewing, taking part in social events which were opportunities to strengthen and expand her network. In addition to her frequent visits to the studios in Paris suburbs, she travelled throughout France and abroad (England, Hungary, Italy, Sweden, Unites States, etc.). In 1938, she accompanied her husband to Spain on the shooting of André Malraux's *L'Espoir*, for which he was the editor. She published a gripping report on the event, intitled "Cinema under the bombs" (1938). She moved several times and, wherever she was, she wrote. Her diaries show that she had neither place nor time dedicated to work. They show a life based on work and female friendships, while her distended relationship with her husband appears to have been a constant source of preoccupation. Cinema crosses and connects these three poles — work, friendships, married life.

As already pointed out, Paola Ojetti knew how to skillfully exploit both mundane memories, expressions of esteem, or friendship and working cultural topics to find opportunities to write to important personalities who could send a prestigious article for *Film*. Examples of the circle related to the Salviatino have already been provided earlier in this article, but Paola Ojetti also built and strengthened her social network through her eclectic work and interests in the cultural sector. For instance, she took advantage of the contacts she had established through her jobs as a translator in order to get contributions to the periodical: her letters could reach illustrious names, such as Karel Čapek, to whom Ojetti recalled her Italian transpositions of his *Novelle*; and Max Reinhardt, through the memory of her work adapting the Shakespeare's plays he directed in the early 1930s.<sup>28</sup> In her correspondence she sometimes also referred to encounters she had made in her work as a translator for dubbing or in lectures she had attended or given herself.<sup>29</sup> Thus, in addition to her familial connections, her work in the cultural field also facilitated her development of friendships within a network of intellectuals, two groups that often interlapped and nourished one other.

In Paola Ojetti's working correspondence preserved at the Fondo Mino Doletti of the Renzo Renzi Library of Cineteca di Bologna, and in the personal correspondence preserved at the Fondo Ugo Ojetti of the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna of Rome and at the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale of Florence, the public or professional dimension seems deeply intertwined with the private. Exchanges of a confidential nature often took on a performative function and were embedded within social constructions that were fundamental to career development. In fascist Italy, it was precisely the domestic and private dimension, to which propaganda

26. FMD, XII/3505, letter from P. Ojetti to R. Levi, 14/01/1938. FMD, sheet J-K-L XII.

27. Personal diary, 1<sup>st</sup> December 1938.

28. FMD, III/735, letter from P. Ojetti to K. Čapek 05/03/1938; FMD, I/26, letter from P. Ojetti to A. Adler (Max Reinhardt's secretary), 27/11/1937.

29. Regarding the mention of conferences, an example is: FMD, IV/840, letter from P. Ojetti to P. Collaert, 24/01/1938 ; FMD, I/66, letter from M. Basaglia Albani to P. Ojetti, 06/09/1939.

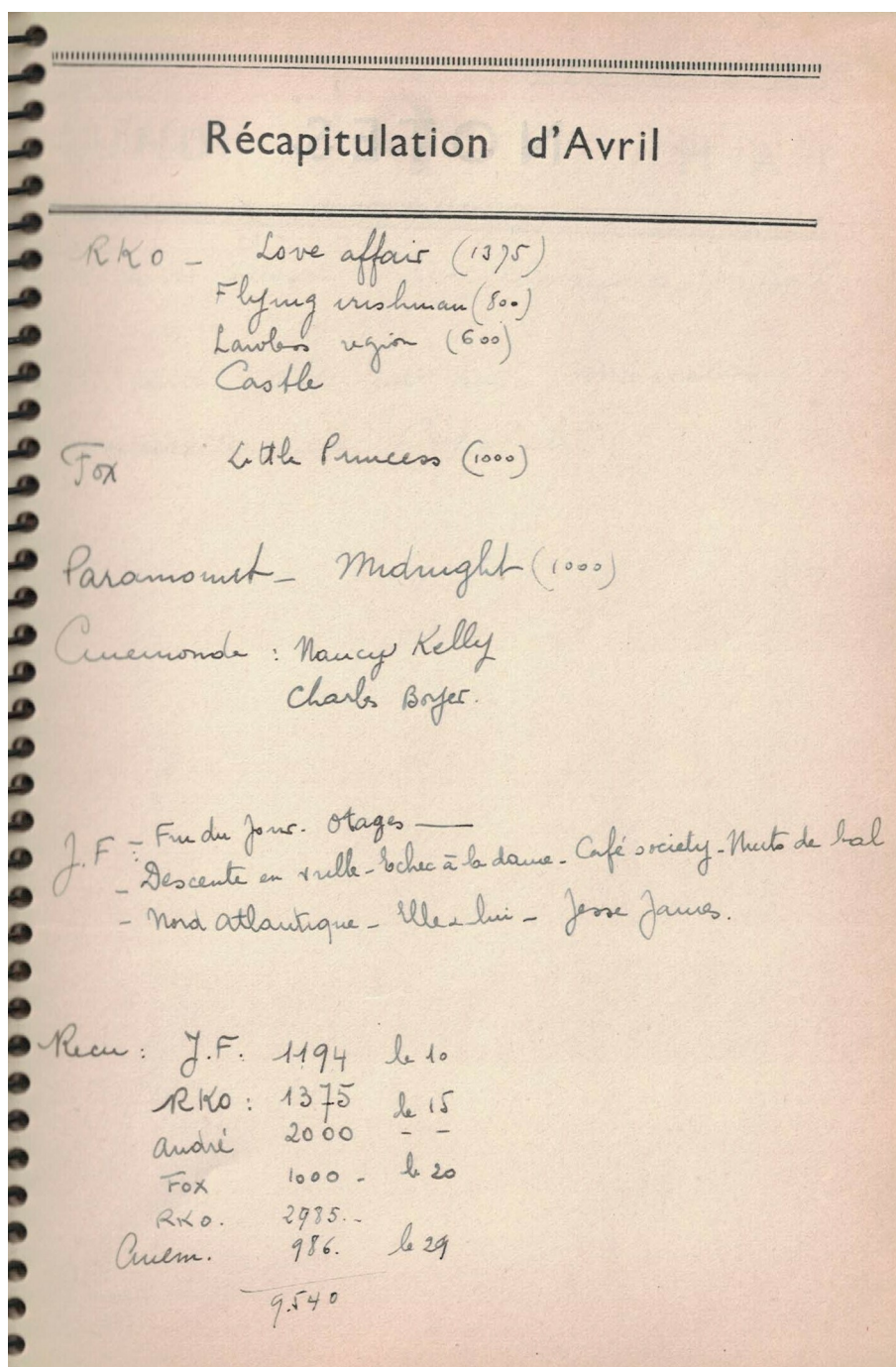


Fig. 4. Suzanne Chantal's receipts in April 1939 (Suzanne Chantal's personal diaries, private collection)

wanted to relegate them, that often-provided women with the key, the tools, to build a working route and carve out a professional and independent experience for themselves (Ferrando 2021). Paola Ojetti was able to take advantage of such a rich and prestigious home dimension and consolidate this *modus operandi* over the years of working in the cultural sector. It is no coincidence that in her previously mentioned piece concerning her editorial work, “Io, cane da guardia”, she defines *Film* first and foremost as an “epistolary family”:

Yes, I am presumptuous, but I think that ‘Film’ is also a big family, private and not just public, an epistolary family as well as, first and foremost, a journalistic family: a big, welcoming and affectionate family in which there is so much warmth (Ojetti 1942).<sup>30</sup>

### 3 Nods to gender cultures: being a female film journalist

In the vast family of film journalism and criticism women were rare and their roles were to a large extent gendered. Suzanne Chantal and Paola Ojetti both experienced this, and each produced work and developed networks through which they asserted their singularity.

#### 3.1 Articles on cinema

Suzanne Chantal was not hired without ulterior motives by Gaston Thierry who, according to her memoirs, told her: “You will write very feminine articles for me” (Chantal 1977: 48). Moreover, it was him who suggested that she took a female last name as a pseudonym, as if to emphasise her identity as a woman (*Ibid.*). The young woman wrote 441 articles for *Cinémonde* between 1929 and 1940 under the name of Suzanne Chantal. But she also published 130 more under the male pseudonym of Michel Gérard, an anagram of her married name, Suzanne Grace.

In addition to these texts, Suzanne Chantal wrote for many other newspapers and magazines, including *Le Film Complet* (specialising in film novels), the cultural weekly *Marianne*, *Le Journal de la Femme* (founded in 1932 by the feminist Raymonde Machard), and the daily *Paris-Soir*. Most of her contributions were on cinema, where her skills were recognised, which was not the case for other subjects (“Saw M. Boutrer who told me that R. Machard said I was inept at everything that was not cinema”, she noted on 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1938). Although her publication rate was remarkable, many film journalists were multiplying their collaborations at the time (Champomier 2018: 246). Suzanne Chantal also pursued her activities as a translator, subtitling hundreds of films. Her diaries reveal that, by the end of the decade, this had become her most lucrative activity.

Almost half of her texts in *Cinémonde* deals with actors, a little less than a third about films (reviews but also reports for on-set filming); the rest is divided between stories (films novel or tales) and articles on a wide range of subjects such as censorship, advertising, or even subtitling, which she knew so well (Chantal 1936). She published plenty of articles explicitly addressed to women (on the celebrity beauty tips, for example – 1931c) or assuming a feminine expertise (on male sex appeal for instance, when her article on female sex appeal the same year was signed “Michel Gérard” – 1931b; 1931a). She often evoked a touch of humour, but never condemned female spectators who dreamed of the stars. In fact, her writings show a certain taste for the romantic, which does not exclude a complicit irony with readers. Although film reviews were secondary, her writings nonetheless reflected her cinephilia, characterised by a predilection for Hollywood and a small number of artists who worked mainly there, though not exclusively. Among them were several actresses who embodied strong and independent women, representing models of female emancipation, such as Greta Garbo and Katharine Hepburn.

Unlike Chantal, Ojetti was a recurring author of the *Film* review column “Sette giorni a Roma” [Seven days in Rome] during 1938 and 1939, and an occasional reviewer in the following years. In the RSI years, while producing enthusiastic reportage on the Venetian *Cinevillaggio* (Carpiceci 2010: 556, Ghigi 2010: 450), she would be an assiduous presence in “Sette giorni a Venezia” [Seven days in Venice].<sup>31</sup> In addition to film criticism, Ojetti

30. Original quote: “Già, io sono presuntuosa, ma penso che ‘Film’ sia anche una grande famiglia, privata e non soltanto pubblica, una famiglia epistolare oltre che, anzitutto, giornalistica: una grande famiglia accogliente e affettuosa nella quale c’è tanto tepore”.

31. Giuseppe Ghigi recalls her film comments for the Venetian daily *Il gazzettino* (Ghigi 2010: 452, 454).

used her vast cultural background, such as her expertise in music, dubbing, translation, theatre and cinema production, and even the experience in elite social circles with her witty verve and captivating references, to enrich various articles she wrote for *Film*.

Among Ojetti's reportages and interviews, her conversation with Alba De Céspedes in 1940 about the film adaptation of the writer's emblematic novel *Nessuno torna indietro* is paradigmatic in a gender culture perspective. Ojetti's admiration and affinity for her friend, which also emerge from editorial correspondence, led her to extol De Céspedes as a crucial and powerful female voice of the day<sup>32</sup>:

Alba de Cespedes is not, for those who do not know her in person, a woman: she is a myth. I would almost say that her name surpasses her; if you say it with your eyes closed, instead of seeing a face you see a cover: Alba de Cespedes..... Alba de Cespedes... a cover with a group of girls... a novel that induced its readers to many sleepless nights: here is Alba de Cespedes (Ojetti 1940a).<sup>33</sup>

This does not seem to be an isolated case. Paola Ojetti, despite faithfully adhering to the perspective of a newspaper framed by propaganda models, did not hesitate to praise women's career paths and their charisma as leading figures. This came across not only in her affectionate exchanges of correspondence but also publicly, in the columns of *Film*. Again, in "Una nuova compagna. Laura Adani capocomico", Ojetti (1940b) celebrated the authoritative role the actress had achieved, applauding the fact that the young star had become "the owner and absolute mistress" of her own theatre company.

In 1939 "Sette giorni a Roma" review of *Per uomini soli* (*For Men Only*) directed by Guido Brignone, Ojetti seems to ironically reference fascism's politics and even its regulations against female labour<sup>34</sup>:

Outside certain offices it says: 'We do not hire female personnel'. Here, on the other hand, it seems to say: 'We don't accept female members of the public'. None of this, women; enter without fear because you must see Fanny Marchiò affectedly disguised as Greta Garbo with black glasses long trousers and fatal debauchery [...] (Ojetti 1939).<sup>35</sup>

Despite writing for a fascist magazine and being part of a fascist circle, Ojetti recognised and choose a particular path for herself as a non-conformist. It is not possible to analyse here Ojetti's or *Film*'s entire production and the complexity of gender cultures that they coexisted with. Yet these examples seem particularly relevant in a periodical like *Film*, that was, as Jacqueline Reich notes, directly addressed to a female audience (2000: 136), as well as thrived on fascist propaganda and Minculpop approval, albeit with its own contradictions, as Claudio Bioni points out (2010: 519–520).

### 3.2 Female networks and friendships

As Marie-Ève Thérénty observes, during the interwar period in France, "women's networks were fully operational" in the world of journalism (Thérénty 2019: 236). We can see in her diaries that Suzanne Chantal sometimes received and advised women who wanted to become journalist. Yet her own beginnings were encouraged by men. She notes: "I have always enjoyed male company. [...] For ten years I have relied on male friendship, I have cultivated it, it has been precious to me in work and in leisure." (Chantal 1977: 320) In some respects, through her independence and the responsibilities she assumed, the young woman refused gendered assignments. It is perhaps in this sense that we should understand Malraux's remark, recorded on 5 April 1939

32. FMD, VII/1843, letter from P. Ojetti to A. De Céspedes, 08/09/1940. Guido Bonsaver (2013: p. 151–158) retraces the stages of the film's troubled production because of the representation of female models antithetical to the canons of fascist propaganda. Ojetti would also collaborate on the screenplay composed by De Céspedes and Alessandro Blasetti (see: Cineteca di Bologna, Fondo Blasetti, 0044 *Nessuno torna indietro*. Relazioni, P. Ojetti to A. Blasetti, 07/02/1943).

33. Original quote: "Alba de Cespedes non è, per chi non la conosce di persona, una donna: è un mito. Direi quasi che il suo nome l'ha sopraffatta; se lo pronuncia a occhi chiusi, invece di vedere un volto vedi una copertina: Alba de Cespedes..... Alba de Cespedes... una copertina con un gruppo di ragazze... un romanzo che ha fatto trascorrere molte notti insonni ai suoi lettori: ecco Alba de Cespedes".

34. De Grazia 1993: 167–181.

35. Original quote: "Non si assume personale femminile, c'è scritto fuori di certi uffici. Qui, invece, sembra ci sia scritto 'Non si accetta pubblico femminile.' Niente di tutto questo, donne; entrate senza paura perché dovete vedere Fanny Marchiò gestosamente paludata da Greta Garbo con gli occhiali neri pantaloni lunghi e divicolamenti fatali [...]".

in her diary: “André says that I don’t care about misogynists because I am one of the rare women to whom misogyny cannot be directed.” However, between seduction and sexist reflections, Suzanne Chantal’s femininity was a constant reference point, as illustrated by the reaction of Jean-Michel Pagès when she hesitated to leave for Portugal: “The bad faith of J.M. who says: I should have known better. Every time you work with women...”<sup>36</sup> (12 June 1939).

Furthermore, she confesses that she preferred women for “their professional conscience, their capacity for work, their enthusiasm” (Chantal 1977: 320). Her memoirs evoke mainly her friendship with Josette Clotis, whom she met at *Marianne*.<sup>37</sup> If Clotis is indeed omnipresent in her diaries, these attest more generally to the importance of women in Chantal’s private and professional life. For example, the names of Lucie (Derain) and Odile (Cambier) appear several times, both of whom were very active journalists in *Cinémonde* but also in many other newspapers and magazines. A dense network of female friendships and solidarity emerges through these pages, in which Suzanne Chantal found support and a form of stability that compensated for the worries caused by her relationship with her husband and by the international tensions that she commented on regularly.

The case of Paola Ojetti also demonstrates the construction of a women’s network, made up of prestigious names, which offered Ojetti work opportunities, support and esteem for her activity in the cultural sector and, of course, the articles for *Film* signed by illustrious female names.

In a letter of February 1940, Paola Ojetti congratulated Daria Guarnati on her art magazine *Aria d’Italia* [*Air of Italy*], expressing all her admiration for a female colleague and director of such a reputable publication.<sup>38</sup> The compliments towards the periodical that Ojetti playfully called “Aria di Daria” [“Daria’s Air”] led *Film*’s editorial secretary to nostalgically recall her first literary salary: one hundred *lire* for a piece in the magazine *Domus*, money she had used years later to subscribe to the “Società degli autori.”<sup>39</sup> Ojetti’s enthusiasm for a magazine edited by a female journalist is extremely significant when considering her own career path.

Looking closely, Paola Ojetti’s prestigious social network was populated by female esteemed voices. This women’s circle also played a major role within her wider system of relations.<sup>40</sup> To describe in detail an example of this dynamic, we can gesture to Margherita Cattaneo, Alba De Céspedes, Ada Negri and Ojetti herself, who were not only close friends but also wrote several significant articles for either *Film* or the *Almanacco della donna italiana* from Cattaneo’s 1939 editorial.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, the correspondence between Ojetti and these illustrious female names, by no means marginal in the Italian culture of the time, demonstrates their strong feeling of affinity and the awareness of sharing a similar path within the cultural sector of the fascist period, while they frequently offered each other collaboration proposals, work opportunities and publicity.

## 4 Conclusion

The careers of Suzanne Chantal and Paola Ojetti in film criticism and film journalism continued long after the periods studied in this essay. After the Second World War, the former published less in *Cinémonde* (re-launched in 1946), but she was in charge of the readers’ letters column until the mid-1960s (Sellier 2023). The latter continued to collaborate with Doletti for *Film* then for *Film d’oggi*. She even contributed to the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia’s magazine *Bianco e Nero*, writing or translating in-depth articles (Ojetti 1948; Leyda 1949; Agee 1950; Jacobs 1950). Both continued their eclectic activities in the cultural field, particularly as they related to translation. Beyond the different contexts of their respective countries, their professional trajectories suggest that film press could be a job favourable to women in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

36. Personal diary, 12 June 1939.

37. Josette Clotis’ career as a writer and journalist was soon interrupted when she met André Malraux and became his mistress.

38. FMD, XI/3281, letter from P. Ojetti to D. Guarnati, 25/02/1940.

39. *Ibid.*

40. This network appears in the comparison of the correspondence of the Fondo Mino Doletti and of the Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna of Roma, Fondo Ugo Ojetti.

41. Additionally, the signatures of Irene Brin and “Vera” Rossi Lodomez are also on both periodicals. Moreover, alongside Paola Ojetti’s circle, other female networks gravitated around *Film* and the members guaranteed each other (see: Peverelli 1941).

In the case of Suzanne Chantal, film journalism appeared to be a milieu full of opportunities because it was booming, it still had little legitimacy, and it offered a variety of contents with numerous supposedly feminine subjects. Coming from a social background outside the world of culture and the press, Suzanne Chantal was able to quickly build a professional network thanks to her personal talents and her great capacity for work. It is significant, however, that once the success of the magazine was established, her position as editor-in-chief was taken away from her in favour of a male colleague. Indeed, as in Italy, the paths to reach a position of power were extremely difficult in France for a woman and such a position was never definitively acquired. Married but independent and childless, Suzanne Chantal was certainly an anti-conformist (a personality trait that seems to have been decisive in her career) in a France that was natalist and still harbored very conservative conceptions of women.

The case of Paola Ojetti is emblematic: she was not just a journalist, but a real film critic due to her assiduous participation in the *Film* review column. Similarly, she was not only an editorial secretary, but also a decisive and vital figure in the editorial office. The weight of her economic-social starting position in her professional success was considerable. Her social capital and her ability to diversify her cultural interests played a major role in the construction of a non-normative career, which also seems partially at odds with her adherence to the fascist environment.

It is of course impossible to draw general conclusions from these two case studies. However, this comparison consolidates a methodological outlook that places private sources and microhistory at its centre. It also provides some possible pathways for an international scale investigation of women film critics between the 1930s and the 1940s. Finally, it invites us to continue our investigation into the history of female film critics and journalists. This requires, first of all, to go beyond the historically consecrated pantheon of the great names of criticism (who are almost exclusively all male), by reopening newspapers and magazines in search of contributions by women. This can be accomplished without limiting the research to critical texts, and by opening the corpus to more journalistic articles. Taking an interest in the workings of these publications is also essential, in order to understand the various roles that women may have assumed, and that are not always limited to writing articles. It is also necessary to contextualize their careers at various levels, placing these women within their oftentimes informal professional networks, which they constructed in order to carry out their work. It is important to reconstruct their social, economic, and cultural background, and it is equally essential to broadly consider their wide-ranging paths in the professional field. Lastly, it also appears crucial to underscore the female networks and gendered discourses in their production.

To make such a history, we need to find sources akin to document activities that are all too often invisible. In this respect, sources of a personal or even intimate nature, such as correspondence or diaries, are particularly valuable. They allow us to approach singular experiences where the private and professional spheres are often closely linked. These sources favour a fertile micro-historical approach, from which we conduct cross-cultural analysis. This study has traversed the lives of the journalists studied, representing multiple sources. Through their contents and their very existence, they offer a unique insight into private and public trajectories. Moreover, these documents highlight the blurred boundary between public and private life. On the one hand, they affirm the social dimension of women's work and their presence in the public space; and on the other hand, they show the fundamental relevance of understanding the "behind the scenes" of an intellectual product, such as a periodical, in order to provide a full picture of its social and cultural history, and the product's cultural legitimisation framework. If they are rare, it should be borne in mind that this is partly due to their invisibility in the archives. Because of both women's self-censorship and a lack of recognition of their work, the collections related to men are much more numerous. Occasionally, these collections bear the traces of the women who were their colleagues; other times we must look to their families, in the hope that these documents have survived. Accordingly, working on the history of women film critics and journalists leads us to reflect once again on the very conditions in which film history has been and can be written.

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