Early Film Theories in Italy, 1896-1922
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Published by Amsterdam University Press

Mazzei, Luca, et al.
Early Film Theories in Italy, 1896-1922.
Amsterdam University Press ed. Amsterdam University Press, 2017.
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The birth of cinema raised a great deal of attention all over the world. Italy was no exception: between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, we encounter several accounts dealing with the new discovery. Interest was first captured by film’s technical aspects. A good example is Edipi’s text, which opens this section:

Do you know what a cinematograph is? The photographic reproduction of the ‘fleeting moment’ through the succession of hundreds of thousands of operations.

You embrace a pretty young woman. Then, 800 instantaneous photographs gather the different gradations of your embrace in an orderly fashion. Then a machine sets the numerous photographs into vertiginous movement. A continuous series of sparks illuminate them. An electric reflector slams them up against a canvas. A magnifying lens brings the very small dimensions of the photograph to almost natural proportions. ...And you present a spectacle of the intensity of your affection to the cultured audience.¹

Edipi’s report, published in 1896 in the lavish and fashionable journal Fiammetta, is based on inaccurate information and free imagination—in some ways, it looks like the Medieval description of monsters and chimeras—and yet it bears witness to how technology elicited popular curiosity.

The presence of the ‘machine’ was relevant for at least two reasons. On the one hand, it distinguished cinema—as well as the gramophone—from traditional forms of representation, so much so that both media earned the widespread appellation of ‘mechanical arts’.² On the other hand, it connected film to Modernity, an age characterized by an overwhelming usage of machines. This second aspect led critics, journalists, and writers to consider film itself as a symbol of a new epoch, characterized by new habits and values. Cinema mirrors the conditions of existence that emerge in a ‘twilight hour such as our own—the twilight of the dawn!’ as Ricciotto Canudo writes.³ Moreover, it embodied the forms of perceiving, and of relating to the surrounding reality, typical of modern times.
The Characteristics of Modern Civilization

Giovanni Papini, then one of the most perceptive intellectuals in Italy, heralded such an approach in a provocative intervention published in the daily *La Stampa (The Press)* in 1907: ‘Those who reflect a little on the characteristics of modern civilization will not find it difficult to link certain facts related to motion pictures with other facts, which reveal the same tendencies.’ Hence an appeal to the philosophers: if they want to understand the current reality, they must get out of the libraries and attend the movies. In the new leisure establishments, the true philosopher ‘could uncover new concepts for reflection, and—who knows? —he may even find new moral emotions and new metaphysical suggestions to explore.’

Among the tendencies of Modernity spotted by Papini, the first was the presence of an economic orientation: we regularly try to save money, time, energy, not because we are lazy, but because of our desire to do and to have more. Film delivers short stories of great intensity, which we may enjoy with negligible expense, minimal effort, marginal cultural involvement, but with a greater satisfaction than the usual theatrical spectacles. Economy also applies to our senses: we tend to use sight more than hearing or touch because we can grasp whatever we encounter more readily and completely. Cinema, again, follows such a tendency: ‘It also has another advantage, in that it occupies only a single sense—sight—[…] and this unique focus is ensured even further, in an artificial manner by the dramatic Wagnerian darkening of the theatre, which prevents any distraction.’

Second, Modernity urges us to possess—physically and symbolically—the world: to conquer its whole parts; to unfold its multiple states and its inner laws; to control its processes for our own ends; to exploit its resources for our own purposes and projects. Cinema satisfies such a need: on the screen, the world becomes available to our eyes. Cinema offers ‘the reproduction of vast and complicated events over long periods of time,’ impossible to access through other means; it also ‘can show important true events only a few days after they have actually occurred’; moreover, it is able to show ‘a succession of movements taken from actual events and full of vitality.’ And while it is true that images on the screen do not make reality as such available to us, it is also true that the ‘impression of reality’ they create is so perfect that they look like a double of the real world.

Third, Modernity means a richer mental life. Movies go beyond factual reality; on the screen, we face a possible world that expands the borders of our actual world. ‘Anything that man could possibly envisage in his
wildest dreams or strangest fiction' becomes at the movies as real as what we encounter daily. Cinema feeds our imagination.

There are other characteristics of cinema that Papini does not mention, but that surfaced within the early debates. Film’s ability to capture life—an aspect that almost all ‘theorists’ touched on—is often connected with an emphasis on contingency. Modernity recognizes contingency as the counterpart of necessity; it appreciates not only what must be, but also what may be. Film, once again, reflects such an orientation: one of its most valuable capacities is to arrest the ‘fleeting moments,’ as Edipi claims in the aforementioned text, and as Lucio d’Ambra, in a text included in the next section, asserts even more strongly.

Another characteristic is the way spectators are implicated: Modernity considers an observer not as a subject detached from what s/he looks at, but someone who activates an embodied vision. Film, in offering an incomplete albeit persuasive image of the world, asks spectators to supply the lack of information and to connect fragments through their imagination, and in this way to cooperate in creating the representation on the screen, as Maffio Maffii underlines. At the same time, cinema captures some of the emerging social strata: its audience is mostly composed of workers, women, kids, and young people—ready to merge all together, as if they were drawn in by a common stream of life. As Giovanni Fossi writes, ‘Upon entering a movie theatre, one is instantly struck by the aforementioned diversity of the audience—which is more mixed here than at any other kind of performance.’

A further aspect worthy of attention is the scientific inclination that affects Modernity: film provides representations that are as accurate and exact as the ones offered by the most advanced tools used for experiments. It is not by chance that Ricciotto Canudo in ‘The Triumph of the Cinema’ speaks of a ‘scientific theatre’ whose essence is based on ‘precise calculations and mechanical expression.’ Canudo also underlines the most evident characteristic of Modernity: the acceleration of life, the vortex of existence. He does so through an impressive metaphor: ‘The driver who watches a cinematic spectacle after having just finished the craziest race through space will not have a sense of slowness. Indeed, the representations of life will seem to him to be as rapid as those he has just seen in the places he raced past.’ Film runs at the same speed as a roadster. Here, the parallel between the experience of Modernity and the experience of cinema finds its fullest expression.

I want add that in the same text (which was one instalment of two series of correspondences from Paris, titled respectively ‘Letters about Life’ and ‘Letters about Art’) Canudo also offers a sort of ‘negative’ match. Filmic
experience is sacred in its essence: it implies not an attendance, but a ritual, and not spectators, but believers. In this sense, cinema is a new religion—the one that is requested by a new epoch, and that allows the latter to dismiss traditional cults.11

Cinephobis Instances

We have seen to what extent these early writings equated cinema to Modernity—and to what extent film ‘theory’ functions as a ‘theory of modern experience’. This fact brings one more further aspect to the fore. Modern experience is exciting, but it is also dreadful. It implies a deep change in our habits and values, and any transformation is potentially threatening. Early film ‘theories’ thus also included a cinephobic component.

Let’s turn to Edipi’s ‘Cinematography’. As early as in 1896, he admitted that movies ‘might bring about strange moral and social upheavals’: in exposing on the screen the female body, often undressed, they challenge the safe borders between art and obscenity. Edipi tries to avoid any confusion—according him, ‘obscenity is in the mind of the person who is watching and listening, rather than in the thing that is shown or said’—and yet his answer does not revoke the presence of a certain concern, which would rise in a few years to the point that movies were considered as a ‘school of vice’, as Section 5 will illustrate.

An even greater source of anxiety is the wholesaling of traditional artistic principles that cinema allegedly elicits. Does modern experience leave room for aesthetic experience? In ‘The Art of Celluloid’, Enrico Thovez, a critic who would later become director of the Civic Museum of Modern Art in Turin, characterizes cinema as the domain of the copy, and since a copy represents the denial of what a true art must be, he consequently expresses his scepticism about film. Thovez is extremely perceptive: he captures the deep complicity between film and its epoch, so devoted to duplicates and reproductions, and he recognizes that the twentieth century ‘will simply be the century of Cinema.’ Nevertheless, while pretending to praise film, Thovez blames it: film is made from celluloid, a material popular as the cheap imitations of ivory, amber, tortoiseshell, and coral; if, on the one hand, it realizes an artistic democracy, on the other it merges and confuses true and false, singularity and similarity, essence and appearance, as celluloid does.12 Thovez adopts irony as his weapon, painting an enthralling portrait of the new medium. But behind irony, there is also a sense of suspicion that colours the whole essay.
We find a darker picture in Martini’s ‘The Death of the Word’, published in 1912. Once again, cinema is partnered with modern sensibility. In this match, what emerges is the sense of a nightmare. On the screen, everything—human beings and things—is stirred up by an infernal wind. Existence speeds to a start: a step is a race; a race, a flight; the gaze, a furtive glance; laughter, a grimace; crying, a sob; a thought, a delirium; the human heartbeat, a fever. Things are violently stirred up by the same fever as men. [...] It is a fantastic tumult: it is the mirror of the dreadful nervous disorder of our age.13

In such a devilish atmosphere, cinema misses its possible task: ‘The flickering machine which seems destined above all to reproduce squares of truth, today serves to mangle and to spit back out—in fragments that are shapeless and deformed—masterpieces of imagination and of human thought.’ The ‘death of word’ in this silent art is a symptom of a such mishap; only the great spectacle of nature, captured by short takes, may restore our spirit.

The most radical cinephobic stance is presented by Luigi Pirandello’s Si gira... (Shoot!) We did not include any excerpts from it in our anthology: the novel is well known, and it was quickly translated into English. However, the philosophical assumption underpinning the book is worth recalling: cinema is a ‘machine’, and, like modern machines, it enslaves men, instead of helping them. The cinematographer is ‘nothing more than a hand that turns a handle’; actors feel as though they are ‘in exile’ when they play, not having a real audience in front of them; and spectators, who enjoy the spectacle, are prey to a pure illusion that does not bring them closer to life, but, on the contrary, offers them a life engulfed, digested, and transformed into excrement. What Pirandello rejects is the filmic experience as such: at the movies, we do not really see, we do not really feel, we do not grasp what we are facing. It is not by chance that when the actress Varia Nestoroff looks at herself on the screen, she not only does not recognize herself, but she does not even understand who is shown and what she is doing.14 Once again, in parallel with modern experience, which reckons with a frantic but empty existence, film experience is ‘inexperience’—a situation in which we lose ourselves and our relationship to the surrounding reality. If it is true that early film ‘theories’ found their first, provisional shape as ‘theories of modern experience,’ it is then true that Pirandello provides a spectacular overturning: his theoretical novel offers an insight into the failure and collapse of modernity, and at the same time into the dark side of filmic experience. And yet, film remains a seductive object—something from
which we are not able to escape. At the beginning of Book 2, Pirandello describes a simple event—a motor-car that passes a one-horse carriage—as if it were seen through point of view shots and a shot/reverse-shot editing.

A slight swerve. There is a one-horse carriage in front. ‘Peu, pepeeue, peeeu.’ What? The horn of the motor-car is pulling it back? Why, yes! It does really seem to be making it run backwards, with the most comic effect. The three ladies in the motor-car laugh, turn round, wave their arms in greeting with great vivacity, amid a gay, confused flutter of many-coloured veils; and the poor little carriage, hidden in an arid, sickening cloud of smoke and dust, however hard the cadaverous little horse may try to pull it along with his weary trot, continues to fall behind, far behind, with the houses, the trees, the occasional pedestrians, until it vanishes down the long straight vista of the suburban avenue. Vanishes? Not at all! The motor-car has vanished. The carriage, meanwhile, is still here, still slowly advancing, at the weary, level trot of its cadaverous horse. And the whole of the avenue seems to come forward again, slowly, with it.

A final sentence addresses directly—and ironically—the advent of machines, and the sensations they generate.

You have invented machines, have you? And now you enjoy these and similar sensations of stylish pace.15

We already belong to such a world—and cinema is at the forefront of it: movies provide the eyeglasses through which to look at it.

Notes

1. Edipi, ‘Cinematography’, included in this anthology.
2. See Gaio, ‘Summertime Spectacles’, included in this anthology.
4. Papini, ‘The Philosophy of Cinematograph’, included in this anthology. Papini’s essay is part of a series of philosophical contributions that the author published in these years, mostly in Leonardo, the journal which he co-founded and directed.
5. ‘Compared to live theatre—which it partially intends replacing—motion pictures have the advantage of being a shorter event, less tiring and less expensive, and therefore it requires less time, less effort and less money.’
7. Maffii, ‘Why I Love the Cinema’, included in this anthology. Of course, Maffii is not Münsterberg, and yet we may find some unintentional resonances. See Münsterberg, The Photoplay.
9. On Modernity as vortex, also see Berman, All That Is Solid.
10. Canudo also highlights the ‘deification’ of speed: ‘We have created a new goddess for our Olympus. This goddess is Speed: completely worthy of the adoration that the ancients had for strength, and above all worthy of our greatest, most complex, and most refined sensibilities.’
11. It is not by chance that Canudo’s essay was published in the Christmas issue of a notorious anti-clerical and freemasonic journal, Il Nuovo Giornale.
12. ‘In its ‘seeming’ without ‘being’, in its deceiving with lucid ease, in its docile fitting in with every requirement, [celluloid] is truly the symbol of the mentality of modern life.’ Thovez, ‘Art of Celluloid’, included in this anthology.
14. Pirandello, Shoot!, p. 61. ‘She herself remains speechless and almost terror-stricken at her own image on the screen, so altered and disordered. She sees there someone who is herself but whom she does not know. She would like not to recognize herself in this person, but at least to know her.’
15. Pirandello, Shoot!, pp. 77–78. On this Pirandello passage, see Moses, Nickel for the Movies.