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The Philosophy of Cinematograph

Giovanni Papini

In just a short period, in every large town in Italy, we have seen the almost miraculous multiplication of motion picture theatres.

In Florence alone, the city for which we have accurate figures, there are already twelve theatres—that is one for every 18,000 inhabitants.

These theatres, with their invasive lighting, with their grandiose triple-colour posters replaced every day, the raucous arias ringing out from their phonographs, the tired calls of their small orchestras, the weary announcements by red-uniformed boys, are now invading the main streets, closing down the cafés, opening up to replace the halls of restaurants or billiard rooms, they join forces with bars. With a sweep of their arc lamps, they have the temerity to shine their lights into the mysterious old piazzas, and are even threatening to expel the live theatres, just as the tramways have replaced public carriages, newspapers have replaced books, and bars have taken the place of cafés.

Although the philosopher is by nature a person who lives a secluded life, generally opposed to noise and fuss, it would be a mistake on his part to ignore these new leisure establishments, leaving them for the curiosity of the kids, the ladies, and the common people.

Success such as this, in such a short period of time, must have some reason, and once he has discovered these reasons, it is possible that, in the motion picture, the philosopher could uncover new concepts for reflection, and who knows? He may even find new moral emotions and new metaphysical suggestions to explore. To the true philosopher—not the type who limits his contemplation to pouring over books, and whom we could define as a mere retailer of philosophy—there is no aspect anywhere, no matter how small, humble, unimportant, or ridiculous, that does not contain some serious matter for reflection, and those who philosophize only and exclusively when speaking of the external world or a synthetic a priori judgement bear a closer resemblance to an anatomist, who is incapable of discussing anything other than monstrous creatures and cases of teratology.

And therefore, movie theatres are just as worthy of some reflection, and I would strongly advise some of these sober and knowledgeable gentlemen to go a little more often. They could begin by asking themselves the reason why this luminous entertainment has become so popular with the public. 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. Compared to theatre—which it partially intends to replace—motion pictures have the advantage of being a shorter spectacle, less tiring and less expensive, and therefore it requires less time, less effort, and less money. We must remember that one of the characteristics that is gradually becoming increasingly important in modern life is the tendency to save money, not because of fatigue or cupidity—on the contrary, this generation produces more and is more wealthy—but precisely because, with the same amount of time, effort, and money, they can obtain more. Motion pictures satisfy all these thrifty tendencies simultaneously. It provides a short phantasmagorical spectacle that lasts twenty minutes, and anybody who wishes to do so can participate for twenty or thirty cents. It does not require a very high cultural level, a lot of concentration, a lot of effort in order to follow the plot. It also has another advantage, in that it occupies only a single sense—sight—since nobody pays much attention to the mediocre and monotonous music that acts as a background to the film. And this unique focus is ensured even further, in an artificial manner by the Wagnerian darkness of the theatre, which prevents any distraction, those greetings and furtive glances that can be seen frequently in sometimes too brightly lit live theatre.

But the popularity enjoyed by the motion picture theatre is not limited merely to petty economic reasons. It can also partially be explained by other aspects, which are more advantageous than live theatre, although it may be inferior in many other aspects. The greatest advantage consists in the reproduction of vast and complicated events over long periods of time, impossible to reproduce on stage, even by the most talented riggers. An expedition with all its vicissitudes, adventures with savages, the ship embarking, travel in Polar Regions, are representations that would involve endless scenery changes, and enormous space in order to give some semblance of realism.

On the other hand, sitting before the white screen in a movie theatre we have the impression that we are watching true events, as if we were watching through a mirror, following the action hurtling through space. These are only images—small, luminous, two-dimensional images—but they give the impression of reality far better than the scenery and backdrop of any of the best live theatres.

Another advantage over theatre that motion pictures can offer is that they can show important, true events only a few days after they have actually occurred, and not only a written description or a fixed illustration, but a succession of movements taken from actual events and full of vitality. In these cases, the motion picture combines the properties of the
daily newspaper and the illustrated magazine: Newspapers describe events shortly after they occur but without the images; magazines provide the images, but they are motionless and fixed in space, while motion pictures show us the pictures captured on film while they are happening. This offers our curiosity something unique: scenes of actual transformation.

Thanks to the secrets and the tricks of photography, which have given us incredible images (a man holding his own head in his hand, etc.) and false ghostly photos (nebulous and transparent human beings), now it is possible to obtain celluloid films showing the most incredible and extraordinary actions: people who suddenly disappear into the floor; figures that exit from framed paintings and begin to dance a minuet in the room; miraculous dividing up of bodies; processions of heads without bodies or bodies without heads; statues that come to life and begin to play music; animals transformed into human beings; people that can pass through walls; anything that man could possibly imagine in his wildest dreams or strangest fiction. In this respect, motion pictures help develop the imagination, a little like opium without the negative effects; the visual realization of the most incredible illusions. Thanks to photographic subterfuge, we are able to enter a world with two dimensions that is far more imaginary than our own.

But if these observations explain the sudden notoriety of the Lumière Brothers’ ingenious invention, even if only in part, they do not, however, justify my advice to philosophers. And yet, philosophers too, as well as moralists and metaphysicians, can gain inspiration in these darkened theatres instead of wandering about the marketplaces and piazzas, like Socrates, or among the tombstones like Hamlet, or on a mountaintop like Nietzsche. The world as it is presented to us in motion pictures is a great lesson in humility. It is made only of little images of light, small, two-dimensional images; and yet, in spite of that, they give us an impression movement and life. This is the spiritualized world reduced to a minimum, produced from the most ethereal and celestial of substances, with no depth, no solidity, dream-like, immediate, imaginary, unreal. This is how the existence of mankind can be reduced to a wisp without removing any of its reality!

As we watch those gossamer light images of ourselves, we almost feel like the gods contemplating their own creations, made in their own image and likeness. Spontaneously, the thought occurs to us that somewhere there is somebody watching us, in just the same way we are watching the figures in the motion picture and to whom we—who are flesh and blood, real, eternal—may simply seem to be coloured images speeding towards our death merely for his entertainment. Could the universe be simply a vast spectacular motion picture with a few changes in the programme now and
then, for the leisurely entertainment of a host of unknown supernatural powers? And thanks to photography, we discover how much our movements lack grace, how certain mechanical gestures seem ridiculous, the vanity in our absurd expressions, and how the divine spectators must smile as they observe us bustling about on this tiny planet, scurrying hurriedly in all directions, distressed, stupid, avaricious, absurd, until our role is finished and, one by one, we leave the screen for the silent darkness of death.