Summertime Spectacles: The Cinema

Gaio

The cinema is not a special summertime spectacle: the cinema is for all times and for all places: like the bicycle or the *bar automatico* (vending machine). When the dog days of summer rage on, and concert halls are shuttered, and theatres that are open are very few and barely survive—hanging on for dear life here and there—and even small variety show theatres languish while the stars and the divas, who temporarily come back down to earth, rest on their metaphorical laurels—both among the rocks of the seashore and non-metaphorical springs, only the cinema remains, undisturbed and surviving: the summertime spectacle *par excellence*. Films know no rest: their frenetic movement continues through the seasons with no respite: exactly as the voice of a singer, through the horn of a gramophone, becomes capable of the most sinister marvels of endurance. Let the dog days beat down: films demand no vacation, the—how can I put it—'gramofonized' voice of the singer never tires out—at most, maybe it tires out the neighbours. As it often happens in the middle of August, the most bitter enemies of mechanical art, first seen hesitating at the entryway that opens up new domains of theatrical illusion; now [they are] mixed amongst the regular clients who wait their turn in blissful calm, in front of the fans.

Let's be honest: the esteemed association of theatre owners seems resolved of their goal to keep away from their doors all those who suffer from or who pride themselves on some refinement in taste. Rascally posters, 'sensational' ads, arc lamps that shake and sizzle in narrow halls; frenzied sounds from player pianos, the shouts of barkers, the trills and warbles of the gramophones, electric bells that launch non-existent alarms always announcing an end that never ends and a beginning that never begins. One must acknowledge that the waiting is rather tormenting. Every once in a while, I have seen some novice who was daunted by the new Babel, fleeing before the gates were even open to the public. Even I, as a novice, felt these moments of distressing uncertainty. You know that in the movie theatre smoking is prohibited: so great is the fury with which gusts of smoke billow out to the left and to the right in anticipation of this imminent temporary abstinence: nor is there lacking, alas, with such great clouds a little bit of rain.

Everything ends down here, even the wait at the cinema. God willing, let us enter: and we enter quietly, without the confused stampede that
characterizes the Latin crowd when it moves with anxiousness in the conquest of a better seat. In the small halls of the cinema, the seats are established with much greater discernment than in traditional theatres. Except from the respect owed to Richard Wagner, it seems that here people have made a treasure out of his rules: from each seat in the hall, one must be able not only to see well, but see the entire scene equally well. It would be too bad if a man's hat were so extravagant and monumental that it ruined one's enjoyment of the show. The audience knows it, and yet, they do not rush: they enter without eagerness, sure of being well situated no matter what happens.

The ringing of a bell, the final echo of disasters now forgotten: some opening joke and then silence, and then darkness. (Wagner all over again!). What silence! That same audience that chats, coughs, and fidgets about in the theatres where people go to hear and to see—often more to see than to hear—here, where people go only to see, they don't even breathe. Hardly a stifled exclamation of wonder, hardly a weak whisper of commiseration underscore the moments of pathos: the bloodshed, the disaster, the end of the world. Rather brief comments are reserved for the very brief intermezzos between one 'number' and the next. Only towards the end, when the oddities of the farce follow one after the other with a frenetic crescendo, does some open laughter break the dignified silence. And when the lights come back on once and for all, the spectators, with the same calm composure, get up and leave very satisfied for one very good reason: they had a good time at a brief show, and for very little money. Three very rare requirements that make the cinema not only an excellent substitute for other theatres in the so-called dead season, but also a formidable competitor when the season is sprightly or alive with its greater vitality.

Indeed, look at how they are increasing in number. They're growing exponentially, they are spreading from the central neighbourhoods of the city into the periphery, they are invading old cafés, old trattoria, and even old theatres, which have thus been made obsolete. It seems that the future belongs to them. Nor should it be ruled out that by multiplying, they will not sooner or later have to improve themselves in those areas which seem in most need of improvement. For example, in the cinematic composition, in the so-called action, which cannot be confused with the reproduction of exotic countries and customs, of real life and real events. This second category of cinematic spectacles should get a unanimous vote. A voyage to Japan, a trip in the upper Nile, which costs a few cents, and which lasts a few minutes are, in a certain sense, measures of distributive justice. By virtue of machines, among the so greatly longed for possible equalities,
one is establishing itself that was completely unforeseen by sociology: the equality of man in travel. The same thing, using different words, could be said about ‘the happenings of the day’: the launch of battleships, the meeting of two sovereigns, car races, mine explosions, and so on.

With cinematic ‘action’, drama, comedy, or farce, we leave the state of necessity and enter into the state of possibility. One can do better, one can do worse. Here, criticism stakes its claim: like the filmmakers who want their own films protected by law (as I revealed in the most recent bulletin of the Society of Authors)...

Cinematic ‘action’ is essentially governed by the same norms that govern pantomime: a theatrical genre which, let it be said in parentheses, has been out of style for some time. The mime—the man who speaks with his eyes, reasons with his hands, and despairs with all four limbs—is pretty much considered a museum piece in our times. And yet, people who would fall asleep on their feet while watching a pantomime remain awake, even though they’re seated, and take a rather lively interest in a cinematic action that is put together well. Why?

Because cinematic action has a very particular, invaluable advantage over common pantomime: it can be—we acknowledge—situated in the real world. A love story? No problem: we will meet the protagonist either in the crowd of the city streets or in solitary walks in a public garden or on a beach. And they will be real streets, real gardens, a real beach. A crime on a train? Even better: we will project onto the screen a real train that arrives, that departs, that empties out, and that fills up with passengers. Life will animate the scenic fiction in a thousand ways that art can not. To hell with backdrops, papier maché trees, snowfalls of shavings, fireworks, and an electric sun! Life, with its countless little dramas and with its countless little comedies will accompany the preordained and fictitious events with a broad, inimitable rhythm. With the very rapid succession of the frames, unknown to pantomime, this diffuse and almost impalpable life will manifest its essential character (a supreme illusion), as if it were reproduced in its moving forms.

This is what happens in cinematic ‘actions’, even in those most ingeniously put together, the discerning viewer is often led to lose sight of the frenetic gesticulations of the ‘characters’, and to follow with his gaze the unknown little figure that crosses the street, the small group of people who have stopped to watch from far away, or maybe even the dog with the wagging tail who runs all around the improvised set...Life! The cinema is and must be the triumph of life. If the cinematic ‘actions’ are suitable or even necessary for satisfying the tastes of the widest audience, let them at least
take place in an *real* setting. The rolling of the eyes, the convulsive shaking, the desperate gesticulations of ‘characters’ will be more easily accepted if life is circulating and pulsing around them. Until the day (alas, it does not seem close) in which the ingenuity of filmmakers succeeds in giving an adequate shape to an artistic dream and in mechanically translating on the screen the highest and most marvellous fantasies. For now, the fantastic spectacles and *féeries* of the cinema are cold reproductions of modest choreographic actions: the wonderful device inevitably is less than pantomime. Movies, in their vertiginous tumult give us the exact image of those backdrops, those *papier maché* trees, those snowfalls of shavings, those fireworks, those electric suns, which are neither the envied, nor enviable patrimony of the true theatre. We thus have the faithful image of a more or less faithful imitation: something like an imitation raised to the second power. This is why, in what should be the sign of illusion, illusion is, as a rule, absent.

But no one can foresee where we will end up in the blessed dominions of this mechanical art. It’s just that we must not be hasty. Think of it: the basic principal of optics on which the cinema of today has flourished (a French scientist has just recently reminded us of this), was not unknown to Lucretius and was fully illustrated by Ptolemy, twenty and seventeen centuries ago, respectively. But in those days, the cinema was at most a fiery ember which, rolling through the air, drew a luminous curve. You know what it is today.

Do we want to bet that in seventeen or twenty centuries the cinema will have succeeded in giving an adequate shape to an artistic dream and in translating on the screen the highest and most marvellous fantasies?