Early Film Theories in Italy, 1896-1922

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Why I Love the Cinema

Maffio Maffii

I do not like visual spectacles that are too perfect as they are like an insult to man's fantasy, imagination, and creative genius. When the stage offers you all of the most minute, moving, and delightful details that you can think of, how can you feel exalted, interested, entertained, moved? I am convinced that when ancient theatre presented the audience with a permanent and extensive set—one made up of four columns, three doors—the audience's enjoyment must have been extraordinary because the quickness of their imagination, excited by the drama, created the rest of the scene in a flash. So, when Shakespeare was staged in the seventeenth-century England with a rough apparatus of a few lights and a few canvases, the spectators could understand the idea of a fantastical setting like that of King Lear or The Tempest or A Midsummer Night’s Dream. Today, even with a thousand games of electrical lighting, a thousand combinations of coloured glass and a thousand complicated mechanisms, it would no longer be possible to achieve that enviable result.

From this point of view, the cinema is most delightful.

Your imagination, excited by the constant passing by of shots, scenes, landscapes, and the most far-away and unusual settings, must work tirelessly in order to allow you the illusion of reality. When the flickering of lights and shadows on a white screen show you a train robbery in the middle of a forest; and then the inside of a ransacked postal carriage after the commission of a murder; and then a chase over an uneven plain; and then the inside of the jail where they have thrown the culprits; and then a large square with a gallows in the middle of it—you can reconstruct the entire story of the plot and the crime from all of these separate, rushed, and imperfect images. In the end, it’s you, it’s your mind that—relying on those few shots and those few fleeting signs—creates this frightful vision and represents it to you as something real. You fill up the gaps with your imagination, you depict the spaces in between, and you carry out the role of spectator a bit like an actor and a bit like a spectator.

All of that individual activity contributes to sharpening for you the pleasure or the pain (which is also always a pleasure in the end) of the optical, scenic, and dramatic illusion.

For this reason, I love the cinema.

It leads the human soul to the unreal—a reality that is the goal of every form and every work of art. With the simplest tools, it takes our imagination
into the most varied and complicated worlds. With cinema, even the most extraordinary féeries seem possible to us. And the magical marvels, which are most surprisingly fantastical, appear before our senses with the same certainty with which we feel the handle of a stick in the palm of our hand. The cinema is Ariostan.’

And one cannot love Orlando Furioso (The Frenzy of Orlando) and the Le mille e una notte (Arabian Nights) without also loving that crazy magic lantern that, in the space of a half an hour, transports our imagination across a hundred of the most unusual lands, through a thousand of the most sharp sufferings, to regions never seen and dreams never dreamed. If cinema has crushed theatre, the real reason is that the cinema is just more fantastical, more agile, and more idealistic than the theatre.


Note

1. [Editors’ note. The adjective Ariostan refers to the poet Ludovico Ariosto (1474–1533).]