The Movie Theatre Audience

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Edmondo de Amicis published a voluminous book entitled *La carrozza di tutti* (The Carriage for Everyone) in which he describes with his usual incomparable naturalness, the typical and not so typical people who ride the tram.

I would advise the illustrious author to write a new book to examine the people who go to the movies. To do so would be to draw out a magnificent study of environment, behaviour, and also psychology.

At this point, every social class has been put under the microscope of that inexorable busybody called ‘the psychological novel’. From Paul Bourget who, according to the happy expression of Celestina (the sensual maid invented by Mirbeau), examined the souls whose bodies have an income of at least 25,000 lira, to Mirbeau himself, who instead goes sniffing out the odours that emanate from the most nauseating mass of rotting human flesh. From the great Émile Zola, who inspected all the locales of the Paris of the Empire and of the Third Republic, to Alexandre Dumas, Jr., who descended into the heart of the prostitute, as all the greatest authors of our times have taken upon themselves the duty of writing thousands and thousands of pages in order to research in all places public and private, the subjects of their descriptions and their analyses: this is what is called ‘a study from life’.

And why couldn’t one write a book about movie theatres and therefore study not only the audience, but also the people who make it happen and who are put into motion by it?

New discoveries create new places and new customs—after having destroyed the old ones. In the same way, the destruction of certain neighbourhoods and the opening of new roads create new ways of living together and do away with old and traditional customs. The passengers and the staff of the stagecoaches of a hundred years ago were certainly typical: certain novels of Dumas and Paul de Kock give us some idea of this today. These are types which have now disappeared—and who were followed by the railway men and the people who travel on the railroads, who were described so skilfully in Zola’s *La Bête Humaine* (The Human Beast).

I previously mentioned De Amicis’ *La carrozza di tutti*, in which he describes a whole new world, one particular to this most recent mode of locomotion.

Who isn’t familiar with the countless descriptions, the intrigues, the portraits of manners, the analyses of the people at the theatre—both the
people who perform on stage and those who work behind the curtains, and finally—most interesting of all, the people who fill the boxes, the orchestra seats and the balcony? All of this is old news.

But, again, couldn't the cinema—this invention which has created a whole set of new customs—be the object of very interesting social study? Actually, this could offer an even more abundant subject matter insofar as the theatregoing audience is much more monotonous and homogenous, while the moviegoers are varied and changeable beyond imagination. Therefore, it would offer a succession of portraits which would be a treasure trove for the writer.

Further, the movie audience—which is predominantly made up of workers, women, children, and young people—is such that it lends itself well to observations that are more curious on some counts and more important on others: because workers and women are two social classes that encounter one another today with new outlooks on life, while young people and children—the eternal and renewing spring of the world—are in themselves an inexhaustible source of grace and gaiety.

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. Generally, there are few who sit in assigned seats: everyone pours into the seats for the general audience, where you'll find the factory worker elbow to elbow with an elegant young lady, the restless, middle-class child near some old, buttoned-up gentleman: members of one social class mixed with the other.

It is, therefore, a bit of democracy that spreads into their behaviour. Or rather, it is the new behaviour, the new invention, that invites the spreading of a democratic spirit. De Amicis observed the same thing, I believe, among the passengers on the tram.

Picture it—it is already night-time. A group of pretty, young seamstresses with a mischievous air about them invade the lobby with their noses in the air, among peals of laughter. Some passers-by notice them, and one, made eager by that manifestation of so much of God's grace, decides to throw away 20 cents in order to find himself in their midst in a dark room for a good half hour. Or, there's a group of kids who have just gotten out of school who wait for the exact minute that the theatre opens and then rush in, with their schoolbooks under their arms, leaving their mothers to worry about why they're late.

There is no lack of amorous adventures. Do you see that young woman accompanied by her maid? All of a sudden, she stops in front of the movie theatre, as if an idea has suddenly come into her head: she suggests to her maidservant that they go in for a moment—just to rest for a bit. With a sneaky air, a young man enters the lobby alongside her and starts to read a
newspaper. But, inside the theatre, this guy will find a way to sit down near the young woman. In the darkness, the two people—who appeared to not know each other—will give each other their hand to innocently hold, and perhaps long and passionate messages. With all that darkness, it’s so easy!

One audience that is more than a little curious is that made up of soldiers. Those soldiers who have come from remote villages and who know nothing about the big city are an especially nice object of observation. Ill at ease, they almost don’t dare to sit on the elegant seats. And then, as soon as the show starts, you see them with their eyes wide open: of course, the experience exceeds all of their expectations, and they find that some small change is certainly not too much to pay in order to enjoy such a marvellous thing.

There’s also the audience that we will call ‘the occasionals’, who only go to the movies every once in a while, or by chance. Who hasn’t gone into the cinema after a long trek through the city, or half-way through completing some task, in order to rest from one’s weariness, or because of the impatience of waiting for the tram that seems like it will never arrive? While you’re inside, three or four tram cars will pass by. But what does that matter? You’re tired of being on your feet. The cinema there in front of you tempts you with its multi-coloured posters and the shouts of the barker; meanwhile, the chords of the piano and the orchestra—with their concertos reaching your ears—succeed in persuading you. And you enter.

There is the servant-girl who has come here to spend the money that she pocketed while doing the shopping for her masters that morning; and there’s also the scoundrel who wants to try to see if he can scrape together a little something while he’s inside: a handkerchief, a shawl, whatever.

To be honest, however, these suspicious people are found more rarely at the cinema than elsewhere. We know that it’s not the people with fat wallets who want to go into the cinema. Besides, we have seen that we’re dealing with an audience nearly always made up of people who, even though they may be of a moderate social condition, are not those best-suited to being robbed. It is the same thing for unscrupulous women: naturally one finds more of them at the theatre or in cabarets. Even though, every now and then, there will be some example of them, for someone looking for this kind of women.

To sum up, the audience at movie theatres is among those most worthy of being observed and studied. We are pointing this out to our authors so that they will know how to derive a pleasant subject matter from it for their prose.

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