Early Film Theories in Italy, 1896-1922

Mazzei, Luca, Alovisio, Silvio, Casetti, Francesco

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Towards the close of the last century a serious issue stirred up controversy: who might be the man or what might be the fact or the idea that could assume the honour of conferring its name on the dying century. Chronology and history delight in such designations: centuries, like notaries' green box files, must have labels. It is generally accepted that the sixteenth century was that of Leo X, the seventeenth century was that of the Sun King, the eighteenth century that of Arcadia: arbitrary designations, irrational and false, but eminently memorable and, as such, powerfully educative. Might the nineteenth century be the century of steam or Herbert Spencer, electricity, or Richard Wagner? Italian patriots, ready as always, claimed there could be no doubt that this was the century of Giuseppe Verdi. The question remained unresolved and will have to be decided by posterity—who will have no such doubts, however, when it comes to naming the new century. If a period of time is to be called after a being or idea that had most influence on its spirit, which has most profoundly dominated human existence, then that designation can already be predicted: the current century cannot be given a name: it can no more be the century of Marconi than Santos Dumont; not the Suffragettes nor Alceste de Ambris; neither the century of the refouleur corset, nor yet Gabriele d'Annunzio: it will simply be the century of Cinema.

Since there is no work of art, scientific invention, economic tendency, speculation in ideals, or form of fashion that can compete in terms of vastness of influence, depth of penetration, or universality of consent with that humble wooden box, its handle turned by a poor wretch on a stool in the shadow of a backroom: the box in which the interminable reel of celluloid dotted with microscopic images unwinds, with the hum of a busy beehive.

Like a trail of gunpowder tossed to the four winds and then set alight at one end, cinema has spread through the world with breath-taking speed and invaded the most impervious recesses. Perhaps with great effort and stubborn tenacity you might manage to seek out some remote corner in which the parasite plant of the picture postcard does not flower, but you will find none in which the clock-ticking of the cinema's cogs cannot be heard. Incredible examples were once given of civilization's pacific penetration of wild thoroughfares: the name of the lucid Nubian written on the sacred rock of an Egyptian hypogeum at the height of the third cataract of the Nile,
or the Huntley and Palmer biscuit tin worshipped as a prestigious fetish by a Papua New Guinean tribe. Cinema has achieved far greater wonders: I am certain that, with a drop of walrus oil in the works, it lightens the long evening hours of the Eskimos in their ice huts on Baffin Bay and the Chukchi of New Siberia; or aids the laborious digestion of the anthropophagists of Tasmania or the Baghirmi. Differences, whether of skin or dress, whether ethnic, aesthetic, juridical, or social, all give way to that solidarity devoted to the sacred cult of the canvas screen and ray of light. It was possible in the past to convene representatives from all the religions to a congress in Chicago, and they say it was a spectacle which could bring tears to the driest of eyes and most immovable of unbelievers; but nothing will be more moving than the scene of brotherhood produced at the next congress of cinema enthusiasts.

So far, philosophers have denied the importance of the phenomenon: they have scorned it as a simple diffusion of vulgar entertainment; they have not observed that it is denser with social philosophy than an *encíclica rerum novarum*.

The history of the cinema has two clearly distinct stages, one almost the antithesis of the other. At first, there was the ingenious and faithful mechanical reproduction of reality in motion, that somewhat tremulous reality of tentative infancy, marred slightly by a strange skin disease like an eruption of shiny blisters, but nevertheless a sincere reality. As such, it appealed to those of cultured spirit and to artists, but was not much enjoyed by the masses. The passion of the masses was aroused when cinema abandoned reality and turned to artifice; when, with the aid of imagination, scenographic illusion, mimicry, and make-up, it imitated nature, creating farces and tragedies, idylls and comedies, visions and mysteries; when it placed itself on a par with art: when it became the facsimile of art, but at an affordable price.

The most striking feature of modern society is the creation of surrogates. Between diamonds of pure carbon and those of lead silicate there is no appreciable difference for the layman, as auctions and sales by court order sometimes demonstrate, to the pleasant surprise of creditors and heirs: between those buckles, pendants, and brooches chiselled by a Lalique, and those which display their seductive gleam for a pound or two from the rotating stands of the bazaars, behind glass casing starred with rather epileptic light bulbs, there is no aesthetic difference proportionate to the abyss between their prices. And it is the face of a dressmaker, rather than her cloth, when she has spent a few pence and a great deal of energetic bargaining breath at the open market stall, that distinguishes her from
the lady who ruminates anxiously over her three-figure bill (never mind the decimals) with its French names and Royal household crest. The trend towards equality, more than collectivism, in politics, tends to lead to aesthetic and hedonistic parity in enjoyment and vanity: this trend is, or at least appears to be, trying to provide everyone with the same quantity and the same form of pleasures; and since pleasures do not exist as such, but are the fruit of our illusion or the reflection of another’s envy, they are indeed provided in this way. Art and elegance used to be part of the aristocratic dominion, available only to those with culture, high birth, or wealth: now they are within reach of every pocket or lady’s purse, from those with gold or silver chains to those in yellow metal or nickel.

Among these many surrogates towards which the inexhaustible genius of modern industry is directed, there can be none so pliable, agile, and dextrous in bending itself in every way and transmuting itself in every nature as that humble product of wood paste treated with nitric acid and impregnated with camphor: celluloid! In its ‘seeming’ without ‘being’, in its deceiving with lucid ease, in its docile fitting in with every requirement, it is truly the symbol of the mentality of modern life. So much more than biblical modernism, which is turning its dogma inside out like an old dried glove to make it softer and more suited to today’s needs; so much more than reformist socialism, which uses the peaceful contact of oral persuasion to settle conflicts magically for freedom of labour; celluloid is an apostle for conciliation between classes and faiths, a conspicuous creator of well-being and social pacification. It supplies a pure and remorseless joy to anyone, especially of the female sex, who is unable to provide herself with ivory and agate, enamel and amber, tortoiseshell and coral: it soothes the pain caused by losing a comb in some flustered moment behind the sofa in a place to which returning will be inconvenient; it helps to accept with moral tranquillity the snapped paddle of a fan, rapped impudently in a gesture of pique against the terrace railing; it takes away the awe from the gift of a necklace pendant, to be conserved religiously like pure Baltic amber at the bottom of a drawer among gloves and garters; it allows the most modest throat to be adorned with an antique cameo, which may not have been engraved by the same Pirgotele craftsman who carved Alexander’s seal, but which can be dropped with impunity to shatter on the floor in fragments.

Besides the miracle induced in the material world of baubles, celluloid has achieved the equivalent in the ideal sphere of art and emotion. Just as the pliable paste has provided facsimiles of luxurious adornment, the transparent elastic strip, bearing the grotesque anatomy of movement dried onto it in infinite stills, has supplied the cheap substitute for the
laborious constructions of genius: from comedy to drama, from tragedy to poem; with the aid of its brother in democracy, the gramophone, it even substitutes opera in music.

It has substituted them, and dragged them down from their throne, because cinema viewing possesses undeniable superiority. To arouse emotion in the mass audience, even the most slapdash manipulator of drama on the stage had to exert a certain amount of effort in providing verbal passages as logical links to the events. Cinema has got rid of this burden for staging action: reduced to its essential dramatic scheme, it carries the spectator with race-car speed from the cause to the effect: he no longer needs to read the last page of the novel, or await the last scene of the drama with impatience to know the final outcome of the tale. What remains of the action is only the plot, which is like saying it is the only thing of interest to 95 per cent of those who open a book or enter a theatre. What used to employ three or four hours of painful sitting in the absence of cigars, the boredom of long intermissions, the tiresomeness of the out-of-tune accompaniment, can now be obtained in a few moments. The feats of the most imaginative delinquent can be rushed through in five minutes. In these five minutes, the burglar can break into the house, kill the maid, tie a towel round the neck of the lady of the house, empty the safe, escape by the window, be nabbed by the police, taken to prison, judged by the Magistrate, sent to New Caledonia; he can see through the prison bars, escape from the penitentiary, shoot the guards, wander through virgin forests, assassinate a wayfarer, flee from pursuing cowboys, get lassoed like a riotous horse, and be lynched on a tree.

But that is only the beginning: events in theatrical art used to take place with the natural rhythms of life: at most, the conclusion could be hurried along a little, omitting the odd month, or year, or five- to ten-year period between one act and another. Now, however, with the cinema reels set at a convenient rate, the events themselves unravel with lightning speed: people move, gesticulate, and act as if pervaded with the quintessence of life: an hour passes in a second, two or three months in a few minutes: the eye is only given the briefest possible chance to take in the action. With the minimal means for holding attention, the maximum of emotion is achieved. The cinema could legitimately adopt for its emblem that same symbol used by American meat extract producers: ‘an ox in a pot’. The human deed has been stripped of anything not indispensable for intensive nutrition: bones, skin, muscles, nerves, horns, hooves, tendons; all that’s left is a bit of salty sediment in a jar: the plot. You don’t even have to dissolve it in hot water like you do with a spoonful of Liebig, you just drink it as it comes: the water will be added on the way out, a long brew of comments to be infused
at leisure on the way home. Thus, cinema viewing abolishes the vexing need for thinking, suppresses the effort of reasoning, inhibits the logical control of instinct. No amount of discerning ingenuity can compete with its persuasive photographic realism: it is real in its falsity, false in its reality; it conciliates these two antitheses in aesthetic representation: character and ideal. It is the supreme form of democratic and socializing art, purified of any feudal aristocracy of thought, of any decadent preciousness of expression, of any abstruse symbol; the easy-access art for every intelligence and purse, contingent and transcendent, universal and eternal.

Theatre critics, dramatists, and actors therefore do serious wrong by protesting against the invading nature of cinema and complaining that the dark and unadorned salons of this new cult fill up with crowds who have deserted the bright and sumptuous ones of the traditional rites of the stage. They must take warning, the lesson is clear: their reproach is expressed in the sincere and enthusiastic support that the magic machine has received from a great artist. The divine Gabriele could hardly remain detached from this supreme renewal of the art: he who ‘goes towards life’, he who has adopted as the emblem of his activity ‘either renew oneself or die’, he who has written about himself: ‘everything was sought after and everything was attempted’; he who, in his soul of souls, has envied the gesture of those who yoke the ox or knead the dough, has also envied the far more remunerative gesture of turning the handle of the cinema projector. He who opened new heavens for painting, with the fabulous picture of the Parks painted for the Salon in Paris; he who supplied with his Acqua Nunzia perfume, an ambrosia for the refreshing morning ablutions of his exhausted female readers; he who at last provided a dignified seat for the tragic Muse, with the Albano theatre; he who, with the elastic wheel for motor cars, gave relief to chauffeurs from their troublesome pannes now announces the re-education of the soul of the masses through wonderworking compresses, the celluloid legends. In truth, the poet was already heading in the direction of this ideal of cinematographic art with his last work, La nave (The Ship). In this play the triumph of action over expression is clear. If, in its reading, the play’s verbal vociferation is appreciated by refined literary minds, on the stage it has no value in its semantic abstruseness for the applauding audience, other than a sonorous roar which might readily be substituted by the din of a wooden wheel full of pebbles which is used backstage to give the effect of thunder.

This was only a transitory form: we will be seeing the real thing shortly. Tragic dignity and mythical mystery will be brought into that ray of light, that evoker of images, by the poet. No longer just the kitchen maid plucking a capon and hiding the soldier in the dirty clothes basket; nor the servant
that lets the canary escape from its cage and replaces it with a duckling; the priest who tries to seduce the maid and ends up in his underpants in the street: we will be seeing Numa in his dressing-gown talking to Egeria, the nymph, and St. Francis shaking the paw of the wolf. Thanks to the rapidity of this modern device, all the confusion of relationships in the Hellenic Olympus will be cleared up in five minutes. The abstruse concepts of Indian philosophy, the Brahman mystery of metempsychosis, and that of Buddhist nirvana will become plastically tangible and comprehensible even for the fireman on shift or the red-jacketed negro giving out the programme.

And already the precursory signs of this glorious dawn are appearing on the horizon. Cinema is already turning its attention to the supreme creations of human imagination: we have already seen Hamlet appear on the magical ribbon, purified of the verbal exorbitance of William Shakespeare; already every evening Don Giovanni takes advantage of his 1003 lovers without getting out of breath in the effort. Soon we shall no doubt be seeing Tristan and Isolde gulping down their *filtre* and tacitly showing its effects, with cinematographic rapidity. Richard Wagner died too early: he missed out on this superb instrument of evocation; with the aid of transparent tape and an acetylene lamp he would have got over the only stumbling block in his colossal work: length! In quarter of an hour, the gods and heroes would have come out of that formless fluctuation of vagrant cells and precipitated into the mysterious shadow of twilight. The music would be lacking, but the majority of the audience wouldn't miss it. How many Wagnerians might experience some authentic pleasure for the first time! The Leipzig maestro would almost become worthy of a seat next to Puccini, even in the eyes of music publishers...