The Death of the Word

Fausto Maria Martini

Who knows if one day we won’t find in some new volume of Maurice Maeterlinck’s prose some interpretative article about the cinema! Don’t laugh: the theme would be perfectly in tune with the keen philosopher and nostalgic poet.

Once again, the small ivory ball rolling in the roulette wheel, or the sputtering of an automobile in front of which the rocky backs of the mountains submissively bow down like hired courtiers (this is an image of the poet’s from Oiseau bleu (Blue Bird)), inspired in him certain pages in which vivid descriptions and suggestive and fantastic inductions follow one after the other—ranging from the field of reality to the hyperbolic frame of his mystical conception of life. The roulette wheel, through mazes of aphorisms and paradoxes, was becoming the tangible expression of the Supreme Will that guides human works and that marks the events of the day. The automobile was just an exterior means through which the occult powers of the demons of speed could be revealed to man: these same demons who hang around droning infernal stories in your ear when a 40-horsepower engine drags you, amazed by the superhuman force, in between two lines of trees. The simple and common things of everyday life were suggested to the commentator [Maeterlinck], thoughts just as deep as those suggested to him by the contemplation and investigation of the most exhausted place of intimacy in the spirit. The essays ‘Au pays du hasard’ (‘In the Land of Chance’) and ‘En automobile’ (‘By Car’), which are collected in Le double jardin (The Double Garden) were and still are worth as much—in terms of poetic density—as the unforgettable pages on silence and on the soul which are collected in Le trésor des humbles (The Treasure of the Humbles).

Now, the cinema also enters the chronicles of modern life as a widespread and essential element: the audience responds to the spectacle offered by this miraculous machine as other audiences in other epochs responded enthusiastically to spectacles that were more serene and dignified. A few days ago, Abel Bonnard observed that a single spectacle at the cinema brings together as many people in one room as perhaps the most successful of the comedies. And it does this without offering its guests the special kind of entertainment that comedy offers: the entertainment of the entr’actes (‘the intermission between acts’). The audience resigns itself to the darkness of the room, renounces one of its most pressing instincts: the need to look
each other in the face and recognise each other. That instinct and that need lead to hearing the comedy of ideas, the problem play, the concert of the Ostrogoth maestro, and lead to attending, in short, all those meetings, which are like the exaltation of a feeling that a genius once defined as being most noble: boredom.

It must be, then, that some reason—even if it is hidden—justifies this new passion of the anonymous mass.

Let’s investigate.

The life of cinematic figures is the life of men hounded by a nightmare. Maeterlinck would say that is is like the life of characters in a play by Swedemborg, if Swedemborg had written a play. Everything—human beings and things—is stirred up by an infernal wind. Existence speeds to a start: a step is a race; a race, a flight; the gaze, a furtive glance; laughter, a grimace; crying, a sob; a thought, a delirium; the human heartbeat, a fever. Things are violently stirred up by the same fever that men are: even the earth’s lowest forms, which seem destined to teach man the supreme laws of peace and serenity, are crazed by the Uhlan evil. The countryside tremble. The mountains—divine examples of immobility—move, they waver, they fade away, they disappear.

It is a fantastic tumult: it is the mirror of the dreadful nervous disorder of our age.

This secret has been known for some time to the speculators of this new business. From active psychologists who study crowds, they have intuited which spectacles will better suit the tastes of the audience, and slowly testing the ground, they have arrived at attracting streams of people into the rooms where the great dramas, the traditional epic poems of humanity are schematized into their essential lines on top of a white canvas.

The flickering machine which seems destined above all to reproduce fragments of truth, today serves to mangle and to spit back out—in fragments that are shapeless and deformed—masterpieces of imagination and human thought. Some time ago, the thing that took the best place on the schedule at a cinema, and which sustained it, consisted of elaborate scenes in which the heroes of old serial novels or, in the best case, the principle characters from a historic novel (usually Maria de’ Medici, Enrico IV, or Napoleon) reappeared.

Today, even more is attempted. Today, the speculator has become more daring. He has taken the book of Homer, has taken the book of Shakespeare, has called up some random bookworm and has enjoined him to draw from these works a scene for the cinema. On that bright canvas we have seen: Ulysses and Nausicaa passing by, Othello getting upset, Desdemona dying,
Shylock shouting before the Venetian tribunal, the figures of Notre Dame de Paris chasing each other, and Hamlet meditating on the skull which has been disinterred by the cemetery’s gravediggers.

The audience got a taste of the scene, applauded, and left the theatre again feeling completely satisfied.

Isn't this joy, then, rather significant? What does this new sympathy and new passion mean for the crowd? Why hasn't the crowd rebelled against this undignified profanation? Ah! Is Carlyle’s aphorism that works of genius touch the hearts of the people and the mind of the critic equally then not true? Ah! Are the people then satisfied with the essential outlines of prototypes of mankind’s great dramas? Don't the people want to hear words? Are they content with gestures and action? Are they only interested in the story?

The word is dead thing. The word is wasted time. The word is an indulgence that the hurried inhabitants of sprawling cities cannot allow themselves to admire. Once upon a time, people used to read. People used to enjoy epic poems. Today, people read short occasional poems. Once upon a time, people used to savour novels page by page. Today, people skim through a novella—only if the title suggests the plot will have the feeling of a bit of the Grand Guignol in it.

Why, then, allow the renowned actor who puts on Othello's clothing, to recite those memorable lines which have been fed on the most aching humanity, before killing Desdemona as she sleeps in her bed? Why allow Hamlet to repeat for the thousandth time his monologue on death and doubt? Why make him tarry on the threshold of the great beyond? Why allow the poet to enclose in immortal verse the anxiety of the supreme passage?...What about the tragedies of Othello or Hamlet truly interest the audience? In the case of the former, it is the handkerchief of Desdemona that Iago had stolen, the strangulation of the innocent blonde carried out by the jealous Moor, and his death. For the latter, it is only the external signs of Ophelia's madness. The rest? Oh! The rest is literature and is not useful in the modern age. The rest—to use a phrase from Shakespeare himself—the rest is words: 'words, words, words.'

And the word is dead.

Is this a warning to dramatists and writers of comedies? I don't know. What is certain is that the crowd wants, for its pleasure, a lightning fast comedy, a lightning fast drama, which unveils itself all of a sudden, and terrifies them in a moment, to then be immediately forgotten. Since the day in which the indifference and the swiftness of the machine have substituted the love and the patience of the authors, the slow decay of the word and of the value of art has begun. Today, we are at the dégringolade.

And the word is dead.
Over the poet, the public prefers the machine which, through a stream of flickering light creates comedies and dramas, which are irreproachable and less demanding than the comedy or drama of a young person, that ask to live for at least the space of an evening.

Art (Oh! Not art, but the depraved shadow of the art) is granted the lifespan of an instant: it is enough—for the consolation of the children of this century—to extract just the basic miming and the inevitable gesture from mankind's masterpieces.

The actors and actresses linger on old, dusty stages against their will. They prefer the small set where a drama for the cinematograph takes place: they have lost their traditional line, they disdain the attention to and the religion of the word, they are made into mimes and nothing else. The effigy of Sarah Bernhardt is visible above the screen in the new theatres that are enriching their impresarios, and her tragic mask mask is very useful especially for the lens of a camera serves.

Is this truly the state of things? Who knows. It could be that this is the sad surprise that tomorrow brings.

Except that now that, through a natural venting, the alarm has been sounded, let's see if the new, great joy of the anonymous masses, the new passion of the People are hiding some element of genuine poetry in themselves.

If you go into a cinema, before watching the adaptation of a Shakespearian drama, you may happen to see the unfolding of nature scenes, surprises in the most far-off regions: forests, mountains, lakes, seas, a ship, a desert, a glacier, a small village in a very distant, unfamiliar land, a city that you love only for the loveliness of its name, a centre of life that awakened in you a tremendous curiosity when you were young, and a place to which you proposed to go, but to which you never will go...Correct?

So, in all of this there is poetry. In this way, the cinema finds its lyricism, satisfies a certain sentimental feeling which sleeps in all of our hearts—the nostalgia for those places that we have never seen, that we may never see, but where we almost seem to have lived in some previous life.

Do you remember that Dante Gabriele Rossetti poem in which the soul of the poet flies off towards some fantastical districts where he says to have stayed prior to his life? So, if you happen to admire the splendour of certain lands and of certain unknown places in an exact, cinematographic reproduction, that is why those sorrowful verses come to your memory: you were already in those places yourself. When? Who knows. In which roaming period of your spirit, which wanders all over the place?
For, in the end, thus is the psychology of modern man: fever assails him, life constrains him. But the more his daily routine binds to his chains, the more he remains the serene vagabond of the primitive age. And he enjoys it if some spectacle gathers two neglected borders of his land close to him; if it makes him think that at the same time those mountains, or those valleys, or those seas that he sees reproduced on film, reciprocally give their beauty to a rosy-fingered dawn, or to a romantic *claire de lune* (‘moonlight’).

In the end, it is the old ‘*amor de tierra loindana*...’ (‘love of faraway lands’) for which Rudel’s whole heart grieved.5

‘*La morte della parola*, *La Tribuna*, (16 February 1912), p. 3. Translated by Siobhan Quinlan.

**Notes**

1. [Editors’ note. Maeterlinck, *Double jardín* and *Trésor des humbles*.]
2. [Editors’ note. In several European armies from the fourteenth-century until the First World War, the term *Ulano* referred to a soldier in the cavalry armed with a lance and saber.]
3. [Editors’ note. From Act II, Scene 2 of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*.]
4. [Translator’s note. In English ‘collapse’.]
5. [Translator’s note. This sentence makes a playful reference to troubadour Jaufré Rudel’s notion of *amor de lonh* or ‘love from faraway’, a trope of Medieval love poetry coming out of the troubadour tradition in which the lover admires his beloved from afar. The joke here is that *amor de tierra loindana* could either be love ‘of’, ‘for,’ or ‘from’ farway lands.]