Section 2
Film in Transition

Francesco Casetti

During the 1910s, attention for cinema did not shrink: if anything, it became more focused and more widespread. Newspapers still had an interest in film. During the Italo-Turkish War, fought between September 1911 and October 1912, newspapers dedicated their front pages to images taken from newsreels, which depicted soldiers’ families and were intended to be shown to the combatants in order to keep their contact with the homeland alive. Newspapers also made room for public debates, like the discussion about the role of movies in national culture, hosted by Florentine Il Nuovo Giornale (The New Daily) between 20 November and 8 December 1913. Other disputes regarded the alleged conflict between cinema and theatre—a topic raised, among others, by Il Giornale d'Italia (The Newspaper of Italy) in February and March 1914—and the question of cinema’s effects on morality, hosted by Il Giornale d'Italia in 1917. Finally, newspapers opened new sections specifically devoted to cinema, such as the weekly column ‘Al cinematografo’ (‘At the Cinema’) in Turin’s La Gazzetta del popolo (The Peoples’ Gazette) from 11 November 1913 to 7 April 1914.

The interest of the weeklies was likewise increasing: examples include La Tribuna illustrata (The Illustrated Tribune) (a spin-off of the daily La Tribuna) and Il Fanfulla della Domenica (The Sunday Fanfulla), from which we have extracted two texts included in this section, written by Lucio d’Ambra and Edoardo Coli.

Eventually, an even stronger role was played by periodicals. It is worth noting that the second half of the decade saw the creation of publications of a new kind, addressed to a more highbrow audience, and characterized by a more sophisticated layout and more complex content. This trend affected cultural journals, like Cronache d’attualità (Chronicle of Current Events), founded by Anton Giulio Bragaglia, which was always attentive to cinema, but the tendency was particularly evident with film journals, like Apollon, L’Arte Muta (The Silent Art), and Penombra (Shadow) (which in 1918 changed its title and became In Penombra). The texts by Emanuele Toddi and Emilio Scaglione included in this section were hosted in this new kind of publication (as were texts by Sebastiano Arturo Luciani, Goffredo Bellonci, Anton Giulio Bragaglia, Lucio d’Ambra, and again, Emanuele Toddi in Section 6, and the short story by Federigo Tozzi in Section 7).
Film Journals

New film journals deserve particular attention. Indeed, they bear witness to the role that cinema played in the Italian society around 1915 and to the changes that characterized the social and cultural context. In the middle of the decade, Italian cinema was at its peak: having gained a widespread reputation, especially for its mega-productions set in Ancient Rome, it enjoyed in Italy and abroad a large audience and high revenues. In particular, it increasingly earned the support and the favour of the Italian petty bourgeoisie, a middle class with some cultural ambitions that did not want to be confused with the popular public, and that found a sign of distinction in elegant representations recalling Jean-Léon Gérome’s or Lawrence Alma Tadema’s paintings, and in chic props evoking Mariano Fortuny’s dresses. This class brought to the fore a sort of sophisticated modernity, in which the sense of tradition was not lost, and the new was not necessarily troublesome. This was a social group that loved d’Annunzio and his rhetoric, and laughed at Futurism and its excess; that did not abandon the cult of Verdi’s opera, but followed Puccini, and the operetta even more; that was nurtured by a liberal education and engaged in a large number of new professions; that wanted to pursue legitimate curiosity without falling prey to dangerous appeals by some radical trends of the time; that, even if not affluent, had money to spent on entertainment and small pleasures. While still an object of consumption for the popular classes, cinema became a perfect product for the petty bourgeoisie, with its desire for elevation and escape, elegance and scandal. Film was no longer a novelty which had to be interpreted; it was a commodity for a new audience that expressed a new kind of cultural taste.

The aforementioned journals played a huge role in this process. When speaking of cinema, they reinforced the values that their cultivated readers wanted to find in the movies. By discussing screens, they expanded what screens were offering in a way that provided what the middle class was looking for. They played a role that went beyond merely being complicit in the middle class’ movie-going, speaking to a need for recognition (and self-recognition) of a new social group, of new goods, and of new markets. Their action was inscribed in the framework that we have briefly described: the promotion of a more ambitious cinema for a more sophisticated audience and the promotion of a modernization that was at once smooth and effective. We will not find in the following pages the sense of an impending conflict, or even of the danger that is pervasive in other essays, especially the ones dealing with the psychological or sociological effects of the movies.
And yet, the change in sensibility that these journals recorded and promoted is significant on other levels.

Take, for example, the overwhelming number of pages aimed at publicizing forthcoming movies. Announcements insisted on the artistic quality of films: grandiosity, intensity, psychological depth, and accuracy were regularly mentioned as key features. At the same time, such a pronounced presence challenged the established idea that a journal had to be, primarily, an unbiased organ that oriented its readers: what advertising in this quantity revealed is that art had become a cultural commodity, to be consumed as such.

At the same time, advertising developed very innovative changes in the layout of journals. *L’Arte muta*, for example, offered folded pages that the reader could open out in order to have six full sheets displayed at the same moment (as in the advertising for the film adaptation of d’Ambra’s novel *Il re, le torri e gli alfieri* (The King, the Towers, and the Standard-bearers), in Issue 4/5 in 1916); we also find special kinds of paper, like tissue paper or rice paper, often tied to the elegant or exotic undertones of the advertised movie as well as photographs mounted on thin cardboard. These experiments tended to migrate to the entire publication, whose visual tone became not only more distinctive, but also recalled the feverish exploration of new territories undertaken by the arts of the time. It is not by chance that *In Penombra*, though less graphically advanced than *L’Arte Mutat*, nevertheless regularly employed famous painters and illustrators like Fortunato Depero, Cipriano Efisio Oppo, and Sto [Sergio Tofano] for its covers and internal pages.

The journals’ written contributions are equally revealing. First, we must underline the quality of the contributors. *L’Arte Mutat* hosted well-known writers and journalists, like Roberto Bracco, Matilde Serao, Eduardo Scarpetta, Emilio Scaglione, Eduardo Boutet, Florian del Secolo, and Saverio Procida; there was also often a section in French. *In Penombra*, founded and directed by Tomaso Monicelli—an interesting intellectual figure, and father of the future film director Mario Monicelli—went even further: every issue hosted an article or an interview with a major Diva, signed by an important writer (like Fausto Maria Martini on Lyda Borelli in Issue 1, published in November/December 1917). We find contributions by actors, filmmakers, professionals, and more than one essay devoted to urgent topics, such as the role of censorship or the state of film industry. There were critical and theoretical texts, columns, scripts, short stories, poems, and eventually articles on architecture, interior design, and fashion, which established a living connection between cinema and other aspects of modernity.
These journals opened a totally new context for reflection on film—especially compared with earlier publications, like *La Vita cinematografica* (*The Cinematic Life*), *La cinematografia italiana ed estera* (*Cinematography in Italy and Abroad*), and *Il Maggese Cinematografico*, which, despite being influential, were less elegant and less attentive to a wider scope of developments. With their graphic innovations, their sophisticated pages, and their more cultivated readers, they reflected and led a transition towards a new ground in which cinema would be rooted.

**Toward a Phase of Discussion**

There is also a second transition that is attested to—or even embodied—by the essays included in this section. It is a transition from an early phase of debate to an integral ‘theory’ of more defined and weighty topics. Since cinema was no longer a novelty, it was worthwhile exploring it in depth, focusing on the particular characteristics that connected it to modernity. Three major points of attention were thus central: how cinema related to the social processes of its times, either aligning with them, or making them more complicated thanks the creation of new aspirations and habits; how cinema interacted with the spectator’s psychology, either improving his or her skills and competencies, or raising new obstacles and challenges; and how cinema improved our comprehension of the surrounding world, thanks a depiction of reality with often unexpected results. During the second decade of the century, these questions raised the interest of experts who answered them in medical, psychiatric, pedagogical, religious or political publications. Sections 4 and 5, respectively centred on educational and cognitive issues, bear witness to the presence of this kind of approach. This section includes texts that are not directly linked to a particular discipline, but rooted in a phenomenological approach, a broad curiosity, and a sense of dialogue with the readers. The aforementioned film journals hosted contributions by intellectuals, writers, journalists, but not ‘experts’ in a strict sense: we find in them essays, not reports. And yet, these essays revealed the need for a more specific and detailed approach: due its relevance, cinema deserved multiple forms of attention. Indeed, we are here in a sort of transitional stage: on the one hand, these essays want to avoid any specialization and keep a direct focus on film; on the other hand, they are aware that it is time for a multi-layered and a multifaceted approach. They move between a previous stage, in which what mattered was the sense of surprise in response to a new and successful invention, and a later...
one in which cinema was to become the object of a more dedicated and methodological investigation.

The essay by Lucio d’Ambra is exemplary of this transitional phase. D’Ambra maintains a motif that was central to the early debate: ‘For less than a century, the creative genius of a few men has given us the railroad and the electric tram, electric lights and the telephone, the transatlantic telegraph and the wireless telephone, the automobile and the airplane, the gramophone and the cinematograph.’ These discoveries imply a deep transformation in our modes of experience. We no longer enjoy a direct contact with reality, but increasingly, we need the mediation of images that capture the surrounding world in its fleeting and ephemeral aspects: ‘Every day, in every corner of the world […] the cinematographic lens collects precise, living, and eternal documents of the life that is passing.’ Film unfolds and preserves contingency. The topic is deeply philosophical, and it would find further development in an extraordinary text by Ricciotto Canudo, penned in the mid-1920s in France, which locates the essence of cinema precisely in its capacity to capture the ephemeral, as writing does, not with letters, but with light itself. D’Ambra discusses the topic in a text full of lightness and irony, written for a reader that appreciates elegance more than scholarly specialization. And, as a twist, he advances a proposal: why not build a museum of fleeting moments with films that have captured them? ‘Now we must found, among so many museums of dead things, a museum of things that live eternally: the museum of the Fleeting Moment, the museum of the Cinema.’ Thereby, the totally modern experience of contingency will be fully satisfied.

Other essays included in this section are also representative of a transition between an early phase and one more marked by specific disciplines; sometimes, they capture emerging topics even more successfully. Such is the case with Emilio Scaglione: once again with a great deal of irony, he describes the effects of cinema on what we can call, after Simmel, the ‘mental life’ of provincial towns—an issue that his readers, mostly belonging to the urban bourgeoisie, can enjoy while keeping themselves at a distance. Film, he argues, leads to acceleration of the usual ways of living because it ignites an imagination without borders. ‘The motion picture theatre has filled provincial life with new sensations. It has created worlds of fictitious experience. Indian pagodas, and Parisian salons, splendid desert oases and obscure Russian drama, tales of love and hate, gambling and money.’ These novelties might seem to threaten traditional habits, and yet Scaglione is confident that they have a positive effect. Even the possibility of a mixed audience sharing the same space in the dark—a true revolution in respect
to the past—can offer a great lesson. ‘By showing the women that they
could sit in the dark only a few centimetres away from a man who was
not closely related without having to faint with fear, the motion picture
theatre made its contribution towards moral education in provincial towns,
strengthening the awareness of respectful behaviour, moderating personal
character and conduct.’ Despite his ironical tone, Scaglione touches on an
issue that disciplinary discourses would later extensively discuss.

Edoardo Coli, in a more serious way, treats a parallel issue. Film changes
body language: women especially have lost their spontaneous innocence,
and have adopted a behaviour aimed at a valorization of their persona.
‘In new acting, the comedy of life has found new weightlessness, subtle
elusiveness, acute suggestions, perverted undertones.’ Coli did not provide
a more focused analysis of the impact of cinema on the behaviour and the
mentality of Italians, but others would. Let us recall Ferruccio Valerio, who
penned, among others, two interesting texts not included in this anthology.
The first is dedicated to a detailed description of some segments of the film
audience: in particular, Valerio analyses children, young women, ladies, and
the elderly. The second has a more psychological orientation, and argues
that film’s capacity to offer true, vivid and often amusing representations
of life can bring some relief, and even a cure, to neurasthenics; through
movies, they can heal from their depression, and train themselves to cope
again with everyday difficulties.

Emanuele Toddi, Alberto Orsi and Ernesto Quadrone discuss topics more
closely related to film style and film language. Toddi criticizes the fact that
movies tend to consider their spectators as mentally feeble, overloading
them with useless details and captions. What a movie must do, on the
contrary, is give the spectator the possibility to complete and to anticipate
an action, as if he or she were part of the creation of the work. ‘An intelligent
film is one that equitably leaves a nice bit of work to the public, which is
not excessive, and which thus generates interest.’ Alberto Orsi, meanwhile,
focuses on close-ups. Movies generally use close-ups to celebrate a diva’s
countenance or to underline the intrinsic beauty of a prop. And yet, the
close-up goes far beyond these functions: it is a powerful resource for film
narrative, and the best way of telling a story on the screen is to adhere to
the spectator’s point of view. Indeed, in film there is a sort of basic law: ‘In
the presentation of the frames, or rather in the framing, the director must
follow the same rule that would guide an invisible spectator as he watches
the scene.’ Close-ups define the amount and the intensity of attention that
this invisible spectator must invest in what is depicted. Finally, Ernesto
Quadrone analyses an often-ignored component, film titles, and tries to
understand what makes them most captivating. Once again, these three texts are positioned in a middle-ground between the early contributions, where the sense of wonder was evident, and future explorations in which the analytical component will be dominant. For example, the need to include spectators in the work of film has already surfaced in a text authored by Maffio Maffii included in Section 1, which will resurface later in more disciplinary accounts; Toddi, in his essay, preserves the immediacy of an early approach. At the same time, he prepares the way for the more detailed explorations that will follow.12

The idea of transition does not only imply the evolution towards a more sophisticated audience or to a more structured theoretical approach. There is another sense, plainly reflected in the essay by Giovanni Bertinetti. Bertinetti was a polymath, who penned several novels in different genres, some signed with pseudonyms, and few manuals, one of them about physical education. But he was also a screenwriter and a film producer, and a frequent collaborator with Luciano Albertini, a former circus acrobat and a popular movie actor, whose specialty was agile and muscular heroes. From this point of view, Bertinetti is a perfect representative of an earlier stage in cinema’s life, in which professional roles were not yet well established. On the other hand, Bertinetti deals with a topic that would take on great importance in the major debates of the twentieth-century, namely the prevalence of action over reflection. He does so with the help of scientists and philosophers of his time, like Angelo Mosso, a famous physiologist, or William James and Henri Bergson, also quoted in his text. Bertinetti’s portraits of the ‘man of action’ who tries to keep the situation under control, the ‘lack of will’ that spoils noble ambitions, or the ‘desire of conquest’ that moves peoples toward new horizons, are vivid and enjoyable, although it is impossible not to hear in them controversial political undertones. Within few years, Mussolini would seize power in Italy, offering an image of himself precisely as a man of action. Bertinetti was not an activist, yet his analysis (which brings to the fore important questions that future film theory would explore in depth, like the presence of a canonical plot in movies) enables us to hear not only the voice of film, but also the sounds that were circulating in the social and political arena.

Notes

2. For a detailed description of popular classes and their interest in cinema, see Orano, *Come vive*.


5. Canudo, ‘Reflections’, included in this anthology.


7. Coli, ‘Cinematic Psychology’, included in this anthology.

8. Valerio, ‘*Cinematografo e il suo pubblico*’. Also see from that same year, ‘*Bambini*’, ‘*Signorine*’, ‘*Signore*’, and ‘*Vecchi*’.

9. Valerio, ‘*Cinematografo in terapia*’.

10. Toddi, ‘Darkness and Intelligence’, included in this anthology.
