The Museum of the Fleeting Moment

Lucio d’Ambra

The financial measures that the new Minister Salandra has presented to the Camera dei deputati (‘Parliament’), which allegedly come from the policies of Minister Giolitti... (Don’t be afraid. This is not about politics, never mind financial politics. Keep reading in peace.) ...also contain a plan which, by taxing movie theatres, guarantees to the State an additional income of I don’t know how many millions. These are millions that must counterbalance war spending. And you can see, in this case, the living sign of modernity: the costs of the old war are being covered by the modern things that we have: movie theatres, cars, motorcycles. It is true that there is also something that it no longer essentially modern. But if it is not modern, it is external—the bill.

This proposed law, therefore, hits the movie theatres with a new tax. But I think that a truly modern, truly ‘up to date’ ministerial cabinet should not have concerned itself only with the sale of films, but also about their creation, and more than their creation, their conservation.¹

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. The time to seriously think about this has now arrived. Each day that passes into further delay represents so much marvellous life, which is ripped away from death by an ingenious invention, and which, nonetheless is left to perish just the same. It is incredible that no minister has thought of this. The government occupies itself with preserving for posterity—through legally mandated storage in national libraries—even the most stupid, worthless book of painstaking poetic studies by the most illiterate poet. No one gives a thought to preserving for those who come after us the living documents of the life that we are living today, of the men and the things that surround us today: to preserve by law, in a specially designated museum, the cinematic films that capture for eternity the fleeing moment of our present time.

We are enfants gates, and like all spoiled children, who are too generously furnished with celestial benefits and terrestrial advantages, we are thoughtless, indifferent, distracted, tired of everything as a result of having everything within reach of our imagination and our fancy. 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 and
the wireless telegraph, telephone, the automobile and the airplane, the gramophone and the cinema. All of this God-given grace, which has fallen on us with such simplicity in so few years, has radically transformed our lives with such immediacy that we haven’t even had the time to wonder at it. Take, for instance, the time in which horses seemed to man to be the best convenience that he could possibly offer to his laziness; the time in which things were lit up with oil lamps and people spoke only seeing one another from a few metres distance; the time in which our impatience was entrusted to the somnolent speed of a worn-out nag; the time in which the letter and the stagecoach were the fastest means of communication among men; that time appears so far away to us that it also seems foreign and fabled to such a degree that it doesn’t even seem possible that men who lived before us could have not had what we have. We almost seem to picture Napoleon giving orders to his generals on the day of Austerlitz by telephone, and to imagine Caesar climbing into a 60-horsepower limousine to depart for Gaul...

So, we do not worry about those new obligations that the new conditions of life impose on us. What would we say today about men who, having had the means to capture for eternity on a few metres of film the people and the events of the great Napoleonic era, failed to do so? We are preparing ourselves for this responsibility with respect to those who come after us. Every day, in every corner of the world—but, because we are in Italy, let’s only talk about us—every day in every corner of Italy, the cinematographic lens collects precise, living, and eternal documents of the life that is passing. Every evening in our movie theatres we can see, in its motion, in its life, that which happened yesterday in Milan, in Palermo, in Turin, or in Naples. The living chronicle of real gestures replaces the cold chronicle of approximating words. The luminous and living pages of current events in all the various ‘newspapers’ unfold on the screens of all the movie theatres.

Then the plan changes: yesterday’s show is forgotten and we let all that we could have miraculously snatched away from destruction be lost [in accordance with] the inexorable human and divine law, expressed by the Latin poet as ‘ruit hora’, or ‘Where do all those flying leaves of the life gathered by the miraculous invention go?’ Where do they get lost, all those little strips of miniscule photographs which, with a stream of light projected on a white canvas, bring back to life that which was, give life back to death, make present again the past, stop miraculously, allowing us to us to recall ‘the fleeting moment’ whenever we want? Films have the same fate that newspapers do: a feverish and phenomenal birth, a splendid and brief life, an obscure death, and a deep fall into oblivion. But even old newspapers can bring back to life some of their dusty collections, give new sparks of spirit,
truth, humanity out from under the ashes of faded letters on yellowed pages. All it takes is for you to look for once curiosity at them, all it takes is one hand to leaf through them in the libraries, in the newspaper libraries, where they collect year after year, month after month, day after day. But how can we find old films? In the excessive annual production output, and in the even bigger production output that we will have tomorrow, how can we save those films that are worthy of sticking around? How can we later exhume from the under mountains of film the ones that have all but lost their commercial value, but to which the passage of time has given even greater value, those films that will have replaced the curious value of current events with the striking and precious value of historical documentation? How can we find among so many silly fantasies the living images of reality? How can we realize the wonder that man’s clever conquest has permitted us, and has compelled us to preserve: not to be informed, not to reanimate the history of the world in the pages of books with the imagination, but to give it a soul and a body, light and heat, movement and life, just as its contemporaries saw it, just as that elusive moment shaped it—the moment that man captured it—to then give back to it a freedom that makes no sense, a liberty that means renouncing the gains already made, giving life back to time, which [otherwise] destroys and erases everything that shaped it.

Something that resembles a ‘museum of the fleeting moment’, a museum of cinematographic documents of our times, of our customs, of our events, was created, if I’m not mistaken, in Vienna. An institute created specifically for this purpose preserves those films that will one day have documentary value, sets about collecting them from the production houses, takes care to refurbish those whose conservation could be threatened by time. Italy should also be in inclined to create a similar institute, I don’t know through what channels, I don’t know through what means. I also don’t know if the cost of the so-called positive would allow us to demand that only one copy from the producers—at least only of the film that are a living reproduction of contemporary reality—be deposited in an office of the State. The details are up to the legislators. The public cannot not suggest an idea, acknowledge a need, remember an obligation, the obligation of preserving the life snatched away from death, the minute torn off from time, the ‘fleeting moment’ closed in its museum of eternity.

I ask one of the 508 members of the Italian parliament to make this idea his own.

Notes

1. [Translator’s note. The phrase ‘up to date’ was in English in the original text.]
2. [Translator’s note. ‘Ruit hora’ (‘time flies’) is a phrase that cannot actually be attributed to Latin poetry. It is possible that d’Ambra was indirectly referencing a celebrated verse with a similar meaning from Book 3 of Virgil’s Georgics, ‘Sed fugit interea fugit irreparabile tempus’ (‘But it flees meanwhile, irretrievable time flies’).]