Early Film Theories in Italy, 1896-1922

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I have sometimes left a cinema deeply offended. Not offended personally, certainly, but rather offended by that share of general insult that was my due, as a small part of the public.

During the film, there is within the cinema a large pyramid of light, the screen is its base and its apex the little window up above, from which a hum and figures in motion come forth. The rest of the theatre is dark. The individuals immersed in this darkness, however, are just thrown into an intellectual semi-darkness.

The cinema spectator is still able to think and, in fact, to reflect and meditate, far more than it might seem to be the case; much more than in the theatre. The proof of this is that there is no place in which the presence of a talkative neighbours is more agonizing. In the semi-darkness of this environment, lucid minds can still work, and they do. An intelligent film is one that magnanimously leaves a nice bit of work to the public, which is not excessive, and which thus generates interest.

Sixty per cent of films, meanwhile, go to enormous lengths to come to the rescue of the spectator, who is presumed to be semi-imbecilic. I have no idea what physio-psychic phenomenon dictates that the spectator, no sooner than he has entered into the semi-darkness of the cinema, must have lost a good percentage of his faculties of discernment.

Anyone who has spent an hour on the streets of Rome has clearly realized that a given group of two, three, four, or more young men following a given group of two, three, four, or more girls or women have intentions of a decidedly romantic nature. He can understand this in the blink of an eye, through all of those minute cues that reveal, who is following and who is being followed within a crowd. This individual, who is intelligent enough that it suffices for him to see this, enters into the first cinema he finds while looking around on the street. On the 60 or 80 square metres of screen appears a man and a woman, no longer in a crowd, but isolated in very particular conditions, suitable for revealing to the dumbest among novice filmgoers that he is in love with her. And yet, the author, actor, and orchestra are concerned with displaying for this viewer a series of...signs, in order to explain to him what anyone with the slightest intelligence has understood since the beginning.

Let us leave aside considerations of an aesthetic nature: we are dealing with intelligence. This is, however, a form of aesthetics in the cinema.
The cinema is, in d'Annunzio's definition, 'mute theatre', and we agree on this. But mutes have a very limited set of gestures determined by simple necessity, and the poor things are already quite comical. The cinema is mute, but it does not use the gestures of a mute.

There is a grandiose film (of which, for the sake of my well-being I recall neither the title, nor the production company) whose entire five sections hinge on the same document, which reveals a hidden treasure. Half of the document is missing, so that that the precious revelation is illegible. There is certainly nothing to object to in the 'discovery' of the document, since we are used to finding it in the hands of every policeman in the weekly serial. But the fragment of the document appears on the screen at least once in every three scenes, accompanied by gestures that might be defined as 'quadrangular'. This happens for the following reason: when, in the world of human beings, one wishes to indicate, even without words, that a document (even one showing the way to a hidden treasure) is missing its right side, one makes a simple, sober gesture with the index finger or an upturned palm. But, in the world of cinema, the film says to the public, 'You are such bunch of fools that if I show half of a document on the screen, with the lines of text broken off in the middle as a result of a clearly visible tear, you will not be capable of understanding that the other half is missing.' The actor thus makes—every three scenes—a complicated gestural description in which the point of the index finger traces in the air, alongside the existing fragment, the entire outline of the missing fragment.

This example, which tormented me for an entire evening, is hardly isolated; rather, it is the sign of a general tendency. The cinema, being very young, has tendencies that are sometimes infantile: we very often find, in the majority of cinematic ‘undertakings’, situations and devices that have already been commonplaces for quite some time, and which make us think of the ‘son of poor but honest parents’ from elementary school.

For a new art—and, moreover, an electric one—the already-established existence of conventions that it uses with a Teutonic regularity and rigidity (and is not moving away from), is anguishing.

In life, things don't happen this way; just as, despite what the texts in elementary school tell us, Pierino's parents are not always both honest and poor.' Yet, the cinema often ignominiously reduces itself to this, in a morass of commonplaces that seem to say to the spectator, with a benevolent smile, 'this is so you will understand better.'

This, frankly, is offensive.

There is no axiom that says, 'the cinema's public is stupid.'
On the contrary: the public has at times read, for example, the adjective ‘mysterious’ on the program posted at the entrance, and gone in to take a seat. Isn’t it making fools out of the public to take away, once they have entered the darkness, the very adjective that drew them in, moving them from the stalls loge into the wings?

Indeed, it is.

All, or almost all, of the films that promise to contain an enigma or mystery at their core unravel it for the spectator in the very first scenes. The mystery or enigma persists, but not for him: he knows perfectly well what is going on, but finds himself before the film’s characters, who still do not. He thus knows everything that is going on behind the scenes: he is in the wings, which in theatre or in literature would not be allowed.

All of this, of course, makes for a clear plot, and the…mental relaxation of the spectator. The author and the actor have taken the public by the hand and told them, ‘Look, I have thought of doing such and such a thing, in such a way, and with such a trick: the secondary character doesn’t know, and we'll see what effect it will have on him’—almost a blink of the eye, and the public is made to witness a scene that unfolds just as expected.

In the theatre, the public understands many things that are not said; it sits through scene after scene, fascinated by a mystery whose causes it is unaware of, and guided towards a solution it does not foresee. When it is over, the public rightly exclaims ‘Wonderful!’

In the cinema, the public is certainly more varied. All of the tenants of a five-story building attend the same cinema, but never the same theatre, and ballet (now ritually included in every production) has different admirers than the tango.

It is certainly difficult to gauge the average intelligence of this public; to calculate it as zero, however, is mistaken and offensive.

It is even more difficult to create ‘returns’ or ‘flashbacks’ in time in a production from which the spoken word is excluded, to clarify and explain when an event has already occurred, or to reveal its cause only in the final dénouement. Difficult, to be sure, but cinematic art is, in every sense, difficult. Alongside this art, there is a vast swamp in which everything is quite easy: this is not art, but only industry, and when unsuccessful, it is made not by cinematic artists, but by people who simply film.

The public knows it. So, it is not true that the ‘public’ is the sum of the individuals that comprise it. It is that intelligent minority of individuals who know themselves to be a public; the etymology of the word is irrelevant. Should we perhaps not call ‘common sense’ precisely that which the majority of men do not have?

**Note**

1. *Translator’s note.* In Italian, Pierino serves as a placeholder name, like John Doe, to indicate a generic identity or someone whose identity is unknown or withheld.