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A Spectatrix is Speaking to You

Matilde Serao

Before the war, novelist, poets, and playwrights could not avoid noticing the impetuous and incessant agitation of the curious, even anxious crowds created by the cinema. Some of these writers became fiercely indignant, showing deep contempt for such inferior spectacles; others, more numerous, shrugged their shoulders, whispering, *que faire?*—unfortunately, the usual outcome of common delusions in art; finally, others, more eclectic, gradually come to exercise their talent in this popular, or, to put it more pointedly, this universal form of expression. Then came the war: novels and poems fell into neglect, and those who wrote them became discouraged and confused. To compose old dramatic works for an audience so capricious was useless and dangerous; but movie theatres were close to bursting more than ever...

‘So, let’s make these movies’—novelists, poets, and playwrights mused, and then decided—‘let’s make them, but let’s also uplift the cinematographic art by lofty, poetic, and sublime stories; let’s elevate *l’arte muta* (‘the silent art’) to the illustrious skies of poetry, grand an uncommon nobility and crystalline purity to these dark and trivial exhibitions, and those all of those *scriptwriters*—paid (and worth) no more than a few lire per story—to mediocrity, ineptitude, and inconsistency. Let us show who *we* are, poets, playwrights, and novelists, and show what happens when all those low and cheap things of the cinema meet the magic touch of our pen.’

My friends, brothers, and colleagues, you cannot deny you have said all this, you who do the same job as I, who have talked to me about this a hundred times in the past; and I listened to you, without answering; or I happened to agree, by nodding carelessly, with complacency... But now your long research, initially quite serene, has become increasingly anxious and concerned: ‘What newer, different, and more impressive could be done? What could one find in the old stories, in the great poems, which could turn out unprecedented, wonderful, and appealing? What other *novelty, beauty, or long forgotten antiquity* could be shown for the first time? Dante’s *La Vita Nova*? The second part of Goethe’s *Faust*? Heine’s *Almansor*? Moore’s *The Loves of the Angels*, or Milton’s *Paradise Lost*? *The Romance of the Rose*? One of Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*? Alexander Dumas (père) Le *Corricolo*? *La Spedizione di Sapri* (The Expedition to Sapri) with Pisacane and Nicotera? Lamartine’s *Graziella*? What, what, what?’
And I don't deny that the novelist and writer named above—myself—has, with her companions in the very same toil, often vigorously discussed potentially remarkable and beautiful but utterly forgotten stories from the name that live on in literary history; stories which for the most part flash across the reality of the cinema like an immense rocket on a summer night, momentarily lighting the firmament only to leave behind a denser darkness and the stink of burned gun power...

Then, for months and months, and with a feeling of sincere humility, I did only one thing: I went to the movies to take up my role of spettatrice (‘spectatrix’). With my mortal eyes, I went to see, for a few cents, or even less, whatever might please, amuse, or move me in a film show. I sat in a corner, in the dark, silent and still, like all my neighbours; and my anonymous and unknown persona because like many others, anonymous and unknown, who were sitting in front of, behind, or beside me. I was like them, an ordinary spectator, without preconceptions, without prejudices, without any sort of bond to anything or anybody. I did not have any ideas or opinions, nothing of anything crammed my mind, which because pure and childlike, spending so little money, staying in that darkness, in that silent and stationary anticipation. And do you know what happened? I experienced the very same impressions felt by my neighbour on my right, who was, I suppose, a shop assistant; the same ones felt by my neighbour on my left, who, now urbanized, has formerly been, I think, a little provincial. And when the lady sitting in front of me laughed, I laughed too because in the dark everybody was laughing; and if the lady behind me cried, I started crying like her and like all the others who were doing the same.

And so, I became a perfect spectatrix, by going from show to show, watching all those stories on the white screen, startling at a sudden appearance or threatening danger, a-throb with the anguish for the heroes of an unknown drama, or with the mortal risk run by a sweet character, destined to die. This spectatrix became convinced of a truth—let us say, an eternal truth—that the audience of the cinematograph is made of thousands of simple souls, who were either like that in the first place or made simple by the movies themselves. For one of the most bizarre miracles occurring inside a movie theatre is that everybody becomes part of one single spirit. This common spirit gets bored with, or angry at the characters’ entanglements, the intricate episodes, the written and often fleeting intertitles, which force it into extremely rapid mental effort. In addition, it is impressionable and tender, sensitive to the real and sincere affections; honourable and right—perversity and meanness astonish, yet outrage it. Attracted, but not deceived by the exterior beauty of actors and actresses, it is disappointed
if their acts and faces reveal no interior life. Plain but highly sentimental forces like love and pain can deeply affect such an innocent thing.

Oh, poets, novelists, playwrights, and brothers of mine, we should not strive so anxiously and painfully for rare and precious scenarios for our films! Let’s just go to the truth of things and to people’s naturalness. Let’s just tell plain good stories, enriching our craft from life itself and take on that elusive but passionate aura of poetry, which springs from our overflowing heart. Stories in which every man and woman would be human, in the widest or humblest meaning of the word; stories in which tragic, dramatic, ironic, and grotesque performances would merge in that unlikely harmony of human events. Dearest friends, it is a spectatrix speaking to you, a spectatrix who now asks herself, *in retrospect*, the reasons for her tears, her smiles, her boredom. This woman who is speaking to you is a creature of the crowd, it is she whom you should move, who you should please...