Early Film Theories in Italy, 1896-1922
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From the moment motion pictures replaced bingo almost every evening, life in provincial towns has disappeared.

It took on the intense work habits of the engraver on precious metals: it separated them from waste and from tradition, it has made them sharper, refined, it has made them shine.

The light of the spectroscope has finally put the old mazurka to the step of the waltz without anyone in the town taking note. The straight faces, the closed hearts, the sober desires, the grounded aspirations, the faded romances, they are all going away, to be replaced by the bursts of excitement that flash across the cinema screen.

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 dramas, tales of love and hate, gambling and money. People in provincial towns would have never believed that so many exciting and vibrant things could have even existed outside the limits of their town. All this has entered their lives for the very first time and it has made their eyes wide with amazement.

They come out from the theatre dazzled and a little stunned, returning home to find the bundles of dried corn still set in the corners, bunches of raisins hanging from the beams, winter pears yellowing on the shelves, in the warmth of the fireplace! No: it's too much. Who can resign themselves any longer? Provincial life is lost. It can smell its own stench.

Film always signalled the end of the quince. The motion picture theatre in provincial towns has resolved one of its worst problems: the problem of personal contact.

I would ask you to consider this aspect seriously because it is a genuine fact. In a provincial town, how often do two people of different sex who are not father and daughter, brother and sister, aunt and nephew, cousins, or at least brother and sister-in-law, get to meet? In provincial towns, there is no half-way mark: blood relations, husband, or official fiancé, or nothing. In any other situation, to be able to admire another person at ease is almost impossible. And as for actually talking to one another—absurd!... Touching hands? A fairy tale...Or a kiss? Out of the question. This explains the thwarted, decorous, intense, and silent love stories that last for seven, eight, ten years before they can reach their legitimate conclusion: marriage.
And this is because in reality, those seven, eight, or ten years were reduced to the seven, eight, or ten days when it was possible for the couple to meet, exchange a promise to be faithful, a furtive squeeze of the hand in the evening light at the corner of a lane or through the bars of a gate where the dense leaves of the climbing roses did not hide the closely woven protective wiring. How many love poems never progressed past the initial copy in the imagination of so many young people, simply because they had no way of meeting one another! How many fresh and rosy faces languished behind the carnations on the windowsill, and withered away because there were few passers-by on the road below!

How many batteries were unable to light up the life of those twenty-year olds, simply because there was no friction that could have lit up the spark.

The motion picture theatre has permitted all these things and more. It has drawn the population of provincial towns out of their homes and their isolation, has gathered them together in a theatre in seats that adjoin one another; finally, men and women who have seen each other for the first time, or know each other only by sight and, in any case, hardly ever speak to one another, are now permitted to sit together. A bouleversement (drastic change) indeed! A couple who would never have been able to approach closer than the ten metres between the balcony and the road below to exchange a word, to express their feelings, can now sit only a few millimetres apart, so close that now, at least for an hour, they can feel the warmth of an elbow or a knee... And this is able to continue, evening after evening, because the low price of the ticket does not break the budget, as does the cost of theatre tickets. Ignoring curfew, le petit gets closer, more persistent, more permissive; la petite quivers, cringes, confused: the confusion that takes our young country girls, when they pull some prank, taking a peach from the fruit vendor or robbing two lire from mom's change purse for a piece of ribbon, her first orgasm as a woman from contact with a man, the virgin blush of her intimate parts, the fear that her parents, seated on the other side, will catch her off guard; this madness of different feelings she mistakes for love, for an everlasting love, [it's] heartbreaking that she will lose herself for the man that is at her side. And this trust, deep in the soul, finds words [of endearment] for him, and in the depths of bright eyes, so sincere and so vibrant, even he softens inside and melts from the joy of feeling so loved. And therefore, no love on earth can resemble theirs, it is decided. They will marry. Within a week they ask for the priest. If the priest hesitates, one evening he will take her from the cinema in a carriage, [and] it will be done. The 'consensual abduction', in the countryside, is still an institution. Of 100 marriages, at least 40 were precede by an elopement.
So, while the immortal Cretinetti blows his overdue patrimony on the foolishness of a pure white carpet, the fate of two lives is decided.²

I swear, therefore, that if the Great War had not interrupted, or better yet, if before 1914, a precise statistical analysis on civic life had been completed, it would have been confirmed a notable increase in marriages in the countryside. Let’s give the cinema the credit it deserves. Today, the carnage from the war augments to irrevocable proportions the numerical difference of the two sexes and the earth is about to become an inconsolable tebaide where a few Trappist survivors are already condemned to a few forms of asceticism, polygamy, and the purpose of the cinema beings to appear truly defeated.³

And this is how the motion picture theatre completed the evolution in provincial towns which had already begun with the introduction of electric trams. As soon as each small town saw the arrival of its own trams, every carriage was overflowing with the local population, rushing to get a glimpse of metropolitan life.

The shiny tracks gave a touch of modern sophistication to the previously melancholy roads. The dismal silence of the piazzas is now broken by noisy tram bells. Even the distances seemed to have grown enormously, because they are now measured by the price of a ticket. But as in all things, advantages come with problems as well. The tram travels. It is too fast. It is too noisy. There is no limelight to attract the eyes and distract the others around them. If it provides the opportunity for a chance meeting, it is hardly ever convenient to talk. Quite frankly, the motion picture theatre is worth more. And in addition to everything else, it has one indisputable advantage: it is dark.

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.

The darkness of the motion picture theatre put a stop to the problem of jealousy.

In provincial towns, motion picture theatres needed a little darkness to tell the truth. It was needed more than drainage systems, aqueducts, reforestation, standard gauge railways, millions of lira for southern Italian schools, the struggle against rodents and mildew, political education, ethics reforms for city councils, dividing up large land estates. All these struggles are aimed at combating well-known enemies, and hopefully justice will triumph in the end: the lack of motivation, drought, typhoid, malaria, lack
of public transport, illiteracy, hunger, rising prices, electoral fraud, misuse of public funds, feudalism. But darkened theatres must overcome the hundred-armed monster that is possibly the combination of all these aspects, that lies dozing deep in the heart of provincial life: tradition. Motion pictures could be considered as a form of triumph for feminism.

It seems to me that the movie theatre has liberated our women from their gilded cages, where they are habitually locked up in air that is stuffy from being shut in, and it gives them, if only for an hour, en pleine air. It gives them suddenly the feeling that they too can be secretive or faithful by free choice, or by mood, when instead they usually are obliged to be. Very often, it is when watching a film that they discover that their brother, father, and even husband, is perhaps not the worst man in existence. In any case, provincial motion picture theatres permit women a certain element of choice. And the faculty to choose develops her sense of initiative. This, in my opinion, could be defined as moral education.

How long will it take before it will be acceptable in provincial towns for an Italian woman to look a man in the eye without having to blush, quiver, or be accused of having thoughts of infidelity?

In provincial towns motion pictures are a complete form of entertainment. Something is available for every member of a good middle class family. The father, instead of yawning with boredom over his work at the office, has the pleasure of taking his whole family out for only two lire, and can relax, without his wife along with some local gossip, accusing him of being incapable of feeling domestic happiness. The elderly wife, thrown into depression after watching some heartbreaking episode on the screen, was reduced to tears, unseen, and sighed, unheard, out of melancholy over memories of her lost youth. For a couple of hours, the grandmother, mesmerized by the trials and tribulations on the screen, stops her grumbling about lack of good manners and decent behaviour. The children follow the action on the screen in part, and breathe in the darkness like the aroma of incense. The toddler is sound asleep, thoroughly amazed that he is finally left to sleep in peace, without having stale sweets pushed at him or being shaken awake, nearly dislocating a shoulder.

The children’s nanny permits a little nudge from a stranger she cannot recognise in the dark. And everybody has a good time.

But is the motion picture theatre really sufficient to establish a regime of extra-marital affairs?

I doubt it. Provincial life is positive, practical. They are not people given to loosing their heads except on rare occasions. And even if it were so? A little scandal over a love affair, crackling in the hearth of whispered
gossip, is a necessary evil in provincial towns. It provides entertainment in the salons during the winter months. It keeps the conversations alive in the afternoons. It creates a stronger bond between the friends who are discussing the culprit, who is then marginalized. And during all this time the fashion for motion pictures grows.

And furthermore, if it is true that where virtue is never forced to struggle a little with vice, it becomes permissive, loosing its power, its energy, then you must concede that an affair in a provincial town is sometimes a necessary element, if only to put normal standards back in their rightful place. Since all women in provincial towns are tremendously honest and faithful, then there is only one single danger: the sense of beauty, reciprocal fidelity, may be lost, as it was always considered a universally accepted fact. An affair, originating in the movie theatre, creates a hint of doubt, a sense of risk that can rekindle the flame of trust.

The affair is like a novel: even when it appals, it excites the town, which devotes itself to the temperamental relationship.

The affair creates around us such inexplicable flow of concentrated hate, and such feelings of disgust, that its results in the end are truly moral: and more than ever after a minor scandal, there are many displays of affection all around that pacify like a marital balm.

In the end the motion picture theatre reintroduces a taste for something unknown that has been missing for a long time in provincial towns: the desire for leisure.

In provincial towns, men work hard and everybody works too much. There is no time to waste and no time for a break. And even when people are not working, every action has a practical objective. Just as a penny will not be spent unless there is something to be gained, nobody does anything without good reason. Leisure time is spent for useful purposes. In Naples, in Rome, in Milan, a stroll, a pause for a chat, gazing at something for a while with nothing particular in mind, wasting time in thought, happily lingering, tapping the pavement for a half an hour with the tip of your cane: all this has a purpose. However, nobody in a provincial town with half a brain would ever tell you he is going out for a walk to stretch his legs: he will say he is off to see somebody, or has to go out for personal reasons, or he must take someone who is not well to get some fresh air, or he is anxiously waiting for the newspaper boy.

Most of the time, we go there for the children: ‘What is there to do? These children are bored: you must take them for a walk.’ Here is the catch. The children—as you know—are very often dragged into this, and it is in their name that many atrocious acts are committed today!
You go to the theatre to see the *play* for heaven's sake! However, this does not fool even the most ingenuous. When you are sitting in your box in the second row at the theatre, you show your social position. Or you make your friends green with envy over your new perfume. Or, in the most common case, you organise a chance encounter—Oh! completely by accident—which would be otherwise impossible and which will later lead to a marriage proposal. Nothing is wasted in a provincial town. Everything must be put to good purpose. Above all, time: No gold without dross, as they say in England.

Motion pictures have revolutionised this positive attitude. You go to a motion picture exclusively to see the film.

Prices are reasonable. You do not have to dress up. You do not go to show off the latest fashion: it is dark. The friends you may want to impress will not see you. Instead of playing, children fall asleep. There is no practical objective.

Half an hour spent in a motion picture theatre is almost always a half hour spent in complete leisure. People lounge languidly in their seats without social restraint. Tense elbows begin to relax. Hands lie idle in laps. Jaws drop imperceptibly, and faces take on a slightly vacuous expression behind the lingering swirl of cigar smoke. This is true relaxation! True leisure! It is like the moment just before drifting off to sleep. Everyday tension is postponed until tomorrow. Any worries about spending a couple of lire are left until tomorrow, the irritations of a life made miserable by trivial disagreements between neighbours: the petty advantages, the petty grudges, the petty problems, the petty ostentations...


Notes

1. *Translator’s note.* Quince is meant to invoke provincial customs disappearing as a result of modernization.
2. *Editors’ note.* Scaglione is referring to the 1909 André Deed comedy, *Cretinetti, che bello.*
3. *Translator’s note.* Scaglione is referring to the Egyptian town with a long-standing monastic tradition.