The Cinematograph Doesn’t Exist

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But how!—said my friend—more than 100 cinematographs exist in Rome alone. They exist in the Film Censorship Office at the Minister of the Interior, companies exist that spend millions and bring in billions, and compete amongst themselves with posters as big as bed sheets, in accordance with the Legislative Decree on the sale of paper, film studios exist, and the salaries of Ghione, Maciste, and Bertini [exist], Febo Mari who writes films in an d’Annunzian style exists, and so does Lucio d’Ambra, who scares the critic at Nuova Antologia (The New Digest); and you yourself say that the cinematograph is an art in and of itself, an original medium of expression, how is it then that something that is one thing and not another, doesn’t exist!

I sought to reorganize my ideas on the subject with a certain method: starting from the beginning.

When I was a kid, one day I said to myself:—‘Let’s go see the cinematograph.’ It was a bit expensive because it cost six cents. But it was an intriguing thing. I found an uncle willing to give me six cents, and I went with him to see this intriguing thing: in a darkened little establishment, by Lelieure [sic], on Mortaro Street. The show was in its entirety, or as you would say now, from reality. King Umberto, all moustache and eyes, inspected a military formation, and then people walked on the boulevard at noon, and then bathers jumped into the ocean from a diving board, creating big, white splashes all around them.

But, perhaps because the projection shook a lot and bothered the eyes, the film was short. But not so short as to exclude a kind of comic finale: which consisted of projecting the films backwards, in front of the eyes of the viewer. And then everyone started to laugh seeing the people and the carriages on the boulevard calmly walking backwards; and the bathers leaping out of the ocean preceded by spray, before they jumped back on the springboard. I also laughed a lot; and mentally catalogued this kind of game among the others I already knew: the magic lantern, the stereoscope, the lamposcope, the puppet shows, etc. Then I forgot them. Without a doubt, the Cinema, with a big C, did not exist yet at that time.

I returned much later, in adolescence, when I had already developed a passion for the theatre, and knew inside out the various genres of dramatic literature, which had not yet been obliterated by Benedetto Croce. This time it wasn’t an uncle, but a mischievous friend who led me to a much bigger
spot, to see a silent film for only four cents, with people made-up and dressed in costumes, who loved each other, hated each other, and battled each other on the screen to the sound of the piano, through fairly complicated plotlines. My friend argued that this was a new form of art. Instead, at the end of show, I was certain of being right and got up in indignation. But what new form!—I said. This is a very old thing. It is the form of representation that humanity has known for the most time; certainly for many thousands of years. It is silent representation, done with gestures: it is called *pantomime*! And my friend, being rebellious, believed in mechanical science and tended toward positivism, laughed knowingly.

—What does pantomime have to do with it? Don’t you see that here you find in front of you the implementation of a method of reproduction that has *revolutionized* pantomime? Don’t you realize that this mechanical medium confers unlimited possibilities, that it multiples its effects one-hundred times over, as it misrepresents and modernizes?

I pontificated:

—The mechanical means of reproduction and distribution can influence art up until a certain point. Even the printing press undoubtedly influenced new forms of literature; but how much does it renew it *ab imis fundamentis* (‘from its very core’), it takes more! What is the essential novelty produced in theatrical scenery by this new medium? The possibility to change scenes 50 times in the course of a single work? But Shakespeare already changed scenes 30 or 40 times without needing a cinematograph! I tell you that this is none other than the old pantomime: the cinematograph doesn’t have its own true essence.

Truth be told, I have to confess that I made quite an impression on my rebellious friend, who had become silent.

It was worse going back to one of those dark theatres every once in a while, which although they are always bigger, are nevertheless more suffocating from all the hot breaths. I only have to take a look at the enormous posters of these studios to see reappear, little by little, the titles of all the old and forgotten great works of drama, those which cannot even draw in the gasps of the petty bourgeois to the provincial, amateur productions anymore; or otherwise, jumbled adaptations of the worst novels, with subtitles full of exclamation points: *Sentence of Death!*—*A Mother’s Tears!*—*Miser [sic] who Performs Poorly Confesses!* *He’s My Son*!!!

I would never say that all of the advertisements for films are of this type; nor that with the passing of time, the adaptations of dramatic works for the silent scene were all of the most disastrous kind. On the contrary, I am always reminded of the generous invite that I received from a renowned
theatre company to attend the performance of a *Cavalleria rusticana* (*Rustic Chivalry*) in which Santuzza was [played by] a famous singer.

Oh, blessed *Cavalleria*, the only true masterpiece of our tragic theatre. I am excited to this day to have heard it again on stage, in a memorable evening, in which Giovanni Grasso controlled himself in an unusually sober performance, and Tina Di Lorenzo and Febo Mari, both of them Sicilians, under his direction and in their native manner of speaking, were arranged with miraculous spontaneity that I had never known before in them, and the company around them trembled, united in its simple truth, including the young, thirteen-year-old girl who in the final scene entered screaming: *they killed my partner Turidda [sic]!*—That scream, which to bring it up again now makes us, at the very least, smile, was shamelessly parodied for more than thirty years. There, the final scene was greeted by the uncivilized rumbling of a public fully engrossed in the action of the drama as if it were something new, agonizing and twisting in a tragic horror, which took their breath away, and unleashed a burst of applause which celebrated the fall of the curtain with rejoicing that no one *before* had ever known.

And here is what I found now in front of me on the screen: the drama as performed concluded in a half an hour, here at the cinema it last more than an hour and a half: everything there had been drawn out, diluted, corrected, expounded upon, contaminated: the landscape, the sun between the leaves, the real cottages of the real towns, the actress that waited to have her image captured head on, in profile, in three-quarters profile, in full light, in partial light; it started with *Turidda [sic]* going off to serve in the military, it went forward with the suffering of Santuzza and Lola’s spiteful actions, and through scenes and byplays and tears and glances and counter-provocations... And that scream, where was that scream? And without that scream, where did the tragedy take off to?

I was the one who took off; depressed: and I thought to myself:—if by chance the cinematograph were this, it would not be a clumsy forgery of the theatre.

But someone who was very intelligent and very *up-to-date*, took up the pen to demonstrate that I was wrong. He had me read articles that rained down from every side against the failings of filmmakers who wanted to adapt works for the screen that were created for the stage; he explained to me the difference between true artists of the *Cinema* and the poor ones who migrate over from dramatic theatre or from music with the goal only to make a buck; he spoke to me about technique and innovation; he described to me the coming of the cinematographic pantomime as the modern art *par excellence*. Fundamentally, he conceived of art using the criteria of absolute
realism, and therefore, considered the absolute faithful representation of reality the non plus ultra (‘the pinnacle’, literally ‘beyond which nothing’) of modernity, that the theatre, with its actors in make-up, scenes made with paper and artificial lights, could never attain. To select and regroup actors, old or young, ugly or beautiful, big or small, each time according to the circumstances, without ever going back to the make-up and the adaptations; to bring to life a scene from reality, whether it is at the top of a mountain, at the bottom of a desert, or in the heart of a city; to capture the tumult of modern existence as it is with a simple photograph: to portray not extras, but masses of real people, crews of real sailors, armies of real soldiers; that’s how, said my intelligent friend, we will be able to reproduce, frame, and celebrate the life that reigns today.

And one of my other teachers went further than that. This was the period of the futurist rumblings; and this person complained that Marinetti did not demonstrate an understanding of how he had come to expect the biggest outcomes for a programme of true renewal from only the cinematograph. For him, nothing was better suited to that quick and intense art that the futurists preached, to the bewildering synthesis of our frenzied anxieties, than the cinematograph: nothing was more logical, after the words-in-freedom, than the suppression of words: there was no better music than the futurist kind to narrate the abstract gestures of silent actors, and create in union with them a new kind of spectacle to replace the very old melodrama.

Still others, beyond futurism, flip it around into dreams and poetry! The cinematograph, with all the richness of the methods it commands, will be the art of the dream par excellence! No vision will come to be as heavenly, imaginary, impalpable, ethereal, lyrical as that of the cinematograph! Only on the screen will poetic theatre have the possibility of being, because it will not be undone by reality of flesh and bone creatures and painted scenery! Oh, cinematograph, liberator of our souls, quencher of desires we most yearn for, we raise a glass to you!

It is for this reason that I wanted to know the why and the how of this curious phenomenon of social life, which is the basis of the cinematographic industry’s success. Once in a while, after carefully entering, I’ll spend no more than four or six cents on what costs two or three dollars, and in the theatres comes the groom with the red jacket, yelling at me: ‘Let’s get going!’—but still I continue to return but with my head lowered.

I find very little of futurism: it seems that its most audacious innovation remains what I first admired from Lelieure [sic] 25 years ago, in the films that were turned until they went backwards, with the people who walked backwards and the bathers who leapt out of the water.
Of the lyrical, idealized, dreamed of, etc. cinematography, I found even less, as long as I didn’t fall for that silhouette of the leading lady taken against the light, or the glints of light that the moon makes on the surface of the water, or the scene coloured in a faint turquoise around the stake of a bush; in other words, the kind of methods adopted by the creator of a famous film, who in order to introduce a fantastic element of its story, acted as if a character suffering a nightmare in his sleep, sees parading in his dreams, in front of his eyes, tigers, lions, elephants, and camels, in other words all of the animals available at the Zoo in Rome.

In terms of realism and the reproduction of our lives that is (the secret, they say, of the success of the cinematograph)... I see a number of sitting rooms with displays of crystal-cut glass and elegant furniture, which give them much more the impression of a Ducrot show room than the environments in which we live.2 I still seek in the visions of these environments, which are as fake as in those of the musical play, some explanation of this glorified modern life. I do not meet anyone but gentlemen in smoking jackets or in pyjamas, who speak on the telephone and light cigarettes, or read the paper, only getting up when there happens to be some big announcement under their eyes that will then come to be explored up close; and the ladies in décolleté or in nightgowns, all of them—in contrast to many of our actresses—voluptuous, or above all, exposed, who knows why? They pull on the edges of their necklines, which are too wide, and oftentimes they show themselves to be very, and I mean very, unfaithful.

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Now, when you think about it, I am not talking about what we have always deplored in our mannered comedy writers, which would be amusing to compare with the creators of the most respected films, but what we supposedly deplore each day in our not so good actors: the lack of natural spontaneity, the conventional formulas of expression and gesture, the overindulgence in the stereotypical byplay, etc., etc.; additionally, you see the stars on the screen move in that way, and make those endless affectations at every step of those unending byplays, which distance us from reality as much as today’s Russia [is distanced] from good social order; there comes time to ask with astonishment if this is really destined to become true, simple, and rapid art par excellence, the faithful expression of that tumultuous daily existence that we all know, etc., etc.

And among these thoughts, all these tiny, little companies, offices, businesses, newspapers, studios, and similar things, which were spoken about
earlier, they cannot be looked at with sympathy after all: sympathy requires stubborn acts of faith in something that one resolutely hopes must come, since it does not exist yet. This thing—to receive what such an enormous organization already prepared, is only enriched by doing these experiments in the meantime—will, presumably, someday be the Cinematograph.


Notes

1. Henri Le Lieure was a French photographer who opened the first Cinématographe Lumière in Rome in 1896. See Abel, Encyclopedia, p. 334.
2. [Editors’ note. Ducrot was an important furniture manufacturer that made furniture used in modernist Italian films, including those by director Lucio d’Ambra.]