The Cinema: School of the Will and of Energy

Giovanni Bertinetti

I do not presume to be making an outlandish discovery by saying that the gravest of modern illnesses is the lack of will. The immediate consequence of this lack of will is the inability to adapt to life and the failure of every youthful hope of conquest. People are not capable of mustering the strength that the struggle requires. And, when it begins, people don't know how to sustain this effort until they achieve the goal that our ambition put forth. We see the most lively intellects, which seemed destined for brilliant conquests, dissipate into nothing.

There have been numerous methods recommended for educating the will, always with something truly effective and not without good results for those who knew how to apply them. To have them applied, however, required an effort of the will—the very same effort that the methods sought to create. As a result, the suspicion arises that when good results are obtained, they are a little bit like those obtained with mnemo-technical systems, which intend to improve memory by requiring...a great effort of memory itself.

Now, if we were to find a means of educating the will without requiring an effort that the weak-willed are not in a position to sustain, we would have found the ideal pedagogical method.

We now have this method in the cinematograph, which, thanks to the principle of least effort, can achieve results as an educator of the will that are truly unforeseen in the field of psychology.

This frivolous pastime, which crowds of women, men, and children rush to, finds itself by chance as the most effective teacher of energy. No oral or written system has a greater hope of successfully curing the malaise suffered as a result of the anguished modern life and preparing young people, with minimal effort, to become ‘men of action’—the men who make up the hard-working element of society and without whom society tends to break apart.

Who is the Man of Action

In the meantime, let’s see what we mean by ‘man of action’.

When a man knows how to free himself from the obsessive tendency of overthinking every action that he must carry out, or when a man carries
out than action without the hesitations that are born from excessive self-
analysis, one can recognize in him the Man of Action.

Do not think, however, that in talking about suppressing self-analysis we
mean to say that the Man of Action acts blindly under the impulse of some
unconscious force. ‘Man of Action’ does not mean an impulsive man. He
is an individual who clearly has a goal to reach in mind, but who does not
create harmful impediments by losing himself in a detailed analysis that
destroys all energy for action.

This is not about destroying reflection. Rather, as Dr. Toulouse rightly
observes

after a certain time of reflection, any useful effort is done. One gains noth-
ing by prolonging it, because then the spirit runs the risk of automatically
ruminating on the same facts with little hope of changing their apparent
value. This is like what happens when reading a book and the text seems
confusing. One goes back to it, re-reads it carefully, but without any profit.
The obscurity remains.¹

The Man of Action does not waste the strength of his will with theoretical
and pointless lines of reasoning, but rather employs it directly in acting.

What, on the other hand, does the Man of Action’s opposite—the so-
called Indecisive Man—do?

The Indecisive Man loses himself in a laborious examination of the
pros and cons. He contents himself by analysing every action that he
must carry out, deploying so much energy in this purely platonic and
sterile exercise that, at the moment it is time to act, he realizes he has
vainly used it all up.

To better represent the two social types which find themselves at op-
posite poles, let us recall two men: Napoleon and Hamlet.

Napoleon acts, employing in his action a tenacious will, which is tena-
cious precisely because no energy is taken away from it by dissipating itself
in analysis.

Focused on the goal to be achieved, Napoleon does not create fantastical
impediments for himself, but proceeds without tribulation—never stopped
by the thought of a possible failure. When such a doubt appears before him,
he drives it away like an insidious danger... And Napoleon was lost the day
when he let himself be overcome by a thousand shadows of uncertainty.

Hamlet never acts. He thinks and reflects. Not only that, but he pushes
reflection to the point where what first seemed evident to him, now appears
confused. Excessive analysis impedes him.
Now, wanting to express these two types with a classification that can seem rather paradoxical, one could say that Hamlet belongs to literature and Napoleon belongs to the cinema. In the former, we see the manifestation of a static psychology. In the latter, the manifestation of a dynamic psychology.

**Why the Cinema Can be a School of Action**

Let us briefly examine what the essence of the cinematographic sensation is, by starting to ask ourselves about the pleasure that viewing a film gives us. This pleasure seems more intense to us to the extent that the action of the film unfolds dynamically—to the degree to which the unfolding of the frames represents to us a real action and not a succession of variably successful photographs.

We love the movement and the dramatic progression in the film, and we hope that the unfolding drama will be produced not by chance, but by the free will of the characters that are present on the screen. This game of wills, battling amongst themselves for the triumph of their respective goals, is the source of our pleasure, which reaches its greatest tonality when we see the **good** character destroy the **criminal** goal of the bad guy by employing those means that are the result of a strong will.

We so admire the extrinsication of the power of will in a filmic action that we are drawn to a certain indefinable pleasure even when we see this will acting in an animal.

This is one of the reasons for the success of *Il circo della morte* (*The Circus of Death*). In this work, we watch the action of a chimpanzee who grows fond of the child of an unfortunate, seduced woman who is—let’s put it this way—an employee at the circus. After a series of events, the chimpanzee steals the child of the seduced woman’s rival, and brings it up to a very tall chimney, as if it wanted to avenge the dead child of the seduced woman... all of which is contrary to what is known about the psychology of animals. But the feeling that the spectator gets from this humanization of the simian will is pleasing and interesting because it fulfils our desire for watching the free game of ‘the will’, even in an animal.

**The Training of the Faculty of Attention**

Psychology has demonstrated the need of the faculty of attention in the struggle of life. As we have already observed in our previous works, the most
important element of intelligence is attention. The measure of intelligence is given by the power of attention: the more a man is able to put into action such a power, the more he will be able to acquire that intellectual capability which is indispensable if he is to become a Man of Action.

The lack of the power of attention is a very serious lacuna in the psychic constitution of an individual. As a result, all pedagogy tends towards nothing but educating the power of attention.

Now we have in the cinematograph the instrument best suited to achieving this goal. The attention of the spectator is excited in a natural way: no effort of will is required in order to pay attention. The effort of will that, on the other hand, is needed in other pedagogical methods and that often constitutes a grave danger.

Angelo Mosso has done some most interesting studies on attention. It is necessary to quote some passage of the dearly departed physiologist in order to understand what the dangers are that we are referring to.

Haller denied the freedom of attention and we know we are not all and not always equally disposed to being attentive. Sometimes we can’t do it, despite all of our efforts of will. In weak and nervous people, the effort of attention, when it is prolonged, especially in women, gives way to grave discomforts. It sometimes happens that when a person gets their eyes checked at a vision clinic, or stands in front of the camera in the studio of a photographer, they remain completely hypnotized and immobile for a little bit of time afterwards. The game of mind readers is well-known, where they have their eyes covered and through a concentration of the will, they are able to predict the intentions of the person whose hand they are holding, made aware by the slightest involuntary movements of the hand that these people make. There are women who, after being forced into this game have a great tension of spirit, vertigo and fainting spells for some time.

One must avoid the effort that can lead to this hypnotic act, which is harmful to the individual. A weak person who forced himself to be attentive and who fell into a such an ecstatic state would find himself in the worst conditions for understanding how much is happening around him. His fortune would be comparable to that of animals awaiting their prey. Animals await their prey in a state of concentration, their attention deadens their other senses so much that often hunters take advantage of this psychic state of unawareness to approach them.

Knowing up to what point it is useful to artificially induce ourselves into a state of attention: here is the problem to solve. Here, in the final analysis,
lies the whole problem of the rational education of the attention and the will. It is about finding the right point at which attention ends up being a means of defence, ends up becoming a condition of inferiority.

The cinematograph solves the problem. It achieves the concentration of attention with minimal effort. It does not create that dangerous state of hypnosis that Mosso pointed out. It instead creates that state of light hypnosis which is very useful for receiving and storing up sensations. The attention is reawakened without effort. The cinematographic sensation can and must constitute the basis of the education of the faculty of attention. Educators are already starting to accept this rather simple truth.

The cinematographic sensation inspires in man the need for action, and it is an exercise for the will because it teaches us to quickly choose the action to carry out and the decision to make.

The spectator almost inadvertently experiences the suggestion of the act that he sees projected on the screen. We would say that he is practically inspired to copy its energetic expressions and its plastic and dynamic attitudes.

But having reached this point, a caveat appears before us that can seem formidable from the outset.

If moving pictures truly possesses such a power of suggestion on the crowd, those who define it as a school of criminality are correct, and the government is right to establish rigorous censorship of films destined for public audiences.

In fact, we must to recognize that many crimes have been committed by reproducing events from films which—as the guilty parties even say—suggested the idea for the crime.

First, we do know that this confession isn’t some kind of instinctive defence that the guilty put up in order to minimize their responsibility—making themselves victims of a suggestion. But let’s accept the truthfulness of what the guilty are asserting. In this case, it is certain that the film that instigates delinquency does not belong to the output of the legitimately-organized production houses, but to the illegitimate output of a profligate editor. Let us repeat that, a production company that continuously produces new films could not support itself with an anti-social production because the audience would reject it.

So then, in reality, the number of crimes committed under the influence of a cinematographic work is rather small. And the bad are fully compensated for by the good so that the screen can and must inspire the field of energetic education.

On the other hand, the same arguments brought forth by enemies of the cinema in order to obtain more rigorous censorship demonstrate that one
must take into account the enormously suggestive power of the screen, and that we possess a miraculous means to educate the wider audience and direct them towards moral and intellectual improvement.

The consequences of this suggestive power, which has acted upon the public for about ten years, appear rather visible to us even though the cinematograph has not yet reached the level of development of which it is capable.

What are these consequences? A careful psychological examination of the new generations would stray from our task, because it would require an entire volume of its own.

We will limit ourselves to some notes on the undeniable inclination towards action that ones sees in young people.

The sense of the heroic, which in the Great War had asserted itself with such splendour, has been fed—we don't want to say created—by the cinematograph. The young people of today demonstrate better inclinations towards action than young people of the past. Certainly, the wide range of literature abandoning the equally nit-picky and vacuous psychological dissertation has for some time been calling for energetic renewal, [and] has contributed to this new fervour of action. And without a doubt, the pragmatic philosophy for which action is the cornerstone has not had a small influence. But the cinema, by translating these philosophical and literary tendencies in its silent photographic language, has popularized a way of thinking that would otherwise not have been comprehensible to the masses.

That is not to say that the production companies have put the philosophy of William James and Bergson into film. But, seeing as the cinema is pure action, one can consider it as the exponent of an entirely new way of considering life and the universe.

One could apply Goethe's motto 'In the beginning was the action' to the advent of the cinematograph, since the essence of this important organ of today's civilization is, as Nordau says, action and energy.

One mustn't forget that darkness and music are important elements in the evocativeness of the projection. As a result, we think that projections made for being seen in full light are useless and sterile ventures. The darkness of the room, added to the music, makes the suggestion more effective. We have all felt a sense of slight anguish when for some reason the orchestra stopped playing during a projection. That slight sense of anguish impedes the full enjoyment of the play of the characters. It is necessary to add that darkness and music to provoke the spectator to enter into that psychic state that is a real basis of hypnosis, during which the suggestions more
easily make their way into the spectator’s spirit, as studies of hypnotism and suggestion demonstrate. For this reason, it is easy to foresee that in the future, the musical element will be an integral component of the film, and that from the combination of sound with vision, they will know how to draw out results from suggestion, which at this point is barely in an embryonic stage.

It seems to us that an important element for educating the will to action is the plastic-dynamic suggestion that the cinematograph makes. The statue-like and energetic poses that the artists strike in front of the camera, unfolding themselves in a series of aesthetic movements that are simultaneously suited for attaining a given goal and for expressing a given dramatic moment, constitute a useful invitation to subordinate every move we make to a precise and utilitarian goal. The Man of Action does not make useless or disordered movements, but he possesses the ability to conform his action, in the least time possible, to his thinking. The Indecisive Man lacks this ability. And that is because for the Indecisive Man, the action is preceded by a disordered jumble of contradictory thoughts, such that the action, when completed after countless hesitations, finds itself unsuited to the circumstances for which it was executed.

Watching good films in which actors carry out purposeful gestures in a perfect harmonious rhythm and in conformity with the goal to be reached presents to the spectators, who are immersed in that state of light hypnosis that we referred to, the need to model these gestures themselves.

In his early years, man’s ability to imitate gestures and movements is strong, absorbing the portrayal that he sees reproduced. The cinematograph must take advantage of precisely this mimetic tendency in order to induce the outward appearance of the Energetic man in young people.

But, we hear people say, what good does it do to achieve this outward appearance if the psyche does not match it?

Psychologists hold the answer.

The movement suggests the thinking, just as the thinking suggests the movement. An action that one has thought of is an action that is beginning. This is a truth that forms the basis of the new psychology and that is a principle of rational pedagogy.

The cinema, as a school of action, will soon be appreciated for its proper value and will be able to give rise to a whole vast production directed to this sole purpose.

The rise of the cinematograph in the conquest of men has just begun. Using this new art to forge the new man will be the great miracle of the future.
What Genre of Film is Best Suited to Incite to Action?

It is evident that not all films will be suitable for incitement and that from this point of view, a great part of what is produced should be cast aside. The production companies that intend to collaborate with the good propaganda of the intense life—as Roosevelt defined it—must make judicious choices about the plotlines.⁶

The protagonist must be a man capable of battling against adversity, equipped, therefore, with a strong will. He must be led, through a series of eventful ups-and-downs, to triumph over the numerous obstacles that other antagonistic wills always place before him. Every inclination of this protagonist must be the affirmation of a will that does not hesitate before danger. Let him have a good and heroic spirit, perhaps a bit like Don Quixote, always ready to defend the weak and to punish the guilty. Let him be the avenger whose condemnation the scheming bad guy never escapes.

From this dry outline, one could conceive of loads of films.

As the reader knows, in the film that incites [us] to action, we are the absolute creators of the happy ending which, for however conventional it is, is more humanely true than a verist catastrophe in which the protagonist dies. And indeed, we must judge the moral content of a film by its pragmatic value, that is, by the usefulness that can be derived by following it with action. The sense of justice that is one of the most marked characteristics of the theatre audience, and especially the cinematograph audience, must not be sacrificed nor undermined. A film where the good and courageous protagonist, the defender of the weak, was a victim of a catastrophe brought on by wicked elements of the action, would have an unjust ending. All the noble and generous efforts carried out by the protagonist would be in vain. His will must lead to a final act of justice. And it is just that the generous man triumphs.

Evidently it is necessary that film criticism—today scarcely in its early dawning—cooperate with the spread of films which we call dinamogeno ('something that generates dynamism'). The production worthy of being distributed throughout the world must not consist of a simple entertainment for idlers, but must provide healthy incitement to action.

In saying this, our disapproval for that genre of films which certainly does not encourage the energies of the spectator is understood: the so-called psychological cine-dramas which are often a boring sequence of frames in which the only thing of interest is provided by the bare shoulder of an actress and frequent immodest exhibitions... It cannot be that this
kind of film is directed at the renewal of men! Thank goodness that film
defined as ‘cinepornographic’ will never attain the straightforward and
widespread success of the good, healthy film that incites to action. For
that reason, the production companies are often punished in their rash
attempt to put a film on the market that goes against—we don’t want
to say to good manners—but against the proper industrial and artistic
criteria.

Physical Strength and the Cinema

As we have tried to demonstrate in our preceding volumes Il mondo è tuo
(The World is Yours) and La conquista dell’energia fisica (The Conquest of
Energy), ‘the possession of physical strength is very useful for the Man of
Action.’ Consequently, reasonable physical education is part of the training
of the person who wants to conquer for himself a good seat at the banquet
of life. And it is not difficult for the reader to be convinced of this. But
the assertion that the cinema facilitates this branch of education in an
unexpected way might seem instead unusual or paradoxical.

And yet, the attentive scholars of the cinematographic effects on the
audience, especially the young people in the audience, will recognize
that this assertion corresponds to a truth destined to make its way
triumphantly.

Indeed, it is easy to say that the spectators of a film have the tendency
to repeat in life the actions and the behaviours that have been suggested
to them on the screen.

An act of muscular strength is the most directly suggestive thing there
is in the cinema, and it is rare that you would find kids resistant to this
suggestion: almost all of them try to repeat the muscular movements that
impressed them on the screen, thus obtaining—without a doubt—rapid
effects in the strengthening of their own muscles.

One can say the same thing about movements of agility: running,
jumping, etc. The need for trying to reproduce the movement is practically
irresistible in young bodies.

Assuming this tendency—and denying it would be the equivalent of
denying the universal phenomenon of imitation brought about by sugges-
tion—one must consider the photodynamic projection an effective school
of physical education. Through these projections, movements are suggested
which are very useful to acquire of physical strength.
The Tendency to Repeat the Actions Seen in a Projection and the Gymnastic Film

The results of physical training that are procured today from films of action are rather evident, but they cannot yet generate very widespread effects because people have not yet thought to produce a film specially dedicated to this kind of physical suggestion.

It is not improbable that the ‘gymnastic film’, knowingly integrated with the honest adventurous film, will constitute one of the most interesting branches of cinematography in the future.

So far, it seems to us a very real possibility to create films to be projected in schools, in which various gymnastic exercises best-suited to the development of young bodies are carefully demonstrated. The screening of the gymnastic film would be followed by practising the projected movements on the part of the students. In this way, the system would constitute a very valid exercise, as much for the body as for the memory. Then, if appropriate music was added to the screening and the practice of the demonstrated gymnastic movements, we could have a new application of the ‘rhythmic gymnastics’ propagated by Delacroze [sic], which is most useful for the acquisition of grace and harmonious rhythm in movement.⁸

We will certainly arrive at this application of the cinematograph when people are widely convinced of the enormous suggestive power—not just morally speaking, but also physically speaking—of the screen. In the meantime, we see that Edison’s idea of transforming oral pedagogy into photo-mechanical pedagogy is making its way. The research and the experiments carried out in the last few years demonstrate how effective the screen is in training the attention, which is the earliest faculty of learning. But we will talk about that later: now, we will limit ourselves to considering the influence of cinema with regard to physical training.

The Unconscious Assimilation of the Spectator

The simple projected vision of grandiose natural spectacles, foaming waterfalls, immense prairies in which the film heroes battle against men, beasts, and the forces of nature, inspires in the spectator a need to relive those actions—even in a lesser form. He generates in his muscles the beginning of those movements. Some time ago, a system of gymnastics was started that is based on the influence of thought on the muscles. Thinking hard about a muscular movement increased the benefit of the exercise when it
is being done. In our book, *The Conquest of Energy*, we mentioned a system of gymnastics that consisted of doing exercises in front of a mirror so that the eye could follow the play of the muscles. The effects of this system have been deemed most excellent.

So, the cinema realizes in an ideal way these two related systems: it incites thought to act on the muscular system and at the same time facilitates the learning of right and rational movement.

The true treatise of gymnastics in the future will not be contained in a printed book, but in a series of films where the most rational system will unfold.

Every gym will have its projection room where students will learn gymnastic exercises by sight, [and] which they will then carry out by putting their trust in their memory.

Certainly, so that our facile prophecy will come true, it is necessary that the current misoneism [fear of new things] that looms over the ruling circles of every people be vanquished: but we think that the cinematograph is such an instrument of social renewal that those same people who today consider it a frivolous pastime or a pernicious school of corruption for young people, will be the first to undergo its influence. The signs are not discouraging. Every day sees new converts. The principle of least effort applies to man and to society, and as we have seen, the principle of least effort explains the enormous prevalence and popularity of the cinematograph.

Today, the ‘gymnastic’ film is on the path to creation.


Notes

1. [Editors’ note. Edouard Toulouse (1865–1947) was one of the leading figures in experimental psychology and French psychiatry, as well as being one of the first to use scientific methods to conduct experiments on the psychophysical responses of moviegoers.]
2. [Editors’ note. *Il circo della morte* is an alternate title for the film *L’ultima rappresentazione di gala del circo Wolfson*, directed by Alfred Lind, Vay Film, Milano, 1916.]
3. [Editors’ note. Angelo Mosso (1846–1910) was considered the preeminent Italian expert in physiology.]
4. [Editors' note. Albrecht von Haller (1708–1777) was a Swiss doctor and one of the most respected founders of modern physiology; Also see Mosso, La fatica, p.195.]

5. [Editors' note. Max Nordau was the pseudonym of Max Simon Südfeld (1849–1923), a journalist, writer, essayist, and author who critiqued the pseudo-science of the philosophical and sociological traditions. Südfeld was frequently cited and well-respected within the positivist climate of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe.]

6. [Editors' note. The author is referring to Teddy Roosevelt’s inaugural address on 4 March 1905 in which he argued that given the intensity of modern life, America’s success in the twentieth-century hinged on ‘vigor and effort without which the manlier and hardier virtues wither away’.]

7. [Editors' note. See Bertinetti, Mondo è tuo and Conquista dell’energia.]

8. [Editors’ note. Bertinetti is referring to Émile Jaques-Dalcroze, the pseudonym of Emile Henri Jaques (1865–1950), the Swiss teacher who created a celebrated method to teach and perceive music through movement.]