Early Film Theories in Italy, 1896-1922

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The Soul of Titles

Ernesto Quadrone

To be a successful film, the title is everything. A film, no matter how good it is, needs a fly a flag that gives a concise and tense presentation of its wonders and intrinsic value; that flag is its title!

Without a title, a film is like a stem with no flower, a man with no money, a city with no strikes.

The title must embrace the subject like a tight-fitting, precise and luminous girdle; under it, the mystery of action must ring out and be gathered, hide and reveal itself at one and the same time.

The title must be the theme of the action, the recurring motif, the rhythm of the passions that make up the action, the spring and estuary, the dawn and dusk of the cinematographic fable.

As well as being persuasive it must possess a harmony of its own that outlines and synthesizes the main characters’ movements. And so, we will have titles as light and rhythmic as minuets, bouncy and agile like the Furlana, the Friulan folk dance of ancient times, like the held breath of declarations of love made to the stars, cool and rose-scented like very slow wafts of May air, twisted and sinister like a delinquent’s sick mask, honest like a child’s laugh, undecipherable like a sphinx’s silence, mad and phosphorescent like happy garlands of flares, closed and packed with mystery like the deep darkness of the jungle, sun-drenched and clear like country afternoons at harvest time, thin as winter branches, opulent as autumn fruit.

As well as harmony, the title must have its colour: blue and calm against a sky of fluffy white clouds accompanied by the simple and kindly outline of a church tower is not bad; vivid and vibrant red can have its place in the anger of a gang of bandits; deep black can appear to sure effect beyond the tips of the cypress trees in a cemetery; almost by necessity, yellow must intrude with mimosa and chrysanthemums against the glass wall of a Japanese room; a shadow in the half-light, dark green is pleasant in a marriage chamber; white, dotted with snowy butterflies, blends well with the silent presence of a Siberian panorama; deep purple sprouts up with a tasty opulent character among the strong boxes burgled by thieves. In addition, no less diligence must be employed in the choice of type that makes up the title. English italic type shines beautifully through the spokes of a gentleman’s horse-drawn buggy; a flat and massive, almost brutal type
finds its place on the window of a bar in a seedy part of town, while an agile
and small type, with little spaces between the letters, thanks to the way its
points and hieroglyphics spring out, can pleasantly welcome the feet of a
troupe of agile ballet dancers. A twisted and sinister type fits a home under
the cruel tyranny of an old mother-in-law; five or six letters all bunched
up together spring excellently from the tip of a hooligan's knife; long and
languid, almost tired, lettering twists itself very tastefully around the silky
dress of a dreamer thinking of suicide among a slow withering of roses...

This long tirade of mine has no pretence to offer advice. The able illustra-
tors of films have already gone beyond all imagination; to be convinced of
this, all you have to do is take a glance at the posters that each day astonish
us more and intensify our curiosity for city streets.

Human knowledge has passed through paintings and words; of every
passion and tragedy they have excitedly charted the truth to the point of
celebration, or caricature to the point of the grotesque, or poetry to the
point of lyricism, or pain to the point of the macabre, or laughter to the
point of paroxysm.

Cunning that has become mischief, love sickness, rebellion anarchy,
blood tears, garden a rose, dedication a smile, symphony a serenade, a star
the universe...

Let’s review them swiftly, dividing them up into

There are monosyllabic titles: Yes. No. Never. But.

In general, these lead us to think of a superficial and sentimental job;
they are typically put on the protagonists’ heads as if they were Sirius, the
star of good fortune. The two real, essential protagonists locked up in the
monosyllables are usually He and She. If she holds his hands, the background
is an alcove with a halo of lace and flowers; if she doesn’t hold his hand, the
background is a troubled sky with a profile of a dramatic rock on which
the storm’s lightening illuminates the open white arms of a cross. The pure
and simple But is the centre of a semi-plucked daisy one autumn evening
or the enigmatic seam of a fat, calm, jolly man’s closed lips. That But can
be the good man’s melancholic answer to a certain question of his about
family disposition... or the taking of leave with which says good-bye and
shows the door his rich and honest daughter’s poor and honest young suitor.

There are titles with question and exclamation marks ... ???!!! These
Cabalistic signs almost always run through the closed mystery of a black
mask, or of a drawn and closed curtain behind which we imagine the held
breath of a murderer, or the flat and massive sadness of a coffin.

This is the richest of promises, but also the most dangerous for the public.
The botanic, chemical, pathological, physical, metaphysical titles always
promise a thesis of thought illustrated by a wise, studious, level-headed person against another person, the antithesis of the former. Who'll win out? Which of the two spirits will come out on top? Neither of them, usually. Initially, science succumbs, then the layman, after which scientist and layman sing a love song on the bow of a Neapolitan boat.

Epic and exotic titles promise a world of dreams, of unreality. The yellow-skinned opium smoker blows out his poisonous spirals, the musme, the young Japanese woman dressed in leather shells, never-ending strings of shiny oriental pearls that resemble drops of blood and the points of daggers. Huge and terrible medieval suits of armour open up in the silences of austere castles out of which bands of heroes and villains pour onto the soft and silent carpets of the rooms, the settings of the final scene in which the catastrophic vision of desperate and horrendous struggles are performed in the midst of flashes of metallic lightning.

The most evocative titles are those that add an unexpected quality to the most common thing in the world by way of the strident bond of an adjective: The Hopping Table, The Harmonic Chair, The Wardrobe of Clouds, The Incandescent Stone, The Spring of Blood..., The Creaking Man, The Velvet Skeleton, Coral Nails, The Pupil Necklace, The Fanfare of the Chimps, The Concert of Slow-Paced Encephalitis, The Electric Microbe, The Skull Bell. There is no sense in explaining the charm and mystery of this wording. All you have to do is read them to experience that light shiver of curiosity that basically determines the success of the film.

The most modern and fashionable titles are those that form at least a phrase or even a whole sentence of a novel. They have the prerogative of making pedestrians, even those most in a hurry, stop in their tracks. Even in the case of the most lukewarm curiosity, this stop can be the victory over the firmest decision an individual can take not to be tempted by the fictions of the screen. ‘When one by one the roses fall’. Under this, we are forced to read: ‘accompanied by a large orchestra’. With this phrase, we immediately feel the slow up and down motion of a swing, we anticipate something soft, a sense of floating, a dream suspended in mid-air, an exhausted romantic female protagonist sitting under the beech trees that overshadow the meadow of the solitary...

This vision can be immediately transformed by the addition of a word, a phrase that augments its effect and charm...

‘When one by one roses fall on the pond that leads them away.’

By conserving that back and forth motion of a suspended hammock, the title is ever more mysterious; the castle dissolves, the beech trees have been cut down by a wondrous axe, the romantic female protagonist has become
a perverse creature expert in black magic... The roses drop from the bush and in their brief flight of death, an ardent puff of wind scorches them. The petals become metallic, the pond water hard and resistant, and the victim that is the perverse creature, in the long nights of vigil and fear, hears in the garden the tragic crack of the flowers that bounce back up from the crystal water like hailstones striking the bell of the nearby... And with a small variation, the public’s imagination is transported into an environment of goodness, poetry, peace, all suffused in a sweet melancholy: ‘When one by one the roses fall from your lap, O mother.’

How is it possible not to hear a distant and intimate family tragedy? A betrayal that has inevitably happened amid domestic peace? A father, ignorant of the sacrifice his bride has made, dies of shame and sorrow, his daughter forgives the paternal error, because she understands. The final scene will probably show her on her knees before the old sinner as she picks the roses of pain that drop from her maternal lap one by...

Titles such as the novels of [Guido] da Verona represent, let’s say, the essence of this category. For example, the final title of his novel: Sciogli la treccia (Untie Your Hair), could be arranged to appear with success on a poster that advertises a cinematographic film: if the character of the film was humorous, with a little trick but without taking anything away from the harmony of the wording, it could come out more or less like this: ‘Brush Your Teeth, Filomena!’, or—increasing its meaning—: ‘Put on the Kimono, O Bertoldina!’ and taking on a more serious tone: ‘O Eat This Soup or Jump out of the Window, O Serafina!’ and more tragically: ‘Open up the Bed, O Lucrezia!’ and more dramatically: ‘I will have your Head, O Cunegonda!’.

And so on.

It bears repeating that as far as titles are concerned the writer’s imagination has gone beyond every limit and expectation. We are not far away from the day in which advertising posters will reproduce on a real screen a part of the film’s final scene. And so, to the Harlequin publicity of the posters will be added the dizzy movement of a hundred scenes that will bundle together their tragedies and farces with the tragedies and farces that people channel in the motion of their daily lives in the city streets, and that motion will become dizziness and contrasts will become evident to the point of exasperation and states of mind will know no truce. The consonance between the unreal and the real will become more tangible, who knows how many intimate expressions of pain or joy will be reflected as in a mirror, from the facial features of the people in the street to those of the people made only of shadow and light, who will repeat on the screens the anxiety or the gasps or the prank induced by fiction.
And so, two lives will exist in parallel between the galloping crowd of the street; and in the superimposition of two speeds, people’s brains will find a catastrophic solution to their incessant desire to be ahead of events that, on the path of life, ambush them.


Note

1. [Editors’ note. da Verona, Scioglì la treccia.]