That Poor Cinema...

Renato Giovannetti

For some time, many writers in their newspaper columns have felt the need to direct their attention to the cinema: it is a clear sign that the cinema has definitively entered into the customs of our lives and of our population.

It is worth noting, however, that the judgements that they are making about it are, for the most part, decidedly against this new ‘institution’. It seems almost as if our writers—the young ones especially—are making a concerted effort to fight it, almost like an enemy—no, worse actually—like it is a competitor.

Indeed, most of them, in nurturing those forms of art that are more directed to a large audience—especially the theatre—believe that they are seeing in the cinema a Siren that will drag the crowds away from carrying out their intellectual activities, thus increasing the number of already numerous obstacles that stand in the not-easy and not-happy path of the arts and of the artists among us.

Some people say that the cinema gives the multitudes a way of having a little bit of fun without spending much. It is also said that the multitudes, who are not searching for too much intellectual pleasure, are deserting the theatres and, more than ever, are failing to cultivate those forms of literature that should be their healthy nourishment: the cinema presents, already manipulated, a brief recap of every literary conception through the part that most interests the masses: the plot. The plot unfolds quickly, frenetically, without being encumbered by words, immediately giving the satisfaction of knowing how the happy or sad stories of the characters in the story will end. So—they say—the cinema, while it’s emptying out the theatres and suffocating the flourishing of any healthy artistic expression, contributes to dulling the audience’s minds, and is supporting their mania to do things quickly and incessantly run towards the future—which creates an insurmountable obstacle for every intellectual project and every intellectual development.

In truth, we believe that, in doing this, people are attributing to the cinema a greater importance than it has or than it claims to have.

It is certain that, for however much people sing the praises of the greatness of modern civilization and the extraordinary value of culture, the masses that form the amorphous, anonymous core of the population—which, however, is also its most numerous part—they will remain immune for a long
time to come to the beneficent contagion of intellectual progress. The masses thus demonstrate spiritual development that is in an embryonic state, and though no longer being the barbarians of other times, is still quite far from the stages of evolution that a small group of men have already reached.

The tastes, desires, pleasures of the masses must then necessarily be childish and naive: suited to their abilities.

Such a very natural need has been felt in every age and in every society: and just as in ancient times the good, ignorant people preferred the tightrope-walkers’ performances to the pure and Latin elegance of Terence’s *La Suocera* (*Hecyra*), and just as, up until yesterday, they rushed to the puppet theatre rather than going to see plays by Goldoni or Alfieri, similarly today they go to the cinema rather than to see the works of Shakespeare, Ibsen, d’Annunzio, or Maeterlink. This is because they have fun at the cinema, while at the theatre they get bored because they don’t understand.

Is this state of things sad? Sure. But why blame the people, or even worse, why blame the cinema?

It is necessary to get fed up with our so greatly praised modern culture which, to everyone’s disappointment, remains the privilege of a few—aristocrats of thought.

On the other hand, it is wrong to think that if the audience didn’t find delight in the cinema, they wouldn’t go to find it in the theatre: they would prefer to save their money and stay at home.

No one has ever lamented that people are writing, selling, and reading so many *feuilletons*, which are certainly not lofty forms of literature and which, precisely for this reason, are within everyone’s reach. Nor has any one ever reproached Ponson du Terrail, Montépin, Mezzabotta, and the modern Conan Doyle for competing with Victor Hugo, Maupassant, Fogazzaro, Wilde, etc.

Just as no one has ever thought that Neapolitan songs—which are a form of art that, though inferior, is still respectable—are competing with the operas of our past and present *maestri*.

This is about completely different things that you cannot compare, and it is therefore absurd to blame the cinema if the theatres have low attendance. Write some good plays, and the audience will come running—but not the cinema audience. It will be the theatre audience, which has nothing to do with the other.

With that, let’s free this poor art—art in a manner of speaking—of light and movement, as people call it, from the accusations that are thrown against it and let’s decide to accept the ‘death of the word’ as a product of the times and as a way to take some customers away from the taverns.
But from the moment that the cinema is the daily bread of the countless poor in spirit of this world, it is right to direct the most serious attention to it, as people do for every other pastime that is granted to the people, so that it will be possible to use it for higher ends and to at least attenuate the damaging effects that could be derived from it.

The most proper reproach that can be directed at the cinema is that it favours, or even instigates, wicked instincts through the depiction of the most horrifying scenes of wickedness.

How can we fix the problem?

As far as censorship goes, it is pointless to consider it: because if the questura starts to concern itself with the cinema, it will ban the most innocent movies, which do not merit such condemnation and will never to ban the truly reprehensible filth.

For such a work of improvement, it is necessary to trust the good sense of the cinema producers. On this front, it is undeniable that great progress has been made, so much so that one could say that it is the only Italian film industry—which truly is flourishing in this field—that still conforms to the old method of violent subjects.

But another problem is now threatening the cinema: profanity. The pochade and vaudeville are now starting to even penetrate the world of films, and we are already starting to see men and women in outfits that are anything but dignified and beds that are a little too unmade. We are at the beginning of something wicked, so it is necessary to immediately take some measures to prevent it from taking root. It would be extremely damaging to feed films of that nature to the large numbers of children and adolescents that frequent the cinema halls.

With such problems out of the way, it will naturally remain that—for however many efforts are made—and indeed, the ones from French and American production houses are shocking—the films will always be what they are: that is, pure representations of automatons, expressions of exterior and banal life—far from any study of the spirit and feelings, far from any discussion of ideas and principles, far from any artistic painting of places, characters, or passions that are truly and profoundly human.

Someone has recommended substituting today’s cinematic representations with the reproduction of only films that show real life. What blessed optimistic naivety!

Do you seriously think that the audience would find pleasure in that? No. In the crowd, there are not many sensitive souls who want to dive the flight of their nostalgic fancies into the calm of the seaside landscapes or among the foggy roofs of Ghent, or to the enchanted shores of faraway lands...
At the cinema—just like everywhere else—the crowd does not know how to understand the sublime poetry of nature and wants representations of the fictitious and unreal—but restless and frenetic—life that dazzles them and takes them away from the worries of their daily lives.

Therefore, there is no hope of a radical renewal. There is, however, the need for loving care so that the wickedness will be less than it is now.

The fact that even the lowly cinema can sometimes be used for something good has been demonstrated to us by the incredible success of all of the films that reproduce scenes from the current war.

These are often small, innocent portrayals that our good soldiers happily participate in. But that does not matter, because the audience either does not realize or they do not worry about it.

The audience only wants to see our dear heroes down there—among the palms and the desert—where every day, every heart longingly flies. And when they see the death and destruction of today’s enemy coming out of the mouth of a cannon, along with billows of smoke, and when they see the feathers of the bersaglieri moving and coming to life at the start of a charge, the tiny hands of children and the calloused hands of men clap together in unison, and a long, irrepressible applause explodes in the hall while the miniature little orchestra hammers away at national anthems, as if the dear brothers who live smiling on the bright screen can feel and enjoy their affectionate salute.

And perhaps, a small, welcome echo of so much thundering applause, in so many cinemas, in so many cities, has gone over the mountains and over the sea to reach them down there.

‘Quel povero cinematografo...’, La Vita, (4 March 1912), p. 3 Translated by Siobhan Quinlan.