Families of Soldiers

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Tripoli, 20 March

Today, the cinematograph, the only intellectual (?) entertainment in this neo-Italian city, has given us a lovely surprise. Before the eyes of the soldiers, who were called up ‘by district’, there are parades of the combatants’ families in a number of ‘films’, shot in various cities throughout the Italian peninsula.¹

I got mixed up in the crowd of soldiers who were entering by the hundreds into the vast rectangular hall, and I nestled into a corner, between a bersaglieri and a grenadier. I don’t know if you have ever—just for the novelty—ended up in the peanut gallery of a popular theatre in order to feel, just for a moment, exiled in an environment not your own, where the spirit speaks its own rough dialect full of strength and candour, where one really does take the ‘poor seduced woman’ or where you would happily throw an orange onto the head of the poor ‘tyrant’.

There was the rustling of people struggling to suppress laughter, a sort of contained glee, an emotional and impatient anticipation. I would have sworn that the majority of people were laughing in order to mask the trepidation that had grabbed them by the throat.

The bersaglieri near me would throw some witty jabs in Roman dialect at his buddies seated further up, but the sonorous ‘r’s of his dialect quivered a little bit, as if betraying some un-confessed distress.²

Indeed, when the lights went down, from the point where no one could see anymore, the laughter stopped and the pale glare of the illuminated screen revealed focused and pensive faces all around. And in that silence, the silent square, which typically shows the vulgarity of the ‘comical final scene’, opened up like a strange window into the far-off homeland.

I had the indefinable sensation of witnessing an unforeseen coming-to-life of things. It was really life: a life hot with passion, trembling with memories and kisses, a life which was passing before our eyes radiating inexplicable waves of sympathy in the rapt hall, stirring up memories that had laid dormant in their hearts for years, reawakening passionate impulses. In the trembling of the light projected on the screen, there was a thrill of affection, and we all felt an unfamiliar human solidarity, a lone tenderness spread among 10,000 beings like a religious faith that is at once unique and
multiple. All of a sudden, in the silence, someone shouted ‘That's my sister!’ and he reached a trembling hand towards a pensive girl with the round little face of a good girl who was smiling while her little gloved hand waved ‘Farewell! Farewell!’...

Then, here and there, many others recognized their loved ones. They greeted them with happy voices quivering with tears. Someone shouted out bizarre expressions in dialect, and in that crowd hidden in half-darkness, a strange and emotional hubbub, a gleeful chatter rose up.

On the silent screen, images of small bourgeois families in their Sunday best, the kindly faces of old clerical workers, and the bowed, slightly tired and slightly sad figures of old labourers all passed by. One could understand that a sort of spontaneous fellowship must have been formed among the subjects that had been filmed—one like the kind that springs up between mothers who wait for the children at the school's entrance or those who wait for visiting hours outside the gates of the hospital.

Seeing them elbow each other, one could intuit the conversations that had taken place a few minutes prior: ‘And your son, where is he?’—In Benghazi.—Mine is in Derna.—If only we could see them again soon!... Some young wives demonstrated a diligent and careful coquetry, a yearning to make themselves more beautiful and to keep themselves from being forgotten... One made a gesture with her hand as if to say: ‘Watch out, you rascal!’

Others, it seemed, had not decided to leave the camera's field of view yet: one very serious old man—a worried, little old man—turned back and waved again: you could see that he was struggling to hold back tears.

Then, a big group of little kids passed by: chubby little babies whose mothers were holding them up with both hands to show them off. Young girls with their hair all tidied up, budding young women, were clapping their hands. The soldiers greeted the children with a barrage of applause.

A little gentleman of about three or four years, fat as a butterball, got a standing ovation. In general, the children and the young people laughed. The old people had an air of contained sadness, as if they had not wanted to get too emotional. One could tell, however, that for the slightest thing, they would have burst into sobs.

One could tell that one little old lady could not contain herself, and at the edge of the screen, she hid her face in her hands.

Companies of soldiers passed by, waving their caps. Some joker was holding up a sign up that spelled out ‘Hi Pinot!’

Gentlemen and labourer, wives of officials and common girls were all blended together in one outpouring of tenderness.
One old man—he had to be a veteran—passed by rigidly, with his medal for bravery on his chest, saluting military style. Some people had put a little message or a little flag into their hatband to make themselves more easily recognizable.

In the film from the district of Rome, one made a series of rather complicated gestures that the bersaglieri next to me translated, thinking I had not understood: ‘He says: ‘Give ‘em a good thrashing, and then when we get back, we’ll eat spaghetti!’

When a company of conscripts passed by, the soldiers yelled: ‘So long, newbies!’

One man from the ‘Iron class’ of 1888, who had been called back to service yelled out: ‘What a stecca, we’re leaving you!’ Then, there was an enormous crowd, a fluttering of handkerchiefs, caps, hats, a waving of the tiny hands of children and of bony and trembling hands, a jumping around of poor human figures trying to show themselves—even for a moment—to make themselves noticed, to launch the message of their affections across space.

A little old lady raised herself up on her toes so desperately that I felt my hands contract, instinctively, from an illogical desire to lift her up in my arms.

But a babe in swaddling clothes was lifted up in front of her and she disappeared, overtaken in that torrent of passion.

Then, lastly, an elegant, very serious, lady passes by on her own and gestures with her hand ‘Write me!’

Exclamations in every dialect ring throughout the hall—‘Hi Ma!’—‘See ya soon!’—‘D’you see Gigin?’—‘Farewell sweetheart!’

When the lights grazed a toscano with a nonchalant air about him, that poor toscano was trembling and trembling.

District by district, so many cities passed by... Apparently, Turin contributed a large contingent of soldiers. Those from Settimo Torinese purposely came into the city [for the filming] and we saw them parade by with a big sign with the name of their town written on it.

Here and there, someone showed some war-like instincts, calls to beat up on the Turk, fluttering on white sheets of paper gestures of encouragement for the aforementioned need.

But one could see that the majority of people had nothing but a great tenderness—an immense desire to embrace, to be with [their loved ones]—which emanated from the illuminated screen into the shadows of the hall like a fluid that could not be stopped.

And, all of a sudden, with a shiver, I thought that many of those hands waving so feverishly were greeting a dead man and that their message of
love went, desolately, to the graves in Henni, or Rababa, or way down in the canyons of Derna, or to the heights of Mergheb, to the flat and yellow tip of Jalyanah, under the highest palm trees, or into the quiet corners of the oasis, where the turtledoves coo on the olive trees and the earth, covered by countless poppies, seems to be coughing out blood as far as the eye can see.9

It seemed to me, then, in that semi-darkness, I was moved by the invisible presence of deceased beings and that a thousand hands made of shadows were responding to the tragically useless greeting: ‘Farewell! Farewell!’


Notes

1. [Editors’ note. He is referring to the ‘cinema for the families of soldiers’. There were projects realized between the end of December and the beginning of March, funded by the Cines production studio in Rome, which happened in various cities across Italy (Turin, Milan, Rome, Naples, Florence, La Spezia and Venice, which were added to those made in Padova, made at the expense of the state). The first shots made in Turin and Rome in December 1911 were screened on 20 March 1912 at the Savoy Cinema Tripoli. The soldiers were invited to the screenings according to their city, but in the military draft in Italy always assigned individual soldiers to military units in different areas of the country, greatly complicating the execution of the event.]

2. [Translator’s note. In the Roman dialect, the ‘r’ was rolled.]

3. [Translator’s note. Nickname for Giuseppe in Piedmontese dialect.]

4. [Translator’s note. In the original Italian, the construction immediately indicates the Roman, working-class origins of the character.]

5. [Translator’s note. Slang referring to the long period between arriving and the day to return home.]

6. [Translator’s note. The original phrases alternate between Piedmontese and Roman dialects.]

7. [Translator’s note. Type of cigar made with Kentucky tobacco and produced in Italy, primarily in Tuscany.]

8. [Translator’s note. Suburb of Turin.]

9. [Editors’ note. Oasis in the Southeast of Tripoli where, on 26 October 1911, the second attack to the Arab troops on the Italian happened. Despite heavy casualties, Italian troops held their position, unlike what had happened three days earlier at Sciara-Sciat. Refers to the cemetery in Rebab for about 250 soldiers who were massacred during the battle Sciara-Sciat on 23 October 1912. These three battles were very well-known at the time.]