The War and Cinematograph

*g. pr.*

One year ago, in the columns of a newspaper with which I happily collabo-
rate, I expressed my wish that a national cinema would rise up and abandon
sentimental scenes and games of cops and robbers; it would make Italians
familiar with our country, its glories and failures, its joys and sorrows; and
it would allow everyone to see with their own eyes how the millions in
gold that Emigrants pour into Italy each year are put to use, and also what
difficulties and hostilities must be overcome in the backward provinces in
order to keep our culture alive.

The occasion and the possibility to do this were, of course, provided by
the war. The cinemas were transformed unwittingly into national bodies.
Such that, next to the professional and the amateur journalist, throughout
the trenches in Tripoli or the Cyrenaica, at the encampments, at the depart-
ture and arrival of the troops, marching towards the enemy, another eye
sprang up—the one belonging to the cinematographer, ready to capture in
the middle of the action events that fill so many Italian hearts to point of
bursting and fill so many Italian imaginations with dear figures.

Since that time, even I go to the cinema often. Nat Pinkerton has stopped
following threatening figures with his ridiculous revolver; the chorus girls
of the operetta and the background actresses no longer use their disgraceful
ways to feign the sorrows of Marie Antoinette and the orgies of Bianca
Cappello. On the fabric of the backdrop, the tops of the dunes follow one
after the other; the sparkling carpet of the deserts stretches out; the thou-
sand feathers of the bunting wave in the sea breeze. Then come the agile
askari, bounding about like sheepdogs, white and mottled; the charge of
the bersaglieri, grey like the clouds of sand that sometimes swallow them
up; and the awe-inspiring artillery men in the act of hoisting a caisson up
the steep slope of a deep, rocky valley.¹

Here is the war right before our eyes.

The tents of a hospital stand unmoving under the relentless gaze of the
sun: and it seems that one can hear the moaning coming out of them. The
generals are visiting an oasis: a grave silence spreads all around them. The
enigmatic Arab crouches, hiding his secret hatred and disgust behind a
stony expression. Precious water is taken drop by drop from the wells, which
have become the centre of human society—a sort of church and fortress, a
meeting place, and the highest financial asset.
The newspaper leaves me cold. At the cinema, I better communicate the enthusiasm the Italian people for their sons who are down there. You can think what you want about the reasons for the war, and about the value of those countries that we are occupying, but you can only think with great emotion about those who belong to us and who are united with us Italians, who are men.

I know, I know...these scenes are brought together, patched and sewn together with spectacles of drills and exercises more than with the direct sight of battles. But regardless of however much that is done, we are left enough reality and immediacy to take us there.

It has been said that the better correspondences have not been from the journalists, but rather from the letters of soldiers. That is often true. But where can you find a better correspondence than the cinematograph?

I have to say, the thing that moved me the most was not the spectacle of the troops going out in formation and seemingly devouring the territory, or even the charge of the riflemen, all of which make the theatre resound with applause. What moved me the most was the soldiers’ amusement. That brought me closer to our people and to their excellent, cheerful, firm, and swift nature. At the seaside, they organized plays, antics, and clowned around. They dressed up as ballerinas; they wrestled and did acrobatics; they organized a brass band; they built human pyramids. What a beautiful thing to see those brave boys, down at the seaside, finding the time to joke around and to have fun in spite of the privations, the oppressive climate, and the thoughts of their distant relatives and the Turk nearby. They seemed more heroic and more dear to me, more like complete men, and therefore all the more Italian.


Note

1. [Translator’s note. Native soldiers in the Italian colonies of Eritrea and Somalia. Refers to the white uniforms which were in contrast to the dark skin of the soldiers.]