Early Film Theories in Italy, 1896-1922

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The Motion Pictures and Education

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The belief that motion pictures possess an uncommon educational power has been established for some time.

The State, in the 1909 budget for the Mezzogiorno has earmarked a sum for scholastic cinematograph. And the City of Rome, through the initiative of the current Administration, has recently proposed the purchase of some cinematographic projectors to be used—so they assure us, at least—in schools.

However, nothing of the sort is in effect yet, because you cannot attribute the reputation or the value of cinematographic operation to the fixed [slide] projections used in the School of Education in Rome, and in some public schools in Milan, Turin, Florence, and also in Rome, too, in the school in Via Palombella and the Regina Margherita School in Trastevere.

In the end, those are no more than a version of the old magic lantern that is slightly improved and that is put into motion by an electrical current. They are an educational tool that has seen a full and practical development in France, Switzerland, and Germany for some time.

Compared to film projections, fixed projections are absolutely a bad thing. The motion pictures, by bringing the eyes of the spectator the full view of reality—dynamic, varied, rapid, and exact—ends up becoming the most interesting distraction of our time.

The statistics on movie theatres demonstrate the growing, successful diffusion of similar spectacles. Rome alone has 70 of them. Now even the most far-off, most inaccessible mountain towns have their own little movie theatre.

No one can escape the appeal of the film: neither the labourer in the noisy workshop, nor the petite bourgeoisie in the small, provincial town, nor the illiterate farmer. Unfortunately, the films that are in circulation, even those that call themselves art and recreate paintings or historical scenes, are practically the opposite of art, or a strict and rigid historical reconstruction. Now, something better could be done, which would be preparing films that have a high moral aim, that are marked by the vividness of scenes from reality, and that are appealingly educational.

But oh! How much capital would be required for such an undertaking!

The companies that are forming little by little in Italy must, because of the iron-clad law of competition, follow the flow of representations that are
risqué, fiercely dramatic, or marked by a paradoxical and theatrical element of fantasy that is devoid of any aspect of aesthetic refinement, never mind morality. Indeed, because they are guided only by making profits, they must have over-the-top plots in order to have more appeal for the poor tastes of the popular class.

A curious example of this is a company in Rome that was established with Catholic funds and is largely subsidized by a very Catholic bank. In addition to grand spectacles for special, Christian occasions—the attendance of which is frequently encouraged in churches, and in Catholic social organizations—by the parish priests and even the preachers—the company puts on romantic representations of castles, grottos, escapes, warriors, vendettas, and hidden treasures, which succeed in nothing else if not in titillating the most puerile spirit of the people, in weakening the soul of the crowd, which needs altogether different examples of life and history, daring and passion, rather than those that they get from the unreal, imagined version of the medieval period that is sung about in dime novels or recounted in novels of the worst kind.

And then, there is one element that they cannot do without: CRIME. Unfortunately, there is crime in life, and especially in the life of the lower class. It is not, however, all there is to life. Nor should it be everywhere and always put before the eyes of the popular masses. This perpetuation of the criminal, bloody spectacle is therefore painful and distressing!

The reality of everyday life, therefore, is not enough. The dark, tragic, noisy halo that the press puts around everyday life is not enough. Even the only artistic representation that is given to the people to enjoy today—the cinema—has to insist upon it, exaggerating the details. And yet, if there is a campaign to be started and to be tenaciously sustained in Italy, it is precisely this: that of eliminating bloodshed as much as possible from the eyes and the ears of the public.

In Rome, this campaign should be presented to everyone. It is urgent, holy, and necessary because our people completely lack a sense of the integrity of life because Italians in general, and Romans in particular, retain the sad, ferocious patrimony of blood—a horrid vein that descends from obscure origins in Latium, in which everything was robbing, aggression, and slashing, and which the priestly regimes—that have inquisitorial perversion in their substance and flaunt grim spectacles—have only enlarged along the way. There ought to be censorship, but does that exist? No doubt occupied with other matters, the censors do not give any care to verifying whether certain ultra-veristic representations are—and they are—appealing to the lowest instincts latent in the people: a genuine provocation to criminality.
It is a duty, then, to attempt an altogether different use for the film projector.

I think that this and all the other marvellous inventions and applications of modern science must see themselves primarily as wicked things, if no benefit can be derived from them for those who, more than the others—who more than everyone—need help to emerge out of the cruel darkness, from which they cannot see the bright beacon of truth and justice.

Let the motion pictures be another means of elevating the people’s spirit.

With the support of the Roman Educational Institute, I have attempted this undertaking in Testaccio.

The need to know, to dream, to watch historical scenes and dramas about other classes of society as direct witnesses—in other words, the need to see the most imaginative dreams realized—those which remain latent in every human being, that makes the cinema a tremendous tool—as much for education as for corruption.

The lower class in general, and the poor in particular, lack the essential conditions through which they can participate in the life of the book, the theatre, and even school, and therefore they cannot receive the moral disciple that typically comes from, or can come from a wisely-chosen book, a theatrical representation inspired by noble intentions, and regular school attendance. Deprived because of these three restraints on the spirit, the people give in easily to the exaggerated passion of the wicked deed in the news, and the movie theatre owners take advantage with skilful cunning, making profits by feeding the over-excitability of crude audiences with overly passionate dramas; fantastic coloured scenes not regulated by any artistic taste or pedagogical approach; and the comical final scenes of an awkward, grotesque comedy which lacks any duty to be corrective, much less to improve manners.

The lower class manifests all of itself—its melancholic pain and impulsive enthusiasm, with its faith and its fetishism—in the half-light of a film projection. You can capture it—and in these three months of experiments, I had the opportunity to do so—in everything it has of the noble and pure, low and bestial. There it reveals the immense treasure of its ideals and the sinister abyss of its instincts. With eyes wide and mouths agape, this audience follows, stares, with growing anxiety, ready either to condemn an abomination with frenetic howls or to vigorously applaud a spectacle that shows itself to them, moves about, and then slips away from them, launched by the screeching of the mysterious machine.

The case of a Republican working-class man in Testaccio watching the depiction of the death of Marat in the movie theatre is a typical one: when
he sees the heroine of old France, Charlotte Corday, stab Marat in the bath
tub, [the working-class man] gets up, brandishing his cane as if to strike her
and to prevent her from killing the French Revolutionary leader.

The case of the two local butchers who could not hold back their tears at
the film about the Carbonari of 1821 is also a typical one.³

Now, seeing how instincts prevail over ideas and noble sentiments in
the lower classes, it is clear that any outside influence that will provoke
a man’s lowest urges can bring about the most serious moral and social
consequences.

On the other hand, precisely because the lower classes are instinct-
driven, and therefore impulsive, they ultimately have a healthy innocence
which can be nurtured and moulded by films. This is the case even if they
evoke love, crime, violence, and passion, so long as they are inspired by a
moral standard that goes directly toward remorse, a sense of justice, an
ennobling faith in rehabilitation, and the ultimate need for punishment:
in short, a concept of life that continually raises up the spirit and keeps it
safe from contact with the frenetic and savage impulses.

The desire to achieve a profoundly educational goal with a pleasing form
is an old one. In past centuries, many literary people—and not just a few
actors, too—have longed for a theatre with the sole benefit of educating
the masses.

So once again, there remains only the unrealized ideal. Once again, there
remains that thing which some are in the habit of calling the unattainable
weapon of moralization. There is a lack of men who are willing to completely
sacrifice themselves for the benefit of others and contribute to the immense
expenditure that it is necessary in order to keep the popular theatre thriv-
ing. And finally, let’s be honest, the extreme success of dramatic works that
are anything but honest, they have made it so that many people speak about
the benefits of popular theatre and few people—no one, really—tries to
make it happen.

The motion pictures come to the aid of our good intentions with an ef-
ficacy that we ourselves did not anticipate. The natural desire for spectacle,
the forces of the spirit that lead us to seek out of some object, which keeps
our attention alert, the common need, almost, for concentration, finds very
great satisfaction in the cinema.

And without remotely harming that sense of the art, that great spontane-
ous art that gave Greek tragedy to the world, we are pleased with the motion
pictures as the most docile educational tool.

Even a theatre started by an uncompromising mind can stray from and
almost flee the constant control of the director through the cleverness of the
actors, but the motion pictures cannot trick the one who starts it up, who establishes it, and who directs it with a firm desire to educate souls. And to whoever would say to me that lectures are more educational and moral than the theatre and the movies, I would respond that that is not true. It is not true because the theatre affirms a psychological need, because the theatre reveals the inclination of the spirit towards spectacle as a form. And we, by using the motion pictures, we set a trap for the theatre, we free ourselves from its dangers, using, however, the very same means of enticement.

Lectures can be pleasing—are pleasing sometimes—when the voice of the speaker raises them up in a theatrical form. But nothing conquers, impasses, and convinces like spectacle. Fondness for spectacle is one of those qualities that the educator ought to exploit for the absolute benefit of the souls that he wishes to ennoble. Fondness for spectacle must always be encouraged because it is this incontrovertible energy that pushes them towards an awareness of the world. And the lower-class people feel this quite deeply. Whoever lacks this fondness, however, is holed up in some dive, once work is finished, with no other desire than to get drunk for the thousandth time, and doesn't even take advantage of non-working days to set foot outside of the neighbourhood.

Now, motion pictures are also better than the theatre for children because they can show, in an enchanting game of sights, all of those divine legends that lead to an ethical formation. The motion pictures, rather than squandering the natural inclination towards knowing, develop it, make it gigantic even, because it leads the spirit not only to glorious acts and to noble reflections, but also to the study of history, and the physical and natural sciences.

I insist on the importance of the fondness for spectacle because I know how much the knowledge of the greatness in the world lifts the soul. There is no vice that is the result of little discernment which does not come from the narrow-mindedness of the soul.

In his Memorie dalla casa di morti (Memoirs from the House of the Dead), Dostoyevsky recounts the day that the inmates got permission to organize a spectacle. Why does he give so much importance to something, which, for someone serving a life sentence, for a man used to every form of suffering, could seem like something so foolish? Because Dostoyevsky found himself in front of a fact that drove him to the keenest observation. Only then he understood what it meant to offer a closed and perhaps abject spirit a new spectacle that in some ways takes an artistic shape. He affirmed, therefore, that the educator needn't take advantage of anything else except the common fondness for the spectacle.
‘From universal beauty I foretasted the feeling of universal goodness,’ says Nievo, narrating the great and unsurpassed feeling he felt as a boy, having left the confines of his house for the first time, to see the sea and the sun setting on top of it. He fell to his knees, as he himself says, ‘like Voltaire on Grütli when he, bowing before God, announced the only article of his credo.’

But are these quotations necessary to demonstrate the value that grandiose spectacles have on the soul?

The only task that remains for us—and I do not know that it is small—is to be grateful again to science, which offers us such extensive assistance. And it is our responsibility to formulate a complete educational method around the cinema. It is not enough to enjoy the child’s joy: it is necessary to take advantage of that enjoyment in order to teach.

Entertaining for entertainment’s sake would be of little import. Of great import would be guiding toward the good without the least bit of boredom. For the same reason that the elementary school teacher makes use of a book of ABCs before a book of grammar, we must work to organize film spectacles. In order for a child to be able to draw lasting benefit from it, it is necessary to begin with the ABCs of simple projections—with patriarchal scenes—in order to arrive at fantastical, historical, and sentimental ones. What is needed is a slow, thoughtful, and graduated process that is appropriate in every way for the child’s psyche. Indeed, I don’t think that it is appropriate to wear the child out with excessive spectacles.

He needs to be able to demonstrate that he understood the previous film before being admitted to the next one. This rouses the attention more than ever, and it forces the children not to miss a word spoken by the person who gives a prefatory lesson before the carefully thought-out projections.

We believe that the action psychiatrists wanted to exert on the child’s mind through suggestion is more attainable through representation. Sentimental spectacles cannot but open the way to emotions. Heroic deeds and all magnanimous acts cannot but leave some fertile seed of goodness in the men of tomorrow. And because childhood is the age that is most inclined to laughter, we must not for any reason inhibit this blessed form of vitality. But it is appropriate to ban that less-than-honest hilarity that arises from [observing] the sufferings or the crimes of other people.

The child must never sully his mouth with a smile that is less than pure.

I have been able to ascertain that children, the littlest ones in particular, enthusiastically and happily recount everything that they have seen at the cinema in detail. The fantastical and symbolic scenes, the fables truly have a profound impact on the little innocent souls and perfume them with that
kindness and that tender grace that gives us hope for the future of Man, just as the little plant that flowers with a beautiful green from the earliest phase of its development gives much hope.

Nor should films for adults be overlooked, because we also believe that by immersing the spirit in the mysteries of the world, instead of bumming around on the street, one can grow a great deal in virtue. We are certain that the cinema, this school of the future, this universal language, this clear, infinitely erudite teacher, combined with conferences and subjected to a methodology, can excite people to work and joy and can demonstrate how many treasure troves of virtue even the most modest of men holds in his heart.

What is happening in Testaccio is an experiment that needs the moral assistance of those willing to show through their actions, and not just their words, their interest in school and in educational initiatives for the working-class, which in Rome—let's be honest—are a myth. A myth because school must be alive in [a person’s] life and not be a dead thing, outside of the aspirations, the desires, the needs, and the goals of the people.

If education for the working-classes existed, if the so highly-touted non-religious school worked, we would not have thousands of illiterate kids, and the religious schools in Rome would not have 25,000 students.

Scholastic cinema is one of those initiatives, which in this age of enormous riches and widespread, terrible human misery, can demonstrate in full light the bright destiny of the discoveries and the applications of science. It is perhaps the only initiative—if I am not incorrect—that can bring the blessing of science to the redeemed hearts and the emancipated souls of the lowly.


Notes

1. [Translator’s note. The Mezzogiorno refers to Southern Italy].
3. [Editors’ note. I Carbonari were members of the Carboneria, an Italian secret society of a liberal and nationalist persuasion, which was begun in the early
nineteenth century. The name of the organization, its symbols and rituals were inspired by the carbonai or coal vendors.]

4. [Editors’ note. The original Italian reads, ‘Dalla bellezza universale pregustai il sentimento dell’universale bontà.’ See Nievo, Le confessioni, p. 189.]

5. [Editors’ note. Nievo cited an episode that would have happened in 1775: Voltaire, in his old age, wanted to be present at the sight of the dawn seen from the summit of a small Swiss mountain, and there, moved, bowing down in front of the natural spectacle, he would have pronounced his faith in God. ‘Come Voltaire sul Grütli quando pronunziò dinanzi a Dio l’unico articolo del suo credo.’ See Nievo, Le confessioni, p. 189.]