Early Film Theories in Italy, 1896-1922

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The Cinema and Its Influence on the Education of the People

Giovanni Battista Avellone

We publish with pleasure the letter that the valiant Commendatore Avellone sent us today.¹

He is advocating for a new and just cause: morality in cinematographic spectacles, which thousands of people from all social categories spend a great deal of time attending.

Commendatore Avellone sounds a warning call concerning the pernicious influence that certain dramas have on the hearts and minds of those who fill the theatres. It is a school of vice, which calls for the attention of the authorities and the advancement of measures to deal with the situation.

Dear Signor Bergamini,²

Your distinguished newspaper’s campaign against usury has been and will be welcomed by all of the unfortunate, starting with its immediate victims, the honest and needy fathers—employees of the State and its Administrations, worried about increasing needs and the modesty of their salaries—as well as delinquent children and slacker husbands, and finally the many women who, as wives, mothers, aunts, and grandmothers, cry and feel the painful, agonizing, and poison bite of the usurious vampire.

Please continue, Signor Bergamini, in this highly moral and holy war against usury, which is practically protected by prevailing laws, or at the very least, remains unmonitored and unimpeded. Continue to expound the idea that money is not merchandise that can be sold at a discounted price, and that capital must (in carrying out its activity and exercising its power, whether used in industry, commerce, or agriculture, or for any sort of lending) remain within the confines of an honest, moral, balanced, and proportionate yield of profit. Il Giornale d’Italia (The Newspaper of Italy) will be blessed by the entire Italian people, who love and value it for the excellent, reasonable morality of its aims in the social and civil work that it carries out on a daily basis for the benefit of the people.

But to this campaign directed at ameliorating of the economic conditions of the many, unhappy slaves from need, I would add another, directed at preventing great moral harm to the education of the hearts and minds of the
people; we must raise our voices against the abuses of the cinema, which out of shameful greed has become a veritable school of immorality, but which could, I believe, carry out holy and wholesome work.

‘Are you saying, then, that the Newspaper of Italy should also fight against the cinema?’

To this question I respond immediately:

Yes, Signor Bergamini, [the journal should fight] also against the abuses of the cinema, and here is why:

This ingenious invention, like the telephone, the phonograph, and the wireless, has shaken and impressed the entire world; this astounding discovery that produces the living, pulsating reproduction of acts, facts, political events, major natural catastrophes, incidents and accidents of every sort from life as it was lived in times past, artificially bringing them back to life with admirable precision; this marvellous way of bringing history back to life gathers and expresses the great moments of today’s history as luminous truths, securing them for posterity. It has also entered into the minds and spirits of all because it makes the reproduction of scenery and action more rapid, less costly, less boring, and less wearying, all while conserving the enthrallment and magnificence of the old theatricality. Responding to the taste of the new age, which is more synthetic in its apprehension and feeling, it attracts everyone from every class, every sort of culture and education, and conquers, dominates, and feverishly appeals to the desire to see, relish, and admire new, original, and exciting things and events.

All of these things, in the field of novelties and attractions, have been and will be the great destiny of the cinema, and they are the reason why the first ones to have brought us this marvellous discovery have gotten rich, and their numerous followers are striving to keep the yet to be established productivity of the extraordinary invention high by any means necessary, even immoral ones.

If the illustrious Liesegang family—its father, sons, and nephews, all devoted themselves to perfecting the astounding reproductions of life in all its movements, forms, and things through the cinema—if they had known that their classic and artistic cinematographic manual, translated from German into all languages, including Italian (by the esteemed engineer Henry Hirsch of Torino), was going lay a path for greedy and rapacious theatrical speculation, dragging the invention from its noble and moral idea—its capacity to produce profound impressions that function, through the feelings that it arouses and the historical grandeur that it brings back to life, a school and a model of virtue, valour, honesty, sacrifice, and heroism—into the lower depths of a vulgar and titillating industry, which
attracts crowds and appeals to the most insalubrious and perverted curiosities through horrid spectacles reproducing adultery, suicides, financial ruin brought about by fraud, forgery, and swindling, shameless loves, lascivious affairs, crooked businesses, attacks on coaches, and brazen robberies using buzz saws, accompanied by the slaughter of those robbed; if the Lisegang family had known all this, believe me, Signor Bergamini, that hard-working, wise, and honest family would have destroyed that product of lengthy, costly, and ingenious experiments, and would not have vulgarized the magnificent art, in order to prevent it from falling into the gutter of a petty and immoral business.3

However, here we are: the famous Liesegang manual is in the public domain, available to all. There are hundreds of cinemas. The most cruel and horrid spectacles are offered, advertised by posters showing the face of a man killing himself, or a thief who kills and then breaks open a safe. People come running in droves, pay a small price, and have a good time—so shall we just calm ourselves and leave things at that?

So says the so-called modern man, who adapts to everything. But you do not say so, Signor Bergamini, nor does the Newspaper of Italy think or write so, and I, who venture to guess at your mind-set and that of your authoritative and beloved newspaper, would ask your hospitality to say in protest:

Our women and children, attracted by the low cost of cinematic entertainment, must not flock to the cinemas to view immoral pulsating or living spectacles, which impart in the souls of the young people the tormented need for an explanation and the trouble of explaining to their parents, and in the souls of adults, their horror at the life-like reproduction of human degeneration in its most vile and wicked acts.

The cinema must be a true school of ancient and modern history, reproducing heroic acts and deeds, highly moral scenes of public or private life, suffering, sorrows, passions, joys, pleasures, and excitement, arising from human misfortune and fortune on the basis of honesty and virtue.

To conclude, the political authorities must fully carry out their duty to oversee public spectacles and to come to the defence of public morality, rigorously and without fail, preventing the depiction of immoral acts (historical or otherwise), and seizing films to prevent their circulation.

Will this voice of protest, supported, after all, by the law, be heard? I hope that it will, if you, Signor Bergamini, will help me, because a government that has so zealously (and rightly) pursued illegal gambling houses and their proprietors cannot leave at full liberty the cinematographic speculation that, out of greed, has transformed the cinema into an enormous, crowded, and very attractive school of immorality and perversion.
With the promise to submit to you a list of all of the immoral cinematographic productions being shown here in Rome, your devoted.


Notes

1. [Editors’ note. Commendatore is an honorific title.]
2. [Editors’ note. Alberto Bergamini (1871–1962) was a journalist and Italian politician who was the editor of the Roman newspaper, Il Giornale d’Italia from 1901 and 1923.]
3. [Editors’ note. See Liesegang, Il cinematografo.]