Cinema for the Cultivation of the Intellect

Angelina Buracci

Why do children go to the cinema indifferently, without informing themselves as to the subject of the film?

Why does one see a considerable number of exuberant little heads in cinemas, bringing distress to mothers and nannies, and a note of gaiety and laughter to the theatre?

Because the mother wants to be entertained, and brings her little children with her, not knowing who else to entrust them to; because the children themselves are entertained; and because (even if the film is a bit racy) the children don't understand anything. These are the reasons why one often sees ladies burst into cinemas followed by a throng of lively and talkative children; this is why so many little imps rush about, running between the seats, shouting with joy, and calling to each other in loud voices, as though their choice of seats were a matter of the utmost seriousness.

I have heard this last reason, adopted by the majority, discussed, affirmed, and proclaimed out loud in a circle of acquaintances, even by those who have a reputation for being sensible, and who are sure that they possess a discreet intelligence.

This reputation is undeserved, no doubt, since a discreetly cultivated and intelligent person could not make such a gross error, which goes against the first principles of good sense and logic.

A child understands nothing? If so, then why are so many childhoods corrupted by the bad examples of parents, so many youths prematurely tainted by depravity, intellectually unbalanced and descending, little by little, down the slope of perversion and perdition?

Why do we hear, with horror, children's mouths speaking obscene words to their friends; why do we see them, with repugnance, commit acts worthy of the most brutally perverse man? If children understood nothing, then they would take nothing away from films, and their innocence would remain untarnished.

The facts, however, demonstrate the contrary.

Children understand neither everything, nor nothing: they understand badly.
This fact is not a result (as many believe) of the late development of their intelligence; it is a natural fact, due to the natural and gradual unfolding of the individual’s psychological energies.

The child, as an organism that goes through successive periods of formation in which his capacities develop, work, and extend themselves, perceives, associates, recalls, synthesizes, analyses, imagines, judges, and reasons.

If the child’s perceptions are quantitatively and qualitatively commensurate to his age, and in consequence, his psychological development, association will take place without effort and in an orderly fashion; memories will be faithful, ideas clear, and judgement and reasoning correct.

On the other hand, disordered perceptions following one another with vertiginous speed will correspond with confused associations, incomplete memories, and overly general ideas, since the rapid succession of perceptions allows only for the most notable resemblances between objects to be comprehended. False ideas, judgements, and reasoning will thus follow.

We thus find a proliferation of errors in the mind of the child, the fruit of work that he carries out in secret and which makes itself apparent from time to time in a few ambiguous or incoherent sentences, with a few embarrassing questions that astonish mothers and nannies.

The latter, shocked, ask themselves, ‘How could he have come to understand certain things, this child? He is very intelligent, too intelligent for his age […].’

This child is neither too intelligent, nor precocious, nor even less a little genius: he is simply a normal child, whose psychological functions are carried out with the same regularity as a machine that must be charged at a given time or with a given system: change the system, accelerate it or slow it down, intensify it or diminish it, and its functions will undergo an analogous change, possibly harming the machine.

During early childhood, the child receives and stores sensations and the resulting perceptions, which are then coordinated, in respect to one another and to the environment, during later childhood and adolescence. To an early childhood that passes normally in a healthy environment, then, corresponds a normal later childhood and adolescence, in which all functions are carried out normally.

This is why the cinema, with its reproduction of so many different subjects, which often do not follow the principles of logic and truth, can generate an irrational direction to childhood energies, can give them a mark that will be the basis of further and significant development, of new and definitive marks; this is why the cinema plays such a large role in the
development of attention, memory, and imagination in both early and later childhood.

The child himself demonstrates this in following, dumbfounded and immobile, the scene that unfolds before him, and in his memory and misalignment of the things he has seen as he recounts them to his family or friends.

It is not necessary to attract the attention of young children with special means, because any stimulus of a certain intensity arouses the attention, even in a baby of just a few months. The goal is to give the attention a certain duration without producing fatigue, following two fundamental principles: the attention is produced, in an unforced way, by a variety of stimuli, and is the main cause of the pleasure produced by a given object upon the subject.

The child will easily remember, because he will from time to time easily associate images with one another, not only on the basis of their relationship in space and time, but also in relation to their content; because mental associations will be enriched through the links between ideas, acquired in the various environments in which the child lives.

Only through the production of a rational mental association will children become properly developed intellectually, and not susceptible to false and damaging judgments and reasoning.

By now it is an old lie, told by many, which claims that a child possesses an imagination superior to that of an adult. This affirmation can be refuted and contradicted: the child does not have imagination in greater or lesser quantity in respect to the adult; rather, he possesses a different sort of imagination. It can be granted only that it is more expansive and has a dominance over other capacities, because reason, not yet at its full development, cannot restrain, discipline, or limit it; it must granted that it has a considerable liveliness due to the child's imperfect knowledge of the external world. This external world, which arouses wonder and curiosity, fills in the gaps in his knowledge, providing him with innumerable particulars about the people shown on the screen, making him create in his thoughts the strangest heroes, making him judge everything that surrounds him in a way that does not match reality.

Because the child believes, after having developed the cinematic scene in his mind, that things are as he sees them, that the adventures are real, and that the characters exist.

I recall the exploits of Maciste, the giant friend of children and the weak, always ready to protect and defend them. I remember him among a group of evil-doers, with whom he fights and from whom he easily frees himself, only to meet more, even more obstinate and wicked adversaries, who lay
a thousand traps for him, [but] from which the giant nonetheless emerges victorious. One quickly understands that although Maciste’s muscular strength may be real, much of the scene relies on many strange and exaggerated shot combinations.

How can children be made to understand all the tricks of the cinema?

Once the non-existence of the action has been demonstrated, the scene loses all of its attractiveness, because the child is aware that it is not real.

I recall the words of a child of around seven years old in relation to this question. A long series of exploits of Protea, the policewoman, were being projected; at a certain point, in order to elude her pursuers, as she is speeding away, she makes a flying leap on her bicycle, reaching the opposite bank of the river.’

The child looked in awe at the actress’s ability, and to his mother, who was trying to explain the impossibility of the feat to him, responded in amazement, ‘Of course it’s true; I saw the jump.’ Anyone would agree that one could make a jump from one bank of a river to the other with an aircraft, but never with a bicycle, and that the effect of this very convincing scene depended upon artfully simulated tricks that give the illusion of reality in films.

And yet, the child remained convinced that he could fly with a bicycle, just as one flies with an airplane. I do not wish to make a list of all of the films whose predominant characteristic is their implausibility, both because one volume would not be enough and because intelligent people know perfectly well that such projected scenes plainly contradict reality, with the exception of some that I will discuss later on.

Many will undoubtedly smile, incredulous, while reading my claim: the cinema is a means for intellectually ruining a child. Intelligent people, however, to whom the good education of their children matters, will not smile. If all parents considered the negative effects that a film can produce in the mind of a child, they would exercise greater care in choosing the cinematic scenes their children watched, or look for other forms of entertainment for them.

It is true: children and adolescents are entertained at the cinema. Their smiling faces, their wonder, their praise, and their applause demonstrate this.

The young child is entertained because he is fascinated by the novelty; the older child because he is satisfying a strong need to widen the scope of his cognition and to clarify many nagging questions; the adolescent because the passing of various scenes on the screen provides him with a means to satisfy, through watching a wide range of films, the tendencies that his sex and his surroundings reinvigorate and intensify.
But any activity that engages our children must have an educative goal, both for their intelligence and their emotions; thus, entertainment too must pursue this aim, must be a means and not an end, and as such, must serve this end.

This, then, is the problem: how to educate while entertaining, to adopt the cinema as a means of intellectual and moral education, not only among families but also in schools. We should imitate the American institution of the Children’s Museum, follow the idea of Spencer and Wundt and add a cinema to every scholastic institution, as a subsidiary element of the school itself, so that all children can partake in entertainment, even the poor ones who cannot go to a public cinema.

Since experts consider the cinema to be an important means of education, the poor must not be deprived of it. But since this institution remains in Italy, for now, one ideal among many to be achieved, let us turn, with patience and goodwill, to the cinemas of our cities, to choose the scenes that respond to our goal.

I have spoken of choice, but I have made a mistake, and one may rightly laugh at my optimism. How can one choose between things that do not exist?

Where can one today see educational scenes? In some cinemas, sometimes, by pure chance (and the exception is not the rule).

So, since we are in the realm of desires, since we are among ideals, let us imagine the cinema of our dreams, which would completely satisfy our educational aspirations.

Teachers weary themselves teaching children the conventions and customs of various times, historical facts, and the elements of geography. Children, for their part, weary themselves learning and remembering. Would it not be more practical and more fruitful to illustrate the knowledge to be studied through cinematic reproduction?

We can certainly not presume to show Napoleon’s descent from Gran San Bernardo or the wars of Italian independence, because the cinema did not exist when these things occurred, and they cannot be reconstructed now for economic reasons. Beyond the financial means, we lack the multitude of men that would have to be brought together in order to represent a battle scene, and the work of an artist or critic who would oversee the unfolding of the scene in order to avoid it falling into ridiculousness or grotesqueness.

Our children have seen, however, episodes from the Libyan war, have been excited by them and excitedly applauded, and have learned about war. Now we see episodes from a closer and more terrible war, and in ten years, other children who are now only a few months old, and others of another
generation, will see the terrifying reproduction of the German invasion of Belgium and will witness our war. They will see the march of our infantry, our Alpine troops’ ascent on snow and ice-covered peaks, the attacks of our gunmen, and the firing of our artillery. Within ten or twenty years, the sight of so many horrors, committed by modern barbarians in Passano gli Unni (The Huns are Coming), which will still move and elicit applause; Mio diario di Guerra (My War Diary) and Alla baionetta! (To the Infantry!) will tell the children of the future how much blood was shed for an ideal; the notes of the royal march will echo beneath the vaults of the cinemas and other hearts will beat as ours do now at the sight of the trenches and the fighting soldiers. And if we cannot reproduce the wars of the past, we can reproduce the main figures and heroes that took part in them.

Describe the face of a soldier to a child and he will remember it for a few days; take him to a cinema to see the same soldier, and he will remember it for several years, because seeing his stature, his build, his attitude, and his gestures will provide an intense stimulus that will keep the image alive and the idea precise, without the aid of excessive mnemonic effort.

The facts that lend themselves best to being taught by the cinema are those of geography.

This field cinematic art can be taken advantage of because there are numerous landscapes that can be projected, and along with them the men, buildings, monuments, animals, and rich plant life of different countries.

Travel instructs while entertaining, as many say. If our children cannot travel, let us give them the illusion of travelling in far-off lands through the means of the cinema.

What use is it to study the physical characteristics of Indians, Africans, Chinese, and Arabs with a textbook? What use is it to make the effort to imagine a far-off group of houses, an unknown part of the sea, an exotic plant, a ferocious animal? None, because for the child, all of this will take on the form of a phantasmagoria and be quickly forgotten.

I recall a film on Rome’s Zoological Garden, which showed it as though in real life: the spectacle was marvellously natural and perfect in form, worthy of admiration.

Several children watched, astonished, while others were a bit afraid: the children chattered and asked questions of their mothers with intense interest, as though they were truly in this internationally-famed zoo.

I had the pleasure of seeing in the cinema a number of local monuments and festivals, with the characteristic headdresses and customs of the inhabitants that were different than our own. I lived for a long time before
enjoying such spectacles; if I had been able to admire them as a girl, I would have learned many things that would have been beneficial to me.

Today, cinemas show various landscapes and the life that populates them as an intermission, between one film and another, as though afraid of boring the spectator, but they are not the subjects of an entire screening.

And yet, it would be very simply to project a landmass with a drawing of the coastlines and the elevation of the terrain, or a river with vegetation on its banks; then a bit of the sea, a prairie, woods, a group of houses, the work of peasants, children from other countries, a monument, a building. Photographs of these things exist, but do not perfectly serve our goal: we want to see life, the life that animates these scenes and which can only be found in the cinema.

Only in this way, by adding to the geographic projections of scientific phenomena, will teaching be made less wearisome, study more pleasing, and the child made able to gradually acquire new, exact, and clear knowledge, without squandering intellectual energy.


Notes

1. [Editors’ note. Female character played by the actress Josette Andriot, who was the protagonist of a long series of films in the 1910s, which began with Protéa, directed in 1913 by Victorin-Hippolyte Jasset by the Pathé production company.]

2. [Editors’ note. Passano gli Unni was directed by Mario Caserini in 1916 and produced by Films Manipulation Agency; Il mio diario di guerra was directed by Riccardo Tolentino and produced by Latina Ars in 1915; Alla baionetta! was directed by Eduardo Bencivenga and produced by Polifilm in 1915.]

3. [Editors’ note. The film recorded by the author was almost certainly Il giardino zoologico di Roma (The Rome Zoo), produced by Cines in 1910.]