Educational Cinema

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Press reports of all kinds have been highlighting for some time the very serious danger posed by educationally harmful motion pictures. This new, very powerful transmitter of ideas, notions, and sentiments, when left completely to the impulses of private speculation, knows no limitation other than the interests of the industry: attendance at movie theatres and the intense production of films. The lone criterion that inspires the motion pictures industry is success—with the audience and at the box office. The industry has no scruples about social utility. Production, in any field, is never inspired by a concern for moral character. No manufacturer of alcoholic beverages, fashions, pharmaceuticals, etc., has ever dreamed of yielding to a socially-useful aim. Nor has a manufacturer ever considered among its responsibilities that of preventively examining its products to see whether they will be used to instruct, heal, elevate, or debase, corrupt, or in some way harm its clientele. Capital is by definition an amoral agent. And when it is in search of profits in order to reach its goal, it would be capable of poisoning all of humankind—at least in those places where prudent and strict laws don't intervene to save the society threatened by the dangers it poses.

The capital at play, in the cinematographic industry, which is now an enormous amount, behaves no differently. State censorship, as one could easily have predicted, has barely served to tone down the coarse and vulgar—and therefore less dangerous—forms of indecency. And with that, morality is thought to be saved. Because morality, in its current and vulgar conception, is almost completely wrapped up in ladies’ lingerie: if the panties are not too scanty, and the camisole covers a little more than half of the beautiful female body, morality is safe from any offense. The rest doesn’t count. You can teach how to steal, kill, hide stolen goods or a victim, flee the police, laugh in the face of the law. You can surround the criminal with a sort of halo and elevate him to heights of heroism. In every popular cinema, you can effectively erect a tremendously eloquent and influential chair of corruption and delinquency. You can even get children to participate in these popular classes of perversion, creating next to school an ‘anti-school’ that has infinitely superior means of attraction; an efficiency of teaching; and a modernity and perfection of didactic devices which are a thousand times better than those used in school.
We have come to this point: in a city like Milan, in the first eight months of this year, there were on average 778,968 visits to public cinemas each month. Moreover, this figure does not include soldiers and cinemagoers who pay less than ten cents—and there are many in this category, as one can easily deduce from the fact that soldiers and children are admitted into almost all movie theatres by paying only half of the ticket price. In any case, around 26,000 or 30,000 people—especially adolescents and children—crowd into the city’s movie theatres each day, watching spectacles that generally stretch out for more than an hour and sometimes reach up to two hours in length. But why are we saying ‘30,000’? These figures are taken from the calculation of the marche da bollo (‘tax stamps’) purchased by the exhibitors in order to put them on the admission tickets. Now, we know that, in popular cinemas in particular, an adult can take a child with him with only one ticket; that in many of the cinemas in the most outlying neighbourhoods, exhibitors generally evade the obligation of the tax stamp; that the staff’s friends, acquaintances, neighbours, and family members all get in for free. Nevertheless, in order to not work from conjecture, let’s stick to the figure of 30,000 daily visits, and let’s say the length of the show is on average an hour and a quarter. In this way, there are 37,500 hours of lessons—and what a lesson!—that the Milanese cinemas are giving every blessed day that God puts on this earth—without ever having a day of rest—to a population that in large part is lacking in those critical elements that protect cultured people from suggestions of all kinds, even bad ones.

Faced with hundreds of these ‘seats’—which have invaded every neighbourhood in the city, which broadcast their incessant teaching all the way out to the streets through their blaring, multi-coloured advertisements, and which make themselves understood even by people who cannot read—what happens to the roughly twenty or thirty poor, small local sections of the Popular University, where the bread of science is broken modestly for two hours a week for six or, at most, seven months out of the year for an audience of 30, 40, 50 people? What about the 20 Popular Libraries, which even though they are mostly open to the public every day, end up distributing on average 1500 books a day? 1500 books! But in one day, the cinemas of Milan show an entire story that could be contained in a book to 30,000 people. In other words, they are the equivalent of a colossal library that circulates 30,000 books each day and manages to make those books be read in their entirety by the same number of readers. And then, what about this: not everyone understands the books that they read, but everyone understands a story that is shown physically in luminous images on the screen.
In short, as a disseminating power, no comparison can be made between the motion pictures and all the other means of diffusion that make of use teaching and the book. Only the newspaper can compete with the cinema in this contest. Perhaps, though, the days of its supremacy are numbered: because in a contest between a verbal interpretation and a direct image of things in motion, the winner is clear. Tomorrow, when technical advances will have reduced the cost of producing films and film projectors a good deal, there will be great circulating collections of films, just as there are already circulating collections of phonographic records, and just as public libraries have existed for centuries.

I think that not everyone will see the immense value that the motion pictures have as an instrument of dissemination. And yet, all it takes is a small bit of reflection to be convinced of this. We have seen how unquestionably more widespread the activities of the cinema are compared to those carried out, most notably in a city like Milan, by the Popular University and the Popular Libraries, where these two institutions are flourishing rather better than in any other city in Italy. Now, if students at the Popular University and readers of the Popular Libraries are added to the visitors of museums and art galleries, of the Braidense and Ambrosian libraries, of the Philological Society, and the theatres—in short, to all the centres that in some way attempt to educate and instruct the population (public schools not included)—we would still be far, very far, from the 30,000 patrons who gather together in the movie theatres of Milan each day. Whoever doubts this, let him get a hold of the statistics, and he will be convinced.

Not too much time will pass before the faithful attendees of the motion pictures will be greater in number than faithful attendees of Mass and other religious services (so long as no one tries to thwart that danger by bringing the film projections into church, as has already happened in some cases).

But the superiority of the cinema as a disseminating instrument does not lie entirely in the large number of people who go to it—a number that is still growing from year to year in unheard of proportions. (The war, with its discomforts and its conscriptions, did not prevent the number of visits to Milanese moving theatres from increasing by 1,288,073 in the first eight months of this year compared to the same period in 1916.) Whatever is taught, the motion pictures teach it better than nearly all other means and instruments of culture we can think of. Let’s take as a point of comparison the Museum of Natural History, which in Milan has great importance and has collections, like the ornithological collection, that are world-renowned. It is true that it shows the visitor the real object, while the motion pictures only project the image of it. But how much more effective it is to see, for
example, the depiction of a living, moving animal in direct relation to its natural environment than to see it dead and stuffed in a setting that gives no indication of its habits and its way of life!

In this respect, the zoo marks a noteworthy development compared to the museum, but it still doesn’t achieve the educational efficacy of a film representation. I have admired magnificent examples of lions, which were stuffed in museums, or living in great big cages in a menagerie, or moving about in the false liberty of a zoo. But I only understood what a lion truly was when I saw one at the cinema, in a great hunting scene, slowly rise up from his den and turn his eye to the burning distances of the desert.

As a means of representation, the motion pictures—and I’m not the first one to note this—has capabilities that even the theatre lacks. If its characters don’t speak—at least for the moment—the fullness of vision that it presents is immense compared to what even the most vast stage can offer. Here the action that is shown can unfold in infinite settings. Armies on the march, crowds in movement, volcanoes erupting, cities in flames, planes flying, water flowing, open horizons, all the most grandiose aspects and phenomena in nature and life pass before your intent eyes, giving you the perfect illusion of the real thing. Meanwhile, these things are excluded from the theatre, which must limit itself to barely giving you an indirect impression of it, making them be recounted or described by some character who—lucky him!—says he has seen them.

I saw the opera, La figlia di Iorio (The Daughter of Iorio), by Gabriele d’Annunzio at the theatre and at the cinema. That small sense of truth that the author into a play that had otherwise been too literary, seemed better to me in the cinematic version. Here the style and the artifice are, to be sure, still present in the exaggerated gesturing of the characters and in the improbability of some of the episodes, but a genuine view of the places where the author imagined that they had taken place brought it a good deal closer to reality. As a result, the play manages to give a person the chills.

In general, every cinematic version of a theatrical work has had the same effect on me. Going from the stage to the screen, the action is enriched and extended, gaining in clarity and in truthfulness, that is, in suggestive power, which is, of course, the ultimate goal of every representational art. Indeed, sometimes the person adapting the play abuses this advantage of the cinema and adds episodes to the plot that have very little to do with the subject, just because the cinema offers him the possibility of filming them in vast and grandiose settings.

Conversely, if the plot loses some episode in going from the book to the screen, it is not because the motion pictures lacks the means of representing
it—whatever the scene might be. In this case, the sacrifice is determined exclusively by the need to not excessively prolong the show. Otherwise, there is no action recounted or described in literary works of any size that could not be wholly and completely translated into motion pictures.

Should we say, then, that the motion pictures, as a representational means and as an instrument of dissemination, ought to replace teaching, the book, the museum, the theatre? It would be absurd to think that. Let us only affirm that, with motion pictures, science has enriched us with a means of representation that is no less important than those that we already had and that is very well suited to integrating all of them.

As an aid to understand and retain what one learns, film representation marks an advancement, which one can have an idea of only by comparing it to the explanatory methods that have been used most often up until now to increase the clarity of texts: the illustration.

It doesn’t take a lot of imagination to predict that in the near future books which have action, and especially books for youths, will all be illustrated in the cinema. And we should not be amazed if tomorrow we were to read in the newspaper that one of the great lending libraries of the United States had installed a cinema in its building in order to show its readers every new book that enters the catalogue. We must get to that point.

We can and should be amazed, however, that in Italy we are not yet succeeding in widely introducing the motion pictures into popular teaching, and that the efforts made up until now in this area have not had encouraging results. It has thus remained a free and uncontested field for motion pictures, which are by now an untouchable institution which triumph in a way and to a degree that everyone is well aware of, to contribute to bad upbringings.

The well-intentioned, who believe in the theory of educational and instructional motion pictures are, however, very quick to add that in practice, this cannot compete with the other kind of cinema because—they don’t give the because, but it is implicit in their reasoning—one is entertaining and the other is boring.

But is it really true that motion pictures with an edifying and didactic purpose can only be an instrument of torture muzzling the spectators? That’s what people who think that one cannot educate and instruct without being boring believe. We believe otherwise. This prejudice is old. It is also applied to readings that are ‘pleasurable’—as opposed to those readings that are ‘instructive’—by those people who find learning and pleasure incompatible. They are very compatible, so long as what presides over their marriage is that great matron of honour, which is Art. Jules Verne taught
geography, physics, and natural history to two generations of children, entertaining them and holding their interest by telling the most extraordinary adventures on land, at sea, and in the air that the imagination of a writer could dream up. Camille Flammarion, with the same procedure, made the most abstruse of the sciences, astronomy, popular. Henri Fabre did the same with the world of insects, impassioning readers by presenting the events in the lives of insects, just as a great playwright depicts a human tragedy. Art brings joy and life to the most grim and dry disciplines—including moral philosophy, which many consider the most deadly boring of all.

What has happened in popularized literature can and must happen in popular cinema—on the condition, of course, that it remains entertaining and knows how to hide its purpose.

The people—this is certain—when looking to distract themselves, don’t go where they know people want to teach them and preach morality to them. The motion pictures can impart ideas and even warnings, but must not seem to be doing so on purpose: the viewers would not forgive it for having premeditated such a blow. The success of educational motion pictures lies entirely in this: it will begin to thrive only when it is able to produce shows that are no less interesting that those offered by the regular motion pictures.

There are those who would say that in large urban centres, even a movie theatre that proposed goals that were exclusively and openly didactic and moral could find its audience. At teaching institutions? Yes. Whoever goes there knows they are going to class. But as public entertainment? No. Pedantic dads would bring their children there a few times. The league of good manners would recommend it to restrained people. But, instructive and moral motion pictures would close very quickly for lack of clientele, just as in Paris, when Le bon Cinéma (an initiative of well-intentioned people who thought it was possible to teach virtue by representing it visually) had to close.

No one will succeed in stripping popular cinema of its fundamental requisite: that of offering an hour of fun to people who have little time and little money to spend. Whoever wants, or is able, to deprive cinema of this essential aspect would kill it. The issue to resolve is something quite different: that of how to intellectualize and moralize the motion pictures, while still preserving all of its efficacy public entertainment.

Is that possible? Yes. Even without professing to revolutionize the film industry on the basis of a program of healthy, educational propaganda (which cannot be of any great interest to producers), it should not be difficult to find, among the thousands and thousands of films that people are
making all around the world, spectacles that are engaging and capable of exerting some positive influence on the minds and spirits of the viewers.

A public movie theatre following this firm standard in choosing what films to show would, of course, have a man of intelligence and of culture as its director—not the leader of a three-ring circus—and it would take its distinguished place among the other movie theatres in the city and create its own success. Literature and history are inexhaustible mines from which education cinema can draw source material. But until, for example, we want to combat tuberculosis by showing the public a monotonous series of paintings that depict all the stages of the disease and all of its treatment methods, adopting, in other words the same objective method that would probably be excellent for an in-class lesson, it will succeed in neither interesting people nor moving them emotionally. If instead, an artist with good intuition knew how to weave together a moving story regarding the same subject—an interlacing of events, people, and passions—he could teach the audience how this terrible disease is contracted, how it is treated, how one inherits a predisposition to it, how one gets well or how one dies from it: all without their realizing even for a moment that they are being taught. This would leave the audience satisfied and convinced of having witnessed not a lesson on hygiene, but the unfolding of a great human interest story.

Let the same be said for propaganda against alcoholism carried out through the cinema. Take the usual flimsy, barebones story of the good worker whose house is all in order, and who, having contracted the terrible vice of drunkenness, sends his family into ruin and ends up at a mental institution or in the poorhouse. It is too rudimentary and primitive to strongly stir up the emotions of the spectators and to leave its mark on them. If instead, around this basic nucleus a great artist like Zola constructs a play like *L’Assommoir (The Dram Shop)* and another conscientious artist faithfully translates it for the cinema without toning down its emotional power, the propaganda against alcoholism will have found an incomparable means of penetrating the masses. And that has been done.

This examples defines rather well what we mean as educational and instructive cinema and how we can arrive at it. It also shows that a cinema made in this way is not necessarily boring and that it has all that is required to hold up to competition with cinema that sets a bad example, about whose tremendous reach we have been complaining.

To ask—as some do—the law to repress the abuses of this kind of cinema is dangerous. In the act of limiting the freedom of thought and of art, one knows where this limiting begins, but one doesn’t know where it will end. On the other hand, it is clear that State’s censorship, wanting to respect
these freedoms, has failed its purpose. And it would be better to do away with it. Whoever wants to give new and wider powers to the censors would risk making the cinema a servant to the affirmation of an official and philistine brand of moral philosophy, as opposed to the servant of ideas of culture and social progress.

Other advocates of educational motion pictures ask that public powers intervene to protect its birth and development with financial aid, convinced as they are of the inherent incapability of this kind of motion pictures to withstand competition from commercial cinema. This kind of protectionism would end up damaging the very cause of educational motion pictures, by allowing it to remain boring. No, not even one cent should go to a motion picture that does not have its own methods for engaging the audience (which is also a motion picture that the audience would abandon). There is only one possible educational motion picture: the one that is entertaining at the same time. This one has its own ingredients for success just like any other cinema, and it is capable of living off its own resources.

The conclusions that I have come to are not just the result of theoretical reasoning. For research purposes, I have frequented many popular cinemas. I have seen a number of film of every genre, and I have taken note of the plots that unfolded and the impression they left in me and on viewers of various ages and stations, especially young workers and kids. I resigned myself to the tastes and predilections of the audience that frequents popular cinemas, and I have specified here the results of this sort of personal, direct investigation, in hopes that they have something that could persuade someone and be useful in some way.

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Notes
1. [Editors’ note. Camille Flammarion (1842–1925) was a French astronomer, editor, and scientific huckster, and an author of more than 50 volumes, among which were guides of astronomy and scientific novels that anticipated the science fiction genre.]
2. [Editors’ note. Jean-Henri Casimir Fabre (1823–1915) was a French naturalist, considered the founder of entomology.]