Section 5
Film, Body, Mind

Silvio Alovisio

At the dawn of the twentieth century, the encounter between cinema and psychology was doubtless facilitated by the fact that both lay within the ambit of modernity. Between the late nineteenth century and the early decades of the new century, cinema established itself as the most widespread performance and communicative phenomenon in the Western world. During that same period, psychology, psychiatry, and neurology affirmed their importance on the scientific and academic level. Thus, it is not surprising that cinema immediately attracted the interest of disciplines involved in the study of the psyche, even in Italy.

Although unavoidably incomplete, the selected texts presented in this section illustrate how cinema and the filmic experience were ‘envisaged’ by the mind sciences in Italy during the course of this period, important not only for the social and aesthetic legitimation of the new medium, but also, and above all, for the controversial construction of twentieth-century modernity.

The selected contributions were all written by men of science, active in universities and/or mental institutions. Nevertheless, the publication sources are not limited to academic scientific journals (such as the authoritative Rivista italiana di neuropatologia, psichiatria ed elettroterapia (Italian Journal of Neuropathology, Psychiatry and Electrotherapy), founded in Catania by Giuseppe d’Abundo in 1907. The contribution by the psycho-physiologist Mariano Luigi Patrizi was published in Turin’s daily newspaper La Stampa (The Press), and the article by the experimental psychologist Mario Ponzo appeared in Vita e pensiero (Life and Thought), the journal of Milan’s Catholic University, neither of which are medical-scientific periodicals. The heterogeneity of the publication sources illustrates the widespread scientific reflection on cinema, even within broader social and cultural circles more receptive to popular phenomenon.

The Historical-Scientific Context

In Italy during the early 1900s, the study of the mind had not yet been subdivided into well-defined fields. There were many shared elements among the various disciplines, including the same scientific vocabulary,
similar topics, and the desire to propose solutions to social problems. In particular, the field was still strongly characterized by the tradition of nineteenth-century positivism and its faith in science's ability to interpret the development of society and guarantee its equilibrium. Its positivist and anti-metaphysical legacy constitutes the cultural and ideological koine uniting scholars of different perspectives.  

Nonetheless, a short overview of the disciplines' historical development might be useful. In the early 1900s, Italian psychology had consolidated its scientific aspirations by developing experimental methods. This experimentation, still partially influenced by medical physiology, studied the relationship between the body and mental phenomena in a perspective that was no longer biological but psychological. Besides experimental psychology, influenced by German psychology (in particular, the associationism of Wilhelm Wundt and—starting in the 1920s—Gestalt Theory), Italian psychology, on a theoretical level, also proved to be open to the phenomenological psychology of Franz von Brentano and the pragmatic psychology of William James. Before the rise of fascism, it also developed other areas of research, such as social psychology, dedicated to the study of collective persuasion and mass suggestion; and applied psychology, interested in social, pedagogical, and economic problems. Instead, the influence of Freudian psychology was fairly irrelevant and did not impact reflections on cinema. Only later on, after the Second World War, did psychoanalysis—opposed by fascism, Catholicism, and authoritative idealist philosophers such as Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile—take root in Italy. This scarce penetration of Freudian psychoanalysis also explains the difficulties clinical psychology encountered in its development in early twentieth-century Italy: care of patients was entrusted primarily to psychiatrists and neurologists.  

But the relationship between neurology and psychiatry was not simple: pathological anatomical research on the nervous system dominated academic studies, while psychiatry, which concentrated on administering mental institutions, struggled to find efficient methods for rehabilitation and cure; instead of considering patients as individual personalities, it regarded them as a combination of symptoms to be interpreted on the basis of proven classification systems. The theoretical reflections, experimental research, and clinical observations presented in this section take into account the complex historical context of study of the mind in Italy, highlighting two main trends.  

On the one hand, we have an exclusively psychological line, interested in the process of cinematographic perception. From Roberto Ardigò's philosophical psychology, which came to fruition in the late 1800s, to the early
studies of the future psychoanalyst Cesare Musatti, published during the second half of the 1920s by way of Mario Ponzo's fundamental contribution published here, this trend studied normal cinematographic perception (or rather, perception that is not disturbed by emotional or pathological alterations) as a situation that can help provide a better understanding of a number of mental phenomena: perceptive memory, imagination, imitation, and emotion. In these studies of perception, cinematography was described as a phenomenon that was certainly new, but 'understood as the continuation of existing devices,' or rather, rooted in its time and placed without prejudice within a shared network of scientific discussions.

On the other hand, we have a line of research, above all neuropsychiatric, but also in part psychological, regarding the social effects of cinema: this line of research also continued with notable success during the fascist period. These contributions no longer studied the perceptions of an ideal spectator who was adult, male, healthy, educated, and middle class, almost abstract in his normality, but the body and nervous system of spectators who, for various reasons, were considered emotionally and cognitively fragile. As opposed to the former, perceptological trend, these latter studies considered cinema a radically new phenomenon, which contemporaneously sparked attraction and preoccupation, amazement and disconcertion.

Discovering Cinematographic Perception

In Italy and abroad, the scientific debate over perception, which had animated almost the entire nineteenth century and crossed into the twentieth century, was largely divided into two trends. The first, interested in physiological factors, explained perception in biological terms and assigned an important role to involuntary sensorial experience. Instead, the second trend, coming out of a psychological-experimental perspective, considered perception as a complex, profoundly unrelated experience within the dimension of the psyche. Both trends placed the act of viewing at the centre of their reflections and also addressed the cinematographic experience.

The study published in 1911 by Mario Ponzo (a future protagonist of Italian psychology) can doubtless be placed within the second trend and represents one of the first international scientific contributions to cinematographic perception.

According to Ponzo, when experiencing a cinematographic projection, the spectator perceives a representation which, even though it mobilizes above all the sense of sight, nonetheless ‘acquires the characteristics of
reality.'\textsuperscript{13} But how can an impression that is essentially visual, and thus partial, produce in the spectator the illusion of truly finding himself ‘in the face of the events’ and not ‘in front of a screen’?\textsuperscript{14} According to Ponzo, the illusion of reality is reinforced by the activation of associative processes.

To interpret these processes, Ponzo drew on a number of concepts from Wilhelm Wundt’s associationist psychology. During the viewing experience, the spectator perceives an incomplete series of external stimuli within the image, but thanks to the perceptive processes of assimilation and complication, he integrates them with other sensations to produce a complete impression. The images projected on the screen interact with the viewing environment but also with the spectator’s memory. The sensorial incompleteness of silent movies assimilates real sensations on the edge of the illusory: for example, if the spectator does not hear the sound of the rain, he immediately tends to activate the sound in his memory or mistakenly perceives real sounds in the viewing room (for example, the hum of a fan), and interprets them as the sound of rain. Thus, the spectator perceives neither the reality in which he finds himself (the viewing room) nor the incompleteness of the images he is watching. Rather, a new mental construct is created in which reality and image, present and past, and visual, tactile, acoustic, and olfactory sensations intermingle almost indistinguishably.

Ponzo’s highly complex text presents numerous elements of interest, at least three of which are worth mentioning. The first regards the observation method he adopted. According to Ponzo, in order to understand how the perception of cinematographic images functions, the most effective method is to go into a cinema and attempt self-observation. Ponzo highlights the limits and the inevitability of this method: in Metzian terms, one could say that when the psychologist enters a cinema animated by scientific intents, he, too, must lower his threshold of vigilance, entrusting himself, almost paradoxically, to the diametrical opposite of experimentation: randomness.\textsuperscript{15} In fact, as soon as the psychologist-spectator begins to observe himself, he becomes aware of this self-observation and the possibility of directly experimenting with the typical perceptive processes of the cinematographic experience immediately vanishes.

The second element of interest in Ponzo’s text lies in its ‘ecological’ and synesthetetic view of the cinematographic experience. As opposed to what Giovanni Papini argued in the wake of William James, Ponzo sustained in his 1907 article on cinema that the cinematographic experience does not only involve the sense of sight, but also entails the interaction of various sensations, above all acoustic and olfactory ones. Moreover, two aspects that
greatly condition the cinematographic experience are the physical space of the viewing room and the presence of other spectators.

The third important element in Ponzo’s article is the active role played by perception. Images spark processes of integration, whose realization calls for active cooperation on the part of the spectator. If the spectator does not associate, does not synthesize, does not commit errors, does not move at ‘the extreme limit of the consciousness’ to recover the memory of certain sensations, the cinematographic image cannot produce any impression of reality. This activism of cinematographic perception, already theorized at the end of the 1800s by Roberto Aridgò, is in evident opposition to a deterministic conception of perception proposed by the positivist physiologist. The conviction—also expressed in other international scientific contexts—that going to the cinema is not a passive experience was also shared by opinions outside the scientific community, as exemplified in other contributions in this volume (Maffii, Bertinetti, Toddi, Orsi).

Cinema and the New Crowds

The first signals that the Italian scientific community was paying attention to the social aspects of cinema did not emerge within neuropsychiatry but in so-called ‘collective psychology’ (a precursor of modern social psychology). Following the unification of Italy, the country was still fairly unindustrialized, not yet urbanized, and wracked by mass protests. Nonetheless, it was one of the cultural areas in which collective psychology first found ground for development, thanks to the work of scholars influenced by the positivism of Cesare Lombroso or with juridical training such as Enrico Ferri, Pasquale Rossi, Paolo Orano and, above all, Scipio Sighele. All these secular and progressive intellectuals ‘felt themselves invested with the moral duty to provide their contribution to resolving the social question and renewing the country on a more modern basis.’

But, as opposed to what was occurring, for example, in France, many Italian scholars reflecting on the psychology of the masses did not seem to pay any specific attention to cinema. Pasquale Rossi was an early and significant exception. Continuing the intuitions of Gabriel Tarde—who saw in the mass media, which in the past had united and conditioned the people, the modern evolution of mass suggestion—Rossi considered cinema a means for rapidly propagating artificial ‘sympathetic discharges’ in space and time, thanks to which ‘we live in the affective world of others’. The image of the ‘discharge’ evokes not only the famous theories of
Franz Mesmer regarding magnetism, but also, and above all, the theses of Aleksandr Herzen concerning the physical laws of consciousness, according to which ‘the internal working of every nervous element discharges itself onto another element, sensory or motor, central or peripheral.’

The sympathetic relationship activated by cinematographic images propagates like a contagious wave among the audience, ‘from the more sensitive people, who are a multitude [...] to the less sensitive,’ generating an authentic fusion of single individualities into a collective body. What determines the effectiveness of the ‘sympathetic discharge’ is the very ancient human ability to comprehend and render comprehensible their own emotional states and those of others through external expression. Thus, the sympathetic process calls for an imitative reaction.

Rossi considered photography, the phonograph and, above all, cinematography an expression of scientific progress that not only consent ‘emotional externalizations’ to be reproduced with an effectiveness that is even superior to the corresponding real-life situation, but also allows them to be diffused to a crowd disseminated in space and time. Rossi, sensing the great persuasive and educational potential of the cinematographic medium, concluded that if one wants to act upon a dispersed mass of people, then precisely these ‘devices of long-distance diffusion’ must be employed.

Rossi’s reflection presents several elements of originality. He affirmed that the senses do not only serve to perceive, but to express, as well: for this reason, psychology must also deal with communicative and social implications. A few years after the invention of cinematography, Rossi judged it positively. The concepts of sympathetic identification and imitation delineated a stimulus-reaction dynamic, which although it entailed a reduction of self-control and inhibitions, is not dramatic, but rather is a widespread form of collective relationships that should, above all, be described and not demonized.

Fifteen years after Rossi’s contribution, the psychophysicologist Mariano Luigi Patrizi intervened on similar topics, reflecting in particular on the cinematographic expression of emotional states. If Rossi considered cinema’s capacity for intensifying the emotions expressed by a person’s face an efficient communicative opportunity, Patrizi considered it, instead, a serious limitation. According to Patrizi, the primacy of physiognomy, mimicry, or gesticulation over the word reduced cinema to an exclusively emotional performance.

As Leonardo Quaresima observed, a large portion of the international theoretical discussion concerning cinema during the 1910s was ‘dominated [...] by the topic of the responsibility and idiosyncrasy of cinematographic
gesticulation and mimicry.’ However, as opposed to Rossi, even though Patrizi, like other authors, grasped the centrality of gesticulation in cinema, he did not perceive its communicative and symbolic potential: to him, gesticulation was an object of physiological study, like movement. Adhesion to a logocentric prospective led him to see cinema not as the progress of modernity (as opposed to the microscope, microphone, or chronometer) but a regression in mankind’s development. His analysis of the gesticulations and expressions of actresses and actors, which carefully underlined the excesses, the agitation alternating with contracted poses, evoked that broader neurotic dramatization of gesticulation in film, interpreted by a number of scholars as a sign of the historical crisis of the human body between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Cinema, Neuropsychiatry, Society

In the first Italian scientific discussions on cinema, when Ponzo’s generic spectator was thrust into the concrete dimension of contemporaneity, his identity was separated into various categories according to social connotations, race, culture, and age; neurological and mental pathologies were addressed. The categories which sparked preoccupation were primarily women, children, and young people, ‘ignorant, or scarcely evolved, or neuropathic minds [even] discreetly intelligent and of good social extraction.’ It was inevitable that the mind sciences would encounter these ‘concrete’ spectators. In the early 1900s, the vocation of neuropsychiatry was not only medical but social as well, interested in proposing solutions to problems linked to the phenomena of modernization (including cinema, an agent and symptom of an amazing and alarming modernity): neuroses, juvenile delinquency, suicide, alcoholism, prostitution, the family crisis, postwar traumas, etc. Giuseppe d’Abundo was probably the first neurologist in Italy to propose scientific reflection on cinema from a neuropsychiatric perspective rather than a psychological one. This change of perspective also transformed the study methods: if, as we have seen, Ponzo chose self-observation, d’Abundo concentrated on clinical observation of his neurotic patients, above all women and young people. He believed cinema could generate neurotic problems with various degrees of severity, not only because of the flickering of the projected images, which was so intense they remained visible even with the eyes closed, but, above all, because of the content of the images. The most disturbing cinematographic visions for his patients dealt with dreams, phantasmagoria, magic, and occult,
pathological, and violent images. Establishing a cause-effect link between neurotic problems and certain types of scenes and images, d'Abundo launched a critique of cinematographic viewing that was later radicalized in interventions by other psychologists and psychiatrists. Nonetheless, there is nothing moralistic or ideological about d'Abundo's criticism: in his reflection, he defines cinema a 'welcome distraction,' and even 'intellectual enjoyment.' The problem lay in the fact that the power of suggestion unleashed by the images in motion could also do harm. In the eyes of an inexperienced or impressionable spectator, cinema can throw the distinction between fiction and reality into crisis because it hides its artificial nature, conceals its artificial 'mechanism of production,' or rather, the technical-technological genesis of the images. This is why, in the darkness of the viewing room, the representation of events is mistaken for their disquieting apparition. The most serious and frequent effects upon the spectators of these cinematographic apparitions consisted in hallucinations, not only visual, but tactile and thermal as well. In researching the mental symptoms of his patients, d'Abundo had discovered, without yet realizing it, the mentally complex process of the spectator's involvement. When the author cited the case of a very young patient who confused his own parent with the image of the infanticide father he had seen the evening before on the screen, he prefigured in clinical terms that which filmologists would later define a process of identification (the patient identified with the child who was the victim of the murder). Instead, a girl who had seen an image of a sleeping stationmaster surrounded by numerous threatening hands later felt constantly persecuted by those same hands. In this case, a process of projection came into play: the young woman attributed to the onscreen character’s situation a series of (markedly sexual) fears and obsessions that were hers alone.

The number and severity of neuropathological symptoms tied to the cinematographic experience tended to increase greatly in later scientific studies. A clinical picture took shape that, although fully aligned with the medicine of the time, presented remarkable differences. As a result of cinematographic viewings, the patients involved in the clinical observations suffered not only from hallucinations, but from insomnia, histrionics, psycho-motorial agitation, constriction of the throat, heightened palpitations, confused vision, tremors, irregular heartbeat, somnambulism, spasms, dizziness, tactile and thermal paraesthesia, headaches, anorexia, weight loss with anaemia, enuresis, convulsions, sitophobia, and apathy. The spectator under psychiatric observation was described as a sort of Golem, a suffering automaton, contracted by haphazard reactions, unable to control
the power of the cinematographic stimulus. Spectators susceptible to excitement reacted before the images almost as though they were Luigi Galvani’s frogs, reanimated by variable and intermittent electrical stimuli.

This image of a ‘galvanized’ public was not a novelty tied to the nascent reflection on cinema, but was backed up by a scientific tradition that is rooted, for example, in Thomas Laycock’s research on the ‘cerebral reflex function’ in relation to mesmeric phenomena, and was strongly relaunched in the late 1800s thanks to the popular images of crowds hypnotized by meneurs, extensively described by Gabriel Tarde and Gustave Le Bon as well as Freud.

Delayed Shocks: Cinema and Memory

According to some early twentieth-century psychologists and neuropsychiatrists, cinema’s impact on the spectator’s mind could modify individual memory. In 1911, Ponzo ascribed to the memory of preceding experiences a resolutive function in cinematographic perception. Instead, the position of those neurologists, psychiatrists, and psychologists who studied how the effects of cinematographic perception develop after the viewing was different and more worrisome. The excitement induced by animated images seemed to induce reactions that were not immediate, and for this reason, more unpredictable. To use a bacteriological metaphor, in keeping with the biological discoveries of the time, the cinematographic image penetrates the spectator’s nervous system with the same invisible insidiousness as a germ, installing itself in a mental dimension that is increasingly close to the subconscious. As with germs, the pathogeny of the cinematographic stimulus has a certain incubation time, after which it becomes active and generates hallucinatory phenomena, following a mental course that had already been described in the second half of the nineteenth century and later developed in extensive literature on the phenomenon of false recognition or paramnesia.

Once again, d’Abundo was the first to underline this particularity in the evolution of suggestions following a cinematographic viewing. He held that the film projection ‘silently explicates its influence, and then very rapidly escalates.’ In the description of this mental dynamic of the re-emersion of cinematographic images, the analogy with Christian Metz’s reflection on the evolution of mental excitation is surprising. Metz wrote,

The impulses originate in the external world (daily surroundings or filmic bande); they reach the psychical apparatus via its perceptual extremities
An analogous conviction was held by Mario Ponzo in his 1919 contribution, which was no longer dedicated to filmic perception but to the social effects of the medium. Ponzo, quoting d’Abundo, observed how a film continues to exist in a part of the mind after viewing. Nonetheless, the images of the movie that exist in this area are in a new form, extraneous to coherent, linear structures encapsulated in the plot. Ponzo wrote of ‘a chaos of scenes lacking any connection’ as the prelude to ‘a new order’ in which the cinematographic images transform and regroup themselves according to new criteria. The spectator does not keep the memory of the cinematographic story in his mind but rather ‘disconnected traces of multiple representations, traces that continuously transform themselves and regroup themselves in different ways.’ These images-traces have cut their ties with the source of their representation (the space-time in which they were projected in the cinema) and now live independently in the mind of the ‘former spectator’. Thus, cinema, well before proposing a systematic pathway of meaning through a narrative-representative construction, offers a pathway of the senses that is unstructured, fragmentary, selective, and able to nullify the rhetoric of the story. The film is thus interpreted not as an organic representation, with a cohesive and structured pathway of meaning, but instead as a ‘réservoir d’émotions’, whose construction begins with the encounter, which is first and foremost sensorial, between the film itself and the spectator’s body.  

Above all, these images have an intense ability to disorient because they are erroneously remembered as fragments of real life. They produce artificial experiences that associate themselves with the memory of real events, creating with these memories a unitary mnemonic landscape, the result of an indiscernible fusion between reality and the imaginary, similar to the retroactive hallucinations described in nineteenth-century literature on hypnosis, or the ‘attitudes passionnelles’ induced by the hallucinatory re-emersion of a traumatic past depicted by Paul Richer.

Conclusions

The selected studies show how the study of the mind dedicated non-marginal research full of theoretical potential to cinema in the early
twentieth century. Despite the diversity of methods and objectives, all of the
contributions in Italy expressed a strongly holistic and relativistic concep-
tion of the cinematographic experience, later developed by the international
theory of the 1920s. Holistic, because the process of viewing involves not
only the observer’s eye but also his body, nervous system, memory, and
emotional-affective and intellectual faculties. Relativistic, because the
 cinematographic experience is described as a temporary and subjective
process, restricted by mental and environmental variants and susceptible
to errors, illusions, and uncertainties. A number of studies pinpointed
questions that were successively developed by international filmological
research in the post-Second World War period. These included the percep-
tive centrality of the spectator and the mental processes of involvement in
film, the memory of filmic images, attention to the relationship between the
screen, and the viewing environment, and the links between cinema and
hallucinations. Even if the Ponzo’s Wundtian associationism or d’Abundo’s
positivism doubtless confirm a lag among Italian academics compared
to other authors (in particular, Münsterberg’s contribution), the selected
studies appear anything but isolated regarding international scientific
reflections on cinema. Mario Ponzo’s observations in 1911, for example,
stand out for their originality and, above all, for their precociousness,
with respect to the—more famous—experiments conducted in France
by Edouard Toulouse. Instead, to remain in a scientific ambit, Italian
neuropsychiatric reflections converge fully with the observations on the
dangers of film-induced hallucinatory suggestion proposed by the Belgian
psychiatrist Henri Hoven, the German criminologist Albert Hellwig, or by
Hugo Münsterberg himself.

Nonetheless, the clinical observations and psycho-perceptive hypotheses
formulated in an embryonic fashion in Italy during the 1910s were unable
to sustain an organic field of study and were rapidly forgotten. This destiny
of oblivion can also be explained by the more general crisis which affected
Italian psychology during the 1920s, marked by the supremacy of fascism’s
neo-idealist culture and its steadfast hostility to psychology.

Notes

2. Casetti and Mosconi, eds, Spettatori italiani; Mosconi, Impressione del film;
De Berti and Locatelli, (eds.), Figure della modernità; Casetti, Eye of the
Century.
8. Rossi, ‘Collective Psychology’, included in this anthology; Patrizi, ‘The Ongoing Battle between Gesture and Word’, included in this anthology; d’Abundo, ‘Concerning the Effects of Film Viewing on Neurotic Individuals’, included in this anthology.
12. Alovísi, Mazzei, and Spinosa ‘Reception Theories’.
26. Masini and Vidoni, ‘The Cinematograph in the Field of Mental Illness and Criminality: Notes’, included in this anthology; Rossi, ‘Collective Psychology’,
included in this anthology; Ponzo, ‘Cinema and Juvenile Delinquency’, included in this anthology. Mondio ‘Cinematografo nell’etioologia’; Pennacchi, ‘Cinema e adolescenza.’

34. Moreli, ‘Le Docteur Toulouse’.