The Ongoing Battle between Gesture and Word

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There is a battle between cinema and the stage, between silent theatre and the loquacious mouth of opera: a duel observed by writers and impresarios, but one that is also of interest to physiologists and sociologists, who observe from a dark corner the workings and tendencies of the human psyche, as it functions alone or in a crowd.

Those who saw the cinematograph come into being in a scientific laboratory, who at its beginnings proclaimed it to be an advantageous device for allowing deaf-mutes to speak, certainly did not foresee that it would one day take speech away from or be placed in competition with men of letters, the artisans of the word.

It was indeed a physiologist, Marey—who still remembers him?—who while using chronophotography for the analysis of animal movement (the gait of a man or the trot of a horse, the flight of a heron or the undulations of a moray, the alternating beats of a tortoise’s heart, or the flow of blood cells through an artery) had the idea of directing the lens of his camera towards the lips of a neighbour exclaiming ‘C’est du chocolat!’ (‘It’s chocolate!’), and took physiognomic images so eloquent that by seeing them, deaf-mutes clearly understood the words that had been spoken.

This early and elegant attempt has by now been lost within the heap of miracles that the old physiological device managed to achieve, beyond the doctor’s office and the aims of naturalists. Anyone today who would not marvel at the subsequent achievements in the reproduction of all sorts of movements without the articulation of sound, anyone with the slightest doubt that the cinematograph has become a prodigious giver of beauty and a large-scale, rapid disseminator of culture, would not be condemned merely with the mild title of a hater of the new, but rather subjected to a memorable corporal punishment; at most, to be indulgent, he might be sent to do penance in the company of those two superhuman spirits—only two in all of Italy!—that recently officially refused to admire Leonardo’s rediscovered masterpiece.

We must, however, distance ourselves from such high praise when it is a question of evaluating the contribution the cinema has made to the collective mindset not in the area of silent motion, but in the representation of speech.
To compose a drama or a comedy while eliminating verbal signs, to stimulate the pleasure of the masses in the hasty and paleo-anthropological expression of the gesture, is one of the oddest mutilations to which the civilized brain could subject itself. Think of the brain's quadrantal speech centre, organized with patient work for thousands of years upon the four zones of the grey matter of the cortex, with its functions now dismissed, as an instrument no longer indispensable for meaning and the aesthetic communication of the affairs of our feelings and thoughts! Imagine the shining treasure of a mother's speech, the rich linguistic patrimony of an Annibal Caro or a Gabriele d'Annunzio, devalued overnight and at risk of failure in the international and interspecies market (cinema is the only sort of spectacle at which the four-legged friends of man are admitted for profit) of a purely visual and pantomimed art! It is a mistake to forget that the elements of language—voice and words—are not only signs of the advance of the species, not only the sacrosanct material of intellectual edifices, traditionally and universally venerated, but also devices of greater mechanical precision, the most subtle way of measuring the quantitative gradations of internal spiritual phenomena.

The genius of the race has now, it is true, overtaken itself through the artificial enhancement of the power of its own senses. It has succeeded in glimpsing with the microscope what the eyes could never have seen, unveiling with the microphone sounds unknown to the ear, feeling with the scale that tenth of a milligram that would have never weighed upon our tactile senses, and dividing time with the chronometer into thousandths of a second, which would never have been able to be analysed with the rhythm of the fastest bodily operations. But it has not, up to this point, been able to devise a machine that calculates the highly-variable intensity of a feeling through a more articulated scale than that of the elocutorial apparatus, one that responds to the changes, nuances, and combinations of feelings, ideas, or actions better than that vast keyboard, that infinite orchestra, that we possess in the entries in the dictionary, the phonetics of their pronunciations, and their combination.

The crude and base idiom of facial mimicry and gestures could never achieve such precision or fulfil such a complex task. It has at its disposal only a half-dozen terms or movements, made even more insufficient by the need to dispose of intermediate states and to exaggerate in order to effectively impact the sensitivity of the fleeting film strip and elicit the instantaneous comprehension of the spectators.

Joy and suffering, whatever their intensity in the drama, are always shown through the same arrangement of the muscles around the nose and
the mouth. In women, a rich variety of sorrowful emotions and passions are uniformly performed with the upward rolling of the eyeballs, as in the statue of Niobe, repeating the gaze obsessively fashioned by Guido Reni in his many Cleopatras, saints, and Madonnas. To these common stereotypes, others are added, typical of the performers who in their cinematic poses, because they are not absorbed in the action and the ordered rhymes of words, easily fall into their personal and habitual attitudes, as though into stock phrases. One notes that recently, in more than one artistic film, a refined, graceful actress has adopted the pose with the head thrown back, the neck supine, and the hair flowing down, and made use of it like a cliché in the most disparate conditions—for dancing, for kisses, and for death.

Not to mention the men who—with few exceptions—depict all spiritual states and portray the widest range of deep anxieties with the tic of putting their hands through their hair and extending and bending their arms like an umbrella opening and closing, or those marionettes who when pressed on their wooden chests alternate between centrifugal and centripetal movements of their rigid limbs.

Aside from the muscles in the face and limbs, other motor phenomena linked to psychological changes could enrich the sparse vocabulary of mute expression: the circulatory changes shown through pallor and redness, the modification of the breath, the changing size of the pupils, and so forth. But these are minute acts that cannot be grasped by the normal camera lens, and are only detected in the sincere emotional investment of great theatrical actors.

In any case, the cinema remains confined to the limited, humble territory of an exclusively emotive art, since it is a fact that through movements alone, without vocal articulation, the signification of ideas, thoughts, and affairs of a truly intellectual character is unachievable.

It is utopian, not to mention a scientific and psychological misconception (that of Valentine de Saint-Pont), to try to raise gesture and physiognomic gymnastics to the high level of mental symbols, to make oneself a prophet-ess of a ‘dance of ideas’ in which the movements of the body and the face function as no less than abstract and general ideas. These will never find better expression—that famous support of the mind of Condillac and the philosophes—than in word. Nothing more distinctly separates us from the brute and the savage than the general idea and its most appropriate form: the abstract word.

But perhaps this comparison between an emotional art and an art of ideas is a digression, given that the primary, avowed aim of cinematic representation is to move, not to make one think. And truth be told, crowds are
drawn to that modern arena of movement and silence, to enjoy that volapuk without an alphabet, not so much for reasons of money, time, or cultivation, but because of the voluminous emotional and passionate content of the productions. This, sadly, offers an argument that should disillusion us about the possibility of the highly-evolved masses of today accepting the intellectualization of aesthetic forms, the bringing to the theatre of logical themes or the problems of the soul and of society, and the effort to masterfully express them. Words and style are seen as the legacy of decrepit old men. In our stenographic day, the beauty of words is too cerebral and not emotive enough, and has the flaw of lacking promptness, causing hurried artisans and merchants to lose precious hours.

Heartbeats and agitation, not ideas and thoughts, are the objective of the art of tomorrow: the frightening clamour of new music, aphrodisiac tango and...films even more horrifying than those of today.


Note

1. [Editors’ note. Volapuk was an artificial language, formulated between 1879 and 1880 by the German Catholic priest Johann Martin Schleyer and intended to be used internationally.]