The Cinematograph in the Field of Mental Illness and Criminality: Notes

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[...] It is certain that among all of today's inventions, the cinematography takes the cake for having the most profound and intense impact on psychic life. Even the influence of the book, which has been a strong force as a vehicle of impression, pales in comparison to the cinema screen, especially because the organs make feelings more lively, more evident, more rapid. After reality, the cinematograph remains the most faithful and effective source of emotions. The optic nerve is the principle entryway and sight tends somehow to overwhelm all the other senses.

Above all, we are interested in studying the effects of the cinematograph in relationship to the pathologies of the mind: one part of the problem is the influence of films on the sexual lives of young people. Certainly, the sexual element lures crowds of adolescents into the theatres in a particular way. As sceptical as you may be in regard to the effectiveness and utility of sexual repression, especially by the way in which it has been preached for some time in Italy, you nevertheless have to recognize the not insignificant damage that sexual emotions are able to produce in young people during the period of adolescence and young adulthood. As much as any attempt to control the sexual tendencies and activities of a man who has reached full maturity seems useless to us, for those who have not yet reached this level of maturity it is useful and worthwhile to avoid and detach from the emotions and practices of sexuality. We consider it unjust and damaging to dictate a law equally for every temperament, since sexual energies are varied in a countless array. But this is not why we believe it is less appropriate to remove adolescents from every sexual stimulus, even if it tends to physically satisfy their appetite.

Normal young people experience a not insignificant harm from repeated sexual stimuli: youthful joy fades and a preoccupation with sex dominates the conscious, leading to depression and distracting them from their daily activities, which makes study and intellectual engagement painful.

For young people who have abnormal and precocious sexual tendencies, the cinematography is especially damaging: following the film, sexual arousal worsens, since the subject matter of the suggestive plot is only augmented by the darkness of the environment, the promiscuity between
the sexes, and the music that accompanies and enlivens the scene. After all, we know that vision is considered the most effective means to bring sensations and sexual stimuli to the forefront and that the eye is the guiding pathway through which passes all of the sensations destined to arouse swelling and awaken sexual desire.

It is therefore necessary to underscore the danger that the cinematograph represents for all adolescents in regards to sexuality: we believe that the best means of prevention is to keep them away from the majority of films without exception. This will be a good prophylactic measure for all of those who have inherited or acquired disorders or diseases of the nervous system. In fact, it is instructive to note how the cinematograph has recently taken a not insignificant place among the casual causes of nervous and mental disorders. We are able to observe with relative frequency how the relatives of the sick or the sick themselves come to denounce the emotions stirred by the cinematograph as the cause of their disorder, and more than once we have seen cases of convulsions, pavor nocturnus, neurotic nystagmus, etc.

Our investigations have also confirmed the veracity of the reported cause, and we have also verified that some shocking scenes continue to cause a state of anxiety for a long time and give a potency to some hallucinations and delusional ideas and beliefs.

However, in relation to mental illness, the cinematograph cannot be ascribed the same casual quality that all new things which catch the imagination of the crowd acquire. Someone said that, in certain cases, the cinematograph can provoke psychosis with unique characteristics. We don't have sufficient experience in this regard, but the claims of these authors seem premature to us. There is certainly something distinctive about the symptoms, such as the state of anxiety mentioned above, the intensity of delirious thoughts, the sensory disturbances that draw inspiration, so to speak, from the subject matter of the film’s scenes. [Henri] Hoven, among others, recently took up the topic and draws on four case studies. His analysis doesn't require any modification in the conclusions we have come to on the basis of our own personal experience.

Also from a therapeutic point of view, the attempts made in a few countries can only leave us doubtful of the effectiveness of the new method of therapy: indeed, if we must refer to our modest and limited experience, we should affirm that film representations, even with their simple and serene hues, provoke an outburst in some that are mentally ill, which is evident in their psychological symptoms, especially in the sensory field.

But where the influence of cinematographic entertainment reveals itself in the most obvious way is in the field of criminality. By now, the literature
references various cases in which the criminal act is closely related to the film plot. To give an example, [Albert] Hellwig demonstrated, through his analysis of a few cases, that films with very impressive robbery scenes can have such a persistent effect on predisposed individuals, that they are somehow, without realizing it, induced to commit crimes that they otherwise would never have committed.  

[Francisco de] De Barbéns also remembers cases of deep depravity in which the influence of the cinematographic entertainment was blatant. Semini—to cite yet another author—in a work on ‘Suicide in Switzerland’ assigns—in his turn—the important influence of cinematographic representations in upending a sense of morality. 

But instead of expounding on that—based on what we can directly verify, either through a critical analysis of observations made by others or from facts in the newspaper—we can determine all the same, without pretence of absolutism, the various modalities through which the relationship between criminal action and cinematographic plots can be established. They can be summarized in three primary categories:

1. The pathological element appears spontaneously during or right after the film screening and criminal action overtakes and influences the subject’s entire being.
2. The pathological element is the underlying and permanent foundation of the subject, which because of special circumstances, directly influences and augments a natural inclination toward crime.
3. The pathological element is completely lacking and the influence of suggestion and imitation only persists in criminal and amoral subjects.

A few crimes belong to this first category, which have a marked pathological characteristic: their mechanism almost always develops around sensory phenomenon. The primarily visual hallucinations, which are of an intense, clear, and precise quality, mark the beginning of the episode and are a product of an elective action that the cinematograph carries out on the nervous system of those predisposed to sensory disorders. It is evident that the rapid sequence of images on the screen represents a specific kind of stimulus for the sensory centre, provoking the hallucinatory phenomenon in an artificial way.

That fact that we observe in a few of our sick patients the intensification of the hallucinations following cinematographic entertainment is proof of this claim. The hallucinations replay the images seen on the screen, and the protagonist operates in reality by roughly following the action of the storyline, oftentimes under a kind of dangerous agitation of conscience.
These crimes in some ways remind us of epileptic criminality: the action happens in a flash, under the force of a hallucination of an aggressive nature. As we have already mentioned, there is even a disturbance in consciousness, which, however, is always less intense than the epileptic kind, and which disperses with exceeding quickness.

In the second category of criminals, the pathological strand is permanent: individuals with a wretched spirit or an inferior mentality, who are usually constant regulars at the cinematograph, end up suffering an artificial transformation in their state of consciousness; the ephemeral world that unfolds before their eyes weakens their sense of reality and their latent criminal tendencies find fertile ground for their enactment. In this category, there are also some suffering with paranoia whose delirium is predicated on a kind of cinematographic abuse.

The last set entails of all those criminals who use the cinematograph as a source of inspiration and imitation. Juvenile delinquents, for whom the cinematograph oftentimes reveals their criminal destiny and awakens in their consciousness to a tendency toward crime, are the most prominent. The role of the cinematograph in juvenile delinquency is certainly large and one cannot deny its harmful influence. Naturally, this is less easily perceived in the adult criminal, who has already begun a life of crime.

Given the widespread diffusion of cinematographic entertainments and their influence, not only educators and doctors (we should not forget the well-documented diseases that ophthalmologists have brought to our attention) are interested in the issue; it has also caught the attention of legislators who have had to intervene, somewhat willingly and with some degree of effectiveness. But we must honestly recognize that for a bit of time the Italian cinematograph—as [Lino] Ferriani has also noted—has put itself on a good pathway by following the example of England, North America, and especially Switzerland and offering films that are strong proponents of civil education and excellent popular culture. The reason why—incidentally—the government is doing a bad thing by imposing a tax is that although it will certainly give the Treasury meagre resources, it will be detrimental to the impoverished. Given the low cost of a ticket and the short length of the film, the cinematograph constitutes the only entertainment where the child and the labourer are allowed a restorative reverie.

The State should have been involved in all of this, since it has a responsibility to provide educational excellence. Even more, it should understand, as a number of writers (including some illustrious ones like [Gabriele] d'Annunzio) have already demonstrated with scholarly arguments, that
the cinematographic has a powerful ability to instruct the people, to refine their dress, to have them, for example, oppose alcoholism and other vices that generally corrode the lives of the impoverished, who in have not yet been given any educational opportunities.

In regard to the potential effectiveness of repressive laws on cinematographic entertainments, we do not delude ourselves. If there is an insistence on strict repression, in the sense of preventing the sexual excitement that the cinematograph stirs in adolescents, we do not believe, for obvious reasons, that many benefits can be gained by preventive measures. We say this because some are strongly misled about the merits of educational factors, whereas the criminal disposition, even if it was removed from external stimuli, the soul will always find in itself, in its own organic force, a way of carrying out and doing damage. But, the fact remains that, with the exception of some nervous and psychic disorders, the law and education can instead be a beneficial influence, as there would certainly be something to gain from preventive measures (which is clearly implicit in our conclusion stated above) against certain crimes and against corruption that pave the way to habitual criminality. And in this regard, the proof that [Enrico] Ferri provided on the influence of educational factors always comes to mind, which can provide very little in terms of results in converting an evil man of anti-social tendencies to good, but produces great results in the inverse situation, since ‘a lack of education and the number of bad examples and corruption has the power to make a man evil, who otherwise, according to his natural tendencies, could have been good or less evil.’

They do not lack these kinds of regulations abroad, and we refer anyone who wants precise knowledge and details to [Albert] Hellwig’s work, to the anonymous author at *Civiltà Cattolica* (*Catholic Civilization*), and to [Gaetano] Leto in [Luigi] Lucchini’s *Rivista Penale* (*Penal Journal*).10 […]

In Italy as well—as we have already seen—something good has been done. The ministerial newsletters of 1907, 1908, and 1910 advising the Prefects on the supervision the movie theatres and regulations in the Luzzatti law against pornography were followed in 1913 by clear rules on the censorship of film and on the workings of that censorship, followed by related guidelines issued in 1914. According to this law, the ‘Government of the King is authorized to supervise the production of films, regardless of whether they are produced in Italy or imported from abroad.’

There is much to say on how this supervision came to be carried out in practice, but as an idea, the regulations are certainly excellent and the experience (we hope) will soon benefit from the contributions of educators and doctors, who have today been completely substituted by the officials…
of Public Security. To tell the truth, there are some signs in this direction from the subcommittee in charge of studying juvenile delinquency, but for now we must unfortunately admit that the regulations in effect once again reveal the shortcomings of the laws, which, although inspired by noble goals, have turned out to be incomplete and ineffective when applied since they lack the astute work of those who, more than anyone, are able to insure a reliable result thanks to their experience and knowledge.

The bureaucratic powers exclusively entrusted with this highly delicate work have demonstrated their failure to do their job many times by now. Therefore, we hope that the need for broader participation of individuals with a technical background to draft social laws will make all the more urgent in the minds of the legislator so as to actually yield the most effective preventive measures possible and the suppression of crime.


Notes

1. One measure imposes, in all respects, the strict separation of the sexes in movie theatres. The legal procedures for indecency committed under the cover of darkness multiply every day. The cinematograph is the cultural terrain where all kinds of sexual immorality are unleashed; it constitutes an open door to sexual arousal, even for normal people: by now, the cinematograph had become the modern galley for a crowd of people who find a happenstance reason for an accumulation of erotic expressions that otherwise would not have an outlet; adultery has certainly more frequently been committed since the establishment of movie theatres.

2. *Pavor nocturnus* is a childhood sleep disorder characterized by sudden awakening, frequently accompanied by increased heart and breathing rate, muscle stiffness, screaming, excessive sweating, and dilated pupils. Neurotic nystagmus is a condition, which, according to cases of a physiological and pathological nature, manifests itself with oscillating movements, and involuntary movement of the eyes.


7. Given the nature of circumstances, it seems appropriate not to refer to particular histories of the sick, especially considering that some cases will probably be the subject of a separate publication by one of us or our colleagues.

8. Ferriani and Prezzolini wrote, ‘The cinematography put into action great ideas and great passion that was destined to take off. It would also be more artistic if the cinematographic studios would have the courage to open the door to attempts that make you think cinematographically, and if young artists were persuaded that art has always been art of one own time, and that if Aristophanes was alive today, he would make “films” for the cinematography and not comedies for the theatre.’

9. ‘The maid, the small merchant, the family man, the clerk do not ask,’ Prezzolini continues to write, ‘more than to be entertained, in the original sense of the word, that is, to be taken out of the usual course of their daily lives, closed in a house or in a store. The beneficial result of the cinematograph in these cases is undoubtable; it offers a bit of happiness and titillation, laughter and paradise. In a quarter of an hour of oblivion and dreams, the cinematograph consoles many misfortunes, and I have come to clearly understand how certain minor artists of the cinematograph, removed from many characteristics of the theatre, have come into enormous incomes. It is right that they are well compensated because they have brought so much happiness to so many people.’