Early Film Theories in Italy, 1896-1922

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Cinema and Juvenile Delinquency

Mario Ponzo

The same value that is acknowledged today regarding cinema as a didactic tool also demonstrates how much it should be feared as a means of perversion for the minds of the young and susceptible. And, if we turn our minds to reflect on the enormous disproportion that, at present, exists between films on educational subjects and those with supernatural, dramatic, or sensational themes, we come to the unhappy conclusion that, if we were to place on either side of a weighing scale the good and the bad that have been brought about up until now by this wonderful invention, the scale would plummet to the side of the bad.

The Italian legislator is not the last to have to appreciate intuitively the danger inherent in cinema and attempt to put forward a remedy; but censorship, which the State exercises, does not achieve the efficacy needed to render it innocuous; thus, it is necessary to repeat the cry of alarm again from time to time, repeating with the eloquence of previous cases the reasons for the social damage. I think it would be appropriate if the journals dedicated to corrective pedagogy periodically published the criminal acts committed by juveniles that have some connection with films. The usual pattern involves crimes which show, by the form they take or by certain details in the way they are carried out, the boggling influence of film viewing, though this may indeed have been clearly revealed in the results from the minutes of the trial. It often emerges from the latter how assiduously the young delinquents frequent entertainment of this kind, and have even in some cases taken part as extras in the occasional drama during the filming process.

The war has come and had the effect of distracting general attention from the reports of the courts, among which it is no particular challenge for the onlooker to pick out the crimes which are of interest here. I recall in the prewar period having already seen a few of such cases collected by the Belgian judge [Raymond] De Ryckère. One of these referred to two sixteen-year-olds who, influenced by films they had seen, had left their homes, disguised and armed themselves with daggers and pistols, and set themselves up as brigands, accosting the passers-by on country roads.

Another case, which appeared some time ago in The Times, involved a much more serious crime committed by a fifteen-year-old boy: and it clearly emerged from the way in which it had been carried out, the way in
which the accused defended himself and the witnesses’ testimonies, that the idea had been taken from films in the cinema, where the boy spent a lot of his spare time. The young cinema-goer had attempted to withdraw some money from the drawer in a desk in his father’s house, but on being gripped by the fear that he might have been seen by his little step-brother, he blindfolded him, tied him up and stabbed him to death with a knife. He fled from home, leaving a brief letter for his father in which he tried to justify his act, stating that he had behaved impulsively in a fit of madness; along with a number of other circumstances the letter only exacerbated the boy’s position in the eyes of those who has to judge him.

In the near future, I intend to carry out a detailed analysis of some of these crimes elsewhere, stimulated by images seen in cinema, which we must regretfully assume will multiply in frequency, given the increased number of films based on criminal adventures, the spreading phenomenon of this kind of popular entertainment, and the continual improvements in technology for the cinema. Here it is sufficient to elucidate a few observations of a general nature.

It is true that censorship can curb within certain limits the freedom with which film themes are treated, but there must be considerable doubt that it can do much more than it has done till now, while the creators of cinema are constantly increasing their knowledge of the shortcuts for getting round the censor’s scissors.

A film, when it is not of an educational task, must be of a distinctly emotive character if it is to keep a hold on the interest of the mass audience. It illustrates facts, rather than thoughts; and no fact excites our emotiveness more than one of passion and crime. We might be inclined to think at first that there can be no danger of social damage, considering that those who conceive the plots of films usually build up the drama so that the delinquent, who has had the upper hand for the main part of the drama and triumphed over the good, is always punished in the end. This is the conclusion that the censor realistically requires if he is to shut an eye about the earlier scenes in the action, and it is the one that most satisfies the audience. With this conclusion, the majority of films could be considered educational. Yet, this is not the case, for several reasons which I shall now point out.

Most of us have been to the cinema many times by now. Well, let the reader try to reconstruct the individual plots. Perhaps he will manage for a few; for most of them, no; what will come to mind instead in some cases will be a chaos of scenes with no connection between them. In other cases, it will become evident that these remembered scenes have undergone a special new ordering according to our own particular tendencies or interests. I
believe it can be considered a certainty that a minimal number of film plots are remembered in their entirety. The ones we recall are usually the most recent, or those from further in the past with special features that have caused them to escape the associative fusion which generally happens to our mnemonic images.

These examples of fully-remembered feature plots are like islands, far apart in the ocean of the images we store up, continuously transforming in permutations. It is true that cases are put forward that describe an immediate influence on an individual of a single film viewing, but these cases are very rare and happen only, in my opinion, where the percipient has a very specific constitution. [Albert] Hellwig, for example, in one of his studies on the effects of cinema refers to a boy’s killing, that seems, with all the appearance of truth, to have been caused by the immediate effects of viewing a film that was being shown during the same period in the village where the crime took place. Boath Parkington [sic], an English novelist, in a short story published in the January 1914 edition of Nash’s Magazine with the title ‘A Boy in the Air’, illustrates with extraordinary realism the influence of a film, telling the odyssey of a man who has turned to alcohol, on a boy with a vivid constructive imagination. To justify his absence from home for several hours and his evident lack of concentration at school, the boy introduced the events from film into his invented excuses, converting his uncle into a dangerous alcoholic in his story. This kind of fantastic pseudology is not by any means rare in children, and the story is so well constructed that I would not be surprised if it were a true story. Some time ago, in fact, a distinguished teacher in a special class for mentally deficient children in a large primary school told me how the children, under the influence of cinema, are capable of giving an impression of truthfulness, constructing and conveying complete falsehoods, which sometimes are genuinely dangerous for the others. In this way, she told me, some of the infants in her class managed on one occasion to take in a supply teacher, making her believe with all the precise detail that the mother of one of the pupils had been killed with a hammer, and that her body was lying hidden in some suburban green. The alarmed supply teacher passed this on to the regular teacher who, knowing the class as she did, soon figured out that the story was unfounded in every way and identified who was guilty of telling lies.

Generally speaking, however, I believe that the worst danger from cinema does not usually stem from the memory of particular representations, but from the frequency of habit in going to see this form of entertainment, as it leads to accumulating in the mind the disconnected traces of a multitude of
films. Given how easily one loses the exact reference in space and time for the scenes one remembers from films, these become associated with other memories and happenings, some fictional but others real. This implies that the borderline between cinema fiction and reality has become tenuous and tricks of the memory can be repeatedly observed, such as those described by Sully, among others, in his memorable book on the delusions of sense and spirit.3

He wrote,

Avid fiction readers will notice that they occasionally confuse what they recall from some passage in a novel with the traces left in their memory by a real event. The name of a person, a notable phrase, or some piece of news may seem familiar, and pop up like an impression from the past, because of its slight similarity to some analogous detail in the work of their favourite author. Furthermore, the written or verbal accounts of other peoples’ adventures, if they catch our attention deeply or excite our imagination into reliving the described events, can easily start to build up an illusionary memory.

Young people, accustomed to absorbing avidly with their vigorous and devouring imaginations whatever is said or read to them, are particularly susceptible to this kind of mistake. But this is not the end of it; when they grow up and their own childhood memories have lost their sharpness, to the extent that they are reduced to a few fragments remaining from a dispersed past, it is almost guaranteed that the images that they have been able to retain of this kind of story will take the form of memories. And thus, I have often been surprised to find myself believing the illusion that I had actually visited the Great Exhibition in 1851; the reason for this stems from my recollection of the description my friends gave me and their enthusiasm about their visit to London. It may be added that repetition of the act of imagining tends to reinforce the belief even more, to the point of its assuming the form of a real memory.

The psychological mechanism of this fusion of reality and fantasy, and this adoption of others people’s material as our own, can be explained in those facts of assimilation and associative complication of a fairly basic nature which happen during the viewing of a film. I have had occasion to describe them in another of my publications, where I think I showed in a general way that our whole complex sensorial organism contributes to an effective representational process, even if linked to a single, given area of
the senses. Even secondary factors participate from a considerable distance towards visual representation and contribute to this integration through association despite the extreme limitations of consciousness. Others have confirmed the importance of my observations, where, on the one hand, they demonstrate the evocative force of cinema and the social danger of certain films, and on the other, they show the efficacy that can be achieved using cinema as a didactic means.4

When the complete plot of a film has disappeared, the memory that remains becomes more personal: the facts we learned at school become separate from the memory of the time, place, and way in which we learned them, and this also happens with the beneficial or damaging knowledge we glean from cinema. Many films seem to pass through us without leaving a trace; yet we see them arise when least expected at some moment in our lives.

Two minor, personal experiences of my own illustrate this point. I had watched a film a while ago during which a burglar entered a house by breaking a window. My attention was caught by the way in which the burglar had broken the glass without making any noise. The scene only lasted an instant, but I was able to glimpse that the burglar held a glasscutter in one hand and a shapeless mass in the other, which he applied to the glass and then cut round it with the diamond knife. All this had completely gone from my mind until a few weeks ago when, having confiscated from by nephew a large piece of soft tar on the suspicion that he intended to make fun of one of his classmate. I was about to throw it out of the window: as I approached the glass I saw that the tar stuck to it strongly. The memory of the burglar came back to me, and I completed my film experience. Perhaps for some other spectator this would not have been a completely unfruitful piece of knowledge!

And again: a few days ago, a letter was left for me at home which had been taxed because it lacked a stamp. Now, while I was on the point of opening it, I reflected on the idea of rejecting it, and my mind was taken back to the image of a clerk in a scene of a film who fraudulently opened a letter by holding it in the steam of a pan of boiling water. The same clerk will certainly have been discovered and punished in the subsequent scenes of the film! But what does that ending matter, if all I remember in that precise moment is the illegal method he was using with impunity to open a sealed letter?

Each one of us has learned in this way, maybe with admiration, the various tricks of burglars or smugglers; how to saw through prison bars using the spring from a clock, how to take the imprint of a lock using wax, the precaution of using gloves to avoid leaving fingerprints and so many
other things that I prefer not to mention. Now, if in normal adults these fragments of films are already capable of leaving traces which might amount to criminal tendencies or actions, their effect must be increased out of proportion in children, for whom the concept of right and wrong is not yet completely clear or fully defined.

I would like to point out that, in this brief article, I am only dealing with a part of the damage that cinema may cause in young people; I therefore do not breach the issues of loss of health, which can develop in neurotic children as an effect of film viewing. The situation in this field is revealed very thoroughly by d'Abundo in the *Rivista italiana di Neuropatologia* (*Italian Review of Neuropathy*) from 1911, with many examples of cases, and he recalls

having been consulted many times about young patients of between seven and ten years old, who displayed markedly nervous behaviour after having seen tragic or fantastic scenes in the cinema. These symptoms consisted of fits of fright at night, with real hallucinations, normally visual, so that they leaped in terror from their beds seized by unspeakable fright, and took refuge in their parents’ bed.

In the face of dangers threatening the young through the effects of cinema, there can be only one aim: that of limiting as much as possible how frequently they go to the local cinemas. In Dusseldorf, a commission for cinema reform carried out a statistical research some years ago on the frequency with which young people from the central neighbourhoods of the city go to the cinema. It emerged that out of 30,886 children from the age of six to fourteen, 18,292 (59 per cent) in the course of a year had been to the cinema once; 11,242 (34.5 per cent) had been several times during the same period; 2438 once a month; 1175 once a week; 57 every day; 2181 children had been to over 7400 evening film shows, despite the fact that in Dusseldorf there is a regulation that certain films thought to be undermining for children’s education should not be shown before eight o’clock.

Statistical surveys based on the same criteria in other German cities gave results which largely coincided with these; we would probably obtain analogous data in many Italian cities.

Having identified not only risk of damage, but actual damage, produced by cinema-going, I would like briefly to refer to the means that might be employed to keep children away from the cinema: I can see no better solution than launching an initiative to establish cinemas specifically for the young. It could be an appropriate field for private enterprise. The latter
would tend to be provident, and it could well be that such an enterprise would even be blessed with economic success! The young should not be oppressed in special cinemas with programmes of exclusively educational films, or too serious, but should be encouraged to laugh—a healthy, honest kind of laughter. In forming judgement on the merits of a work of film, it is essential to focus attention not only on the ending, but also on the single scenes of the unfolding plot. It would not perhaps be difficult to involve the collaboration of the Italian cinema companies towards this aim, and consequently develop a rich repertory of circulating educational films, with continual renewal.

Until this intention is fulfilled, teachers should not tire of warning parents about the damage which films can cause in the moral health of their children. In this way, we may avoid witnessing parents unconsciously accompanying their young children to public lessons of corruption! For their part, the legislators must find a way to intensify controls imposed on movie theatres, by prohibiting access for unaccompanied youngsters or changing screening schedules in a way so that children are permitted only a few days a week, to watch special programs made for them.


Notes

1. [Editors’ note. Albert Hellwig (1880–1950) was a German jurist, criminologist, and journalist who was the most influential theorist of the causal link between watching cinema and criminal behaviour, particularly among the young.]

2. [Editors’ note. The author is referring to the American writer, Both Tarkin-ton, whose story was published in the October 1913 edition of Cosmopolitan Magazine.]  

3. [Editors’ note. See Sully, Illusions.]

4. I refer those readers who would like to read my observations on the subject to the article which appeared in Atti dell’Accademia delle Scienze di Torino (‘Proceedings of the Academy of Sciences in Turin’) under the title, ‘Di alcune osservazioni psicologiche fatte durante rappresentazioni cinematografiche’ (‘Some Psychological Observations Made during Film Screenings’). In addition, I can briefly outline two recent cases of an associative complication I have observed. One is a case of an auditory issue. When someone in the film Il prezzo del riscatto (The Cost of Ransom) threw himself into the water,
I believed I heard his shout. The shout was also heard by a person next to me, so together we partially watched the next screening of the film to figure out the cause of the phenomenon: seeing the scene again we found there was no according acoustic element. Most likely it had been provoked the first time by a noise of some other kind in the cinema and fused by us with the images projected on the screen. In the second case, the complication involved the sense of smell. At one point while watching one evening the Ambrosio Company’s interesting, 1913 patriotic film *La lampada della nonna* (Grandmother's Lamp), the grandmother of the film’s title lights the lamp on the church tower to warn our soldiers that the Austrian troops were leaving the village. I had the sudden sensation of the characteristic smell of an oil lamp. Thinking about this afterwards I realised that I had been resting my cheek on my left hand at the time, and that my fingers smelt of oil, having handled the light on my bicycle a little earlier on my way home. It is strange that until that moment I had not noticed the smell, but did so only when I could associate it with the lamp on the screen.]