Early Film Theories in Italy, 1896-1922

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Section 6
The Aesthetic Side

Silvio Alovisio and Luca Mazzei

Early film theories approach cinema holistically, not just as an aesthetic phenomenon. However, it’s also true that the question of whether or not film was an art or how it could become one emerged almost immediately. These discussions were carried out in a number of different contexts throughout the 1920s, not just within the aesthetic debates. For those interested in cinema as a pedagogic tool, for example, cinema was an important point of intersection between pedagogy and aesthetics (Orlando and Orestano, both of which contributed to this field, are included in this anthology). For Catholics, cinema was important in the relationship between morality and art. For positivist psychologists, the developmental dynamic that transformed brute sensations into aesthetics feelings was fundamental. Most of all, the diffuse presence of discourses on aesthetics reflect the degree to which art was a fundamental aspect of ‘tradition’ in Italian cultural history of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. The theoretical context of this cultural history is characterized by a deep and complex intersection of different philosophical, scientific, artistic, and literary currents, all of which are interested, despite their different methods and objectives, in the question of art. The texts gathered in this section, even if they do not fully reflect the broadness of Italian discussions on cinema and aesthetics, nonetheless demonstrate the extensive influence this period’s discourses had in defining the principal terms of the debate.

The Positivist Position

Positivism was hegemonic in Italian culture between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and was a major influence on Corrado Ricci’s 1898 essay, ‘Problemi d’arte. L’espressione e il movimento nella scultura’ (‘Problems of Art: Expression and Movement in Sculpture’). According to Ricci, everything is subject to scientific laws, even art ‘is under the direct laws of nature.’ For Ricci, this meant that even photography and cinema had to be analysed as cognitive processes. Therefore, Ricci analysed the temporal dimension of perception, which his contemporary, Henri Bergson, called the ‘pure duration’ in his 1896 book, *Matière et mémoire* (*Matter and Memory*). In fact, the sensations generated by visual stimuli do not manifest themselves as
isolated instances, but rather blend to create a continuous dimension: every single sensation is wholly inseparable from the preceding and succeeding moments. The mind, by gathering this continuous overlap of impressions, operates over the course of time in a selective and hierarchical manner. For example, upon seeing a body in movement, the mind selects only the most regular processes; that is, those most responsive to the aesthetic canon of the classical tradition, forgetting all of the others. Thus, it goes from involuntary sensations to an effective perception, and then to reflection, through the phases that found the basis of aesthetic experience. In a film, the shot does not go through this process: the camera unpredictably extracts an isolated sensation from the temporal flow without arriving at any real perception or reflection. Therefore, according to Ricci, the shot is the anti-aesthetic. Cinema may seem like a step forward because it is based on a series of shots taken together at regular intervals. The movement of the film may, in fact, help the spectator to forget the ugliness of the shot, but it is ready to remerge when the projection gets stuck on a single image because of a technical problem. However, recognizing this meant that cinema stopped short of being art. Cinema gets close to sensation, but it moves at a pace that is much faster than what the human mind needs to produce perception, and it seems to block any possibility of conceptual and aesthetic realization (i.e. ‘the reflection’). The cinema spectator does not have enough time to organize sensation. So, while cinema offers a way to perfectly reconstruct movement, it shows itself to be a defective system, unable to offer aesthetic guarantees.

The distinction between sensation, perception, and conceptual reflection proposed by Ricci is typical of positivist experimental psychology, which was highly active in Italy throughout the first twenty years of the twentieth century. Within this epistemological context, cinema is seen—like Ricci’s theoretical perspective—as an experiment so completely immersed in the rapid vortex of sensation that it precludes any aesthetic reflection. In some of the psychological and aesthetic discourses of the era, the possibility of cinematic aesthetics eventually becoming legitimized seemed almost to depend on the ability of the new medium to overcome the sense of immediacy that defined modern life. Not everyone was convinced that cinema would be able to transform the flow of sensations into controlled and contemplative manner, open to aesthetic sentiment. For example, according to Mariano Luigi Patrizi (who was not only a psychophysicist but also an art critic and a researcher in aesthetics), the cinematic experience was based on ‘palpitations and shock’, or physiological reactions and raw emotion. Therefore, according to him, cinema can never completely and
fully be art. In 1922, Adelchi Baratono, the first experimental psychologist and philosopher, offered a perspective that was in diametric opposition. According to Baratono, artistic creation enables—even in the case of cinema—sensation to be aestheticized and tempered. Art mediates sensation so that it goes beyond physiological immediacy to orientate itself toward the beautiful.  

Late Impressionist Scenes

Even more different is the thought of Sebastiano Arturo Luciani, who, in the 1910s and post-World War One period, was perhaps the most prolific Italian theorist of cinema, if not the most cited by his contemporaries. Already in a 1913 article entitled ‘Il cinematografo e l’arte’ (‘The Cinema and Art’), Luciani considers cinema not an art, but entertainment, and he compares it to pantomime, an ancient type of performance that Luciani considered to be in a state of decline. Yet, even though Luciani denies film the validity of being an art, he argued that cinema had strong potential. What struck him most was the ‘rapid succession of different frames’; in other words, it was that same sense of speed that had attracted Ricci fifteen years earlier, in 1898, and then Canudo, in 1908. In international scientific literature of the early twentieth century, there was a widespread belief that the quick succession of cinematographic images easily surpassed the ability of the mind to capture visual and narrative information. However, according to Luciani, if this characteristic is exploited in an intelligent way, the filmmaker will be able to ‘realize a kind of impressionistic scene’. Three years later, in an article entitled ‘Impressionismo scenico’ (‘Scenic Impressionism’), which has been republished in this anthology, Luciani clarifies the issue. What interests him are not films ‘from reality’, but fiction films, or what we could call films of ‘invention’. At the heart of his discussion is the possibility that the film, with its fluidity and almost musical rhythm, could forever change the dramatic theatre, since it could potentially extend the work already started by a few innovative theatrical experiments that had, notably, already integrated painting and music. Starting in 1917, after meeting Gordon Craig in Florence (with whom he kept up an interesting correspondence), Luciani began to conceive of cinema as a way to renew theatrical performance.

The reflections on cinema carried out by the Futurists, which we will discuss shortly, brought Luciani to new reflections on the role of cinema and dynamism itself. Gradually, Luciani became convinced that cinema could even be superior to theatre: a position that was exceedingly rare in
the far-reaching and intense Italian debate on the relationship between cinema and theatre in the early years of the twentieth century. Luciani’s perspective was therefore teleological: according to his hypothesis, cinema was not only destined to become an art, but a more perfect art. It is easy to see why in ‘Poetica del cinematografo’ (‘The Poetics of Cinema’) and his successive article on ‘Impressionismo scenico’, Luciani moved the discussion from evaluative judgements (is it possible to say that cinema is an art?) to normative judgements (‘according to what logic can cinema become an art?’).

The Encounter with Neo-idealism: The Futurists and Gramsci

Passionately anti-positivist, the Futurists drew their inspiration from different sources. They shared with Henri Bergson the idea of dynamism as a fundamental element of reality. Drawing on the fringes of European philosophical Irrationalism, they became interested in the demiurgic relationship of the artist with the world. Their relationship to Impressionism, however, was more problematic. Umberto Boccioni considered the final iterations of this movement as one of the most important antecedents to Futurism. By contrast, Carlo Carrà maintained that the continued existence of the Impressionist tradition in Italian culture was Futurism’s greatest enemy. In this light, the cinema initially appeared to the Futurist as one of the many turbulent and dynamic phenomenon emerging as a result of modernity. To use the terminology that was in vogue in the period, it was about a distinction between the social concept of ‘taste’ (in their case, the awareness with which you perceive modern life) and the aesthetics of the ‘beautiful’ (meaning classical art). This did seem like negative development. As conceived by the Futurists, social (and political) dimensions had an enormous importance on the project of modernization, much more so than Art in and of itself, which, for that matter, had been decisively repudiated, at least when art was defined traditionally in terms of ‘beauty’. It is no coincidence that in 1912, Boccioni added cinema to a list that included ‘cabarets, the gramophone, lighted signs, mechanical architecture, night life, the life of stones and crystals, occultism, magnetism, velocity’. In his 1916 *Pittura e scultura futuriste. Dinamismo plastico* (‘Futurist Painting and Sculpture: Plastic Dynamism’), Boccioni is attracted to newsreels, which he adds to a new and more provocative series, ranging from ‘the popular American dance, known as the Cake-Walk’ to sparkling ‘English water closets,’ all of which were, according to Boccioni, valuable tools with which to fight the
‘old aesthetic.’ The painter Carlo Carrà, in two essays from 1914 and 1915, entitled ‘Cineamore’ (‘Cine-love’) and ‘Parole in libertà’ (‘Words in Freedom’), recounts a sexual encounter in the darkness of a movie theatre, re-reading the cinema experience in terms of a melange of sounds, noise, and odours, which are not only present during the show, but are also capable of defining it. This attention to the medium as a social phenomenon of modernity appears in the very first text in which the Futurists confront the question of cinema as an art, the September 1916 manifesto, ‘La Cinematografia futurista’ (‘The Futurist Cinema’). In it, cinema is seen, above all, as a disruptive phenomenon, constantly threatened by artistic tradition. According to the Futurists, the greatest danger comes from a forced analogy with theatre. To understand cinema as a form of ‘theatre without words’ (which was the classical definition in use by the Symbolists) was to assign it a ‘refined’ nature that was extraneous to it. In response to this anachronistic interpretation, the Futurists conceptualized cinema as a ‘medium of expression’, which was more connected to literary-pictorial communicative forms than to theatre. In particular, the visual-literary sign for the Futurists was not only like an analogon of the real, but was also part of reality itself. To their mind, the cinema was therefore no longer ‘a spiritual world, reduced to the bare bones, made with ethereal and angelic material,’ as Giovanni Papini described it, but instead was indivisible from the spiritual, an instrument with which to open up matter in order to touch the spirit, breaking down and reconstructing the world according to the paradigm of their own ‘marvellous whims.’

Antonio Gramsci’s 1916 ‘Teatro e cinematografo’ (‘Theatre and Cinema’) was closer to the neo-idealist aesthetics of Benedetto Croce. The socialist and future founder of the Partito Comunista Italiano (Italian Communist Party) was then theatre critic at Avanti!, and had not yet written the innovative theoretical construct for which he became famous with the posthumous publication of the Quaderni del carcere (Prison Notebooks) at the end of the Second World War. In his article, he reaffirms the need, expressed in Crocean aesthetics, to distinguish between art and non-art. Although cinema had an important social function by providing cheap entertainment and a guaranteed distraction for the worker, it did not have the quality of art because of its intrinsic characteristics. First, its exaggerated acting made cinema seem like puppet theatre. At the same time, it allows theatre to concentrate on the development of psychological drama, which is its true function and fundamental to its growth. In this sense, cinema ‘leads the theatre back to its true nature.’ The second reason is that cinema like second-rate theatre, only produces an illusion of reality, without being able to capture the exemplarity of individual existences. The third reason,
Gramsci clearly explains in his text on the actress Lyda Borelli, is that cinema expresses a sensuality and a primitive and seductive sexuality that contradicts the way in which these qualities have been culturally developed. With these three reasons, Gramsci distances himself from cinema and at the same time demonstrates that he understands its basic characteristics.

The Symbolist Hypothesis

Symbolism’s influence was long and wide-ranging, and continued to be very influential in Italy and France into the twentieth century. Until the end of the 1920s, there was an extremely heterogeneous group of artists and philosophers that made reference to the movement, even if the authors were only weakly connected. One of them was Ricciotto Canudo, who, by the time he published ‘Trionfo del cinematografo’ (Triumph of Cinema) in 1908, had already been living in Paris for a number of years, where the influence of Symbolism was stronger. There was also Fausto Maria Martini, Enrico Thovez, who was known primarily for his art criticism, and finally and most famously, Gabriele d’Annunzio, who was perhaps the most famous writer and intellectual in Italy at the time. These four authors warned that cinema demanded new expressive forms and evaluative criteria for modern aesthetics; at the same time, they maintain a trans-historical concept of art, which found points of reference in the past. They legitimized cinema as an art through examples that ranged from Greco-Roman Classicism to more contemporary artistic experimentations (such as those by Léon Bakst, Sergej Djagilev, and Gordon Craig). In these cases, the future was seen as a new golden age in which the cinema, in the hands of the demiurge, would bring back the splendour of art of the past (Canudo) or, if there was no artistic inspiration, a new period of decline in which cinema would become the primary symbol of cultural decay (Thovez, Martini).

Symbolism’s influence on reflections about the cinema became stronger, beginning in 1916, the exact moment when an era of artistic film journals started in Italy. These journals, although they are generalist publications, use Symbolist aesthetics as their hallmark. Figures with extensive contact with cinema, such as Lucio d’Ambra, Goffredo Bellonci, Anton Giulio Bragaglia, Emanuele Toddi, intervene. At the centre of the debate was the relationship between nature (or reality) and art, which, according to these writings, meant a dialectic between habit and innovation, the imitation of reality and expressive interpretation, classicism, and modernity. One of the characteristics of Symbolism is the love for ‘the unfinished, the unspoken, the indefinite—or
the indefinable.36 As a result of these discussions, cinema was interpreted as an ideal, but incomplete art, a bit like, as Canudo had already imagined, projecting on the screen a future that has only been imagined.37 These themes also emerge in Lucio d’Ambra’s article, ‘My Views on the Cinematograph’, which presents the aesthetics of cinema in terms of a duality. On the one hand, cinema’s influence will be absolute and totalizing, probably destined to change the entire aesthetic panorama. On the other hand, it would be defined more by the way in which it calls attention to the limits of previous forms of art than by its own autonomous and original contributions.

Lucio d’Ambra and Emanuele Toddi, who were connected to Symbolist aesthetics, reflected on the role of the frame in particular, which they considered a poetic fragment of the real. The concept of the fragment is fundamental to Symbolist theory: it is only through the completely torn up fragment that the poet can depict the larger reality that he so desperately craves. In January 1915, d’Ambra reviewed what was the most important war film in Italy at that time, Il sopravvissuto (The Survivor) by Augusto Genina, writing that

Happily, Augusto Genina figured out a way to take the immense context of the war in all of its limitlessness, immediacy, and intensity and break into small pieces, glimpses, particularities, visions of light and shadow, the finished and indefinite, which disappear immediately after they appear, which do not ever pretend to give a complete view, but always suggests that there is more than what appears on the screen, and which overlap, intersect, reverberate, integrate, and add to the unanimity of the representation, through which the small things give the impression of being large, in which the framed image of the screen expresses the immensity of the battlefield.38

The same theoretical framework drives the essay by Toddi entitled ‘Rettangolo Film (25x19)’ (‘Rectangle Film (25 x 19)’), which operates between concepts of gestalt and magical-esoteric influences. Toddi was interested in the way in which cinema is able to dispel any tension in the spectator by the very way in which it presents itself as the art of the fragment. Anticipating Eisenstein’s famous reflections by twelve years, Toddi imagines an original use for the frame.39 Toddi argues that the ‘perimeter’ given to a scene, even though it limits the visual field, opens up enormous expressive possibilities. While the viewer wants to go beyond the limits of the visual field to have a sort of absolute vision, the artificial limits of the frame can create the sensation of unlimited space. To the great surprise of the viewer, the camera, which does all it can to render the image more ‘defined’, instead helps to reveal the infinite.
Even Anton Giulio Bragaglia saw the revelatory potentials of cinema, but in terms different than those proposed by Toddi. In his 1916 text, ‘L’arco scenico del mio cinematografo’ (‘The Proscenium Arch of My Cinema’), he argues that cinema, in order to render man’s inner ideals visible, must ‘transform reality’ instead of reproducing it. ‘Our aesthetic,’ he writes, ‘must be our reality.’ In order to realize this goal, Bragaglia argued that the role of set design is key, since it is the only way to renew the evocative power that the grand cathedrals once had. To demonstrate this last point, Bragaglia published an image from the film Thais alongside his text. The film, which he had just made, featured the experimental set design of Enrico Prampolini, which was more Symbolist than Futurist.

Another central aspect Symbolist imagery, metamorphosis, it is at the core of Goffredo Bellonci’s 1916 essay. Just like Ricci, Canudo, Luciani and many other authors, Bellonci thought that the dynamism of moving image makes metamorphosis the very essence of cinema. The argument was not entirely new, and—among the others—even Gabriele d’Annunzio argued a partially analogous concept in 1914, when he suggested making a film based on Ovid’s Metamorphoses. Bellonci, however, expanded the argument in an original way. To him, cinema was an extraordinary succession of appearances and disappearances, an incessant, rhythmic transfiguration of gestures, forms, and physiognomy. The comedic film was better than the film of a movie star because the kinetic transformations of the former is more artistic than the static nature of the latter. Films of movie stars were not truly films because they relied on statuesque poses of the actors (Gotthold Ephraim-Lessing’s ‘pregnant moment’), while the film must be like a ‘river that flows without stopping or forming an eddy.’ Even more radical is the essay written four years later by art critic Michele Biancale. He argued that cinema, even before it transforms objects, faces, or narrative relations, is a transformation of temporal moments, and above all, pure light. Biancale’s text is provocative because he establishes the artistry of cinema on its abstraction of form. In fact, the referential and narrative contents of the images in a film are, according to Biancale, less important for its aesthetic legitimization than the ‘rapid occurrence of moments that are and then are no longer’ and the incessant dynamism of ‘pure, luminous impressions.’

Conclusion

From 1896 until 1919, cinema seemed like a battleground and, at times, a meeting point between the many aesthetic tendencies inspired by the
primary cultural currents of the twentieth century. The way in which aesthetic reflections played out, as we already mentioned in the opening, is rather different than what happened in the following decades. The dominant trends investigating cinematic aesthetics were spread across different disciplinary contexts. But that does not mean that the theoretical context was disorganized or dispersed. Instead, the plurality and the diffusion of aesthetic discourses on cinema can be condensed into a few convergent themes. For example, cinema's lack of words is criticized by Gramsci, but also by the poet and journalist, Fausto Maria Martini (who was part of the late Symbolist perspective) and the positivist psychologist Mariano Luigi Patrizi (who came from evolutionary science). The exact same crossover happens with regards to the centrality of gesture (Gramsci, Bragaglia, Patrizi), the distinction between the arts in terms of their mediality (d'Ambra, Luciani, Canudo), cinema's sense of dynamism (Ricci, Bellonci, Luciani, the Futurists), and the relationship between the body and objects (Bragaglia, the Futurists, Luciani).

The publication of Luciani's Il cinematografo. Verso una nuova arte (‘Cinema: Towards a New Art’) in 1920, which gathered many of the author's writings on cinema published between 1916 and 1919, helped create a gradual change in paradigm. If the previous period was defined by writings diffused across different discipline, a specialized aesthetic theoretical discourse began to emerge, which is today even more intense and institutionalized. This phase, documented in artistic film journals, went from the first signs of the production crisis in Italian cinema until 1923 when it was almost completely dissolved. The following ten years were defined by the emergence of a cinephilic culture, even in Italy. Cultural experiences, such as the cine-clubs founded by Antonello Gerbi in Milan, or like the journals founded by Alessandro Blasetti, including Il Mondo a lo schermo (The World on Screen), Lo Schermo (The Screen), Cinematografo (Cinema), all of which were formed after 1926, characterized a period, driven by new theoretical venues and an almost absolute lack of Italian films. For the history of Italian theory, a new era began.

Notes

1. This essay was discussed, planned, and organized collectively by the two authors. Silvio Alovisio wrote the first, second, and fifth sections; Luca Mazzei wrote the third, fourth and sixth sections.
2. See contributions by Orlando and Orestano, included in this anthology
4. See Patrizi, ‘Ongoing Battle’, included in this anthology; Baratono, ‘Male
edizione del cinematografo’, p. 3.
5. Ricci, ‘Problems of art’, included in this anthology.
6. Ricci, ‘Problems of art’, p. 59, this passage of the essay is not included in this
anthology.
7. Bergson, Matière et mémoire.
8. Bergson, Évolution créatrice. It could be said that the camera gathers any
moment instead of the pregnant moment, which, for Lessing (as cited by
Ricci), is a condition of aesthetic perception. Also see Lessing, Laokoon oder
über die Grenzen.
9. Also see the Introduction to Section 5.
10. Berton, Dialectique entre image.
16. Luciani, ‘Scenic Impressionism’, included in this anthology.
19. Luciani, ‘Idealità del cinematografo’, p. 3 Also see Farassino, ‘Dibattito su teatro’;
Bernardini, ‘Interazioni cineteteatrali’; Angelini, ‘Dal teatro muto all’antiteatro’.
23. Carrà, ‘Cézanne a noi futuristi’ and ‘Pittura dei suoni’.
25. Ibid., p. 39.
27. See Carrà, Tutti gli scritti, pp. 32, 42–48. Parole in libertà, or literally ‘words-
in-freedom’, were Futurist texts that emphasized word play by combining
elements of poetry and narrative prose with unconventional grammar,
syntax, word choice, and typography.
28. Marinetti et al., ‘Manifesto for Futurist Cinematography’, included in this
anthology.
30. De Castris, Estetica e politica.
31. Bellingeri, Dall’intellettuale al politico; Gramsci, Quaderni del carcere.
32. Gramsci, ‘In principio’.
34. Crainquebille, ‘Art of the Celluloid’, included in this anthology; Martini,
‘Death of the Word’, included in this anthology; d’Annunzio, ‘Cinematografo
come strumento’, pp. 115–122.
36. d’Acquara and d’Ambra, ‘Inchiesta tra gli scrittori’.
40. Bellonci, ‘Aesthetics of Cinema’ and ‘Manifesto for a Cinematic Revolution’, both included in this anthology.
42. Bellonci, ‘Manifesto per una rivoluzione’, p. 293.
43. Luciani, Verso una nuova arte.