The Aesthetics of Cinema

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Is cinema an art? And being an art, in what way and in what manner does it distinguish itself from the other arts: from poetry, from music, from painting? What is, therefore, its nature? What are its limitations? And do the screenwriters and movie actors take these limitations, take this nature, into consideration? Must we, however, say that the artists of the cinema have a complete experience of their means of expression, or not? In these questions, I think I have summarized all, or nearly all, the problems of the cinema. In the brief notes that follow, I do not presume to resolve these, or even make them as clear as day: it is enough for me to describe them well among ourselves, so that then, after the conversation, one might linger at debating them, each one on its own.

1. The cinema is without a doubt an art. With the continuous improvement in mechanical apparatus, every trace of materiality is disappearing. The time when one was a slave to the camera and had no freedom beyond the choice of the scenery or the people to capture on the photographic plate now seems prehistoric. And, moreover, even this choice, was a manifestation of art. It revealed a creativity, a singular and ineffable spirituality in the photographer that allowed experts to distinguish the photographs of one photographer from those of another. But, in the end, having chosen and framed a scene that in this light corresponds to your état d'âme, it was impossible, in the early days of photographic art, to eliminate extraneous parts of it from your fantastical world: to take away awkward details, to shade what you were seeing in the background, and to give prominence to what, in your mind, should be in the foreground. Photography never corresponded to your vision: it converted the scene that you had in your mental image and made it far too material. It captured on the light-sensitive paper details that you hadn't seen when you picked up the camera, precisely because the scene, in your imagination, had lived from another life: from the life of the spirit. The variety of sensitive paper, retouching tools, graduated lens strengths, the different ways of 'developing' the plates allowed, after a long time, for photography to have that chiaroscuro [technique], those lights and shadows, which have manifested our artistic originality. And we had photographs that were comparable to etchings and dry point engraving.
The cinema goes beyond. That world which for photographers was by necessity inorganic—because they had to make representations as they were, from outside, by illuminating them with their own spirituality—becomes organic, very organic, even. Indeed, think of it: the photographer is by nature an ‘impressionist’. He has to stop himself in front of individual events and to retrace those that stir up some feeling in his mind. But he cannot compose these individual events together into a fantastical sequence. He is forced to accept nature in its material changeability without being able to attack it, to dominate it, and to recreate it with his own spirit. The cinematographer, instead, moves from his spirit—from his creativity and his imagination—and submits nature to himself. He has a way, if you will, of capturing unreal things on the screen—the monsters, fairies, and gnomes of fairy tales, for example—showing two images contemporaneously that, in natural reality, would be subsequent to one another; giving life to the changeable phantoms of a dream; representing metamorphoses more audacious than any Homer and Ovid ever thought up. How, then, could we deny the name of ‘art’ to cinematography, if, by virtue of the wonderful instruments designed by mechanics, it has all the most subtle means of expression? But here’s the point: this expression is not and cannot be anything but cinematographic. Cinema lacks that lyrical element that painting finds in colour; that dramatic element that poetry finds in the word: its ‘relationships’ are not pictorial; its contrasts are not ‘dramatic’. And just as the painter betrays his own art when, instead of his own chromatic world, he shows his own literary ideals through symbols—when, in short, he makes literature instead of painting—so, too, does the screenwriter pervert his own art when he forces on it expressions that are not cinematographic, but pictorial, dramatic, musical. Take notice: the first characteristic of art is expressive coherence, in which the part is equal to the whole. Let me explain: that particular mode of expression that makes Giacomo Leopardi different from Dante Alighieri, Michelangelo different from Donatello, Manet different from El Greco—it is not necessary to search for it in their entire oeuvre, but you can find it in one of their verses, in a fragment of their sculptures, in one of their brushstrokes. The accents and the pauses, the voluminous parts and the flat ones, and the chromatic relationships are enough and make each artist ineffable. If cinematographic art had reached the fullness of these others, we could distinguish one artist from another from a few centimetres of a film because the spiritual world of the cinematographer is made up of transformations and metamorphoses. The one who has a
unique way of transforming things, who has his own unique imagination capable of seeing the whole world in terms of metamorphoses, he is an accomplished cinematographer. And this particular way of changing one form into another, or one form from another, is seen in an entire film just as it is seen in a few centimetres. It is the distinguishing feature, the connection, the rhythm of cinematographic art.

2. It is superfluous to add that contemporary cinema is off track: besides, it is practiced by transplants from other arts—painters and playwrights—who wear themselves out trying to bend it to significations that are foreign to its nature. If filmmakers had really thought about the nature of filmmaking, they would have easily arrived at my conclusions. Why do comical scenes end up being a lot more expressive than tragic ones? Why does farce find in the cinema an artistic fullness that drama never finds? It is clear: because comical scenes—as primitive and vulgar as they may be—are metamorphoses. That is, they all consist of ‘connections’ of gestures [and] changes of forms. Drama does not. Drama is intimate, spiritual, and reveals itself through words: you can perform it, like the tragedies of Shakespeare, with a bare set, and it will fully retain its own unique expressive power. Even the gestures are superfluous. It is a mistake to think that a great dramatic actress is she who has, as they say, a changeable ‘mask’: rather, it is she who knows how to bring this ‘mask’ to life with words, with the accent. Try listening to Eleonora Duse in the last act of Hedda Gabler with your eyes closed: you will be as equally moved as if you had watched her. Filmmakers instinctively feel the truth of what I am saying. And when they cannot rely on the gestures of the actors—who will never know how to manifest the innermost conflicts—they rely on the plot: they increase the number of captions and bundle together material incidents: the explosions, falls, chases, derailments, and so on. And very often, instead of a dramatic emotion, they provoke laughter; and they always enthral the spectators with physical catastrophes rather than with drama. Here we are, at the beginning again: in cinema, artists and spectators are searching for a transformation.

The defect of this new art, therefore, is, if I am not mistaken, the scant awareness of its own nature and its own limitations. People want to do in cinema what is done in theatre. They impoverish cinema with Verism and Naturalism. They are still at the early beginnings of composing scenes that really give the impression of reality or weaving together great big dramas that awaken the viewer’s interest in physical catastrophes, which really seem real. A bridge that is falling; two trains that crash: it seems
impossible that after years and years of moviemaking, we have not moved away from this narrow mechanism, while the cinema has the means of lifting itself to fantastical heights which no Indian storyteller, no Ariosto, no Hoffmann ever reached. All of its failings stem from this first one. It has been observed that movie actors never achieve the expressive fullness that even these same actors display at the theatre. And it is said that this happens because movie scenes do not allow for a continuous performance because they are not made all at once, and sometimes are made out of order—from one scene to another many days or even, very often, months pass. This observation is correct, but the explanation is mistaken: in the cinema, knowledge of the scene that comes next is useless for the actress or the actor, because every scene has a life of its own, each dramatic feeling must reveal itself in a gesture, without the possibility of ascending step by step to the climax of the drama, as one does with words that translate the impulses of the mind from the pianissimo to fortissimo. The cause of the defect is instead something else: it is precisely this strange persistence of movie artists in perverting their own art. And I will give you proof: comic actors, who put all their expressive virtuosity into physical changes and gestures achieve a marvellous fullness of art.

A dear, cultured, and very clever friend of mine, Sebastiano Arturo Luciani, in an article on the cinema, which is, perhaps, the only serious thing that has been written about the art of filmmaking, highlighted the similarities between this art and Russian ballets, which is to say with the musical, miming drama.¹ And he had outlined a kind of fusion of music with the cinema that would have the power to miraculously renew moviemaking. But even he didn’t know how to formulate the crucial point of the question. If I’m not mistaken, I have raised this issue in this article. Now, having put ourselves on equal footing with aesthetics, we can investigate the connections between cinematographic art and the other contemporary arts, the technical necessities of moviemaking, and the importance of cinema in our society. We’ll see.


Note

¹. [Editors’ note. See Luciani, ‘The Poetics of Cinema’, included in this section of the anthology.]