Early Film Theories in Italy, 1896-1922

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Published by Amsterdam University Press

Mazzei, Luca, et al.
Early Film Theories in Italy, 1896-1922.
Amsterdam University Press ed. Amsterdam University Press, 2017.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/66278.

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Manifesto for a Cinematic Revolution

Goffredo Bellonci

The cinema, in order to be an art, must acknowledge its own modes of expression and its own limitations; it must, above all, free itself from its enslavement to dramatic art, which needs words—only words and intonation—and can do without gestures and scenery. I have already shown that the fantastic world of the cinema is made up of transformations, metamorphoses, and that an artist is such when through his imagination is able to look at life as a metamorphosis. In short, it is about changing one form into another, or one form from another. How many of the numerous armies of writers, of directors, and of actors can boast of a cinematic soul? Very few, and this will be clear to you if you will take into consideration most of the films that unfold before you in movie theatres; in hardly two or three do the signs of the ‘techniques’—those artifices, those tricks (as they say) which are the best means of expression in the cinema—show themselves. The others show scenes from any old play, so much so that for each one, you have to imagine the words and refer yourselves to theatre: they are the mask, the shadow, the ghost of dramatic art. The closed circle of photography has not yet been overcome: they make films as if they had to be a well-organized series of photographs, in which each one would be complete in itself, and the representations carried out from begin to end with a rigorous continuity were not yet organic. The most adaptable art, the most ‘dynamic’ art, it gives you instead, by the fault of its creator’s artistic consciousness, a static impression: you feel that it looked for the ‘frame’ and that it was carefully constructed to give you a beautiful succession of ‘frames’ gathered together: the tumultuous comical or dramatic events prepare that scene—where the protagonists appear in close up, often with only their head and shoulders in a circle of light—to show you the joyous or mournful, comic or tragic facial expression. In reality, these films are composed of many photographs in just as many cinematic parentheses.

But the cinema has to be something rather different: a river that flows without pauses and without eddies, and which twinkles in the varied lights of the sun, the moon, and of the stars. Go back for a moment to the origins of this art—when it stupefied and enraptured us. Think back to those honest films which showed you a busy street, an attended countryside, a sky, and a sea filled with life. And tell me if in their innocence they do not seem to you rather more artistic than these others.
which capture in a few expressionless acts the vanities of our actresses. Expressionless! In the theatre, the actors acquire their own style, giving the words of comedy or of drama a flair which transforms them: they whisper some of them, they mumble others, and some they stress, and some others they scream: this is how they interpret, this is how they play the characters. The gestures and the facial expressions add colour to the acting, but in themselves, they are poor. Think of how many different tones—of joy, anger, desperation, death—that actors, which you have seen in your life, knew how to express. And then compare this abundance to the scarcity of the mimicking 'jokes'. Oftentimes in photographs, very original actresses look equal to one another—not in the beauty of their faces and their person, which is a natural thing and not an artifice, but in their poses. And I challenge the idea that there are not many ways one can turn down one's face out of shame or bashfulness, lift the eyes to heaven in desperation or laugh or cry in pleading. From one person to the next, for each feeling, the words change, but the lines of the body have a small range for each movement of the spirit. The cinema gives you further proof of this: in the essential gestural moments, when the projector places in front of you only the protagonists so that you can admire them better, our actresses—who look so different on the stage, so different in these same films when they are shown in a quotidian kind of spontaneity—look identical. A Francesca Bertini type or a Lyda Borelli type: there are no other possibilities. And if we do not allow any other possibility, it is because we like those actresses for their beauty. A display of beautiful women and beautiful, stylish costumes is not art: beauty and clothing, yes, they can be instruments of the art of cinema, but it is necessary that they not be ends in themselves. The actors and actresses of the silent theatre must convince themselves that being dressed by top designers, driving around in cars, and carrying oneself with confidence, with grace and with elegance are not enough for them to be hailed as artists. They must, above all, feel that they are part of a changeable organism, which is the cinematic representation: changeable in its continuity just like everyday life in the streets. They must make the lines of their bodies, the gesturing of their faces, the shape of their clothing, and the colour of their person agree with the lines, the movements, the forms, the colour of their person, with the lines, the colours of a fantastic scene which is continuously transforming itself. To be the note of a symphony, the word of a poem, a tone in a painting: that is what is necessary. The rest, even servant girls know how to do when, on Sundays, they go into the photo booths for 50 cents to pose for a portrait to give to their boyfriends.
You have understood, I hope, that I would like to wage a small revolution in the cinema: I would like for them to no longer write stories and make films specifically for the lead actor or actress. Instead, I would like the actors and actresses to interpret stories that were created with a free and rich cinematic imagination. In this way, we will see who deserves to be the best of silent theatre actor and who is the worst. Today, dramatic theatre actors and opera singers, impoverished noblemen, the young men of the _beau monde_, and the young women of the ugly world are all rushing into silent film. The actors are distributed parts, and they force the writers, the operators, the directors—everyone—to make films where they can appear in the theatre just as they were or are in society. It happens, however, that the lead parts are still entrusted to men and women who often have no idea about the cinematic art and who almost always lack the aptitude for becoming film actors. The stars are fixed points around which film companies whirl—from the shareholders to the props master. And in order to please them, to not force them to study the new art of the cinema, they continue to translate, impoverish, and degrade into fantastical film plots the dramas and melodramas that the actors have performed and continue to perform in the theatre. When by chance you happen to see a film that is wholly or partially worthy of that name—_Cabiria_, for example, or _Avatar_, or even _Fluffy Ruffles_, are among those films that display nobility and novelty of invention; and many of those comic films, made with an imagination of the third order are very vulgar, but take advantage of cinematic means of expression, by which I mean the transformations—you will understand right away what this art could become, if the impresarios can convince themselves that they can make money, and more than they are making now, by obeying the artistic laws of the cinema and not the styles and whims of the theatre and of society.  

I dream of a cinema that is very different from that of today. I think of writers as no longer constrained by the patterns of dramas and of comedies, but instead free to create with an imagination that would surpass Ovid, Ariosto, and Hoffmann, marvellous fictions in which heaven and earth, reality and the supernatural would be mixed together. Cinematic techniques allow for the expression of the most strange, fantastical worlds which the word and the paintbrush could not signify or would express in an incomplete way. Think of it—it would be possible to show the transformation of Io into a cow or of Daphne into a laurel tree; it would be possible to give real life, for example, to the monsters of Italian and Celtic epics, to the island of Alcina, to the gardens of Armida; and even Hoffmann's _Il vaso d'oro_ (The Golden Pot) would be translated into film.  

The imagination no longer has limits. Would
you like to make the gods descend from heaven onto the earth? Would you like to show it, this earth, in a sudden, marvellous passage from barren to blooming? Would you like to mix bodies, free souls, insert the past into the present with an unexpected parenthesis, make creatures ascend from the purgatory of material to the paradise of the spirit? You can do it all: the cinema is a magical art which in its studios changes one form from another, and one form into another. Today, now that filmmaking is encroaching into photographic realism, magic is called, with disdain, ‘tricks’: tomorrow, when the public will have solemnly made it understood with whistling that they are fed up with this exhibition of beautiful faces and beautiful bodies, it will be the last of the lady of silent theatre. The writer must therefore capture on the film screen a sparkle, a dance, a tumult of forms which harmonize and which oppose, like the solid masses, the lines and colours of contemporary Impressionist and Syntheticist sculpture and painting. Changeability is its great law. The scenic fictions of Egorov, Appia, and Bakst can be its models: a poet and painter together, or a poet who takes advantage of a painter in order to depict better his own phantasms, he can in the cinema lead to completeness an art which is barely at its beginnings. But, it is necessary that the organizer of the scene be something rather different than what he is today. Look at them, these organizers who pompously call themselves ‘metteurs en scene’: theatre authors or actors, they don’t even know how to imagine something other than moving masses of people or individuals over a stage that is static, very static, the most static in its master-lines. They have remained men of the theatre, with their static conception of art; and they imagine the entire scene—even in the countryside, even if the characters are moving—as though it had curtains and backdrops: they are very happy when they succeed—that’s it!—in making an extraordinary dramatic pause with a close up of the protagonists looking into one another’s eyes with passionate love or passionate hatred. They offer two things to the art of cinema, one of which is absurd, and the other is extraneous: they want to express with gesturing spiritual contrasts and to imprint on film, as a background to the drama or comedy, the reality of nature. They are excellent actors and excellent photographers: not filmmakers. The bad thing is that while they are not educating themselves in the art of cinema, they are not even educating the actors and actresses, whose desires they always indulge instead. Imagine that the writers and directors were different, that they were more like that ideal type I have described for you, that they did with cinema what Bakst has done with Russian ballets. It is clear that the arsenal of the comicaroli of the silent theatre would disappear into thin air. Our actors and our actresses must first learn to move. May they understand that
they have an ignorance of movements that elicit compassion, and no sense of rhythm and no idea about scenic ‘complementarity’. It’s useless: until they convince themselves that they should especially take the example of Fokine or Karsavina, if not of Duse or Zacconi, they will not succeed in doing anything. Why is it that Russian ballets are judged as one of the highest manifestations of contemporary art and the cinema is instead so disdained that even the people who practice it deny it the name of ‘art’? Of the many, many things that they should understand, our actors have understood only one, although rather badly: the importance of clothing. But each person thinks of himself, dresses himself as if he had to appear in a salon, very content if, by virtue of money, tailoring, and also of his own good taste, he manages to set the style for a city or for a season. Try to convince them that should all go along with one another on film in an artistic continuity; and that an ugly costume can become very beautiful in a particular place, in that particular moment of a scene, where and when a costume of the best cut would stand out and clash. Ah! Yes: they want to show expensive clothing and they would be ready to put together 1793 tailors and stylists against the bold man who would dare to energetically call them back to the reasons of cinematic art. And the actresses, they want to show their faces, so that everyone can see how beautiful they are; you will never make them understand that in certain Russian ballets where Karsavina erases her own face into a diffuse pallor in order to accentuate the changing lines of her body, she is artistically more beautiful that all the actresses of the cinema put together. In short, beauty is an element, an instrument of the cinematic art; but it is not a fixed endpoint. If actors were to convince themselves of this, they would hasten the advent of a cinematic art and they would finally merit the name of ‘artists’, which today—with few exceptions—they are usurping. They usurp it for their use and consumption; because the public thinks about and judges them in a completely different way.

‘Manifesto per una rivoluzione cinematografica’, Apollon, 2/2 (September 1916). Translated by Siobhan Quinlan.

Notes

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

2. [Editors’ note. Cabiria (1914) was directed by Giovanni Pastrone and produced by dall’Italia Film. Avatar (1916) was directed by Carmine Gallone]
and produced by Cines. Fluffy Ruffles is the name of the protagonist in the film, *La signorina Ciclone* (1916), directed by Augusto Genina, written by Lucio d’Ambra, and produced by Medusa Film.

3. *Editors’ note.* Alcina e Armida are characters from, Ludovico Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso (The Frenzy of Orlando)* and Torquato Tasso’s *Gerusalemme liberata (Jerusalem Delivered)*, respectively.

4. *Translator’s note.* The word *comicaroli* cannot be translated into English. It is a derogatory term for those actors who only perform comic scenes.

5. *Editors’ note.* The author is referring to the sense of unity among all the elements of a painting, which for him must inspire the creation of the film.

6. *Editors’ note.* The author intends to reference 1793, the year of the Reign of Terror, the bloodiest period of the French Revolution.