Early Film Theories in Italy, 1896-1922

Mazzei, Luca, Alovisio, Silvio, Casetti, Francesco

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I think that a great path through which the cinema can be led to art is still hiding in the artifices of scenography.

Infinite and astonishing are the tools that the cinema can possess in this field of wonders.

The creation of impossible visions and views shot at night and made fantastical by artificial light, for example, open up infinite horizons for the genius of a modern set designer.

For the cinema, the question of ‘art’ is often raised. But for the creation of certain effects, aimed at exteriorizing interiority—a manageable task even at the cinema—certain tools are necessary. Could a little café orchestra play the *La morte di Åse* (*Death of Haase*) or *La danza di Anitra* (*Anitra’s Dance*)?1

To create a work of art—which is a perfect thing—the complexity, the integrated totality of the methods is necessary, so much so that the work of art can be damaged by even the slightest disturbance of an additional feature that is less than perfect. Today, the cinema claims to reach art —[but] with the systems, the criteria, the intellectual possibilities, and the quality of methods sought out up until now, is certainly a reckless phenomenon. It is well known, then, what theatrical sets are. What have Wagner and Reinhardt, Bakst and Fokine, Gordon Craig and [Alexandre] de Salzmann, Djagilev and Wilkinson created or brought about that is like our architect [Gian Giuseppe] Mancini and the futurists themselves, such as Giacomo Balla’s attempts at illuminated sets, which are better than *Schauspielhaus’s* sets made of light, and with Fortunato Depero’s plastic dances, which will be one of our strongest decorative energies?2

Maeterlinck’s marionettes, like the dances of Isadora Duncan; the psalms of Paul Claudel, like the visions of Andreieff; the sets of Larionov, Golovine, Gončarov, like—let’s add as well—the clothing of Loïe Fuller and the artificial smiles of Lyda Borelli, these and other even more unimportant phenomena, have created a pretension of having achieved something new in the minds of modern aesthetes, [even though] there are no longer simple and easy paths that have not yet been explored and known.

No other means of theatrical representation can achieve the rapid, kaleidoscopic synthesis of 100 consecutive scenes better than the cinema.
This is the basis of its primary reason for being. And similarly, no other means can create the happily unreal (and therefore artistic) vision that is just like the one that appears in the mind of each creative artist.

For this reason, too, cinema can become an art—because of the possible unreality, the artificiality that can triumph within it.

The scenic apparatus is a formidable contributing factor to that effect—a provocateur of suggestion, that is all the more irresistible when it is the least expected. If the great Christian cathedrals didn’t have the imposing aspect of their walls and columns, and the echo of their towering domes, and the lights of a thousand candles around the altar, where the priest is dressed like an ancient king, the church would not be animated by the sacred terror of a looming divinity, and the faithful would not feel the fear of so much mystery and such superhuman power.

Today, it takes something other than a simple tragic event to captivate and intoxicate the hearts and mind of a refined modern audience. Once upon a time, a tragedy of Sophocles recited on a street corner, or a scene of Shakespeare in front of a black backdrop was interesting. Today, I saw Djagilev’s Balletti russi (Ballets Russes) in front of a black background, but what colours don’t light up the choreographic costumes created by Léon Bakst? That black canvas was nothing but the best background for the triumph of those rainbow-colored flames, dancing before a nocturnal horizon: demented, fleeting flames contained by the proscenium arch as if it were in a gigantic chimney.³

Whoever thinks that the sublime work of art is independent of the scenography demonstrates to have not understood the theatre’s means, the goals of its effects, or its mission.

Even today, certain tendencies of contemporary painting lead the rational artist to represent reality in a way that is daring in its brutality (and exclusively pictorial) through studies of material sensitivity, having abandoned colours and the old spiritual and sentimental qualities of artistic emotion.

But these are inane heroisms.

To want to impose on the theatrical work what doesn’t have in its own nature, which is the suggestive means of descriptive sights and sentiments that we know abound in the literary work: to want to impose, stripped of any backdrops, what you find it the script, because certainly the interpretation of the scenery counts more than the contents of the drama—just as poetry depends on the meter and the sound, architecture depends on harmonious rhythm, [and] music depends on harmony—it is a misguided and barren effort, that while it adds nothing to the work of art, even depletes it of its secondary, and most essential qualities.
In the world of the cinema, people shout a lot, preaching and predicting the coming—finally!—of the cinematic work: a work written specifically for the cinema. When one realizes that it is often the mise-en-scène that spoils, deforms, and often destroys theatrical and literary works, which would have been better off translated into cinema, then it’s the priests of the new glass temples, who declare themselves victims of the absence of a truly cinematic literature. But it’s not the feathers—it’s the entire nest that is missing, not the nightingale!

If one could see the potentials of scenography distinctly, as much as cinema's photo-scenographic technique, the very new and wondrous qualities of this new art would provide, almost on their own, the structure of the cinematic artwork.

The cinema, when it is a substitute and travesty of the theatre, is only able to create some noteworthy idea—but always a superficial one—of a psychological situation.

The totality of the film as a whole always ends up being a caricature, in spite of the efforts of the most intelligent metteurs en scène, who are a little dumb for pursuing a utopia of psychological theatre for the cinema. In saying this, I don't want to claim that the psychological drama of the cinema is absolutely a dead end. I mean that the elimination of the unified set has an advantage in that the settings can be psychologically enhanced. This aspect can significantly facilitate the exteriorization of interiority. However, the sets must not limit themselves to being the decorator and the property designer's vulgar collection of knick-knacks; but it must be an interpretation, which through a refined and sensitive creation of settings, we call psychological.

I do not claim, then, that all that has been dedicated up till now to the art of the screen—even worthy efforts—has been a pointless and ineffective endeavour. I only claim that the true, great path of the cinema is not this: that it is still unknown, because it has only just been explored here and there, and that it is directing itself creatively towards the bright and triumphal backgrounds of imagination, with spectacles that are more or less unreal and imaginary.

This claim is not at all Futurist, I sometimes say, in the rather ridiculous sense of the definition. Because to bring theatrical representation back to the scenography of the imagination and to an almost pure aesthetics, means bringing it to its origins, which touch on the religious ceremony in all of its most lofty theatrical pageantry.

So—and I'm not alone in this—we want to get as far away as possible from the true. We want to affirm the dream, make it real, bring it to life, and to complete it in minute detail.
At the theatre, like on the screen, we will seek out the details of in every beautiful folly with the heart of a poet and with the certainty and faith of a prophesier.

Our eyes are brimming with our orgiastic visions, with which (let it be said without exaggeration) we will burn every dismal synthetic tent and every cold, Nordic oversimplification, just like at the cinema [we will burn] every antiquated and wretched reconstruction of luxury apartments.

We want to transform reality: to dazzle the most triumphal reality with the dream of an even more clever and triumphal vision of artifice. The exuberant creativity of our southern temperament must triumph on the screen in the bursting of lights, like in the theatre, in the pageantry of the bright colours and the flaming efflorescence of idealized landscapes, springing forth from the sweltering spectacle of our Mediterranean countries.

Plato thought that reality resides in the forms of man and not in the reality of things. The closer the material thing is to IDEA a form, the more perfect it is.

The more our visions are artificial and cerebral, they will be all the more close to beauty—like perfection and like a unique truth.

So, we want to make aesthetic truth ourselves; in such a way that whatever will be our aesthetic will have to be reality, and that which will be our vision will have to be the truth.

Therefore, we want to overdo it: to proudly overdo it. The simplification will come later.

If we don’t first make it complicated, what will we need to or be able to simplify tomorrow?

In the meantime, we have to be and we are savage and primitive. We have to put our orgiastic instincts about scenography out there. We will think about training and restraining these instincts after we will have left them out in the open for a while.

The few shaky attempts that I have already made at filmmaking, with an absolute lack of resources, did not turn out to be, nor could they be, anything truly noteworthy. The modern methods of scenography are so magnificent and varied that my work in the cinema almost became something of a joke.

Moreover, my work in the cinema, which was about three years ago now, was a rather heroic. When Mario Caserini’s film Ma l’amor mio non muore (Love Everlasting) was shown, it was like a wonderfully new language. This film was noted for its modern editing, its close ups, and for its settings that for the first time came quickly, one after the other, with various backdrops.

Without knowing anything about the cinematic profession, my friend Emidio de Medio and I latched onto this project with the imprudence
and enthusiasm that are the most happy gifts of being 24 years old. I was publishing the Cronache d’attualità (Chronicle of Current Events), which was financed by my friend, and I shut down this journal. We started a film production company instead, and we chose an actress for it; that is to say, an artist who acted, naively, without counting on or worrying about the beauty of her own face: Thais Galizky.\(^5\)

When my first film was shown to the distributors, it was immediately stamped with the futurist label because it was not common.\(^6\) Because of this, people took us as carefree jokers who cared primarily about playing around and crazy eccentricities. However, we sold it nonetheless, and I had a lot of fun letting myself be the butt of jokes. The only bad part, which I was obsessed with, was playing the part of the misunderstood genius!

Another one of my films, which was noted for its scenery, was decimated by the censors. It was a novel of modern magic. The censors simply eliminated...the magic.

These events can be recalled even after such a short while because the birth of the cinema is so recent that our actions have an importance that I would almost call historic. For this reason, it is not in bad taste to talk about ourselves in terms that for many people are rather delicate.

For my part, then, it is necessary to bring to light certain details—now that I have agreed to write about some of my films—because in comparison to old productions they have an enormous importance, yet they are purely primitive and minute, pale seeds of another cinema when compared to the great future of scenery on the screen: of the true cinema of modern art, which I see as a phenomenon completely in the future.


Notes

1. [Editors’ note. The Death of Haase and Anitra’s Dance are two musical passages from Suite no. 1, Op. 46, composed by Edvard Grieg nel 1888 for the play Peer Gynt (‘Grieg’).]

2. [Editors’ note. Gian Giuseppe Mancini (1881–1954) was an Italian architect, scenographer, painter, and sculptor. Fortunato Depero (1892–1960) was an Italian painter, sculptor, and designer. He was among the signatories of the Manifesto dell’aeropittura futurista in 1929 and was part of the second wave of futurism.]
3. [Translator’s note. The original uses the term fuochi fatui ‘wil-to-the-wisps’ These are flames that spontaneously appear in swampy areas as result, it is thought, of the combustion of gases released from the swamp.]

4. [Editors’ note. 1913 film with Lyda Borelli as the protagonist, produced by the Turinese production company, Film Artistica Gloria.]

5. [Editors’ note. The name of the production company was Novissima Film.]

6. [Editors’ note. The author is referring to his film Thais (1917) produced by his production company, Novissima Film.]