My Views on the Cinematograph

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A novelist, a dramatic author, a sculptor, and an architect, a musician and a poet, after dinner over coffee and cigarettes, speaking of the cinematograph.

The novelist speaks:

I see in the cinematograph the possibility of narrating, narrating with pictures instead of with words.

What is the real meaning of the art of narrating?

It is the secret of finding in one’s own imagination and in the reality which surrounds us a circumstance, and to cleverly develop that circumstance in a plot, peripizia [sic], and a solution.

I think that a designer, gathering together the different points of the circumstance that I have imagined, could narrate by means of drawings that which I narrate in written words.

Imagine one of my novels cleverly illustrated, page by page, each scene accurately. Imagine this book in an edition in a language unknown to you. Now think of yourself having to wait in the salon of an hotel where you have only that book at your disposal to pass the time.

Do you think that turning over the leaves methodically from the first to the last page, unheeding the text, which is illegible to you, looking at the drawings which have the universal language of signs, do you think that reaching the end you would not know all of the circumstances that I have narrated?

Do you think that it is not possible by the aid of illustrations in an illustrated edition to trace the story of Manon Lescaut or of Margherita Gautier?

Certainly, it is necessary that he should know how to catch expressively all the essential points of my story, all of the characteristic traits of my characters.

Assuredly, it is necessary that he should be able to arrange his drawings as I have been able to decorate all the narrative elements of my story.

In other words, he should not abandon himself to the caprice of his pencil, nor have I allowed myself to yield to the fancy of the pen.

He must construct as I have constructed.

What is the cinematographic picture if not a design composed of real figures and reproduced in movement by a special photographic process?
It is evident that not all novelists can find a means of being interpreted by the cinema; neither can all novels be satisfactorily illustrated.

It is surely not by means of the cinema that Xavier de Maistre describes the events in his *Voyage autour de ma chambre* (*Voyage Around My Room*) or Benjamin Constant could give expression to the psychological anxieties of Adolphe. But, from this one must not conclude that only those novels consisting of external events, movement of persons, hazardous situations, lend themselves to a cinematographic interpretation: for example, pious [Jules] Verne, *Dumas père*.

The pictures, the surroundings, the facial expressions, the short text which accompanies the cinema picture allow us to go further than mere exterior movement, they permit us to reach the farthest depths of sensibility and consciousness. I would not have you misunderstand me. I should deny all my art as a novelist. I should do away with the small amount of talent I may possess if I were to affirm that a novelist can equally well write and place on the cinema: *Madame Bovary*.

I well know the meaning of the novelist’s art, the art of narrating if it be only a work of purely descriptive scenes.

When you have by the aid of the great *metteur en scène* reproduced on the cinema, the characters and the vicissitudes of *The Three Musketeers*, you will still be far from finding the artistic enjoyment derived from the reading of the book.

There is simply wanting in your interpretation the narrator's art and his style.

I do not say therefore a heresy, or worse than heresy, anything cruel. I do not say that those works proper to literary narrative, maintaining equal value, can be transferred lightly from the book to the stage.

But I do say that the imagination of a novelist can find also on the cinema a means of narrating a theme by pictures.

I affirm that today, if *Dumas père* lived, he would not write *The Three Musketeers* for the cinema, but he would certainly be able to narrate by means of the cinema a theme, either lively or sad, that would please the play of his imagination.

In fact, for me, the cinema is another manner of narrating.

The dramatic author speaks:

I do not know of a more foolish sacrilege than to give a version of the opera on the cinema.

Tempted by a small profit, I have relinquished the right of reproduction of my dramas and comedies.

I am red with shame and black with remorse.
I am an unnatural father who for a slight gain has permitted his offspring to be assassinated. Do you know of anything more grotesque than those reproductions of theatrical works on the cinema, where a comedy is faithfully followed, reducing a scene of twenty pages to five or six pictures, intermixed with four or five episodes taken at hazard from the play without sequence, and thus bereft of all its strength, introducing between one scene and another some exterior effect, some contemporary action, some small particular, all of which the very construction of representative art does not admit on the theatrical stage.

They say in so doing, they follow scrupulously the work of the cinema dramatist; that is to say, massacred.

As a fact, if they were artists, if they were not inflated with presumption, these producers of reductions should, in order to follow art scrupulously, act in quite a different manner: they should, that is, live again the work of art, remould it, reconstruct it in another form of artistic expression.

The only method of treating faithfully the work of art to be reproduced is to seem unfaithful to it.

It would be necessary to be an artist, as much of an artist as the writer one is going to reproduce. I have therefore sworn upon my dignity, also I were to be covered with gold, never again consent to the reproduction of my dramatic works on the cinema.

I believe it an error to confuse cinema and theatre just because for each scenery and actors are required. It is like confusing the Orlando Furioso (The Frenzy of Orlando) and the Ninth Symphony, simply because Ariosto and Beethoven have in each instance needed ink and paper and a sense of rhythm. I think that cinema offers to a man addicted to the theatre a new mode of representing a scene.

For one thing, cinema does not need consecutive words. How many acts in life are made up without words, how many so-called principal scenes in life take place with few words and long silences!

At the theatre, we are obliged to fill in that blank so caused, to give speech, even when a look, a gesture, and a long silence suffice to say all. But there is more besides.

At the theatre our scene is closed in by the imprisoning bounds of the three artificial walls unchanged for three quarters of an hour.

How much dramatic poetry, that life holds, is lost in this inexorable servitude?

How many dramatic situations are made up of contradictions and contrasts, with references to other situations, and with other persons, which the theatre does not permit us to have present contemporaneously?
The betrayal of Brutus, would it not perhaps be more potently dramatic if, as a contrast, we could represent contemporaneously the calm security of Caesar before entering the Senate?

The cinema gives breadth to the scene with powerful representations of the leading artists and all those concerned, it allows collecting together all the near and distant elements, both contradictory and complementary.

And how many visions of dramatic poetry find in the cinema a means of expression which the theatre does not provide?

When in Shakespeare the army advances covered entirely with branches of trees, and the poet says that it appears a ‘walking forest’, only the cinema gives opportunity for this marvellous reproduction.

Do not mistake me. I do not mean by this to say that Shakespeare, if alive today, would be the author of films for Francesca Bertini: I mean only to infer that the dramatic author can for his play of the situation and dramatic positions, find in cinema a very new form of expression.

In fact, for me, the cinema is another method of representation.

And in his turn the painter speaks:

It is incontestable that the cinema is a picture.

I follow with much interest the great progress that authentic artists have made in this branch of art.

How many photographs are more beautiful than our paintings, how many photographs give the soul of a model more than our portraits?

Why therefore is not the great photographer an artist as much as the painter?

Because photography is like art on the borders of the divine kingdom, why does it remain banished in the realm of good intentions?

It is because photography does not create the image, but seizes it, does not prepare it, but fixes it, so it can never be fantasy, but can only at most be ability and good taste.

Photographers are admirable artificers, but not artists: executors, but not creators.

The cinema picture, instead, which is photography in movement, is a new photographic art, is in face the art of photography, that is creation and execution combined, the artificer and the artist in one. Could not Michetti in a cinema picture have found and composed the lines of The Daughter of Jorio? Could not Watteau, ‘scenemaker’, compose the scene of Embarkation of Cythère?

The artist’s art would it not be equally revealed in the composition of an oil painting and a cinema picture of the suggestive poem of Beethoven by Lionello Balestrrieri?
I know what objection you will make—the colouring—but colour will come.

That is the unquestionable conquest of tomorrow for the cinema. And when by means of colour you can fix the sky you have selected, the shades you have chosen for a dress or a piece of stuff, the harmony of the tones you have created as a whole, or in a surrounding, will you tell me why the painter, tempted by the idea of a picture, cannot create it there in front of the lens, in the living spontaneity, in the simple and great reality, rather than upon two yards square of canvas placed upon his easel in his study? I smile to think of an exhibition of pictures by illustrations painters, taken directly from that which is the most vital, most real that nature and humanity can offer them; paintings created and imagined, fixed, recorded in their vibrations and movements by the cinematographic apparatus.

How much more life, how much more geniality, how much more novelty you would find then in the ordinary ‘salon’? Colour—I know I have already said so. In the meantime, until we have colour, many artistic combinations can be derived from black and white. I wish to try something in this form.

Understand me, I do not repudiate painting, and I do not ask you to bring back Leonardo and compel him to put a scene on the cinema.

But I tell you simply that this new cinematographic art interests me because it seems to me that the cinema without brushes, without pastels, without pencils can be for artists a new mode of painting and drawing.

And in his turn the sculptor:

You are right. I thoroughly underline all you say; I would paraphrase your words for sculpture. I have seen in certain films groups of human beings of an incomparable beauty of art and attractiveness of form.

A short time before our war, a German film appeared Bug, the Man of Clay. What else was it, you remember, than a sequence of sculpture and engravings. Rodin and Félicien Rops would have seen it with the greatest interest.

A beautiful woman, a strong man with mother and child, sorrowful parents and pitying daughter. Given these, how many groups an artist can create, how many varied forms of beauty he can suggest by moving, grouping, disposing in one way or another, two or more persons? Cannot I perhaps, sculptor, give to human material, as I do with marble, the pity of Antigone stooping over the city of Edipo [sic]; or the desolation of King Lear receiving in his arms the body of Cordelia?

The stereoscope will, and one day must, give to flat photographic images the effect of being raised, the more complete sense of form, that plastic sense, that is, which belongs rightly to sculpture. But also without having
found the means of applying the stereoscope to cinematographic photos, or to the projections of the cinematographic photographs, the ability of some operators is already successful in giving to some cinema pictures a perfect illusion of raised and complete images.

When a fresh technical discovery shall render these isolated effects universal, the sculptured line can be executed in human groups photographed either in masses of plaster or marble.

Already there are actors and actresses who wisely directed have been able to give to the cinema admirable examples of plastic beauty. I have not the time to do it or even attempt it: but how many times on seeing a film I think that a sculptor could group two personas in sufferance, give the embrace of two beings who love, the opposition of two who hate each other, with a line, in an attitude of supreme plastic beauty, that is, the same form of beauty that I pursue, seek, and attempt in the silence of my studio, in the mobility of the clay under my febrile thumb... But, yes, yes, think of it, ponder well, my friends. It is not a paradox if I tell you that, for me, a sculptor, the cinema, at root, could be a new form of sculpture.

And the architect said:

If I attempt originality, all the academics rush at me to crucify me. In general, it is always necessary to follow the limited world of ideas which past beauty has consecrated, I should almost say, authorized.

I remember that at the academy, my illustrations Master, praised my fantasy when I was studying.

But since I have opened the window to my fantasy, no one has answered to its appeal.

It is easily understood.

Where does the flower of fantasy grow if not in the garden of the imagination? Now where is the fantastic element of our life of today to be found? In the edifices to our cities, in the construction and the furnishing of our houses?

With the cinematograph is born an art where the fantastic reigns, where fantasy can freely play all its divine caprices.

This fantasy has its architecture and should have its fantastic architecture.

Since the cinema opens the world on the unreal to our reality, here architecture can find there an entirely new inspiration, an entirely new and wondrous freedom of fantasy.

Temples, palaces, fountains, buildings, halls, gardens, all can be revealed by the cinema.

The fantasy of the architect could create on the cinematographic scene a new world, an entirely fresh beauty.
If tomorrow a poet’s caprice for a cinematographic vision could take me to the moon; if an architect could create a style which shall not be either Greek or Roman, or Renaissance, or Baroque, neither future nor past, which shall be only and ultimately be something not seen before, and therefore impossible, which shall be the style of the ‘moon’, and mine alone; if, tomorrow another poet by means of another fantastic cinematographic vision should take me to the bed of the ocean, what a yet unknown architecture I would discover amongst the seaweeds, and the sea green rocks where the Sirens live! Ah! Give me money, time, and a poet’s imagination, give me liberty and novelty, give me the thing not yet seen, something not yet conceived in the realm of fancy, of all that which does not exist; give me the fantastic, give me the cinema in fact, and you will see that with cardboard and canvas, and transparent paper, there will flower [sic] in the sky, at the bottom of the sea, an entirely new beauty, and I, architect hemmed in by the ordinary forms, the ordinary conventions, could perhaps finally find in the cinema the means of giving you, a new architecture.

And in his turn the musician speaks:

I confess that I am tempted for some time by the idea of setting a film to music, a film, be it understood, that shall be the work of an artist’s, a poet’s fancy.

Not The Iron Claw nor The Murder of Lyon’s Courier.

Between the melodrama and the symphony, this musical accompaniment to a series of pictures that narrate a story lyrically seems to me a new, a varied, genial, and light form of musical composition. Today, the projected film is accompanied by a potpourri of musical fragments, taken casually here and there by the indolent hand of an insignificant orchestral conductor from amongst the old pieces of music composing a well-used repertory. It happens, moreover, accidentally, that occasionally a piece of music applies so perfectly to the dramatic situation, to the poetry of a picture, to the fantasy of a dream, to be able to tie the impression of having been expressly written for the circumstance, inspired by that poetry, by that particular fantasy. You will each have observed that when this happens, the cinematographic representation arouses in us a profound feeling, envelopes us in an irresistibly suggestive atmosphere.

Think, then, what value the cinematographic reproduction can acquire by musical collaboration, artistically understood. Observe further that music associated with the cinema finds a new form, other than the defined, precise, and rigid accompaniment of the melodramatic melody, and is not merely the vague, indefinite, mysterious atmosphere of the purely symphonic composition. In its immense variety of pictures, of motives, of
surroundings, of persons, the cinema can offer to the musician a marvellous variety of rhythm, of style, of accents, and the most varied and contrasting tones of the musical keyboard.

I repeat that I am attracted by the idea of making this experiment. It is said that the musician will be forcibly suffocated in his poetic sentiment by the demands of necessity of synchronism, by the limitation of pictures, etc.

I do not think that the musician will be in greater slavery in that case than he would be when confronted by the verses, and strophes of a libretto, or by the scenic demands of a theatrical work. I know well that the truly free form of music is symphonic composition and that only with unlimited freedom Beethoven could write the *Ninth Symphony*.

But I who am not Beethoven can only appear to you at most – by your good will – a graceful musician with a little polish and a little talent, I find for my part that the cinema can be a new manner of composing music.

Speaks finally the poet:

Do you know where I think it most possible to freely express the lyricism that lives in my spirit?

In verse and in a cinema film.

I have made a film; I have written a drama.

Do not be scandalized if I dare to say that more than in music, more that in the limits of the theatre, more than in the iron bound laws of drama, it has been possible for me to be a poet, to be lyrically and purely poetic in the free, fanciful, fantastic dreams that the cinema in its infinite possibilities can offer to my most ardent lyric fervour.

If all this appears to you exaggerated, it is because you look at the cinema such as it has been so far.

Only let us remember that notwithstanding its prodigious technical development, also commercially and artistically, the cinema is scarcely out of infancy.

The first teachers had reduced the pupil to the suffocating enslavement of their bad taste, of their niggardly industrial spirit, and of their absolute artistic sanctimony. By the help of some artists today in America, in Italy, in France, aided by some far-seeing commercial persons, who second [sic] their desires, the cinema reproduction is making various efforts in search of art and is finding poetry. And today it becomes art only because poetry is joined to it, since there is no art possible without poetry.

Fantasy and imagination, the fantastic and the real woven in harmony, lead the cinema toward art: then to poetry.

As for me, I think that a film can be at the same in observance of the laws of moment and action which despotically govern all forms of representation.
I think that a film can be a picture, rhythm, music, poetry, as much as any other form of art.

Thus, across a series of pictures lyrically seen and expressed, as across a series of lyrical thoughts verbally expressed, the fantasy of a poet can sing freely and without limit.

The cinema picture and the action accompanying the picture are I think for those who know how to seek in its depth, an inexhaustible mine of fantasy and poetry.

The poet’s fancy that by verbal expression suggest the idea to our imagination is here free to represent it directly to our eyes and our spirit.

Call all poets to the cinema, call all artists, but exclude the blunderers, the calumniators, the evil-speakers, the money-grubbers.

You will so give to the cinema that artistic nobility which belongs to it, you will so create for me a new method of poetry.

Thus, they spoke in my hearing, I being silent—a novelist, a dramatic author, an architect, a musician, and a poet. But they did not prevent me, on my return home, from finding upon my writing desk, printed in a cinematographic review, once more the same question: ‘Do you think, Sir, that it is possible for the cinema to become art’?


Notes

1. [Editors’ note. The original essay was published in English and contained a number of minor typographic and grammatical errors which have been corrected by the editor.]

2. [Editors’ note. This is a misspelling of the Italian word peripezia, meaning ‘adventures’ in English.]

3. [Editors’ note. The author is referring to Francesco Paolo Michetti (1851–1929) who designed the original sets for Gabriele d’Annunzio’s Daughter of Jorio. Michetti was one of the main proponents of the School of Resina, who sought to bring the school’s images of Italian landscapes and contemporary life into the mainstream of European painting.]

4. [Editors’ note Beethoven (1899) was shown at the 1900 Universal Exposition in Paris and is one of Lionello Balestrieri’s most famous paintings.]

5. [Editors’ note The author is referring to the 1915 film Der Golem by Henrik Galeen.]

6. [Editors’ note. In all likelihood, the author intended Thebes, where according to Greek mythology, Antigone is imprisoned and commits suicide.]