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Theatre and the Cinema

Antonio Gramsci

They say that cinema is killing theatre. They say that, in Turin, theatre companies have kept their theatres closed during the summer months because the audience has deserted the theatre to crowd together at the cinema. In Turin, the new film industry has arisen and has established itself, luxurious movie theatres have opened up, the likes of which there are not many in Europe, and all of the places of this sort are always very crowded.

It would seem, therefore, that there was at least a basis of truth in the sad statement that the audience's taste has degenerated and that for the theatre, some ugly times are approaching.

Instead, we are most convinced that these complaints are founded on a decayed aestheticism and that one can easily show that they depend on a false conceit. The reason for the fortune of the cinema and the way it absorbs the audience, which previously frequented theatres, is purely economic. The cinema offers the same, the very same sensations that, in the best circumstances, the common theatre does, without the choreographic apparatus of false intellectualism; the productions that are most commonly performed are nothing but a weaving together of exterior facts, devoid of any human content, in which some talking marionettes move around in different ways without ever reaching a psychological truth, without ever succeeding in giving the creative imagination of the listener a character of truly felt and adequately expressed passions. Psychological insincerity and inflated artistic expression has reduced the theatre to the same level as pantomime. They are only trying to create for the audience the illusion of a life which is only different on the outside from everyone else’s typical life, in which only the geographical location, social environment of the characters changes, everything in life that is the subject of an illustrated postcard, a visual curiosity—not of artistic, imaginative curiosity—and no one can deny that in this regard, film has a crushing superiority over the stage. It is more complete, more varied, it is silent. That is, it reduces the role of the artists to simple movement, to a simple machine with no soul, to what, in reality, they also are in the theatre. To get angry with the cinema is simply ridiculous. To speak of vulgarity, of banality etc., is inflated rhetoric. Those who truly believe in the theatre’s artistic function, they should instead be happy about this competition. Because it serves to make things happen, to lead the theatre back to this true nature. There is no doubt that a large part
of the audience needs to entertain itself (that is, to rest itself by changing
the focus of their attention) with a pure and simple visual distraction:
the theatre, by industrializing itself, has sought in recent times to satisfy
only this need. It became above all a business, it became a variety store
of inexpensive junk. Only by chance do they now make productions that
have a timeless universal value. The cinema, which can fulfil this function
more easily and inexpensively, surpasses it in success and tends to replace
it. The businesses and companies will end up convincing themselves that it
is necessary to change course if they want to continue to exist. It is not true
that the audience is deserting the theatres: we have seen theatres that were
empty for a long series of performances fill up and suddenly get crowded for
an extraordinary evening in which they exhumed a masterpiece, or even
more modestly, a typical work that is of some old-fashioned style but which
now has a certain cachet. It’s necessary that what the theatre now presents
as extraordinary should instead become the norm. Shakespeare, Goldoni,
Beaumarchais, if they require work and activity to be performed properly,
are also beyond any banal competition. D’Annunzio, Bernstein, Bataille
will always have greater success at the cinema; the facial expressions, the
physical contortions find in film a material that is more suited to their
expression. And the useless, boring, insincere rhetorical tirades will return
to being literature, nothing but literature, dead and buried in books and
in libraries.

‘Teatro e cinematografo’, Avanti!, (26 August 1916). Translated by Siobhan
Quinlan.