In the Beginning Was Sex...

Antonio Gramsci

In the beginning was the word ... No, in the beginning was sex.¹

Facing certain expressions of public spirit, you, who have logical needs, will remain astounded at the start. If you presuppose a certain fact, you expect that any additional one will follow the logical outcome. Instead, you see that this does not prove the logical order, and that it verifies other, non-logical outcomes in its place; you will see that new forces, elementary, instinctive, elusive forces come into play in the calculating the odds.

Go attend a performance by [Lyda] Borelli. Your ears will still be ringing with the praise for Borelli, by the criticisms of Borelli's audacious elegance, for Borelli's incredible dramatic effectiveness. Now, go and observe a film featuring Borelli. By some strange chance, you don't fall for the trap that has been unconsciously laid for you. You remain your own master. You are able to stay in the role of observer. You watch. You are floored. It seems incredible to you. You shrug your shoulders, and you remember that someone once asserted: in the beginning was the word, substituted the other: in the beginning was sex.

Let's be clear. Sex is like a spiritual force, with its purity, not like a base expression of barbarity. As a result, we must study the case of Borelli as a case of sexuality. There is no other way to understand or explain it or to liberate ourselves from it. I don't mean to say that the example of Borelli is so dangerous that it demands the intervention of the famous surgical instrument. However, it's not pretty and it weakens a number of people who could otherwise help achieve a more perfect humanity.

Dante proposed the question of sexuality in elevated terms. In the encounter with Francesca da Rimini, he says that the highest form of sexuality comes from the fact the love between the two is necessary, unavoidable. There are two halves of the whole: they look for each other and once they find each other they merge into a single thing. However, this is what happens now. There exists a half which instead of having only one half has two, three. Some could be half for all the men. The ‘sexual’ element has totally overpowered all of the other attributes, all the other possibilities become a sort of fascinating magic.

All the men find themselves someone complimentary to them, and they are influenced by them. It is a kind of Orphic cult that is unconsciously created.
Orpheus with the sound of his lyre can get even the plants and the animals behind him. The myth symbolizes the music’s absolute power of attraction, like a force that can lure everything by setting it to music. The phenomenon has given rise to some literary creations. Guy de Maupassant wrote a short poem in which a woman, ‘sex’, attracts lively creatures, which follow her unconsciously, as if they are following a saint or an apostle who knew how to shake the soul to its core with the simplest word.

With the necessary limitations, this is what happens with the actress Lyda Borelli. This woman is an example of prehistoric, primordial humanity. It is said that she is admired for her art. It is not true. No one knows how to explain what Borelli’s art is because it does not exist. Borelli does not know how to interpret any character but herself. She speaks the lines, but she does not act. For this reason, she selects works in verse, and preferably those of Sem Benelli, who writes words for the music, more than for the represented meaning. So, Borelli is a film artist par excellence, in which the only language is the human body in all its modernizing fluidity.

On the stage, the ‘sex’ element found a modern method of connecting with the public. It has robbed its intelligence. It can be fantastic for those who it arouses, but in the case of Borelli, it is hardly comforting for those who get carried away. Man has laboured enormously to reduce the ‘sex’ element to its absolute limits. To yet again allow it expand at the expense of intelligence is proof of depravity, and certainly not of spiritual elevation.

‘In principio era il sesso...’, Avanti!, (16 February 1917). Translated by Courtney Ritter.

Note

1. [Editor’s note. The author is referring to the first verse of the Gospel of John, which reads, ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.’]