‘Uncle! The *Cinematofono* Dacomo is here! What’s a *Cinematofono*?  

The question was put to me by one of my lively nieces, Letizia, one day last summer, during the bathing season at Viareggio.²  

I explained to her that when a film is accompanied by the sounds of a gramophone—when the action on screen is combined with spoken poetry or singing on a gramophone recording, to create an even more total illusion—the resulting spectacle is called *Cinematofonone*. It was one of those words that not even the Greeks (from whose language it was borrowed) would understand.

My explanation, for all that I’d made an effort to simplify it, did not succeed in clarifying matters for Letizia, nor for her younger sister Luisa.

I realized then that a practical demonstration would be a thousand times more effective than my empty words.

‘I’ll take you!’ I finished solemnly, to cut short the questions coming from the children.

And because I savoured my time with those dear little girls, just as a connoisseur might savour a fine wine, I decided to take them to the show separately. Careful to observe the rights of succession, the next evening I took Letizia to the *Cinematofono* Dacomo. The music was Massenet’s splendid *Marie-Magdaleine* (*Mary Magdalene*), the film reproducing the scenes of the oratorio as it had appeared at the Opéra-Comique in Paris. I had heard the work a few months prior; not even the metallic quality of the gramophone could lessen the intense emotion that those magical melodies had made me feel in Paris, so simple and sad, sweet and authentically oriental. My little niece, her twelfth birthday long since past, could already appreciate the music, but she was more intent on admiring the unfolding of the biblical drama than the harmonies. The scene with Judah, and the insults Mary Magdalene throws at him when she sees him being ungrateful to Our Lord—and then the Lord’s Prayer sung during dinner!—brought tears to her eyes.

I noticed that Letizia was not the only spectator so moved. In the first row there was a tall, blond man—a Frenchman, I thought, for there are blond Frenchmen—who stared with rapt attention, as though he would never tire of hearing those songs and seeing those pictures.
'How odd!' I thought to myself. ‘And here I thought that the Cinematofono was only for children and soldiers!’

The next day, it was Luisa’s turn. There was only a year between her and her older sister, but as so often happens, the younger child had quickly caught up with the eldest. I scarcely noticed that I had a little girl next to me, so serious and perceptive were her observations, and so tasteful were her criticisms.

Mary Magdalene was playing, and I confess that I listened to it again with infinite pleasure. I was beginning to think that there might be some good in the cinema—that it wasn’t just ‘for the military and young people.’ Nonetheless I was stunned to see my blond Frenchman, sitting in the same seat in the first row. My gossiping niece noticed him too. ‘Uncle,’ she said, ‘can you see our beach bum neighbour? He’s the Frenchman who’s always on his own. He bathes every morning at dawn and in the evening by moonlight. The caretaker of private beach told me he wants “to be alone in the sea.” He never talks to anyone, but when he sees us, Letizia and me, he always smiles at us, very sadly... Had you not noticed him before? Yet, he’s a funny fellow. Letizia says that we need to try to say hello to him, to talk to him, to distract him... He must have suffered some great loss.’

In the meantime, the Lord’s Prayer scene had arrived, and Luisa broke off suddenly, to watch intently as the miserable drama of Jesus unfolded.

The next day, and for several days afterwards, I too observed our neighbour by the shore. He was always quiet, as he gazed far into the distance, towards the never-ending horizon. Then, in the evenings he would spend hours and hours on the balcony at Neptune’s, leaning on the railing to stare intently at the lighthouse, its light appearing and disappearing regularly as it turned in the gulf of nearby La Spezia.

Certainly, he had noticed me just as I had noticed him. He must have recognized me as the companion of the two smiling little girls, because one evening he wound up greeting me politely, in the same way that you might greet someone you don’t really know in the stairwell of your apartment building. I responded a little more effusively, and he seemed touched by my efforts. Seeing him always alone, always quiet, I became convinced that only some tragedy—and an intense one at that—could explain his obsession with solitude and silence. The short story writer in me overwhelmed my façade of respectability; my curiosity piqued, one evening, I gathered my courage and to start a conversation if nothing else, asked him:

‘Do you like the shores of our Italian seas, sir? You’re not from around here, is that not right?’
His grammar, when he replied, was pure, even if his accent was not. From that evening on, we would regularly spend hours upon hours talking about art and poetry, travel and science: but he never asked me about myself or my business, nor did I ever ask him any indiscreet questions.

My inner short story writer, in other words, made no advances—indeed, he took a few steps back, given that he could never explain why, every evening at the same time, from nine to ten o’clock, this solitary young man would distance himself from the Neptune to go to the little theatre hosting the *Cinematofono* Dacomo, only to return each time more sad, more pensive than before. And on the way back, he would always stop to look at his lighthouse shining in the distance; and there he would remain, unmoving, until it was time for his evening dip, under the broad sweep of silvery moonlight.

The psychologist in me made my inner gentleman indiscreet. Once again, I gathered my courage, and one evening I asked him point-blank:

‘Why is it, at your age, that you are so fond of the cinema that you go every night?’

He hovered, unsure whether to answer or to leave. Understanding that there was no malice in my question, only curiosity, after a long silence he said:

‘What do you want from me!... I’m chasing, always, the beloved phantom, I spend my life running after the trace of a shadow that once adored.’

And so he told me his tale of woe.

‘Like all men who live for the ideal of work, and working with one’s mind, I went many years without realizing that Woman existed, without realizing that she is an integral, inseparable part of every Man’s life (unless Religion, the only possible rival for Woman, banishes a man’s innate desire for ownership, takes power over his mind, his senses, his heart...)

The education I received was pedantic, dogmatic in the extreme. My mother died when I was still just an infant. My father was always at sea, commandeering merchant ships; when he was on land, he stayed strictly in port towns, and would come to see me infrequently at Clermont-Ferrand, where I stayed in the house of one of my uncles, an elderly priest. My uncle decided it was my destiny to enter the priesthood, and he educated me accordingly. Like the hero of Prévost’s *Scorpion*... you remember?

In other words, I had never thought that I could become anything other than a priest... But towards my fifteenth birthday, some unknowable passion drew me towards studies in mathematics, then towards the sciences in general. It was when I was about nineteen that I finally obtained my uncle’s blessing to study in Paris.
You must have noticed, have you not, how the study of the pure sciences and the study of harmony form a willing alliance? Well, living in the city which offers its public the finest concerts in the world, I acquired a passion for music. I studied harmony and counterpoint. I subscribed to the Opéra, to the Opéra-Comique, to the concert series at the Colonne and at the Lamoureux. In other words, whenever I wasn’t listening or making music, I was at the astronomical observatory studying astronomy.

I lived between stars and melodies. But my life of equal intellectual and auditory pleasures made an already innate tendency towards excitability, towards freely felt and intense emotions, towards an almost neurotic and morbid affectivity, more acute... I had been living in this way for two years, and I was therefore twenty-one years old, when, to my eventual shame, the great singer Rivière was contracted by the Opéra-Comique, one of the theatres to which I subscribed assiduously. A great artist, like your Bellincioni, who was an unsurpassed actress as much as she was a talented and moving singer...

I saw her in Manon and in Werther by Massenet, in Puccini’s Bohème, in Mascagni’s Cavalleria Rusticana (Rustic Chivalry), in Leoncavallo’s Zazà, in Erlanger’s Aphrodite and his Juif Poloniais (The Polish Jew), and in many, many other operas that formed the pleasant repertoire of the Opéra-Comique. But never, never was she so moving, so unsurpassable an artist, as in the part of Mary Magdalene, in Massenet’s Mary Magdalene!

I was diligent. I didn’t miss even a single performance of that opera when she was singing in it. That woman’s voice made me swoon; her beauty intoxicated me. Fate ensured that I met her in person, and I saw her more than once, in the drawing rooms of friends we had in common. We often ate there together, on her nights off, and after dinner our guests made her sing, and sing, and sing again. She never tired of it. Always selfless, and glad to make us happy, she would warble away all evening, without having to be asked twice. And we abused that privilege—overjoyed! Knowing her so intimately, I knew things about her that made the passion I felt in my heart for her burn even brighter. I knew that she was twenty years old, that she lived alone, and that she had given herself to Art because a fiancé—after having seduced and betrayed her in the most undignified way—had abandoned her, barely eighteen years of age, without means and heavy with child. The usual story of egotism and misery, of male vice and motherly abnegation.

Perhaps my great love for her seduced her, sad as she was to live without love, without dreams—or better, with shattered dreams. And she loved me. She told me so, and she gave herself to me, making a gift of herself
in the same way that one gives a toy to an upset child: to make sure he
doesn't cry.

We lived together for a few hours each day. I had my telescope and she
her studying—she was extremely conscientious about exercising her lovely
voice, about preparing for the various roles she was to sing. But the few
hours we did spend together filled our hearts with joy, gave us purpose in
life: made us love our existence, till now so ungrateful, so empty, so sad
for us both.

What took place within her heart? Did she tire of me, or had I in truth
been deluding myself, and she had never loved me? Or perhaps she loved
me sincerely, until her ill-fated encounter with the tenor Barinetti, who had
come from a carpenter's workshop in Piedmont up, up, up to the stages in
Monte Carlo and Paris?

I don't know! All I know is that I saw her change, and I saw her smile
wilt like a flower: she still gave herself to me, but out of pity, not out of love.

I intuited this: but I wanted to persuade myself that my doubts were those
of any lover. I loved her more than ever. I dreamed only of her. My life was
in her hands... But I became something I had never been: which is to say,
jealous and duplicitous. I wanted to spy on her, to have her followed... The
usual banal, tragic story of a thousand betrayals took place... I surprised
them... I have told you, I think, that I was prone to an extreme, pathological
excitability? Certainly, I wasn't thinking about what I was doing, or about
how dearly I held the life in that beautiful, idolized body: or what a loss it
would be for that smile, without equal, to cease forever. I killed her right
there in her sitting room, at the feet of her handsome tenor Barinetti, white
with fear and trembling impotently.

Later, in prison, as I went over the horrendous act in my mind, that
darkest of tragedies, I hoped that the judges would condemn me, that the
Assizes would send me to the scaffold. But that's not how it went. A lawyer
whom I didn't know arose, spontaneously; he read from my diary with a firm
voice, though choking with real emotion. My sorrow-filled diary, in which I
had marked, day by day, the steps travelled by my poor, deluded love on its
road to Golgotha. The jury was crying. The testimony of the star witness,
the handsome tenor Barinetti, also played a part in making me seem more
sympathetic to the jury. Inevitably, a psychiatrist took the stand—the
famous Meuriot—to argue for my almost complete lack of responsibility
(on account of the terrible state of chronic nervous excitation to which my
passion had led me). Even though I was practically an automaton, playing
my part in the process as though the crime had been committed by a person
unknown to me, I understood then that the death I hoped for would not
come. Already, the eternal rest I desired in the tomb—for only the grave would allow me to forget the events that had intoxicated me, the smile that I had loved so much, insatiably—was slipping away.

I was condemned, through God knows what indulgent partiality on the part of the jury, to ten years in prison... My long, unending martyrdom began. Not even a photograph of the deceased, down in the gaol: only the memory of her kisses, the certainty that I would never again see her lips opening around her unforgettable smile. That shared solitude, which I lived with her—perhaps even more than when we had lived together, before I had killed her—was painful beyond any utterance. I understood how much more serious than a capital sentence the sentence of living apart from one’s beloved could be, face to face with one’s memories of the past and with remorse for the crime committed.

I was so well-behaved, so docile, and I was able to make myself useful in the prison in which I had been placed, to my credit, that my lawyer—who had remained my friend and my only comforter—managed, with the support of favourable letters from the director of prisons, to wrest the commutation of my remaining sentence from the President of the Republic, after just five years of incarceration.

Fate decreed that the indulgence of others should be a continued source of great shame and intense torment: even the pardoning of my remaining five years was painful to me. Now a free man, I collected portraits of Mary Magdalene (I had always called her thus, to remember her in the role in which she had seemed to me the most sublime artist), surrounding myself with them, looking at them from morning to night. Until it seemed to me, then, that having lacked any means of envisioning the victim, my beloved, the years of prison had been less horrible, less wretched by far...

I lived in a miserable condition, dragging myself from place to place without a destination in mind, without the possibility of returning to my work. On the contrary, I couldn’t even raise my eyes towards the skies, towards the heavenly bodies that I had studied so passionately as a young man, because it seemed to me that I was not worthy of looking at the stars, now that I had killed the only reason I had for living, and along with it my youthful smile.

Though I was unemployed and idle, the days went by rapidly nonetheless. I felt the woman’s absence keenly in my heart, and I carried her with me wherever I went. Such is life: sometimes, memory is like company, and being alone with our thoughts is to have them populated with thousands upon thousands of spectres that make us forget the place in which we are, the facts that have occurred. They render us deliciously oblivious and they drag us enviously out of the present...
I ended up, one day, in a village in Piedmont, where the Cinematofono Dacomo was flooding the walls with its advertisements. And I saw that Massenet’s *Mary Magdalene* was on the programme... I ran that night to the box-office. I need not tell you, surely, the emotions that flooded my body when the gramophone sounded the first measures of the prelude... It was my favourite music: music that she had made me taste, so many times... I thought I would die, so strongly did my heart tighten in anguish when I recognized the sets that I had seen so many times at the Opéra-Comique... Was this an illusion? My illusion as a suffering and wounded lover, or was it reality? Judas came to the front of the stage: I recognized the bass who had sung that part in Paris... I was trembling... A cold sweat beaded my brow... I was clutching the cane I held in my hands so strongly, nervously, that it snapped with a dry, dry noise... The actress playing Mary Magdalene appeared... There she was! There she was! And in the meantime, the gramophone was reproducing the voice of my Beloved! Muffling it, to be sure, but stripping it of none of its warmth and characteristic personality! To see her move, to hear her sing, the Deceased! What a dream, and what a dream come true!... I had had one aim in life: to see her again, to hear her again... And that, good sir, is why I follow the Cinematofono Dacomo across every town in Italy, like the Wandering Jew, but of Love. Every day, among the fifteen or twenty rolls of film that it presents to its regular audience, there is one that fills my veins with new blood, through which I am reborn to new life. I stagnate for 23 hours of each day: but in the twenty-fourth hour, from nine to ten o’clock, I have an appointment with the Dead. It is for me that she smiles underneath the marquee, it is for me that she sings...’

A dry cough interrupted the blond Frenchman here... I understood then that not for much longer would he wander the world, pursuing an image, following in the footsteps of a phantom.


Notes

1. [Editors’ note. Jean de La Jaline was the pseudonym of Henri Joubert (1875–1947). Joubert was an official in the navy, a poet and writer. His most important works include, *Acquareles Japonaises* (1904), *Le chemins du rêve. Journal de bor. Journal de bord sentimental* (1905), and *Le chemins du rêve. Sous le griffe du Dragon* (1906).]
2. [Editors’ note. A seaside town in the northern part of Tuscany. It was known at the time for the grandiosity and elegance of its seaside establishments.]

3. [Editors’ note. Il Nettuno or Neptune’s, was one of the most important seaside establishments in Viareggio. Founded in 1865 by the Barsanti brothers, it was introduced as a great artistic work in wood that protruded to the sea. In 1907 the monumental gate was opened after serving as the opening entrance to the Universal Exposition of Milan in 1906, and was moved explicitly to the site at the end of that event.]

4. [Editors’ note. Scorpion (1887) is the first of three novels dedicated to the life of the French writer, Marcel Prevost (1862–1941).]

5. [Editors’ note. L’Orchêsta Colonne, founded by Édouard Colonne and L’Orchêstra Lamoreux, founded by Charles Lamoreux, were the two major Parisian concert halls during the ‘Belle Époque’. Competing with each other, they found their first key composer with Hector Berlioz and then with Richard Wagner.]

6. [Editors’ note. Gemma Bellincioni (1864–1950) was a soprano and actress active at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. She was famous for her performances of Verdi and Mascagni.]

7. [Editors’ note. The author is referencing lyrical works put on stage at the Opéra-Comique. Werther and Manon by Jules Massenet debuted 16 January 1893 and 19 January 1884, respectively; Cavalleria Rusticana by Giovanni Mascagni debuted 19 January 1892 and La Bohème by Gianni Puccini debuted 13 June 1893; Le Juif Polonais and Aphrodite by Camille Erlanger, debuted 11 April 1900 and 23 March 1906, respectively. The exception is Zazà by Leoncavallo.]