Early Film Theories in Italy, 1896-1922

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Miopetti’s Duel

Aldo Borelli

Claudio Xilo didn’t have to go to rehearsals that day, so he allowed himself the luxury of getting up at noon, after having eaten breakfast in bed and bored himself half to death leafing through the papers. Once dressed, he immediately felt the desire to lie down again, because his long sleep had made his limbs sluggish. So he went into the study, trying to shrug off the torpor by busying his mind with some work.

Spring had already arrived; gusts of fresh air came in through the large windows loaded with the scents of the nearby gardens, which were silhouetted against the white backdrop of the façades of houses, like fabulous, densely shadowed frescoes, with a statue here and a fountain there, poking out from the midst of the greenery.

Claudio Xilo observed all of this attentively, noting the curiously false and mannered expression that the warm afternoon light gave to the gardens, and murmured:

‘What a marvellous setting for a romantic film. Someone should ask the owner for permission to make it!’ He immediately rebuked himself for the thought:

‘These goddamn films give me no peace, even on my days off! Did I really need to think about them before I enjoyed this lovely scene calmly and sincerely?’ He moved away from the window, threw himself into the depths of a sofa, and considered a most unpleasant conundrum:

‘What should I do today? Working is out of the question, because it’s my day off, and I want to enjoy it properly; I won’t go to rehearsal for the same reason. So... let’s have some fun!’ He let out a long sigh, stretching out further on the sofa and not making any decision at all. It was true, this happened every time he had a day off. He desired them ardently before having them; when they arrived he had no idea what to do with them; but given that they were days off he would rather have died of boredom than do any work. He called for the butler to engage in some light conversation at the very least:

‘Bring me some cognac. Are there many people out and about? What ended up happening in that little matter with your brother?’ The well-mannered butler, who had many years of service in a noble household under his belt, replied with exaggerated humility as he brought over the tray with the cognac.
At least I won’t be obliged to throw this tray on the ground, thought Claudio Xilo, and he felt satisfied that he was able to savour his little glass of cognac, and satisfied with his butler, so polite that he would never have to chase him out with blows, and satisfied with the downy soft sofa, that was firm enough that it wouldn’t collapse underneath him for the public’s enjoyment.

These simple facts that wouldn’t have brought happiness to any normal man gave Claudio Xilo the curious feeling of finally finding himself, of being able to live sincerely, if only for an instant.

Claudio Xilo was, in fact, used to performing all of these actions in front of a camera, which recorded them scrupulously and having transformed them into luminous projections, gladdened the hearts of the teeming cinema spectators. Claudio Xilo had plied his trade for more than five years. A brilliant actor for one of the major film production companies, with the additional obligation of writing the films which he then interpreted, he had since lived a decidely curious double life, whose borders he had never managed to demarcate precisely.

His psychology was constantly changing: the actor peered often into the lives of private individuals; and their nerves, their sudden impulses frequently disturbed the mask of the comic actor. Claudio Xilo had been an intellectual in his youth. Then, on the verge of dying of starvation, he had put his talent for mimicry to good use. From then on he had earned enough money to live like a king. But Claudio Xilo was, regrettably, guilty of analysing his life far too often, and overthinking the irreducible duplicity that existed inside him, drawing from it laughter that was more often bitter than content. By virtue of laughing constantly in front of the camera, he had forgotten how to do the same, but honestly, for himself.

And he lived with a tremor that was hidden but constant, which he was unable to overcome despite his background in acting, even as he kept his every action under surveillance, policing the movements of his arms and legs as though the inescapable camera was always there to record them. He would frequently stop whatever he was doing to make his usual grimace, the characteristic and hilarious smirk that delighted the public and had brought his films clamorous success. When Claudio Xilo realized that he was doing this he would be in a bad mood for the rest of the day. Evidently, he thought, I can’t go back to being a normal person like everyone else. He had become completely obsessed with films, and at the same time he detested those brutal confections of humour. A shop window full of crockery would lead him immediately to the idea of the innocuous, phantasmagorical catastrophes that he was frequently obliged to execute for the screen. A
ladder induced in him the temptation to knock it down as he passed by; flowing water brought to mind the frequent soakings to which he was submitted during chase scenes.

Policeman, thief, gentleman, stableman, soldier, plumber, Claudio Xilo had dressed in all of these outfits and worn all of these uniforms; but the roles that at first glance seemed so varied were, at heart, reducible to just one: the role of a bumbling idiot who takes part in the most unlikely and unrealistic adventures, and receives a good beating in the end. The role of a cinematic comedian is as unchanging as that of the old masks.

Claudio Xilo had earned the right to live in a princely home and to employ a butler only by getting a daily beating from a vast crowd of butlers, as a joke; he could sit in a comfortable chair only at the price of taking a comic tumble from a papier-mâché chair two or three times per film; and he allowed himself the luxury of taking a carriage that flew through the streets smoothly and peacefully only after having faked any number of crashes at the edge of a muddy trench. After having played that part so often, Claudio Xilo was now unable to enjoy his real life. Gradually, over time, a fear of crowds had entered into his psyche, as if the crowd were always there to clobber him after the usual pranks; and he felt an indefinable unease when he was in the midst of other people, as though he were worried that he would have to get himself into one of those monumental messes that his fantasy imagined for the screen.

He had, therefore, isolated himself from society and lived alone; but day by day, the voluntary solitude embittered his character. With his characteristic perceptiveness, he realized that he was tending towards misanthropy, and he regretted it without, however, being able to overcome that instinctive defensive impulse that distanced him from society. He made little small talk with his fellow actors, who appeared to him more often in the costume of the day than in real life, and so for him they weren’t real, living people, but simple tools, machines for the production of tears or laughter. He hadn’t a single friend, having broken off all his connections to the literary sphere, and his only substantial conversations were with his butler who, it seemed, felt some affection towards him. The butler, so proper and polite, who moved around the house with so much obsequious deference, served to lift his spirits in his more dejected moments. Not that Claudio Xilo was stupidly vain, but after coming back from those shoots, in which he’d had to submit to so many small and great humiliations for comedy’s sake, his spirit drew a sort of ironic fortitude from considering the elegance of the house and the comportment of his servant, who had served a prince of royal blood with the exact same correctness.
'Before my butler,' he thought, ‘I and his former master, the prince, are the same, and he equates us in the same respectful devotion.

Claudio Xilo had almost grown fond of him, and he didn’t notice that even his servant received some of his familiarities with a certain sense of wonderment. Of course, that excellent servant had some very firm and serious ideas about hierarchy, and couldn’t easily accommodate an employer who descended, on occasion, to his level.

Claudio Xilo finally decided to make use of his afternoon by going out: ‘Let’s go see how other people live and how they enjoy their lives.’

He said this to himself, not without a certain feeling of envy for that part of humanity that passed through its existence in a single, continuous way.

‘I am like a double-entry book,’ he thought, ‘kept by an incompetent accountant who gets the two columns mixed up.’ The streets were full of people who slithered rather than walked along the pavement, indulging themselves everywhere, in front of a woman or an exhibition, enjoying the warm sunlight that cast soft and tenuous light, like a caress. Used to scenic trickery, Claudio Xilo had the impression that everyone was displaying their emotions with an almost brutal sincerity. An old man, his little eyes shining, winked shamelessly at the women passing by, tempted by the freshness and transparency of their spring outfits; a group of young people laughed without discretion behind the old man’s back; the women took visible pleasure in the many admiring exclamations provoked by their passing. Nor did anyone seem to worry about the thousands of witnesses they had around them, and people offered up their feelings for consumption with placid indifference, for the curiosity of others. Claudio Xilo entertained himself for a while by noting the infinite variety of behaviours on show, and he fixed in his memory several of the more original facial expressions, instinctively, thinking of reproducing them himself. Then, he was irritated, as usual, by that spontaneous effort, which led him inexorably to thinking again about his job.

He let himself be carried along by the crowd, no longer looking at anything, unthinking, enjoying the physical sensation of the soft rays of sunlight that loosened his limbs like a restorative bath. He stopped like the rest of the crowd in front of a cinema’s enormous billboard. His name shone there in a box-like script: Miopetti’s Duel—a side-splittingly funny film, interpreted by the greatest of all comic actors: Claudio Xilo. He felt a sudden surge of disgust, standing before that unbelievably idiotic pseudonym that was nevertheless very suited to the idiocy of Claudio Xilo the actor; and he saw a long line of other Claudio Xilos dressed up as Cretpetti, as Stupidini, as Bietolini, all equally wretched in their chaotic
comicality, all recognizable by that characteristic grimace, that smirk, which had first come to him in a moment of pain, and which he had adapted as a comedic mask.¹

The smirk was, in fact, the kind that precedes crying; by tensing his facial muscles painfully, Claudio Xilo used it in his films when he was in the process of receiving one of his customary clobberings; and the strident contrast between the pained expression and the laughable events happening on screen became an endless source of humour. The masses were pouring into the theatre, and the actor went with the flow: Let’s go see me on screen, he thought, it’s a pleasure that few can enjoy. He sat in a corner, next to some placid gentlemen who were already deeply affected by the fate of a poor orphan girl on screen, and were itching to submerge their emotion in a salutary bath of laughter.

On the blank screen flashed a few more sunny visions of landscapes, then appeared the sign: ‘Miopetti’s Duel: Comic Finale’, etc. The audience let out a gasp of pleasure, reading the name of their favoured actor. Claudio Xilo felt that gasp resound like mockery. All of a sudden, he had remembered the sad arc of his erstwhile career as an intellectual, when no one had emitted an exclamation of wondrous enjoyment listening to one of his novels or short plays. And yet they weren’t that bad; and yet the best of himself was in them, the flowering of his spirit and his ingenuity.

But the public preferred those idiotic films that he wrote and acted in for his job like an automaton, and it preferred to pay attention to his smirk rather than his soul. The film began to play on the screen; the public was constantly laughing. Miopetti was truly one of a kind, and his shortsightedness caused disasters on screen and laughter in the theatre.² Claudio Xilo observed himself, tried to recognize himself. As though he were seeing himself for the first time, he was amazed, furious:

‘That imbecile moving up there is me!’ He felt both love and hate for Miopetti, who was cruelly placing his very self before his eyes, forcing him to recognize the miserable falseness of his comic art. He had managed to fool himself, sometimes, that he was still an artist even despite the films: but now he was lost, as he realized how vulgarly he was behaving, how pathetic his inspiration really was.

‘Stupid,’ he hissed quite loudly, ‘stupid.’

The men sitting next to him shushed him energetically, scandalized by the iconoclast who wished to bring down their idol. But Claudio Xilo wasn’t thinking clearly any more, and he was also annoyed by the audience that was so entertained by his smirking, abandoning itself to a gross amusement that offended him to his hidden artistic core:
‘This is stupid,’ he repeated, ‘unbelievably stupid, bastardo!’ Some shouts of protest came from the hall:

‘Out with the troublemaker! Who even is he? What does he want? Out! Show him the door!’ The man sitting next to him, annoyed, said to him:

‘Would you stop interrupting the show? Keep it down!’ Claudio Xilo turned around, his anger rising:

‘Keep it down yourself! Your Miopetti is stupid! Incredibly stupid, do you hear? Or are you stupid yourself?’

‘Me? Watch your tongue, imbecile!’

‘Oh! Oh! What’s going on? Enough, stop that!’ Several people had stood up, the ladies were emitting little screams of terror: then all of a sudden the film was stopped and the lights in the hall came back on. The two adversaries were immediately surrounded, pressed on all sides, interrogated. Claudio Xilo wrenched himself out of their grasp, screaming:

‘Imbeciles, idiots, idiot, I’m talking to you, sir, you know that!’ Struck by the movement that swirled around him, for an instant he had the impression that he was on the stage in front of the camera. This thought made him almost frantic. ‘I’ll challenge you, sir, yes I will!’ And he took out his business card and threw it at the other man, who picked it up with excessive dignity as he prepared a pointed reply.

‘But you’re Claudio Xilo,’ he exclaimed after a moment, ‘so this is all a joke! Sir, I’m honoured to meet you!’

The audience was struck by the scene.

‘Who is it? Claudio Xilo! Miopetti! It’s really him!’ A group of witty individuals started to shout ‘Long live Miopetti, long live Miopetti!’ People were throwing themselves around the actor in order to see him properly; then in a sudden swell of exhilaration they lifted him up over their shoulders and carried him triumphantly around the theatre and around the foyer, through an applauding crowd. Claudio Xilo wanted to escape; he kicked and screamed. He wanted to fight at any cost, truthfully, to experience his feelings honestly just this once. He felt brutal, fierce, in a sudden awakening of a long-repressed animalism.

It seemed to him that his very blood could have washed away the layer of theatricality that he felt clinging to him, at least momentarily.

He wanted tragedy and he realized, despairing, that tragedy was rapidly and irreversibly descending into farce. In the distance, he saw the man who had offended him moving away, and at that point he gave up all resistance, conquered by that overwhelming desire for buffoonery that he could sense was emanating from the crowd, exhilarated by the extraordinary adventure.
Finally they put him down on a chair; the crowd gradually diminished, and then there was no one next to him but for two ushers and the owner of the cinema, who was offering his services. Claudio Xilo felt physically exhausted and morally worn out. That duel that should have been, that fact of real life that had somehow mutated into a sort of extraordinary performance, took on a symbolic importance for him. It seemed to him the irrevocable ratification of his life as a mime. By now, any semblance of a sincere existence had been denied to him. The only option open to him was to continue to act, both on and off the screen.

Crushed, he almost felt like crying; he tried to hold back the tears and made the usual grimace, the characteristic smirk that was the distressing source of so much laughter. The ushers saw it, and recognizing it, smiled in satisfaction thinking that the actor was, in doing so, showing his enjoyment of the unexpected triumph of a few moments before.


Notes

1. [Translator’s note. These names are supposed to call to mind comic actors. The first name, Cretinetti, refers to a real person; from 1909 onwards, André Deed starred in a hundred or so Italian films under this monicker (translated for the English market as Foolshead). For all their apparent similarity, the other two names are entirely made up. They translate to roughly the same thing—dunderhead, half-wit, etc.]

2. [Translator’s note. There is an element of nominative determinism at play here, in that Miopetti’s name is based on the Italian word miope, shortsighted—a direct translation would be something like Mr. Nearsight. Hence the ‘short-sightedness’ causing disasters is part of Miopetti’s persona as much as it is a physical affliction.]