Early Film Theories in Italy, 1896-1922

Mazzei, Luca, Alovisio, Silvio, Casetti, Francesco

Published by Amsterdam University Press

Mazzei, Luca, et al.
Early Film Theories in Italy, 1896-1922.
Amsterdam University Press ed. Amsterdam University Press, 2017.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/66278.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/66278

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2323190
Section 7
One of the aspects likely to strike any scholar who studies Italian film theory of the silent era is the enormous role played by narrative. In fact, in Italy there were many short stories, novels, and even rhymes focused on the cinema during the silent era. This kind of text has been the object of growing interest in the field of film studies since the 1990s.1 In parallel, Italian Studies has invested in this same era.2 Therefore, we would be remiss not to offer adequate space in this anthology to narrative form. But why reserve an entire section exclusively for narrative texts? The question is particularly pertinent because two of the most important anthologies dedicated to the theory of the silent era over last few years did not include a section for this kind of text.3 Instead, they opted to integrate narrative works into the same categories as all the other texts. Our choice to give fictional texts their own section comes out of the conviction that the narrative form plays a specific role. When these texts appeared rather preciously beginning in 1897,4 they were originally cine-phobic, but in a historical era that spans from 1896 to 1922, they came to become fully dedicated to bringing cinema to the heart of national cultural discourse in the Kingdom of Italy.5

Making Fiction to Share

The core arguments that these texts revolve around are quite straightforward. In these stories, there are three main themes that persistently recur: the power of the cinema to transform the habits of the individual’s life; the degradation of physical experience when compared to the image onscreen; and the destabilization of gender roles that the movie theatre seems to provoke.6 At times, these themes even emerge together in these stories, as they do, for example, in eight of the ten stories in this anthology, which demonstrate an exemplary amount of thematic density in their narratives.7 Two of the three themes described above—the impact of the cinema on the social life of the individual, and the dematerialization of the object’s physical identity as a result of the film experience—function as decisive elements in two remaining stories.8

Literary articles, scientific reports, and essays on aesthetics never attempt to provoke the hidden fears of their readers with the same intensity
and efficiency. They never aspired to create that same thematic density. If anything, in the culture of the time, the task of literary texts was to offer the reader a 'clean', localized analysis or a practical solution (we could even say ‘normative’ model) that was immediately usable. It is the same as with the non-fiction essay and the scientific report. Instead, in the era of silent cinema, narrative form, heir to the conte philosophique, was offered to its reader primarily as an interpretative tool: an object that was perhaps not immediately able to offer satisfying answers, but that enabled the reader to forge a hypothesis of their own and provide all the cultural tools necessary to obtain the necessary answers in the future. Indeed, it is not a coincidence that beginning in 1922, and for the remainder of the 1920s, narrative tales about cinema, which had held a privileged position among the cine-phobic intelligensia, had instead become the gathering place for a new cine-philic elite.

What the theoretical-narrator of the era attempted to do is to render the cinema a shared experience: common, collective, and therefore ‘expressible’. The experience of the cinema was transformed from the temporary receptical of individual anxieties and the already well-known, pre-modern panorama into the new and unknown lands of the modern. Therefore, as compared to the non-fiction essay, these texts direct themselves to a different kind of reader. If in the non-fiction essay, the presumed reader is the scientist, the politically-engaged bourgeois male, or potentially even the artist or viewer of art, in the narrative texts it is, instead, always an interchangeable figure, a reader in need of definition that we can call the ‘reader without qualities’, to paraphrase Robert Musil. Within the cine-theoretical narrative form, it is of little import if this person is a man or woman, of the middle- or lower middle-class, an occasional or a frequent movie-goer. Ideally, it is by not distinguishing between them that the cine-theoretical story embraces all of them, so much so that when published, the thematic structure of the stories change very little.

A Modern Backdrop for a Modern Literature

But if these texts were put into dialogue with the cinematographic experience, how much, when we consider the form that the modern assumes in this period in Italy, can be said of this specific form of modernity? Here, the issue becomes more complex. If we mean technical-industrial modernity, we must come to terms with an extreme discontinuity. In Italy, between 1896 and 1922, there were only a few areas of the country affected by
modernization; in particular, the large and medium-sized urban centres primarily in the North. The South (with the exception of Naples, which was the former capital of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies) was totally excluded from this process, as were all of the mountainous areas and a large part of the agricultural areas in the rest of Italy. But also within these cities, the advance of modernity was spotty. It was in one piazza, but not in the adjacent one. It came through quickly on the street that overlooked cars rushing by, but it stopped in that same street with the arrival of the pedlar’s cart. It is on the lowest floors of a building that housed a vibrant, new bar, but it disintegrates as you go up to the top floor, where that same building shows traces of its austere medieval construction. In countries like France, Germany, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the United Kingdom, Denmark, and the United States, where a process of advanced industrial development and, more broadly, a process of political and social modernization has already taken root, the development of cinema was much more structured process. Therefore, as a whole, the panorama of the modern presents itself as much more continuous. In Italy, it was not like that; so, it follows that, on the Mediterranean peninsula in the 1910s, modernity and tradition were consistently found coexisting with one another, often under difficult circumstances. But there is a more distinctive feature that for the purpose theoretical analysis is almost positive. The presence of this new medium alongside the debris and the operating frameworks of the old world allows the sensible individual to see even more clearly the chasm that separates modernity from tradition.

The same goes for cinema as well. In fact, in the Italian context, the movie theatres were spread everywhere. But they were concentrated in urban areas, even though a large part of the population of the country was dispersed in rural areas and in small towns, where it was hard to see a film. And as compared to other sectors, cinema seemed to have greater communicative potentials. Until around 1911 or 1912, viewing a film took very little time, at most, according to the texts of the time, about 20 minutes to half an hour. And cinema had become ‘popularized’ in the early years of the twentieth century. By 1905, the cost of a film was already so cheap that even those who did not live in the city or who were not of the upper class could partake in the cinematic experience at a festive event, a trip to the city, or during military service, even on a minimal wage. After all, the cinema is not a product that must be bought (like a car); it is not reserved only for a privileged few (like the airplane); and it does not require a prohibitive degree of urbanization (like the department store). In addition to these markers of democracy, it adds an important opening to women: mothers, daughters,
maids and nannies (often bringing the kids, often for themselves), had general access to the theatres and that for Italian society was a new norm.\textsuperscript{10} We can say, then, that in Italy, cinema was the element of modernity most accessible to all.

To this deeply democratic nature, cinema also contributed directly in the field of perception. In fact, to Italians at that time, it does not appear only as a superficial experience; that is, it was not only a light from outside the doorway. It was instead, and above all, an immersive experience that sought to reunite in condensed form the entire visible world by re-viewing it through the lens of modernity.\textsuperscript{11} In the eyes of the cultured elite of the time, the movie theatre not only integrated itself within the world, but almost seemed to want to undo it in order to reestablish it under new rules.\textsuperscript{12}

**A Non-Canonical Literature**

By virtue of all of these complex characteristics, it is almost obvious that the cinema became more than just a new form of entertainment for Italian writers of the era; indeed, it presented, in its form and in its function, the same impulse it had for Anglo-American, French, and German culture in the previous century.\textsuperscript{13} That is, it was not only a banal technology with which to enliven the actions of a character or a key place to reference in a risque passage, but it was an ideal symbol of the (modern) condition, which Italian writers wanted urgently to narrate. In other words, it is easy for the cinema, which is at the centre of the discourse that the twentieth-century Italian writer is having with himself, to be transformed into the signifier that carries the meaning of modernity.

It is no coincidence that, with the exception of a few essayists, from a certain point, writers explicitly seek to work on cinema in a way that is more prosaic, with the vast majority of narrators rejecting the use of the movie theatre as a mere source of interesting situations (the set that puts in motion a curious story, the movie theatre as a source of different types to ‘observe’ with pen in hand).\textsuperscript{14} The engine of narrative-theoretical production seems to emerge not so much from the simple will to profit commercially from some variations of the ‘new’ (as some of the minor producers did for the novel or the theatre, such as Sandro Camasio, Nino Berrini, Primo Piovesan, Alfredo Testoni, and Nino Martoglio), as much as the widely-accepted conviction that only a traditional instrument, such as narrative, can provide a better explanation, with its view ‘from far away’, for the otherwise inextricable complexity of the cinematographic experience.\textsuperscript{15} The narratives about the
cinema find space across diverse areas (and this is strong proof of its hold on the culture of the era). Of the ten stories republished here, three appeared in various art magazines (Borelli, Vanzi, Di San Secondo); two in a magazine on cinema (Tozzi, Doria); two others in a literary magazine (Cortesi, Lumbroso); one in a daily paper (Gozzano); another in a children's magazine (Tanfani); and the last one, at the end of this volume, in a posthumous anthology (Gozzano). The social pervasiveness of these texts indicates that the desire for them was—we must conclude—extremely widespread.

At a certain point, the environment in Italy was almost overcome by this desire for conceptual elaboration. The production of narrative texts dedicated to the filmic experience (in the entire silent era there were about 90 in all, and an additional ten were theatrical texts) is quite excessive, and seemingly points to an exaggerated response to demand. This is especially true when you think that very few writers wrote additional stories about the cinema: the number of short stories, comedies, novels, just about coincides with the number of writers moving in this direction.

But if these stories appeared under the sign of excess, they also came to be almost immediately excluded from every memory. Not one of these texts (with the exception of Shoot! by the Nobel laureate Luigi Pirandello) belongs to the Italian canon. That is to say, the environment desired them, but they were not intended to last for a long time; not because they were of poor literary value, but because of their very nature as accounts or glosses. What these stories were intended to do was to respond to a need that was contingent—to grasp a real novelty—and their transience is a sign of how well they responded such a task.

A Hybrid Theory

Did fiction writers go outside the confines of the canon as a way to mimic the continual freshness of the cinematic medium in its first few years? The hypothesis is seductive, and perhaps in some ways true. After 1922, there are a number of Italian narratives written on the cinema that take up, in a new way, the situations and themes already confronted in the preceding decades, so much so that it is difficult to understand for many of these if it is plagarism, coincidence, or strategy. Moreover, this pervasive amnesia seems to stem from the hybridity of these narratives. In a country like Italy, where the philosopher Benedetto Croce, the most influential intellectual of his era, exalts the distinction between the various arts, the exchange between literature and cinema (in which cinema offers opportunity to
literature and literature helps cinema develop) primarily sparks scepticism. This is the reason that, in the eyes of their contemporaries, these narratives must have appeared like a sort of monster that could only be exhibited among the curiosities within the pages of the magazine, the small volumes on the fringes of mainstream literature, maybe in the newspapers, but hard to find outside the domain of immediate consumption.

And yet, it is the standardized, but efficient form of these stories that strikes us today. It is about a form that is, in some ways, always ‘philosophical’. The methodological framework with which Leo Marx analysed the conceptual core of Thomas Carlyle's *Sign of Times* can be useful. In fact, Marx argued that the strength of Carlyle lies in the association between the idea of the machine as an object (a technological reality) and the idea of the machine as a metaphor (a symbol of values), in a way that presents culture as an integrated system, in which neither the causes, nor the consequences of mechanization can be relegated to the external or physical world. In the same way, in these stories, the elements of the cinematographic experience and the experiences that surround it—including the movie theatre and the street, the projector and the crowds, the visual imagery of the film and the recounting of this imagery—are always in communication with each other. One makes use of the other, just as the one serves the other.

**Perseus’s System**

For Italians at the beginning of the century, the primary characteristics of the cinematographic experience can be seen more in ‘mirror situations’ (in our case, the mimesis of the filmic experience offered by literature), than by watching a film in the movie theatre, in the place where the hypnotic appeal of the emerging medium dulls judgement so much that it does not allow the ‘average’ spectator to be aware of the work’s operation during its own expression. To filter the cinematic experience through the form of the narrative is, therefore, a method similar to that of the classic myth of Perseus. It is only through the reflection created by his shield’s reflection—the myth says precisely this—that the hero is able to admire (or kill) the horrible, but also seductive face of the Medusa. In the same way—as the stories included here seem to say—the most important characteristics of the cinematographic experience are more easily observed when fixed on the literary page than viewed at the theatre. Together, what these stories seem to want to impart is an aesthetic of hybridity (no understanding of the cinematographic experience without the filter of literature, ‘no
new’ literature without the cinema) and wonder (no beauty without the suspension of judgement, no judgement without first having saved reason from the paralysis caused by beauty), in which the whole thing is further blended into a new solution. Being faithful to the aforementioned method, the theoretical-narrator declared (by pretending) not to know how to present the spectator’s experience according to the frameworks of classic argumentation. Incapable of analysis, he instead intends to repackage it to the reader as a reflection of his internal experience of the cinema.

Therefore, the narratives included in this section are not only descriptions of an experience that in reality can never be described outside of the movie theatre. Rather, they are truthful outlines of those contradictory feelings, traces of shock from which there is no recovery. To study them today as ‘theoretical objects’ means not only to confront them with structures designed to be complex from the outset, but also to see the past ‘of a modernity that is no longer’ in the act of its own making. It means being able to look back, not only at its most planned aspects, which the tradition of criticism already offers, but also at its most problematic aspects, as only as literature allows, in the progressive process of comparing first, and then to connect Italian culture of the first 20 years of the twentieth century to the experience continuously (re)established by cinema.

Notes

3. Lant and Periz, Red Velvet Seat; Banda and Moure, Le cinéma.
5. Mazzei, ‘Risvegliarsi nel film’.
Film; Tozzi ‘A Cinematic Performance’; Doria ‘Me, Riri’; Gozzano ‘The Shears Reflection’. All these references are included in this anthology.


Tanfani, ‘Colour Film’, included in this anthology; Borelli, ‘Miopetti’s Duel’, included in this anthology.


Papini, ‘The Philosophy of Cinematograph’, included in this anthology; Marinetti et al., ‘Futurist Cinematography’, included in this anthology.

Mahr, Eisenbahnen in der deutschen Dichtung; Baroli, Le train dans la littérature française; Marx, The Machine in the Garden; Schivelbusch, Geschichte der Eisenbahnreise; Ceserani, Treni di carta.

Livoni, ‘Cinematografo ispiratore’; Livoni, ‘Il signore del cinematografo’; Martini, Si battono la parola ed il silenzio; Guastadini, ‘Letteratura Cinematografica’.

Camasio-Berrini, Il cuore dell’amante; Piovesan, Signori!... Si gira!; Testoni, La spada di Damocle; Martoglio, L’arte di Giufà.

Mazzei, ‘Risvegliarsi nel film’.


Croce, Breviario di Estetica; Croce, Estetica come scienza dell’espressione.

It should be noted that the Carlyle’s text is the source of the founding text of Italian film theory Thovez’s ‘The Art of the Celluloid’, included in this anthology.