

**FROM THEATER TO CINEMATOGRAPHY: THE DISQUIET OF MODERNITY IN
PIRANDELLO AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES**

by

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Abstract

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From Theater to Cinematography: The Disquiet of Modernity in Pirandello and His Contemporaries investigates visual perception from the mid-nineteenth century until 1929, tracing the developments and controversies that would lead to the first talking films. Defining the ‘performative’ space of mass entertainment as a conflict between street amusement and legitimized “art” theatre, I call attention to how visual spectacles in the city square blurred and subverted categories of class and aesthetics. Central to the inquiry is the aggressive way the cinematograph replaced theater as the leading entertainment in Europe and America. More specifically, the situation in Italy is closely examined, in particular the ambivalence of Pirandello with respect to film.

The first chapter recounts the historical, social, and cultural background in which Italian visual culture took root. The Italian case is juxtaposed with that of France and England, where industrialization and economic advantage led to a flourishing of visual entertainment. Early devices are discussed in terms of technology, commerce, and more theoretically as triggers of a new spectatorship, a new mode to theatricalize settings and increasingly immerse the viewer in visual movement. The second chapter explores different forms of entertainment and their modes of commercialization before the advent of cinematography within the rising commercialism and

internationalism of modern culture. The third and final part deals with the theater/cinema debate over the artistic legitimacy of the new art form. Pirandello's theoretical writings and *Si gira...*, his seminal novel on the disconcerting effects of the cinematic spectacle, as well as several adaptations, are for the first time examined as significant in his career.

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INTRODUCTION

The cinema is an invention without a future.

Louis Lumière

The camera introduces us to unconscious optics
as psychoanalysis does to unconscious impulses.

Walter Benjamin

At the core of this study is the goal to establish how visual power gained a central role in mid-19th-century life and the stages that led cinema being glorified as the medium of modernism in all its mobility. The dynamics of movement, industrialization and the technological innovations, the circulation of capital, and *fin-de-siècle* social ambitions all figure in the pages that follow. Multiple forces caused changes in lifestyle and drove economic progress, while viewers' subjective experience and the legitimacy of visual entertainment as a self-gratifying activity were questioned and promoted.

Methodologically speaking, this study employs what Foucault would call a “genealogy,” a trajectory investigating the multifaceted, discontinuous, and even contradictory net of historical, political, and socio-cultural contingencies. At issue is the transformation in spectatorial perception, which occurred alongside the transformations of technology, staging, and displaying. How did the new representational practices and projections end up catalyzing the viewer's attention? And how did the extraordinary expressive potential of the new medium overturn aesthetic and moral objections? Did the intellectual world eventually resolve the initial caution and prejudice towards the industrialization and commercialization of art? To these and other questions this study seeks an answer.

The evidence that visuality was not an autonomous, independent activity, but a product of entangled socio-cultural forces and practices was gradually assimilated after the discovery of photography in 1839. The very first optical devices that circulated in fairs and amusement parks lured the most heterogeneous audiences with their visual wonders; they turned the activity of peering through the holes of magic boxes into a public ritual. Entertained and simultaneously puzzled by the artificial reality they saw reflected in the peep shows, viewers found themselves increasingly exposed to this new gratification and to novel mass-produced performances. Social and aesthetic dynamics are taken out of the context of visual entertainment, to call attention to questions of artistic legitimacy and appraise the square as the performance space of optical shows. With the goal in mind to investigate the roots of *fin-de-siècle* new visuality, Chapter I:1 starts a journey *à rebours* from the moment the Lumières' *Cinématographe* made its exceptional debut at the *Grand Café* in Paris on the night of December 28, 1895. The Lumières' discovery is framed within a period of competition among rival and allied inventors. The absence of laws for patents safeguarding discoveries meant that cinematography would result more from joint collaborations than single contribution. After all, the impressive number of scientists-- Plateau, Faraday, Marey, Muybridge, and Edison-- who contributed significantly to extraordinary technological advancements, worked with the common goal of putting images in motion. Their devices complimented the early development of cinema techniques and did anticipate the idea of sliding images before viewers. As representatives of pre-cinema apparatuses, optical devices such as Thaumatrope, Praxinoscope, Zoetrope, and Phenakistoscope attracted audiences by means of visual deception and encouraged new forms of viewing.

It did not take long for optical devices to appear not only in the scientific environment of laboratories, but in the lucrative world of fair grounds and amusement parks. Chapter I:2 frames

the public space where illusion toys and peep-show boxes made their appearance, brought to the crowds' attention by resourceful itinerant showmen. The space hosting these new optical devices was the same occupied by magicians, acrobats, singers, and dancers, the representatives of traditional forms of spectacle tagged as 'low' leisure for their nomadic nature and the mob they usually attracted. Building on Judith Butler's idea of performativity, I address the disqualification of street amusement and its exclusion from legitimate playhouses as caused by the difficulty in recognizing the value of new forms of spectacle. The stereotypes of traditional theatrical performances finally clashed with the audience's enthusiastic reaction for new genres.

In this respect, popular taste was decisive in raising the artistic value of the performance. Vaudeville acts, for instance, are held up as evidence of a form of once disqualified entertainments that ended up being regarded as qualitative spectacles not as much because they were performed in indoor venues, as for the enthusiasm with which the public rushed to see them. In the end, the continuous attendance of street theaters and optical shows legitimized the agency of visual tricks, opening up the way to the emergence of a new theatre of illusions.

Chapter I:3 furthers my position that popular curiosity was key in orienting the spectatorial gaze. Optical devices quenched the thirst for foreign realities as early as the very end of the 18th century, when the very first Panoramas appeared thanks to English painter Robert Barker. Huge canvases offering views of battles, historical fights, and exotic locations, Panoramas sold viewers the illusion of accessing the most distant realities. These large scale paintings engaged the peripheral vision with dynamic imagery quite unlikely the visual models of traditional painting. Panoramas are investigated as early manipulatory mediums that constructed visuality upon the idea of an inescapable surrounding environment, the Rotunda, a concept clearly anticipating the controlled space of the cinema hall. Foucault's Panoptical model

serves here as metaphor to contextualize supervised spectatorship. The isolation and confinement of the public on a platform encircling the painting was as significant as the mesmerizing effects of the illuminated images.

This section calls attention to other strategies of indirect spectatorial control, such as inputs to respond to specific commercial stimuli and targeted advertisement. Archival documents and articles from journals of the time attest to luring techniques promising the same ‘genuine’ thrills as those in actual historical battles. Accessible costs and hours of operation were customized to respond to the needs of a cross-class public. Such tactics are addressed as significant forms of spectatorial inducement, but also as commercial strategies maximizing profits, rather than respecting class categorizations. Panoramas, in fact, experienced the same debasement of Vaudevilles and optical tricks in the square for their drawing essentially a popular audience.

If cheap tickets encouraged low classes to attend Panorama shows, their impressive hyper realism attracted spectators from higher rungs on the social ladder. This twofold interest, however, does not mean that Panoramas enacted a genuine class mingling among the public. In Chapter I:4, I parallel what happened in Panorama spectacles with the situation in legitimate theaters in France, England, and Italy, where audiences attended performances according to their social echelon. The widespread Italian feeling that wealthy viewers could debase their social status by attending playhouses open also to the ordinary public is tackled in contrast with the situation in mid-19th-century theaters in France and England, where popular appreciation was immediately accepted as a major factor in legitimizing the performance.

Tactical pricing and class selection on certain days of operation led to the flourishing of a new bourgeois viewer finally entitled to enjoy what was once the sole privilege of aristocrats.

Since a new class - poor in intellectual tradition, but now rich in capitals - had access to legitimized genres, such as drama and comedy, theaters owners subdued themselves to the urge to host performances that were remunerative in economic, rather than social terms. Unlike France and England, in Italy sub-genres ended up being staged in formal playhouses, but only as a result of a cosmetic operation that sought to profit from all social echelons without explicitly calling attention to the mixing of classes.

Consequently, the less restricted space of the square was increasingly empowered; here, the popular fascination with artistic novelties remained untouched by class restrictions. On the wave of the evidence that outdoor optical spectacles would attract audiences of different social status, also the legitimacy of visual entertainment could no longer be questioned. In the 1870s, when Panoramas enjoyed a revival in appreciation after being overshadowed on and off first by the discovery of photography and later by the fierce competition of the various -ramas designed between the 1840s and the 1860s, several Rotundas were inaugurated to host optical shows. These buildings officially symbolized the recognition of a new genre, as if the permanency of the construction legitimized the permanency of visual deception in the history of entertainment.

Chapter II:1 theorizes the importance of permanent Panorama rotundas not only as landmarks of the evolving urban scenario, but notably as milestones in the control of spectatorship and the modernization of perception. Space theory, particularly the works of Gottfried Semper and Conrad Fiedler, support my argument that European architecture enacted a revival of classical forms in the exteriority, which tallied with the latest achievements of industrialization. The preoccupation of theorists, however, was that of seeing the excessive attention to exterior décor hamper the interior functionality of buildings. Versatile cast iron and

glass structures in the end espoused with traditional styles, giving birth to that eclecticism predominating in *fin-de-siècle* constructions.

The first Panorama rotunda built in Milan in 1881 is held up as an example of the national preoccupation with satisfying the aesthetics of tradition while keeping the pace with architectural progress. However, if the building combined the progress with the legacy of the past, the interior layout and the staging in the optical shows hosted inside did not equal the foreign refinement of visual techniques. The direct involvement, both physical and visual, of viewers into the illusion was such that the panoramic experience had by then become a cognitive and emotional immersion.

The theatricalization in staging helped viewers break with the models of vision that mid-19th-century optical devices initially offered. Such devices, in fact, still put the observer in contact with an instantaneous reproduction of nature. Experiments in the 1860s and 1870s by scientists such as Helmholtz, Hering, and Wundt, finally proved that vision was a dynamic and personal reaction to external stimuli. A shift in the visual field occurred, which gave prominence to a new subjective mode of looking. Optical images implied decodification and thus the viewer's involvement. Panoramic illusionism could make sense of only if images were 'interpreted' by viewers.

By 1880s, deceptive optical systems such as Stereoscopy called attention to the transmission of sensations. The mystification of the machine was evident, but the pleasure of watching an artificial deception was unquestioned. Increasingly exposed to challenging modes of looking, audiences trained themselves in letting collapse the fix visuality of the *Camera Obscura*. Such a rational system of vision, based essentially on a precise source of light and a true image, no longer satisfied audiences whose abstract capacities were altered by the new

experiences. Watching was by then synonymous with experiencing an imaginary reality. Thanks to the incredible verisimilitude in staging and a realistic mode of reproducing reality, viewers felt motivated to put their disbelief aside and enjoy the demystification for the sheer optical amusement it provided.

While theatricalization brought audiences into the performance, illusionism increasingly became a visual narrative tool. In the case of the *Ballo Excelsior*, a dance spectacle debuting in Milan in 1881 alongside the inauguration of the first Panorama house, staged icons belonging to the socio cultural context. It was playing on the visual representation of history and progress- exactly as Panoramas had done- that viewers satisfied their thirst to experience the past. At this point, what was glorified in legitimate theatres was the recognition of the communicative power of images and their ability to turn abstract concepts, such as progress and scientific advancement, into an effective visual language for mass consumption.

In Chapter II:2 we see how this perceptual experience helped audiences master a new visuality and a more immediate engagement with the real. Optical shows at the *Great Exhibitions* continued the legacy of theatricalization in Dioramas and Panoramas for popular entertainment, enriching their displays with live natives and exotic architecture. In terms of staging, the presence of elements belonging to different cultures brought diversity into European representation, offering a new visuality. Fairs brought the exploitation of popular curiosity for the exotic at its highest peaks, playing on stereotypes about diverse cultures and race, which had been nourishing the European collective imagination for a long time. As Edward Said made clear in his seminal work *Orientalism*, the Orient itself “was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” (1).

Said's conceptualization of Orientalism serves our discussion on visibility and the power images held over the crowds. Said theorizes the Orient as a construct playing on diversity, which helped emerge and reinforce the Western image. Orientalism, thus, was more broadly a mode of thought based upon the neat distinction between the Orient and the Occident and the way the latter had authority over and dominated the former. This study demonstrates that fair shows used the same logic of prevarication, letting cultural diversity amuse Western audiences; what was theoretically sold as sheer visual entertainment was practically a mode of displaying controlling spectatorship through the barrage of exotic icons.

This section's end is to prove that the display of exoticism exposed viewers to a massive barrage of symbols belonging to non-Western systems of signs. Chinese, Turkish, Indian, Japanese, or African cultures and their symbolic architectures appeared more than instances of an imaginary 'orientalism;' they represented the visual encounter of the West with the rest of the world. Roland Barthes' reflections on sign universality are applied here to discuss the foreign not as much as tangible reality, but as the representative of a world of visual symbols in alternative to the familiar Western knowledge. What audiences were summoned to face was, in fact, the limit of universal visual significance. Once the restrictions imposed by cultural barriers were broken, visual novelties started being perceived as empowering tools of the modern world, something that could detach spectatorship from old legacies. So as photography had freed artists from the burdensome task of reproducing faithful reality, ethnographic inputs at the *Great Exhibitions* freed viewers from Western visual constancy, exposing them to the alternatives of cultural difference.

In Chapter II:3, I develop my argument around the visual treatment of exoticism and the way it was used as inducement to consumption. Optical shows reflected not only a major

refinement in the imitation of the real, since dioramic and panoramic displays involved even live characters, but also the marriage of fiction to reality as a marketing strategy. This section furthers the critique of how Western visual and consumer culture actually gained in strength by showcasing the explicit debasement of racial diversity. In order to capitalize on the public's increasing demand in spectacularization, entrepreneurs transformed ethnographic dioramas into aberrant "human zoos."

Caged as animals, natives 'spectacularized' dioramic displays with an allure of authenticity. Theatrical performances, fantasy fictions, and eventually early films are held up as instances of different mediums exploiting ethnography for the purpose of entertainment. Multi-cultural visual inputs are seen within the background of colonialism with a special eye on the Italian enterprise in Africa. Catalogues displayed ethnography and racial diversity in dioramic spectacles as an art installation, an alluring and exploitive maneuver to raise the number of visitors and sell tickets. In other words, ethnography simply replaced the exploitation of history (as Panoramas did) in the logic of spectacularization.

When exoticism, ethnography, and racial diversity are investigated under the lens of narrative, theatre, and cinema, the effects of the colonial politics are addressed from an international perspective. Paralleling Italy with the artistic *milieu* in France and England, we notice how the process of civilization was mythologized, transforming the colonized countries into fantasy lands or providing material for satire. Cultural and racial diversity was exploited to amuse *fin-de-siècle* white audiences, mocking what deviated from Western norms. Edison's early filmography, for instance, displays the communicative power of the new medium and the new interest in ethnography. When exoticism teamed with film, in fact, the result was a

propulsive force fueling visual pleasure, while simultaneously endorsing a distorted interpretation of the foreign.

The cinema consolidated the superiority of the colonizers, a trend that remained powerfully in vogue from the earliest silent French movies in the 1900s to the Italian film production in the 1911-12. Films supported the national colonial ambition with documentaries. Articles from journals of the time reveal how these reportages not simply validated the necessity of military intervention to allegedly civilize the colonized: their melodramatic tones turned the political reality into fiction. The result was a filmmaking that dampened the cruelty of the fight into weepy plots or hilarious adventures on the war theater (starring famous comedians). Audiences were encouraged to put their moral scruples aside, letting the grief for those who really lost their lives in the battlefield be overshadowed by the magic potential of the new medium.

What notably emerged was the belief that movies could ‘tell’ what cold press reportage could not, not even with a thousand words. Building on the theories of Susan Sontag and Julia Kristeva, as well as Freud, this section contextualizes the satisfaction from seeing war images on screen as far greater than moral concerns. The realism of film gratified a number of emotions: the viewers’ deference for the technological power of the new medium, the agency of autonomous spectatorship, as well as the sublimation of their own visual pleasure. By combining hyper realism with the mechanic reproducibility of images, cinema reinforced *apperception* in viewers, recalling what had happened with Panorama spectatorship.

Chapter III:1 frames visual gratification in films as strictly linked to the logic of capitalism and mass consumption brought by modernity. The socio-economic theories of Thorstein Veblen and Paul Nystrom lay here the foundations for a discourse around the consequences of the industrial age. The cross-class quest for wellbeing, material possessions, and the latest

technological novelties nourished mass produced *divertissement*. The way the films were marketed is set along the merchandising and windows of new department stores. Cinema and shopping emerge as happiness-inducing activities: both viewers and consumers appeared motivated to repeat either watching or buying because of the pleasure they gained from these actions.

Edison's *Kinetoscope* was commercialized as a mode exemplifying the exploitation of the public's reactions to visual novelties by means of strategies triggered by the consumer culture. The apparatus, in fact, went beyond scientific discovery, becoming rather the commercial agent of visual entertainment, whose products had to be sold via targeted advertising and marketing strategies. The real hero of his age, Edison is discussed both as the protagonist of international narrative fiction and the inventor who nourished the myth of progress and self-made ingenuity in the popular imagination. The limits of the *Kinetoscope* as a medium essentially promoting single viewing are put in contrast with the diffusion of the Lumière *Cinématographe*, which showed instead films projected on a screen in front of an audience.

Significantly, cinema turned ordinary actions into visual spectacle, although films were a few-minute long and lacked narratives. What magically glued viewers to the screen were the communicative power of images and the shock they provoked in portraying reality in motion. After all, the so-called *actualités* did not but screen events as people lived them in their everyday life. Archival materials and articles from journals of the time attest to the popular nature of film and the commercial strategies used by entrepreneurs to attract the widest possible audience. Inexpensive tickets and continuous running time in shows were the main strategies. Furthermore, films were promoted in concomitance with other proven visual entertainments, such as Panoramas or the suggestive x-rays demonstrations. Such combinations are evidence of the

initial difficulty for cinema to be self-sufficient. Venues could not be used exclusively as movie theaters, essentially because audiences still appreciated the cinematic spectacle as one of the many fair attractions; the popular interest, in fact, remained in the astonishment and visual marvels the apparatus could produce, rather than the film content.

Chapter III:2 develops the argument around the viewers' attraction for the faithful realism cinema provided. The rising film industry played a large role in destabilizing the pedagogical role of images. As multinational production companies developed in the early twentieth century, itinerant showmen disappeared, raising new issues in terms of spectatorship and social dynamics. In Italy, the successful trend of the so called films 'dal vero' opened up the discussion around the audiences and their moral behavior. Cinematography became also the object of a controversial debate around visual pedagogy. Since an increasingly large number of viewers relied on cinematic reportages to know historical and contemporary events, images had to be monitored and selected in order for them to educate and elevate the crowds intellectually. As a frame around the dispute on the instructional role of projections, I look at original early-century manuals of cinematography and the writings of authors of the time, such as Anita Marradi, Luigi Sassi, Santina Rifici, and Antonio Romeo. In these works, I argue, there is a general belief that visualization was more effective than verbal explanation both in the education of young generations and disciplines like medicine and science, for which practical visual evidence was essential. Besides beneficial to pedagogy, the application of visual tools was also representative of the Italian struggle to equal more industrialized countries, such as France and Germany. Santina Rifici, for instance, fiercely advocated the effectiveness of films in transmitting knowledge and instilling the importance of education in forming civic morality.

The educational task of cinematography is inevitably juxtaposed with that of traditional theatre. A cross-class and easily accessible attraction, cinema not only endorsed the mingling of people from different social and cultural levels, but notably became the basis for comparison with the elitist theatre. Besides being restricted to the few, the traditional stage lacked the allure of cinematic deception and was hence incapable of attracting a number of spectators. André Bazin's thoughts on the paradox behind cinematic realism serve here our discussion on the viewers' fascination with the wonders of the screen. The 'cinematic' depiction necessarily implied the suspension of ordinary spectatorial conditions, such as temporality and liveness, but in the end films appeared 'real' to the viewers' eyes just because of the virtual 'existence' of images contemporaneously with their being in the movie theater.

When the lack of living action in films was paralleled with the physical presence of actors in theatres, major aesthetic concerns aroused around the convincing power of images. Since films were clearly relying on their visual communicative power to compensate for the lack of live presence, both the press and intellectuals could not but notice a decline in quality. Cinema, however, ended up being debased for poor acting, low-quality images, and notably the amorality of subjects and venues. Popular taste, blamed for encouraging poor plots as well as vulgar comedies, and mercenary producers, jackals financing deplorable repertoires consisting of sensational dramas, were the two targets of attack.

The major names of the Italian intelligentsia turned to screenwriting as a remunerative activity. Giovanni Verga, Marco Praga, or Roberto Bracco in Italy put their pen at the service of the cinema industry, although they had misgivings about the aesthetic integrity of the new art form. Journals and reviewers, however, saw positively the intellectual contribution to the screen as a means to stem the aesthetic degradation. Since directors and owners of movie theaters

proved to be only inclined to privilege profitable subjects, the only possible chance for film to gain artistic credibility seemed to be using works written by established literary masters.

Chapter III:3 furthers the aesthetic confrontation between cinema and legitimized theater, opening up a discussion around the disquieting changes Modernity brought into visual entertainment. Here, I explore the questions of cinema's artistic integrity through the theoretical work of Luigi Pirandello; his attempts at screenwriting are investigated within a wider reflection on the clutches of categorization in the arts. The cutting-edge ambitions of Luigi Pirandello, both as screenwriter and *metteur en scene*, are originally contextualized within the socio-cultural and political dynamics of Italy at the dawn of the 20th century. Pirandello's preoccupation for the future of legitimized theatre and the fierce advancement of the star system is seen under the lens of firsthand sources from journals of the time.

Boredom in theatrical productions was progressively pushing viewers towards lighter forms of entertainment, such as cafès-chantants and movie theaters. Bad acting, poor repertoires, and the lack of originality in the subjects for the stage were the main causes of theatrical debasement. The attraction that lavish film contracts wielded on actors, then, played its part in leaving the stage short of serious professionals. Pirandello's reflections on the mechanization of art in *Si gira...* highlight the aesthetic differences between cinematic and theatrical acting. At stake were the de-personalization of the actors' body and the suppression of their voice, two main ways that mechanical reproduction fell short of traditional theatre.

The issues around cinematic trickery are central to this chapter. The paradox around cinema is that it used deception as an agent while contemporaneously killing authenticity. As a result, cinematic deception is framed as a commercial construct finalized to sell fake realism to the public, which in the end undermined the moral value. Easy money in the film industry proved

to be detrimental to the cultivation of a talented artistry. The rapidity of cinema in conveying visual significance to the plot reflects the dynamics of velocity brought by modernity. These dynamics are looked at as symbolic of the alteration in perceptual experience.

The speed of automatic projections exposed viewers to a new mode of enjoying optical effects in the safe and protected environment of movie theaters. In the end, viewers cherished the aesthetic value of what the camera had the task to capture and experience the pleasures of looking per se. This increasing demand for visual effects led the film industry to invest money in spectacular productions. By looking into Guazzoni's *Quo Vadis?* and Pastrone's *Cabiria*, I examine the twofold condition of staging, trapped between the necessity to showcase realism and the urge to be spectacular in order to catch on the masses. Both films attest to the glorification of past national history, while providing evidence of the refinement reached in equipment and camera movements by 1912. Film was clearly moving towards the development of its own autonomous language, although critics and press in Italy seemed indifferent to these important developments. Journal articles and the 1920s writings show how a decade after the visual experimentalism of *Cabiria*, the intellectual circles were still discussing moral questions and the content of films, giving scarce credit to any originality of invention in style.

Pirandello's ambitions of innovative screenwriting are investigated within the wider cultural context of visual experimentation in the arts. Anton Giulio Bragaglia's idea of *Photodynamism* and the Futurists' theorization of modern velocity are reflected in Pirandello's screenwriting. In this chapter I read *Si gira...* as a work both mocking the obsession for grandiose scenography in filmmaking. Pirandello aimed at transcoding the literary text, turning it into a screenplay celebrative of the autonomous expressivity of cinematic language.

A final thought is devoted to the aesthetic changes brought into film language when the gestural expressiveness of silent films clashed with the new acting style requested by the rising sound industry. Pirandello's reflections in his seminal article *Se il film parlante abolirà il teatro*, along with the interviews he granted to the major Italian columnists, serve here as background to the investigation of his suggestive idea of *Cinematography*, the visionary and utopian marriage between music and screen. In a time period when the 'Talkies' were being made, Pirandello's idealistic cinema in music furthered the aesthetic preoccupation for the recognition of cinematic agency without the presence of words and a final effort to defend the visual autonomy of film language.

Chapter I

The Aesthetics of Visual Entertainment

1- The *Cinématographe* and its Predecessors: the Roots of New Visuality.

I'm just a storyteller, and the cinema happens to be my medium. I like it because it re-creates life in movement, enlarges it, enhances it, distills it. For me, it's far closer to the miraculous creation of life than, say, a painting or music or even literature. It's not just an art form; it's actually a new form of life, with its own rhythms, cadences, perspectives and transparencies. It's my way of telling a story.

Federico Fellini

On the night of December 28, 1895, the Parisian *Salon Indien*, located in the basement of the *Grand Café*, was filled to capacity with an audience paying to witness for the first time the *Cinématographe*, an apparatus capable of filming and projecting motion pictures on screen. As the chronicles of the occasion report, the inventors - brothers Louis and Auguste Lumière – left before the *première* began. Their father Antoine and the *impresario* Clément Maurice welcomed the thirty-three spectators, charged one Franc each for the twenty-five minute film. The inventors' absence did not diminish the sensational success of the screening of ten short films, to which the public responded with enthusiasm.¹ In his monograph on Louis Lumière, Georges Sadoul recounts how Georges Méliès and other influent filmmakers, impressed by the wonders of the revolutionary new apparatus, approached the Lumières after the performance with generous offers to purchase the *Cinématographe*:

¹ The program of the *soirée*, including the titles of the ten films screened, is contained in Rittaud-Hutinet, *Le Cinéma des Origines*, p. 35. Among the vast bibliography reporting facts and anecdotes about the night of December 28, 1895, see among others Paoletta, *Storia del cinema muto*, Chardère, *Le Roman des Lumière*, Rittaud-Hutinet, *Le Cinéma des Origines*, and Sadoul, *L'Invention du Cinéma*.

Dès la fin de la séance, je (Georges Méliès) faisais des offres à M. Lumière pour l'achat de ses appareils pour mon théâtre. Il refusa. J'avais pourtant été jusqu'à 10 000 F, somme qui me paraissait énorme. M. Thomas, obéissant à la même idée, offrait 20 000 F sans plus de résultat. M. Lallemand, directeur des Folies Bergères, allait jusqu'à 50 000 F. Peine perdue.²

Towards the end of the screening, I (Georges Méliès) made some offers to Mr. Lumière for the purchase of his apparatus for my theater. He refused. I had offered him up to 10,000 Francs, an amount that seemed enormous to me. Mr. Thomas, following the same idea, offered him 20,000 Francs, without a better result. Mr. Lallemand, the director of the Folies Bergères, got to up 50,000 Francs. It was all to no avail.³

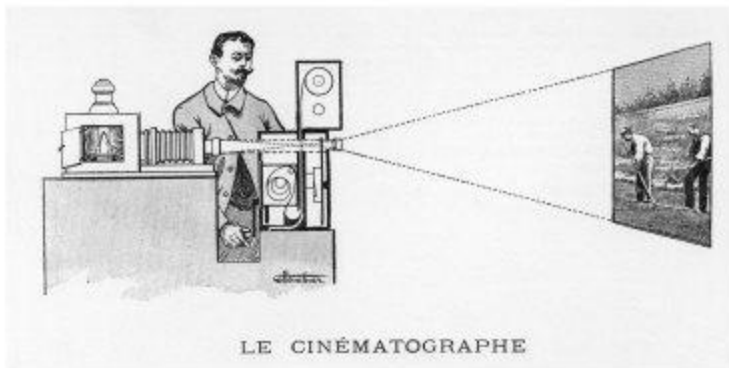


Figure 1. The *Cinématographe*. Picture in the public domain.

If the *Cinématographe* enchanted the spectators, the local press was generally indifferent, except for *La Poste* and *Le Radical*, in which the novelty was described as “une des choses les plus curieuses de notre époque” (“one of the most curious things of our time”); the name of the apparatus was deplored as “rébarbatif” (“uninviting”).⁴ The initial number of spectators attending the *Salon Indien* was barely sufficient to cover the costs of the rental agreement, but

² Quoted in Sadoul, *Louis Lumière*, p. 36.

³ Translations are my own, unless otherwise noted.

⁴ *Le Radical* reviewed the event on December 30, 1895. The review is quoted in Pasinetti, *Storia del cinema*, p. 27. On the premiere, see also Paoletta, *Storia del cinema muto*, p. 14.

before long the theater was making a profit, as the number of daily screenings rapidly increased from three to twenty, raising the revenues shot up to 2 500 Francs daily. The echo of the Parisian triumph was already spreading throughout and beyond the city, so much so that by January 25, 1896 there were two *Salons* operating in Lyon (Rittaud-Hutinet 34). In short, a new era had begun, ironically on the heels of a debut that had gone almost unnoticed. The extraordinary potential of the device would soon transform the collective imagination.

1896 might be remembered as the year during which the Lumière's *Cinématographe* embarked on its adventure around the world. In his *Storia del cinema*, Pasinetti chronicles this journey, which was long in terms of its geographic extension, yet short in terms of how quickly the new technology moved beyond France. In February the *Cinématographe* was heralded in London and Bruxelles, by April it was the marvel of Vienna and Berlin, not to mention having crossed the Atlantic for the American premiere. It arrived in Madrid, Serbia, Russia, and Romania by the end of July (29).

As for Italy, the diffusion of the *Cinématographe* touched the entire peninsula from north to south with the same speed that characterized the larger European reception, although in this case the process was layered and complex: it was influenced and regulated by the geographical and social heterogeneity typical of the country, especially in terms of regional dialects and local cultures (Pasculli 21-22). Rome, the first Italian city to host the Lumière apparatus, did so on March 12, 1896 at *La Lieure*, a photographic studio near the Trevi fountain. There was a special preview for insiders, followed by a public screening the following day. The success of the *Cinématographe* spread to Milan (March 29), Naples (March 30), Genoa (May 30), Livorno (June 30), and Venice (July 9). Surprisingly, the novelty reached Florence only the following year, on January 29, after having passed through smaller and culturally less influential cities,

such as Mantua (September 5), Modena (October 4), La Spezia (October 22), Forlì (December 6) and Cesena (December 29).⁵

The Florentine delay was due to the fact that other projectors for public screenings, successfully devised practically in conjunction with the Lumière's *Cinématographe*, were in circulation. This explanation is confirmed by Aldo Bernardini's detailed chronology of all the premier screenings in Italy starting with 1896, which includes a "prima" in Florence at *Palazzo Ceci and Rossi*, held on September 12, 1896, for which an Edison apparatus was used (*Cinema italiano delle origini* 153). If we consider the frantic pace of technological experimentation in the late nineteenth century, we should not be surprised that by the time the *Cinématographe* reached the Italian market, other similar projectors had already invaded it. On both sides of the Atlantic, inventors and scientists were aggressively pursuing new technologies in a ruthless fight for primacy in the sector. This ungovernable rivalry was certainly stimulated by the lack of a proper law for patents, as many scientists were so eager to exploit the immediate result of their research that they gave little thought to personal protection; applying for a patent was often forgotten in the struggle to invent something new.

Thomas A. Edison was probably one of the first inventors in the world to understand the dangerous consequences of free competition, especially in commercial terms; in 1897 he started a cutthroat fight for overseas patents, which jeopardized in some way the ascent of cinematography. But Edison's attempt to legislate a field of commerce where the only law was scooping the competition inevitably failed. And this failure confirmed that the future success of cinema would be the result of a synergy of discoveries, simultaneous experiments, and even

⁵ See Aldo Bernardini, *Cinema italiano delle origini*, pp. 163-164. The appendix to the book contains a very well detailed chronology of all the screenings that took place in Italy since 1896, also including the name of the apparatus used on those occasions.

unfair collaborations. As Ettore Pasculli points out, cinematography was a “laboratorio di tentativi” (“a laboratory of attempts”) (21), an art whose development was determined by countless contributors with intuitions, be they scientific or commercial. Louis Lumière himself, although he insisted that he was the real inventor of cinematography, acknowledged his predecessors for their precious research that brought the final success. Lumière pointed out that, with such an outcome already “in the air,” he was merely the fortunate first one to make the most of it:

Qu’ai-je fait ? C’était dans l’air. Les travaux antérieurs, ceux de Janssen, d’Edison et surtout de Marey et de ses élèves devaient un jour ou l’autre conduire au résultat auquel j’ai eu la chance d’arriver le premier (Chardère 283).

What have I done? It was in the air. The antecedent works of Janssen, Edison, and above all Marey and his pupils would sooner or later bring about the result of which I had the chance to get to first.

America with Edison and France with the Lumières competed for the primacy in inventing cinematography for several decades.⁶ Actually, the echo of this diatribe spread widely and rapidly also in those countries not directly involved in claiming rights to the invention, contributing to fuel a debate over the true discoverer of cinematography. An article in the Italian journal *La vita cinematografica* as late as 1910 reveals the enduring interest in chronicling the stages leading to motion pictures. The article advances the idea that Muybridge, whose *Zoopraxiscope* was devised in 1879, was the authentic founder of movie projection:

⁶ See Pasinetti, *Storia del cinema*, p. 28; Pasculli, *Milano cinema prodigio*, p. 22.

Per quanto si creda la cinematografia un'invenzione francese, c'è un certo Edward Muybridge, inglese di Xingston-on-Thames, trasferitosi giovanissimo negli Stati Uniti che [...] nel 1879 inventò [...] lo *Zoopriscope* [sic], ritenuto il primo apparecchio che venisse usato per la proiezione di [...] vedute.⁷

Even though cinematography is considered a French invention, there is an Edward Muybridge, an Englishman from Xingston-on-Thames, who, in his youth, moved to the United States, and [...] in 1879 invented the *Zoopriscope* [sic], which is considered the first apparatus to be used for [...] scenic projection.

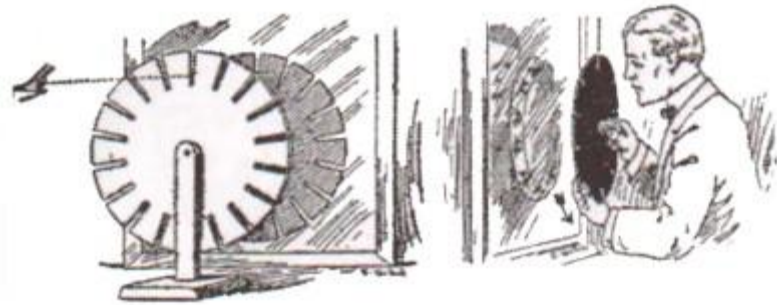


Figure 2. Functioning of the *Fenakitoscope*. Picture in public domain.

To ascertain the originator of cinematography is, however, of marginal importance to a theoretical discourse that aims to investigate the visual signs leading to a new form of mass entertainment. December 28, 1895, after all, must be viewed as a symbolic starting point for cinematography, as it is undeniable that many scientists were fascinated by the possibility of creating motion in an image long before the Lumières. If the French brothers are discredited for being the inventors, Plateau, Faraday, Horner, Duboscq, Rudge, Marey, Muybridge, and Edison are only a short list of the many device makers, some who linked their names to ambitious inventions, other times to bizarre or exotically labeled machines. All were striving after the common goal of giving reality to illusory movement. Mid-19th-century devices that exploit the

⁷ “Le origini della cinematografia,” in *La vita cinematografica*, Torino, 20 dic. 1910, Anno 1, No. 2, p. 7.

strategic positioning of images, in order to depict phases of motion, were many: Faraday's *Wheel of Life*, Plateau's *Fenakitoscope*, Horner's *Daedaleum* (also known as the *Devil's Wheel*), and Desvignes's *Zoetrope*, to name only those that were widely successful.⁸

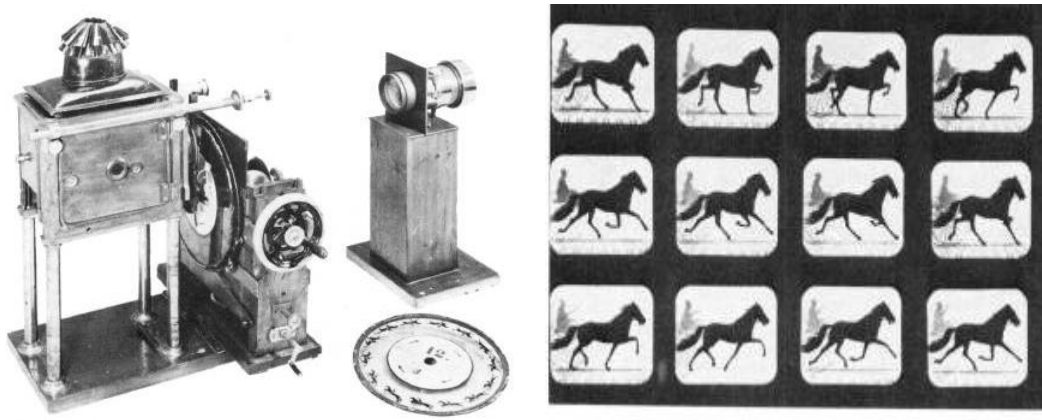


Figure 3. Muybridge's *Zoopraxiscope* and his galloping horses. Pictures in public domain.

These devices usually were made of a slotted disk around which were placed pictures portraying the different stages of an activity, such as dancing or running. When placed before a mirror and spun, the disk would reproduce a moving image to a spectator looking through the slots. Alternatively, a cylinder was embedded with interior illustrations and slits, through which the viewer would look at the spinning drawings; this was the design of the *Zoetrope* and the *Daedalum*, as well as numerous and more sophisticated inventions. In later versions, the quality of the images reproduced was vastly improved. Optical projectors like the *Stroboscope*, the *Kalotrope*, the *Polyrama Panoptique*, or the *Cosmoramic Stereoscope*, for instance, used photographs instead of painted pictures to achieve dimensional realism; the *Zoetrope* and the

⁸ See Russel Naughton's *Magic Machines: A History of the Moving Image from the Antiquity to 1900* for a detailed description, including the functioning, of all the optical machines devised from the antiquity to the 20th century.

Chromatope relied on colors, reproducing captivating revolving circles by means of octagonal drums. These early devices were little more than optical illusion toys, and supporting tools, such as mirrors, lamps, pictures, and the chromatic scale would be necessary to achieve more complex motion effects. The positioning of these paraphernalia was also crucial to the suggestion of the final result. Pepper's *Ghost*, used mirrors and lenses to project a ghostly image, for instance, while the *Stereoscope* created illusory depth by the optics of two converging pictures.⁹

Constant experimentation produced results mainly in the last two decades of the 19th century, when the persistent problem of inaccuracy was finally solved, thus laying the foundations for cinematography. The seminal work of scientists such as the French Étienne Jules Marey and the English Eadweard Muybridge initiated the age of motion pictures, though their initial experiments involved rather simple movements of animals in motion. Birds in flight held a particular fascination for Marey, while Muybridge was able to reproduce a lifelike representation of moving figures following a series of experiments with images of a horse in a full gallop. In 1881 he devised the *Zoopraxiscope*, which projected motion equine pictures from rotating glass disks, using images originally painted onto the glass.¹⁰ Obviously, the impression of motion depended on the rapidity of the spinning device, but the final effect was so realistic that Muybridge's apparatus may be considered the forerunner of future movie projectors.¹¹

For Muybridge, animal experiments were only the initial phase of his research that evolved into a combination of photography and motion studies. Marey widened the field of *chronophotography* thanks to his innovative idea of recording consecutive phases of movement

⁹ See Paul Burns's *The History of the Discovery of Cinematography* and the chronologically divided sections of Russel Naughton's *Magic Machines: A History of the Moving Image from the Antiquity to 1900*. See also Pasinetti, *Storia del cinema*, pp. 11-24.

¹⁰ Only later these drawings were printed photographically and colored by hand.

¹¹ See Stephen Herbert, *Eadweard Muybridge: The Kingston Museum Bequest*, also containing images from all the surviving zoopraxiscope discs.

on a photographic surface, whose outcome was the triumph of «animated photography» in the 1880s.¹² In 1888 Marey offered his first “cinematic” show, by presenting animated images placed on a long band of sensitive paper. Georges Sadoul considered Marey the inventor of the first camera.¹³

Almost all projectors in the 1880s used paper roll films, which allowed the display of images on screen by means of lamps and mirrors. Only after 1898, when George Eastman, the American inventor of roll film and founder of the Eastman Kodak Company, started commercializing celluloid, paper was replaced with the new transparent film. This innovative material facilitated motion picture experiments for its resistance and versatility, solving the problems related to paper fragility and allowing the viewing as a single continuous moving image. Needless to say, Eastman’s business boomed, as he shortly became the leading supplier of film stock in America and overseas.¹⁴ However, the majority of the innovators, such as Marey, continued to use paper in their experiments, even when celluloid was available. As far as 1891, in fact, Thomas Henry Blair’s company was providing Edison with transparent film for his *Kinetoscope*’s tests.¹⁵ The early inventors were interested in recording phases of motion more

¹² See Marta Braun, *Picturing Time: The Work of Etienne-Jules Marey*.

¹³ Georges Sadoul, *L’époque des pionniers*, p. 14.

¹⁴ See Barry Salt, *Film Style and Technology: History and Analysis* and Roberto Paoletta, *Storia del cinema muto*, p. 24. Pasinetti chronicles Eastman’s discovery in his *Storia del cinema dalle origini a oggi*, pp. 20-22.

¹⁵ Blair’s production was both intense and competitive, as he was the sole supplier of flexible celluloid film between the years 1891-1893. Blair’s activity shut down in 1896, after extenuating and long patent fights with Eastman, who eventually incorporated his competitor’s brand into the new Eastman Kodak Company. See Reese V. Jenkins, *Images and Enterprise: Technology and the American Photographic Industry, 1839 to 1925*, pp. 134-145 and Charles Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company*, pp. 87-88.

than in reproducing it for public viewing; therefore, their attention was still focused on the apparatus, while the act of projection was a secondary interest.¹⁶

¹⁶ See Roberto Paoletta, *Storia del cinema muto*, pp. 24-26.

2- Defining the ‘Performative’ Space of Street Amusement.

Culture relates to objects and is a phenomenon of the world; entertainment relates to people and is a phenomenon of life.

Hannah Arendt

If the leading research ambition since the early decades of the 19th century was to capture images and reproduce them on a screen, the same ambition gave also birth to countless optical devices that soon abandoned the space of laboratories, invading fairgrounds and street theaters. These devices, in fact, ended up enlivening the realm of the so-called popular entertainment, governed by the primary goal to please the shifting, short-lived tastes of the audience.

The urge to satisfy a broad public explains why 19th-century entertainment offered such diverse distractions, from theaters and variety performances, to magicians with their optical tricks, without disdaining traditional forms of spectacle, such as those of acrobats, trained animals, singers, and dancers. A distinction, however, should be made among such diversified forms of amusement, in order to understand why some of them were perceived as activities of ‘high’ level, while others were tagged instead as ‘low’ leisure. If ‘high’ culture included respectable and acknowledged theaters, formal buildings where only renowned and professional artists could perform, ‘low’ art was shown in second, even third-rate theaters with smaller ambitions: they aimed only to be filled to capacity and have a stage for the show. Street amusements were disqualified, as if they were part of a sub-category devoid of any artistic recognition. They were expressions of a low culture, to be intended as a derogatory term embracing all that had a mass appeal. This might be due to the fact that street amusement was

intricate and hard to frame for its extension into heterogeneous artistic fields and culturally diverse contexts. Moreover, I argue that the label of ‘artist’ itself, if referred to street theater, had to be rethought accordingly, considering the need to include showmen, conjurers, magicians, and jugglers now exploiting optical and pictorial illusionism into the realm of ‘professional’ performers.



Figure 4. The famous Professor Pepper performing at the Royal Polytechnic Institution. Picture in public domain.

Through the 19th century, in fact, these ‘artists’ frequently supplemented their tricks and gymnastics with the use of novel optical devices. If traveling performers initially brought their spectacle into private homes, thanks to the hospitality of their hosts, later they made their appearance in public squares, halls, auditoriums, and churches, motivated by the growing success. The operators of the most popular *Magic Lantern* followed the same path, moving from private to public spaces, eventually entering “The Royal Polytechnic Institution,” the most

famous venue for these shows in the 19th century, which opened in London's Regent Street in 1838.¹⁷

What emerges from this comprehensive outline is a new conception of the “performative” space. A legitimate indoor theater, halls, or auditoriums did not, in fact, guarantee that the performance would be regarded as ‘high’ quality entertainment. The most representative case in 19th-century was *Vaudeville*, a genre that has been traced by historians to Early-Renaissance France. It evolved into a formulaic, predictable, and mass-produced performance.¹⁸ The *Vaudeville* fed itself upon “stereotypes, situation-based plots and happy endings,” without ever

¹⁷ As a device projecting images on a wall or screen, the origins of the *Magic Lantern* could be traced very far back in history, since even Leonardo da Vinci was fascinated by the idea of projection and his experiments were made two centuries before the *Magic Lantern* appeared. The first accurate examples came into existence in the 17th century, when the device became a scientific instrument. However, by the end of the century, the *Magic Lantern* had already abandoned the realm of science to enter that of public entertainment. Throughout the 18th century technical and illuminants improvements allowed the creation of different types of show. By the mid of the 19th century the success of the *Magic Lantern* was consolidated and available to larger audiences. For an in-depth description of this device and its historical background, see Richard Balzer, *Optical Amusements: Magic Lanterns and other Transforming Images*. As for “The Polytechnic,” it was born from an idea of Charles Payne and housed a large exhibition hall, lecture theatre, and laboratories. Public attractions included exhibitions, working machines and models, and also demonstrations of photography (only from 1839). On the roof of the building, in 1841 Richard Beard opened the first photographic studio in Europe. “The Polytechnic” became known for its spectacular *Magic Lantern* shows, in particular Pepper’s most famous stage demonstrations of realistic ghosts by means of optical projections. Due to the patronage of Prince Albert, the Institution added the word Royal to its name. See Richard Altick, *The Shows of London*, pp. 382-390; see also Helmut and Alison Gernsheim, *The History of Photography*, for a deeper insight on “The Polytechnic” and its exhibitions of photography.

¹⁸ Olivier Bassan, a Norman poet and songwriter, is considered the initiator of this genre, as around the mid-15th century he founded a group named ‘The Companions of the Vau de Vire,’ from which the term *Vaudeville* likely derives. By the end of the 17th century, thanks to the contribution of the ‘Comédiens Italiens’ the use of songs and operatic parodies was already part of the *Vaudeville*. It was after the 1820s that the genre was reinvented and the role of songs was subordinated to plot and dialogues. For a more detailed chronology of the *Vaudeville* throughout the centuries, see Henri Gidel, *Le Vaudeville*, pp. 1-55.

gaining the respectability or aspiring to high cultural goals.¹⁹ This was due, in part, to the reliance on stereotyped formulas, showing little originality or imagination. According to Terni, the low status of *Vaudeville* was mainly the result of its “association with commercial-and especially bourgeois-culture” (225).

Nevertheless, the *Vaudeville* can be named among the most popular theatrical genre in the first half of the 19th century. In his *Histoire des Arts du Spectacle en France*, Dominique Leroy estimates that by the end of 1840 2.5 to 3 million spectators per year were seeing vaudeville shows in Paris alone (202). This genre was by far the most popular entertainment, attracting audiences far greater than melodrama and romantic theater (143).

Looking more closely, it appears that the success of an entertainment did not depend on any sort of official literary or artistic acknowledgment. Rather, the achievement of *Vaudeville* was indicative of commercial and cultural needs at the turn of the century, evidence of an emerging gap between artistic value and pejorative considerations of class. In this respect, the growing importance of popular appreciation demonstrates how the enthusiasm for novel forms of entertainment tended to overcome the question of aesthetic categorization. The socio-cultural heterogeneity of the audiences contributed to generate shifting tastes in the contexts of leisure, which were highly influenced by cultural and social contingencies.

While I will explore the shifts blurring the boundaries between high and low culture in the following section, giving special attention to class mixing before optical spectacles, what I

¹⁹ Jennifer Terni compares the *Vaudeville* to the twentieth-century television situation comedy, for which she claims it should be recognized as a model. Even though the *Vaudeville*'s cast was not fixed as it is in situation comedies, the other ingredients were the same: stereotypes, reversal of fortune, mistaken identities, and happy endings. Terni also looks at the “laugh track” in modern entertainment as an element whose precursor can be found in the *Vaudeville*'s “claque,” a group of professionals “paid to elicit desired audience responses by laughing, clapping, or booing at the right moment.” See Jennifer Terni, *A Genre for Early Mass Culture*, pp. 222-223.

intend to address here is how the disapproval of ‘street amusement’ was bound to the lack of institutionalized performative spaces and the absence of support from *élite* spectators. Discriminatory opinions such as those considering traditional theater the embodiment of the institutionalized form of art and ‘street amusement’ the exemplification of low-class culture are judgments to which categories of ‘true’ or ‘false’ do not apply. These statements posit an illegitimate marginalization based on an idealization stemming from conventional norms. Discriminatory criteria rely on categories decided *a priori*, which ignore contextual determinants, such as socio-cultural forces.

A careful evaluation of multiple external contingencies, instead, is essential to construe the meaning of judgmental statements, as well as that of events and actions. These meanings should be examined in relation to the context where they took shape, without assuming that contextual conditions and social phenomena depend on preexisting principles of legitimization. They produce their own grounds. Thus, the repetition of actions and events could be seen as a ‘performative’ way to instill convictions without relying on any verbal apparatus. This pragmatic process, for instance, invested the visual spectacles of pre-cinematography, which gained their ‘performative’ value thanks to the repetitiveness of actions and events. The act itself of the operators spinning the disc of their optical devices corresponded to a silent but effective form of communication producing persuasion. In this respect, the visual power of images was ‘performative’ and its impact over the viewers extremely intense. This consideration calls attention to the ‘performative’ quality in early devices and their cogency in orienting cultural trends. As a non-verbal action, the practice of spectators attending ‘street amusement’ and their fascination with its visual devices--despite their connotations of ‘low entertainment’ and ‘witch tricks’--was determinant in shaping popular taste. This confirms the necessity to enrich the

notion of ‘performativity’ with social considerations that look at people’s daily actions as acts influenced and shaped by standardized norms.

This concept is akin to Judith Butler’s idea of performative space, to be intended as the result of a number of actions producing change. Butler’s discourse relies on an ongoing transformation, which invests gender, identity, and social issues with the power of breaking cultural boundaries. In Butler’s words, ‘performativity’ is described as “that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains” (*Bodies that Matter* 2). Performativity is always linked to reiterating conventions that constitute the norm. Individuals’ mechanical tendency to reproduce what already exists, however, does not undermine the role of repetition, in which lie the resources to resist to and subvert the norms. Hence, following the social theory grounded in Butler’s notion of performativity, cultural conventions that make a theatrical performance traditionally accepted should be seen as those power forces hampering the creative potential of emergent genres. In other words, performativity might be construed as an insight into the process of artistic subjection (i.e. street amusement dominated by traditional theater).

When applying to 19th-century visual devices the hierarchical discrimination that Butler applied to questions of gender and identity, we see that the same bias works nevertheless as a ‘performative,’ constituting the very act of prejudice that it performs. In the preface to *Gender Trouble*, Butler pointed at the unstable notion of gender, how “female” and “woman” are unfixed definitions because they both “gain their troubled significations only as relational terms” (xxix). I would claim that the same instability could be seen in the forms of entertainment and their modes of diffusion before the advent of cinematography, with particular reference to their legitimacy or dismissal as true forms of art. In this respect, 19th-century categories of artistry should be

reinterpreted and construed in a perspective contesting the authority of traditional performance on a common ground. Butler's assumption that gender should not be ascribed as a "locus of agency from which various acts follow," but rather as an "identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (*Gender Trouble* 179) seems to attain the process leading to the definition of pre-cinematography artistic identity.

Butler's notion of performative acts can be brought to bear on the appearance of new expanded forms of amusements such as Vaudeville, which repositioned the boundaries between high and low culture, social class and "popular entertainment." The audience's positive reaction, which we can infer from reviews and commentaries, can be analyzed as attributing a value to the new genres. The 'repeated actions' of attending street theaters and optical shows, paying for tickets and responding to advertisement served several functions. First, it expressed a solidarity that would give authority to the new entertainment (one in which vast audiences were for the first time conceivable). Second, it served as a catalyst to innovations, both technical and artistic, disrupting the centuries old reliance on standard classical forms, or spectacles rooted deeply in folklore or religious tradition. In this new cultural/economic environment, appealing theatrical actions, from a man swallowing fire, to a show of dog tricks and situation comedies, had a potency to change tastes and audiences expectations. I am arguing here, following the logic of Butler, that our notions of what constitutes high culture and low, popular entertainment and pure art, are relational terms, terms that shift and change in time and place.

No longer could the impresario rely on the approval of a small class of elite viewers. Inventions and discoveries in technology sped up the process of reassessing the value of art, subverting artistic hierarchies by bringing in material that artists in past centuries did not have at their disposal. The invention of photography and later the moving picture gave rise to new

repetitive behaviors and repeated actions. Convention hierarchies of artistic genre were subverted by fantasized performances in the crowds, which, though in contrast to traditional modes of mimetic art, still aimed to imitate reality.

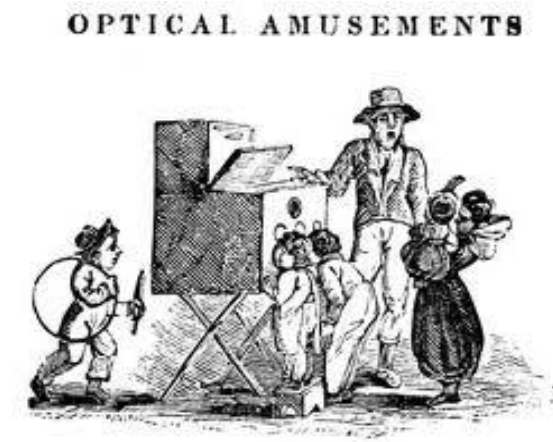


Figure 5. An itinerant showman performing in the square. Picture in public domain.

I claim that street amusement, especially when enlivened with new optical devices, was excluded from consideration as a true artistic creation, not only for its dismissal from a recognized performative space, but on account of its very novelty. Even the amateurish ‘low’ labeling this alternative entertainment was principally dictated by the general incapacity to understand innovations, especially when these mirrored historical and socio-cultural mutations, with their uncanny and still-to-be-decoded signs. I would argue, in fact, that the input of ‘low’ amusements was determinant to the formation of a novel visual mass culture.

Without a pre-established performative space, the first optical devices and the projectors that appeared in fairs and amusement parks spread mainly through itinerant artists recalling man theaters who traveled centuries earlier. Like the street performers, the early spectacles with projectors were excluded from the domain of ‘pure art’; despite its auspicious beginnings, cinema as well would be from the start summarily dismissed as lacking the dignity, grace, and

refinement of true theater. In *Cinema italiano delle origini: gli ambulanti*, Aldo Bernardini points out that, in the early days of projectors and moving picture machines, the performers were itinerant showmen who toured the countries with their apparatus strapped to their backs, offering shows that would amuse and simultaneously puzzle the audience. Such a propagandistic activity was vital in leading to the formation of a fascination with the visual, starting from early experimental projections in pseudo-theaters and fair booths to the permanency of legitimate theater houses (9-10).



Figure 6. *The Camera Obscura*. Picture in public domain.

Film historian Gian Piero Brunetta coined the term ‘icononauta’ as a theoretical index to frame the activity of those ‘icon navigators’ who helped images travel throughout the centuries, giving their contribution to the birth of a new visuality. Brunetta stresses the centrality of the gaze in the conquest of the world of images, where “eyes” functioned as “rowing paddles” (13). The use of pictures to register and communicate distant realities had remote origins, but primarily optical devices starting in the 16th century enhanced the mechanics of fantasizing.

From Leonardo da Vinci's discoveries²⁰ to the intuitions of Renaissance alchemists and magicians, the astonishment for newness was wed to a form of popular entertainment, which traveled from village to village, from squares to fairs displaying visual wonders before the people's eyes.



Figure 7. An itinerant showman with his peep-box. Picture in public domain.

Significantly, this astonishment already contained the features of a mass show, which was dedicated to a multiple audience, rather than a single viewer. Thus, the invention and the support

²⁰ In his *Codex Atlanticus* (1515), Leonardo da Vinci described a mechanism to draw buildings and landscapes, which he called *Oculus Artificialis*. Leonardo's *Oculus* was later named *Camera Obscura* and consisted in a pinhole box exploiting the effects of natural light. When external light passes through a small hole in a box's darkened interior, an inverted image appears on the wall opposite the hole. Interestingly, the image preserves color and perspective. As the image can be projected, the *Camera Obscura* is considered the precursor of photography. However, some historians date the invention of the *Camera Obscura* long before Leonardo da Vinci's discovery. David Hockney claims that the Arabian scholar Alhazan made use of this device in 1029 to watch a sun eclipse (240), while Jan Campbell holds that already in the 4th century b.C. Aristotle used the *Camera* for the same experiment (114). At any rate, Leonardo's description of the device is proved to be the most accurate and advanced.

of optical toys and illusion devices could but consolidate this trend. Moreover, throughout the centuries men's obsession with the unknown was gradually satisfied by a virtual gratification coming from the chance to navigate the world by means of pictures. This theme anticipates Heidegger's idea of the 19th century as "the age of the world picture," to paraphrase the title of his work, and the characteristics belonging to the modern individuals. The conviction to dominate the world by images and the consequent reduction of the world to a view implied a new conception of visibility, whose truth has to be found in its very representability. Heidegger's modern subject epitomizes this visual autonomy, although the liberation from traditional source of authority appears inextricable from "the fundamental event of the modern age" identifiable with "the conquest of the world as picture" (85). In the 19th century, in fact, pictorial illusions and thirst for realism tended to converge, resulting in the production of numerous *Panoramas*, huge paintings circling the audience, and their more elaborated versions, the *Dioramas*, enriched with lights and moving platforms for the spectators, which simulated natural effects.

3- Orienting the Spectatorial Gaze: The *Panoramas* and their Followers.

Life proceeds as a series of optical illusions,
artificial needs, and imaginary sensations.

Alexander Herzen

The curiosity for the foreign and the attempt to satisfy it pictorially was already deeply rooted in the late 18th century, when the first *Panoramas* appeared. In 1787, English portrait painter Robert Barker patented his invention, which he called *Nature à coup d'œil* (*Nature at a glance*). He replaced his French label, intended no doubt to confer prestige on his invention, with the Greek derived *Panorama*. “The technical term coined to denote a new type of round paintings,” writes Oettermann, “came to be applied generally to mean ‘circular vista, overview (from an elevated point) of a real landscape or cityscape’” (6-7). Dimensions that commonly extended to 250 square meters, *Panoramas* offered 360-degree views of battles, landscapes, historical scenes, and urban spaces (Comment 24). Of course, these canvases caught the attention of audiences, by their moral and historical content as much as by their pulling together of the real and the imaginative, and thus gave viewers the impression of accessing the foreign.

This illusory accessibility to faraway lands was certainly enhanced by the addition of informative exotic details. In advertising Robert Burford’s *Panorama of Hong Kong*, for instance, the journal *The Living Age* praised its remarkable fidelity to nature, pairing it with the ability to help viewers familiarize with the novelties of Chinese art:

A nearer approach by art to reality has never been witnessed; and the great merit of the panorama is, that while a genuine Chinese view, with all its most striking

characteristics, is presented, the materials are selected with a painter's skill, and so managed as to form a most harmonious picture. The ingenious artist, we make no doubt, will find this the most attractive of all his productions.²¹

The pictorial suggestions, powerful as they must have been after the age of small, plain air paintings, turned spectators into astonished witnesses of a larger than life yet realistic scene or actual historical moment. This new genre, with its dynamic imagery that pushed the visual field, engaged peripheral vision, and seemed stunningly realistic, captured the imagination of spectators. I argue that we can certainly trace to this invention the idea of cinema's "big screen." Furthermore, every effort was made to engage the direct participation of the viewers and thrust them into the scene depicted; they stood on a central platform that rotated under a skylight, immersed in a visual experience that was, in fact, a moving picture. Particular lighting effects were developed and implemented. Barker, for instance, in order to let natural light flood the canvases, built two windows into the roof of his Panorama building, the first purpose-built panorama construction in the world (Comment 7-8).

Strategically placed lights and appealing images, however, were not sufficient to convey the realism Barker had in mind. Skillful painting techniques, for instance, played an important role in achieving that multitude of interacting points of view that would distinguish a Panorama from a traditional work of art and allowed the viewers' eyes a 360-degree rotation. Early 19th century panorama artists used optical devices, such as *Daguerreotypes* and *Magic Lanterns*, tracing with painstaking accuracy the original design, before ever taking out the oils and brushes. In the end, the illusory outcome was so impressive that no viewer could perceive the fiction behind a deceiving technique. Artists were forced to develop ways to deal with and exploit the potential of a curved pictorial field; some lines, in order to appear straight, had to be painted with

²¹ *The Living Age*, Vol.1, Issue 6, June 22, 1844, p. 350.

just the precise curve (Oettermann 52-54). These techniques were not entirely new, of course, but from the time of the cave painting the surface medium was flat, canvas, paper, tabletop, board, and so forth.

Interestingly, as the audience's expectation of visual accuracy and verisimilitude increased, the need for artistic deception grew, as sloppy detailing and inaccuracy would compromise the success. Viewers with specialized knowledge could be uncompromising in pointing out inaccuracies that they may very well have not noticed in smaller, or less faithful, depictions in earlier artworks:

[Accuracy] would be demanded by the public [...]; visitors would be military history buffs, and some might have taken part in the battles [...], aristocracy and landed gentry would know all the breeds of horses shown, ladies would note details of clothing, and sailors would point out errors in the masts and rigging of ships" (Oettermann 52).

If truthful details were necessary to satisfy the viewers' visual, no less crucial was the painters' ability to select the best point of view in order to offer the largest and most informative perspective. In this respect, Robert Burford's *Panorama of Paris* was particularly appreciated for its comprehensive scenario, which offered visual details tagged to insights into architecture and history:

In painting his new Panorama, Mr. Burford has achieved one of his usual successes, adhering to the principle, which has served him so well on former occasions, viz., that of selecting such a point of view as to secure great variety of object. In the view of Paris, the spectator is supposed to stand at the entrance of the Champs Élysées, and in every direction there is some object of architectural or of historical interest. [...] The view on every side is animated by groups characteristic of the present state of France. [...] In another part a group is

parading a tree of liberty, which is about to be erected. The details of the panorama are represented with the usual accuracy and knowledge of effect.²²

For the public, the viewing of *Panoramas* was an experience quite diverse from that of viewing a framed portrait, still life, or landscape. The scenarios surrounding the observer of a work of art in a museum were very different from the pre-set environment of the Panorama auditorium, which was essentially arranged for the spectators' sensorial deception. The audience was immersed in the "Faux Terrain" of a gloomy "three-dimensional interior" resembling the dark room of a movie theater and was perceptually disoriented by a source of light hidden behind the canvas, which magically illuminated the images (Grau 367).

Some audience members, immersed in this overpowering visual field, experienced negative psychosomatic effects, such as dizziness and sickness, so much so that Panoramas would be accused, paradoxically, of disorienting the spectators and disconnecting them from reality (Grau 371). The psychic disorientation in front of the feigned reality closely resembled physical malaise, thus suggesting to some critics that artists were engaged in a premeditated effort to do harm. To get to the central platform, the audience was directed through a long, dark corridor, followed by a spiral staircase guaranteed to destabilize the audience.

If the viewers' central positioning strategically facilitated their fall into the fantasy of the pictorial space, I claim that such a specific placement held major implications worth of investigation to construe the theoretical and functional value of the *Panoramas* in the late 19th-century visuality. While from their ideal perspective the audience felt emboldened from the reproduced reality as if they were at the center of this 'new world,' this confidence was illusory. At the same time, centrality functioned as an indirect strategy to supervise their emotions. A

²² *The Times*, May 26, 1848, p. 5.

central positioning forced viewers to turn their eyes in both directions in order to see the painting in its entirety, without missing any part of it. Furthermore, entering the auditorium from the middle of the room meant the immediate envelopment of the public in the mesmerizing effect of the scene; and since the center of the painting was undeniably the emblem of fairness and equilibrium, the strategic positioning masked the illusion of the spectators to master explorative freedom. Most importantly, the circular shape of the building demanded the rotation of the viewer's body.

Foucault's analysis of prison architecture and the rise of surveillance in modern society, famously articulated in *Discipline and Punish* (19), informs my understanding of the way these early visual spaces functioned. Foucault argued that "the exercise of discipline presupposes a mechanism that coerces by means of observation; an apparatus in which the techniques that make it possible to see induce effects of power, and in which, conversely, the means of coercion make those on whom they are applied clearly visible" (170). For Foucault, a system of power is implicit in the dynamics of seeing and being watched; a concept that when applied to the systematic organization of Foucault stresses the inducement of "effects of power" used in the disciplining of crowds, exercised by means of invisible control. Foucault also traced a specific architecture of control, according to which space appears to be organized and delimited with the purpose of controlling. Similar strategies of indirect control are hidden, I would suggest, behind the placement of the spectators in the Panoramas. Such operation occurs in the isolation and confinement of the public to the platform encircled by the painting, and their exposure to a pre-defined viewing. Immobilized by the mesmerizing effects of the illuminated images and the visual novelty, spectators were unable to perceive such a manipulative domination over them. The audience, brought to the viewing by a destabilizing entrance through a dark stairwell,

overwhelmed by the unusual scale of the perspective picture plane, set in the center of a revolving stage carefully lit to heighten the powerful visual impact, was nonetheless completely imprisoned by the controlling force of the artist and producer.

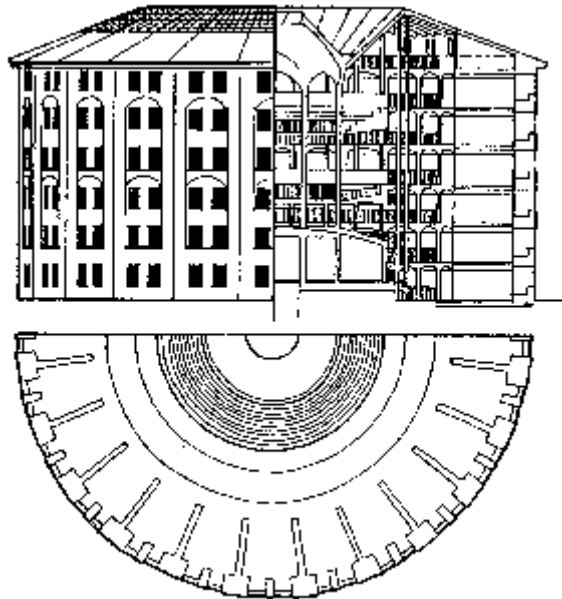


Figure 8. *The Panopticon*. Picture in public domain.

More importantly, however, space for Foucault becomes the metaphor for discipline in his chapter *The Panopticism*. Mixing historical analysis with theoretical speculations, Foucault demonstrates that architectural space is not merely an enclosed and restricted area of a constructed building: it is a strategic container in which to control people. In such a definite space, individuals have a fixed collocation that fosters the regulation of the disciplinary device. Foucault considers Jeremy Bentham's prison building design called *Panopticon* as a trope for the way the modern world controls and normalizes the masses. Bentham's prison model, in Foucault's reading, is stripped of its purpose as location for criminals, becoming instead a loaded symbol of hierarchical structures and extremely sophisticated methods of manipulation and domination.

The performance space built to display the Panorama, I would argue, is informed by similar mechanisms of control, a manipulation that places the confined viewer under the thumb of the artist, exposed and vulnerable. Foucault claimed that disciplinary power was meticulously constructed not only by means of architectural space, but also by a profound awareness of the human body and human behavior. He writes:

What was then being formed was a policy of coercions that act upon the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, and its behavior. The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it (138).

The individual, within this abusive system of manipulatory forces, can no longer be viewed as natural and organic, but rather “constructed” by a setting of inescapable surrounding forces (135). Inside the Panorama showroom, viewers display the traits of the Foucauldian “docile bodies,” over which the forces of power operate with strategies. The ‘docility’ of the audience becomes a function of consumption, as their ‘bodies’ participate in the mechanism of production, tending to generate economic profit. In fact, the viewers’ behavioral analysis took on a pivotal role in the process of commercial exploitation of spectatorship. Valuing the audience’s reactions, their tastes and surprise, as well as controlling their positioning and the route of their tour were all controls designed to improve the economic success of the entertainment. Panorama viewers were guided to respond to specific commercial stimuli, such as a bombarding propaganda and targeted advertising aiming to play on the curiosity for the new medium. More specifically, audiences were commonly attracted with the promise to let them experience the thrill of being part of real historical events. Such an approach was commonplace since the Panoramas beginnings, as this 1796 advertising attests:

Admiral Cornwallis's unparalleled retreat is likewise open, where observers may feel themselves between the Fire of the British Squadron and the French Fleet, at the time when the [unreadable] action commenced. The English, with seven ships, [battled?] and beat off the French Fleet, consisting of 27. Admittance to each, One Shilling.²³

Among the most popular and effective strategies for Panoramas advertising was an appeal to the audience's appetite for large historical scenes, epic in size:

The public are (*sic.*) respectfully informed, that the Representation of Lord Bridport's Victory on the 23rd of June, 1795, off L'Orient, is now open at the Panorama, Leicester Square. The scene is taken when the greatest number of ships was engaged, and affords a fine view of 17 capital ships in action, together with a near prospect of Ille de Groa, and a view of Port Louis, the River Quimperly, and a considerable extent of the Coast of France.²⁴

The promotion of history and the geographical appeal of faraway lands through public announcements in newspapers continued, as the 1810 advertising for Barker's *The Siege of Flushing* confirms, whose main visual attraction consisted of naval battles and towns set on fire, without leaving out the consolidated fascination geography had over the popular imagination:

Walcheren - *The Siege of Flushing* is now open, in Henry Aston Barker's Panorama, Leicester Square, representing the combined attack by land and see, the town in flames, the whole Island of Walcheren, the West Scheidt Cadsand, and South Beveland; taken on the spot by H.A. Barker. – A Grand View of Malta, is also open in the Lower Circle. – Admittance to each painting One Shilling. – Open from Ten till dusk.²⁵

Interestingly, the “Lower Circle,” where *The Grand View of Malta* was displayed in concomitance with *The Siege of Flushing*, makes clear the structure of the Rotunda in Leicester

²³ *The Times*, March 21, 1796, p. 1.

²⁴ *The Times*, September 6, 1796, p. 1.

²⁵ *The Times*, July 23, 1810, p. 1.

Square, which was conceived to house two Panoramas at the same time. Furthermore, in 1810 the price of the ticket to enter the Panorama House was still 1 Schilling, as it was in 1796, and also the daily shows maintained the standard time frame “from 10 till dusk.”

The specification of cost and duration of the exhibition was a common closing formula at the end of advertisements, which can be construed as a further tactic for the viewers’ inducement. Cheap tickets were part of a pricing strategy designed to maximize spectators and profits, while at the same time excusing any inadequacies of the productions itself, any accusations of artistic overreaching, any prejudices against the uneducated or poorer classes; like the Vaudeville shows and early optical spectacles, the audience was demographically decidedly of a different sort from those in many traditional theaters, for which costs and class consciousness alone precluded the entrance of multitudes. The ticket price for the first time in history, perhaps, allowed for the regular and even repetitive viewing of people from all social ranks, and therefore the material on view was necessarily adapted to fit these economic considerations.

As we have seen with Vaudeville and street amusement, questions of class influenced the legitimacy of a performance as expression of artistic value; the Panoramas, despite their popularity, held the same precarious status in terms of artistic legitimacy. This was a consequence of two major considerations. Firstly, the ‘panoramists’ made their living outside the traditional networks and exploited more profitable commercial trends. Secondly, the Panorama reliance on illusionism as the primary goal was also looked at with distrust if not dismissal. As we have seen for the tricks displayed by early optical toys, the art of deception was judged inferior to serious art and consequently excluded from artistic recognition. The mimicking of the real was a product tailored for popular tastes, which required little knowledge of any particular

genre of art or scholarly insight. Viewers got more upset by the shiver running down their spine upon entering the rotunda, rather than by aesthetic doubts on the legitimacy of art. Audiences essentially marveled at the reality of the depicted scenes before their eyes and were surprised at the prodigious results of technology. In her study on early mass culture, Vanessa Schwartz argues that the Panorama's illusion "lay not so much in the actual quality of the panorama's realistic representation of a particular place (for few in the audience would have stood before the actual site and therefore could judge the quality of the copy) as in its technological illusionism" (153).

If inexpensive tickets, targeted advertising, and the exhibition's extended hours of operation contributed to the appeal of Panoramas to a mass public, the value of these paintings should also be placed within the rising consumer culture of the later nineteenth century. The Panoramas hyper-realism, the luminosity of the images, in contrast to the darkness of the surroundings can be read as modern deceiving visual techniques, behind which we can see the hand of consumer culture, selling artwork to the largest number of viewers, in a way that does not set as a goal refinement and sophistication so much as surprised awe before a wonderful amusement.

The ritualized procedures accompanying Panorama viewers in their process of visual initiation should be analyzed in relation with similar theatrical/cinematographic modes of looking and considered as the forerunning *modus operandi* of cinematography. The total immersion in the depicted scene enhanced by the Panorama canvas with its invisible edges and images that seemed to go on forever recalls the surface of the cinematic screen. Both the canvas and the screen did succeed in eliminating the two forces that threaten perfect illusion of an image, the limiting frame and the intrusive elements of the spectator's surroundings. Skillful

manipulation of perspective and lighting, as well as the black environment of the Rotunda and the central sitting of the audience, for instance, inevitably channeled the viewers' gaze towards the illuminated scene before their eyes. These conditions of viewing were similar to those of theater and cinema, where watching a moving image in the dark, in the company of strangers, surrounded by a black room could but solely direct the spectatorial gaze towards the screen or stage where the action took place.



Figure 9. Audiences before a Diorama. Picture in public domain.

Despite these similarities, however, there were also equally important differences between the conditions of viewing Panoramas with the theater and cinema, which are worth considering at some length. In a theater, viewers are expected to forget their own individuality in order to merge into the actors' reality, in an utter unity with them, which furthers the sense of the representation. The theatrical space as well actively encourages this transfusion with its dim lights; both in the case of the area occupied by the audience and the stage with the actors, we can talk of a 'true' space. Everything the public sees in a theater is staged before their eyes. On the contrary, for the Panoramas or the cinema the visual scene is an image of reality.

This ontological contrast between traditional theater and the emerging genre of cinema, with all of its preceding visual experiments that I have been analyzing up till now, raises interesting issues involving the notion of the ‘time’ of staged action. When the actors move on ‘real ground’, they also act out a narrative that unfolds live, although the action of the narrative does not generally coincide with the duration of the performance on stage. On the contrary, neither the painted canvas of the Panorama nor the cinematic spectacle have the same theatrical liveness, as images on screen depict a fictional story and actors and sounds are not ‘real’. Furthermore, in the case of cinema also the signifier –which is the narrated account- is absent, for the narrative, too, is recorded.

If the theatrical performance stages the exact reality, cinema is technologically driven. As a consequence, elements of realism in cinema are mixed up with the wonders of technology, which inevitably alter the traditional viewing experience. I would argue that reality is more authentically perceivable on the stage rather than on the screen, as acting in theater exemplifies the genuineness of human emotions. When compared to screen actors, theater performers have to be strongly convincing in order for the audience not to reject the performance as incredible or false.

Interestingly, although the modern photographic/cinematic media offer the audience a reality decidedly less immediate than a live performance, they are no less captivating. The French film theorist Christian Metz argues that the fascination with cinema is connected to its peculiar «imaginary» power. He observes that the cinema represents imaginatively some event or content, but at the same time is already a construct of the imagination. To experience a movie requires already a suspension of disbelief, even before we know what the movie is purporting to reveal:

What is characteristic of the cinema is not the imaginary that it may happen to represent, but the imaginary that it *is* from the start, the imaginary that constitutes it as a signifier (the two are not unrelated; it is so well able to represent it because it is it; however it is it even when it no longer represent it). The (possible) reduplication inaugurating the intention of fiction is preceded in the cinema by a first reduplication, always-ready achieved, which inaugurates the signifier (Metz 44).

If the imaginary arises from the mysterious combination of ‘presence’ and ‘absence’, in the cinematic process the ‘absence’ is treated in a way that it becomes the signifier. If we apply Metz’s claim to the viewing of Panoramas, the concepts of ‘present’ and ‘absent’ are dependent on fantasy. I claim, in fact, that for Panorama viewers the act of looking unfolds a narrative that relies almost exclusively on the spectatorial ability to flesh out mental images. Pictorial representations could satisfy the visual curiosity for faraway lands and exotic places, while the images remained inert, incapable of narrating a live story in the same way as a live stage performance.

Panorama viewers, however, certainly had lower visual sophistication than theater audiences and future cinemagoers, especially because such visual illusions were still primeval. Predictable in their curiosity, audiences were essentially eager for the novel entertainment. But it would be misleading to suggest that the Panorama viewing was nothing more than ‘low-class entertainment’ for naïve viewers. Rather, these paintings requested eyes able to grasp the value of a virtual tour as the synthesis of a real journey and an audience willing to make a knowing experience out of them.

In fact, newspapers and magazine articles repeatedly stressed how the Panoramas recreated the same immediacy and the same sensations, as one would have experienced first

hand in front of the scene. A reviewer from *The Times* of April 24, 1789, for instance, suggests that the Royal English family, “who rarely go abroad,” could benefit from the vicarious experience provided by Barker’s Panorama:

This Artist brings the wished for scene before them, one entire uninterrupted circle, placing them in the center, where they can see the same as those who travel ... and having seen it personally, they can retain it perfectly in idea, the same as nature could impress.²⁶

While Panorama paintings were intermediaries shortening the distance from the foreign and distant, they did more than provide merely large picture postcards. These scenarios came to gain such a high reputation for accuracy, built as much on marketing as on artist technique, that they were regarded as ‘true’ reproduction of the world outside, unquestionable in terms of authenticity. It is worth noting here that paintings and engravings of earlier times never attained such a visual authority. Seeking to motivate the Panorama’s superiority, I claim that the presence of painters “on the spot”, which was widely stressed in the advertising campaign, as we have seen, was a main factor in convincing the viewers of the genuineness of the scenes portrayed. Furthermore, the sizes of the canvases—enhanced with skillful lighting and perspective tricks, as we have seen-- were certainly of no less importance in thrusting the viewers into the scene. This advertising for *The Battle of Trafalgar*, for instance, conveys the impression of the convincing combination of gigantic sizes (10,000 square feet) with the Panoramic ability “to give the perfect idea” of the sea battle, as if viewers had really been part of it:

Now open the glorious Battle of Trafalgar, which pictures exhibits and sail of the line, painted on 10,000 square feet of canvas. Many of the English ships are

²⁶ *Times*, 24 April 1789, p. 4. Quoted in Peter Otto, *Between the Virtual and the Actual*, p. 19.

closely engaged with the enemy; and the whole is so arranged to give a perfect idea of the mode of attack in two lines, as well as the engagement. Edinburgh will continue open a few weeks longer. Admittance to each painting 1s. Open from 10 till dusk.²⁷

In the years to follow the Panoramas' reputation of faithful reality 'reproducers' could only but consolidate, becoming also crucial prerogative for commercial ends. This 1861 advertisement demonstrates that once Panoramas became available for sale and hire, their peculiar visual "correctness" was an essential feature to make them more desirable on the market:

PANORAMA for SALE or HIRE. A large Panorama, comprising a series of views, unequalled for their beauty and correctness, with blocks for wood cuts, to be sold, a bargain. May be seen on application to Mr. John Blagrove, concert agent, No. 32, Langham Street, Portland Place, W.²⁸

In discussing the viewers' confidence in the Panorama's faithful portrayal of the real, criticism contemporary to us has often highlighted the capacity of this pictorial show to respond to the need to dominate the absolute, which Comment interprets as a feature of the 19th century (19). Before a Panorama, crowds felt "that they were masters of the world" (136); Miller points out that, at a time of increasing growth and colonialism, popular audiences had a "craving for visual-- and by extension physical and political-- control over a rapidly expanding world" (35). Panoramas chronicled not only the spatial transition, but, as Miller writes, "the passage of time and the grand sweep of history" (*ibidem*). They promoted a particular view of past events and

²⁷ *The Times*, July 16, 1806, p. 1.

²⁸ *The Times*, November 5, 1861, p. 1.

nationalistic spirit. In addition to providing historical narratives, in fact, Miller holds that panoramas served as public educators, teaching on the new areas being colonized by Europe. After viewing a Panorama, for instance, Napoleon recognized the possibilities of these paintings to offer particular views of history with nationalistic ends and ordered the construction of ten more Panorama buildings on the Champs Élysées. Miller stresses how panoramic activity frequently coincided with moments of revived nationalism both in France and Germany, around 1830 and 1870-71, the period of the Franco-Prussian War (58).

These critical interpretations clearly echo Benjamin's conviction that "Panoramas are at the same time an expression of a new attitude toward life" (*Paris, the Capital* 6); a statement suiting in particular the urban setting represented in these types of paintings, which was one of the most appreciated and portrayed subjects, besides sea battles and historical events. Benjamin remarks that throughout the centuries "the city dweller" in light of his "political supremacy over the provinces" has always attempted "to bring the countryside into town." The Panoramas, instead, reverse this tendency, as "the city opens out to landscape" (*ibidem*). The urban space that Benjamin takes into account is essentially that of nineteenth-century Paris and his reflections develop mainly upon the visual characteristics that the Panoramas assumed in the second half of the century. At any rate, the tendency that Benjamin highlighted in the Panorama painting to let the city space transform into landscape is a central argument, which anticipates the discourse on the mobility of the visual practice linked to the experience of the *flâneur*.

Burford's *Panorama of Venice* (1860), for instance, confirms the tendency to portray the architectural features of the city, embracing the view of the surrounding area and making the landscape around an essential part of the visual appeal:

Forty years ago a picture of Venice was the novelty exhibited in the cylindrical rooms adjoining Leicester square, and now Mr. Burford returns to the same city, which he contemplates from the same point of view, and at the same season-viz., that of the Carnival. In the old picture, however, the marked figures of the work were much more conspicuous than in the new one, in which the architectural features of Venice receive most attention, while the view itself has been considerably altered by the comparatively recent erection of the Patriarchal Palace in the Place of Flowers. The spectator is supposed to stand on an imaginary elevation in the great square of St. Mark, whence looking westward he sees the world-famed Basilica, with all its majestic details. This, the Campanile, and the Torre dell'Orologio, are the chief architectural objects in the picture; but the Ducal Palace is also visible on the side of the Piazzetta, and the granite columns fronting the sea stand prominently in sight. The other side of the picture-less imposing, but forming an admirable contrast to the eastern view-comprises the regular line of buildings composing the northern and southern sides of the great square. The canal existence of Venice is not indicated in the panorama, the only water visible being the small portion of the sea shown between the Campanile and the Ducal palace; but this is quite enough to prove anew Mr. Burford's art in copying the liquid mirror, while the architectural features of his work are as perfect as ever.²⁹

The same *Panorama of Venice* by Burford was advertised in *The Times* a few months later, in conjunction with two other popular Panoramas: *Canton* and the Swiss mountains of *Rigi Kulm*.³⁰ This combination of urban setting with historically and geographically appealing locations attests the commercial urge to please the audiences, but also the tendency in the last three decades of the century, as Benjamin stressed, to pair views of cities with country and exotic images:

²⁹ *The Times*, January 14, 1860.

³⁰ The highest mountain in central Switzerland, the Rigi Kulm was a popular feature in several 19th-century works of art. It appeared in the famous painting by J.M.W. Turner *The Blue Rigi – Lake of Luzerne – Sunrise* of 1842 and in Mark Twain's recounts of his travels, when he visited the peak in the late 1870s. Located in Southern China on the Pearl River, Canton too was a popular spot, especially for English audiences. Canton, in fact, was one of the world's trading ports, which was captured by the British forces in 1841, during the Opium War.

Yesterday the views shown here were the new Panorama of Venice, Canton, and the Righi Kulm (*sic.*). The latter splendid picture has only been added within the last few days, and it certainly deserves to rank with the most celebrated of all the panoramas, which have here been given to the public. In this painting St. Mark's, of course, is a prominent feature; but all the details of this queen of cities are given with the most elaborate finish and with that extraordinary skill in perspective, which distinguish Mr. Burford's drawing. The beautiful picture of Canton seems to be almost as popular as ever; while that of the Righi Kulm (*sic.*), which is older than any appears to be the most popular of all of the three. It certainly deserves to the very fullest all the admiration, which it receives, for it is unquestionably one of the best and most effective views of that charming mountain scenery, which we have ever beheld. If the exhibition at Leicester square contained this view alone it would of itself most amply repay a visit.

As a form of visual entertainment, Panoramas experienced discontinuous phases of appreciation after their glorious debut at the end of the 18th century. Initially, they remained unconditionally in vogue up to the 1820s, a period of time during which the idea of artistic landscape gradually evolved from a concept of ideal beauty towards a "picturesque" approach. The final creative goal was no longer the synthesis of nature, but rather the sum of all the new elements that could complete the representation of nature and integrate the novel fascination with the *horizon*. Although it might seem odd to think of the 'horizon' as a new discovery, Oettermann holds that this was the ongoing feeling between the 1780s and 1790s, when the appeal with the line in the furthest distance, where the land or sea seems to meet the sky exploded, fueled by Goethe's amazement with it during his 1787 sea voyage. Such a 'discovery' stimulated the desire to climb and explore everything from an aerial perspective, the same that once was reserved to God (10-13). The viewing experience was starting being conceived as an effort to gain mastery of the view itself. The chance of expanding one's horizon was seen as a thrilling experience. Eventually, the horizon became an element of this new visual culture, which the panorama artists

were able to manufacture and render 'natural.' Panoramic painting inaugurated a new mode of seeing, which gradually changed people's views and encouraged the break with pictorial tradition. Panorama paintings reached the goal to blur the line between art and reality.

In the 1820s, the undisputed appeal of Panoramas started to slowly decrease, especially because of the concomitant success of early optical devices and the advent of photography in 1839. These new discoveries refined the imitation of nature to such an extent to determine the inevitable decrease in fascination of the pictorial illusion as visual entertainment. This does not mean, however, that Panoramas utterly disappeared from the scene. Instead, they kept circulating and the term 'panorama' remained in use for the decades to follow (Hyde 96), although it ended up labeling different forms of pictorial entertainment, which shared with their predecessors only a conceptual resemblance. In fact, as the appeal and impact of the early panoramas was in decline, artists were stimulated to create 'moving Panorama,' also known as 'extended Panorama' (Oettermann 63-66). Audiences were increasingly familiar with and enchanted by the power of moving pictures, so every attempt was made to capitalize on this growing trend.

If perfect illusionism had always been the Panorama's artistic goal, such an ambition was soon obstructed by the absence of motion; hence, the urge to device 'moving' paintings was practically an inevitable step towards faithful mimicking. In Moving Panoramas views of landscapes were painted on canvases and rolled between two cylinders, one on each side of the stage. Thus, images passed by before the viewers' eyes, giving them the impression as if they were traveling on a train or boat. The sequential dimension of the Moving Panoramas characterized a form of visual entertainment that had originally developed from the fusion of the stationary Panorama with the more technically sophisticated Dioramas.

Louis Daguerre in 1822, roughly two decades after Barker's discovery, invented the Diorama. Refining the features of panoramic paintings, Dioramas recalled a theatrical experience, with shows that commonly lasted 10-15 minute and included two, sometimes three, scenes. The audience sat or stood on a massive turntable that rotated mechanically, allowing the public's view to switch from one painting to the next. Rather than displaying a circular painting illuminated by a skylight as it happened with stationary Panoramas, the Diorama's auditorium had a cylindrical shape, with a single opening, similar to a window, which framed the lit image. In this way, the painting was the focus of the viewers' gaze, as they lost peripheral vision, retaining solely the central image.³¹ Buddemeier compares this technique to a visual "tunnel," conceived to enhance the sense of illusory depth:

Die Zuschauer befanden sich in einem theaterähnlichen Raum mit ansteigenden Rängen, in dem fast völlige Dunkelheit herrschte. Die vorderste Reihe war noch 13 Meter von dem ausgestellten Bild entfernt; diese Distanz wurde durch einen schwarz drappierten Tunnel überbrückt, womit der gleiche Effekt wie bei einem rahmenlosen Guckkasten erzielt wurde (p. 26).

The audience found themselves in a theater-like space with rising circles, in which an almost total darkness dominated. The first row was distant 13 meters from the emitted image; this distance was covered with a black draped tunnel, with which was achieved the same effect as with a frameless Zograscope.

Interestingly, Buddemeier's description of the Diorama implicate the reference to another optical device, the *Zograscope*, which was originally invented at the very end of the 18th century and remained in use until the first decade of the 20th century. This device consisted of a lens and mirror on a wooden stand and was used to view images known as "perspective prints." The peculiar curved edges of the lens distorted the image so as to offer a surprisingly illusion of depth (Balzer 17). As in a *Zograscope* the edges of the picture are blocked by the frame of the

³¹ For a broader description of Dioramas see Helmut and Alison Gernsheim, *L.J.M. Daguerre, The History of The Diorama and the Daguerreotype*.

lens, I guess this is the reason why Buddemeier made a comparison with this device to explain the visual tricks of the Diorama.

Sound effects, such as tinkling bells, thunderclaps, and waterfalls made with hidden buckets, which enriched the detailed reconstruction, could distract Diorama viewers. Nevertheless, the key role in capturing the global attention belonged to lighting and its crucial function in dictating the appeal of the show. Daguerre's principal innovation combined techniques of opaque and translucent painting with methods of manipulating natural light. The canvases were made translucent in strategic areas and the painted scenes lit from the front and through the back. More importantly, the canvas had to be decorated on both sides.

In the last section of *Historique et Description des Procédés du Daguerriotype et du Diorama*, Daguerre provided a very detailed description of the «Procédés de Peinture et d'Eclairage» for his Dioramas. He discussed the importance of using a lightweight canvas, so as to achieve a twofold illumination of the images, «par réflexion et par réfraction», as he specified (73). In fact, the effects painted on the right or front of the canvas were lit by reflection, while those painted on the wrong side received light by refraction, that is, only from behind. Obviously, the front side facing the viewers was the one reproducing the illusory reality, while the wrong side belonged to workmen and painters who operated the tricks out of sight, using a system of shutters and screens, moved by ropes and pulleys.

The peculiar role of lighting was the most important device for the medium, for it allowed the artists to create the illusion of the passing of time as the scene went from light to dark, simulating the daily course of the sun. What the audience perceived as day turning into night was nothing more than the calculated outcome of relatively simple combination of pictorial effects and proper lighting. In Daguerre's words:

Pour en revenir à l'application de ce principe aux tableaux du Diorama, bien que dans ces tableaux il n'y avait effectivement de peints que deux effets, l'un de jour peint par-devant, et l'autre de nuit peint par-derrrière, ces effets, ne passant de l'un à l'autre que par une combinaison compliquée des milieux que la lumière avait à traverser, donnaient une infinité d'autres effets semblables à ceux que présente la nature dans ses transitions du matin au soir, et vice versa (*Historique* 76).

Going back to the application of this principle to dioramic paintings, in these paintings there are only two effects represented, one of day in front, and one of night behind. These effects, not passing the one into the other without a complicated combination of the media, which the light had to traverse, produce an infinity of other effects similar to those that nature presents in her transitions from morning to night, and the reverse.

In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin reflected on the significance of the variations of lighting within the dioramic spectacle. He extended the basic idea of time being conveyed through light to a complex analysis of the compression of time in the artistic reproduction of the real, especially given the duration of the Dioramic shows. Benjamin saw direct parallels between such a process and filmic reproduction:

It remains to be discovered what is meant when, in the dioramas, the variations in lighting which the passing day brings to a landscape take place in fifteen or thirty minutes. Here is something like a sportive precursor of fast-motion cinematography—a witty, and somewhat malicious, “dancing” acceleration of time, which by way of contrast, makes one think of the hopelessness of a mimesis [...] (529).

Benjamin's statement unveils the destiny of fixed images: to face the inevitable loss of their expressive value. Because of its immobility, every form of pictorial mimesis must fail; the

absence of motion in this artistic display is the main obstacle that stands in the way of a faithful reproduction of reality. This consideration highlights the main difference between filmic mimesis and any other creative attempt to simulate the authenticity of the world.

As Helmut and Alison Gernsheim wrote in their *History of the Diorama*, Daguerre's invention had a strong cultural and social impact on its time and can certainly be viewed as "a kind of forerunner for the cinema" (43). If the dissolving views of the dioramic spectacle certainly recall the cinematic one, however, a major difference still exists between the two media "the painted picture" of the Diorama, in fact, was replaced by "a projected and animated picture," in the filmic procedure, as Schivelbusch pointed out (219). Also reflecting on the role of light in the dioramic and cinematic spectacles, it appears articulated and heterogeneous because of differences that are worth analyzing. Whether photographs can freeze light in a single image and cinematic spectacles reproduce the illusion of continuous movement thanks to a succession of images in sequence, the dioramic scenes resulted from the manipulation of light in real-time. As Dioramas exploited natural light requiring its continuous input, however, the spectacle was influenced by climatic conditions and, even if the weather was good, the painted images could not appear the same at all hours of the day. This would explain why during the dioramic show there were always two paintings displayed, one illuminated naturally and one darkened.

As these two pictures below of an alpine village demonstrate, images appeared before the viewers as daylight or night scenes, more specifically illuminated by reflected or transmitted light. Obviously, the same concerns for climatic limits cannot affect the cinematic spectacle, as once the shot is captured, the filmic reproduction exists regardless of the weather conditions. Interestingly, Schivelbusch remarks that while most of the lighting technologies developed in the

19th century sought to make nighttime exploitable as the day, light-dependant media such as Dioramas and Panoramas, gave rise to darkened auditoriums that facilitated the maximum use of daylight (221).



Figure 10. Diorama of an alpine village. Picture in public domain

In order to paint images on the translucent dioramic screen, Daguerre had initially used the help of the *camera obscura*. But as Crary suggests in *Techniques of the Observer*, the *camera obscura* model could rely on “a founding site or referent” (14) that was absent in the Diorama. Daguerre’s medium, in fact, operated rather according to the use of light on the right or wrong side of the canvas. The wrong side could seem opaque to profane eyes, but skilled painters realized their refracted illusions by seeing through it. The name itself of Daguerre’s invention, in fact, suggested this procedure, resulting from the combination of the Greek words *dia* (through) and *hermos* (seen). What is particularly interesting in Crary’s assumption is not only the emphasis given to the absence in the Diorama of “an objective ground of visual truth” as there was instead in the *camera obscura*, but also his bringing attention to “a new valuation of visual experience” that occurred before the advent of cinematography (14). The uprooting of vision from the stable and fixed grounds of the *camera obscura* brought to a new concept of visuality, which involved faculties of mobility and abstraction in the observer. Crary remarks how this new

autonomy of vision was “a precondition for modernist painting in the later nineteenth century, but also for forms of visual mass culture appearing much earlier” (14).

When Dioramas evolved into Moving Panoramas lighting tricks disappeared and canvases again were painted traditionally. Essentially mesmerized by the painters’ pictorial ability and the novelty of motion, viewers watched a controlled narrative that unfolded events through scenes connected to each other. As the visual appeal relied exclusively on the image portrayed, the most famous Panorama artists, such as Robert Barker, Robert Burford, Peter Grain, John Barvard, to name a few, wandered indefatigably in search for the better *veduta*, the geographical space where the landscape would be sublime. I argue that both the idea of displaying images continuously and the artists’ anxiety for the best setting anticipate two features belonging to future cinematography. In fact, we can certainly trace to this effort to find the most arresting scene to depict the later notion of capturing the “perfect shot” in cinema. The Panorama artist, roving in search of a location that would impress the audience, is a prototype of the modern filmmaker. At the same time, the idea that a story can be told by a series of moving images is a further step towards the future cinematic narrative power of motion picture.

Moving Panoramas introduced a new mode of displaying images, a sort of passing sceneries that recalled the effects visible from the window of a moving train. This was a significant evolution from the 360-degrees-circular-perspective of traditional Panoramas in the rotunda, which undeniably mirrored the results of the industrial progress. The velocity of transportation certainly stimulated artists to consider new modes of visualizing and interpreting landscapes. Oettermann states that from the 1820s on, Moving Panoramas “became very popular in English-speaking countries, with American artists making astounding contributions to the genre” (66). England and America were, not surprisingly, the most industrialized countries; the

rest of Europe, instead, including Germany, Italy, and even France, was still impressed by the stationary precursor. Oettermann reports that in 1834 a Panorama of the railway between Liverpool and Manchester was first exhibited in England and later in Brooklyn (323). Significantly, the Liverpool and Manchester railroad inaugurated in 1830 is acknowledged as the first regular passenger service from city to city.

As Oettermann suggested, “the moving panorama anticipated, in art, the speed of travel, which the railroads would soon make a reality.” Oettermann also highlights a connection with the phenomenon of American migration, stating that the Panoramas “proved highly successful [...] in motivating prospective settlers to consider California” (325). Oettermann attributes the poor reception of traditional Panoramas in the United States to two major causes: European nationalistic themes of the early painting did not capture American interest, as audiences were mainly focused on the promotion of their own nationalism; secondly, American audiences did not find 360-degree vistas so astonishing, as they were already naturally familiar with wide extensions, given the geographic vastness of the country, compared to Europe.

The success of moving Panoramas was also enhanced by commercial and practical reasons. These paintings “could be transported and set up for display far more easily than their circular counterparts” (Oettermann 323). Quick setup and low transportation costs helped to maximize profits, allowing the traveling displays to go up in more towns in a shorter period of time, as well as increasing the number of showings per day. The renowned American panorama painter John Banvard, for instance, toured the entire nation with his panoramic views of the Mississippi River, redundantly advertised as “the three-mile canvas,” although it was long about ‘only’ half a mile.³² Banvard brought his Panorama to Europe, Asia, and Africa, thanks to its

³² See Dorothy Dondore, *Banvard's Panorama and the Flowering of New England*, pp. 817-826.

easy set up. Chronicles report that with the huge profits he gained from his shows, Banvard designed and built a baronial, tacky mansion on Long Island, which his contemporaries nicknamed “Banvard’s Folly” for its extravagance (Hanners 71).

If John Banvard’s views of the Mississippi River valley enthralled American audiences, as much appealing over them was Peter Grain’s *Panorama of the Hudson and James Rivers - Scenes in Virginia*, an impressive painting “covering no less than 9,400 feet of canvas, and portraying views over an extent of 5000 miles.”³³ Rivers were already recurrent spots in traditional landscape paintings, as famous artists, such as John James Audubon and George Caleb Bingham had brought attention to these subjects in their works of art. These artists, however, focused essentially on man’s interaction with the river, rather than giving a comprehensive visual representation of it (Smith 111). This was certainly due to the limits imposed by traditional canvases, which were overcome thanks to the impressive scale of Panoramas. These paintings, in fact, easily contained the entire length of the river, as Banvard’s *Mississippi Valley* attests, which embraced the view from the river mouth up to New Orleans. Significantly, as the portrayal of the river included pictorial representations of the increasingly industrialized towns along it, the urban views of this valley shortly became “emblems of civic pride” (Smith 111). With moving Panoramas, “antebellum America turned to a potent mixture of art, technology, commerce, and expansionistic rhetoric,” writes Smith (111). This medium, in fact, not only mirrored the rapid urbanization of those years and celebrated the glorious results of steamboating, but also contributed to spread the national pride for progress and expansionism through visual images.

³³ See Anna Wells Rutledge, *Artists in the Life of Charleston*, pp. 146-148.

The same fascination with rivers as pictorial subjects did not invade the European scenario, although here, too, Moving Panoramas of the Mississippi and Hudson widely circulated. Banvard gave even a private viewing of his *Valley* before Queen Victoria. European audiences showed their predilection rather for the pantomime of the *Commedia dell'Arte*. Among the most popular representations, Gian Piero Brunetta mentions the adventures of *Arlecchino*, who traveled ceaselessly, fueled by his explorative fever (*Il viaggio dell'icononauta* 390). Interestingly, the variegated tastes of American and European audiences bring attention to the wide range of Panoramas' representations, which went far beyond scenic depictions and the displacement of surrogate realities. As pictorial mediums, Panoramas aimed to respect popular preferences, especially in light of commercial exploitation, and sought to employ subjects that responded to the collective penchant. The popularity of *Arlecchino* in the European Panoramas, for instance, clearly confirms the trend to recover traditional subjects. *Arlecchino*, in fact, was a popular staged and applauded character far before appearing in 19th-century optical spectacles.

Between the 1840s and 1850s, when Banvard's views of Mississippi were having their glorious moment, urban subjects started their slow decline, after having been a blockbuster for the first three decades of the century. Certainly, the advent of photography accelerated the decline of pictorial views of cities, being the new medium incomparable in reproducing reality. What is worth pointing out, however, is the new alliance that Panoramas formed with photography in this period, attesting a synergy in the arts, more specifically, between painting and new technology. The outcome of such a coalition was a novel mode of visual representation, which certainly helped Panoramas improve their ability to portray the real: city aerial views. Achille Morelli's *Veduta dalla torre del Campidoglio* and Lorenzo Suscipi's *Veduta di Roma dal Convento di San Pietro in Montorio*, both of 1841, represented the first examples of circular

panoramic views realized with the daguerreotype. Fine-tuned by Daguerre in 1839, this photographic procedure was acknowledged as the first commercial success, whose mirror-like surface allowed the immediate reproduction of the image. When the daguerreotype was applied to panorama paintings, traditional urban views turned into a real and well crafted pictorial show, whose images became descriptive chronicles of historical events. I argue that the combination of photography and painting contributed to shape a new creative ambition that was no longer tied to visual deception as it was for the Panorama, but rather to the achievement and improvement of technical skills. Photography, in fact, was essentially exploited by Panorama artists to copy images on the canvas, in order to make them the most faithful as possible to reality (Scharf 53). More than ever, realism was now essential to the artistic goal of recounting history pictorially.

The use of painted charts ‘telling’ facts with illustrations was an effective way to disseminate historical and geographical knowledge. The educational effects of Panorama pictures, in fact, contributed to give this medium a sort of aesthetic dignity as a quasi-cultural institution. When 19th-century English art critic John Ruskin, twenty years later, commented on the success of Panoramas between the 1840s and the 1850s, he praised their “attention on the truth” and “care in the execution,” which made them “very truly a school both in physical geography and in art.”³⁴

Although the pictorial patronage for instruction was critically contested and there is no consistent proof that large-scale painting attained formal recognition of aesthetic dignity, Panoramas doubtless contributed to educate adults and children of their age. The evidence of pictorial input to public education was given by the so-called “sixpenny booklets,” which translated the custom of selling guides to the pictures viewed during optical shows. Altick writes

³⁴ “On the Present State of Modern Art,” in E.T. Cook, *Works of Ruskin*, IXI, p. 218. Quoted in Altick, p. 174.

that “in addition to an outline sketch of the picture, these pamphlets contained a dozen or so pages of text, summarizing the history, geography, and current interest of the scene depicted”. Interestingly, these informative brochures soon became appreciated souvenirs that people aimed to collect on the bookshelves of their private homes (174). At the time of Moving Panoramas, the informative function of the brochure was commonly replaced by the presence of a lecturer, who offered live comments to the pictorial show, spicing up with details the story unfolding before the audience.

This could be interpreted as an attempt to elevate the Panorama spectacle, to give the show a certain seriousness or gravity that, for the reasons I have put forth, it simply did not have. The distance between pictorial representation and formal theater was narrowed with the inclusion of a script. The presence of a lecturer would not only recall the live acting of actors, his memorized and carefully delivered monologue, in fact, must have rendered the experience much more valid, in moral and artistic terms.

The *Panorama of Garibaldi* (1860), one of the very few examples of large-scale moving paintings that have survived to our days, is a testament of the habit to let a narrator describe the vignettes while the canvas unrolled. A manuscript, in fact, accompanied the painting, which was likely composed by John James Story, the same English artist who realized the canvas.³⁵ In the 1860s, when Story’s Panorama was produced, Garibaldi’s portrait commonly appeared in contemporary newspapers and magazines. As Hydes points out, in that period “Britain was in the

³⁵ In 1980, Dr. Smith inherited The Garibaldi Panorama from Robert Burford’s descendants. In October 2005, Dr. Smith donated the panorama to the Brown University Library, where it resides as part of the Anne S.K. Brown Military Collection. In 2007, the library digitalized the panorama, making the resource available for consultation at www.dl.lib.brown.edu/garibaldi/panorama.php.

grip of Garibaldi-mania” and “by 1864 a veritable Garibaldi cult was in full swing” (*The Campaigns of Garibaldi*, 46).



Figure 11. Scenes from *The Garibaldi Panorama*. Pictures in public domain.

The *Garibaldi Panorama* chronicles the Italian patriot’s life in forty-nine consecutive scenes, from his youth to his final triumphant entry into Naples with King Victor Emmanuel, without marginalizing crucial events, such as the defeat of Rome and the Aspromonte incident. Certainly, this Panorama confirmed the outgoing popular predilection for historical events, battles, and heroic figures, a trend that apparently never lost its appeal since the time of Barker’s success. The *Garibaldi Panorama*, however, besides the innovation of motion, held major refined features that did not belong to its predecessors, which made it an invaluable source of visual entertainment and knowledge of contemporary events. The painted scenes, in fact, offered a detailed and up-to-date retelling of the ongoing Italian history, making it available also to that large part of the population who had no access to the written word. The fact that the Panorama contained an episode of 1862, when Garibaldi was wounded at Aspromonte, clearly suggests that Story regularly added events to the painting he had started in 1859.

Obviously, Story sought to update his work in order to make it more appealing for the audiences and gain the maximum profit from it. In this respect, focusing on a patriot, who was already part of the collective predilection, certainly helped. I would argue, in fact, that the *Garibaldi Panorama* should be construed as a significant example of exploitation of a popular subject for commercial entertainment, as well as it happened with Arlecchino and the *Commedia dell'Arte* before European audiences. Surely, viewers were willing to pay the standard “one schilling” requested to be amused by a story of captivating images and verbal anecdotes, which all the while told them about the latest historical events. Recent scholarship furthered these undeniable commercial goals, advancing new hypotheses on the role that the *Garibaldi Panorama* might have played in political propaganda. Ralph Hyde, for instance, remarks how triumphantly Garibaldi was welcomed upon his arrival in London in 1864, hailed as the national hero of Italy’s unification and the man who fought generously in the name of freedom. Hyde validates his thesis with the notes left by a contemporary diarist, who after witnessing the event, struck by such popular enthusiasm, reported of people screaming “with a mighty shout of enthusiasm that took one’s breath away to hear it” (*The Campaigns*, 46).

Already famous as a subject for medals, postcards, handbills, and moving Panoramas, Garibaldi initiated also a trend for 360-degree Panoramas to portray views of places somehow linked to the Italian patriot and his glorious deeds. The “Views of Naples” and “Views of Messina,” for instance, were two of the most successful pictorial reproductions of sites crucial to the Garibaldi campaign, which remained in vogue between 1860 and 1863. *The Times* advertised Burford’s *Panorama of Messina* with a daily opening “from 10 till dusk” for the standard One Schilling, promoting a special “half price” fee for “schools and children” to intensify the

attendance and exploit the instructional value of the spectacle.³⁶

The educational role of the Panorama entertainment is a further element that interweaves the history of cinematography with its pictorial precursors, besides the shared features already discussed, such as the novelty of passing images, illuminated screens, and dark auditoriums. While detailed attention will be devoted to this topic in the following chapter, it might be significant to remember here Gisella Chelini, an early 20th century teacher in a male elementary school in Florence, who has left a precious account of her 1915 field trip to a cinema with her pupils. Chelini recounts of the joy on the children's faces, when the room suddenly got dark and the title *I porti della regione laziale* (*The ports of the Lazio Region*) appeared on the screen. Chelini insists on the pedagogical value of the images her pupils had the opportunity to view, writing that the same pictures would not have had the same effects, if they had been seen in a museum:

Queste scene presentate su un quadro qualsiasi del museo scolastico e illustrate dalla parola calda, suggestiva del maestro, avrebbero avuto lo stesso effetto entusiastico di oggi? No, perché anche con la migliore volontà di un maestro artista, non si elimina lo sforzo di attenzione necessario a percepire l'insieme dei fatti e la loro coordinazione, e come ognuno sa, la fatica è il maggior nemico dell'interesse. Inoltre il vero in movimento favorisce la tendenza dei fanciulli che animano tutto e tutto vogliono in moto (p. 5)

Would these scenes, presented on any painting of the school museum and illustrated by the teacher's lively, suggestive voice, have had the same enthusiastic effect they had today? No, because even with the best will of an artist teacher, it is impossible to eliminate the attention effort necessary to perceive the facts and their combinations and, as everybody knows, exertion is the main enemy of interest. Furthermore, seeing the real in motion fosters the children's tendency to animate everything and to want everything to be in motion.

³⁶ *The Times*, December 27, 1860, p. 1.

Chelini's exhaustive account of the school field trip provides crucial information on the variety of instructional images that passed before the children's eyes on that occasion, besides the pictures of the Lazio coastal towns. The Libyan Desert, cannons, and the peculiar *bersaglieri*-- the Italian infantry soldiers recognizable by their plumed hat-- appeared on the screen, producing exclamations of surprise in the audience, when each new scene was cranked into view. Among the subjects portrayed on the screen, Chelini mentions also images from the *Battaglia delle due palme (Battle of the two Palms)*, a violent conflict occurred on March 12, 1912, during the Italo-Turkish war, which involved the Italian troops of General Ameglio versus the Ottoman soldiers.³⁷ I argue that unsurprisingly an episode of the Libyan conflict was part of the documentary screened before Chelini's students, as this war had been a motif of national pride since its outburst on September 29, 1911. Italy's claim over the Ottoman Empire of the right to occupy and colonize African lands was advertised by a large-scale campaign, tailored to support the national colonial ambitions. The declaration of war itself was a moment of intense political propaganda, which tended to spectacularize national ideals, playing on the intellectuals' patriotic souls and their sympathy. Even a lyric, *A Tripoli (To Tripoli)*, whose words *Tripoli bel suol d'amor (Tripoli, beautiful land of love)* became one of the most popular refrain of its days, was composed specifically to celebrate Italy's colonial enterprise. Young singer Gea Della Garisenda, whose exotic artistic name was coined by no less than Gabriele D'Annunzio, successfully performed this song, while sensually moving on the stage, dressed only with the

³⁷ The battle was fought in the Libyan province of Benghazi and was named "delle due palme" after the oasis where it took place. For a broader overview of the conflict and the political causes that led to it see Paolo Maltese, *La terra promessa. La Guerra italo-turca e la conquista della Libia, 1911-1912*.

Italian tri-colored flag.³⁸ Shocked by her audacious performance, audiences easily forgot the more serious implications of the Italo-Turkish conflict, under the spell of the catchy tune and its patriotic words.



Figure 12. Gea della Garisenda performing *Tripoli bel suol d'amor*. Picture in public domain.

Such an appealing display of nationalism did not take hold only over the crowds, as the most prominent figures of the intelligentsia, too, gave their intellectual contribution to the Italian expansionistic cause. Some of them belonging to the extremist wing, such as D'Annunzio and the Futurists, asserted Italy's right to join the European craze in colonizing and commercially exploiting African lands. We should not forget that the Futurists had also been the major activists in the formation of the *Partito Nazionalista* (*Nationalist Party*) a few years earlier (1910), and their popular propaganda slogan encouraged the war as “sola igiene del mondo” (“sole cleanser

³⁸ Gea Della Garisenda's real name was Alessandra Drusi and she was an acclaimed *chanteuse*, before retiring and becoming the devoted wife of rich Italian industrialist Borsalino. See Roberta Paganelli, *Gea Della Garisenda, regina dell'operetta*.

of the world”).³⁹

What was less linear, instead, was the active support to the national cause given by less aggressive intellectuals, such as Giovanni Pascoli. While his poetry maintained prevailing sentimental tones, Pascoli let himself into the euphoria for the national expansionism, writing an article titled “La grande proletaria si è mossa” (“The Great Proletarian moved off”) to voice his enthusiasm for the Libyan enterprise.⁴⁰ Pascoli’s text goes beyond the transmission of its author’s political ideals; Pascoli’s words epitomize a broader and general intellectual attitude towards the Libyan conflict, to be viewed as an inevitable phase of the national progress. Sentences like “non si può fare altrimenti” (“we cannot act otherwise”), “contribuire all’incivilimento dei popoli” (“to contribute to the peoples’ civilization”) intend to justify the necessity of the Italian intervention. Pascoli saw in the Libyan war a solution to the problem of emigration, as Italian proletarians would have had a closer ‘motherland’ with lands to exploit, instead of being forced to leave for foreign, faraway countries.

If seen under the perspective of a ‘necessary’ colonialism and national pride motif, the images from the Libyan conflict were understandably used with educational purposes when screened before school audiences. Art and politics appeared as synergic forces well-suited to transmit the artificial optimism that aroused the nation (such a combination cannot but recall the propagandistic pictorialism of the *Garibaldi Panorama*). In fact, Chelini, in her recount, hopes for further utilization of the cinematic spectacle for educational purposes, stressing her faith in the new medium as a means able to exploit the children’s natural disposition to learn from visual

³⁹ See Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, “War, the Sole Cleanser of the World,” in *Critical Writings*.

⁴⁰ Originally, “La grande proletaria si è mossa” was a speech that Pascoli held at the Teatro Comunale in Barga on November 21, 1911. It was then published in the daily newspaper *La Tribuna*, on November 27, 1914. See Roberto Tessari, *Pascoli, D’Annunzio, Fogazzaro e il Decadentismo italiano*, pp. 90-92.

references, powerful tools to stir the young's fantasy. "Il cinematografo, questo linguaggio universale che appaga, istruisce e interessa nella sua versione del vero dinamico, risponderebbe in tutto e per tutto a questa esigenza naturale del ragazzo" ("The cinema, this universal language that gratifies, educates, and arouses interest in its version of a dynamic reality, would fully respond to the child's natural need"), she writes (6). The intellectual and emotional stimulus that Chelini envisioned in the filmic images recalls the esthetic and cultural benefits that Panorama shows had started promoting through their painted scenes fifty years earlier.

The functional role of *panoramic* scenarios in spreading knowledge of geography and historical events is a feature taken on by the cinematic spectacle since its early phase. It is worth noting, for instance, that the *Battaglia delle due Palme* mentioned by Chelini was also the title of a 1912 documentary directed by Luca Comerio, one of the pioneers of Italian cinematography. Comerio traced in first person the Lybian conflict, recounting the various phases from the disembarking to the final peace campaign. With this pseudo-documentary style, Comerio was probably the first to ever put on film the front lines of a war and, as was recently discovered, his film was among the very first in full color with newly developed "Kinemacolor" system (Canosa 110). Comerio's *Battaglia delle due palme* is yet another point of contact between the pictorial art world and the novel field of motion pictures. Early cinematography, in fact, quite frequently took as inspiration facts from recent history or current events, to capture the attention of the audience and, at the same time, to enliven recent history with the benefit of the visual image, quite as the Panoramas had done earlier.

When Chelini stresses the key function of visual support in teaching history, she refers to a value that goes beyond educational goals, as filmed images certainly helped promote the "conservation and enlargement of our national heritage" ("la conservazione e l'ingrandimento

del nostro patrimonio nazionale”) (11). In Chelini’s view, the educational merit of visuality embraces also geography, thus she valued projected images as a precious means to foster the children’s familiarity with foreign lands and unknown races, “the teacher could receive the same powerful help, also for the teaching of geography” (“Lo stesso aiuto potente il maestro lo potrebbe avere anche per l’insegnamento della geografia”) (11). In this respect, I argue that the display of images from the Libyan campaign, with black people and North-African landscapes, encouraged the children’s experience with the exotic. Significantly, Chelini concludes her pamphlet stressing her love for children, education, and her country solely as some of the components of the broader intent that motivated her account of the field trip. Chelini, in fact, envisions the necessity to exploit the tools of the novel technology for practical purposes, aiming to give her pupils a teaching experience that was primarily a life lesson. In Chelini’s words: “Solo l’amore grande per l’infanzia e per la scuola, per la patria e per l’arte mi hanno spinto a scrivere queste righe, nonché il bisogno di mostrare la necessità di avvicinare sempre più la scuola alla vita e ai suoi bisogni molteplici” (“Only my great love for children, education, my homeland, and art pushed me to write these lines, as well as to show the need to draw school closer and closer to life and its multiple demands”) (pp. 13-14).

The pedagogic value of moving images, so much emphasized by early cinematography, had its roots in the informative and educational task given to pictures by pictorial and optical devices. The *Mondo Novo* (*The New World*), for instance, a large peep-show box, very similar to the magic lantern, which was extremely popular in Italy between the 18th and the 19th century, could be considered the prototype of the modern news bulletin.⁴¹ The painted images portrayed

⁴¹ Unlike the magic lantern, images in the *Mondo Novo* were projected inside and viewers, in order to view them, had to peer into the box. Another major difference between the two devices consisted in the fact that the *Mondo Novo* could be used both at night and during the day, as it

in the box, in fact, ‘recounted’ real facts and historical events, gaining success especially among the lower stratum of the population. Illiterates could certainly benefit from the ‘visual bulletin’ in terms of historical knowledge, becoming familiar with topics that could have not been transmitted to them otherwise. During the French Revolution, for instance, when the *Mondo Novo* reached its highest peak in popularity, episodes and ideals of the conflict spread thanks to the images painted in the magic box. One of the blockbuster scenes, for instance, was the beheading of Marie Antoinette, which viewers enjoyed as a genuine amusement, despite the cruelty of the spectacle. Executions were considered materials of entertainment, to which all classes aimed to assist live. In this respect, the *Mondo Novo* shortened not only the distances between what was visually accessible or inaccessible, but also the gap of social discrimination among classes. This feature was a crucial characteristic taken on by future cinematography, too, when the visual spectacle became an empowering experience, in terms of its accessibility, both in proximity, in cost, and in times that it could be watched over and over.

The popular taste for decapitations was one of the subjects that optical devices lent to early cinematography. *The Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots*, a one-minute film of 1895, produced by Edison Company right after film itself was born, depicts the tragic end of Queen Mary. We see the queen walking to the execution block, kneeling down and placing her neck over it. The executioner lifts up his axe and lets it come down to sever the head. Mary is obviously replaced with a dummy, hence is notable the precursory value of the scene, which should be considered one of the first examples of “camera tricks” used in a movie. As the last scene depicts the executioner while picking up the head to show it around proudly for public

did not require the darkness indispensable to the magic lantern. For a more detailed description of the functioning and utilization of the *Mondo Nuovo*, including its most popular subjects see Donata Pesenti Compagnoni, *Quando il cinema non c'era*.

spectacle, this film confirms the trend introduced by pictorial devices to adapt historical events to entertainment purposes. Although new visual technologies enabled a spectacularization of history with unprecedented realism, we should not forget that the reproduction of historical truth and its turning into public amusement, as well as the portrayal of recent past used with a flair of political propaganda had their roots in the ground of pre-cinematography.

The process leading to the achievement of faithful reproduction of reality was certainly slow and uneven, marked by innovations that only apparently seemed insignificant. On a closer inspection, in fact, we have seen how technical improvements profoundly changed the artistic experience and the potential effects of the new medium. Chief among them, I would mention the transition from the stationary viewing of Panorama painting to the mobile features and the thrilling lights boosting the Dioramas.

4- Legitimate Theater vs. Illegitimate Genres: the Dispute on Social Debase

Art, like morality, consists in drawing the line somewhere.

Gilbert K. Chesterton

Do not waste your time on social questions. What is the matter with the poor is Poverty; what is the matter with the rich is Uselessness.

George Bernard Shaw

We have seen how the first Panoramas relied for their commercial success on luring audiences through the impressive and novel dimension of the canvases and the replica of foreign, exotic scenes. Within two decades, Dioramas' powerful visual impact consisted in what must have seemed a magical way of mimicking everyday life. Movement through space and time was reproduced by the use of a carefully constructed system of lights. Elements of theatrical spectacle that go back centuries, such as simulated fogs and fires, were now employed not to recreate the artificial world of masques or melodramas on the stage, but to evoke real events and actual places.

After such a brilliant debut, however, illusory effects began to lose the attention of the once captivated public. The visual wonders lost none of their marvelous accuracy, but rather the viewers demanded even more impressive visual effects. The techniques that once astonished began to bore audiences increasingly familiar with photographs. After the 1840s, visual

fascination started gradually to rely on the idea of a ‘narration’ through images and various ‘-ramas’ continued to stimulate the audience’s appreciation of illusions and visual tricks. As a consequence, optical attractions acquired such a variegated “range of applications” that “in everyday practice they came to mean whatever exhibitors wanted them to mean, irrespective of the actual nature of the entertainment in question” (Altick 173). In the end, any sort of device with mechanical or optical specificity was designated a –rama, which led to nothing short of a craze for every form of pictorial and visual entertainment. The *Cosmorama*, for instance, was not only one of the first optical shows to combine painting and dioramic lighting tricks. It also marked the debut of visual amusement within theaters built specifically for the purpose.

The *Cosmorama* was a more sophisticated version of the old, well-known street peep-show, now brought indoors and given more prestige by the refined building in which it was presented. Altick argues that the “Cosmorama room” was the ideal locus where social mingling combined with current optical illusions and visual artworks. Cosmorama rooms were “places where in addition to the advertised shows, paintings and other objects of art were offered for sale and light refreshments were available for those who chose to drop in and idle away an hour or so in casually inspecting whatever was on display and gossiping with acquaintances” (211). Such venues elevated the artistic respectability of optical spectacles already popular in street amusement by bringing them into purpose-built buildings. Admittance to *Cosmoramas* usually was set at the standard one Shilling fixed for Panoramas ticket price, while street peepshows cost a penny or less, a pricing structure that would guarantee a more refined audience from higher social classes. This also meant, however, that only images of highest quality would be accepted. Itinerant peepshows, on the contrary, could rely on nothing more than “coarse colored prints” (Altick 211).

When entering a *Cosmorama* room, viewers walked along a corridor whose facing walls were covered with large convex lenses behind which were placed photos or painted views of cities and exotic lands. The illusion was created by the powerful lens that magnified the size and distance of these popular vistas. The *Cosmorama* was based on the dioramic setting: a black frame similar to the dark tunnel was interposed between the lens and the picture to create a separate reality.

The latest pictorial manipulations and the elegance of the premises were not sufficient to elevate the artistic dignity of peepshows; more expensive tickets did not always guarantee the attendance of upper-class audiences. It did not take long for critics to begin harshly assessing these new productions, especially after the introduction of the *Naturama*, a display of forest scenes and landscapes, rather than urban views. As some were poorly produced and attracted a coarse public, *Naturamas* fostered the collapse in respectability for this medium. Commenting on the *Naturama* show, a reviewer writes in the *Literary Gazette* of January 1888, “The halfpenny shows in the streets are creditable performances of the fine arts in comparison with this trashy exhibition, which resembles them in character. You are allowed to look through glasses at miserable *models* of places, persons, and landscapes; while two or three nasty people sit eating onions and oranges.”⁴²

The reviewer calls attention to the cheap quality of the visual spectacle, but he also highlights the mingling of social classes within *Cosmorama* buildings, offering a social critique that opens broader reflection on theaters and their audiences. Social mingling, in fact, was not solely a characteristic of indoor optical shows, but theatrical productions of all sort. Godefroy Engelmann’s lithograph “Spectacle Gratis” offers powerful visual evidence of the bizarre mob

⁴² Quoted in Richard Altick, *The Shows of London*, p. 213.

attending theatrical spectacles in the mid-19th century, and reflects perhaps on why the support of the upper and middle classes declined while popular taste increased.⁴³ In this picture we see the interior of *Drury Lane*, one of the London's finest playhouses and one of the few *patent* buildings entitled to "legitimate" productions, rather than melodramas, dance spectacles, and concerts.⁴⁴ In London, only two *patent* theaters existed, *Drury Lane* and *Covent Garden*, to be intended as playhouses that were licensed since 1737 (*The Licensing Act*) to perform legitimate dramatic plays typically followed by a shorter "afterpiece," such as a farce, pantomime, or ballad opera.



Figure 13. Detail from *Spectacle Gratis (Free show)*, G. Engelmann. Picture in public domain.⁴⁵

⁴³ Godefroy Engelmann was a Franco-German miniature painter, who was credited to have introduced lithography in France in 1814, making Paris the European capital of this art from the 1820s. This was a huge achievement, as lithography became the first mass medium for art reproduction and a modern alternative to traditional engraving techniques. See Robert Verhoogt, *Art in Reproduction*, pp. 82-84.

⁴⁴ See Michael J. Gillette. *Theatrical Design and Production* for a broader interpretation of "legitimate" theater.

⁴⁵ Engelmann's lithograph is part of the Victoria and Albert Museum Collection and is visible at amethyst.vam.ac.uk/images/image/45567-popup.html. The picture is in the public domain.

In Engelmann's lithograph, the man at the bottom of the picture passing a glass to a spectator in the upper circle confirms that beverages and foods disrupted the show, while a *Literary Gazette's* reviewer lamented about *Naturama's* viewers eating onions and oranges. Also Gaetano Savonarola, the author of *Il Galateo dei teatri* (1836, Milan) took a very critical look at the circulation of food during the performance, although he admitted that this habit was commonly accepted ("giacchè é prevalso"). Savonarola, however, lamented the "incivility" ("villania") of sellers, who used to circulate among the rows of seats in the pit with their baskets full of stale goods, instead of standing along the corridor and approaching the "client" only when needed:

Nè men degni si rendono della taccia di villania gli acquacedratai che, con un canestro di appassite melarance e di dolci spesse volte più duri del biscotto, vanno di fila in fila offrendo acque calde, fresche, portogalli, dolci, sorbetti e birra. Io non voglio farmi contro l'uso (giacché è prevalso) di entrare nella platea e proclamare l'offerta delle lor merci; solo vorrei che que' garzoni, dagli spazi laterali alle panche gridassero a posta loro ma non entrassero nelle file non chiamativi a ristorare qualche povero Tantalò (33-34).

No less worth of the accusation of incivility are the water sellers, who go from row to row with their basket full of shriveled sweet oranges and cakes often harder than biscuits, offering hot and cold water, portogalli, sweets, sorbets, and beer. I do not want to be against the habit (as it prevails) to enter the pit and shout the offering of their goods; I would only like those boys to shout from their position towards the seats, without entering the rows, if not called, to refresh some poor Tantalus.

Engelmann's lithograph depicts an uncouth public, crammed into the seats and indifferent to the spectacle before their eyes; indeed, they seem to have become the show. How much was this chaos in the public the result of the cost of admission? Implicit in the image is a socio-economic commentary on popular culture, and the effects of social mobility. Furthermore, the public depicted in Engelmann's lithograph attests the lack of a dress code for those occupying

the upper galleries, while for the audiences in the first galleries, rightly labeled as the ‘dress circle,’ dress appropriateness was a condition of entry. For upper and middle classes, theater going was motivated by different social goals and prestige that went far beyond the amusement of a night on the town. The show was a ritualized social event, in which elegance of the dress and class status were on display in the fashionable section of the theater, where one could be seen and see not only the show but the audience itself. In *Teatro e spettacolo*, Meldolesi and Taviani point out that aristocratic and wealthy spectators were willing to finance the remodeling of a theater only if renovations respected the traditional structure with elevated boxes and a distant pit, which assured them of the proper detachment from people in the lower ranks of society (107). It was as if the elevation of the boxes endorsed only too obviously their social superiority.

What is crucial to stress here is that uncouth behaviors were not exclusive to low-class audience members. If they were present in the more refined playhouses, we can conclude that they were even more blatant in the less refined settings. Investigating the representation of the theatrical locus in Italian treatises of the 19th century, Elena Tamburini brings evidence of the practice of nobles to consider their boxes as private homes where everything was allowed. Tamburini details the recounts of Paolo Landriani, a renowned stage designer in the early 19th century, who actually spoke of these boxes as “abitazioni” (“habitations”) and called the pit a “piazza” (“square”).⁴⁶ Landriani’s considerations concur with what Gaetano Savonarola wrote in his *Galateo dei teatri* about the so-called *palchettisti* (those who occupied the boxes), who created such a noise while playing cards and tarots during the performance as to make inaudible the lines of the actors (27-28).

⁴⁶ See Elena Tamburini, *Il luogo teatrale nella trattatistica italiana dell’800. Dall’utopia giacobina alla prassi borghese*, p. 83.

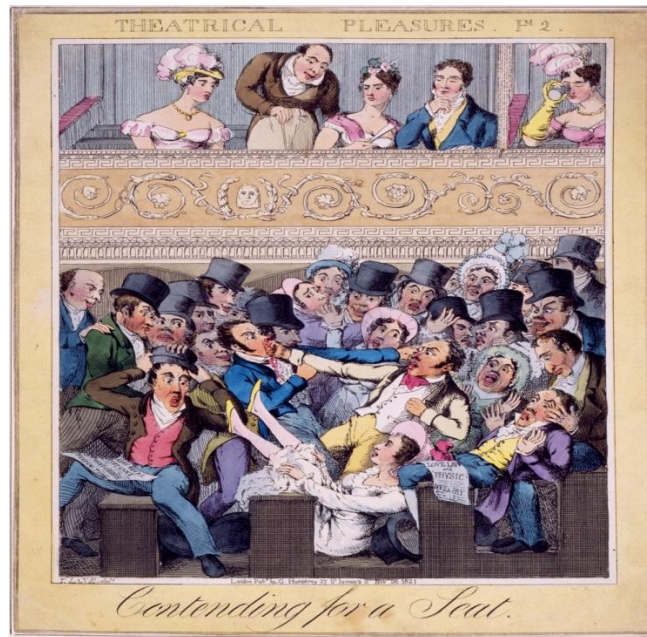


Figure 14. *Contending for a Seat*, by Theodore Lane (1800-1828), about 1820s. V&A Museum Web Collection. Picture in public domain.

Also lithographs and etchings are powerful visual witnesses of just how boorish the public could be: audiences fight over a seat, scream, and engage in crude confrontations. Theodore Lane's etching *Contending for a seat*, for instance, captures the disruptive behavior of middle class audiences sitting in the pit, offering a spectacle before a more refined public in the boxes, but also the urge to occupy the most visible seat. Although tickets were priced according to the zone of the theater, within the section the seats were often not numbered. In the 1830s tickets were still priced according to social status, while a *bacile* (*washbasin*) was circulated to collect donations from the public in the pit (Meldolesi and Taviani 120).

Surely, price increases in certain theaters in the first decade of the 19th century could also be the target of such satirical engravings. In 1809, the management of the *Covent Garden*, for instance, decided to raise the ticket for the pit, the boxes and the third tier after a fire the year before destroyed the playhouse. This decision brought to the very famous *Old Price Riots*, during

which spectators protested for more than three months, forcing the manager to eventually make a public apology. Interestingly, the public rioted over the rise in ticket prices during the premiere of *Macbeth* at the newly rebuilt *Covent Garden*, attesting how social disturbance prevailed over the legitimacy of the performance.⁴⁷

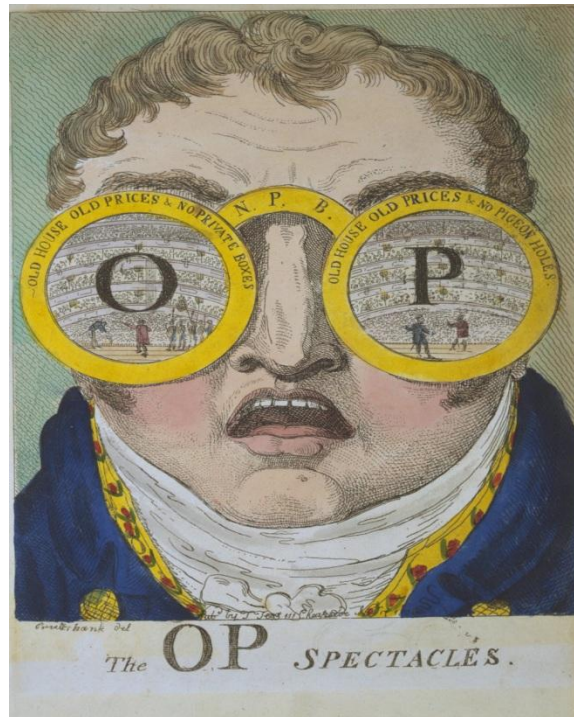


Figure 15. *The OP Spectacle*, by Isaac Cruickshank (1809). The caricature shows a man wearing large spectacles with the letters 'OP' (Old Prices) on each lens with theatrical scenes behind. V&A Museum Web Collection. Picture in public domain.

This reform in prices, however, did not involve the gallery, the area that generally would be crowded with the lower class spectators, for which the admittance remained one shilling. Galleries were not large enough to contain such a multitude of people, thus audiences were crammed into the so called “pigeon holes,” tight seats in the uppermost section of the theater from which only the legs of the performers could be seen. Interestingly, Isaac Cruickshank’s

⁴⁷ For a broader interpretation of the riot and how the stage contributed to shape the audience’s self image, see Marc Baer, *Theater and Disorder in Late Georgian London*.

satirical caricature of John Philip Kemble, the *Covent Garden*'s manager, portrays him wearing glasses, on which is written "Old House, Old Prices & No Private Boxes" (left lens) and "Old House, Old Prices & No Pigeon Holes" (right lens). Cruickshank is satirizing on the social mingling in theaters after the price raise.

Like *Drury Lane* and *Covent Garden* in London, *La Comédie-Française*, also known as *Théâtre-Français*, in Paris held the monopoly of performing serious drama in the first decades of the nineteenth century. In France, too, in fact, theatrical performances were controlled by political rules that aimed to empower the stage as a way to enhance the national enterprise and thus tended to promote a glorious tragedy. For this reason, in 1807 Napoleon enacted a decree to limit the number of theaters in Paris to eight: four grand theaters (the *Théâtre-Français*, the *Opéra*, the *Opéra-Comique*, and the *Opéra-Buffera*) and four secondary theaters (the *Vaudeville*, the *Variétés*, the *Ambigu-Comique*, and the *Gaité*).⁴⁸ A strict censorship controlled the repertoire and made sure that each theater performed its allowed production. Such a surveillance avoided both genre contamination and competition between legitimate and secondary theaters. Napoleon's classification remained official until 1864, although starting in the 1830s secondary theaters questioned their exclusion from legitimate culture. This happened especially for those playhouses hosting the so-called "spectacle de curiosité," whose success relied more on attendance than the sophisticated expectations of the ancient régime. Such spectacles, in fact, attracted a large number of spectators, for they were hosted in theaters usually located in densely populated urban areas, which were supposed to satisfy the divertissement of the crowds interested in having fun, rather than being culturally edified.

⁴⁸ With a previous decree of 8 June, 1806, Napoleon had restricted the number of major theaters to twelve. In 1807, he lowered this number to eight. Napoleon's decrees regarding his reorganization of the theater between 1806 and 1809 are reported in Donald Roy and Victor Emeljanow, *Romantic and revolutionary theatre, 1789-1860*, pp. 270 ff.

Although de-centralized, these secondary theaters were located in popular areas, such as Boulevard Montmartre and Boulevard du Temple, which were enlivened with cafés, street performers, and Panoramas and Dioramas, the latest optical attractions. The most famous *Passages des Panoramas*, a glass roofed passageway owing its name to two rotundas installed above the original entry that projected the panoramic views of large cities, was located here. In *Popular Theaters of Nineteenth-Century France*, John McCormick highlights that in the 1820s theaters in these popular areas did some of the best business in Paris and ended up attracting a more fashionable public, so that by 1830 they were no longer denigrated as mere low-class show houses (24).

A “social upgrade” in spectatorship, I would propose, was due also to the specificity in terms of genre that these theaters were entitled to present in accordance with Napoleonic decrees. Secondary theaters, in fact, were supposed to stage satirical plays and parodies, in other words vaudeville, which tended to mock tragedies and formal productions.⁴⁹ Such parody, however, could only be enjoyed by audiences accustomed to attend major theaters, such as the *Comédie-Française* or the *Opéra*, and familiar with the formal tragedy repertoires. If in 1816, a secondary theater such as the *Vaudeville* welcomed an artist like Eugène Scribe, who would soon make his name for the perfection of the dramatic formula and the elaborated middle-class plots of his *comedies vaudevilles* accompanied by songs, it is evident that pejorative labels of “illegitimate” entertainment could no longer be applied either to the genre or the location. New blends or hybrid entertainments became increasingly the norm.

⁴⁹ Point 3 in Napoleon’s 1807 decree, for instance, in defining the allowed performances at the Vaudeville, maintained that “repertoire shall comprise only short plays interspersed with songs set to popular tunes and parodies.” The full text is reported in Donald Roy, *Romantic and Revolutionary Theater*, p. 271.

It is said that Scribe provided the *Gymnase* theater, a secondary playhouse for vaudevilles virtually indistinguishable from the *Vaudeville* or the *Variétés*, something like over a hundred and fifty pieces by 1830 and that such a prolific activity finally entitled him to debut in serious comedy at the *Comédie-Française* in 1822.⁵⁰ What is most striking about Scribe's success in France, however, is the public's evident appreciation of a new genre that, albeit undeserving of artistic recognition from the more refined critics of the day, was praised for providing an entertaining and lighter alternative to some sluggish dramatic production. Mindless of stranglehold censorship and licensing laws, the managers of secondary theaters in large cities as London and Paris found their way to get around imposed grouping and genre limits, by evading in the entertainment they offered definition as "drama." Napoleon's vigilance had delegitimized theatrical business, rendering several artists and entrepreneurs jobless in order to preserve legitimate theaters and their repertoire. If many lost their jobs, however, others turned out as more resourceful and resorted to personal experiences as fairground showmen, offering alternative entertainments, such as animal shows, gymnastics, optical tricks, and the lively acts of the *cafés-chantant*.

Even selective censorship in the end was no longer able to ignore the success of such productions and after the Restoration in 1814 tricks, pantomimes, and performances by acrobats became emblems of a sub-genre entitled to be hosted in permanent buildings. The *Théâtre des Funambules* (*Theater of the Tightrope-Walkers*), built on the Boulevard du Temple in 1816

⁵⁰ Eugène Scribe vividly mirrored his contemporary society in his plays, satirizing middle-class people in a bourgeois equivalent to high comedy. Having learned from his initial personal failures as a vaudevillist, Scribe succeeded in interpreting what the public craved. Scribe enriched his ingeniously contrived plots with witty dialogues, catchy songs, and popular allusions. See Karin Pendle, *Eugène Scribe and French Opera of the Nineteenth Century* for a broader overview on Scribe's life, his collaboration with other artists, and his contributions to the world of the Opera as a librettist.

became the most accredited venue for acrobats, tricks, pantomimes, and the blockbuster Pierrot show by mime Jean-Gaspard Debureau, which lasted almost thirty years, from 1819 to 1846.⁵¹ The *Funambules* was one of the cheapest theaters in Paris, essentially attended by low and working classes, for whom pantomimes had to be accompanied by explanatory dialogues and simplex songs. Such a customized repertoire was also a stratagem of the manager who, by being successful at this level, could potentially elevate the genre of his theater in order to be licensed to stage vaudevilles. The government, in fact, finally granted the *Funambules* this opportunity, in light both of the large public and the number of people employed there, which turned out serious considerations to let the threats of potential riots win over questions of genre (McCormick 39).

In 1845 larger theaters protesting for the ungovernable competition attempted to close down secondary theaters and enacted codes of censorship to restrict recognized artistic genres, but the ‘tolerance’ by then granted was not questioned. Although licensing remained theoretically subordinated to laws aiming to protect dramatic genres until 1864, the practical theatrical reality since the 1840s onward testified the blurring of the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate performance. By 1845 licences were even extended to ballets, which had been largely excluded as a theatrical genre lacking in artistic merit (McCormick 49).

Like France, England experienced a similar trend when the 1843 *Theaters Act* replaced the *Licensing Act* of 1737, thus revoking the privileges granted to very few theaters to perform legitimate drama and extending them to more playhouses. This process was anything but linear, for authorities were still torn by the preoccupation that abolishing patent theaters would be tantamount to destroying serious drama and social decorum. Theater owners as well were

⁵¹ The *Funambules* was demolished in 1862 along with other neighboring second theaters during Baron Haussmann’s renovation of Paris. See Louis Pèricaud, *Le Théâtre des Funambules, ses mimes, ses acteurs et ses pantomimes, depuis sa fondation jusqu’à sa démolition*.

inclined to conclude that a selective monopoly would ensure the purity of dramatic genre, but they could not deny the evidence that their livelihoods depended on attendance and a paying public's satisfaction. Alfred Wigan, for instance, manager of the *Royal Olympic Theater* in London, a playhouse that specialized in comedy, stated that he was forced to give up and introduce music and ballet performances in his theater, because this was what the public craved. He wrote: "men simply go there for the pleasure of looking at the women's legs; there is no art, or anything else in it, and I would, if I could, altogether exclude it."⁵²

The Parliamentary Debate Papers detailing the *Theaters Licensing Act* of 1843 are an invaluable source of information to investigate the function of dramatic censorship and its clash with the consolidation of new artistic genres and changes in audience and social prestige. These documents show that already in the 1830s the crisis of serious drama was detectable. Among the many reasons that managers, actors, and entrepreneurs sought to explain this phenomenon, was the conviction that the theatrical decline was determined by the change in society and their tastes in recent years. The stage manager of the *Covent Garden Theater*, George Bartley, for instance, lamented the disturbance of other attractions responsible of distracting the public's interest from drama.⁵³ Others, instead, explained the decline of legitimate performances with a generalized accuse on the loss of fashionable allure experienced by dramatic entertainment or attributed responsibility to the competition caused by the diffusion of literature.⁵⁴

The *Theaters Act* of 1843 restricted the powers the Lord Chamberlain had been given with the *Licensing Act* of 1737, but such maneuver empowered local authorities to license

⁵² *Parliamentary Papers. Report from the Select Committee on Theatrical Licenses and Regulations with Minutes of Evidence* (1866), Q 4727.

⁵³ *Parliamentary Papers. Report from the Select Committee on Dramatic Literature with the Minutes of Evidence* (1832), Q 3274.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, Q 1360 and 2393-94.

theaters, encouraging the flourishing of new venues for popular entertainment, such as saloons, music halls, and *cafés chantant*. These places were well-known for the disruptive audience and the dubious decorum, as well as the allowance of smoking and drinking during the performances. Theaters' managers feared that licensing such places to perform drama would mean to debase the artistic dignity of tragedy for good. Nelson Lee, the manager of the *City London Theatre*, called attention to the fact that patenting music halls would affect the drama "because there would be drinking, smoking, eating, and the people could not pay attention to the context of the piece from the noise and the buzz of the gentleman walking about at those places; the piece would be mutilated."⁵⁵

If France and England yielded to the pressure of illegitimate spectacles and included them in the buildings once reserved only to official performances, Italy followed a similar but more complex path. Italy faced a peculiar situation, unknown to any other country in Europe, especially in terms of theatrical construction. By the 1840s any city in Italy, even some provincial towns, was equipped with a theatrical building. When in 1866 Italian chief officers were asked to provide the Kingdom administration with the exact number of theaters in their jurisdiction, 942 active theaters emerged from the survey out of 650 cities. Interestingly, two third of these buildings had been built or renovated after 1815 (Sorba 534).

This does not mean that theaters were something new in Italian cities. The first theaters built for a paying public were erected in the XVII century and the main edifices date back to the XVIII century, such as the *San Carlo* in Naples (1735), the *Pergola* in Florence (1738), the *Regio* in Turin (1741), the *Scala* in Milan (1778), and *La Fenice* in Venice (1791). Something extraordinary, however, was taking place in Italy starting the end of the XVIII century

⁵⁵ *Parliamentary Papers. Report...* 1866, Q 4982.

throughout the first three decades of the 19th century. Small towns built their own playhouse, which were inferior in terms of size, but equal in architectural prestige and rich decorations when compared to major theaters. It is understandable that spirit of emulation, ambition, and demographic pressure guided this process, but it comes spontaneous to question such a grandiose urban planning in light of the economic weakness that Italy was experiencing in the first half of the century.

In terms of funding, the architectural zeal was financed by the so called “privativa dei palchi” (“box patent”), which separated the ownership of the building from that of the boxes. Regardless of the fact that the owner of the theater was the State, a private corporation, an Academia, or a group of actionists, boxes were put on sale and generally ended up being bought by nobles and members of the upper echelon. These revenues allowed the owners to finance the construction or remodeling of theaters. But socially speaking, to own a box was also a very remunerative investment, for theaters functioned as magnets around which the entire cultural urban life rotated.

The interior structure of early-19th-century Italian theaters was governed by the rule of social hierarchy, as I have already mentioned, and seats were occupied accordingly. Since class status reflected the dignity of the public, much importance was given to privilege specific sections of the theater and to select the audience that could access them. The first two tiers of boxes were recognized as “noble” and were occupied by aristocracy and high bourgeoisie, while the tier above, known as “mercantile,” was used by the *nouveaux riches*, those who had recently acquired wealth. The *parterre*, was the yard located before the stage, with movable wooden seats, in case the area had to be used as a ball room, which was attended by a mix audience consisting of officers, young nobles, students, and women of poor reputation. Lastly, there was

the *loggione*, located in the upper gallery, which was assigned to the popular stratum and accessible only through a separate entrance (Sorba 535). Such a classified structure clearly pointed at limiting social mingling and privileged categorization and status discrimination for economic ends.

When comparing the situation in Italy with that of France and England, we notice that nothing similar to licensing acts existed and no bureaucracy was in the way of inaugurations and new constructions. This meant that whoever wanted to open a theater, either a private or a society, needed only the authorization issued by the office of security, which was also the organization responsible of maintaining public order within theaters. More importantly, no limitation existed in Italy in terms of genre regulation. With the only exceptions of few primary theaters in the major cities, such as Milan, Naples, and Rome, which had their own formal repertoire (drama and comedy) and public, all the other playhouses disseminated in the peninsula were venues for multiple performances. Driven by monetary goals, owners let genres overlap and, more often than ever, turned a blind eye to artistic quality. In their *Teatro e spettacolo nel primo ottocento*, Meldolesi and Taviani wrote that indoor performances throughout the first half of the 19th century were a mix of everything, “ora un po’ di danza o di prosa o di canto o di musica o di esibizione o di esotismo o di virtuosismo, in una continua riproduzione dello stesso tipo di spettacolo” (“now a little bit of dance, or prose, or songs, or music, or exhibition, or exoticism, or virtuosity in a continuous reproduction of the same type of spectacle” – p. 104).

The lack of specialization did not involve only genres, but also acting. The professionalism of actors, in fact, was subordinate to monetary goals and appeared a minor detail in comparison with the need for both performers and theater owners to profit from the show. It was common for travelling comedians to act as singers and dancers in major theaters, as well as

for professional dramatic artists to compromise and perform tricks and gymnastics in secondary spectacles. Because of the scarcity of jobs, actors were aware they could not disdain either a low-class audience or a secondary play. Antonio Ghislanzoni, a singer, talented journalist, and future librettist (to him we owe the libretto for *Aida*) left a very interesting memoir, *Gli artisti da teatro* (1856), where he lamented the difficulties that actors experienced to force proper contracts and their fights with greedy entrepreneurs and agencies interested only in profits, rather than preserving artistic identity.⁵⁶

By looking at how miserable life was for artists in the first half of the 19th century and the paucity of a repertoire that did not know how to renovate itself, we see that the ambitious development of theaters throughout the peninsula was everything but a maneuver to foster artistry. Theaters took on primarily a socio-political function, as they served to embellish the social context and to operate the state control over the crowds. Italian rulers – Victor Emmanuel I, Carlo Felice, the King of Naples- took theatrical sponsorship very seriously, as they envisioned in it the most effective way to control information and win the crowds’ favor. This attitude turned into a hybrid form of censorship, which sought to limit political liberties on stage yet granting some artistic freedom. But censors did not operate uniformly throughout Italy. Rules were more oppressive in those states where the connection with the Church was stronger, such as Piedmont, the Duchy of Modena, and the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. In Rome, as well, censors were often illiberal to artists. Vincenzo Bellini’s *Norma* could not be performed on stage as the noun *norma* was technically a theological term. Also the word *Dio* (*God*) was forbidden

⁵⁶ See Antonio Ghislanzoni, *Gli artisti da teatro*, in particular the chapter “Lo studio di un agente teatrale,” p. 18.

and had to be changed with *cielo* (heaven).⁵⁷ These exceptions aside, however, censorship in Italy was far more tolerant and resulted influenced by major practical factors, rather than expurgating performances and choosing subjects. Theaters depended on the patronage of wealthy classes, thus pleasing them and what they wanted to see on stage were objective elements to limit *regime* clutches.

Playhouses were ornaments to increase the decorum of a city and the audiences attending them. Major efforts, in fact, were put into the protection and satisfaction of the two most valuable financial supporters: the old and new élite. A strict control was wielded to preserve the divertissement of a paying public, rather than the performance itself. More importantly, much attention was devoted to prevent class mingling. Relying on archive administrative documents Meldolesi e Taviani highlight that the opening of a theater corresponded to a “stato d'emergenza” (“state of emergency”), as if collective entertainment could jeopardize the social reputation of upscale spectators (*Teatro e spettacolo* 109).

The general feeling spreading through Italy was fear that nobles and wealthy audiences could debase their social status and compromise their morality by attending theaters open also to ordinary people. Such a concern paved the way to aggressive impresarios and entrepreneurs, who sought only to preserve theatrical speculation and their logic of gain. As a result, the price of tickets for the pit and the upper gallery was kept intentionally high during prose and drama performances in order to discourage the attendance of a low class public (Meldolesi and Taviani 111). This strategy fostered a diversification in terms of genres governed by social discrimination and drive for profits. In the 1840s, opera and prose ended up being the privilege of nobles and wealthy spectators for their expensive tickets and the elegance of the premises. Melodrama

⁵⁷ See *The Frightful Stage: Political Censorship of the Theater in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, edited by Robert Justin Goldstein, pp. 200-203.

would even win over prose and drama, establishing itself as the most successful entertainment for upscale audiences. Musical journals of the time testify to an extraordinary increase of opera seasons, from 128 to 270 per year between 1825 and 1846, with a total growth in terms of productions from 388 to 798 (Sorba 536).

Major attention will be devoted to Melodrama and its social function as a form of entertainment fostering political upheaval and nationalism in a later chapter, but what is essential to stress here is the classified shape taken on by theatrical organization in the first half of the 19th century. Playhouses followed the rules of the audience's social status and the mobile logic of prices for tickets, which could vary according to genre, public, and elegance of the venue. This strategy of diversification reassessed the legitimacy of the pit as a cross-cultural venue in order to exploit the interest of the middle class for theatrical entertainment. As theater historian John Rosselli put it, impresarios were increasingly similar to "businessmen," unscrupulous individuals prone to bargaining in the name of profit, rather than elevating the quality of the performance; hence they sought to satisfy any available audience with no attention to class hierarchies.⁵⁸

As we have seen, architectural grandiosity in Italy did not correspond to as much intense artistic fervor. If theaters were now larger in order to be filled to capacity and increase profits, legitimate performances did not benefit much from this increase in dimensions. A large stage was perfect for opera and dance spectacles, but was dispersive for drama and comedy, making it hard for actors to master the space or project to the back of the house. More importantly, mid-century legitimate theater was bogged down by a stale repertoire still depending on Vittorio Alfieri's Enlightenment tragedy and torn by the theoretical dispute on classicism vs. romanticism (Balduino 1199). As a consequence, such thin offering prevented the possibility of high profits

⁵⁸ See John Rosselli, *L'impresario d'opera. Arte e affari nel teatro musicale italiano dell'Ottocento*.

slim indeed. Nevertheless, legitimate drama continued to be staged in theaters and kept in high consideration.

Behind this apparent contradiction, I argue, was hidden the interpretative key to the handling of the performing space in Italy and its dependence on socio-cultural regulations. The permanence of elevated genres, such as drama and comedy, as pricey forms of entertainment empowered the new bourgeoisie. For it was solvency to guarantee access to legitimate performance, the *nouveaux riches* could place themselves on the same level as noble spectators. Rich in money, but poor in traditions and recognized social decorum, bourgeois audiences could finally have the opportunity to experience what was once an aristocratic privilege. New classes saw in their possibility of attending legitimate drama the accomplishment of social evolution and class redemption. By getting possession of the chance to emulate the nobles, bourgeois audiences certainly fostered the blurring of discriminatory social ranking in theaters, but they did not contribute to artistic development. Italy consolidated the trend set up by owners and entrepreneurs, according to which beautiful theatrical buildings would also host performances that were economically and socially remunerative.

On one side, drama satisfied an outward social decorum; on the other, less “noble” forms of entertainment financed the theatrical building. Such a compromise surely pleased both the management and the public, but ended up fueling Italy’s backwardness in keeping the pace with European artistic novelties. All those new theatrical entertainments, such as musical acts, vaudevilles, magic tricks, *mimodrame* (pantomimes with music), and optical spectacles, which were the rage in France and England with so much intensity to be artistically elevated despite their lack of tradition, did not catch on nearly so much in Italy. These theatrical novelties were certainly known in Italy through the national press, but they were not adequately represented and

integrated in the socio-cultural milieu. After all, the theater in Italy was still a locus for social display, rather than a venue for artistic nourishment and visual amusement; thus, in the name of decorum, most Italians would have opposed opening the doors to amusements that belonged to the street. For the first half of the 19th century, the Italian theatrical reality was so limited by social categorization and the dispute between “high” and “low” entertainment that different performances took place in the same playhouse, at different times of the day, depending on the social status of the public. In *Teatro e Spettacolo*, Meldolesi and Taviani speak of afternoon and evening shows, the former for the lower classes and the latter for upper audiences, as well as Sundays and Mondays were the days designated to entertain the popular public, while from Tuesday to Saturday shows were staged for refined spectators (131). In essence, popular sub-genres were staged in the same building of recognized genres, but such a promiscuity was disguised behind net class distinction. It was as if refined audiences were not aware of the use of the theater on “popular” days. What in France and England was openly accepted, allowing sub-genres in purpose-built buildings, in Italy was a cosmetic operation that hid quite similar results from the sociological standpoint.

Hampered by provincialism and a social decorum for its own sake, the Italian theater throughout the first half of the 19th century did not give open recognition to those visual innovations and optical entertainments that had already taken root in the rest of Europe for several decades. The Parisian *Passages des Panoramas* had opened in 1800 in Montmartre and in 1808 a second Panorama rotunda was built on Boulevard des Capucines. Between 1824 and 1827, the Coliseum of Regent’s Park was erected in London as the home to a massive panorama of the city as well as other optical curiosities. In Italy, the first purpose-built rotunda for

Panorama entertainment will be erected in Milan only in 1881, with a delay of over half a century against Europe.

As we have seen, although financed and supported primarily by state rulers and upper class spectators, theaters were also places of social mingling, attended by bourgeois and lower class audiences. In the name of profits and the need to please investors, in fact, both censors and owners/entrepreneurs were willing to compromise just to have the theater full. Disdaining popular audiences became increasingly lesser profitable, especially when the enthusiasm brought by Risorgimento ideals set in motions demands for a freer theater. The political and social outbreaks in early 1848 forced the authorities to let up on tight control in theaters in order to dampen tensions. It goes without saying that theatergoing was affected by the ruling class's maneuvers, social discrimination, and the censorship rigidity. In such a difficult climate, theatrical entertainments were even more appealing than ever to the crowds. Prohibition failed in its intention to select genres for indoor performances according to class's protection and satisfaction. Less recognized genres, especially the newest imported from abroad, such as visual amusements, vaudevilles, and optical spectacles were circulating widely. The only difference was that the state obscurantist politics indirectly allowed them to triumph on a more accessible and less controlled stage: the square.

The public space was not regulated by class discrimination and could easily dodge censorship obligations. Here, the ability of entrepreneurs and actors, wed to the appeal of the novelty being offered, were the most effective tools to set up spectacles that would capture the public interest. In his monumental history of traveling entertainment, Giancarlo Pretini calls attention to street performances as forms of art that should not be denigrated as lesser creative expressions than legitimate shows, only because their quota of success are difficult to assess in

figures.⁵⁹ For street amusement we cannot speak of a ticketed audience, classified by social status and tastes, but rather of a less controlled and more heterogeneous public attracted by the ability and skills of the actors, as well the fascination of the artistic novelty.

As we have seen in the previous sections, optical entertainment did not follow class regulations because a numerous attendance was the most profitable goal, being more remunerative than an audience carefully selected. Following the logic of numbers, visual amusements was accessible to low class audiences thanks to the low cost of the ticket and the continuous running time of the shows, thought for people who worked hard and had little time for a visit to the theater. At the same time, optical tricks were not disdained by more refined audiences, who saw in their novelty a valid motive to attend an affordable-by-all entertainment. In fact, if class mixing was disturbing when it went indoors at “legitimate” theaters, in front of outdoor optical spectacles different social echelons generally intermingled unacknowledged.



Figure 16. Giandomenico Tiepolo's fresco *Il mondo nuovo* (1791) . Picture in public domain.

⁵⁹ See Giancarlo Pretini, *Storia dello spettacolo viaggiante*.

From a visual perspective, I claim that Giandomenico Tiepolo's fresco *Il mondo nuovo* (1791), preserved in the Ca' Rezzonico Museo del Settecento Veneziano in Venice, is an effective pictorial evidence of the ability of optical devices to magnetize the attention of crowds belonging to different social strata since their onset. The visual novelty in outdoor spectacles must have overshadowed class discriminations, for evidence shows that the upper classes did not express any particular concerns about debasing their status by sharing an outdoor performance with the hoi polloi. Such social tolerance was certainly favored by the novelty that optical spectacles represented.

Although the figures depicted in Tiepolo's fresco turn their back to the viewer and their identities are concealed, the details of their clothing make clear the presence of both high and popular classes. The crowd's attention is drawn by a small structure in the middle of the painting, surmounted by a rotunda and two flags, one in red and one in yellow. As the title suggests, the structure refers to the *Mondo nuovo*, a term used in literature by Carlo Goldoni, which was commonly known as *Cosmorama*, or more simply, a peep-show box.⁶⁰ The title of Tiepolo's fresco might behold an allegorical allusion to the discovery of the Americas. After all, the term 'New World' to designate a virgin continent was commonly in use since Vespucci's enterprise in the late fifteenth century. Tiepolo's *Mondo nuovo* is a vivid illustration of just how much optical devices attracted viewers of various classes, lured by visions of foreign lands. We have seen how Panoramas relied on the audiences' fascination with unknown realities for their commercial success.

⁶⁰ In 1761, Carlo Goldoni wrote *Il mondo nuovo*, a poem in honor of the Balbi family. This term, however, was likely in use before the 1760s in the spoken language to designate a peep box, but Goldoni was the first to use this expression in a written work. See, *Tutte le opere*, pp. 689-702.

Significantly, curiosity for the foreign was behind the Panorama and Diorama spectacles and central to the first attempts of cinematography. In Tiepolo's fresco, rich and poor, young and old, men and women, nobles and beggars, even clowns convey how optical shows had an appeal that crossed social boundaries at various levels. The visual pleasure of a gaze in the magic box was by all means more satisfying than fleeting aesthetic preoccupations for social standing. "Curiosity was a great leveler," Altick writes, suggesting that this "cultural interplay between the several classes" was instrumental in creating "the slowly evolving social democracy of the Victorian period" (3).

At the center of Tiepolo's painting, the showman operating the optical tricks in the device is a crucial presence, for he provided a live commentary to the scene depicted, as well as advertised to improve commercial success. Tiepolo's showman with his ability to advertise the amusement, exaggerating the wonders to be seen in his magic box, anticipated the entrepreneurs of Panorama and Diorama, who disseminated in newspapers and magazines their blown-up advertising some decades later and the alluring posters of cinematography. Tiepolo's showman is the forerunner of the lecturer of future Moving Panoramas, who mediated and interpreted images for the lower classes and the illiterates. The showmen's commentary and newspapers' promotions were forms of inflated propaganda, which essential to the commercial success of the shows, involved a certain degree of exaggeration.

But leaving aside the overblown marketing rhetoric, what is worth noting here is the revival in appreciation that Panoramas enjoyed in the last fourth quarter of the 19th century, between 1870 and 1885. As we have seen, Panoramas reached their highest popularity from their invention in the 1790s to the 1820s. Then, between the 1840s and the 1850s, Panoramas captured the public interest again, under the new label of *cyclorama*. After the 1870s, Panorama interest

shot up once again, resisting until the motion picture overshadowed them for good. The Panoramas' revival at the end of the century, I believe, was encouraged by the very novelty of their names, but also by the fact that pictoriality was increasingly getting closer to a 'cinematic' approach to reality, to be intended as the satisfaction of a curiosity that aimed to see the reproduction of the real in motion on a surface. The image of a framed artificially recreated reality happened in these rooms well before the first silent motion pictures of feature length in 1895.

In their second wave of popularity, Panoramas were commonly advertised as Cycloramas, a label first used to refer to a London exhibition hall that in 1806 recreated the effects of the violent Lisbon earthquake of 1755. Viewers could enter the building through a dark corridor lighted with candles, passing a foyer structured as a social space, where food and refreshments were sold (Altick 157). The simulation of the Lisbon earthquake was a cycloramic blockbuster. Audiences could experience the shaking effects of the seism, as sound effects imitated frightening rumblings and collapsing buildings. The most sensational experience for the public was the illusion to be swallowed by the roaring sea. In 1850, William M. Thackeray reviewed the earthquake show for the literary journal *Punch*. "I was more dead than alive when I quitted the premises, and don't know how I found myself in my carriage," he lamented.⁶¹

After the success of the earthquake show, the meaning of the term *Cyclorama* shifted from the building to the entertainment itself, a spectacle that, while similar to a moving Panorama, offered much superior technical effects never seen among the earlier peepshows and enlarged paintings. While Banvard's *Panorama of the Mississippi* unrolled its scenes before the audience, the Cyclorama earth show employed an elaborated mechanical system of cylinders that

⁶¹ *Punch*, Vol. 18, 1950, p. 132. Quoted in Altick, *The Shows of London*, p. 158.

allowed the image to be continually extended as it moved offstage (Altick 160-161). A significant improvement in visual terms, this device did not bend, so the illusionism was not broken at any point. The ingenuity of this mechanism was a solid step towards the accomplishment of the future dramatic tension on the silver screen.

Moving Panoramas, Dioramas, and Cycloramas rivaled contemporary stationary Panoramas, but did not eclipse them, as circular, large-scale paintings were still able to compare favorably with more complex optical illusions, in popularity and in commercial success. The dioramic and cycloramic spectacles, with their configurations and equipment, were so complex and time consuming to allow the performance of a single show at a time. Traditional Panoramas, instead, could easily offer multiple viewings, making up for the cheap tickets with numbers of repeated shows. As stationary Panoramas guaranteed a wider variety of subjects for the viewers, they were also more profitable in commercial terms.

In time the Moving Panoramas would solve the problems of complicated assemblage and transportability, but they remained classed among the more vulgar itinerant entertainments. While they brought knowledge of the world to local communities, they permitted a lower class of people to become familiar with areas of culture formerly thought for the very few privileged. Interestingly, the Moving Panoramas are today a neglected area of scholarly research, generally treated as surrogates of 360-degree paintings. Recent works on the history of Panoramas, such as Bordini's *Storia del panorama* (2009), Comment's authoritative *The Painted Panorama* (2000), and Oettermann's *The Panorama. History of a Mass Medium* (1997) devote some few pages to Moving Panoramas. The most exhaustive discussion of the subject goes back to Altick's 1978 *The Shows of London*, which contains a chapter chronicling the history of moving pictorial devices, from their modest English debut in the first decades of the 19th century until the

extraordinary contribution American showman and entrepreneur John Banvard gave to the diffusion of painting in motion in the 1850s.⁶²

It should be recognized that the undeniable success of Moving Panoramas among the audiences is sufficient to acknowledge them as crucial contributors towards the rehabilitation of illusionism in the realm of art. As Panoramas became an officially patented invention, their inclusion in permanent buildings made them inevitably the emblems of a recognized artistry. On the strength of their institutionalization, Panoramas fostered the contribution of visual illusionism to the broader industry of image making, which developed into the commercial phenomenon of the twentieth century. The pictorial simulation of the real was manifestly a 360-degree innovation. Panoramas served as brilliant examples of how art and mechanization could combine with new opportunities for publicity, mass marketing, and broad audiences.

The communicative value of Panorama paintings should not be forgotten either, as they functioned as powerful precursors of mass media and turned out as cultural metaphors able to stand out as urban landmarks. The peculiar rotunda hosting circular paintings, in fact, was a central place in the evolving urban scenario, and its controlled spectatorship from diverse social ranks could only have come to pass in the modern world.

⁶² See Altick, *The Shows of London*, in particular Chapter 18, pp. 198-210.

Chapter II

Stage Theatralization and the Modernization of Perception

1-Optical illusionism and the purpose-built building: a spectacularized visibility.

Practically we perceive only the past, the pure present being the invisible progress of the past gnawing into the future.

Henry Bergson

The construction of a Panorama rotunda was an expensive and time-consuming enterprise that requested not only consistent financial investments in the masonry, but also the support of a large paying audience, eager to attend the shows. In this respect, metropolitan areas were the most suitable loci for purpose-built rotundas, and city-dwellers were the viewers most likely to satisfy profit needs. Even in urban environments, however, the number of Panorama buildings was unimpressive: its success was essentially restricted to rich, European, industrialized cities, such as London and Paris, or American cities on the East Coast.

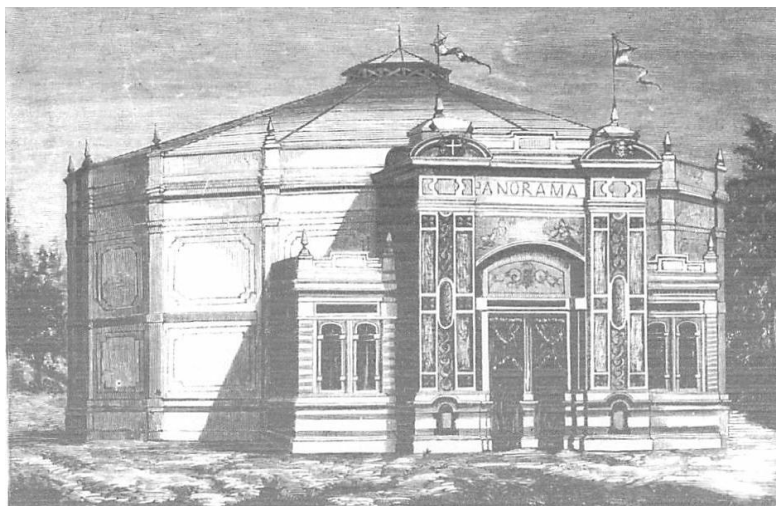


Figure 17. The *Panorama* Rotunda on Piazza Castello. From *La rivista illustrata*, July 1881.

In Italy, the first dedicated building for Panoramas was erected in Milan in 1881, a decade after circular paintings started experiencing their second phase of international appreciation. The weekly journal *La rivista illustrata* advertised the opening of a Panorama house on Piazza Castello, “Il giorno 24 giugno, anniversario della battaglia di Solferino, s’è aperto a Milano il Panorama – il primo che si vegga in Italia.” (“On June 24, anniversary of the Battle of Solferino, opened in Milan the Panorama, the first ever seen in Italy).

¹ The subject was still in the memory of many viewers: a battle fought at Solferino, in Lombardy, in June 1859, during the second war of Italian Independence, between the Austrians and the Franco-Piedmontese army. The battle, which led to the annexation of most of Lombardy by Sardinia-Piedmont, contributed decisively to the Unification of Italy. A pictorial enhancement of a glorious moment, the Milanese Panorama spectacle operated with similar illusory techniques found in the classic rotundas. As usual, viewers would enter “through a dark corridor that has to prepare the eye to be cut off from light” (“per un corridoio buio che deve preparare l’occhio al distacco dalla luce”), which led to a circular platform depicting the battlefield in vivid and suggestive realistic detail. “A primo aspetto, si resta stupiti, senza parola, per l’evidenza dello spettacolo, per la potenza dell’illusione. Siamo proprio sul campo di battaglia” (“At first sight, one gapes, speechless, at the evidence of the spectacle, at the power of the illusion. We are just on the battlefield”), claimed enthusiastically the reviewer, while eager to explain the secret behind such powerful illusionism:

Come si ottiene codesta illusione? Con un modo semplicissimo. Concentricamente alla piattaforma, alla distanza di pochi metri, è distesa tutt’attorno una tela dipinta maestrevolmente. Sulla piattaforma incombe una cupola chiusa che tiene lo spettatore in una penombra insensibile: mentre la tela è illuminata da un torrente di

¹ “Apre il Panorama di Piazza Castello,” in *La rivista illustrata*, July 3, 1881, No. 131, p. 2.

luce viva, senza riflessi, raccolta e distribuita da un'apertura del tetto. Lo spazio tra la piattaforma e la sala è colmato da alcuni praticabili che raffigurano, con meravigliosa evidenza, i clivi di un poggio, seminati qua e là di morti e feriti. Il passaggio dal vero all'illusorio, da' praticabili alla tela dipinta, è così insensibile che quasi non ci si accorge. E in ogni punto della scena sono ottenuti così begli effetti di prospettiva, che l'illusione è – ripeto – perfetta (2).

How is this illusion obtained? In a very simple way. Concentrically with respect of the platform and a few meters distant, a canvas masterfully painted lies all around. Over the platform, a closed dome looms, which keeps the viewer in a numb dim light, while the canvas is illuminated by a stream of bright light, without reflexes, channeled and spread through an opening in the roof. The space between the platform and the room is filled with practicable areas that depict, with wonderful evidence, hill slopes, with dead and wounded bodies here and there. The passage from truth to illusion, from practicable areas to painted canvas, is so negligible that one cannot almost perceive it. And in any place on the scene effects of perspective are so neat that illusion is – I repeat – perfect.

What the reviewer stressed was something beyond the visual artifice and the consequent viewers' deception we have seen was a constant characteristic in optical spectacles. To catch attention in his words is rather the number of supplemental details, such as the reproduction of dead and wounded bodies theatricalizing a space the public had access to. These details were no ordinary spectacle and their importance is worth investigating to frame visual entertainment within the logic of aesthetics, culture, and economic profits.

The soldiers' depicted bodies were strategically positioned, thus giving audiences the illusion of crossing the Solferino battlefield and serving the historical accuracy as spectacle. While touring this reproduced theatre of war, audiences certainly did not mourn for those who lost their lives for the national independence. What captured their interest was rather the verisimilitude of the context and the ensuing thrills, as if they were really engaging in a bloody battle. Such a scrupulous reproduction satisfied the captivation of the public's imagination with a

strikingly realistic representation finalized to sell the highest number of tickets. If the display succeeded in drawing the viewers in, making them feel a part of the action, rather than seeing it at a distance, the economic profit was consequently guaranteed. Tragic historical events were looked at nothing but sources of spectacle, on which Panorama owners and entrepreneurs could capitalize.

The accumulation of objects and details in the Panorama display was essential to depict the ‘real,’ but marked also the start for viewers to approach a new *immersive* visuality similar to that which the cinema was soon to offer. With audiences directly invested in the representation, in fact, the Panoramic experience became a cognitive and emotional immersion recalling the activities of reading or theatre-going. Furthermore, since viewers felt the pictorial reproduction perceptually convincing, they experienced a spatial immersion thanks to the sensation of being ‘really’ there, in a simulation that looked authentically ‘real.’ In a certain way, details gave legitimacy to the spectacle. And viewers did believe that the representation before their eyes was enough life-like to suspend their disbelief. On the wave of this “reality effect,” as Roland Barthes called it, audiences started being gradually exposed to the idea of an optical reality to be interpreted, for it consisted of images to be understood as representation.

Looking at the display in the Milanese Rotunda, we notice a spectacularization, both of history and reality, in imitation of the French tradition. That painters looked at history for their Panorama subjects is nothing new. The Crimean War, for instance, had inspired an impressive number of canvases. A highly-rated military painter like Jean-Charles Langlois even traveled to take pictures of the battlefield in order to preserve historical and realistic accuracy, and then re-elaborated them with pictorial tricks and colorful addictions. His *Panorama de Sébastopol*

(1860-1864) was highly praised for its truthfulness and richness in topographic details and war action, being a blockbuster for half a decade.

The realism of photography contributed the most significant innovation in Panorama painting since Barker's invention. Langlois, for instance, overlapped and joined photographs to create a 360-degree image he beautified with additional drawings and painting. Essentially, what Langlois was striving to recreate was a continuous field of vision in which images would reproduce reality. In other words, the same uninterrupted effect that today would be obtained with a dolly shot. It is no accident, in fact, that cinematography, as descendent of panoramic modes of reproducing reality, sink Panoramas into oblivion by accomplishing visual continuity by means of mechanic advantages.

Langlois's *La Bataille de Solférimo*, exhibited from 1865 to 1870, was the most effective result of the refinement of panoramic pictorial techniques. Langlois manipulated his own photographic prints, magically turning a sheer reflection of the world into an image with a dense pedagogical value that went beyond the consumerist end of visual entertainment. Langlois, in fact, would provide viewers with descriptive booklets illustrating his artistic glorification of the French recent military campaign, rather than continuing depicting past epic events, such as Napoleon's enterprises in Egypt and Moscow. Napoléon III and the victories of the Second Empire were the new target for Langlois's pictorial celebration of the nation. In his 1867 *Explication du panorama et relation de la bataille de Solférimo (Explanation of the Panorama and account of the Battle of Solferino)*, Langlois empowered his public with interpretative instructions, eliciting the spectatorial reaction before the fusion of art and history in the name of national propaganda. Langlois's canvases presented a recent past that unfolded through images and tickled audiences' comprehension of their own national identity.

By invoking the present, the panoramic spectacle elicited a mode of viewing directly dependent on the viewers' illusion of 'being there.' After all, since the very beginning painted events in Panoramas were staged in a way to enhance the temporal and spatial immediacy of the action. If we think of Daguerre's dioramic lighting tricks to reproduce shifting temporality or the illusion of movement provided by the rolling canvas in Moving Panoramas, we cannot but notice the goal of the artifice to re-produce the reality effect. As an anticipation of the cinematic reenactment, what the Panorama mode of depiction did essentially set in motion was the spectators' stimulation to re-visit a past experience through its virtual reconstruction.

The visualization of contemporary history, rather than the exploitation of remote events--reminiscent of a past too far and pictorially over-used-- was a considerable achievement in visual entertainment. Perhaps, the urge to revive the dying popularity of large-scale paintings after the diffusion of photography in the 1840s had inspired this change, but what is at stake here is how optical amusements served to popularize the re-visitation of the past. The allure of history, in this respect, was clearly key. As forerunners of a cultural mode of visual communication, Panoramas anticipated what cinematography- equipped with sound and motion- would consolidate in the 1900s: images of national history, as visually realistic as possible, offered to a paying public, in a purpose-built building.

In the mid-1930s Walter Benjamin called attention to the powerful dyad history/art in influencing human perception. "Just as the entire mode of existence of human collectives changes over long historical periods, so too does their mode of perception," he writes in his famous essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*" (104). To Benjamin, history conditioned perception, as well as the medium in which it occurred. Essentially, what Benjamin aimed to frame was a twofold process: the ability of the work of art

to encode its historical period and the way in which media affect the senses. In fact, because the production and reception of art occurred under changing historical conditions, this could not but impinge on the human sensory apparatus as well.

We have seen how the history displayed in the new Panorama setting produced shifts in the viewers' perceptive attitudes. The public could perceive the simulated environment to be physically real just because their senses were fooled. More specifically, the addition of 3-D objects and mannequins in the Panorama display stimulated *visual* deception, while the effects of sounds and acoustic inputs, such as the reproduction of bombs and cannons, elicited *auditory* cheating. No less important, was the ruse to let audiences move through the display, allowing them to touch installations in the name of *tactile* deception. Perceptually fooled by such realism, audiences were forced to tune themselves to the images their senses perceived.

This process, however, was everything but the passive indigestion of impressions taken in through the sensory apparatus. Audiences were rather active and desiring interpreters of the images displayed before their eyes. The richness in details and scenography accuracy, as well as the use of recent historical events we have discussed in Panorama staging, were clear signs of this transformation in perception. Detailing the display encoded not only the specificity of the optical medium in light of its age, but also the features of the society enjoying it.

It is not surprising that Benjamin described the individuals' perception of the world they live in as an optical device, in other words, as a constant producer of *phantasmagorias*. Major attention will be devoted to the meaning Benjamin assigned to this term in the next chapter, but what is crucial to stress here is his reference to a performance of suggestive shadows to explain the fallacy of human visuality. Paradoxically, the crowds perceived what they saw as 'real,' although it was only a commercial construct. The illusions of optical amusements mirrored the

illusions of *fin-de-siècle* life, which, according to Benjamin, exposed individuals to inconsistent values increasingly affecting their capability to rationalize the world. But to this aspect, we will return later.

One of the most considerable contributions to the refinement of Panoramic entertainment and the consolidation of large-scale paintings as forerunners of the 20th-century motion picture, however, was the crucial involvement of spectators into an increasingly immersive visual experience. Already in the 1830s, Langlois had pioneered modifications in spectatorship, being one of the first panoramists to understand the importance of placing viewers directly into the depicted action. In his hit *Panorama de Navarin* (1830), for instance, Langlois replaced the central platform from which viewers looked at the Panorama, with a battleship, whose deck would offer viewers a different point of observation. Anecdotes circulated that Langlois even purchased the *Scipion*, a ship he used to fool audiences with a simulated adventure at sea (Schwartz 154).

Anecdotes aside, we notice how the importance of realistic settings forged a new mode of display in visual entertainment, which was essential to the satisfaction of a public increasingly eager to be brought into the representation. To viewers, Panoramas meant visual challenge, especially when their subjects developed into something beyond the sheer representation of a place. We have seen in earlier sections that the shifting condition of appreciation and decline experienced by Panoramas between the 1840s and the 1870s was essentially due to their difficulty in keeping the pace with the audiences' increasing thirst for optical novelties. Panoramas' resurgence, in fact, boomed in concomitance with painters' awareness of the importance of featuring an event, rather than a static location.

The panorama rotunda itself, with its circular shape, accentuated the action of the representation, making the viewer feel enveloped by images. We discussed the importance of circularity in panorama buildings as a tool to control the spectatorial gaze, but what that was added in this *fin-de-siècle* panoramic resumption was a richness in staging details. The panorama canvas became a theatrical arena, where historical events were dramatized so that the public could have the illusion to live through them. Careful staging, platforms and props strategically placed, together with an accurate scenography put art at the service of patriotism. By looking at history on the canvas, viewers could eyewitness the past. Such an empowering spectacle could not but fascinate the crowds. The chance to experience tragic events that had happened out of their sight was priceless. It is not hard to imagine the amazement to find oneself on the deck of a ship that had taken part in a real naval war or walk through a battlefield disseminated with dead and wounded bodies. These experiences were worth the price ticket and documents confirm that outlandish staging such as Langlois' indeed met with a tremendous success.

Once the theatricalization of events caught on audiences and entrepreneurs, Panoramas re-emerged from their decline up to the 1880s, when cinematography swept them away for good. For a long time, Panoramas represented one of the most lucrative businesses in visual entertainment. In fact, is not surprising to learn that Langlois himself invested his money on a Panorama rotunda designed by Gabriel Davioud (1860), built on the lively Champs-Élysées (Comment 50). It was in this premise that Langlois staged his two last panoramas, the *Siege of Sebastopol* and the *Battle of Solferino*.

When commenting on the panoramic display in the Milanese rotunda, the *Rivista Illustrata*'s reviewer was appreciative of the accuracy both of the reconstruction and historical details. He spoke of “colli” (“hills”), “burrioni” (“ravines”), “accidenti del suolo” (“uneven

ground”), “villaggi” (“villages”) and fighting armies on the horizon, in other words “la vera, proprio la vera battaglia, com’è, come deve essere, contemplata da un poggio elevato e sicuro” (“the real, just the real battle, as it is, as it must be, seen from an elevated and safe hill”) (2). This description makes clear the public’s positioning on an elevated platform simulating a hill that would offer the most comprehensive view of the scene and accentuate the illusory effect. Rightly, in fact, the reviewer compared the sight before his eyes with that one could enjoy from “an air balloon” (“un pallone aerostatico”).

Though accurate and compelling in illusionism, the *Battle of Solferino* in the Milanese rotunda did not achieve a choreography to the same standard of foreign staging. By the time the first Panorama house opened in Milan (1881), European cities, such as London and Paris, had already consolidated modes of dramatizing the Panorama scenography, which elevated the show to a theatrical performance. Langlois’s real ship in the 1830s demonstrated that, even before photography, panoramists relied on three-dimensional objects to enhance the reality effect and lure the viewers with the illusion of being part of the depicted action. In 1881, such illusory techniques had clearly reached a high level of realism. Théophile Poilpot’s panorama *Les Cuirassiers de Reichshoffen* (1881), for instance, featured the defeat of the French in the Franco-Prussian war. Poilpot enriched his canvas with shiny tinsel for the weapons and the buttons on the soldiers’ uniforms, while well-known sculptor and anatomist Jules Talrich theatricalized the setting with wax bodies giving astonishing verisimilitude to the *ensemble* (Schwartz and Chutney 312).

While in London popular fascination with wax figures thrived since the 1830s thanks to Madame Tussaud’s gallery-like collection (1828), in France it flourished only in the 1850s. Pierre Spitzner, a showman with no medical expertise, opened a wax museum of anatomy in

Paris in 1856, the *Grand Musée anatomique et ethnologique*, on the wave of the contemporary popular appreciation for science and the body's pathologies. Despite the verisimilitude of his anatomical cabinets, however, Spitzner's 'museum' became soon a traveling exhibit. Only a decade later, when Jules Talrich himself opened his wax museum on the Boulevard des Capucines (1866), as Théophile Gautier recounted, wax figures acquired major artistic recognition, thanks to their arrangement in groups of *tableaux vivant* within a permanent building (Schwartz Spectacular 97).

The initial popular interest in wax figures was mainly fueled by itinerant shows using pathological anatomy to attract the public. Sheer spectacle of oddities, these shows were rudimentary and attended essentially by unrefined audiences, as they were allowed only outside the city by one of Napoleon III's decrees. Wax displays became legitimate art in the 1880s; the Musée Grévin opened in April 1881, in the lively area of Boulevard Montmartre.² Its director, Alfred Grévin, insisted on the artistic value of wax shows and legitimized his installations by distancing them from the anatomy collections of itinerant booths. The lavish and colonnaded building hosting the museum, embellished with skylights and busts of Michelangelo and Benvenuto Cellini, played the major role in elevating the status of wax art. As for Panoramas and optical entertainment, the legitimacy of the building sensibly contributed to legitimize the spectacle hosted in it. Grévin's museum was recognized as the first wax showroom in Paris.

Grévin's commercial talent exploited the wave of popularity that large-scale paintings were experiencing by mixing his wax *tableaux* with visual entertainment. Grévin molded the most distinguished Panorama artists of the time among his wax figures. The well-known panoramist Edouard Détaillé, for instance, was featured in the wax tableau *Les coulisses d'un panorama*,

² In her *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-siècle Paris*, Vanessa Schwartz details the history of the Musée Grévin. See p. 98 ff.

while working on his hit the *Battle of Rezonville* (Schwartz 104). Grévin's belief was that by showing respectable Panorama artists, the museum would gain artistic respect as well.

The outlandish mix of science, popular entertainment, and publicity barrage attracted thousands of visitors, spurring the use of wax figures in visual staging. By the 1890s, in fact, was common practice to see dioramic and panoramic spectacles enhanced by realistic dramatized settings where wax models were the rage. One of the most successful was Poilpot's *Panorama of the Fleet of the Compagnie Générale Transatlantique* (1889), a moving panorama simulating a sea voyage on the ocean liner *La Touraine*. The major attractions consisted in moving canvases reproducing the costal landscape, which gave the illusion of motion, and the possibility for viewers to walk on the deck as real passengers. Wax figures of crew members and the captain mingled with the enthusiastic public and live sailors dressed in the uniform of the Transatlantic Company (Schwartz and Charney 314). The mixture of reality and fiction was astonishing and, needless to say, attracted an impressive number of visitors.

The visual fascination that theatricalized Panoramas and Dioramas exercised over the crowds, however, was motivated by something beyond the fidelity of reproductions. The large attendance was also determined by factors, as crucial as the novelty of the staging and the power of the depicted illusionism. Pricing one franc the entrance to Poilpot's attraction, for instance, certainly made the tour on *La Touraine* even more appealing; also the diversification of fares according to time and day of the week did encourage attendance. This variety for the entrance fares demonstrates that the public was far from being exclusively bourgeois. As we have seen for legitimate theatres, reduced fees were not the sign of the organizers' philanthropy, but satisfied rather their urge to gain the maximum possible profit. Class mingling in theaters, in fact, was tolerated essentially in the name of capitalization.

What we have seen happening in legitimate playhouses in Italy, where refined audiences did not attend when popular classes did, was not a common practice in visual spectacles. An attraction such as Poilpot's *La Touraine* could easily attract diplomats and aristocrats, as well as bourgeois people, workers, shopkeepers, and proletariats. Clearly, not all of them could assess the fidelity of the simulation they were part of, as many of the visitors had never entered a ship in their life, but this was not a deterrent at all. Popular audiences had no curiosity for testing the quality of the reproduction, aiming rather at a new immersive visual experience. The nature of visual spectatorship, in fact, should be understood as the result of social and cultural practices motivated by people's interest in reality and in keeping the pace with it. These practices were not certainly the privilege of well-off classes only, but a cultural activity in which all the members of the society felt entitled to take part.

Although the reviewer of the Milanese Panorama did not state the entrance fee for the optical show, he did mention the "modest price" (One Lira) of similar attractions. The *Arena* in front of the Panorama Rotunda, "illuminated by electric light, with twelve most powerful bulbs and sixteen of minor intensity" ("illuminata a luce elettrica da dodici grandi lampade di forza grandissima e da altre sedici minori"), hosted the equestrian show of the renowned Circo Renz, concerts and music, as well as the captivating *phantasmagorias* of an aerostatic balloon. Advertised as "il Pallone frenato" ("the Bridled Balloon"), the attraction recalled the successful show held in Paris in 1878, which captivated the public with a unique experience: an aerial trip over the city. Audiences could witness the inflation of the balloon for a modest One Lira, while for Ten Liras they could enjoy the thrills of the ascension.³ Greedy fees would have discouraged attendance. And since we have seen that entrepreneurs staked their all on great numbers, rather

³ See *La rivista illustrata*, May 1, 1881, p. 10.

than the quality and value of the show, they had no interest in marginalizing any attraction. By making all shows affordable, the public's taste was the sole decisive factor. The greatest the selection at the same price, the greatest the chance to cover the audiences' demand. And Milan was not an exception.

The theatricalization of Panoramas' scenography fostered a serious advance in visual entertainment: the increasingly faithful simulation of the real. Viewers expected more than masterfully painted canvases, where perspective, lights, and colors gave the illusion of a true landscape. They looked to immersive installations, enlivened with real actors, wax bodies, mannequins, and day-like situations blurring the gap between reality and what was represented. That realistic details were fundamental to the success of the show and something 1880s public expected is evident also from the words of the *Rivista Illustrata's* reviewer. After praising the faithful depiction of the *Solferino Battle*, he lamented the choreographic lack of Italian infantry soldiers with their plumed hat, who would have certainly tinged the scene with realism and celebrative allure, "Peccato che, trattandosi della doppia giornata di Solferino e di San Martino, non si veda l'ombra di un soldato italiano, non il cappello piumato d'un bersagliere" (2) ("It is a shame that, being the double day of Solferino and San Martino, one would not get even a glimpse of a *bersagliere's* plumed hat").

In the Milanese Panorama the soldiers' bodies were painted on the props and had nothing of the spectacular theatricalization that wax figures and real actors offered in coeval France, when they engaged with the public as in Poilpot's naval simulation. The absent intermingling of life and fiction in the Italian Panorama's scenography is even more striking if we consider how well established wax art was in Italy's *fin-de-siècle* field of entertainment. A cheap and easily available material, wax had a long tradition behind, both in the figurative arts and for religious,

as well as scientific use. Already 16th-century famous artists such as Verrocchio and Michelangelo achieved realism in their works of arts thanks to wax mannequins they molded on cadavers, while Renaissance anatomists relied on wax models' hyper verisimilitude for research and experiments. By the 18th century, wax anatomy had reached such a level of perfection to turn out to be the alternative to dissecting cadavers. The museums *La Specola* in Florence (1775) and *Luigi Cattaneo* in Bologna (1803) became the major centers for the display of wax anatomy and had a decisive role in diverging the scientific interest for the human body towards popular entertainment.

We have seen how Spitzer's *Grand Musée anatomique-ethnologique* almost immediately lost its value of scientific institution and transformed itself into an itinerant freak show. Albeit devoid of artistic seriousness, what Spitzer's attraction did not lose, however, was its educational and moralizing intent. Spitzer showed wax tumors, skin ulcers, and dissected limbs to discourage immoral behavior and the spread of venereal disease. However, when these macabre reproductions were paired with statues of Aborigines and representatives of the foreign the *mise-en-scène* took on a broader significance. Ethnological displays became entertaining oddities that audiences loved to see. Popular pedagogy, ethnology, and scientific spectacularization gave birth to a highly appreciated divertissement exploiting curiosity, ignorance, and thirst for knowledge.

In one of his 1980s Parisian reportages for the newspaper *La Repubblica*, Italo Calvino masterfully described the impression generated by the mix of education and morbid spectacle in 19th-century visual entertainment, he called "la pedagogia del raccapriccio" ("the horror pedagogy"). When asked to review the new mounting of Spitzer's itinerant museum at the

Parisian *Beaubourg* after the attraction was found in a dusty warehouse, Calvino commented on the paradox of repulsion and attraction the wax staging exuded:

Nella ricostruzione dell'ambiente s'è cercato di conservare l'atmosfera tra lo scientifico e il losco, insieme di laboratorio ospedaliero, d'obitorio e di baraccone di luna-park che doveva avere allora, compresa la penombra in cui risaltano le nudità cadaveriche, e la smorzata musichetta da banda paesana. Manca solo la voce degli imbonitori e dei ciceroni che – a detta delle cronache – illustravano la “Venere anatomica” smontabile in quaranta pezzi, passando dalla fragranza seducente dell'epidermide al cupo intrico dei vasi sanguigni e dei gangli, al groviglio dei nervi alla bianchezza dello scheletro.⁴

In reconstructing the environment, it was attempted to preserve the atmosphere between the scientific and the seedy, a whole of hospital laboratory, morgue, and fair booth, which must have had at that time, including the semidarkness where the cadaverous nudity and the country band's deadening jingle stood out. Missing is only the voice of touts and guides who, according to the records, illustrated the “anatomic Venus” dismountable in forty pieces, moving from the skin's seductive fragrance to the grisly tangle of blood vessels and ganglia, to the nerve twines and the white of the skeleton.

Calvino's words perfectly captured the sinister realism that fascinated so deeply *fine-de-siècle* viewers. The frenzy for visual sadism Calvino called attention to equaled the taste for the tragedies of history audiences loved to see featured in Panoramas. Blockbuster wax works, in fact, were depictions of guillotined heads, slaughtered soldiers, and monstrous births inspired by historical events and newspaper columns.

In 1877, a few years before the *Battle of Solferino* was staged in the Milanese Panorama, the press sparked off the case of the Tocci brothers, two Siamese twins from Sardinia who shared a stomach and two legs in a common body. The brothers toured Italy and Europe for almost twenty years, and they were also inspiration for a successful wax attraction. Calvino himself, in

⁴ Italo Calvino, “Il museo dei mostri di cera,” in *Collezione di sabbia*, p. 33.

his review, wrote about the creepy wax reproduction of the Toccis, whose popular story of fame and glory he amended, recounting how Battista and Giacomo actually died young after a stunted life. The Toccis, however, featured as one of the major attractions in the manifesto advertising Spintzer's show. This story must have had a certain impact on the public if even Mark Twain got inspiration from the physical oddity of the Siamese Toccis, on whom he modeled the protagonists of his short story "Those Extraordinary Brothers" (1894).



Figure 18. The Tocci Brothers cabinet card, 1880s. Picture in public domain.

Fin-de-siècle literature was not less explicit than visual entertainment in exploiting popular fascination with wax bodies and macabre situations. In 1879, *La maschera di cera* (*The Wax Mask*) was a blockbuster novel by Francesco Mastriani, a well-known writer of his day for serial stories, such as the social drama *La cieca di Sorrento* (1852). Mastriani's *The Wax Mask* played on the widespread taste for wax bodies, featuring the story of Armando, a man who cannot get rid of his obsession for his dead sweetheart Giuliana. In his bedroom, Armando stages what he

calls “una lugubre stanza d’amore” (“a mournful love room”), where he treasures his beloved wax Giuliana.⁵

Looking at the visual and intellectual stimuli exploiting the allure of the macabre over the crowds, the minimal staging of the Milanese rotunda stood out even more. Instead of painted, the dead soldiers in the battlefield of Solferino could have been mannequins or wax reproductions. A more spectacularized scenography would have equaled the refinement of foreign staging. Since the optical show in the Milanese rotunda was inaugurating the national diffusion of Panoramas in a purpose-built building, the most refined staging was expected. After all, what was at stake was the chance for Italians to see something they had only heard of and a few fortunate only experienced abroad. As the reviewer pointed out, “É questo uno spettacolo nuovo per molti di noi, ma di cui dicono meraviglie quelli che l’han già goduto a Parigi e Bruxelles” (“It is a new spectacle for many of us, but about which those who enjoyed it in Paris and Bruxelles said wonderful things”).⁶

Less refined in visual terms, the Milanese display reflected not only Italy’s backwardness in panoramic scenography, but also the excessive importance given to the building hosting the performance, over the staging of the show itself. The Milanese rotunda, the reviewer pointed out, was a permanent and well-made construction, “non uno dei soliti baracconi provvisori” (“not one of the usual temporary tents”); its structure, too, was architecturally more articulated, as it had the “twelve-sided shape” (“Ha forma di dodecagono”). This rotunda clearly had nothing to do with the booths of itinerant shows of traveling artists: the edifice itself was an emblem of artistic seriousness. The façade was enhanced with architectural details, such as the columns at the

⁵ Francesco Mastriani, *La maschera di cera. Romanzo storico contemporaneo*, 4 vol, Napoli: Gabriele Regina Librajo editore, 1879.

⁶ *La Rivista Illustrata*, May 1, 1881, p. 10.

entrance and a lunette overarching the door, frescoed by Pietro Michis, one of the most appreciated painters of his day.

Clearly, Italy was pointing at the exterior sophistication of the building, rather than investing on a cutting-edge dramatization of the show. This limitation seemed still dictated by an outward respectability that tended to give prominence to building décor, rather than the quality level of the performance. However, attention to architectural exteriority and the use of classical details, such as columns, lunettes, and arches clashed with the ongoing theoretical discourse on masonry, in terms of style and materials. German art critic and architect Gottfried Semper's monumental theoretical work *Der Stil in der technischen und tektonischen Künsten (Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts)*, written between 1860 and 1862, had already spread a practical model for the aesthetics of architecture.

Semper turned against the prevailing idealism of Hegel and the romantic philosophers and directed attention on the things, as they appear to us. Artifacts and constructions, he believed, derive their meaning from their functions and materials, thus they are subject to historical and cultural changes. From these ideas, Semper developed his theory of style, an interrelationship between architecture and the motives of practicality. In particular, Semper explored the role of the “ornament” in constructions, as a result of the current shift in interest from exterior to interior details. Light, ornaments, and modeled forms are architectural particulars that articulate the surrounding spatial effect enhancing our experience of the interior space. By analyzing masonry and carpentry, two of the four style's basic motives (the other two

were textiles and ceramics), Semper raised the issue of *space* in architecture for theoretical consideration.⁷

Scholars and historians began to conceptualize the ‘interior’ architectural space, namely a sort of creative opposition to the preoccupation of classical design for outer surfaces. In 1869, Berlin architect Richard Lucae published *Über die Bedeutung und Macht des Raumes in der Baukunst* (*On the Meaning and Power of Space in Architecture*), where he isolated the elements of architectural spatial experience: form, light, color, and scale. All of them elicited different perceptions and the bodily participation into the space of architecture. For the first time in architectural theory, space came to signify the locus for psychological experience. Inessential, instead, Lucae argued, was the building’s style, for in this case “the spatial effect is influenced only to a very slight extent” (“wird die Raumwirkung nur in einem sehr geringen Masse beeinflussen”).⁸

Art theorist Conrad Fiedler drew on this theorized notion of space in his 1878 essay *Observation on the Nature and History of Architecture*, linking it to Semper’s reflections on style and the limits of historicism. In the second half of the 19th century, the continuous recourse to historical style had led to a disorienting pluralism in design. Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque, had all become “Neo-styles.” The suffix *Neo* did translate the intermingling of the old with the new artistic ambitions, but art had difficulty in detaching from the past golden age.

⁷ For the debate around architectural space theory, see Harry Frances Mallgrave, *Modern Architectural Theory: a Historical Survey, 1673-1968*; Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Architecture*. On the critique to Semper’s notion of architecture as a mere superficial art of decoration as articulated by art historian August Schmarsow, whose 1893 lecture *The Essence of Architectural Creation* is routinely cited as the *locus modernus* of space theory, see Deborah J. Johnson, *Seeing and Beyond*, especially pp. 159 ff.

⁸ Richard Lucae, *Über die Bedeutung und Macht des Raumes in der Baukunst*, in *Zeitschriften für praktische Baukunst*, p. 199.⁸ For the debate around architectural space theory see Harry Frances Mallgrave, *Modern Architectural Theory: a Historical Survey, 1673-1968*; Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Architecture*.

An example to explain the extent of 19th-century eclecticism and revivalism in the arts is Vienna's *Ringstraße*, a circular road running around the central urban district, originally built in the 13th century to replace the city walls. From 1860 to 1890, along the *Ringstraße* were erected opulent buildings, representatives of multiple architectural styles, such as Friederich von Schmidt's Gothic *City Hall* (1872), Theophilus Hansen's Greek *Parliament* (1883), and Ferstel's Italian Renaissance *University* (1873-1884). Such multiplicity in style must have puzzled artists and theorists for several decades, if already in 1828 German architect Heinrich Hübsch had raised the question "In welchem Style sollen wir bauen?" ("In which style should we built?"), as the subject of his provoking theoretical essay.



Figure 19. Vienna's *City Hall*.
Both pictures are in public domain



Figure 20. Vienna's *Parliament*

Despite the predominance of eclecticism, what was at stake from a theoretical stand was the argument that technical progress and changed living habits had made classical forms

inadequate. Theorists like Fiedler envisioned in this conception, the suitable arena to set the tone for a discussion on psychological space. To Fiedler, calling attention to a space where details elicited the viewers' personal involvement was the solution to the concern of the current age with the dependence of architecture on historical and multiple styles.⁹ When sturdiness and functionality were satisfied in the outer part, Fiedler advocated, attention could diverge onto the layout of the interior space, the locus for experimentation and artistic renewal could blossom.

Fiedler's considerations did confirm how rooted were space theories and the dispute around the excess of traditional models in architecture, at the end of the 1870s. Instead, the classical legacy of forms in the 1881 Milanese Rotunda attests Italy's distance from the architectural experimentation in design and coeval theoretical stands. We have seen how the idea of functional simplicity was taking shape; furthermore, the European rationalism and architectural realism of artists such as Otto Wagner were increasingly looked at as a departure from conservative style.¹⁰ These new visions could not but have a noteworthy impact on masonry. Residential and commercial structures, in fact, were erected in respect of and architectural language suited to contemporary societal and commercial demands.

⁹ Conrad Fiedler, *Observation on the Nature and History of Architecture*, in H. F. Mallgrave, *Empathy, Form, and Space: Problems in German Aesthetics 1873-1893*, p. 142.

¹⁰ In 1896, Otto Wagner published *Moderne Architektur* (Modern Architecture). Its appearance "presaged a revolution" in the history of architecture, as Harry Mallgrave writes in the preface to the English translation (1). Wagner's work was the first modern writing advocating a definitive break with past models. Infatuated with the cosmopolitan spirit of the time and technical achievements, Wagner outlined an approach to new designs and style. He turned against the romantic qualities in the arts and defended the materialism of his "utility principle." What Wagner was looking for was an architectural realism capable of satisfying the building's compliance with the practical demands of purpose and comfort. To Wagner, realism was the primary attribute to modern life. In the 1880s, Otto Wagner's works offered proof of how fruitful was his functional reconsideration of architectural styles in modernizing the urban space. Wagner pioneered the use of innovative materials, such as glass, steel, and aluminum and had a lasting influence on Vienna's city planning, to which he contributed several buildings. See Harry F. Mallgrave's English translation of Wagner's work *Modern Architecture: a Guidebook for His Students to This Field of Art*.

Starting the 1850s the leading theoretical goal seemed that to purify architecture through the elimination of classical imitation and decorative ornaments deemed outdated and useless to utilitarian social concerns. These ideals were anything but easy to achieve in a coherent way. If we look at some of the results in masonry throughout Europe from 1850 onward, we see how constructions ignored theoretical modernization and kept imitating the styles of earlier times. In this respect, Italy was not the *rara avis*. Among the profusion of revived styles, emblems of the ruling eclecticism in architecture, the most predominant was the Neo-Gothic, reworked from a romantic point of view.

In Germany, the resplendent *Rathaus* (1867-1874) and the Castles of Ludwig of Bavaria revived the Gothic culture in its myths and legends, as well as Heinrich von Ferstel's *Votivkirche* (1855) and Friederich von Schmidt's *Rathaus* (1872) in Vienna. In France, the *Opera House* (1861-75) by architect Charles Garnier is emblematic of the stylistic *eclecticism*. The astonishing opulence of the façade and its neoclassical style reflect the aesthetics of the *Beaux-Arts* architecture, as well as the political and social aspirations of the Second Empire. Many cathedrals were restored combining the Gothic spirit with new techniques and materials. Architects such as Henri Labrouste and Eugène Viollet-le-Duc stimulated the theoretical use of Gothic as a way to shape national identity.

In his reading room of the *Bibliothèque Nationale* in Paris (1868), for instance, Labrouste made use of slender cast-iron columns to support the domes as a tribute to industrialization, but imitated Greek art for the style. Viollet-le-Duc restored the cathedral of *Notre Dame* in Paris (1868), according to his intention to re-design medieval buildings and return them to the original Gothic. Viollet-le-Duc, in fact, intended restoration as an invasive procedure consisting of new additions. The task of the restorer was to interpret the original goal of the constructor and

integrate his work of art with the lacking parts. In Viollet-le-Duc's words, “restaurare un edificio non è conservarlo, ripararlo o rifarlo, è ripristinarlo in uno stato di completezza che può non essere mai esistito in un dato tempo. (“To restore an edifice does not mean to preserve, repair, or re-make it; it means bringing it back to a state of completeness that might never have existed at the period in time”).¹¹



Figure 21. Labrouste’s Reading Room. Picture in public domain.

In England, the Gothic revival was spurred by writers who advocated the superiority of this style that idealized beauty. John Ruskin, for instance, believed that Gothic architecture represented the perfect marriage of spiritual and artistic value (*The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, 1849). Unlike Viollet-le-Duc, Ruskin was opposed to this kind of restoration. To him restoration meant “the most total destruction which a building can suffer: a destruction out of which no remnants can be gathered; a destruction accompanied with false description of the thing destroyed” (*The Seven Lamps* 161). On Ruskin’s extremist anti-restoration ideas built artist

¹¹ Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, *L’architettura ragionata. Estratti dal dizionario*. Milano: Jaka Book, 1982, p. 247.

and utopian socialist William Morris, who advocated the importance to take good care of constructions, instead of having to restore them. Morris founded the *Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings* (1877), which led to the foundation of the British *National Trust* in modern times. The greatest example of authentic Gothic revival in England, however, is the Palace of Westminster in London, whose rebuilding by Charles Barry and Augustus Welby Pugin, after a fire in 1834 destroyed the old buildings, lasted thirty years (1840-1870).

In Italy, the return to medieval styles in the second half of the 19th century reflected the rise of nationalism and coincided with the move towards the Unification. In 1862, Pietro Estense Selvatico, a theorist, critic, architect, who championed the study of medieval art in Italy, was commissioned by the municipality of Piacenza to write “Sulla condizione attuale del Palazzo Pubblico di Piacenza e sui modi di restaurarlo” (“On the Actual Condition of the Palazzo Pubblico in Piacenza and the Modes to restore it”). In his report, Selvatico insisted on the necessity to return the Palazzo Pubblico to its original beauty, to that functionality and purity of style of when it was built in 1821. Freed from those 18th-century frivolous embellishments that “ne sconciarono l’ordinanza organica” (“altered its organic unity”) (18), Selvatico pointed out, the Palazzo would have brought local glory to Piacenza and prestige to Italy’s artistic heritage.¹²

The instance of the Palazzo Pubblico sheds light on the nature of the Italian revival of medieval styles, which can be understood as expression of nationalistic pride and regional empowerment. At the dawn of the Unification, Italy was still a patchwork of diverse local realities, each of which with its own history, culture, and artistic heritage. Scarcity of capitals did not allow experimentation and economic take-off, thus regions entrenched a blind attachment to

¹² See Pietro Estense Selvatico, *Sulla condizione attuale del Palazzo Pubblico di Piacenza e sui modi di restaurarlo*. Piacenza: Tipografia di A. Del Majno, 1862.

their own traditions and needs. As a consequence, artistic experimentation flourished essentially in a provincial dimension.



Figure 22. The *Palazzo Pubblico* in Piacenza. From *The Ecclesiastical Architecture of Italy*, vol.2 (1843).

The preoccupation to glorify and legitimize the national heritage was widely diffused, especially for those countries that strove to lift themselves from rural legacies and socio-political disunity. In Spain, for instance, Catalan architect Lluís Domènech i Montaner advocated the international recognition of Catalonia's *Modernisme* and wrote in 1878 his suggestive article *En busca d'una arquitectura nacional (In Search of a National Architecture)*.¹³ *Modernisme* in Spain was a wide-scale and distinctive movement that involved any artistic field, not just architecture, and coincided with Catalonia's growth in wealth and power after 150 years of oppression. The region's national and artistic identity assimilated into local idioms ideas from

¹³ The article appeared in the journal *La Renaixença*, 1878, Barcelona, ano VIII, núm. 4, vol I. 28 de febrero de 1878, pp. 149-160.

Germany, France, and England. What Montaner championed was a style that endorsed the Catalan spirit, as well as gave Barcelona a unique aesthetic in Spain and in the world.

In Italy, expressing national character in architecture was hampered by the weight of local identities. Which style should be elected as a model? More specifically, the style of which region? I argue that difficulty in finding a viable solution to these questions explains the artistic eclecticism that characterized post-Unification architecture in Italy. Since all past styles were glorious, and each of them was now representative of regional grandiosity, none of them could be excluded as potential contributor to the national heritage. In the name of this eagerness to give birth to a comprehensive state design, eclecticism found its justification in architecture.

Giovan Battista Filippo Basile was one of the most prolific 19th-century Italian architects, active between 1850 and 1890 mainly in Palermo, where he was the chief of a significant urban expansion. To Basile we owe the *Giardino Inglese* (1850-53) and the *Teatro Massimo Vittorio Emanuele* (1875-1891) in Palermo, as well as the façade for the Italian pavilion at the 1878 Great Exhibition in Paris. Basile also designed the eclectic *Palazzina Favaloro* (1889) in Palermo, which displays anticipations of *Liberty* taste, although the *art nouveau* was yet to blossom. In Basile's works is traceable the peculiar eclecticism of 19th-century Italian architecture and its wedding with theoretical hypothesis of modernization.¹⁴ Basile's combination of the new with preexistent artistic elements is key to understand how Italian ideals of a national style matched with the ambition to keep the pace with international modernity.

Architecture was effectively moving into industrial age and constructions could not but respond to these new parameters. The materials employed had to be innovative and forged to satisfy the modern dictum of utility in style. Cast iron and glass, in particular, seemed to

¹⁴ See Antonio Samonà, *L'eclittismo del secondo ottocento. G.B. Filippo Basile, la cultura e l'opera architettonica teorica didattica*. Palermo: Renzo Mazzone Editore, 1985.

accommodate commercial, aesthetics, and practical demands. Cheap and available thanks to the industrial revolution, cast iron could be molded in a variety of shapes and designs. The construction of the first iron bridges sped up the industrial progress and changed the art of building forever. In countries such as England and France, where iron industry was well rooted and could count on natural resources and large supplies, this new architecture found its rich soil. But what happened in countries like Italy, where iron was an imported material?

In Italy, the emulation of the European frenzy for iron construction had considerable costs, for this material was not the national natural resource. Basile himself, when reflecting on the architectural modernity of Paris, was puzzled by the extensive use of iron in Italian architecture. In Basile's words, "l'uso di questo materiale [il ferro] che noi ritiriamo dall'estero dal lato economico non giova al nostro paese ricco di materiali di vario genere che si prestano più docilmente alla modellazione artistica" ("the use of this material [iron] we import from abroad, in economic terms is not good for our country, rich in various materials easily suitable for artistic molding").¹⁵

Basile advocated the exploitation of national natural raw materials, such as stone, wood and earthenware and their combination with the glorious models of the past. Basile attempted this 'midway' experimentalism in his *Teatro Massimo*, but the clutches of local provincialism hindered the project. The construction of the theatre, in fact, lasted over two decades and was completed only in 1891 by Basile's son, Ernesto. Although Basile's innovative ambitions were not extremely radical and privileged the national interest, his attempts of modernization were hampered by the conflicts between conservatism and new bourgeoisie, a situation that seemed particularly true of the South, with the predominance of the landowning aristocracy.

¹⁵ Giovan Battista Filippo Basile, *Osservazioni degli svolgimenti dell'architettura odierna all'Esposizione Universale del 1878 in Parigi*. Palermo, 1879. Quoted in Samonà, p. 63.

Basile's experience provides a good example of the subordination that experimental eagerness was experiencing in Italy because of a multifaceted net of political, social, and economic conditionings. From the Unification onward, Italy faced structural problems and the contentious assimilation of a new national spirit. Avant-garde theories, thus, and the search for new expressive tools in the arts could not be the priorities for a country that was still striving for its socio-political unity. This does not mean that Italy kept the distance from the international theoretical debate in the arts, but its attempts at renewal essentially played on traditional legacies. Rather than modernizing itself, the artistic Italian language rested on old schemes, with a style borrowed rather than personal.

In this light, the clash between artistic innovation and formalism, which stood in the way of the discourse around modernization, as we have seen with Basile, is explicable. The slowness of the Unification process affected Italy, for it privileged national choices to the detriment of the openness to internationality and change. As we can see, the construction of the first Panorama rotunda in Italy occurred in a time period of great uncertainty, not only in political and economic terms, but also in social, cultural, and artistic. *Fin-de-siècle* Italy showed an intense aesthetic preoccupation, which had to be satisfied in respect of civil engagement, national needs, and the concern to keep the pace with the progress: a serious goal for a country still without national identity.

Perhaps, this ambition explains why starting the 1850s art was invested with a more robust and assertive role, ideologically and pedagogically. Architecture, in particular, was deemed as the artistic branch capable of voicing the intellectual progress of the nation. A debate on the teaching of architecture and the proper formation for architects started animating the public opinion in the attempt to stimulate national renewal. Camillo Boito, architect, noted art

historian, and novelist, was one of the most active members of the Italian intelligentsia to put personal commitment with the pedagogy of art at the service of the country.

Boito deplored the lack in his present Italy both of a significant architecture and a valid didactic method. “Nè architettura, nè insegnamento architettonico abbiamo al giorno d’oggi in Italia” (“What we have nowadays in Italy is neither architecture, or architectural teaching”), he wrote in June 1860 in the *Giornale dell’ingegnere-architetto ed agronomo*.¹⁶ But Boito was seeking something beyond the effectiveness of didactics. He advocated the professional training of architects and the definition of a specific architectural language to respond to the ideological function of art.¹⁷ Boito’s voice was not an isolated one, as the many similar articles appearing in the *Giornale dell’ingegnere-architetto ed agronomo* between 1854 and 1869 attest. Intellectuals lamented the stalemate of Italian architecture and did not acknowledge the slavish imitation of past models, which could not but clip the wings to national artistic autonomy.

Italy, however, was still very much dependent on the architectural glories of the past. Camillo Boito himself encouraged the resumption of the Neo-romanic as the only possible avenue towards artistic renovation. Pinnacles, tympana, buttresses, and pointed arches, which were typical of medieval Lombardy’s architecture, to Boito served “to form the building organism and the exterior embellishment, without that aesthetic needs ever stand out against or cause the slightest inconvenience to those of the construction” (“a formare l’organismo

¹⁶ See Camillo Boito, “L’architettura odierna e l’insegnamento di essa.” In *Giornale dell’ingegnere-architetto ed agronomo*, June 1869, v. VIII, pp. 269 ff.

¹⁷ See Camillo Boito, *Questioni pratiche di belle arti. Restauri, concorsi, legislazione, professione, insegnamento*. Milano: Hoepli, 1893.

costruttivo e l'esterno abbellimento, senza che le esigenze dell'estetica s'oppongano mai o rechino il più leggero impaccio a quelle della costruzione").¹⁸

Boito was intent on the preservation of both the functionality of the building and the importance of the ornament, aspects we have seen central in Semper's theoretical discourse. In this respect, the Panorama rotunda in Milan fit the scheme. The exterior façade maintained forms and ornaments of classical legacy, while the structure rested entirely on experimental materials. The building, in fact, consisted of prefabricated walls and a roof of cast iron and glass designed in Belgium. When highlighting the "grandiose and very ingenious" structure of the rotunda, the *Rivista Illustrata* reviewer wrote:

Quest'edificio, che misura 40 metri di diametro, 15 di altezza all'interno e 23 al cupolino ventilatore del centro, la cui ossatura arrivata completa dal Belgio, è semplice, grandiosa e ingegnosissima, onde si può montarla e disgiungerla con facilità straordinaria, ha le pareti in muratura ed il tetto a zinco e vetri. La facciata su disegno dell'ing. Luigi Broggi, la quale si compone di un fabbricato che contiene un grande atrio e due locali di servizio, è pure in muratura. Ha decorazioni in cemento eseguite dalla ditta Ferrari e C., stucchi, dorature ed affreschi. Due pilastri ai lati del grandioso ingresso, terminano in due grandi timpani curvi, entro cui saranno gli stemmi d'Italia e del Belgio. All'affresco provvede il pittore Pietro Michis.¹⁹

This building measuring 40 m in diameter, 15 in internal height, and 23 up to the central ventilator dome-- whose skeleton arrived assembled from Belgium is simple, grandiose, and very ingenious, as it can be assembled and dismantled very easily-- has brick walls and a zinc and glass roofed. The façade designed by engineer Luigi Broggi, which consists of a building hosting a large atrium and two rooms, is also brick-made. It has concrete decorations made by the Ferrari Company, plasters, gliding, and frescoes. Two large columns at the sides of the entrance end in two large curved tympana hosting the escutcheons of Italy and Belgium. Painter Pietro Michis will provide frescos.

¹⁸ See Camillo Boito, "Sulla necessità di un nuovo ordinamento di studi per gli architetti civili." In *Giornale dell'ingegnere-architetto ed agronomo*, June 1861, p. 734.

¹⁹ *La Rivista Illustrata*, May 1, 1881, p. 10.

It was as if architecture was not yet capable of distancing the legacies of its historical past, but at the same time could not ignore the new emerging social and economic needs. As we have seen, iron constructions were the rage abroad and their commercial importance in optical entertainment was considerable. In terms of assembling and disassembling, cast-iron skeletons were the most functional solution for playhouses. This operation would take a few days of work on site; once the show had exploited the marketplace was easily transportable to a different location.

The architecture of the Milanese Panorama combined progress and change with commercial needs and aesthetic traditional legacies. Its design, in fact, respected Boito's neo-romanic revival, without overshadowing ends of utility and functionality. Luigi Broggi, who designed the Milanese Rotunda, was not surprisingly a student of Camillo Boito while he attended the Academy in Brera.²⁰ Broggi, however, built only partially on Boito's argument around classical heritage, since he tinged the revival of traditional styles with personal taste and goals.

Broggi had great ambitions for Milan, ambitions that reflected the extraordinary architecture he had seen in Paris and the major European metropolis. Broggi aimed to satisfy the criteria of elegance and financial power. The class he had in mind as ideal commissioner of his works was the ruling bourgeoisie, a class holding the material faculty to approve new designs and influence the urban arrangement. Thus, Broggi drew from the past those elements of

²⁰ Camillo Boito was an architecture Professor for over forty years. From 1869 to 1908, he taught at the *Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera*, and from 1865 to 1908, at the *Istituto Tecnico Superiore* in Milan. Luigi Broggi was Boito's student at the Academy in Brera. In 1879, Broggi started his career as a professional architect, becoming one of the most quoted in a couple of years. The life and formation as an architect, as well as his impact on the architecture of fin-de-siècle Milan is explored in recent monographies devoted to the revival of this eclectic architect. See Maria Catella (ed.) *Luigi Broggi. I miei Ricordi. 1851-1925* and Paola Gallo, *Luigi Broggi. Un protagonista dell'architettura eclettica a Milano*.

scenographic grandeur, such as gliding, columns, frescoes, and stuccos, which epitomized the bourgeois taste for magniloquence. But to this theatrical lavishness, Broggi added the innovation of the iron skeleton imported from Belgium. The result was the combination of multiple ends, which satisfied celebrative climate, awareness of the national glorious past, and the social ambitions of the new commissioners. But what happened with the functional role of the interior space?

Broggi's Panorama rotunda confirmed a major preoccupation for exterior décor and social satisfaction to the detriment of the shaping and enrichment of the interior space the international theoretical debate was discussing. Since the Panorama rotunda was the locus for sensorial experience and spectatorial captivation, exterior style was expected to be subordinated to interior layout. Scenographic displays got the viewers' attention by creating stimuli audiences could note, process, and react to. This means that sensorial stimulation was not only the basis for cognitive experience, but also drove emotions and instigated behavior.

Visual stimuli were the most powerful strategy used by optical entertainment to captivate viewers. Although displays featured a multi-sensorial deception, sight prevailed over hearing and touch in the perceiving process and viewers' engagement. The overstimulation of sight, however, could hamper visual stimuli, making it difficult to hold the viewer's attention. In order to ward off this risk, entrepreneurs saw in the multi-sensorial experience a way to increase the audiences' involvement. The idea was that the more senses were stimulated, the greater the show was perceived and profitable. Accordingly, the panorama spectacle became like an invitation to a sensory journey finalized for immersion and continuity. This constant necessity to advance illusionism and guarantee the viewers' engagement with it, in fact, led to the exploitation of the latest technology.

If we look at the far-sightedness that countries such as France and America showed in combining art with technical innovation, Italy's major preoccupation of exteriority and class was even more striking. In 1880s America, for instance, the accomplishment of realism in optical spectacle was already well-tested for several decades. We have seen that already in 1850s America, 'virtual' trips along the banks of the Mississippi or the Grand Canyon were blockbuster shows, in which viewers were sitting before a flat painting running along the window. It is no accident, in fact, that American Panoramas were nicknamed "moving pictures" and, instead of staying on the traditional cylindrical platform, viewers were placed on a device equipped to simulate motion. Ships and trains then chauffeured the public around, recreating the thrills of a real journey. Such tricks had clearly evolved in the 1880s, when the refinement of optical techniques and pictures allowed the replacement of painted images functioning as passing scenarios with real photographs taken from train windows and ships. Additional multi-sensorial tricks, then, might include whistles and weaving passengers.

Also in France, by 1890 the effects of simulated motion were a consolidated practice in optical attractions. Audiences had been turned into consummate viewers by moving photographs, thanks to major discoveries, such as Émile Reynaud's *Pantomimes lumineuses*, the rage of the *Théâtre optique* between 1888 and 1893, which featured slides drawn on transparent gelatin with punched holes on the strip between images, foreshadowing the preparation of modern film; as well as Edison's Kinetoscope, with its strip of perforated film bearing sequential images (1894) and the Lumières film premier at the *Salon Indien* (1895).

The combination of art and mechanical innovations meant the consolidation of a *divertissement* fusing creativity, commerce, and industry; it also meant the emergence of a new mode of spectatorship able to overcome the mystification of the machine. Consider innovative

devices in optical entertainment from the 1830s to the advent of cinematography: Wheatstone's *Stereoscope*, Plateu's *Phenakistoscope*, and Edison's *Kinetoscope*. We notice that all implied the physical engagement of the viewers with the apparatus. In order to enjoy the spectacle, in fact, audiences were asked to peer through binocular lenses or hold transparencies up to light; importantly, all these optical devices made no mystery to viewers of the trick behind the illusion. This was a serious achievement in comparison with the *phantasmagorias* operated by Magic Lantern shows and Dioramic spectacles, where the 'secrets' of the performance from spectators were concealed. Once aware that the reality the apparatus featured was simply the outcome of a mechanical reproduction, viewers started ignoring the presence of the optical device.

I argue that in the 1880s viewers questioned the need of a mechanical intermediary and developed a visually independent mode of looking because deceiving systems such as stereoscopy, for instance, had fostered the transmission of 'sensations,' rather than the preoccupation for the agency of the trick itself. Stereoscopy essentially enhanced the illusion of depth in an image, by presenting two images separately to the left and right eye of the viewer. The two images then combined in the brain, so that they could be perceived with a 3-D depth.

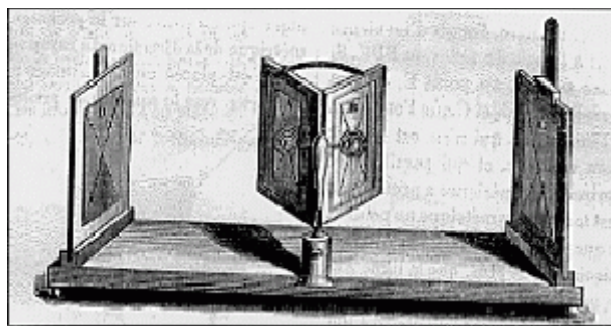


Figure 23. Wheatstone's *Stereoscope* proved that stereo perception is the result of binocular vision. Picture in public domain.

Mid-century optical devices, however, were still influenced by the scientific dictum that the human retina had zones of varying sensitivity, each of which responsible of visual acuity.

The voice of German physicist Hermann Von Helmholtz was authoritative in the theory of vision and perception of space. In his 1867 seminal work *Handbuch der Physiologischen Optik* (*Handbook of Physiological Optics*), Helmholtz explained visual sharpness as a phenomenon triggered by separated receptors located in different spots of the retina. The central area, which is called *fovea*, provided the sharpest details and colors, while the larger peripheral areas gave more indistinct impressions and were extremely sensitive to movement.²¹

German physiologist Ewald Hering, rejected Helmholtz's theory as reductionist, especially in terms of color perception. In the 1860s, Hering used colors as trigger receptors to explain the optical illusion of the *afterimage*, which refers to a vision that continues to appear after the original source has ceased. These experiments led Hering to conclude that sharp vision was rather the dynamic result of the interrelation between the retina and external sources of light.²²

Experiments and research demonstrated that different areas of the retina did not have a specific perceptual function. The stimulation of the entire retina, in fact, was involved in visual

²¹ Hermann Von Helmholtz published his *Handbuch der Physiologischen Optik* in 1867, although the book was revised and republished several times, after updating and reconsiderations spurred by Helmholtz's dispute with Ewald Hering. The *Handbuch* was translated into English in 1924 and edited by James P.C. Southall. For a broader account of Helmholtz's discussion on the retina's *fovea* and its differentiation with peripheral vision, see *Treatise on Physiological Optics*, vol. 2, pp. 331-338.

²² In 1874, Ewald Hering published his *Theorie zur Wahrnehmung der Farben im menschlichen Auge* (*Theory on the Perception of Colors in the Human Eye*). Here, he developed Thomas Young's early-19th-century intuitions on vision and color theory, according to which color perception depends on the presence in the retina of three nerve fibres responding to red, green, and violet. Hering furthered these concepts and demonstrated that the visual system is regulated by what he called color *opponency*. He identified three coupled primary colors, red-green, yellow-blue, and white black. When one receptor is turned off by one of these colors, its couple nuance excites the receptor. This is why Hering thought that six different receptors existed. Such articulated conviction distanced Hering from Helmholtz, who believed instead that human eyes could perceive colors only as a consequence of the combination of three primary tints, red, green, and blue. Hering's opposition to Helmholtz's interpretation of a localized functioning of the retina is detailed in the English translation of Hering's work, *Outlines of a Theory of the Light Sense*, pp. 153-171.

perception. Rather, what was more influential in the perceptual process, was the dynamic and personal reaction of the viewer to the stimuli received from exterior objects. Individuals were progressively losing their characteristic of passive ‘eaters’ of visual inputs, to acquire the traits of psychophysical *organisms*, who had active part in the sensory and cognitive understanding of the world around them.²³

Late-19th-century scientific positions in visual perception highlight a shift in the visual field, which gave prominence to a subjectivity shaped by the *organism*’s attitude towards the objects, rather than by the sheer intake of images and sensory inputs. Discussing the effects of central or peripheral stimulus of the retina was no longer the central purpose. If optical images transmitted information to the brain, the perceptual process was everything but direct. Its decodification implied the involvement of the perceiver’s previous knowledge and experience. At stake was a new consciousness of the optical artifice and the viewers’ dynamic participation in the images elicited by visual entertainment.

In 1874, Wilhelm Wundt had termed this dynamism in human behavior *apperception*, to provide scientific explanation of how events are observed and interpreted. What people see is not simply the product of ocular stimulation, but an intricate net of sensations, feelings, conscious perceptions, and practice. Thus, the act of ‘apperceiving’ is the attainment of full awareness of

²³ The word *organism*, translating the individual involvement in the process of visual perception, took on an increasingly central position in the last two decades of the 19th century and paved the way towards the “holistic” interpretations of German neuropsychologist Kurt Goldstein in the 1920s. Kurt Goldstein’s most influential work was *Der Aufbau des Organismus (The Construction of the Organism)*, which appeared in English as the *Organism: A Holistic Approach to Biology* (1934). Goldstein’s work was the result of a research calling attention to natural systems (mental, social, physical, biological) functioning holistically, that is to say as wholes (*holos* is the Greek word for whole, entire). This means that phenomena cannot be understood for their components parts, but only in their totality. In other words, this concept was the opposite of the reductionism Helmholtz was claiming for the retina activity. Goldstein’s ideas are rooted in the *Gestalt* theory, whose principle rest on the holistic functioning of the brain, as perception is envisioned as the product of interactions among different stimuli.

what we see in relation to our past knowledge. More precisely, apperception occurs because new inputs are assimilated thanks to an existing net of experiences. Wundt, in fact, designated *apperception* as a mental process; furthermore, he looked at sensory phenomena in relation to physical stimuli and psychology. Wundt's research led to the diffusion of a new science called *physiological psychology*, which he outlined in his 1874 seminal work *Grundzüge der physiologischen Psychologie (Principles of Physiological Psychology)*. The title itself established the alliance between two sciences, one dealing with phenomena perceived by external senses (Physiology), and one processing the effects of internal observation (Psychology). To Wundt, the resulting fusion between these two sciences was deemed unavoidable, as *physiological psychology* cannot sidestep the "contact between internal and external life."²⁴ I look at Wundt's concept of psychological subjectivity in visual perception as a model to isolate two key points in *fin-de-siècle* spectatorship: consciousness and attention.

By distinguishing between *Blickfeld (Field of Vision)* and *Blickpunkt (Point of view)*, Wundt highlighted the gap between the field of passive sensory experience and the field of *apperception*. Attention occurs during both. This theory connects to my claims regarding Panoramic illusionism, where images had to be 'interpreted' within the field of subjective experience to become objects of active attention. Without a subjective re-interpretation, in fact, images would have remained vague pictorial stimuli with the same dim effect Wundt detected in the inputs entering the *Blickfeld*. Take the example of how audiences originally responded to optical tricks in Magic Lantern shows. Essentially they marveled at the projection of frightening images. A house on fire, a horse with no head, as well as skeletons and ghosts did not request 'interpretation.' The main attraction was the very macabre subjects. These shows employed

²⁴ English translation is taken from Wilhelm Wundt, *Selected Texts*, in Rieber's *Wilhelm Wundt and the Making of a Scientific Psychology*, p. 157.

techniques for derailing the spectators' senses and belief, and exploited the crowds' naïveté. Certainly, spectatorial interpretative skills were not at stake.

Since Panoramas offered a 360-degree visual experience, they activated essentially the peripheral field, while the effects on the central fovea were not as active. On the other hand, with stereoscope the fovea displayed 3-D effects. When engaged with these optical apparatuses, the human eye functioned according to either 'panoramic' or 'stereoscopic' capacities (Wundt 233). Thus, both Panoramas and stereoscopes could offer a partial perception. This limitation leads to a critique of optical systems and the falsified feeling of reality they transmitted. In *The Problem of Form in the Fine Art* (1893), German critic and artist Adolf Hildebrand lamented the pictorial deception of Panoramas as an illusion exploited to make viewers believe that the image before them was a piece of reality.

The sense of trueness, instead, Hildebrand claimed, was possible only "because of the power of the stimulus contained in the image" (242). What Hildebrand thwarted both in the stereoscopes and panoramas was their impossibility to keep a coherent and rational distance between image and viewer. The spatial depth occupied by the panorama requires eye accommodation, for the distance perceived by the viewer is not the actual distance of the images before his eyes. In Hildebrand's words:

The crudity of this device [Panorama] lies in the fact that the sensitive eye is aware of the conflict between these accommodations and the visual impressions. According to the accommodation it is looking at something one meter away, while according to its visual impression it is a mile away. This contradiction produces an unpleasant feeling, a kind of dizziness, instead of the satisfaction of a clear spatial impression (*The Problem of Form* 242).

Although the sense of reality Panoramas evoked relied on false spatial impressions Hildebrand exposed, audiences did not question the validity of this visual distortion as pleasurable activity. On theoretical and scientific stands, optical amusements were criticized because they exploited a twofold conception of the field of vision as if it consisted of two entirely separated halves: the center and the periphery. Viewers, however, exclusively enjoyed the optical illusions before them, without worrying about which ocular function they activated whether looking at a panorama or through the stereoscopic apparatus. In the end, what emerged significant was the visual training that audiences experienced, which exposed them to multiple ocular stimuli and new models of visual consumption.

This modernization in perception, in fact, fostered a realistic imaging that led to the transformation of visual modes. It was as if viewers were assigned a new task of visuality: the capacity of abstraction. Audiences were required to believe a premise they would have never accepted in the real world. While walking through the battlefield of Solferino, audiences were surely aware they had never been soldiers in the real fight; they knew that impressive pictorial representations of Chinese landscapes did not make them real travelers on the silk road. Nevertheless, the captivation of these virtual experiences granted viewers the full immersion in a reality that was easier to believe than if it were described in a newspaper. The enjoyment of the reproduction, however, was dependant on the quality of the trickery. In other words, audiences could engage in the ‘suspension of disbelief,’ but the representation had to maintain its own form of believability.

In light of this conceptual interpretation of the real, the reason why the model of the *camera obscura* collapsed is quite understandable. Its rigid opticality, fixity, and identification of perception and object could no longer work with the process of modernization that spectatorship

was undergoing. The constraining setting of the *camera obscura* implied the rationalization of vision and offered a perceptual model. This apparatus let visual deception depend completely on a fixed source of light and the trueness of an exterior image; no less significant was the fact that viewers were a set distant from the locus of optical experience. How could such a ‘concrete’ approach to visual deception keep satisfying spectators now equipped with ‘visionary’ capacities?

The fictionalized world of Panoramas, especially after their theatricalization in staging, had accustomed viewers to a visuality that allowed actions, perceptual emotions, and virtual reality to intermingle. Reproductions were so believable that in the name of this verisimilitude, I argue, arose the public’s eagerness to put aside disbelief and accept the *mise-en-scène* as being real for the duration of the show. Audiences did not question the trueness of the tinsel buttons on the soldiers’ uniforms or the historical reconstructions and not even doubted that facts had really occurred as they were now featured before their eyes. Audiences simply ‘experienced’ what they saw, encouraged by the realism of settings and subjects. In the next chapter we will see how Cinematography exploited the same principle, letting the suspension of disbelief rest on the convincing power to see everyday images on screen.

By acquiring the eagerness to believe in and accept the illusion, viewers acquired also a new status, changing their perception of visual deception. In other words, opticality became an abstract experience, a crucial precondition for the future cinematic achievements. Panoramas’ pictorial deception used nature and past events as sources for the reconstruction of a scene, but such a *mise-en-scène* certainly did not literally mean re-enactment. While cinema really re-performed events for viewers, Panoramas reproductions were a-spatial and a-temporal, as paintings could not ‘perform’ actions; even when motion was enacted for viewers, this involved

only the physical movement of the rolling canvas. The nature of the panoramic mode was essentially re-constitutive and viewers played on their imagination to supply the lack of literal re-enactment only cinema can achieve. Unaware of the future accomplishments of cinematography, audiences availed themselves of historical accuracy, topographic authenticity, sensorial deception, and detailed staging to give temporal continuity to the representation.

In the last decades of the 19th century viewers of art took on the multifunctional role of observers and participants. As we have seen, such combination of tasks was initiated by a reorganization of antecedent modes of observing, when optical illusionism started to call visual truth into question and the camera obscura model collapsed. The deceiving techniques of Panoramas transformed vision into a supervised operation embellished by spectacular staging and regulated by commercial ends, exposing the viewers to a sort of ‘artificial’ realism very different from the faithful, undisputed reproduction that optical devices had offered until then. Illusionism shaped the ground for those changes in spectatorship that later became central features of mass visual culture, such as perceptual desire, the exploitation of images and their visual appeal to influence and persuade the crowds, as well as the consequent ‘suspension of disbelief’ indispensable to enjoy an artificial reality.²⁵

A reviewer of the *Battle of Solferino* in the Milanese Rotunda, when describing the building hosting the Panorama, called attention to two female figures in Michis’s fresco on the façade: *L’Ottica (The Optic)* and *La Pittura (The Painting)*. Clearly, the two figures typify the union of science and art, a crucial synergy of forces that stressed the contribution of optical

²⁵ Issues concerning the relations between images and consumers evaluated in their cultural significance are discussed in Margaret Dikovitskaya, *Visual Culture: the Study of the Visual after the Cultural Turn* (2005), Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (1999), James Elkins, *Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction* (2003), and Michael Ann Holly (ed.), *Art History, Aesthetics, Visual Studies* (2002).

discoveries to the development of art. From painting to dance the visual arts in the last two decades of the 19th century celebrated social, cultural, and aesthetic innovations by employing symbols for scientific and technological advancements.

Illusionism transformed itself into a narrative tool, once it was applied to artistically valued indoor performances. The *Ballo Excelsior*, a dance spectacle that debuted in Milan on January 11, 1881, six months before the inauguration of the Panorama house on Piazza Castello, relied entirely on symbolic representations. The *Ballet* danced out the allegorical victory of *Luce* (*Light*) and *Civiltà* (*Civilization*) against *Tenebre* (*Darkness*), the bitter enemy of *Progresso* (*Progress*), in a spectacle articulated in six parts and eleven scenes, which staged the great discoveries of the time, from the steamboat to Volta's light bulb and the Mount Cenis Tunnel. The deployment of the *corps de ballet*, lights, and special effects was impressive: four hundred and fifty dancers, international flags, and a tri-colored illumination enhancing the patriotic message. The *Excelsior* was a rare instance in which a dance entertainment enjoyed success for years and years; the curtain did not close on this show until War World I. The *Excelsior*, after 103 consecutive runs in Milan, was taken on the road throughout Europe and beyond.²⁶ The question why this show was such an overwhelming success is worth answering.

The *Excelsior*'s extraordinary appeal over the crowds was dictated essentially by its communicative visual power. The ability of its choreographer, Luigi Manzotti, and musician, Romualdo Marengo, turned abstract concepts, such as the potential of science and its effect on

²⁶ See Flavia Pappacena, *Excelsior. Documenti e Saggi*. Pappacena offers a detailed reconstruction of the original choreography for the Ballet by Luigi Manzotti, thanks to the perusal of the original manuscripts, archived in the "Museo Teatrale alla Scala" in Milan. Pappacena also compares the version of the Ballet staged at La Scala in 1909 by choreographer Caramba with the 1913 homonymous filmic rendition by the pioneer of cinematography Luca Comerio. The text is accompanied by a 14-minute videocassette, containing the two surviving fragments, *Obscurantism* and *Light*, restored by the Cineteca Nazionale in Rome.

the progress and human enterprise, into a visual language comprehensible to the masses. This was what helped the *Excelsior* rise to an aesthetic and cultural phenomenon. Manzotti started his ‘visual’ history of the progress with the Spanish Inquisition, the highest instance of iniquity that *Luce (Light)* and *Civiltà (Civilization)* are able to defeat (scene I). While the new epoch of science and discoveries is celebrated (scene II), the first steamboat Dionisio Papin invented in 1707 navigates through the stage, along the river Weser. *Oscurantismo (Obscurantism)* instigates the boatmen to destroy Papin’s steamboat (scene III), but the progress is by then unstoppable and viewers can see its results: a steam liner moves across the scene (scene IV). It is now the turn of Alessandro Volta, genius of the electricity (scene V), and his impressive discovery: the telegraph (scene IV).

The choreography moves to the desert, where *Tenebre (Darkness)* and *Luce (Light)* fight violently, setting off a sand storm. Travelers lose their way, but *Light* metaphorically indicates them the path and saves their lives (scene VII). In the desert, spectators see a long waterway, connecting the Mediterranean and the Red Sea; it is the Suez Canal, opened in 1869, after a ten-year construction. While ships of different nationality pass along, union and brotherhood are celebrated with impressive and colorful choreography. In a long *Pax de Deux, Civiltà (Civilization)* unchains *Schiavo (Slave)*, making him a free man who, guided by science, works to better the world (scene VIII). The result of human industriousness is the tunnel of Mount Cenis connecting France and Italy (1871). Running from the opposite sides of the tunnel, French and Italians hug in the name of brotherhood and cooperation (scene IX). *Obscurantism* is finally defeated by *Light*, who pierces him with her rays. When *Light* nods, the ground cracks and swallows *Obscurantism* (scene X). The last scene is the apotheosis of human genius. The glories

of past and present dance out the positive hopes for the future, while *Science*, *Progress*, *Light*, *Brotherhood*, and *Love* reunite on stage for the optimistic grand finale (XI).

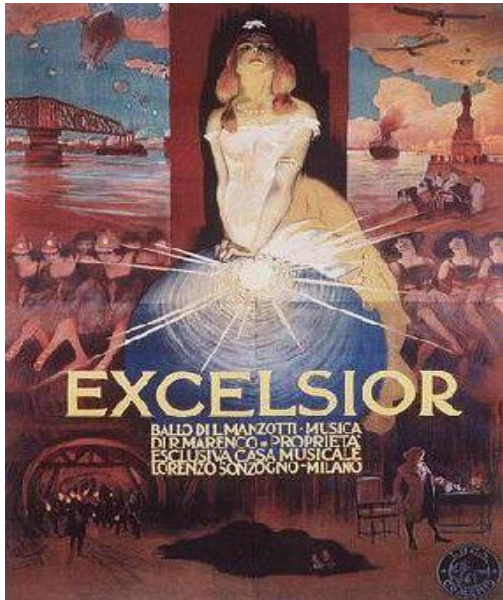


Figure 24. Manifesto for *Excelsior*, 1881.
Both pictures are in public domain

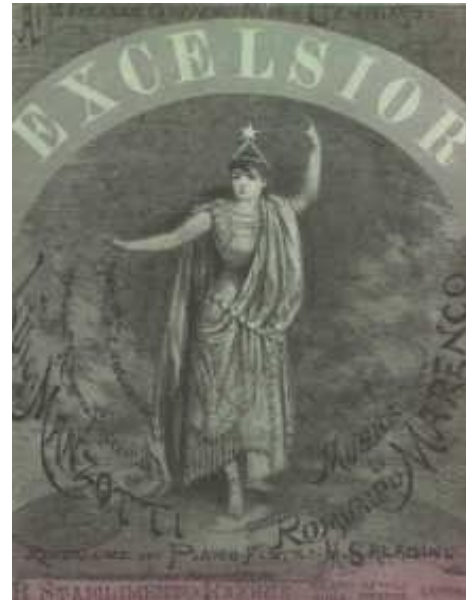


Figure 25. Score for *Excelsior*, 1881.

Looking at the Manifesto advertising the *Excelsior*, we can notice the captivating appeal of colors and images, as well as the use of icons meant for effect, representatives of the outcomes of progress danced in the spectacle, such as Volta's discoveries, the steamboat, and the Mount Cenis Tunnel connecting Italy and France. In the *Manifesto*, the iconography celebrating scientific achievements is the background frame to a feminized *Light*, a curvilinear figure dressed in white sitting on the globe. *Light* has successfully defeated ignorance and *Darkness*, in fact, is lying face down under the globe. In visual terms, the Manifesto shows the influence of French decorative motifs, the colors and forms of the *Art Nouveau*; at the same time, however, as a visual document, it attests the interweaving of a narration through images with melodramatic suggestions of Italian taste. In this respect, the dancers forming a circle behind *Light* sitting on

the globe give visual prominence to the lively quadrille that hymned universal harmony in the grand finale. The swinging score of maestro Romualdo Marengo accompanied the general belief in the permanent defeat of *Obscurantism*, as if this naïve optimism for the future were marked in mazurka time. The sumptuous costumes, the bombastic choreography, the massive displacement of dancers and lighting, as well as the impressive orchestra mirrored the intent to please the tastes of bourgeois theatergoers in *fin-de-siècle* Milan.

The themes portrayed in the ballet relied on the strength of images, staging a repertoire of culturally elaborated icons that encapsulated the 19th-century technological advancement. In fact, *Light, Civilization, Progress*, as well as Papin and Volta were key images of the scientific developments of the time; they were the emblems of a symbolic code that was now employed to encode new collective values. People wanted to believe in the enlightening power of rationality and technology as means of social and cultural empowerment. What the audiences saw in the staged icons, was a visual conveyance of the healthy dynamism of progress.

In his choreography, Luigi Manzotti keenly manipulated the compelling power of visual communication. He found an effective channel to reinforce the general faith in scientific development. Abstract beliefs in the applications of industrial progress were becoming tangible realities. Means of transportation, systems of communication, and electric illumination were only some of the stunning innovations framing the widespread visual frenzy for the potentiality of technology. Certainly, such improvements not only provoked changes in everyday life, but also cultural and aesthetic transformations. It was as if ideas could metamorphosize real facts.

We have seen with the theatricalization of Panoramas how profitable it was to bring audiences into the representation, on the strength of their new capacity of visual abstraction and detachment from the mechanical deception. The visual experience of the *Ballo Excelsior*, too, is

readable under this lens, as the demonstration of the viewers' ability to give body to abstract concepts. The icons staged by the *Excelsior*, however, take on a different function in comparison with facts and historical events featured in Panoramas and optical devices. History, in that case, was something already familiar to viewers, who rather wished to experience the past in their capacity of protagonists. The *Excelsior*, instead, staged an abstract iconicity; its key terms, in fact, made sense only if they were elaborated within the socio-cultural context. Conceptual ideas, such as the strength of progress and its impact on everyday life, as well the misery of humanity before scientific discoveries could take a better hold on the crowds, if turned into vivid images. Thus, audiences were taught that the absence of light could bring the same blindness of a sand storm and the transportation by water between Europe and Asia without the Suez Canal would imply the circumnavigation of Africa.

Once staged, *Progress*, *Light*, and *Darkness* were no longer abstract subjects, but inputs spurring visual imagery. Functioning as communicative icons, these terms voiced the Positivist ideal of unlimited faith in progress, which corresponded to the philosophy of the new dominant class: the bourgeoisie. Bourgeois attitude and values, such as efficiency, industriousness, rationality, and national pride, as well as the cultural acknowledgement of science and progress were recalled in scenes like those featuring men rolling up their sleeves to expedite the opening of the Mont Cenis Tunnel and the Suez Canal, or Volta's moral compensation after years of disappointing experiments. Paradoxically, the *Excelsior's* visual language reinforced bourgeois ideals also by staging their very counterparts. Seeing the effects of slowness in transportation, the nuisance of backwardness, and *Obscurantism* hampering scientific advancement was just as convincing as ten thousand words.

Featuring a depressed Volta sitting at his table discouraged because stuck in his process of discovery and then the aftermath of his prodigious electric achievements had a very persuasive power over the crowds. What could be more convincing than dozens of messengers frantically can-canning through the stage to deliver their telegrams, or dancers dressed like abat-jours and circles of light dancing out the electricity frenzy? As a consequence, the crowds saw themselves in the twofold role of spectators and protagonists, persuaded by subliminal inputs triggered by the choreography; a spectatorial empowerment that certainly recalled the one experienced by Panorama viewers when involved in re-constructed bloody fields of historical battles.

We have seen with Panoramas and early pictorial illusionism how the clutches of a controlled performance shaped new viewers. The *Excelsior* as well followed this established trajectory, using instances from the real world to grant value to the visual representation of progress. While the stage was turned into the setting of mass media propaganda through images, the translation of abstract concepts for viewers became an inescapable construct. Nothing could be more compelling than seeing how miserable life was before Volta's electric discoveries and Papin's steamboat. Viewers were increasingly subject to the norms of a controlled spectatorship. We discussed that in Panorama rotundas audiences had no say in the matter of their positioning before the spectacle and watching was deemed a lucrative activity. The *Excelsior* confirmed this logic of guided spectatorship. In the dance case, however, the control over the crowds was wielded through the visual barrage of icons representing the benefits of progress and science, rather than by the viewers' strategic central positioning as in Panorama playhouses. The *Excelsior* calls attention to the interplay between watching as a pleasurable activity and the repetitive use of symbols belonging to popular culture that endorse certain acceptable positions and presumptions.

The theatricality of the *Excelsior* reflected the social aspirations of bourgeois viewers: the expansion of trade and the market economy, a comfortable lifestyle, as well as the triumph of appearances and capitalism. The *Ballet* choreography itself was a celebration of the bourgeoisie and its contribution to social advancement. It was as if through the dance new standards of living could be honored. The final act of the show, in which a hundred dancers break free from the clutches of *Darkness*, is suggestive of the bourgeois willingness to liberate itself from the past in favor of technological progress.

The visual iconicity of the *Excelsior*, however, underpinned a generalized faith in science and progress. In fact, none of the real problems (the economic gap between North and South, the labor turmoil, and issues of unemployment, illiteracy, and backwardness) entered the ballet. The grand finale was the visual apotheosis of this abstract use of symbols, where *Progress*, *Fraternity*, *Science*, and *Love* enacted the enthusiasm for the present achievements and the hopes for tomorrow. Dancers can-canning throughout the stage waving the flags of the world suggested the faith placed in progress. The technological advances made possible by Volta and Papin could spread across the world.

Although visually appealing, the message of fraternity promoted by the *Excelsior* was yet a further confirmation of the limitations of the belief in progress. The benefits fostered by scientific advancement were strictly dependent on Enlightenment legacies. After all, the association of *Light* with rationality and knowledge, as well as the confinement of *Darkness* to the embodiment of ignorance were Enlightenment motifs. The themes of fraternity, equality, and peace were quite clichéd, especially in consideration of the social and political situation of contemporary Italy. Italian regions were torn apart by internal conflicts and hegemonic struggles, while social disparities were enhanced by the emancipation of the North at the expense of

subjugated masses of Southern peasants enslaved to unexploitable lands and to the process of industrialization. So as it happened with Panoramas, the employment of past events and socio-cultural themes in the *Excelsior* served to finalize the use of history to entertainment.

With all its vows of faith in progress and optimism for the future, the *Excelsior* was highly selective in what it depicted, and it avoided entirely all the negative realities facing contemporary Italy. The *Excelsior*'s emphatic themes of fraternity and equality were solely standardized icons staged for the visual appeal, deprived of any reformist intention. An effective treatment of the future benefits brought by progress should not have skipped crucial issues affecting the economic, social, political, and cultural advancement of the nation.

The *Excelsior* staged brotherhood and an ideal progress to the benefit of the community, but these were essentially blathered values. No attempt to support regional equality and reverse the dominant cultural representation of the South, for instance, entered the show. Visual emphasis was given to Italians and French tight in a sympathy hug in the Mount Cenis' tunnel, but the racist stigma that was affecting Southern Italy remained untouched. Gramsci's reflections on the uneven relationship between the Italian regions confirm the widespread discriminating message that fueled prejudice, rather than extirpating it, turning southern natives into the representatives of an inferior race:

It is well known what kind of ideology has been disseminated in myriad ways among the masses of the north by the propagandists of the bourgeoisie - the South is the ball and chain which prevents the social development of Italy from progressing more rapidly; the Southerners are biologically inferior beings, semi-barbarians or total barbarians, by natural destiny; if the South is backward, the fault does not lie with the capitalist system or with any other historical cause, but with Nature, which has made the Southerners lazy, incapable, criminal and barbaric.²⁷

²⁷ In David Forgacs, *A Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings, 1916-1935*, p. 173.

Paradoxically, the very first scene of the Ballet staged the Spanish Inquisition as the most striking example of inequity and cultural barbarity, but no visual emphasis was placed on major and more contemporary instances of social and political backwardness occurring on the national ground. The show distracted the audience from the real societal plagues with the faith in progress and, in the case of the Inquisition, with a displacement into the past. The icons of scientific progress served to manipulate the crowds, to instill in them the desire for a materialistic and hedonistic lifestyle. The staging of concrete improvements brought by progress into everyday life reinforced the audiences' inducement to aspire to comfort and economic well being.

This critique of the constant production of desire that visual barrage encompassed will be pivotal in Benjamin's reflections on the effects of modernity (*The Arcades Project*). Benjamin coupled desire with the process of commodity manufacture, highlighting the ability of technological progress to create repetitiveness and thus dependence. This concept highlights the ambivalence of modernity, which consists in the capacity to fascinate and baffle individuals at the same time, fostering utopian ideals. The visual philosophy of the *Excelsior*, too, should be construed under this light, as iconography lacking pedagogical value and a cogent use of historical images. Visual references to real events were treated solely on a superficial level, losing the informative and educational scope of 1860s Panoramas.

I argue, in fact, that in the *Excelsior* the spectacularization of history and its didactic function we discussed in relation to the *Garibaldi Panorama* in Chapter I lost its appeal, as in the Ballet a glorious past was reduced to icons staging bourgeois social ambitions for a better world. More importantly, the visual representation of recent history was neglected purposively, following the logic of overshadowing in favor of political interests. After all, the *Excelsior*

reflected the bourgeois ideal of *fin-de-siècle* Italy, thus the new ruling class aimed to voice its faith in progress as a metaphor for the production of wealth and well-being, denying any responsibility for the lack of social balance between North and South.

I stress that the overdone visuality with which the *Excelsior* re-elaborated scientific advancements takes on the function of an effective socio-cultural document reflecting the milieu in which it acquired its significance. The splendor of the stage recalled the splendor of the new bourgeoisie, a class that, we have seen in Chapter I:4, interpreted theater going as a way to display social achievements. In other words, theater going meant to see, but also be seen in a context that could not be but grandiose, sumptuous, and celebrative, in so much it epitomized the bourgeoisie's social empowerment. It was as if with the *Ballo Excelsior*, the theater gave expression to that privileged elite of contemporary society able to appreciate its self-celebration in the staged spectacle.

This part of society, however, was not representative of the general cultural situation in Italy. In fact, it was not a coincidence that the *Excelsior* took place in Milan, an exceptionally developed and industrialized urban space, whose social and economic reality did not resemble that of the rest of the nation. After the Napoleonic supremacy at the very end of end of the 18th century and the dominance of Neoclassicism, which was followed by the Austrian governance in the 1840s Milan was the first Italian city to be endowed with modern services, such as the *omnibus*, gas, and light. After the Second War of Independence (1859) and the defeat of the Austrian Empire in the bloody battle of *Magenta*, Milan was annexed by the Kingdom of Sardinia and could move towards the Unification process. Both the French and Austrian dominance, however, had a decisive impact on the cultural blossom and modernization of Milan. To the foreigners, Milan owed the construction of its most famous theatre *La Scala*, the opening

to the public of once private libraries, the upgrading of public administration (the very famous *catasto*), and the improvements in transportation with new streets and railways. Although in 1881 Rome was the capital of Italy, Milan was the epicenter of cultural innovations, the city where avant-garde intellectual movements, such as *Verismo* and *Scapigliatura*, took shape.

It is significant that the allegorical show of the *Excelsior* and the first national playhouse for optical entertainment were hosted in Milan, where every effort was made to combine artistic culture, societal ambitions, and politics. The idolatrized progress in the ballet and the modern structure of the Panorama house behind a classicist façade endorse the national run towards the modern world. The combination of old and new, which integrated the past rather than canceling it, voiced the nation's personal interpretation of modernity. The architectural eclecticism of the Panorama rotunda was dictated neither by mythic exaltation of the past or nostalgia, but was rather an attempt to personalize one's own ideology. Italian eclecticism drew on past archetypes because tradition guaranteed artistic trueness and respectability, but this revival was looked at with eyes projected towards the future of the country.

We have seen that the preoccupation for a national style assailed Italy since the 1850s and went on until World War I. Beyond its national and political identity, the country aimed to shape its cultural and artistic unity. Ambitions of renewal, in fact, invested any creative field, from language (the cultivated Florentine became the model) to the figurative arts and architecture. The idea was to build up national unity through the arts, architecture in particular. What was advocated was an artistic discourse capable of voicing ethic and aesthetic values, in order to foster the formation of a unified identity and culture.

Architectural choices continued to rest on multiple styles and historical eclecticism, and constructions throughout the peninsula reflected the national conditionings. The powerful dyad

of politics and culture gave birth to buildings finalized to a twofold satisfaction: ethics from one side, and patriotic sentiments from the other. In Turin, the *Mole Antonelliana*, the city's symbolic monument originally built to celebrate the Jewish emancipation became the *Museo Nazionale dell'Indipendenza Italiana*, while Florence was disseminated with statues of Dante Alighieri as local tributes to the father of the Italian idiom. In Rome, capital of Italy since 1870, the ambition of unity and national memory was consecrated in the "marble homeland" in honor of king Victor Emmanuel II.

Since the urban space was emblematic of the changes in politics and society architects were expected to display this transformation in their works and projects. Streets, fountains, buildings were re-named to honor great men and concepts of the national unification: Mazzini, Cavour, Garibaldi, but also *Indipendenza*, *Libertà*, and *Nazione* labeled the new topographic asset. Ancient city-walls were demolished in cities such as Milan, Bologna, and Florence as seen as old obstacles to the new speculative urbanization. The privilege was given to open spaces capable of hosting railways and train stations, signifiers of progress and the needs of new technology. Squares were transformed into arenas for the reinforcement of national identity. Here, marble heroes of the Italian Risorgimento triumphantly stood in the center to elicit the collective imagination.

The most emancipated city in Italy, Milan elected its central Piazza Duomo as the epicenter of national awareness, where politics and culture spoke out their convincing dialectics. It is around this square that businessmen, bourgeois social climbers, bureaucrats, and speculators erected their buildings, a blaze of power and status symbol. Streets became a net of lines to host banks, ministries, churches, and edifices with multiple architectural styles. Here, Ferdinando and Luigi Bocconi opened the first store for ready-to-wear outfits (1865), Massimiliano Chiari

exploited the crowd-pulling event of 1878 Paris *Great Exhibition* and opened the first travel agency in Italy, while engineer Giuseppe Colombo built the first electric power station in Europe in a narrow street behind the Duomo and introduced the use of the telephone in Italy after he saw it at the Philadelphia exhibition in 1876.

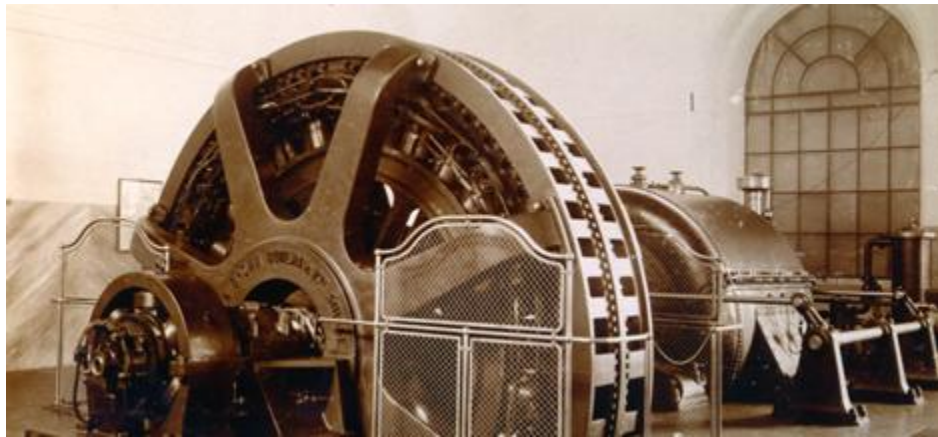


Figure 26. Giuseppe Colombo's plant in Milan was the first electric power station in Europe for the continuous distribution of energy (1883). Picture in public domain.

When the Milanese Panorama was erected the selected locus was deliberately the golden triangle between Piazza Duomo, Dante e Foro Bonaparte, the pulsating heart of societal life, as well as crucible of well-off spectators and entrepreneurs. Not less important, then, was the fact that both the Panorama and the *Ballo Excelsior* were part of the celebrations to honor another important national event taking place in the same urban context: the first *Esposizione Industriale*.

On May 5, 1881 the *Esposizione Industriale* opened to the public and was hosted in the area between Porta Venezia and Porta Nova, two of the historical Milanese gateways. The *Exhibition* was an impressive success, recording one million visitors and considerable incomes of over 300.000 Liras from the tickets sale only, as the *Archivio storico* reported.²⁸ The *Esposizione* was opened for six months and over 20.000 visitors a day attended the pavilions

²⁸ See www.fondazionefieramilano.it accessed on May 20, 2011.

displaying the products of 7.000 expositors coming from any region of Italy.²⁹ In terms of visual appeal, the *Esposizione* was in line with the taste for grandiose buildings, lavish décor, and theatricalized spectacles we discussed earlier.

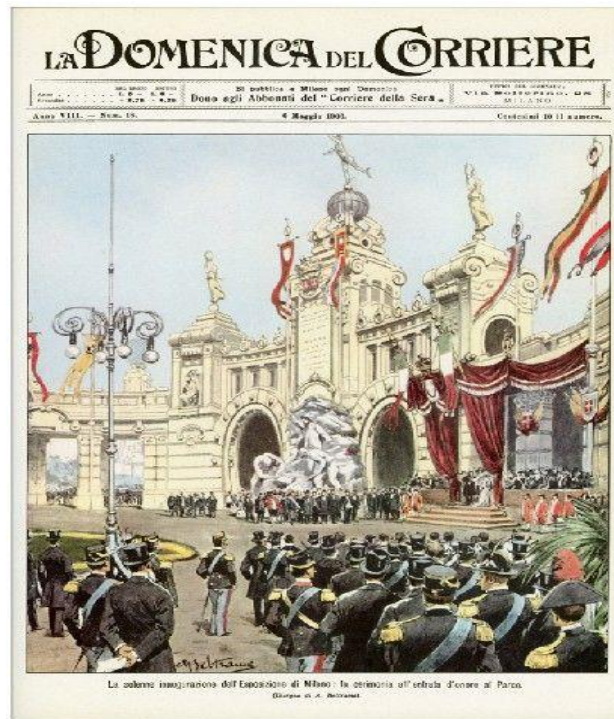


Figure 27. Opening Ceremony for the *Esposizione Industriale* in Milan, from *La Domenica del Corriere*, May 4, 1881.

Reviewers of the time report that the opening ceremony saw the deployment of bands playing the national anthem, while twenty gunshots made the city windows shake with their intensity. King Umberto I and Queen Margherita presided at the inauguration sitting on their sumptuous throne under the neo-classicist façade of Porta Venezia, adorned for the occasion with national flags and red velvet drapes with golden decorations. The minister of agriculture, industry, and commerce Luigi Miceli did the opening remarks before an enraptured audience,

²⁹ See Ilaria M. Barzaghi, *Milano 1881: tanto lusso e tanta folla. Rappresentazione della modernità e modernizzazione popolare*.

who could not but see in this event “una data importante nella storia dello sviluppo economico del paese” (“an important date in the country’s history of economic development”).³⁰

On the wave of foreign Expositions, the Milanese fair was conceived as an amusement park where even ordinary activities were spectacularized in the name of profits and public captivation. Within the *Esposizione*, for instance, were organized two galleries, one displaying the costumes of Italian regions and another showing workers and machines in action as emblematic of the industrial process. Such a *mise-en-scène* featured the job in the fabric as a *tableau vivant* for the public amusement with clean workers dressed up and smiling for the occasion, happy to act out their pleasant collaboration with industrial machines. Furthermore, the celebration of the progress and technological innovation were reinforced by concomitant shows, such as the *Ballo Excelsior* or the aerostatic balloon described by the Panorama reviewer, which gave continuity to the modernization advocated by the *Esposizione* and contributed to make Milan the “capitale morale” (“the moral capital”) of Italy.³¹ This label mythologized the values of the industrial bourgeoisie and reinforced the identity of this new ruling class.

While more attention will be devoted in the next sections to the importance of the *Exhibitions* in Italy as a phenomenon of self-propaganda, functional to the national participation in the industrial process of modernization occurring in the rest of Europe, what is essential to stress here is the new active role urban space played in defining visual entertainment as a socio-cultural phenomenon. It was not a coincidence that the *Excelsior* debuted at *La Scala*, the most fashionable theater, and that the sophisticated dodecagonal Panorama house was erected in the lively and upscale area between the Castello Sforzesco and Foro Bonaparte. The *Esibizione*

³⁰ Giuseppe Colombo, *L'industria delle macchine all'Esposizione di Milano*, p. 239.

³¹ On the idea of Milan as the “moral capital” of Italy and the myths around this definition, see Vittorio Spinazzola “*La capitale morale*”: *cultura milanese e mitologia urbana* and Giovanna Rosa, *Il mito della capitale morale. Letteratura e pubblicistica a Milano tra Otto e Novecento*.

Industriale took place in the same context. These selected locations highly contributed to the success of the events they hosted; vice versa, the shows taking part there benefited from the location and the captivation of the social occasion. In such a luring atmosphere, how could even a poor production be a flop?

Once again, what was at stake was not the quality of the performance, but the level of its scenographic appeal and profitability. Architecture and grandiose décor reinforced the laws of theatricalization and let social ambitions, entertainment, cultural, artistic, political, and commercial needs intermingle and benefit one from another. Lights, colors, the lavish windows of the shops along the main avenues, the continual coming and going of people, then, completed this scenario of public seduction. It was as if the spectacularization of indoor artistic events exploded outside, in the streets, a way to let the spectacle continue in the urban context. If visual spectacles served as models to understand the dynamics of visual seduction, however, another world of pleasure and exploitive exoticism, dreams and alleged reality was running parallel, reinforcing and consecrating the regime of consumption, that of the *Great Exhibitions*.

2- From Pictorial to Visual: The *Great Exhibitions* and the Consumer Logic

I shall be calling *Orientalism* a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience. The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other.

Edward W. Said

The general belief in technological progress gave rise to the remarkable *Great Exhibitions*, a series of imposing World's Fairs promoting culture, industry, and commerce, which became the most popular public event of the mid 19th century and remained in vogue for almost a century.³² In an effort to establish international contacts, the *Exhibitions* featured displays of the participant nation's heritage, production methods, and technological advances. In economic terms the Fairs were particularly beneficial for the hosting country, as visitors arrived from all over the world for the event.

The first such fair was boldly called *The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations*, and it took place in the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park, London in 1851.³³ The *Exhibition* celebrated the impressive industrial technology. In his novel *The Fortress* (1933), Hugh Walpole

³² For a wider perspective see Paul Greenhalgh, *Ephemeral Vistas: The Expositions Universelles, Great Exhibitions and World's Fairs, 1851–1939*.

³³ See Gibbs-Smith, Charles Harvard. *The Great Exhibition of 1851* and Jeffrey A. Auerbach, *The Great Exhibition of 1851: A Nation on Display*.

praised the lavish décor, the glass fountain at the center of the palace, and the booths decorated with expensive carpets. Mainly, however, Walpole was captured by the sophistication of the machines:

There were in the machine-room the ‘self-acting-mules,’ the Jacquard lace machines, the envelope machines, the power looms, the model locomotives, centrifugal pumps, the vertical steam-engines, all of these working like mad, while the thousands nearby, in their high hats and bonnets, sat patiently waiting, passive, unwitting that the Age of Man on this planet was doomed.³⁴



Figure 28. The *Crystal Palace* in Hyde Park, London. Picture in public domain.

The English Exhibition hosted products from the Imperial colonies (Australia, New Zealand, and India), from Denmark, France, Italy, and the United States. Efforts were made to let English and foreign heritages mix together. But such open-mindedness towards all countries’

³⁴ Hugh Walpole, *The Fortress*, Hamgurg, 1933, p. 306. Quoted in Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, G10, 2, p. 191.

displays of their merchandise was not the only motivation: England was ambitious to claim its industrial superiority.³⁵ As a consequence, the philanthropic spirit gave way to nationalistic self-promotion, a quality that will characterize all future world Fairs.

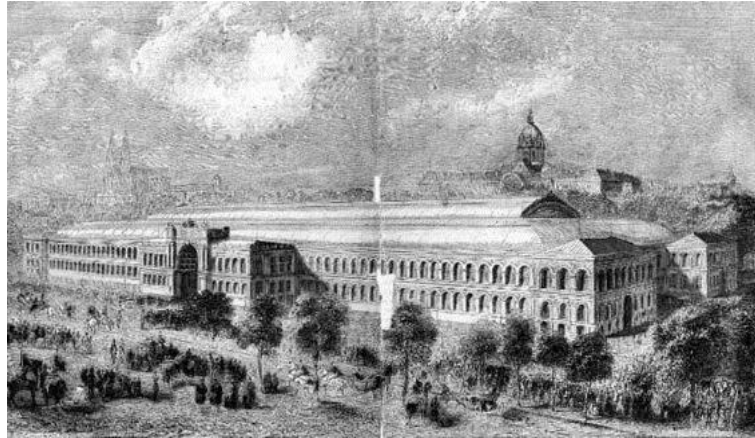


Figure 29. The *Palais de l'Industrie*, Paris 1855. Today, what remains of this building is the théâtre du Rond-point des Champs-Élysées designed by architect Gabriel Davioud, This theater originally housed the Panorama National. Picture in public domain.

The next Exhibition after London took place in Paris four years later, the first of a series of important events leading to the famous Paris Fair of 1900 (1867, 1878, 1889, 1900).³⁶ The Paris 1855 Fair, officially titled the *Exposition Universelle des produits de l'Agriculture, de l'Industrie et des beaux-arts de Paris*, took place in the *Palais de l'Industrie* on the Champs-Élysées from May 15 to November 15. Like England, France sought to display its industrial and

³⁵ See Yvonne Ffrench, *The Great Exhibition: 1851*.

³⁶ See Paul Greenhalgh, *Ephemeral Vistas: The Expositions Universelles, Great Exhibitions and World's Fairs, 1851–1939*.

commercial superiority in Europe by enlarging the number of goods on display and expanding the fair to include agricultural and artistic sectors.³⁷

Inside the *Palais de l'Industrie*, the Hall of Machines, an impressive gallery, ran parallel with the Seine, twelve hundred meters long. A.S. Douncourt, the author of *Les Expositions universelles* (1889), described it vividly:

Four locomotives were guarding the hall of machines, like those great bulls of Ninevah, or like the sphinxes to be seen at the entrance to Egyptian temples. This hall was a land of iron and fire and water, the ears were deafened, the eyes dazzled. ... All was in motion. ... All exhibitors without exception were allowed motility and steam, contrary to what went on in London in 1851, when only the English exhibitors had had the benefit of fire and water.³⁸

France seized the opportunity to promote and glorify Paris as the European capital of art and industry: the visual display functioned as propaganda in the mission of nation building. The World Fairs from then on became instrumental in organizing and in disseminating visual culture, and the various scientific developments connected to visual entertainment. Fairs would exploit extensively the appeal of dioramic and panoramic spectacles over the crowds, including them in their efforts to entertain. The Parisian *Expositions*, in particular, fired the improvement of the qualitative standard of Panorama representations. It was the pictorial images' high definition and their perfect match with reality to attract photographers, professional painters, and artists interested in decorative techniques.

³⁷ While in 1851 the English fair did not include works of art (except for sculptures in enclosed areas), the French Exhibition appeared by contrast an enormous gallery, giving paintings and statues a significant prominence, See Negri p. 138.

³⁸ A.S. Douncourt, *Le Expositions universelles*, Paris, 1889, p. 53. In Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, G8a, 1, pp. 188-89.

Photography documented and divulged the specialization achieved by optical amusement through journals and catalogues. A caricature of the time (see picture below) portrayed the famous photographer Nadar and his revolutionary idea to take aerial photos of the 1867 Paris Exhibition from a hydrogen balloon on which visitors could take a ride in groups of twelve (Aimone 193). In the image it says “Nadar elevated photography to the height of art,” (“Nadar élevant la Photographie à la hauteur de l’Art”). Nadar’s enterprise effectively combined photographic pedagogy and amusement in a spectacle of wide appeal.

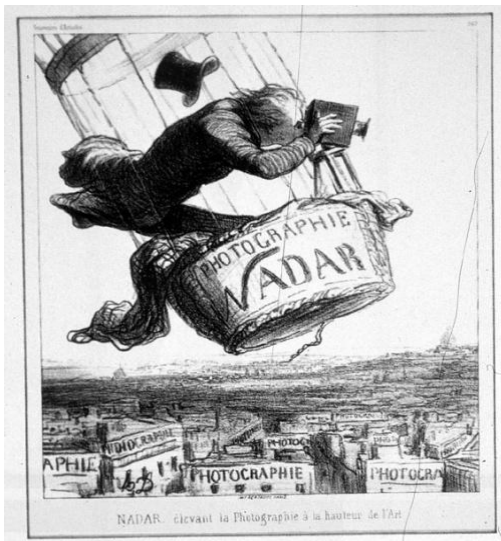


Figure 30. Caricature of Nadar.

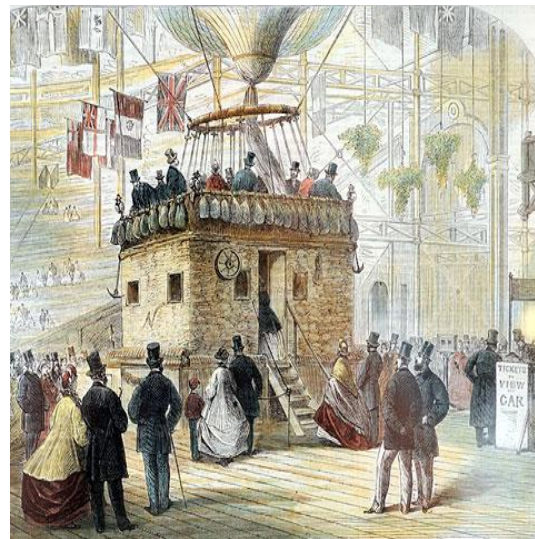


Figure 31. Nadar’s hydrogen balloon

Both pictures are in public domain

At the exhibitions, the history of photography ran parallel to that of dioramic and panoramic spectacles. Starting from the mid 1850s, photographic images were projected on the canvas in order to guide artists in their pictorial representation of the real. Later, exotic photographs taken by travelers around the world integrated the scenarios of visual spectacles for

the public's captivation. Well known Panorama painter Louis Dumoulin, for instance, for his blockbuster Panorama *Tour du Monde*, used images from his private collections of some four thousand photographs (Aimone 196).



Figure 32. Posters advertising the Exhibition in Paris in 1889 and special reductions for the ticket. Pictures in public domain.

Catalogues and brochures with photographic images of the objects on display spread rapidly, and they are today an invaluable documentation that chronicles exhibitions and their official iconography. Numerous illustrated catalogues were published between 1851 and the 1930s, important documents to which we owe not only information on the attractions on display, but principally the visual evidence of the impact that exhibitions had on the urban layout and the application of technological novelties in the field of entertainment. Certainly, photography, catalogues, pictorial and optical entertainment fostered a new visual language that was codified

in the elaborate staging of the exhibition itself, with its specially built display edifices, gardens, and ethnographic *mise-en-scènes*.

Since spectacularization and attendance was part of the logic behind the Great Exhibitions, the sophistication of the attractions and publicity barrage became essential to amplify the extent of the event. In this respect, posters played a pivotal role, especially after the diffusion of chromolithography at the end of the 1850s. Thanks to multi-color printing and a refined layout design, the advertisements for the *Great Exhibitions* caught on with the audiences and reinforced their curiosity for what was new. Poster art elicited the idea of the fair as a colorful and sparkling world, a sort of fantasy land promising distractions and divertissement.

When paralleled to such a manifest strategy to promote nationalism, exploit visual captivation, and satisfy commercial needs, Italy's attempt to display its own artistic heritage resulted quite backward and limited. No large-scale event comparable to those occurring in 1850s Europe was organized in pre-unification Italy. Since Italy still entrusted local distribution with the task of promoting its handcrafted products, its first Fairs, traceable to the beginning of the 19th century, were nothing more than pseudo-commercial initiatives, generally celebrating Napoleon.³⁹ Italians, however, did visit foreign fairs with curiosity and receptivity, becoming gradually aware of the necessity for them to face a new reality no longer tied to agricultural and handcrafted products.

³⁹ During the period of Piedmont's annexation to France, for instance, Turin was the theater of a series of exhibitions in 1805, 1811, and 1812. Milan too was pretty eager to put its local products on display yearly, with fairs regularly held from 1806 to 1813, while Naples joined this trend only in 1811. Significantly, the Neapolitan interest took on a key role in keeping alive the tradition of hosting exhibitions after Napoleon's fall. In fact, during the Restoration, Naples was the only venue for the Fairs, as the ones in 1818, 1823, and 1828 state. In the 1830s, the tradition of displaying made a comeback in Turin, Milan, and Florence, on a regular basis, although the exhibitions had no longer a yearly frequency. See Linda Aimone, *Le esposizioni universali 1851-1900*.

The exact number of Italians among the 60.000 foreign visitors who attended the 1851 London Exhibition is unknown (Kraiser 575). The local press, however, remarked a prolific turmoil in Italy, which reflected the widespread hope to look to the foreign example for the national upheaval. The journal *Il crepuscolo* even encouraged Italians to travel and use newly learned skills to the benefit of the national economy, “che molti si rechino preparati a distinguere quelle cose che possono meglio giovare alle patrie industrie” (“Go numerous and prepared to distinguish those things that can be of help to national industries”).⁴⁰

The official guide to the 1851 London *Exhibition* records the presence of around two hundred Italian exhibitors, coming from the Papal State and the Kingdoms of Sardinia and Tuscany; in comparison with the 13.000 exhibitors from all over the world, of which half were English, the number is quite small.⁴¹ Although attending a fair showcasing the latest results of progress, Italy did not display any technological achievements. The *Annali universali di statistica*, in fact, report that the majority of Italian exhibitors were artists and craftsmen specialized in decorations: “decoratori, cesellatori, mosaicisti, glittografi, ebanisti, modellatori” (“decorators, chasers, mosaicists, glyptographists, carpenters, blow molding designers”).⁴² This selective presence was representative of the typically regional country’s productivity.

Italy’s fragmented national fabric tended to favor local artistry, and it did not encourage exchange and comparisons. Good at its own area of expertise, each region confronted itself with its own micro-reality at the expense of style and industrial advancement. As one juror of the commission set up for the *Esposizione* in Florence in 1861 remarked, “Divisa l’Italia in tanti piccoli stati, era impossibile alle industrie di avere grandi mezzi di eccitamento, e rimanendo

⁴⁰ *Il crepuscolo*, 19 gennaio 1851, p. 11.

⁴¹ See *Annali universali di statistica*, vol. 27, f. 80, Febr. 1851, p. 226.

⁴² Vol. 26, f. 77-78, Dec.1850, p. 298.

serrate e circoscritte in definiti confini, non potevano avere lo sviluppo necessario per essere fonte di vera e propria ricchezza generale” (“Since Italy was divided into many small States, industries could not have great stimuli and remaining locked and circumscribed in restricted borders could not have the necessary development to be the source of general wealth”).⁴³

Industries were the privilege of Northern regions. Even here, however, industrial advancement was slow and resistant to external stimuli. In the juror’s words, “costrette [le industrie] a non uscire dai limiti prestabiliti, i loro prodotti giudicati essendo senza confronti, non poterono gran fatto avvantaggiarsi, e per alcune ciò fu danno gravissimo” (“Since [Industries] were forced to remain within preconcerted limits and their products were evaluated without comparisons, they could not advance and for some of them, this was a very serious damage”).⁴⁴

The London *Great Exhibition* in 1851 interrupted Italy’s reclusion. This date signed for the country the consciousness of the real national productive power. The juror of the 1861 Commission wrote that, “fu questa la prima volta che si videro i prodotti di un intero stato esposti gli uni accanto agli altri, e fu questa la prima volta che gl’Italiani cominciarono ad avere una idea un poco più esatta sul proprio stato manifatturiero” (“this was the first time that the products of a State were seen displayed among the others, and this was the first time that Italians started to have a clearer idea of their own manufacturing condition”).⁴⁵ However, once the Italians crossed the threshold of the phantasmagorical *Crystal Palace* their backwardness was undeniable, “le industrie italiane [...] rimasero per la maggior parte offuscate dalla perfezione che avevano raggiunto quelle di altri paesi, ove gl’incoraggiamenti erano stati maggiori, e più facilità avevano avuto i produttori per confrontare i prodotti con quelli di altri industriali” (“the

⁴³ *Esposizione Italiana tenuta in Firenze nel 1861. Relazione dei giurati. Classi XIII a XXIV.* Volume terzo. Firenze: Tipografia di G. Barbera, 1865, p. 183.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem.*

⁴⁵ *Ivi*, p. 184.

majority of Italian industries was overshadowed by the perfection that those of other countries had reached, where encouragements were stronger and producers had more facility in confronting their products with those of other manufacturers”).⁴⁶

Italy's commercial inferiority was consequent to the national incapability to fully embrace the havoc of the manufacturing progress. After all, mid 1850s Italy was still strongly tied to agricultural resources that were considered the strength of national economy, and to those, even the novel industrial development, was subordinated. We should not forget that the 1851 English *Exhibition* was held in the still unresolved context of the 1848 liberal revolutions, which swept through pre-unitary Italy with serious political repercussions. Giuseppe Garibaldi was leading the republicans towards the unification in the South, while the North was faithful to Camillo Cavour's ambition of establishing a monarchic united state. Such a contrasting scenario tallied with the timid Italian approach to the more advanced European industrial panorama; an approach that certainly suffered from the already precarious economic and political conditions. Italy, in fact, was nothing more than a patchwork of regions still under the yoke of foreign supremacy.

When in March 1861 Italy officially became a nation-state and the regions were united under King Victor Emmanuel II, the political, economic, and social milieu was extremely instable. The process of unification could be considered complete, but only formally. In practice not even all the regions were annexed to the novel *Regno d'Italia* and the proletariat still had to be brought into the mainstream of national life. The fights for independence and the *Risorgimento* itself had not been movements of the populace, but rather of an elite, in so far as students, former soldiers, craftsmen, and literati had been their leading forces. Such a social

⁴⁶ *Ibidem.*

selection would have obvious repercussions on an agrarian economy as that Italy had; the bulk of the Italian population, in fact, was made up with peasants and another part consisted of a decayed noble class, lazy and corrupt, which found it hard to merge into the rest of society.⁴⁷

Thus, it is not surprising that the 1861 Florentine *Esposizione*, held a few months after the proclamation of the unification of Italy, offered the joint display of the *Belle arti* (*Fine Arts*) with products from agriculture and industry. The *Esposizione* respected both the agricultural asset of the country's economy and the nation's long tradition of artistic heritage; however, it served also as an opportunity to face other countries in terms of industrial production. If Italy acknowledged the undisputed foreign superiority, this superiority was not to be attributed to untalented artists but "rather to the times and conditions of Italy" ("ma piuttosto ai tempi e alle condizioni d'Italia"), as the national press pointed out.⁴⁸

L'esposizione italiana del 1861 became a highly-rated periodical, published in Florence from 1861 to 1862, which chronicled the Florentine exhibition, with the support of "engravings and the official acts by the Royal Commission," as the sub-title advertised ("Con incisioni e con gli atti ufficiali della commissione reale"). Enriched with masterfully handcrafted decorations, the visual impact of the journal was impressive and favorably representative of the national artistic skills. The journal offered an overview of the typology of visitors attending the exhibition, from as far away as Rome and Venice. They represented the elite of the country, that smallest and privileged part of the population, those unaffected by poverty and illiteracy.

Pictures from *L'esposizione italiana del 1861* portrayed elegant upper-class couples, strolling arm in arm in the octagonal rear garden of the *Palazzo dell'Esposizione*, evidence of the refined echelon that made up the audience. These images recalled the graphics adopted by the

⁴⁷ See Denis Mack Smith, *Modern Italy: A Political History*, pp. 34-38.

⁴⁸ *L'esposizione italiana del 1861*, Florence, Jul. 1861, n.1, p. 3.

international press. In fact, journals chronicling World Exhibitions in London and Paris divulged images of visitors attending the fairs while taking a stroll in the *Crystal Palace* or the *Palais de l'Industrie* on the Champs-Élysée. These images commonly circulated in Italy through the local press and constituted an inspiration for the recently united country hoping to keep pace with European industrial progress.⁴⁹



Figure 33. Octagonal garden with strolling couples at the Florentine Esposizione. From *L'Esposizione Italiana*, 1861.

⁴⁹ Publications such as *La grande Esposizione di Londra* by the Tipografia Subalpina and the official catalogues of international fairs by the Milanese publishers Sonzogno and Treves were the most consistent and informative, offering a broad overview on the European industrial panorama.

The Florentine journal sought to exorcise the castrations that pre-Unification political maneuvers (both Clerical and Borbonic) had brought on the artistic market. The *Programma* of the exhibition itself was a bitter invective against the foreign dominance that was hampering collaboration between regions:

Avanti il risorgimento nazionale, i governi italiani vivevano in una specie di reciproca diffidenza, la quale impediva, o inceppava, le relazioni fra provincia e provincia. Era interesse dei governanti che questo stato d'isolamento si perpetuasse; sicché quando anco si mostrava di cedere in qualche lieve provvisione al bisogno manifestato indirettamente dai soggetti di stringere più stretti nodi coi loro fratelli, da cui non erano separati se non da artificiali confini, pur siffatta provvisione era circondata di tanti riservi, di tante difficoltà, di tante formalità da farle perdere quasi affatto il fine principale a cui era diretta.⁵⁰

Before the National Risorgimento, the Italian government would live in a sort of reciprocal mistrust, which would obstruct or jam the relationships among the regions. It was in the interest of the leaders that such a state of isolation be perpetuated; therefore, even when one would show weakness in some small provision for the need indirectly manifested by subjects to tie tighter knots with their brothers, from whom they were not separated but by artificial borders, also such a provision was surrounded by many reserves, many difficulties, many formalities to make it lose almost completely the principal goal to which it was directed.

The general hope was that the *Esposizione Italiana* could restore national commercial ties and strengthen State productivity. In this light, the participation of foreign exhibitors was re-considered. In order to prevent sophisticated international models to overshadow the weaker local production, the Royal Commission sent out a formal letter in English to remind that

⁵⁰ *L'esposizione italiana del 1861*, 1 Luglio 1861, No.1, p. 2.

“agricultural machines and implements will be received only as models, as they cannot compete for prizes, the Exhibition being exclusively Italian. The Royal Commission will limit itself to receive them in a special department of the Exhibition.”⁵¹

Agricultural machines were the exhibition’s strongest point, since they represented the major attraction in terms of innovation (especially those steam operated) and were the most used national tools, “la maggior parte di queste macchine è intesa a sussidio dell’agricoltura, che è l’industria principale senza contrasto in Italia” (“The majority of these machines is intended as an aid for agriculture, which is the principal and undisputed industry in Italy”).⁵² This reference to the country’s practical economic needs explains the *Esposizione Italiana*’s visual distance from the captivating *phantasmagorias* of London and Paris, where ornamental gardens, statues, and fountains made the atmosphere fairylike.

Collateral attractions in the Florentine agenda were limited to a *lotteria*, and two ceremonies for the opening and the closing of the Exhibition for invited guests.⁵³ Even the arts on display (photography, sculptures, and paintings) did not showcase visual amusement, since they responded essentially to the need of re-launching national artistry. The canvases, albeit impressive for size, featured traditional portraits and landscapes incomparably distant from the mesmerizing effects and theatricalization of international *Panoramas* and *Dioramas*. Even in terms of architecture, the building of the *Esposizione italiana* could not compete with the stylish masonry of London and Paris. The imitation of the English glass palace, whose monumental proportions covered even palms and gardens, or the French Palace of Industry with its six pavilions and 306 arcades running through the lower story was unthinkable for Italy. Due to tight

⁵¹ *L’esposizione italiana del 1861*, 2 settembre 1861, No. 4, p. 32.

⁵² *L’esposizione italiana del 1861*, 4 ottobre 1861, No. 7, p. 49.

⁵³ See *Guida all’esposizione italiana del 1861*, Firenze 1861.

budgets, the *Esposizione* in Florence fell back on the *Stazione Leopolda*, an existing building simply remodeled and enlarged for the fair:

Il primo pensiero per una grande Esposizione è sempre quello di trovare un luogo acconcio e di tale vastità da raccogliere il gran numero di oggetti che vi si portano da tante parti. A nazioni potenti e straricche, come l’Inghilterra, [...] è facile [...] innalzare subito un grandioso edificio siccome fu il palazzo di cristallo; ma il nuovo regno d’Italia mancante tuttavia di quegli elementi e nella ristrettezza del tempo non avrebbe certo potuto creare dalle fondamenta un sì vasto edificio che bastasse all’uopo. Convenne pertanto ricercarne uno già in piedi, e con ingrandimenti e modificazioni adattarlo al bisogno.⁵⁴

The first preoccupation for a great Exhibition is always that of finding a place proper and vast enough to contain the large number of objects coming from different parts. To powerful and wealthy nations like England, it is easy to immediately raise a grand building, as it was the Crystal Palace; but the novel reign of Italy, lacking of those elements and time, could have surely not built from the foundations such a large building for this purpose. It was more convenient to seek one already existing and adapt it to the needs with enlargements and modifications.

Economic and political restrictions in setting up a fair had affected also the two pre-Unification exhibitions in Turin (1850 and 1858), delayed by the concurrence of more international fairs. As the Italian press pointed out, “the two exhibitions of London and Paris delayed until 1858 the Italian national exhibition that was supposed to be held in 1856, and with their example changed its organization” (“le due esposizioni di Londra e Parigi ritardarono fino al 1858 l’esposizione italiana che doveva essere fatta nel 1856 e coll’esempio loro ne mutarono [...] l’ordinamento”).⁵⁵

In *World’s Fairs Italian Style*, Cristina Della Coletta holds that mid-century exhibitions in Turin demonstrated Piedmont’s attempt to get rid of a provincial reputation and compete with

⁵⁴ *L’esposizione italiana del 1861*, 1 Luglio 1861, No. 1, p. 4.

⁵⁵ “Le esposizioni industriali in Italia. Cenni storici sull’origine e progresso delle medesime.” In *L’esposizione italiana del 1861*, 20 Agosto 1861, No. 3, p. 22.

industrial Europe. The 1850s exhibitions were the “first modern national” instances of a display that “no longer exclusively featured objects d’art and artisans’ products for the upper classes, but introduced mass-produced goods intended to invade foreign markets as well as local ones” (20). However, if both the Turin and the Florence exhibitions sought to keep pace with foreign advancement, their effort was affected by the backwardness of the national economy. The presence of very specialized machines, designed for agricultural and engineering purposes, would essentially display the pride for national manufacturing, but the assimilation of the advancements in visual entertainment, which were booming internationally, hardly played a role.

Not even the displayed paintings and sculptures went in this direction, since they aimed to value very traditional artistic skills and styles. The exposed works of art celebrated national heritage, but ignored the scenographic captivation of international *Panoramas* and *Dioramas*. Visitors at mid-century Italian fairs essentially marveled at industrial machines and the comfort these would bring into everyday life. After all, as a newly united country, Italy concentrated on economic stability and political centralization. We could assume that to Italian viewers the enthusiasm for the display of modern technology was perhaps already a form of visual entertainment, from which derive personal enjoyment.

The Italian conservative mode of display, however, was a consequence also of the conformation to socially accepted customs of style. We should not underestimate that optical amusement in the 1850s relied essentially on itinerant diffusion and unrecognized artists, both excluded, as a matter of principle, from legitimate forms of art. We have seen in chapter I that traditional theater held the title of official and appraised provider of popular entertainment; thus, it presumably represented the collateral leisure activity for those visitors who were in town to

attend the fair. Nevertheless, legitimate performances on stage reflected artistry in the doldrums, one bequeathed by pre-Unification productions.

Devoid of inspiration, theatrical performances were essentially entrusted to wandering actors, who continued to move from town to town, keeping alive a tradition of itinerant acting that in Europe had already faded long before (Molinari 216). Roberto Alonge, in his *Teatro e spettacolo nel secondo Ottocento* stresses the “errant dimension” (“dimensione errante”) of mid-century companies as a legacy of the “centuries-old tradition of the Commedia dell’Arte” (“tradizione plurisecolare della Commedia dell’Arte”) (10).

We should not underestimate that actors’ itinerant lifestyle only increased after the attempts to establish permanent theater companies failed. The Milanese *Compagnia Vicereale* and the *Reale Sarda*, which were established in the first two decades of the 19th century to stage legitimate drama, had short life and closed down before the 1850s. Alonge wrote that actors traveled “to escape the crisis and hunger that gnawed mid-19th-century Italian theatre” (“per sfuggire alla crisi e alla fame che attanaglia[va] il teatro italiano a metà Ottocento”); some even emigrated (54). Countries such as France, Spain, England, and the United States became the most desirable destinations for actors in search of better opportunities. Some actors even settled in these new lands for the rest of their lives, while others returned to capitalize on experience and fortune gained abroad.⁵⁶ At any rate, economic uncertainty and *nomadism* certainly did little to lay a solid theatrical foundation.

⁵⁶ On the extent of *nomadism* and the actors’ emigration, which affected mid-century Italian theatre and productions, see Roberto Alonge, *Teatro e spettacolo nel secondo Ottocento*, especially pp. 51-63, and Cesare Molinari, *Storia del Teatro*, pp. 215 ff. For a broader overview on *nomadism* as artistic necessity, see Siro Ferrone, *Teatro dell’Italia Unita* and Teresa Viziano, *Il palcoscenico di Adelaide Ristori: repertorio, scenario e costume di una compagnia drammatica dell’Ottocento*.

Hard conditions actors experienced in mid-century Italy were the consequences of a multiple crisis with both economic and artistic implications, wrecking not only repertoires but the entire classes of workers. Silvio D'Amico describes the intricate net of problems obstructing the grounding of resident theater companies and productions:

Nella prima metà dell'Ottocento, le condizioni dell'attore drammatico in Italia erano tra le più misere d'Europa. Coinvolto nel fallimento delle grandi compagnie stabili dell'età Napoleonica, soverchiato dalla concorrenza del melodramma e del balletto, privo d'un repertorio nazionale decente, ostacolato dalle censure, l'attore italiano a metà del secolo è costretto a compiere una serie di scelte che condizioneranno la nostra vita teatrale per quasi un secolo. Le scelte sono: abbandono degli schemi letterari e culturalistici adottati e promossi dalla Compagnia Reale Sarda; apertura al repertorio straniero, meno costoso perché non si pagavano diritti, e più sicuro; accantonamento dell'idea di stabile; riorganizzazione del nomadismo e della compagnia basata sui ruoli, ripresa delle tournées all'estero.⁵⁷

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the dramatic actor's conditions in Italy were the poorest in Europe. Involved in the failure of large resident companies of Napoleon's age, overwhelmed by the competition of melodrama and ballet, devoid of a decent national repertoire, hampered by censorship, the mid-century Italian actor is forced to make choices that will be conditioning our theatrical life for almost a century. Choices are: abandonment of literary and cultural schemes adopted and promoted by the Compagnia Reale Sarda; opening to foreign repertoire, less expensive because royalties were not paid, and more secure; dismissing the idea of resident troupes, and the reorganization of nomadism and companies based on roles; the resumption of touring companies abroad.

Together with companies, also pre-unification repertoires suffered from tight budgets and the unprofessionalism of itinerant actors. Unoriginal, derivative, and restricted, in fact, the repertoire was essentially marked by a dominating tragedy that aimed to voice the painful

⁵⁷ See Alessandro D'Amico, *L'attore italiano tra Otto e Novecento*, pp. 26-27.

consequences of socio-historical events.⁵⁸ The main advocate for the diffusion of historical tragedy was certainly Alessandro Manzoni. He contributed to overcoming the former concept of dramatic action, which was intended as an action governed by a limited number of characters, as Vittorio Alfieri had understood the concept. Besides Manzoni, however, other authors, such as Carlo Marengo, Giovan Battista Niccolini and Silvio Pellico devoted themselves to historical drama. Their works intended to promote the new principles of the *Risorgimento*, thus the plots were rich in highly patriotic motives.

However, all these authors essentially offered productions with an eye toward the past, and a relative indifference to theatrical experiment or innovation. Marengo looked back to medieval times (*Pia de' Tolomei, Il conte Ugolino, Manfredi, Corso Donati*), while Niccolini had a preference for mythology and Greek Tragedy, or the Renaissance (*Medea, Ino e Temisto, Ludovico Sforza, Filippo Strozzi*). Pellico recalled the past to elicit patriotic emotions in *Francesca da Rimini*. Not even Manzoni's tragic production was able to reinvigorate the mid-century theater, mired as it was. His tragedies had undeniably high literary value, but were more reading material for intellectuals than performance pieces capable of captivating the crowds and enlivening the future of Italian theater.⁵⁹

The crisis of national drama tallied with the weakness of prose, still heavily reliant on the conventions of Goldoni's plays. Suffice it to mention comedies such as Paolo Giacometti's *Il poeta e la ballerina* (1841) and *Quattro donne in una casa* (1842), and Paolo Ferrari's *Goldoni e*

⁵⁸ On Italian Romantic drama see at least Giorgio Pullini, *Teatro italiano tra due secoli (1850-1950)* and *Teatro italiano dell'Ottocento*; Silvana Monti, *Il teatro realista della Nuova Italia*; Benedetto Croce *La letteratura della Nuova Italia*; Cesare Molinari, *Storia del teatro*.

⁵⁹ On Manzoni, Pellico, and the minor dramatists of pre-unification Italy, see Armando Balduino, *Storia letteraria italiana, l'Ottocento*, tomo 2, p. 1260 ff. See also Giorgio Santangelo, *Il dramma romantico in Italia*, vol. 1, and Nino Borsellino and Walter Pedullà, *Storia generale della letteratura italiana*, vol. 9.

le sue sedici commedie nuove, allusive even in the title. In front of such outdated repertoires, the attention of audiences was diverting towards lighter theatricality in delegitimized venues, such as squares and private buildings. It was in these various venues that one encountered a vast range of divertissement, from dance to marionettes, as well as circus and gymnastics. Among the major attractions, however, were the so-called “curiosity spectacles” (“spettacoli di curiosità”) that a law of June 30, 1889 defined as suited “to expose to public view rarities, persons, animals, optical cabinets, or other objects of curiosity” (“esporre alla pubblica vista rarità, persone, animali, gabinetti ottici od altri oggetti di curiosità”).⁶⁰

If Italian intellectuals dismissed the illegitimacy of these spectacles, crowds filled the squares to capacity and let these *spettacoli* spread rapidly as collateral entertainments, on the wave success already garnered in France and England. We have seen in Chapter I:2 that illegitimate spectacles in these countries had risen to recognized art just thanks to popular appreciation and their marketability. On occasion of the *Great Exhibitions*, in fact, *spectacles de curiosité* came alongside official leisure activities.

With its more refined and advanced cultural milieu, France allowed prominent intellectuals to actively provide aesthetic evaluations of the Fairs and the new entertainment they brought. As a result, the involvement of the intelligentsia broadened the *nouveaux idées* into a theoretical discourse. The French journal *Le Pays* commissioned Charles Baudelaire to write on the 1855 *Exposition*.⁶¹ Baudelaire was particularly attracted to Eastern Art as a specimen of

⁶⁰ This was the Article 37 reported in Enrico Rosmini, *Legislazione e giurisprudenza dei teatri* (1893), p. 11.

⁶¹ Although another writer was soon assigned to comment on the Fair, Baudelaire devoted three essays to the 1855 *Exhibition*, writing on the modern idea of progress, on Delacroix, and on Ingres. Then he reassembled his works with some additional material and published them in *Curiosités esthétiques*. See Charles Harrison, *Art in Theory*, p. 485.

“universal beauty” that should make the West reconsider its assumed superiority.⁶² Baudelaire was so taken with Oriental art that he suggested that the French art establishment was overly valued. No doubt his experience at the fair confirmed a notion that the “ever new” essential to fine art, which eternally eludes rules and judgments, is only made possible by cultural exchange. This is why artistic innovation deserves admiration and imitation, and why the initially disorienting impact of a strange artwork should not provoke fear or disapproval from any esthetic standpoint of righteousness.

Baudelaire’s critique was implicitly an attack on France’s sense of its political, cultural, and industrial supremacy (the 1855 *Exposition* was concomitant with the State involvement in the Crimean War). As if willing to celebrate its ability to remain unaffected by the political repercussions, France hailed the *Exposition* as a promotional means to celebrate the cooperation between nations.⁶³ After 1855, personal profits and strategic maneuvers aiming to promote the public image of the hosting country lay behind each subsequent *Exhibition*. The 1872 *Polytechnic Exhibition* in Moscow intended to commemorate the bicentenary of the birth of Peter the Great; the 1876 Fair in Philadelphia sought to demonstrate the total recovery from the Civil War; the 1878 Parisian Exposition would celebrate the French triumph after the 1870 Franco-Prussian war. Perhaps the best example is the great 1889 *Exposition* in Paris, set up to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the French Revolution, for which the famous Eiffel Tower was

⁶² Baudelaire offered an objective interpretation of foreign production in his essay, *De l’idée moderne du progrès appliquée aux beaux arts*.

⁶³ The French propaganda to promote cooperation among nations sounds quite contradictory, if we consider that France had sided with England in declaring war on Russia for the right on holy areas in the Middle East. What this shared with the real spirit of the Exposition and its proclaimed faith in industrial progress was the massive employment of ‘modern’ technology, such as railways and the telegraph, which played a tactical and decisive role in the fight. See Trevor Royle, *Crimea: The Great Crimean War, 1854-1856*.

erected.⁶⁴ This scenario makes clear how the highly advertised intent of fostering exchange and transfer among different countries increasingly became less of a priority than the nationalistic display of identity and a politics of state promotion on the international scale.

After the *Esposizione* in Florence in 1861, Italy continued its emulation of foreign models with an increasing number of fairs throughout the peninsula. Padua 1869, Milan 1881, Modena 1882, Turin 1884, and Como 1889 attest to Italy's eagerness to make up with its backwardness. Since Paris 1855, when merchandise for the first time was marked with a fixed price, exhibitions had increasingly been used as sales rooms for commodities. Since prices were no longer subject to negotiation as it used to be, viewers were not obliged to buy, but rather encouraged to inspect, confront, and eventually desire the items. Goods were displayed with the intention to instigate the crowds to consumption. Lured by the illusion to be free not to buy if they did not want to, viewers ended up making a purchase because of inducing techniques of advertising and display. Encouraged by cheap tickets, visitors filled the pavilions to capacity and, once swallowed by the fairylike structure of the exhibition, all their needs were satisfied, from gadgets to refreshments.

At least apparently, attendance at the *Great Exhibitions* was not regulated by class restrictions. Workers were particularly welcomed, since machineries were the tools they used in the factories. Behind this logic was the idea that by improving the working classes' lifestyle, social tensions would be avoided. For this reason, workers were commonly given free or reduced tickets and workers delegations were sent to fairs to write reports on the displayed machines. From the workers' delegations who visited the *Great Exhibition* in London in 1862, we learn that "each delegate received, on his departure, the sum of 155 francs, a second-class round-trip train

⁶⁴ See Adriana Baculo Giusti, *Le grandi esposizioni nel mondo*, pp. 144-149.

ticket, lodging, and a meal, as well as a pass to the exhibition.”⁶⁵ Similar conditions were offered to Italian delegations of workers, sent to review the Exhibition in Paris in 1878.⁶⁶ Furthermore, workers were encouraged to attend in order to display their manufacturing products, as attested by the pictures contained in the catalogue published by Sonzogno for the fair in Milan in 1881.⁶⁷

Despite reduced/free tickets and railway discounts for those who lived in the suburbs, workers were not the most numerous visitors. Essentially, workers attended the Exhibitions to have fun, rather than refresh their professionalism. As a reviewer wrote about workers visiting the Exhibition in Turin in 1884, “Gli operai che giungono in piccole comitive, mandate dalle fabbriche seriamente per studiare, sono pochissimi” (“Workers arriving in small groups, sent by factories for serious study, are very few”). The majority, in fact, arrive “la domenica mattina per ripartire alla sera: fanno qui una colazione e un pranzo, visitano gli Assabesi, il castello medievale e se avanza tempo l’Esposizione” (“on Sunday morning and leave at night: they have breakfast and lunch here, visit the Assabese, the medieval castle and, if they have time, the Exhibition”).⁶⁸

Rather than being preoccupied for the workers’ professional refinement, organizers were eager to encourage attendance of any sort in any possible way. On Sundays, for example, tickets were free so as to allow those who worked during weekdays or had limited finances to attend the fair. Once lured in the exhibition’s capitalist net, even low-class visitors were anyway profitable

⁶⁵ *Rapports des délégués des ouvriers parisiens à l’exposition de Londres en 1862, publiés par la Commission ouvrière*, Paris 1862-64, Volume I, pp. iii-iv. Quoted in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, G8a, 1, p. 188.

⁶⁶ See *Relazione sulla Esposizione di Parigi del 1878 fatta alla Società Centrale Operaia di Napoli nella tornata straordinaria del 7 dicembre dal socio G.G.*, II edizione, Napoli: Stab. Tip. F. Giannini, 1878.

⁶⁷ See *L’Esposizione italiana del 1881 in Milano illustrata*. Milano: Sonzogno, 1881.

⁶⁸ G. Saragat, “Operai all’esposizione,” in *Torino e l’esposizione italiana del 1884. Cronaca illustrata*. Roux e Favale & Fr. Treves, Torino- Milano, 1884, p. 219.

costumers, as they spent money at cafès, bazaars, and restaurants, as well as on the displayed merchandise. The philanthropy behind free tickets was sheer decoy. The apparent generosity was counterbalanced by the so called ‘elegant’ day, when tickets were more expensive and affordable only by well-off people, and when much better merchandise was out for display.

After the Esposizione in 1861, exhibitions in Italy gradually transformed from displays of national productivity to international events emulating European *phantasmagorias*. The *Esposizioni Riunite (United Exhibitions)*, taking place in Milan in 1894, are likely the most significant example to attest the Italian internationalization and spectacularization of visual entertainment. *Esposizioni Riunite* meant that eleven different national and international exhibitions were formally coordinated by a common Committee, but each of them maintained its own organizational autonomy.

The 1894 *Esposizioni* showcased Italy’s economic upheaval and promoted national products, such as wine and oil, but also photography and the arts. The fair venue was the magniloquent *Castello Sforzesco*, restored for the occasion by foremost architect Luca Beltrami, who followed the dictates of historical eclecticism we discussed in Chapter I. The sophistication in masonry tallied with the refinement of visual entertainment. Photography had a privileged space and viewers looked avidly to projections, while the advent of cinematography was approaching. As a reviewer wrote in *L’illustrazione Italiana*, “si attendono le proiezioni fotografiche... saranno una delle grandi curiosità. La fotografia ha invaso anche il campo della vecchia lanterna magica, ed è capace di tutto. Si vedranno i risultati dei dispositivi monocromi di un Professore di Parigi e della Società Urania di Berlino” (“photographic projections are expected... they will be one of the great curiosities. Photography has invaded also the field of the

old magic lantern and is capable of anything. People will see the results of monochrome devices by a Parisian professor and the Urania Society in Berlin”).⁶⁹

Visual entertainment was created with sophistication. Visitors could choose between a tour inside the *camera obscura* to master the tricks of photography, the impressive aerial views from the heights of the *Torre Stiegler*, or a trip along the *Luftbahn*, a suspended railway giving the illusion to run down breathtaking slopes and ravines. Panoramas and Dioramas were still the rage, as confirmed by the celebrated *Panorama Giordani*, a large-scale canvas offering tours of France and Switzerland, with dioramic lighting illusions, simulation of motion, and even the reproduction of the smell of the train. Attractions imported from America completed the wide range of attractions, such as a rollercoaster and the *Toboga*, a sort of modern surf already a blockbuster at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893.⁷⁰

Interestingly, despite the refinement reached by projections, the popularity of Panoramas in 1894 was still high. Panoramas captured the public even in 1911, on the occasion of the Exhibition in Turin, when they offered pictorial illusions of adventurous fox hunting.⁷¹ Panoramas resisted after the debut of the Lumières’ Cinématographe in 1895 thanks to their ability to satisfy the crowds’ curiosity for unknown countries. At the exhibition in Turin in 1898, the first fair after the cinematic premiere at the *Salon Indien* in Paris, Panoramas beat the competition of the new medium. Here large-scale canvases were celebrative of a tourism *en place*, which allowed viewers to ‘visit’ exotic lands. Capri’s Blue Grotto, the Amazons of Dahomey, and the Swiss suggestive gullies were three of the Panorama shows that enthralled the

⁶⁹ “L’esposizione,” in *L’illustrazione italiana*, n. 19, I semestre 1894, pp. 290-91.

⁷⁰ See the catalogue *Le esposizioni riunite del 1894 in Milano*. Milano: Tip. Ed. Contemporanea, 1894.

⁷¹ See *L’esposizione di Torino 1911. Giornale ufficiale illustrato dell’esposizione internazionale delle industrie e del lavoro*. Torino: G. Momo, 1911.

audiences.⁷² Panoramas overshadowed cinematography also at the exhibition in Milan in 1906, when the large-scale canvas of the North Pole outshined any other spectacle.⁷³

The simulation of exotic journeys was a constant of all the *Great Exhibitions* in the world. Exoticism was heterogeneously showcased through Panoramas and Dioramas, optical devices, photography, and replicas of real architectures. The entire world was concentrated in the exposition space, in a sort of dreamlike atmosphere that made an unreal site real. Distant locations, so different from one another and each with its own national identity identifiable per se, were now gathered to transfuse the idea of the exotic. Assembled in this common space of replicas, however, singular identities were no longer distinguishable, as if they had been swallowed by the commercial aesthetics of the exposition. In other words, architectural replicas and exotic displays created a space connected with all the sites of the world, but what these buildings reflected was different from what they were. This principle recalls Foucault's idea of *heterotopia* and its capability of "juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible."⁷⁴ Similarly, staging at the Great Exhibitions attracted the crowds by gathering a series of exotic places, each one essentially foreign to the others.

Foucault coined the term *heterotopia* to find a counter-meaning to utopias. Utopias, in fact, are for Foucault "sites with no real space." Heterotopias, instead, are real places, but "a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found

⁷² *L'esposizione nazionale di Torino del 1898. Giornale ufficiale illustrato* Torino: Roux Frassati & C., 1898.

⁷³ *Milano e l'esposizione internazionale del Sempione 1906. Cronaca illustrata*. Milano: Treves, 1906.

⁷⁴ See Michel Foucault, *Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias* (1967). Originally entitled *Des Espace Autres*, this text was published by the French journal *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité* in October 1984. This article was the result of a lecture Foucault gave in March 1967, but was never reviewed for publication. The manuscript was released on occasion of an exhibit in Berlin before Foucault's death. Translation here is by Jay Miskowiec and is available online at Foucault.info/documents/heterotopias/Foucault.heteroTopia.en.html.

within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality.” As exotic sites, the Great Exhibitions enacted architectural replicas of places that do exist, but their identity in this context was distorted and commodified.

Exotic simulations at the Great Exhibitions narrowed both the dyad of space and time, as well as the confusion between fantasy and reality. However, they also brought together social classes. Since unknown realities were now at everyone’s grasp thanks to their visual representation, long and expensive journeys were no longer the privilege of wealthy people. Proletariats could afford the same visual experience as aristocrats. The Great Exhibitions reinforced the accessibility to exoticism and they gradually exposed common viewers to unknown forms of expression and art.

Since the Exhibition in Paris in 1867, the “oriental quarter” was the blockbuster show and represented the center of attraction of any following fair. Compared by many to Rome’s Colosseum, the exhibition palace of 1867 on the *Champ de Mars* lured the public’s gaze by means of a serialized and controlled display of the foreign. Viewers, in fact, were offered an ordered insight into the industrialization of all nations with no effort:

The arrangement conceived by Le Play, the head of the exhibition committee, was a most felicitous one. The objects on exhibit were distributed, according to their materials, in eight concentric galleries; twelve avenues... branched out from the center, and the principal nations occupied the sectors cut by those radii. In this way, ... by strolling around the galleries, one could... survey the state of one particular industry in all the different countries, whereas, by strolling up the avenues that crossed them, one could survey the state of the different branches of industry in each particular country.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Adolphe Démy, *Essai historique sur les expositions universelles de Paris*, Paris, 1907, p. 129. Quoted in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, G9, 2, p. 189.

The display of exoticism became more and more bound to the exhibition space, insofar as the premises figured decisively in both the economic viability and the realistic credibility of productions. The very elliptical building of the fair in Paris in 1867, with its seven concentric galleries, resembled in form the circuit of an ideal tour around the world. After this exhibition, however, the ellipsoidal shape for the exhibition building was changed with a rectangular outline, divided into a series of galleries in parallel. This new layout allowed a structuralized partition of space and a clearer display for merchandize, which responded to capitalistic ends. If admissions charged at standardized and subsidized prices encouraged attendance, showcased goods became the targets of a commercial strategy. Imposed price tags on displayed objects turned viewers into passive buyers inflamed by the material desire to possess what others possessed. Such tactics secured the control of the crowds and nourished capitalist standardization and rationalization.



Figure 34. *Le Bon Marché*, the first Parisian department store, created under the project of Gustave Eiffel in 1852.

As Lukàcs pointed out, this logic did not remain restricted to cultural practices and leisure activities, but rather affected the whole social system, since “the principle of rational mechanization and calculability” embraced “every aspect of life” (*History and Class Consciousness* 91). The same logic that rationalized consumption at the Great Exhibitions, in fact, was to continue in the philosophy of the department store. Responding to the urge of presenting customers with an array of desirable products, from the latest fashion to the most exotic food, numerous department stores were opened throughout Europe from the 1850s onward.



Figure 35. *Alle città d'Italia* in Milan.
Both pictures are in public domain

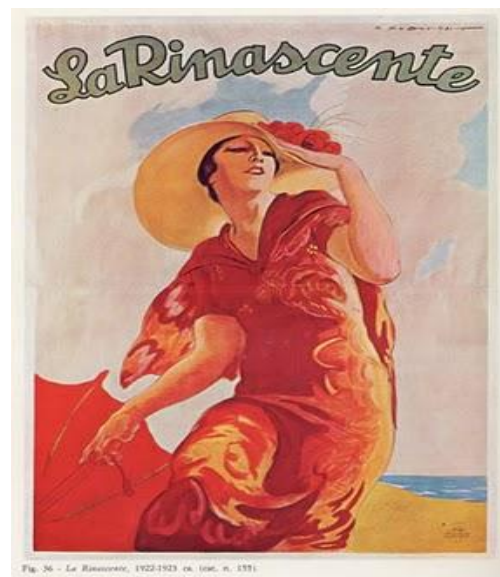


Figure 36. *La Rinascente* by Marcello Dudovich.

In Paris, *Le Bon Marché* (1852), *Les Grands Magasins du Louvre* (1855), *Au Printemps* (1865), and *La Samaritaine* (1869) were the most famous. In London, *Harrods* opened the doors of its Knightsbridge store in 1851, to take advantage of the concomitant and nearby *Great Exhibition* at the *Crystal Palace* in Hyde Park. In Italy, the Bocconi brothers, following the French model of *Le Bon Marché*, in 1865 inaugurated *Alle città d'Italia*, the first department

store in Milan. The Bocconis' enterprise was so enthusiastically welcomed that a larger store was soon opened in 1877, closed to the Duomo; the same store that in 1917 Gabriele D'Annunzio renamed *La Rinascente* and that became a renowned meeting-place for intellectuals and artists, besides the most popular retailer in Italy.⁷⁶

The advent of the department stores coincided with the structural urban renovation that occurred in all of the European capitals starting the 1860s. Urbanization put the latest innovations in technology to the service of architecture. Cast iron was the dominant material in the construction of railway stations, symbols of the beginning of a new era in transportation and metaphors of the continuous transit, both mental and physical, of individuals. London's *King's Cross* (1852), Paris's *Gare du Nord* (1862), and Berlin's *Anhalter Bahnhof* (1878), typify the practical application of the latest technologies in terms of materials and design to masonry.

Massive train stations were a revealing architectural achievement similarly conceived and executed as the *Arcades*, covered walkways including retail shops. Protective structures to induce customers to shop even in inclement weather, the *Arcades* polarized the visitors' attention with multiple distractions, a range of entertainments and stores rigged out with lighting effects and eye-catching images. In the 1930s, Walter Benjamin devoted critical attention to the phenomenon of metropolitan alteration and to the *Arcades*, suitable locus for new visual effects. Speaking of the Parisian covered walkways, Benjamin called attention to the peculiar space occupied by Dioramas along the *Passage des Panoramas*. Mesmerizing lighting recalling the entrance to an aquarium:

The innermost glowing cells of the city of light, the old dioramas, nested in the arcades, one of which today still bears the name *Passage des Panoramas*. It was,

⁷⁶ See Elena Papadia, *La Rinascente*.

in the first moment, as though you had entered an aquarium. Along the walls of the great, darkened hall, broken at intervals by narrow joints, it stretched like a ribbon of illuminated water behind glass. The play of colors among deep-sea fauna cannot be more fiery (*The Arcades* 533).

Indeed, the crowds along the walkways did resemble the relentless activity of school of fish in the aquarium; both scurry within an enclosed space, without specific destination and entranced by the first image to dazzle the senses. Individuals as fish is a suggestive metaphor indeed, conveying as it does the idea of beings in perpetual transition, amazed by futilities, and prone to proceed in a dumb state of constant distraction.

The stream Benjamin referred to is an abnormal procession of people not to be confused with traffic and walkers in streets, who move in forward progress toward some goal, be it work or home, not shopping here and there, darting back and forth for the sake of sheer sense distraction. Walking under the Arcades is an aesthetic exercise done under the spell of a very seductive structure so intense a force to slow down and redirect the individual, forcing him or her to contemplate visual wonders on display; in other words, the same walking that audiences experienced at the Great Exhibitions. As Benjamin emphasizes at once the lack of purpose and the hallucinatory quality of the experience, writing, “an intoxication comes over the man who walks long and aimlessly.” (*Arcades*, 417, M1, 3).

Benjamin’s adverb “aimlessly,” in the original *Passagen-Werk*, suggests “idleness,” a concept central to the idea of *flânerie* first articulated by Baudelaire. He or she is the stroller who walks the heart of the city with no pressing obligations other than imbibing the senses. The ideal walker along the Arcades, the *flâneur* is the epitome of the bourgeois viewer who has the leisure for an idle walk; this is the most favorable condition for aesthetic contemplation. The lighting of

optical devices and shop windows numbs the senses and contributes to a disorientation that necessarily slows the pace. City lights and the illumination of dioramic spectacles captured the century's new attitudes toward life. Individuals are prone to be under the spell of illusions and harnessed to desires unfulfilled.



Figure 37. Galleria Umberto I in Naples. Picture in public domain.

In the last two decades of the 19th century, the Arcades became the social space of the city, the core of the urban space, the meeting place between the public and the private self. No mere shelter from rain and cold, a covered passage was essentially a public sphere, a venue where social distinction broke down. Speaking of the *Galleria Umberto I* in Naples, built between 1887 and 1890, German architectural historian Johann F. Geist pointed out that the class mingling under the *Arcades* was one of its peculiar traits: “The passerby does not have to be of a special religion or have a ticket to enter. The arcade belongs to everyone. It is the monumental expression of this most characteristic achievement of the nineteenth century, the public sphere, in which everyone may participate (437).

The Neapolitan Galleria was not the first covered iron-glass construction erected in Italy to promote social events and commercial activities. Already in the 1830s, the necessity of a covered space for social amusements led to urban alteration in Milan. Geist wrote, “Milan was the first city in Italy to construct wide, clean streets and a large theater, but it lacked a place where a certain public could spend inclement days and long winter evenings” (366). The construction of the *Galleria De Cristoforis*, the very first iron arcade built in Italy between 1831 and 1832, was a significant achievement.⁷⁷



Figure 38. Galleria De Cristoforis in Milan. Picture in public domain.

The Milanese gallery was a magnificent, elaborate building with a mezzanine and apartments above the shops. It served as a model for similar edifices throughout the nineteenth century, such as Giuseppe Mengoni’s *Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II* in Milan (1865), *Galleria*

⁷⁷ Although the Galleria De Cristoforis was destroyed in 1930, the architect Andrea Pizzala published his drawings, which are now essential visual documents to piece together the asset and the social function of this construction. See Andrea Pizzala, *Galleria De Cristoforis in Milano del architetto Andrea Pizzala*.

Mazzini in Genoa (1870), and the *Mercato Centrale* in Florence (1874). These are only some of the Italian iron constructions modeled on an experimental architecture of international matrix, which had in Paxton's *Crystal Palace* (1851) for the London *Great Exhibition*, its forerunner. We should not forget, in fact, that iron was extensively used for the fairs' purpose-built buildings. At the Exhibition in Paris in 1867, the *Galerie des Machines* had an impressive iron skeleton thirty-five meters high, with arches and vaults, not to mention the Eiffel Tower erected for the Exhibition in 1889.⁷⁸

Looking at the urban transformation of Paris in particular, Walter Benjamin criticized the idea of rebuilding, because he saw behind it the logic of creating by destroying, which was a legacy of the French Revolution (*Arcades* 121). Baron Haussmann, a civic planner hired by Napoleon III to modernize Paris and fuel its economy, carried out the city's renovation. Questioning Haussmann's demolition of old narrow streets in favor of large avenues, tree-lined boulevards, gardens, and impressive monuments, Benjamin advocated that such a radical transformation was essentially useless and ineffective. In quoting from Dubech and D'Espezel's *Histoire de Paris*, he wrote:

In Haussmann's time, there was a need for new roads, but not necessarily for the new roads he built. [...] His thoroughfares rarely possess any utility and never any beauty. [...] We must not accuse him of too much Haussmannization, but of too little. In spite of the megalomania of his theories, his vision was, in practice, not large enough. Nowhere did he anticipate the future. His vistas lack amplitude; his streets are too narrow. His conception is grandiose, but not grand; neither is it just or provident (*Arcades* 132).

⁷⁸ See *L'Exposition universelle de 1867, illustrée, publication internationale autorisée par la commission impériale*, Paris 1867.

According to Benjamin, Haussmann did not foresee the demand in terms of space of the new technological phase. People brought into the city by the new rail system, the appeal of visual entertainment, shops, and nightlife, in fact, soon re-made Paris as densely populated as it was before its rebuilding.

This logic of creating by destroying what existed previously, which Benjamin despised was the same behind the absorption of small retailers into department stores. Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pointed out how the large distribution “took over old specialized shops,” forcing them out of business because of the concentrated offer of a wider and more convenient selection of merchandise. But if the new emerged from the ruins of the old, Adorno and Horkheimer stressed that “individuals suffer(ed) the same fate,” while experiencing the demolition of their self in the name of modernity (203).

The mode of displaying of department stores, Arcades, and the *Great Exhibitions* induced the masses to shape themselves to the models offered, losing their decision-making autonomy, “decisions for individuals are taken by the system of mass culture, which takes over the last inward impulses of individuals, who are forced to consume what is offered to them” (*Dialectic* 203). Entitled by such a manipulative power, the commodity acquired the traits of fetishized objects, tailored for the mass deception. Adorno and Horkheimer, in fact, explained the principle behind commodity fetishism as a commercial stratagem to control human psyche, which cages individuals into roles over which they have no power.

Looking at the progress as bearer of alienation, Giovanni Verga made it a literary trope, the perfect backdrop for his characters’ self-exclusion from life. In the short story *Via Crucis*, for instance, Verga chooses the very arcades of the Bocconi gallery and the mesmerizing lighting of

the department store as the scenario in which the protagonist, a girl turned into a prostitute by hunger and social prejudice, sinks her sadness and her transparency to the passengers' gaze. Verga depicted street-walking before the department store as a *via crucis*, an avenue of human calvary, where individuals expiate their sad life before the indifference both of humans and the culture of merchandize:

Poi scese giù nella strada; fece la dolorosa *via crucis* della Galleria e di Via Santa Margherita, nell'ora triste della caccia al pranzo, tremante di freddo sotto il mantello di seta, col viso pallido di cipria, sorridendo a tutti colle labbra affamate, scutrettolando coi piedi gonfi rasente agli uomini che la salutavano con un'occhiata sprezzante; senza ripugnanze, senza simpatie, senza stanchezza, senza sonno, senza lagrime, senza un briciolo della sua sciagurata bellezza che le appartenesse più (Verga 440).

Then she went down, in the street; she walked along the painful *via crucis* of the Galleria and Via Santa Margherita, in the sad time of lunch hunting, shaking with cold, under the silk cloak, with her face powder pale, smiling to everybody with her hungry lips, stamping her swollen feet next to the men who greeted her with a scornful glaze; without repugnance, without sympathy, without tiredness, without sleep, without tears, without a scrap of her wrecked beauty that still belonged to her.

The principle behind the display of the department store and the *Great Exhibitions* explains the gaze of alienation. This principle met the needs to put goods on view on a single space, so that customers could take them in at a glance. This mode of displaying kept the crowd constantly under the spell of visual seduction and consolidated the form of luring and controlled visuality we have discussed for pictorial entertainment in Panorama houses. I claim that Panoramas were the first authorities for the diffusion of a visual display that concentrated on the length of the canvas images the viewer could perceive at a glance.

The same logic will be drawn on by cinematography, whose screen will function as the single space of the floors in department stores or the pavilions at the Exhibitions, where images and goods were staged with the only purpose of enchanting the public. Both filmic images and merchandise on display reveal an ephemeral nature. In both the image is ephemeral, fleeting, and perpetual. People frantically moving before shop-windows give the sense that the window content is constantly changing like the passing scenario of a cinematic reel. Even though displayed goods do not disappear as moving images do from the screen, their pleasurable allure turns out yet temporal and gives way to a relentless quest for novelty.

The modes of displaying images of shop-windows and cinema run parallel, since commodity fetishism is connected with the pleasurable activity of watching and both are commercially exploitable. This recalls Theodor Adorno's aesthetic reflections on how works of art coalesce with capitalism, making exchange the dominant logic.⁷⁹ Both cinematic images and window displays signify dream-displacement and channel induced desires. Shop windows function as dream screens, visual tools to serve commodification and metaphors akin to the activity of setting up the scenography for a film.

If fairs, arcades, and department stores used exotic *mise-en-scènes* in their displays to lure the crowds, exoticism served also as profitable subject for early cinematography. Film viewers found themselves prepared to deal with foreign visuals on screen, as they had been prepared by the experience of decoding a barrage of foreign imagery. Fairs and stores had forced audiences to disentangle from standardized images. Spectators had learned to master their initial

⁷⁹ See Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, London: The Athlone Press, 1997. On Adorno's reflections of the impossibility for art to be autonomous from the capitalist clutches of modernity, see Jay M. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno*, and Lambert Zuidervaart, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory: The Redemption of Illusion*.

visual disorientation and familiarize with the optical omnipotence of virtuality, which granted them the knowledge of what they had not and in most cases could not experience firsthand.

To understand the evolution of visual entertainment leading to the future shaping of cinematic spectatorship, it is necessary to consider the “construal” experience that challenged fin-de-siècle viewers. In social psychological terms, *construal* explains how people perceive and interpret the world around them. This term gives relevance to a subjective elaboration of external inputs. In praising how beneficial to self-formation the “construal” is, social psychologist Lee Ross writes that this attitude is sparked off “whenever people are obliged to venture beyond the information immediately provided by the direct observation or secondhand report of a stimulus event, in particular whenever they are obliged to offer additional details of content, context, or meaning in the actions and outcomes that unfold around them.”⁸⁰

Cinema will consolidate the empowerment of viewers with an interpretative ego, thanks to the new function taken on by the screen, turned into a mirror in which spectators saw themselves reflected. Psychoanalytic film theorists, such as Christian Metz and Jean-Louis Baudry will make this achievement their ultimate discourse on early cinema, calling attention to the identification of the viewer’s eye with the camera. Although passive and sitting in the darkened auditorium, as was the case with Panorama rotunda viewers, spectators will be given the illusory power to master screen images, thanks to the exploitation of their induced association with the apparatus eye.

If the technological nature of the filmic apparatus reinforced the illusion of visual power in the audience, panoramas, dioramas, and optical entertainment at the Fairs extensively prepared this result. So as the affinity of the camera with the human eye empowered viewers, at the same

⁸⁰ See Lee Ross, *The Problem of Construal in Social Inference and Social Psychology. A Distinctive Approach to Psychological Research*, p. 118.

time the accessibility of the foreign and the global mode of displaying featured at the *Great Exhibitions* reinforced a new regime of visibility. Able to enjoy any novelty, from technology to unknown lands and cultures viewers were lured by the illusion of their own power. Paradoxically, their actual passivity and reduction to exploitable subjects were disguised behind their very fascination with visual newness. Both film spectators and fair public, in fact, were thoughtless of the trick behind their illusory visual omnipotence. If early cinematic viewers ignored the camera's activity and enjoyed screened images as if they were real, at the same time audiences at the *Great Exhibitions* did not deepen the reality effect that ethnographic and exotic dioramic shows re-created. On this naïve mode of looking, which essentially privileged the satisfaction of curiosity for new effects, the logic of consumption could not but capitalize.

Since department stores and the *Great Exhibitions* validated the rule that what lured viewers sold well, this logic reinforced the idea of images to be offered as commodities. Art, architecture, and displayed goods became all tools of seduction at the service of commerce. New techniques of retail and display offered by department stores, Arcades, and fairs essentially drew on the conventions of spectacle and scenery that belong to the theatre tradition. Visitors were treated like customers, but at the same time entertained as audiences before a theatrical production. Displays were orchestrated to spectacularize the goods. Indian carpets on sale were placed on the ceiling, walls, and floors to recreate an enveloping exotic scenography. The same effect was achieved by dozens of open umbrellas along columns, balustrades, and staircases, which dissolved their banality of everyday objects into their resembling of magic lanterns (Williams 70-71). No less spectacular was the use of fake marble and mahogany, stucco and frescoes, as well as the frenzies of mirror plays and lighting.

This extravagant décor beautified displays, while luring customers into the stores. Interestingly, the importance of lavish scenography served also to distance from the ordinary and capitalize on the fascination with the exotic. This logic was the same behind the scenes of seduction at the *Great Exhibitions*, where the commercial exploitation of the foreign fueled the triumph of fetishized commodities. For instance, exoticism on display functioned as a *trait d'union* between art and commerce, without producing any genuine artistry. Extravagant and tacky décor imitated art with no ambition of authenticity in style. No artistic value, in fact, was at stake in displaying, only the unavoidable consideration that “with the dramatic signage of the *magasins de nouveautés*, art enters the service of the businessman,” as Benjamin sadly noted (Arcades 34).

Both shops and fairs exploited scenographic displays to encourage costumers' attendance and their purchases. In *Dream Worlds*, Rosalind Williams writes that Emile Zola created the fictional store of his novel *Au Bonheur des Dames* out of his observations of displaying in contemporary department stores (67). Zola's protagonist, like the real owner of *La Samaritaine*, one of the largest department stores in Paris, “employed exotic décor to encourage shoppers to buy his wares” (68). Clearly, when watching shop windows hosting everyday objects artistically displayed and spurred by electric lighting, customers could not be indifferent to the allure of these *mise-en-scènes*. Such concocted scenography testifies to the submission of decorative art to the laws of lucrative commerce.

The controlled space of department stores and the *Great Exhibitions* staged the same spectacularization of the visual we discussed for Panorama entertainment. Illusions and lavish scenographies once the realm of pictorial tricks, became the dream scenarios that encouraged mass consumption. Furthermore, new techniques in staging commodities and creating

convincing illusions were less and less pictorial and increasingly ‘cinematic.’ We should only think of the representation of the exotic, which moved from the achievements of pictorial tricks to the dynamicity of sophisticated real-like journeys. Both fairs and stores offered a cinematic dream world. A *Tour du Monde* at the Exhibition meant walking along canvases displaying the globe from Spain to Japan, while relaxing from extenuating shopping in department stores meant to lounge in temple-like cafès with natives serving tea in their local costumes. Both these experiences offered a dynamic and scenographic knowledge of the world.

Novel artistic expressions, new merchandize displaying, and the theatricalization of optical entertainments at the *Great Exhibitions* played a pivotal role in eliciting a new mode for viewers to engage with visual images. Bridled by the guided and inescapable structures of the fair, spectators approached visual inputs motivated by the pleasurable experience of watching novelties, unaware of being both exploitable “customers” and the representatives of a new spectatorship in progress. We have seen in Chapter II:1 that sophistication in Panorama staging bridged the gap between the initial spectatorial awe before optical tricks, while major interpretative faculties were requested to viewers to master new visual material and techniques. The theatricalization of Panoramas and the shift in spectatorial perception fueled by stereoscopic and panoramic modes of displaying, in fact, paved the way to the idea that visual images were a fantasized version of reality, which presupposed the viewers’ interpretation and disbelief.

Spectators were now indirectly invested with the same mediating task. Displays and shows at the *Great Exhibitions* demanded viewers to increasingly challenge themselves as “mediators” able to decode novel images and their significance. If past showmen had exaggerated visual wonders to increase the number of spectators, these wonders were now speaking for themselves and implied not only the audiences’ interpretative skills, but also their

disengagement from Western visual standardization. The display of exoticism, in fact, was increasingly exposing viewers to a massive barrage of symbols belonging to non-Western systems of signs. Chinese palaces, Turkish minarets, Hindu temples were no longer instances of an imaginary exoticism diffused by colorful picture-postcards and fairytales. The *Great Exhibitions* enacted the physical encounter of Western culture with the rest of the world. Even the mass production of postcards divulged to advertise the fairs attests to the reinforcement of an iconography that collaged the West into the cultures of the world.



Figure 39. Postcard publicizing the *Universal Exhibition* in Paris in 1889 with architectural symbols from all over the world. Picture in public domain

Catalogues from the time provide evidence on how displays, architecture, and the layout of the Great Exhibitions forced viewers to wander away from Western visuality and relate themselves to not-yet-classified symbols belonging to Eastern, Islamic, or Hindu cultures.⁸¹ Subliminal techniques tinged even basic needs such as resting, eating, and drinking with an

⁸¹ See *The Exposition of 1851*, London: Cass, 1851, and the *Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue* edited by Robert Ellis, Great Britain, 1851. See also *The Illustrated Exhibitor*, London: Cassel Ltd., 1851, and the *National Art Library Great Exhibition Collection* of the Victoria & Albert Museum at www.vam.ac.uk.

exotic barrage. Starting in London 1851, refreshment rooms were highlighted on the exhibition's general plan and referred to with captivating names of distant locations: the *Alhambra Court* with a copy of the Lion Fountain, the *Pompeian Court*, the *Byzantine Court*, or the *Egyptian Court* containing replicas of the immense statues in Abu Simbel. While eating or having a drink, audiences could have a lesson in non-Western decorative architecture.

Besides taking strolls in the tropical vegetation enlivened by chirping exotic birds and gushing pools of water, audiences marveled at the chance to have Buddhist art, rock-cut Indian temples, and Islamic buildings before their eyes. Exotic architecture was now a palpable reality, the representative of a world of visual signs in alternative to familiar Western masonry. Clearly this attracted viewers more than any other publicity. By the Paris 1867 Fair, in fact, stereotyped constructions of foreign countries became blockbuster icons.

The apotheosis of this clichéd ethnography occurred at the Exhibition in Paris in 1889 with an attraction called *L'Histoire de L'Habitation Humaine (History of Human Habitation)* by artist Charles Garnier, the architect of the famed Parisian *Opera House*. The *History of Human Habitation* consisted of forty-two buildings showing audiences the advancements achieved in masonry through the ages. Garnier's reconstructions featured all types of shelter, from primordial grottoes, huts, and tents, to cottages and palaces, exposing viewers to a variety of non-Western civilizations, from the Aztec and Inca, to Indian, Chinese, Japanese, and African. According to Garnier, these buildings exemplified ethnic authenticity thanks to their typical decorations recalling the originals and dressed-up natives welcoming the public. Garnier claimed that the verisimilitude achieved in the buildings was such, that their "resemblance to truth was truer than truth itself."⁸²

⁸² Charles Garniere and Auguste Ammann, *L'habitation humaine*, 1892, iii-iv.

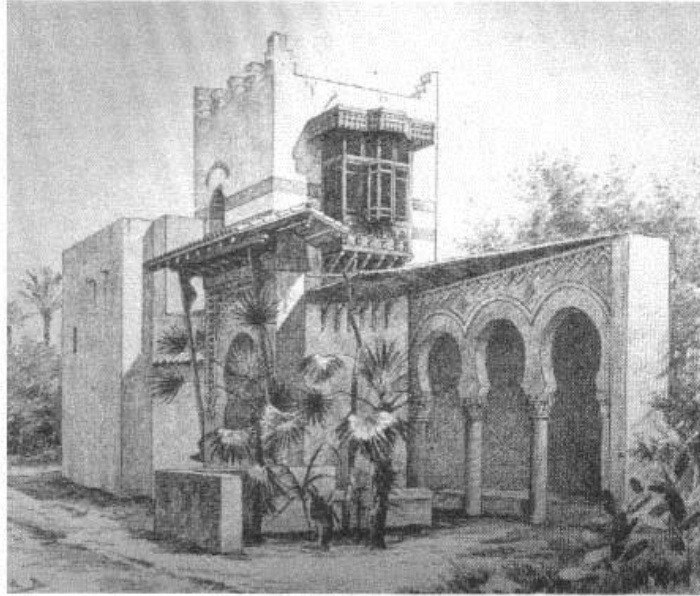


Figure 40. The *Arab House*, from Garnier and Hamman, *L'Habitation humaine*, 1892.

Since one single building could not be representative of an entire culture, these constructions were clearly clichéd and based on the subjective interpretations of the architects. Garnier himself had no expertise in world's cultures and masonry. Nevertheless, on the wave of his success for the magniloquence of the *Opera House*, he was appointed to re-create the same visual suggestions in the exhibition displays.⁸³ Clearly, organizers pointed to an architecture of spectacle and counted on the appeal of Garnier's name. The *History of Habitation* was designed to satisfy the logic of spectacularization, like “a moving panorama, where all habitations parade before us,” as Garnier wrote.⁸⁴

Offered as an anthropological and historical lesson, constructions along the *History of Habitation* featured the superiority of Western masonry over alleged unrefined examples of dwellings from those “primitive civilizations” that “n'ont exercé aucune influence sur la marche

⁸³ This experience even gave Garnier the materials for a bestselling companion book he symptomatically titled *Histoire de l'habitation* and published in 1892.

⁸⁴ See Charles Garnier and Auguste Ammann, *L'Habitation humaine*, 1892, p. iii.

générale de l'humanité" ("did not exert any influence on the general advance of humanity"), such as Chinese, Japanese, Eskimo, Indian, Aztec, Inca, and African.⁸⁵ However, how could audiences make sense of such discriminating messages glorifying alleged Western superiority? Uninitiated to interpret racial diversity, viewers were not accustomed to deal with foreign ethnic visuality. Theirs were 'colonial' eyes and could not but be guided by their own Western notions. Thus, unknown architectures and cultures were looked as seductive novelties, rather than a show-off of Western elitism over forms of artistry deemed as 'primitive'.

We have seen that scenographic displays and three-dimensional optical tricks in Panorama shows had trained viewers to interpret and 'experience' visual language, but a new task was now imposed to fairgoers. The decodification of novel visual inputs implied the detachment from standardized Western signs. This means that prior to becoming "interpreters," audiences at the *Great Exhibitions* had to train themselves to handle their awe before new ethnicities, cultures, and racial attitudes.

I believe spectatorial interpretation can be an effective hermeneutic tool for discourse on exoticism and novel non-Western visual inputs, if these are intended as instances of not-yet-visually-and culturally decoded symbols. In fact, if attention has to be devoted to an interpretation that is part of a wider context, where the activity of looking turns out like a map, tracing multifaceted cultural influences, it is necessary for the observer to acquire the role of "interpreter."⁸⁶ The clearing of visual and ethnic obstacles, however, was a serious task for

⁸⁵ Émile Godeau, *L'histoire de l'habitation*, 1889, p. 80.

⁸⁶ To Norman Bryson it is imperative to consider artistic expressions as the combination of past social practices with our own interaction with the work. Thus, the artistic context consists of a number of signs that require the observer's interpretation. See Norman Bryson, *Visual Culture: Images and Interpretations*.

Western viewers, considering their dependency on sight constancy. After all, if Baudelaire, Zola, and Hugo were initially disoriented by the foreign signs (especially Eastern) that the *Great Exhibitions* brought into Western culture, we can easily imagine the impact that they had on the ordinary public.

When Roland Barthes returned from his trip to Japan in the late 1950s, he spoke of the same visual disorientation that Baudelaire mentioned in his writings on the Parisian Fair. Barthes turned his visit into *Empire of Signs*, a narrative that does not aim to offer an objective picture of Japan, but rather a reflection on the author's own culture and its handling of the value of symbols. Barthes' Japan, in fact, is more properly a fictive land, a theoretical construct challenging the interpretation of newness. Barthes was mainly interested in investigating the limitations of Western universal signs, especially facing them in contrast with Asian peculiarity to ignore the judgment of other standards. Japanese symbols, in fact, exist for themselves, for it is their signifiers that naturally instill significance. Such a society contrasts with Western beliefs of standardized visual signs; after all, the Occidental space was where Asian newness was still perceived as "the idea of an unheard-of symbolic system, one altogether detached from our own" (*Empire*, 3).

What Barthes aimed to highlight in the Asian symbols was a more general consideration on "the possibility of a difference, of a mutation, of a revolution in the propriety of symbolic systems" (*Empire*, 3-4). And this was what actually happened in the late 19th century in Europe, when the wave of artistic novelty brought by exotic craftsmanship had such an inspiring visual impact, that it decisively encouraged the extraordinary flowering of decorative art. By the turn of the century, exotic motifs, especially Asian, were present in all branches of art, from painting and architecture to fashion, dance, and avant-garde theatre.

Devoting attention to foreign culture and to its shocking surfacing in Western visuality in this study serves as a meditation on the limits of universal visual significance. What Western art depicted was essentially a fantasized exoticism, a commercial and ideological construct similar to that which Edward Said defines as *Orientalism*.⁸⁷ If a new attention to Oriental symbols was evident in fin-de-siècle art, this was essentially constructed by and in relation to West, as Said claims. What emerged, in fact, was a system of visual representation that brought the Orient into Western culture through categorizations laced with notions of power and superiority.

The visual universality I refer to, thus, was a consequence of restrictions dictated by cultural barriers. The crowds looked at visual novelties essentially as empowering tools to overcome the outmoded. In fact, the burgeoning diffusion of Eastern or Oriental motifs in Western culture fostered by the *Great Exhibitions* tallied with the widespread desire for innovation that at that time was spreading on the arts all over the world. While fairs were originally about exchange and national pride, they became soon also venues for the figurative representation of the exotic, where ethnography and racial diversity went beyond the function of serving capitalism. These foreign displays, disentangled from their commercial value, had a great impact on the artists and writers of the time.

Since the invention of photography had freed artists from the burdensome task of reproducing faithful reality, painters hailed the *Great Exhibitions* as a chance to experiment with new visual techniques, as the birth of *Impressionism* in France will attest. Many of the Impressionist painters had intriguing connections with the foreign arts, fascinated and influenced as they were by the foreign iconography they first saw displayed right at fairs. Since the Exhibition in Paris in 1855, Eastern models started to circulate in Europe and Japanese art

⁸⁷ See Edward. W. Said, *Orientalism*, especially Chapter I.

became soon the main topic of discussion in literary circles such as the *Café Guerbois*, “the meeting place in the 1860s for all the leading figures in the Impressionist movement from Bracquemond and Manet to Gauguin and Cézanne, and for writers and critics such as Astruc, Zola and Duranty” (Sullivan 215).



Figure 41. An example of Ukiyo-e by famous Japanese landscape printmaker Utagawa Hiroshige (left) and its copy, *The Blooming Plum Tree* (1887), painted by Vincent Van Gogh (right) . Pictures in public domain.

Impressionists of the so-called ‘second generation,’ such as Van Gogh, Cezanne, and Toulouse-Lautrec, showed in their works undeniable influences of Japanese style and techniques. In their canvases, in fact, the models and coloring of the *Ukiyo-e*, the typical Japanese wood-block prints, are striking.⁸⁸ These artists attest to the complete absorption of Eastern models into Western painting style, compared for instance to Claude Monet’s sheer aesthetic fascination with imports. Fans and kimonos in Monet’s canvases served only to recreate a Japanese effect. The

⁸⁸ See Klaus Berger, *Japonisme in Western Painting*, in particular pp. 13-15.

widespread term *Japonisme*, in fact, intended the assimilation of Eastern pictorial techniques, rather than the mere inclusion of Oriental paraphernalia in the visual arts.



Figure 42. Claude Monet, *La Japonaise* (1876) shows extensive use of Japanese exports, but not Japanese pictorial style. Picture in public domain

That Japanese art was a source for stylistic stirring in painting is confirmed also by art historian Henri Dorra, who contends that even the dotting technique of Seurat, Signac, and Pissarro was inspired by Eastern models they saw at the *Galerie Georges Petit* in 1883.⁸⁹ Fairs' exotic displays were no less rousing for Paul Gauguin, who was enchanted by the Indonesian village and the Javanese dancing he saw at the *Exposition Universelle* in Paris in 1889 (Sullivan

⁸⁹ See Michael Sullivan, *The Meeting of Eastern and Western Art*, p. 234.

234). Buddhist art impressed Gauguin inasmuch as it provided him with subjects for the rest of his career.

Far Eastern displays at fairs must have been particularly enthralling, if even Claude Debussy widened his musical horizon thanks to the inspirations he drew from Vietnamese and Javanese Theater performed at the *Exhibition* in Paris in 1889.⁹⁰ An experience analogous happened to influential composer Erik Satie, a contemporary of Debussy, who was captivated by “the hypnotic effects of repetition from the Javanese *gamelan*, and the *acciaccaturas* and melodic style of the Romanian folk ensembles,” both of which he heard at the 1889 Parisian fair.⁹¹

According to the general revenue on the Exhibition in Paris in 1889, the show in the Javanese Pavilion attracted some 875,000 visitors, drawn by four young women dressed up in Indonesian costumes dancing accompanied by the sound of the local *gamelan*, an ensemble of several instruments, such as xylophones, drums, and gongs.⁹² As customary, the Javanese reconstruction delegitimized natives and sublimated ethnography as a marketable product. In fact, while watching the performances, audiences could consume foods and drinks seated in the café located in the theater, protected by a fence that isolated them within what that was the replica of a primordial paradise with suggestive gongs and wind whistling through bamboo canes. To complete the idyllic scenario, Balinese men, women, and children acted out their daily activities as natives in their ‘real’ homeland. Natives enhanced the authenticity of this artificially

⁹⁰ See Annegret Fauser, *Musical Encounters at the 1889 Paris World’s Fair*, p. 165 ff.

⁹¹ Satie incorporated these novel sounds in his exotic piano pieces the *Three Gnossiennes* (1890). See Robert Orledge, *Satie the Composer. Music in the Twentieth Century*, p. 190 ff.

⁹² Alfred Picard, *Rapport général sur l’Exposition universelle internationale de 1889*, vol. 3, p. 285.

reconstructed land of quietude, whose goal was to lure viewers with an illusory break from chaotic urban life and Western industrialization.

A commercial construct, the seclusion of the Vietnamese theatre clearly pointed at something beyond the audiences' recovery from stressful urbanization. A fenced secluded area was the perfect venue for performances and concerts. Without disturbing noises, audiences could enjoy the spectacles without distraction. If the public could mentally detach from the ordinary life of the metropolis with its hectic and familiar routines, the illusion of traveling to faraway locations and experiencing foreign cultures was even more successful. As we can see, *divertissement* was the result of marketing strategies, so as to reassure the crowds that anything they experienced beyond the threshold of the fair was worth the money they had spent to enter.



Figure 43. Javanese Dancers, from *L'Exposition Universelle* 1889.

Besides painting, music, the visual and decorative arts, fairs' foreign displays also influenced literature and architecture. Eastern exhibits at the *World Exhibition* in London in 1862 charmed the American artist James Abbott McNeill Whistler, who drew inspiration for his *Peacock Room*, today in Washington D.C., a masterpiece of domestic architecture prefaced with

Japanese decorative motifs.⁹³ Whistler's room is a good instance of the massive concentration of exotic objects foreign to Western observers: blue and white typical Chinese ceramics fill the shelves, while the woman in the painting above the fireplace stands on an Oriental rug, in front of an Asian screen, and wears a kimono; not to mention that the peacocks after which the room is named are Asian birds.



Figure 44. *The Peacock Room* by James Abbott McNeill Whistler. Picture in public domain.

In the same years when Whistler fell under the spell of *Japonisme*, Walt Whitman wrote *Errand Bearers*,⁹⁴ a poem composed in response to a parade in Manhattan, which was held in honor of the first Japanese Embassy to the US. Whitman saw in the “Asian guests” the “intense soul” of the Orient, “lesson-giving princes,” whose arrival would mean a new start for America.

⁹³ Linda Merrill analyzes Whistler's work providing a broader insight into nineteenth-century European cultural taste and the attitudes toward Asian art in relation to American culture. See *The Peacock Room: A Cultural Biography*

⁹⁴ Published in the *New York Times* on June 27, 1860, the poem appeared then in all subsequent editions of *Leaves of Grass*, under the revised title *A Broadway Pageant*. See Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass: A Textual Variorum*, pp. 513-517.



Figure 45. Members of the 1860 Japanese mission meeting with President Buchanan at the reception in the White House. *Harper's Weekly*, May 26, 1860.

If in the 1870s the taste for Eastern art was mainly seen as a means to contest political and aesthetic authority by the majority of artists, in the 1880s writers such as Baudelaire and Huysmans started including Asian motifs into their “own poetics of decadence” (Hokenson 93). When in 1884 Huysmans published *À Rebours*, a novel dealing with the protagonist’s alienation from the social world to embrace the realm of artistic contemplation, Asian aesthetic was already perceived as non-traditional, amoral, and sensuous. Gabriele D’Annunzio, too, in *Il piacere* (*The Child of Pleasure*) invoked the sensual effects of Japanese *objects d’art*. D’Annunzio’s narrative eroticizes the foreign and exotic, in a way that masterfully makes exoticism coincide with eroticism. This is evident in the description of Elena Muti – the novel’s female protagonist – while preparing tea for her lover Andrea Sperelli; her sensual and ceremonial gestures as she touches the rare China evoke a silent seductive power that erotically and sexually arouses her partner and the readers:

She began her delicate manipulations - lit the spirit lamp under the kettle, opened the lacquer tea caddy and put the necessary quantity of aromatic leaves into the

teapot, and finally prepared two cups. Her movements were slow and a little hesitating, as happens when the mind is busied with other things than the occupation of the moment; her exquisite white hands hovered over the cups with the airiness of butterflies, and from her whole lithe form there emanated an indefinable charm, which enveloped her lover like a caress. Seated quite close to her, gazing at her from under his half-closed lids, Andrea drank in the subtle fascination of her presence. Neither of them spoke. Elena, leaning back in the cushions, waited for the water to boil, with her eyes fixed on the blue flame while she absently slipped her rings up and down her fingers, lost in a dream apparently. [...] The kettle began its slow song (198-199).

In Italy, the interest for *Japonisme* was initially stirred by collecting, although the consequent contribution of the intellectuals brought Asian art into theoretical and aesthetic discourse. Collecting was a phenomenon widely encouraged by the *Great Exhibitions*, with their display of foreign paraphernalia. Fairs were the suitable arena to allow the passion for the exotic to intermingle with buying, exchanging, and collecting. Ruled by capitalist logics, *World Exhibitions* gave visibility to unknown goods belonging to foreign cultures and fueled their commercialization.

Among the figures that fostered the diffusion of Eastern art in Italy through their passion for collecting, it is worth mentioning Frederick Stibbert and Edoardo Chiossone. An English nobleman, Florentine by adoption, Stibbert devoted his entire life to what he called “il mio museo,” an impressive collection of some of the most antique weapons and suits of armor in the world.⁹⁵ His predilection was for Japanese weapons, which he started buying in the 1870s when Eastern goods were the rage at the *Great Exhibitions*. For his collection, Stibbert set up even a specific stage and mannequins in order to re-create their original context. Stibbert’s scenography recalls the use of theatricalization to enhance authenticity in displays we discussed for Panoramas.

⁹⁵ Today, Stibbert’s Eastern collection is displayed in the *Museo Stibbert* in Florence. Rich in documents and illustrated catalogues, the Museum archive is an invaluable mine of information on Stibbert’s life, his travels, and passion for collectibles.

Stibbert, however, set up genuine staging for his own aims, while Panoramas' theatricalized displays were designed to market products.

Chiossone, instead, was an Italian engraver from Genoa, who lived in Japan the greatest part of his life as an employee of the *Meiji* government. He collected a valuable amount of Japanese crafts, which was donated to the "Museo d'Arte Orientale Edoardo Chiossone" in Genoa. Eastern motifs, however, spread also thanks to fervent intellectual contributors, such as the scholar Vittorio Pica, rightly acknowledged as the father of Italian *Japonisme* for his 1894 seminal volume on Oriental art, titled *L'arte dell'Estremo Oriente*. A passionate advocate of *chinoiserie* was also Gabriele D'Annunzio, whose intellectual input was pivotal in directing the collective interest towards Japan. Into the unusual shoes of a correspondent, D'Annunzio chronicled the diffusion of *Japonisme* in Italy in a series of articles he contributed to the journal "La tribuna," which shed light on the Roman aristocracy's passion for Asian knick-knacks.⁹⁶

However, the fascination with exoticism in Italy was never a mere prerogative of the cultural elite, since middle-class people, too, fell under the spell of Oriental novelties, albeit these were often misperceived, since Japan, China, and faraway lands tended to overlap in popular imagination. This interest in the aesthetics of the exotic, nevertheless, would have been unthinkable earlier in the century, when the foreign 'visual culture' was not only unknown, but also out of reach for all but the elite in major Italian cities.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Interestingly, D'Annunzio used the information gathered in these articles as narrative and descriptive materials for his novel *The Child of Pleasure* (Ragione 5). For discussion of this topic, see Giovanni Ragione, "*Il piacere*" di D'Annunzio.

⁹⁷ When Svetlana Alpers coined the term "visual culture" in 1972, she intended to propose a new approach to art. The critic would consider not only the historical circumstances surrounding a work of art, but also the cultural environment of its genesis. Alpers' cue takes from an investigation into Dutch paintings, whose legibility is successful only if framed into its contemporary visual culture. See Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*.

To understand the extent the exotic appealed to the crowds, we should consider that the Great Exhibitions were not the sole channels for bringing foreign products to public attention. Arcades and department stores nourished the popular craze for Oriental novelties, with their lavish shop-windows publicizing exotic clothing, furniture, and home appliances, also played on this fashion. Emporia were arranged as luring temples where Oriental commodities on display functioned as spectacle and exoticism served as inducement to consumption.

Already in the 1860s Aristide Boucicaut, the founder of *Le Bon Marché*, was selling Chinese, Japanese, and Arabian specialties in his store, on the wave of the success that Oriental merchandise had met at the *Exhibition* in Paris in 1855. A consummate showman, Boucicaut literally disseminated his store with jewel-toned Oriental rugs to seduce his clients. Michael Miller writes in his 1981 history of *Le Bon Marché* that no one better than Boucicaut understood retailing as synonymous with theater. In Miller's words, "selling consumption was a matter of seduction and showmanship and in these Boucicaut excelled, enveloping his marketplace in an aura of fascination that turned buying into a special and irresistible occasion."⁹⁸

In his department stores, Boucicaut used inducing techniques he saw at fairs, such as fixed prices, permitted browsing and returns, pounding advertisements, and the first catalogue published in 1856. Lavish and colorful pictures presented Oriental paraphernalia alongside Western furnishings, seductive alternatives to familiar décor. As diversification in stores increased in the 1870s, Oriental exports, especially rugs, became paramount attractions and gave way even to the idea of making them the key products of monothematic stores. An exhibit of Persian rugs at the *Centennial Exhibition* in Philadelphia in 1876, for instance, made such a

⁹⁸ See Michael B. Miller, *The Bon Marche: Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store, 1869-1920*.

lasting impression on American viewers that a William Sloan bought the entire collection at the closing of the Fair and opened *W.J. Sloan*, the first major retailing store for Oriental rugs in America.⁹⁹

A further proof of the crowds' passion for Arab upholstery is given by the first exhibition entirely dedicated to Oriental rugs, which was held in Vienna in 1891. The catalogue published for this exhibit offers detailed lists of priced carpets available for purchase.¹⁰⁰ The impressive number of visitors and sold items attest to the audiences' taste for exotic furnishings and the popular eagerness to invest on imports in order to show them off in their Western homes. Organizers tried not to let this phenomenon of popular appreciation pass unnoticed and even asked F.R. Martin, a successful dealer, collector, and scholar, to write the first comprehensive history of oriental carpets.¹⁰¹

Before becoming object of serious scholarship, however, Oriental rugs made materials for books and travels. In 1884, Herbert Coxon, a passionate British rug importer, on his return from the Caucasus wrote one of the earliest books in English on the manufacture and exportation of Oriental carpets, enriched with beautiful colorful plates.¹⁰² Such publications did elicit the crowds' curiosity for foreign imports and allowed the rooting of a novel non-Western iconography. Intricate weaving, exotic design, and vibrant colors did make carpets the metaphors

⁹⁹ See Gerard R. Wolfe, *New York, a guide to the metropolis: walking tours of architecture*, p. 237.

¹⁰⁰ See *Ausstellung Orientalische Teppiche im K. Oesterreiches Handels Museum*, Vienna, 1891.

¹⁰¹ Martin's text *A History of Oriental Carpets Before 1800*, however, was published only in 1908, seventeen years after the popular craze for Oriental rugs exploded. The carpets displayed at the Exhibition in Vienna appeared in a three-volume publication in 1897, *Oriental Carpets*, edited by C. Purdin-Clarke, containing also informative articles on the contemporary carpet industry. However, Martin's monumental work was followed by a flood of articles and books. The bibliography in Kurt Erdmann's *Oriental Carpets, an Account of their History* is vast and contains more than six hundred titles.

¹⁰² See Herbert Coxon, *Oriental Carpets. How they are made and conveyed to Europe. With a narrative of a journey to the East in search of them*, 1884.

of seductive experiences, objects able to lead viewers on imaginary adventures. I claim, in fact, that Persian carpets hold aesthetic and theoretical value for their capacity to assemble within their perimeter the compendium of the foreign by means of symbolic icons playing on the collective imagination.

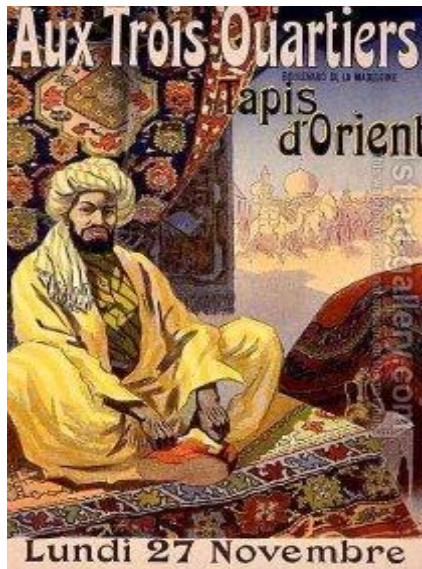


Figure 46. Poster by René Péane (1899)
Both pictures in public domain.

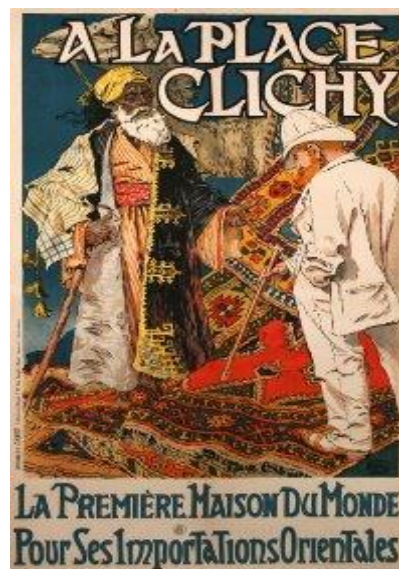


Figure 47. Poster by Eugene Grasset (1891)

After all, flying carpets magically transporting persons from one place to another were rooted suggestions in the crowds' minds. The tales of the *One Thousand and One Nights*, for instance, widely circulating in the 19th century through many available translations, had certainly reinforced the magic aura of rugs, sumptuous Arabian palaces, and turban emirs among Western audiences.¹⁰³ This collection of lavish tales was even the touchstone to measure the

¹⁰³ Between 1704 and 1717, orientalist and archeologist Antoine Galland published in French the first European translation of *The Thousand and One Nights* in twelve volumes. The intellectual world, from Coleridge to De Quincey, from Stendhal to Tennyson and Poe recognized the value of Galland's translation for a long time. British translator and passionate of Egyptian culture, Edward Lane offered his version in three volumes of *The One Thousand and One Nights* in 1840, he revised and expurgated with Puritan severity. Lane's prudish tone prompted libertine explorer Richard Francis Burton to publish his eroticized version in 1885. All these renditions

seductiveness of emporia's displays. A reviewer recounting of a sale of Oriental carpets and porcelain held in Boucicaut's store wrote, "all artistic Paris gathered at the Bon Marché that day, and the store offered the sight of a vast Oriental museum ... transporting the imagination to the sunny land of a thousand and one nights."¹⁰⁴

If we look at how Oriental carpets were advertised at the time, we can track down the same exploitation of the mystery evoked by popular, albeit stereotyped, Arab icons. Posters often displayed men in turban and sultan trousers, cross-legged seated and intent on making deals with Western buyers. Such iconography clearly exploited the distortion of the Arab world Edward Said highlights in his seminal work *Orientalism*. Undeniably, these representations did nothing but depict the Western notion of the Orient, enacting the constant binary opposition between East and West. However, it is functional to our discourse also to point out how stereotyped Oriental images evoked the accessibility of the foreign; they were, in fact, supportive of the same glorification of a tourism *en place* as that advertised by the *Great Exhibitions*. Even the redundancy in publicity remained unaltered in poster art, as the ad for *A la Place Clichy* proclaimed, "the first store in the world for its Oriental imports."

No less convincing was painting over the crowds, as Arthur Melville's *An Arab Interior* (1881) attests, with its abundance of Oriental carpets, mosaics, golden furniture, and exotic beverages. By looking at Melville's use of imports to theatricalize his painting, we can easily imagine how Oriental displays in stores and at the Great Exhibitions might look like. The profusion of Arab icons in Melville's production filled also the works of Italian painter Amedeo

were widely circulating in Italy via uncountable translations from the French and English. In Italy, however, the first official translation from the Arabic was assigned by editor Einaudi to Francesco Gabrieli only after the second World War. Gabrieli's version was published in 1948.

¹⁰⁴ Quoted in Michael B. Miller, *The Bon Marché: Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store, 1869-1920*, p. 174.

Simonetti, who was so enthralled by Oriental clichés that he made them his most repeated subjects. Simonetti essentially portrayed the Arab as a carpet seller, barker of exotic goods to captivate Western collectors, or a teller of adventurous enchanting stories.



Figure 48 Amedeo Simonetti, *The Carpet Seller* 1898. Picture in public domain.

As we can see, Oriental carpets represented something beyond sheer floor coverings. Recalling the Foucauldian heterotopias with which we defined the juxtaposition of merchandise on the fair's ground, Persian rugs brought together inside their real and defined rectangle fragments of the unknown and made them available for mass consumption. When providing examples of *heterotopias*, Foucault himself referred to carpets as symbolic objects taking shape from the garden, a space sacred to Persians and *heterotopia* itself. Persians thought that in the garden “all the vegetation was supposed to come together,” explains Foucault. Exemplifying *heterotopias* for its capacity to condensate a variety of patterns and motifs within a single surface, Foucault wrote that “the rug is a sort of garden that can move across space” (*Of Other Spaces* 4).



Figure 49. Amedeo Simonetti, *The Teller of Adventures* 1897. Picture in public domain.

Carpets, in fact, elicited fantasies and predisposed the crowds to virtual ‘flights’ of the mind. Carpets made the rectangle a suggestive metaphor for visual sensations. Rectangular were shop-windows under the arcades and Panorama canvases, as well as the stage in a theater and the cinema screen. All these ‘rectangles’ are instances of a medium conveying a physical experience of the foreign by using the suggestion of images concentrated on a delimited single space. The arabesques on the carpets evoked Arab and Turkish lifestyles, while providing visual information about foreign countries and enacting fantasizing tales on screen. It was as if the rectangle framing the visual representation of the exotic engrossed the public with the same intensity of a filmic frame.

If literature fueled the air of mystery around Oriental carpets reinforcing their suggestive iconography in staging and painting, the tales of *One Thousand and One Nights* were exploited for material by early filmmakers. *Le palais des mille et une nuits* (*The Palace of the Arabian Nights*) was a sixteen-minute film directed by Georges Méliès in 1905. A typical fantasy reel with mighty rajahs in their turbans and scimitars, lavish Arab domed buildings, and Oriental

canopies, this silent film is a blaze of visual effects. The décor is more captivating than the predictable story of the poor but good-at-heart prince, who eventually got the better of the greedy raja and married his daughter. Clearly the film lacks a shaped cinematic narrative and is essentially an instance of a cinema of attractions, where Méliès' famous fantasy tricks, such as walking trees and dissolves espouse the dominating icons in coeval collective imagination. The mist-shrouded sorcerer appearing from a lamp clearly recalled the Arabian Night's genii and attests to Méliès urge to remain true to popular icons.

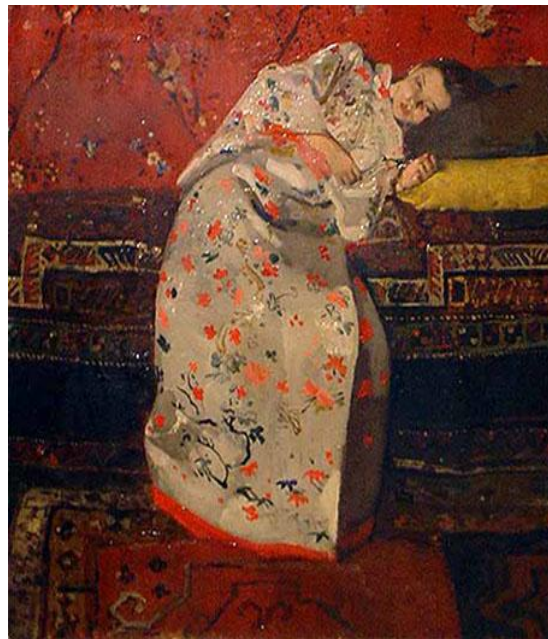


Figure 50. *Meisje in witte kimono* (*Girl in White Kimono*), by George Hendrik Breitner (1893). Picture in public domain.

The popular appreciation and commercialization of foreign imports were encouraged in any possible way. Stores even allowed exchanges and refunds, as well as free browsing of merchandize to persuade customers to integrate their home furniture with foreign *objets d'art*. As a result, exotic imports influenced Western culture and ended up holding an active role that went beyond their appeal as exotic hieroglyphics. Dutch Impressionist painter George Hendrik

Breitner, for instance, was so enthralled by girls in kimono, that he painted this subject in dozens of works. Doubtless, Breitner was a devotee of *Japonisme*, but his recurrent topics also epitomize the intensity with which Japanese imports broke through the collective imagination once they hit Europe and came to symbolize a new aesthetic.

Although interest for Japan was exclusively visual at first, as the legibility of its writing signs remained inaccessible to all but the learned few, the popular imagination was soon captivated by cultural exports. Parasols, kimonos, and kites, which had entered Europe via Holland, thanks to the East India Company trading with Asia, in the 1850s, soon became visual icons. In 1854 the very first “Japanese Exhibition” was held in London (Cruikshank 98), and by 1862 *Ukiyo-e* were commonly available in London and Paris (Watanabe 83). *Japonisme* became everywhere the term in use to indicate the influence of Japanese Art on Western culture, but also the epitome of a new cultural and social open-mindedness towards visual newness.

However, the typical commercial products had a theoretical value, if considered in light of Benjamin’s notion of “commodity.” While interpreting *Das Andenken*, the souvenir, as an active “complement” of a new experience, at the same time Benjamin remarked that “the emblems recur as commodities” (*Central Park* 49). More precisely, he devised a dialectical critique of commodity production, highlighting the risks hidden behind the ceaseless manufacturing of ever-new products: “the newness of the product acquires (as a stimulus to demand) a hitherto unheard-of significance; the ever-always-the-same appears palpably in mass-production for the first time” (48). Benjamin looked at souvenirs as sheer merchandising commodities, objects that give the owner the illusion of being in touch with a tradition.

Benjamin’s reflection on foreign objects as cultural icons typifies the effect produced by visual newness on Western *fin-de-siècle* popular culture. The crowd’s naïve fascination for the

never-seen-before was turned into exploitable commodity. At the great exhibitions, foreign scenarios were reproduced with such a verisimilitude that dreamers of travels no longer felt the need to travel, for exotic lands had magically come to them. Exotic novelties became icons able to orient the culture, its attitudes, values, and tastes, and followed a structured luring path. Attractions, in fact, essentially featured the foreign through a twofold channel: pictorial deception and the architectural reproduction of well-known places from all over the world. These two modes of capitalizing on spectatorial curiosity for the unexplored are worth investigating.

On the fair ground, pictorial deception was exemplified by Panoramas and optical shows, whose theatricality was finalized to lure the crowds as we have seen happening with productions in the rotundas. At the exhibition in Paris in 1889, the *Bataille de Rézonville*, a monumental painting depicting an important juncture of the Franco-Prussian war, realized by French painters De Neuville and Detaille in 1882, after being exposed from 1883 to 1887 in Paris and Vienna, even received the honor prize for its engrossing realistic effect.¹⁰⁵ The Panorama de Rézonville encompassed the spectacularization of military iconography we discussed in Chapter II:1, offering a realist treatment of horrors and violence on the battlefield. Placed on a darkened platform before this huge brightly-lit canvas, viewers experienced a figurative and emotional immersion in the heart of the illusion. The same popularity was achieved by Gabin's *Paysage des Alpes* for the Alpine landscapes' impressive match with reality.

Such reproductions reflected not only a major refinement in the imitation of the real (as we have seen, displays involved even live characters), but also the marriage of fiction to reality

¹⁰⁵ When at the turn of the century Panoramas fell out of fashion, the *Bataille de Rézonville* was divided into 115 pieces, which were sold at auctions around the world. Many other Panoramas had the same destiny, as cutting them into pieces of reasonable size was the only way for them to continue to be exposed. Today, a copy of the complete *Bataille de Rézonville* is preserved at the Musée d'Art in Paris.

as a marketing strategy. Poilpot's Panorama *Fleet of the Compagnie Générale Transatlantique*, discussed in earlier sections, for instance, put its scenography at the service of commerce. While entertaining the crowds with *La Touraine*, the company's newest steamer that visitors could board, Poilpot's Panorama advertised the major destinations reached by the Transatlantique Company: Algeria and Tunisia. Luring images of suggestive desert tours on the back of dromedaries did entice viewers to buy the tickets for the crossing. The magic of progress and the advancement of technology, then, did their part, empowering audiences with the chance of easy travels.

Lured by the idea of exotic lands within their reach, audiences served an exploitative system that capitalized on their very sense of empowerment before what was actually the commercial construct of an ephemeral reality. However, amusements at the *Great Exhibitions* did something more than bringing exoticism into Western culture and did not simply capitalize on the effects of the unknown on curious eyes. The logic behind amusements sold viewers a virtuality disguised with phantasmagorical copies of the real world. Egyptian temples, Turkish mosques with domes and minarets, Islamic buildings, and Chinese Pagodas were disseminated throughout the fairs' ground to symbolize the grandiose constructions from every part of the globe. Each style of architecture had to be characteristic of the country represented.

The architectural parade of foreign cultures nourished the crowds' illusions and laid the foundations for a world of dreams. Whatever desire of exotic excursion people had, the Exhibitions satisfied it, for their displays recapitulated the unknown and the human experience of it. Chinese collections were hosted in pavilions that emulated the rooms of the *Summer Palace* in Beijing (Paris 1867) and were located in spaces recreating the typical oriental gardens with exotic plants, Asian bazaars, restaurants serving local foods, and even a theater performing the

national art. The Japanese Pavilion erected on occasion of Chicago 1893 was no less enthralling, for it emulated none other than the eleven-century *Ho-O-Den* temple in Kyoto (Aimone 167-170).

Phantasmagorical *mise-en-scènes*, however, satisfied viewers beyond their curiosity for Eastern cultures and suggestive strolls along the paths of lotus gardens. Celebrative of the centennial of the French Revolution and the colonial enterprise, the grandiose Algerian and Tunisian displays occupied a prominent space at Paris 1889, where characteristic *souks*, cafés, and restaurants were hosted in a replica of Kabul village and Bedouin tents. Reproductions of Swiss Villages, then, thrilled the crowds with their typical alpine buildings for housing and stabling; but the straw huts of African tribes and Brazilian villages, as well as the intriguing dioramic vistas of a tour around the world were as many enthralling pastimes. Audiences literally marveled at Louis Dumoulin's Panorama *Le Tour du Monde* (Paris 1900), which allowed human eye to range over the immensity of the globe, from Athens to Tokyo in a continuous glaze. Such images served as documents of living-history, which played on the collective imagination and fostered the circulation of mass-produced images.

Ottoman Pavilions, Egyptian pyramids, the Moorish palaces of the Alhambra, and Muslim buildings were only some of the architectural styles emulated by the buildings disseminated on the grounds of World's fairs throughout the second half of the 19th century. Theme-based pavilions fueled dreams and afforded visitors an opportunity of imaginary journeys. Reinforced by lavish scenographic displays, architectural replicas elicited a new type of tourism *en place*. Organizers played on spectators' expectations and assumptions, wrapping up their desires in captivating packages. Tinged with social, personal, and cultural significance, fair divertissement was an authorization to daydream and materialize illusions. Empowered with an ephemeral and

apparent agency viewers indirectly allowed organizers to exploit their curiosity and granted spectatorial manipulation.

What the public at the Great Exhibitions was unprepared to face was the finalization of the captivating *mise-en-scènes* before their eyes and how these responded to the laws of commodity fetishism. Distracted by their fascination with novel visuality, the crowds overshadowed their illusion of agency and ended up enjoying the very visual allure that subjugated them. Blind before novelties, the public underestimated that amusement was shaped like a pre-fixed path, along which visitors were guided in their enjoyment of a well-defined entertainment. Everything, in fact, was concocted to make sure that visitors explored the exhibitions far and wide. Since the very first fairs onward, mechanized auxilia prevented tired people to give up the extenuating activity of touring the exhibition. Visitors were provided with complimentary wheelchairs (since London 1851), and when the dyad of spectacularization and exploitation was at its highest peaks (Paris 1900), organizers mounted sophisticated *tapis roulants* with three different speeds, able to ride visitors along panoramic tours, with strategic stops at cafés and restaurants for refreshments (Aimone 39). These examples attest the visitors' beguilement with illusory offers of pure *divertissement*, behind which was rather insidiously hidden the urge to ensure commercially exploitable attendance.

These displays did spread knowledge of progress and technical achievements, but they mainly encompassed a serious attention to materiality and the treatment of viewers as customers. Restaurants, café, Arabian markets, and bazaars selling goods to nourish materialistic and capitalistic appetites, in fact, profaned the idyllic space for suggestive strolls among water gardens and lotus flowers. Since commercial ends regulated visual entertainment, everything served the imperative that spectators did not have to get bored and leave the fair, even

anthropology and ethnography. On the wave of the “authenticity” fueled by architectural replica of existing buildings, displays followed the same logic. Costumes, settings, and activities had to be genuinely displayed. Non-Western people were engaged to ‘perform’ the authenticity of their own culture and forced to act in *tableaux vivant* for the public entertainment. Ethnography served capitalism and the representatives of racial diversity theatricalized the *mise-en-scènes* on display just how wax figures enhanced Panoramic scenography. In order to respond to an increasing demand in spectacularization, entrepreneurs attracted the audiences by transforming ethnographic dioramas into aberrant “human zoos,” the subject of our next chapter.

3- Diversity Exploited for Popular Show: Cinema, Theatre, and Fantasy Fiction.

When referring to the notion of national superiority we discussed in the last section, it is essential to point out that from the 1870s all the World Fairs hosted, as a major attraction, a *village nègre*. This show displayed nude or semi-nude indigenous people, sometimes in cages, as actors in *tableaux vivant* doing their daily chores. Such racist and discriminating performances – some foreigners were being referred to still as “savages” - underscored the cultural differences between Western civilization and non-European peoples. The use of cages and fenced areas as display sites implied that living ‘attractions’ were considered wild animals, rather than human beings.



Figure 51. *Negro Village* at the World's Exhibition in Paris in 1889, with natives gathered in a fenced area and curious visitors behind the net. Picture in public domain.

Ethno shows became a constant of *fin de siècle* exhibitions all over the world. The Antwerp's World Fair in 1894 displayed a Congolese village with sixteen naked natives, while the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago made of racial hierarchies a semi-didactic experience for fairgoers. “Human Zoos” were also found in London, Paris, Hamburg, Barcelona, Milan,

New York, and Warsaw.¹⁰⁶ Audiences evidently were very drawn to the chance to encounter real natives and see them engaged in their normal routine. The degree of fascination these ethno exhibits had over the crowds is marked by some numerical evidence. At the World's Fair in Paris in 1889 four hundred indigenous were set out on a display visited by twenty-eight million people.



Figure 52. At Anwerp in 1894 a group of natives from the Congo village *Vivi* was exhibited as *Vivi on Scheldt* (the Antwerp river). In this postcard natives are described as Zulus (Les Zoulous). Picture in public domain.

In Italy, where colonial expansionism was not yet a maneuver of national politics, the interest in these spectacles grew. The daily newspaper *La gazetta del popolo*, for instance, chronicled the successful *International Colonial and Export Exhibit* held in Amsterdam in 1883, including numerous photographs which captured the Italian public's interest for live natives.¹⁰⁷ A few years earlier, in 1879, Edmondo De Amicis had published *Ricordi di Parigi* (*Studies of*

¹⁰⁶ "Negro Villages," also known as "Human zoos" and "ethnological expositions," as extremely popular fairs spectacles are discussed in Nicolas Bancel, *Zoos humains. Au temps des exhibitions humaines*.

¹⁰⁷ "Amsterdam e la sua Esposizione Internazionale," in *La gazetta del popolo*, September, 20, 1883.

Paris), a collection of notes and personal impressions on *la ville lumière* and the Oriental living displays in the *Trocadéro*. De Amicis offered a vivid account of the sensations he experienced while visiting the *Trocadéro*, whose sight left him “astonished, provoked, confused, and excited at the same time” (*Studies of Paris* 38). De Amicis was particularly interested in what he called a “caravansary,” an arena containing African and Asiatic shops and cafés, Chinese roofs, Siamese kiosks, Persian terraces, and Egyptian bazaars.

To De Amicis, however, the peculiarity of this miniaturized cosmopolitanism emerged from the exotic population that animated it:

All those ambiguous faces of a swarthy hue, Parisianized Arabs that re-dyed orient, phantomlike Africa, Asia in miniature, all that cleansed and varnished barbarity placed in the show window with a little red ribbon around its neck; and that inexhaustible black crowd of curious people, who wander slowly around with a heavy gait and languid eyes, looking on every side, without knowing where to stop (*Studies* 40).

Besides stressing the viewers’ curiosity for racial and cultural diversity, De Amicis also called attention to the “most beautiful spectacle” of the people in the audience, impressive in number but also in social heterogeneity (77). De Amicis’ report, in fact, documents the extent of ethnographic displays and how they appealed across lines of class, attracting intellectuals and ordinary people.

This trend to use natives as enhancements of dioramic spectacles was also picked up by editors who published catalogues for those unable to attend. Sonzogno, a prolific editor in Milan, published enticing illustrated editions.¹⁰⁸ Equally effective was narrative fiction appearing in the same years. In Italy, Emilio Salgàri fed the readers’ minds with catchy adventures in faraway lands. In 1887, Guigoni published Salgari’s *La favorita del Mahdì*, a novel inspired by the real

¹⁰⁸ *L’esposizione di Parigi del 1878 illustrata*. Milano: Sonzogno, 1878.

fighters between England and Sudan in 1885. Other blockbuster titles in Salgari's *oeuvre* among the others were *Un dramma nell'Oceano pacifico* (1895), *I naufragatori dell'Oregon* (1896), *La costa d'avorio* (1898). Also Italian editions of Verne's books were widely diffused already in the early 1870s, as attested by Treves' publications of *Storia dei grandi viaggiatori* (1872), *Dalla terra alla luna: tragitto in 97 ore e 20 minuti* (1873), and *Viaggio al centro della terra* (1874), to name a few. The appreciation of Jules Verne in *fin-de-siècle* Italy was considerable, as the Milanese editors Muggiani and Guigoni even reissued his books in a paperback series. The last pages of these editions included additions by anonymous writers, easily mistaken for Verne's. This ambiguous mingling certainly served to thicken publications and satisfy the readers' avid demand for exotic fiction at a bargain price.

As we see, different channels contributed to intensify the Italians' fascination with exotic lands and their inhabitants, far before the nation itself officially put its colonial ambitions into action. In the 1880s, in fact, Italy's imperialistic strategies were still in the embryonic stages and the country was slowly taking possession of the closest colonizable land: Africa. When compared to the prolific expansionism of the great European colonizers (France, Great Britain, Belgium, and Portugal), Italians were so slow that Lenin treated Italy's lagging behind with contempt, branding its expansionistic aims as "beggar colonialism."¹⁰⁹

The ambition to shorten the gap with Europe was the impulse for Italy to put its colonial ambitions into effects and set up the first national ethnographic exhibition. The *Esposizione Generale Italiana* took place in Turin in 1884. Italy imitated the European mode of displaying and gave account both of its industrialization and imperialistic advancement in Africa. Turin was

¹⁰⁹ Quoted in Laura Ricci, *La lingua dell'Impero. Comunicazione, letteratura e propaganda nell'età del colonialismo italiano*, p. 10.

eager to demonstrate its faith in the progress, its activism, and the ambition to be acknowledged as the “industrial capital” of Italy.



Figure 53. Manifestos for the *Esposizione Generale Italiana* in Turin in 1884. Pictures in public domain.

In 1880, journalist Vittorio Bersezio addressed Turin as “a city that works and thinks” (“una città che lavora e pensa”), observing that the Piedmontese left unified Italy behind and moved headlong into the industrial world.¹¹⁰ Manufacturing industries, the Great Exhibition, the *Museo Industriale*, and the *Scuola d’applicazione* (the prestigious school of the Italian Army): these alone made Turin industrial core of Italy. The *Esposizione Generale Italiana*, however, aimed essentially to showcase the pride for the national colonial advancement. In 1882, the Eritrean port city of Assab, located on the west coast of the Red Sea, had officially become an Italian colony.¹¹¹ The *Esposizione* thus served to display colonial products and encourage

¹¹⁰ See Vittorio Bersezio, “Torino,” in *Torino*, 1880, v. I, pp. 1-24. Quotation is on p. 24. Now in *Torino 1880, scritti di autori vari con presentazione di Giovanni Tesio*. Torino: Bottega d’Erasmus, 1978.

¹¹¹ In 1869 the Rubattino Shipping Company acquired Assab from the local sultans as a mooring post for his ships to be supplied with coal. In 1882, then, Rubattino sold Assab to the Italian

commercialization. In terms of *divertissement*, instead, it followed the clichéd formula of world with parades, concerts, and shows, as well as food, drinks, and ethno exhibits.¹¹²



Figure 54. The six natives from Assab displayed at the exhibition in Turin in 1884. Picture in public domain.

Six natives from Assab (three men, one woman, and two children) were put on display for the public entertainment as representatives of a foreign reality that was now made affordable for all. The six Assabese attracted visitors from the entire peninsula more than fireworks, concerts, and shows advertised in the brochures. For the first time, Italians faced Otherness through the lens of racial diversity, rather than confronting themselves with an imaginative exotic world as that populated by lions and dromedaries in catalogues. Sonzogno's illustrations for the exhibition in Milan in 1881 (the last fair before Turin 1884) still depicted the foreign

State, launching the basis for the colonial enterprise. See Paolo Piccione, *Raffaele Rubattino. Un armatore Genovese e l'Unità d'Italia*.

¹¹² See Umberto Levra, *Le esposizioni torinesi (1805-1911). Specchio del progresso e macchina del consenso*, for a detailed overview of the attractions that were set up for Torino 1884 and the effects they had over visitors.

through unusual animals; this catalogue, in fact, did not contain photos of human beings as representatives of the exotic.¹¹³

Catalogues, magazines, and journals are a revealing source of visual evidence to investigating the audience's appreciation of ethno exhibits as forms of spectacle. *Torino e l'esposizione italiana del 1884*, an illustrated chronicle of the exhibition edited by Treves, displayed pictures of visitors mingling and entertaining themselves with the six Assabese.¹¹⁴ Although the natives were protected by a fence, curiosity did not prevent viewers to experience racial diversity at first hand. Guards, in fact, watched aggressive audiences who sought to touch and feed the six natives.



Fra i sei è una donna le cui forme furono battezzate scultorie... forse perché nella scultura ora se ne vedono d'ogni forma...

...Ma questo sia detto per incidente, come pure che quelle forme trovarono fra i visitatori dei nuovi fratelli d'Italia un entusiasta, al quale solo la benemerita potè impedire di accognatarsi...

Figure 55. Kaliga's body as caricatured by satiric press (left) and its luring effect over male audiences. From *Pasquino* 1884.

Kaliga, the Assabese woman, in particular, was object of seduction by male spectators for her exotic sensuality. The press contributed to transform and dehumanize her native beauty in offensive caricatures. Exaggerated broad lips, wide hips, and a disproportionate breast lured men

¹¹³ See *L'Esposizione italiana del 1881 in Milano illustrata*, Milano, Sonzogno, 1881.

¹¹⁴ See *Torino e l'esposizione italiana del 1884. Cronaca illustrata dell'Esposizione nazionale industriale ed artistica del 1884*. Milano, Treves, 1884.

to such an extent that pictures show policemen even fighting to keep male audiences away from her.¹¹⁵ Journalists of the *Pasquino* were sure to call attention to the luscious forms of Kaliga's body they defined "*scultorie*" ("statuesque"), as we read in the vignette below.¹¹⁶

uch images not only attest to how the audience could experience an entertainment that was new and strange, but that the very experience was different: it allowed for active, even intrusive participation. Pictures of the time from catalogues, newspapers, and prints provide evidence of the public's curious gaze and meddling behavior (see images below). The authenticity of natives not only brought major refinement to the theatricalization of displays, but made shows more profitable. Audiences, attracted to what they were convinced was genuine, were more willing to buy a ticket.

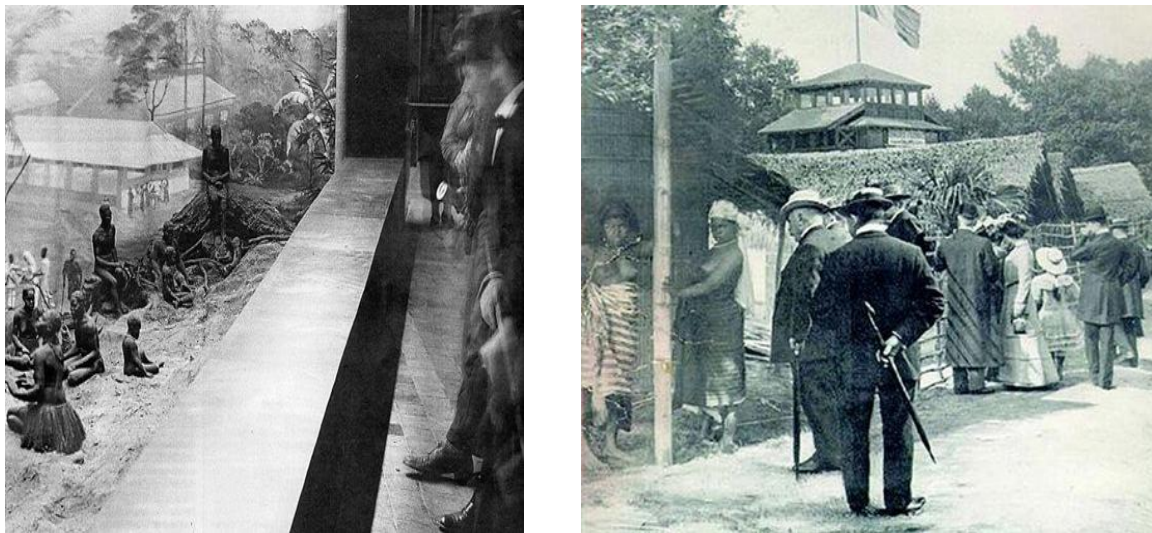


Figure 56. Pictures attesting Western visitors' curiosity for Negro Villages displayed at the World's Exhibitions. Pictures in public domain.

¹¹⁵ See *Pasquino*, n. 31, August 3, 1884, p. 243.

¹¹⁶ See *Pasquino*, n. 42, October 19, 1884, p. 331.

Ethno shows continued into the 20th century. An impressive live Diorama at the *World's Fair* in Paris in 1900 hailed the new century. It featured the blockbuster “human zoo,” *Living in Madagascar*.¹¹⁷ The *Colonial Exhibitions* in Marseilles (1906 and 1922) and Paris (1907 and 1931), as well as the *Kolonial Ausstellung* in Stuttgart in 1928 and the *Congolese Village* displayed at the World’s Fair in Brussels in 1958 are only the most prominent ethno shows.¹¹⁸ Historian Robert Rydell rightly holds that such events made it hard to separate racism from entertainment, especially when different races were presented as “the other types of humanity” and viewed “in the backdrop of the White City” (58). Diversity among races was glorified as a means of mass entertainment, inasmuch as ethnic impediments became consequently subordinated to the logic of profits. Ethnography was transformed into an art installation, loaded with live references powerfully playing on the viewers’ curiosity.

The essential presence of realistic settings in dioramas is a key factor to chronicle the moving of visual spectacles towards an increasingly realistic and very cinematographic reproduction of the real. Racial diversity and the world itself were now treated as exploitive subjects of spectacle. Certainly, a tradition of exploiting physical diversity as entertainment has a history long before the *Great Exhibitions*. In antiquity, the deformed were displayed before spectators, encouraged by the public taste for anomalies. Without marginalizing their racist and inappropriate nature, however, such shows play a key role in understanding the logic of displaying and viewing hidden behind the exploitation of the so called “freaks.” In *The Spectacle of Deformity*, Nadja Durbach discusses the most famous physical oddities showcased throughout the 19th century. She argues that diversity was essentially tailored to serve political, commercial,

¹¹⁷ See Richard D. Mandell, *Paris 1900: the great World’s Fair*.

¹¹⁸ See Alexander C.T. Geppert, *Fleeting Cities. Imperial Expositions in Fin-de-Siècle Europe*; Sadiyah Quareshi, *Peoples on Parade: Exhibitions, Empire and Anthropology in Nineteenth-Century Britain*; Pascal Blanchard (ed.), *Zoo humains. De la Vénus hottentote aux reality shows*.

moral, and even religious purposes. Products of their time and place, Freak shows must be investigated as social phenomena shaping viewers' identities and essentially reinforcing codes of race, class, and nationalism.¹¹⁹

It is hard to believe that freak show performers, as well as native groups at the Great Exhibitions, having no other means of support, did not feel abused or manipulated, as many impresarios and agents have left written in archival documents (Durbach 13-14). Without questioning in this context if the diverse possessed agency, their choice and consent were certainly consequent upon the lack of alternatives to starvation, isolation, and even death. I would place and analyze the displaying of alterity in relation to its cultural context. Ethno exhibits, for instance, encompassed a phenomenon that responded to a social and cultural tendency dictated essentially by the capitalistic expansion of entertainment market. These shows reflected the necessity to follow these laws, abusing a hierarchy that always placed whites and privileged classes at the top and alleged primitive people and the deformed at the bottom.



Figure 57. Members of the Kawesqar Tribe from the Tierra del Fuego in Chile's far South toured Europe as "attractions" in Human Zoos. Pictures in public domain.

¹¹⁹ See Nadja Durbach, *The Spectacle of Deformity: Freak Shows and Modern British Culture*.

Within the context of ethno exhibitions, the aberrant use of the human body satisfied commercial archetypes and turned individuals into money machines. Both racial and physical diversity was an ‘attractive’ to be sold. The ‘performative’ task of natives is supported by photographs in the archives. Pictures feature “impresarios,” that is avid commercial promoters eager to capitalize on the ‘oddities’ of their pseudo artists.

Entrepreneurs ‘bought’ their actors from explorers abducting natives and selling them as fair attractions. One of the most moving and popular story was that of the five members of the Kawesqar tribe kidnapped in 1881 from the Tierra del Fuego in Chile by German animal trader Carl Hagenbeck (the zoo in Hamburg is still after his name) and exhibited in European human zoos. The five natives all died within a year, because of the exhausting touring they went through and their difficulty in adjusting to climate changes.



Figure 58. Natives from Suriname with their Impresario at the exhibition in Amsterdam in 1883. From the collection of the Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam. Picture in public domain.

So as history was spectacularized by moving panoramas, now ethnography was. As we have seen, the most popular feature of early *dioramas* was offering viewers both a theatrical and informative experience. Enriched with human beings in a ‘primitive’ state, optical entertainment

satisfied the viewers' morbid curiosity for the diverse and their urge to give Otherness a specific image. What audiences could experience at the *World's Exhibitions* was turned into a lucrative business, which overshadowed any formative and cultural enrichment, as well as moral qualms. Viewers were over-stimulated in their curiosity to respond to economic ends and ethic codes had to be put aside. The popularity of these shows clearly putting the "other" into a humiliating state of inferiority suggests that entertainment value for many in the audience was greater than any moral disapproval.

Ethno exhibitions were a regular, expected feature at the World's Fairs from the 1870s to the 1950s. I claim thus that the audience's expectations must be viewed in terms of their cooperation and complicity in the exploitation. When discussing the theatricalization of Panorama displays in Chapter I explored how audiences increasingly expected authenticity in the staging, inasmuch as even wax dead soldiers intensified realism. The public did not look at wounded bodies in the pictorial battlefield as men butchered for the glory of the country: the audience (and the producers) seemed indifferent to the moral implication of the scene. The logic of entertainment prevailed over any emotional or political reaction. Issues of discrimination and social injustice faded into the background, while a new form of spectatorship emerged, motivated by the pure pleasure to look at a *mise-en-scène* that was new, hence enthralling, but totally 'a-perceptive.'

This was the triumph of watching as aesthetic experience. Moral and race concerns were of secondary importance, since dead bodies, slaughtered soldiers, or the representatives of racial diversities were solely pleasurable spectacles, providers of entertainment at a bargain price. It is not a coincidence, thus, that in the heyday of world exhibitions exotic images, the displays of real native bodies, and ethnic references were found in many genres, from fair amusements to

theatrical and literary pieces, as well as vaudevilles, press, and catalogues, ending up influencing even the subjects of early cinematography.

Exoticism, ethnography, and racial diversity that were great attractions at the Great Exhibitions also invaded theaters. The stage responded to colonialism by depicting its implications in vaudeville, pantomimes, farces, and ballet. In *The Orient on the Victorian Stage*, Edward Ziter highlights that London's *Drury Lane*, in the last two decades of the 19th century, became the home of "Imperial Theater," featuring spectacular melodramas celebrating the national colonial expansionism. Popular and acclaimed pieces, such as *Khartoum* (1880), *The World* (1882), and *Human Nature* (1885), as these titles suggest, staged the adventures of Western heroes in the process of extending civilization to the natives of countries viewed as inferior (168). The widespread idea was "to place the spectator in the exotic terrain" (Ziter 164)

In Italy, the Imperial politics was not staged with as much intensity and pride. The Italian first colonial attempts reflected the overconfidence of the Crispi administration, which officially started with troops landing in the Eritrean city of Massaua in 1895 and gruesomely concluded with the defeats of Dogali (1887) and Adua (1896). Essentially, the colonial enterprise became artistic material after these two tragedies, either as a means to mourn the victims or a cry for the wounded nationalism.¹²⁰ Such mixed feelings gave birth to a literature selling Africa as a land of mystery, where hostility and seductiveness were interchangeable. Editors invested on tales and recounts by the numerous explorers (Orazio Antinori, Carlo Piaggie, Pellegrino Matteucci), missionaries (Monsignor Giuseppe Sapeto, Cardinal Guglielmo Massaia), and officials (Romolo Gessi), who were sent by the Italian government on missions to study, evangelize, and civilize African tribes. Among the books which became paramount readings, we can cite Antonio

¹²⁰ For a broader overview see Giovanna Tomasello, *L'Africa tra mito e realtà. Storia della letteratura coloniale italiana*; Charles Burdett, *Fiction and Narratives of Empire*.

Cecchi's *Aure Africane* (1883) and *Continente nero* (1885), Cardinal Massaia's twelve volumes *I miei trentacinque anni di missione nell'Alta Etiopia* (between 1885 and 1895), and Gaetano Casati's two volumes *Dieci anni di Equatoria e ritorno con Enim Pascià* (1891).

Narrative essentially aimed to be informative. Writers sought to convey in their pages what they eyewitnessed on the African ground, as was the case of Ferdinando Martini in his *Nell'Affrica italiana* (1891), or to be supportive of the nationalistic politics as Alfredo Oriani in *Fino a Dogali* (1889) and Enrico Corradini in *La patria lontana* (1910) and *La Guerra lontana* (1911). Such fiction, however, offered scarcely realistic perspectives. Africa emerged as a mythic and fantasized land, rather than a realistic place where injustices were perpetrated against Africans. The Italian colonial enterprise in Africa, in fact, was everything but exotic and adventurous as fiction stories depicted. Indigenous tribes did rebel against the colonizers' mission of progress; even pacific explorers, such as Gustavo Bianchi, lost their lives.

By mythologizing the process of civilization, the atrocities of colonial fights remained overshadowed. Once divulged in the mother country, the reportages of those who wrote and lived on the spot caused a great stir and publicized the colonial epic, nurturing the collective imagination with distorted tales. As a result, literature detached from objective geographical, political, and social descriptions and took on the aesthetic function to transform Africa in a land of myth; a symbolic world, rather than a country contesting its subordination to Western dictatorship.

Africa became a mythical topic for the stage and metaphor to resist the dreariness of bourgeois life. In Gabriele D'Annunzio's *Più che l'amore* (1906), the protagonist Corrado Brando reacts to the intolerable mediocrity of his time by killing a usurer to finance his

audacious colonial enterprise in Africa.¹²¹ The drama debuted at the *Teatro Costanzi* in Rome on October 19, 1906 and was panned by critics and public, both offended by the protagonist's amorality.¹²² D'Annunzio's manipulation of the colonial theme to glorify the ego of his superman Corrado returns in Tommaso Filippo Marinetti's first novel *Mafarka le futuriste*, published in French in 1910 and in Italian a few months later. *Mafarka il futurista* transfigured the colonial politics to respond to Marinetti's artistic goal. African king Mafarka, instead of proclaiming his kingship over the natives devotes his energies to give birth to his son Gazourmah through his will, without the "stinking complicity of the female womb" (Mafarka 169). Mafarka epitomizes the allegory of the futurist phallogocentric conception of artistic creation, while reinforcing an imaginary Africa as literary trope. Marinetti went on a trial for obscenity. The collective rape of black women and the ten-meter-long phallus flaunted by Mafarka did not meet with the audiences' favor. Clearly, there was a limit to how much the public was willing to accept in colonial themes: in fantasies and in the human zoos, morality was subordinated to perception. The public was rather inclined to appreciate the romantic side of colonialism, tinged with the colors of mystery and exoticism in the pages of fantasized tales. In more graphic and controversial depictions, the reaction was much more volatile and politically engaged.

To understand the extent of blown-up misinformation and how the colonial adventure reversed even into satirical materials for the stage, the story of the Assabese displayed at the Exhibition in Turin in 1884 is illuminating. The six natives had been introduced to the Italian fair's public as dignitaries of African royal lineage. Received by no less than the King and the

¹²¹ On D'Annunzio's *Più che l'amore*, see Giorgio Bàrberi Squarotti, *La tragedia impossibile di Corrado Brando*; Ettore Paratore, *Più che l'amore*, in *Quaderni del Vittoriale*.

¹²² A reviewer of the *Illustrazione Italiana* reported that audiences left the Teatro Costanzi on the night of October 29, 1906 shouting with indignation "Arrestate l'autore!" ("Arrest the author!"). See Laura Granatella *Arrestate l'autore! D'Annunzio in scena. Cronache, testimonianze, illustrazioni, documenti inediti e rari del primo grande spettacolo del '900*.

Dukes of Aosta upon their arrival and treated in strict accordance with the rules of the ceremonial for the duration of the event, the six Assabese could not keep hiding their poor origins after their departure. Journals such as *La Rassegna* and *La civiltà cattolica* oriented reports that once back in their native land, the six Assabese returned to their wretched life and swore at the humiliation.

Such a paradox could not but be turned in the subject for satirical *boutades* and brought on stage. One of the most exhilarating jokes was Eraldo Baretto's *Tavanata* in one act in Piedmontese dialect *J'Assabeis a Turin* (1884). Baretto mocked the public curiosity for the Assabese at the Exhibition staging the gullibility of *mônssù* Rubiola, a retired shopkeeper fooled and robbed by six jesters disguised as faked Africans with their faces blackened with shoe polish. The *Tavanata* attests to the complex way in which the African colonial experience was exploited on the stage.

In 1884, mocking satires on colonial themes were produced at theaters such as the Rossini and Balbo in Turin, or the Follie in Milan. We will see that after the defeat of Adua (1896) and Italy's disastrous attempt to add Ethiopia to its territories of Eritrea and Somalia on the Horn of Africa, colonial subjects continued in the realistic documentaries and reportages filmed on the spot by the first pioneers of cinematography, such as Luca Comerio and Giovanni Vitrotti.

In the 1880s, (except for Baretto's *Tavanata*), colonial mockery in Italian theaters was a far less consolidated genre compared to what happened in European playhouses specialized in ethnic parodies, such as the Folies Bergère and the Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin in Paris or the Saint-Paul in Hamburg. Certainly, here the theatrical exploitation of ethnographic stereotypes was deeply rooted because the colonial politics had a long history behind. In France, for instance,

already in the 1840s, during the phase of African colonization, the distortion of exoticism and racial diversity through satires and mocking farces was very common.

The allusive title of Charles Deburau's pantomime *Pierrot en Afrique* (*Pierrot in Africa*), reviewed by Théophile Gautier in 1842, was an explicit reference to French colonial expansionism in North Africa. The gullible Pierrot is transformed into a French soldier captured by Bedouins, able to defend himself from a terrible end (MacCormick 144). Gautier was explicitly polemic about the vaudevillian replacement of Pierrot's traditional smock and trousers with a soldier's uniform and devoted to this costume change a great deal of criticism (Pratima and McCready 189). The playwright had touched a nerve in displacing a character with a long tradition, one deeply rooted in local pride, into the area of international politics. Indeed Gautier was forced to respond to outraged critics and, in his letters to the director of the *Funambules Theater*, where the piece debuted, discussed at some length his surprise at the public's refusal to accept the involvement of France in a colonial enterprise.

Gautier's reproach for the disrespect of a tradition rooted in the schemes of the *Commedia dell'Arte* reveals a new direction in vaudeville after the 1840s. One acts conceived for the light entertainment, often distorted by mocking and satire, continued, but by the last quarter of the century were showing up in regular theaters. At this point, pieces had moved towards "comedies of characters." Major vaudeville authors, such as Eugène Labiche and Augustine Eugène Scribe, elevated the quality of this genre, turning single-situation performances into a subsequent number of hilarious *coups de theatre*; writers like George Feydeau, then, eliminated the songs and raised Vaudeville to a fundamentally bourgeois entertainment to be performed in elegant premises (McCormick 131-132).

Pierrot's transformation can be viewed under the lens of vaudevillian class legitimization. It was in fact a step towards the affirmation of a new character on the stage, who necessarily abandoned his naiveté to acquire the traits of a middle class hero. What Gautier had foreseen was a new thirst for theatrical realism, which tallied with the mania for authenticity in visual entertainment. Actors and playwrights gave more attention to movements and situations, rather than dialogues. MacCormick stressed how the pantomimes of these years relied on tricks, transformations, and disguises for their success. Audiences were interested in these effects, rather than in the narrative and the character development (144).

The visual movements and music became of greater importance than the words, which were sometimes seen almost as a distraction. A convention of this new sort was a series of *tableaux*, in which the actors' movements were frozen at key moments, like a photograph. Such a technique certainly recalls the *mise-en-scène* of the Great exhibitions, with natives featuring word-less actors in *tableaux vivants*, but also the framed shots of silent films, whose narrative strength relied heavily on images and the accompanying music, with titles being used sparingly.

Since early-19th-century pantomimes, parody depended on effective staging, visual captivation, and socio-cultural mockery, rather than on coherent and ethical scripts. On a same perspective, the law of entertainment at the *Great Exhibitions* invested on the appeal of natives over the crowds, bypassing any implication of morality and agency. Natives were asked to act out their ethnicity for the public's divertissement and a script would have been undignified. Essentially, theatrical parody and ethnographic shows exploited native Africans and used their cultural icons to the economic gain of the white producers. As a final result, a new theatrical objectivity was dictating the pace of the performance; staging was enslaved by the business attitude to spectacularize the normal world, so that to make it profitable. Producers found that if

they were able to make the ordinary spectacular, even more the ordinary tinged with the savage or foreign, profits could be gained at low cost and quickly, without sacrificing audience numbers in favor of a highly polished and poetic script that limited the public.

Early cinema fit in with the trend to exploit luring images of exotic lands and racial diversity. But before invading the ground of early cinematic spectacles, the colonialist discourse was familiar not only through plays, but also popular fiction. Author such as Rudyard Kipling, H. Rider Haggard, Edgar Wallace, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Jules Verne, and Emilio Salgàri fictionalized India, Africa, and Eastern countries, offering readers captivating virtual tours of these lands; at the same time they made prolific feeders for film narratives.

The Edison Film database shows that in 1894, Thomas A. Edison was one of the first device makers to film a native American Sioux dance in his New Jersey studio, the *Black Maria*, producing *Buffalo Dance*.¹²³ Intended to be displayed with a *Kinetoscope*, this 16-seconds film featured genuine Sioux Indians while dancing in war paint and costumes, first of a number of reels with natives groups as protagonists. In the *Ghost Dance of the Sioux* (1894), a group of Indians demonstrates a dance called a “ghost dance.” However, the film’s significance is essentially the rehabilitation of Native American culture, rather than the dancing ability of the performers.

In *Movies and the Kinetoscope*, Paul C. Spehr reports that Edison really met Buffalo Bill when he visited the Paris Exposition of 1889, starting with him a collaboration that brought performers from Mexico and the Middle East to West Orange, NJ, to be filmed in the *Black Maria* (38). Although Edison never toured the world with his *Kinetoscope* in search of appealing

¹²³ The Edison Film Database is available at the Library of Congress, in Washington, D.C. As a courtesy of the Library, the Database is accessible online at www.loc.gov, while a video of the *Sioux Ghost Dance* is uploaded in the Youtube website.

subjects to film, these subjects came to him. As with the *Great Exhibitions*, Edison's exotic films were another example of tourism *en place*.

The portrayal of dance rituals in early films was a way to entertain the viewers with unusual numbers spiced up with exotic mystery. The *Dance of Fatima* (1903), a one-minute film produced by Edison and shot in his *Black Maria*, is one of the most controversial censored reels. It features Fatima, a belly dancer widely known for her provocative shows at the Exhibition in Chicago in 1893.¹²⁴ The shortness of the film and the performance, basically reduced to a few twirls before the camera, attest how late-nineteenth-century entrepreneurs exploited not only social and racial taboos, but also cultural and ethical restrictions. This film was castigated by the censorship for featuring a scanty-dressed woman, sensually jiggling, but it was a blockbuster among audiences, who could not remain indifferent before Fatima's moves, in a time when an inch of female flesh was rather unsettling.



Figure 59. Fatima performing her belly dance in Edison's *The Dance of Fatima*. Picture in public domain.

¹²⁴ "Muscle-dancer" was the term in use when "belly-dancer" had not yet been coined. The *Dance of Fatima* is also known as *Fatima, Muscle Dance* and *Fatima's Coochee Coochee Dance*, where "coochee" was the common slang for vagina.

However, it was the content of these ethnographic films to be at stake. What is important is rather the communicative power of the new medium. When exoticism teamed with the prodigies of the motion picture, the result was a propulsive force fueling social change and the subordination of morality to visual pleasure. The infatuation with progress and novelty blurred ethical questions and fostered a distorted interpretation of foreign cultures.

In *Orientalism* Edward Said wrote, “the imaginative examination of things Oriental was based more or less exclusively upon a sovereign Western consciousness out of whose unchallenged centrality an Oriental world emerged, first according to general ideas about who or what was an Oriental, then according to a battery of desires, repressions, investments, and projections” (9). As a consequence, the triumph of Western ideology over ‘uncivilized’ countries could emerge only by a comparison that allowed the emergence of alleged ‘civilized’ values mirroring racial superiority, such as cultivation, industry, and social decorum. This logic explains the confinement of savage-looking natives in the cages of *human zoos* as emblems of a deplorable primitivity, or the cinematic interest in filming tribal savagery and immoral dancing; both, however, functioned as mocking amusement.

The cinema agency served to disseminate the colonial ideology, consolidating Western superiority in the collective imagination by de-valoring native life.¹²⁵ By mocking racial and cultural diversity and featuring it as an act of primeval and uncivilized behavior, early cinematic spectacles mirrored colonial racism, letting cinematography walk along the same path of commercial exploitation of exoticism already paved by Panoramas and ethnographic dioramas at the *Great Exhibitions*. Even the attitude to parody the foreign remained unaltered in early

¹²⁵ On how film idealized the colonial enterprise and contributed to reinforce stereotyped images of natives, see Ella Shoat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*.

cinematography, as films scoffed at culinary, religious, and cultural habits. Georges Méliès' 1897 *Le Musulman Rigolo* (*The Funny Muslim*) and 1902 *Ali Bouffé a l'Huile* (*Ali Eats Oil*) typify this *fin-de-siècle* attitude to ridicule on ethnicity and caricature racial diversity.

Africans became the prototypes of cannibalism and incivility, the representatives of a primitive culture, whose only ambition was cooking the Whites in the pot, as D.W. Griffith's *The Zulu's Heart* (1908) and Arthur Hotaling's *Rustus in Zululand* (1910) show.¹²⁶ Mexicans, instead, portrayed marginal and underdeveloped Latinos in American cinema, featuring stereotyped *greasers* and *bandidos*, as attested by films, such as D.W. Griffith's *The Greaser Gauntlet* (1908) William F. Haddock's *Tony the Greaser* (1911) and *The Greaser Revenge* (1914), Gilbert M. Anderson's *Broncho Billy and the Greaser* (1914), and Raoul Walsh's *The Greaser* (1915).¹²⁷

Georges Méliès' production was rich of allusive titles calling attention to a stereotyped representation of cultural and social diversity, although the settings he chose for his films were commonly tinged with surreal and fantastic elements. Among the most significant films, we can list *Le Fakir: Mystère Indien* (1896), *Vente d'Esclaves au Harem* (1897), *Cléopâtre* (1899), *La Vengeance de Bouddha* (1901), *Les Aventures de Robinson Crusoe* (1902), and *Le Palais de Mille et une Nuits* (1905). These films represented exotic cultures and had such a draw on the

¹²⁶ A detailed list of African American films produced between 1890s and 1950s can be found in the Appendix of the *Encyclopedia of African American Popular Culture*, p. 1559 ff. Interestingly, in films produced at the very end of the 19th century or early 20th century, African Americans were portrayed by white actors in blackface. On how films produced in these years portrayed black in derogatory and stereotypical ways, see Donald Bogle's exhaustive work *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies & Bucks: An Interpretative History of Blacks in American Films*.

¹²⁷ On how early films characterized Mexican men in negative terms, giving rise to offensive labels, see Steven Bender, *Greasers and Gringos: Latinos, Law, and the American Imagination*; Juan José Alonzo, *Badmen, Bandits, and Folk Heroes: the Ambivalence of Mexican American Identity in Literature and Film*.

collective imagination, as they contained all iconic, prefabricated images: fakirs, slaves, suggestive Arabian buildings, and popular Eastern divinities.

Méliès enriched early cinema with something more complex than numerous special effects, dissolves, and time-lapses he mastered thanks to his past expertise as a magician. While Méliès certainly pioneered fantasy cinema, as film historians have noted, opposing his deceiving techniques to the Lumières' realism, only gets at the story half right.¹²⁸ The French brothers indeed portrayed *scènes d'actualités* on the screen, but Méliès' reels went beyond cinematic tricks. Méliès manipulated historical, cultural, and social icons through the film medium, infusing them with a magical allure. If exoticism, Orientalism, and racial stereotypes were prevailing themes at the time, Méliès took advantage of this material, focusing on oriental subjects; however, rather than imitate or parody reality, he brought the foreign into the familiar across surreal settings and photo-science fiction.



Figure 60. The rocket ship as smashing into the Moon's eye in Méliès' *Le voyage dans la Lune*. Picture in public domain.

¹²⁸ On how Méliès' achievements in displaying have won him the label of early originator of fantasy films, see James Walters, *Fantasy Film: a Critical Introduction*, p. 43 ff.; Elizabeth Ezra, *Georges Méliès*; Aaron Sultank, *Film, a Modern Art*, p. 215 ff.

In his 1902 *Le voyage dans la Lune* (*A Trip to the Moon*), based on Jules Verne's novel *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865), we can see how Méliès takes the metaphor of the colonial enterprise and works it out through the fantastic, surreal effect of cinema. The scientists travelling to space on a rocket to land is a modern allegory of the French imperialistic venture into the exploitable lands of North-Africa. The image of the spatial capsule landing into the eye of a human-faced moon is a powerful visual metaphor that conveys the invasion into someone else's territory. The moon grimaces at the intrusive action into his private space, a facial gesture which seems to suggest the director's misgivings about the colonial enterprise.

Recent scholarship calls attention to some allusive scenes in Méliès' film, previously overlooked, which may be read as visual commentary on the repercussions of colonialism.¹²⁹ One of the cruelest frames is that portraying the return to earth of the only survived moon-dweller. Held by a rope around its neck, the *Selenite* is forced with a stick to parade and dance before the crowd. While certainly a very brutal scene, I would suggest that Méliès, a child of a "cinema of attractions," to paraphrase Tom Gunning, may have been merely attempting to show what cinema could do. It would be excessive, I believe, to claim that he asserted a narrative intention over the medium. Méliès was undeniably a precursor in attempting 'to plot' trick films, but his works should still remain envisioned within the limits of a controlled production and still undeveloped filmic language.

Colonizing countries kept an eye on film production and, evidence suggests, would have made it difficult to attack imperialist policies. Film historians highlight that the great Empires, specifically England and France, imposed a portrayal of a positive image of the colonizer. The circulation of any cinema that would ridicule or criticize the politics of expansionism was

¹²⁹ See the articles contained in the book edited by Matthew Solomon *Fantastic Voyages of the Cinematic Imagination*.

carefully monitored and censored.¹³⁰ Following this principle, Méliès' *Trip to the Moon* results more powerfully significant from a visual perspective when it is construed as a further example of how images from the real experience were turned into cinematic attractions. Méliès' intention to denounce the consequences of Imperialism is undeniable: he was working with tropes from the popular culture of his time, transfiguring them into fantasy films.

In *fin-se-siècle* popular culture, the trip to the moon was a popular subject not only in early silent films, but also in magic lantern shows, fairground amusements, and theatrical performances. Thierry Lefebvre has demonstrated that Méliès' film has strong connections with a "Trip to the Moon" that was a popular attraction at the 1901 Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo and to Jacques Offenbach's operetta *Le voyage dans la lune*.¹³¹ More attention was paid to capitalizing on subjects already shown to be appealing to a wide public, rather than making works on topics of untested appeal.

Trips to the moon continued to be blockbusters for several years, even after Méliès' *A Trip to the Moon* was released (1902). In Italy, for instance, Méliès' film was one of the main attractions in permanent theaters and travelling cinemas and circulated already at the very end of 1902 (Solomon 3). Filoteo Alberini projected a color copy in 1904 at the *Cinematografo Moderno* in Rome titled *Un viaggio fantastico dalla terra alla luna* before 180 spectators who paid 20 cents for a seat at the premiere. The film was then screened in the years to follow without

¹³⁰ For a broader analysis of how a positive image of empire was encoded into law and censorship provisions, see Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the media*, in particular pp. 109-112.

¹³¹ Lefebvre's study confutes the interpretation that *A Trip to the Moon* is simply a film inspired by Jules Verne's novel and Sadoul's point, which makes Méliès widely dependent on Herbert George Wells's novel *The First Men to the Moon*. Lefebvre shows how Méliès' film is rather a "composite" work that combines different sources. Méliès, for instance, drew inspiration from Offenbach, taking from his operetta entire *tableaux* and scenes, such as that of the umbrellas the scientists bring to the moon, with which they destroy the Selenites, the meek moon-dwellers. See Thierry Lefebvre, *A Trip to the Moon: A Composite Film*.

losing its crowd appeal.¹³² Méliès' ongoing success demonstrates that special visual effects had more than a fleeting appeal. But how much did the audience question the film's narrative coherence and the ideological metaphors hidden behind the *tableaux*?

If French early silent films became immediately the agents consolidating the colonial epic, in Italy the cinema played a part in national politics from 1911, the year of the Italian occupation in Libya. As we have seen, the defeat at Adua (1896) was the watershed for the exploitation of colonial subjects. We discussed that before this date, ethnicity and the colonial mission fed parodies to enliven the stage with hilarious *boutades* between colonizers and colonized (Baretti's *Tavanata* on the six Assabese) or led to a mythicized portrayal of Africa serving aesthetic purposes (D'Annunzio and Marinetti).

After the 1896 humiliating defeat, instead, media and early cinema chronicled and reinforced the national attempt to extend the dominance in the African territory. The idea was to offer visual evidence of Italy's efforts in colonial expansionism. What is at issue here are thus the multiple implications of colonial references when used in conjunction with the cinematic medium. These images mythologize Imperialism, letting viewers identify with the oppressing race, while the oppressed are depicted as savage creatures to civilize. In this regard, there was little difference between theatrical spectatorship at the *Great Exhibitions* and cinematic spectatorship of early cinematography.

The Libyan war in 1911-12 provided Italian early cinema with the subjects for a vigorous debut in support of national colonial politics. Luca Comerio and Giovanni Vitrotti, the two major film directors of the time, shot numerous documentaries and reportages from the front. Comerio filmed the Italian landing in Libya (*L'avanzata decisiva in Libia*, 1912, and *L'avanzata in*

¹³² Information contained in the online archive of *Penombra*, sempreinpenombra.com, URL accessed on January, 20, 2012.

Tripolitania, 1912), chronicled the glorious national victory in the Battle of Two Palms (*La battaglia delle Due Palme*, 1912), and celebrated the first radio telegraph station in Tripoli (*L'inaugurazione della stazione radiotelegrafica di Tripoli*, 1912). Vitrotti was also heavily invested in this documentary-celebratory cinema, with his reportages on local costumes (*I costumi della Libia*, 1912 and *La vita a Tripoli*, 1912) and national victories (*L'esercito vittorioso*, 1912). Besides Comerio and Vitrotti, the Roman film company *Cines* produced serialized documentaries that provided viewers with insights on the realities of the war (*Corrispondenza cinematografica dal teatro della Guerra Italo-Turca*, 1911) and the unknown territories of Somalia (*Somalia*, 1912).

The press followed the film directors and production companies to glorify the nation's colonial enterprise. On October 30, 1911, the Turinese journal *La vita cinematografica* emphasized the importance for viewers to have the war chronicled with vivid images displaying “lo sbarco delle milizie, del materiale da guerra, dei cavalli” (“the landing of troops, war materials, and horses”). The belief was that such visual references would “tenere alto il decoro e l'onore della madre patria” (“hold high the decorum and honor of the homeland”).¹³³ Real images filmed on the spot, in fact, had an impact on the crowds that “cold” accounts sent by reporters from the front could not have:

Più del freddo resoconto ufficiale, più delle stesse bene scritte corrispondenze inviate ai giornali, dal teatro della Guerra, ci elettrizzano, ci rendono orgogliosi della nostra armata, del nostro esercito. Ed è veramente ammirabile il contegno dei nostri soldati, dei nostri marinai!. Noi vediamo quei baldi giovanotti, nella primavera della vita, forti, gagliardi, nonostante i disagi di una lunga, faticosa traversata, sbarcare

¹³³ See “Corrispondenza cinematografica dal teatro della guerra,” in *La vita cinematografica*, Anno II, n. 19, October, 30, 1911.

sorridenti, fra di loro scherzando, pur sapendo che il nemico li attende con l'arma in pugno, pur sapendo di correre incontro alla morte.¹³⁴

More than cold official accounts, more than well-written correspondences sent to journals from the theatre of the war, they [real images] electrify us and make us proud of our armada and army. The dignity of our soldiers, of our seamen is really admirable! We see those brave young men, in the prime of their lives, strong, vigorous despite the uneasiness of a long arduous crossing, landing with a smile and teasing each other, although they know the armed enemy is waiting for them, although they know they are heading for death.

If the reviewer praised the dignity of Italian troops and their sacrifice at the service of national politics, his words pointed also at the de-valorization of the colonized, as if patriotic zeal could make the Arabs fear and trembling, as well as more inclined to a docile capitulation, “Noi in queste films notiamo pure, nei Turchi e negli Arabi, chiaramente espresso sui loro volti, quasi sempre impassibili, l'alto stupore pauroso, da cui sono agitate, nel veder sfilare le nostre truppe anelanti a combattere, anelanti alla vittoria!” (“In these films, we see also clearly expressed in the faces of Turks and Arabs-- almost always emotionless-- a frightful wonder that agitates them, when they see our troops marching, yearning for fighting and victory!”).

Predictably, military valor and a bold attitude soon encompassed racial superiority and the vindication of colonial maneuvers, “come si rendono conto, ora, quei semibarbari, della potenza della nostra nazione!” (“how those semi-barbarians can realize now the power of our nation!”); on the other side, production companies rose to benefactors exempt from avid capitalization, eager only to reinforce the Italian patriotic spirit, “La Cines prescindendo dalla speculazione finanziaria, ha fatto e fa opera buona e patriottica, col metter sott'occhio, a noi italiani ed altri stranieri il valore delle nostre truppe” (“Regardless of financial risk, Cines has done and does a

¹³⁴ *Ivi.*

good and patriotic deed by displaying for us Italians and the other foreigners the valor of our troops”).¹³⁵

Whether in reportages or documentary film, propagandistic support of national colonialism tallied with the celebrative rhetoric, feature films were similarly commemorative, and they emphasized Italian intervention as beneficial to the colonized. Films such as Nicola Notari's *Guerra italo-turca tra "scugnizzi" napoletani* (1912) and Ubaldo Maria Del Colle's *Bianco contro nero* (1913) were shot from the perspective of the 'good' Italians who must defend the locals from the 'bad' Turkish. In Notari's film the patriotic excitement for the Libyan conflict- and the engagement of national troops- reflected in the 'neighborhood' war of street kids (the *scugnizzi*). Reviewers praised Notari's picture for eliciting healthy patriotism in the young generations. As one wrote, "the film is characteristic, unique in its genre, of the enthusiasm that the heroism of our soldiers in Lybia has provoked in our Neapolitan *scugnizzi*."¹³⁶

Besides validating colonial intervention, such films exaggerated and made melodramatic the clichéd friction between civilized Italians and the barbarian foreigners. *Raggio di luce* (1912), produced by the Turinese Società Anonima Ambrosio on a script by Arrigo Frusta, is about the abduction of an Italian girl who does not want to surrender to the flattery of a rich pasha. The girl can escape unharmed from the harem only thanks to the providential arrival of the national soldiers to arrest the Turkish brutal kidnapper.¹³⁷ The allusive ray in the title is

¹³⁵ See "Corrispondenza cinematografica dal teatro della guerra," in *La vita cinematografica*, Anno II, n. 19, October, 30, 1911.

¹³⁶ Quoted in Giuliana Bruno, *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map*, p. 90.

¹³⁷ *Raggio di sole* was restored in 2007 and is now archived in the *Cineteca* of the *Museo Nazionale del Cinema* in Turin. The film has subtitles in Spanish, as it was part of the collection of Italian silent films at the *Filmoteca de Catalunya* in Barcelona. The film is 300 mm long. Interpreters were Fernanda Negri-Pouget and Paolo Azzurri.

metaphor of the salvation of the girl, the light of the ship carrying the soldiers on their rescue mission.

The script of *Sogno patriottico di Cinessino* (1915), produced by Cines and directed by Gennaro Righelli, tells the story of little Cinessino, who dreams of leaving for Bengasi in search of his father.¹³⁸ Dressed like a *bersagliere*, Cinessino fights against the Bedouins and finally finds his father. Awarded an honor for his bravery, Cinessino wakes up as the medal is being pinned on his chest. Predictably, the young boy awakes to find his father next to his bed. The colonial theme is tinged here with the same tones of sentimental melodrama as *Raggio di luce*. The atrocity of the war and the glorification of the Italian political enterprise, however, are still in the background. The emotional plots do not overshadow the praise of national colonialism. Sentiments rather reinforced the fathers' self-sacrifice for the motherland (*Sogno patriottico*) and the importance of a well-timed intervention of civilization (*Raggio di luce*).

Fiction films gave a strong contribution to dampen the bloody tones of colonial fights by turning the most popular comic characters, such as Pik Nik, Kri Kri, Cocciutelli, and Polidor into the protagonists of hilarious adventures on the battlefield. Among the titles found in databases, we can list the allusive *Pik Nik vuole andare a Tripoli* (1912), *Pik Nik odia il Turco* (1912), *Cocciutelli va in guerra* (1912), *Polidor ritorna da Tripoli* (1912), *Kri Kri reduce dall'Africa* (1914), *Kri Kri ritorna a Tripoli* (1914), and *Kri Kri odalisca* (1915). Cinessino himself was the protagonist of an African adventure in *Cinessino in Africa* (1913). Such films validated the colonial war by using well-received comic formulas and protagonists. Kri Kri, Cocciutelli, Polidor and the others confronted themselves with paradoxical adventures on the African ground

¹³⁸ Cinessino was one the first baby actors in Italian cinema and the stage name of Eraldo Giunchi, who became a foremost interpreter of silent movies. The allusive nickname Cinessino derived from *Cines*. This company produced the majority of the films starring the young actor, and considered him its mascot.

and offered laughable scenes clearly inappropriate for the national-historical context they recalled.

When intermingling with the natives and dealing with their local costumes and habits, Western comic characters gave birth to a number of hilarious gags, featuring how ridiculous was the confrontation with different norms. *Negri comici*, a film produced by Cines in 1912, was explicit even in the title and allusive of a mockery against the black colonized featured as vaudevillian characters in blackface protagonists of gags.

Film productions around the Libyan war were also celebrative of a less pathetic and formulaic sentimentalism. Titles in databases attest to a prolific filmography screening the real bloody side of the conflict. Luca Comerio filmed the return of Lieutenant Paolo Solaroli's corpse to his homeland (*Rientro in patria*, 1912) and gave visual account of the number of cadavers that the glorious victory in the Battle of the Two Palms cost, shooting the battlefield disseminated with slaughtered bodies (*La gloriosa battaglia delle due palme*, 1912).¹³⁹ As much emotional was the rendition by the Parodi brothers' San Giorgio Films of the arrival in the port of Genoa of the coffins of Generals Alessandro La Marmora and Rodolfo Gabriello di Montevecchio (*Il rientro delle salme dei Geneali La Marmora and Montevecchio a Genova il 14 giugno 1911*, 1911).¹⁴⁰

These films intended to voice the national grief for those valiant combatants who put their lives at the service of the country with official acknowledgements. At the same time, however, since it was beneficial to colonial politics not to discredit the enterprise in Africa, these films

¹³⁹ A copy of Comerio's *Rientro in patria dei caduti* can be found at the Museo Nazionale del Cinema in Turin. The film is two-minute long.

¹⁴⁰ The reel was donated by the San Giorgio Film to the Italian army in 1911. It was found in the Museo Storico dei Bersaglieri in Rome and restored by the Cineteca Nazionale in Rome. The film is two-minute long.

were run along with other shorts on the valor of Italian troops and military tools. Luca Comerio enhanced the national war gunnery and its functioning in *La potenza dell'esercito italiano, la nostra artiglieria da guerra* (1912), besides providing visual account of the sailors' daily routine on a warship and their dealing with the most advanced firearms in *La nostra marina da Guerra* (1912).¹⁴¹ The artillery used during the Italian-Turkish war was motive of national pride for its cutting edge components. This was the first war in history, for instance, that featured air attacks by airplanes and dirigible airships. As we can understand, to give visual evidence to such advanced military equipment meant to give credence to the persuasion that dying was worth for a glorious country.

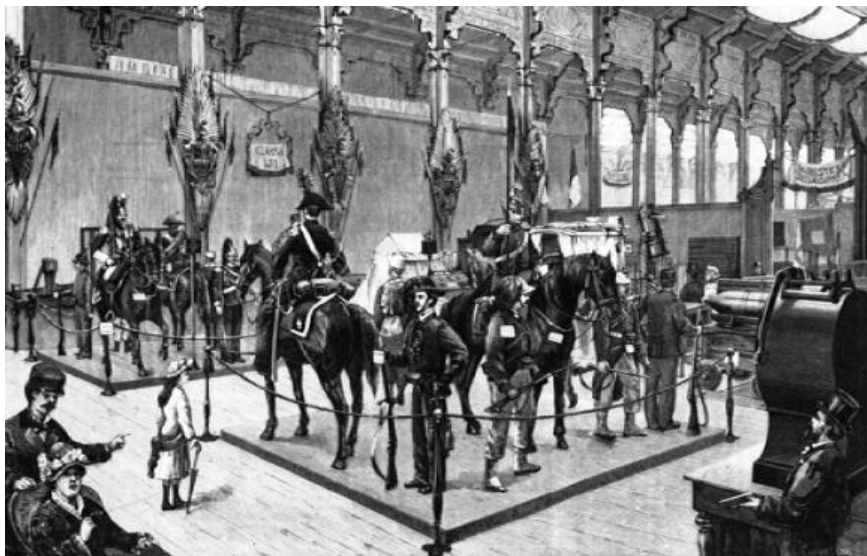


Figure 61. Military mannequins at the *Esibizione* in Milan in 1881. From the *Sonzogno Illustrated Catalogue* 1881.

As a pioneer, film-director Luca Comerio experimented with a new mode to chronicle conflicts inaugurated at the Great Exhibitions, which glorified Italy's political ambitions by giving visual prominence to national military equipment. Already at the fair in Milan in 1881, model battleships and artillery, as well as army corps were put on display to convince the

¹⁴¹ Both Comerio's films are preserved in the Museo Nazionale del Cinema in Turin.

audience of Italy's battlefield readiness. Sonzogno, through the pages of its illustrated catalogue, apprised the public of two must-see exhibitions within the Milanese fair: *Le navi d'Italia* displaying national model battleships, such as Duilio, Maria Adelaide, and Flavio Gioja, and *Armi e soldati*, where viewers had the chance to see mannequins in the military uniforms and a wide range of artillery, including "cannons of long range, in compliance with the last scientific findings" ("cannoni di grande portata, secondo gli ultimi ritrovati della scienza").¹⁴²

As we can see, the exhibition ground was supportive of a global message of national empowerment, which ranged from the enhancement of manufacturing and commercial results to that of economic, military, and political achievements. Italy was clearly striving to fulfill the divide from Europe's cutting edge industrial and Imperialistic advancement, and fairs were the suitable arena for nation building. Furthermore, since in the years around the Exhibition in Milan Italy was about to embark on the colonial campaign in Africa, visual evidence of the State economic solidity and military preparedness could not but be beneficial to nourish the crowds' faith in the national politics.

Comerio's filmic style fit in with the same glorification of national products accomplished by the Great Exhibitions. Films like *La nostra marina da guerra* were clearly showing off Italian artillery's power. Images powerfully displayed the crowds' astonishment at the cannons' thunder that were boomed in the air. The same could be said for *Sottomarini nel Mediterraneo* (1912), in which Comerio even filmed the sinking of a submarine so as to impress the public with tangible and suggestive proof of the potentiality of national war tools.¹⁴³

¹⁴² *L'esposizione italiana del 1881 in Milano*, Sonzogno, 1881, p. 31.

¹⁴³ A copy of this film in the English version *Submarines* is archived in the Museo Nazionale del Cinema in Turin.

By playing on the spectacularization of technical progress and the novelty of the cinematic medium, these films simulated acceptance of the conflict as a necessary move towards civilization. As we have seen happening for choreographic carnage of wax bodies in Panoramas' reproduced battlefields, also the real victims the Libyan conflict claimed did not incite the audiences' revulsion at the atrocities wars entailed. The same could be said for racial and physical diversity sold at the Great Exhibitions as popular attractions. Pity for caged human beings was overshadowed by the visual pleasure to satisfy their morbid curiosity for the diverse. Film fables and the tableaux in human zoos recalled the same imagery. In both, images became realistic, but then it was reality to become image.

When screened, also tragic images such as the riddled soldiers on the ground in Comerio's *La gloriosa battaglia delle due Palme* or the corpses brought to homeland in his reportages lost their objective significance. Brutality and atrocities inflicted to other human beings were of marginal interest. Audiences, distracted by the cinematic medium that quenched their thirst for realism, were at the same time detached from the actual lives the country was laying down in the name of colonialism. It is this paradox between reality and image, between sympathy and dehumanization that we have been tracing through this chapter.

Susan Sontag's reflections in *Regarding the Pain of Others* question the commonplace that images of pain and atrocity have a particular emotional communicative power. She argues that events pictured within frames enact a narrative viewers can make sense of because of its visual obviousness, but they do not enact a factual meaning; since observers have not actually lived through the framed events they look, they "can't understand, can't imagine" the experiences behind the represented reality (126). This argument bears how late nineteenth and early twentieth century audiences screened the horror of colonialism, racism, and war. Sontag reproves

spectators' lust for horrific images as a drive triggered essentially by the media's manipulation of pain and violence. Driven by consumerist logic, media falsify the reality they would be supposed to document and provide observers with images they no longer perceive as 'real.' At this point, the intolerable and violent content portrayed is automatically transformed into 'fiction;' an uncomfortable content viewers want to keep at a safe distance, something they do not actually know, as the pain they see 'belongs' to others.

In early cinematography, viewers' reactions to screened atrocities recall individuals' "appetite" for violent images in Sontag.¹⁴⁴ When watching war films and reportages, audiences could certainly 'see' the horrors on screen, but they did not 'feel' them. Instead of blaming documentaries for portraying brutal images, whose sacredness would have been more aptly honored privately, viewers craved for their apparent realism, a realism that actually cut them off from reality and set up a sort of imagery barrier. The silver screen, like the nets and the fences that kept the natives at a safe distance, were demarcated both authentic and somehow real.

Now that the potential of the cinematic medium was savored, audiences did not give up experiencing the safe thrills of virtual reality. They were aware they could live as protagonists the 'effect' of the war, without taking the risk of its 'actual' enactment. Realistic reportages were the kind of news audiences expected, witness the popular protest arising when World War I hampered the ease with which reporters shot from the front and transmitted their reportages. "Il pubblico era stato abituato prima della Guerra a considerare i fatti del giorno attraverso i documenti e le narrazioni più ampie e più esaurienti, e molto spesso gli era stato concesso di portarsi idealmente, assistendo alla proiezioni di pellicole di attualità, sui luoghi dei maggiori avvenimenti" ("Before the war, the public was used to look on everyday events through

¹⁴⁴ Sontag writes that "the appetite for pictures showing bodies in pain is as keen, almost, as the desire for ones that show bodies naked." See *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p. 41.

documents and the most detailed and informative accounts, and very often had been ideally brought to the venues of the major events by watching the projections of news reels”), denounced *Cinemagraf* on March 1916.¹⁴⁵

Audiences were by then so much used to news films, they had no intention to put up with the lack of visual realism in reporting. They could no longer be satisfied by “cold” written accounts. Under attack was not only the deafness to the popular dissatisfaction with “the muddled literature of journalists” (“farraginoso letteratura dei giornalisti”), but also a mode of reporting news that deprived audiences of the possibility to formulate “a direct and personal judgment” (“un giudizio diretto e personale”). Clearly, filmic realism was increasingly credited as the most reliable source of information and the only medium capable of rousing independent spectatorship.

Sontag makes an important distinction between war pictures exhibited in public places (galleries, museums, theatres) and those protected by the private and controlled space of the press. To Sontag, horrors in photographs are solemn events that should not be commodified as “wall-hung or floor-supported art” (121). Pain thus displayed becomes accidental, something we can either see or ignore. “Seriousness” in image content is rather respected in a book, in which photographs are “surrounded by words” (32). The verbal auxilium functions as a guide for viewers and elicits their critical thinking. Sontag had a faith in the veracity of the written word to overcome the limitations of image.

We have seen, however, that audiences blamed the very journalists’ verbiage as an impediment to independent thought. This popular aversion to press reportage was likely due to the fact that journals never missed the opportunity to discredit the cinematic spectacle. “Since the

¹⁴⁵ “Films, fotografie, comunicati di guerra,” in *Cinemagraf*, anno I, n. 2, March 11, 1916, p. 3.

Cinema exists..., why should not be fair to speak about it seriously and impartially, without prejudice, but with right criterion?” (“Dal momento che il cinema esiste..., perchè non deve essere lecito parlarne seriamente e spassionatamente senza preconcetti ma con retto criterio?”), asked *Il Maggese Cinematografico* in defending the cinema from harsh attacks against its communicative efficacy in broadcasting the news.¹⁴⁶

Given the evidence of *Cinemagraf* on March 11, 1916, there appears no reason to think that audiences were troubled by the lack on accompanying text. In fact, some reviews suggest that audiences found titles and verbal cues nothing more than a distraction. The spectacle before their eyes appeared as a gallery of frames, but such a display was anything but passive knowledge. To viewers, filmic intrusiveness was quite a pleasurable experience, which granted them visual satisfaction and the virtual immersion in real events. We should not underestimate that for spectators the “value” (“il valore”) of war films consisted in their very capability “to draw the people and the entire nation closer to the efforts, pains, and heroism of its sons” (“avvicinare maggiormente tutto il popolo e tutta la nazione agli sforzi, alle fatiche, agli eroismi dei suoi figli”). The public enjoyed this *value* as an ultimate “gioia di vedere” (“joy of seeing”).¹⁴⁷

How could such a gratifying condition elicit theoretical hassles? The dislocation of reality and the finalized manipulation Sontag contended to the media’s use of war images was irrelevant to early cinema spectators. To them, images of pain and violence could not be instances of commodified aestheticism as Sontag argued. In their appreciation for war images on screen, audiences satisfied a net of multiple emotions: their deference for the technological power of the

¹⁴⁶ “In difesa della Cinecritica,” in *Il Maggese Cinematografico*, Anno II, n. 10, May 25, 1914, p. 11.

¹⁴⁷ “Films, fotografie, comunicati di guerra,” in *Cinemagraf*, Anno I, n. 2, March 11, 1916, p. 3.

new medium, the glorification of autonomous spectatorship, as well as the sublimation of their own visual pleasure. The combination of filmic hyper realism with the mechanic reproducibility of images reinforced *apperception* in viewers, recalling what had happened with Panorama spectatorship.

Panorama audiences, amazed by the invention of images and familiar with the ethno scenes provided in the Grand Expositions, which presented even weapons of terror as marvels of technical genius, were well conditioned to be not responding to the horrors of war and its tragedy. Theatralized staging and screened images were completing this process of knowledge. Even the written word, in the form of the adventure stories, did little to convey the realities of war, despite being presented as the real experience of the other. The ambiguities of the audience's perception of the earliest films do not end here.

The cinematic medium, however, fostered spectatorial emotional impassiveness also because of its mechanic way of recording reality. Images of death on screen could be watched and re-watched an infinite number of times: death itself was not perceived as a cruel end of a young soldier's life, since the film could be rewound to resuscitate the young man. The moving image, indeed, took the amorality we discussed in the dioramas to a new level. André Bazin, taking to task the cinematic reconstruction of death scenes as spectacle, argues that cinema enacts a sort of "perversion" in depicting death and filmic realism is totally different from the photographic one. Bazin writes in *Deaths every afternoon*, "a photograph does not have the power of film; it can only represent someone dying or a corpse, not the elusive passage from one state to the other" (30). This argument is illustrated with the deplorable effects of a filmed execution and its supreme 'perversion': its projection in reverse. "At each screening, at the flick of a switch, these men came to life again" laments Bazin, as if death could be a multiple

experience (30). Thus screened, death appears a scenographic operation deprived of its tragic objective content, a dispossession recalling Benjamin's concept of loss of *aura*.

Benjamin, however, had a totalizing aversion for any mechanical reproduction of culture and thus accused cinema as a whole to destroy "the authenticity" of depicted events;¹⁴⁸ Bazin, instead, called attention to a specific scene, *i.e.* killing, as a cinematic moment in which both the *aura* (Benjamin's authenticity) and its loss emerge simultaneously. On screen, death becomes reproducible and its singularity of one-time-event is effaced by its very recording. Paradoxically, cinematic repetition keeps death alive and turns it in a sort of transcendent visual experience.

Without enacting the same deviant spectacle of the execution Bazin theorizes, early filmography exposed viewers to the recurring images of death. What audiences saw were cadavers laying on the ground, not the act of killing. However, the fact that viewers did not visualize bullets riddling the soldiers did not make filmic real horrors less cruel and unbearable. Cinema would bring the real into people's lives with such a dramatic pragmatism, that its impact over the crowds was not comparable to the aesthetic re-elaboration of death triggered by Panoramas' historical spectacularization. Images of war on screen made viewers confront with the real traumas the country was experiencing. At stake was no longer the pictorial or theatrical re-interpretation of past history, but rather the enactment of a tragic present. How could contemporary brutality leave people cold? And more importantly, how could corpses and coffins on screen not to recall one's own death?

War images in early cinematography, in fact, enacted the spectatorial confrontation with factual death. This concept exemplifies what Julia Kristeva called attention to in *Powers of*

¹⁴⁸ See Walter Benjamin *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility*.

Horrors, that is the urge to differentiate the *knowledge* or the *meaning* of death from the materiality that traumatically *shows you* your own death:

A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify* death. In the presence of signified death – a flat encephalograph, for instance – I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being (Powers of Horror 3).

Kristeva assigns to the corpse a meaning of destruction in the identity formation process, as its sight breaks the distinction between subject and object. Seeing the corpse for individuals is the palpable equivalent of seeing one's own death. To Kristeva, if no division exists in the subject/object relation, our acceptance of ideological conventions –the set of rules dictated by society Lacan labeled “the Symbolic order”—is hampered.¹⁴⁹

Repulsion for the sight of death, corpses, and any connotation of degradation Kristeva identifies as *abjection* are reactions constituting the subjectivity in the societal world; but what happens when other drives get in the way? Kristeva speaks of *fear* (“The phobic object shows up at the place of non-objectal states of drive and assumes all the mishaps of drive as disappointed desires or as desires diverted from their objects,” *Powers* 35) and *jouissance*, a passion, rather than a desire, associated with the *abject*, of which she writes “one does not know it, one does not desire it, one joys in it. Violently and painfully” (*Powers* 9).

¹⁴⁹ According to Lacan the symbolic is “the pact which links...subjects together in one action. The human action *par excellence* is originally founded on the existence of the world of the symbol, namely on laws and contracts.” See Jacques Lacan, *Freud's Papers on Technique 1953-1954*, Book I, p. 230.

Also early viewers before filmic war images experienced the same turmoil triggered by the conflicting interaction between opposite impulses. Repulsion for images of death and the grief for war victims clashed with the pleasurable activity of watching and visual gratification. Journals of the time did offer consistent proof of the popular excitement for war films. *La vita cinematografica* reported the warm and patriotic welcome viewers reserved to military reels, "... il pubblico gremisce giornalmente le sale del Cinema Romano, Borsa, Odeon e di tutte le altre ove vengono proiettate [le films di guerra]... sono salutate con applausi e grida di Viva l'Italia! ("...every day the public fills to capacity the cinemas Romano, Borsa, and Odeon, as well as all other places where [war films] are projected and hailed with applause and shouts of hurrah for Italy!"),¹⁵⁰ the same did *La Cine-Fono* for the release of the reportage *Tripoli* at the cinema *Edison* in Florence, which "attracted a large crowd ("richiamò una gran folla").¹⁵¹ The *Cinema Nuovo* in Catanzaro displayed images of the Libyan war and the *bersaglieri*, "un intero programma patriottico molto gradito alla cittadinanza" ("a whole patriotic program, very appreciated" by the townspeople).¹⁵² *Lux and Cine* even highlighted the pedagogic function of war reportages for both soldiers and the ordinary public, "il soldato è messo in presenza di una pellicola in cui è formata una battaglia [...] non solo egli studierà le azioni ed i portamenti dei combattimenti, ma sarà per ciò stesso messo in condizioni di poter compiere all'occasione il proprio dovere, sia individualmente che collettivamente" (the soldier is exposed to a film

¹⁵⁰ See "Corrispondenza cinematografica dal teatro della guerra," in *La vita cinematografica*, October, 30, 1911, n. 19, p. 4.

¹⁵¹ See "Corrierino Fiorentino," in *La Cine-Fono, Rivista Fono-Cinematografica*, October, 7, 1911, Anno V, n. 170, p. 12.

¹⁵² See *La Cine-Fono, Rivista Fono-Cinematografica*, October, 21, 1911, Anno V, n. 172, p. 11

displaying a fight [...], not only he will study the actions and behaviors in the battle, but because of this he will be capable of carrying out his duty, both individually and collectively”).¹⁵³

The dedicated press-- *La vita cinematografica*, *Cinemagraf*, *Lux e Cine*, and *Cafè Chantant* to name a few of the more popular journals-- spoke of boldness, military pride, and solid spirit of emulation that military camerawork would instill in viewers. Nothing in these articles questioned how cinematography was used as a way of endorsing war, or showing images of death with no verbal interpretation, detaching the audience from the horrors of reality. Indeed, some reviewers praised the filmmakers for allowing an audience to safely experience war: “to watch, with patriotic enthusiasm and without risking our life, the war maneuvers of our army and troops” (“di assistere, con patriottico entusiasmo e senza rischiare la pelle, alle operazioni di Guerra della nostra armata e delle nostre truppe”).¹⁵⁴

Albeit cynical, this comment is evidence of how the spectatorial desire to watch the replication of the real on screen was intense and irrespective of the tragic filmic content. The need to please a large audience led filmmakers to a new way of getting the audience to respond not to the message but to the medium, not to the implications, moral and political, of the image, but to its ephemeral, illusory quality. The more the pictures became “realistic,” the more they promised actual experience of the foreign other and detached the audience from the ordinary, creating the earliest version of what we call “virtual reality.” After all, viewers looked at cinema as a means to venture beyond the boundaries of their own knowledge and the screen offered an ‘escapist’ experience. Visual pleasure derived meaning from the activity of watching per se,

¹⁵³ See “L’insegnamento militare a mezzo del Cinematografo,” in *Lux e Cine*, May, 1911, Anno I, n. 5, p. 4.

¹⁵⁴ See *La Cine-Fono, Rivista Fono-Cinematografica*, October, 7, 1911, Anno V, n. 170, p. 12

rather than from intellectual engagement. Images in motion essentially triggered spectatorial rapture.

More than philosophical introspection and aesthetic reflections, early cinema elicited in viewers flashes of imagery and thrills for the potentiality of the new medium. At issue, in fact, was not the ethical dilemma between what could or could not be displayed. Predominating was rather the popular desire for instantaneous information and the faithful reproduction of the real world. After all, film makers were expected to screen what their cameras had faithfully filmed. The risk, otherwise, would be for the cinematic medium the loss of its prerogative: realism.

Film directors themselves were well aware that the war was an event to capitalize on, a ‘commercial’ product to sell rapidly and genuinely. In 1911, Comerio even established in Tripoli a branch of his Milanese production company he boldly called *Stabilimento Foto-Cinematografico*, in order to expedite the making and distribution of his war reportages. The Libyan conflict, however, was not the only tragic event to be provider of marketable realism for the cinematic industry. Earthquakes as well, for instance, made ‘profitable’ calamities for the screen. In 1905, Filoteo Alberini sent one of his reporters to Calabria to shoot on the spot the victims and the buildings collapsing an earthquake shook the region on the night between the 7th and 8th September. 609 cadavers, 2880 wounded bodies, and the remains of destroyed towns became the subjects of Alberini’s *Il terremoto in Calabria* and *Vedute ed episodi del terremoto in Calabria*, produced by Arturo Ambrosio.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁵ On the so-called films “from life,” see Aldo Bernardini, *Il cinema muto italiano. I film “dal vero” 1895-1914*; Gian Piero Brunetta, *Storia del cinema italiano: il cinema muto 1895-1929*; Riccardo Redi, *Cinema muto italiano: 1896-1930*.



Figure 62. Suggestive scenes from Alberini's *Il terremoto in Calabria*. Pictures in public domain.

Both these films were powerful visual documents either of the catastrophe striking Italy and the effectiveness of cinema as news medium. Cinematography and press, as we can imagine, competed to document the event. The major Italian newspapers-- *L'illustrazione Italiana*, *Corriere della Sera*, *La Nazione*, *La tribuna*, and *La Stampa* --had sent their reporters on the spot to chronicle the catastrophe with the freshest news. Journals divulged pictures and reportages to inform readers of the seriousness of the calamity. The Sicilian newspaper *L'ora* spoke of “spaventevoli disastri” (“dreadful disasters”);¹⁵⁶ *Il giornale d'Italia* reported of “scene angosciose, una notte di terrore, morti e feriti, paesi distrutti” (“anguished scenes, a terror night, dead and wounded bodies, destroyed towns”);¹⁵⁷ the local journal *La Rivista Vibonese* empathically wrote that “una forte scossa di terremoto... destava dal sonno tutti gli abitanti, producendo gravi danni ai fabbricati della città, e facendo numerose vittime” (“a strong earth

¹⁵⁶ *L'ora*, September 10, 1905.

¹⁵⁷ “Il gravissimo terremoto in Calabria e in Sicilia,” in *Il giornale d'Italia*, September 10, 1905.

tremor... woke up the inhabitants, causing serious damages to city buildings and numerous victims”).¹⁵⁸

The press vehemently denounced the poor quality and timing of the State rescue operations. “There is lack of rescue in the towns devastated by the earthquake” (“Manca l’organizzazione dei soccorsi nei paesi devastati dal terremoto”), in evidence only (“poverty, inactivity, and complaints” (“miseria, inerzia e lagni”) denounced the *Corriere della Sera*;¹⁵⁹ while Olindo Malagodi from the pages of *La stampa* lamented “the disproportion between the extent of the disaster and the pettiness of the rescue” (“la sproporzione fra l’entità del disastro e la meschinità del soccorso”) and the shame that “it took nine days to ensure a reasonable distribution of bread” (“Ci sono voluti nove giorni per assicurare una ragionevole distribuzione del pane”).¹⁶⁰

None of these journalistic accounts, however, could compete with the captivating realism of cinematography. When Alberini’s *Il terremoto di Calabria* was premiered in Rome at the *Cinema Moderno* on September 29, 1905, the movie theatre was filled to capacity. The success of this reportage was such, that special screenings continued to be scheduled even through October and over the weekends “to satisfy the desire of many workers who, being busy during the week, could not see them” (“per soddisfare il desiderio di molti operai che, per essere occupati nei giorni feriali, non hanno potuto vederle”).¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁸ “Un’orrenda catastrofe,” in *La Rivista Vibonese*, September 10, 1905.

¹⁵⁹ *Corriere della Sera*, September 20, 1905.

¹⁶⁰ *La stampa*, September 17, 1905.

¹⁶¹ See Aldo Bernardini, *Il cinema muto italiano. I film “dal vero” 1895-1914*, p. 62.



Figure 63. Lieutenant Tricomi holding little Maria Antonia Colace he saved from a pile of rubble. Picture in public domain.

Film directors had great interest in shooting the most horrifying images they knew would catch on the crowds. Frames featuring people walking amid the rubble in the hope to find still-alive bodies did impress the public. One of the most moving scenes circulating was that of Lieutenant Tricomi with little Maria Antonia Colace, the babygirl the heroic soldier pulled out of the rubble still alive after 96 hours of burying. This news spread through Europe so rapidly that the same scene can be found in the French reportage *Tremblement de terre en Italie* (1906), likely filmed by Arturo Ambrosio and listed in the Gaumont catalogue.

No less advantageous in terms of marketable images was the earthquake hitting the Sicilian city of Messina in 1908. When the news of the catastrophe spread, all the major production companies sent their operators to Sicily in search of scoops. *Messina distrutta* (Cines, 1909), *Messina* (Itala Films, 1909), *Il terremoto calabro-siculo* (Comerio, 1909), and *Terremoto di Messina e Calabria* (Cines, 1909) are only some of the numerous reportages devoted to the Sicilian calamity. Production companies competed with ruthless operators, Adolfo Croce,

Giovanni Vitrotti, Roberto Omegna, Raffaello Lucarelli, and Luca Comerio. The common goal for both companies and cameramen was to oust the rival and do battle getting a scoop.



Figure 64. Poster for a 1909 film featuring Messina before and after the earthquake. Picture in public domain.

Adolfo Croce was one of the most astute reporters. He fascinated the public with two blockbuster reportages *La città di Messina* and *Il terribile terremoto di Calabria e di Sicilia* both of 1909. *La città di Messina* in particular is an authentic example of strategic filming finalized to commercial results, as in this reel Croce exploits his shots of the Sicilian city before the earthquake and puts them in comparison with the images he filmed after the calamity. The idea of such a strategic montage was soon imitated. In 1909 the Bellini theatre in Catania screened *Il terribile disastro di Messina*, a filmic rendition of the destruction of Messina, advertized as “la

più vera, la più dettagliata nei suoi minimi particolari” (“the most truthful, the most exhaustive in the minimum detail”) (see poster above).

A large number of titles in the archives attests to the popular appreciation of filmic reportages despite the cruelty of their images and the film makers’ eagerness to feed this profitable strand. In the case of documentaries based on seismic tragedies, however, the bloodcurdling images of buried bodies and collapsed buildings had ethical implications, in comparison with the political and patriotic conviction that war films instilled in the crowds in support of the national mission of alleged civilization.

Both the earthquakes of Calabria and Messina, in fact, were turned by the cinematic medium into tools of national propaganda. Screenings themselves, for instance, became events in aid of charity. Proceeds from public events were often donated to the earthquake victims, as it happened when Alberini’s *Il terremoto di Calabria* debuted at Rome’s *Cinema Moderno*, and fund raising were organized to finance urban reconstructions.¹⁶² Several titles in databases attest to shootings aiming to display the architectural efforts to reconstruct the cities from the earthquake devastation. In this respect, Comerio’s *Ricostruzione di Messina* (1909) and *Messina al giorno d’oggi* (1912) produced by Cines are two powerful visual documents.

It is *Messina che risorge* (Cines, 1910), however, the most suggestive and detailed cinematic rendition of Messina’s ascension from the ruins.¹⁶³ The film features the slow process of reconstruction, with modest shacks temporarily hosting Municipal buildings once the fulcrum of urban life. People are filmed while praying and cooking in the streets. Cadavers and wreckage still blocking the way mingle with frantic comings and goings of people in their daily routine.

¹⁶² Bernardini, *Il cinema muto italiano. I film “dal vero” 1895-1914*, p. 62.

¹⁶³ This film was restored by the *Cineteca del Friuli*, thanks to the finding of its English edition *Messina Rising from its Ruins* at the British Film Institute National Archive in London.

Very suggestive are the images displaying the local movie theatres, *Trinacria* and *Peloro*, emblems of the individuals' defense of their right to pleasurable activities even in hard times. Death and destruction clash with energetic workers cleaning the streets at a brisk pace. Spectators can glimpse the future rise of Messina, while the distress over the tragedy is not yet over, as the camera focuses on the frightened gaze of the locals. Journals, however, praised anything but the touchy scenes about reconstruction. Indeed, reviewers called popular attention to the verisimilitude of shootings and how impressive was to see real explosions, with workers dynamiting cracked houses to allow the city rebuilding ("Ottima cinematografia dal vero... si vedono le case screpolate che vengono fatte saltare colla dinamite");¹⁶⁴ while foreign journals advertised *Messina che risorge* as an "interesting travel subject," which, because of its realism, "should prove deservedly popular."¹⁶⁵ Such a cynical attention to the spectacularization of tragedies, however, was nothing new. Also Alberini's *Il terremoto in Calabria* (1905) had been described as "an interesting spectacle" featuring "episodi strazianti" ("heartbreaking episodes") and "muri che crollano" ("collapsing walls"), which could not but attract "crowds of spectators" ("L'interessante spettacolo richiama una folla di pubblico").¹⁶⁶

Early filmography displayed the war as the costly event it was, even in human terms, while contemporaneously presenting the conflict as indispensable to national progress. The display of objective war horrors functioned as a scenographic and patriotic operation made even more captivating by the astonishing technical power of cinematography. Films let viewers experience the thrills of an unfamiliar mode of reproducing images. In psychoanalytical terms, what viewers

¹⁶⁴ See *L'eco degli oratori*, November 6, 1910, n. 21. Quoted in Bernardini, *I film dal vero*, p. 178.

¹⁶⁵ See *The Bioscope*, London, September 22, 1910, p. 39. Quoted in Bernardini, *I film dal vero*, p. 178.

¹⁶⁶ See *Il Messaggero*, October 5, 1905.

faced was their ultimate surrender to self-fulfillment in the face of painful events. Freud's findings that both the *pleasurable-principle* and the *reality-principle* are eventually both committed to personal satisfaction exemplify the viewers' enjoyment of war films in spite of their cruel images.¹⁶⁷ Viewers enacted instinctual drives, a sort of safeguarded indifference to screened horrors, which ended up being deemed as natural implications of the machinery war.

In this process, however, spectatorial agency was mined by a subtle and subliminal manipulation. Film frames, in fact, isolated only specific images of death, on which the viewer's gaze was forcedly directed. Unlike the spectacularized reproductions of Panorama displays where the viewers' eyes could move freely and linger over any detail they liked in the staging, the filmic experience enacted less autonomous dynamics in spectatorship. In the cinematic spectacle, the point of view of spectators was camera subdued and distant from the scene represented on the screen. Films offered the reproduction of reality by means of frames enclosing selected images. In fact, documentaries audiences had before their eyes were nothing but the final result of an editing operation, during which images had been filmed, de-composed, and re-composed in a signifying sequence. What people watched was a number of shots glued one after the other, a sort of product skillfully wrapped for both mass entertainment and convincement.

Clearly, by presenting powerful gunnery, heroic actions, brave victims eager to sacrifice themselves for national ideals war films dismantled real events. These scenes served as visual 'language' to persuade the crowds. Political ideology did run through screenings, although

¹⁶⁷ With the Pleasure-Principle Freud explains the desire for immediate gratification, to which he contrasts the Reality-Principle enacting the deferral to that gratification. Freud explains that individuals, when coming of age, learn to defer their satisfaction because of the obstacles of reality. Freud writes: "An ego thus educated has become 'reasonable'; it no longer lets itself be governed by the pleasure principle, but obeys the *reality principle*, which also at bottom seeks to obtain pleasure, but pleasure which is assured through taking account of reality, even though it is pleasure postponed and diminished." See Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 16, *Introductory Lectures*, p. 357.

disguised in frames 'sutured' to honor nationalism. Suturing was at play in constructing the 'narrative' of the cinematic spectacle as a faithful reproduction of the real. Recalling Kaja Silverman's notion of "suture" in film theory, however, images thus created were fixed and limited. In fact, Silverman stresses that events are "stitched together" on the film stock into a series of frames, but the periphery of the camera inevitably reduces and regulates the viewer's point of view.¹⁶⁸

Analogously, cinematic reconstructions of war scenes resulted from a reality de-composed in frames 'sutured' one to the other, giving birth to a visual collage localizing the viewers' gaze. However, while Silverman's analysis of suturing as a finalized mode of editing theorizes the significance of the blank and unidentified space between sutured images, such an argument is premature for early cinematography.

Even when viewers were exposed to filmic narrative and coherent plot, such as those of comedies and sentimental pathetic fictions we discussed, their eyes were uninitiated to theoretical questions about their spectatorial positioning and interpretative role. In the case of documentaries and reportages, viewers' self-interpellative awareness in terms of spectatorship was not less primitive. What cameramen filmed from the front or the theatres of earthquake calamities essentially became a strip of images based on shots from real life, whose objective significance spoke for itself and disregarded interpretative prerequisites. Thus, audiences had no clue in a suturing process thrusting them out of the story for a second and presupposing the aesthetic responsibility to fill in the signifying gap connecting images.

In the early period of Italian cinema, the technical inventions and improvements held a great appeal and were essential to satisfying an audience conditioned by panoramas and the

¹⁶⁸ See Kaja Silverman, "Suture," in *The Subject of Semiotics*, pp. 194-246.

nationalistic grand expositions. We have explored the concept of *apperception*, and how the audience in confronting this new medium that was based on reality, even the most horrifying realities of war and natural catastrophe, was positioned to value the superficial entertainment or spectacle, with little or no commitment to the moral and political implications of the subject filmed. Much like the people who attended the human zoos, the reality of the natives behind the net made them in some way very unreal. Once on screen, death did not seem a given fact and war itself was rationalized, a proof that audiences had learned to separate the self from the other.

The grief of audiences viewing coffins of dead soldiers from war was mediated by these images sutured together, creating a virtual reality infused with melodrama and sentimentality from the theater. Ethical and moral questions, however, were disconnected from the images viewed. By offering the chance to re-play and re-project images incessantly for mass entertainment, cinema made war horrors repetitions enacting a sort of spectatorial dispossession. As we have seen, the very filmic reproducibility undermined the emotional involvement in the tragic dimension of the spectacle.

The strength of cinematic realism was an engine of visual entertainment beyond compare for details and realism, but this status would not continue without critique. Cheap provider of visual pragmatism, a medium lacking of aesthetic credibility, below the realm of true art: there was much to criticize in the motion pictures. Such an aversion is indeed worth investigating and key topic of the next chapter.

Chapter III

Mass Consumption and the Commercialization of Art

1- Commerce and Innovation in the Early Years of Cinema

Anything that won't sell, I don't want to invent. Its sale is proof of utility, and utility is success.

Thomas A. Edison

The last three decades of the 19th century marked a significant turning point both in projection and style. The theatricalized staging and optical devices, as we have seen, were increasingly capable of capturing and reproducing reality, and thus helped viewers master new visuality and refine both their spectatorial and interpretative skills. However, we must bear in mind that any photographic apparatus antecedent the advent of cinematography in 1895 could only *imitate* reality in motion. Previously, machines were capable of showing a rapid succession of still or posed photographs that appeared in motions.



Figure 65. A man peering through the peephole on top of a *Kinetoscope*. Picture in public domain.

The most outstanding contribution, one that for the first time closely resembled a movie, was the *Kinetoscope*, a bulky apparatus devised by Thomas A. Edison in 1891. A filmstrip held

on two spools passed between a lens and an electric bulb in a wooden box, while the viewer could peer through a peephole on top. On May 20, a prototype was demonstrated to a group of women of the National Federation of Women's Clubs visiting Edison's headquarter in West Orange, NJ. The *New York Sun* reported:

In the top of the box there was a hole, perhaps an inch in diameter. As they looked through the hole they saw the picture of a man. It was a most marvelous picture. It bowed and smiled and waved its hands and took off its hat with the most perfect naturalness and grace. Every motion was perfect.¹

Given its cutting-edge features, the *Kinetoscope* projection was astounding and, by all reports, left the audience breathless. The importance of Edison's film did not consist in any narrative -it was merely thirty seconds long- nor in its originality, although it was arguably the first true motion picture.² What is remarkable is the degree to which this film is representative of how optical entertainment was bound to the logic of consumer culture by the 1890s. Edison's projection, in fact, attests to a gendering of consumption, which played a pivotal role in the commercialization of the artifact. The female audience was indeed a further sign of the finalized commercial strategy we discussed for optical amusements and fair entertainments, a catalyst crucial in launching new divertissements to a widening audience.

Since the boom of Department Stores in France and abroad in the 1860s, women were considered the primary consumers, the agents deciding the fortune or misfortune of a product.³ In his illuminating novel on the clutches of modern commerce, *Au Bonheur des Dames* (*The*

¹ Quoted in Patrick Robertson, *Film Facts*, p. 5.

² This film has gone into history as *The Dickinson Greeting*. Its title is allusive of the actor performing the greeting with his hat: he was William Dickinson, Edison's official photographer. See Charles Musser, *Edison Motion Pictures, 1890-1900*, p. 73.

³ Critical attention has been devoted to the economic role of women as consumers and the rise of feminine consumption in the nineteenth century. See Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing, and Zola*, and William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture*.

Ladies' Paradise), Zola treated female consumption as a phenomenon driven by impulses of self-gratification, which turned women into aggressive and avid shoppers. "It has been said," wrote Zola, "that if the Department store were suppressed, there would be a revolution among women" (83). After all, we have seen how merchandize was displayed in theatricalized settings, with a scenography aiming to nothing but transforming objects on sale into objects of desire. If stores were dream-machines capable of inducing fantasies out of control, women were the ideal victims for their inclination towards superfluous and frivolous shopping.

The self-gratification Zola identified in female shoppers recalls the same act of satisfying one's own desires we singled out in Chapter II as an early characteristic of the activity of watching a film. When discussing early cinematography and war images that were the rage, we saw how viewers gave priority to their visual pleasure, rather than the preoccupation for the amorality of filmic contents. Female shoppers did not see the subliminal rhetoric and the risks of mass consumption behind the attractive merchandise on display; similarly, audiences ignored the ulterior motives behind the allure of cinematic spectacle. We have seen with the Great Exhibitions and the advent of Department stores that what audiences and shoppers did look for was essentially diversion from the daily routine and the enjoyment of a form of recreation, motivated by emotional gratification, rather than utility and ethics.

Psychoanalysis explains the subordination of morals to gratifying escapist emotions and the need for immediate pleasure. Already in the 1920s Freud called attention to people's inclination to avoid displeasure so as to satisfy the *id*, that part of their personality containing basic drives, such as *libido*, and the source of instinctual forces.⁴ Freud regarded the *id* as a child,

⁴ See Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 1922.

for its urge of immediate satisfaction and disinterest in ethics. The id “knows no judgments of value: no good and evil, no morality,” writes in fact Freud.⁵

If *libido* is the energy for unconscious aspirations, the force liberating the individuals’ proneness to pleasure, also cinema going and shopping can be viewed under the same lens. Although providing only an illusion of fulfillment, both films and the purchase of merchandize did represent happiness-inducing activities. Motivated to repeat behaviors because of the pleasurable sensations they enjoyed, consumers did not question merchandize and the first achievements of cinematography as results of an embedded imagery finalized to elicit fruition. The masses responded to strategic grooming at work within society, but did not consider the harnessing potential behind this phenomenon.⁶

Already back in the 1890s, American economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen attacked production for profit and the spreading consumer trend triggered by the Industrial Revolution and the appearance of the *nouveau riche*.⁷ Wealth and social standing became values to display through material possessions, an attention to exteriority that provoked envy and played on the middle class’ aspirations for social elevation. As Veblen remarked, by 1899 the crowds abided by the imperative to appear ‘wealthy’ through goods and comfortable lifestyle. Following this rationale, films and merchandize represented the latest novelties, fashionable ‘goods’ whose fruition was a byword for cutting-edge lifestyle and uppermost social rank.

What nowadays could be labeled as ‘peer pressure,’ in *fin-de-siècle* society resulted in the mass encouragement to aggressive consumption by emulation. Unconsciously, consumers were

⁵ See Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, p. 107.

⁶ On the connections between consumption and psychology, see Rachel Bowlby, *Shopping with Freud*.

⁷ See Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (1899). Veblen

pushed by advertising barrage towards unnecessary products they wanted simply because everybody wanted them. By the 1920s, in fact, economists such as Paul Nystrom spoke already of a “philosophy of futility,” to theorize the phenomenon of accumulation that was diverging healthy lifestyle towards wild consumerism.⁸ Like Veblen, Nystrom saw the industrial age as the epicenter of the capitalization on the crowds’ dependence on mass consumption as a determinant of social echelon.

The preference for immediate pleasure rather than knowledge was the result of a reaction to the monotony of the industrial age. Both Veblen and Nystrom remark how fashionable apparel, goods, and escapist amusements were signs of the gratification the crowds found in frivolous materials as an alternative to labor. Progress meant also to be engrossed by and benefit from its results. Moving from a materialist Marxist perspective he initially shared, Veblen came to the conclusion that the “industrial arts,” technology in particular, were the creative forces, rather than labor (as Marx thought), capable of shaping society. Possessions and technological knowledge were by then acquired ‘goods,’ benefits the crowds were no longer willing to re-negotiate.

The consequence of a system based on the ostentation of wealth as social empowerment was a class-model tending to standardization, and urging to consumption by fueling the continuous search for the latest novelty. If the leisure class was expected to consume the best, as Veblen stated, this attitude was incumbent on all the classes inferior in rank because of the spirit of emulation. Such a tendency generated homologation and a mass of undifferentiated individuals treated all as would-be well-off and potential customers. We have seen with the

⁸ See Paul Henry Nystrom, *Economics of Fashion*. Nystrom termed *philosophy of futility* a “new view of life” affected by the lack of purpose and the excessive reliance on fashionable consumption. See p. 68 in particular.

Great Exhibitions how *divertissement* was anything but regulated by social status. Workers and lower classes were favored in any possible way, from reduced tickets, to weekend performances, and even free entrance. Entertainments, as well as merchandize, worked under the aegis of profits and the overshadowing of class distinctions.

Also the first results of cinematography were advertised and sold according to market interests. It was not a coincidence, that when the *Kinetoscope* debuted, its commercial launch played on the benefits of gendered consumerism. Edison's film was a 'product' to sell, like a brush or a soap displayed in stores, another type of commodity to put on the market via deliberate commercial strategies; and who else could be a better public than female viewers? Women embodied the ultimate audience to capitalize on through visual seduction and their likes were certainly a source of money.

From the pages of *The Ladies' Paradise*, we can grasp how Zola viewed the feminization of commerce as a phenomenon tallying with the urbanization, and consequently commercialization, of Paris; this assumption, however, would fit any other large city both in Europe and the United States in the same time period. When the *Kinetoscope* debuted before the female audience of the National Federation, for instance, the culture of consumer capitalism was in full bloom in the United States.⁹ *Fin-de-siècle* American society was "preoccupied with consumption, with comfort and bodily well-being, with luxury, spending, and acquisition,"

⁹ Historian William Leach claims that the period from about 1890 to the Great Depression saw the rise of a culture essentially defined in terms of material plenty; the central institution became the Department store and the crowds witnessed the mass production of consumer goods. Leach's focus is on well-known retail sellers, such as John Wanamaker (Philadelphia), Marshall Field (Chicago), and Henry Siegel and Frank Cooper (New York), who put small dealers out of business and marked the new path towards a pecuniary culture, turning shopping into a voyeuristic experience. Leach, however, admits that wholesalers such as Alexander Tunney Stewart, with his famed Marble Palace of New York (the largest store in the decade between the 1860s and 1870s) anticipated the "retail wars" of the 1890s. See William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture*.

writes William Leach in *Land of Desire* (xiii). The enjoyment of the latest results of technology and visual entertainment, thus, aggravated this desire for possession of novelties and self-fulfillment.

1890s American audiences, in fact, indulged in a variety of leisure activities, spanning from live theatre, music halls, and opera, to concerts, traveling fairs, and circuses. *Nickelodeons* were also extremely popular from 1890 to 1910 as early forms of cinema, with their moving pictures accompanied by music, which provided the working class with an affordable form of entertainment.¹⁰ In fact, given the cheap cost and the informality of these theaters, as well as the brevity and continuous running time of the shows, *nickelodeons* were marketed to laborers. Although in 1890 we cannot yet speak of refined cinematic spectacles, this initial period of commercial production attests to the exploitation of moving images as ‘attractions’ tailored to satisfy socio-cultural, and consequently economic, needs.

If we look at how the debut of Edison’s *Kinetoscope* was advertised, we clearly see that the social role of early ‘films’ served primarily the urge to place projectors on the commercial market. The luring of the crowds with the optical novelty of the moment was the bait for dealers, agents, and all those who could invest their money on devices for public entertainment. The main goal for inventors like Edison, shrewd businessmen prior than passionate, disinterested savants, was to encourage commercial interest in their devices, as the real profitable business was deemed that of making machines, not films.

Alfred O. Tate, Edison’s private assistant, stressed at various times how Edison considered himself mainly an inventor, rather than a scientist, for his ambition to create an

¹⁰ The admission price to these film theaters was a nickel, hence the name nickelodeons. Nickelodeons were commonly called “the poor man’s theater.” See André Gaudreault, *American Cinema, 1890-1909: Themes and Variations*, especially pp. 16-17.

application that would be economically viable.¹¹ Following this rationale, we understand how popular curiosity had to be exploited until it was fresh and thus profitable. Edison himself, after constructing his *Kinetoscope*, wrote to Muybridge how “doubtful” he was there could be “any commercial feature in it.” “(I) fear that they (*Kinetoscopes*) will not earn their cost,” he wrote.¹²

The urge not to let public interest in optical entertainment wane explains the proliferation of new devices between 1890 and 1895 and the continuous perfecting of the existing ones. On the wave of the successful reception of Edison’s primitive ‘film’ before the female audience, major improvements were made to the *Kinetoscope*, including a coin-operated system for the viewing. By the end of 1892, the design of the apparatus was complete, also under a mechanical profile, running a 35 mm wide filmstrip, with sequenced frames perforated on each side four times, almost exactly the film format still in use today.¹³



Figure 66. Screenshot from William Dickinson’s *Blacksmith Scene* (1893). Picture in public domain.

¹¹ See Alfred O. Tate, *Edison’s Open Door: the Life Story of Thomas A. Edison, a Great Individualist*, 1938.

¹² The letter of Edison to Muybridge is quoted in John L. Fell, *Film Before Griffith*, p. 145.

¹³ See Paul Spehr, *Unaltered to Date: Developing 35mm Film*, pp. 11-14.

The first public *Kinetoscope* performance took place on May 9, 1893 at the *Brooklyn Institute of Arts and Sciences*. Filmed from a stationary camera by William Dickinson, the 34-second film was titled *Blacksmith Scene*.¹⁴ The historical importance of this movie is enhanced by the fact that it was the first film in which actors ‘performed’ a role. The public was so captivated by the originality of Edison’s device that, by the spring of 1894, the first public *Kinetoscope* parlor was opened in Manhattan. Moviegoers paid 25 cents to peer into the boxes showing five (of the ten) brief films; the ticket price, though equal to the cost to enter an amusement park or the most popular *vaudeville* theater, was no deterrent to an avid audience.¹⁵

The *Kinetoscope* boom was unstoppable, as more and more parlors opened not only in the United States. The *Kinetoscope* first appeared in Europe when a successful American businessman, Irving T. Bush, bought a dozen machines and placed them in London. Other peephole viewers were distributed shortly thereafter in France, Germany, Netherlands, and Italy in response to a growing demand.¹⁶ Louis Lumière, too, offers a further testament to the circulation of *Kinetoscopes* at popular fairs. In a 1935 interview, the inventor recalled strolling

¹⁴ See David Robinson, *From Peep Show to Palace: The Birth of American Film*, pp. 34-35.

¹⁵ The term ‘vaudeville’ as used here refers specifically to American variety entertainment that rose after 1871, which had little to do with the ‘vaudeville’ of French theatre we discussed in chapter I. M.B. Leavitt – a variety showman – argued that the term labeling American variety came from the French “Vaux de ville” (“Worth of the city”), but it is more likely that this definition was chosen «for its vagueness, its faint, but harmless exoticism, and perhaps its connotation of gentility», as Albert McLean suggests in his *American Vaudeville as Ritual* (19). For a broader overview on American Vaudeville and its audience, see Gary S. Cross, *The Playful Crowd: Pleasure Places in the Twentieth Century*, especially p. 39 ff.

¹⁶ Curiously, Ludwig Stollwerck, a chocolate and sweets manufacturer, played a decisive role in initiating the German market. His contribution was probably dictated by his personal business in automated vending machines for his candy, which made him interested in the new technical entertainments of the late nineteenth century, including mechanical music boxes, panorama machines, automat restaurants and other devices. Stollwerck ended up holding exclusive rights to the *Kinetoscope* in all the German-speaking countries. See Martin Loiperdiner, *Film & Schokolade: Stollwercks Geschäfte mit lebenden Bildern*.

among the booths of a fair many years earlier. He tells about how a “curious” apparatus, a refined version of a Magic Lantern, captured his attention:

Un soir de 1893, j’observais parmi les baraques d’une kermesse [...] un curieux appareil qui présentait à une seule personne à la fois et à travers un verre, une rapide succession d’images fixes. Cet appareil pourrait s’appeler aujourd’hui cinémascope. Faute de termes précis, on le considérait comme une lanterne magique un peu raffinée (Chardère 284).

On one night of 1893, I would observe among the booths of a fair [...] a curious apparatus, which offered to a single viewer at a time a rapid succession of fixed images through a lens. Nowadays, this apparatus might be called cinémascope. In the absence of precise terms, it was considered like a magic lantern, a little more refined.

The popularity of the *Kinetoscope* in Europe consolidated Edison’s reputation as a hero of his age, a name he had already made for himself thanks to his numerous revolutionary discoveries.¹⁷ We have seen with the *Ballo Excelsior* (1881) and its choreographic tribute to Volta and Papin as scientists revolutionizing everyday life with their inventions, how European audiences could be impressed by those who contributed to the spread of progress. The *Excelsior* indirectly celebrated Edison as well, suffice it to say how its scenography gained in visual terms from the use of thousands of bulbs disseminated on stage. The scene was eye-catching: the stage filled to capacity with dancers dressed like *abat-jours* can-canning. Edison’s invention of the carbon filament in 1879, which made available the famous Edison-style light bulbs on the mass market, meant that a performance staging the advances and benefits of progress could not but honor the inventor of electric lighting.

We should not forget that also the Great Exhibitions did make effective channels contributing to spread the craze for the American “genius of electricity,” as the Italian press labeled Edison. On occasion of the first *International Exposition of Electricity* held in Paris in 1881 at the *Palais de l’Industrie* on the Champs Elysees, the stand of the *Società Generale*

¹⁷ See Matthew Josephson, *Edison: A Biography*.

Italiana was sponsoring the “Edison electrical system” that the American inventor modeled after the gas lighting then in use.

An exhibition such that on electricity held in Paris in 1881, assembled the best of technological progress, both in terms of inventors and inventions, offering visual proof of the benefits of the advent of lighting. Exhibitors came from the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, France, Holland, and the United States. Only a few years earlier, small, rudimentary electrical achievements were displayed at the *Universal Exposition* in Paris in 1878.



Figure 67. A poster advertising the *Théâtrophone*. Picture in public domain.

Among the most impressive displays at the Parisian fair was the electric tramway of Werner Von Siemens, the telephone of Alexander Graham Bell, and the *Théâtrophone* (*The Theatre Phone*), a telephonic apparatus evolving from an invention of Clément Ader, which allowed subscribers to hear the live opera and performances even two kilometers away over the telephone lines.¹⁸ Among the ‘attractions’ displayed in Paris in 1881 the *Théâtrophone* attests to how strongly the innovation brought by technological progress determined the appreciation of

¹⁸ See Danièle Laster, *Splendeurs et misères du Théâtrophone*.

entertainments by a mass public and consequently their marketability. The *Théâtrophone* was such a success that after its first demonstration at the 1881 Paris fair, it was commercialized by the *Compagnie du Théâtrophone*. It remained in operation until 1932, when it was rendered obsolete by the radio and the phonograph.

Besides the *Théâtrophone*, audiences at Paris 1881 did marvel at Edison's incandescent light bulbs. Edison had consciously modeled his electric system on the previous gas-operated technology. He replaced gas pipes running under the streets with electrical conductors carrying current. Electric lamps, in fact, could be controlled individually as it happened before with gas lighting. Needless to say, such a conquest in everyday life was about to change people's lifestyle for good.

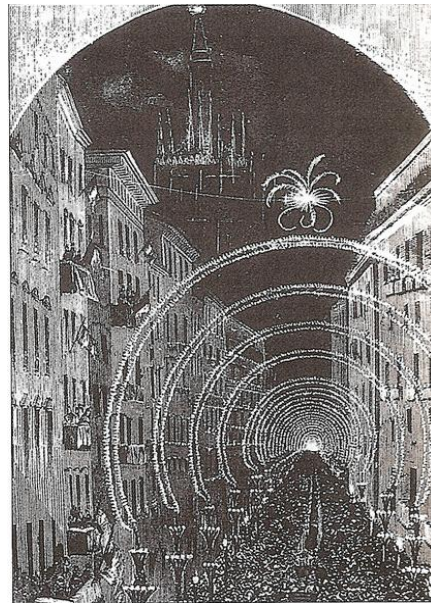


Figure 68. Electric lighting for the *Esposizione Nazionale* in Milan in 1881. From *La rivista illustrata*, 1881.

The Galleria Vittorio Emanuele in Milan was entirely illuminated with electric bulbs on occasion of the *Esposizione Nazionale* in 1881. The effects of the electrical power company Edison had established in the United States were spreading all over the world. Giuseppe

Colombo, a Milanese engineer and businessman was so impressed by Edison's electric system he saw at the 1881 Parisian fair, that he became the sole agent for its distribution in Italy.¹⁹ After returning from America, where he visited Edison's first central station in the world on Pearl Street, in the heart of Wall Street financial district in Manhattan, Colombo built in Milan the first central power plant in Italy. It started generating electricity in 1883 and was known everywhere as the central station of Santa Redegonda; the building hosting it was in fact the former Santa Redegonda Theatre located on the street with the same name. Although remodeled in 1851, this theatre was demolished to give prominence to the other Milanese playhouse par excellence, *La Scala*. Curiously, when Colombo's power plant was torn down in 1926 as it no longer responded to the urban needs in terms of electric capacity, it was replaced by a cinema, the *Odeon*.

As a consequence of the enormous transformations it brought to everyday life, industry, and the field of entertainment, electricity was understandably hailed as the real new marvel of the century. In European collective imagination, America became the epitome of Modernity and cutting-edge lifestyle. The *Excelsior* itself, when touring Italy and Europe after its debut in 1881, contributed to spread and reinforce the American myth with its allusive eye-catching scenes, such as those staging a reproduction of the Brooklyn Bridge, the telegraph room in Washington, DC, or New York skyline at the back of Papin's steamer. The telegraph, for instance, invented by Samuel Morse in the 1840s, by the time the *Excelsior* was staged, had already revolutionized

¹⁹ The life of Giuseppe Colombo, his experiences at the Great Exhibitions (especially those in Philadelphia and Paris) as avid visitor, and his rapport with Thomas A. Edison are detailed by Rita Cambria in her biography of the Milanese engineer contained in the Treccani Encyclopedia. See *Giuseppe Colombo*, in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 27, 1982, available at [www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/giuseppe-colombo_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/giuseppe-colombo_(Dizionario-Biografico)/), URL accessed on April 19, 2012.

long-distance communication.²⁰ By the 1860s, in fact, a telegraph line had already been laid across the Atlantic Ocean from the U.S. to Europe.

It is also true, however, that many of the icons of the new era, especially those belonging to the New World, spread after the *Excelsior* was premiered in 1881. The Brooklyn Bridge, for instance, was inaugurated in 1883, but the echo of its opening as the first suspended bridge in the world did engross audiences, making this event an inescapable landmark for a theatrical performance that aimed to stage the advances of progress. In fact, the bridge was included in the ballet as an icon of progress since 1883 onward. Besides the *Excelsior*, Italian audiences did certainly see pictures of this impressive construction and read articles about this widely advertised event.



Figure 69. Poster for the *Excelsior*. The Brooklyn Bridge is here a prominent icon. Picture in public domain.

When the Brooklyn Bridge was opened to the public on May 24, 1883, the ceremony was attended by thousands. *The New-York Times* estimated that “over 50,000 people came in by the railroads alone.”²¹ The crowds enjoyed fireworks, processions, band performances, gunfire from

²⁰ In 1844, Samuel Morse successfully sent his first telegraph message from Washington, DC to Baltimore, Maryland.

²¹ “The Bridge formally opened,” in *The New-York Times*, May 25, 1883.

ships, and an impressive electric illumination with Edison-style bulbs. In a celebratory respect, the Bridge was hailed as a true commercial attraction, with the same spectacularization we have seen characteristic of the *Great Exhibitions* and their mass entertainments. In order to walk through the bridge, in fact, audiences had bought tickets as for a traditional show. Chronicles even report that “those who hadn’t tickets, and who were very curious, paid \$2 to ticket speculators.”²²

Also in architectural terms, the Brooklyn Bridge, like the playhouses discussed earlier, alluded to the European Gothic. The neo-Gothic style of the Bridge, with its characteristic towers and pointed arches above the passageways, espoused with the cutting-edge aerodynamics and wired-structure. This blending of old and new resembled the first Milanese Panorama rotunda, in which the classical twelve-sided shape of the exterior did wed with the high-tech iron skeleton of the interior. No matter if it was bridge building, commercial constructions, or the erection of new playhouses, the past returned to give style and grace.

On a different side, the *Excelsior* was representative of the same flurry of progress and the urge to keep the pace with it, which we highlighted in constructions. The ballet, in fact, was the rare instance of a performance with an extraordinarily long run. Periodically, it was revised to make reference to the advancements occurring after its 1881 debut. Every revision was expected to offer visual proof of events, discoveries, devices, and buildings that were transforming the world. The press did remark how the very subject of the *Excelsior* allowed updates and kept the production constantly alive, “l’Excelsior è forse il solo ballo degno di esistere e resistere non solo per l’intreccio della mimica e per la bontà della musica, ma per la possibilità di essere aggiornato ad ogni nuovo periodo del progresso e della civiltà” (“The

²² “The Bridge formally opened,” in *The New-York Times*, May 25, 1883.

Excelsior is perhaps the only ballet worth of existing and enduring not only for the gestures interweaving and the excellence of music, but for the possibility to be updated according to every new period of progress and civilization”).²³

Journals disseminated references to America as the land of innovations and progress. The Italian journal *L'illustrazione cinematografica*, for instance, gave large attention to the occasion the famous Italian tenor Alessandro Bonci visit to Edison's headquarter in New Jersey.²⁴ These pages are representative not only of the geniality of Edison's scientific accomplishments, but also of the encounter between Italian artistry (Bonci) and American know-how (Edison). On a different perspective, what the press was reinforcing was basically the same message of fraternity and collaborations among different cultures and peoples staged by the *Excelsior*.

Edison's reputation as a positive hero was rooted so deeply in the collective imagination that he became even the fictional protagonist of some late-19th-century American and European literary production. The early science fiction American writer Garrett P. Serviss published *Edison's Conquest of Mars* (1898), a sequel to *Fighters from Mars*, in which the popular inventor warded off a Martian invasion.²⁵ Although Serviss' work was an unauthorized sequel to H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*, Edison did like it and encouraged its publication as a profitable promotional vehicle to his discoveries. The plot, in fact, revolved entirely around Edison rescuing the world thanks to two prodigious inventions of his: a flying car contravening gravity through electromagnetic repulsion and a gun capable of disintegrating atoms in objects.

²³ *Il Messaggero*, October 16, 1919. Quoted in Flavia Pappacena, *Excelsior*, p. 120.

²⁴ See “Un'intervista di Bonci con Edison” in *L'illustrazione cinematografica*, July 5-10, 1913, pp. 5-7.

²⁵ Written on commission from the “Boston Post”, this was an unauthorized version of H.G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds*, which was published despite his strong protests. See Patrick Parrinder, *H.G. Wells: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 4–5.

Significantly, three years before (1886) in Paris, Villiers De L'Isle-Adam had published *L'Ève future*, a symbolist science fiction that used Edison's fame as an appealing literary gimmick. In the *Avis au Lecteur*, Villiers De L'Isle-Adam defends his decision to turn Edison into a character: the American inventor was the perfect interpreter of a "légende moderne" (24). Gifted with magical powers, the fictionalized Edison creates a female android in his laboratory, into which he will inject intelligence and a spiritual essence to compensate for the intellectual emptiness of the real woman that has inspired the artificial copy. This experiment typifies the potentiality of human progress, seen as strictly linked to the value of scientific research and its power of social transformation. The android is destroyed in a shipwreck at the end of the novel, which suggests that the author is aware of the limitations of mechanical power and the moral depravity in technological advancement. The death of Edison's synthetic creature seems to forecast the depersonalization and dehumanization that come with progress.

An unusual narrative at the threshold between magic and science, *L'Ève future* dramatizes the contrasting traits acquired by men of science on the two sides of the Ocean. In contrast with Serviss, whose novel was underpinned by a faith in progress, a work ethic, and a sense of democratic community (the same values the *Excelsior* would devoutly stage), Villiers De L'Isle-Adam offered a hybrid representation of scientific advancement. In his novel, in fact, the man of science appears still mysterious and linked to witchcraft, a sort of modern transfiguration of Faust.

As we have seen in the European response to *phantasmagorias* and their charm over the crowds, scientific advancements remained in Europe inseparable from practices of magic. Optical devices, together with the *camera obscura* and the Magic Lantern showcased dreadful

tableaux vivant, where the main attraction for most in the audience was the very macabre content: skeletons and ghosts, devils and phantoms.

Throughout Villiers De L'Isle-Adam's narrative, American positivism overlaps with artistic interpretations; the likeable scientist had a talent so grandiose that he appears superhuman. In Villiers De L'Isle-Adam's description of 'his' Edison, we see an ambiguity between artist and scientist, which is presented also as a physiognomic trait, "C'était presque le visage de l'artiste *traduit* en un visage de savant" ("It was almost the face of an artist, *translated* into the face of a scientist") (1).

I consider Edison a key figure in the allure of modernity over the crowds, especially for his involuntary contribution to the prolific combination of the practical American faith in technology with the abstract and artistic naïveté of Europe, especially France and Italy. In fact, if Edison was hailed as the hero spreading the New World's civilization, the Europe welcoming him was still the urban space of Baudelaire and the *poètes maudits*, more precisely a discordant scenario where the euphoria of modernity mingled with melancholy and alienation. Significantly, in fact, Walter Benjamin built right on Baudelaire's anatomies of the crowds and the city to theorize the impact of 19th-century culture with the modern world and the forces of the urban commodity capitalism.²⁶

In Italy, then, the poetics of *Verismo* as well as Verga's short stories and novels were cautioning the crowds against the destructive effect of modernization over moral values. How not to think of *I Malavoglia*, published in 1881, the same year when the *Excelsior* was staged? In this seminal novel Verga dealt with the dark side of the progress and questioned the benefits of industrial and social emancipation. Unlike the ballet, Verga attacked the destructive forces of

²⁶ See Walter Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*.

modernity and the negative sentiments linked to it; greed and selfishness exemplified the emotions accompanying the individuals' desire to constantly move forward. Progress was envisioned as a blunder, an illusory force that swept everyone away, without any social regard. Giosuè Carducci, one of the major Italian poets of that period was preoccupied by how industrialization was detaching individuals from traditions. In Carducci's "poemetto" *Ça ira*, (*It will go*), written in 1883 and inspired by the motto Benjamin Franklin used when he was in Paris campaigning in support of the War of Independence (1776-1785), references to a revolutionary past are clear metaphors to discuss the plagues of recent history.²⁷ Carducci blames "positivismo e americanismo" ("Positivism and Americanism") that "lavorano di buzzo buono a macinare tutto il mondo de' vecchi iddei, tutto l'ideale e tutto il fantastico, tutto il classico e tutto il romantico. Nulla ha da rimanere in piedi, se non il vero materiale, il vero che si tocca, che si brancica, che si compra e vende, che si ammazza" ("hammer away at grinding up all the world of old Gods, all the ideal and the fantastic, everything classical and the romantic. Nothing has to remain standing, if not the real material, the reality you can touch, you can grope, you can buy and sell, you can kill").

This contradiction between a blind faith in technological advancements, as *Excelsior* staged, and the critical attitude of some intellectuals towards industrialization, I believe, embodies the spirit of progress itself. Considering how any novel discovery is subject to getting old rapidly - especially as soon as it becomes part of the daily routine - the consequent quest for further discoveries confirms only the cyclic feature of the industrial process.

²⁷ *Ça ira* consists of twelve sonnets Carducci composed between February 27 and April 29, 1883, and that was published in Rome, in that year, by editor Angelo Sommaruga. In 1887, the poem was included in the seventh book of *Rime nuove*. See Giosuè Carducci, *Ça ira*, now in *Opere*, vol. XXIV, p. 388 ff.

In *Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century*, Benjamin uses an enlightening quote from Jules Michelet's *Avenir! Avenir!*, which exalts the steady clash between what already exists and the new.²⁸ He states that "each epoch dreams the one to follow" (4). Benjamin interprets this longing as a process dictated by images that belong to the collective sphere, in which oldness and newness are ceaselessly interwoven, although he also glimpses within it the individuals' determination to detach themselves from all that is "antiquated." Interestingly, Benjamin connects the urge of detachment to a distancing that inevitably embraces the recent past insofar as the new nourishes a powerful imagination capable of destroying what has happened before. In fact, he developed a dialectical relation with history. He stresses how the 19th century's ambition to make its own 'present' did not show any regard for the outcome, that is a hybrid *presentness*, constantly changing, and barely distinguishable from a still uncertain future. According to Benjamin, any successive epoch is unimaginable, unless with the awareness that it is inevitably indebted to elements belonging to what he calls an *Urgeschichte*, a primal history.

If the endless production of newness is central to modernity, Benjamin claims that there must be a collective need to search for "utopia" and for social advancement. In fact, people reverse in their "wish images" their hope "both to overcome and to transfigure the immaturity of the social product and the inadequacies in the social organization of production" (*Paris*, 4). Here we witness a utopian thinking that recalls Villiers De L'Isle-Adam's *L'Ève future*, which offers an interpretation of the industrial progress as an optimistic advancement towards the future, despite the author's preoccupation for its consequences. However, *L'Ève future* envisioned scientific evolution less optimistically than *Excelsior*. In the ballet, in fact, social progress

²⁸ Michelet's quotation is to be referred to the version of *Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century* that Benjamin wrote for the *Exposé* of 1935. Benjamin revised this essay, deleting and adding some considerations, though he maintained the same title, for the *Exposé* of 1939. The quote from Michelet is expunged from the second version.

resulted from work ethic and dedication at the service of technical advancements; hence, the spectacular staging glorifying bourgeois values of dynamism and social upheaval. The end of the performance, in fact, was anything but tragic and pessimistic: the curtain dropped on a light-hearted can-can in honor of a blind faith in scientific progress, only as a carrier of well-being.

The critical analysis of the Positivist ideals as theorized by *L'Ève future*, however, was not representative of the collective trend that characterized Europe in the last three decades of the nineteenth century. We have seen how the faith in technological advancement was blind and destined to spread widely; more importantly, it seemed to be untouched by any preoccupation for future consequences, both moral and ethical. Seen under this lens, the fictionalized Edison, too, after all, epitomizes the good side of the progress, being the confirmation of the advancement brought by science into everyday life. Significantly, in fact, at the very beginning of *L'Ève future* Edison is intent to praise his own discoveries, remarking how life would have been miserable without them.

Gian Piero Brunetta rightly calls Edison “an authentic catalyst” (“un autentico catalizzatore”), unveiling his ambition to wed scientific and industrial interests to the popular dream of wellbeing (*Il viaggio* 452). After all, we should not forget that the new discoveries and the scientific progress had already promoted a compelling confidence in the productive process; and questioning this faith was increasingly difficult, insofar as industrial mechanics extended comforts and security to masses of people.

It was playing on the very allure that technology had on the crowds that Edison felt it was more profitable to concentrate on apparatuses than in moving pictures as entertainment. This explains why, along with the *Kinetoscope*, Edison was perfecting the *Kinetograph*, a device taking its name from the Greek for “motion recorder.” The *Kinetograph* was essentially a camera

with which Edison captured images to accompany the music of his most popular *Phonograph* he launched in 1877.²⁹

Edison concluded that showing movies on individual viewing machines like his *Kinetoscope* could be more profitable than showing them before an audience. While Edison had to use two devices, one functioning as a camera (the *Kinetograph*) and one as a viewer (the *Kinetoscope*) to feature his motion pictures, on the other side of the Ocean the Lumières were perfecting a versatile apparatus that could be simultaneously a camera, a projector, and even a printer, they called *Cinématographe*.

The Lumières' system had many advantages over Edison's. Besides recording, printing, and projecting, the *Cinématographe* was hand-crank operated and extremely lightweight, an invaluable merit for operators who, for the first time, could shoot on the spot their documentaries. The *Kinetoscope*, instead, weighed several hundred pounds, since it required a heavy battery, and was intended for a steady projection. Edison, in fact, shot his films entirely in his New Jersey studio, the Black Maria, using staged scenes and actors he essentially borrowed from the Vaudeville theatre and the Great Exhibitions.³⁰

In terms of filmic aesthetic, the *Cinématographe* represented a considerable refinement, insomuch as the *actualités* it featured were scenes from everyday life and taken from the real world, in other words, common situations the crowds could recognize as representatives of their own lifestyle and daily routine. Edison's sets, instead, kept anchoring the first attempts of

²⁹ Edison initially thought motion pictures as a complement to his *Phonograph*. He strove to combine moving images with synchronous sound, a challenge he eventually abandoned as impractical. Edison's secretary left an account of his master's attempts to continually develop new technologies. See William K.L. Dickinson and Antonia Dickinson, *History of the Kinetograph, Kinetoscope, and Kinetophonograph*, 1895.

³⁰ For a broader overview on the films Edison realized for his *Kinetoscope*, see Charles Musser, *Thomas A. Edison and his Kinetographic Motion Pictures*; see also *Edison Motion Pictures, 1890-1900 : An Annotated Filmography*, by the same author.

cinematography to well-known theatrical performances showcasing dancers, acrobats, and the same ‘fauna’ of human attractions that were the rage in freak shows and fairs. We have discussed in Chapter II Edison’s commercial strategy to film Buffalo Bill and Fatima, the belly-dancer, exploiting their proven appeal on the crowds.

However, the most consistent difference that distinguished the spectacle offered by the *Cinématographe* from that of Edison’s devices was the commercialization of motion pictures as collective entertainment. In the *Kinetoscope*, running images were available only for a single viewer at a time. Consequently, inside the parlors there was no sharing in terms of visual experience among the viewers. In the *Cinématographe*, instead, films were projected on a screen in front of an audience. The spectacle was thus a collective viewing experience, with strangers sitting one next to the other, in a dark room where dim lights let their attention be entirely focused on the screen, and forced to share emotional and contrasting reactions.

The night of December 28, 1895, when the *Cinématographe* debuted, marked the commercial birth of cinema. Instead of charging audiences per viewing, as Edison did, the Lumières charged the public for the admission to a shared performance, initiating a trend of profits derived from screenings and not the only sale of the machines. Whether or not the French inventors did not advertise the first show of their *Cinématographe* as they supposedly believed there could be no commercial future in their apparatus as often asserted by cinema scholars, the success of the screening acknowledged cinema going as a compelling mass leisure activity.³¹ Since that night onward, the *Cinématographe* triggered a collective euphoria that spurred the number of viewers from thirty-three of the first screening to several thousands in few weeks.

³¹ Such anecdotes are widely reported, especially on the wave of Georges Sadoul’s *Histoire générale du cinéma*.



Figure 70. *La sortie des usines Lumière* (1895).
Picture in public domain.



Figure 71. *Le repas de bébé* (1895)
Picture in public domain

With their brand new device, the Lumières filmed and projected before a paying audience the pleasurable effect of everyday life on screen. The *Cinématographe* succeeded in turning ordinary actions into powerful sources of popular entertainment. In fact, if we look at the allusive titles of the ten films screened on December, 28, 1895-- *La sortie des usines Lumière*, *La voltige*, *La pêche aux poissons rouges*, *Le repas de bébé*, to name a few-- we notice how customary scenes from life, such as workers leaving a factory, a baby attracted by a red fish, or a swim in the sea lost their normalness because of the allure that seeing them in motion on a screen would give them. All these films lacked a refined narrative, were only few seconds long, but imbued as they were with such a communicative power, their images magnetized viewers with the same mesmerizing effect produced by goods showcased in Department Stores.

Early cinematography and mass consumption tailored their 'products' for the public using similar strategies and techniques. They both played on the popular longing to experience and hold the latest results of technological progress and fashion. Cinematography did instill the gratification of the gaze in the spectators with the same intensity with which consumer culture subjugated the crowds selling merchandize as fulfilled dreams. So as Panoramas had imposed

admissions charged at standardized prices and showcased goods in stores had become the targets of a commercial strategy placing price tags on displayed objects, the *Cinématographe* inaugurated the trend to ticket the entrance to movie theaters. Such tactics secured the control of the crowds and reinforced capitalism, operating towards standardization and rationalization. Knowing consumers' tastes was the most profitable commercial strategy, thus a ticketed entrance allowed to know exactly how many viewers had watched a film, as well as shoppers' preference for a specific product helped the store owners design the most catchy display. Both movie houses and Department Stores, after all, were run by the need to please and satisfy the public's taste.

It did not take the Lumières too long to understand that if their *Cinématographe* was not marketed in the right manner their business would fail. Instead of selling their invention, the French brothers licensed their apparatus in foreign countries. This meant that licensees had the exclusive to show Lumière films, had to pay the Lumière operators sent to present films on catalogue and shoot new ones. And they had to remit a share of the showings proceeds to the owners, the Lumière brothers. This commercial strategy allowed the two French inventors to hold for one year a monopoly on world cinema. Starting 1896, in fact, aggressive competition resulted in a number of imitations of the *Cinématographe*, forcing the Lumières to start selling copies of their apparatus.

Edison in particular was the competitor the French siblings feared the most, when in 1896 he responded to the *Cinématographe* with his as much versatile portable camera: the *Vitascope*.³² The first theatrical exhibition of the *Vitascope* before a paying audience was held on April 23, 1896, at the Music Hall in New York City.

³² The *Vitascope* became a popular attraction in variety and Vaudeville theaters across the United States. The Edison Manufacturing Company stopped marketing the *Vitascope* after developing a new projector called *Projectoscope* in November 1896. See Charles Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company*.

Although their decision to license the *Cinématographe* in the face of unmanageable competition and the consequent loss of their monopoly, the Lumières set the foundation for worldwide cinematography and device-making. Firstly, they called attention to marketing strategies in launching the filmic product. What they demonstrated with their 1895 screening was that projections for large audiences generated more profits than the *Kinetoscope*. Furthermore, the Lumières' work made it clear that what cinema needed was a commercial audience in a dedicated venue. Secondly, by sending their operators abroad the Lumières not only commercialized their apparatus and made it known worldwide, but also stocked up material for later documentaries. What operators filmed on the spot with the Lumière light and portable camera, in fact, served as useful material for profitable screenings back home for viewers avid to 'know' the world without traveling.

On the wave of the success wielded by the *actualités* of the *Cinématographe*, any competing projector after 1897 would feature "actuality films." The Vitascope, the Eidoloscope, the Kineopticon, and the Biograph are only some of the numerous devices imitating the Lumière prototype: all projected motion pictures taken from everyday life and events as people lived them. The most used subjects were tourist destinations, railway trains, exotic views, but also military exercises, patriotic parades, and public events. Certainly, projections respected the tastes of local audiences, and on both sides of the Ocean filmic production was quite similar in content and style.

The railroad icon, for instance, since the Lumières' exploitation of its appeal over the crowds in *L'arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat* (*Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat*) of 1896, was one of the most widely used. The train was clearly emblematic of the transformation that industrialization and technological progress had operated in everyday life. Its appearance on

screen celebrated the advantages of modern technology, instilling an iconic image in the collective imagination. Furthermore, what should not be forgotten is the impact that seeing for the first time a train moving on a screen must have had on early viewers.

When the Lumières directed and produced *L'arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat* (*Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat*) in 1896, audiences ran in horror from the screening room of the Grand Café's Salon Indien, terrorized by a train that seemed destined to run over them. This anecdote has been often reiterated, as scholars such as George Sadoul and his *Histoire Générale du Cinéma* contributed to spread the legend of mass panic. Other historians have contended that this was wild exaggeration of what, in fact, occurred. Martin Loiperdinger, for instance, has demonstrated that the film featuring the moving train was not screened until January 1896, and not on the night of December 28, 1895, in occasion of the *Cinématographe* debut, as anecdotes recount.³³ Film historian Tom Gunning, in his well-known study *An Aesthetic of Astonishment*, profiles the viewer watching the Lumières' train approaching, drawing a portrait of an audience member perfectly capable of distinguishing fiction from reality.³⁴

Rather than separating truth from legend, what is crucial here is referring to the screened moving train as an episode key to investigate the power of filmic image over the crowds. Following Gunning, it seems unlikely that early spectators were as foolish or naïve as some historians have suggested, especially considering the many and various optical experiences they had already known, from the magic lantern shows, Moving Panoramas, and dioramic spectacles. I question whether they were vulnerably exposed to the threat of the image, “with no defenses, with no tradition by which to understand it” (*An Aesthetic of Astonishment* 114). This study has demonstrated that viewers were hardly inexperienced when it came to optical illusions and

³³ See Martin Loiperdinger, *Lumière's Arrival of the Train: Cinema's Founding Myth*.

³⁴ See Tom Gunning, *An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator*.

photographic tricks. While it is certainly possible that some audience members were unprepared for the train scene and reacted with alarm, there is insufficient documentary evidence to prove it.

Extremely captivating for the public must have been primarily the opportunity to satisfy the curiosity of seeing familiar scenes in motion, animated by the tools of the latest technology. Cinematography did not offer a stationary image like the shows operated by a magic lantern, nor painted pictures unrolled on a canvas like Moving Panoramas did, but rather the continuous movement of a real object. Significantly, what stands out is a spectatorial absorption that was not determined by *seeing* the real, but rather watching the *image* of the real. In other words, spectators did no longer deal with a depicted/reproduced/imitated reality, rather they gushed over the representation of reality.

Anecdotes of a panicking audience at the first screening of *Arrival of a train* aside, watching the moving black locomotive or any other image in motion did produce a juxtaposition of multiple feelings in the viewers, as reality on screen was both novel and disorienting. If we look at how the Parisian premiere of the *Cinématographe* was reviewed by the Italian press, we see how to be stressed was essentially the ladies' fear for carriages and horses on screen:

Potenza della illusioni! Quando ci si trova in faccia a questi quadri in movimento, si domanda a se stessi se si è in preda a una allucinazione, o se si è attori di queste scene stupefacenti di realismo... Il signor Lumière aveva proiettato una strada di Lione. Le *tranvie*, le carrozze circolavano e si avanzavano incontro agli spettatori. Un cavaliere veniva verso di noi al gran galoppo. Una delle mie vicine era talmente sotto la impressione, che si alzò per salvarsi e non si riassise che quando il cavallo fu passato. Tutte le parigine vollero da allora in poi provare quello spavento.³⁵

The power of illusions! When one finds himself before these pictures in motion, wonders if he is stricken with hallucination or an actor in these astounding scenes of realism... Mr. Lumière had projected a street in Lion. The *tramways* and the

³⁵ *Il Resto del Carlino*, April 5, 1896.

carriages circulated and advanced towards the viewers. A horseman was galloping towards us. One of my (female) neighbor was so shocked, that she stood up in order to save herself and did not seat back until the horse passed. Since then, all the Parisian ladies craved to experience that fright.

Curiosity, together with shock and awe, clearly served to disseminate an *aura* around cinematic spectacle, an *aura* that must have been convincing publicity for the new medium, exactly as the audience reaction had been in earlier decades with optical illusions. The idea that an everyday event could provide emotions of astonishment and shock went a long way toward empowering the work of the filmmaker. Shocking the audiences with images of violent, intense motion enticed and entranced viewers. We have seen in the previous chapter, how war images and atrocities on screen enthralled the public, overshadowing even reserves for amoral contents. Panic and attraction worked on unconscious level and glued spectators to the cinematic image. The screen was able to provide a pleasurable experience, but also demonstrated the ‘communicative’ power of images, rather than words.

In Italy, the *actualités* spread thanks to the many operators taken on by the Lumière firm to expand its business throughout Europe and by those enterprising sole distributors of the *Cinématographe*, such as Giuseppe Filippi, Vittorio Calcina, and Albert Promio. To these men we owe the commercial advertising of the cinematic spectacle through handbills, posters, programs and brochures they disseminated throughout the cities reached by the *Cinématographe*, Rome, Milan, Turin, Florence, but also smaller towns, such as Padua, Monza, and those of the Marche region.³⁶

Monza, in particular, attracted the first cinema operators, and it was here that a foretaste of what cinema would be was offered to King Umberto I and his wife Queen Margherita. It took

³⁶ These materials are collected by Valerio Angelini and Fiorangelo Pucci in *1896-1912, Materiali per una storia del cinema delle origini*.

place at the Villa Reale di Monza on September 10, 1896.³⁷ Many claimed the paternity of the Monza screening--Filippi, Calcina, Promio, and the Lumière operator Pierre Chapuis-- since so many took part in this event, some in the capacity of agent and promoter, others in that of entrepreneurs or person in charge of the projection. What is to stress here about the Monza screening, however, is its function of social leveler. The wonder of reality on screen tallied not only with the representation of everyday events, but also with the chance for the ordinary public to watch the same spectacle that has entertained the royal couple. It was not a mystery that authorities loved to be enthralled by the cinematic novelty. Besides Umberto I's invitation to Filippi to project his shootings "dal vero" at the Villa Reale, also Pope XII asked the Italian operator to be filmed on the papal chair and offer a public projection in the Sistine Chapel.³⁸

Manifestos advertising the spectacles of the *Cinématographe* Lumière are good sources of evidence of the heterogeneous public attending them. Pictures feature people of different age, class, profession, and sex mingling together. If the very first Italian screening of the *Cinématographe* --that in Rome at the photography studio *Le Lieure* on March 13, 1896-- allowed the entrance solely to a selected public, the following projections became soon social events, whose 50 cent ticket price suggests the attendance of the lower classes.

³⁷ A detailed account of this screening is offered by Pierre Chapuis, credited as the operator sent by the Lumière firm to film the event. See Jacques Rittaud-Hutinet and his chapter on Pierre Chapuis, in *Le cinéma des origines. Les frères Lumière et leurs opérateurs*.

³⁸ "Il figlio del mezzadro pioniere del cinema," in *La Stampa*, May 23, 2004.

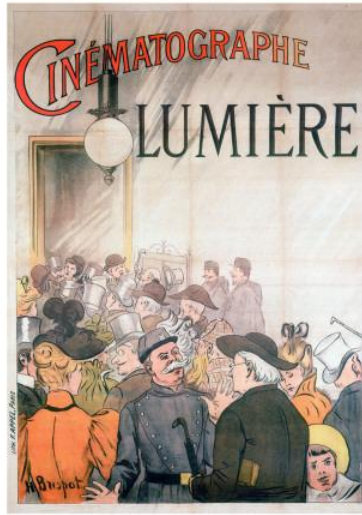


Figure 72. Poster advertising the Cinématographe Lumière with a noticeable class mingling in the audience. Picture in the public domain

On March 29, 1897, a year after the Roman debut of the *Cinématographe*, the journal *Il Messaggero* reviewed the ongoing screening at *La lieure* and wrote that “lo spettacolo è a tale buon mercato che anche i più poveri possono levarsi la soddisfazione di ammirare la stupenda invenzione di fine di secolo” (“the show is so inexpensive that also the poorest people can gratify themselves by admiring the wonderful end-of-century invention”).³⁹ This comment sensibly calls attention to the popular nature of the cinematic spectacle and how the managers’ vocation was commercial, rather than elitist; a considerable change, if we look at how class supportive had been the review of the *Cinématographe* opening barely twelve months earlier:

Iersera, nello stabilimento fotografico “Le Lieure,” al Vicolo del Mortaro, avanti ad un pubblico sceltissimo, tra cui abbiamo notato il sindaco di Roma con la sua signora, è stato inaugurato il *Cinematografo*, l’ultima originale invenzione che così clamoroso successo ebbe ultimamente a Parigi e in altre capitali d’Europa.⁴⁰

³⁹ Quoted in Aldo Bernardini, *Cinema muto italiano, 1896-1904*, p. 28.

⁴⁰ *Tribuna*, March, 14, 1896. Quoted in Aldo Bernardini, *Cinema muto italiano, 1896-1904*, p. 25.

Yesterday night, at the photography studio “Le Lieure,” on Vicolo del Mortaro, before a very selected public, among which we noticed the Mayor of Rome and his lady, the *Cinematografo* was inaugurated, the latest original invention that had lately so much success in Paris and other European capitals.

We have seen with optical entertainments at fairs that organizers could not afford elite performances, as a selected and refined public alone would not be remunerative enough. Cinema followed the same logic. Inexpensive 50-cent tickets and running times from 2pm to 10pm, seven days a week, were all done in an effort to attract the widest possible audience of viewers. A further explanation to the urge for owners and agents to encourage mass attendance, however, was the threat of the public’s volubility in terms of visual novelties. Inventors would prefer to invest on the machine sale, as a consequence of the fact that audiences got soon tired of optical tricks; spectatorial volubility, after all, was known since the times of the *camera obscura* and the Magic Lantern shows. A proof that cinematography as well was about to take the same risk of declining in popularity is the offer of *Cinématographe* films in combination with Panorama shows, which was starting barely a week after the cinema premiere at *Le Lieure*. On March 19, 1896, *Il Messaggero* advertised “animated photographs” in conjunction with Panorama views of distant locations.⁴¹

Looking at the film poster below, not only do we notice that the photography studio *Le Lieure* added to its name the more inclusive label *Museo Foto-Elettrico*, but also that its programming underwent a substantial renovation in terms of quality and variety of the entertainments. From January 29 to February 5, 1897, the crowds could choose between eight films projected with the *Cinématographe* Lumière, the suggestive demonstration of Röntgen’s

⁴¹ Quoted in Aldo Bernardini, *Cinema muto italiano, 1896-1904*, p. 25.

invisible X Rays, and two impressive Panoramas (The Tour of the World and the apparition of the Virgin Mary to Bernadette inside the grotto at Lourdes).



Figure 73. Poster advertising the wide selection offered at *Le Lieure* together with the Cinématographe Lumière. Picture in public domain.

Visual attractions were strategically combined to respect all tastes and pockets. The *Cinématographe* alone would cost 50 cents, against the 40 cents to see the Panoramic Tour of the World and the 25 cents for the Lourdes apparition. When combining the three attractions, however, the public would spend only 1 Lira, “I tre biglietti ora detti si possono avere cumulativamente per il prezzo di Una lira,” reads the film poster; a tempting offer, if we consider that 1 Lira was the price for Röntgen’s show alone.

This effort to sell films as part of a package deal suggests that relying exclusively on cinema for profits was not satisfactory. Only when pairing films with well-tested performances (Panoramas) and the newest visual attraction (X –rays shows), managers could be sure to make a profit; a strategy that made clear how initially cinema did not represent a profitable entertainment on which investors would capitalize with purpose-built buildings.

The venues where the very first screenings took place, in fact, were not specifically used as movie theatre. We know that *La Lieure* in Rome was a photography studio, the same as the *Circolo Fotografico* on Via Principe Umberto in Milan, where the cinema debuted on March, 29, 1896; in Naples, the *Cinématographe* premier was held at Salone Margherita, a renowned café-concert located in the lower level of the commercial Galleria Umberto I (April 4, 1896); in Bologna the *Cinématographe* debuted at the Teatro Brunetti as intermezzo during the pantomime by Mario Costa *La storia d'un Pierrot* (August 27, 1896); in Turin, even a deconsecrated church hosted the cinema opening (November, 7, 1896).⁴²

The absence of purpose-built buildings demonstrates that in its initial phase, cinema could not suffice to itself in commercial terms. When theorizing early viewing experience, Tom Gunning remarks that spectators' attitude towards the cinematic spectacle resembled that of fairgoers before Exhibitions' divertissement: both had essentially an avid interest in astonishment. Machines, in fact, and their prodigious capabilities were the real wonder, rather than the content they would produce. In Gunning's words:

Early cinema audiences went to exhibitions to see machines demonstrated (the newest technological wonder, following in the wake of such widely exhibited machines and marvels as X-rays or, earlier, the phonograph) rather than to view films. It was the *Cinématographe*, the *Biograph*, or the *Vitascope* that were advertised on the variety bills in which they premiered, not *The Baby's Breakfast* or *The Black Diamond Express* (*The Cinema of Attraction* 231).

That audiences could marvel primarily at the performance of the apparatus is quite understandable, if we take into account how initially the cinematic spectacle relied on a spectacular strategy. Looking at the *actualités* as the first films audiences watched, we see how

⁴² Aldo Bernardini offers a careful account of the *Cinématographe* debut throughout the main Italian cities in his *Cinema muto italiano*, pp. 25-49.

their function was essentially to show what the *Cinématographe* was capable of. Storytelling was not at issue, insomuch as the goal of the projection was the demonstration that technological progress allowed now the reproduction of reality on screen. Hence, the absence of a plot was a consequence; the ‘story’ resolved in shots featuring everyday actions, images that spoke for themselves, rather than a developed narrative.

Even a revolutionary medical discovery such as Röntgen X-rays was sold as visual entertainment by the same standards as animated pictures and Panoramic views. Agents and entrepreneurs exploited the crowds’ thirst for knowledge and updated discoveries, which they skillfully turned into engaging ‘spectacles of curiosities.’ When commenting on the astounding popular fascination with X-rays, the *British Medical Journal* remarked that “the application of the discovery to the photography of hidden structure is a feat sensational enough and likely to stimulate even the uneducated imagination.”⁴³

Looking through solid bodies and seeing one’s bones was as enthralling as watching a moving train on screen or enjoying ethno shows and virtual tours of the world at the Great Exhibitions. X-rays were simply another visual ‘curiosity’ worth experiencing and paying for, whose enjoyment did empower the public for its accessibility. In fact, given their consolidated familiarity with photography and optical tricks, the crowds felt they could easily master this new scientific achievement, which, they hailed simply as an extension to photographic procedures they already knew. The press played on the very people’s acquaintance with photography when reviewing the successful reception of Röntgen’s discovery in Italy, and spoke of X-rays as a phenomenon applying the latest technological progress to consolidated systems. X-rays should

⁴³ “The New Photography”, in *The British Medical Journal* 1:1831, 1896, p.289.

be appreciated as a wieldy device even by amateur photographers, as if the prerequisite to enjoy it was a smattering of photography.⁴⁴

X-rays counted on the awe effect on the public, which explains why when new optical discoveries were presented to the public, a skilful scenography was always considered. Generally, a dark auditorium with black curtains covering the walls to emphasize darkness welcomed viewers and suggestively prepared them to the watching experience. The only light was that illuminating the premiered ‘phenomenon’ or coming from the screen, as in the case of cinema. When X-rays debuted before audiences, the effect involved swaying theatricalization, as if no distinction existed between this viewing experience and a film: they both were ‘attractions’ to sell and needed the proper scenography.

On the wave of Röntgen’s revolutionary discovery, in 1896 Edison devised a successful system allowing sharper images he called the *Fluoroscope* and finalized to mass entertainment. Edison showed the *Fluoroscope* at the Electrical Exposition in New York in January 1896. In reviewing the event, the *New York Times* wrote:

Thomas A. Edison’s fluoroscope was shown last night at the Electrical Exposition to nearly 2,000 persons. The fluoroscope exhibition was a great success from every point of view. Everyone who wished saw the bones of his or her hand, wrist, and forearm.... The sight-seers were admitted through one door of the prepared room, and immediately found themselves in almost total darkness, emphasized by black curtains covering the walls. The only light shown was one small, red glass incandescent bulb. They were formed in line as fast as they were admitted, and each one, as he or she arrived opposite the fluorescent screen, placed his or her hand behind the screen where the Röntgen rays could fall upon it.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ “Una meravigliosa scoperta nella fotografia,” in *Corriere della sera*, January, 12, 1896.

⁴⁵ “Fluoroscope: a success. Mr. Edison’s invention shown at the Electrical Exposition,” in *The New York Times*, May 12, 1896.

In the reviewer's words we cannot but recognize a familiar strategic organization of settings and audience positioning we have seen exploited in other divertissements. As the *New York Time* reviewer stressed, "the darkness of the room had a very subduing effect upon conversation."⁴⁶

As we can see, the first attempts of cinematography were treated as any other optical spectacle; they all were sheer producers of awe, whose marketability heavily counted on the ability to set up the proper scenographic and convincing techniques. After the initial euphoria for the representation of reality in motion, in fact, what was soon clear for cinema was the awareness that its future as simple awe solicitor would rapidly fade. Aldo Bernardini stresses how by the second half of 1897 the climax of spectatorial wonder for the new medium could be considered practically over (*Gli ambulanti* 14).

At the closing of the century, cinematography, albeit freshly born, suffered a crisis that jeopardized its future. Technical limits in the *Cinématographe*, such as flickering images that tired the viewer's eye and the jams in the intermittent motion mechanism, brought to its decline. If the films produced by the Lumières continued to circulate until 1900, as Aldo Bernardini demonstrates (*Gli ambulanti* 14), but by this date the two French inventors no longer held the monopoly. New modes of distribution and exhibition took root, and each country developed its own strategy to give continuity to the cinematic phenomenon. William K.L. Dickinson left Edison's company and gave birth to the Biograph Company, soon to become the leading American film company. Max and Emil Skladanowsky in Germany, and Robert W. Paul in England inaugurated their own projection systems, while in Italy Filoteo Alberini, Giuseppe Filippi, Giuseppe Boaro, and Italo Pacchioni were the main responsible of a new trend for film diffusion.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

The major difference brought by competition to the Lumière system of distribution consisted in what might be called a multi-tasking approach. Competitors positioned themselves as owners of the equipment, operators, and distributors, but more importantly, in full control of the range of their operations. With the involvement of freelancers, film distribution spread rapidly even outside Europe. Russia, Scandinavia, and the Balkans are only some of the distant locations reached by cinema operators with their portable apparatus. In their *Histoire du cinéma comparée*, Jacques Deslandes and Jacques Richard highlight how the diffusion of early cinema heavily depended on the initiative and versatility of hawkers and entrepreneurs, who sooner than others understood that the visual novelty of the moment was a profitable business. Furthermore, it was much easier to move around with films than with exotic animals and wax reproductions (170). By 1897 in France, at least ten hawkers and showmen were involved in film distribution, but these figures were destined to spread rapidly and remain vigorous until 1905 (Deslandes and Richard 143).

In Italy, the settlement of cinema in street fairs was less immediate than in France, but we have seen with Calcina and Filippi that any social class, even the lowest, was a desirable audience. Giuseppe Boaro, instead, made his name as one of the first owners of a traveling booth where he organized film premieres throughout Italy starting 1897; an activity similar to that of Italo Pacchioni, who set up cinema shows at fairs in Genoa and Milan up to 1900.⁴⁷

Significantly, film distribution moved along the same outdoor path as optical amusements. Fairs and public squares were less restricted in terms of social and financial rules. Here, the ownership, both of the apparatus and itinerant booth, made the film distribution

⁴⁷ Aldo Bernardino offers a very detailed chronology of the activity of early cinema pioneers, as well as the places and dates of their itinerant exhibitions. See his *Cinema italiano delle origini. Gli Ambulanti*.

effective. Street divertissement was by definition the one seeking to give pleasure to the widest possible tastes. Thus, when exhibited in such a context, cinema could count on a number of collateral entertainers, jugglers, acrobats, and magicians,.

Unlike performers, whose success depended entirely on their skills, cinema needed a choreographic display capable of attracting viewers and motivating them to enter the dark booth. Italo Pacchioni was one of the first pioneers not to underestimate the importance of beautifying his itinerant booth; in fact, he presented his films “in un padiglione ben costruito ed adornato signorilmente” (“in a well-done pavilion and adorned with great class”).⁴⁸ This was quite an exception: the majority of the tents were poorly and unsafely built. Pacchioni himself lamented the meager conditions of itinerant exhibiting, and the problems with electricity and the combustion of oxygen and ether necessary for the projection.⁴⁹

Technical problems, however, did not hamper the dedication of hawkers to the cinema business. Since the admission to a cinema booth was very modest, with fees as low as even ten cents, audiences easily filled the venue to capacity. However, showmen often lamented how large attendance was not necessarily synonymous with net profits. An account left by an anonymous showman found in the journal *L'aurora* calls attention to heavy disbursement.⁵⁰ Parking fees, transportation, trip expenses, coal, and the purchase of films were all outflows that had to be considered when summing up profits. As the showman lamented, “alla fine dell’anno poco rimane di attivo” (“at the end of the year, a little remains in surplus”). Despite the considerable costs of the business, investments on traveling cinema were not discouraged. Aldo Bernardini remarks that some entrepreneurs even paid the double in parking fees to occupy more

⁴⁸ Quoted in Elena Bonfanti, *Il cinema ambulante in Lombardia*, p. 329.

⁴⁹ See Aldo Bernardini, *Cinema italiano delle origini. Gli ambulanti*, p. 33.

⁵⁰ See *L'aurora*, n. 10, September 15, 1906, p. 4. Quoted in Aldo Bernardini, *Gli ambulanti*, p. 40.

space and limit the competition of similar attractions, or differentiated the admission charge. Taddeo Kuhlmann, for instance, made a distinction between the fancy seats closest to the screen, those in the middle (velvet covered benches), and the back row with rough benches (*Gli ambulanti* 41).

As showmen increasingly invested their money on the film business, advancements both in aesthetics and functioning of fairground cinema were considerable. Booths became more refined and comfortable, screens were enlarged and the quality of images improved, but more importantly, the length of films augmented. As performances were more complete and lasted longer, admissions could be raised even up to 40 cents for the best seats and 20 for the back row. Popular appreciation of cinema must have been significant and constantly growing, as pictures in the archives attest to a progressive enlargement of itinerant booths. In 1899, in Venice were registered itinerant cinema booths measuring 12 x 8 meters and 5 in height; these measurements incremented in a few years, as booths' length reached over 30 mt.⁵¹

International itinerant companies, such as the Bläsers, the Leilichs, and the Kuhlmanns were the most solid investors and contributed heavily to the diffusion of the cinematic spectacle among the Italian crowds. In northern Italy, for instance, the brothers Kuhlmann became the leading traveling showmen and their shows were blockbuster events until 1905 (Bernardini *Gli ambulanti* 37). The increasing interest around fairground cinema in Italy is conveyed by these figures: in 1902 the fair at Porta Vittoria in Milan consisted of 42 booths with 3 for films, while the same fair the following year had 6 cinema booths out of 34. In 1906 at the fair at Porta Genova still in Milan, the booths devoted to projections were 8 out of 46 (Bernardini, *Gli ambulanti* 33).

⁵¹ See Antonio Gesualdi, *Le origini del cinema nel Veneto*, pp. 57 ff.

Fairground cinema could rely on various forms of advertising, from the showman's voice outside the booth, to captivating music and electric signs.⁵² The discovery of electricity and the diffusion of Edison-style bulbs made possible to transform the façade of squalid moving trailers into bright and colorful dream venues. Luigi Caglio, in his memoir about fairground cinema, recalls the magic atmosphere recreated by the cinema Kuhlmann with its dreamlike appearance and the impressive organ:

La facciata di questo cinematografo aveva quanto occorreva per incantare non solo noi ragazzini autentici, ma anche quel fanciullino che non è mai morto negli adulti. A sinistra, un grande organo, di produzione germanica naturalmente, deliziava orecchi e vista del pubblico con una sequela di musiche e con una struttura... che facevano sgranare tanto d'occhi per lo stupore (*Gli ambulanti* 39).

The facade of this cinema house had what was needed to enchant not only us, authentic kids, but also that child who is never dead in adults. On the left, a big organ, clearly of German production, regaled the public's ears and sight with a profusion of lyrics and a structure,... which made the eyes pop out with astonishment.

No less captivating was the lighting sent out by the trailer of the Zamperla company, a family-owned business of actors and jugglers from Ferrara. Labeled as the *Grande Cinematografo Zamperla*, this trailer made a massive use of electric signs and bulbs, with a “40 horsepower generator” (“officina elettrica della forza di 40 cavalli”).⁵³ The journal *La Provincia di Vicenza* speaks of the Zamperla movie theatre as “an exceptional attractive “ with “a profusion of electric lighting” and a repertoire capable of attracting “spectators always numerous and satisfied “ (“spettatori sempre numerosi e soddisfatti”).⁵⁴

⁵² On the captivation of electric signs in early cinema, see Sergio Raffaelli, *Quando il cinema era mobile*, p. 106 in particular.

⁵³ Quoted in Raffaele De Berti, *Un secolo di cinema a Milano*, p. 102.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Aldo Bernardini, *Cinema italiano delle origini. Gli Ambulanti*, p. 39.

The increasing popular appreciation of fairground cinema brought to the rise of a new category of businessmen, which started competing with hawkers and showmen: dealers. Besides investing on booths, dealers purchased the apparatuses with which they shot the films they resold to theatres and private distributors. Music-halls, concert venues, and theatres became the new venues for cinema. If public squares were the realm of itinerant spectacles and the latest visual attractions, albeit the less refined audience, permanent playhouses could offer equipped rooms for the projections provided with elegant seats and more comforts.

Between street showmen and theatre owners soon developed a cutthroat competition, as both offered the same kind of films and subjects: panoramic scenes, *actualités*, physical oddities, and war scenes. What was different, however, was the cost of these projections. We have seen that showmen had major expenses deriving from trips and parking, but were forced to keep their admission charges as lowest as possible to encourage attendance. Theater owners, on the contrary, relied on a more refined audience, who could afford more expensive tickets. Posters of the time show that the entrance to a movie theatre was 60 cents for boxes and the pit, while the so called “poltrone” closer to the screen could cost even one Lira. Discounts for soldiers and the second gallery were also common practice (30 cents).⁵⁵

In theatres, the projection of films happened in conjunction with other entertainments. Generally, films were an intermezzo during operettas, melodramas, and the light divertissements of the Café Chantant. This trend consolidated throughout the first five years of the 20th century. In advertising the program of the Teatro Balbo in Turin in 1907, the journal *La stampa* wrote:

⁵⁵ See *Materiali per una storia del cinema delle origini*, edited by Valerio Angelini and Fiorangelo Pucci.

Questa sera la compagnia Scognamiglio Aleoyer metterà in scena *La cicala e la formica*. Lo spettacolo è allestito sotto la direzione artistica di Giuseppe Lauri. Vi sarà pure, in un intermezzo, una cinematografia applicata e connessa all'operetta, ciò che costituisce per Torino e specialmente per il Teatro Balbo un'assoluta novità.⁵⁶

Tonight the Scognamiglio Aleoyer company will stage *The cicada and the Ant*. The show is staged under the artistic direction of Giuseppe Lauri. There will also be, as intermezzo, a cinematic viewing applied and connected to the operetta; this is for Turin and especially for the theatre Balbo an absolute novelty.

The idea to include a cinema spectacle within a theatrical performance did encounter the public's favor, since the following day, *La stampa* positively reviewed the event and the brilliant gimmick to advertize cinematography at the lowest cost. The reviewer wrote that the public was "numerosissimo" ("very numerous") and "incontrò generali approvazioni la trovata della cinematografia tra il primo e il secondo quadro" ("the idea of cinematography between the first and the second act encountered general favor").⁵⁷

Popular appreciation did encourage theatre owners to schedule events consisting only of projections. Theatres such as the *Volta* in Senigallia and the *Excelsior* in Trieste were among the first venues specialized in the screening of *actualités* (Bernardini *Gli ambulanti* 45-47). When Aldo Bernardini chronicles the titles offered by the *Volta* in Senigallia on September 1, 1906 no significant difference emerges with those featured in the trailer in Legnago owned by Costantino Daneo. Both the itinerant and the permanent venue, in fact, screened life scenes, war conflicts, railways, and physical oddities with similar titles (*Gli ambulanti* 48).

As we can see, theatres showcased what the square did, but in a more comfortable venue; however, no considerable difference existed in terms of admissions, since tickets for movie houses were by then 30 cents. It was at this point that the two circuits merged and itinerant

⁵⁶ "Spettacoli di oggi," in *La stampa*, September 21, 1907.

⁵⁷ *La stampa*, September 22, 1907.

cinema started losing not only its appeal, but also its *raison d'être*. Audiences no longer needed to be lured with the side attractions and comprehensive cheap admissions of fairgrounds, since the cinema screen already made a dream machine by itself capable of eliciting fantasies and attracting viewers.

Thanks to dealers and their commitment in film commercialization, more and more permanent cinemas opened. In 1907, when commenting on the expanding market of cinematography and the increasing popularity of films, in his well known article *La filosofia del cinematografo*, Giovanni Papini wrote: “Da pochissimo tempo, in ogni grossa città d’Italia, assistiamo a una quasi miracolosa moltiplicazione di cinematografi. Nella sola città di cui sappia il numero preciso, Firenze, ve ne sono già 12, vale a dire uno per ogni 18.000 abitanti” (“In a short time, in any large city in Italy, we notice an almost miraculous increase in moviehouses. In the sole city I know the exact number, Florence, there are already 12, which means one every 18,000 inhabitants”).

Starting 1906 itinerant exhibitors gradually disappeared. This process was anything but linear and straightforward, especially because showmen who had striven to set up the cinema business had no intention to let the owners of permanent playhouses put a spoke in their wheel. In 1908, Taddeo Kuhlmann, the most active and long-lived showman in the cinema business, poured out his anger over the right that owners of permanent playhouses asserted. In Kuhlmann’s words, “Siamo stati noi i primi a portarlo [il cinema] da una città all’altra, di modo che i permanenti hanno copiato da noi e non noi da loro; ed ora che dappertutto sono stabiliti dei permanenti, noi si dovrebbe evitare la città e le grandi fiere per non danneggiare i permanenti” (“We have been the first to bring it [cinema] from a city to another, thus permanent owners have copied from us e not us from them; and now that permanent movie houses are everywhere, we

should keep from the city and the great fairs not to harm permanent owners”).⁵⁸ Itinerant cinema trailers and permanent playhouses did coexist for many years. In 1909, at the fair at Porta Genova in Milan the cinema booths were still 5, even though the following year they were only 2; in 1912 Taddeo Kuhlmann was the only itinerant showman attending the fair in Milan with his wonder trailer (Bonfanti 344).

By the outbreak of World War I, itinerant cinema had disappeared for good, but the short-lived coexistence of itinerant and permanent circuits offering similar film products did give birth to an aesthetic controversy. Could cinema be considered a legitimate art, when its performing space would alternate between the square and respectable playhouses? Could itinerant trailers host the same spectacle as permanent theatres without discrediting the show? And consequently, was such a showcased performance true ‘art’? To these questions we need to find an answer.

⁵⁸ See *Il Café-Chantant e la Rivista Fono-cinematografica*, April 25, 1908, p. 6. Quoted in Bernardini, *Gli ambulanti*, pp. 51-52.

2- Morality, Aesthetics, and the Rise of Film Language

For art to exist, for any sort of aesthetic activity or perception to exist, a certain physiological precondition is indispensable: intoxication.

Friedrich Nietzsche

Besides the development of movie theaters, something important happened in film distribution that led, during the period from 1905 and 1910, to the foundation of a true industry of motion pictures. Given the growing popular demand for new films-- the showmen and theater owners made every effort to keep their repertoires updated-- the way films were put on the mass market transformed from local to national networks.

Men gifted with long view and business acumen, such as Charles Pathé and Leon Gaumont, sensed the commercial potential of cinema.⁵⁹ In 1896, a year after the debut of the *Cinématographe*, these pioneers started investing their money and energies in copying projector models, then selling them at bargain prices. In 1903, the Pathé Freres moved from a family-run business to a multinational production company with branch offices throughout Europe and in the United States. By realizing their own film studios, venues for projections, and a system of rentals, Pathé and Gaumont managed to have the monopoly on film distribution. This cartel accelerated the disappearance of showmen and their itinerant trailers from the cinema business.

⁵⁹ On Charles Pathé, see Richard Abel, *The Ciné goes to Town. French Cinema: the First Wave, 1896-1914* and George Sadoul, *Pathé, premier empire du cinéma*; on Leon Gaumont, see George Sadoul, *Les pionniers du cinema (de Méliès à Pathé), 1897-1909*.

As Sadoul remarked, 90% of the films screened in public squares were owned by Pathé and Gaumont.⁶⁰

With the imposition of a rental system rather than sales strategy, Pathé and Gaumont created permanent circuits, and showmen lost their supplies. Since the fortune of itinerant cinema heavily depended on a fresh repertoire, showmen could not but give competitors a clear run. In fact, from 1905 onward, film factories pushed forcefully into the cinema business.

In Italy, while there was no firm like that of Pathé-Freres in France, a number of major and minor localized companies were established in these years. Rome and Turin were the main venues for film distribution. In Rome, the Alberini & Santoni company (1905) became the very famous *Cines* a year later; in Turin, hit the scene, including the Ambrosio Company (1906), the Carlo Rossi & Company (1908), then turned into the well-known Itala, and the Pasquali & Tempo (1909). Local companies also operated in Genoa, Pisa, Naples, and Venice. In Milan, film pioneer Luca Comerio founded the Milano Films in 1909.

All these companies allowed the three decisive elements in cinema industry to consolidate: production, distribution and exhibition. The career of Rinaldo Arturo Ambrosio and the rise of his Ambrosio Film Company offer an excellent instance of how the complete distribution cycle (production, rental, and exhibition) was being tightly integrated.⁶¹ In 1902, Arturo Ambrosio owned a photography studio in Turin, with one special privilege: his firm was the official photographer of the Savoia royal family. Ambrosio thus was connected to film innovation and, after visiting the Pathè headquarters in Paris, he perfected film perforation and

⁶⁰ See Georges Sadoul, *Les pionniers du cinema (de Méliès à Pathè), 1897-1909*, pp. 83ff.

⁶¹ On Rinaldo Arturo Ambrosio and his *Ambrosio Company* see, Georges Sadoul, *Les pionniers du cinema (de Méliès à Pathé)*; Domenico De Gregorio, *Nascita e morte dell'Ambrosio Film*; R. Ascarelli, *Ambrosio Rinaldo Arturo*; Aldo Bernardini, *Cinema muto italiano*, vol. 2, pp. 95-103.

built his own cameras. He soon would be shooting successful films “dal vero,” helped by his faithful operator Roberto Omegna: the first car race Susa-Moncenisio and the maneuvers of the Alpine troops on the Colle Ranzola before Queen Margherita, both of 1904. Encouraged by the success of these first attempts, in 1905 Ambrosio built on his own property a film studio with a laboratory for film processing and printing.

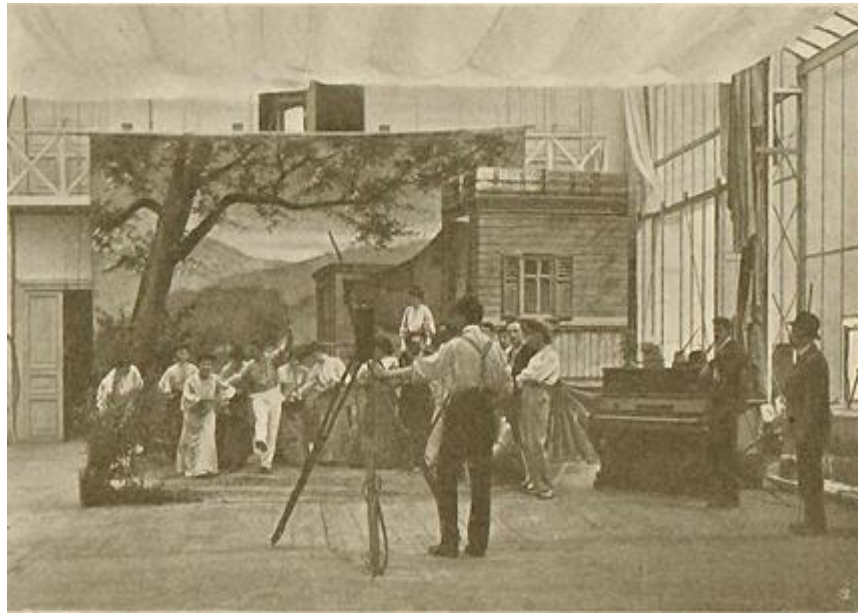


Figure 74. The *Cines* studio in 1906. Picture in public domain.

Similar ambitions pushed Filoteo Alberini and Dante Santoni to manufacture subjects and devices for cinematography. They founded the well-known *Cines* in 1906 for 400,000 Liras, a significant sum to risk at that time. Their impressive studio on the Via Appia was established with bold goals to become the first supplier in Italy for films, cameras, and projectors of every sort.⁶²

In 1906, the Ambrosio Film boasted a complete organization, with all the operators (Giovanni Vitrotti and Roberto Omegna), director (Luigi Maggi), and starring actors (Alberto

⁶² On *Cines*, see Riccardo Redi, *La Cines. Storia di una casa di produzione italiana*.

Capozzi and Ernesto Vaser). Databases show that in 1906 alone, the Ambrosio Company produced and distributed some 90 films of the most various genres: dramas (*L'angelo della famiglia*, *Cuor di soldato*), comedies (*Il cappello nella minestra*, *Il dolce che scappa*, *Cornuto*) and documentaries (*Cavalleria infernale*, *The riding school of Tor di Quinto*). It was, however, the melodramatic plot of *Il cane riconoscente* (1906) directed by Giovanni Vitrotti that brought prestige and the Lumière golden prize at the Concorso Cinematografico Italiano to the Ambrosio Film.⁶³

In 1907, Ambrosio's turnover was so profitable to urge the company to move to a larger headquarter. With these words, on December 1, 1907, the official gazette of the Ambrosio Company explained the reasons behind the moving: "Il grande incremento della nostra sfera d'affari ci ha indotti ad abbandonare i nostri antichi locali per altri più ampi, pari all'importanza che la nostra Società ha assunto nel commercio dell'Ottica e Fotografia, nonché nell'industria Cinematografia" ("The large increment in our business prompted us to leave our old venue for a larger one, equal to the importance that our Company gained in the commerce of optics and photography, as well as in the cinematographic industry").⁶⁴

For the *Ambrosio*, the moving tallied with a significant corporate expansion. Opened to partnership and new investors, in 1907 the company became a corporation known as the *Anonima Ambrosio*, whose principal activities became production and distribution of films. Besides shooting, distributing, and renting their own moving pictures, the new *Ambrosio* invested in exhibition. By owning the venue where their own films were screened- the *Ambrosio Biograph* on Via Po in Turin- the *Anonima Ambrosio* managed to have full control on the industry.

⁶³ See Arturo Ambrosio's memories collected by Franco Moccagatta in *Cinema*, n. 7, 1956.

⁶⁴ See *Società Anonima Ambrosio*, December 1, 1907, p. 5.

Inside the dark room of the *Ambrosio Biograph*, on February 17, 1908 what may be considered the first Italian scientific documentary was shown. Between 1906 and 1908, Ambrosio operator Roberto Omegna was asked by Camillo Negro, professor of Neuropathology at the University of Turin, to film his patients suffering from nervous disease. The results of Omegna's shootings appeared in *La Neuropatologia*, a 35-minute film in 24 episodes.⁶⁵ Notably, the learned public of clinical experts attending the premiere was very different from the usual crowd of middle-class viewers, workers, and children normally filling the *Ambrosio Biograph* to capacity, as the press noticed:

Pubblico e spettacolo insoliti, ieri sera all'Ambrosio Biograph! L'aula in cui accorre di consueto una folla che sbuccia arance, folla di piccoli borghesi, di operai e bambini, per assistere alle 'esilarantissime scene' della moglie gelosa o a quelle veramente drammatiche ed emozionanti della 'piccola eroina', era gremita di un occhialuto e calvo pubblico scientifico che dava alla sala – ove scoppiano le più fresche risate infantili ed echeggiano gli 'ohi' della più prolungata meraviglia – un aspetto severo di Accademia.⁶⁶

Unusual audience and show yesterday night at the Ambrosio Biograph! The room, where crowds peeling oranges, of petit bourgeois, workers and children usually rush to watch the hilarious scenes of the jealous wife or those highly dramatic and touching of the 'little heroine, was filled to capacity with a bold scientific public in spectacles that gave the room – where the freshest childhood laughter burst and lasting wonder of "oh" resonated – a severe Academia aspect.

Besides calling attention to the typology of viewers, their social class, and behavior, this article significantly praised Negro's idea to apply cinematography to medical research and

⁶⁵ Copies of this film are preserved at the *Museo Nazionale del Cinema* in Turin and the *Istituto Luce* in Rome. The film underwent restoration in 1993 and 1997 thanks to funds and intervention of the *Museo Nazionale del Cinema*.

⁶⁶ Quoted in Virgilio Tosi, *Il pioniere Roberto Omegna*, p. 53.

therapy. Such an experiment allowed a direct observation far superior to that offered by photography. As the reviewer remarked,

Il professor Negro volle con geniale pensiero applicare il cinematografo all'insegnamento delle malattie neuropatiche, per fornire alla studentesca delle piccole università, dove scarseggia il materiale clinico 'vivente,' una raccolta di 'tipi' e di 'casi' cinematografici. Il riuscitissimo tentativo del prof. Negro... mette in nitida evidenza e conserva la grafia dei 'movimenti' che con la sola fotografia non poteva essere riprodotta.⁶⁷

With geniality, Professor Negro meant to apply cinematography to the teaching of neuropathic disease, in order to give students in small universities – where 'living' clinical material is lacking – a collection of cinematographic 'types' and 'cases.' The very successful attempt of Professor Negro highlights and preserves 'movements,' impossible to reproduce with photography alone.

Journals praised Omegna's films for their "excellent photographic quality" ("eccellente qualità fotografica") and Negro's innovative contribution to the treatment of neurosis, "la più fortunata applicazione cinematografica che sia mai stata fatta per l'insegnamento della psichiatria" ("the most fortunate cinematographic application ever done for the teaching of psychiatry").⁶⁸ What could not be but stressed, however, was also that Negro's experiment was bringing Italian research to a cutting-edge level in clinical therapy, in comparison with similar tests conducted abroad, "Già in America e poi Parigi si erano prima d'ora fatti dei tentativi al riguardo, ma senza applicazione clinica" ("In America and Paris there had already been similar attempts, but without clinical application").⁶⁹

In the 1930s, when explaining the importance of scientific film in medical research, as well as the unthinkable difficulty in realizing these kind of shootings, Roberto Omegna offered

⁶⁷ *Ibidem.*

⁶⁸ See *Café-Chantant e la Rivista Fono-Cinematografica*, November 19, 1908, p. 8.

⁶⁹ See *Café-Chantant e la Rivista Fono-Cinematografica*, March 12, 1908, p. 5.

evidence of the progress reached in filmmaking by 1908. Neither an equipped camera or a talented operator, Omegna claimed, were sufficient to realize a good scientific film. The basics of photography, “la luce, gli obbiettivi e le emulsioni sensibili” (“light, lenses, and sensitive emulsions”), always had to go hand in hand with the latest results of “fisicochimica,” such as the “emulsioni pancromatiche” and the “filtri selezionatori.” In order to get results, thus, what Omegna recommended to operators of scientific films were “assiduo lavoro” (“hard work”), “pazienza,” and “continuamente studiare e tenersi al corrente delle più recenti acquisizioni scientifiche” (“studying continuously and keep the pace with the most recent scientific advancements”).⁷⁰

Ambrosio’s *La neuropatologia* demonstrated that scientific cinematography was “destinata ad un grande avvenire sia nel campo didattico che in quello della ricerca” (“destined to a great future both in the didactic field and that of research”). This film, in fact, was representative of the new purposes of cinematography in the first decade of the 20th century and its enlarged field of operation, which went beyond mass visual entertainment. Scientific films flowed into the successful trend of a ‘demonstrative’ cinema, which had in the Lumière *actualités* and the screening of everyday life their most considerable predecessor.

It is not a coincidence, in fact, that cinematography soon acquired credibility in science and medicine, two fields heavily dependent on objective representation. Luigi Sassi, in his illustrated manual of cinematography published in 1911, praised the superiority of moving pictures when applied to medical research over still projections, “nel campo delle scienze mediche, nelle quali le proiezioni fisse riuscirebbero meno efficaci delle proiezioni cinematografiche, come ad esempio, nella osservazione della deambulazione patologica, dei

⁷⁰ See Roberto Omegna, *Cinematografia scientifica*, p. 59.

fenomeni nervosi, del movimento dei microbi nelle preparazioni microscopiche” (“in the field of medical sciences, in which still projections would be less effective than cinematographic projections, as for instance in observing pathological ambulation, nervous phenomena, and the movements of microbes in microscopic solutions”).⁷¹

Sassi believed that moving pictures were more suitable to those sciences studying physical and psychological pathologies for their showing bodies in motion and the dynamics of symptoms; by observing live hysteria, panic attacks or nervous breakdowns, in fact, remedies and medical progress were certainly favored. Still projections, instead, according to Sassi satisfied essentially the needs of lecturers and educators. “Le proiezioni fisse si sono specialmente imposte nelle conferenze, delle quali sono diventate parte integrante ed indispensabile” (“Still projections stood out especially in conferences, where they are an integral and indispensable part”), Sassi wrote. In education, still projections were capable of “istruire, interessare e divertire in un solo tempo” (“instructing, arousing interest, and amuse at once”).⁷²

Journals supported this effort to use cinematography in scientific research. Articles even highlighted how the cinematic medium was used in laboratories far before it was exploited for popular visual entertainment. *Eco film*, for instance, reminded to its readers that “[Il cinematografo] come strumento di investigazione nel campo scientifico è anteriore alla sua solita applicazione attuale: spettacolo” (“[The cinematograph] as tool of investigation in the scientific field is prior to its usual current application: entertainment”).⁷³ The press referred to the pioneering studies of French scientist Étienne-Jules Marey on the physiology of movements in animals (we discussed in Chapter I Marey’s revolutionary recording of phases of movement on

⁷¹ Luigi Sassi, *Proiezioni fisse e cinematografo*, Hoepli, 1911, p. 2.

⁷² *Ibidem*.

⁷³ See “Il cinematografo nelle sue applicazioni scientifiche,” in *Eco Film*, June 5, 1913, Anno I, n.4.

one photographic surface) viewing them as experiments to be regarded as the very first “cinematografie scientifiche”:

Si attribuisce l’invenzione del cinematografo al célèbre fisiologo francese Marey, il quale realmente ideò e costruì (sic) un apparecchio cronofotografico ... mediante il quale studiò la fisiologia dei movimenti, il volo degli uccelli, degli insetti, ecc. ecc. infatti in queste investigazioni scientifiche, il cinematografo serve come analizzatore dei movimenti e permette lo studio del moto in tutte le sue fasi.

The invention of cinematography is attributed to foremost French physiologist Marey, who really invented and built a chronophotographic device, with which he studied the physiology of movements, the flight of birds, insects, etc. In fact, in these scientific investigations, cinematography serves as movement analyzer and allows the study of motion in all its phases.

It was the reproduction of movement to be looked at the leading-edge element. With his experiments, Marey had given proof that animated photography and the importance of seeing movements on screen could be beneficial to any field or goal of research. Interestingly, in conclusion of his article, the reviewer of *Eco Film* held America up as an example of a forward-looking country able to stretch the exploitation of cinematography even to the benefits of industry:

Un’ultima applicazione del cinematografo, curiosa ma molto importante, fu quella che si ideò in America poco tempo fa, e questa volta nell’industria. Si cinematografa un operaio che lavora un pezzo di macchina, studiando poi la pellicola attentamente, si osservano tutti i movimenti inutili fatti dall’operaio il quale cercherà in avvenire di non farli più, finché arriva al minimo di tempo per eseguire un dato lavoro. Pare che con questo metodo si siano ottenuti risultati veramente stupefacenti nella rapidità di lavoro.⁷⁴

The last application of cinematography, curious but very important, was that invented recently in America, and this time in the industry. A worker is filmed

⁷⁴ “Il cinematografo nelle sue applicazioni scientifiche,” in *Eco Film*, June 5, 1913, Anno I, n.4.

while he works at a machine; then, studying carefully the film, one can observe all the useless movements done by the worker, who will try in the future not to repeat them any longer, until he carries out a given duty in the shortest time. It seems that this method led to astonishing results in work speed.

Using moving pictures in support of scientific, medical, or business ventures dates to the earliest literature. Muzio Pazzi wrote about the possible use of cinematography in obstetric surgery (*Il cinematografo applicato alla chirurgia e all'ostetricia*, 1898), while Giuseppe Bucciante saw cinema in connection with legal studies (*Il grammofono, il fonografo e il cinematografo nel diritto*, 1909). After the commercialization of film distribution in 1906, the companies sought even more uses for films, such as in international law. Giacomo Dina, for instance, published his study on cinema legislation in French, since his area of interest was the difference between Italian and foreign governmental regulations (*Le cinématographe et le gramophone dans la législation italienne et dans les législations étrangères*, 1910). Cinematography and law was also the topic of Renzo Ascoli's *Cinematografia e diritto* (1913) and Umberto Tiranti's *Il cinematografo e la legge* (1921).

Archives, however, show that the most widespread application of the moving pictures to other areas than visual entertainment was in the field of education. *Il Cinematografo e l'educazione* (1909) by Domenico Orano, *Il Cinematografo, l'educazione sociale e la scuola* (1909) by Alfonso Napolitano, *Il cinematografo nella vita e nella scuola* (1913) by Antonio Romeo, *Il cinematografo nella scuola* (1913) by Luigi Scialdoni, Francesco Orestano's *Il cinematografo nelle scuole*, and Michele Mastropalo's *Il cinematografo e la scuola popolare* (1916) are only a few of the studies that explored how cinema could have a didactic function.

Anita Marradi in her *Il cinematografo, l'educazione sociale e la scuola* (1912) acclaimed the effectiveness of the moving pictures in instruction. According to Marradi, cinema represented

a sort of subsidiary language, an invaluable tool in the teacher's hands to help students master new concepts. No verbal explanation could work better than visualization to make understandable abstract notions:

Il cinematografo è il mezzo sussidiario che meglio rappresenta la vita con grandi fatti e scene in movimento, ed è necessario portarlo dalla società degli adulti alla società degli adolescenti per dare, in modo facile ed attraente, spontanee cognizioni intorno al mondo, all'Uomo e alla Società... La parola del maestro non basta all'insegnamento: abbisognano mezzi sussidiari che rendano la sua parola più sensibile, più dimostrativa, più efficace (5).

Cinema is the subsidiary tool that better represents life with great events and scenes in motion, and it is necessary to bring it from the community of adults to the community of adolescents, in order to give, in an easy and attracting way, spontaneous knowledge of the world, to Man and Society... The teacher's word is not sufficient to teaching: subsidiary tools are needed, which make his word more sensitive, demonstrative, and effective.

The same importance Marradi envisioned in screening the evolution of life is present in Antonio Romeo's *Il cinematografo nella vita sociale e nella scuola* (1913). Both Marradi and Romeo recalled what the article in *Eco Film* had praised, when taking into account Marey's representation of the various phases of motion. As Romeo put it, cinematography "ci rappresenta la vita nel suo moto continuo, le cose nei diversi strati di formazione per diventare quelle che sono" ("represents to us life in its continuous motion, things in different formation layers to become what they are") (13). It was thanks to instructional images, that audiences could refine their intellect, as if visual language had an 'illuminating' power, "Il cinematografo, come benefico raggio di luce, penetra nella mente dell'ignorante e gli parla un linguaggio nuovo, non mai sentito e gli apre dinanzi un mondo vero e reale, svolgendogli sotto gli occhi la vasta tela della commedia umana" ("Cinema, as a benefic ray of light, penetrates in the ignorant person's mind and talks to him a new language, never heard before, and displays a true and real world, unrolling under his eyes the vast canvas of human comedy") (15). In her *Il cinematografo nella*

scuola, Santina Rifici extolled the instructional effect of seeing phases of motion on screen (7), calling special attention to the ‘talkative’ feature of cinematography. Images on screen could ‘tell’ about events with an explanatory strength that was unreachable for the written word:

Il cinematografo, nel suo muto linguaggio, mostra la vita vera, lontana e vicina, scene panoramiche con usi e costumi, riproduzioni storiche, scene scientifiche, scene drammatiche sensazionali, scene comiche esilaranti. Le descrizioni verbali del terremoto calabro-siculo non mi impressionano tanto quanto la vista della produzione cinematografica di quella grave catastrofe (8).

Cinema, with its mute language, screens true life, far and close, panoramic scenes with costumes and traditions, historical reproductions, scientific scenes, sensational dramatic scenes, hilarious comic scenes. Verbal descriptions of the earthquake in Calabria and Sicily do not impress me as much as the sight of the cinematic reproduction of that catastrophe.

Rifici advocated not only the subsidiary help of moving pictures in the pedagogic field, but also the need for an “opportuna disposizione legislativa” (“appropriate legislative regulation”), in order for Italy to be equal to countries, such as France and Germany, where cinematography was already institutionalized in education (24). Rifici stressed the importance of films in the teaching of subjects like geography, for which practical video case studies from around the world resulted prove informative and effective. “Sono consigliati i viaggi scolastici” (“School trips are suggested”), Rifici writes, “ma si può mai andare in America?” (“but can we ever go to America?”). Rifici’s answer to her rhetorical question was in line with the concept of tourism *en place* entrepreneurs used to advertise the virtual wonders of Panoramas at the *Great Exhibitions*, promising the opportunity to ‘see’ the world without traveling and spending money. To Rifici, cinematography offered what fairs did with their inexpensive ticket, “Col cinematografo si vedono le varie città dell’America e delle altre parti del mondo con gli usi e costumi relativi, con la vera vita in movimento” (“Thanks to the cinematograph, one can visit the

various cities in America and other parts of the world, with their costumes and traditions, with real life in motion”) (21).

As cinematography grew to be central in the national cultural debate, the film’s role became increasingly key in the formation of social identity. Santina Rifici herself, spoke of filmmaking as the “perfect” mode of transmitting knowledge, the only capable of “instilling” (“far penetrare”) in the people’s minds “the need of education” (“il bisogno di cultura”). Rifici emphatically reminded her readers of “centuries” of fights, during which learning benefited only privileged classes; while now the advent of cinematography- portrayed again as a “benefic light” (“luce benefica”)- could “dispel the darkness of ignorance and illuminate the peoples’ mind” (“fugare le tenebre dell’ignoranza e rischiarare la mente dei popoli”) (*Il cinematografo* 4). Rifici’s metaphor calls to mind the *Ballo Excelsior* (still the rage when Rifici was writing in 1918), with its symbolical staging of the triumph of scientific progress represented by *Light* over the darkened ignorance of *Obscurantism*.

Significantly, what was emerging from writings dealing with the formative role of cinematography in everyday life was the twofold function of cinema as social and pedagogical mentor. If cinema was now envisioned as a medium capable of instilling the love for learning among the mass public, its comparison with the traditional stage was quite inevitable, since theatre had always been deemed “un grande mezzo di educazione e di civiltà” (“a great means of education and civilization”), as Antonio Romeo pointed out (10).

Writings on early cinematography frequently juxtaposed stage and screen. “Il cinematografo è il teatro popolare, il teatro socializzato” (“Cinema is the popular theatre, the socialized theatre”) wrote Anita Marradi in 1909, calling attention to films as well-liked and cross-class attractions, but also to cinemas as venues endorsing socialization among people of

different social echelons. Marradi's use of the adjective "popolare" implies a low-class connotation for cinema; however, this does not affect its capability of attracting a far larger and socially heterogeneous audience than theatre. "Il cinematografo ormai è entrato nelle abitudini di ogni ceto di persone" ("The cinematograph has by now become a habit for peoples from all ranks"), adjudged the journal *La vita cinematografica*.⁷⁵

Like Marradi, Antonio Romeo recognized the educational function of theatrical performances, but at the same time was critical towards the selective attitude of theaters in social and economic terms. The theater, Romeo wrote, "non è sempre alla portata di tutte le borse: resta quindi come privilegio di classi abbienti e come istituzione di grandi città" ("is not always affordable by all pockets: it thus remains a privilege of wealthy classes and institution of large cities") (10). By making performances accessible only by a selected few, legitimate theater automatically excluded the less well-off from its fruition, losing thus its function of social educator.

The cinematograph, instead, was the "ideal theater" in commercial terms, since its shows were capable of entertaining, amusing, and educating the masses at a bargain price (Romeo 12). It was true that the largest audience attending cinemas was that formed by the "popolino" ("hoi polloi"), but "dobbiamo essere lieti di questo entusiasmo pel cinematografo, perché in esso il popolo allarga la sua cultura ed educa il suo animo a nobili sensi" ("we have to be happy about this enthusiasm for cinematography, as thanks to it the crowds enlarge their knowledge and educate their souls to noble senses") (12).

Besides being restricted to well-off classes, theatrical performances lacked the visual fascination the screen exuded. Anita Marradi believed that films were "something more various,

⁷⁵ *La vita cinematografica*, May 30- June 5, 1911, Anno II, n. 9.

more fantastic” (“qualcosa di più vario, di più fantastico”) than staged representations, and that cinema would feature “scenes impossible to be represented in theatre” (“scene impossibili a rappresentarsi sul teatro”) (1). Marradi’s enthusiasm clearly ensued from the technical advantage of the cinematic medium, capable of manipulating reality through the use of montage and other optical ‘tricks.’

We have seen that for the crowds, cinema’s attraction was that it ‘looked real,’ as if even common everyday routines were ‘fantastic’ events. Cinematic wonders put in the shade even the fact that screened reality was actually virtual. In his essay on *Theatre and Cinema* (1951), André Bazin remarked how the paradoxical nature of filmic realism is often overshadowed by the wonder to watch the faithful reproduction of the world on the screen. Cinema “reproduces” an existing reality, that of the phenomenal world, but the nature of the cinematographic image is purely unreal, since it does not have “an existence distinct from the object” it represents (375-376). Yet, this virtuality in the cinematic medium passes almost unnoticed. To Bazin, this happens because presence in cinema “is defined in terms of time and space” (376). Audiences valued screened images as ‘real,’ because they saw them existing contemporaneously with their being in the auditorium and perceived them within the actual range of their sight. To see the cinematographic image within the frame of space and time, as Bazin suggested, is crucial to understanding its uniqueness and paradoxical nature, “the cinema does something strangely paradoxical. It makes a molding of the object as it exists in time and, furthermore, makes an imprint of the duration of the object” (376).

This statement opens up a reflection on the ambiguous meaning of the term *presence*. “It is false to say that the screen is incapable of putting us in the presence of the actor,” claims Bazin. The screen ‘really’ displays images with the same effectiveness and believability of a

mirror that “relays the presence of the person reflected in it” (376-377). This means that the state of not being physically present is not truly an absence, as the sight makes presence on screen a perceivable experience. When Marradi, Romeo, and Ricifi were calling attention to the popular satisfaction in seeing human passions in motion on screen, they referred to how viewers let themselves be overcome with the emotion to live another life through the actors’ performance. Ricifi spoke even of a spectatorial “pleasure” in watching “la vita di altri uomini, qualche volta diversi nel pensiero, nel sentimento, nell’azione” (“the life of other men, sometimes different in thinking, feelings, and actions”) (*Il cinematografo* 4-5). It is clear, thus, that what caught on the popular taste was the very illusory allure of the cinematic artifice, which was appreciated for its eliciting fantasies, rather than rejected for being deceptive.

Cinema scholar Robert Stam notes how cinema “conjugates the realistic and the fantastical,” as it deploys both the *realism* of the objective and the *magic* of superimposition (13). What impressed viewers and early authors writing on cinema was this very characteristic of the cinematic medium to feature a ‘realistic’ deceit. An article appearing in *Cosmograf* in 1916, stressed right how the ultimate charm of the moving pictures consisted in their ability “to help viewers dream.” The cinematograph “proietta mondi fantastici con l’illusione di farli apparire veri” (“projects fantastic worlds, with the illusion to make them seem real”), wrote the reviewer.⁷⁶

More effectively and realistically than theater, cinema would re-create the false impression of spatial continuity and the passage of time, by relying on a number of technical ‘tricks’ (fades, dissolves, editing, etc.), determinant in conveying and maintaining narrative flow. The *Cosmograf* reviewer himself lamented how theater required “uno sforzo d’immaginazione”

⁷⁶ *Cosmograf*, June 22, 1916, p. 6.

(“an imaginative strain”) for the audience, while during a film “lo sfarzo è sotto gli occhi di tutti” (“the splendor is under everybody’s eyes”).

The only disadvantage of the cinematograph was the lack of living action and verbal support, which forced viewers to redress with their imagination, in order to make sense of the representation. In Romeo’s words:

Nel teatro le scene della vita sono integrate nei personaggi viventi e parlanti e una passione umana si può trattare in tutto il suo sviluppo, in tutte le sue più delicate sfumature, in tutta la sua vibrante e palpitante espressione... Nel cinematografo no. Esso non può rappresentare che l’esteriorità del fatto, la mimica del fatto stesso. Al cinematografo manca la parola, l’anima, la vita, ed a questa parola, a questa anima, a questa vita, deve supplire la fantasia dello spettatore (11-12).

In the theatre, life scenes are integrated in living and talking characters, and human passion can be explored in its whole development, in its most delicate nuances, in its vibrant and throbbing expression... Not in the cinematograph. It can feature the exteriority of the event, the mimics of the event itself. The cinematograph lacks the word, the soul, the life, and for this word, soul, and life the viewer’s fantasy must compensate.

Journals as well, debated questions related to acting style and gestures in the theater and the cinema. *La vita cinematografica*, for instance, even held that gestural expressiveness of stage acting was completely distinct from what would work on the big screen. Gestures are supportive of dramatic and psychological significance in the theatrical performance, while cinema rather benefits from a less explicit body language, as in its case images ‘talk,’ and emotional implications are more limited:

Mentre [nel teatro] si deve esprimere ogni minimo particolare del discorso che si vuole far capire al pubblico, ogni piccolo contrasto dell’anima, sia di dolore come di gioia, in Cinematografia è d’uopo certe minuzie completamente dimenticare, essendo molto più ristretta l’idea che l’autore ha voluto rappresentare, perciò più

facile a comprendersi; dunque, è inutile accompagnare tutte le parole con il gesto, come si fa nella mimica.⁷⁷

While [in theater] one has to convey the smallest detail of the argument we want the public to understand, any slight conflict of the soul, both painful or joyful, in Cinematography is necessary to forget completely such trifles, being much more restricted the idea the author meant to represent and thus easier to comprehend; thus, it is useless to accompany all the words with gestures, as one does with the mimics.

Santina Rifici, following Romeo's remarks on the limits of cinematography, contended that cinema presented only the "exteriority" of events and could not rise to the level of theatre in terms of emotions, "Nel teatro lo spettatore assiste con vivo interesse alle esplicazioni di fatti riguardanti l'alternarsi di passioni umane... e prova un'intima compiacenza nel vedere svolgere d'innanzi a sè la vita di altri uomini" ("In theater, the spectator watches with vivid interest the displacement of actions dealing with human passions... and feels an intimate complacency in seeing deployed before his eyes the life of other men") (4-5), and its contribution to the education of the crowds since the times of Greeks and Romans. Ancient peoples, Rifici claims, loved to see the "Olympic Games" they considered a real and typical "atto di valore" ("act of valor"). In contemporary times, however, the theatre has taken on essentially a "moral" function, which is "disguised as comedy" ("sottoforma di commedia"). The goal of the theatrical performance, in fact, is to entertain the public with living characters acting out the passions of everyday life (6).

Rifici, however, ended up overshadowing the noble intent of theatre and its long tradition, and glorified cinematography as the medium deploying "real life," despite its "silent language" ("linguaggio muto") (8). This problem with the absence of real words, and

⁷⁷ "L'arte drammatica e la Cinematografia," in *La vita Cinematografica*, December 15, 1911, Anno II, n. 22.

consequently with physical presence, was easily triggered by the antagonism between cinema and theater, and their mode to convey visual realism. The cinematograph showcased “real life” with a descriptiveness and wealth of details unachievable in theater; however, the communicative power of images and the actors’ gestural expressiveness could compensate for the absence of words.

What eventually movie and theatre actors have in common is movement, which serves to compensate with the lack of speech in the case of cinema, and to emphasize the verbal element on the stage. Film theorist Mary Ann Doane speaks of the “stylized gestures” typical of silent films as a “pantomime” serving exaggeration in the deployment of emotions when words are absent.⁷⁸ This “compensation for the lack,” however, Doane argues, engenders major attention on the body, “The absent voice reemerges in gestures and the contortions of the face-it is spread over the body of the actor” (373).

The body Doane refers to is the filmic presence, that is a technical reconstruction she defines “phantasmatic”. After all, in silent films, it was the presence of actors to make lifelike the representation and the spatial dimension. Unlike theater, the diegetic space of cinema is not measurable and has nothing like the physical limits of the stage. The screen that is at play here, however, is a “receptor of the image,” to reprise Doane’s definition (377), and the visual possibilities its canvas surface can relay are infinite.

By exposing viewers to unlimited visibility (people, objects, events, the unseen world), cinema engendered the virtual experience of all aspects of physical reality, and asserted its intellectual and educational influence. It was in these years that subjects of cinematography became objects of increasing public concern. Invested with the role of social educator, cinema

⁷⁸ Mary Ann Doane, *The Voice in the Cinema: the Articulation of Body and Space*.

potentially do harm if projections were not sifted through and expurgated. Anita Marradi (1912), for instance, stressed that abroad the attention to the moral quality of films was already a priority, “In Francia sono bandite dai pubblici spettacoli scene rappresentanti atti di violenza (“nous ne devons pas habituer les enfants et le public à des spectacles de violence”)[“In France, violent scenes are banned from public shows” (“children and audiences should not be accustomed to violent shows”)].⁷⁹ Her belief, in fact, was that “Non è educativo infervorare le menti con proiezioni di massacri, carneficine, città devastate, uomini che si uccidono come belve, scene simili sollevano dal fondo degli animi istinti atavici bestiali” (“It is not educational to overheat the minds with projections of massacres, slaughtering, ravaged cities, and men killing each others like beasts; such scenes elicit brutal ancestral instincts from the bottom of the soul”).⁸⁰ Marradi’s critique to amoral cinematographic subject touched on a sore point. Editorials frequently called into question the purported social benefits attributed to film.

Commenting on a news item appeared in the *Gazzetta del Popolo* on April 14, 1913 reporting the robbery to a baker by some young racketeers, the journal *Eco Film* found the source of this vice in cinema and literature, with their emphasis on low-life heroes:

Si vuol sapere in qual modo costoro [i malviventi] abbiano concepito il misfatto? La letteratura di romanzacci, nei quali le azioni delittuose vengono esaltate, presentate come forme seducenti, nei quali i delinquenti posano da eroi, la polizia è schernita, il vizio incoraggiato; questo è l’alimento intellettuale quotidiano di giovani menti, facilmente suggestionabili. Si aggiungano gli spettacoli cinematografici a base di assassinii, di violenze, di furti; il Codice Penale viene passato in rassegna, non certo con intenti etici, nei suoi vari capitoli, sullo schermo del cinematografo.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Anita Marradi, *Il cinematografo, l’educazione sociale e la scuola*, p. 2.

⁸⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁸¹ “La suggestione delittuosa dei cinematografi e della letteratura criminale,” in *Eco Film*, April 15, 1913, Anno I, n. I, p. 12.

Do you want to know how they [the racketeers] designed the misdeed? The narrative of bad novels, in which crimes are exalted and presented as seductive actions, criminals pose as heroes, the police is mocked, and vice is encouraged, this is the everyday intellectual nurture for young and easily suggestible brains. You can add criminals-based cinematographic shows, with violence and robberies; on the cinema screen, the Penal Code is examined, certainly not with ethic aims, in its various chapters.

Antonio Romeo, for instance, recommended “oculatezza” (“caution”) in selecting the projections, as he believed that “violent and cruel scenes” did incite aggressive behavior. Romeo also suggested major attention with scenes screening “amori torbidi” (“turbid love stories”), whose immoral contents were as harmful as violent scenes.⁸² Like Romeo, Santina Rifici, albeit a strenuous defender of cinematography’s pedagogical role, could not but recognize “i pericoli che il cinematografo presenta per l’educazione della gioventù” (“the perils the cinematograph presents for the education of youth”).⁸³

Rifici did claim that films “can contaminate and pervert the soul of youth” (“possono contaminare e pervertire l’animo della gioventù”) and that this risk for kids to lose their purity should be one of the major social concerns. Since children learn essentially by imitation, this principle should never be dismissed, especially in the household:

L’immaginazione dei fanciulli si esprime col desiderio di imitazione: animali, cose, persone destano in lui simpatie profonde purché trovino la via del cuore e della fantasia infantile. Spesso basta una lettura fatta con calore, una biografia ben lumeggiata di qualche grande per eccitare questa fantasia.⁸⁴

Children’s imagination expresses itself with the desire for imitation: animals, things, and people elicit profound sympathy, as long as they find the way to the

⁸² Antonio Romeo, *Il cinematografo nella vita e nella scuola* (1913), pp. 16ff.

⁸³ Santina Rifici, *Il cinematografo nella scuola* (1918), p. 9.

⁸⁴ Santina Rifici, *Il cinematografo nella scuola* (1918), p. 13.

heart and childhood fantasy. Often, a hearted reading or a well-illustrated biography of a great man are sufficient to arouse this fantasy.

Rifici's words betrayed a defense of cinema from the accusation of depraving the crowds. She explicitly called attention to the innate inclination for individuals to be attracted and seduced by perverse adventures, "Il popolo ama vedere riprodotte sulla tela scene di vita dissipata e libertina, precipitazioni di amore, e corre là dove l'anima, dalla depravazione altrui, può trarre tacito stimolo" ("The crowds love to see scenes of dissipated and libertine life reproduced on the screen, and head for where the soul can take tacit delight in other people's depravation") (9). This human penchant to twisted emotions, Rifici argues, could be controlled by selecting films to project with "wisdom." "Le cinematografie devono essere scelte con criterio educativo e mirare soprattutto al miglioramento della coscienza umana" ("Projections should be selected with educational criterion and aim essentially to the improvement of human consciousness"), Rifici wrote (9).

The general belief was that brutality and incivility had to be banned from the screen. Rifici, for instance, was very specific in her advice on how the screening of highly moral scenes would be beneficial to social costumes and ethics. Not only should be avoided the sight of "the man confused with the brute" and "civility confused with barbarity," but women, too, should be regarded virtuously. "Per la buona morale bisogna bandire tutte quelle scene che ci mostrano la donna avvilluppata nel fango e nel disonore, allorché madre e sposa rompe i vincoli coniugali, e tutti i vincoli della virtù" ("For the sake of morality, what should be banned are those scenes showing the woman disgraced and dishonored, when as mother and wife breaks marital ties and all the bonds of virtue") (10).

According to Rifici, female characters must be presented not merely as morally good, but as heroic in their goodness:

Della donna dobbiamo sempre rappresentare il lato bello; dobbiamo rappresentarla nella vita familiare (sic) attorno ai suoi pargoletti, per i quali compie i maggiori sacrifici; dobbiamo rappresentarla vicino al letto dell'infermo, in atto di prestare ad esso le sue amorose cure; dobbiamo rappresentarla in ansia nell'attesa dello sposo o del figlio lontani; dobbiamo rappresentarla sul campo di battaglia ad infondere coraggio ai combattenti, conforto ai morituri (10).

We should always portray the beautiful side of woman; we should portray her in the domestic sphere around her children, for which she makes the major sacrifices; we should portray her next to the ill's bed while living caring assistance to him; we should portray her anxiously looking forward to her distant husband and son; we should portray her on the battle field to give fighters courage and console dying people.

Although authors were in favor of cinematography as an indispensable tool in education, they recognized that films were threatening the public's moral nourishment. Only by following a wise selective criterion, projections could have the expected pedagogic effect. As Anita Marradi claimed, "if projections are well selected, they can impregnate the viewers' souls with love seeds, cooperation, and human solidarity" ("ben scelte le proiezioni possono fecondare negli animi degli spettatori germi d'amore, di cooperazione, di solidarietà umana") (3). Marradi stressed that these noble sentiments were those staged in the theatre, which elevated the public's moral values to such an extent, to provide a model for cinema. "Come dal teatro, così dal cinematografo, dopo certe scene, si esce migliorati" ("As from the theatre, so from the cinematograph, after such scenes, one comes out a better person"), Marradi writes (4).

A lively debate ensued on whether or not the cinema audience could be put on the same level as the public attending the theater. The crosstalk between the director of the specialized

journal *Eco film* in 1913 and its readers is representative of the discordant opinion among the crowds of the qualitative and functional superiority of cinematography over the traditional stage. Responding to an article glorifying the “worldwide” reputation of cinema (“il cinema ha ormai conquistato il mondo intiero e tutta l’umanità”), which appeared in *Eco Film* on April 15, 1913, a reader felt entitled to a harsh rebuttal: “Tutta l’umanità dice lei, ma cosa intende per umanità? La folla serale e domenicale dei bottegai, dei borghesucci, degli scolari e dei fanulloni? Infatti, di questa degna plebe son piene le sale cinematografiche” (“The entire humanity you say, but what do you mean by humanity? The evening and Sunday crowd consisting of storekeepers, petit bourgeois, schoolchildren, and loafers? In fact, these worthy plebeians fill movie theatres to capacity”).⁸⁵

Rather than with theatergoers, cinema viewers were comparable with the lower-class public of *café-concerts* and *music halls*. “Son pieni della medesima [plebe] i caffè concerti e i teatrucchi di farse e da *pochades*” (Cafè-concerts and small theaters performing farces and *pochades* are filled with the same plebeians”), lamented the *Eco Film* reader. What he called “the aristocracy of art,” was able to distinguish artistic beauty “from the heap of mediocrity and indecency” (“dal mucchio del mediocre e dell’indecente”). Under attack were the disgraceful and filthy conditions of movie theaters:

Con che cuore, mi dica, crede Ella potranno assidersi sulle sudice poltrone di quelle sale stipate e fumose dove per quattro soldi tutta la plebaglia del marciapiede può andare in sollucchero dinanzi le smorfie e le contorsioni e le movenze e le attitudini affettate e tragiche degli istrioni che la ronzante e fastidiosa macchina proietta attraverso l’aria grassa e nauseabonda in vacillanti e accecanti immagini?⁸⁶

⁸⁵ “Per l’arte e l’estetica,” in *Eco Film*, May 5, 1913.

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*.

With what heart, tell me, you think they (theatergoers) will be able to sit on the dirty seats of those packed and smoky rooms, where for a penny all the street mob can go into rapture before the grimaces, contortions, and moves, as well as studied and tragic gestures of ham actors, which the buzzing and annoying machine projects through the filthy and sickening air in flickering and blinding images?

Against such contempt, the director of *Eco Film* promptly objected. Cinema venues could not be all labeled as “dive substitutes” (“sucedanei della bettola”), as the reader accused. Turin, for instance, hosted “very elegant movie theaters that for hygiene and neatness make certain theaters (real ruins) envious” (“elegantissimi saloni che per igiene e pulizia danno dei punti a certi teatri che son dei very ruderi”). If then was bad production to be at stake, this was ascribable mainly to “foreign distribution.” It was not sheer nationalistic pride to trigger the director’s disproof, but the “evident artistic dignity” of Italian films: they would not even require “i rigori della censura” (“the severity of censorship”), as it commonly happened with movies produced abroad.

The counter-argument of the *Eco Film* director was straightforward and convincing, nevertheless, hygiene in cinemas had been before, and would continue to be, a major concern. In 1911, for instance, *La vita cinematografica* had denounced the widespread dirtiness in movie theaters, which was seriously jeopardizing both the future appreciation of cinematography and the public’s safety:

Eccezion fatta per pochi locali, molte sale cinematografiche sono in ambienti sotterranei, angusti e fetidi; vere caverne che ospitare dovrebbero delle belve, anzi che degli essere umani. Ed è in queste caverne che continuamente ed in modo allarmante, nei giorni festivi, si ammassa il pubblico per assistere alla proiezioni; in queste caverne umide e prive di aria e di luce, che mille fiati si immagazzinano e si confondono in un tanfo nauseante e pernicioso senza che il minimo riguardo si abbia per la salute, non solo, ma per la sicurezza di uscirne vivi. Un principio di incendio in uno di questi locali porterebbe uno scompiglio tale fra gli spettatori, che ben pochi si salverebbero. Da quali uscite potrebbe sfollare questo pubblico, e

sfollare in un attimo, se nei passaggi vi si passa appena? Succedendo un allarme nessuno potrebbe più muoversi ed il locale, senza esagerazione, diventerebbe la tomba di tutti gli spettatori.⁸⁷

Except for a few venues, many movie theaters are underground, in fetid and cramped places; true caves that should host beasts, rather than human beings. It is in these caves that continuously and alarmingly, on Sundays and holidays, the public is crammed to watch the projections; in these humid caves, without air and light, where thousands of breaths are absorbed and confused in a nauseating and dangerous stink, without the slightest regard not only for health, but for the certainty to exit alive. A fire burst in one of these venues would bring such a panic among viewers, that few of them would save themselves. From which exits the public could evacuate, and rapidly, if passages are barely large for the transit? In case of alarm, nobody could move any longer and the venue, with no exaggeration, would become the grave for all the spectators.

Besides the dirtiness and the lack of safety, other and varied accusations against cinematography were advanced. The *Eco Film* reader had compressed in his harsh letter the true essence of cinema debasement: bad acting, poor technology, low-quality images, and filthy amoral venues. As for this last indictment, the darkness of movie theaters certainly favored illicit behavior:

Due categorie di persone prediligono in modo speciale le sale di proiezione: gli innamorati e i ladri. La pellicola, già lo sapete, ha bisogno per trionfare del buio assoluto. E che cosa cercano i ladri e gli innamorati? Precisamente il buio. Alzare un orologio o un portafoglio, ecco il sogno del ladro; carpire un bacio o arrischiare una stretta audace, ecco l'obiettivo del galante timido, a cui le tenebre della sala incutono un ardore insolito.⁸⁸

Two categories of people have a special preference for projection rooms: lovers and thieves. Films, as you know, need absolute darkness, in order to be successful. And what do lovers and thieves look for? Exactly darkness. Scraping up a watch

⁸⁷ "Igiene e sicurezza nei cinematografi," in *La vita cinematografica*, May 30-June 5, 1911, Anno II, n. 9.

⁸⁸ "Variazioni sul cinematografo," in *Il Cinematografo, settimanale di cinematografia ed arti affini*, June 1, 1909, Anno I, n. 1.

or a wallet, here is the burglar's dream; stealing a kiss or hazarding a daring embrace, here is the goal of the timid gentleman, who has an unusual boldness in the dark room.

In defense of an amoral conduct incited and favored by dark auditoriums, however, specialized journals made haste to remind the public of how robberies and sexual advances might be a risk everywhere:

Diremo per questo che i cinematografi sono luoghi di perdizione? Nemmeno per sogno! Gli uomini prudenti tengano affibbiata con cura la giacca, il palamidone o il *pardessus*; le ragazze morigerate si accertino di avere bene strette fra le loro le mani del fidanzato o dell'amico e tutto andrà in piena regola.⁸⁹

Can we say for this reason that movie theaters are fleshpots? Not at all! Prudent men should keep the jacket, the greatcoat, and the *overcoat* buckled; honest girls should make sure to hold tight their lovers' or friend's hands in theirs, and everything will be fine.

Although the technology of cinema was vastly superior than in early years, critics disparaged poor visual effects reproduced on the screen. Filmmaking had certainly achieved a considerable progress by 1913. The shift from the initial short subjects and *actualités* to feature-length films had brought significant refinements in terms of subjects and genres, without mentioning the advances in projection mechanics.

If cinema was initially a purely technological *nouveauté* capable of arousing curiosity for its 'realistic' trickery, movies moved soon from basic sequences of ordinary events, panoramas, and imitations of blockbuster shows at the *Great Exhibitions*. As scripts and plots became increasingly values, "cinema of attraction" did not disappear. Rather, as the concept of cinematic

⁸⁹ *Ibidem.*

plot came into the picture, visual attractions became components of narrative films, as Tom Gunning pointed out, when speaking of Méliès' *trucage* films (Gunning 230).



Figure 75. Talking heads on a table and headless Méliès, from *Un homme de têtes* (1896). Picture in public domain.

Méliès' filmography reveals the direct intervention of the filmmaker into the cinematic product. By using the 'stop trick,' with which he turned the camera off, moved out objects out of sight, and then resumed filming, Méliès gave the illusion of disappearance, inventing what would eventually be called "special effects." In fact, by 1902, Méliès had developed all the basics of cinematic language: dissolves, fade-ins and fade-outs, slow and fast motion, double and multiple exposures, and the technique of masking, by which he created his own scenery. Such tricks contributed to the birth of the comedic genre and increased the cinematic allure films held over the crowds. Representatives of this new trend are the exhilarating jokes in *Un homme de têtes* (*The Four Troublesome Heads*), a one-minute film of 1896, where Méliès removes his head, places it on a table, and continues to converse with it, until he grows another and another head. When the mouths of four heads are too much for him, Méliès smashes them with his banjo and exits with a theatrical gesture. Vanishing, replacements, the headless busy protagonist, and the

four chatterbox heads give this film an irresistible comedic charm, offering viewers the palpable evidence of the astounding visual potentiality of the new medium.

Films continued to be credited as faithful reproducers, since jokes, fades, and dissolves did not detract from the reputation of the camera for projecting reality. Rather, the use of trickery would kindle even more appeal, and these gimmicks raised the commercial value of the film. Speaking of the success of special effects and their combination with live-action footage, the journal *Film* stressed that *trucage* was anything but a deterrent to realism: it allowed cinema to checkmate the theater, in terms of alluring visuality:

[Il cinema] offre la migliore garanzia di verità, poiché sarebbe impossibile ritoccare e truccare una per una le innumerevoli fotografie che costituiscono il film. La scena che si riproduce sulla tela è sempre stata agita per davvero dinanzi all'obbiettivo dagli attori. Ma ciò non vuol dire che essi l'abbiano agita esattamente come noi la vediamo proiettata. Poiché se il cinematografo non permette agli artisti l'uso della parola, in cambio mette a loro disposizione una quantità di mezzi, che non offre il teatro. Sono i cosiddetti *trucchi*, dai quali un abile *metteur en scène* secondato da un buon operatore e da artisti provetti può cavare degli affetti nuovi sorprendenti e dei quali il risultato certo è di interessare il pubblico e di assicurare il successo del *film*.⁹⁰

[Cinema] offers the best certainty of truth, as it would be impossible to retouch and make up one by one the countless pictures forming the *film*. The scene reproduced on the screen was still really acted by actors before the camera. However, this does not mean that they acted it exactly as we see it projected. If cinema does not allow artists the use of words, in return it provides them with a number of tools that the theater cannot offer them. These are the so called *tricks*, from which a skillful *metteur en scène*, helped by a good operator and expert artists, can obtain astonishing new effects, whose certain result is to interest the public and guarantee the success of the *film*.

We have seen that a few years after the *Cinématographe* debuted, the Lumière mode of filming had already worn off. Undeniably, the French inventors had given a considerable

⁹⁰ "Trucchi cinematografici," in *Film*, March 29, 1914.

contribution in evolving from the limited opticality of *Zootropes* and peep-boxes; their moving pictures, however, lacked a developed storytelling, even in those cases when the French brothers attempted a plot, like in *L'arroseur arrosé* (*The Sprinkler Sprinkled*).

The subject of this 50-seconds film of 1895 was entirely based on a joke a boy plays on a gardener. The boy steps on the hose, cutting off the water flow. When the gardener looks into the nozzle, the boy steps off the hose to let the water splash into the gardener's face. Although this film is widely considered the very first comedy in cinema history, its commonplace incident was characteristic of the Lumières' most realistic products. For the charm of cinema not to wane something beyond the screening of life dynamism was needed. Georges Méliès was responsible of the renewed popular interest in the cinematic spectacle.



Figure 76. A scene from *L'arroseur arrose* (1895). Picture in public domain.

Speaking of Méliès' extraordinary input to film aesthetic, Siegfried Kracauer stated that "his main contribution to the cinema lay in substituting staged illusion for unstaged reality, and contrived plots for everyday incidents" (*Theory of Film...*). Méliès, in fact, moved from the

Lumières' idea to satisfy curiosity and rather indulged in delighting spectatorial fantasy. He used the cinematic medium to create illusions he sold as films tinged with magic tricks. In other words, what Méliès gave birth to was a new aesthetic of the illusory, which could make sense only on the screen. By combining the heritage of photography and the stage with ingenious optical tricks he realized with the camera, Méliès shaped the concept of 'cinematic illusion.'

After Méliès' *trucage* films, what emerged were the fantastic potentialities of the motion-picture camera, besides the documentation of reality: film could amuse with exhilarating jokes. By 1905 the majority of mimes, comics, and music-hall performers got involved in the cinema business, not only because they were better paid, but also because they could bring with them the rhythms and styles of their theatrical gags. Rae Beth Gordon remarks how the trend of hosting cinema and theater spectacles side by side in the same venue ensured that "the performance codes of the cabaret were carried over into the new art, and that the "messages" conveyed by gesture... were transmitted to the spectator as before" (168).



Figure 77. The poster for *Marion*, *artista di caffè-concerto* (1920) with Francesca Bertini. Picture in public domain.

Released in 1920, *Marion, artista di caffè-concerto*, directed by Roberto Roberti and starring Francesca Bertini, one of the foremost silent actresses, is an interesting case in point.⁹¹ This film was based on the eponymous 1891 novel by Annie Vivanti, an Italian-English writer, the daughter of Anselmo Vivanti, a patriot from Mantua and Anna Lindau, the sister of foremost German intellectuals Paul and Rudolph.⁹² The plot is based on the sad and amoral life of Marion, a cabaret artist (Annie Vivanti herself was an ex *chanteuse*), her love story with penniless poet Mario, and the reckless search for the father she never met. For the scabrous content, this film was approved by censorship only “con riserva” and the production was forced to censor some scenes, such as the request of Marion’s old impresario to kiss her on the mouth (“I want your mouth,” said the caption) and Marion instigating Mario’s friend to kill her rival in love.⁹³

The film is faithful to the literary source and offers a glimpse into the glamorous and sinful world of cabaret, its vulgar gags, and the double entendres. Rodolfo De Angelis, in his *Storia del café-chantant* (1946), was very explicit about nightclub public’s preferences and the predilection for ribaldry and dirty songs, “Doppio senso, scurrilità e salacità infioravano in questi brevi componimenti. Gli è che forse gli altri pregi non sarebbero bastati a promuovere l’ilarità degli spettatori, che andavano in quei luoghi più con disposizioni erotiche che con ansie di divertimento” (“Double entendre, vulgarity, and salaciousness were the rage in these short lyrics. It was perhaps that other qualities would not have been enough to elicit the hilarity of spectators, who went to those places more with erotic disposition, than eagerness of amusement”) (26-27).

⁹¹ This film was restored in 2000 by the Cineteca Nazionale in Rome. The original length was 2019 mt, while the current format is 982 mt. The film’s finale was resumed thanks to reviews contained in journals of the time. See, for instance, *Lux. Rivista Internazionale dell’Industria Cinematografica*, February 2, 1921, Anno III, n. 2, p. 75.

⁹² Annie Vivanti, *Marion artista di caffè concerto*, Milano, Galli, 1891.

⁹³ The changes that censorship imposed are detailed in Vittorio Martinelli, “Il cinema muto italiano,” 1920, in *Bianco e Nero*, p. 198.

Annie Vivanti herself disseminated her novel with unequivocal allusions to cabaret's depravation. She spoke of "canzonacce sguaiate" ("coarse songs"), "gambe scoperte fino alle cosce" ("bare legs up to the thighs"), and the public's encouragement for the female artist to increasingly lift up her dress ("Brava bellezza, su, su, su!"). In Vivanti's novel, music itself is presented as a contrivance for the *chanteuse* to wiggle and "far vedere le gambe" ("show her legs"). Notably, Vivanti's amoral charges were comparable with those we have seen directed to cinema venues, fleshpots by the same standards as café-chantants and cabarets.



Figure 78. André Deed, alias *Cretinetti*, in his clownish costume. Picture in public domain.

Audiences, however, could find in film a continuation in themes, characters, and gestural acting of what they were used to in theatrical performances. Interestingly, in fact, the majority of comics who gave birth to the successful tradition of serialized comedies- André Deed, Ferdinand Guillaume, Marcel Fabre among the others- had all been trained up by the stage. In spite of their foreign origins, these actors were the rage in Italy with their exhilarating characters: Cretinetti (André Deed), Tontolini (Ferdinand Guillaume), Robinet (Marcel Fabre), and Cocciutelli

(Eduardo Monthus). They were acclaimed as true national heroes, together with local stars, such as Jolicoeur (Armando Gelsomini), Pik Nik (Armando Fineschi), and Lea (Lea Giunchi).

The fame of Cretinetti was such that the Neapolitan journal *Lux* defined him “il più agile, il più originale, il più umoristico dei comici del cinematografo, il creatore, anzi, del comico cinematografo, inteso come caricatura e satira mimica della vita reale” (“the most agile, the most original, the most humoristic among the comedians of the cinematograph, indeed, the creator of comic cinematography, to be intended as caricature and mimic satire of real life”).⁹⁴

No less popular among Italian crowds was Ferdinand Guillaume, who in 1910 alone, after being purchased by *Cines*, realized some over one hundred films at full steam into the shoes of Tontolini, on the wave of the successful trend of clumsy physicality, funny falls, and exaggerated mimicry inaugurated by Deed’s Cretinetti. Tontolini was even the starring character in Giulio Antamoro’s *Pinocchio* (1911), a film making innovative use of animated objects and puppets on the wave of the successful special-effects trend inaugurated by Méliès we discussed earlier.⁹⁵ When the heyday of Tontolini was over, Guillaume signed up a contract with *Pasquali Film*, dressing the part of Polidor.⁹⁶

The comic genre relied essentially on very simple plots and the gestural expressiveness of their whimsical artists, their clownish attitude, and their clumsy way of handling situations from everyday life. Titles themselves were simple and allusive of the paradoxical adventure the character was about to embark on. It could be a Christmas lunch (*Come fu che l’ingordigia rovinò il Natale a Cretinetti*, 1910 and *Il Natale di Cretinetti*, 1911), office problems (*Lea in ufficio*,

⁹⁴ “Cretinetti,” in *Lux*, July, 17, 1910, Anno III, n. 54, p. 6.

⁹⁵ Antamoro’s rendition is the very first film inspired by Carlo Collodi’s novel *Pinocchio*. This film was found in 1994 in the archives of the National Cineteca in Milan. A copy of the film was restored by the Cineteca Nazionale in Rome.

⁹⁶ See Elena Mosconi, *L’oro di Polidor: Ferdinand Guillaume alla cineteca italiana*.

1911), sex change to get a job (*Polidor cambia sesso*,1912), and the handling of avances (*La cameriera è troppo bella* with Robinette,1912). In *Lea si diverte* (1912), the protagonist Lea Giunchi keeps the advances of her portly boss Grosventre at bay with hilarity and comical gags.



Figure 79. A scene from *Lea si diverte* (1912), with the protagonist Lea Giunchi mocking her boss Grosventre. Picture in public domain.

In *Tontolini è triste* (1911) emotions hold the stage. Tontolini is curiously unhappy, but after entering a cinema and watching a film-strangely enough with Tontolini- a broad smile comes back on his face, while captions explain that the man is now cured of his sadness. Frontal shots frame the public sitting with their backs turned, alternating with close-ups of miserable Tontolini among the audience.

Tontolini è triste is a peculiar example of a film within a film, where roles interchange as the protagonist is both actor and spectator. The fact that only the cinematic performance is able to cure Tontolini celebrates the recognition to the entertaining power of cinema. By seeing himself on the screen, Tontolini deals with the two opposite sides of himself. Shots picturing him happy and carefree are healing for his sadness and suggest Tontolini that this is how he would

like to see himself. Since audiences tended to identify themselves with characters and situations they saw projected, the screen functioned as a sort of spectatorial narcotic, as film theorists Baudry and Metz have established. Laughter was a liberating and cathartic experience.⁹⁷ *Tontolini è triste* might be considered a sort of indirect publicity to the ‘therapeutic’ effect of the comic genre.



Figure 80. A scene from *Tontolini è triste* (1911), featuring sad Tontolini among the audience. Picture in public domain.

Although comedy films and their starring characters filled movie theaters to capacity, specialized journals started blaming films for debasing cinema aesthetics. Cinematography could redeem itself only by getting rid of “i Tontolini, i Jolicouer, i Robinet, i Cretinetti e simili altri energumeni degni di pianto, anziché di riso, e le cui produzioni danno davvero un senso di nausea *L’effect cinéma*” (“the many Tontolinis, the Jolicouers, the Robinets, the Cretinettis and

⁹⁷ See Jean-Louis Baudry, *L’effet cinéma* and Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier. Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*.

other similar wild men worth of weeping, rather than laughing, whose productions really nauseate”), preached *Lux e Cine*.⁹⁸

Journalists were aware that if ‘low’ moving pictures were the rage, it was because the public *in toto*, irrespective of social and class order, loved to see them, “é vero che se detti spettacoli si moltiplicano contagiosamente è perché il pubblico, e non solamente la plebaglia da marciapiede, dimostra di accettarli con compiacenza” (“it is true that if these shows multiply contagiously is because the public, and not only street mob, demonstrates to accept them with pleasure”), lamented the director of *Eco Film*.⁹⁹

If something had to be done, in order to change the public’s bad tastes, this had to go in a different direction than demonizing producers for capitalizing on popular preferences. The task of re-directing viewers’ penchant should have been taken by the specialized press and cinema owners. The *Eco Film* director, however, skeptically concluded that none of these two ideal moderators would have been in the condition of fostering changes for reasons of different kinds: “la stampa cinematografica... non ha ancora un diretto contatto con il pubblico per poter prestare una valida opera; in quanto poi ai proprietari di sale... Santo Iddio... prima di essere degli artisti o per lo meno dei fautori di educazione, sono speculatori!” (“the cinematographic press... has not yet a direct contact with the public to be able of giving a valid aid; as for cinema owners... Oh my Goodness...they are speculators, before being artists or supporters of education”).¹⁰⁰

As a matter of fact, cinema owners did any possible impropriety to gain their bad reputation. The journal *Cinemagraf* denounced with indignation the guile of some owners speeding up the projection, in order to have more shows during the day and anticipate the closing

⁹⁸ “Sull’orizzonte,” in *Lux e Cine, rivista della cinematografia italiana ed estera*, May, 1911, Anno I, n. 5, p. 3-4.

⁹⁹ “Per l’arte e l’estetica,” in *Eco Film*, May 5, 1913, Anno I, n. 2.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibidem*.

time, “Bisogna frenare con la più grande energia la pericolosa tendenza che hanno certi operatori di girare più presto del normale” (“We must stop with energy the dangerous tendency of certain operators to film faster than the normal speed”). Such crass strategies to increase profit did not certainly contribute either to the good reputation of cinematography or to cultivate a faithful audience, “Se volete che il pubblico resti fedele alla vostra sala, bisogna che sia assolutamente convinto che non troverà una proiezione fissa ben regolata e perfetta, come da voi” (“If you want audiences faithful to your venue, they must be absolutely sure they won’t find a projection as smooth as perfect as yours”).¹⁰¹

No less dishonest than speeding up projections was the deplorable habit of cutting films to expedite their running time. Such speculation was clearly finalized to profit from shows as much as possible, involving not only cinema owners, but also renters:

Alcuni noleggiatori poco scrupolosi, alcuni proprietari di sale poco rispettosi del pubblico che occorre numeroso ai loro richiami, si permettono di deturpare, con tagli bestiali, alcune tra le più belle produzioni d’arte, allo scopo di una bassa speculazione, di far cioè maggior numero di spettacoli durante lo stesso periodo di tempo.¹⁰²

Some unscrupulous renters and cinema owners disrespectful of the numerous public answering their call, dare to disfigure with brutal cuts some of the most beautiful artistic productions, with the purpose of a low speculation, that is to offer a major number of shows during the same time period.

Film cuts did endanger the morality and reputation of cinematography, but more importantly affected the aesthetic credibility of movies, which were deprived of narrative content. Usually cuts were made by operators doing what employers imposed on them, with no concern for the artistic implications, “La produzione resta così monca, alcune volte diventa

¹⁰¹ “Curiamo la proiezione,” in *Cinematograf*, April 8, 1916, Anno I, n. 8, p. 15.

¹⁰² “Uno sconcio,” in *Cinematograf*, April 8, 1916, Anno I, n. 8, p. 17.

perfino assurda, perché l'operazione del taglio è compiuta da un qualsiasi operatore, al quale il padrone dice semplicemente: "Levami cento, duecento metri di pellicola." E la forbice dove taglia taglia" ("Thus the production is incomplete, sometimes even absurd, as the cut operation is performed by any operator, to whom the employer simply says: "Cut out one hundred meters, two hundred meters of film." And scissors cut at random").¹⁰³

If cuts endangered the aesthetic credibility and integrity of films, and the lack of hygiene attracted only street audiences, genres were no less deplorable for debasing the reputation of cinematography. Journals did not miss the opportunity to remark that many films were, far from being educational, devoid of serious literary and artistic value, aiming only to profit and fill venues to capacity.

Lux e Cine thundered against the degradation of cinematography, suggesting as only possible cure the radical purging of ethics, repertoires, and movie theaters. As the reviewer wrote, "Certi cinema, abbominio dell'arte, dell'igiene, della comodità, della sicurezza, della morale dovranno ritornare nel fango da cui sono sorti, per dar vita ad un cinema scolastico, salubre, estetico e confortevole" ("Certain cinemas, abomination of art, hygiene, comfort, safety, and morality will have to go back to the mud from where they rose, in order to give birth to an educational, healthy, aesthetic, and comfortable cinema").

The finger was also pointed at a deplorable repertoire, giving prominence to "sedicenti drammi" ("would-be dramas") promoting only "oscurantismo storico" ("historical obscurantism"), the "sconcio trivialismo" ("indecent triviality") of serialized comedies, and those

¹⁰³ "Uno sconcio," in *Cinemagraf*, April 30, 1916, Anno I, n. 8.

“drammi a forti tinte” (“sensational dramas”), whose “turpe passionalità” (“foul passion”) would transmit “infamia nel cuore e nel cervello” (“infamy into the heart and brain”).¹⁰⁴

The harsh criticism of *Lux e Cine* was an evident jab to a filmic tradition consolidated between the years 1907 and 1910, which was known as “dramma storico.” The reviewer made even reference to specific titles, such as *Nerone* (1909), *Giulio Cesare* (1909), and *Agrippina* (1910), as representative of a cinema trivializing peoples and customs of Roman history, and instilling a distorted idea of the past. Nevertheless, audiences were attracted to the *peplum* genre, insomuch as its appreciation soon swept through the foreign market. Chronicles report that Luigi Maggi’s *Nerone* alone, on the wave of its incredible national success, sold over 300 copies abroad (Brunetta *Storia* 39).

The taste for the world of classical antiquity had shaped on the wave of Ambrosio’s blockbuster *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei* (1908), directed by Luigi Maggi.¹⁰⁵ Inspired by Edward G. Bulwer-Lytton’s eponymous novel *The Last Days of Pompei* (1835), this film laid the foundations for the fortunate historical-epic genre. Classical captions, stage directions and gestural expressiveness in imitation of the theatrical tradition were celebrative of a glorious national past that was now serving the country’s present needs.

While approaching the 50th anniversary of its Unification, in fact, Italy could not but pay homage to its old glories in the attempt to consolidate national consciousness. The displacement of ideals and values of ancient times served to empower the present with the same eminence. Together with the political establishment and intellectuals, cinematography took to the field with its communicative visual language with the intent to help audiences cherish the greatness of the

¹⁰⁴ “Sull’orizzonte,” in *Lux e Cine, rivista della cinematografia italiana ed estera*, May, 1911, Anno I, n. 5, p. 3-4.

¹⁰⁵ A copy of the film is preserved at the Museo Nazionale del Cinema in Turin.

nation. By exploiting suggestive visual *topoi*, the historical-epic genre made use of spectacular scenography, heroic narrative, and acting techniques drawing from the opera and the lyric tradition, in order to develop a cinematic rhetoric bringing forth national pride. The label itself, with which this genre is known, *peplum*, refers to the over-the-shoulder robe that Greco-Romans used to wear and is representative of a well-defined national identity. This garment established people's belonging to a common culture, heroic ideals, and the pride to give continuity to one's own laws and mores. By screening the dignity of Ancient Rome, the ambition of dominating the world, and the solidity of the classical values, cinema directors and producers meant to contribute to develop an awareness of patriotism in Italians.

Films such as *Nerone*, *Giulio Cesare*, and *Agrippina* we already mentioned drew up alongside productions dealing with themes and characters other than Roman history. Since the intent was to exploit glory and values of tradition, neither historical accuracy nor thematic coherency were important. Films based on ancient Rome, in fact, were released in concomitance with productions glorifying heroism in the broadest sense, with titles celebrative of the Risorgimento (Mario Caserini's *Garibaldi*, 1907 and *Anita Garibaldi*, 1910) and even the leaders of national revolts against foreign dominance (*Masaniello*, 1908).

Homage to national literary greatness was also rendered with films dedicated to Dante (Francesco Bertolini's *Inferno*, and *Purgatorio* produced by Helios Film, both of 1911), Torquato Tasso (Enrico Guazzoni's *Gerusalemme liberata* and *Aminta*, 1911), and Alessandro Manzoni (Eleuterio Rodolfi's *I promessi sposi*, 1913). Foreign masterpieces, however, were also celebrated (Mario Caserini's *Macbeth*, 1909, Arrigo Frusta's *Otello* and Ambrosio's *Amleto*, both of 1914), without forgetting Italian stars, such as Arturo Ambrosio's *Galileo Galilei* (1909) and Giuseppe de Liguoro's *Conte Ugolino* (1908). The birth of the Italian lineage was also the

rage, with blockbusters such as Francesco Bertolini's *Odissea* (1911) and Giovanni Pastrone's *La caduta di Troia* (1911).

Such a variegated production was representative not only of the intellectual commitment to the nourishment of national pride, but also of the level of specialization and complexity reached in filmmaking and plots. Whether subjects were taken from literary texts, history, or classic epic, their projection required a considerable employment of labor and scenographic resources. Besides a wealthy producer to go to great expense and a skillful cameraman, the realization of historical films imposed the need for a new specialist: the artistic director. Among his duties were the care for set constructions, the artists' make-up, and the confection of costumes; the artistic director was also responsible for conducting historical research for and mediating between the production crew and temperamental artists.

The growth of film industry and its refinement in set design not only implied major roles and tasks in the production, but also conspicuous investments in the studios, as sets became more complex. Besides capitals, however, grandiose productions requested a continuous supply of subjects. It was for this reason that together with scriptwriters taking care of captions and the difficulty to compensate with the absence of voice, the major Italian intellectuals ended up being involved, more or less reluctantly, into screenwriting. In 1913, Renato Serra looked at scriptwriting as one of the most remunerative activities, "c'è il teatro, la fabbrica dei libretti d'opera, il cinematografo, che finiscono di mettere in valore come si suol dire, l'opera dei nostri scrittori. Per poco che una abbia di ingegno e di produttività, è sicuro di ricavarne qualche cosa sul mercato" ("there is the theater, the librettos for the opera, and the cinematograph, which end up valuing, as we say, the work of our writers. Even if one has little ingenuity and productivity, is certain to get something from the market") (*Le lettere* 243).

Serra's words pointed at the possibility for men of letters to market their writing skills; writers who could churn out one screenplay after the other were needed. In fact, it did not take intellectuals long to start seeing cinematography as the golden goose. By 1910, material interests had already had the upper hand over reserves dictated by the new medium's lack of artistic credibility and the majority of the intellectuals had let themselves be tempted by screenwriting as a sheer way to easy profits. One of the first to lend his works to cinematography was Giovanni Verga, whose *Cavalleria Rusticana* was probably edited for the screen as soon as 1901.¹⁰⁶ Only in 1909, however, Verga officially waived his copyright of *Cavalleria Rusticana* to a French Company, the *Association Cinématographique des Auteurs Dramatiques*, which turned the play into a film in 1910, directed by Émile Chautard. The Italian rendition of Verga's *Cavalleria Rusticana*, was screened only in 1916, directed by Ugo Falena and produced by Tespi Film.

Verga, however, was never fully satisfied neither with the script nor the cinematic adaptation he saw mutilated by brutal cuts in the original dialogues, insomuch as, after seeing the film "out of pure curiosity," he wrote her lover Dina Castellazzi di Sordevolo that he had not even been able to understand the production. Such skepticism, however, did not prevent Verga from authorizing the exploitation of his entire *oeuvre*, attracted by the promises of ready money. Verga's cynical disposition to dismiss aesthetic concerns, as long as he got paid, is revealed in the letter "Il punto è che paghino e poiché del genere si fa un consumo enorme spero che qualcosa verrà a te di questi famosi diritti d'autore e del lavoro di messa in opera" ("The point is that they pay and

¹⁰⁶ See Sebastiano Gesù and Nino Genovese, *Verga e il cinema* as a detailed chronicle of Verga's conflicting relationship with the screen.

since this genre is used a lot I hope you will get something from this famous copyright and mise-en-scene”).¹⁰⁷

As we can see, Verga’s approach to film industry was essentially dictated by economic ends and was never accompanied by a solid conviction, insomuch as when he felt entitled to take scripts in his own hands, in order to minimize the damage to his sources, he felt so embarrassed to beg for anonymity. “Vi prego e vi scongiuro di non dire mai che io abbia messo le mani in questa manipolazione culinaria delle mie cose” (“I pray and beg you not to tell anybody that I was involved in this culinary manipulation of my works”), was Verga’s supplication to Dina.¹⁰⁸



Figure 81. Pina Menichelli in *Tigre Reale*, directed by Giovanni Pastrone (1911). Picture in public domain.

Despite the shame for getting involved in screenwriting, after *Cavalleria Rusticana* Verga did continue to offer his plays to production companies. From 1912 to 1916 databases offer conspicuous evidence of film inspired by Verga’s short stories and theatrical plays, *Storie*

¹⁰⁷ The letter is of February 20, 1912. The letter is contained in Gianpiero Brunetta, *Gli intellettuali e il cinema*, p. 58.

¹⁰⁸ Quoted in Gino Raya, *Verga e il cinema*, p. 33.

del Castello di Trezza, La lupa, L'amante di Gramigna, Storia di una Capinera, and Tigre Reale. Many of them had a long gestation and appeared on the screen only after extenuating mediations between the author and the filmmaker. *Tigre Reale*, for instance, which was offered to Itala Films in 1912, became a film only in 1916, directed by Giovanni Pastrone and starring Pina Menichelli, one of the most admired Silent Era divas.

Verga's double standard, however, must have been a normal practice for intellectuals eager to profit from the film industry and reluctant at the same time to reveal their involvement. The journal *Cosmograf* in 1916 lamented that "c'è un gran numero di letterati egregi che stima avvilente l'occuparsi di cinematografia" ("there is a large number of illustrious literary men, which considers humiliating dealing with cinematography").¹⁰⁹ As a matter of fact, it was not a rare event to hear of intellectuals changing their mind about the alleged downgrading collaboration with the cinema industry. The same journal called attention to Marco Praga's changing of the guard. "The author of *La moglie ideale*," the reviewer wrote, "has handed in a script to Itala Films" ("L'autore della moglie ideale ha consegnato uno scenario alla Itala Films"), whose tentative title was *L'orma*. In the end, "anche Marco Praga non ha sdegnato di scrivere un suo lavoro per il cinematografo" ("also Marco Praga did not disdain to write for the cinematograph"), the reviewer concluded. Itala Films considered Praga's collaboration a surplus value to its mission "of renewing and bringing cinematography to a true expression of art" ("di rinnovare e di portare ad una vera espressione d'arte il cinematografo").¹¹⁰

Sabatino Lopez, a prolific author of comedies and dramas in the first two decades of the 20th century, like Marco Praga reconsidered his reluctance for screenwriting. The journal *Cinemagraf* did not miss the opportunity to highlight how Lopez's "initial dislike got blunt little

¹⁰⁹ "Pietro Fosco e il Fuoco," in *Cosmograf*, June 22, 1916, Anno I, n. 11, p.3.

¹¹⁰ "Marco Praga e il cinematografo," in *Cinemagraf*, April 10, 1916, Anno I, n. 6, p. 14.

by little” (“la sua antipatia iniziale si è andata a poco a poco smussando”), even though “he was until yesterday arch-enemy of the cinematograph” (“è stato fino a ieri un nemico acerrimo del cinematografo”). As the reviewer said for Praga, with Lopez’s acquisition in the team of cinema collaborators, “lo schermo si arricchisce di un repertorio interessante” (“the screen is enriched with and interesting repertoire”).¹¹¹ Roberto Bracco, for instance, entered in a debate with producers he accused of being blind to his playwriting. In a letter to the director of the journal *Il Marzocco* he wrote in 1914, Bracco lamented even a sort of conspiracy against his productions and the indifference of the public.

When finally a production company took an interest in one of his dramas, Bracco’s resentment had not softened, “Quando una casa cinematografica mi ha offerto parecchio denaro per un mio vecchio dramma ho detto di sì con rabbiosa gioia” (“When a production company offered me a lot of money for one of my old dramas, I said yes with angry joy”).¹¹² The play Bracco referred to was likely *Sperduti nel buio* (1901) that Nino Martoglio turned into a successful film in 1914, starring theater actor Giovanni Grasso and Virginia Balistreri.

If easy profits made authors overlook concerns for the debasement suffered from their literary source during the adaptation process, not all those who approached screenwriting held the cinematographic medium in low esteem. Guido Gozzano, for instance, when motivating his collaboration with the cinema explained how this chance had helped his dream of a “teatro favoloso” come true, “Da tempo vagheggiavo un teatro favoloso, volevo sceneggiare alcuni temi di mia invenzione, fare cosa di poesia vera, dilettevole per piccoli e grandi” (“For a long time I have been yearning for a fabulous theater; I meant to script some of my own themes, to create true poetry, entertaining for children and adults”).

¹¹¹ “Sabatino Lopez,” in *Cinemagraf*, April 10, 1916, Anno I, n. 6, p. 15.

¹¹² See Caterina del Vivo, *Roberto Bracco e il “Marzocco,” con lettere inedite*, p. 17.

Screenwriting challenged Gozzano with the creation of a visual language unachievable with poetry and theater dramatization, “Il cinematografo è giunto in buon punto per semplificare e realizzare il mio sogno: non più prolissità di dialogo e di scena, non più difficoltà di accertamento, ma la proiezione muta ed eloquente ad un tempo; il nastro prodigioso che rivela e commenta” (“The cinematograph came at the right moment to simplify and make my dream true: no more lengthiness in dialogues and scenes, no more difficulty in understanding, but the silent and eloquent immediate projection; the prodigious film that displays and comments”).¹¹³

Unlike Verga, who begged for anonymity in scripting, Gozzano was proud of his activity as screenwriter, inasmuch as he defined this experience as something he had done “with great love and great delight” (“É cosa che ho fatto con grande amore e gran diletto”). He even boldly declared himself ready to put his signature on any of his cinematic works, “ogni pellicola col suo quadro favoloso e il suo commento in versi, mi è cara come un mio lavoro letterario, e non esiterò a firmarla e tutelarla come i miei volumi di prosa e di poesia” (“any film with its fantastic scenery and its comment in verse is dear to me as much as one of my literary works, and I will not hesitate to sign it and protect it as my volumes of prose and poetry”).¹¹⁴

Reviewers lamented the superficiality of directors and owners of movie theaters, depicted as unscrupulous jackals interested only in profiting from subjects regardless of their quality. What journals were calling attention to was the excessive importance given to *metteurs en scène*. Subjects, instead, had to reflect the director’s personal creative vision, without being debased and mutilated by non-professionals, in order to respond to the logic of the industrial process:

¹¹³ “Poesia e Cinematografo,” in *La vita cinematografica*, December, 20, 1910, Anno I, n. 2.

¹¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

La illustre genia di analfabeti che impera nel mondo italiano delle *films* non ha ancora capito che non si crea il *soggetto* senza creare gli *autori*; e non si creano gli autori senza rompere quel cerchio di ignoranti, di empirici e di studenti di ginnasio che rubano gli spunti ai giornali illustrati della domenica.¹¹⁵

The illustrious breed of illiterates prevailing in the Italian world of films has not yet understood that one cannot create the subject, without creating the authors; and that one cannot create the authors without breaking the circle of illiterates, empirical, and high school students, who steal inspiration from Sunday illustrated journals.

The lack of a refined and recognized authorship in movie-making was a serious threat not only to the aesthetic credibility of cinematography, but to the reputation of Italian production as well. Journals, in fact, highlighted the backwardness of national *mise-en-scène* and its heavy reliance on the screenwriter rather than the author, in comparison with championed foreign productions, especially French, “si lascia alla Francia, che in poco tempo ha fatto un cammino enorme, la cura di perfezionare il soggetto” (“we leave to France, whose progress was enormous in such a short time, the care of perfecting the subject”).¹¹⁶

The lack of a sophisticated and skillful authorial touch in the *mise-en-scène* started being sensed by the specialized press. In 1918, for instance, the journal *In Penombra* noticed how aesthetic progress in set design in the last ten years was only apparent and superficial. To be stressed was how historical and epic films from 1908 onward brought major attention to make up, costume, and set reconstructions. Such refinements, however, still satisfied the thirst for “exterior” décor, rather than the search for image aesthetic, style, and artistic significance:

L'inquadratura, la messa in scena, l'interpretazione hanno in cinematografia lo stesso valore che possono avere le parole in letteratura. Occorre che le parole si compongano in uno stile, e che questo stile rivesta un contenuto, per giungere

¹¹⁵ See *Cinemagraf*, March 4, 1916, Anno I, n. I, p. 4.

¹¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

all'opera d'arte. L'arte di inscenare è però ben più complessa di quanto possa apparire a prima vista... Una trama, sia essa ricavata da un romanzo, da una commedia o originariamente fornita da un autore, è pur sempre un racconto fatto semplicemente di parole. Può, è vero, contenere già tutti gli elementi che occorrono allo sviluppo di una composizione cinematografica, ma solo in potenza. Occorre quindi trasformare, realizzare, creare... ed anzi tutto scomporre la concezione, qualunque essa sia, per ricostruirla cinematicamente.¹¹⁷

Shots, the mise-en-scène, and acting have in cinematography the same value as words in literature. Words need to be composed with style and this style must display a content, in order to get to a work of art. Staging, however, is harder than we can think at first sight... A plot, either if it is based on a novel or a comedy originally provided by the author, is still a simple tale of words. It is true that it may contain all the elements necessary for the development of a film, but only potentially. We need to transform, realize, create... and notably break down the idea, no matter what it is, in order to rebuild it cinematically.

What *In Penombra* was rising, however, was only the birth of editing concerns that would enliven film theory in the years to come. For the time being, productions still held on the big names of intellectuals and their waving copyrights to let film industry adapt their works. After all, the intelligentsia felt almost duty bound to take to the field and save the reputation of cinematography with the glory of their prestigious name. As Gozzano claimed, for the men of letters it was the time “di opporsi alla volgarità che ha invaso il cinematografo e vi trionfa in modo nauseante” (“to cross the coarseness that invaded the cinematograph and prevails disgustingly”).¹¹⁸ Gozzano’s sense of entitlement and his conviction that intellectuals could elevate cinematography and its repertoire with their collaboration must have been widespread, if even Serafino Gubbio, the passive cameraman protagonist of Luigi Pirandello’s *Si gira...* hinted at the same attitude, when speaking of the educated men that everyday walked in procession to the *Cosmograph*, his production company, in the attempt to market their works in the cinema business. In Serafino’s words, “Scrittori illustri, commediografi, poeti, romanzieri, vengono qui,

¹¹⁷ “L’arte di inscenare,” in *In Penombra*, June 1918, Anno I, n. 1.

¹¹⁸ “Poesia e Cinematografo,” in *La vita cinematografica*, December, 20, 1910, Anno I, n. 2.

tutti al solito dignitosamente proponendo la “rigenerazione artistica” dell’industria” (“Distinguished writers, playwrights, poets, and novelists come here all as usual graciously suggesting the “artistic re generation” of the industry”).¹¹⁹

Si gira..., the most seminal 20th-century novel on the world of early cinematography and its author, Luigi Pirandello, most widely known as an innovative writer for theater, but also a theorist of the aesthetic confrontation between cinema and the traditional theater, will be the subject of the final chapter.

¹¹⁹ Luigi Pirandello, *Si gira...*, p. 1187.

3- Luigi Pirandello and the Dynamism of Modernity

There were artists who depended on silence, and sound was powerless to add a thing. They live in their time, and we must be willing to visit it. An inability to admire silent films, like a dislike of black and white, is a sad inadequacy. Those who dismiss such pleasures must have deficient imaginations.

Roger Ebert, *Chicago Sun-Times*

Luigi Pirandello's view of cinema, in comparison with the bold and self-interested attention of his contemporaries, was halting and dubious. Verga, Bracco, and Di Giacomo, among others, had already expressed severe doubts about the artistic merit of the new art, despite being attracted by the commercial appeal. Others, Gozzano in particular, had generally a favorable attitude about film and even praised the activity of screenwriting. In both cases, however, the easy profit that the film industry promised appears to have played its part in promoting collaboration.

According to historian Gaspare Giudice, also Pirandello was drawn to film making not by sheer curiosity for a novel medium. Although Pirandello "quasi sempre durante tutta la vita" ("for the greatest part of his life") was plagued by debts, as Giudice remarks (511), his involvement in cinematography was not merely financial. In the 1960s, film historian Francesco Callari was among the first to question the image of Pirandello as one eager only for fame and fortune; rather, he depicted "un osservatore acuto, spettatore critico, vivamente attento alle capacità espressive della nuova arte" ("a keen observer, critical spectator, vividly interested in the expressive potential of the new art") (85).

As a matter of fact, Pirandello's initial mistrust of the cinematic machine and its technological disruption over individuals, which the playwright theorized in the novel *Si gira...*, was short lived as, curiosity and faith in the expressive potentiality of cinema developed, so much so that he considered adapting his works. In 1929, the influential essay *Se il film parlante abolirà il teatro* made explicit his preference for silent films over the talkies. Moreover, when the Lumière *Cinematographe* was premiered at Roman photographic studio *Le Lieure* on March 13, 1896, Pirandello was among the audience, having been invited by Ugo Ojetti (Callàri 17). This day marks his profound interest in the new medium: it was the first of many projections he watched enthusiastically. These were the years of the Lumières' *actualités*, Méliès' fantastic trick films, and the extravagant transformations of Leopoldo Fregoli with his *Fregoligraph*, which were the rage in Italy.



Figure 82. Leopoldo Fregoli's *Fregoligraph* in 1898. Picture in public domain.

Between 1898 and 1903, the stage star Leopoldo Fregoli made films around the idea of elaborated transformations and optical tricks: *Fregoli in palcoscenico*, *Fregoli prestigiatore*,

Fregoli al ristorante, *Fregoli barbiere*, and *Segreto per vestirsi* were the most successful.¹²⁰ Fregoli displayed in all of them a rare ability at impersonations and role changes, as well as a keen talent in innovative filmmaking and special effects. He included projections called *Fregoligraph* as intermezzos during his performances, which he realized with the *Cinématographe* purchased soon after the Lumières invented it. One of his most applauded special effects film was the backward or reverse projection:

Un giorno mi saltò il ticchio di fare uno scherzo al pubblico attraverso lo schermo: feci proiettare qualcuna delle mie pellicole al rovescio. Il pubblico vedeva, sbalordito, uscire gli abiti dalle mani degli inservienti, o passare dalle sedie addosso al trasformista, e questo marciare velocissimo all'indietro, e via di seguito... Furono torrenti d'ilarità nella sala.¹²¹

One day, I got it into my head to play a trick to the public through the screen: I projected some of my reels backwards. The audience, astonished, saw clothes coming out from the housekeepers' hands or passing through the chairs onto the quick-change artist, and this rapid marching backwards, and so on and so forth... There were peals of laughter in the room.

While no evidence survives of Pirandello commenting on these films, it seems unlikely that he never saw them. In his memoir, futurist painter Primo Conti, a friend of Fregoli's, records a wedding party at which "tra una folla variopinta di amici si vedevano sorridere a contatto di gomito Répaci e Viani, Pea e Zacconi, Marta Abba e Tina De Lorenzo, Fregoli e Pirandello" ("among a variegated crowds of friends, one could see smiling, elbow to elbow, Répaci and

¹²⁰ These films are preserved at the Cineteca Nazionale in Rome and have been restored in 1996 as part of the Lumière Project. A complete list of films made by Fregoli between 1898 and 1903 can be found in *The European Film Archives at the Crossroads*, edited by Catherine A. Surowiec, p. 197.

¹²¹ Leopoldo Fregoli, *Fregoli raccontato da Fregoli*, p. 217.

Viani, Pea and Zacconi, Marta Abba and Tina De Lorenzo, Fregoli and Pirandello”).¹²² Primo Conti painted an exceptional portrait of the Sicilian playwright in 1928.



Figure 83. Futurist painter Primo Conti with a posing Pirandello and the portrait of the Sicilian playwright he realized in 1928. Pictures in public domain.

Fregoli’s chameleon-like talent became indicative of the transformations that technology had brought into everyday life. Journals compared Fregoli with “a flash of lighting, an electric current, a living cinematograph” (“un lampo, una corrente elettrica, in cinematografo vivente”).¹²³ As a matter of fact, his quick changes resembled cinematic dynamism and called to mind the frames of a film reel. As the journal *La tribuna* wrote as early as 1899, Fregoli “passa come un cinematografo tramutandosi da *regisseur* a clown, da baritono d’opera seria in ventriloquo” (“moves like a cinematograph from *regisseur* to clown, from opera baritone to ventriloquist”).¹²⁴

¹²² Primo Conti, *La gola del merlo*, p. 352.

¹²³ *Il Paese*, October 16, 1907.

¹²⁴ *La tribuna*, May 13, 1899.

A “living cinematograph,” Fregoli was the epitome of vitality and creativity, almost the embodiment of the new art form. It is not a surprise, in fact, that Fregoli and his dynamic variety were inspirational to those involved in legitimate theater, who were seeking to resuscitate performances that were anchored to *fin-de-siècle* bourgeois drama and the staging of psychological conflicts. Marinetti and his fellow futurists, for instance, saw in Fregoli’s dynamism the turning point towards an innovative mode of acting, representative of the changes in modern technology.



Figure 84. Fregoli and his numerous characters in a postcard of the time. Picture in public domain.

In the *Manifesto del Teatro di Varietà*, the Futurists wrote in 1913, Fregoli’s name is emblematic of artistic vigor and vitality of modernism, “il teatro di Varietà spiega luminosamente le leggi dominanti della vita moderna:... d) simultaneità di velocità + trasformazioni (Es: Fregoli)” “Variety theater brightly explains the dominant laws of modern life...d) speed simultaneity + transformations (For example: Fregoli)”.¹²⁵ Since the Futurists exalted the fast pace and brevity of variety sketches that appeared as cinema frames, Fregoli’s

¹²⁵ Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Manifesto del Teatro Futurista*, in *Lacerba*, September 29, 1913.

artistry was lauded for what the master displayed: speed, economy, contingency, and excitation. As Marinetti wrote in the *Manifesto*, “Il Futurismo esalta il Teatro di Varietà perchè... è il solo che utilizzi il cinematografo” (“Futurism exalts Variety Theater because... it is the only one using the cinematograph”).

Callàri reminds us of Pirandello’s regular visits to film studios in Rome, where he met others involved in screenwriting: Luigi Capuana, Ugo Fleres, Ugo Ojetti. In 1904 Pirandello wrote to Angiolo Orvieto, the director of the literary journal *Il Marzocco*, announcing a novel tentatively titled *Filàuri*: it would be a work based on the world of cinematography (Callàri 18). The project was abandoned until 1913, when Pirandello brought it to the attention of Renato Simoni, the director of *La lettura*. By then the title was *La tigre*, but the plot was the same: Aldo Nuti, a Neapolitan gentleman, becomes an actor for the sake of a Russian actress. Nuti shoots the woman and lets himself be killed by the tiger hired by the production crew. Observing the tragedy is an emotionless operator named Serafino, who passively films the drama of jealousy. The grotesque violence of the plot collides with the humoristic representation of the actors, emblematic of the fatuous cinema world.

La tigre was clearly telling in advance the future plot of *Si gira...* (1916), while playing with contemporary issues around filmmaking, such as the increasing preoccupation for the theater and the developing star system. These concerns were food for thought for Pirandello as early as 1902, when he started outlining them in *Filàuri*. Since the cinema was increasingly becoming a mass phenomenon and theater was at risk to lose its central role in popular entertainment, journals did not miss the opportunity to criticize theatrical acting styles and repertoires. *La Stampa*, for instance, denounced “the rubbish” staged in theaters in an article

explicitly titled *Le porcherie a teatro*.¹²⁶ Obscenities and poor performances were threatening “le buone tradizioni del nostro teatro drammatico” (“the good traditions of our dramatic theater”), leaving the stage in the hands of speculators, who “continuano ad ammorbare i nostri palcoscenici con la zavorra immorale del teatro francese” (“keep poisoning our stage with the immoral ballast of French theater”).

As a matter of fact, Italian early-20th-century theater was heavily dependent on the French vaudevilles of Courteline, Labiche, and Feydeau; and Italian playwrights frequently drew inspirations from French *pochades*, reworking their themes and characters to please national taste. Edoardo Scarpetta, one of the most popular artist in this field, gave birth to blockbuster caricatures like Don Felice Sciosciammocca, the protagonist of exhilarating parodies on the Neapolitan middle-class. The reviewer of *La stampa*, however, was not opposed to the French influence *per se*, but rather objected “lavori triviali, sguaiati, acrobatici, che sotto il leggero velame dei doppi sensi nascondono un veleno che ammorba spirito, mente, e cuore” (“trivial, coarse, and acrobatic performances, which under the light veil of double meanings hide a poisoning affecting the spirit, the mind, and the heart”). The press intention was not to ostracize foreign productions, provided that they were “buone commedie, ispirate a intendimenti artistici, intese a coltivare la mente ed a dilettere lo spirito” (“good comedies, inspired by artistic aims and meant to cultivate the mind and please the spirit”).¹²⁷

Le porcherie in teatro was a frontal assault on theater directors and solicitors, accused of falling back on import “commediacce” (“bad comedies”) in the name of profits, without considering how harmful the effects were on society. Considering the efforts of legitimate theater to bear comparison with cinema and produce significant plays, these accusations were

¹²⁶ “Le porcherie a teatro,” in *La stampa*, February 14, 1901.

¹²⁷ *Ibidem*.

devastating. Even the Jubilee of 1900 called by Pope Leone XIII, seemed the good opportunity to refresh the stage: for the occasion theaters in Rome embarked in rich and elaborated productions. The journal *Il Messaggero* reported of highly crafted *pièces*, such as *Quo Vadis?* and *Cyrano De Bergerac*, scenographic operas (*Nabucco*, *Carmen*, *L'italiana in Algeri*), and the very successful equestrian circus.

If the Jubilee consolidated Catholic religion, the theater pointed at establishing its own unquestioned artistic agency. After all, the spirit behind the celebration was to remember that the new century was marking an opposition against the faith in progress of the *fin-de-siècle*. The words in Leo XIII's encyclical letter *Tametsi futura prospicientibus* took a firm stand against the idea of religion as ephemeral, a disposable ideology to be dismissed as outdated.¹²⁸ Productions of classic plays represented traditional values and past greatness. *Quo vadis?*, for instance, was premiered on June 3, 1900 at the *Teatro Mercadante* in Neaples, adapted by Silvano D'Arborio from the 1896 bestseller novel by Polish writer Henryk Sienkiewicz *Quo vadis: A Narrative of the Time of Nero*. Its pro-Christian message could not be more manifest.

Sienkiewicz's work, in fact, was about the love story between the Christian Ligia and Marcus Vinicius, a Roman patrician in AD 64, when emperor Nero was ruling. Sienkiewicz's attention to historical figures and accuracy reinforced nationalism and re-directed audiences towards theatrical performances. The journal *La stampa*, after the successful premier in Naples, published an article entitled *Una resurrezione*, hoping in the contribution of Sienkiewicz's efforts to revitalize historical drama.¹²⁹ Italian crowds cheered the Polish writer as a hero and, on the occasion of his visit in Italy, "una pioggia di fiori salutò il grido uscito da cento e cento petti

¹²⁸ The Encyclical *Tametsi futura prospicientibus* (1900) of Pope Leo XIII can be read in *Documenti Papali* at www.vatican.va/offices/papal_docs_list_it.html.

¹²⁹ "Una resurrezione," in *La stampa*, June 7, 1900.

‘Viva Sienkiewicz’... L’entusiasmo suscitato dalla presenza del festeggiato fu spontaneo e commovente (sic)” (“a storm of flowers accompanied the cry ‘Hurrah Sienkiewicz’ shouted from hundreds of bosoms ... The enthusiasm for the guest of honor was spontaneous and moving”).¹³⁰

Although the popular approval, Sienkiewicz was however victim of accusations for plagiarism and historical inaccuracy. Professor De Antonio, a scholar researching Agostino della Sala Spada’s *Mondo antico* (1877), could not but notice some affinities between this work and Sienkiewicz’s, while Italianist Pia Treves found *Quo vadis?* heavily indebted to Bulwer Lytton’s *The Last Days of Pompei*.¹³¹ Both De Antonio and Treves agreed in questioning the originality of subject, themes, and characters of Sienkiewicz’s novel. “Tutti i personaggi, tutte le figure del Bulwer ritornano nel libro di Sienkiewicz; trasfigurate, vivificate da un alito nuovo, ma ritornano. E non le figure soltanto, ma anche le scene e le situazioni” (“All the characters, all the figures of Bulwer return transfigured in Sienkiewicz’s book; they are revitalized with a new breath, but they are the same”), lamented Pia Treves. As severe was De Antonio’s comment, “l’idea generale è pressoché la stessa, come quasi gli stessi sono i sentimenti a cui si ispirano” (“the general idea is practically the same, as the same are the inspiring sentiments”).

Accusations of plagiarism, however, did not lessen Sienkiewicz’s popularity. Rather, the Polish writer received numerous accolades, including the Nobel prize in 1905. His *Quo vadis?* was translated in more than fifty languages. When Sienkiewicz visited France in April 1901 for the premier of his novel, the journal *La stampa* spoke of “spettatori in visibilio” (“spectators thrown into ecstasies”).¹³² The production, showcased in Paris on April 1, 1901 at the theater of

¹³⁰ “Il giubileo letterario dell’autore di Quo vadis?,” in *La stampa*, January 1, 1901.

¹³¹ “Enrico Sienkiewicz può dirsi plagiatario?,” in *La stampa*, February 9, 1901.

¹³² “Trionfo di Sienkiewicz in Francia,” in *La stampa*, April 5, 1901.

Porte Saint-Martin, was such a success that literary critic Émile Faguet defined the staging no longer as historical melodrama, but “pure choreography.”

Productions inspired by successful plays, such as *Quo vadis?* and Edmond Rostand’s *Cyrano De Bergerac* demonstrated that theatrical performances were still capable of filling playhouses to capacity. The secret behind the popularity of these renditions was the romantic love story surrounded by a picturesque historical scenography exalting nationalism. In fact, it did not take long for the press to start lamenting that audiences deserted legitimate theater not because of their natural aversion for drama, but rather for the lack of winning material. As *La stampa* advocated, theaters were not emptied “dall’antipatia per il dramma alto e potente” (“by the antipathy for high and powerful drama”), but “dalla scarsità di veri ingegni drammatici, dalla poltroneria di autori ed attori, dalla noia stessa che, per tale mancanza, il pubblico risente” (“by the scarcity of high dramatic wits, the laziness of authors and actors, the boredom itself that the public feels because of this lack”).¹³³

Boredom in theaters became a serious matter, the main cause of the public’s hijacking towards lighter forms of divertissement. “Il caffè-concerto ingrassa, la pochade affolla i teatri e l’operetta trionfa” (“The café-concerts swarm, *pochades* fill theaters to capacity, and operettas triumph”), denounced *La stampa* in 1904. Variety theater and cabaret did offer an amusement that held no risk of leaving the public “di soffrire disillusioni” (“to suffer from disillusion”).¹³⁴ The triumph of frivolous divertissement at the expense of traditional theater was such that extreme measures were considered to stem the decay of legitimate drama and the proliferation of unprofessional acting. Daniele Chiarella, for instance, the owner of playhouses in Genoa and Turin, put forward the formal request to temporarily shut down theaters, which he thought filled

¹³³ “Sul sentiero della *decadenza*,” in *La stampa*, November 18, 1904.

¹³⁴ *Ibidem*.

with mediocre actors; such a drastic measure, Chiarella hoped, would discourage poor companies to flock around the stage:

Bisogna tenere chiusi per un anno tutti i teatri... In questo modo almeno la metà delle compagnie si scioglierà e gli elementi che costituiscono queste compagnie cambierebbero mestiere, per buona fortuna dei teatri e del pubblico che, dopo necessario riposo, ritornerebbe ai teatri, che si aprirebbero soltanto in stagioni propizie, con poche buone schiere di artisti.¹³⁵

Theaters must be closed for an entire year... In this way, at least half of the companies will be dissolved and their actors would change occupation, for the sake of theaters and the public, who, after a necessary break, would go back to theaters, which would be open only on selected seasons, with a few good artists.

Chiarella's resolution reveals a general lack of confidence in professional theatrical acting during these years. Gifted theater actors were abandoning the stage to take contracts in the film industry. "Oggi l'arte è invasa dagli spostati della vita, dai fannulloni e dalle attrici cocottes" ("Today, art is invaded by misfits, idlers and loose women"), lamented Chiarella. Such dispersion of actors could not but be fatal to the future of professional theater, increasingly forced to fall back on secondary companies to balance running costs:

L'impresario deve trasformare il suo teatro in un caffè o in una birreria, dove lo spettacolo drammatico è posto al servizio del bicchier di birra che si sorbisce o della ghiacciata che rinfresca le labbra della mondana che ha eletto il teatro per il suo ritrovo e campo d'azione. Il teatro di commedia diventa quindi non di rado semplicemente uno spettacolo sussidiario e secondario.¹³⁶

Impresarios have to transform their theater in a caffè or a brewery, where drama is at the service of a glass of beer or the slush cooling the lips of the loose woman, who elected the theater to her place and field of operation. Comedy becomes thus frequently a sheer subsidiary and secondary spectacle

¹³⁵ "Un anno senza teatro," in *La stampa*, July 28, 1905.

¹³⁶ *Ibidem*.

For Chiarella many theaters were little more than bars in bad taste, but even more he objected to the unstoppable commercialization of art and the lack of institutional administration within playhouses. As a matter of fact, the traditional division of duties of theatrical labor was, under everybody's eyes, being cast aside. Once well-established categories- authors, actors, stage directors, and theater owners- were now thrown together in a single group of avid individuals fighting each other for profits and forgetful of their respective expertise. This confusion in roles occurred as importers and promoters come into the picture. These new figures materialized together with the awareness that theaters were profitable arenas, where professionals of art turned into "concorrenti ad uno stesso guadagno" ("contenders to the same profit"). This was how "art ended up being confused with industry and viceversa."¹³⁷

Each category strove to defend one's own interest: actors were afraid not to work, authors feared the supremacy of foreign productions, theater owners were threatened by poor profits, while stage directors fought for finding challenging subjects. The result was unmanageable, with everybody working at cross purposes. The general preoccupation was protecting one's own task and job security, "proprio come una qualunque categoria di lavoratori" ("just as any category of workers").

Journals, instead, believed that commercial concerns were alien to creativity and that too much attention to personal profits alone would have led to a deplorable art commercialization. In order to take a new lease of life, theaters needed rather a fresh repertoire and the contribution of intellectual wits, "si faccia avanti una buona commedia, un autore...questo è l'importante; il resto è una guericciola che decide soltanto di minori interessi. L'arte, per buona sorte, non se ne cura ed è sorda ai clamori dell'industria" ("Come in a good comedy, an author... this is

¹³⁷ "A proposito del trust teatrale. Per l'arte o per l'industria?," in *La stampa*, August 3, 1907.

important; the rest is an insipid fight deciding only minor interests. Art, fortunately, does not care about this and is blind to the clamor of industry”).¹³⁸

Commercial ends were increasingly transforming the artistic product into an industrial manufacture. Giovanni Papini explained this phenomenon as triggered by the modernization of the world and the unstoppable technological progress. In his well-known article *La filosofia del cinematografo* (1907), Papini called attention to how the urban space itself was transforming to respond to industrialization and the new principle entertainment, namely the cinematograph:

I cinematografi, colla loro petulanza luminosa, coi loro grandiosi manifesti tricolori e quotidianamente rinnovati, colle rauche romanze dei loro fonografi, gli stanchi appelli delle loro orchestre, i richiami stridenti dei loro boys rossovestiti, invadono le vie principali, i caffè, s'insediano dove già erano gli hall di un restaurant o le sale di un bigliardo, si associano ai bars, illuminano ad un tratto colla sfacciataggine delle lampade ad arco le misteriose piazze vecchie.¹³⁹

Cinemas, with their bright petulance, with their grandiose daily-changed tricolored manifestos, with the hoarse romances coming from their phonographs, the tired appeal of their little orchestras, the shrill calls of red-dressed boys invade the main streets, cafès take over where once stood the hall of a restaurant or a billiard room, they pair with bars and suddenly illuminate with the impudence of arched lamps the mysterious old squares.

Papini stressed that the invasion of technology and progress in everyday life had reached such an extent to force old icons to yield to the new symbols of the modern world. “Cinemas,” Papini wrote, “threaten little by little to oust theaters, as well as tramways have ousted public cars, newspapers have ousted books, and bars have ousted cafès” (“I cinematografi

¹³⁸ *Ibidem.*

¹³⁹ Giovanni Papini, *La filosofia del cinematografo*, in *La stampa*, May 18, 1907, p.3.

...minacciano a poco a poco di spodestare i teatri, come le tranvie hanno spodestato le vetture pubbliche; come i giornali hanno spodestato i libri, e i bars hanno spodestato i caffè”).¹⁴⁰

Enrico Thovez, correspondent for *La stampa* since 1898, remarked that the advent of the new medium, like previous technological discoveries, had given intellectual and material power to the crowds:

Il telefono, l'automobile, l'aeroplano e la radio hanno modificato talmente I limiti di tempo e di spazio entro cui le civiltà si sono svolte durante i secoli che l'uomo oggi ha finito non tanto con l'acquistare una rapidità di sensi ignota agli antichi, quanto una specie di ubiquità. Ora il cinematografo appare come il riflesso artistico di questa nuova condizione di vita materiale e spirituale.¹⁴¹

Telephone, automobile, airplane, and radio have modified the limits of time and space, within which cultures developed through the centuries, to such an extent, that man today has ended up not as with gaining a sensorial rapidity unknown to old peoples, as with a sort of ubiquity. Now the cinematograph appears as the artistic reflection of this new material and spiritual condition of life.

Both Papini and Thovez agreed on the empowering function of cinematography as a medium child of technological advancement and carrier of progress. To Thovez cinema was even “a democratic art,” since it was “for all brains and pockets” (“alla portata di tutte le intelligenze e di tutte le borse”);¹⁴² a concept Papini reinforced, noting that “[Il cinematografo] è una breve fantasmagoria di venti minuti, alla quale tutti possono partecipare per trenta centesimi. Non esige troppa cultura, troppa attenzione, troppo sforzo per tenervi dietro” (“[The cinematograph is a short twenty-minute phantasmagoria, in which all can take part for thirty cents. It does not require too much education, too much attention, and too much effort to follow”).¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ *Ibidem.*

¹⁴¹ Enrico Thovez, *L'arte di celluloide*, in *La stampa*, n. CCIX, July, 29, 1908.

¹⁴² Enrico Thovez, *L'arte di celluloide*.

¹⁴³ Giovanni Papini, *La filosofia del cinematografo*.

Guido Gozzano believed that cheap tickets were the most powerful incentive for moviegoers, but at the same time he blamed this affordability for the “folla plebea” (“plebeian crowd”) that filled playhouses to capacity. Cinema to Gozzano had to be viewed necessarily as the “celluloid industry,” without any pretension of artistic agency. Cinema certainly “si sforza di fare dell’estetica” (“strives for aesthetics”), but nonetheless its results are fleeting and destined to a rapid, cheap consumption. Gozzano, in fact, was convinced that cinema would have never been capable of equaling the greatness of theater, the only “unfaltering and immortal” medium (“incrollabile ed immortale”).¹⁴⁴

Cinema’s strength was surely in its communicative power. To Papini, the visual language of images ‘spoke’ to people more effectively than newspapers and books, “I giornali descrivono i fatti nel tempo, ma senza darcene le immagini; le riviste ci danno le immagini, ma immote e fisse nello spazio, mentre il cinematografo ci dà figure visibili e svolgentisi nel tempo” (“Newspapers describe events in time, but without offering images; magazines offer images, but motionless and fixed in space, while the cinematograph offers visible images unfolding in time”).¹⁴⁵ Cinema’s optical trickery offered viewers a “world with two dimensions,” as Papini labeled the phantasmagorical potentiality, where the imaginary side surprisingly unfolded dreams.

Pirandello saw the upsetting effects the new medium could have over individuals. Cinema exposes to artificial fantasies that cannot but make man hostile to real life, and actors in particular experience the alienation the machine elicits. They are paid to act out a part, a role that means nothing to them, “non sanno neppure che parte stiano a rappresentare” (“they do not even

¹⁴⁴ See *Guido Gozzano, Il nastro di celluloido e i serpi di Laocoonte*, pp. 1170-1171.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibidem*.

know the part they are playing”).¹⁴⁶ It is money that makes film stars moving, but easy profits debase acting and defeat stage performing in favor of mechanical reproduction:

La macchina, con gli enormi guadagni che produce se li [gli attori] assolda, può compensarli molto meglio che qualunque impresario o direttore proprietario di compagnia drammatica. Non solo; ma essa, con le sue riproduzioni meccaniche, potendo offrire a buon mercato al gran pubblico uno spettacolo sempre nuovo, riempie le sale dei cinematografi e lascia vuoti i teatri, sicché tutte o quasi le compagnie drammatiche fanno ormai meschini affari; e gli attori, per non languire, si vedono ormai costretti a picchiare alle porte delle Case di cinematografia.¹⁴⁷

The machine, with its enormous profits, hires them [the actors], and can pay them much better than any other impresarios or owner of dramatic company. Not only, but this, with its mechanic reproductions, being able to offer a fresh new spectacle to the public, fills cinemas to capacity. Leaving theaters empty, so as all, or almost all, dramatic companies do meager business; and actors, in order not to languish, are forced to knock on the doors of film Companies.

To Pirandello, those who were worst hit by the estrangement of the machine were the “true actors,” meaning professionals “truly in love with their art” (“che amano veramente la loro arte”), whose resentment for the new medium was even bitter, just because the mechanization snatched the genuine contact with the public from them, “si sentono strappati dalla comunione diretta col pubblico, da cui prima traevano il miglior compenso e la maggior soddisfazione” (“they feel themselves detached from the direct communion with the public, from which they derived the best compensation and satisfaction”).

Thus, what Pirandello questioned in the film machine was something beyond its imposing artists a passive acting. It was rather the de-personalization of the actors’ body to preoccupy the Sicilian playwright and how screen drama relied essentially on inconsistent shadows enacting a sheer “giuoco d’illusione su uno squallido pezzo di tela” (“illusion game on a squalid piece of

¹⁴⁶ Luigi Pirandello, *I quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore*, p. 585.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibidem*.

canvas”).¹⁴⁸ The words Pirandello used to describe the void screen actors felt around them are in fact eloquent. He spoke of an interior “svuotamento” (“emptying”), the suppression of “voice,” “breath” and all those “noises” the body produces when it moves. Being the actors’ presence on screen only virtual, “la sera della rappresentazione per essi non viene mai” (“the night of the performance never comes for them”).¹⁴⁹

Into the thoughts of Serafino, Pirandello let flow his own concerns for the self-deterioration enacted by the machine. Serafino, in fact, blames himself for shooting such a devaluing spectacle, “E colui che li spoglia della loro realtà e la dà da mangiare alla macchinetta, che reduce ombra il loro corpo, chi è? Sono io, Gubbio.” (“And he who strips them of their reality and use it to feed the machine, he who reduces their body to shadows, who is he? It is me, Gubbio”). Serafino’s hand operating the camera handle is the only realistic agent in this unrealistic *mise-en-scène*, which deprives actors of their genuine artistry for the sake of filmic representation. It is by voicing Serafino’s guilt for enacting the trick that Pirandello can blame the camera activity and the fact that it paradoxically requested human intervention to operate its deceit. In the end, the bewilderment was both that of the actors and the cameraman.

The problem with cinematic trickery occupied Pirandello’s mind to such an extent that several parts in *Si gira...* deal with the consequences that camera deceit has on the artistic product. Serafino questions the lack of life in the cinematic reproduction and wonders how possibly a mechanic reality can be called *art*, “Ma se è un meccanismo, come può esser vita, come può esser arte?” (“But if it is a mechanism, how can it be life, how can it be art?”) (573). As Pirandello argues, since the make-believe acquires realism only thanks to art, what happens when realism is reached through the help of a machine? Any authenticity is killed, for the simple

¹⁴⁸ Luigi Pirandello, *I quaderni*, p. 586.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibidem*.

reason that this has been achieved with a tool that unveils and proves its pretense. The camera, in fact, paradoxically conveys realism to a reproduction that is anything but real.

What Pirandello contended with was thus “the stupidity of pretense” (“la stupidità della finzione”), as he labeled the process ironically enacting a fake realism by means of the least suitable tool to deception: photography. Cinematic trickery kills visual legitimacy for the simple fact of being a mechanized practice. Film can elicit awe for screening motion, but cannot convey “the illusion of material reality” (“l’illusione d’una realtà materiale”). Such glaring and self-contradicting deception is what makes filmmaking a flippant activity. As Serafino asks himself, “come prendere sul serio un lavoro che altro scopo non ha se non d’ingannare- non se stessi- ma gli altri?” (“how can we take seriously a job, whose only goal is to deceit- not ourselves- but the others?”) (573).

It is as if mechanic agency were exploited to provide fiction with its wonderful realism. In fact, the answer to Serafino’s question is in the cynical and disenchanting approach to shooting of actors, *regisseurs*, producers, and cameramen. They were all aware of putting up a false fabrication of the real for the public. “No one believes to be capable of creating this illusion of realism,” writes Pirandello, but economic motives did endorse the deceiving *mise-en-scène*, “Si fan denari a palate, e migliaia e migliaia di lire si possono spendere allegramente per la costruzione d’una scena, che su lo schermo non durerà più di due minuti” (“One makes big money, and thousands and thousands of Liras can be easily spent on a scene that on screen will not last more than two minutes”) (574). As a result, professionalism in cinematography was questionable, as if in the end the sole responsible for making fiction real were the machine, without anyone being morally torn by the deplorable evidence of selling a deception. The mirage of fabulous contracts overshadowed morals. “True actors” got reluctantly involved with

cinematography and missed the live emotions of the stage, but still did not disdain the opportunity of moneymaking; those less skilled, meanwhile, moved in the cinema circles in the hope to get better paid.

Pirandello's critique against the debasing of acting because of the exaggerated compensations in film industry recalls the lamentations in journals for poor performances and the commercialization of art we discussed earlier. Pirandello materially contextualized his discontent through his alter-ego Serafino some fifteen years after the debate on theater-cinema began. The lapse of time intervening between the publication of *Si gira...* and the early-of-the-century outbreak of the polemic around art commercialization and acting confirms how Pirandello let flow into his novel concerns that he had on his mind for a long time.

By calling attention to the "miserable profits" of theaters because of the cinema competition, Pirandello expressed preoccupation for the fortune of the stage. It was true that film industry had attracted the most skilful theater actors with lavish contracts, but this did not necessarily mean the abundance of professionalism on screen. Exaggerated fees not only made movie stars unmotivated, but also appealed any artist in the field regardless of talent. The result was the proliferation of starlets and unskilled actors lamented by Serafino, avid individuals interested only in money making to the detriment of their talent's cultivation.

Pirandello's bitter disappointment for the professional and moral decay of cinematography felt the effects of the events antecedent to *Si gira...* and the ongoing debate around the supremacy of cinema over the theater. After all, in 1913, when Pirandello sent to Renato Simoni the story of Serafino Gubbio (still tentatively titled *La tigre*), the controversial discussion involving intellectuals and journals around the artistic legitimacy of film and the overwhelming victory of the screen over the stage was at its peak. As early as 1911, *La vita*

cinematografica called attention to how cinema audiences, like those of theater, were fickle and drawn to whatever was new:

In tempi non lontani, la tragedia, i drammi in versi e quelli a tinte meno forti, scritti con frasi reboanti, facevano andare in visibilio il pubblico...; poi vennero le commedie sentimentali, gli idilî campagnoli, i bozzetti medioevali, tutti latte e miele, che suscitavano non meno entusiasmo delle tragedie e dei drammi. Ma anche questi passarono presto di moda per cedere il passo alle commedie a tesi, e poi a quelle, diremo così, con sfondo psicologico.¹⁵⁰

In a recent past, tragedy, dramatic poetry, and less sensational verbose dramas threw the public into raptures...; then came sentimental comedies, folksy romances, medieval sketches all milk and money, which provoked no less excitement than tragedies and dramas. But these, too, went out of favor to give way to ironic comedies and then to those with a psychological background.

Because of the nature of the new art form, cinema audiences were even more unpredictable than those of stage lovers:

In cinematografia l'evoluzione si è prodotta assai più rapidamente. Superate le prime incertezze tecniche, che consentivano tenuità di soggetti, si passò ben presto alle azioni eroiche; si evocarono gli avvenimenti storici o pseudostorici, con gran lusso di scenari, con combattimenti più o meno accaniti, ricercando l'effetto coreografico, a detrimento di quello artistico... Contemporaneamente vennero in auge i drammi sensazionali..., e quelli in cui primeggia la astuzia di un abile poliziotto. Ora poi siamo passati, con felice successo, ai drammi familiari, a pochi personaggi, per eseguire i quali occorrono non le solite marionette *mosse* con le stesse *mosse* da un poco perfetto burattinaio, ma artisti capaci di esprimere un pensiero, un sentimento, con un atteggiamento del volto, con gesto lieve e conciso, con un volger d'occhi.¹⁵¹

In cinematography the evolution enacted much more rapidly. After the first technical uncertainty was overcome, that responsible of weak subjects, soon films arrived at heroic actions; historical, or pseudo historical events were evocated, with lavish scenography and more or less hard fights, seeking for a choreographic effect, to the detriment of the artistic one... At the same time, sensational dramas were the rage ..., and those in which the cunning policeman excels. Now then, we

¹⁵⁰ “L'evoluzione cinematografica,” in *La vita cinematografica*, September, 10, 1911, Anno II, n. 15.

¹⁵¹ *Ibidem*.

successfully moved towards family tragedies with few characters, for which are needed not the usual monotonous puppets moved by a wimp puppeteer, but artists capable of expressing a thought, a sentiment with their faces, with light and precise gestures, with a look towards.

Talented acting, thus, was still at issue. The more the public's taste was refined and tended towards increasingly articulated plots, the more films required professional actors. Expertise, however, was hard to find among the actors, inexperienced in character and gestural expressiveness. As the reviewer of *La vita cinematografica* stated, "non sempre certi artisti i quali vanno per la maggiore, riescono nel compito loro affidato" ("Not always certain trendy artists succeed in the task they are entrusted").

Unreserved admirers of cinematography claimed that movie acting was equal in quality to that found in legitimate drama. Both tragedies and films relied on body movements, but while the stage required an accentuated gestural expressiveness, images and captions on the screen helped viewers. Since cinema actors would have recourse to ancient qualities of theater (gestures and drama), movies were art to all intents and purposes. As the reviewer of *La vita cinematografica* claimed, "In conclusione, da quanto ho esposto più sopra abbiamo visto essere la drammatica arte vera, e come la mimica le appartenga strettamente, con ciò, se la cinematografia prende un poco dall'una e dall'altra, alla sua volta devesi chiamare arte" ("In conclusion, from what I stated above, we have seen how drama is true art and how mimicry is tightly linked to it, thus, if cinematography takes something from one and something from the other, it should be also called art").¹⁵²

The idea that cinema could make up the expressive deficiencies of theater thanks to the communicative power of images was widely discussed. Some journals were even convinced that

¹⁵² "L'arte drammatica e la Cinematografia," in *La vita cinematografica*, December 15, 1911, Anno II, n. 22.

a sort of mutual collaboration would ensue. *La vita cinematografica*, for instance, even called attention to experiments mingling stage and screen. In America, for instance, film projections between one act and the other during operas, so as not to let intermissions interrupt the dramatic action, “il pubblico, calata la tela per esempio del primo atto, vedeva proiettarsi sul sipario gli avvenimenti che poi si raccontavano al secondo atto” (“the public, once the curtain dropped, for example after the first act, saw projected on the curtain the events to be told in the second act”).¹⁵³ In other words, the projection was a sort of visual summary of the second act.

In Berlin, instead, the use of projections in conjunction with the theatrical performance was even applied to the show itself. The comedy *Il milione* premiered at the *Neues Schauspielhaus* showcased projections interspersing dialogues. Local German journals-- the *Vossische Zeitung*, the *Berliner Lokalanzeiger*, and *Die Schaubuehne*-- did praise this innovative and creative staging, hoping for *Il milione* nothing but a brilliant future. Reviewers stressed how the cinematograph was by then an indispensable tool to attract audiences towards theatrical performances and favor their appreciation. Projections could refine dramatic action, beautifying the choreography with a touch of verisimilitude. The theater could only benefit from the cinema’s collaboration and the “soffio di vita e verità” (“breath of life and truth”) it brought with itself.¹⁵⁴

The advantage of projections in staging was to shorten the length of the action, compressing in few scenes what words would take an entire act to convey. “Non vi pare che sia molto pratico?” (“Don’t you think it is very practical?”), asked the reviewer of *Il milione* enthusiastically.¹⁵⁵ Again, in this rhetorical question we infer the elation for the rapidity of

¹⁵³ “Cinema e teatro,” in *La vita cinematografica*, 20-25 June, 1911, Anno I, n. 10.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibidem*.

cinema in conveying plot, the same appreciation of speed that we saw in Fregoli's quick-change artistry. As a symbol of the new era, the cinema was the medium satisfying the velocity culture of modernity, the agent enacting spectatorial experience with visual acceleration.

Technological progress led to significant advancements in communication and transportation, but achievements in visual entertainment went beyond the physics of speed. Filmic velocity was altering the perceptual experience of visual acceleration, giving rise to the emergence of what Jeffrey Schnapp calls "the kinematic subject." By remarking the change brought into spectatorial subjectivity, when viewers are exposed to the speed of automated motion projection, Schnapp argues that film changed the relation between one's own self and the machine (13-14). The cinematic show is a form of "commodity-based" visual experience for the viewer, since he "passively submits himself to velocity" of images on screen (19). This mode is different from a "thrill-based" experience, such as riding a horse or driving a car, in which one is "the author of his velocity" (18). Film enacts a perceptible speed, which enables a safe and pleasurable visual experience for the viewer comfortably sitting in a playhouse; the viewer participated in the aesthetics of visibility, without any threat of a real danger. This concept recalls eighteenth-century philosopher Edmund Burke's conceptualization of the *sublime*, an awe-inspiring sentiment we can experience only when "we have an idea of pain and terror, without being actually in such circumstances" (51). The camera captured and processed images, leaving to viewers the task of taking pleasure in them.

Both audiences and critics were engrossed in the experimental conjunction of cinema and theater. It was not accidental that a visually experimental theatrical performance like *Il milione* was cheered by journals as "the apotheosis of cinematography." Certainly, painted backcloth and pictorial illusions were no longer enough to captivate a public increasingly avid of realistic visual

effects and the spectator's involvement. So as acrobats and their gymnastics could no longer be of interest for audiences demanding professional acting and convincing gestural expressiveness, also staging increasingly showcased realistic, but also spectacular, productions.



Figure 85. Enrico Guazzoni's *Quo Vadis?*
Both Pictures in public domain.



Figure 86. Giovanni Pastrone's *Cabiria*.

Between 1909 and 1914 Italian cinematography experienced its golden age of highly spectacularized productions; great epic films inspired by classical history appeared on screen, laying the foundations for the rising of *divismo*. Enrico Guazzoni's *Quo vadis?* (1912) and Giovanni Pastrone's *Cabiria* (1914) are certainly the most representative examples of history glorifying the greatness of the nation. Since spectacularization on screen was key, the director's creativity also played a pivotal part. For *Cabiria*, Giovanni Pastrone modified equipment and used dolly shots to create fluid images toward, away, and alongside the subject. Pastrone's intuition, helped cinema develop a formal vocabulary: zooms and lateral tracking shots were known as "Cabiria movements."

Although such grandiose scenography required a grand investment of capital, producers were willing to back a promising blockbuster. Chronicles report that the heirs of Henryk

Sienkiewicz made an outrageous request to waive their copyright, which the production accepted without flinching, confident in the future profitability of the film. As a matter of fact, Guazzoni's *Quo vadis?* was the greatest box-office success in the history of cinema; for the first time, a film was even premiered in the major opera theaters in Italy.¹⁵⁶ With its accurate reconstructions of ancient temples and the gladiators' fights in the Colosseum, the rendition of the Christians' slaughtering and the choreographic God's punishment, *Quo vadis?* brought impressive staging to its highest peaks. When Alberto Fassino, the director of Cines, discussed marketing *Quo vadis?* with American film producer George Kleine, he pointed out that twenty lions were hired for four weeks and the film length of about 1,500-2,000 meters for a negative cost of 80,000 Liras, a considerable amount for the time.¹⁵⁷

The trend of exploiting exotic animals in film productions for the sake of scenographic allure was pretty common. Ubaldo Maria del Colle's *Jone* or *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei* (1913), for instance, relied on lions taken to the set to glamorize the scene where Glauco, the protagonist, is devoured in the public arena right on the day when the Vesuvio's eruption would bury Pompei. Also Mario Caserini directed a version of *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei* (1913). One of the most eye-catching scenes showed keepers cracking the whip to instigate the lions' ferocity against Glauco, who this time is saved by the eruption. Aggressive beasts did give verisimilitude to the scenes and made the spectatorial tension rise dramatically.

Even Pirandello brought a tiger into *Si gira...*, for the fictional film shot at the *Kosmograph*. In the novel, Aldo Nuti, instead of killing the tiger in the cage scene guns down *femme fatale* Varia Nestoroff in jealousy revenge, and lets the animal devour him. I look at the

¹⁵⁶ See Roberto Paoletta, *Storia del cinema muto*, and Vittorio Martinelli and Aldo Bernardini, *Il cinema muto italiano, 1913*.

¹⁵⁷ The letter of Fassino to Kleine is quoted in Gianpiero Brunetta, *Storia del cinema italiano*, 1993, pp. 50-51.

tiger as an aesthetic presence in the literary text serving a more functional role than epitomizing human bestiality as some scholars claim (Bassanese 73). The animal symbolized Pirandello's disdain for the colossal and absurd artifice reached by films. It is unlikely that he included the tiger in the novel to build either suspense or awe. Pirandello is mocking the use of exotic animal for the sole purpose of scenographic grandiosity, critiquing an industry increasingly tailored to a mass audience and mindful only to make profits. After all, Aldo Nuti's jealousy drama could have been committed regardless the presence of the exotic animal, which looks in fact a beguiling extravagant addition to the plot. Furthermore, Pirandello changed the title of his novel on cinematography (until then still tentatively called *Filauri*) into *La tigre* (1913) right in the time period when producers, directors, and audiences seemed to be obsessed with the presence of exotic animals in film productions.

In the years of Guazzoni's and Pastrone's spectacular historical films, Pirandello was making efforts to collaborate with the cinema industry as a screenwriter. A frequent visitor of film studios (the *Cines* will serve as model for the *Kosmograph*, the fictional studio in *Si gira...*) and an avid observer of movie cameras and technology, Pirandello used his personal experience and reflections as materials for a novel on the ephemeral nature of cinematography and filmic deception. But starting 1911, Pirandello seriously considered entering the film industry, by offering his skills as adaptor of Ippolito Nievo's novel *Confessioni di un ottuagenario* (1867).

By choosing Nievo's novel, Pirandello must have thought of a subject that would satisfy the popular taste for historical films and nationalism. In fact, if historical themes were the rage on screen, the adaptation of Nievo's *Confessioni* could really be the ideal continuation of this genre. Notably, the plot was about the protagonist Carlino Altoviti's crisis in national identity in a crucial time period of Italian history, such as that between the fall of the Venetian Republic and

the consequent restoration of the Austrian domination in Italy, and thus highly celebrative of patriotism and Risorgimento ideals.

Gerolamo Lo Savio and Ugo Falena, respectively producer and artistic director of the *Film d'Arte Italiana*, with whom Pirandello had volunteered to screenwriting Nievo's novel, did not show further interest in the project; Pirandello was not discouraged, however. In 1914, he wrote to his friend of long standing Nino Martoglio, expressing once again his ambitions as a screenwriter:

Carissimo Nino,
Verga, Bracco, Salvatore di Giacomo... A gonfie vele! Non potrei fare qualche cosa anch'io? Avrei tanti e tanti argomenti di qualunque specie, tu lo sai! E avrei in questo momento tanto tanto tanto bisogno di guadagnare: tu lo sai! Sono disperato per 500 lire che mi urgono per bisogni immediati e non so come e dove trovare... Due mie novelle *Nel segno e Lontano*, drammaticissime e piene di poesia, si presterebbero soprattutto a esser ridotte in films e potrei far subito la riduzione a richiesta; ma avrei bisogno subito di queste 500 lire.¹⁵⁸

Dearest Nino,
Verga, Bracco, Salvatore di Giacomo... everything is coming up roses! Couldn't I, too, do anything? I would have so many topics of any kind, you know it! And in this moment, I would much much much need to earn money: you know it! I am desperate for 500 Liras I urgently need for immediate necessities and I don't know how and where to find... Two of my short stories *Nel segno* and *Lontano*, very dramatic and poetical, would be perfect to be turned into films, and I could immediately take care of the rendition upon request; but I would need these 500 Liras immediately.

If we look at how Pirandello solicited money, we understand how he won himself the reputation for being attracted merely by easy profits in filmmaking. When Pirandello wrote to Martoglio, however, he was about to publish *Si gira...*, a novel making available to the public a decade of philosophical and theoretical pondering on the nature of film. In fact, I would rather

¹⁵⁸ The letter is of February 5, 1914 and is contained in *Carteggio Pirandello-Martoglio*, edited by Sarah Zappulla Muscarà.

see the letter to Martoglio as an interesting document shedding light on the audience's taste. The fact that Pirandello was playing on two short stories that were "very dramatic and poetical" for his debut as screenwriter, is evidence of the kind of topics viewers appreciated most. *Nel segno* was about Raffaella, a humble girl paying the price of social isolation for giving in to passion, who melodramatically kills herself by getting a pin in her heart. And *Lontano* dealt with the lyrical theme of homesickness, narrating of a Norwegian who is forced to settle down in Sicily. Neither the caring attention of his young wife and their child can cure the sadness for the loss of his homeland.

Despite their popular overdramatic subjects, neither *Nel segno* nor *Lontano* were ever turned into films. In 1916, however, anything but discouraged by these failed attempts, Pirandello joined the *Tespi Film*, in the capacity of "consulente letterario" ("literary consultant").¹⁵⁹ Founded in 1915, the Tespi Company immediately made clear its predilection for producing historical and literary reels. The artistic director Ugo Falena, a former playwright now involved in a series of film versions of classic literature: *Otello* (1909), *Beatrice Cenci* (1910), *Salomè* (1910), and *Guglielmo Tell* (1911). Symptomatically, once directing the *Tespi*, Falena adapted Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* for the screen (1916), basing his script on Verga's short story (1880).

The collaboration with *Tespi Film* together with other intellectuals, such as Arnaldo Frateili, Mario Corsi, and Umberto Fracchia, who also tried their hand at directing films, gave Pirandello a considerable visibility in the cinema business. Furthermore, in 1917, he started collaborating with the specialized journal *Penombra*. In these years, Pirandello still believed his true *passé-partout* into screenwriting would be *Si gira...*, a "very original" subject for

¹⁵⁹ See Francesco Pasinetti, *Storia del cinema dalle origini a oggi*, p. 73.

cinematography, with its pertinent plot and the easily adaptable narrative structure. As a matter of fact, the device of employing in cinematography a literary source dealing with cinematography, with real actors playing the role of ‘narrative actors’ shooting a film at the fictionalized *Kosmograph* presented a challenge.

On January 25, 1918, Pirandello wrote to Anton Giulio Bragaglia about Pina Menichelli, the jewel in the crown of silent actresses, who he felt would be “perfect” for the fictional diva Varia Nestoroff:

Mi pare che una film adatta per la Menichelli si possa trovare nel mio romanzo *Si gira...*, la cui protagonista è una russa: la Nestoroff... Verrebbe anche una film originalissima. Il cinematografo nel cinematografo. Il dramma infatti si svolge durante la confezione d’una pellicola. E ci sono scene bellissime. Sarebbe opportuno che ne parlassimo insieme.¹⁶⁰

It seems to me that a film perfect for Menichelli can be found in my novel *Si gira...*, whose protagonist is a Russian, Nestoroff... It would make a very original film. Cinematography within cinematography. The dramatic action, in fact, takes place during the making of a film. And there are scenes that are beautiful. It would be convenient for us to discuss this together.



Figure 87. Italian silent actress Pina Menichelli (1890-1984). Pictures in public domain.

¹⁶⁰ The letter is quoted in Mario Verdone, *Anton Giulio Bragaglia*, p. 11.

Launched in Pastrone's *Il fuoco* (1915), Pina Menichelli was by then a lavishly-paid diva, who had made her name on her decadent charm and seductive eroticism, playing roles such as the all-consumed-by-passion aristocrat in *Il fuoco* and the callous seductress Russian countess in Pastrone's *Tigre reale* (1916), a screenplay loosely adapted from Giovanni Verga's novel with the same title. Given the resemblance between the roles Menichelli excelled at and Varia Nestoroff, the shady *femme fatale* of *Si gira...*, Pirandello's proposal to Bragaglia sounded reasonable and advantageous. How could one ignore the effect that Menichelli's languid body movements, all wrapped in sophisticated long capes and feathered hats, had on the public? Although indignant about art commercialization, Pirandello was endorsing this way the capitalist logic in cinema industry, which made producers and companies invest in proven artists capable of glamorizing the production with their celebrity status.

Pirandello's letter to Bragaglia, however, reveals an interest in experimental filmmaking, uncommon in that time period. Notably, Pirandello's innovative editing brought forward a sophisticated *mise en abyme* as sophisticated, a sort of film within the film within the literary text; this was a daring innovation in years when cinema had not even the credibility of an expressive language of its own. Being *Si gira...* a hardly 'filmable' novel for the long philosophical digressions of Serafino and his internal monologues, its rendition should have necessarily focused on the love drama, Varia Nestoroff's killing, and the tiger devouring Aldo Nuti. Pirandello somehow anticipated the conclusions to which Sergei Eisenstein came in the 1940s after reflecting on how heavily Griffith's creative montage built on Charles Dickens' 'cinematographic' writing style: literary texts with facts and physical descriptions are the easiest to be adapted, while those rich in interior monologues force directors to find external aesthetic

devices (commenting, a chorus, or captions).¹⁶¹ Silent films relied on limited expressive tools; essentially, there were captions to summarize plots and render visually what Eisenstein called “the syntax of inner speech.” As Eisenstein put it, what crosses a character’s mind can find its full expression only in sound-films, “capable of reconstructing all phases and all specifics of the course of thought.”¹⁶²

The film *Pirandello dreamt of* relied essentially on the cinematic re-enactment of the crime of passion of the literary text. As he wrote to Bragaglia, in fact, the true innovation was in screening “the cinematograph within the cinematograph,” recognizing in Serafino’s inner thoughts a disturbing element. However, the cameraman’s critical thinking resulted already out of place in the embryonic stages of the novel. In 1914, when offering his novel to Alberto Albertini, for publication in the literary journal *La lettura*, directed by Renato Simoni, Pirandello was warned that the work was dull.¹⁶³ Both Albertini and Simoni disliked the novel, because of the length of Serafino’s speculations and the lack of narrative flow. Aldo Nuti arrived too in the book, giving the impression that the jealousy murder and the tiger’s grand finale were an afterthought.

How could Pirandello not to think of such reprimands when trimming the literary plot for the screen? Pirandello would have to transform the “literary” into images, endorsing the legitimization and autonomy of cinematic language. I believe, in fact, that Pirandello’s goal was not to exploit an existing commercial audience, as it was Guazzoni’s rendition of Sienkiewicz’s bestseller. Pirandello’s intuition anticipated of fifty years Derrida’s conceptualization of

¹⁶¹ See Sergei Eisenstein, *Dickens, Griffith, and Film Today*.

¹⁶² Sergei Eisenstein, *A Course in Treatment*, p. 105.

¹⁶³ See the letters exchanged between Pirandello, Albertini and Simoni and their reservations about the publication of *Si gira...* in Francesco Callari, *Pirandello e il cinema*, pp. 20-21.

deconstruction, as a semiotic process pointing at invalidating hierarchy in oppositions, in order to highlight their interaction. As Derrida put it:

We must traverse a phase of overturning. To do justice to this necessity is to recognize that... in opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a vis-à-vis, but rather a violent hierarchy... To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment. To overlook this phase of overturning is to forget the conflictual and subordinating structure of opposition.¹⁶⁴

Oppositions are thus necessary components to produce meaning; hence, ‘deconstructing’ them does not mean to eliminate them. This operation indicates rather the way to make sense of the product generated by the validation of the “difference” and “eternal interplay” intervening between oppositions (*Positions* 21). As well as speech over writing, or male over female are not categories simply legible as opposites in which one subdues the other, the same could be said for the film and its literary source. What Pirandello was calling attention to was the autonomy of the filmic product and its own expressive language by performing the cinematic re-enactment of the film within the literary text.

By offering the adaptation of *Si gira...* to an intellectual like Bragaglia, Pirandello must have thought he was addressing the perfect promoter for his project. As a futurist, Bragaglia had theorized the concept of *Photodynamism* in his long essay *Foto-dinamismo futurista* (1911). This visual process aimed to capture life in its dynamic multiplicity by using long exposure photography. In fact, what Bragaglia would do with his pictures was opening his shutter at the start of an action and closing it at the end. It was with this system that he ‘captured’ the whole movements of a man playing the cello or slapping someone in the face, turning abstract photography into the ultimate dynamic art.

¹⁶⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, pp. 42-44.



Figure 88. Anton Giulio Bragaglia's *Lo schiaffo* (left) and *Il violoncellista* (right), both of 1911. Both pictures in public domain.

Bragaglia's technique was a clear evolution of 19th-century *chronophotography* used by Marey and Muybridge to record different phases of motion we discussed in chapter I. What was different this time, however, was the aesthetic meaning assigned to these pictures, which questioned the documentation of movement as a trigger of astonishment in the public. Bragaglia refused the reductive interpretation of the machine as a sheer reproducer of reality, convinced as he was that the camera had a much greater power. The camera is the agency of artistic expression, as it technically reproduces what the human eye cannot perceive. In the slap, what is caught by the naked eye is the initial movement of the hand on the face and the moment it detaches from it; all micro movements in-between are lost, and only the sound determines the action is complete. What Bragaglia believed he could achieve with his long exposures was the ultimate goal of artistic photography, the viewer's total emotional involvement.

Blurred images would thus take on the aesthetic function of dignifying photography, raising it to the level of true art, "Noi vogliamo realizzare una rivoluzione, per un progresso, nella fotografia: e questo per purificarla, nobilitarla ed elevarla veramente ad arte" ("We want to

make a revolution in photography, for the progress' sake: and this is to purify, ennoble, and elevate it to the status of art") (*Foto-dinamismo* 13). To Bragaglia, key words were *movement* and *life*, the same words used in Serafino's argument and paraphrasing his concern for cinematic demystification and the way the filmic process degrades trueness.

Bragaglia's reasoning, however, was ahead than Serafino's, since it evolved from the contempt for the mechanical reproduction of reality. Bragaglia saw this disdain as a starting point to get to the glorification of the machine for its extraordinary ability to represent movement as a whole and elicit the viewer's emotional fruition of the work of art. Serafino, instead, blamed the machine for the individuals' alienation. *Photodynamism* left nothing to the imagination. It rather 'created' a new visual artistry performing the movements of bodies in time and space, to which only cinematography could give the deserved continuity.

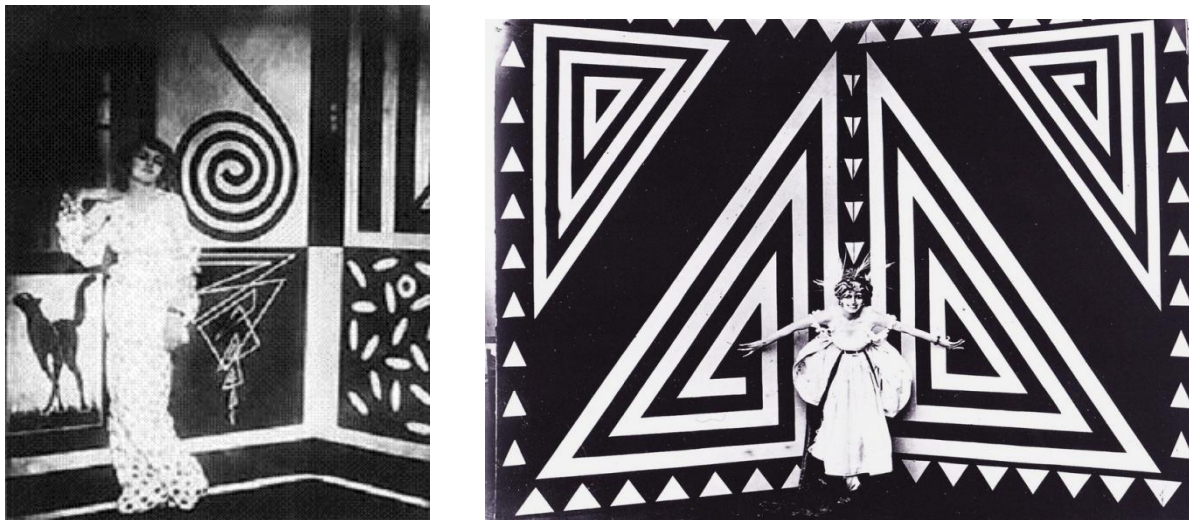


Figure 89. Scenes from Anton Giulio Bragaglia's *Thais* (1917). Pictures in public domain.

On the wave of the belief that cinema was the perfect medium to perform live movement, Bragaglia tried his hand at theorizing visual dynamism in the 1917 Futurist film *Thais* or *Perfido incanto*. Bragaglia based his story on the clichéd stereotype of the Russian turbid countess, who

ruins men with her irresistible sensuality. Bragaglia's *Thais*, in fact, seduces her best girlfriend's husband, leading the woman to suicide. The cynical portrait of the female protagonist is smoothed only by the melodramatic final, when the title character kills herself in her labyrinth mansion.

From a visual perspective, Bragaglia's *Thais* was an experimental attempt to play with hypnotic geometrical and elliptical shapes of futurist taste, which recurred both in the furnishings and clothing, as well as the décor. Futurist painter Enrico Prampolini designed the scenography, infusing it with symbols, such as spirals, checkerboards, black cats and sinister masks spitting fire. The black and white contrast served the aesthetic interaction between the characters' actions and their interior crisis. The scene leading to *Thais*' suicide is a sequence of hallucinatory shapes obsessively recurrent to visually transmit the woman's subconscious turmoil. Colors blur the distinction between reality and fiction, making it hard to distinguish the imaginary from the real. Clearly Prampolini voiced his revulsion at naturalist décor, favoring instead a symbolist aestheticism, where the figurative art functions as a disturbing element of alienation.

Although a bold experimentalist, Bragaglia could do nothing to favor Pirandello's debut in screenwriting, being himself a quite contested figure. In the pages of the journal *Lacerba*, Boccioni, Carrà, Balla, Russolo, Severini, and Soffici boldly declared:

Data l'ignoranza generale in materia d'arte, e per evitare equivoci, noi Pittori futuristi dichiariamo che tutto ciò che si riferisce alla fotodinamica concerne esclusivamente delle innovazioni nel campo della fotografia. Tali ricerche puramente fotografiche non hanno assolutamente nulla a che fare con il Dinamismo plastico da noi inventato, né con qualsiasi ricerca dinamica nel dominio della Pittura, della scultura e dell'architettura.¹⁶⁵

Given the general ignorance on the subject of art, and in order to avoid misunderstandings, us Futurist Painters declare that everything is in relation with photodynamic concerns exclusively innovations in the field of photography. Such

¹⁶⁵ Quoted in Guido Aristarco, *Il cinema fascista: il prima e il dopo*, pp. 39-40.

purely photographic research has nothing to do either with the Plastic Dynamism we invented, or any dynamic research in the field of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture.

Such harsh defiance for Bragaglia's *photodynamism* cannot be justified, especially considering the great deal of attention that futurist painters and sculptors themselves were devoting to the study of movement as the only possible way to renew art.¹⁶⁶ Their boldness, however, notably unmasked a considerable disdain for photography, and hence for cinematography, its direct descendant. Photography appeared as an illegitimate artistic expression that was somehow debasing painting, sculpture, and architecture, the only true forms of art.



Figure 90. Umberto Boccioni's *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* (1913). Picture in public domain.

The futurist idea of movement operating a visual renovation would go beyond the sheer reproduction of exterior aspects of life, as Marinetti himself stated in the *Futurist Manifesto*,

¹⁶⁶ See Umberto Boccioni, *Manifesto tecnico sulla scultura futurista*, 1912.

“The gesture that we would reproduce on canvas shall no longer be a fixed moment in universal dynamism. It shall simply be the dynamic sensation itself.”¹⁶⁷ The aesthetic quest was thus for a “synthetic continuity,” which had nothing to do with the series of fragmented images of the same subject Bragaglia immortalized in his ‘dynamic’ photos. As Boccioni showed in his most famous sculpture *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* (1912-1913), movement had to be fluid and convey inner feelings. The jugged lines in his armless bronze figure are emblematic of the dynamism of life, as they give expression to all possible movements an individual could make all in one place. By rejecting Bragaglia’s model, Boccioni advanced his idea of “succession,” which “is not to be found in repetition of legs, arms and faces, as many people have stupidly believed, but is achieved through the intuitive search for the unique form that gives continuity in space.”¹⁶⁸

Such an aesthetic goal explains Boccioni’s resentment when futurist artistry was accused of recalling cinematography. “L’accusa di cinematografia ci fa ridere come una volgare imbecillità. Noi non suddividiamo delle immagini visuali, noi ricerchiamo un segno o, meglio, una forma unica che sostituisca al vecchio concetto di divisione, il nuovo concetto di continuità” (“The accusation of being cinematographic makes us laugh like a vulgar stupidity. We do not share out visual images, we seek for a sign or better a unique form that substitutes the old concept of division with the new concept of continuity”).¹⁶⁹

The futurist idea of movement as conveyer of emotions and the totality of human gestures, rather than a sheer succession of actions, was in line with Pirandello’s preoccupation for the coldness of cinematic reproduction. So as the futurists refused any comparison between their art and cinematography, Serafino could hardly think of film as a creative process, because

¹⁶⁷ Marinetti’s *Manifesto* is contained in *I manifesti del futurismo*, p. 3 ff.

¹⁶⁸ Quoted in Linda Henderson, *Italian Futurism and the “Fourth Dimension,”* p. 320.

¹⁶⁹ Boccioni voiced his resentment in the pages of the journal *Lacerba* in 1913. Quotation is from Guido Aristarco, *Il cinema fascista*, p. 41.

of the camera's cold capturing of a superficial reality. Both Pirandello and the Futurists, however, were thwarting a visual dynamism they insisted in investigating with 'artistic' eyes, when it could be made sense of only in mechanical terms, as it was for Bragaglia's *photodynamism*.

If we look at how rapidly cinematic language had already evolved by 1918, we cannot but be surprised in seeing visual experimentalism still so tightly bridled in restricting categorizations, while film kept being denigrated as art. After all, as early as 1914, Pastrone's epic style in *Cabiria* had demonstrated a considerable advancement in moviemaking, revolutionizing the form with masterly camera movements. Even film director Martin Scorsese, when prefacing the screening of the restored version of *Cabiria* at the Cannes Film Festival on May 27, 2006 highlighted how the novelty of Pastrone's tracking shot helped him realign his sense of film history.¹⁷⁰ What Scorsese had considered an American invention could be traced to early Italian experiments, and to the aesthetic material on which even D.W. Griffith built for its box-office success *The Birth of a Nation* (1916).

Griffith himself made an impressive aesthetic use of the camera, perfecting the cross-cutting, an editing technique adding suspense to films and shaping the contrast between two actions. Such devices not only enriched visual language, but also challenged viewers with comparisons, emotional disparities, tensions, and a headlong narrative, as well as other complex film editing strategies. In Italy, however, the press almost ignored such expressive innovations in the cinematic product. Journals such as *La vita cinematografica*, *L'illustrazione*

¹⁷⁰ Martin Scorsese, *A Sheer Beauty*, in the flyer of the Museo Nazionale del Cinema in Turin, printed on the occasion of the *Cabiria* screening at the Cannes Film Festival in 2006, prefaced by videotaped remarks by Scorsese. The flyer is available at www.festival-cannes.com/assets/.../014517.pdf.

Cinematografica, *Film*, or *Cinemagraf* focused their attention exclusively on the *mise-en-scene*, the subject, and the acting.

As Eugenio Ferdinando Palmieri wrote in the 1940s, as late as 1919 “la stampa non aveva le idee chiare. Il linguaggio della macchina da presa non era ancora un problema ‘interno,’ di sostanza. I problemi preoccupanti erano il soggetto e i mobili” (“the press did not have a clear head. The camera language was not yet an ‘internal’ problem, a major preoccupation. Worrying problems were the subject and the furniture”).¹⁷¹ Journals, in fact, notably praised an excellent scenography, as if this were the prerequisite to make film an artistic product, “Quando il soggetto è bello e nuovo, la interpretazione curate nelle prime parti, quando lo scenario può darci l’illusione della realtà, e le luci sono disposte con sobria armonia – che cosa manca alla pellicola perché possa chiamarsi opera d’arte?” (“When the subject is beautiful and new, the interpretation is neat in the slightest detail, when the scenography can give us the illusion of reality, and the lights are displayed with sober harmony- what is the film missing to be called a work of art?”).¹⁷² As the journal *Film* advocated, a constructive critique is that valuing “la perizia maggiore o minore con cui questi elementi essenziali, soggetto, recitazione, messinscena, sono stati fusi insieme per la creazione” (“the major or minor expertise with which these fundamental elements—subject, acting, and staging—have been fused together for the creation”).¹⁷³

As for the experimental use of the camera, journal showed a total blindness, as we can infer from the pages of *Cinemagraf*, in which even close-ups were treated as a potential hindrance to effective visuality, “È necessario abolire, fin dove si può, i primi piani che ossessionano gli spettatori e costringono l’artista a fatiche improbe e sovente gli impediscono la

¹⁷¹ Eugenio Ferdinando Palmieri, *Vecchio cinema italiano*, p. 126.

¹⁷² “Cinematografo e arte,” in *Film*, November 14, 1917.

¹⁷³ “Cinematografo e critica,” in *Film*, May 31, 1918.

massima realtà di recitazione” (“It is necessary to abolish, whenever is possible, the close-ups, which obsess spectators and force the artist to arduous efforts, often restraining him from the greatest realism in acting”).¹⁷⁴

Pirandello’s ambition adaptation of *Si gira...* was, against these obstacles, destined to remain an ambition never to be filmed. At any rate, through the net of collaborations, the personal connections, and his outspoken projects, Pirandello drew finally the filmmakers’ attention, and starting in 1918, offers began to arrive. Marco Praga, the artistic director of the *Silentium* produced *Il lume dell’altra casa*, directed by Ugo Gracci and based on the short story of 1909; in 1919 *Itala* and *Tespi* produced *Lo scaldino* from the short story (1906), directed by Augusto Genina, though the film would be censored until 1921. From 1919 to 1921, four additional works were adapted for the screen: Mario Gargiulo’s *Il crollo* (1919), from the short story *Lumie di Sicilia* (1900), Augusto Camerini’s *Ma non è una cosa seria* (1920), based on the comedy with the same title, Arnaldo Frateili’s *La rosa* (1920) from the eponymous short story (1914), and *Il viaggio* (1921) that Gennaro Righelli sourced from the 1910 short story.¹⁷⁵

Righelli’s *Il viaggio* was reviewed as a sheer “jewel,” which let Maria Jacobini shine in the leading role of dying Adriana. The journal *Al cinema* praised Jacobini’s acting and the way she played with her eyes, “the rapid contractions” of her face, and the “voluptuous abandonment of the body.”¹⁷⁶ Again, we can see how reviewers were more attentive to the allure of the actress than the innovations of the filmmaker. The consolidated editing that Righelli used, for instance, was not even mentioned. From the reviewer, we only know that “the land of sun,” presumably Sicily, was rendered in a “miserable” way, “undignified” for such a talented director as Righelli.

¹⁷⁴ “Dal proscenico alle quinte del nostro cinematografo,” in *Cinemagraf*, October 15, 1917.

¹⁷⁵ For a wider overview, see Francesco Callari, *Pirandello e il cinema*, pp. 30-33.

¹⁷⁶ “Maria Jacobini,” in *Al cinema*, June 10, 1923, Anno 2, n. 23, p. 4.

Il viaggio, however, with its melodramatic plot around Adriana's aching death when she has finally found true love, kept Pirandello's *oeuvre* in vogue as an excellent source, given the crisis of subjects by 1920. The *Corriere del cinematografo* was one of the most active journals to denounce not only the poverty of plots, but also the unskilled craftsmanship of directors and *metteurs-en-scène* when tailoring the cinematic product. As one reviewer pointed out, a film lacks originality "perché è svolto male, perché è tagliato male, perché insomma vi manca l'impronta di un artista geniale che abbia questa sola preoccupazione: divertire, tener desta nel pubblico l'attenzione" ("because it is poorly developed, because it is cut badly, in short, because what lacks here is the mark of a genial artist with an only preoccupation: amuse and keep alive the public's attention").¹⁷⁷

The problem inevitably went beyond mere aesthetics and involved the exportation and appeal Italian cinema wielded on foreign producers. Under attack was the "megalomania of directors," who trusted too much to fashionable actors capable only of sending production costs up "with their exorbitant requests for compensation," while attention should have been devoted rather to investigate why the national film product was so unattractive abroad. In criticizing the Italian inertia, a reviewer observed that very few in the industry travelled abroad to explore ways to capture the richest markets, England and America.

No care was showed for the fact that when it comes to films "gli inglesi e gli americani amano la semplicità, il fatto verosimile, una certa rigidità morale, e un po' di idealismo" ("The English and the Americans love simple things, verisimilitude, a certain moral strictness, and a little bit of idealism"). Indeed, producers ignored such information and kept financing "film assurde e idiote, prive di contenuto e di logica a base di delitti e di tragedie, di salti e di fughe

¹⁷⁷ *Corriere del cinematografo*, January-February 1920, Anno I, n.2, p. 9.

pazzesche e di sensualità morbosa” (“absurd and silly films, devoid of content and logic, based on murders and tragedies, jumps and crazy flights, and morbid sensuality”).¹⁷⁸

Foreign producers, who did research the public’s preferences, were much more focused on wide distribution. “Gli Americani, più pratici e più intelligenti in fatto di organizzazione commerciale, hanno studiato i nostri costumi e i nostri gusti e hanno trovata la via per invadere l’Europa con i loro films” (“The Americans, more practical and more intelligent as far as commercial organization is concerned, have studied our costumes and tastes, finding the way to invade Europe with their films”).¹⁷⁹ American practicality was praised over the insular concerns for futile aesthetics and artistic ideals, “Gli Americani hanno capito il cinematografo! Da gente pratica non hanno lasciato alle dive e agli esteti da strapazzo la scelta dei soggetti..., ma hanno subito guardato alle possibilità espressive del cinematografo. Le loro trame sono ingenue, è vero, ma come sono ricche!” (“The Americans did understand cinematography! As practical people, they did not leave the choice of subjects to divas and lightweight aesthetes..., but they immediately looked at the expressive potentiality of cinematography. Their plots are naïve, this is true, but how rich they are!”).¹⁸⁰

Pirandello’s emotional short stories (*Lontano, Lo scaldino, Il viaggio*) resulted in far more palatable subjects for producers than experimental works like *Si gira...*, with its alienated cameraman as protagonist. While the press lamented that by then “all the novels, all the popular penny dreadfuls had already been adapted for the screen” (“Ormai tutti i romanzi, tutti i drammi popolari d’appendice si sono ridotti per lo schermo”), Italian film industry increasingly felt the

¹⁷⁸ “Conversazioni mensili,” in *Corriere del cinematografo*, September 1920, Anno VII, N. 9.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸⁰ *Corriere del cinematografo*, January-February 1920, Anno I, n.2, p. 9.

threat of foreign directors and their avidity for the national literary production.¹⁸¹ No longer competitive in terms of length, format, and spectacular scenography, Italian filmmaking could not bear comparison with other countries, including Germany. As for the press, no mercy was granted to Italian producers and their stubborn shortsightedness,

Ecco che oggi l'industria cinematografica italiana non ha più un solo nemico, l'America, ma anche la Germania. E gli industriali italiani—eterni dormienti, i megalomani sordi a tutti i consigli e a tutti i moniti della stampa—gridano, sbraitano contro il nuovo pericolo e invocano dal Governo seri provvedimenti. No, signori. Il Governo non c'entra, non deve entrarci. Sbrigatevela voi. Non irridevate ieri alla minaccia della produzione americana? Non chiamavate noi giornalisti che cercavamo di aprirvi gli occhi, illusi e prezzolati perché parlavamo bene della produzione straniera? Che cosa pretendete ora?¹⁸²

Here is that today the cinematographic industry does not have only one enemy, America, but also Germany. And the Italian businessmen—the eternal sleepers, the megalomaniacs deaf to any advice and warnings of the press—shout and yell against the new danger and invoke serious measures from the Government. No, sirs. The Government is not relevant, it must not be relevant. Do it on your own. Weren't you mocking yesterday the threat of American production? Weren't you calling us journalists, who tried to open your eyes, dreamers and mercenaries, because we spoke kindly of foreign production? What do you expect now?

One of the finest renditions of Pirandello was the French Marcel L'Herbier's *Feu Mathias Pascal* (1925), highly praised both by critics and public. Pirandello expressed great admiration for the experimental and skillful film director, praising him more than he did with the Italians:

Ora do con entusiasmo a L'Herbier, di cui stimo infinitamente il carattere e l'ingegno, *Il fu Mattia Pascal*. Colui che ha saputo così abilmente mettere in scena il *Don Juan* and *Faust* saprà porre nell'esecuzione del film tutto quello che non è nel romanzo, pur conservando al soggetto originario il massimo di nobiltà e di portata

¹⁸¹ "Conversazioni mensili," in *Corriere del cinematografo*, September 1920, Anno VII, n. 9.

¹⁸² "Causeries Mensili," in *Corriere del cinematografo*, March, 1920, Anno VII, n. 3.

filosofica. Per la prima volta io ho fiducia nell'arte muta, perché due grandi artisti la servono: Mosjoukine e L'Herbier.¹⁸³

It is now with enthusiasm that I give to L'Herbier, whom I regard very highly for his temperament and talent, Il fu Mattia Pascal. He who skillfully directed Don Juan and Faust will be capable of putting in the film everything is not in the novel, although maintaining the greatest nobility and philosophical allure in the original subject. For the first time, I have faith in the silent art, because two great artists are serving it: Mosjoukine and L'Herbier.

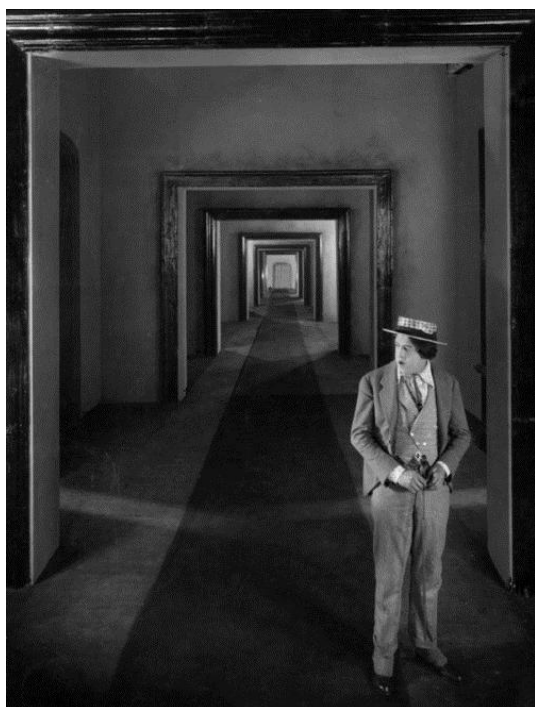


Figure 91. Screenshots from L'Herbier *Feu Mathias Pascal* (1925), starring Ivan Masjioukine. Pictures in public domain.

This interview granted to *Il secolo* emphasized how two of Pirandello's major expectations- experimentation with film language and the actor's depersonalization to 'live' the character's life- were now satisfied respectively by L'Herbier and Masjioukine. As a matter of fact, L'Herbier used innovative editing to capture the paradoxical plot , which was adapted from

¹⁸³ "Pirandello e il cinema," in *Il secolo*, October 29, 1924. The article is now reprinted in Pupo, *Interviste a Pirandello*, p. 280.

a twofold standpoint, both fantastic and realistic. He added comic elements absent in the literary text, such as Mattia's fight with the rats in the dusty library and his clumsy opening of all the doors in the Roman *pensione*. L'Herbier's re-reading of the novel Pirandello wrote as early as 1904, did succeed in bringing forth those typically 'cinematic' tropes the literary text surprisingly anticipated, which were all somewhat related to the sight (the spectacles, the *Lanternino*, or Pascal's cross eye) and the idea that the eyes do offer, like cinema, an illusory reality.

Leonardo Sciascia, recalling the screening of *Feu Mathias Pascal* he saw as a teenager in the Sicily of the 1930s, wrote: "tutti i lettori che hanno visto il film, forse lo stesso Pirandello, non riuscirono più a ricordare il suo personaggio se non con la figura, i movimenti e le espressioni di Mosjoukine" ("all the readers who saw the film, maybe Pirandello himself, were no longer capable of remembering its character if not with the look, movements, and expressions of Mosjoukine").¹⁸⁴ Although Mosjoukine did not mention the work in his memoir, *Quand j'étais Michel Strogoff*, ghost written by Jean Arroy in 1926, Leonardo Sciascia posited the intentionality of such excision as the fruit of an exaggerated estrangement in the Pirandellian style: when the actor has put too much of himself in his character, he is no longer capable of living his own life (486 ff). As a matter of fact, after acting in *Feu Mathias Pascal*, Mosjoukine hardly sought to get rid of the destabilizing association with Pirandello's character by playing the role of the self-styled lover in Alexandre Volkoff's epic comedy *Casanova* (1927). Accused of squandering his expressive talent in light *divertissement* for the screen, Mosjoukine sank his acting career for good by signing a contract with Hollywood producers and returning to Europe in 1929, when the silent cinema had already been overtaken by the 'talkies.'

¹⁸⁴ Leonardo Sciascia, *Il volto sulla maschera*, p. 487.

Eclipsed by the arrival of the talking pictures, Mosjoukine's decline recalls the crisis suffered from fictional silent film star George Valentin in Michel Hazanavicius' *The Artist* (2011). Here, the character struggles with depression as he realizes that he no longer fits into the new cinema machine. His facial and gestural expressiveness is clashing with the new acting style requested by the rising sound industry. Valentin, in fact, attempts suicide, incapable of accepting his fading popularity. Hazanavicius' film frames a delicate time period in the history of cinema. The radical way sound changed filmmaking starting 1927, when the first featured film with synchronized dialogues, *The Jazz Singer* directed by Alan Crosland, was released in October, was initially difficult to accept, both for actors and the public. If the former struggled with the delusion for being no longer mass idols as Valentin in *The Artist*, the latter were torn between the pleasurable effects of technology and the disappointment for seeing their former adored stars falling into obscurity.



Figure 92. Scenes from Michel Hazanavicius' *The Artist* (2011). Pictures in public domain.

As a matter of fact, very few silent film stars succeeded in maintaining their former popularity once the talkies became the rage, the sole exception was likely Charlie Chaplin. Also the fictional actor Valentin in Hazanavicius' *The Artist* is stubbornly financing himself a silent film when the talkies were just staking their claim in cinema history. Only the evidence that on the same day his movie was released, audiences were rather flocking to see a talking picture, and his inevitable bankruptcy convinced Valentin that the golden age of silent films was gone for good.

In Italy, by 1929 the major production companies, such as the *Anonima Pittaluga*, had already provided their movie houses with devices suitable to offer the latest novelty, “L’anonima Pittaluga... ha intanto provveduto a dotare nelle principali città d’Italia i suoi grandiosi cinematografi di apparecchi di proiezione Vitaphone e Movietone” (“In the meantime, the Anonima Pittaluga has provided its magnificent playhouses throughout Italy with projectors, such as the Vitaphone and the Movietone”).¹⁸⁵ Many were convinced that the sound would be just a fad, an ephemeral fashion that would soon eclipse. On the wave of young intellectual Antonello Gerbi’s statements in 1926 that the cinema could only generate the “feeling” of art, while cinematography could have never been art in itself, many saw the film as the sheer product of a mechanic device.¹⁸⁶ Technology, thus, if on one hand was blamed for lacking aesthetic value, on the other it was paradoxically capable of generating an ‘artistic feeling.’ Hence, journals, *Solaria* in particular, urged the reaction of intellectuals.¹⁸⁷ What emerged significant from the pages of *Solaria* and from such figures as Ugo Betti, Eugenio Montale, Massimo Bontempelli, and Pietro Gadda to name a few, was a snobbish academism still linked to the

¹⁸⁵ “Films parlanti e sonori,” in *Al cinema*, April 28, 1929, Anno 8, n. 17, p. 13.

¹⁸⁶ See Antonello Gerbi, *Teorie del cinema*, 1926.

¹⁸⁷ See Issue 111 of *Solaria*, March 1927, a special publication dedicated to the cinema.

legacy of tradition. Notably Bontempelli and Antonio Baldini, were among the harshest advocates of cinema as a popular entertainment by the same standards of “circus and radio”. Riccardo Bacchelli called cinema a “minor” art, since films were as futile as “dance” and “fashion;” while Montale and De Benedetti showed a certain perplexity to give their opinion. They recognized the ‘artistic’ value of films for their ability to enact sentiments and emotions, but they did not know how to reconcile this with Benedetto Croce’s prevailing rigorous categorization of art.¹⁸⁸

In his *L’Antiteatro* (1928), Sebastiano Arturo Luciani argued for the superiority of the cinema over theatre, because films would enjoy the liberty not to have to stick to the unity of place and action.¹⁸⁹ Cinema could play with its frames, making thus editing the primary preoccupation in filmmaking (27). In other words, Luciani demonstrated not to disregard the idea that film *montage* could create a meaning beyond the individual images as pioneering Russian theorists such as Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov already posited.¹⁹⁰ It is hard to believe that key films such as Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* were not in Luciani’s mind when he was shaping his idea that a progression of images give greater emotional impact to any event.

Luciani did not intend to underestimate the importance of professional acting. He did believe in the idea that actors had to be fluid in their gestural expressiveness, as if guided by “modulazioni visive” (“visual modulations”), even when they were performing the most opposites sentiments. When actors succeeded in mastering such a difficult task, they were sure to have that “photogenic” attitude that “molti non riescono a definire” (“many do not know how to define”) (34). Luciani, thus, was focusing on a possible combination of different artistic

¹⁸⁸ See Benedetto Croce, *Estetica come scienza dell’espressione e linguistica generale* (1902).

¹⁸⁹ Sebastiano Arturo Luciani, *L’Antiteatro*, p. 20.

¹⁹⁰ See Sergei Eisenstein, *Montage of Film Attractions* and Dziga Vertov’s *From Kino-Eye to Radio-Eye*.

expressions, such as acting and music. By asking actors to harmonize their facial and body movements with “modulations,” he had clearly in mind an integration between different ‘languages.’ Reflecting on the role of music during projections, in fact, Luciani stressed how vision is overshadowed when we simply listen to music; but when the focus of our attention is on the screen, notes are a sheer background sound. This physiologic principle had to be at the core of filmmaking, so as to integrate music to acting, instead of creating an “interferenza” between the two (63).

The Italian intelligentsia was increasingly inclined to recognize the specificity of film language and journals, such as *Cinematografo*, *Cine-Convegno*, and later on *Bianco e Nero*, were laying the foundations for a scientific reflection on the cinema. Intellectuals like Pietro Solari and Pietro Gadda praised in *La fiera letteraria* the extraordinary power of the camera in framing “l'imponderabile” and even “il subcosciente,” while calling attention to peculiarly cinematic expressive devices, such as “sovrapposizioni” and “scorci arditissimi, rallentati, annebbiati, primi piani vicinissimi” (“very bold glimpses, delayed and blurred, as well as the nearest close-ups”).¹⁹¹

As early as 1922, Pirandello had come to similar conclusions, praising the expressive peculiarity of cinematography that, better than any other medium, can express human thought:

Il cinematografo, più facilmente, più completamente, più immediatamente di qualsiasi altro mezzo di espressione artistica, può dare la visione concreta del pensiero... Io non ho mai avuto disistima, sfiducia o avversione per il cinematografo... Riconosco tutta la grandezza del suo dominio e l'estensione delle sue possibilità.¹⁹²

¹⁹¹ See Piero Solari, “Appunti cinematografici,” in *La fiera letteraria*, April 29, 1928, and Piero Gadda, “Giovinezza del cinema,” in *La fiera letteraria*, April 17, 1928.

¹⁹² See “Giudizi di scrittori e artisti sul Cinematografo,” in *Cine Mondo*, October, 5-20, 1922, Anno I, n.1, p. 12.

The cinematograph, more easily, more completely, more immediately than any other tool of artistic expression can offer a concrete visual representation of thought... I have never had disesteem, lack of confidence, or aversion for the cinematograph... I recognize all the greatness of its supremacy and the extension of its potentialities.

In 1928, Pirandello had great ambitions as screenwriter, one for all the adaptation of his *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, for which he had even written the script with Adolf Lantz while in Berlin. Pirandello was determined to follow the path of experimentalism, even thinking of the expressionist filmmaker Friederich Murnau as the director for his film. German artistry was seen as the apotheosis of innovation in terms of editing and scenography. Talking with reviewer Enrico Rocca, Pirandello stated that in Germany he saw “prodigi”: “Palcoscenici che si sollevano per metà o per intero, o che sprofondano, luci che bagnano tutto in una specie di alone fantasmagorico, irreali, sgorgando dalle fonti più impensate. Prodigii, Le dico, prodigi” (“stages, entirely or partially raising, or sinking into the ground, lights that illuminate everything with a sort of a phantasmagorical unreal aura, radiating from the weirdest sources. Prodigies, I am telling you, prodigies”).¹⁹³

By mentioning to Rocca the phantasmagorical experimentalism of film directors such as Max Reinhardt and Erwin Piscator, Pirandello seemed no longer preoccupied with the mechanization of art, over which fretted Serafino Gubbio. Now the agency of the machine appeared less frightful, because it is powerless without the artist to feed it. Only human creativity, after all, allows mechanical reproduction, “Bisogna che sorga il grande artista capace

¹⁹³ “Luigi Pirandello e le sue grandi novità cinematografiche,” in *Il popolo d’Italia*, October 4, 1928. Reprinted in Pupo, *Interviste a Pirandello*, pp. 406-410.

di appagare, inventando, la fame, la vorace fame delle macchine” (“We need a great artist to be born, capable of satisfying, by inventing, the hunger, the voracious hunger of machines”).¹⁹⁴

To Pirandello the risks of fueling the film engine with dull materials were serious, being cinematography a medium gifted with extraordinary expressive tools that cannot mask bad content, “Troppo spesso il cinematografo esprime con gran lusso di dettagli perfetti, originalissimi, un contenuto gramo ed ingenuo per non dire peggio. Leggi di domanda e d’offerta, richiesta del pubblico, ragioni commerciali. E va bene. E l’arte, non ha forse l’arte anche lei i suoi diritti?” (“Too often the cinematograph, with great profusion of perfect and very original details, features a poor and naïve content, not to say worse things. Laws of supply and demand, the audience’s requests, commercial ends. That’s fine. And art? Does not also art maybe have its own rights?”).¹⁹⁵ Under attack was thus a filmmaking that did not keep into account the spectacularization of the artistic material in cinematic terms. What Pirandello was pointing at was an experimental visually narrative agency totally relying on image suggestions.

At the time when the silent films were being swept away, Pirandello was envisioning a film that had to be deprived of words, an absence that was the metaphor for a de-contextualization of the narrative logic. Since the speech is child of rationality, it can express only the conscious. Images, instead, are the only interpreters for “tutto ciò che alla parola si ribella: la materia del sogno” (“everything that rebels against the word: the matter of dreams”). After all, “Si può raccontare un sogno a parole?” (“Can we tell a dream with words?”), Pirandello asked Rocca.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁴ *Ibidem.*

¹⁹⁵ *Ibidem.*

¹⁹⁶ *Ibidem.*

In 1928, thus, right when Luciani was weighting up the pros and cons of matching music with the screen, Pirandello was shaping his idea of *cinemelography*. Writing to Marta Abba on July 6, 1928, Pirandello would hint at a film project on Beethoven's symphonies, "Ho comprato a Roma tanti libri su Beethoven, per quell'idea che Tu sai; e son dietro a leggerli. Verranno visioni magnifiche e cose non mai viste" ("In Rome, I bought many books on Beethoven for that idea that You know, and I am reading them. Magnificent visions and never-seen things will come out") (*Lettere* 36-37). Inspired by a 'cinema in music' Pirandello entered the second phase of his theoretical reflections on the world of the motion pictures. What Pirandello theorized in 1929 was a furthering reflection on the specificity of film language and its proper agency, as well as a philosophy somehow voicing the authorial doubt that the 'talkies' might have a future.

In the interview granted in London to Oreste Rizzini, the reviewer for the *Corriere della Sera*, Pirandello expressed his skepticism for the addition of a mechanized voice in films:

LP: ... Ne ho visti 5 di questi film sonori a Londra
OR: E l'hanno convertito?
LP: Tutt'altro. Mi hanno confermato il mio giudizio che è contrario. Uno dei film, *The Singing Fool*, mi ha dato un desiderio, tuttavia, quello di udire Al Johnson in carne ed ossa. Ma che cos'è questo? È la conferma del mio giudizio. E la mia idea è che... bisogna assolutamente liberare il film dalla letteratura. La cinematografia è stata finora su una falsa strada. Ha seguito a fare letteratura (narrazione o teatro) trovandosi in una doppia impossibilità, e cioè: 1) nell'impossibilità di sostituire la parola; 2) nell'impossibilità di farne a meno.¹⁹⁷

LP: ... I have seen 5 talking films in London
OP: And did they convert you?
LP: Not nearly. They confirmed my opposite belief. One of the films, *The Singing Fool*, inspired me, however, to hear Al Johnson real live. But what is this? This is the confirmation to my judgment. And my idea is that... we absolutely need to get the film rid of literature. So far, cinematography has been on a false path. It kept producing literature (narrative or theatre) and finding itself in a twofold

¹⁹⁷ "Pirandello contro il film parlato," in *Corriere della sera*, April 19, 1929. Reprinted in Pupo, *Interviste a Pirandello*, pp. 433-435.

impossibility, that is: 1) the impossibility to replace words; 2) the impossibility to do without it.

Pirandello seemed here to put cinematography in a blind alley. By insisting in imitating the literary text, cinema did harm most notably to itself, since the mocking process prevented it from developing its specific expressiveness. Mechanized words could only negatively impinge on a realistic representation:

Ogni illusione viene ad essere irrimediabilmente distrutta con la voce impressa nel film meccanicamente, anche se a perfezione, per le seguenti ragioni: 1) la voce è su un corpo vivo che la emette e nel film non ci sono corpi degli attori come a teatro, ma le loro immagini fotografate in movimento; 2) le immagini non parlano, si vedono soltanto: se parlano danno la sensazione macabra di spettri o di apparizioni in cui la voce viva, in contrasto colla loro qualità d'ombra, diventa non solo innaturale ma spaventosa.¹⁹⁸

Any illusion is fatally compromised, when the voice is mechanically impressed on the film, also if this is done to perfection, for the following reasons: 1) the voice is on a living body that emits it, and in the film there are not the bodies of actors like in the theatre, but only their photographed images in motion; 2) images do not talk, they can only be seen: if they talk, the impression they give is that of macabre ghosts or apparitions, in which their real voice, in contrast with their being shadows, becomes not only unnatural, but scary.

Pirandello's disbelief for the 'talkies,' thus, originated from an aesthetic concern for the impossible marriage between the accuracy of the voice and the manipulated, artistically edited images. Given the still primordial technology, then, the addition of mechanized words could only make films difficult to export internationally. Only those countries, like America and Germany, with major economic solidity and technological advancements, would have hit the market. "Ma quanti altri paesi saranno tagliati fuori?" ("But now many other countries will be cut off?"), was Pirandello's concern.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibidem.*

As a matter of fact, foreign companies had a great interest in nourishing the popular frenzy for the *talkies*. Patents yielded millions especially to American companies, not to mention the profits made from the sale of widely used sound devices, such as the Warner Bros' *Vitaphone* and the *Phonofilm* system, which eventually became the *Fox Movietone*.¹⁹⁹ Pirandello himself made clear that part of his aversion for sound films derived from the disdain to see commercial goals prevail over art aesthetics. In the interview to Rizzini, he even went as far as saying that America, "having in hand the 'talkies' toy, was launching in onto the market, in order to mess up the European coalition for silent movies, as far as the novelty lasted" ("trovandosi ad avere nelle mani il trastullo del film sonoro, lo abbia lanciato sul mercato per buttare all'aria la coalizione europea del film muto, fintanto che lo spirito della novità dura").²⁰⁰

In his essay *Se il film parlante abolirà il teatro* (1929), Pirandello adjusted his harsh comments on American materialism and the excessive attention given overseas to profit from art at the expenses of aesthetics.²⁰¹ America, in fact, emerged from the pages of this essay as the land where "new forms of life" are born, where artistic vitality flattened the European "weight of history, traditions, and costumes." The "new form" Pirandello hinted at was clearly that of a renovation in playwriting, being theatre the highest and widest artistic expression; hence, the "heresy" that in a few years the cinema would "abolish" the theater was likely only child of the American "love for exaggeration." The stage will be never overshadowed by films for the simple reason that "non è lui, il teatro, che vuol diventare cinematografia" ("it is not him, the theatre, that wants to become cinematography"), but it is the other way around (1031). Since eventually the screen will make only a bad copy of the stage, the crowds will not be able to do anything but

¹⁹⁹ See Donald Crafton, *The Talkies: American Cinema's Transition to Sound, 1926-1931*.

²⁰⁰ "Contro il film parlato," in *Corriere della sera*.

²⁰¹ Originally published for the *Anglo-American Newspaper Service*, London-New York, June 1929, the essay is now in Lo Musti Vecchio, *Saggi, Poesie, Scritti vari*, pp. 1030-36.

miss the theatre. Indirectly, thus, cinema, especially after being equipped with the voice, will end up doing good to the theatre, from the moment it lost its own peculiarity: to depict reality in motion.

Piero Gobetti, too, in the 1920s called attention to the assistance that cinema would give to theatre. His reflections, however, rather took into account the social purge that cinematography could operate, by dismissing vulgar audiences from legitimized theatres. Gobetti even hoped for a “campagna iconoclastica che riesca a far disertare i teatri” (“iconoclastic campaign capable of having theatres deserted”).²⁰² Pirandello, instead, played on the cinema’s attempt to imitate literature and stage, as the element spurring the theatre’s new splendor. In cinematography, words and images cannot coexist. If melodrama belongs to the opera, and jazz belongs to the music hall, the pure sound of music belongs to cinematography, as the only possible agent of visual language.

What Pirandello expressed in his essay *Se il film parlante* was eventually a declaration of love for pure cinematography, not a sheer outburst of skepticism for the future of the talking movies. He was envisioning a cinema that could be only genuine cinema, without the risk of transforming itself into the mimesis of existing mediums. What Pirandello feared, I believe, was simply that film could miss its chance of becoming an art of its own. His intuition for the suggestive potentialities of *cinemelography*, after all, did not remain a dream in the drawer, as the success of Walt Disney’s *Fantasia* in 1940 attested. But exploring the controversial use of Pirandello’s *cinemelography*, which even led the playwright to accuse Walt Disney of embezzlement, would embark us on a very long and totally different adventure. This study stops here, in 1929, when a new aesthetics and technological achievements were to challenge

²⁰² Piero Gobetti, *Eresie*, p. 77.

regisseurs, actors, and audiences. The introduction of voice into film would bring in new issues that would alter what cinema would become, imposing a new acting, new editing, and notably a new mode of looking.

FINAL THOUGHTS

This study has demonstrated how audiences matured their viewing experience step by step, starting as early as 1840s, when the very first prototypes for visual entertainment were put on the market. It was first through the trickery of these optical devices, and later through the supervised spectatorship of Panoramas, the visual challenge of increasingly theatricalized Dioramic settings, and the spectacularized scenery of ethno shows at the *Great Exhibition*, that the crowds gradually saw the world itself transforming into a virtual ‘screen.’

The modernization of perception was essentially triggered by pictorial reproductions that resulted so perceptually convincing, to let viewers experience the sensation of being ‘really’ part of the depicted reality. What was striking was seeing how both Dioramas and Panoramas, once enriched with increasingly realistic details, became capable of empowering the visual spectacle, giving legitimacy to it. It was, in fact, thanks to these life-like representations that audiences willingly accepted to suspend their disbelief. On the wave of such exceptional visual realism, audiences found themselves gradually involved in the Althusserian process of *interpellation*, exposed as they were to an opticality that had to be interpreted, for it resulted from images to be understood as representation. As a matter of fact, what Dioramas first and Moving Panoramas later taught audiences, playing on tricks enhancing temporal and spatial immediacy of the action, as well as the illusion of movement, was to deal with a representation stimulating them to enjoy a visual experience through its virtual reconstruction.

Such a mode of displaying the mimesis of the real was a clear anticipation of the cinematic re-enactment. No matter if it was because of mannequins embellishing displays, or

moving shadows on a screen, the simulated environment was perceived as physically real because the spectatorial senses were fooled. Certainly, what was essentially captivating was the entertaining aura of this estrangement, rather than the cynical conclusion that a sheer commercial construct was behind this illusion, as Walter Benjamin would stress in the 1930s. Undeniably, the driving force of capitalism played a considerable part in letting art, culture, industry, and commerce become all agents contributing to the shaping of mass consumption. For the way visual attractions were marketed, they had soon a considerable impact on the urban layout. For what this study (especially Chapter II:1) has asserted, it is not hasty to affirm that the rise of a new visual language, increasingly cinematographic, led to the necessity to codify it in specially-built display edifices, so as the refinement of visual entertainment could tally with the sophistication in masonry. If spectacularization triggered attendance, supported by publicity barrage, posters, and catalogues, the venues for visual entertainment were soon disguised as a fantasy land promising escapism as well as the arena for the displacement of the latest optical advancements.

When the first Panorama house opened in Milan in 1881, its construction reflected both the achievements of industrialization, the frenzy for iron constructions, and the urban needs of a modern society; but essentially what this permanent rotunda valued was the urge to provide the city with a purpose-built building in respect of visual entertainment that, in defiance of any critique, filled venues to capacity. Building permanency was thus a way to legitimize both the popular taste and visual entertainment. Interestingly, in fact, permanent playhouses did any possible effort to offer visual spectacles as catchy as the most glorious events in national history, in order to draw the viewers in the performance and make them feel part of the action. The same spectatorial involvement was resumed by early cinematography in 1910s, which played on films

showcasing Roman past greatness, the Italo-Turkish war, or the colonial enterprise in Africa to promote nationalism via the exploitation of visual captivation. Filmmaking endorsed the commercial exploitation of grandiose scenography as Panoramas did, which now more than ever made the viewer feel enveloped by images and mesmerized by the astonishing visual potential of the new medium.

Whether intellectuals often dismissed the illegitimacy of “curiosity spectacles,” not much different was their attitude towards the grounding of cinematography in the realm of true art. The crowds, however, filled movie houses to capacity with the same abundance with which they had filled the squares where street artists performed with their optical novelties. As well as this study has offered evidence that illegitimate visual spectacles rose to recognized art just thanks to popular appreciation and their marketability, the same happened with the cinema. Panorama shows and the *Great Exhibitions* encouraged attendance with cheap tickets and promotional reductions, making it no longer subject to class restrictions, and movie houses were no less so. However, while Panorama organizers attracted spectators with strategies such as free Sunday tickets for workers or the so-called “elegant day” affordable only by the well-off, without thus ever reaching a genuine class mingling, movie houses did turn cinema going into a true cross-social activity.

As a reviewer of *Febo* wrote in 1920, “Assistendo all’entrare della folla in un cinematografo si ha l’impressione di assistere alla rappresentazione di una commedia di Terenzio o di Aristofane in un circo romano, quando 20.000 spettatori, senza distinzione di casta, sedevano sui gradini marmorei del gigantesco teatro” (“Looking at the crowd entering a movie house, we have the impression of seeing a comedy by Terence or Aristophanes in a Roman circus, when 20,000 spectators, with no class distinction, sit on marble steps in the huge

theatre”).²⁰³ Cinema frenzy thus was triggered by the low-class nature of film and the informal environment of movie houses, which eased the preoccupation for exteriority and elegance:

Le ragioni di questo entusiasmo [per il cinema] sono assai semplici. Il popolo al cinematografo si trova come in casa propria: assiste a spettacoli popolari, occupa posti popolari, ed è in un ambiente popolare. Anche i prezzi sono popolari, così come la disciplina nella sala. All’uscir dal lavoro, l’operaio può andarci in salopette, in *casquette*, e la *midinette* senza cappello. Né *ouvreuses*, né ispettori, né impiegati subalterni indicano il posto da occupare: ognuno lo sceglie a suo talento e lo trova facilmente.²⁰⁴

The reasons of such enthusiasm [for the cinema] are very simple. At the cinematograph, peoples found themselves at home: they watch popular spectacles, occupy popular seats, and are in a popular environment. Even prices are popular, as well as the discipline in the room. When leaving the work place, workers can go there wearing dungarees, hats, and the *midinette* without hat. Neither usherettes, or supervisors and attendants indicate the seat: everybody can choose at will and find it easily.

However, it was this very accessibility by the widest social echelons that made cinema vulnerable to elitist attacks and the accusations of those who saw in its agency the profanation of aesthetics. Throughout this work, we gave evidence of how Italian intellectuals remained skeptical as late as 1928 regarding the artistic credibility of the new medium and were hostile to consider it equal to theatre and literature. The cinema’s inferiority was addressed with the legacy of tradition and a snobbish intellectual approach, which hardly considered the popular tastes as a decisive agent in rising film among the legitimized arts.

The philosophical concerns afflicting the intelligentsia were irrelevant to the audiences, who rather valued the technological potential of the new medium and its astounding communicative power. Even the most ordinary life scenes, in fact, did not look so routine-like, when they were showcased in motion on a screen, proofing that what counted most was

²⁰³ “Il popolo francese diserta i teatri per i cinematografi,” in *Febo*, October 27, 1920.

²⁰⁴ *Ibidem*.

satisfying one's own curiosity for the prodigy of animation. The cinema, after all, was a product of the modern world, the child of the latest technology, which not by chance, played on effective icons of progress (on for all the railway) already impacting the collective imagination.

What cinema completed was the visual formation of viewers, directing their gaze towards the appreciation of a product not as much for showcasing reality, but more for screening the imitation of the real. On the strength of their experience with optical illusions and photographic tricks, viewers mastered watching as a pleasurable experience. Images were enthralling, just thanks to the net of mix-feelings they produced—panic, attraction, curiosity—which worked on unconscious level.

We understand, thus, how abstract issues, such as the presence/non presence of actors, that troubled intellectuals so intensely, were inevitably put aside by the enjoyment viewers got from the activity of watching per se. The sensorial reception, then, solved any clash between virtuality and physical presence. Functioning as a mirror, the screen did put viewers in the presence of actors with great effectiveness, leaving then to the sight the task to turn the actors' virtual presence into a perceivable experience.

The extraordinary communicative power of images imposed eventually the necessity to legitimize the expressive specificity of cinema. Film was by then a collective viewing phenomenon, very different from the solitary peering in *Peepshows*; it performed the mechanical re-enactment of reality and was capable of forcing viewers to focus their attention on the screen, while sharing their emotions and reactions with strangers in a dim room. The expressive strength of film language could no longer be questioned, hence not even the medium's autonomy. Insisting on defining film from the comparison with the arts could lead nowhere. As Lukács pointed out as early as 1913 in an article he published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* when reflecting

on the debated distinction between the cinema and theatre, the diversity among mediums cannot be approached in linguistic terms.²⁰⁵ In the case of stage and screen, the essential difference is given by the presence and the absence of the actor, but has nothing to do with words or gestures. On stage we have a physical body, who can enact a living interaction with the audience, while the film does perform the actions of actors, but not their ‘liveness.’ This is the peculiarity of cinema, however, not its deficiency; and keeping this singularity in mind is the only valid criterion to the artistic legitimization of film.

Also Pirandello in *Si gira...* voiced the destabilization experienced by “true actors” once they have to adapt their theatrical acting to the rules of filmmaking. What they truly miss is the real contact with the public, the physical presence of people willing to “commuoversi, fremere, ridere, accendersi, prorompere in applausi” (be moved, laugh, light up, to burst in a storm of applause”) (585). But Pirandello in 1915 was still influenced by existing artistic conventions, which tended to classify film as a limited medium, for its lack of real presence; a stance he reconsidered in the 1920s, when, excited for the expressive potential of film, became even a harsh opponent of the cinematograph imitating theatre and literature. Such a mimesis could only limit cinematic expressiveness, he claimed, stigmatizing film as a sub genre with no autonomy.

I like to conclude this study with the belief that Pirandello, with the passing of time, would have been inclined to reconsider also his uncertainty for the future of sound cinema. After all, his hesitation is understandable, if we consider the primordial level of technology in 1928, when he premiered the first ‘talkies’ in London. The soundtrack was not yet printed on the film itself, but issued separately on phonograph records and the *Vitaphone*, although exceptionally capable of maintaining a good synchronization and filling auditoriums with a comfortable

²⁰⁵ György Lukács, *Gedanken zu einer Ästhetik des Kino*, in *Frankfurter Zeitung*, September 10, 1913. Now reprinted in Anton Kaes, *Kino-Debatte*, pp. 112-118.

volume, could perform nothing comparable with the amplification and sound fidelity we know today. Should Pirandello have lived beyond 1936, he would have been surely inclined to value the extraordinary progress made by a medium that the press in 1895 presented as “one of the most curious things of our time;” he would have accepted the aesthetic evolution of cinema into a product no longer confined to silent images, but ready to evolve into the globalizing phenomenon we know today.

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