

The Accidental Artists: Art in Early Cinema

By Thomas Cleary

The room is massive. It's absolutely filled with people, all of them eagerly awaiting the evening's first film - a film made in 1903. Then after introductions, which only seem to heighten the collective anticipation, the lights go down and a beam of light hits the screen. The film is *Les aventures de Robinson Crusoé*, the director was Georges Méliès. Of all the many cinematic experiences I was privileged to share at the 31st Giornate del Cinema Muto, seeing *Crusoé* stands out as my favourite. There was something thrilling about seeing a film that old, still able to captivate and enthrall an audience after so many years. We didn't just see a piece of cinema history that evening; we saw a piece of art.

I think most of my fellow spectators would have agreed that *Crusoé* is unarguably a piece of art, and that Méliès was most unarguably an artist. But it seems as though he and his films are one of the few exceptions to the conventional wisdom that the majority of works from the earliest cinema are only of interest as curiosities for cinephiles or for scholarly study of the medium's incremental developments - that they merely foretell the artistic merit of films to come, and lack any of their own. But I have to say, the festival's selection of early film made me see things otherwise.

All of these early films seemed to have a goal that I believe to be an inherently artistic one: to emotionally engage the audience. I'm not saying that all these films necessarily achieved that goal, just that trying to elicit an emotional response seemed to be, even then, absolutely paramount. Whether it was Col. William N. Selig's decision to place romantic sub-plots alongside the daring-do in his "animal pictures" or the decision of countless early filmmakers in the programme to capture the rich tapestry of emotions that any Dickens novel provides, these pioneers seemed to realise that if they were going to keep their infant medium alive, they would have to engage their audience on levels other than novelty.

You might say that art can only be created by someone who considers himself an artist, that intention and vision are everything, and that the majority of early filmmakers were either only interested in making a quick buck or saw their creations as a purely scientific endeavour. But I see it like this: whether consciously or more likely unconsciously, the businessmen realised they had to make art in order to make their money, while the scientists and technological innovators realised they had to make art in order to make people pay attention to their photographic experiments. This, in my mind, made these early filmmakers artists - reluctant artists maybe, or perhaps more accurately accidental artists, but artists nonetheless.

I should stress that when I say “art” and “artists” I’m not implying any value judgement - there is good art and bad art, effective art and ineffective art. I see art as anything that is in itself superfluous, something that has no immediate practical use, that seeks (though not necessarily with success) to engage the viewer on an emotional or intellectual level.

While there wasn’t too much intellectual stimulation being displayed (although I feel an argument could be made that that was in fact the goal of some of the early non-fiction films), I still felt my criteria were met by the vast majority of the earlier films I saw, in terms of aiming for emotional resonance. I’m not denying that these attempts were more often than not quite crude, but that lack of technical and thematic subtlety didn’t invariably diminish their effectiveness. A lack of subtlety does not equal bad art.

Those who know little about the silent era are always inclined to view it in terms of its limitations, what they see as missing. They find it hard to imagine that a film that is mute and uncoloured can be as effective as a contemporary one. I and the rest of the festival’s audience know otherwise, of course, but I see something similar in the way the silent film community views the very earliest films. Again, they tend to be viewed in terms of what’s missing, of what’s yet to come. Now I know there’s a great amount of appreciation amongst our community for these films (why else would so much of the festival be devoted to them?), but I feel they are still often misrepresented and misunderstood. When taken on their own terms with an acceptance of the lack of technical and thematic sophistication, they can be enjoyed not just as historical artefacts, but also as in-the-moment cinema experiences. This, in my mind, is a far better way to appreciate the films of the past.

In the course of the festival, I spoke with Col. William N. Selig’s biographer Andrew Erish, who was participating in a Collegium Dialogue. I talked to him about some of the ideas that would ultimately become this paper and we seemed to share similar views on the subject. But he also shed some light on something that had not occurred to me before; that there was appreciation of early cinema’s artistic qualities when the films themselves were new. For instance, Andrew Erish told me, an international film festival held in 1903 and sponsored by the British Photographic Society awarded one of Col. Selig’s “actualities”, *Runaway Stage Coach* (1902), its top prize - not because the film showed any remarkable technical prowess, but because of its stunning setting: the Rocky Mountains in Colorado. This film was applauded not just for its amazing feat of capturing our reality, but also for the filmmaker’s decision to capture an element of our reality that was of great aesthetic beauty – an artistic decision. Whether they knew it or not, the organisers of this competition were holding *Runaway Stage Coach* above its peers because of its artistry.

Andrew also told me about Charles Frohman, the prominent American theatre producer who, in 1896, attended the first public projection of Thomas Edison’s films. When asked about the films by a *New York Times* reporter, Frohman noted their ability to replicate the movement of a tree’s branches gently swaying in the wind. He apparently went on to say that an audiences would never again accept the artifice of a painted backdrop now that such realism, such a vivid and tangible illusion, could be

achieved. Even then, a man coming from such a well-established artistic medium as theatre could see both cinema's inherent artistic qualities and its potential to overtake his medium not only in terms of popularity with an audience, but also in its capacity for accurate and vivid expression. I would feel safe in saying that cinema has unequivocally done both of these things.

I enjoyed the Giornate's early film strands most when I strove to see things from the naïve perspective of someone standing at the dawn of a new art-form. The miracles I have absolutely taken for granted in cinema once again felt miraculous. The early colour films in the programme are a good example. Even though I've grown accustomed to modern cinema's flawless reproduction of real-world colours, tinting, hand painting the individual frames and other primitive forms of colour processing often lend these colour films a really appealing and strikingly surreal quality. They're great examples of cinematic pioneers making early attempts at one of the things cinema does best: creating an otherworldly experience for the viewer. Also, after nearly a whole week at the festival without a single word spoken onscreen, when the woman began to sing in *Après La Bataille* (1903) it was astounding, mesmerising, a thing of profound beauty. By accepting this film's lack of any nuance or complexity (one shot, static camera and one actress just singing), I was able to have a personal encounter with it that I will cherish forever. I could not call something that stirred such potent feelings within me anything other than "art" - even (or perhaps especially) something so very simple.

Before I finish there's just one last thing I'd like to say: I don't consider this paper to be an attempt at a definitive argument. It was never really my intention to completely win you over or to make you see things hundred per cent my way. If you found any of the preceding paragraphs insightful then I couldn't be happier, but this was always mainly an attempt to articulate some of the rather abstract thoughts and feelings the Giornate provoked in me. When it comes to interpretation of film, as with most of life in general, there is no *real* truth, and I consider this paper to be no truth other than my own. I don't think you can say for sure what any given film is or isn't, because film isn't really anything *real* at all, and that's one of the things that makes it great. When you look up at a cinema screen all that you're seeing is an illusion, and there's really only one thing you can do: make of it what you will.