

## When the Cinema was Fairy Tale

### Rubrica a Cura di Italo Spada\*

*Comitato per la Cinematografia dei Ragazzi, Roma, Italy*

**\*Corresponding Author:** Rubrica a Cura di Italo Spada, Comitato per la Cinematografia dei Ragazzi, Roma, Italy.

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Those ones who say that cinema was born in 1895, when Lumière brothers presented their first short film at Salon Indien du Grand Café in Paris, are right and wrong at the same time. Historians agree with them, whereas academics disagree. As usual, everything depends on one's point of view and, most of all, on what is meant by cinema.

There are many definitions of cinema but, to not to disappoint anybody, I am going to choose Italo Calvino's one as it appears in A spectator's autobiography, which is the introduction of "Four films" by Federico Fellini. During the interview with Lietta Tornabuoni (<<La stampa>>, 23 of August 1981) Calvino, who was appointed president of the jury at Biennale di Venezia that year, after having recognized the importance of cinema as a privileged instrument to glimpse the image of the world, makes a comparison between the language of cinema and literature describing his young spectator's experience as "a mix of miracle and deceit".

The statement of the Italian writer alludes to the spectators' reaction to the first short films in the history of cinema (the astonishment for Workers Leaving the Lumiere Factory, the fear for Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat, the laugh for the prank on The Waterer watered, etc.), and pays tribute to the fabulous cinema that was invented 47 years before (1895), when the little match girl was first published by Hans Christian Andersen.

Let's read it again, maybe with an eye on recent events.

On New Year's Eve, a poor little girl wanders alone through the streets, trying in vain to sell matches. Streets are empty but there is no pandemic or lockdown. The only disease is indifference. The little girl is trembling with cold and hunger and she is sad. She doesn't want to come back home because she didn't earn a penny and she fears her father's reproaches and blows. So she decides to warm herself, to eat and to play imagining an all new world, if it is literary or filmic ante litteram it doesn't matter. In this way, she becomes screenwriter, producer, actress, director and spectator of herself. This lasts few seconds, less than the first Lumière's reel, and it is clear that her movie was only a draft, but in those images there are already all the main characteristics of the new language: screenwriting, framing, on-screen text, editing, interplay of lights. In that outdoor arena, the box of matches serves as a projector and nature creates the typical darkness in the movie theater. Images arise, acquire movement, lure, seduce, deceive.

It is no wonder this fairy tale has been an inspiration for many English (J. Williamson in 1902), American (J. Sullivan in 1912; The Screen Gems in 1937; Disney in 2006), French (J. Renoir in 1928), Italian (R. Scarpa in 1953) and Japanese (two cartoons in the 70's) directors. During this 2020, in which cinemas are closed, it is no wonder we add our own version turning Andersen's words into three short films to be shown on the screen of our fantasy.

Short film № 1: The heat from the stove. <<It made a warm, bright flame and it gave a strange light! It really seemed to the little girl as if she were sitting before a great iron stove with shining brass in which some logs were burning. She stretched out her feet to warm them, but the little flame went out and the stove vanished>>.

Short film № 2: The nourishment of the table spread. <<This time the light was so bright that she could see right into the neighbor's house. She saw the table spread with a white cloth and on it stood a shining dinner service. The roast goose winked at her and suddenly it jumped off the table and waddled toward her. The little girl stretched out her arms but the vision disappeared as the match burned out>>.

Short film № 3: The joy of toys. <<She lighted another match, imagining herself sitting under a Christmas tree. It was much larger and much more beautiful than the one she had seen last Christmas through a shop window. Thousands of candles burned on the green branches, illuminating wonderful toys. She tried to grab them but the match burned out>>.

The warmth of being together, the intellectual nourishment, the desire to escape: doesn't cinema serve this purpose?

Those ones who want to stay more in the movie theater can write the Short film № 4.

It is the little girl that plays it whereas the grandmother writes the plot and the script. The beacon of light comes from the sky, like a shooting star. Everything starts with a flashback, a voice-over ("When a star falls, there is a soul that ascend to heaven"), and an appearance. Fantasy and reality come together creating a special effect of rare beauty: a hug between a grandmother and her granddaughter who spread their wings to go "where there is no cold and where you don't starve".

How can all this happen? It is a miracle! As Andersen wrote, those passers-by who, in the morning, find the dead body of the little girl, give a prosaic version because "none of them deserved to know such a secret".

Obviously, they never went to cinema!

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