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Professor Camillo Negro's Neuropathological Films

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Abstract

Camillo Negro, a professor in neurology at the University of Turin, was a pioneer of scientific film. From 1906 to 1908, with help from his assistant Giuseppe Roasenda, he had some of his patients filmed by Roberto Omegna – one of the most famous Italian film camera operators – for scientific and educational purposes. During the war years, he continued his scientific film project at Turin's Military Hospital, recording shell-shocked soldiers. In the autumn of 2011, the Museo Nazionale del Cinema, in partnership with the University of Turin's Faculty of Neurosciences, presented a new critical edition of the neuropathological films made by Negro. The Museum's collection also includes 16mm footage probably filmed in the 1930s by Dr. Fedele Negro, Camillo's son. One of these films is devoted to celebrating the effects of the so-called "Bulgarian cure" on Parkinson's disease.

Key words

Camillo Negro, Fedele Negro, Roberto Omegna, Giuseppe Roasenda, Neuropatologia, Bulgarian Treatment, Shell-shock, Cottolengo, Turin.

Introduction

Camillo Negro (1861-1927) was professor of Neurology at the University of Turin from 1910 to his death, at the age of 66 years. He was a keen researcher, in particular in the fields of clinical neurology and neurophysiology. In 1901 he discovered the cogwheel sign of Parkinson disease (Negro & Treves, 1901), which is one of the criteria for the diagnosis of idiopathic Parkinson disease (Ghiglione & Mutani & Chiò, 2005).

He was a passionate teacher and, as such, he had the idea to produce a documentary including some cases with typical clinical signs, especially movement disorders, to be shown to medical doctors students, in particular “small” Universities, where there is a shortage of patients, in order to have movie reproduction of principal signs and true characteristics of nervous diseases (Gazz Pop 17 Febbraio 1908). In order to realize his idea, he met Mr. Arturo Ambrosio (1869-1960), who had recently founded the the movie company *Film Ambrosio & C.*, and Roberto Omegna (1876-1948), a camera operator, who authored a large number of scientific documentaries in the following years.

The shooting took about two years, from 1906 to early 1908, and the documentary was shown in preview in Turin, at the Ambrosio Biograph, with the members of the Royal Academy of Medicine, on February 17, 1908, and officially at the first meeting of the Italian Neurology Society, on April 11, 1908. However, several sources indicate that it was also presented in New York (February 23, 1908) and in Paris, at the Salpêtrière (March 12, 1908).

The documentary in its original form included 24 “scenes” organized from the presentation of clinical signs (eye movement, facial paresis, deep tendon reflexes) to that of neurological syndromes (ataxias, hemiplegias, Parkinson’s disease, Huntington chorea) and psychiatric disorders (mainly hysterias). A series of patients with congenital diseases, then

admitted at the Cottolengo Hospital in Turin, is also presented. Interestingly, in several scenes Camillo Negro and his assistant, Giuseppe Roasenda (1879-1959) are also filmed, actively participating to the examination of patients, and not rarely interacting with them.

Novel Findings

In 2011 the Museo Nazionale del Cinema in Turin, in partnership with the Department of Neurosciences of the University of Turin, published a new edition of the neuropathological films made by Camillo Negro. Starting with the original footage present in the Museum's own collection and materials that had already been preserved in the 1990s, the Museum has suggested a new order for the episodes, it has separated those materials dealing with neuropathology and those dealing with war syndromes and includes new, unpublished materials.

The original presentation has been reconstructed thanks to a detailed description which has been found in an article of the *La Phono Cinéma Revue*, which described in detail the first presentation of the documentary in Paris (*Phono-Cinéma-Revue* Mars 1908). However, it is likely that at least one of the original scenes, i.e. that presenting an epileptic spell, is still missing.

It is clear, both from the images and from several documents that the cases were chosen by Camillo Negro with the intention to show to students and physicians neurological signs and movement disorders, which are not easily understood with photographic images.

It is certain that the documentary was used by Camillo Negro in several occasion in the following two decades, and that from time to time the order of the scenes was modified, according to the context and the type of audience.

Notably, the interest of Camillo Negro for filmography was not confined to *Neuropatologia*. In fact, during World War I he filmed several cases of 'war neurology',

including muscular disturbances, war wounds and cases of mental disorders that we now would call “posttraumatic stress disorder”, probably the most impressive of the whole corpus.

Within the collection of the Museo Nazionale del Cinema also two films by Camillo’s son, Fedele Negro, have been preserved. These are two 16mm prints, probably shot in the early 1930s. The first is a compilation of shots without a definitive editing, and shows patients affected by malformations of the limbs. The second is definitely more structured and was intended to promote with Queen Elena (1873-1952) the effects of the so-called “Bulgarian cure”, a treatment of Parkinson syndrome patients, in order to obtain support and finance from the Italian Royal Family for the research led by Fedele Negro.

Conclusion

Camillo Negro was not the first neurologist to film neurological patients. We still have precious movies made by Georges Marinesco (1863-1938), who in Bucarest filmed patients with hemiplegia and ataxias in 1899 (Buda et al, 2009) and Arthur Van Gehuchten (1861-1914), who in 1907 filmed several patients at the Leuven University also using stills from his films as iconographic material for his scientific publications (Aubert, 2002). However, Negro was the first to organize the filmed cases in a documentary with a logical sequence and to use it in several public occasions. Moreover, differently from the other films of this period, *Neuropatologia* has a particular artistic value, for the quality of the images and the richness of details.

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Figure legends

Fig. 1: Facial palsy (Courtesy, Museo Nazionale del Cinema)

Fig. 2: Ocular movements (Courtesy, Museo Nazionale del Cinema)

Fig. 3: First case of hysteria (Courtesy of Museo Nazionale del Cinema)

Fig. 4: Second case of hysteria: the masked woman (Courtesy of Museo Nazionale del Cinema)

Fig. 5: Patients admitted to the Turin Military Hospital. (Courtesy of Museo Nazionale del Cinema)