

Silent Cinema as Ambiguous Heritage at the Giornate del Cinema Muto

by Sebastian Köthe

I.

Visiting the *Giornate del Cinema Muto* feels like waking up from a vaguely lucid dream. I remember meeting people, going places to have coffee, things one does when one is awake - but everything is flooded by a vibrant phantasmagorical rush of cinematic images. Images that are not contained in the prisons of their narratives, of their closed nature of single artworks or of cinema. Not only did the festival guests from all over the world mingle, so too did the films their images, tropes and characters mingle among them and in my perception.

Thus it seems that Kean (*Kean* [1924]) and Nana (*Nana* [1926]) would be visiting the same bars, dancing together and fighting the same social barriers; that the Russian villains of US films must be part of the same gigantic scheme (*The Woman Disputed* [1928], *Tempest* [1928], *The Cossack Whip* [1916], *The Mysterious Lady* [1928]); that the Polish marine of *Zew Morza* [1927] should protect himself from the dangerous German U-boats of *Behind the Door* [1919] and that the elephant with the inheritance hidden behind his big ear (*His Friend the Elephant* [1916]) must have escaped from *The White Desert* [1925].

This stream of images gets even more confusing as it is intimately connected with world history. But it's unclear in which way: As a trace of world history? Its mimetic image? A variation, parody, distortion or a grotesque double? It seems this cinematic twin of world history preserves it: silent cinema is the eternal repetition of the struggles at the American Frontier, Austrian pre-war chic, the atrocities of First World War ... World history and film history seem to merge, and even though we know how few some films of the past have to do with their corresponding past realities, they are here with us, and it is hard to withdraw from their mimetic evidence. They scream at us or whisper gently: *that's the way it all happened!*¹

It is due to this experience of wholeness and surprising cross-links that it is impossible for me to write about a single film, theme or actor of the *Giornate*. And while it is easier to approach a singled-out work empirically by (film-)historically contextualizing it, showing differences to its predecessors, analyzing the use of specific techniques, you cannot do this if your experience is that of the aforementioned stream of images. This is not to say that all those more careful, more case-based explorations are not useful - in contrast. But this essay is meant to react to the experience of the *Giornate* as a whole. Thus its premise is the experience of being beautifully and terribly overpowered by a storm of images, that has swept away three distances that enable empirically-critical writing: between an autonomous subject and an analyzable film-object, between separate films, and between history and film history.

The question of this essay must therefore be a general and more philosophical one: How do we ethically cope with the heritage of silent film as a whole, if that heritage is strikingly ambiguous: full of ignorance, hate, violence as well as being full of empathy, imagination and consciousness of the frailty of human life? In this essay I will point out three aspects that show the entanglement of silent cinema with violence, another three that point out its alliance with forces of social progress and beauty, and another three that hint at our possibilities to react to silent cinema as an ambiguous heritage.

¹ *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* [1927] is just an especially self-reflexive and sided case of cinema's tendency to duplicate and overwrite world history.

II.

Living in silent film for one week means to laugh to the point of tears, to instantly fall in love with beautiful actors and actresses and to be exposed to violence. Violence that is only partly fictional, because it is fully real at the same time.

The first instance of real violence is perceived through anthropocentric animal cruelty, represented onscreen when elephants are dragged around by the ears (*His Friend the Elephant* [1916]), or off-screen when animals are trained to behave as instructed on camera (*The Thief of Bagdad* [1924]).

Secondly there exists a violence defined by exoticism, when non-western human beings are defamed as oversexualized foreigners like Oriental dancers (*Algol* [1920]), as childlike and naive Hawaiian tribespeople (*A Hula Honeymoon* [1923]), or as blood- and rape-thirsty Native Americans (*The Lieutenant's Last Fight* [1912]).

There also exists the real violence of racism, when people of color are displaced by blackfaced actors (*The Extraordinary Waiter* [1902]) or Mexicans only appear as horse-thieves (*At the End of the Trail* [1912]). Besides these hateful misrepresentations, the days at the *Giornate* were filled with the presence of an absence: that of 'racial', ethnic and sexual minorities who have only become so-called minorities because they were discriminated against and omitted from our shared visual history.

Real violence is also portrayed through sexism, which may perhaps be the most ubiquitous example. Subtly, when Budapest's baths are promoted by men playing water sports in medium long shots while women's faces are splashed by water fountains in close-ups (*Budapest - the City of Spas and Cures* [1935]). Less subtly, when women are being degraded to sexual objects or even raped as a means to provide the male hero with additional 'motivation'. There is the example of Tania Fedorova constantly being pressed sexually by her general (*The Mysterious Lady* [1928]) or the almost-rape of Jola in her own house by a sailor that solely heightens the enmity between the male protagonist and the sailor (*Zew Morza* [1927]). What is so striking about these depictions is that they are not perceived as worthy enough to constitute the main plot of the films. They are used as atmospheric background, like the fog of London or the rocky deserts of the 'Wild West'. Especially obscene is the nationalistic and quantitative logic of *The Woman Disputed* [1928], whose titular protagonist is in a situation where she has to agree to being raped by a former (of course Russian) friend. As she disagrees to do it to save the lives of four strangers, the constructed plot ups the ante by introducing a spy who has important information on enemy lines. She submits to being raped and is finally paraded as a hero. The obscenity here comes from the lust to imagine at what point of gain a woman is ready to submit herself 'free willingly' to sexual violence.

To show that this violence is not merely 'fictional', it is useful to differentiate between three kinds of real violence in these examples.² The first kind of violence is immediate and goes from one body to the other. It occurs, for example, when animals are not treated species-appropriate, while being onscreen or trained for the camera. The second kind of violence links the representational omissions to social exclusions. As minoritized people such as women or Native Americans did usually not possess the means of production and distribution, they could not negotiate their images, roles, plots and wages at eye level. This means that the violence done to their images due to misrepresentation and omission mirrors as a social violence: that

² The notion of 'real' is meant as an opposite of something like 'mere fiction' which would be non-real in the sense of not having effects on the 'real' world, e.g. our daily lives, the structures of sociality, political choices etc.

of being underpaid and out of jobs. The third kind of violence is that which inscribes violent habits of perceptions and affections through images into our bodies. That would be for example the dominance of male gazes as described above, the imagination of foreign cultures as primitive (*A Hula Honeymoon* [1923]) or the normalization of heterosexual, monogamous relationships. This violence is real insofar as the images we perceive cohabit our own desiring bodies and our political imagination. Surely we can distance ourselves from certain images we disagree with, and yet do images significantly form not only the ways in which we can think about ourselves and others, but also the ways we affectively, that means pre-consciously, connect to them and us.

Again, I want to stress that this essay cannot be an in-depth discussion of the aforementioned films. You could find lots of arguments to not only show that these films are funny, thrilling, beautiful etc. but maybe also try to save them politically.³ Thus far my goal was to show that the collective silent film phantasmagoria at the *Giornate* is intrinsically entangled in racism, sexism, exoticism, heteronormativity and more. As my experience in Pordenone was that of being overwhelmed by the moving images as a whole, I feel it methodically wrong to try to dissolve that entanglement and to critically discern the good films from the bad, the subversive moments from the propagandistic.⁴ Additionally, that would not depict the situations of screenings at *Teatro Verdi* correctly: the audience has been laughing not only during R.W. Paul's beautiful and delicate films (like *Troubles of a Tired Traveler*⁵ [1901]), but also during *The Extraordinary Waiter* [1902], a shocking short in which a small, blackfaced waiter is hit and even trampled on by a discontented white colonialist. Even though the waiter's indestructibility, achieved through changing his body with that of a puppet via matchcuts, hints at a certain power of resisting colonialism, the goal of both films seems to be the enactment of brutality against a black body that is unwilling to submit to claims of white supremacy.

This entanglement does not mean that we should dismiss silent cinema, not least because we would consequently need to dismiss recent cinema with it. The same stream of moving images that renders invisible minorities, advocates heteronormativity and submits nature and animals alike under the reign of man gives us beautiful hints at possible better lives and real depictions of our lives as they are and were.

There are for example the impressive stagings of female agency in the heterogeneous sources of the Western that have been buried in the genre's classical phase. Most memorable and deserving of a burst of spontaneous applause by the audience was *Sallie's Sure Shot* [1903], in which the female protagonist shoots a burning dynamite cord from afar and thus saves the day. Even though different in temperament, she might be a distant relative of the women in Kelly Reichardt's recent deconstructivist approach to western *Meek's Cutoff* [2010]. That silent film heritage can endow such relationships between past and present struggles of empowerment is more than just film-historic kinship: to have roots in the past is an important factor in legitimizing one's political/aesthetical claims - not only in front of others, but more importantly in front of oneself. It means to never be alone with your claims, even if you should be in your de facto social situation. It is a source of confidence to know that 1913's Sallie with her shooting skills is on your side.

Another trait of utopian potentials in silent cinema is revealed in *Kean* [1924] where improper and

³ In that sense you could argue that e.g. *The Woman Disputed* [1928] is a take on genre-conventions, that consciously switches from film-noir to Lubitsch-like comedy to war-melodrama. The sacrifice of the heroine is thus not proposing that a woman's war-service is to get raped, but a smart and self-reflexive disclosure of genre rules.

⁴ This longing to discern and differentiate is also at the greek roots of the word 'critic', coming from krinein - separating out or krei- - to distinguish.

⁵ Which is, when read completely a-historic, a sharp metaphor of neoliberal work-addiction.

heterogeneous communities are celebrated. This already happens in the construction of the protagonist: Kean, the famous English actor, is played by the Russian actor Ivan Mosjoukine who speaks in French intertitles. The film folds these three nationalities into one fictional body, that of Mosjou-Kean. The film goes on to invent communities when Mosjou-Kean visits his favorite pub, and connects with the poor, immigrants and drunks until the scene ends in an ecstatic joint dance. The dance, a communication between and synchronization of heterogeneous bodies, is one of the main tropes of silent cinema and reveals itself here as a way to realize an improper and thus political community. Next to the sheer joy of seeing bodies seemingly free from gravitation, the inclusive gesture of the dance seems to be open for anybody. Everybody is meant to join this dance.

Silent cinema as experienced during the *Giornate* does not only give us roots to strengthen our fights for emancipation or to invent images of possible communities between diverse strangers, it can also reveal frailty as a fundamental trait of mankind. *Il Terremoto Di Messina* [1909] visits the region in long, panning shots after the earthquake of 1908. The bodies of the city's inhabitants still seem shaken. Once wholesome buildings are reduced to an amorphous mass of broken stones. We realize: when even architecture, built with the pretension of lasting forever, turns out to be as fragile as porcelain, how much more fragile is the human body, destroyed in endless numbers by the same earthquake. This double fragility, first of architecture, man's only protection from the wideness of cosmos, and second of human bodies, is encaptured in a third fragility: that of the 35 mm print, whose damages seem like wounds. Material that seems to be as perishable and in need of protection as we humans. And due its unavailability on DVD or other online resources, the print does not only remind of its destructibility, but also of its uniqueness and danger to be forgotten.

Thus, the film as presented at the *Giornate del Cinema Muto* enfolds a three-sided fragility, that of man within architecture within the film material into a double work of remembrance: to remember means to see the film, that is to take part in the collective memory of an earthquake that no living being has experienced anymore. And to remember means secondly to remember the seen film, that is to keep in our minds the images of a destroyed cityscape and the ethical insistence upon the ephemerality of human lives, even when the light has vanished from the screen in Pordenone.

III.

In this essay, I first tried to explain why it is methodically inevitable for me to discuss the festival's films as a whole corpus. This has led to what could be described as a non-critical approach in the sense that I did not try to filter good from bad films but to react to the exhibited films as a pars pro toto for the whole silent film heritage. Secondly, I tried to show two faces of silent cinema: its entanglement in racism, exoticism, sexism and anthropocentrism, as well as its coalition with emancipatory movements, its utopian depiction of communities, both heterogeneous *and* equal, and its insistence upon the frailty of not only human lives. The silent cinema we rightfully love is flawed, inevitably, due to its entrapment in a flawed history and society. When we call a single film flawed, due to its narration being bumpy, the images imprecise or racist, we often indicate that it does not need to be seen. But when we talk about film history as heritage that is inherently flawed, this cannot be the consequence. It is also impossible to just look at the good traits of silent film or to search for 'pure and innocent' films. But how do we reply to a cinema that is our ambiguous heritage and as violent as it is tender? In the last part of this essay, I will try to answer this question not in general, but in regard to the possibilities that became visible during the *Giornate*.

One very radical answer was given specifically by one of the festival's films: *Three Live Ghosts* [1922]. The lost British film only survived in a Soviet re-edit, but this term is too weak: it seems more like a hostile but vitalistic appropriation. The plot was completely changed, so that, for example, an amnesiac aristocrat named Earl of Mannering was turned into a delusional opera singer who has lost his voice and job after a nervous breakdown. In the original, Mannering returns home as he regains his memory and is forced to steal his own baby. In the appropriation, this tragic scene is turned into a beautiful display of dada, as his rich home is presented as the theatre, in which he once sung, and the baby he steals is not his, but just some baby whose screams are so beautiful to his ears, that they promise a great singer. This Soviet intervention is not concerned about heritage. It is brutal as it is a product of censorship that erased the original film from the Soviet Union and replaced it with this recreation. It is indeed an answer, albeit to a question which is lost to us. The appropriators saw the original film as flawed, thus they took it and re-constructed it in a way they deemed to be unflawed, or at least less flawed. This vitalistic process has an inciting character: you don't like the Soviet appropriation of *Three Live Ghosts* [1922]? Well, you know what to do ...

The digital upholds possibilities to intervene in films that have not been there before, also embraced by filmmakers such as Bruce McDonald who released the original material of his film *The Tracey Fragments* [2007] via torrent so that watchers could (re-)edit the film themselves. Another example that is usually used for pop cultural purposes, but that can take part in a critical epistemological re-arrangement, are supercuts. Supercuts collect cinematic tropes from different films or tv shows and align them, so that their impersonal, industrial or cliched character becomes visible.⁶

In appropriating original material, we have a chance to reply to the flaws of the past. This reply can be analogue or digital, aggressive or tender, radical or mimetic⁷. It is not about deleting the original material, or about making a 'better' film. It is about answering to a film in the same medium.

The second possibility to reply to the ambiguous character of silent film heritage lies in the performative quality of every film screening in cinema. Theorists like Jean Louis Baudry have described cinema as a numbing dispositif, with people being immobile and silent in a dark room, with an invisible projector screening wish-fulfilling film-dreams. If Baudry had visited Pordenone, he would have noticed his mistake immediately. People come late and leave early, chat, laugh, eat, snore and applaud. These performative acts render each screening unique. There is a political dimension to every kind of interaction in cinema in the sense that it transforms the space of attention given to the film.⁸ Laughter during *The Extraordinary Waiter* [1902] is one very obvious case, as is scene applause for Sallie's shooting skills.

A silent film festival is in this regard very interesting because different traditions of reception come together. We have internalized to see film as art in a bourgeois sense, e.g. to be quiet in cinema, to identify with the protagonists. But early silent cinema has notably known very different forms of reception: either because the films are aesthetically more concerned about visuals than narration, or because early cinema was a vivid and tumultuous place, which stands in stark contrast to the bourgeois theatre of the late 18th Century. Being noisy and being quiet, booing and applauding, reflecting and feeling, discussing and laughing are all

⁶ There are supercuts on seemingly nerdy topics like enhancing images to find previously invisible clues: https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=27&v=Vxq9yj2pVWk. But supercuts can also unmask a government's effort to close discussions, as here the case with German government and the affair about the secret service: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YQ1QC1lq63o>

⁷ As maybe Gus van Sants color-reproduction of Hitchcock's *Psycho* [1998].

⁸ In Weimar cinemas, left and right wing groups fought to enable or disable the audiences to see certain films. Later, it was a political and subversive act to be late to cinema, because you thus skipped the propagandistic *Wochenschau*.

potentially reasonable reactions to ambiguous cinema. It is important to keep in mind that they are not only private, but also public and thus political in the sense that they transform the conditions of perception for all attendants.

I want to add one last point to this unfinished list, even though I fear it might be trivial. When do films end? One's first impulse might be to say that films end when the exact word appears on the screen: *the end*. The question gets more complicated⁹ when we say that films continue as long as we feel, think or talk about them. When we discuss films, they change inside of us: firstly, because we have to transform our subjective and dark feelings into objective words and arguments that can be understood by our dialogue partners. And secondly, because our dialogue partners do the same: and their perception of the film has the power to transform ours. A possibly infinite game that re-creates the films. And paradoxically, without this re-creation there is no film, there would only be light trapped on a screen. A film is only one in our understanding and feeling. If we let our reflection and feeling enter the democratic process of discussion, we also inscribe this democracy into the films, as fiendish as they may be to it.

This means that one does not necessarily see more film when one sees more films. Films that have just been seen, and have not been communicatively re-created again and again, tend to be quiet short, no matter their length in meters. I did perceive films at *Teatro Verdi*, but also at *Il Posto*, *Twister*, *Pepperino*, *Barrique* and *Hotel Santin*. To re-create films in dialogue, and thus to create them in the first place *and* infinitize them at the same time, is to answer their ambiguous heritage.

IV.

Even before we had seen a single film at the *Giornate del Cinema Muto* this year, we had already answered to the ambiguous heritage of film history. We had answered by coming to Pordenone. By letting us be assembled by the past. This may be the most fundamental answer to a heritage: to let oneself be moved by it, without yet knowing what it is. And to seize the communicative chance that a completely heterogeneous, diversified group of people has heard the same call and also went. The heritage has created us as a group of cinephiles, friends, discussants, colleagues. Without it, we wouldn't be there and not together. And it is part of *our* gift that we came to the heritage without knowing it beforehand. Funny, that this is also a major trope of silent cinema: the executor of a testament slowly opening the envelope, the kinship assembled only through the power of the heritage of the deceased ...

In this essay, I tried to answer to the challenge of the films of the 2016's edition of the *Giornate del Cinema Muto* as a *pars pro toto* for the heritage of silent film. I tried to show that this heritage is ambiguous, as the films on the one side are entangled in racism, exoticism, sexism and anthropocentrism and on the other side give us emancipatory role models, show beautifully improper communities, and stress the porcelain-like fragility of not only human lives. I tried to show that it is necessary to react to this ambivalence of our heritage and tried to outline three possible ways of doing so that have been noticeable during this year's festival: by re-appropriating existing materials, by using the public sphere of cinema as a space of audience-performances, and by reminding us of our ability to not only continue but to (re)create the films in our discussions. The necessary condition of these answers to the ambiguous heritage paradoxically has to be fulfilled even before the heritage is perceived: that we heard its call and came to Pordenone.

⁹ Without needing to even consider aesthetic phenomena such as open endings, serial storytelling, sequel and reboot culture etc.