

“A discontinuity given an illusory wholeness by the blessings of light”: the luminous
formal quality of the silent cinema
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I

As we returned to the cinematic darkness as a spectator at *Le Giornate del Cinema Muto* during a short respite in the middle of the pandemic last October, I was predominantly affected by an overwhelming sense of fragility. The transience of the time in which we live, a time fragmented and characterised by discontinuities as I can no longer tell the days of the past two years apart, seemed to directly relate to and be reflected in the fragility of silent cinema. A cinema that is always visibly balancing on the feeble divide between existence and disappearance as it is decaying in front of our eyes (film will, after all, always remain a physical entity subjected to the toils of time). This year’s programme of the *Giornate* and the masterclasses of *Collegium* were a reflection of this formal fragility and an embrace of the uncertainty that comes with decay. The three films I will discuss in this text – it is not an academic essay, but rather a collection of thoughts – are all reflective of this fragility and are exquisite examples of the formal quality of early cinema in relation to its luminosity. They all shimmered and flickered in the cinematic darkness frame by frame, and reminded me strongly of the words of the American experimental film maker Jerome Hiler:

“I drew inspiration from the idea that my films were to be like stained glass glowing in a space of sacred darkness. I knew that both my film work and stained glass itself were based on a discontinuity given an illusory wholeness by the blessings of light.”¹

In his lecture *Cinema Before 1300* given at the Harvard Film Archive, Hiler proposed that over 800 years ago, the first mass media and the first version of the cinema was created in the form of stained glass, as he recognised a similarity between the medieval perception of light, the metaphorical meaning and accessibility of stained glass, and the cinema. Medieval scholars defined light - or in relation to stained glass *fulgor*² to be precise, as they had various definitions for different forms of

¹ Jerome Hiler, “Jerome Hiler’s Harvard Film Archive program notes for Cinema Before 1300 and an extensive interview for Lumière,” accessed 17 December, 2021, <https://nathanieldorsky.net/post/164458460288/jerome-hiler-interview-for-lumi%C3%A8re-and-harvard>.

² Wojciech Bałus, “A Matter of Matter: Transparent – Translucent – Diaphanum in the Medium of Stained Glass,” in *Investigations in Medieval Stained Glass: Material, Methods, Expressions*, eds. by Elizabeth Carson Pastan and Brigitte Kurmann-Schwarz (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2019), 109.

light - as the “ubiquitous origin of all motion”: light, in all its different properties, was the very principle on which beauty was founded.³ One of the most profound ways to be directly touched by the transcendental quality of light and its beauty was through the “carrier of images”⁴, stained glass. Giant windows filled with coloured glass that hovered far above the many spectators in the churches and cathedrals, who were often illiterate and had to depend on recounted stories and their realization in light. The inability of the average medieval individual to interpret written language (Latin being the official language of the church as well as of scholarship throughout the Middle Ages in Europe) defined the way in which they related to visual communication as a source of knowledge and as a way to make sense of the world.

When it comes to the creation of an image via light, Wojciech Bałus in his text on stained glass mentioned the concept of diaphanum (the transparent, the manifestation of light itself), that is crucial in the creation of stained glass as well as its meaning: “invisible and formless in itself, [diaphanum] gives the means for the visible to materialize.”⁵ In the case of the cinema, the camera similarly to diaphanum, invisible to the eye of the spectator in the creation of an image, materialises the image on film, which is revealed via the light of the projector. Besides this similarity in the basest way in which stained glass and the cinema both operate and come into being (light falls through glass to create an image), there is perhaps something much more profound to be found in its comparison, especially in relation to the silent cinema. The audience that witnessed the birth of the cinematic medium shared a similar sense of awe, and ultimately illiteracy, in the face of a new visual language as they had to learn to watch and interpret as they looked up to “a discontinuity given an illusory wholeness by the blessings of light.” I keep repeating these words over in my head as it seems to me that silent cinema’s splendour, its essence, while devoid of colour, might lie in its luminosity, that is emphasised by its flickering black and white imagery that seems to continuously be on the brink of dissolution. Simultaneously seemingly about to slip away, to disappear as soon as it appears on the screen due to its fragility, while also remaining as an accessible and continuous memory. Consisting out of hundreds of individual images, film became an illusory wholeness through light and the speed of the projector and introduced a new way of looking, of interpreting images created through light.

³ Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, trans. Hugh Bredin (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), 50.

⁴ Bałus, *idem*.

⁵ Bałus, 114.

II

Peering down over the balustrade on the third ring of the Teatro Verdi, elevated far above the screen, the orchestra sitting in front of it, and the rest of the audience, it feels like we are watching down on a spectacle taking place far below our feet. After months of fearing that yet another festival edition would have to take place online the opening film of the festival is about to begin while we are surrounded by each other in the dark. Ernst Lubitsch's 1925 adaptation of Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1893) proves to be the perfect start of a week of cinematic discoveries. Lubitsch's abilities to connect directly to our innermost emotions via cinema were, and still are today, paramount. The primary objective for this film seemed to be rooted in his wish to create a film that exemplified and simultaneously defied the contrary relation between Wilde's written language and the visual aesthetics of the cinema. In doing so, Lubitsch succeeded at translating language into images, close-ups, glances, and movement with only a few linguistic intertitles. Ultimately proving that the cinema could bring a literary text to life via nearly only imagery alone, as he refused to borrow lines directly from Wilde's text. Interestingly enough, the film's narrative seemed to be continuously driven by the misinterpretation of these images, the gestures of the characters, and of what we think we register with our own eyes, as well as the misinterpretation of language.

The film's plot is drenched in dramatic irony and centred around Lady Windermere (May McAvoy) who is edged on by Lord Darlington (Ronald Coleman), a friend of her husbands who seeks to seduce her, to check her husband's check-book. Lord D. namely saw a letter addressed to Lord Windermere (Bert Lytell) from a woman called Mrs. Erlynne (Irene Rich), to whom, as it turns out, he has been writing checks. Lady W. is unaware of the fact that this woman is in fact her long-lost mother, now a pariah in a society as she ruined her life by running off with another man. When Lady W. confronts her husband, he refuses to explain the situation, all under the guise of protection as he cannot possibly tell her that her mother is actually alive, but that she has been chastised by society. One key moment of crucial misinterpretation sets off the dramatic climax. Lady W., hurt because of her husband's supposed adultery when she discovers Mrs. E. kissing a man she wrongly assumes is her husband, leaves a letter on his desk explaining why she is leaving and angrily goes to find Lord D. at his house after he earlier professed his love for her. Only to have a change of heart as her mother chases after her, having found the letter on Lord W. desk and revealing who she really is, urging her daughter not to make the same decision that ruined her life. Accidentally, both women get trapped in the house as the men arrive and Mrs. E. sacrifices herself by creating a diversion to save her daughter,

getting caught and claiming Lady W.'s fan that she had forgotten in the living room. However, in the end both women triumph in characteristic Lubitsch's fashion.

Lubitsch's cinematic language is predominantly rooted in his mastery over the deployment of the glance as the epitome of cinematic expression. Within a glance, everything is possible. Its exchange can create a feeling of belonging, hope, courage or of love as easily as it can implicate fear, betrayal, blame, sorrow and delusion. It can be unexpected, sudden, intuitive or urgent. But above all, the glance is mute. And it is its muteness, in which a world of emotion is hidden, that draws the spectator in. Simultaneously untouchable, far away, yet always close when we directly meet the gaze of the actor on screen, who manages to express their entire being in a single moment. And in this moment, the silent cinema feels closer than at any other given time.

III

Gustav Machatý (1901 – 1963) was another director that was instantly fully aware of cinema's potential mass appeal as new artistic language based on imagery alone. The beforementioned notion of light as the origin of all motion seems to be directly exemplified and embodied by Machatý's *Erotikon* (1929, not to be confused with Mauritz Stiller's *Erotikon* (1920, a film about which Bill Wilder coincidentally said that "Lubitsch told me he learned everything from this picture"⁶).

The way in which Machatý manages to express desire and fragility, erotic ecstasy, is closely connected to his deployment of light, to the flickering quality of the image and to concepts of fascination, fright and muteness. My thoughts keep wandering to the flickering frames and the shimmering depiction of Ita Rina's Andrea, who as the daughter of an old railway guard falls prey to the advances of a persistent stranger (Olaf Fjord) arriving through the rain in the dark of night. In an exquisite display of formal invention, the opening sequence of *Erotikon* sets the atmospheric precedent for the rest of the film, depicting Andrea as a shimmering and flickering mirage as she experiences her first sexual encounter.

⁶ Jon Wengström, "Erotikon," in *Il Cinema Ritrovato*, <https://festival.ilcinemaritrovato.it/en/proiezione/sieurins-bilder-erotikon/>.



The sequence⁷ is powerful because the spectator is directly impacted by the luminosity of the light, which feels like a physical illumination that almost seems to penetrate the screen because of the flickering quality of the surviving reel. The display of desire pivots on this particular quality of the material of the film here. And despite the fact that Machatý still depicts Andrea as seen through the male gaze of her seducer – and ultimately as a male projection of what female (orgasmic) desire should look like, raising questions of how female sexual pleasure is constructed on the screen – I predominantly remember I was initially struck by her pleasure and how refreshing it felt to see it so explicitly on screen. It is a complex duality that certainly needs to be mentioned, especially when placed in the wider context of the rest of the film, but that I think should not detract from the mesmerizing quality of the film, as its aesthetic and formal invention is of a stunning beauty and quality. Similarly to Lubitsch, Machatý relied on the glance as the epitome of visual expression. But while in Lubitsch's films the glances between the characters are part of his many nuances (or what Herman G. Weinberg called the Lubitsch touch) that he incorporated throughout the film in such a refined manner, Machatý's use of the glance is in comparison much more simplistic and part of the formal fabric of the film. In *Erotikon* the glance is first and foremost a way to instantly direct the gaze

⁷ *Erotikon* (Gustav Machatý's, 1928).

of the spectator within the frame. It drives his narrative and guides the interpretation and our understanding of the actions of the characters.

IV

Trying to defy the dominant representation of women on screen at the beginning of the 20th century, is Ellen Richter's character in *Moral* (1928). Similarly to Machatý, the Austrian-Jewish actress and film producer Käthe Weiß (1891 – 1969), better known under her stage name Ellen Richter, was an outsider operating on the outer margins of society. The largest retrospective presented at the *Giornate* this year was dedicated to this massive star of Weimar cinema, who was wrongfully forgotten by history. Her exquisite abilities as an expressive and commanding actress were often captured by her husband and director Willi Wolff before the pair fled to America at the beginning of World War II. According to curators Oliver Hanley and Philipp Stiasny who gave a masterclass on their research, Richter's disappearance from our history books is predominantly due to the Nazi regime's efforts to erase the existence of Jewish artists and the fact that after her relocation to America, she disappeared from the film industry. It is a good example of how history can be so easily forgotten and rewritten and that the thin line between being and nothingness is easily blurred.

Moral seems to be a visual representation of the following statement that “our age is a moralistic one, nauseatingly so, which is a large part of the problem – for moralistic attitudes are intolerant, and intolerance is one of the worst discourtesies”⁸ and shows that there is effectively nothing new under the sun. Ellen Richter plays showgirl Ninon de Hauteville, who strikes down in Emilsburg (Germany) with her revue show. She is met with hostility and threats by the local so-called Morality Society (subtly not being their strong suit) who stage a protest during the show, and that consists of a group of old, white men angrily shaking their fists at anything that deviates from their own moral and rigid beliefs based on the patriarchal and social conventions at the time.

Richter teaches her own lesson in this film by repeatedly turning the camera on her moral persecutors and by reversing their roles. The protest that the Morality Society stages during her performance to disturb the revue show by turning into a group of seemingly utterly deranged men calling out and making noise, reminded me of the real-life protests seen at Dada performances in the late 1910s and

⁸ A.C. Grayling, *The Meaning of Things: Applying Philosophy to Life* (Phoenix, 2001), 12 and 13.

early 1920s (the latter were held in The Netherlands). Here the audience, in complete shock and uproar, lost all inhibitions and joined in the animal noises and screams of the performers themselves – thus becoming a part of the very thing they tried to ridicule. The film also includes a fantastic sequence in which Richter – who never seems to stop smiling in defiance – again reverses the traditional power relations by literally turning the camera on the men who tried to shame her into leaving. She does this by hiding a camera in the wall and secretly filming all the individual members of the society that crawl to her for piano lessons once she stops performing, regaining control of her image. The film also becomes incredibly interesting when placed in a historical context, as the narrative directly relates to, and references, the moral discourse and the scrutiny early cinema was under at the time. Especially after 1905, the cinema started to pose a threat to the guardians of dominant moral discourse, who wanted to impose control and regulations on cinema and its possibilities.

V

The reason I began this text with the musings on the similarity between stained glass and the cinema was not because I was trying to establish a link between the silent cinema and any religious qualities, but rather because I recognised in Hiler’s words an idea that touched upon a fundamental formal aspect of the silent cinema and that, in a way, revealed part of its formal essence: its ability to connect to the spectator via pre-linguistic imagery created through the light cuts across the division between image and spectator. While stained glass and silent cinema oppose each other in one crucial differentiation, as stained glass’ essence lies in its coloured reflection and silent cinema is a realm that in its bare minimal essence is devoid of sound and colour, both are reflections of moments when everything seems to be heightened and on the very breaking edge between dissolution and the eternal.

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