

The explanation of a metamorphosis: a reflection on two films that changed me during Le Giornate del Cinema Muto.

Metamorphosis, with its etymological beginning in ancient Greek, literally means change of form. In its purely encyclopedic sense, metamorphosis denotes a remarkable change in character, appearance, function, or condition. Whereas its biological application expresses a change of habit in an animal or a change of tissue, its organic anatomical transformation. Since change of state or form is part of the nature of the elements of the world in which we live, metamorphosis is an essentially animal, human concept. Thus, in the field of art, and especially in literature, the idea of metamorphosis is a *topos* that has managed to establish itself as a central figure in some of the most relevant works in the history of this discipline and other arts such as cinema. The transformation of the human form into something else, into other beings, or the change of state into a parallel reality has been a resource or a poetic tool that has historically allowed us to think about ourselves, to think about the human experience, from an ontological point of view.

Regarding cinema, most audiences would agree with the idea that not only one transformation happens when watching a movie. So, which are the possible transformations experienced? First, we can focus on the exposure to the images that appear on the screen, and those images meeting the spectator/cinephile's background. Then, the space outside the theater, which implies an exchange between those spectators and, last but not least, is the transformation experienced with cinema as a social practice.

This text intends to reflect on the series of transformations that take place when watching a film at Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, on the basis of two films that were central to my experience. It is not an unambiguous reading, but the result of many ideas thought and rethought together, alone, in the dark and under the lights of the bar facing the Teatro Verdi.

In my experience, the Collegium functions as a space for reflection, debate and exchange between generations of cinephiles and people who dedicate their lives to ensuring that the light falls on the screen for as long as possible, that there are always people in the seats, and that we never forget what and who came before us. I personally believe it is important to emphasize what I saw in the audience of the festival: for cinephilia, it is a dream come true, and I must have been among one of the most knowledgeable audiences I have ever seen. This is not a common audience, so this analysis could not be transferred to a general one, and I think there is a very interesting seed planted here to talk about the films of the festival and the silent film experience in general.

At the beginning of the Collegium days, I was given the suggestion to question every image that passes in front of me. From my point of view, and despite the cultural distances I could find with the films, this has a great value: in order to understand our present, it is necessary, even obligatory, to reflect on our past. As a starting point, it was an invaluable help for thinking critically about the films. This made possible (and at moments challenging) to confront the ghosts of a past that was deeply repressive and cruel to the place where I come from, as well as to the women who came before me, told from the point of view of those holding the power, and this is something I saw repeatedly in most of the films. This attitude of sharp criticism really enriched my experience, first of all, because I found my place in the audience and my presence at the festival became more meaningful in terms of representativeness. In this way, the ideas that the screen gave us were transformed into an analysis of the present in an individual way, which in turn was transformed into words and debates between me and my colleagues from the Collegium. Here lies as well the importance of understanding cinema as a

necessary collective and social practice, since these ideas themselves could never develop in an individual and inner analysis.

From the stories, the formal intention of the films, their political positioning before the world, the gags, the links between characters, each and every one of the elements that make up the films trigger connections with today's world and our way of living it. In this context, cinephilia has a key role in the understanding and reading of films as part of a whole, as part of history with its contradictions, the blind spots and interests of the enunciators of that history. In her text "Some Reflections on the Cinephilia Question", Laura Mulvey says "If cinephilia now has an immediate and useful purpose, it might well be to turn to the cinema as a "lesson" in time, its visualization and its passing that, on the one hand, leads to history and cinema's referentiality and, on the other, leads to the marvelous and the ineffable in the cinema's temporality"¹ and reflects on the place of the cinephile as the one who faces that naturally impossible task that cinema achieves: to make something inanimate like images an entity with movement. That purely mechanical movement can be reinterpreted both as a conversation with that historical moment in which the film was produced and with this present reality of the audience. Thus, the hard and passionate cinephilia of this audience makes it very evident and, at a certain point, opens very easily the doors to reflection around time, where do ideas come from and the transformations of these in the cinematographic device.

On *Hell's Heroes* (1929) as the hinge of metamorphosis.

Hell's Heroes, an obscure and rare Western within the genre, is a film that stands out tremendously in the program in which it was inscribed (*The Canon Revisited*). At first glance, it presents itself as a formal and narrative hinge point in the history of cinema, and this is what makes it stand out from the other films in the festival. Without much context, I watched the movie and found a surprise and an experience I may never forget. After a little research, just after leaving the theater, I learned that the film has two versions: it was shot as a silent and a talkie, and I understood that this was the explanation for its wonderful naturalism, because it is a film that is at the center of a process of historical importance, the transition to the sound in cinema. With this in mind, there was an illuminating experience at the end of the movie that I would like to mention, in which surprise choir singers in the theater stood up and sang to accompany the final walk to the church in the movie. This performance stood out and planted also the question of film experience restoration in my mind.

But first, I will like to focus on the factor that made this film so important among other films in the program. At the beginning, the character played by Charles Brickford is presented as a crook who is holed up (not innocently) in a western town called New Jerusalem in the United States and, after getting two women to fight over him in a bar, proceeds to rob a bank with three other companions and begins what might be classified as an odyssey in the desert as a way of escaping. Here, a great significance lies in the fact that he is presented at the same level of a classical hero, just like Oddyseus, who by trying to save his sailors and himself attacks Polifemo, son of Poseidon, who then turns his wrath against him. In the film the main character also suffers this type of evolution or change of state, since he suffers from the punishment resulting from poetic justice, and later is also going to save someone else's life and going back to the place where he came from in an act of redemption. However, the metamorphosis in the reader/viewer's eye is what lays the foundation of the difference

¹ Framework 50, Nos. 1&2, 2009, pp. 190-93. Wayne State University Press.

between these two heroes. One, the classical Odysseus, has the reader's support and sympathy through the story. Moreover, he can be classified as the victim of the Gods' wrath. Whereas, the hero in *Hell's Heroes*, is first a criminal whose hands take an innocent life and later becomes into the saint prepared to die to save the purest form of life represented by the baby. At one point in this great pilgrimage, which ultimately leads to a path of salvation for the protagonist that first began with sin and violence, they find a woman in childbirth alone in a wagon on the verge of death. This point, I think, was one of the most revealing moments in the whole festival. At first, the plot follows its natural inertia, as Charles Brickford's character in his intent of raping this woman repeats "I saw her first" to his partners in crime in a gesture of appropriation, ready to take over on this woman's will. Right after, the epiphany moment begins.

This mother was cast adrift in that hostile and arid sea of desertic soil, so the three delinquents, by force and as a request from the mother, become the godparents of the newborn. This key moment is revealing from a cinematographic point of view: at the moment of understanding their duty, the film pays particular attention to their facial expressions, which had a great impact in the theater. Each of them has their own close-up, in which we pause, in an almost frozen time. Those frozen moments of contemplation function also as mirrors for the spectator to look at ourselves in the image of those men witnessing, simultaneously, the birth of the child and of their new selves. The three criminals look through the frame of the wagon at the scene of the woman giving birth, creating something entirely new for them to take over, and the understanding of this idea resides in their faces in an incredible proficiency by Wyler. Once the image is revealed before them (and before us), the characters change, think, reflect, - and so do we - and converge in what they were and what they want to be in the future, which becomes the next challenge of the narrative. This double challenge consists, first, in taking on the responsibility of taking care of that creature, especially, considering they have killed the baby's father and the promise they have to honor. Secondly, they feel compelled to assume the moral obligation to transform themselves into that which, at the beginning, is presented in the role of the women representing the weak, the disposable. It is surprising, given the short length of the movie, how much attention Wyler gives to this moment. I don't think it's just coincidence, nor innocence, since I understand Wyler tried -and achieved- to profoundly mark the turning point of the film's narrative without the need of more explanation than just three close ups. A powerful and hard to forget image.

This process of change, so radically and clearly concentrated in the encounter with the woman in the wagon, is absolutely illuminating when thinking about the cinematic experience and the context in which the movie was shown. The images that are revealed to us make us responsible for what we do with them. Here I see an absolute mirror between us as viewers and these three outlaws: we are confronted with an image that forces us to change, to think, to act.

Focusing on the role of Charles Brickford's character, I see the ideal counterpoint to talk about the other film that was key to thinking about the transformations of images and ideas as protagonists of the festival.

Oh! What a Nurse! (1926), the revelation of the festival.

It is impossible to talk about this movie without mentioning the great programming work around it. The film, in which Syd Chaplin plays an extraordinary role (the first time I've seen him in a movie), was preceded by two short films which, in my opinion, provided a very valuable and rich context for the screening. The first was *Rudi Na Záletech* (1911), a short movie but very effective in its theme: a

man disguises himself as a woman in order to take advantage of another woman. People laugh (the same audience that is critical of the most violent, colonizing and animalizing images of the Amazonian population in the documentary *Amazonas, maior rio do Mondo* (1918), which I find curious), people laugh because the gag is effective, the film is short, the joke has a concise narrative curve, and therein lies the sympathy. Then, we saw *La Signorina Robinet* (1913), a movie of exactly the same caliber of comedy: a simple, short gag consisting of a man disguising himself as a woman, but in this case, it works as a hinge to the film that will come later. Here, the male distraction as a factor of laughter is introduced. Up to this point, the system is almost always the same, because there is a clear, stigmatizing and stereotypical definition of what it means to be a woman. A woman wears a dress, has long hair and curves, three necessary and sufficient factors to create the disguise so that no one notices the transformation. The gag in this case lies in the fact that the male characters are not capable of recognizing the man behind the female disguise, apart from the simple fact of his dragging. The audience laughs again.

Next, *Oh! What a Nurse!* (1926) changes the rules of the game in a big way. Here, in the form of an endearing screwball comedy, the process of metamorphosis is inscribed in a much more complex form. In this movie, a man disguises himself as a woman in order to use the personality of one to liberate the other, thereby exposing male unintelligence. It is interesting how the figure of the transvestite, which we saw in the two previous films, has a much more complex political discourse in this case. The woman that Syd Chaplin becomes is fast, intelligent, insightful, and therein lies the gag: the laughter factor is no longer deposited in the standardized figure of the woman, but in lack of male perspicacity.

Thus, this succession of films generates an arc of ideas that allows us to think politically about the representation of silent cinema comedy, particularly about what a woman is and how a woman is made. This is why the programming decision is so interesting to me, and the reason why I emphasize it so much: is a woman easily constructed by a dress, curves and long hair? Of course not. The representation of women in the arts of the modern era separates itself from men and creates its own identity, and in this sense cinema naturally takes that characteristic from other arts such as theater. A woman is not made only by her physical qualities, by her form. So, for these films, how is a woman configured? What does the woman's place in silent cinema comedy imply? If a man and a woman have such dissimilar roles in classic cinema, how then is the figure of the transvestite man configured? This conceptual arc that begins with *Rudi Na Záletech* and ends with the brilliant *Oh! What a Nurse!* allows us to understand in a linear (and basic or generalizing) way the evolution of female representation in the period from 1911 to 1926, where there seems to be a very clear progression, and stereotypes become more complex with time and cinema's technical and narrative development. In the Austro-Hungarian film, this representation can feel basic, gimmicky if we think about it in perspective as we finish watching the end titles of *Oh! What a Nurse!*. Here, in the time between the beginning of the first film and the end of the last is where the turning point in the viewers' ideas, in our ideas, can be found. Throughout this program we star in this metamorphosis alongside the male actors wearing dresses, we complexify the understanding of what it is to represent a woman, what it means to be one. The configuration of such diverse forms of representation of the female figure as a basis for comedy allows us, unconsciously, to transform and make those ideas we receive from the screen more complex. This is something as unconscious as the metamorphosis that the protagonists of *Hell's Heroes* undergo. Before the images we are forced to respond, and with a counterpoint as clear as this slapstick program the effect is immediate.

Another important aspect of watching this movie, related to what was mentioned before is: what does a modern audience receive from this movie after a restoration process? At the Collegium session on restoration, I asked the experts on the panel if they thought the audience was a factor to consider in restoration. This is obviously a key issue when it comes to making restoration decisions; and fortunately a discussion was sparked around this sensitive topic. This was ideal for me, as I think it is a very important aspect, and my question referred to a particular lack of fragments at the beginning of *Oh! What a Nurse!* (which I think does not affect the viewing experience of the film at all, and even if there is only one existing material, it can be presented that way), and the answer was that the audience is, in fact, a key factor in the restoration of the film. In my role as an archivist and also as a restorer, I think it is really important to bear in mind about what are the challenges we face as restorers of a film, restorers of an experience, and what choices we make for the experience that the audience will have in the theater. Consequently, this discussion is central. According to the restorer of *Oh! What a Nurse!*, part of the restoration process takes place during the screening: the audience's reception is very important. So I wonder, what happens when there are gaps in a print? Does the audience automatically transform the film into a historical document and deposit its value there? Or does the laughter factor and the enjoyment of the cinematic experience lie elsewhere? Is it possible to enjoy a movie that is missing important parts of its plot? Is it worth rescuing something that may have gaps and unconnected fragments? What struck me as remarkable was that, despite the gaps in *Oh! What a Nurse!*, the movie caused an incredible response in the audience. If I remember correctly, it was the movie that caused the most laughter at the Teatro Verdi, and this is where I find the turning point: the audience transforms what is seeing projected, and in the space between the image and we as a spectators lies the metamorphosis of the ideas that we receive from the screen. There, in that space, everything is re-signified, and a movie with missing or unconnected fragments can still shine splendidly, leaving its incompleteness on a secondary level.

Thus, I believe that all these ideas and reflections are found in a neuralgic point, which is that space between the screen and us as audience that I mentioned before. It is in that space where ideas and images have the possibility to transform themselves as the light coming from the screen enlightens us so we can see the world and who we are in a different and clearer light. These films I talked about were key in my experience precisely because of that, they somehow enlightened me and allowed me to enrich the exchange with others, a substantial factor in the cinematic experience. Both feature films make evident and tangible the existence of this space of transformation of ideas, a space that through emotion and empathy transforms meanings, minimizing the temporal distance between us and the images, and between us and other people. After all, cinema is one of the many social practices we, humans, have created and still need. That is the reason why I do hope the screen of the Teatro Verdi is forever illuminated, enlightening and transforming the lives of various audiences.

Lucía Ciruelos Rodríguez,

February 2024

luciaciruelos@gmail.com