

haunting presences and Image restitution

spiral-shaped reflections over gaps and fractures

Afinal, o que fica das pegadas no chão da memória? Fica o que significa, pode-se pensar. Ou talvez o contrário: o que significa passa a ficar.¹

Attending the 44th Giornate in 2025 was the experience of a lifetime. Physically intense, sensorially dazzling, emotionally overwhelming. These reflections, therefore, could be nothing less than visceral and honest. During one of the silent film accompaniment masterclasses, one of the professors spoke about the idea of being open to chance and uncertainty during improvisation, but even when guessing, to make it an “educated guess”. In a similar way, this text is linked both by a memory of enchantment as well as research that branches out, never a cerebral attempt to construct a thesis – merely an educated guess.

In my discussions with colleagues between sessions, we went back and forth many times on the notion of *how* to watch the films. While I felt it was extremely important to be attentive and critical, I reflected that a certain distance, a certain agreement of trust, was equally needed. To be attentive, yes, and at the same time, open. The film guides until a certain point, the soundtrack stretches us a bit further, but what we see is inadvertently the sum of a proposition on the screen and the personal interpellation of everything one has lived. By this, I do not mean to claim the screen as a narcissistic mirror from which I remove what displeases me and cling voraciously to what is familiar and desired. In fact, it’s the complete opposite. From those days and the many films screened, I emerged with an urge to, as spectator and researcher, seek balance while remaining open to chaos.

The thoughts of a Brazilian essayist helped me organize the impressions I intend to share. Leda Maria Martins proposes, regarding the construction of collective memory in African diaspora communities in Brazil, the idea that memory would not be factual and tied to an immutable material object, but remade and sewn together on each new encounter with the present time (the contemporary moment), with all interpretations being equally true and cumulative, in a perception that, as the future imposes itself on every instant, infinite elaborations of meaning are made. Then, an isolated object couldn’t possibly contain in itself an enclosed significance, but is, at most, a device that triggers ongoing relationships of meaning. To explain this parallel better, the images on the screen necessarily exist in relation to something; they respond to demands and contexts of production just as they dialogue with each projection and each spectator. I emphasize the multiple possible interpretations of an image produced in a context but which, upon review, indicates clues for a counter-meaning: excerpts, gestures, details, presences, and absences that propose parallel or eventually openly opposite meanings against an alleged original intention of the film.

¹ Literal translation by the author: “After all, what remains of the footprints on the floor of memory? What remains is what signifies, one might think. Or perhaps the opposite: what signifies starts to remain.” Lúcia Castello Branco, 1994, p. 11, quoted in Leda Maria Martins, *Afrografias da Memória: O Reinado do Rosário no Jatobá*. São Paulo, Perspectiva, 1997, p. 22.

Thus, I reflect on possible movements for reading these images, guided by rupture and reparation. First, something we discussed extensively during the Giornate: that content considered notoriously offensive to a community or representational minority must be seen, as its review promotes discussions and the construction of knowledge that is necessarily in constant mutation. The reviewing demands contextualization. When and how this contextualization occurs is something that seems to me to be always falling behind and for which there is not yet a definitive answer. The current absence of this answer does not invalidate the coherence of the question. And may the question always be present. Perhaps the most important thing, for now, is to ensure in some way that the discomfort of the offenses reproduced on the screen is always *noticed*.

The second reading movement is of a different nature. It involves the perception, essential to me, that films need to be seen by multiple audiences, and an effort in this direction might be one of the most effective tasks in the re-elaboration of meaning for works that contain within them potential negative representations of a certain group or minority. In this sense, “The Canon Revisited” section of the festival, as described in its catalogue introduction “...which reminds us that just because certain films are better known doesn’t mean they’re often seen” – and in addition, seen by new and diverse audiences – points toward a path of eternal revision and re-articulation of interpretations. Despite the enormous temporal leap between the films of the Giornate and the film to which the following quote refers to, I think of director Denzel Washington’s elaboration on the importance of multiple authorship in cinema. When asked whether a white director could not have directed the film *Fences* (2016), he responds:

“It’s not color, it’s culture. Steven Spielberg did *Schindler’s List*. Martin Scorsese did *Goodfellas*, right? Steven Spielberg could direct *Goodfellas*. Martin Scorsese probably could have done a good job with *Schindler’s List*. But there are cultural differences. [...] I know what it smells like when a hot comb hits your head on a Sunday morning... That’s a cultural difference, not just a color difference.”²

Bringing this to our context, the burdens and responsibilities of those who watch the films, this idea holds equally true. The spectator watches with all their past, their culture, and their background. Even if this might eventually sound like an intellectual and abstract concept, I genuinely believe that, on the contrary, the responses are immediate, notable, and tangible.

Following this line of thought, I’d like to draw attention to a woman’s head and gestures that linger despite the context of the narrative in which they are shown. From early on in my years as a cinema student, I was told that hair, specifically hair that belonged to a female figure, functioned – apart from the most obvious uses as indication of social aspects – to convey in an easy and effective way subjective

² Broadcast interview during promotion of the film *Fences* on SiriusXM Town Hall, on the SiriusXM Urban View channel, December 19, 2016.

nuances of a character. That being said, still, I could only grasp the complexity of this resource by seeing several different uses during this year's films screened and the enlightening "Dressed for Chaos: Costumes, Nasty Women, and Social Change" lecture.³

One film in particular eclipses quite well this search of mine for out-of-place gestures, even if small ones. The very ending of *Le Cœur et l'Argent* (1912), where the protagonist, played by Suzanne Grandais, after giving up a life of material benefit and still being refused by the man she loves, decides to take her own life by drowning in a river. This story structure is certainly not unique; the woman who suffers and ends up either committing suicide or living in disgrace is a plot seen again and again in many films produced in the same period. Though the film seems to reinforce the idea that her suicide is closely tied to guilt and unrequited love (her last blown kiss into the air before she enters the river), one discreet gesture stood out from the rest. After being refused and strongly pushed away by her former lover, she stands on the small boat and suddenly, vigorously, tilts her head up and gazes in the distance. Her head, turned to the sky and away from the man, who remains small and hunched in the very corner of the frame, feels incredibly meaningful: outrage, defiance, skepticism, as if only then something dawned on her and her naivety is torn away, something irreparable shifting inside. In the next scene, though the audience never sees the undoing of the bun, her hair is loose, long, and floating around as she stumbles disoriented through the bushes. The hair quite clearly was meant to convey her disarray, being specifically loosened from one shot to another. But it's also the first and only time in the whole movie that we see her hair down. That, combined with the boat scene just a moment before, points not to someone lost, but instead alludes to a woman reborn in metamorphosis, made new before our eyes. Even if the film insists on showing her lifeless body compared to a broken flower, I refuse to disregard the strength of her presence in the scenes prior. Here, there's a possibility of seeing her gestures as opposing actions to the film's path; a second of her head moving and the loose hair locks have completely hijacked the original narrative's intention.

I also highlight a small film that seemed shocking and clarifying to me the moment I watched it. In *Concealing a Burglar* (1908), by D. W. Griffith, what at first seems like a usual suspense story eventually becomes blackmail against Florence Lawrence's character. Having discovered a thief in her room, the criminal forces her to help him hide under the threat that, if she does not cooperate, she will be presented as his lover to her husband, who will arrive at any moment. The character of Harry Solter, the thief, points out with absolute transparency the fragility of a woman's social place in the early 20th century, subject, on one side and the other, to the desire and opportunism of men. The shocking part is not the social vulnerability of women at the time, but the transparent representation, in a film of the period, of how men did, indeed, have a perfect understanding of this social and political advantage, and a clear notion that maintaining this condition could only favor them.

³ "Dressed for Chaos: Costumes, Nasty Women, and Social Change" lecture presented by historians Maggie Hennefeld, Laura Horak, and Elif Rongen-Kaynakçi, at the 44th edition of Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, 2025, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8IEG2QroxJ0>

As a more explicit example of the significance of defying gestures, there's *Something Good: Negro Kiss* (1898), screened at the Giornate in 2018. The version discovered by the University of South Carolina in 2017, and its complement found in Norway in 2021, feature a black man and woman who treat each other in an affectionate and comfortable manner amidst a series of kisses and laughter in front of the camera. Researcher Allyson Nadia Field, involved in the rediscovery, identified in the documentation related to the film that it had been distributed primarily as a comic work, aimed at white audiences. Field emphasized:

"I want to be careful and not say that this was a film that was made as an assertion of Black humanity. That is very much happening despite its framing, [...] I think what's interesting is the way the performance really refutes that framing, regardless of the way it was marketed."⁴

Here, it is not just a detail but the work as a whole that, rediscovered and revisited, finally allows for the rescue of its image and meaning.

Considering the broad idea of hijacking a narrative, I delve deeply into *Lonesome Luke on Tin Can Alley* (1917). This film came right after a long and intense session of the beautiful *Love and Duty* (1931), and I felt equally euphoric and heartbroken after the end of two and a half hours completely engulfed by the narrative before me. I tell you this because *Lonesome Luke* started abruptly without me noticing which film would be screened, and its chaotic narrative of a still intensely physical and caricatured Harold Lloyd did little to engage me. But at a certain moment, I see her, a woman dancing in the background of one of the scenes. And the film gains my full attention, even if in vain, since shortly after appearing on the screen, she is gone, never to return. The actress is paired up with a man, both are Black and seem focused on their discreet dance. Something happens, perhaps a signal off-camera, then they stop dancing and break away. She separates from her companion and walks to the left of the frame, as if oblivious to the scene, oblivious to the chaos, oblivious to the cinema apparatus that was placed in front of her. To this day, I still don't know how to describe with absolute certainty what was so magnetic about her presence. Perhaps a measured indifference that contains no disdain. Perhaps it is the fact that her slow form of moving is diametrically opposed to the rhythm of the film and the rest of the characters. Or her gaze, which is not attracted by the central action and sees something the spectator can only imagine. I try to understand her presence by also looking at the musicians in the background, who are seen in the previous shots waiting attentively, observing the action unfold until the moment Luke actually bumps into them. Among the musicians, there's Paul Leroy "Ox Blood" Howard⁵, a young Black man who would become a well-known jazz saxophonist in the following years. Paul was credited in at least two more films during

4 Friedman, B. (2019, January 9). *1898 silent film represents earliest depiction of on-screen Black love*. WTTW News. <https://news.wttw.com/2019/01/09/1898-silent-film-represents-earliest-depiction-screen-black-love>

5 D'Agostino, A. M. *The Harold Lloyd Encyclopedia*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004.

the 1920s, but possibly participated in many more. Even so, the group's presence is still quite discreet and generally disconnected from any main action in the narrative.

When I mentioned these reflections to a fellow Collegian from an earlier edition of the *Giornate*, he immediately remembered *A Day's Pleasure* (1919), starring and directed by Charlie Chaplin. This film, made during a troubled personal time and today considered unremarkable in his filmography, was a huge surprise. The narrative takes place largely on an excursion ferry, where a band plays to entertain the passengers. This band is composed of four Black men. However, unlike the previous film, the band does not serve merely as atmosphere but participates actively in some of the gags, even featuring in one of the promotional posters. Of course, these gags are all based on offensive humor with racist connotations, and in this light, *A Day's Pleasure* does not diverge from many other early silent films. What is interesting though, is the considerable amount of attention the camera devotes to the band: three of the members get close-ups of their faces while they play, highlighting their expressions and gestures. In the longest gag with the musicians, Chaplin interacts directly with the trombone player, who appears in makeup drawing on racist caricature, with his face heavily whitened to suggest seasickness – in the Chaplin archives, there is a photo showing Charlie himself applying makeup to the actor, as well as other images where he directs the band on set. The close-ups, alongside the directorial interaction with the musicians, are significant as a Chaplin film certainly embodied the definition of mainstream and modern cinema in Hollywood at the time.

In *Lonesome Luke on Tin Can Alley*, the presence of black musicians and the couple I mentioned earlier does not exist to make a statement about racial inclusion. The generic term “tin can alley” points to a much more reasonable explanation for their presence. In the context of the work, it can refer to an impoverished and likely multiracial neighborhood, corroborated by the main setting being Chanahan's Cafe, a name that possibly refers to an Irish origin.⁶ Thus, the presence of these people there would function more as an attempt to set the scene than anything else on the part of the production. However, whatever the original intention, I argue that our enchanting woman breaks away from it. My humble attempts to identify her proved fruitless. Paul is mentioned in the casting list (as P.L. Howard) in period documents, but this makes sense as a musician. She, an extra who appears for a few seconds, would not be named. In any case, for now, what I want to reinforce in this encounter – hers with us, in 2025, almost by chance, in a film considered minor even in Harold Lloyd's filmography – are the spiraled waves created by revisiting her image, which necessarily occurred through the collision of my entire life with her immense, infinite, few seconds on the screen.

6 Seemingly a variation of Shanahan or O'Shanahan, anglicised from Gaelic Ó Seanacháin. See Patrick Hanks, ed., *Dictionary of American Family Names* (Oxford University Press, 2003; online ed., 2006) and MacLysaght, Edward. *The Surnames of Ireland* (Irish Academic Press, 1980) p. 268.

Shifting the focus, but still on reparations and revisions in the context of Cinema, I turn the attention to the restitution of cultural works, carried out recurrently for decades. If the continuous dialogue between film archives is an established and fortuitous practice in tracking works and returning them to their original production locations, as we were able to witness in this year's edition of the Giornate, the logical question that occurs to me reflects on the specific nature of films made in the first years of silent cinema. The high popularity of expeditionary films and travelogues also meant productions that made use of images shot in a variety of places, displaying people often considered exotic by European and North American audiences. Many of these images were acquired in contexts either openly violent or the result of politically and economically asymmetric relationships rooted in colonial heritage. What remains, beyond the question of image rights, is the role these representations would have in shaping, over decades of history, a biased and inadequate imaginary of those portrayed in it. This construction, sedimented in a unilateral discourse that proposes single and often reductive visions, occurs not only through the way images were filmed but also through their exhibition context and the dialogues established with spectators. Those who film and those who watch, not just one and not just the other.

In our discussions during the festival, reflections emerged on the perception of these films in at least two senses: the photographic image actually filmed and printed, and the conceptual image, constructed, reinforced, and disseminated through cinema. Furthermore, to whom do images obtained in such circumstances belong, and what may be the possible reparations for the people and communities exposed and exploited. That is, returning a lost work to its place of origin in itself raises several questions, but thinking about how to return and repair the harm caused by an image captured in an improper context sparks far more complex dilemmas.

In this year's catalog introductory text for the travelogue *Villégiatures – Palestine – Bethléem* (1928), director Lina Soualem points out that even though the images were originally captured by foreigners, they figure among the few filmic traces of Palestinian presence at the beginning of the century. So, they are important and relevant to the people represented in it, despite their original context of creation. Another significant remark Soualem makes is that, inheriting the colonial context of filming, these films are usually preserved and stored away from the places in which they were shot, forcing a continuous and unbalanced power play for image access. These ideas have a direct rapport with the cine concert *Palestine – A Revised Narrative* (2024). Cynthia Zaven edited several British newsreels from the Great War into a concise journey composed of archival images, recorded sound design by Rana Eid, and complementary live sound by Cynthia playing her altered, dismembered, pianoforte. Between the cracks of an ancient colonial gaze, the film manages to build a different landscape of history, the sound creating and breaking tension against what is shown. When I asked if Cynthia thought of her gestures on the piano as a performance, she responded that every musician plays with their whole body, not just the hands. I couldn't refrain from thinking that it was, in some ways, the same for living the film, only possible by a whole attentive presence. Watching or seeing feel like pale and fragile words to describe what it meant feeling those images regaining life on the screen, so distanced from their original purpose. The notion of

war is still there, but inverted; now it's the background of a land still vivid with people existing together. The film works both as historical document as well as poetic elaboration. Even so, these images don't push praise for nostalgia, but rather promote a counter point of view for something that in many ways was intentionally hidden. War propaganda has existed for a long time but, especially today, conflicts have evolved and shifted so much that there are narrative battles rather than just physical ones.

While writing this essay, I couldn't help but notice one aspect of the Giornate I had never considered before actually experiencing it: its power to stay with me long after I've left Italian soil. In the conversations I held with friends and peers from archival life in Brazil, there seemed to always be something else to mention, to discuss, and while discussing it, a detail finds its path into light to point a direction for new discoveries. It made me think of this perhaps third extra life of a film, when it relives through the exchange between two human beings. At times during my complementary research for this paper, I would come across information that completely dismantled my previous beliefs about one or another aspect of silent cinema, especially diversity, representation, and presence through different contexts, communities, and periods. One single idea was never an absolute truth and, far from that, I came to confirm what already had been made explicit during the week of the festival: silent cinema is very much alive, defiant, and far more complex than I could ever have imagined. In other moments, however, the complete opposite occurred. What I assumed to be something recurrent and already worn out by research would not necessarily be presented so commonly or be easily accessible for study. Both of these scenarios were intriguing in the sense that they signified to me that I was on the right path, a balance between the eagerness of defying a commonplace for established narratives of representation and the humility and respect for an intricate history that started long before I dreamt of existing, and undoubtedly will outlive me by many years.

One thing made clear from our dialogues is that there's no running away from the past, but it's irresponsible to assume there's only one version of it. Our moments of discussion proved that the films are in fact quite loud, and to stay silent is to face the weight of omission. The Giornate, its films but especially its people, allowed for a place of encounter, where bridges are built and hard topics are genuinely and generously debated. I was forever changed, and though I'm neither naive nor blind to the many contradictions and eventual intellectual and emotional marathon of my presence in a still very white European festival, I face those contradictions as an inevitable and essential part of building an ongoing future based on the dynamics of connection and rupture.

Thaynara Bastos de Brito,

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thaynarabritob@gmail.com