

“*Daydreams of Society: Class and Gender Performances in the Cinema of the Late 1910s*”

Ruth Mayer

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Intersectional theory’s insistence that the structures of social distinction and identification are entangled and overdetermined has left its mark on social and cultural analyses, and – as not least the present volume shows – it has also affected the debates of film and media studies. Obviously, the insight that race, class, gender, age, ability, and other categories of inequality draw upon each other in complicated ways and can thus not be reduced to the logic of binary distinctions bears promising implications for any approach concerned with social and cultural meaning-making. With regard to the history of film, the conceptual metaphor of an expansive network of distinctions and interactions that organizes intersectional theory does not only reverberate with the productivity of genre, as Janet Staiger has pointed out,¹ it may also serve to identify the ways in which difference and diversity are being enacted visually and spatially. As this paper will show, in the late 1910s, at a key period of industrial and mass-cultural mobilization, films envision class and gender negotiations in settings and plots that highlight very concrete crossings in space and time. They use visual and narrative structures of coincidence, simultaneity, parallelism or correspondence to explore the possibilities that contemporary conceptualizations of class and gender yield.

To focus on such structures may also help to contribute to a reinterpretation of the period itself. The 1910s, the so-called transitional era between early film and the Hollywood system, have been traditionally seen in terms of linear direction and technical, formal and narrative progression. In keeping with such a directed reading of history, film studies tended to approach the late 1910s as the end of transition and the beginning of a long period of stylistic consolidation and perfection that the cinema of the teens prepared and envisioned. More recently, this idea of a smooth development from early to classical film has been contested.² Ben Singer characterized the transitional period in

terms of “a complex dynamic process in which disparate forces – competing paradigms and practices – overlap and interact.”³ He is thus taking recourse to a set of markers that also feature prominently in the lexicon of intersectional theory – and this conceptualization of film history in terms of competitive trends, dead ends, loops and parallel tracks seems to capture the dynamic of development beyond the 1910s much better than the image of the ascending (or descending) line. The films of the late 1910s that I am going to discuss may be more sophisticated than earlier films in their narration and technical realization, but they by no means abandon the spirit of trial and error that has been made out as the dominant principle of the transitional period.

This manifests on the level of style as well as in the films’ plots and character mapping. While cinema has always been a vat filled with a highly volatile and instable mix of ingredients, by the late teens its capacity to juggle narrative formulas, viewer expectations, ideological agendas, and technological innovation has reached an unprecedented momentum. By then, what James Snead has identified as cinema’s “polymorphic perverse oscillation between possible roles, creating a radically broadened freedom of identification”⁴ had become a refined mechanism, particularly with respect to the invocation and cross-referencing of ideologically precarious categories of social distinction. In this paper I take my cue from recent critical observations on the ways in which such categories inadvertently change their shape and function through the indirect and allusive usage of genre conventions, formulaic storytelling or the star system.⁵ All of these ‘frames’ impact on the ways in which narratives are received and interpreted, but their processing and recognition in turn depend heavily on factors of personal or social identification. How an instance of genre crossing, the employment of a narrative convention or a casting decision are recognized and read hinges heavily, after all, on a spectator’s cultural horizon, value system, informedness and her awareness of all sorts of subtle implications, submerged messages, or unacknowledged biases.

This corresponds with Siegfried Kracauer’s assessment of the films of a slightly later period of time as the “*daydreams of society*, in which its actual reality comes to the fore and its otherwise repressed wishes take on form.”⁶ The ‘daydream’ expresses a particularly pregnant reflection of

possibilities – disclosing options and opportunities, figurations and formations next to, above or underneath the real. The daydream is about things that might have been or may still come about, about variations and versions, roads that were not taken, decisions that are still open, hunches that were ignored or misinterpreted. These are the worlds of the cinema, and in the films of the late teens they tend to be displayed in their fictional and fictionalizing character: as stories told from the vantage point of the ‘what if.’ In what follows I will focus on the popular narratives of masquerades of class in the films of the late 1910s: What if he was the master and not the butler? What if they were our servants rather than our friends? What if one could just disappear? Of course, none of these stories can be told on the grounds of a symbolic repertory of social status, financial assets, habitus and class conditioning alone; they call up, inadvertently or explicitly, the conceptualization of race and ethnicity, of sexuality and gender, of ability and age.

The cinematic ecology of the late 1910s in the United States seems to exemplify the intuition of intersectionality that the processes and principles of identification and identity formation overlap and interfere with each other. In particular, the assumption that categories of exclusion and distinction take effect simultaneously but unevenly resonates strongly with the filmic enactment of difference and diversity, as we shall see. With regard to film, the *simultaneous* operation of all sorts of identifying factors and forces has to be addressed in the context of other features of temporal organization: duration and instantaneity, routines and ruptures, regularity, acceleration, belatedness and – perhaps most importantly, given the predominance of the daydream mode, the *mise-en-abîme* that figures forth simultaneous but bracketed events which reflect a larger order brokenly, as inversions or miniatures or distorted reflections. The fantasy of a ‘time out’ is particularly pertinent for a cinematic system that responded to “the mastery of time and space by new technologies” by establishing “flexible but systematic spatial and temporal relations” in its own right, as Tom Gunning writes about the transitional era.⁷ In the films that I will analyze, the interlinkage of larger temporal regimes and smaller ‘framed’ temporal orders is addressed when exceptional situations effect the temporary inversion, suspension or rupture of regular routines and

social relations. During the ‘time out,’ categories of identification and distinction are no less entangled than in their routine operation, but they enter into either disturbing or exhilarating new combinations that highlight their constructedness – although not necessarily their changeability.

I will argue my case with close attention to three films: *All Night* (dir. Paul Powell, 1918), *Male and Female* (dir. Cecil B. DeMille, 1919), and *The Whispering Chorus* (dir. Cecil B. DeMille, 1918), signaling to a wider array of narratives as I go along. All three films engage with the implications of social mobility and fluctuation of status and identity as means of coming to terms with change. In all of them particular attention is afforded to a subject position that is often assumed to be the least affected by intersectional dynamics: the white male middle class perspective. *Male and Female* and *The Whispering Chorus* are social dramas, while *All Night* is a comedy, which gives me a chance to explore a range of generic procedures and techniques. Like many other films of the period, these films enact identity performances as a means of reflecting their own medial status and with close reference to the larger transformations characterizing modernity.

To Be Looked At: *All Night*

If one goes by the plot synopses of *All Night* and *Male and Female*, the films seem to address and expose the regimes of class. *All Night* enacts the scenario of a surprise visit of a potential financier to Maude and Bill Harcourt, a society couple with money problems, who just happened to have fired all of their servants. They decide to have a couple of (unmarried but courting) friends take over their role as master and mistress, and to pose as their own servants (“Since we know the house, we can manage easily!”). *Male and Female* tells a similar story in the guise of social drama: here the master/servant-constellation is turned around when a family of British aristocrats on a yachting trip gets stranded on a lonely island together with their servants. In this wild and uncultivated world, the butler quickly becomes the master and ‘king’ of the community, to whom all others are eager to cater. The film ends in the shipwrecked party’s rescue and the restitution of the old order – which prompts the butler and maid to emigrate to the American west.

Clearly, these stories gesture to the vagaries of social rank and the arbitrary distinctions of power and submission imposed by class. It is all the more surprising, then, to see that neither film makes much of this theme. While *All Night* is much more concerned with generational difference and sexuality than with class, *Male and Female* projects the issues of class difference onto a complicated matrix of historical and geographical references. In consequence, differences are not so much effaced or suspended but rather shifted around, transposed. Especially gender and sexuality flare up as issues of contention in a manner that inadvertently highlights these factors' interlinkage in an intricate layout that is made out as horizontal – spread out – rather than hierarchical. As an effect, social roles are enacted in close conjunction and interdependence – as part of an expansive grid of interlinked factors. If you change around one, everything else shifts in accordance. But eventually, this brings about stability, not disruption.

All Night stars Rudolph Valentino before his stellar career in the 1920s – and as an ethnically non-marked character. The part also differs starkly in other respects from Valentino's later signature roles: he is a comedic figure, characterized as shy, sexually inexperienced and easily cowed. The film's title refers to the exceptional and bracketed situation that is brought about when the visiting sponsor spontaneously decides to spend the night rather than just staying for dinner. It also signals to a second storyline that explains the friends' presence in the Hartcourts' home: Maude Harcourt (Mary Warren) had arranged a dinner party for her friends Dick Thayer, played by Valentino, and Beth Lane (Carmel Myers), to give Dick a chance to catch Beth alone and declare his feelings for her. Beth, who "belongs to one of Kentucky's oldest and most prominent families," is under strict orders by her exacting father, Colonel Lane, to return home before 11. Since Bradford is staying, she's staying too, and since she is staying, her father will show up, to cause further trouble. Every move in this film elicits counter-moves, and in anticipation of the situation comedy, the domestic setting with upstairs and downstairs, bedroom and guestroom, porch and hallway sets the stage for an incessant series of parallel actions, laid out in largely symmetrical fashion. Doors,

windows and staircases function as means to enter and to exit, to go up and down, in and out, leading to ever-changing scenarios of contact and contingency.

The film's plot logic relies on the discrepancy of class, status and access, but its comic effects derive almost exclusively from what is made out as generational rather than economic or power differences. The two young couples, even though they affect different social roles, are presented as a tightly interlinked entity, moving about in choreographed fashion in a series of shots



that punctuate the film – either

the women in white to the left

and the right, and the men in black in the middle, or, a little later, the women to the left of the

Choreographed smartness: *All Night* (1918)

screen, and the men next to each other to the right. When one or more ‘players’ leave the screen, the others rearrange their positions quickly to create a new symmetry – man in the middle, women together on the side; two women; two men... These symmetries of arrangement express a closeness based on age and habitus that seems to defy the crude categories of class, race or gender, since it relies on fine-tuned practices, tastes and intuitions. These people are a ‘smart set’ in the usage of the term as it was established in the 1910s: urbane, self-assured, witty, relaxed and very well dressed.⁸ Rudolph Valentino’s emergent star personality is based on the aesthetic of ‘smartness’ – cool, elegant, poised, and well-groomed. “[H]e is superbly dressed in cutaway suits, coats with fur collars, and silk pajamas, so he’s not that far from the Valentino we know,” writes Jeanine Basinger, who is one of the few critics that sees the film in accordance with the star’s impending career rather than as a stark contrast.

When Beth calls home to explain that she is going to spend the night, a black servant picks up the phone (“Massa Colonel has left town, Miss Elizabeth”) – and this brief cut to a world outside the Harcourt home exemplarily expresses what this film is *not* about. The difference between the

African-American servant in the Southern mansion of the ‘old and prominent’ family, and Bill Harcourt, the dapper young society man pretending to be a servant, is so absolute that it cannot be expressed in the film’s relational aesthetics. In the film’s logic, class is something that you ‘have,’ not something that shapes or determines your existence. Only in its debilitating interlinkage with race does it surface as an imposition that cannot simply be shed or disposed of once the job is done. Before Bradford arrives, we can see Bill posing in his butler outfit for Beth and Maude, ironically distancing himself from the garb he is forced to wear. When Bradford then enters, Bill tries to shake his hand rather than take his hat.

The eccentric visitor humiliates the young men and women in every way imaginable, and he does not make much of a difference between the ‘servants’ and the ‘masters.’ He molests Maud, he forces a cigar in Dick’s mouth, he beats up Bill, he punches Beth on the shoulder and he insists that his hosts go to bed early and together, since they “ought to have one or two kids,” entering their



Fig 2: To be looked at: Poster advertising *All Night*'s re-release in 1922, following the Valentino craze

bedroom several times in a bizarre exaggeration of his patriarchal power position. The bedroom setting epitomizes the contrast, when Dick, who has been forced to undress, is mortified – holding up his blanket protectively, as one by one the other protagonists enter and leave, comment, command, consult – and cast amused and desiring glances: after all, the man is looking good and he’s good to look at. This is the man of the future, more than the film itself knows, and Bradford’s power is comic rather than threatening because it affects a position of privilege and exceptionality that is outdated and more embarrassing than Valentino’s *déshabillé*. There is no indication, in all of this, of the powerful and aggressive eroticism of the Sheik, but Valentino’s gender performance signals ahead to what Miriam Hansen has identified as a pivotal aspect of the later star cult – that Valentino “seemed to live out the vicissitudes of social change as they affected people’s lives.”⁹ In *All Night*, he is part of

a team, a well-rehearsed group of social players, who react rather than act and perform rather than work – who manage and cope with the conditions as they present themselves rather than trying to shape or change them. This is something that Bradford, as the voice of an older generation, acknowledges at the end of the film, when, alerted to the ruse, he surprisingly volunteers to extend the requested loan after all, because he is impressed with Bill's flexibility: "I don't know what kind of businessman you are" ... "However, you do know how to cope with any situation."

High and Low, *Male and Female*

All Night's 'smart' flexibility is marked by the spirit of playful improvisation and wish-fulfilment: the daydream, which tests out conditions rather than going up against them, and which always reaffirms the status quo by returning to it eventually. *Male and Female* operates similarly, although the 'time out' of this film is longer and more markedly terminated at the end of this film. Moreover, this film's return to 'normal' is critically reflected by presenting America's 'classless' society of the West as an alternative to a British society that has by then been exposed as decadent and hypocritical. But then again, the West is presented like a clichéd afterthought, while aristocratic flamboyance and eccentricity are what the film is all about. The displays of decadence are steeped in desire – for commodities and for people (as far as it makes sense to differentiate between these two in this film) – to the extent that the markers of class, hierarchy and rank all become fetishes. The film's narrative culminates in a diegetic insert that stages the Babylonian court, conflating the antique with the modern in accordance with a larger trend of the silent cinema to conjure up the "modernity of antiquity," as Pantelis Michelakis and Maria Wyke write about silent era costume dramas.¹⁰ The film's narrative justifies the detour to the past through its repeated reference to a line from a poem by William Ernest Henley that inexplicably intrigues the key characters: "Or ever the knightly years were gone / with the old world to the grave, / I was the King in Babylon / and you were a Christian slave". The Babylonian episode is inserted to illustrate, somewhat spuriously, that the butler Crichton (Thomas Meighan), the scullery maid Tweeny (Lila Lee) and Lady Mary

Lasenby (Gloria Swanson) are caught in a love triangle that reaches back to antiquity, when their lookalikes and pre-incarnations *were* an ancient king (Crichton), a slave (Mary), and the king's consort (Tweeny). The insert pretends to explain the triangulation of desire between the characters, suggesting that the present can learn from the past or that the past informs the present, but it is unclear what precisely the past teaches or how it persists in the present. Is it that the king has to atone for his cruelty vis-à-vis the slave through centuries of servitude? Is the lady's vanity exposed by the slave's virtuous resistance? Then what is the role of the South Sea island setting in all of this? Is this about differences? Or about similarities? Maureen Turim rightfully pointed out that "the doubled and trebled temporal settings help [DeMille's] films indulge and condemn in a manner that makes no sense except if we understand it through the psychoanalytic trope of denial."¹¹ Prefiguring DeMille's big historical dramas of the 1920s and after, the Babylonian backstory glamorizes the motif of sexual attraction across class barriers, and employs the ancient setting "as a cover, sanctifying the exploration of the sensual, the decorative, the flamboyant."¹² Like in *All Night*, markers of class, status and social rank are made out as largely performative – or, indeed: decorative – categories in the course of *Male and Female*. There is no larger logic or underlying message to the film's diverging storylines, they do not add up but spread out randomly in kaleidoscopic fashion, calling to mind D.W. Griffiths' earlier, much more magisterial, "conflation or cannibalization of various layers of tradition" in *Intolerance*.¹³

The film's main characters are introduced at the beginning in a similar mode. A page boy is putting polished shoes in front of a row of doors, and sneaks a look, at this occasion, through each of the keyholes, so that the spectator's first glance at the film's main players is imbued with voyeuristic stealth: each shot is marked as subjective through the use of an iris lens, and the close-ups of the sleeping or waking characters are completed by intertitles introducing the actors and roles. The last such staged intrusion presents the film's star, Gloria Swanson, and here the preceding routine is expanded into a longer sequence of shots. This glance through the keyhole first discloses an untidy pile of lingerie, then cuts to a montage shot of a peacock, the symbol of vanity, onto

which the intertitle is superimposed, and then finally shows the Lady herself, waking up beautifully in her luxurious art nouveau bed and sounding an antique bell. This introduction, which is interspersed with shots showing the page boy's comically excited response, will then lead over into the film's most iconic scene – depicting a lavish bathing routine that merges British upper-class luxury and ancient splendor before the latter even makes a diegetic appearance.

Crichton and Tweeny have been introduced before, but they clearly figure as supporting characters at this stage in the film, or rather, they are made out as spectators, very much like the voyeuristic house boy. In the first scene that presents all three together, Tweeny is transfixed by



Mary's shoes that the camera

presents in another close-up iris shot which is then juxtaposed with an iris shot of Tweeny's dilapidated footwear. A little later, a shot depicting Crichton's observation of Mary's dainty eating

“Comparisons are odious”: Male and Female (1919)

is cross-cut with a flashback to a previous depiction of Tweeny's healthy appetite. These vignettes, in turn, signal ahead to a later scene on the island when Lady Mary relishes the soup that Crichton made and is reminded through another flashback of her picky table manners back in England.

“Comparisons are odious – and sometimes dangerous,” runs the intertitle that comments on Crichton's initial correlation of the lady and the scullery maid. But the film at large employs comparisons, interlinkages, cross-cuts and juxtapositions as its dominant narrative modes.

Resemblances, associations, recollections, and analogies organize the way in which storytelling proceeds, the film is a veritable feast of intersections. While it pretends to be about the ‘big’ topic of transhistorical passion, it really tells numerous small stories of longing and desire that each have their place and time, and need to be carefully bracketed off. Early in the film, Lady Mary's friend Eileen confides in her, telling her of her passion for her chauffeur, a blasé dandy with heavily made

up eyes, who is presented in a montage iris shot, the film's favored mode of communicating desire. Lady Mary warns her not to give in to this impulse – "It's *kind to kind*, Eileen, and you and I can never change it." The film condones this injunction, by making Crichton and Mary come together on a lonely island, and disband and return to their 'kind,' once they return to civilization. But it is important to note that this is no melodramatic tale of love across the class divide, but rather a reflection of propriety, enablement and possibility.

"His dramas are as intimate as a department store window," derided film critic Frederick James Smith DeMille's *Male and Female* in September 1919 in *Motion Picture Classic*,¹⁴ and he thus captures well the ways in which the film distances itself from its characters' feelings, presenting social settings – the British upper-class world, the South Sea island – like experimental arrangements or display cases, each with its own conditions and regularities that may not be mixed up. Seen this way, the film has a lot in common with another popular release of the previous year: the first adaptation of *Tarzan of the Apes* for the big screen. After all, the Tarzan story, too, celebrates the modern man as flexible (in a physical and social sense), adaptable, and versatile. In the film of 1918, Tarzan stands out as the one character who masters the wilderness due to his clever use of things. In Edgar Rice Burroughs' novels of the 1910s, the ape-man is celebrated as the man of the future on the grounds of his quick learning – and his capacity to *fit in*. Even though Burroughs' narrative, just like DeMille's film, seems to about the nature/nurture divide, it is thus really much more concerned with the exigencies of modernity in all of their manifold manifestations.

When Jane Porter thus meets the titular hero in Burroughs' *Tarzan of the Apes* (1912) for the first time, he appears to her as the epitome of primitive masculinity, as a prehistorical "wood-good." She falls in love immediately and fatally, but then starts to doubt the future potential of her relationship: "She tried to imagine her wood-god by her side in the saloon of an ocean liner. She saw him eating with his hands, tearing his food like a beast of prey, and wiping his greasy fingers upon his thighs. She shuddered."¹⁵ It will quickly transpire that these doubts are unjustified.

Significantly enough, the series' second volume, *The Return of Tarzan* (1913), starts out with precisely the scenario that Jane had pondered so fearfully before – Tarzan on board of an ocean liner. Yet when the French lady, from whose perspective the 'wood-god' is then depicted, shudders, it is certainly not because of unease or embarrassment. "Magnifique!" she sighs involuntarily when she sees the jungle man in his elegant attire on a deck chair. When her husband asks what she means she finds a telling excuse to cover for her obvious titillation: "I was but recalling with admiration those stupendous skyscrapers, as they call them, of New York."¹⁶ Where Jane was thinking of primitivity and wildness, the French lady thus associates the core emblem of modernity. In both cases – wood-god or skyscraper – an erotic element is impossible to miss, and the desiring glance of a woman serve to showcase a successful male gender performance. In the course of the Tarzan novels it will become increasingly evident that this is what Tarzan excels at: he is up to whatever situation he finds himself in, looking good and acting right whether he is in the jungle or at a dinner party.¹⁷

Male and Female similarly is hardly concerned with the issues it professes to dramatize and actually does foreground in its intertitles: "One cannot tell what may be in a man, my Lady! If all were to return to Nature tomorrow, the same man might not be master – nor the same man servant – Nature would decide the matter for us!" muses Crichton bitterly early on in the film, and of course, he will soon have a chance to show what's 'in him.' But what is staged as the 'return' to nature is really just a scene change, depicting a new setting with its own codes of conduct, attire, and culinary choices. It is important to note, after all, that Crichton is not only the one character that adjusts most easily to life on the desert island. He is also the one to return most abruptly to his previous role, shifting gears effortlessly and smoothly as they return to England. It is this very versatility that marks him as superior in the end, and that allows for a happy ending with Tweeny, rather than Lady Mary, on an idealized Western frontier, where, again, he knows just what to do.

The film's title suggests that away from civilization the characters' 'true' gender identities are coming to the fore. But given its various historical and geographical settings, the binary of 'true'

and 'false' collapses onto itself. Once more, like in *All Night*, class and gender roles are made out as a loose grid, shifting and changing with the overall conditions and conventions – performative rather than essential ascriptions. But in both cases, this does not mean that the categories are made out as arbitrary or even freely negotiable. They are shown to be firmly entrenched in their social settings, and need to be rehearsed, practiced, and performed according to the social script. Miriam Hansen has shown that Rudolph Valentino's sex appeal rested on the filmic ambiguation of the scopical object – in terms of the film's explicit narrative it is the woman who is looked at, but "Valentino's appeal depends to a large degree on the manner in which he combines the masculine control of the look with the feminine quality of 'to-be-looked-at-ness,' to use Laura Mulvey's rather awkward term."¹⁸ This dynamic may be specific to the Valentino effect, but it is significant that in *Male and Female* and *Tarzan of the Apes*, too, the white male is coming into his own by becoming the *object* of projections and desire, the one who responds to impulses and events rather than actively shaping the circumstances of his sexual and social life.

The desirous glances that Crichton shoots at Lady Mary at the beginning of the film mirror Tweeny's desire for her shoes, and in consequence it might seem as if the film deliberately highlights the divide between privilege and deprivation, since it addresses an audience that has probably more in common with the servants than with the masters.¹⁹ In such a reading, films like *Male and Female* would capitalize on eliciting feelings of desire or envy. But I think that the identificatory pull that is at work in the late transitional and early classical cinema is more complicated than this, and to make my case I would like to recur once more to Siegfried Kracauer's conjunction of cinematic representation and the daydream. Kracauer points to the logic of upward aspiration inscribed into the Hollywood film, referring to the cliché of the poor girl meets rich guy narrative: "In reality it may not often happen that a scullery maid marries the owner of a Rolls Royce. But doesn't every Rolls Royce owner dream that scullery maids dream of rising to his stature?"²⁰ In Kracauer's gloss the dream is the rich guy's, not the poor girl's, and this seems to me a more appropriate reading of the powers of projection that are at work here, although I doubt that

the constellation is as neatly gendered as Kracauer has it. The daydream of modern mass culture, I argue, is driven by a polymorphic perverse dynamic of projection and identification; it aims to pull the viewer into the subject position of the one who is effortlessly in control and at ease - be that a “Rolls Royce owner,” or the a “wood-god,” a Babylonian king or a member of the smart set. In many of these instances of identification, conventional class and gender associations merge, overlap or intersect as we have seen.²¹ The Valentino hype provided an arena in which this rearrangement of subject positions and perspectives was blatantly cast as a renegotiation of the binaries of gender and sexuality – other cinematic narratives proceeded more carefully. But still, playing around with status and with class in the 1910s is no revolutionary endeavor but presents itself, rather, in the conditional terms of the fantasy, the dream or the speculation.

The films of the late 1910s make out social settings as ever-shifting constellations of options and strictures – as forcefields of possibilities and forfeitures. From this vantage point, and very much in keeping with Kracauer’s assessment, the cinematic mode of the daydream does not primarily point to scenarios of social mobility (the poor girl’s dream), but rather to phantasmatic imaginations of achieving stability. Even though these films address masquerades of class and status, their momentum hinges not so much on the desire to *become* somebody else, but rather on the *projection* of desire *onto somebody else*. To be desired, to be looked at, to be recognized, to be attended to, these are the values that rule supreme here; this is much more important than to actively command or control. By the same logic, public opinion is made out as a network of intersecting perspectives, expectations and attitudes that may give shape to the individual – or make it disappear.

Disappearance Act: *The Whispering Chorus*

The Whispering Chorus, DeMille’s society drama of 1918, is a narrative of class masquerade only at first glance. It really records the attempt to step away from the defining reach of society altogether. Given the immense significance afforded to contexts, frames, and identifying markers in

the cinema of the time, this experiment cannot but fail. Where other films about social masquerades take care to bracket their narrative, marking it as momentary, exceptional, and set off from the regular order of things, *The Whispering Chorus* defies the mode of the *mise-en-abîme*, totalizing the daydream as it were – and thus turns it into a nightmare, at least for the white male protagonist who ends up on the electric chair for a crime he did not commit. While his story is told straight and without qualifying frame, however, the film soon branches out into two different storylines – one narrating the man’s social decline, the other one tracing his wife’s ascent.

The film has been discussed mostly with regard to its experimentation with modes of representing consciousness and as an ‘art film,’ in contrast to DeMille’s following, more commercial productions. I want to focus on its continuities with later productions such as *Male and Female*, however, and on the ways in which the film stages the struggle between social norms and personal inclinations that informs so many narratives of the period, as a psychic drama, projected, as it were, on the screen of the mind. The protagonist’s moral predicament and troubled conscience materializes visually as a shadowy ‘whispering chorus’: superimposed shots of faces, representing his good (female: Edna Mae Cooper) and bad (male: Walter Lynch) impulses and a mocking commentator (Gustav von Seyffertitz). Key scenes of the film are thus organized by way of the spatial layout of the intersection, showcasing crucial moments in the protagonist’s life that require decisions between two or more possible options: do I go or do I stay, do I speak up or stay silent, should I do this or that? The voices of the silent chorus pinpoint different narrative trajectories, usually by forecasting the consequences of a possible action in the conditional voice or future tense (“What would Jane think of a thief?”/“Don’t be a fool! No one will ever know!”).

The film tells the story of a disappearance act. Its central character John Tremble (Raymond Hatton) is a small accountant who embezzles a substantial sum of money and runs away when he is about to be found out, leaving his patiently suffering mother (Edythe Chapman) and equally angelic wife Jane (played by serial film star Kathlyn Williams) behind. Living in hiding in a tramp-like existence, he happens across the dead body of another tramp, whom he decides to dress up in his

clothes and to disfigure, so that he is taken for himself. This act, which is meant to bring about John's liberation from public prosecution, constitutes the decisive step towards his eventual undoing. As John is going down, Jane is rising. Believing her husband to be dead, she falls in love with the prosecutor of his case, who is soon elected Governor of the state. At the height of its action, the film proceeds by cross-cutting ever more quickly between the narratives of husband and wife. The cross-editing culminates when Jane's glamorous wedding to the Governor is contrasted with John's sad carousing with an Orientalized prostitute. Eventually, John is caught and taken for the murderer of himself. Prodded by the whispering chorus, he decides to face the electric chair rather than destroy the happiness of his wife, who is expecting the Governor's child.

The Whispering Chorus differs from the films discussed above in that it does not celebrate white male flexibility but chronicles its fatal momentum. John Tremble is so good at making use of every chance that presents itself to him that he is getting lost in the twist and turns his life thus takes: totalized, the daydream turns into a nightmare. In keeping with the narrative logic of naturalism, the film presents the individual as heavily entrenched in social relations, in networks of labor and economy, family obligations and ambition.²² The film's protagonist tries to master these circumstances, but keeps succumbing to larger forces and conditions, as he plunges into his actions with desperation, not elegant poise. John is no smart society man to begin with, he does not stay on top of things, and instead of being looked at, he becomes invisible in the course of the film. Leaving mother and wife behind, he enters an all-male world of physical labor, crime, homelessness, brutality and alienation that drags him down.

His wife, Jane Tremble, exemplifies the alternative to this demise. At the end of the film, without much of her own doing, she has become "Governor Coggeswell's wife" or the "Governor's lady." She is safely ensconced in social relations – a wife (actually of two husbands), a daughter (ironically to John's mother, of whom she continues to take care), a mother-to-be. By severing his social ties, in contrast, John has also lost his social identity. He is no longer recognized by the law, and when he meets his wife again in court, she does not recognize him either: "No, I never saw him



before.” John is horrified and

his protestations take a telling guise: “I’m John Tremble himself. Governor Coggeswell’s wife is my wife.” In this strange concatenation of pronouns and possessions, personal identification and distancing are syntactically interlinked to chart a process of disintegration.

When Jane does recognize him a little later, his old bearded appearance is projected on the haggard clean-shaven face of the prisoner. At this point, the



Familial Visions: *The Whispering Chorus* (1918)

filmic modes of superimposition,

blurring, fading and double-exposure seem to explode into the narration, suggesting a second layer of reality that pushes into view. Now for the first time John’s imagination of a surveilling ‘chorus’ is a complemented with a similar vision on Jane’s part. In her bedroom, Jane fantasizes about her first and her second husband, facing their spectral appearances and the sight of her future child beckoning her. Her ‘chorus’ consists of close family relations, addressing her as wife or mother. In prison, meanwhile, John is haunted by a ‘chorus’ that does no longer consist only of the two voices representing his good and bad impulses, but that keeps growing in size, featuring a panoply of anonymous faces – a crowd of strangers

The screen of the mind: *The Whispering Chorus*

that is mocking, admonishing, laughing,

scolding, to then fade away, leaving John suspended against a black backdrop, without context, connection, interrelations. In the end, he is completely isolated, while Jane is fully immersed in a solid and safe social network.

John Tremble's fantasy of a clean slate, personal reinvention and exculpation quickly turns into a nightmare. But this is not the film's only fantasy, although it is the only one that is acknowledged. There is also the dream of the humiliated, long-suffering, self-sacrificing wife to be rid of a husband who will never make it – Jane's dream, which needs to stay unexpressed. Seen from her vantage point, *The Whispering Chorus* is a dream-come-true: the difficult – criminal, gambling, lying – husband disappears, another – respectable, successful, honest – husband shows up, and one does not even have to go to the trouble of being unfaithful to switch from one to the other – it *just happens*. An early review of the film pointed uneasily to the film's ambiguous message and the fact that Jane and her second husband “base their happiness upon a lie”.²³ In fact, the film takes trouble to resolve this moral predicament but it does not manage to do away with it. More than *All Night* and *Male and Female*, it gives shape to a particularly *genteel* daydream, delineating a sphere of entitlement and privilege, in which obstacles and problems need not be actively eliminated but disappear on their own. The visualizations of inclinations and restraint in *The Whispering Chorus* figure forth cinema's different possibilities, as they trace the intersection of moral responsibility and escapist fantasy. The film's protagonist eventually turns against self-indulgence and sacrifices himself in a virtuous act of self-denial. But the film at large does not opt for responsibility over escapism but rather ends up merging these two extremes – very much in keeping with the ‘dream factory's’ persistent reconciliation of moral instruction and irresponsible wish-fulfilment. The film exemplifies the potential of cinema to address all sorts of audiences simultaneously and with different messages (and white lower middle-class women were as important, in this respect, as middle-class men). But it may very well also have unsettled its audiences because it highlights the fatality of the situation and the monumentality of the choice in the end rather than keeping the array of options open, as so many other narratives of the period do. Eventually, the realization of Jane's dream requires a decision, and if it is only *not* to act and let her first husband face his execution. This final plot turn, much more than the darkness and negativity of the plot, may have been the film's biggest problem – and may have brought about DeMille's own

verdict on the film as a failure.²⁴ The mass cultural imagination of the 1910s favors the mode of the daydream precisely in its indecisive status between the real and the imaginary, after all – as a state that does not require action: it just happens. To force the dream into actualization and concreteness is a dangerous thing to do – and it is so much more pleasant to stay at the threshold or linger at the intersection, where all the options are still open.

Notes

¹ Janet Staiger, “*Les Belles Dames sans Merci*, Femmes Fatales, Vampires, Vamps, and Gold Diggers: The Transformation and Narrative Value of Aggressive Fallen Women,” in *Reclaiming the Archive: Feminism and Film History*, ed. Vicki Callahan (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010): 32-57, 34.

² Charlie Keil and Shelley Stamp, Introduction to *American Cinema’s Transitional Era: Audiences, Institutions, Practices*, ed. Charlie Keil and Shelley Stamp (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 1-11.

³ Ben Singer, “Feature Films, Variety Programs, and the Crisis of the Small Exhibitor,” in *American Cinema’s Transitional Era*, 76-100, 76.

⁴ James Snead, *White Screens, Black Images: Hollywood from the Dark Side*, ed. Colin MacCabe and Cornel West (London: Routledge, 1994), 23. On the ways in which narratives of identity and identification enlist and disclose numerous, often mutually exclusive readings and offer various access points to different readers and readings see also: Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 1-30.

⁵ See, among others: Laura Horak, *Girls Will Be Boys: Cross-Dressed Women, Lesbians and American Cinema, 1908-1934* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016); Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, “What Happened in the Transition? Reading Race, Gender and Labor between the Shots,” in *American Cinema’s Transitional Era*, 103-30; Rob King, *The Fun Factory: The Keystone Film Company and the Emergence of Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press,

2009); Jennifer M. Bean, ed., *Flickers of Desire: Movie Stars of the 1910s* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011); Jean-Anne Sutherland and Kathryn M. Feltey, "Here's Looking at Her: An Intersectional Analysis of Women, Power, and Feminism in Film," in *Journal of Gender Studies* 26:6 (2017), 618-631.

⁶ Siegfried Kracauer, "The Little Shopgirls Go to the Movies," in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, tr., ed. and introd. by Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 291-306, 292.

⁷ Tom Gunning, "Systematizing the Electric Message: Narrative Form, Gender, and Modernity in *The Lonedale Operator*," in *American Cinema's Transitional Era*, 15-50, 27.

⁸ See: Catherine Keyser, *Playing Smart: New York Women Writers and Modernist Magazine Culture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010).

⁹ Miriam Hansen, *Babel & Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 267.

¹⁰ Pantelis Michelakis and Maria Wyke, "Introduction: Silent Cinema, Antiquity and the 'exhaustless urn of time'," *The Ancient World in Silent Cinema*, ed. Pantelis Michelakis and Maria Wyke (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 1-36, 15.

¹¹ Maureen Turim, "Seduction and Eloquence: The New Woman of Fashion in Silent Cinema" in *On Fashion*, ed. Shari Benstock and Suzanne Ferriss (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 140-58, 154.

¹² Turim, "Seduction and Eloquence," 154. On the flattening of history into style and the camp appeal of silent and sound films about antiquity see also, next to Michelakis and Wyke, Richard Lindsay, *Hollywood Biblical Epics: Camp Spectacle and Queer Style from the Silent Era to the Modern Day* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2015).

¹³ Hansen, *Babel & Babylon*, 192.

¹⁴ Quoted in Sumiko Higashi, *Cecil B. DeMille and American Culture: The Silent Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1994): 195.

¹⁵ Edgar Rice Burroughs, *Tarzan of the Apes*, New York: Signet 1990, 219.

¹⁶ Edgar Rice Burroughs, *The Return of Tarzan*, New York: Signet 1990, 120.

¹⁷ On Tarzan see also: Ruth Mayer, *Artificial Africas: Colonial Images in the Times of Globalization*, Hanover: University of New England Press 2002, 48-75, and Ruth Mayer, "Entartung? Tarzan, Charles Darwin, Max Nordau und der Mann der Zukunft," in *Ich Tarzan! Affenmenschen und Menschenaffen zwischen Science und Fiction*, ed. Gesine Krüger, Ruth Mayer, and Marianne Sommer (Bielefeld: Transcript 2008): 133-148.

¹⁸ Hansen, *Babel & Babylon*, 272.

¹⁹ See: Sumiko Higashi, *Cecil B. DeMille and American Culture: The Silent Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994): 147.

²⁰ Kracauer, "The Little Shopgirls," 292.

²¹ Race is a different matter, but films like DeMille's *The Cheat* or D.W. Griffith's *Broken Blossoms* (1919) illustrate that it can be factored in, although for the purposes of this paper this would have been too much. See Sumiko Higashi, "Ethnicity, Class and Gender in Film: DeMille's *The Cheat*," in *Unspeakable Images: Ethnicity in the American Cinema*, ed. Lester D. Friedman (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991): 112-39; Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, "What Happened in the Transition? Reading Race, Gender and Labor between the Shots," in *American Cinema's Transitional Era*, 103-30.

²² On these analogies, which indeed are so much more significant than the often-drawn analogy between silent film and modernism, see Katherine Fusco, *Silent Film and U.S. Naturalist Literature: Time, Narrative, and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

²³ Quoted in: Scott Eyman, *Empire of Dreams: The Epic Life of Cecil B. DeMille* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013): 149.

²⁴ Cecilia DeMille Presley and Mark Vieira, *Cecil B. DeMille: The Art of the Hollywood Epic* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2014): 77.