

Le mythe et le retour....

‘On ne parle de moi que sur hier, rarement sur aujourd’hui, jamais sur demain’ - *Abel Gance*.

J’accuse myself more than any other living being.

There is something prophetic in losing one’s notes, especially since it might start to seem a sign of an unfinished ritual. Silence only knows the incommensurable dedication of *J’accuses* I’ve brought towards myself, denoting instances of perpetual and cowardly serene flagellations. However, this misbehaving presents an intriguing set of meditative questionings. Writing, at least eight months after the ‘event’ which was for me the extraordinary screening of *J’accuse* (Abel Gance, 1919) forces me to reflect upon the very function of remembering or better yet, inventing History. Even if I will advise future Collegians to preserve their notes and recapture their own feelings with fervour and immediacy, I am not afraid. I know now, that a particular emotion is kept, however transformed, in time. Surely, it may not be the same in its concrete unfolding but beauty and its miraculous effects on a young soul can be effectively preserved, in essence. Curiously enough I seem to use the word preservation in its *double entendre*. In fact, I came to realise that distancing is a perfect tool for judging essences. I smile, thinking this is such an intimately Abel Gancean thing to say and I am not surprised. Learning has nothing to do with memorising facts but with expressing knowledge, passion and any troublesome metamorphosis to which one is subjected, along his or her path.

In the beginning was the silent...

I remember perfectly well my first Pordenone edition in 2008. I was walking on the streets like a narcotic Homunculus...searching, scribbling and trying to find as much as I could about the dances, drawings and magician’s tricks performed by master *Alexander Shiryayev*. Losing, re-

finding, losing again, notes, drafts and all there is to it. One could say, in the same line with the beautiful, serene logistics of Paolo Cherchi Usai that any true Model Image of History is something to be re-‘created’ or re-remembered⁸. On the other hand, it would be fair to accept this careless behaviour as indicative of a form of personality vice; a larger problem of rigour; perhaps, this much is true.

Nonetheless, this more or less controlled or self-conscious [lack of] discipline bears an altogether different trademark: Pordenone, is in many ways, my only regenerating dacha, a place where I don’t know myself and nothing is clear or exact but that is as close as one could ever get to issues of ‘truth’ and ‘knowing’...

Years dissolve in states...

What I seem to remember the most from the 2009 edition, soon after being assigned the dutiful role of curious Collegian, is love; but surely not a naive, awfully sweet or tedious kind of love; but one of a different kind. A solid, mature love not artificial...A love which expects, demands. The event, or rather, the challenging series of events, all seemed to be deeply camouflaged in this mission to expiate, probe, question or consolidate such love.

If there is a myth there is a retour....

It is in this sense that I want to refer to the idea of the myth of the eternal rebirth, understood in its deep Eliadean implications (see Mircea Eliade’s book of the same title) as a possibility for History to be shown in its reverberating essence and for man or woman to witness an epiphany, of sorts. That epiphanic moment was for me seeing *this J’accuse*, in *this* particular pordenonian context, for the first time, a gift to the novice. It is *this* re-mastered, re-stored, re-created *J’accuse* that I will always keep in mind and cherish in my heart, as a secret initiation, as a gift to the gods and not the subsequent representations I saw a few months later (Stephen Horne’s hands played once more for my

enchanted ears both at the Barbican and at the NFT in London, yet from that feeling of unperturbed intimacy there was something missing; in my view, they could not compete with or echo the particular joys of *this* Pordenone premiere, the one, which, miraculously, as I try to explain, got stuck, permanently stuck in time, immortalised).

Don't be afraid to be anti-nostalgic...but remember to respect the melancholy of the living

It is important for me to admit that the title of this paper owes everything to the ever-so-brief but forever titillating discussion with Paolo about Eliade and his repartition of mythologies... it sounds so inevitably pompous, yet this rapprochement owes so little to elitist debates. As young collegians we are encouraged to approach people, scholars, savants, archivists. It felt so strange, so illuminating and so bizarre to want to meet exactly the Pordenone organisers (David, Paolo, Riccardo, Carlo Montanaro etc.) and not accidentally, Kevin Brownlow. Such exciting encounters shape somebody's life forever. I write this also thinking of the care and respect for those who are no longer with us. Every time I attend *Le Giornate* I come to think of its fragility, of the fragility of life and of people, in general. It is now, clear to me, why *J'accuse* so aptly filled this delicate spot – as an indictment against war and general anti-humanist tendencies, or as manifestation of a revolt against human misery and misconceptions, a visceral plea, a reconfiguration of pacifist ideals, making it, thus, so infinitely actual....

The anti-nostalgic manifesto must be written in invisible ink...

The main lesson to be learned from this is that an empty sentimentalist trend and any tumultuous sedimentation of unhealthy nostalgia must be declined, abruptly rejected. Our love for silent cinema must exist in its entirety, freed from fable projections. In short, silent cinema is not a Pandora's box of 'back then', it is not a place to redirect personal anguish. Silent films are alive, very much alive, and differently alive from 'back then'. We shouldn't proclaim as necessity the re-creation of

time: we should get to it, like children, almost by mistake. We should preserve not only cans of nitrate, tons of nerves, disposition, ambition and patience but the spirit and the nature of our particular encounters. Our humanity.

Any access to ‘back then’ is not a matter of empirical, de facto strategies. Our ‘back then’ is confounded with our ‘back now’ and ‘back future’ especially when such a-historical themes (the rise of the dead in *J'accuse*) are presented on screen. There is nothing ‘silent’ about silent cinema, not simply in terms of musical accompaniment but in terms of essence, of art. Silent cinema communicates in full. It does not form a distant, vitiated alpha language. Also, as Gance so often proclaimed, it is for the people [!], it is tempting; open, not in a populist sense but in a humanist sense. I can’t imagine sharing the same amount of enthusiasm at a 9 am screening of forgotten French Albatros discoveries – without the feeling of community, of proper theatrical setting which gives to our experience a certain dimension, a particular viewing mode – in effect, all of this – is ultimately, a matter of sharing. If I’ve learned something accessible in words in Pordenone it is the fact that culture itself is transmissible, contagious and transient.

Thinking of Paolo

I have many reasons to be thinking of Paolo and remember his function of bridging the world of film scholarship to that of the archival milieu. It is an unstable but ever so priceless position to be in. In his Introduction to *Burning Passions*, Paolo so correctly identifies the problem by stating:

I have always been dissatisfied with any discipline whose aim does not go beyond its own fulfilment, and wished that knowledge in one area could become a catalyst for enthusiasm, curiosity and the impulse of discovery in other aspects of life. As far as I’m concerned, looking at silent films makes sense only as long as it encourages and develops the art of seeing in itself, regardless of its forms and manifestations. (p.viii)

This idea of an almost mystical response to film preservation, albeit without losing its impeccable rationale is outlined by David Robinson in his Preface for the same book. As both Paolo and David conclude there is nothing less elusive in the confrontational character of silent cinema when compared to the reminiscences of any other art. The type of commitment silent cinema entails is not simply related to a willingness to perform a kind of time-cultural abandon, to an effort of imagination. Silent cinema viewing involves a more serene approach at times, a less fatalistic vision. Not simply because having an inoculated idea of an ‘original’ print is questionable or sympathetically dangerous from the outset but also because we might lose the part of needing an event, the *eventful* part of watching silent cinema, in good company.

Understandably, good company is a must! In Paolo’s words and ever so magnificently this relationship is not just flammable but explosive. It is as if we are discussing a matter of impact, an instance of high seismic risk. It is my contention that this particularity of staging, this orchestration, sometimes with greater minute precision and attention to detail than those of ballet or opera, is what transforms or radiates silent film and turns it into an event, a representation and presentation all at once. For me, this philosophy is prioritised by the wonderful title of Kevin Brownlow’s documentary about Gance, *The Charm of dynamite...*

Looking at Kevin...

Here’s an instant memory from that night. It probably popped up generated by the wave of tension and release from my previous paragraphs. It is true, I remember as if it was yesterday, Kevin Brownlow’s expression during the break. How we all stood outside, inhaling fresh air and with our faces red, our bodies tensed. Kevin had his irreplaceable pink jacket on. He looked so dignified, so relieved – I must have thought, *this* is something irreplaceable. We all came back for the last and most majestic part of the film with that feeling of ‘red carpet’. But certainly not as they do in Cannes or Venice, not a red carpet in a dress code sense, but a red carpet in an emotional sense, red

faces and red carpets, everywhere. Excitement, murmurs, exactly 192 minutes - minus the time for ovations, partly for Stephen, partly for restorers – partly for Gance and partly for us, in our preliminary understanding of what just happened....An understanding, that for me, personally, only later [now, actually] finds its clearest form of appreciation. Researching about Gance has been an option, a privilege and not an imposition. Reading through French, Italian and English monographs and collections I found myself lost in minor details, in Romanesque adventures, in master-disciple fables, precisely as I had imagined *then* that it would be. Also, encompassing the range of feelings I'm experiencing in this context, the baby steps of a silent enthusiasm bursting here and there – I can't help noticing the somewhat fatidic nuance of *this* particular evening as a promise for the future.

But what a promise it was...

To give an example of a standard Pordenonian atmosphere it is worth mentioning my unconventional meetings, in circumstances which turned up to be favourable and triggered future, unofficial guiding tours. Some time around *this* projection of *J'accuse* and a considerable time after Browlow's astute presentation at the Barbican of one of my favourite mis-interpretations/jokes, Jack Huse instead of *J'accuse* (the troublesome, yet amusing, wrong deciphering of an English speaking audience is still at the heart of the matter, so to speak) – Mr. Brownlow took me on a special, 'private' London tour in which I could see, through his eyes, what London looked like way before *Fires were Started*...Surely, it is not the place here, to describe Kevin's generosity and kindness, but as he took me on those streets, the streets that I know so well, having studied in the Strand for exactly three years – I realised that we don't really know things, with our hearts, absorbing their profound resonance. And this is what struck me after this encounter. Not a word on Gance, not a word on *J'accuse* and yet it was exactly the same emotion for me, part of something gradual, quasi-religious (indeed, when reflecting back to Eliade's field of research). In sum, the epiphany is there, ready to be re-orchestrated, to stimulate my Gancean

fascination, to attest my unattributed Latinity, to confess my weakness towards French liberalist ideals, and to prove my chance of re-experiencing enlightenment. This phenomenon is a breakthrough in its purest substance, a moment *vivant, tout court*.

A constellation...

Significantly, *J'accuse* was not a lonely diamond on a desert theatre... there were many more films that moved me, somewhat *gravitating au tour* as part of an improvised constellation; but - as with the inexhaustible findings about Shiryaev, that I am bound to keep with me ever since, what I will preserve from this eloquent 2009 – is the grandiosity of an absent orchestra. The *silenzioso maestoso*. A grandiosity, not in terms of a career prospectus but a wholeheartedly experienced idea upon the state of the world. Obviously, not the ‘forgotten’, ‘ancient’ world of the past, on the contrary, a meditation and mediation of our world, of the world of today.

The species informed by Nostradamus....

Arrestingly, Gance saw everything that was there to come from the mid twenties [!] As I sit, in the garden, surrounded by bibliographic material, I am shocked. Gance’s manifestos of ‘The cinema of tomorrow’ or his very insistence that the cinema *is* tomorrow seem like a series of regenerative memoirs pertaining to a Nostradamus of film culture! He anticipates not only colour and sound but tri-dimensionality, an era when the screen shall no longer be a dividing wall. How could anyone be reading such lines thinking of the past? (see p. 168 of Sophie Daria’s study of Gance). The idea of suppressing crepuscules is only one amongst many other exalting points Gance kept repeating to the audience. (ibid. p.33).

Again, mysticism, conclusions about the insubordinate human nature, all preoccupied Gance from the moment he started working with film. It is well known that his experience of the First World War left him with a pronounced civic sense. He kept addressing cinema like a luminous symphony, both physical and spiritual at the same time. (ibid, passim).

Such predispositions are detectable also in his poetry:

'Mon avenir est incertain
Mon avenir est incertain
Jusqu'a la fin; de mort suivie
Que feront le roi, l'aigrefin?
Tous feront meme comedie.
La gurre ruine toutes mes esperance'. (+translation)

It is also informative that with the coming of the Second World War, Gance worked on a re-release of *J'accuse*. He generally regarded this film as une '*oeuvre humaine*', not designed for commercial exploitation. My film is '*an acte de foi*', he would often say.

Roger Icart's new study (pp.34-38) sheds light on Gance's meditations on sacrifice and fratricide. For further edifications read also the Post-face of this study written by Kevin Brownlow on pages 272 to 274.

J'accuse la guerre d'hier d'avoir prepare l'Europe d'aujourd'hui et l'Europe d'aujourd'hui de préparer la guerre de demain, qui serait l'anéantissement total de l'Europe... j'aime mon pays et j'estime qu'on n'a pas le droit d'assister en témoin muet a la méthodique organisation des massacres de demain. Au lendemain de la guerre, on parlait des étas-unis d'Europe. L'Europe d'aujourd'hui este divisée en blocs rivaux. Nous respirons un air empoisonnà et nous dormons sur de milliers de tonnes d'explosifs....comme le livre. Le cinema a sa mission à remplir et mon film n'aura pas été inutile si, comme je l'espère, il incite le spectateur à faire un retour sur lui même... Je dédié ce film aux morts de la guerre de demain qui, sans doute, le regarderont avec scepticisme, sans y reconnaître leur image,
C est pour que j'accuse soit encore plus vrai, plus expressif; pour qu'il donne a tous ceux qui le verront l'épouvante de cette chose affreuse qui fait de vous ce que vous etes! – Abel Gance

All in all, I feel particularly inclined to sustain Jean Arroy's opinion about Gance 'I love him in his silent suffering, the meaning and the beauty of his suffering'. (cf. Norman King's study on Abel Gance, page 18).

Una passione infiammabile, is omnipresent in Italian too, facilitated by Enrico Groppali.

Gance's proclamations also betray his poetry, his vision of life, and his animistic concerns. Cinema is not just a mirror to the world, it is rather the world transformed. His rejection of the wall as the screen conveys his greater programmatic interest; his idea of an all-engulfing cinema, spectacular. The focus lies on the experience, on the spectator and on the act of communicating about things that matter. A proclamation of and for the being. Indeed, his exalted glorification of a unique, tangible memory seems to highlight the order of thinking at the time. To respect his films would be to believe in these eventful mechanisms behind it; to absorb the freshness, the extraordinary innovative input of his artistry. His films are like a symphonic fugue, what you don't know or didn't have enough time to explore matters just as much as what you see and hear and seem able to isolate into a meaningful experience. Effectively, it is a question of magnitude, or in Louis Delluc's words in relation to Gance, 'of never ceasing to think big...' (*Abel Gance Promethee Foudroye*, p.101)). In my view, such aspirant, catapulted enthusiasm can only be matched by a few passages of Claude Mauriac's diary. Such phrases bear the imprint of visual proofs, they start documenting a whole era. Gance did not think of such issues in abstract terms, on the contrary his inflections bear the trademark of anti-conformism reflected by what he calls, insightfully, 'the secret of the spiral'. As Gance insists:

All my life, all my work turns not according to the wheel but according to the spiral. Or the circular factum of the spiral line serves considerably to enlighten our ideas about historical matters, and to explain the true spirit of periods of 'return to the antique'.

Reassembling some of my earlier obsessions with the musical accompaniment for silents, the detectable philosophy of rhythms as

proclaimed by an old text signed by Jacques Dalcroze, Nelly Kaplan's wonderful study about *Napoleon* secures the theoretical framework needed to get around Gance's filmic experimentations:

Relying on a text dating as early as 1250, Gance already observes that

'the composition of images is a spirit in a body...As for images, the sages call them Thelgam or Tetzavi, which may be interpreted as violators, for everything the image does, it does by violence and in order to vanquish everything for which it is composed'. (cited in Kaplan, p.18)

Even more significant is Gance's appropriation of Novalis's text from 1810:

Visible music, properly speaking, is images, arabesques, models, ornaments...visible objects are the expression of feelings...All matter is close to light, all action is close to seeing and every organ is close to the eye ...Every image is an incantation. A spirit summoned is a spirit appearing.'

For Gance, cinema was not in any way different, as he concludes:

There are two sorts of music, the music of sound and the music of light which is none other than cinema itself; and it's the music of light which stands higher in the scale of vibrations... There is noise and there is music. There is cinema and there is the art of cinema which has not yet created its neologism...Already, however, several Christopher Columbuses of light have emerged...All is or becomes possible. A drop of water, a drop of star ...Cinema becomes an art of the alchemist from which we can expect the transmutation of all other arts if we can only touch its heart: the heart, the metronome of cinema...Our Art requires a harsh law, demanding, rejecting what is pleasant or original at any price, neglecting virtuosity and the facile transposition of pictures... Another thing: reality is not enough'. (cited in Kaplan, p.20)

The absent diary

Initially, I saw this paper as a misinterpretation of a diary. Later, I realised that the days are lost and worse, that they have managed to exist mutually infected, like pouring emulsions describing conflicting tonalities. In this sense, I should better refrain from any over-emphatic tendency. Clearly, there is a most revelatory relationship between silent film and death, between cinema and death, in particular. I feel, I have learned from Paolo's books a certain philosophical detachment and

perhaps a shyness regarding these matters. I wonder if death could truly be ‘a creation of the mind’ as Paolo refers to the mutated object, the nitrate entity suffering changes. (see all his books). Accepting my time with the silents I feel I am under the auspices of a greater Time and whatever I will do or whoever I am meant to become I must learn to cherish the importance of this ‘talking time’ ahead of me, of the future and past Giornate presences.

Not only time, but also unknown spaces

La vie merveilleuse de Paris or beautifully sung Parigi

was an event which enabled me to commute geographically. Believe it or not, I have never been to Paris. Imagine my joy to see the old rails on the screen...In this context, Richard Abel’s remark that ‘music is the *matter* of film’ (34 silent film) could not be more adequate. Alchemy and mystical reactions. I wrote on a note, ‘I give the day to The Albastros inspection of *Harmonies*, to the Paris I never got to visit but always dreamt of, to the carousels and the locomotives spinning more vividly than in Ruttman, to Patrick’s voice and Touve’s hands and to the ecstatic kiss on the cheek I gave them afterwards.’

And, on another note:

‘I can’t think of a more exquisite moment than seeing Touve perform whilst remembering his masterclass and shy jokes from last year. The sense of belonging somewhere in tune with the true harmonies... that’s it...I remember perfectly well singing to myself in the dead of the night, waking up some unworthy mortals, with my recollection of ‘Parigi...Parigi...’

Ma nuit chez Maud, about an imaginary encounter

Besides, *J’accuse*, and still on the French territory, another mesmerising plunge was made... straight into the life of Max Linder. It is not a coincidence, nothing is. My findings include a brief description of the collaboration between Linder and Gance on the comedy *Au Secours*.

Loving Linder for so long, this was a time of meeting his vigilant daughter. Here is what I kept on a second slippery note:

This is an invisible report of an evening that never took place, with Linder's *chapeau* at his Institute in Bordeaux. Or was it perhaps descending from the previous singing locomotives straight on the streets of Paris – struggling to identify his *chapeau de paille [en Italie?]*... This is a visit in my dreams, a vivisection of all the films Linder made and I will never know or have the chance to see... It is also an *hommage* to the woman left with tears in her eyes and interrupting us from crying in the middle of projection. It is a projection of a projection and seeing Max tactfully taking a bath in public in a moment of sheer extravagance...an instant of liberating joy and fantasy... It is crying without a reason and laughing out loud for many. *This* is the experience which defines Le Giornate and which no matter how hard I try I can't really explain to the fullest...

And also:

I have all reasons to believe that such magical moments may have never occurred; that I am now, still walking, talking, writing in a dream.

Asta, the only woman like Hamlet.

The festival had the nurturing purpose of feeding my obsession with Asta Nielsen in extremely compelling, yet very simple terms. I remember carrying Paolo's book as if it were a secret artefact. Walking along in jubilation, pretending to read German and generally bragging to anyone; obliging friends to gaze at the magnificent photos with the same stupor as I did. And rightly so – Asta is the most adoring and adorable, sublime Hamlet on screen I've ever had the chance to see.

Jean, Darling

It turned out, that Asta was not the only woman that would trigger such magnetic responses. The second concert with Jean Darling is part of those moments one never knows how to express or if one should address them in the first place. The problem is not one of connoisseurship but of realising one cannot compete with Jean Darling's contagious sense of humour. Or, as I've used Kevin Brownlow's preface to Paolo '*the information is there, the art has gone...*'

In the case of Jean Darling, the information is there and the art is in plenty!

Or, as I reflected earlier:

Neither the extraordinary Kurotegumi Sukeroku by Fuyushima nor the Divas and their complicated relationship with snakes or tigers (Bertini and Negri) could have prepared the audience for meeting Jean Darling.

I was more than right. Like Linder, like Chaplin beforehand, it never seemed more obvious that comedy is tragedy – but with a tragic that never puts things down for good. I will always remember, Jean, walking out of the Auditorium accompanied by her young escort, a boyish gentleman. Seeing her, I said in a half teasing, half jealous manner ‘When will I have a boy like that?’ to which she promptly replied ‘Wait till you’re eighty!’ I went to the next screening still wearing that witty smile on my face. I hope to have the same energy, when I am forty.

La Danse pas de deux or another kind of dancing

I find here my old commentary in full:

Chopin’s prelude – is a good starter for Edith Kramer’s advice in her Jonathan Dennis Lecture. I felt at home hearing sentences like, ‘film is alive’, ‘let the audience breathe the film’, cinemateques instead of empty churches...the idea of taking your public on a journey, that is precisely what she did with her heart-warming speech. What does it mean to restore colour and to be taken on a mirage similar with the rediscovery of Camerini’s *Rotaie* ? This dance continued at the meeting of women and film history. Not to undermine the *Golem*, but for me *Le Danse du Flambeau* and the *Pas de deux et soli* and the pleasantly detectable sound of John Sweeney took me back in time, one year ago... where the whole film theory movement came to life inside me, when I said ‘cinema is movement, is dance’....

Le tour du monde d’une policier

Paolo’s recommendation, this flaming celluloid romance of time travelling and adventure works hand in hand with any vision of myth and return/rebirth. Dreaming, or waking up into dream, this is the closest description of the colouristic effects of this short piece. Even back then, I had a glimpse of its impenetrable function...It is no other but the untranslatable logic of the myth in its purity, I said to myself, As if a concrete (yes, material, tonal, visual) realisation of the nitrate’s ‘internal history’ – could speak about the print’s avoiding of decay and this abrupt

confession could satisfy my insatiable wish for romantic transcendence and idealism. This memory fulfilled is what gave me the sparkle for the Gancean trajectories to inhabit, now, at the time of writing.

Apropos de (Ve)nice reflections on a vaporetto without ticket

Such line appears last on my forgotten notes. It reads as if I could meditate upon my innate Eastern-European predilection towards Spiritualism, Dadaism and good old superstition since my final epitaph, without even envisaging such atrocious misbehaving, unmercifully predicts:

‘A discussion of last year’s melted into present...a propos de nice anticipating my zero de conduite.’

What is more telling than a zero or a commendable conduite is the fact that more important than the myth is only, the return. Pordenone is my home and the greatest pleasure for any prodigious daughter is the liberating joy of forgiveness, the sheer pleasure of coming back and not surprisingly making the same mistakes as the year before, but no matter what, keeping and treasuring that particular flavour. As Gance so often proclaimed – ‘There is no great cinema, without enthusiasm!’

**See The Death Of Cinema but also Burning Passions, or Silent Film An Introduction).*