

## **The Outcasts, or notes on a revolution**

By Guilherme Maggi Savioli

*Dedicated to Andrea Tonacci*

*There's a beautiful quote by Griffith: "What's missing from modern cinema is the wind (...) the wind is nothing but the spirit."*

Jean-Marie Straub

*Out there - who knows? At least we'll play the game to the end.*  
Dakkar (Lionel Barrymore) in *The Mysterious Island* (1929), by Lucien Hubbard

In the catalogue introduction to the main programme strand of the 33rd Giornate del Cinema Muto - The Barrymores - one point claims attention: there is a consensus that this subject is long out of fashion, especially for the academic world. A so-called "modern sensibility" has relegated an acting style - a very specific way to interpret human questions and give them physical expression - to complete oblivion. Some negative results of this are instantly apparent: the difficulty of finding the films, the prints with missing reels, and those that sadly have already disappeared entirely.

Taking a look at the entire program of the 2014 *Giornate* it is possible to infer some relations between the variety of films presented, works that just like those of The Barrymores can often be regarded as long out of fashion. These relations aren't totally clear – they are sometimes even hidden. Relations that flow like an underground river, connecting men and their work not only by an historical situation, but by something much deeper, much more intense: a common approach, a common sensibility to what we've been calling Cinema, since ever.

### **The Barrymores: life as it is**

*Jean-Pierre Melville used to say that much more courage is needed to make a classical than a modern film. Telling an elegant history with a complex message is something brutal. It's out of fashion. It seems like there's a refuse of the feeling, of the melodrama. Nowadays, the only thing that is done when a piece of art is made is creating an ironic distance. The risk of emotion is never taken. We look at these films like pieces on a wall.*

James Gray

Lionel, Ethel and John: many things could be written about their acting style and the movies in which they played. Although what claims attention here is something quite simple but unusual: there is no ironic distance, never ever. To experience their presence in those films is like watching for the first time ever the whole human adventure figured all

at once. A simple gesture and its immediate contradiction, a simple look at the horizon (figured here as a wide range of possibilities) and the feeling of having seen all its terrible consequences: that's what they have given us through their acting, through their presence, through their materialization of all these ambiguities.

First of all, Lionel. *The Copperhead* (1920), *Jim the Penman* (1921) and *The Bells* (1921). Shaking hands with Abraham Lincoln, forging a signature or killing someone: in each a miserable life is engendered. In the first two films we are invited to follow a life marked by a silent grudge. At the end what comes to light is a crystalline figuration of the hackneyed notion of sacrifice: Milt Shanks finally revealing his noble secret; Ralston sinking a ship full of rogues, including himself. Lionel perfectly embodies this notion, everything is reflected in his vicarious eyes.

*The Bells* gives us pretty much the opposite. If in these other films we had seen Lionel embody a gradual, meticulous construction that culminates in an enlightened vision, here we observe a process of destruction. A man trying desperately to reach a goal becomes incapable of discernment, of calling things by their own names. Once more, everything is expressed by Lionel's body: this corpse that moves unceasingly through his world and afterwards through a dream, trying to protect or reach something still unknown. (What are Lionel's shy smiles in this movie but the perfect figuration of resignation?).

Of the three siblings, Ethel is the one whose work has suffered most from the passage of time. Only *The Awakening of Helena Richie* (1916), *The White Raven* (1917) and *The Call of Her People* (1917) survive, and only the first is complete. Yet with all these losses, and the incomplete narratives, we still have her presence. The lacunae may even reinforce the attention demanded – commanded – by Ethel's remarkable presence. What we recognise is the power exerted by the *grande dame of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century American Stage*. Her characters reveal how it was to be a woman in the first decades of the century; the misfortunes and prejudices experienced by a lone woman: no marriage, no family and, finally, no one. Ethel's journey narrates the ways in which someone put aside by society may impose her existence.

Finally, there's John. *The Beloved Rogue* (1924), *Beau Brummel* (1924) and *When a man Loves* (1927): through the great sets, reconstructing former eras, there's John Barrymore climbing, jumping and fighting, over-riding every obstacle destined to impress and imprison an outsider, as all his characters are. We have the experience of watching the discharge of a massiver concentration of energy.

The opening of *When a man Loves* is the best example of it: in a few minutes John falls for Dolores Costello, just by looking at her. In a flash, he climbs to her balcony and convinces her to escape with him. What we see now is a spectacular flight, a marvelous explosion of energy. The situation recurs repeatedly in *The Beloved Rogue*, which, like *Beau Brummel* can be watched almost as a documentary of John's unique *persona* trying to survive in a society whose rigid hierarchy tries to overwhelm a body that freely moves through its social estates.

But it is with the earlier duo, *The Incurable Dukane* (1915) and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1920) that John's most beautiful artistic facet becomes clearer. Here, the essence of both characters played by the youngest sibling is ambiguity. If in the aforementioned later works the drama and the humour coexist as the natural data of his characters, Dukane, Jekyll and Hyde live like tragic data of life itself. Dreyer once said: "In cinema you can't play the role of a Jew:, you need to be one". Maybe something that turned the Barrymores' acting style (not that they all rigidly followed similar specific precepts, but presuming that they share common traces) out of fashion is this: a very unique way of showing/figuring life as it is, with all its ambiguities and consequences, in all its tragedy and joy.

### **Fairbanks/Dwan: *The Good Bad Man* and the trip to the heart of American cinema**

*...the taste of reason; silent gratitude to the few human beings who have shown some goodness, this is how Dwan's characters oppose themselves against evil and also the bloody disasters that abound in his works (...) It's where the classicism of his work lies. That's the common trace, or, if you prefer, the essence of any classicism that wants to hold this world, besides everything, to turn it into a better place.*  
Jacques Lourcelles in *Allan Dwan. Présence du Cinéma* n° 22-23, 1966.

In his famous article about Howard Hawks, Jacques Rivette wrote that "the evidence is the trace of the genius". Evidence and narrative continuity: things that ever since were praised by Hollywood. Only in the heart of this system could a film like Allan Dwan's *The Good Bad Man* (1915) ever have been brought into being. Produced by Griffith, we go along here with the history of *Passin' Through* (Douglas Fairbanks), a thief who steals from the rich to give to kids born out of wedlock. *Passin' Through* is also a man searching for his roots (a lost father) and who falls in a love with a girl (Bessie Love). A complete world imposes itself, revealed to us through Dwan's eyes.

Here the domain of evidence and continuity is something that doesn't seek to fool our eyes or feelings.

Quite the opposite, everything must be shown, exposed to the last detail, the *good* and the *bad* of each human being.

Unable to deal with the fact that he has fallen in love with the girl, *Passin' Through*/Fairbanks implodes (in a way, an opposite acting style from that of John Barrymore, which explodes his energy), he demands vigorously: "Get out of my way, I'm in love", and runs. It's like watching the first man to fall in love, the first man to be aware of that fact and also the first man to be filmed and shown in this most intimate situation.

In *The Good Bad Man* the world imposes itself mostly due to the view of the west. Nothing extraordinary happens, nothing is permanent (the protagonist is called *Passin' Through* and in the restored version presented at Pordenone, Bessie Love's character is named only as "A Girl") but a single look at the men riding their horses into the prairies, or Fairbanks and Bessie Love exchanging looks, with the wind sweeping the same prairies behind them, tell us everything. It's like taking an intimate, pioneering trip

to the heart of the American cinema (no wonder Bogdanovich named his study, *Allan Dwan, The last pioneer*). Everything Dwan did after – from *Sands of Iwo Jima* to *The Most Dangerous Man Alive* – was already there, in those pioneer views of the west and its wind.

### **Raoul Walsh's *Regeneration*: we won't grown old together**

*The filmmaker (Raoul Walsh) has defined his respect for reality by establishing the principle that there is only one way to stage a certain character in a given situation.*

*That means: the ideal organization of the visible and audible material, depending on assumptions freely set by the script, would have an overwhelming necessity, similar to boiling water at a hundred degrees.*

Michel Mourlet in *A manly lucidity. Présence du Cinéma* n° 13, 1962

Just like *Passin' Through*, the main character of Raoul Walsh's *Regeneration*, Owen, is an orphan. Although, what Walsh's classical intelligence narrates is the complete path traced by this outsider. From that crucial progression of events, nothing more than the essential can be shown.

Alongside his classicism is a deep tragical conscience about what is being told (as one intertitle says: “The prizes of existence go to the man who has the most daring in defying the law, and the quickest fist in defending his own rights”). There's no place for ironic distance here either: the movement of life demands complete devotion, complete attention.

### **The most Brechtian author of all time**

During his passage through North America, Eisenstein wanted to film an ambitious project entitled *Glass House*. It would have demanded a complex set: a glass building all of whose interiors would be visible at the same time. A film which would expose, in all their minutest details, the daily activities and gestures of the building's inhabitants. At the same time it would also reveal all the social stratification of American society. Once more, the evidence as a primal necessity, a primal trait of a cinema in which the detailed description and confrontation of the conflicting data of reality becomes a privileged tool of knowledge.

Not surprisingly, one of his few supporters and enthusiasts was Charles Chaplin.

Being Brechtian is not about filming a few reflectors or tripods. Being Brechtian is assuming the conflict and the dialectic as the driving force of your dramaturgy - exactly what is central in Eisenstein's work. In this sense, no wonder Chaplin is the most Brechtian author of all time.

At the exact moment when modernity claimed its price – at the dawn of the talkies – Chaplin maintained his iconic character and his rigorous method in *City Lights* (1931), a “comedy romance in pantomime”.

More than in any other film in the *Giornate* programme, the gesture is here a central task. The pantomime's choreographies are where Chaplin's evidences take place. Through repetition, through reinforcement, through an extremely physical controlled scheme. Between all this emerges his humor. Finally the contradictions of the environment inhabited by The Tramp are exposed all at once.

### **Who will be responsible for telling men their own history?**

We could keep going further and keep asking ourselves: what have Paul Nadar's films in common with Colleen Moore's acting in *Synthetic Sin* (1929)? What are the links between the impressive Méliès' coloured shorts and the brutal surrealism of *Whoozit* (1928)? And between the rebellious nature in *Sir Arne's Treasure* (1919) and the devastated land of *The Love of Jeanne Ney* (1927)? The common approach, the common sensibility that passes – just like an underground river – beneath the complex works of playwrights from the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century demanded new strategies of staging – cannot be assumed as a privilege of fiction films nor a theoretical tool identified with a restrictive authorship theory. The *mise en scène* of cinema has more to do with a sensibility, with a disposition to capture some details that engender a whole world, from those committed in creating images.

In a text devoted to Serge Daney, the Portuguese director Manoel de Oliveira writes: “...since cinema first appeared, it has always existed, not as a machine, but as Cinema. Therefore we may say that Cinema has no specific time, because it is the result of all arts combined, and the spirit that animates them”.

The subtle revolution effected by these men and women at the dawn of an art-form was simply allowing the spirit to continue to exist over the materials; and that suffices as the only aesthetic requirement.

In an art-form that dispenses a human ability to recreate the world in a realistic way, maybe the vital result is simply the presence of the wind in every frame.