

Blessed tears: the human soul unveiled in *Les Misérables* by Henri Fescourt (1925-26)

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The melodrama, the cinema and the tears

One of the unquestionable happenings of Pordenone's 34th edition of the Giornate del Cinema Muto was the exhibition of the cinematographic adaptation of Victor Hugo's masterpiece *Les Misérables*, shot by Henri Fescourt in 1925-26. The 397 minutes long *cinéroman* – a kind of serial whose label aimed to stress the literary value of the object, adapted from the classics of the French literature – reproduces in film the monumental breath of the narrative by Hugo, which is originally divided in five volumes (the first edition was published in 1862). The dimensions of the picture, together with the density in the depiction of the characters and the entanglement of the paper lives – and their relations to the destiny of the post-revolutionary France – and the development of the cinematographic technique testify, once and for all, that the cinema inherited from the novelistic genre the vocation for storytelling. The cinema was the new novel: poignant and popular. Its influxes would mold the 20th century sensibility, like the novel had molded the sensibility of the 19th century.

We inherited this tradition, and this was specially clear to me in the afternoon and evening of that Wednesday of Festival, when the Theatre Verdi suffered, from top to bottom, before the mishaps faced by Jean Valjean, Fantine, Cosette, Eponine, Marius and Gavroche, along the hard journey of existence. The conventional scheme of the Melodrama was all there: in the pure young lady obliged to surrender to prostitution in order to feed her daughter, in the poor child slaved by the shrew, in the repentant sinner persecuted by a society that judged by appearances. In the last time escapes and rescues, in the disguises, in the adventurous sequences of fighting and persecution.

We knew – as we know the kind of stuff all the melodramas are made of – that Jean Valjean, once his sins were purged, would end his life in peace with the society that was his mother and stepmother; that Faustine would have to purge with death the stains in her body (and so she does, won by tuberculosis, as Marguerite Gautier once did); that Cosette would be rescued from Madame Thénadier; that, once and for all, the bad guys would suffer and the good guys would reach the bliss – after all, this genre distributes punishments and prizes to the extent of the crimes and the good deeds performed by the characters. And yet, all the souls that fulfilled the Theatre Verdi for six and a half hours wept in unison the fate of those celluloid lives.

Florence Fix gave her book on the melodramatic genre the subtitle of *la tentation des larmes*, “the temptation of tears”¹. Victor Hugo is not strictly a *melodramaturge*, but his work is filled with the characteristics of the prose of men as Pixérécourt – whose theatrical production aimed to perform a function similar to the one performed by the churches, closed by the revolutionaries of 1789: to serve for the collective catharsis through pathetic moments that led the audience to tears. And so the dramas welcomed the Christian *mise en scène*, distributing their characters between heaven and hell. The curious thing is that, without being particularly religious – us, the men of the skeptical 21st century – we become the most faithful of creatures when facing the literature by Hugo, or Henri Fescourt's cinema. We do not necessarily go to church, but we are the direct descendants of that hybrid society –

¹ FIX, F. *Le Mélodrame: la tentation des larmes*. Paris: Klincksieck, 2011.

made up of individuals from all backgrounds and professions, from the *sans-culottes* to the high bourgeoisie – that could finally join both in society and before the Art, in the same exhibition hall.

The break with the *status quo*, made possible by the French Revolution, extended the breeze of democracy to the artistic field. As Thomasseau² notes, all was possible to the melodrama, the child of the revolution: the assemblage of history and fantasy, of everyday life and of the miraculous, of comic and tragic, of adventure and lecture, of dance, of music... As half-bred as the society, the genre soon began to suffer from prejudice. Victor Hugo did not want to assume how greatly he was influenced by it, as did Balzac, both authors of *romans-fleuves* which owed nothing to the melodramatic novels by Eugène Sue or the theatrical melodramas by Pixérécourt. As I doubt Henri Fescourt – the author of this masterful adaptation of *Les Misérables* –, would want to see his work “reduced” to the aegis of the melodrama, hence his option to define it as “*cinéroman*” (cinema adapted from the high-literature, what underlined its artistic bias) rather than “serial” (the title given to the multitude of digestive-serial movies, shot in America and Europe in the years 1910 and 1920).

The prejudice against melodrama – nurtured by intellectuals and novelists throughout the nineteenth –, did not prevent it to be the most influential of genres, getting shaped both to the letter and to the footlight, and finally metamorphosing itself, by the twilight of the century, in the lights and shadows that were responsible for providing the visions that fascinate us until today. Questioning if the cinema has a soul, Edgar Morin states that it has nothing but that: “It overflows with it; it oozes with it (...). Love, passion, emotion, heart: the cinema, like our world is all slimy and lachrymal with them. So much soul! So much soul!”³. The blessed tears of the melodramatic novel and the theatrical melodrama finally bathe the cinema, new and lasting space for collective catharsis.

Which *Les Misérables* did we see in Pordenone?

One and a half century separate us from the already historic screening of *Les Misérables* in Pordenone – accompanied by the penetrating music by Neil Brand – and the publication of the five volumes’ masterpiece by Victor Hugo. Ninety years separate the *première* of the *cinéroman* and the showing of the film’s restored version. But what are 150 or 90 years compared to the freshness of those images that seem to have been shot yesterday, so acutely they speak to our eyes and hearts?

Looking back in perspective, we realize that we are the offspring of those artists born with the Revolution, to which human subjectivity overlapped distinctions or privileges of any kind. We were modern, postmodern, but we remain to be a bunch of hopeless romantic fellows, getting wounded when Fantine strips her lap before a potential client, under the winter snow, or when little Cosette’s tortured face strikes us in a close-up, and she silently reverberates “Oh, God. Oh, God.”

What paths and detours did Henri Fescourt’s film follow, so it reached us with such an inescapable actuality? Like Hugo, Fescourt chooses to depict the unprovided from France – the “miserables” in question – from a few beings whose fates intertwine with the nation’s history. Subjectivity as the key to reach the collectivity: romantic aspiration par excellence. The filmmaker duplicates the novelist,

² THOMASSEAU, J. M. *Méiodramatiques*. Saint-Denis: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, Université Paris 8, 2009, p. 17.

³ MORIN, E. *The cinema or the imaginary man*, translated by Lorraine Mortimer. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2005, p. 111.

weaving each episode from a specific character, relying on flashbacks to establish the relationship between each character and its ancestors and the other characters of the *cinéroman*.

Hugo tells the story of 1- Fantine (though the first volume also depicts Jean Valjean, his long incarceration due to a lower crime, his change of identity once he is free from prison, and finally his encounter with the fading Fantine); 2- Cosette (from the ailments she suffered in the hands of the ambitious Madame Thénadier until the child's encounter with the protective Jean Valjean); 3- Marius (the love the liberal young lad nurtures for Cosette – now a pretty young woman, whom Jean Valjean had adopted as a daughter); 4- The Idyll in the Rue Plumet and the Epic in the Rue St. Denis (the romantic encounters between Cosette and Marius, and their sharp separation when the young man is wounded in a barricade); 5- Jean Valjean (his journey to save his child's lover; his discreet removal from both lives, once the lovers get married – since Marius discovered the truth regarding his father in law's past – and finally, his reconciliation with the daughter, the son in law and the society, on his deathbed).

Fescourt essays to follow the novelist's footsteps while segmenting the episodes of his *cinéroman*. However, the establishment of the film's integrality is more difficult than it is supposed. Which *Les Misérables* did we see in Pordenone? The silent cinema obliges scholars to face mishaps that are unusual in our era, so accustomed we are to the detailed records of each production. Movies were shot for immediate consumption, and although the cinema was an emerging industry, there was no concern for the preservation of its products – which led few movies to resist in its entirety. The presentation of the Collegium concerning *Les Misérables* made that clear. The restoration made use of a copy on acetate film, available at the Cinémathèque de Toulouse; while the dyeing was made out from a nitrate sample of the original work. However, the copy was not edited, and the editing work was done during the restoration, from Fescourt script. Moreover, *Les Misérables* were shot by multiple cameras positioned side by side – a common practice at that time, aiming the production of multiple negatives that could be sold around the world. Another point worthy of note: the lesser extension of the restored copy compared to the original (6.30 instead of 8 hours) is due to the faster speed of the current projection, or the original material losses?

The final result makes an effort to mimic the screening of *Les Misérables* to the mid 1920's audiences, but it stresses beforehand the impossibility of the project. It is impossible to access the “real” movie, just like it was screened to the primary audiences, since several copies were set up in 1925-26, from different angles; and as faithful as it has been the copy presented in Pordenone, we cannot forget that it was carried out during the restoration process made in the years of 2010, following – albeit unconsciously – our contemporary sensibility. A final consideration: the segmentation of the film considering the peculiarities of each exhibition market generates different fruitions, depending on the location or time.

***Les Misérables* and the primary audiences**

Fescourt segments his *cinéroman* in four episodes: 1- Jean Valjean, 2- Fantine 2- Marius and 4- L'Épopée de la rue Saint-Dennis. Sold to foreign markets, it would arrive in Brazil – the essayist being Brazilian determines the geographic choice of the example... – in November 1926, firstly displayed in a full-length format, in a single session of the *Odeon* cinema, in Rio de Janeiro; and reissued afterwards in a serial format, “in six chapters and 32 parts” (1- Fantine; 2- The trial of Jean

Valjean; 3- The search for Cosette; 4- Cosette, 5- Marius; 6- Love, justice and freedom)⁴ shown weekly at the *Empire* cinema, in Rio, between January and February 1927. The dissemination strategies of the two pieces varied. If, in November, the screening was preceded only by a newspaper synopsis of the plot, in January and February the film “chapters” were screened concurrently with the Brazilian reissue of Victor Hugo’s novel, serialized by Rio’s newspaper *Romance-Jornal*⁵. As it was customary during Silent Era, the printed words gave voice to the moving shadows, and not just during the film’s intertitles.

When *Les Misérables* was screened as a feature, the reviews were not the best. One of our specialized magazines criticized the continuity as well as all the major actors and the small use of exciting situations, and concluded that the film was “dull and uninteresting”⁶, far less entertaining than the US version of the story (by Frank Lloyd, 1917). Split into six short “chapters”, the work was exhibited within programs in which took part other comic or dramatic films (like *Volcano*, by William K. Howard, and *Paris*, by Edmund Goulding, both from 1926), a common practice then. In this new format the *cinéroman* seems to have pleased, so much it was acquired by another exhibition hall in Rio, the *Theater St. Joseph*: so that two different episodes of the film were screened in the city, concurrently.

The publishing of Hugo’s novel in a serial form, in newspaper, seems to have contributed to the success of the *cinéroman* *Les Misérables* in Brazil – it should be noted that the titles of the film “chapters” screened in Brazil are more influenced by the novelist’s volumes than by Fescourt’s filmic episodes. The filmmaker leaves out the continuity (the conventional explanation of causes and effects) to build some highly concentrated episodes, in which the emotional investment overlaps the effort in the construction of narrative bonds – or of sensational adventures (maybe that’s why the Brazilian critic mentioned above has found the film either languid or elliptical). Leaning on the printed novel, the audience of the six “chapters” film best digested the news, since it could supply the omissions of the cinematic storytelling with the voluminous printed narrative.

***Les Misérables* and the contemporary audiences**

Curiously enough, it is this so-called “fault” of the film that makes it so delightful to us nowadays. Maybe because we have behind us a century of moving images, and so we learned to understand and love works like *Sunrise* (by Murnau, 1927), whose mastery was questioned by its primary audiences because of the very same episodic narrative, slowness and melancholy that pours out of *Les Misérables*. Or because we watch *Les Misérables* with the hearts fulfilled with nostalgia for the cinema we love and that is gone. Because, above all, our sensitivity is still shaped by the *melodramatic imagination* which gives its name to the book written by Peter Brooks⁷. We continue to exalt the virtue and reproach the vice, to believe in the salvation of souls, to cheer for the union of loving couples and the resolution of conflicts.

When I left the screening of *Les Misérables* in Pordenone, still immersed in Neil Brand’s music, the brain impregnated with the bright eyes of the little Cosette carrying her new doll, or the harsh face of

⁴ Os Miseráveis. *A Manhã*, Rio de Janeiro, 30 dez. 1926, p. 16.

⁵ Romance-jornal. *A Manhã*, Rio de Janeiro, 13 jan. 1927, p. 2.

⁶ Os Miseráveis/*Les Misérables*. *Cinearte*, Rio de Janeiro, 15 dez. 1926, p. 28.

⁷ BROOKS, P. *The Melodramatic Imagination*. Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1976.

Jean Valjean after its ultimate pacification – once he saw his daughter for one last time – I had an epiphany: if the silent cinema can be as contemporary and sharp as some of the current serial fiction shot in Great Britain or North America – or our Brazilian “telenovela” – why does it remain restricted to such a small group of scholars and cinephiles, so far away from the general public? The way the *cinéroman* was screened to us – in two parts, encouraging the religious concentration, accompanied by a music that efficiently led the shadows across the screen – can be reproduced in future presentations of this film (and, why not, of other films), in commercial cinemas and on television. It’s up to us to withdraw *Les Misérables* from the windows of the museums and promote its encounter with the contemporary audiences, to whom this film has still much to say.