



RESEARCHING WOMEN IN SILENT CINEMA

NEW FINDINGS AND PERSPECTIVES

EDITED BY MONICA DALL'ASTA, VICTORIA DUCKETT, LUCIA TRALLI

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ALMA MATER STUDIORUM
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Researching Women in Silent Cinema: New Findings and Perspectives

Edited by: Monica Dall'Asta, Victoria Duckett, Lucia Tralli

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Peer Review Statement

This publication has been edited through a blind peer review process. Papers from the Sixth Women and the Silent Screen Conference (University of Bologna, 2010), a biennial event sponsored by Women and Film History International, were read by the editors and then submitted to at least one anonymous reviewer. When the opinion of the first reader was entirely negative or asked for substantial revision, the essay was submitted to a second anonymous reviewer. In case of a second negative opinion the essay was rejected. When further changes were deemed necessary for publication, the editors worked extensively with the authors to meet the requests advanced by the reviewers.

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A Pendulum of Performances: Asta Nielsen on Stage and Screen

ABSTRACT: Asta Nielsen turned to filmmaking in June 1910 because she was dissatisfied with the minor parts that the Danish theatres were offering her. She aspired big dramatic roles and hoped to convince theatre directors of her talent. Instead, her striking film performance launched her prolific career as a film star who virtually personified screen acting. The focus on Nielsen's work in the cinema, however, has often obscured the significance of the stage performances for her career. This article explores and contextualizes Nielsen's actual stage acting as well as references to the theatre within her films. Nielsen's pantomime performances in the 1910s informed a discussion how variety shows and cinema could benefit from one another; her adaptations of plays in the early 1920s revitalized the debate how to adapt theatre to film; and her star performances in popular plays in the late 1920s, when she toured all over Germany, were an alternative for film parts she deemed inapt for her intense physical and mimic acting style. Asta Nielsen employed the cinema to develop her unsurpassed acting style and to establish her sovereignty as an actress, but the stage ultimately enabled her to maintain her art and position.

Asta Nielsen turned to making films in June 1910 because she was dissatisfied with the roles that the Danish theatres offered her. She wished to play *große dramatische Aufgaben* [grand dramatic endeavors], but instead was given minor parts, mostly comic characters or aged women in which she was unable to display her talent for dramatic acting. It was immediately evident to the film trade as well as to audiences that her acting style was made for the camera, and that her ideas about cinema could help the development of a young medium that was seeking improvement and expansion. The thirty-three films that Nielsen made between 1910 and 1914 together with Urban Gad, a set designer and artistic advisor to the same theatre to which Nielsen was engaged (the Ny Theater [new theater] in Copenhagen), set new standards. Their characters and subjects were new and engaging, their films were longer than the average production of the time, they produced and released their works at a pace that outstripped all others (they made eight films each year, which meant that from August to May a new Asta Nielsen film was released every month) and the quality of their dramatic and comic acting was uniformly high. Further, their films were the subject of much publicity and press coverage, and, finally, circulated internationally. It is amazing for us to discover how a trade paper like the *Lichtbildbühne* praised these initiatives as they occurred. I will illustrate this below. What I want to underline at this opening point, however, is that Nielsen's entrance into film was not a case of replacing one career (the stage) with another (the cinema), and nor was her success on screen seen by audiences as an impediment to her return to the stage. Instead, Nielsen negotiated both forums; avoiding typecasting she allowed her own professional choices to determine when she shifted between stage and screen. In 1911, in the first year of the German production that was publicized as the "Asta Nielsen Series," the

trade paper *Lichtbildbühne* published an article that appointed Nielsen as the first *dramatic* film star. As it explained: “all of a sudden came *The Abyss*, and the popularity of Asta Nielsen occurred overnight.” The anonymous reviewer noted that *The Black Dream* (*Den sorte drom*, Urban Gad, 1911), “with its lengths of 1381 meters and in its dramatic effect, ought to be considered an exceptional masterpiece of film art and technique”¹ (*Lichtbildbühne*, Sept. 2, 1911 8). A few weeks later, *Lichtbildbühne* covered the press screening of *At The Big Moment* (*In dem großen Augenblick*, Urban Gad, 1911). With representatives from all daily and art presses as well as nine hundred literary, theatre and art personalities in attendance, the event had resulted in thirty-two reviews in Berlin’s one hundred newspapers: “This is a success, and practical evidence, that in the papers the Kinematograph is equivalent to the theatre . . . Asta Nielsen and her *Big Moment* have inspired art critics to serious and respectfully elaborate contemplations about the modern art of film. We mention this with great pride”² (*Lichtbildbühne*, Sept. 30, 1911 22). In November that year, *Lichtbildbühne* assessed an “Asta-Nielsen magazine” published by the production company as “a novel and original form of publicity for film appearances,”³ mentioning that every film was viewed by at least six million spectators (*Lichtbildbühne*, Nov. 11, 1911 12).

These citations illustrate the unforeseen impact of Asta Nielsen’s and Urban Gad’s activities on the German film trade. But this is just a backdrop to the theme proper of this paper, which is Asta Nielsen’s stage career in Germany and its intersections with her film career. In 1910, acting for the camera was not equivalent to stage acting, so Nielsen took quite a risk. With *The Abyss* (*Afgrunden*, Urban Gad, 1910), moreover, she and Gad did not intend to enter the *film* trade, but to show to *stage* directors what they were capable of. It was the film’s instant critical and international success that encouraged Nielsen and Gad to continue filming.

In her first film role in *The Abyss*, Nielsen played a modest piano teacher with a gentleman fiancé, who is suddenly overcome by lust for an itinerant performer and follows him to the world of the circus and the variety show. She ends up a pianist and prostitute in a beer garden. This role is about yearning, jealousy, humiliation, revenge and faithfulness. In fact, it is about a woman’s body and soul caught in what we today would characterize as a sado-masochistic relationship. This is most graphically and physically expressed in the famous gaucho dance, set in a variety show that Nielsen and her partner (Poul Reumert) act out in the film. David Mayer has noted in an unpublished article the “cluster of theatrical roles” that may have motivated Gad’s script: the dance echoes Nora’s frantic tarantella in Henrik

¹ “Da kamen plötzlich die ‘Abgründe’ . . . und die Popularität von Asta Nielsen war mit einem Schlage da”; “die in ihrer Länge von 1381 Meter und dramatischen Wirkung als ein außergewöhnliches Meisterwerk der Kinokunst und –Technik bezeichnet werden muß” (All the quoted texts in this paper are translated by the author).

² “Dies ist ein Erfolg, und gleichzeitig ein praktischer Beweis dafür, daß der Kinomatograph seitens der Zeitungen mit dem wirklichen Theater sich getrost auf eine Stufe stellen kann . . . die Asta Nielsen und der ‘Große Augenblick’ [gab] Anlaß zu ernsten und würdevoll durchdachten Betrachtungen über die moderne Lichtbildkunst seitens der Kunst-Kritiker.”

³ “eine neue und originelle Art der Reklame für Film-Erscheinungen.”



Asta Nielsen in *The Abyss* (*Afggrunden*, Urban Gad, 1910).

Ibsen's *A doll's house*, while Nielsen's characterization as a tragic victim of her own passions may have been inspired by, among others, Wedekind's *Earth Spirit* (*Erdegeist*), Strindberg's *Miss Julie* (*Fröken Julie*) and *There are Crimes and Crimes* (*Brott och Brott*, in Germany entitled *Rausch* or *Intoxication*), and Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*. Asta Nielsen will, indeed, play later on the starring role in the cinematic adaptations of these four stage pieces. We may assume from the choice of these roles and pieces that these were among the stage parts that she had wished to act in Denmark. The scenarist and director Gad most likely was familiar with these plays as well, because he had grown up in a cultured family and his mother was a playwright herself (according to Schröder 206).

References to the live stage can be found in many of Nielsen's subsequent films. Indeed, about one third of the seventy-five films interpreted by Asta Nielsen contained references to a form of theatre. Either the films were cinematic adaptations of plays such as the ones mentioned above, or the characters that she played worked as stage performers. As

Nielsen maintained a policy of playing the largest variety of characters as possible in order to preclude typecasting, quite an array of stage performers are sprinkled throughout her oeuvre. They include dancers, singers and actresses who, moreover, perform in a range of theatres, from the high-class opera and the legitimate stage to popular entertainment venues like the circus, the cabaret and the variety shows. Much like *The Abyss*, many of these stories, were tragic love dramas that emphasized Nielsen's ability to dramatically and graphically act a range of emotions and so consolidate her status as an eminent tragic star. The continuous and manifold references to the stage in Nielsen's oeuvre suggest that she aspired to keep working in both film and theater. I therefore argue that it was her circumstances and working conditions that drew her primarily to the cinema.

One circumstance, which prevented her from performing on the stage, was her command of the German language. It took Nielsen years to become fluent, and even when she achieved this, she was never able to get rid of her Danish accent. Even as late as 1926, when resuming her stage career by touring the German provinces, she told a reporter of *Kurier* that her command of the language was not good enough for acting in German classic plays (*Der Film-Kurier*, Jan. 9, 1926 n. pag.).

Prior to this, Asta Nielsen had in fact occasionally performed in variety shows (more precisely in pantomimes, a theatrical genre that was another form of acting without using words). As I have been able to gather so far, these performances concerned at least three pieces: *Prince Harlekin's Tod* (the death of Prince Harlequin) written by Urban Gad and performed in Vienna in March, in Budapest in May and in Frankfurt in October 1913; *L'enfant prodigue* (the lost son) in 1918 in unspecified European cities; and *La main* (the hand) in the Dutch cities of The Hague, Scheveningen, and Rotterdam in November and December 1920 (Streit; Seydel and Hagedorff 141; Beusekom 396-397).

While Asta Nielsen's live performances were very popular with audiences, the press was rather critical. In Austria, this difference was explained by the *Wiener Montagblatt* in the following manner: "This performance is almost too delicate for a variety show . . . its poetic subtleties would be better relished in the context of a cabaret"⁴ (*Wiener Montagblatt*, Mar. 10, 1913 qtd. in Streit 394). The *Österreichischer Komet* of 8 March 1913 similarly concluded: "After all, the stormy applause that she earns in the Variété Ronacher every night, is the result of the cinema. People attend to finally see with their own eyes the famous Asta, who has made the cinema so popular, and they will prefer to go to the cinema in the future, whenever Asta Nielsen films are on the bill . . ."⁵ (W. St. 2 qtd. in Streit 395).

This explanation resonates with the German trade press's ongoing discussion about the intersection of cinema and variety shows. Prevalent during 1913 and 1914, it culminated in

⁴ "Diese Darbietung ist beinahe zu Zart für eine Variétébühne, die doch auf derbere Effekte gestimmt ist, an man würde ihre poetischen Feinheiten im Rahmen eine Kabarets vielleicht besser Goutieren."

⁵ "Immerhin, die rauschenden Beifallstürme, die ihr jetzt allabendlich im Variété Ronacher gespendet werden, sind der Erfolg des Kinos. Man kommt, um endlich einmal persönlich die berühmte Asta zu sehen, die das Kino so populär gemacht hat, und wird in Hinkunft umso lieber ins Kino gehen, wenn man Asta Nielsen-Films geben wird."

the establishment of a weekly insert in the *Lichtbildbühne* in June 1913 called the *Kino-Variété* [cinema-variety show]. Editor in chief Arthur Mellini argued on May, 3 1913 that the new form of entertainment, in which cinema and the variety show are combined, was a happy one that had a future. He observed: “The variety show has first offered hospitality to the cinema, soon it will be the reverse, . . . and the development will be like this: Variety show—Variety show with Cinema—Variety shows and Cinemas—Cinemas—*Kino-Variétés*—*Variété-Kinos*”⁶ (Mellini 7). Mellini’s prediction was based upon phenomena abroad: in Russia, New York and Italy, such *Kino-Variétés* were booming. Also in Berlin, however, more and more variety show stages were including films in their programs in order to survive. (In my dissertation, “Histories of Fame and Failure,” I have shown that in the pre-war years the mixing of live and screened performances was embraced as a new and potentially productive programming practice in France and the Netherlands too).

To support the thesis that the variety show was being productively combined with the cinema, the German trade paper listed an increasing number of global *Kino-Variétés* in each weekly issue. In October 1913, for example, the list ran up to five columns naming some one hundred and thirty theatres (*Lichtbildbühne* Oct. 17, 1913 66-67) The *Lichtbildbühne* also discussed the professional and technical problems and benefits that resulted when the two modes of entertainment were joined. In January 1914, the consequences for actors were instead the issue. Commenting on Max Linder’s combined live and screened shows in France, Hugo Schwab observed that similar mixed presentations were being planned by several more international film stars throughout Europe, and recalled that both Asta Nielsen and Henny Porten had made their debuts in variety shows. The article ends with a warning: “Despite the proven successes of his performances, it cannot be denied that Linder lost much of what has made his popularity, his specialty and personal note, because his role in the live sketch could have been acted by any gentleman comedian, whereas in his films Linder remains unequalled”⁷ (Schwab 63). Linder’s partial failure was explained by two reasons: firstly, the details of facial expression got lost in the spacious auditorium, and secondly, the spoken word had an alienating and distracting effect on the audience. While Asta Nielsen also experienced the first of these problems in her pantomimes, she circumvented the second by not using the spoken word at all. Still, the general consensus was that the cinema would benefit from the live appearance of film stars in variety shows, because this would give audiences evidence that their favorites were better seen on screen than on stage.

I will now jump ahead in time, to the post-war years when Asta Nielsen acted in the films inspired by (or based upon) the stage plays that I mentioned earlier. Her acting in these films

⁶ “Das Variété hat zuerst dem Kino Gastrecht gewährt, jetzt wird es umgekehrt, und . . . wird der Werdegang folgendermaßen zu registrieren sein: “Variété—Variété mit Kino—Variété und Kinos—Kinos—Kino-Variétés—Variété-Kinos.”

⁷ “Trotz der erzielten Erfolge bei diesem Auftreten war aber nicht zu verkennen, daß Linder auf der Bühne viel von seiner Eigenart und der persönlichen Note, der er seine Beliebtheit zu verdanken hat, verlor, denn die Rolle in dem Sketch in dem er auftrat hätte ganz ohne Zweifel mangel elegante Humorist eben so gut ausfüllen können, wähen Linder im Film in seiner Art konkurrenzlos ist.”

earned her superlative tributes, which are worth quoting for the eloquence of the authors who praise the physiognomy and physical skills of the actress, whom they called *Seelenmalerin* [soul-paintress]. For example, in a review of *Rausch*, based on a play of August Strindberg—a film that is no longer extant directed by Ernst Lubitsch in 1919—it was explained that: “Her eyes have turned ever more demonic, . . . her body ever more supple and snakelike, the sensitive play of her hands ever more expressive”⁸ (Hb. 37). Another author wrote:

The demonic look in her eyes, which clearly look sideways to her temples in the wildest states of her soul, has turned downright devastating, criminal . . . and this is the highest possible praise. The play of the fingers, evil, intense, extremely sensitive and blood-conscious, is unparalleled among film actresses. . . . She is a heap of rustling, suffocating sulphur fumes, she wins because she hates, is evil down to the lowest and meanest, a bitch cut out of Strindberg’s fanatic vision. How does she do it? Asta Nielsen knows no embarrassment about herself, she allows her lowest elements to surface, she tears the clothes off her soul-ego without any scruples, her laughter is ugly, her seductiveness is ugly . . . and in its achievement this is just overwhelmingly, devilishly wonderful.⁹ (*Neue Hamburger Zeitung*, Aug. 26, 1919 n. pag.)

Similar remarks were made about *Hamlet* (Svend Gade, Heinz Schall, 1920). Based on the traditional saga that had inspired Shakespeare’s masterpiece, the film presented Hamlet not as the *prince* of Denmark, but as a princess raised as a boy in order to secure the throne:

She succeeds thanks to the charm and the spirited grace of her appearance: she looks very slim and slender in her tight black outfit and is not just fully the melancholic Danish prince whom we love thanks to Shakespeare, she also has in every gesture the enchantment, in each look of her dark glowing eyes the womanly attractiveness that the secret girl of the saga . . . ought to have: she is simply also *princess* Hamlet, and as such she is really dramatically gripping in her double tragic destiny—her stature is already poetic.¹⁰ (*Film-Kurier* Feb. 15, 1921 4)

The changeability, the expressivity of her face is truly unlimited. No, this is not the right way to put it. Because the unshaped raw material of her physiognomy takes shape from part

⁸ “Noch dämonischer sind ihre Augen geworden, seit wir sie nicht gesehen, noch schlangenweicher der Körper, noch beredter das nervöse Spiel der Hände.”

⁹ “Die Dämonie der in den wildesten Seelenmomenten deutlich nach den Schläfen auseinanderschielenden Augen ist geradezu entsetzlich geworden, verbrecherisch, . . . und das ist hier das stärkste Lob. Das Spiel der Finger, verrucht, gespannt, ungeheuer nervös und blutbewußt, findet unter den Filmschauspielerinnen nicht seinesgleichen. . . . Sie ist ein Haufen knisternden, erstickenden Schwefelqualms, siegend aus Haß, zerfressend bis zum Niederträchtigsten gemein, ein Weib, wie aus Strindbergs fanatischem Gesichtsfeld geschnitten. Woher kommt dieses Können? Asta Nielsen kennt keine Scheu vor sich, sie läßt ihre Elemente durcheinanderbrodeln, sie reißt ihrem Seelen-Ich rücksichtslos die Kleider vom Leibe, ihr Lachen ist häßlich, ihre Verführung häßlich . . . und das Ganze als Leistung überwältigend, teuflisch schön.”

¹⁰ “Daß sie siegt, dankt sie letzten Endes dem Charme un der beseelten Grazie ihrer Erscheinung: sie ist, sehr schmal und schlank in den knappen schwarzen Habit, nicht nur ganz der melancholische Dänenprinz, den wir von Shakespeare her lieben, sie hat auch in jeder Geste die sie betörende, jedem Blick der dunkel glühenden Augen den frauenhaften Reiz, den das heimliche Mädchen der Sage . . . haben muß; sie ist eben auch Prinzessin Hamlet, und als solche wirkt sie in der Erfüllung ihres nun doppelt tragischen Geschicks auch wirklich tragisch ergreifend—ihre Gestalt allein ist Poesie.”

to part, from scene to scene, even from second to second, from nothingness into something, [it shows] at each moment the clearest, the most self-evident and highest possible expression of the state of her soul.¹¹ (*Film-Kurier* Feb. 5, 1921 2)

In these years, the German trade press maintained a discussion about whether it was possible to adapt stage plays cinematically and, if so, under what conditions. Both Nielsen's *Rausch* and *Hamlet* were subjects in this discussion—*Hamlet* from the very moment it was announced, and this, needless to say, generated a lot of free publicity. Nielsen herself also gave her opinion on the topic, to which I will turn. We must bear in mind that Nielsen was herself responsible for *Hamlet*, since the work was produced by her own company, Art-Film. In the following years the company would produce two more films, namely *Fräulein Julie* (Felix Basch, 1922), from Strindberg, and *The Fall* (*Der Absturz*, 1922), from an original scenario by director Ludwig Wolff, in which Nielsen plays a former operetta diva. The references to the stage are thus obvious in the films that Nielsen intended to (and did) actually make.

In the pre-war years, the discourse addressing the relation between film and theatre created the consensus that film adaptations of stage plays were not desirable. This was because of the differences in the respective acting techniques, and because of the centrality of the spoken word in the theatre. On the other hand, stage directors and actors were beginning to show that they were capable of making stylistically impressive films, like Max Reinhardt with *Die Insel Der Seligen* (1913) and Paul Wegener with *The Golem* (*Der Golem*, 1915), both of which were based on original scenarios, not stage plays. So the involvement of stage professionals with film was not considered a problem.

In the early 1920s, the consensus shifted to the idea that filmic adaptations of stage plays were acceptable if the intrinsic differences between the two forms of expression were respected. The influential stage critic Herbert Jhering stated that “human spiritedness is to the stage what physical magic is to film”¹² (Jhering 398). And Leopold Jessner, the stage director who had worked with Nielsen in his film *Erdgeist* (earth spirit, 1923), was convinced that while theater offered an idea, film offered an illusion. In terms of style he believed that “the film thrives on the movement, which has to become telling, whereas the theater thrives on the word, which has to become movement”¹³ (Jessner 67).

Nielsen's defense of her *Hamlet* ought to be read in the light of this debate. In a 1920 interview she stated:

¹¹ “Die Wandlungsfähigkeit, Ausdruckfähigkeit dieser Maske ist völlig unbegrenzt. Due zweu Begruffe sagen eigentlich nicht das Richtige. Diese ungeformte Rohmaterial von Physiognomie formt sich nämlich von Rolle zu Rolle, von Szenen zu Szene, ja von Sekunde zu Sekunde aud dem Nichts in ein Etwas, das von Sekunde zu Sekunde das Einfachste, Selbstverständlichste, Höchstmöglichste an Ausdruck der jeweiligen seelischen Situation ist.”

¹² “. . . was auf der Bühne menschliche Beseelung, im Film körperliche Magie heißt.”

¹³ “Der Film lebt von der *Bewegung*, die *sprechend* werden soll; das Theater vom *Wort*, das *Bewegung* werden soll.”



Asta Nielsen in *Hamlet* (Svend Gade, Heinz Schall, 1920).

Our *Hamlet* is by no means a filmed Shakespeare. I would have objected against that with all my power. We are filming an old Nordic Hamlet-legend, which was Shakespeare's source as well, and we keep very close to it. . . . It is impossible to film Shakespeare.¹⁴ (Steinthal 42)

Nielsen also mentioned her wish to bring Strindberg on screen, for "the sense and inner meaning in Strindberg's dramas is not outside the action, but directly inside, in the events and the sensations. This is why Strindberg can be filmed, and I like the idea very much. . . . but only if the scenarist and the director are prepared to leave his due to the playwright."¹⁵

¹⁴ ". . . unser 'Hamlet' ist überhaupt keine Shakespeareverfilmung. Dagegen würde ich mich mit allen Kräften gewehrt haben. Wir verfilmen eine alte nordische Hamlegende, die auch Shakespeare als Quell benutzt hat, an die wir uns aber ganz eng halten. . . . Zu verfilmen ist Shakespeare nicht."

¹⁵ "Der Sinn und der seelische Gehalt steht in den Strindbergdramen nicht neber der Handlung, sondern ist ganz direkt in ihr, in den Ereignissen und Sensationen. Deshalb ist es möglich Strindberfilme zu machen, und es ist eine meiner Lieblingsideen. . . . aber nur wenn Bearbeitung und Regie die Gewähr bieten, daß dem Dichter

This last sentence was annoying to Ernst Lubitsch, who had directed Nielsen in *Rausch*, a work that was based on Strindberg. In an open letter to Asta Nielsen in *Lichtbildbühne* he protested: “Please allow me to tell you, grand Asta Nielsen, that the real Strindberg cannot be filmed! Strindberg’s art is housed in the mind, the art of film in the optical! Mental problems cannot be filmed!”¹⁶ (Lubitsch 31). Many critics found themselves in agreement with the director’s view, such as this reviewer: “There was no Strindberg at all; mostly admirable was what the film was able to make of the plot, how it actually succeeded in transforming it by means of film technique”¹⁷ (Hb. 32).

Nielsen’s interview offered another interesting point made by the actress. It concerned the relation of what she called “the artistic” to technique, meaning the importance of acting in relation to the *mise-en-scène* and editing. In a statement that she later repeated throughout the 1920s, she said: “The artist is no longer allowed the time to fully develop the acting. Or, if he is allowed the time during shooting, then the director’s scissor cuts the best out afterwards”¹⁸ (Steinthal 42). This remark indicates Nielsen’s serious dissatisfaction with the developments in post-war German filmmaking, which saw the directors competing with the stars in a struggle to determine who was to be deemed responsible for the artistic quality of the film. Or, as Lubitsch wrote in his open letter to Nielsen: “The artistic quality of a film does not depend just on the acting, as you wrongly assume, but on a thousand other things that you seem to dispute”¹⁹ (Lubitsch 31). Asta Nielsen sadly concluded in 1928, in a series of autobiographic articles in the *B.Z. am Mittag*: “The film in general has changed from being an actor’s work to being a director’s work, and it is no longer able to create great actors or to offer them adequate and attractive tasks” (Nielsen, “Mein Weg im Film” [my way in film]. *B.Z. am Mittag*, Oct. 24 1928 rpt. in Seydel and Hagedorff 214).

In the German expressionist cinema of the 1920s, symbolic set props, atmospheres and archetypes were more prominent carriers of meaning than what Jessner used to call *menschliche Darstellungskunst*, the art of human representation (244). A similar concern was repeatedly expressed by Nielsen with regard to what she referred to as the “Americanization of German cinema.” The action-centeredness and restless cutting of the American films allowed no acting study and no characterization, but just the use of average types: “What was a necessity for American cinema, which mainly work with types, has resulted in an assault on the European actor”²⁰ (Nielsen, “Mein Weg im Film” [my way in film]. *B.Z. am Mittag*, Sept.

gelassen wird was des Dichters ist.”

¹⁶ “So lassen Sie sich denn von mir gesagt sein, große Asta Nielsen, daß der eigentliche Strindberg gar nicht zu verfilmen ist! Strindbergs Kunst liegt im Gedanklichen, die Kunst des Filmes im Optischen! Gedankliche Probleme lassen sich nicht verfilmen!”

¹⁷ “Strindberg war es nicht; um so bewundernswerter aber, was der Film aus der Handlung zu machen wußte.”

¹⁸ “Zu schauspielerischen Vollenwicklung wird dem Künstler keine Zeit gelassen. Oder, wird sie ihm bei der Aufnahme gelassen, so nimmt die Schere des Regisseurs hinterher das beste weg.”

¹⁹ “Das Künstlerische im Film hängt nicht nur vom Schauspielerischen ab, wie Sie irrträglich annehmen, sondern noch von tausend anderen Dingen, von denen sie anscheinend nichts halten.”

²⁰ “Was für die amerikanischen Filme, die vornehmlich mit Typen arbeiteten, eine Notwendigkeit war, führte zur Vergewaltigung des europäischen Schauspielers.”

29 1928 rpt. in Seydel and Hagedorff 102). If one considers that Nielsen had long enjoyed autonomy and prominence in the choice and performance of her roles, it is no surprise that she rejected these conditions and styles. Her intense acting style required both a character with a large range of emotions and the time to evoke it in its multi-layered nuances.

In a letter to the *Film-Kurier* published in September 1925 she explained: “The highest art is and remains the clear, vivacious and deeply internalized portrayal of a stirring human fate”²¹ (Nielsen, “Wie ich die Zukunft des Films sehe” [how do i see the future of film] n.pag.). This was just two months before her switch to the German stage, this time not with a pantomime, but with a stage play and a text. Although she kept repeating that she wished to continue making film, her criticism of German cinema and her refusal to give up her autonomy resulted in a boycott. This was also despite of the fact that influential critics such as Siegfried Kracauer (Seydel and Hagedorff 216.) and Herbert Jhering kept arguing that the trade should be ashamed if it wasn’t able to give work to a genius actress like Nielsen. She indeed appeared in five more films in 1927, but had to wait until 1932 to act again in what would be her only sound film, *Unmögliche Liebe* (impossible love, Erich Waschneck).

Instead of making films, then, Nielsen toured the German provinces with her own theatrical ensemble, whose director was her then-lover Grigori Chmara, a Russian actor. This was a constellation in which she was able to reclaim her autonomy and her own acting style. In November 1925 and from October until December 1926 the company took an adaptation of *Rita Cavallini* (based on *Romance* by Edward Sheldon) to at least twenty cities and towns. In March and April 1928 they performed *Kameliendame* (based on *La Dame aux Camélias* by Alexandre Dumas fils) in twenty-three different theaters. From 1929 until January 1936, Asta Nielsen acted in four more plays and two variety-sketches. Her last stage role in Germany, opposite her dear friend Paul Wegener, was in *Gentlemen*, by Sidney Phillips, pseudonym of the playwright Hans-José Rehfisch (1935). She also performed this play in Switzerland and Austria. In this way, Asta Nielsen’s stage acting formed a substantial part of her career in Germany.

According to the theater historian John Willett, German theater enjoyed wide attention from both the audiences and the press in the second half of the 1920s (which was a relatively stable economic and political period). Heavily subsidized and extensively decentralized, it consolidated the high standard it had developed in the previous decades. In particular, it maintained its non-hierarchical structure in terms of high and low culture. Cabaret and *revues* were taken as seriously as the classic stage, there was no distinction between margin and mainstream, and the provincial theaters were surveyed by the press as closely as the ones in Berlin. Admittedly, it was the heyday of Brecht and Piscator as well as of the commercial *revue*, and the general climate was one of tremendous productivity on all fronts. Although this changed dramatically between 1929 and 1933, it may explain how it was possible for

²¹ “Die höchste Kunst . . . ist und bleibt immer die einfache, blutdurchströmte, tief verinnerlichte Gestaltung eines erschütternden Menschenschicksals.”

Asta Nielsen to choose her plays without any interference and tour the German provinces so extensively (Willett).

Although the press considered *Rita Cavallini* and *Kameliendame* to be sentimental and outdated, the plays offered Nielsen the big tragic roles that she had sought. But most importantly, critics also agreed that Nielsen's acting on stage was no less effectual than her screen performance:

The story is what it is, but Asta Nielsen creates a human being with a gripping fate. . . . Asta Nielsen told me afterwards that she had played exactly as in a film. . . . She apparently retained only great improvements from film technique: an excellent graphic delicacy, an extraordinary precision and expressive confidence in every movement, an admirable, never failing mimic discipline and a constant interaction with the ensemble. But the language of her eyes, the silent eloquence of her lips, her entire stirring sincerity are her very own artistic property, beyond style and technique, the artistic power of expression of a great tragic heart.²² (Bloßfeldt 566)

Asta Nielsen often said that, for her, acting before the camera did not fundamentally differ from acting on the stage. As she stated: "In my opinion, the difference between theatre and cinema is not the lack of words. Film is not, as people used to say, a different art. An actress has to control her body to the same extent. Moreover I often speak out the words belonging to my role when I make a film. The differences concern, of course, the proportions, as the totality of the stage offers a completely different sense of space, while film close-ups offer a unique possibility of mimic playing"²³ ("Gespräch mit Asta Nielsen" [a conversation with Asta Nielsen] 5). Another important difference noticed by Nielsen was that film scenes were not shot in the same order of the plotline, which required that the actress would be able to immerse herself in scraps. In any event, Nielsen maintained, both these two types of acting depended on the actress's ability to internalize her character as well as on the veracity of her physical and mimic expression.

One may or one may not share Asta Nielsen's views on cinema, but I believe that her turn to the stage was a logical consequence of the developments in her career as well as her acting style. It was undertaken in much the same vein as her turn to the screen in 1910. In both cases, her performance was not subjected to technical rules; stories and action were

²² "Die Geschichte mag sein, wie sie will, aber Asta Nielsen macht daraus einen Menschen von rührendem Schicksal. . . . Asta Nielsen sagte mir später sie hätte ebenso gespielt, wie im Film. . . . Von der Filmtechnik sind anscheinend nur große Vorzüge geblieben: eine große Zeichnerische Delikatesse, eine außerordentliche Präzision und Ausdruckssicherheit jeder Bewegung, eine bewundernswerte, nie versagende mimische Disziplin und der stetige Kontakt mit dem Ensemble. Aber die Sprache ihrer Augen, die stumme Beredtheit ihrer Lippen, ihre ganze erschütternde innere Wahrhaftigkeit sind ihr eigenstes Künstlerisches Eigentum, jenseits von Stil und Technik, die künstlerische Ausdrucksmacht eines großen tragischen Herzens."

²³ "Der Unterschied zwischen Theater und Film liegt, meiner Ueberzeugung nach, nicht im Fehlen der Worte. Es ist nicht, wie man immer sagt, eine andere Kunst. Man muß seinen Körper als Schauspielerin genau so beherrschen, un wenn ich filme spreche ich die Worte meiner Rolle doch vor mich hin. Unterschiede bestehen natürlich in den Größenverhältnissen, zwischen der Totalität der Bühne, die ein ganz anderes Raumgefühl vermittelt, während der Film die Möglichkeit mimischen Ausspielens durch Großaufnahmen gibt."



Asta Nielsen as Marguerite Gauthier in *Die Kameliendame*, Berlin 1930.

less important than characters and emotions, and directors did not compete with actors in claiming credit for the artistic result of the final work. It was on the stage that Asta Nielsen found an opportunity to keep performing in the minute, intense physical and mimic style she had developed in and for the cinema. Indeed, critics and audiences now came to watch her on the stage, not because they liked her better on the big screen, but because it was here that she could still portray “stirring human fates.”

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