



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

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Amy Sargeant

However Odd—Elsa Lanchester!

ABSTRACT: The article is concerned with Elsa Lanchester as an anti-star figure in British Cinema in the 1920s. It makes a comparison with the performance style of Alexandra Khokhlova in films made with the Kuleshov Workshop in Russia, suggesting that both actresses drew on a similar range of sources (notably, Bode, Duncan, Jaques-Dalcroze and Chaplin). While both seem willing to parodize themselves, embracing ugliness, their eccentricism simultaneously provides something of an ironic commentary on the ideal feminine “types” presented by Hollywood and Hollywood’s commodification of particular notions of feminine beauty.

In 1926, the Soviet cinema journal, *Kino*, published Sergei Eisenstein’s polemic appraisal of the actress, sometime director and muse to Lev Kuleshov, Aleksandra Khokhlova, possibly best known to present readers for her appearance in Kuleshov’s *The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr West in the Land of the Bolsheviks* (*Neobychniye prikliucheniia Mistera Vesta v strane bol’shevikov*, 1924) or *Dura lex* (*Po zakonu*, 1926). On the one hand, Eisenstein contrasted her appearance with the “touching little girls in ringlets” familiar from imported American films—Khokhlova was no child-woman, no Mary Pickford or Carol Dempster in the service of Griffith. Nor was she of the type employed by Sennett: “America is possessed by the ideal of the petty- bourgeois ‘Bathing Girl,’” Eisenstein commented (72). On the other, he criticised Soviet Studios for the lack of imagination deployed in their construction and casting of a comparable set of female ideal “types.” “The artistic councils of the studios look at a woman through the eyes of a primeval cattle-breeder,” he said (Eisenstein 71). In contrast, Khokhlova’s “firm grip of her bare-teethed grin tears to shreds the hackneyed formula of the ‘woman of the screen’” (72). Eisenstein complained that the studios were under-using such a unique and original talent. Here, I want to investigate what Eisenstein meant by his designation of Khokhlova’s style as “grotesque” and “eccentric.” I want also to argue—contrary to Eisenstein’s assertion that European cinema could not match her—that British cinema, in the 1920s, was to have something modestly approaching her—in the form of Elsa Lanchester. I am not suggesting that there was any direct influence of Khokhlova on Lanchester, rather that they may have both drawn from a particular set of sources and, perhaps, shared a particular attitude towards performance. Possibly best known to a general audience from her casting as both Mary Shelley and the monster’s mate in *émigré* James Whale’s 1935 *The Bride of Frankenstein* (or perhaps from René Clair’s 1935 *The Ghost Goes West*—in which, in a cameo role, in a matter of minutes she entirely steals the scene), Elsa Lanchester established herself with her various contributions to British Cinema in the silent period. Finally, I want to suggest that Khokhlova and Lanchester, in delivering performances which self-consciously invoked other performers and performative modes, allowed irony “to

happen” for their audiences.

Elsa Lanchester

Politically and artistically, Elsa Lanchester came from an interesting background. Her mother was a science graduate of the University of London and had been secretary to Eleanor Marx. When she decided to live with a railway clerk, her middle-class family incarcerated her in a lunatic asylum in the hope that she would see sense: she did not (Bland 159–161). Elsa was trained as a dancer, and enjoyed the rare privilege of being selected for Isadora Duncan’s school in Paris. As a “Duncling” she later toured, demonstrating Raymond Duncan’s Greek dances, a much-commented upon craze of the 1910s and early 1920s which found itself suitably mocked by Richmal Crompton:

Weedy males and aesthetic-looking females dressed in abbreviated tunics with sandals on their feet and fillets round their hair, mostly wearing horn spectacles, ran and sprang and leapt and gambolled and struck angular attitudes at the shrill command of an instructress and the somewhat unmusical efforts of a very amateur flute player. (Crompton 179)

But Elsa too remained healthily sceptical towards the discipledom and mystique surrounding the Duncans and Jaques-Dalcroze, and was not in any way in awe of “artistic” dancing, “interpreting the music” and eurhythmics:

If I had stayed longer at Isadora’s school, I would probably have become a classical dancer in the worst sense of the term, backed by no knowledge of life and with no sense of responsibility. I was fortunate not to have been caught up in that particular art eddy. After all, bare feet are no longer naughty and nobody can make a living today by imitating rose petals. (Lanchester, *Elsa Lanchester Herself* 30)

Her 1938 autobiography duly contains self-parodying photos of herself in bare feet and chiffon: “very very graceful and madly artistic” (Lanchester, *Charles Laughton and I* plate 4).

Elsa was not only a performer but an admirable hostess, bringing together friends and acquaintances from various informal social and cultural groupings and various interests in cinema. She knew Evelyn Waugh through the club she ran in Charlotte Street, in London, in the 1920s, The Cave of Harmony. It staged one-act plays, revue items, songs and pastiche Victoriana. It features in Aldous Huxley’s 1923 parody, *Antic Hay*, and in Waugh’s own diaries and autobiography (Huxley 213–231; Waugh, *A Little Learning* 209). James Whale appeared in a number of sketches (Lanchester, *Charles Laughton and I* 57). Elsa also mixed with the bohemian set at Soho’s 1917 Club, where the clientele included Dope Darlings and aesthetes cross-dressed or, notoriously, not dressed at all. In 1924, Waugh and Terence Greenidge, founder of Oxford University Film Society, invited Elsa and other friends and relatives to



A portrait of Elsa Lanchester.

appear in the film *The Scarlet Woman: An Ecclesiastical Melodrama*, in which the Pope, Cardinal Montefiasco and the Dean of Balliol (played by Waugh) conspire to convert the English monarchy to Roman Catholicism. Father Murphy (played by Greenidge) falls in love with the actress Beatrice de Carolle (played by Elsa). Like Waugh's novels *Decline and Fall* (1928) and *Vile Bodies* (1930), the film includes some cruel lampooning of individuals then known to the author. Waugh, it should be observed, did not embrace the Scarlet Woman (that is to say, convert to Catholicism) until 1930.

The film is very much a home-movie, filmed on Hampstead Heath, in Oxford and Golder's Green, and in Waugh's father's back garden with his brother's children gawping and laughing at the camera. Waugh confessed himself disappointed with the outcome and, heavily in debt, regretted the expense (Davie 169–170; Hastings 118). It has something of the character of an Adrian Brunel burlesque, incorporating travelogue footage of the Vatican and employing literary pastiche: "This is a far, far deeper hurt than I have ever felt before," says the Dean to the Prince of Wales, in the style of Sidney Carton in Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*; "To sleep, perchance to dream—aye, there's the rub," says Beatrice, writhing in bed, recalling Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (Gledhill 159–160). The cast send themselves up as Bright Young People: "Beatrice de Carolle, the cabaret queen' at her Bohemian flat"; "Bills, dear me', says Borrowington', 'and cocaine, surely not . . ." Elsa goggles, shock-haired, in the manner of the monster's mate in *The Bride of Frankenstein* (where she is *not* the Brigitte Helm of Fritz Lang's 1926 *Metropolis*) and poses *a la* Duncan in suitably diaphonous drapery.

Elsa knew Ivor Montagu and Brunel through an informal lunch club and The Cave, and with them made the short films *Bluebottles*, *Daydreams* and *The Tonic* (Brunel 141; Wykes 59). *Bluebottles*, like *The Scarlet Woman*, delights in caricaturing. Cartoon burglars engage in rough-and-tumble fighting. Elsa, in Chaplinesque mode, is the innocent confronting authority, inadvertently apprehending the burglars in a state of dazedness and confusion. Unaccustomed to handling a gun, she holds it gingerly, with her little finger crooked. At other times her gestures are wildly exaggerated, contorted, even grotesque, grimacing and throwing out her arm to acquit herself from police interrogation. In *Daydreams* (opening with Elsa as a fellow lodger of Charles Laughton in a London boarding house), Elsa as the "Countess" elaborately prepares herself for an elegant dive . . . then belly-flops from the board. As with Chaplin, there is much stage business around props and costume. As the "Countess," Elsa removes layer upon layer of cardigan before a game of tennis at Wimbledon, while the "Count" (complete with parodic waxed mustachios) looks on. Elsa herself said that *Bluebottles* originated with the simple image of her blowing a whistle; H. G. Wells (an old acquaintance of Montagu) began work on the scenario with his son, Frank, with the intention of providing a role for a female Chaplin (Lanchester, *Elsa Lanchester Herself* 187; Montagu 153–155). It also includes a number of "in" jokes: Elsa parts from "Mabel" in front of a poster for Brunel's *The Constant Nymph* (1928), starring Ivor Novello and Mabel Poulton as the film's child-woman heroine, with Elsa Lanchester cast as an archetypal "greenery-yallery" highbrow. Elsa imagines Spiffkins, "the



Elsa Lanchester in *The Bride of Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1935).

promising young constable” whose life she has saved as Douglas Fairbanks (who appears also as a pin-up in *Daydreams*) or Adolphe Menjou (star of Chaplin’s 1923 *A Woman of Paris*) and *not* Charles Laughton, whom Elsa Lanchester married in 1929.

In *The Tonic*, Laughton is cast as a member of a family intent upon inheriting from a wealthy, elderly, supposedly sickening aunt. Bossy and cantankerous, the aunt has seen off three maids in as many weeks. The family decides to dispatch their own servant (Elsa) whose clumsiness and incompetence, they assume, will finally put an end to the aunt. Obediently, Elsa bows a courtesy and, retreating, trips over a bucket. At the aunt’s house she is confronted by a bewildering array of medicine bottles and an onerous itinerary of daily tasks, including the care of the aunt’s pet parrot. A flask is broken but, unperturbed and maintaining the same wide-eyed innocent expression, Elsa indiscriminately substitutes another and resourcefully snips fake grapes from the decoration on her hat to satisfy her charge’s demand for tablets. At the sight of a caterpillar, the aunt faints and Elsa, fearing the worst, telephones for the doctor. Spying a household manual on a shelf, she meanwhile seeks advice: smoke from burned feathers can be used to revive a patient, she reads. Again unperturbed, Elsa plucks the parrot until he is quite bald and duly sets his plumage alight (more slapstick). The doctor arrives and gingerly (as in *Bluebottles*) Elsa hands over a fearsome battery of surgical instruments—only to be informed that the aunt is simply a hypochondriac. Elsa resolves to cure the old woman of her imaginary illness, wheeling her onto a railway line in her bath chair as a train approaches. The sudden shock proves effective. Much to the family’s disappointment, not only is the aunt (a travesty role) restored to rude good health but she also determines to adopt the maid as her daughter. Elsa herself is the eponymous tonic, incongruously never registering humor in the face of the farcical situations in which she finds herself.

Laughton biographers—most recently Simon Callow—have tended to take Elsa at her own word and dismiss her as a mere light vaudevillian, in the shadow of a great actor (Callow 274–275). However, we could, instead, take Elsa’s estimation of her talent as modesty, even generosity. On the other hand, we could set her preference for revue and cabaret in the light of the authorities to whom Eisenstein appeals in his article on Khokhlova. Eisenstein explicitly cites the FEKS [factory of the eccentric actor] (and, thereby, the 1922 Trauberg, Kozintsev, Yutkevich and Kryzhitsky manifesto) and tacitly quotes the teaching programme of his mentor, Vsevolod Meyerhold (Eisenstein 73). Under the enlightened patronage of the Commissariat of Enlightenment, Boris Lunacharsky, Duncan and Duncan’s technique proved enormously popular in Russia and Isadora was briefly married to the poet, Esenin (Schneider 23–26). Amidst an eclectic and erudite range of references, Meyerhold encouraged his students to investigate the musical interpretations of Duncan and Fuller. He taught his students to adapt their movements to the area available for performance, to take control of the body in space and to involve the whole body in every gesture (by way of Rudolph Bode)—skills, one might argue, more readily associated with the stylisation of dance than with naturalistic acting.

Amongst Meyerhold, Kuleshov and Trauberg there was general agreement that the performer needed to work on him or herself—specifically in training the body—before embarking on any role. Furthermore, Meyerhold and the FEKS manifesto called upon popular traditions—vaudeville, the fairground booth, the circus, even sport—not only as training methods but as effective models in confronting an audience. For one production, Meyerhold brought a troupe of Chinese jugglers on stage as an interval attraction; for another Red Fleet sailors and Komsomols performed biomechanical exercises, acrobatic dances and played football as a demonstration of Soviet vigor. Meyerhold and the FEKSy enthused over cinema’s inheritors of music hall performance styles—Chaplin and Linder—with Meyerhold devoting an essay to Chaplinism and the FEKSy memorably declaring in 1922 “We prefer Charlie’s arse to the hands of Eleanor Duse!” in a rousing appreciation of popular and American modernism across all artistic activity—including the graphic arts of typography and the poster (Taylor and Christie 59).

However, what I want to suggest here is that Khokhlova and Lanchester are worthy of attention for more than just their preparedness to look ugly on screen, setting themselves apart from the “types” presented by Pickford and Poulton. Both are capable of gawky and abrupt angularity, but their delivery of such movements and gestures are the product of control over the body in space. In the case of Khokhlova’s work for Kuleshov, apparently large gestures were accommodated to a strictly constricted screen space and blocked for orthogonal framing, sometimes further emphasized by a closing iris—akin to another graphic art, the comic strip. Lanchester’s apparent awkwardness is counterposed against a dancer’s balletic grace. We could say that she confidently embraced ugliness whereas Laughton was painfully aware of his corporeal irregularity even while repeatedly accepting studio roles that capitalized on his bulky face and figure.

In 1912, Meyerhold wrote a concise definition of what he understood by “grotesque” style, a term originally applied to fantastical zoomorphic motifs in decorative art:

It is the style which reveals the most wonderful horizons to the creative artist. ‘I,’ my personal attitude to life, precedes all else The grotesque does not recognize the *purely* debased or the *purely* exalted. The grotesque mixes opposites, consciously creating harsh incongruity, playing entirely on its own originality . . . the grotesque deepens life’s outward appearance to the point where it ceases to be entirely natural . . . the basis of the grotesque is the artists’s constant desire to switch the spectator from the plane he has just reached to another which is totally unforeseen. (Braun 74)

Khokhlova’s ungainly bare-toothed grimacing (as the “Princess” in *Mr West*) is contrivedly ugly to serve a particular purpose. To say, simply, as does Lindley Hanlon, that Kuleshov’s models deliver “very exaggerated performances” is rather to miss—or at least to underestimate—the point (Hanlon 213). Mr West himself is played as an *ingénu*, with child-like mannerisms like dropped-jaw gawping. His *naïveté* is underscored by his inability to recognize

in the ostentatious pretence of the Princess and her fellow conspirators, the falsity of their story. Assuming that the audience sees what the audience sees simultaneously, one is amused that he could be so readily duped by the frenetic lip-biting and popping eye-balls of the Princess. American cartoon types (the cowboy, Jed) and American fantasies of Soviet Russia are set against another Moscow, presented by archive footage of the Red Army and a smiling leather-jacketed officer with a mauser at his hip. Khokhlova's performance undermines and satirizes Mr West's gullibility. The film oscillates playfully between an enthusiasm for American popular culture and its rejection of American politics. Khokhlova's fluffy-haired, exaggerated parody of English evangelism, in *Dura lex*, receives due retribution in the ominous return of the victimized object of her obsession: again, marked by a distinction in his style of acting, before and after his hanging.

For Linda Hutcheon, "irony is the superimposition or rubbing together of meanings (the said and plural unsaid) with a critical edge created by a difference of context that makes irony happen" (Hutcheon 18–19). It takes an audience to interpret the performances of Khokhlova and Lanchester as ironic, by way of reference to *Bathing Belles*, Duncan and (in the case of Lanchester's Anne of Cleves in Alexander Korda's 1933 *The Private Life of Henry VIII*), Elisabeth Bergner. These are ludic performances which act up to the camera, which are turns in the sense intended by Eisenstein as "attractions." The target of their irony, I suggest, is the cinematic apparatus—in which the audience is implicated—and the cinematic system—which capitalises on particular "types" of women—in which the audience is complicit.

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