REMEDIATION AND REPRESENTATION
Asta Nielsen in Early Twentieth Century Film Stills and Painting

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While its influence on popular culture has been pronounced, the film still has been given little attention in the histories of film, photography, and painting, even though strong intermedial connections have always existed between these different forms of artistic expression. Drawing on Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's theory of "remediation" and Roland Barthes's writings about the cinematic frame, this paper considers the film still's unique, interstitial medial status. Through analysis of photographic and painted representations of the silent film star Asta Nielsen, a reverse remediative process is identified, in which older media incorporate the content and formal structures of newer media. This challenges traditional film and art historical narratives that have treated the development of new media in the early twentieth century as a linear progression toward greater realism. Instead, this paper argues that remediative practices in film, photography, and painting reveal a web of intermedial exchange that complicates understandings of the film still as a distinct medial category and effectively widens definitions of the "cinematic."

Keywords. Film still; intermediality; remediation; Asta Nielsen; Pyke Koch; eartly twentieth century art.

Ainda que a sua influência na cultura popular tenha sido particularmente relevante, o *film still* tem, contudo, recebido pouca atenção no âmbito das histórias do cinema, da fotografia e da pintura, apesar das fortes conexões intermediárias entre estas diferentes formas de expressão artística. Com base na teoria da "remediação", de Jay David Bolter e Richard Grusin, e nos escritos de Roland Barthes sobre o enquadramento cinematográfico, o presente artigo considera o estatuto único, intersticial e medial da imagem fílmica. Através da análise de representações fotográficas e pintadas da estrela do cinema mudo Asta Nielsen, é identificado um processo remediativo reverso, no qual as mídias mais antigas incorporam o conteúdo e as estruturas formais das mídias mais recentes. Tal desafia as narrativas históricas tradicionais do cinema e da arte, que trataram o desenvolvimento de novas mídias, no início do século XX, como uma progressão linear em direção a um maior realismo. Em vez disso, este artigo argumenta que as práticas corretivas no cinema, na fotografia e na pintura revelam uma rede de trocas intermediais que complexifica o entendimento do filme como uma categoria medial distinta e amplia efetivamente as definições do "cinema".

Palavras-chave. Imagem fílmica; intermedialidade; remediação; Asta Nielsen; Pyke Koch; Arte do início do século XX

Introduction

The role of the still image has often been overlooked in the histories of film and photography, though its presence in illustrated publications, on the walls of cinemas and in the cultural imagination has been profound. Not quite autonomous photographs and certainly not moving pictures, film stills, frame enlargements and studio portraits are essential elements of early cinema's *dispositif* and challenge the media categories of film and photography, residing instead somewhere in the interstice between the two. The introduction of the star system in the 1910s precipitated the rise of the still image, which claimed a central position in film marketing and distribution strategies throughout the following decades and influenced the popularity of film periodicals and postcards. In certain cases, such as Carl Theodor Dreyer's influential 1928 drama *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, the still has become an iconic crystallization of a film's visual and emotional effect, while in others, like Tod Browning's nonextant 1927 feature *London After Midnight*, stills are all that remain. Though the film still has traditionally been subsumed into a history of cinema dominated by the moving image, its ubiquity and lasting influence on visual culture has been so great that artist Jeff Wall claims: «No picture could exist today without having a trace of the film still in it» (Wall apud Jacobs, 2010: 373).

Film's early critics were quick to point out the new medium's relation to photography, due most obviously to the fact that film's illusion of movement is caused by the projection of a rapid succession of still images. Both André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer see cinema as part of a photographic tradition that aims to finally accomplish painting's centuries-long goal of faithfully portraying reality. For many theorists, the moving image represented a forward march into the future,

incorporating and ultimately supplanting prior media while engendering a new set of social relations that irrevocably redefined the subject's relationship to technology and post-industrial society. However, in their book R*emediation: Understanding New Media*, Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin argue that media history should be understood as a «genealogy of affiliations, not a linear history», wherein «older media can also remediate newer ones» (Grusin & Bolter, 1999: 55). Following this line of thought, I argue that in considering photographic and artistic representations of Asta Nielsen, Europe's most popular female star of the early silent era, a reverse trajectory of remediation can be identified. In it, painting remediates the still image, which remediates film, revealing a complex web of intermedial exchange that challenges traditional film and art historical narratives which rely on linear progression and distinct media categories.

Stillness and Cinema

Following her sensational debut in 1910's erotic drama *Afgrunden* [*The Abyss*], Asta Nielsen quickly rocketed to unprecedented international stardom, collecting legions of devoted admirers with each performance. «She is Everything! She is the Drunkard's vision and the lonely Man's Dream», professed the poet Guillaume Apollinaire in an ode to Nielsen (apud Jensen, 2010: 91). Apollinaire was not unique in his passion for the ethereal actress; many others, including Kracauer, film critic Béla Balázs and poet Paul van Ostaijen lauded her highly original talent and captivating looks in published writings. Though trained on the stage, Nielsen performed in front of the camera with a naturalistic style and emotional versatility that often rendered spectators speechless. One filmgoer described the audience after seeing Nielsen in *Rausch* [*Intoxication*] (1919) as «sitting motionless for minutes, there were no comments, no attempts even to express appreciation, because words couldn't express the feelings which the picture aroused» (Cole, 1922: 104). Nielsen's effect on filmgoers was immediate, surpassing language and holding them captive in their seats, immobile, even after the film had ended.

It is precisely within this immediacy, which confounds and eclipses linguistic expression, that Roland Barthes locates the essential nature of the 'filmic'. He argues that a film possesses three levels of meaning — the informational, the symbolic, and a 'third meaning' that frees itself from the «civilization of the signified» in which the other two are bound, transcending language but not interlocution (Barthes, 1977: 65). For Barthes, this third 'obtuse' meaning becomes accessible when a film's 'natural state' of motion is halted, producing a still image, which, he insists, presents an opportunity for engagement different from that offered by a photograph or figurative painting due to film's unique 'diegetic horizon' (*Ibidem*: 66). By referencing movement as film's 'natural state', Barthes casts stillness as its unnatural counterpart, antithetical to a cinematic tradition defined by images in motion. However, it is precisely when film viewership goes against the grain of spectatorial convention by embracing the medium's possibilities for stasis that a film's 'third meaning' surfaces. Barthes realizes that by asking the viewer to reverse a technological progression in which still images are multiplied and animated, a seemingly unusual remediative process occurs in which a film that began as a series of photographic images is turned back into one.

The images upon which Barthes bases his analysis are actually reproductions of film frames — which Steven Jacobs terms 'frame enlargements' — but his evaluation could arguably also be applied to film stills, which are photographs taken of various scenes by an on-set photographer[1]. For Barthes, the frame enlargement differs from a regular photograph due to the fact that it «is *doubled* by another text, the film», a quality it has in common with the still (*Ibidem*. Emphasis by the author). Yet, a different kind of doubling occurs in each. While the frame enlargement is literally doubled due to its presence as a fragment within the larger body of the film, the film still is a photograph taken separately and therefore is not extracted from the original movie. However, because it usually aims to match the filmic action, the still so closely resembles a frame enlargement that an uncanny doubling occurs in which

the viewer is unsure of the image's status within or outside of the film text. Barthes himself may have been unaware of the distinction between these two types of images, as he erroneously uses the term 'film still' to describe frame enlargements, and recalls his fascination with photos he saw «outside a cinema, in the pages of *Cahiers du Cinéma*», many of which would undoubtedly have been stills rather than enlargements (*Ibidem*: 65).

Though the still and the frame enlargement do not relate to the original film in the same way, both share in its diegesis a condition that makes a still ontologically different from an autonomous photograph. For Barthes, a clear contrast between the still and the photograph becomes apparent when considering the latter's inherent confrontation with death. He argues that every photo is at once proof of a subject's life and the premonition of their death. However, for him, «(fictional) cinema combines two poses: the actor's 'this-has-been' and the role's» (Barthes, 1993: 79). When looking at a film still from one of Nielsen's movies, the fate of her character becomes equally as central as the reality of the actress's eventual death. By existing in a narrative, which can endlessly repeat itself through retelling and replaying, Nielsen — in the guise of her role — partially escapes the cycle of life and death that viewers face when regarding regular photographs.

However, the nature of the film still is also essentially different from the frame enlargement due to the way in which the former captures a moment of artificial motion. Steven Jacobs argues that in stills, «a rigid stability determines the image since these pictures seem to compensate for [their] stillness with slight exaggerations of gesture and facial expressions» (Jacobs, 2010: 381). Actors pose as their characters in the midst of activity, often with mouths slightly agape as if in conversation or hands outstretched in gesture. In a still from the 1911 film *Den sorte drøm* [*The Black Dream*], Nielsen stands next to a seated Gunnar Helsengreen, who claps her hand as though to keep her from leaving [See *Image 1*]. Their pose

Image 1. Asta Nielsen, Gunnar Helsengreen, and Valdemar Psilander in a film still from Den *sorte drøm* [The Black Dream] (Urban Gad, DK, 1911).

suggests that Nielsen has just gotten up from her seat and stands now at the precipice of a definitive moment of action; either Helsengreen will pull her back into her chair, or she will break free of his grasp and walk away. Behind them, co-star Valdemar Psilander has placed his hand on his own seat, which it seems like he is about to draw back in order to sit down, and other tables and guests are vaguely visible, letting the viewer know that the scene takes place in an active social environment. However, the actors' facial expressions are slightly too deliberate in their dramatic effect and belie the spontaneity that their gestures try to express. Whereas a frame enlargement presents a frozen instant of true motion — which explains why these images are sometimes blurry — a film still's attempt to portray natural movement is veiled with deceit.

However, it is unlikely that the millions of filmgoers who saw stills published in fan magazines or taped up outside of cinemas were aware of or bothered by the images' synthetic depiction of action. In these contexts, the still created an economy of meaning that was in many ways alternative to the film's official narrative and instead centralized the importance of the depicted performer. The star system did not emerge alongside the invention of cinema, but appeared slightly later, once production companies realized that audiences would seek out films featuring actors they recognized and liked. With it came new possibilities for consumption, and the production of magazines, ephemera and other souvenirs featuring images of film stars became more widely available. Kathryn Fuller-Seeley argues that when items such as «photos, postcards, toys, spoons, buttons, and badges» were sold or given away, they transformed «a fan's fascination with the movies into concrete material objects to possess and collect» (Fuller-Seeley, 2018:31). Edgar Morin claims that this effectively converts «the star into merchandise designed for mass consumption», with the star system operating as a «specific institution of capitalism on a major scale» (Morin, 1961: 135-137). However, he also argues that «star-merchandise never wears out nor diminishes upon consumption. The multiplication of a star's

Image 2. Full-page spread in 'Cinema en Theater' on the Asta Nielsen film *Irrende Seelen* [De Waas_Wandering Souls] (DE, 1921).

images, far from impairing, augments her worth and makes her more desirable» (*Ibidem*: 138). Thus professional film stills, paintings and the extensive supply of mass-produced objects featuring actors' images, all contribute to the process of remediation and the economy of stardom.

These various circulating images also all arguably inform and alter the filmic text itself. A spread in a 1921 issue of the Dutch periodical *Cinema en Theater*, dedicated to Asta Nielsen's drama *Irrende Seelen* [*De Waas* in Dutch and *Wandering Souls* in English] (1921), features a montage of stills alongside a short informational text about the movie [See *Image 2*]. Framed by Art Deco-inspired graphic designs, the collection of images provides the magazine's readers with a fragmented pictorial experience of the film. In their analysis of collage, Bolter and Grusin argue that its

effect is primarily hypermedial, as «the artist is defining a space through the disposition and interplay of forms that have been detached from their original context and then recombined» (Grusin & Bolter, 1999: 39). The spread's layout does not prescribe an order in which viewers should look at each individual image, making a number of combinations possible, and thus an imagined narrative may supplant the film's official storyline. Even viewers who have seen the original film must recreate it through their memory, which, no matter how sharp, is always prone to subjective "rewriting". The film stills posted as advertisements outside of movie houses functioned similarly, as they attempted to excite potential audience members about a current or forthcoming film by encouraging creative speculation about its content.

Film into Photography into Painting

By challenging accepted positions regarding the nature of film and photography, the still revealed the inadequacies of strict media categories. However, many still considered these new technologies a threat to painting's status in the artistic landscape of the early twentieth century, and even practitioners and proponents of avant-garde art struggled to assert the medium's purpose in an era of mass-produced images. Certain critics and artists embraced possibilities for intermedial connections between painting and cinema, including the filmmaker Walter Ruttmann, who described his abstract approach as «painting with time», and hoped it would help bridge the divide between mass cinema audiences and rarefied avant-garde circles (Ruttmann, 2016: 451). However, others were less enthusiastic about interdisciplinary exchange, including *Bauhaus* magazine editor Ernst Kállai, who recognized film's central position in the cultural consciousness but criticized its hegemony. In a 1931 article, he argues: «Film is thus truly the standard vehicle for our modern vision in its unsteadiness and its addiction to variety... It tears things apart and disperses them into a flurry of alternating appearances» (Kállai,

2016: 405). It is interesting to note that, in Kállai's analysis, film's social effect mirrors its form; its ability to «tear things apart» and «disperse them» reflects its structural composition as a series of fragmented frames, cut and spliced together and run through a projector at a 'flurrying' pace. Yet, Kállai remains committed to a simplistic binarization that casts cinema's «unleashed kinesis» as diametrically opposed to painting's «fundamentally static essence», and leaves little room for consideration of filmic stillness and kinetic painting (*Ibidem*: 406).

Kállai exalts a select number of artists for persevering with revolutionary work in the face of cinema's exhaustive speed. However, it is highly unlikely that Pyke Koch would be among them, as his self-described magical realist style shares a number of visual commonalities with *Neue Sachlichkeit* painting, which Kállai considered 'reactionary' (*Ibidem*). Still, Koch shared Kállai's interest in film's effect on modern visual perception. In his 1929 *Portret Asta Nielsen* [*Portrait of Asta Nielsen*], Koch's earliest extant painting, the artist directly confronts the medium of the film still and studio portrait [See *Image 3*]. An active member of the Utrecht branch of the interwar film and art collective Filmliga, Koch was an avid moviegoer whose fascination with Nielsen is well documented. He once stated: «Asta Nielsen made a very powerful impression on me. It was a real shock. And her image has never left me» (Tilborgh, 1985: 142). It is widely known that Koch frequently painted from photographs, and Carel Blotkamp points out that *Portret Asta Nielsen* is based on two specific images — a film still of Nielsen from Bruno Rahn's 1927 film *Dirnentragödie* and a studio portrait of the actress dressed as her character in G.W. Pabst's 1925 drama *Die freudlose Gasse* [*Joyless Street*] [See *Images 4* and 5]. Blotkamp argues that, by combining these images, the painting is «a sort of collage», wherein «the welding between the different parts is no longer visible» (Blotkamp, 2009. English translation by the author). In his reliance on a film still and studio portrait for the subject of his painting, Koch complicates the autonomous position the painter has traditionally maintained in cultural discourse, particularly when

Image 3. Pyke Koch. *Portret Asta Nielsen* [Portrait of Asta Nielsen], 1929. Oil on canvas. Centraal Museum, Utrecht..

Image 4. Studio portrait of Asta Nielsen in *Die freudlose Gasse* [Joyless Street] (G.W. Pabst, DE, 1925).

contrasted with producers of photographic and cinematographic images. Walter Benjamin expresses the essential differences between the artist and cinematographer in his seminal essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*:

> «The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, whereas the cinematographer penetrates deeply into its tissue. The images obtained by each differ enormously. The painter's is a total image, whereas that of the cinematographer is piecemeal, its manifold parts being assembled according to a new law» (Benjamin, 2008: 35).

In remediating a film still through the form of painting, Koch subsumes the work of both a photographer and filmmaker into his own painting practice, thus challenging any easy distinction between the images produced by artists in each medium. Unlike Benjamin's painter, Koch creates work that is triply mediated; his relation to his subject is first shaped by another apparatus and artistic practitioner, whose work was in turn informed by context of the original film.

Portret Asta Nielsen carries references not only to the images that serve as its source material, but also to the films from which these images originate. In the painting as well as the antecedent still and studio portrait, Nielsen does not break the fourth wall and, as a result, each object remains faithful to the original film's diegesis, effectively inhabiting the same narrative universe. However, a radical difference between Koch's painting and its photographic and cinematic sources is present in the artist's inclusion of color. Yet, even here a connection to filmic tradition can be identified, as Koch's sparing application of bright, broad color fields is visually similar to stenciling methods used in the coloration of black and white silent film [See *Image 6*]. Stenciling was a popular technique that required colorists to manually cut out areas in a film frame, which would then be tinted in different hues on another duplicate print[2]. The laborious time-consuming process meant that individual frames would rarely include more than six separate colors, resulting in a lack of subtle tonality and a predilection for blocks of vivid color that is also present in Koch's painting. However, unlike the film technicians who usually preferred

Image 5. Film still of Asta Nielsen in *Dirnentragödie* [Tragedy of the Street] (Bruno Rahn, DE, 1927).

Image 6. Frame enlargement from *Cyrano de Bergerac* (Augusto Genina, IT, 1923).

somewhat naturalistic color choices, Koch decided to paint Nielsen's skin a mossy green, imbuing the portrait with a distinctly uncanny effect that is at odds with the otherwise realistic style of the artwork. Contrasted with the shadowy, colorless background, Nielsen's green skin tone is suggestive of ill health, and lends the painting a sense of foreboding that perhaps hints at the films' dark themes and Nielsen's characters' ultimately tragic fates.

Koch's interpretation of images of Nielsen also represents the final stage of a remediative progression that slowly chips away at the actress's autonomy over her image. As a performer, Nielsen was widely regarded for her expressive portrayals of compelling and complex characters, which sometimes risked overwhelming the film's narrative and stylistic elements. After seeing her perform the title role in a 1921 film adaptation of *Hamlet*, a reviewer described Nielsen as «the thing to be remembered above all else... She is the pivot about which the drama revolves» (Fletcher, 1922: 69). Film historian Ansje van Beusekom argues that, during the 1910s, Nielsen was the most widely known actress amongst cinema audiences in the Netherlands, where Koch was living and working (Beusekom, 2010: 179). Unlike the vast majority of silent film actresses, Nielsen formed production companies in order to retain significant creative control over her films and was highly selective in the roles she chose to play. Each of her performances is imbued with a passionate sense of empathy that led spectators to believe they could sense «her inmost thoughts, almost, one might say, the workings of her mind» ("Big European Star in New York", 1917: 789). These qualities are frequently invoked by critics as reasons for Nielsen's deserving categorization as a proto-feminist icon of early cinema, and they are also the first to be stripped away when she is featured in photographs and paintings. Immobilized in a still or studio portrait, she becomes more easily objectified, as Susan Sontag reminds us that photographs «turn an event or a person into something that can be possessed» (Sontag, 2003:81). In partially extracting Nielsen from the diegesis of the film in which she performs and separating her from the other characters, she can no longer react or interact, and

becomes «someone to be seen, not someone (like us) who also sees» (*Ibidem*: 72). It is thus not surprising that when Nielsen's studio portraits and film stills were reproduced as postcards and in magazines, she became the most popular pin-up amongst soldiers fighting in World War I. Though criticism of the male gaze originated with Laura Mulvey's 1975 analysis of film, in Koch's painting its influence is also deeply felt, as all remaining traces of Nielsen's commanding physical presence are filtered through his brush (Mulvey, 1999: 833-844).

Conclusion

In the early twentieth century, the mediums of photography, film and painting collided in unprecedented ways, and have continually inspired a wide variety of critical and artistic reactions. While numerous theorists eagerly categorized these different modes of representation, arguing for the essential nature of each, some artists and critics recognized the ways in which certain cultural products evade clear definitions and produce their own economies of meaning in the spaces between traditionally accepted medial boundaries. Film stills and Koch's *Portret Asta Nielsen* challenge histories of art and film that treat painting and photograpy as static media, necessarily different from the kinetic moving image. Instead, they remediate the newer technology of cinema by referencing a particular film's narrative, motion, formal structure and color. Bolter and Grusin point out that a reciprocal relationship can often be identified between older technologies and the newer media that threaten to supplant them. They claim: «New technologies of representation proceed by reforming or remediating earlier ones, while earlier technologies are struggling to maintain their legitimacy by remediating newer ones» (Grusin & Bolter, 1999: 61). While this circumstance is certainly identifiable in the examples included in this essay, reducing an older technology's remediation of a newer one to a struggle for legitimacy is too simplistic. Asta Nielsen's film still and studio portrait and Koch's painted interpretation of them may instead be indicative of changes in

visual perception brought about by a rapidly modernizing society and its accompanying media, such as the moving image. New technologies always encourage alternative ways of perceiving the world, and galvanize artists to rethink visual representation and the category of "the real". Therefore, it could be fruitful to consider remediative practices in film, photography and painting in the early twentieth century not as a tactic for artists to affirm their own medium's relevance, but as a means of challenging the critical narrative that considers the quest for artistic realism inextricably tied to technological progress and unique media categories.

NOTES

1 For further information about these different types of images, see Steven Jacobs's article. To avoid confusion, in this esssay I will adopt Jacobs's terminology.

2 For more on this practice, see B. Flueckiger's digital resource "Timeline of Historical Film Colors" (http://zauberklang.ch/filmcolors/timeline-entry/1218/).

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