

The Reflection on the War and Violence as the Impulsion of the Development of the Western Cinema Aesthetics in 1900-1920

Ekaterina Salnikova

The State Institute for Art Studies
Kozitski per. 5, 125009, Moscow, Russia
E-mail: k-saln@mail.ru

Abstract—The following article is devoted to the screen images of violence in the silent cinema of 1900-1920. The author compares the aesthetics of early costume dramas, screen biographies of Jesus Christ and films about the First World war – and detects shared visual motifs and methods of narration. The reflection on violence turns out to be an important component of the cinema language formation.

Keywords—*silent cinema; visual image; Bible story; costume drama; military theme*

I. INTRODUCTION

In 1895, on the eve of the XX century, a new art form was born: the motion picture. The First World War started shortly after, in 1914. That war has greatly and undeniably affected the cinema by initiating the active formation of specific, screen-oriented means of expressiveness. [1, p. 29] The cinema itself became an integral part of the social process, contributing to the creation of many political myths and doctrines of the XX century, inserting ideological messages into popular art and entertainment, making it possible to influence the masses remotely with the power of onscreen culture.

For their part the film leitmotifs, as well as the political atmosphere of the first decades of the XX century, might create an impression of being the involuntary reflections on some of the Friedrich Nietzsche's theories. At any case the perception of war playing a much bigger role in the fate of humanity than any period of peace ever did was most likely in the air at the time, revealing itself both in the common mentality and the predilection of the early cinema for the subject of armed confrontation. Nietzsche wrote: «It is the good war that justifies any cause. War and courage have done more great things than love of neighbor». [2, p. 34] With the exception of propagandistic films, encouraging the militaristic state of the public mind [3, p. 34], [4, p.113-114], the art of cinema didn't aspire to celebrate the essence of war; and when it came to where Nietzsche stood, that made a fundamental semantic difference. However, even before the First World War the cinema became aware of the aesthetic and commercial appeal of the subject of war, contributing to the understanding of war as a key aspect of the human

activity, its self-assertion in this world. It's indicative that the first feature to be made in Italy, the future cinematographic stronghold of historical narration, was «The Taking of Rome» («La presa di Roma», 1905), which depicted the events of 1870, quite essential to the era of Risorgimento. [5, p. 5]

Collisions of any kind became the pet subject of early features. The conflicts unravel in historical and modern times alike, with the scenery varying a lot: the outdoors, cities, interiors, land and sea (as, for example, in the famous scene of the destruction of the enemy fleet with Archimedes' mirrors in «Cabiria»). A sort of transformation of the motif of the «eternal fight», a never-ending confrontation of antagonistic forces, occurs in the new art form. The genres giving vivid visible forms to every possible conflict will remain on the main cinema road up to this very day: action films, including historical and sci-fi ones, mystery films, and war dramas, to name a few.

Still, it's not so much about the direct interaction of philosophy, politics, and film, but their shared affiliation with the great history. [6, p. 89] However, it was in 1910-1920s when the cinema's childhood and apprenticeship were finally over that it started to vigorously stretch the artistic means of the cinematographic matter. In addition to the films dedicated to the First World War it was essential for the cinema of the pre-war and post-war period to have a certain ground for permanent reflection upon the essence of war and the eternal hostility of the world towards each individual.

This ground, or the «mental substance» of understanding war as the recurring motif of the human existence, binds together the films of different national schools, genres, subjects and aesthetic value in a common cultural statement. Transcending visual motifs emphasize the involuntary semantic interrelationship between religious films, films about the First World war, and the ones that have no direct connection to that particular subject. The attention of the article is turned to the Bible films, as they were on the main cinema road back in its early days, when film was actively seeking plots and characters guaranteed to attract a big audience and become a box office success.

The principal goal is to highlight the ways in which the theme of violence and war in early cinema influenced the development of the cinema language and concept of human existence.

II. THE EARLY ILLUSIONS OF DOCUMENTARY

The illusion of authenticity happens to be one of the most important resources of the feature films. The interest in this illusion most likely was (and still is) aroused by the spontaneous need of the individual of the XX century to expand the limits of the observed reality further and further, increasing their possibilities as a potential witness to any dramatic events. The art captivates us with its ability to revive the past, to visualize the non-existent and the incomprehensible.

The subject of Christ's birth and life was so popular among the general public that it didn't necessarily require the cinema to improve its formal language. Even in Sidney Olcott's «From the Manger to the Cross, or Jesus of Nazareth» (1912) the absolute majority of the scenes, presented quite archaically, in the spirit of a medieval mystery, alternate with completely different fragments, narrated in a «documentary-like» manner. It is even more interesting, considering that this American film fares quite far from the modern cinematographic language. One of the original episodes contains the wide shot of Mount Calvary and the preparations for execution, witnessed by the Virgin Mary and Maria Magdalena. The women are crouching in the foreground, hiding behind the rock with their back to the audience, watching the mountain that can be hardly seen on the horizon. In this particular moment, as if by accident, the perspective reminds that of a scout, watching the enemy from under cover. It also bears resemblance to the glance a soldier in the trench might cast on the enemy's camp, seen in the distance. It is this glance that we are encouraged to mentally share.

Whenever the emotional experience of the Bible is deeply felt and communicated as the one caused by some war-like drama, every trace of anything illustrative, theatrical, naïve or literary disappears from the onscreen narrative; the historical and genre distance from us to the biblical events decreases dramatically. Some kind of spontaneous switch occurs to the war chronicle mode, the one of the priceless authentic evidence, bringing Christ's fate closer to the modern audience and transforming it from a legend into something genuine.

In Giulio Antamoro's «Christ» («Christus», 1916) we see once again the deliberately conventional scenes, obviously inspired by the classical masterpieces of painting, book miniatures, and opera productions, alternate with the ones evoking the immediate horrors of the First World War with its mass destruction for no reason at all. Let's take, for instance, the episode of the massacre of the innocents, ordered by Herod. In this scene the ritualized, slow, and regular rhythm of the characters' actions disappears, as does the theatrical affectation of their movements. On the contrary, the carnage is depicted in a swift and chaotic torrent of the

fleeing civilians, among them mothers with children, and the armed warriors who chase them. Ruthlessness and defenselessness, cruelty and despair are communicated through the growing increase in speed of the movement, through the shifting build-up. We see in wide shot not only the mass destruction but also the fate of an ordinary woman, trying to hide in a dark archway, leaving her shelter to look for a new one, being captured by the soldiers, separated from her baby and killed despite her pleas for mercy.

The camera deliberately doesn't show us the ultimate fate of the baby snatched from its mother's hands, but the audience still has no hope for its salvation. We succumb to the frantic rhythm of the mass destruction that makes it impossible to concentrate on a single victim. The fluent, faltering, arresting narrative of the film not only tells a canonical biblical story but also conveys the observer's attitude towards the unstoppable mass murders, the human cruelty that gains momentum in the aggressive attack on the defenseless population. The camera reflects not the ancient tradition of grieving for the innocent, but the despair of our contemporaries, who remember all too well from their recent collective experience what merciless extermination is. The film, as if unwillingly, likens the biblical events to the recent ones, impossible to discuss in a neutral manner.

When it comes to the onscreen violence, early cinema faces the need to carefully measure just how much visual information and how many details it should give and show. Even the most reserved demonstration can be graphic and brutal, if dynamic and naturalistic. The cinema discovers the paradox of the visual omission, the editing «lapse» leaving out the most terrifying part of events. It's not so much the view of the bloody scene that shocks the audience, but the wider factual context, which makes it clear for the viewer that this plain sight is indeed the aftermath of unspeakable horrors.

In Enrico Guazzoni's «Quo Vadis?» (1913), we are first shown a group of Christians, forced to stand in the center of a Roman circus arena, and the wild lions, brought out to tear them to pieces. The lions are seen in the foreground, strolling leisurely outside of cages, getting used to their surroundings. The helpless people, sensing their dismal end, form an unexpectedly scenic group, looking and acting like opera extras that make melodramatic gestures to express their glorified agony. This scene is absolutely archaic in its expressiveness, alienating the audience from the events. But later, after several other episodes, we see the lions, once again strolling along the empty arena, smelling and picking at small unidentified objects, scattered unevenly all over the place. These objects are the remains of the people eaten by the predators. It's all what's left from several dozens of Christians. The scene bears the mark of mature cinematography, which will later be quite specific to the non-profit cinema. Fully aware of the value of a performance lacking in visual showiness, it will use this minimalistic trick very often, showing as much as possible without the artificial affectation and forced visualization of the events.

On the one hand, early film is very partial to the scenic, enclosed, frontal shot with a steady, well-balanced set-up of

«archaic», «attraction-oriented» forms. [7, p.4] Different framings like windows, arcs, ceilings, balcony outlines etc., enhancing the still's vividness, showiness, and visual harmony, are not rare. At the same time there is certain affectation, excessive rationality, immobility. In the absence of evident framings the film often uses the composition already discovered by the painters to further the aestheticism of the dramatic moments. For instance, in «The Last Days of Pompeii» («Gli ultimi giorni di Pompeii», 1913) the main character, blind girl Nydia, commits suicide by throwing herself in the sea. In the novel of the same name written by Edward Bulwer-Lytton it says that she drowns immediately, but in Mario Caserini's film she floats on the waves for a while, supported by her attire, which looks like a scenic carpet. This composition, reminiscent of the John Millais' «Ophelia», allows for the audience's complete estrangement from the event.

On the other hand, in 1910-1920s the active overcoming of the scenic organization of the frame is already evident. It can be seen most often in the episodes depicting war or natural disasters, like volcanic eruptions or earthquakes. Even today the scenes of mass panic in «The Last Days of Pompeii», as well as in «Cabiria», «Quo Vadis?», «Civilization», «The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse» and many other films whose artistic language is very far from the present standards, seem quite modern. [5, p. 9-10] In the pictures of the Silent Era of the early XX century the motions of the wanderers, the refugees, or the military formations, seem the most authentic, as do the mass scenes of chaotic movements of scared and angry crowds, of chase and escape, of confrontation and despair. The episode depicting the crush of the workers' strike in the modern story line of Griffith's «Intolerance» remains one of the most visually expressive portrayals of social conflict.

When it comes to episodes like this, directors abandon the desire to insert the motion into the frame in a scenic manner, let alone to create a showy set-up. On the contrary, they start to see the frame as some kind of a ragged hole, an ethereal portal, through which the viewer on this side of the screen can witness the onscreen events. The observed reality is boundless, limitless, and open. In case of orderly displacement of different processions they go right through the frame, which doesn't contain the movement. If the movement of big masses of people is chaotic and confused, the frame compartmentalizes the motion that the observing individual cannot take in at a glance. The frame is cut, broken, crumpled, subdued, crushed.

III. A MYTH OF OMNIPRESENT AND INDIFFERENT CAMERA

In Giovanni Pastrone's «The Fall Of Troy» («La caduta di Troia», 1910) the obvious fairground-like naivety of a side show – for instance, of the episode where Elena and Paris travel to Troy by air – is interspersed with realistically depicted battle scenes. There is no feeling of the artificiality of the shots or the forcefully suppressed, aestheticized motion. The warriors, in the throes of aggressive affectation, run right «into the audience», depriving our observation of the onscreen battle of its serene comfort. The location of the

camera's eye in the thick of the battle between the Greeks and the Trojans is implied.

In the process of the development of that perspective a myth of the omnipresent invisible camera is created, the one that is quite substantial to all feature films. In the new art form's self-consciousness it comes to resemble a magical living creature, capable of following and recording the dramatic and dangerous events that would be the end of any human being brave enough to try to see them from such a small distance. The underside of this myth implies an assumption that the magical camera's eye has been in existence forever, even in the times of Julius Caesar, Jesus Christ, and Joan of Arc. Feature films mask their own conventionality and maintain a new and informative one by creating an illusion of the truthful representation of reality. This new conventionality means a new understanding of the human history and its legends as recordings of the actual past. One of the most important characteristics of the world, torn to pieces by wars and disasters, is its «eternal» accessibility for uninterrupted observation and interpretation. The modern illusion of the availability of the visual image of the past is one of the biggest illusions of the XX and even the XXI centuries.

The paradox of the indifferent device emerges. The camera arguably inherits the role of the «indifferent nature» of the XIX century that was, according to the era's philosophers, undisturbed by human suffering. Such an effect can be created by different means. Quite often, the camera seems to notice in the observed world a kindred object, equally inanimate, equally watchful, but incapable of adapting itself to react to the witnessed events. The static character of the artificial zoomorphic or anthropomorphic objects, which happened to find themselves in a dynamic space, is used with good effect. In the first part of the German film «Nerves» («Nerven», dir. by Robert Reiner, 1919), the state of chronic despair, extreme agitation, and near exhaustion of the main characters, caused by their suffering, is emphasized by the presence of the classical statues, adorning the interiors of the buildings where the people dwell, in the frame. That is how an image of a rock, forced to be indifferent and unable to express anything or affect the situation, is created.

In «The Fall of Troy» we see a huge statue of the Grecian horse in the background; enemy warriors start to climb out of it. The foreground is taken up by a lion sculpture. The movement of the enemy soldiers is directed from the horse towards the lion and further outside the frame, from the farthest statue to the nearest one, to the audience and further deep into the city of Troy that is somewhere out there. Both the wooden horse and the stone lion seem to be the silent witnesses to the city's takeover. The horse most likely helps the invaders whereas the lion fails to protect its homeland. The horse provides transportation and shelter for the warriors. The lion is a statue, completely useless in times of war. The film creates an illusion of the contrasting participation of the two sculptures in the fate of Troy. Its illusiveness is evident, since the bulky statues are nothing but playthings to the human will and weakness. Their actual stand somewhat mimics that of the camera that is present and observant but

refraining from any kind of active involvement in the course of events.

In Giovanni Pastrone's «Cabiria» (1914), a statue is left in the center of the frame at the height of the universal panic caused by the volcanic eruption. All around it buildings are collapsing and people are trying to save themselves from the debris and fire. The statue is slightly swaying, but still stands upright. It's obvious, though, that those might be the last minutes of its existence. Paradoxically, the right position of the statue, surrounded by falling columns and fleeing people, only confirms the inevitability of its destruction, as well as the impossibility for any object, animate and inanimate alike, to keep their peace, balance, or well-being in times of disaster. The static character of the artificial zoomorphic or anthropomorphic objects, which happened to find themselves in a dynamic space, is used with good effect. That is how an image is created of forced indifference in the sense of practical helplessness and inability to express anything or affect the situation. It is indicative that the static inanimate object is the embodiment of any person, any living creature and any camera's eye, recording the events but unable to change them.

Despite the general transparency of the moral and political beliefs of the filmmakers, sometimes the cinematographic matter might lack in evident markers of the directors' attitude towards the depicted events, the markers that would be easy for the audience to decipher. There is no visual ethical emphasis, no characters capable of sharing in the emotionality of the viewer. In Thomas H. Ince's «Civilization» (1916), dedicated to the First World War, there is a shot of an old lady, lying still on the floor in her overturned chair. She's not calling for help, crying or even moving; she's paralyzed. Nobody will come to her rescue since her only son, who used to take care of her, went to the war. This silent helplessness of a still alive person makes a terrifying impression, creating a soundless protest against the war, even though the camera is only covering in a neutral manner a routine episode that has nothing to do with the front.

Similar effect can be observed in another scene from the same film, where we see a person killed in action and a dog near him, which is still alive. The animal seems incapable of leaving its deceased owner's side – or was he just a stranger? The camera follows not so much the dog's attachment to a certain human being, as the loneliness of the living creature surrounded by corpses. The animal still sees itself instinctively as part of the human world, but that world simply doesn't exist anymore. The camera, as if told by its own instinct, records the exact ratio of life and death that exists in this particular patch of land. The Virilio's significant idea is about the creation of an «anthology of public vision» by the filmmakers who went through the First World War and learnt that photography and film are the «anonymous participants» of the events, easy for the viewers to associate themselves with. [1, p. 50]

The more consistency the film shows in maintaining the emotional neutrality and imperturbability of the camera's eye, the more evident it becomes that human perception prevents

us from remaining unaffected when observing cruelty and suffering. The pretended authenticity of the impassive war shots can be just a way for an agitated person, unable to be nothing more than an observer, to refresh its sense of self-awareness. The indifferent neutrality of the camera is only a role, assigned to it by the filmmaker, who watches life and film with equal interest. The film era creates the situation of permanent reflection on the contrast between the emotional and ethical attitude of the individual, on the one hand, and the impassiveness of the recording device, on the other. The new vision of violence and suffering is shaped by these two approaches.

The superficial indifference of the camera's eye represents the underside of the human fascination with all things terrible. In «Intolerance» the camera freezes in front of the Huguenots' bodies in the scene of the Massacre of St. Bartholomew, in «The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse» it captures the corpses on one of the battlefields of the First World War, in Ernst Lubitsch's «Madame DuBarry» (1919) it shoots the remains of the commoners in the episodes of revolutionary battles. It seems that, wherever the dead bodies are present, the camera's eye struggles to find another object worth of its attention.

There is one more conjunction of the motif of war with the Silent Era. Another type of cinema emerges, which doesn't necessarily imply or expect any verbal communication from the characters. It doesn't matter if the representation is static or dynamic. In both cases there is nobody left on screen able to talk or to cry: people are either physically destroyed, or deprived of articulate speech and consciousness. The onscreen boom of guns might muffle any words as well as illegible exclamations. In the American film «The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse» (dir. by Rex Ingram, 1921) we first see a small fountain square in the last hours of peace and then in the heat of action that reaches as far as the characters' family castle. Little by little the ancient houses surrounding the castle are left in shambles, not at all reminiscent of the good old days. Debris is all what's left from the beautiful fountain. We only see the wide shot of the fleeing people and the ruins – where there's no life, there can be no long dialogs.

The film intentionally refuses to give this sight any kind of external emotionality or chaos-fighting impetus. A new type of cinematographic matter, where the silence is not a constraint but a source of realism, is born. The authenticity of the world torn by war lies in the absence of verbal communication.

IV. CONCLUSION

This kind of onscreen reality presentation will later be adopted by television to cover any emergencies, especially natural and technological disasters as well as sociopolitical conflicts. Candid shots and «no comment» stylistics aspire to guarantee as few mediums between the audience and the captured reality as possible. Off-screen and on-screen narration, background music, and sound editing can be seen as such mediums. When the footage is clear of those elements, the audience sees a captured fragment of reality

that is disharmonious, unstable. Its expressiveness reflects the reality itself, which shouldn't resemble art or give an impression of a completed form. On the contrary, it has the value of something true to life, and as such is not required to abide by the artistic laws.

The language of roundabout expression of the disaster's scale is formed for the indescribable horrors that cannot be brought to fit certain limits. Disharmony, cruelty, violence and terror have no boundaries, metaphorical or real. The drama of life can be adequately reproduced with complex turmoil, infinite reality, broken into fragments that ignore the laws of classical harmony.

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