

**WITHIN THE FUGACITY  
THE SUBLIME MOMENT IN CINEMA**

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## **Within the Fugacity: The Sublime Moment in Cinema**

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## **Abstract**

Romantic love has always been a major theme in cinematic representations since the very beginning of cinema's existence. This dissertation realizes a research of sublime moments, particularly focusing in miraculous love along the history of cinema. The research takes interest in the most special moments when love reaches its climactic height in filmic images, and the representations of the occurrence of sublime miracles in the experience of love. The theories and collections of films in this dissertation will serve for a historialization of how the film apparatus visualizes these moments in its different stages of classic Hollywood cinema, modern European cinema and contemporary cinema. Special attention will be paid to the formal evolution of how miraculous love is represented based on a comparative study of different historical periods.

**Keywords:** Love, miracle, the sublime, film history

## **Statement of Original Authorship**

I certify that the work in this thesis has not been previously submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text. I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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## Introduction

### Modernity and the Experience of a Moment

Overwhelming images, constant distractions and ephemeral feelings – life in the era of modernity is characterized by “shock” proclaimed by Walter Benjamin, which consists in an excess of audiovisual stimuli with the acceleration of time and the fragmentation of space during industrialization. In the need to seduce consumers, modern societies produce products that appeal primarily to our senses within all aspects of our daily lives. Constant physical and psychic shocks to our sensorium have become common experiences of our modern existence. Cinema undoubtedly constitutes one of the aesthetic shocks of modern cultures. Modernity, according to be said, is “intrinsically cinematic”<sup>1</sup>, and cinema, born in the modern era as a new art without the burden of pre-established traditions, is ontologically modern<sup>2</sup>.

Lipovetsy and Serroy<sup>3</sup> have reasonably found modernity as an essence of cinema, embodied in its massive production and consumption, its engagement with fashion and its spectacular and momentary effects. Indeed, for their rapid trends of fashion and unceasing renovation, films are frequently composed of fast successions of abundant images. This might be a rather worrying situation according to Benjamin<sup>4</sup>, who considers that individuals receiving an overwhelming amount and intensity of external stimuli like those of today tend to protect themselves by shielding away those audiovisual shocks, thus becoming numbed in their reception of images and sounds.

Cinema hence forms part of an audiovisual entirety that produces a “crisis of perception”<sup>5</sup>. The eyes of the spectators may see too much under the bombardment of

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<sup>1</sup> Charney and Schwarz, 1995: 1-3

<sup>2</sup> Lipovetsky and Serroy, 2001: 31-72

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> 2006

<sup>5</sup> Buck-Morss, 1992



fragmented images but nevertheless “register nothing”<sup>6</sup>. Numerous concerns on this perception crisis caused by an excess of fleeting images lead to the discussion of the possibility of “experimenting a moment”<sup>7</sup> in the viewing of films. According to Charney<sup>8</sup> himself, to experience a moment signifies to experience the existence of a cinematic moment in the present, that “the moment exists to such an extent that the individual experiences an immediate and tangible feeling”. Under our habitual defense mechanism of shielding away excessive shocks from modern aesthetics, whether we can still experience such a moment becomes a pivotal theme.

Submerged in the modern bombardment of audiovisual materials, perhaps it is time for us to make a reflection on the very moment when we were detained in front of the screen stricken simply by a distinguished emotion; perhaps it is time to reconsider the capacity of films – employing all their aesthetic dynamics – to construct an instant of intensity, to portray a most profound universe and to move the spectators; perhaps it is time to remind of our initial infatuation with the cinema. As Susan Buck-Morss<sup>9</sup> reasonably puts it, the key task of contemporary artists is to “undo the alienation of the corporal sensorium and restore the instinctive power of the human senses”. Against our sensorial indifference of the excessive audiovisual messages, the significance of a film resides exactly in surpassing the shield to reach for the heart of the spectators.

### **Cinema of Attraction and the Sublime Moment**

As has been commented by Tom Gunning<sup>10</sup>, cinema in its first years after birth comes out as a spectacle of attractions that “aggressively subjected the spectators to sensorial or psychological impact”. Derived from the brunch of the Méliès tradition, the non-actuality cinema, often lack of plot, favors magical attractions over narrative continuity<sup>11</sup>. During the history of cinematic development, cinema of attraction has been incorporated as components of feature films which attempts to balance pure spectacle

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Charney, 1995: 279

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Buck-Morss, 1992

<sup>10</sup> 1986: 63-70

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

with narrative advances. A lot of these remaining fragments of cinema of attraction have converted in prominent moments with visual and aesthetic richness within the narrative as a whole.

This study intends to make a historialization of the sublime moment in classic, modern and contemporary cinema and comparatively examine the change of its representation in different eras in the cinematic history. A notion abstract as such might indeed encompass a great variety of distinct themes and aspects. After a painstaking consideration and selection, this study finally settles particularly on the living of love as a miraculous experience as the main theme in discussion for the advent of the sublime moment. The reason for choosing this topic is that as a common theme for artistic expressions, love at its height can take on religious, mystical and spiritual qualities, and becomes an avenue for spiritual transcendence. Indeed, a great many of astounding love stories have been documented in its archives during the cinema's centenary history. This investigation only wishes to offer a selective analysis of the most paradigmatic sublime moments in cinema when the intensity of love manifests itself at its peak that could arguably facilitate the occurrence of a miracle so as to lead the spectators to a transcendental sublime domain.

The intention of this investigation is not to isolate an oeuvre of a particular filmmaker or a specific genre as the subject of study, but rather to discover a thematic practice that permeates along the cinematic history – one that cuts across genres, studios or careers. I find it quite necessary – instead of detaching a separated cinematic object from its context – to situate a practice in its different historical conditions to detect an entire transformation of a collective mode. Albeit in their different ways adjusted to their distinct historical periods, classic, modern and contemporary cinema all find their way to represent and visualize an abstract sentimental concept as love, miracle or sublime in their respective aesthetics.

## Chapter One

### Sublime Moments in Classic Cinema

Romantic love is no alien subject in classic Hollywood cinema. It is an era when the representation of love embarks on its purest and simplest debut in cinema. Although amorous themes are anything but novel in various artistic creations in the humanities, the embodiment of such a grandiose and nebulous, hardly tactile emotion, can still be a real challenge for the new-born apparatus as the cinema. Even more so if we are discussing about love at its sublime climax – the kind of epic love story. Nonetheless, as surprisingly as it might be, from the beginning of its birth, cinema already displays a set of mature strategic techniques at its disposal when reaching for the height.

In general, the construction of a miraculously sublime moment in classic cinema needs both a continuation and rupture from the film as a whole – continuation in the sense that the instant is finally reached as an accumulation of previous impetus, whereas rupture may be understood as a breaking-away from the temporal and spatial order maintained earlier in the narrative so as to achieve a distinguished instant. Therefore, continuation mainly addresses the narrative aspect of the films, referring to the narrative evolution which gradually pushes to the high, while rupture deals with the mise-en-scene of the films, more specifically to the construction of a specially separated space within the entirety only for the moment. Roughly summing up after a study of these moments in Hollywood classic cinema and as will be scrutinized with particular filmic texts below, the continuation and rupture in the production of a sublime moment in the classic cinema are often demonstrated in the following senses: continuation – to sublimate the romantic love and to underline its miraculous nature, classic cinema often resorts to dramatic plots, i.e. to make the lovers undergo a severe trial/difficulty so as to arrive at a happy ending where the determinant and faithful love conquers all; rupture – a new space or an entire universe is almost always set apart from the actual realities that face the protagonists in the films, particularly to prepare a poetic world for the miraculously sublime love to happen.

The first filmic example that I will be analyzing features a moment that occurs nearly at the end of *Tea and Sympathy*<sup>12</sup>. The film narrates a forbidden love between Tom (John Kerr), a young student at a boy's prep school and Mrs. Reynolds (Deborah Kerr), his house mistress as well as his coach's wife. Apart from their taboo relationship which hinders their amorous expressions, their growing affections for each other are also subjected to a series of individual troubles and conflicts – on the part of Tom, his difficulty in identifying himself in the machismo school culture, resulting in his isolation among his father, his fellow peers and the coach; while on the part of Mrs. Reynolds, her frustration for her husband's ignorance and indifference. It is amidst the bullying of a young boy driving him to suicide attempt that Mrs. Reynolds' tea and sympathy for Tom at last develops into a special affection as love and compassion.

The most sublime moment of the film rises when Mrs. Reynolds finds Tom in the woods alongside the road after the disastrous event of his suicide attempt at the “town whore” Ellie's (Norma Crane) place when the girl, one more time, laughs at his nickname “sisterboy” following innumerable times of his fellows' derision and bullying. As Mrs. Reynolds walks through the trees searching for Tom, the tracking shot of the camera enables us the spectators to witness and follow her to approach an expectedly imminent scene – the young boy's first appearance after his heartbreaking devastation, but an appearance, as might have already been sensed, anything but the same as his usual presence. The tracking shot hence indicates, with all its possible signs that should already have prepared the audience, the mysterious manifestation of a significant moment.

And thus we see. From the back of Mrs. Reynolds – exactly where the camera is placed that assigns us this specific perspective – we see Tom's legs, lying on an open area among the woods. This encounter point is immediately unfolded before our eyes as clearly another space – a peaceful and serene harbor – previously unseen from almost the entire film, away from the blatant swagger and ridicule of the adolescent boys, away from the ruthless torment by the rest of the world. We are at once revealed to this nearly transcendently new space beyond reality – nothing like what we have seen – just like the tranquility after a storm. Yes, exactly where a sublime moment should emerge. The

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<sup>12</sup> Minnelli, 1956

camera then captures her front, calling out his name. “Tom”, he turns back, raises his head and at that moment, her figure must have come into his sight just like how it is shown to us on the screen. From below, the camera elevates Mrs. Reynolds’ back-lit, almost saint and fairy-like image against the dreamlike woods – such a bewitching image that could confuse the reality from fantasy. She approaches him, looks down on him, with words and posture that try to awaken him from his self-obsessed mind wandering.

He then gets up. After an emotional talk about the earlier happenings, she confesses to him that he has given her the best kiss she has ever had from anyone. However the camera at the end moves away, little by little leaving the two characters at a more distance, somehow suggesting Tom’s rejection and her messages’ incapacity to reach him. At this point, a series of significant movements take place – she slowly and desperately stands up and walks away on her back, while he goes back to lie down, again locking himself up into his shells. At this point the moment comes, right in this way, a complete magical rupture to a seemingly end-of-story. Just as they enter into a standstill which could as well have ended the tragic and desperate story, a miraculous change occurs. Mrs. Reynolds, for the last time turns back, looking at Tom’s recumbent figure from behind, and once more walks to him. This is indeed how the complex relationship between the two protagonists has always been throughout the film – the repeating step-ahead and step-back of one or another, the advance of one followed by the withdrawal of the other – until this ultimate moment, when all the elements and the repetitive gestures of the two accumulate to their pinnacles. Naturally a complete release of emotions is presaged.

She stops and empathetically looks over him. He turns back with such an undefined look, both confused and expecting, with his hands surrounding his chest in an almost delicate and self-protective gesture. Mrs. Reynolds stretches out her hand, with the camera all this time from below underlining her saint-like image. As always, she is offering this lost boy compassion and love, far beyond what she was designated for – tea and sympathy. While the camera turns back to him, her offering hand appears from the left-top of the frame, responding to his calling needs. His right hand, from his left chest-shoulder – the opposite side to her offering hand – seems to have taken forever to reach hers. This single one shot with this one simple movement of his hand responding and reaching for hers, is prolonged as such that the significant sublime instant when the

two hands, as well as the two souls, finally connect is permanently waited. We experience a profound palpitation in our heart at this moment, so deeply dragged into this hidden place, having escaped from all the complexities of the mundane and finally arriving at this particular moment in this particular space. Cinema, indeed, provides us an escaping land.

So the two characters, deserted from the worldly realities, initiate their sublime journey in this new universe. Her hand leads him closer, and then with her two hands, she strokes his face – the two looking at each other imprinted in the center of the frame in the middle of the fairyland. “Years from now, when you talk about this, and you will, be kind.” And then they kiss, shortly but meaningfully – following a long Hollywood tradition of representing the filmic kiss as “a privileged moment of romantic bonding”<sup>13</sup>. It is such an ambiguously sublime kiss, since it goes far beyond any simple kiss of desire. This concluding kiss contains an extensive universe – it’s both motherly and amorous; a kiss between two lonely souls, between a pair of potential lovers, between a lost boy and a compassionate mother. This sublime expression of love temporarily finalizes their story, yet with definitely a determinant and lasting power. The living of love as something miraculous is not only limited to this particular moment when the rest of the world fades away for a spiritually eternal embrace; but it also – as the letter at the end of the film reveals – saves a delicate young boy from his self-destruction and guides him to his way of becoming a man. Although not commenting on this particular film, Belton’s<sup>14</sup> argument quite suits the situation of this particular moment of *Tea and Sympathy*: “the characters – the childlike and emotionally innocent hero who becomes capable of understanding and, therefore, love and the sacrificial and self-aware heroine who devotes herself to something greater than herself – make a trial of one spiritual state by contrasting it with another, providing the catalyst for the characters’ growth out of one order and the emergence into another, transcendent one”.

As has been commented at the beginning of this chapter, romantic love in classic cinema is often sublimated as miraculous by means of being subjected to a drastic trial. If *Tea and Sympathy* aspires for the representation of a kind of salvation love that prevents the falling of a young boy and unites two lonely souls; there are other classic

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<sup>13</sup> Wexman, 1993: 18

<sup>14</sup> 1974: 128

films that even reaches for more extremes by throwing love at the face of death. One of the black and white silent films that attempts to represent miraculous love that conquers distances and even death is *7<sup>th</sup> Heaven*<sup>15</sup>.

However, it is necessary to note here that chronologically from *7<sup>th</sup> Heaven* to *Tea and Sympathy*, Hollywood cinema has experienced quite a stylistic change during its decades of history. The kind of ambiguity and the distance it provokes in the spectators of the 50s Hollywood cinema is actually developed from quite a distinct filmmaking concept of the early classic Hollywood. *Tea and Sympathy* belongs to what Requena<sup>16</sup> defines as the mannerist cinema – an era of aesthetic search responding to a Hollywood classicism in crisis.

From the 1950s, the classic Hollywood cinema and its rigid formal structures begin to be undermined under the influence of the mind-opening filmmaking styles that is brought in by the European filmmakers. The subject, i.e. the spectator, which in the earlier classic films once occupied the center of the meaning-making process, has been displaced in mannerist cinema. The transparent gaze of the spectator of the early classic films that traverses an economic signification system reaching for a direct and clean decoding of the encoded signifiers on the screen is substituted by an opaque gaze of the mannerist spectator, to whom the cinematic linguistics could generate various ambiguities.

As a clear example of the mannerist cinema the hero in Minnelli's *Tea and Sympathy* is weakened with regard to his heroic qualities, in that ambiguous doubts take over his determinate power earlier eulogized by the classic Hollywood. As can be easily detected from the word "mannerist" – a cinema made to the method (by origin the word "maniera" in Italian), mannerist films especially highlight their stylistic forms – camera movement, depth of field, camera angle and soundtrack etc. The functionality of narrating a story privileged by the conventional classic Hollywood comes second with mannerist cinema's aesthetic challenge that elevates the films' expressivity to the priority, often creating a sensation of excess in its representations. The apparent speciality of Minnelli's utilization of colors is perfectly illustrated in the earlier discussed sequence of *Tea and Sympathy*, through which a separated dreamland is

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<sup>15</sup> Borzage, 1927

<sup>16</sup> 1986: 19-48

constructed. Apart from this, instead of the most natural representation of the real that the classic cinema strives for, mannerist films confront the unreal with their stylistic techniques. A multiplicity of subjective shots and the surreal landscape that *Tea and Sympathy* disposes of in the sequence capture the spectators in their fascination by the unrealistic images in front of their eyes.

What comes next, i.e. *7<sup>th</sup> Heaven*, nonetheless, belongs to the more classic Hollywood style, where the “interrupting” distance between the representation and the represented is intentionally avoided so that the privileged silent narration could seem more real to the spectators. It exemplifies the predecessor of the mannerist cinema in a period when the stylistic and technical effects have not yet taken such predominance over the well-adjusted and organized narrative.

Recounting the story of a just-married poor couple who confront an immediate separation for Chico’s (Charles Farrell) enlistment in the army during the First World War, the film presents several sublime moments along the progress of their love story. The film for one more time submerges the protagonists in extreme adversaries – poverty, war and death – but on the other side bestows them with a set-apart heavenly space that rises from the filthy world where their true love can bloom. The space in this particular film finds both a physical and spiritual incarnation. Physically, as the camera ascends vertically, following from a distance the couple’s rapturous figures walking upstairs to Chico’s apartment “near the stars”, we are taken to the primary material embodiment of the space set apart as “heaven”. From the very moment that Diane (Janet Gaynor) settles down in this small physical space where she joyfully anchors her sense of security, the nest of love is instantly and almost violently alienated from the time and space of the outside world. The center of focus shifts to this little space created by love, with only minimal and perfunctory depictions of the activities carried out in the external world, be it war or factory work. Time in this separated space is eternally elongated while the rest of the world blurs, to the extent that the outside world becomes nearly an abstraction compared to the couple’s otherwise intense love that is experienced in the apartment as the only real – such is what happens when Diane refuses to accept the news that her lover has died in the war, believing in the realness of their everyday appointment at eleven o’clock. This centrality of the enclosed space predominated by



the protagonists has precisely been commented by Rosen<sup>17</sup> in his observations on *7<sup>th</sup> Heaven*, where he claims that the environment is subordinated to the characters, and the world external to the characters (“the real world”) is “blurred over” and softened to the extent that they “are there only to be transcended as the characters forge binds that go beyond time and space”.

Hence the activities taken place in Chico’s apartment assume major importance in the film and several sublime moments in their love story are experienced here – marriage, separation and reunion. When they have decided to get married right here in this little apartment before Chico sets out for the war, he looks up after repetitive conflicting thoughts about the existence of God or a Bon Dieu, determined to give his belief another chance and plead for a true marriage. For this very instant, the camera is elevated and looks down from a high angle upon the faces of the two protagonists looking up, hopefully and expectedly – as if from God’s point of view as far as their love reaches – dramatized by the usually exaggerated facial expressions in silent films. In the traditional wish-fulfilling dream factory of Hollywood, the marriage as the symbol of a happy union as a consequence of blissful love, has always been a favored and privileged moment. This sacred moment is further sublimated in *7<sup>th</sup> Heaven* by the impact that it creates with the positioning of the camera from a certain height that their love and hope arrives at – emphasizing the spiritual nature of their union – and the expressive performance of the actors.

The next sublime moment as has been mentioned is the immediate separation – the last image of Diane filling the eyes of Chico before he leaves. Again in this image time seems to detain. Diane is presented in an overwhelming full-frontal American shot with a perfectly acted out expression on her face – as if nothing else but only her look can reach for him and stop him for a while. The camera holds still in this image for a short while – when the rest of the world fades away and time fixates upon her look – until her image dissolves into the pendulous clock. So they make the appointment that every day at eleven o’clock he will come to her.

Before we jump to the final sublime moment which is the reunion, let me first make up to the point earlier left about the spiritual embodiment of the separated space. This space emerges with Chico and Diane’s physical separation following their appointment.

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<sup>17</sup> 1977: 95

Spiritually, this space shows itself in the cinematic linguistics as a kind of telepathy between the two where they are able to communicate and transmit their love surpassing the huge physical distance that divides them. The brief sequence begins with Chico walking away from his soldier peers, and then cuts to Diane in the apartment, their conserved heavenly space miles away from him. She closes the windows and looks to the clock – eleven. When the camera returns to Diane, she is portrayed in medium shot, pulling out their wedding medal, closes her eyes and calls out “Chico-Diane-Heaven”. Her image dissolves into his image, with the same gesture holding the medal to his heart, eyes closed and his face elevated to the infinite height. This looking or simply raising the head with eyes closed in a sense becomes a symbol of entrance to the sublime space in this film – the desire to reach for heaven, to grow and rise. The shot then cuts across between the two with the same gesture speaking to each other with words that are not shown in the captions. In fact, what they are speaking is no longer that significant at this moment – exactly the beauty of silent film – what matters is the sublime time and space reserved for the communication and love of the couple expressed only by their acting. They are visually tied together.

Now it’s time for the ultimate sublimity: the reunion of the lovers after the war. When Diane finally desperately accepts that Chico is dead, on the other side, the survived but blind hero is pushing through the crowds to reach home. This sudden cut to Chico fighting his way back home makes a total rupture to the narrative continuity, which again echoes the argument in the beginning about this technique to produce sublimity and miracle. Robert Smith<sup>18</sup>, when reflecting upon the disruption of this “flat cut”, comments: “there is no preparation in the narrative for Chico’s return, and the first appearance of him back from the dead is not softened by an explanatory caption or even a dissolve. All that heralds his return is a brutal, flat cut which marks the transformation between one narrative (sorrow at Chico’s death) and another (Chico’s return).” Borzage seems to be intentionally creating a maximum of intensity at this moment to prepare for the climactic sublimity that comes after.

When Chico nearly struggles to drag himself upstairs to reach for the “heaven”, the images constitute one of the most impacting moments in the film. The camera, again quite symbolically and metaphorically from the perspective of the *Bon Dieu* from

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<sup>18</sup> 1975: 17

above, looks down on the spiral stairs where Chico, round and round, feels for his way up, calling out Diane's name, with his head – although he cannot actually see anything – all up, with the expression on his face like a frantic man. When he approaches, little by little, to the camera and his face appears nearer, the letters of Diane's name in the caption also grows larger – an ascending intensity of his emotions. The clock strikes eleven – “reinstating the spirituality of their union”<sup>19</sup>. He enters in the apartment – last call of her name, – while she blinks her eyes, unbelieving of his appearance. The intensity constructed by this dramatic turn of the narrative reaches its sublime height. The camera gives a medium shot of him, with his eyes expectedly but blankly looking ahead when it shifts to the general shot showing Diane's frail figure approaching him with her open arms. When she finally reaches him, she collapses down on his feet. Their spirituality that has almost been lost is recovered by Chico's affirmation that “God is within him”.

The sequence, as well as the whole film, ends with a long embrace of the two – a culmination shot where a brilliant shaft of white light is casted from the diagonal angle of the screen and becomes stronger and stronger. This sanctifying light symbolizes the couple's “move beyond the immediate and into the spiritual”<sup>20</sup>. The love that has conquered distance and death finds its ultimate strength in this embrace of the reunited lovers, with the light illuminating the sublimity of this moment of life.

Another masterpiece with similar kind of larger-than-life emotions that evolve to the production of a sublime miracle, interpreted exquisitely as well by the genius couple on the screen Janet Gaynor and Charles Farrell, is Borzage's next work *Street Angel*<sup>21</sup>. Again following the most classic Hollywood structure of boy meets girl – boy loses girl – love conquers all, the pure love of the two protagonists once more suffers from a moral trial and separation. However, for another time the couple finds their way to create a space of their own for the nourishment of their love. One time after another the couple is shot to be whistling their song *O Sole Mio* as a special way of communicating in their united and connected space of love – quite similarly to the “Chico-Diane-Heaven” vow in *7<sup>th</sup> Heaven*. A rather magical effect symbolized by the whistling of the song is produced. In various moments of the film – at Angela's (Janet Gaynor)

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<sup>19</sup> Lamster, 1981: 49

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Borzage, 1928

performance in the circus while Gino (Charles Farrell) stays below looking over her, or at home in Naples while Gino looks down upon Angela by the window – the song is whistled by the two consecutively in turn like a conversation. At these moments, a nearly separated space is constructed for the existence of the two only – an overwhelming predominance of a moment when passionate love seems to lead the lovers into a space where the rest of the world disappears. That means, in spite of being among people, or perhaps to put it better, among the impoverished and misty Neapolitan landscape, survives a space savored only by the couple.

Of course, these are all before the turn of the story. When Angela is arrested for prison as a consequence of her earlier robbery and solicitation to save her mother from death, the pure and ideal love shared by the couple comes to a sudden ruin, replaced, instead, by frustration and hatred. At Angela's release, the two reencounter at the port. Angela, frightened by Gino's eyes filled with hatred, escapes while he chases her to a chapel. Here the dramatic turn finally occurs with their reconciliation in a miraculous way. The camera follows Gino's eyes looking ahead, until it finally fixes upon the painting of Angela once from his very own hands, like an angel. This painting, throughout the whole film, has made clear its significance for the couple. "Gino's portrait of Angela comes to represent more than their love or the soul he sees within her; it becomes representative of the abstract, transcendent nature of this relationship"<sup>22</sup>. At the final moment, the painting becomes a powerful force in the turn of the situation to re-bind the two together.

*The religious atmosphere, coupled with the painting's transformation into a Madonna, makes clear the quasi-religious nature of their new awareness of and need for one another. Through the painting, each redeems the other. Borzage's great dissolve from the painting to them [Angela and Gino] eloquently equates the rebirth of their love with a greater, more mysterious spiritual regeneration.*<sup>23</sup>

Just as this comment shows, following the shot of the painting comes a significant framing of the couple – the two at the middle of the frame with the camera above looking down at them, Angela pressed down by Gino on the altar looking up at him while Gino looks up supposedly at the painting. Only their faces are illuminated, of

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<sup>22</sup> Lamster, 1981: 52

<sup>23</sup> Belton, 1974: 83

which Gino's face without doubt is the more expressive one with his eyes stricken by shock and reverence. Angela's portrait is featured again while at this moment the chapel bell starts to ring, like an announcement – an atmospheric touch of the sublime and dramatic scene. Gino's hand, together in a close-up with Angela's face, releases from her neck. Still looking up at the painting as if his eyes have been stuck to it, he draws back and starts to look around the chapel, when finally, his sight casts on her, the real Angela trembling on the floor. He then looks back on the painting, followed by a close-up of the angel's face, and he takes off his hat. Backing and backing off, he seems to be worn out from the surreal happenings at this moment.

The miraculous moment is already taking place. Again in a separated space prepared for the advent of the moment, the two in the chapel are cut off from the rest of the world – a highly metaphoric and symbolic place, religious and sacred, ideal for the witness of the most dramatic instant of the entire story. They are suddenly dragged into another space – this time spiritually and mentally – a space full of bypast memories of the old days' pure love, recalled by this old painting of theirs. His receding initiates her advancing – a positioning as significant as such hints us the turn of the situation. A desperate and exhausted Gino is finally to be conquered by Angela's proving of the pureness of her love. "Look in my eyes!" She looks up to him from the floor, with her soft and moist eyes exuding tenderness and love, illuminated like an angel, just like in the painting. The great miraculous and sublime moment is thus occurring, with this angel-like image of her permeated with the halo of pure love, and also with the incredible re-discovery and remembering on Gino's part of this love that has remained unchanged at all odds. So subtly and delicately interpreted by Charles Farrell, Gino's renascent faith in love constitutes one of the most impacting shots of the film. He turns back his head and looks into her eyes. The next sequence centered on his face could display and embody all the sublimity and miracle that happens within this magical instant – his weary and somber face begins to change. His eyes start to open wide and fix on her, fascinated by the recognition of love. When he pulls her up to recognize her one more time and the camera returns to his face for another time, his eyes are already shining with light, recovered with the old innocence and affection. The next sequence of the two looking into each other already takes us to the full explosion of sublimity reified by the recuperated love and hope. She, like an angel gently looking into him; he, like a little

boy, is joyfully overwhelmed by the surprise of rediscovering his lover, right under the painting of madonna.

Once again in this separated space, a physical religious space protected by the divine, the lovers transcend to their spiritual space where they are united, capable of elude from earthly obstacles. At the end of the film, the couple walks out of the chapel with Gino holding Diane in his arms, again into the misty landscape of the Neapolitan port. Lamster<sup>24</sup> has detected a similar effect of “the immersion of Chico and Diane in the beam of light” in *7<sup>th</sup> Heaven* with the walk Gino and Angela take at the end of *Street Angel*, believing that “both couples transcend their reality and enter a sphere that has first been incorporated within their souls, souls that have been ‘made great through love and adversity’”. Therefore, the existence of another transcendental space remains an important aspect in the construction of a sublime and miraculous love in Borzage’s works.

The next classic film that narrates the story of a couple separated by prison is *Peter Ibbetson*<sup>25</sup>. Highly relevant to the thematic discussion of the miraculous love experience as sublimity, this film proposes a kind of forbidden love which possesses the power to last for a lifetime. Narratively the miracle manifests itself in two particular senses: the childhood puppy love that lasts during years of separation until the reencounter of the two adults and their inexplicable identification of each other; dream as an mysteriously and mutually shared astral sphere where the lovers could enjoy a lifelong happiness in spite of their bodies shackled to worldly separations, and the power of love/fantasy to drag Peter (Gary Cooper) over death when he has lost his will to live. The creation of dream as a paradisaal landscape in this film is the most significant space where nearly all the sublime moments emerge – love, miracle, or even death.

The beauty of cinematic representation of the miraculous experience of love as the sublime moment lies exactly in its visualization of an invisible feeling. To achieve this end, films of this theme frequently open new spaces other than the reality dimension where the protagonists are situated within – simply to leave a place where an out-of-hold affection so intense like the passionate first-sight love can linger on and be represented through memory or dream after the demise of that first instant. With this

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<sup>24</sup> 1981: 54

<sup>25</sup> Hathaway, 1935

special strategy, sublime love in Hollywood cinematic representations is able to break away from the ordinary banality or even its narrative timeframe to cut into the dramatized and glorified fantastic universe.

So as to achieve sublimity, *Peter Ibbetson* again resorts to the construction of another space like a place of escape which transports the characters as well as the audience beyond the hard reality. Although in this film, that space is a pure dream, the “reality” of the dream is so strongly insisted that the dream space seamlessly emerges from the reality. When they meet for the second time in their dreams after Peter has been jailed – him, having been convinced by Mary (Ann Harding) to believe in the trueness of the dreams – the camera begins with the shot of Mary in her bed sleeping, and then moves to her window. With the light filtered through the window constructing such a dreamy picture that the entering of another space is indicated, the shot is connected to his window, and naturally, to his sleeping face. Peter’s face then dissolves into a hazy light. When the picture becomes clear again on the screen, it is understood that they are already in their dreams – a separated space but an extension of the reality.

Peter stands up and miraculously passes through the bars of the jail, going up the stairs until he hears Mary calling his name. Then she appears wearing an all-white dress, not unlike the image of Mrs. Reynolds in *Tea and Sympathy*, portrayed from a low-point angle, with strong light pouring on her from the window at her back – elevated and lightened like an angel. Similarly, this Shangri-la is directed by the female figure, who, as the spectator would expect, will lead her lover to a coming sublime moment. So she takes his hand, helping him to overcome his fears and doubts, and guides him to their paradise. With the ascending background music, the very next moment when they pass through the jail bars, they are already walking on a country road through the trees – the arrival of the nostalgic paradise: their childhood house.

The dream world of theirs is pictured clearly with a narrative structure so complete like an entire filmic storytelling – equilibrium (continuation of the childhood play when they first arrive at the house and their magical construction of a fantastic castle with music), rupture of the equilibrium (out of Peter’s fears, the castle is destroyed and the two are caught in a landslide), and the reconstruction of equilibrium (when the two re-find each other after the catastrophe and decide to put away their fears and to be free in this dreamy paradise as long as they live). This lucid dreaming becomes a full landscape for



their most sublime emotions to emerge. To overcome his fears and desperation, Mary actively encourages Peter to be conscious and to take control of his feelings while he miraculously survives in his filthy bed in jail.

The ultimate climax takes place at the end of the film at their death. The two characters are depicted correspondingly to their elder age in real life whereas in their dreams they appear with the same costume like before, young as ever. This costume and character change in real life but their conservation in the dream suggest a sublime significance of the miraculous effect of their love – the remaining of a forever glorified place uninfluenced by the passing of time. In the particular sequence before Mary's death, Peter enters the shot alone and Mary is embodied only by her voice and a light from above symbolizing the illumination from heaven. While the rest of the world is submerged in obscurity, Peter sits on a bench under the tree in such a mystical atmosphere with the only light in the mise-en-scene beside him – Mary's light. He stares at this light when she, in her voice only, speaks to him with a farewell discourse before she leaves for heaven. While he gazes into the infinity with his face illuminated by the light, Mary describes to him the cannot-be-defined beauty in the world there beyond. The whole sequence basically oscillates between the general shot of Peter sitting beside the light and the medium shot of him looking into the light – a kind of action/reaction shot while the two converse about life and death beyond the mundane. The sublimity of her appearance in his dream is aggrandized in this way with the discussion of a nearly sacred theme – reunion and love that transcends death.

Another Classic film that touches upon this great theme of love beyond death as a miraculous and sublime experience is *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*<sup>26</sup>. Proposing a romantic fantasy between the widow Lucy Muir (Gene Tierney) and the ghost of a deceased sea captain Gregg (Rex Harrison), the film leads to a necessary happy ending – Lucy's death for an eternal love – as a resolution for the impossible romance. The most sublime moment occurs at the end of the film at Mrs. Muir's death. Once again, she sits in her bedroom and closes her eyes – as has been seen from the previous plots, the typical prelude as her entrance to the dream sphere and encounter with Captain Gregg. Her death, represented quite symbolically with the camera following her hand loosing and letting drop of a cup of milk, initiates the rather long-expected final moment of

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<sup>26</sup> Mankiewicz, 1947



transcendence. The frame stands still featuring only the bottom half of her body with her dying hand hanging at the armchair while a man's footstep enters the screen. "And now you'll never be tired again" – his voice is immediately identified as the Captain, after such a long disappearance from her life. The camera then lifts up – we see him, with a gently smiling face as always, looking down at her. "Come, Lucía. Come, my dear." He reaches out both of his hands. The lyrical and poetic performance of Rex Harrison of the Captain figure perfectly interprets the dreamy nature of the whole story.

So we see her hands unite with his. When he pulls her up from the seat, the next image creates such an impacting visual effect exactly for the embellished representation of a miraculous moment – she rises young and beautiful, tenderly looking into his eyes. The camera's momentary lingering on her closed-up face seems to prolong this idealized sublimity into forever. The camera then follows the two walking away from the room, hand in hand, while she looks back at her elderly dying figure on the chair. Then she looks back at him, in a way like scrutinizing his face and confirming her determination toward a new journey with him. The two walks down the stairs, passing by the servant Martha, when Mrs. Muir, still adapting her new role, urges to call Martha's attention while realizing that she herself already goes unseen – all a very uncanny sequence. The two finally walks through the automatically opening door – as if welcoming them to the new world – while the camera, following them from behind, sees them walking into a heavenly place composed of a morning stone path and an infinite cloudy sky. Once again, a moment of sublimity is completed with the construction of another separated space and the transportation of the characters to this new world. In this particular case, this heavenly space achieves for the two their ability to enjoy an eternal love without life-death barriers in a blissful world. Death, as such a horrifying theme, is "tamed" at the end of this film as a peaceful and pleasurable transition to a sublime happiness.

From the scrutinized examination of various filmic examples of this chapter, it doesn't seem difficult to detect a similar strategy in the creation of miraculous love as sublime moment in classic cinema. The love stories of the couples in these films are usually exposed to a kind of trial and adversity that threatens the continuation of their love life – with factors often being prison, war, distance, death or threatens of death – which finally leads to a triumph of determined and pure love. This conquering of love over all difficulties reinforces the sublime nature of their love, resulting the normal happy ending of the films being the time when miracles happen. The sublime and miraculous

significance of this final moment is represented and strengthened always by the construction of a new space beyond reality, an often heavenly place where the female figures play the role of the guardian angel guiding her lover to a world of solace. This place becomes a higher spiritual world derived from the love between a man and a woman. As has been perfectly described by Lamster<sup>27</sup>, “the major characters exist outside of the actual or material world and within their own spiritual and emotional sphere, which even physical separation and death cannot destroy”.

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<sup>27</sup> 1981: 1-12

## Chapter Two

### Sublime Moments in Modern Cinema

When commenting on Godard's 1982 film *Passion*, Alain Bergala<sup>28</sup> made a quite interesting point, noting that before starting to shoot a film, filmmakers normally try to avoid the rip between the purity of artistic form and the impurity which could prevent cinema from becoming art, by protecting its beauty from noises and chaos. What conventionally constitutes a filmmakers' mission is to achieve such a sublime beauty that any disorder which could disrupt its harmonious beauty should be prevented<sup>29</sup>. This could indeed conclude the kind of miraculous love experienced as sublimity discussed in the previous chapter of classic cinema – an absolute form of sublimity. Classic films often present a black or white world clearly defined with unequivocal moral values and a strong faith in love that conquers all. From the earlier chapter's analyses, it is not difficult to see that the love stories in classic cinema nearly always follow a clear structure of: the emergence of affections between the protagonists – a violent adversary that places their love in trial – the ultimate resolution of the problem with a miraculous transcendence because of love. The insistence that the sentimentalism always takes priority to criticism has created numerous fairytale love stories in the classic era, when love is the almighty salvation and illusion<sup>30</sup>. While cinema enters its modern era, nevertheless, the supreme beauty of sublimity protected integrally from possible disorders seems to be disturbed. The simple one-fold structure evolves into an often much more complex argument in European modern cinema. Compared to classic cinema, the manifestation of the sublime moment in modern cinema is more subtle and critical, sometimes even happens unnoticed.

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<sup>28</sup> 2003: 55-56

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Rins, 2001: 37

The classic mode of filmmaking is violently discarded behind, and the cinema entering in the era of modernity starts a thorough revolution on classic cinema's transparency and intelligibility. As Losilla<sup>31</sup> has concluded, cinematic modernity finds itself in "the self-consciousness of the story, the linguistic opacity, the direct interpellation to the spectator, the breakdown of the classic narrative, and the intrusion of reality to the fictional".

I feel like it is necessary to start with Jean-Luc Godard's cinematic experiments at the beginning of the 1980s, as these works might serve as a perfect illustration of the notion "sublime" in its primal form. Moreover, some of these works demonstrate themselves as a bridge in my discussion of the transition of the sublime moment from classic cinema to modern cinema – the representation of sublimity is no longer reflected in an absolute faith in pure love that conquers all adversaries but rather being dialectic in its depiction. Just as Bergala<sup>32</sup> has argued, in Godard's cinema there no longer exists a completely unilateral glorification of love – i.e. an "elevation without fall, music without noise, purity without interferences, or sublimation without triviality". Quite contrary, the sublime love, in its heavenly ascend, is always inextricably bound with worldly gravity, resulting in an "odd mixture of weightlessness and gravity"<sup>33</sup>. In the film *Jo Vous Salue Marie*<sup>34</sup> for example, the absolute transcendence of the lovers completely free from mundane problems like that in *7<sup>th</sup> Heaven* and *Street Angel*, is substituted by a co-existence of opponents of the celestial and terrestrial.

As one of the most outstanding cases of modern European cinema depicting sublimity, Godard's "trilogy of the sublime"<sup>35</sup>, consisting of *Passion*<sup>36</sup>, *Prénom Carmen*<sup>37</sup> and *Jo Vous Salue Marie*<sup>38</sup> shows clearly the filmmaker's conscious approach to a more spiritual kind of cinema which is charged with elements of mysticism and metaphysics. These films, filled with Godard's keen interests in filming the immense nature, bring us

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<sup>31</sup> 2012: 31

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*: 36

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Godard: 1983

<sup>35</sup> Marc, 1989: 207-213

<sup>36</sup> 1982

<sup>37</sup> 1982

<sup>38</sup> 1983

right back to the origin of the sublime, where the nature was once redeemed as the foremost sublimity. This recognition of the great nature as the representative of the sublimity was first derived from the theories of Kant, who actually introduced the notion of the sublime to the aesthetic judgment. The discussion of this particular concept of the “sublime” finds its origin in Kant’s *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*<sup>39</sup>. For Kant there exist two finest feelings in the humanity: the feeling for the beautiful and the feeling for the sublime. Kant often associates the sublime to the magnificence of the nature, recognizing it as the foremost incitement of the feeling for the sublime – or mathematically for the magnitude of a presence, or dynamically for its strength. Nevertheless, the experience of the feeling for the sublime is not only about the reverence produced by facing the grandeur, but at the same time concerning what this confrontation awakes in us – a sense of impotence of our physical being under contrast, and the power of our spiritual being that elevates beyond the nature.

In fact, the cinematic apparatus itself makes a significant transmitter of the sublime. The gigantic images projected on the immense screen are designed to produce a physical impact on the audience. This exhibition mechanism can create a powerful optical effect that contributes to the spectator’s transcendence beyond his/her distance with the film images, so as to facilitate the achievement of a sublime sensation.

Sympathizing with Kant’s prioritization of the nature as the sublime, Godard gradually expresses in his trilogy a great interest in the pursuit of beauty and sublime, reflecting constantly on those elements such as “feminine flesh and the transcendence of nature”<sup>40</sup>. For example, the sky, as a recurrent element represented prominently in the trilogy, drives the filmmaker’s gaze to a large extent into the cosmic sublimity, where the spectator is supposed to identify as well with this gaze to the up high so as to reach a sublime experience through the cinematic images.

In *Jo Vous Salue Marie* for example, shots of natural signs such as a sun, a moon or water, the soundtrack of birds and the music of Bach repeat themselves consecutively throughout the film. It is exactly from these fascinating sights and sounds of the nature that Marie’s ([Myriem Roussel](#)) virgin body raises as an even more sublime existence. A

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<sup>39</sup> 1961

<sup>40</sup> Loshitzky, 1995: 88-99

significant characteristic displayed in this film that distinguishes the modern cinema from the classic cinema in their representations of the sublime is that the sublime stems out of the ordinary, making the divine significance of the images – in the case of *Jo Vous Salue Marie*, the Holy Family and the virgin birth – mingled with a commonplace story. Just as Conley and Kline<sup>41</sup> have pointed out, Godard achieves spirituality and sublime substances right through a “passionate awareness of the materiality” rather than through a transcendence that passes completely beyond the physical (which often constructs exactly the kind of sublime experienced in classic cinema). In other words, different to the classic cinema which often seeks an absolutely purified form of transcendent sublimity, modern cinema proposes a dialectic coexistence of the spirituality and materiality in its pursuit of beauty and sublimity.

The sequence most symbolic in *Jo Vous Salue Marie* which addresses the point that the sublimity in modern cinema is always dialectically tied to earthly trivialities is the moment when Joseph ([Thierry Rode](#)) is finally permitted the mercy to see – simply looking at – the nude Marie at the mature moment when he, after a long-time suffering, finally concedes to the belief in something unbelievable. The sequence starts with Joseph’s entrance into Marie’s room, sitting beside her on her bed and from a top view, Joseph is shot caressing Marie’s arm. This point of view is regarded by Bergala<sup>42</sup> as the look of the God. Marie, at this very moment is exposed simultaneously to two looks with contrary significations – that of the God from above and that of Joseph from below. She is divided between the two masters – the sublimated is weighed heavy with its worldly counterpart.

This makes indeed a “painful dialectics” of the sublimity<sup>43</sup>. Marie slips from her bed onto the floor, tormented between the two looks that cast upon her. This torture can only be severer for Joseph considering the sufferings that he has been through, his love and desire for the Virgin subjected to the order of the God, and the mistrust that this order generates in him. When Marie stands up from the floor, with her abdomen at the height of Joseph’s eyes, she asks for a condition before the real execution of her promise to let see: “Joseph, tell me that you love me”. However, every time he tries to touch her belly, his hand is rejected because the “I love you” that comes out of his mouth is still

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<sup>41</sup> 2014: 395

<sup>42</sup> 2003: 118

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*: 36

considered as fake for her. Until the last time when he impatiently cries out I love you and reaches for her belly, Marie screams “no” while the camera fixes upon the close-up of her face, mouth slightly open in a state of shock and fright. The next shot constitutes one of the most surprising shots throughout the film at the sudden turn of the situation. With the camera placed behind Marie’s head at a high angle looking down upon from above, the visual field of the shot is almost completely covered up by Marie’s hair. With several shakes of head, her hair leaves the shot, uncovering the Annunciation of the Angel, who is now removing Joseph from Marie’s body and pressing him down to the bed. Joseph turns to Marie who has re-entered the field bending down beside the bed and questions why, while the Angel, in his protection of Marie’s body from Joseph’s desire declares “because it’s the law”.

The shot is then suddenly cut to a field of weeds – once again like Godard has always done in this particular film, cutting across between main narrative scenes and scenes of nature elements – the primordial signifier of the sublime. This abrupt interference of a peaceful landscape somehow indicates the termination of a violent chaos and the advent of sublimity. When the scenes return to the confined bedroom, the camera again fixes upon Marie’s head in close-up, with her hair covering completely her face, while Joseph and the Angel carry on with their last bit of the conversation. With his last words, the Angel disappears unannounced and undemonstrated, leading to the next shot of Joseph bewilderedly glancing over the room, searching for the trace of the Angel that cannot be found. Joseph then returns to bed, again in the same position like that of the beginning, with Marie’s belly right in front of his eyes. In his last attempt, still false, to touch upon her, the church bell enigmatically begins to ring, like the last consent to the final right attempt. Joseph gazes at his hand and again tries to touch Marie’s belly. “Yes”, she finally affirms. “It’s like this, I love you?” He asks, with an already normal voice. He once again touches upon her, with hesitation, when at the very moment of the contact, music begins to play.

So it comes the long-awaited final moment – the look and touch upon the Virgin’s nude body after a torturous trial and sufferings. Marie lifts her shirt, and finally, comes the magnificent close-up of the abdomen of the Virgin soaked in the warm light, with Joseph’s hand upon it. The sequence ends with Marie turning her body towards the light from the window and a shot that cuts directly to the sky, with Marie’s voiceover describing the “clarity like a radiant fire” that is born within her in pleasing the look of

her lover. This whole sequence rises as a miraculous mercy, incorporating both the pureness of the sublime touch and the gravity of the mundane wrongs in the same instant.

Hence this long-expected final touch of Joseph's hand upon Marie's belly, filmed so enigmatically with the closed-up beauty of the Virgin's body signifies the miraculous moment of Joseph's love toward Marie after a long struggle to surpass his own desire. With the Angel's last guidance, it is finally made clear that to achieve the sublime touch, Joseph does not need to necessarily "sacrifice himself" as he has claimed in front of the prohibited, but rather to renounce his doubts and accept the "taboo that saves sacrifice" – God's will that masters Marie's destiny is beyond his control. Joseph's love to Marie, unlike that of the protagonists in classic cinema, no longer enjoys a complete weightlessness and transcendence that is free of all problems. His love becomes a dialectic one and the assimilation of this ambivalence is exactly the precondition to arrive at sublimity and miracle.

Quite similar to Godard's representation of the sublimity in *Jo Vous Salue Marie* is Pasolini's *Teorema*<sup>44</sup>. Both intending to embed the sublime into the daily lives of ordinary characters, the Divine is burdened with mundane gravities. To begin with, just like the attempt of *Jo Vous Salue Marie* to reincarnate the Virgin, *Teorema* presumes a similarly sublime thematic proposition: what if a god or some form of divine appeared before a middle-class family, formed relationships with each of its members, and then departed? The youth (Terence Stamp), the only unnamed one in the film and depicted as the sublime beauty and kindness, is metaphorically presented to the family with his sudden and mystical appearance and disappearance implying a godlike theophany. With his mysterious charisma, the youth approaches each family member and seduces them one by one, physically and emotionally – just as they desire.

Narratively, the sudden appearance of the visitor provokes a dialectic effect in the bourgeois family – on the one hand, he offers each one of the family members a kind of altruistic love and complete attention; on the other hand, his love without compromise ends with destroying the family or rather their inauthentic bourgeois order. At his departure the absence of the visitor provokes a vacuum in every family member: the son resorts to artistic creation to memorize the gone one, the daughter falls into an eternal

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<sup>44</sup> 1968



trance, the mother drives over the streets picking up young boys at random for sex, the servant returns to her hometown to perform miracles, the father gives away his factory to the workers and relinquishes all his material possessions including his clothes till running and screaming naked in the desert.

Hence the love that the enigmatic character offers the family, instead of being a simple transcendent one like that of classic cinema, might be interpreted as both an angelic and diabolic existence: he awakens love in every family member but shatters their bourgeois order by sexually liberating them. Sex has been the revolutionary element to break open the reserved and contained zone of the family, in such an extent that each of the members experience some sort of revelation and epiphany through their contact with the foreigner. Consonant again with the great theme of sublimity in cinema, what is emancipated and released via the act of sex is a miraculous love among the bourgeois domain, exactly as Pasolini<sup>45</sup> himself has confirmed in an interview:

*[...]What is authentic is the love that he arouses (referring to the visitor here), because it is a love without any compromise, a love which provokes scandal, which destroys, which alters the bourgeois' idea of themselves [...].*

Through this unconditional love that he carries with him, the visitor is endowed, in a religiously symbolic way, with an omnipresent power that captures every being. This divine power is often symbolized by the use of light in the film while the visitor is present in the family. Like Godard's recurrent resort to nature elements in search of a larger sublimity, Pasolini bestows the poetics of his images and the love from the visitor with a repeating capture of warm lights. In the famous scene with the mother Lucia ([Silvana Mangano](#)), for example, the visitor slowly approaches the undressed woman who is embarrassedly asking for excuses for her sin. He is shot from a low angle, bathed in a warm glow of sunlight lit from his back, smiling down to her with a heavenly halo on his head and torso. Similarly, when it comes to the father Paolo's ([Massimo Girotti](#)) transformation, the process begins with him waking up at dawn with a sudden pain. He is followed by the camera leaving his bedroom and entering the bathroom, blinded by the light of sunrise coming through the window. He shields his eyes. With the camera shifting to his own point of view, we see his hand in a gesture like a mixture of warding off and reaching for the light, while his body slowly moves to the source of the light. He

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<sup>45</sup> 1968: 33-37

looks outside the window and then steps outside the house into the garden, where he looks directly into the glow of the dawn. Through this whole process the father seems to be compelled to the light, called by an unconscious seduction. In some sense, again corresponding to the whole theme of the story (the duality of the sublime and the carnal), the conjuncture of the visitor and his symbolizing light creates a perfect paradox of his existence: both sublime and seducing, hence the particular way of his conquering of the family – through sensual love.

Compared to *Jo Vous Salue Marie* and *Teorema*, there is a distinguished difference in the manifestation of the sublime in the film *Viaggio in Italia*<sup>46</sup> – that is, the sublime condensed in a particular instant. In *Viaggio in Italia*, the sublime moment standing out from the rest of the filmic narrative might be better explained by Heidegger's *augenblick*.

Indebted to the Greek term *kairós*, which literally means “the appropriate and opportune moment” when something important takes place, Heidegger conserves the idea and utilizes the word *augenblick* – the moment of vision – to define an instant of transcendental ecstasy without reference to the Christian theology<sup>47</sup>. Especially concerned with time, Heidegger believes that the present is not a flow of some infinite “now” points but rather something that one can firmly get hold of<sup>48</sup>. The moment of vision refers to the temporality – or perhaps better said, the sudden and brief but at the same time crucial instant – of an extraordinary amazement for feeling alive and seeing something that transports us outside the quotidian banality of our existence.

Cinema, like photography, embarks on “freezing the fleeting distractions and evanescent sensations through identifying isolated moments of the ‘present’ experience in our ephemeral daily existence of modernity”<sup>49</sup>. It is not hard to figure out that Heidegger's *augenblick* makes particular emphasis on one special moment instead of a continuing sensation as a whole. In this sense, Heidegger's *augenblick* is particularly pertinent to the discussion of the sublime moment as shown in *Viaggio in Italia*, since the term acknowledges the possibility of some decisive moments. In fact, sublimity

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<sup>46</sup> Rossellini: 1954

<sup>47</sup> Critchley, 2009

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Charney y Schwartz, 1995: 2-3

condensed in a particular moment finds its most common expression in classic cinema, now that nearly all the films discussed in the earlier chapter close with an upsurge. In this sense, *Viaggio in Italia* still largely maintains this narrative tradition of a climactic ending, just as Losilla<sup>50</sup> has pointed out, unlike Godard and Pasolini who represent the peak of European modern cinema, Rossellini's *Viaggio in Italia* belongs to a phase of post-classicism and pre-modernity that hasn't departed radically from classicism.

The film features an upper-class English couple who are forced to make a journey to Italy and to spend an uncomfortable time together in a critical moment when their marriage is in disintegration. Although the history of their eight years' marriage behind the simple story presented on the screen is left largely untold, it is not difficult for the spectator to quickly realize the situation of their relationship with the lack of communication between the two characters, their indifference for the worries of the other, till the two initiate their separate activities on their own account during their stay in Italy. The ultimate tension comes when the couple drives into a religious procession just as the two are settling for a divorce after various failed attempts of reconciliation.

This final sequence begins with Rossellini's camera capturing the couple impeded and blocked in the procession, quite symbolic of the same block in their relationship. The images shift between the crowds waiting for the procession and the couple sitting inside the car carrying out their dialogues about the divorce, until they cannot move any more. Again in this sequence like many others that have been analyzed earlier, the duality of the divine and the quotidian cannot be more confrontational. And again as it occurs with all other sublime moments in modern cinema, the divine and the overwhelming feelings for something much more grandeur achieves to win over from its co-existence with the mundane. The beginning of the procession marks the beginning of Katherine's (Ingrid Bergman) turn of attitude. Back in the car, we are presented with the image of Katherine's attempt to approach Alex (George Sanders) by putting her arm on his shoulder, asking if he is sure about the decision. Alex however, defensive toward Katherine's approach, gets out of the car with Katherine following him in the middle of the crowd. This series of movements are interwoven with scenes of the procession, underscoring the complexity of the situation.

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<sup>50</sup> 2012: 20

We then see the couple undertaking the same pattern of attempts which has been previously repeated for numerous times during the film: Katherine for the last time trying to retain Alexander and reconcile with him – Alex being rejecting and defensive – Katherine turning cold and irritated again. Just at this moment are they suddenly caught in a sharp, critical and miraculous turn of the situation – exactly how a miracle would appear. The crowds pour down, swallowing Katherine away with them. She is captured in a tracking shot while she cries out Alex’s name for help in the middle of the panic. In this critical moment capable of unblocking all kinds of trivial senses, we see Alex fighting through the crowds and reaching out for Katherine’s rescue against all odds until they find each other. In a close-up shot she firmly throws herself into his arms. A complete turn of the situation has taken place. With the background chants from the procession crowd “Miracle! Miracle!”, the couple has staged their own love miracle as well. Katherine expresses her concern for Alex while he confirms his love for her. They are filmed firmly occupying almost the entire screen when Alex finally spells out the long-expected “I love you”. They embrace while the camera elevates into the sky, leaving them farther and farther from a celestial point of view. Their miraculous love story ends with reaching for the divine sublime.

This sublime ending where a miraculous love emerges, although might seem quite similar to the classic structure discussed in the earlier chapter, is in essence, completely distinct. Unlike the kind of glorified endings provoked by supreme love in the classic cinema, the finale in *Viaggio in Italia* ceases to be a sublimation produced by an absolute faith in love. As the above detailed analysis of the sequence has indicated, the couple, during the whole process of the occurrence of the miracle seems to have been always pushed and impacted by the outer environment of the religious procession, which makes the turn somehow a quite contingent one. Alain Bergala<sup>51</sup> in his examination of Roberto Rossellini’s oeuvre has accurately detected that the representation of this miracle in *Viaggio in Italia* differs from those in the classic cinema, pointing out that “the real miracle does not necessarily depend on deliberate choice, conscious thought or even faith”. The miracle happens arbitrarily and unforeseeably after a latency period of the couple’s separated lives<sup>52</sup>. Indeed, distinct from the classic tradition which follows a linear progress toward an expected and

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<sup>51</sup> 2000

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*

predictable miracle frequently driven by the protagonists' taking of consciousness, the final moment of *Viaggio in Italia* represents a rather sudden and unpredictable turn of situation with the protagonists being unconsciously driven by their surroundings. Like Bergala<sup>53</sup> has put it, the couple caught in the middle of a series of miraculous happenings by contiguity, which perhaps goes unseen by both them and the spectators, is affected by the contagious atmosphere.

However, this instinctive act in the end may not necessarily be less genuine. The transient separation among the crowd that the two protagonists are caught within and which leads to the final climactic reencounter and reconciliation is such a symbolic synopsis of the whole film – especially in terms of the separated space particularly constructed for the miracle. By witnessing the banalities of their time spent together or individually during their journey – touristic visits of the cities, intermittent arguments and disputes, or even time of relaxation – we are at once present in the other reality that overwhelms them. This reality is one that is completely unknown and alien to them. The sharp contrast of the Italian culture and the bare life and death that confront them on the archeological sites all produce an effect in the couple as time passes. Loneliness and solitude accumulate unnoticed with the proceeding of the story until the ultimate thrust leads to their separate isolation, driving them to realize the necessity and love that they still hold for each other<sup>54</sup>. As confirms Rossellini himself in one of the interviews<sup>55</sup>:

*What the finale shows is sudden, total isolation. . . . Unfortunately it's not as if every act of our lives is based on reason. I think everyone acts under the impulse of the emotions as much as under the impulse of intelligence. There's always an element of chance in life—this is just what gives life its beauty and fascination. There's no point in trying to theorize it all. It struck me that the only way a rapprochement could come about was through the couple finding themselves complete strangers to everyone else. You feel a terrible stranger in every way when you find yourself alone in a sea of people of a different height. It's as if you were naked. It's logical that someone who finds himself naked should try to cover himself up.*

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*: 22

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Brunette, 1996

Such is the sublime moment in *Viaggio in Italia* – an almost instinctive reaction of the couple in a surreal and alien space. However, it does not mean that the contingency of this moment becomes irrelevant to the rest of the film. On the contrary, just as in classic cinema, this distinguished moment in the film represents both a continuity and discontinuity to the rest of the film. This synthesis between continuity and discontinuity, between pure duration and constructed appearance proposed by *Viaggio in Italia* precisely demonstrates itself as a great value in Alain Badiou's<sup>56</sup> evaluation of a great film work under the criteria of its operations on time. According to him, great films are those whose continuity is indisputable while there is still room for sudden manifestations, for “complete surprises, for bolts out of the blue” – i.e. the possibility of miracles<sup>57</sup>. This point of view is shared also by Deleuze in his comparative introduction of the time and movement image in Italian neorealist cinema, who believes that since neorealism every object that appears in the frame is charged and valued with a material reality<sup>58</sup>. It becomes necessary that the spectators, together with the characters in the films, spend time seeing and hearing things happening around them, so that an action or a passion can emerge in the end, interrupting the preexisting quotidian life routines<sup>59</sup>. For this point, the long time spent witnessing the daily activities of the couple and the final miraculous action/passion appeared in *Viaggio in Italia* also makes a precise illustration. In this sense, cinema is anti-metaphysical in that it transcends the simple dualist oppositions that the metaphysics embrace, in order to reach a sensible miracle<sup>60</sup>.

The reason to leave Godard's *Passion*<sup>61</sup> at the nearly end of the chapter is that the film represents a peculiar and somewhat extreme case of modern cinema's challenge to the simplicity and singularity of the sublime moments depicted by classic cinema. If the sublime moment in *Jo Vous Salue Marie* proposes a dialectic complexity that impedes a complete transcendence, or in *Teorema* it has to fight constantly over the bourgeois ideology; or in *Viaggio in Italia* it no longer derives from an absolute faith in love, then the dissonance in *Passion* arrives at such a disturbing extent that it actually hinders the

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<sup>56</sup> 2013

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Deleuze, 1985: 15

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Badiou, 2013

<sup>61</sup> 1982

exact sublimity from happening. Just as Bergala<sup>62</sup> comments, “there is not a single moment of beauty or emotion to which a gesture of triviality does not come to disrupt or a discordant sound does not come to ruin”. Indeed, whenever there is a slight tendency of an affectionate movement which might lead to a sublime moment of love, it gets to be interrupted and damaged by either visual chaos or acoustic noise.

When Hanna (Hanna Schygulla) accompanied by Jerzy (Jerzy Radziwilowicz), sits in a hotel room and looks for the first time into her own image recorded in Jerzy’s films, the loving moment of the two appreciated privately in the small room is constantly interrupted by telephone calls. This seemingly ideal place which could be separated from the rest of the world somehow does not achieve to cut off its connection with the external, thus fails to accomplish its function like that of, for example, Chico and Diane’s apartment in classic cinema. Similarly, when Isabelle (Isabelle Huppert) and Jerzy carry out a sentimental talk in the kitchen, their conversation is repetitively disrupted by Jerzy’s anxious friend outside knocking at the windows. Another space that escapes the reality is failed to be constructed for the sublime moment.

Nevertheless, as might seem quite contradictory, with this triviality of life often disturbed on the one side, Godard on the other side proposes a purity of beauty even beyond cinema’s usual reach – music and painting. Godard claims that the purpose of *Passion* is “the grandeur of the ordinary”<sup>63</sup>. The ordinary life story of the characters is aggrandized by the reconstructions through tableau vivants of famous paintings in Jerzy’s film shot scenes, which somehow expand the ordinary theme of the film to an often sublime experience through its mise-en-scene. By cinematically recreating the paintings of Rembrandt, Goya, Delacroix, and El Greco, the artistic masterpieces are able to illuminate the contemporary living struggles of the characters. Moreover, Godard’s selection and use of extraordinary music pieces from Beethoven, Mozart, Ravel etc. also help to intensify the visual images projected on the screen. For example, the tableau vivants of Goya’s *The Third of May* that recreates the powerless Spanish peasants in front of the powerful executing French army, with the camera slowly scanning through the faces and body parts of the characters accompanied by the *Requiem de Fauré*, are followed by the scene where Isabelle and other factory workers

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<sup>62</sup> 2003: 54

<sup>63</sup> *ibid.*

gather for a discussion about forming a workers' union. The powerless struggle of these naïve young women against the powerful owner of the factory set against the signifying painting of Goya is thus touched with a special light of sublimity.

Although a private space of the lovers is constantly disrupted in this film, sublimity is achieved by setting apart another space – a sacred space out of the ordinary. Just as Plate<sup>64</sup> argues in his *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-Creation of the World*, cinema, similar to religion which creates sacred places such as temples or heavens, distinguishes the space of the sacred and ritual from that of the profane and ordinary. *Passion* constructs a particular bridge between the two spaces – through the homage to the passion for the arts, a sublime realm is elevated within a more common passion for social justice. According to Bergala<sup>65</sup>, this is exactly what Godard searches for – wondering between the pure beauty/emotion and the confusing chaos/noise of the world.

Perhaps the only moment that achieves sublimity without extreme disturbance but rather a *raccord* between images is the moment at the near end of the film when Isabelle offers herself for love with Jerzy in the bedroom. The sequence begins with a symbolic prelude in Jerzy's film shot: a naked girl, her body illuminated, climbing up the stairs in the dark. The shot is then cut to the kitchen where Jerzy and Isabelle sit for a conversation about work and love. When Isabelle decides to give herself in for love with Jerzy's proposal "Isabelle, let's go", she stands up. We later see that Jerzy's proposal has a symbolic meaning following the earlier film shot scene in that he wants to go "upstairs" to the bedroom with Isabelle. The naked girl's climb to the platform is a symbolic climb for Isabelle, the virgin. This shot ends with Jerzy's hand abruptly extend to Isabelle's skirt, and the shot is violently cut to the other space – the tableau vivant of El Greco's *The Assumption of the Virgin*. After the ascending camera's filming of this biblical scene, the sequence returns to Isabelle, now naked sitting in the bedroom, shot as a shadow against the light, reciting Agnus Dei (her voice is accompanied later by Jerzy's voiceover) before their sexual intercourse. Without any more depictions of this scene, the shot shifts again to the tableau vivant, while Jerzy finishes his last phrase of recitation.

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<sup>64</sup> 2008

<sup>65</sup> 2003: 55



The recitation and the biblical scene at the film shot seem to underscore the divine nature of what is about to happen. The carnal love is sublimated as such that it is endowed with a sacred dimension. The sharp opposition of the sublime and profane love is even more strengthened by Jerzy's proposal to penetrate Isabelle "from behind", so that there won't be traces left behind. The sublime moment is made paradox as such that it consists in a pure contrast of attempts – the most refined expression possible of the sacred by means of paintings and music, is accompanied by the "dirtiest" possible way of profane love. Again in this film, two antithetical themes which embody both heaven and earth are introduced and related to each other. No longer insisting on an absolute certainty and faith in love as maintained by classic cinema, *Passion* even proposes an interval "betweenness" in affections and sublimity: not only with regard to the triangular relationship that Jerzy finds himself in between two women – "one open and one closed", but also in terms of the mediation between the celestial form of beauty and sublime with the terrestrial quotidian life stories.

After having examined several films of modern cinema, it is not difficult to detect that there are both continuities and discontinuities in the representation of sublimity compared to classic cinema. Modern cinema still frequently resorts to the construction of another space beyond reality for the sublime moment, yet this particular space obviously embodies much more extensive meanings than that in the classic cinema. Instead of being obsessed with an almost ideal form of transcendent sublime – love as absolutely miraculous – and a pure faith in all-powerful love, sublime love in modern European cinema often displays itself as dialectic and paradoxical. No longer being a celestial moment when the worldly weight seems to disappear, sublime love in modern cinema is often burdened with a trivial gravity.

## Chapter Three

### Sublime Moments in Contemporary Cinema

The second half of the 1970s is flooded with doubts questioning the death of cinema. The kind of the auteur cinema revolutionarily promoted by the European modern cinema seems to hit its standstill. From the end of the decade time enters in the long-phase mourning for the premature death of the modern cinema<sup>66</sup>. The quite controversial assumption of the death of cinema has caused debates in contemporary film criticisms, mainly interpreted from two perspectives, both of which might be worthy to be mentioned in the discussion of how representations of sublime and miraculous love have changed in contemporary cinema.

One perspective of the death of cinema is centered on the melancholic sentimentality that haunts contemporary filmmakers after the experimentation of European modern cinema. The great auteurs of the modern era successively retire from the stage, leaving behind them a vacancy of fragmented images. The distinguished critic writing on this perspective is Carlos Losilla<sup>67</sup>, who believes that the contemporary cinema building on the ruins of the dead is haunted by the melancholy for the absent forms from earlier times. The contemporary cinema struggles to survive, but finds itself against immense adversity to be capable of creating the totality of a continuous history of its own. Faced with the fading away of the glorious images, cinema in its contemporary era is more often involved in the commemoration of the past – just like a reverse shot reacting against its loss.

The other perspective focuses on the technological aspect of the cinema. Partly as a consequence of the difficulties in creating new contents, contemporary cinema relies largely on taking advantages of the technological innovation in special effects and

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<sup>66</sup> Losilla, 2012: 179

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.*

soundtracks to compensate the thematic and aesthetic void. The technological advances also imply a change in cinematic exhibitions and film viewing habits. According to Román Gubern<sup>68</sup>, the kind of cinema that existed until the 1970s and 1980s has been replaced by “the audiovisual”, which involves a much wider medium of exhibition, particularly with regard to the television. He regards that the core notion of cinema has died with the diversification of its media and formats, which are gradually substituting the conventional cinema projected in dark rooms, and proposing ever more spectacular than the narratives. This drives us to the initial question put forward at the beginning of this thesis concerning the shock effect of the cinema. The tendency of the contemporary cinema, in its aimless hover, little by little directs to the more attention-grabbing manipulation of the images through rapid montage, whereas it only produces a kind of fast cinema that doesn't demand anyone's full attention.

Susan Sontag<sup>69</sup> has also expressed her concern in this respect. She believes that when a film is viewed on television in a domestic sphere, the spectators no longer experience the overwhelmed sensation produced by seeing a film on an enormous screen in a darkened theater with strangers. This seems to be an interesting point with regard to our question at hand, as the changed exhibition space could arguably affect the viewing experience, and furthermore, the reception of the sublime by the audience. Rather than the death of cinema in its own, Sontag alerts us of a seemingly more serious problem, i.e. it is the love that the cinema inspires that has come to an end. The cinephilia that used to suggest films as “unique, unrepeatable and magic experiences” has died. This point of view shifts the debate to another usually neglected domain: the reception of the encoded filmic messages apart from the production of cinematic codes.

Perhaps it is still premature to mourn over a “death of cinema”, but both lines of concerns are reasonably valuable to the representation and reception of sublimity in the contemporary audiovisual environment. When cinema arrives at its contemporary form of the present stage, the recurrent and repetitively represented theme of love is already not a new subject, just as Ignatieff<sup>70</sup> has commented: romantic love “has been taken prisoner by discourse and has become a dead artifact of an overwritten, overinterpreted culture.” For contemporary films which attempt to deal with this topic, how to renew

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<sup>68</sup> 1995: 289-309

<sup>69</sup> 1996

<sup>70</sup> 1988: 15-21

the cliché of love becomes a central concern. However, contemporary cinema faces huge adversities in renewing love stories as sublime miracles.

On the side of production, cinema from the 1980s does not thematically treat sublimity as the most primary subject since each time it becomes more and more dedicated to fast movements, montage and special effects for the creation of full intensity in order to capture the transitory attention of the contemporary audience. The credo of cinema as an industry wins thoroughly over the belief of cinema as art, making it considerably difficult for the artistically ambitious filmmakers to carry on with making sublime movies. In fact, commercial benefits to a large extent pre-determine the thematic subjects of contemporary cinematic productions. Miraculous love as a rather “artistic” and philosophical theme is only dealt with by a small scale of first-line filmmakers.

On the side of reception, the kind of cinema that used to be exhibited only in movie theaters – where the spectacle projected on large screens in those liturgical spaces once received collective reverence from the audience – has lost its strength in projections outside the darkened rooms. The huge benefits generated from other products of the film industrial chain pull the cinema out of the restricted spaces of theaters to an often de-ritualized, easily distracted and individual consumption environment, which does not facilitate the communal experience of a sublime moment.

Sontag<sup>71</sup> reasonably put forward that admirable cinematic works in the contemporary era have to go beyond the actual norms that dominate the commercialized filmmaking practices of our times. Nonetheless, as a result of the gloomy circumstances in both film production and reception contemporary cinema seems to head to the opposite direction. The history of cinema, like all histories in general, is all too often about repetitions. Sublime love has experienced perhaps its most radical avant-garde revolution in filmic representation when it proceeds from the classic to the modern cinema. For the old occidental continent of America and Europe, the new generation of filmmakers, being left with the chaotic vacancy with the death of their fathers’ experimentation, has to retrieve to the classic to look for answers. A dramatic finale applauding for a classic notion of love miracles comes back to be trendy in the elite circle of contemporary directors.

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<sup>71</sup> 1996

Nevertheless, it would be overly simplified to thereby interpret contemporary cinema as the sheer return to the past. Instead, the past comes back in a form rather as Sergi Sánchez<sup>72</sup> describes it – each time distinct only to adapt to the nature of the present. Recycling and re-appropriating the earlier narrative and conceptual representation of love, contemporary cinema develops its own pastiche of the miraculous love. This process underlines exactly the essentiality of the postmodernist cinema, since the contradictory dimension of postmodernism is in essence “oscillating” and “mutant”, moving between the “mummification of the status quo and the visceral rejection of its own history”<sup>73</sup>. It is quite common to see contemporary films resorting to a classic idea of love while taking a postmodern approach in their forms and styles of representations. Meanwhile on the other hand, the center of the cinema becomes dispersed and the occidental tycoon looks out in other places of the world for its rescue.

Perhaps the sublime moment of love most parodic to classic cinema is the one presented in the happy ending of *Wild at Heart*<sup>74</sup>. With the similar dramatic story of a couple who has surpassed the separation of jail, their love resembles that of the classic Hollywood in the sense that it is subject to drastic trials. However, in addition to the external adversaries that separate the couple, the film demonstrates postmodern traits by also presenting the subjective doubts of the characters. In fact, the miraculous turn of this love story resides exactly in the hero’s overcoming of his subjective doubts in love. Although following the narrative type of the classic love stories in general, the film exhibits postmodern strategies and techniques in its representation of specific scenes.

The sequence begins with Sailor (Nicolas Cage) being surrounded by a street gang in the middle of the road after he decides to leave Lula (Laura Dern) and their son at being freed from more than five years’ service in the prison. After calling them faggots, Sailor is hit down to the ground – that is when the miracle happens. The images of the gang boys disappear and a strange light lights up from the bottom of the frame, where Sailor is filmed from the bottom with his limbs stretched out against the asphalt road. Following the light, a pink-lit color ball appears on the sky, with a fairy-like female

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<sup>72</sup> 2013: 23

<sup>73</sup> Sánchez, 2013: 65

<sup>74</sup> Lynch, 1990

figure inside it. Its stereotypical appearance is so carelessly decorated with almost a clumsy air of old films' poor technology that it immediately reveals itself as an intentional pastiche of the classic. The fairy calls out Sailor's name and he sees "the good witch" in a shiny light. The good witch overturns Sailor's self-condemning notion that he is too "wild at heart" to enjoy the happiness with Lula and she encourages him to pursue love. In this what might be called a "schizophrenic reality/unreality" in Fredric Jameson's<sup>75</sup> terms – who considers this aspect one of the defining factors of postmodernism – that is experienced by Sailor, the materiality seems to be overwhelmingly and powerfully vivid, charged with hallucinatory energy. Apparently in this imagined space with ultra-intensity and changing power that Sailor has created in his mind, some miraculous turning point has taken place which blesses his essence of being and persuades him to give up his earlier idea to leave Lula and their son.

When the scene goes back to reality, Sailor stands up from the ground, apologizing and giving thanks to the bandit boys, then lifts up his arms and yells out Lula's name to the sky – somewhat an absurdly exaggerated movement in terms of acting, which is only seen in classic cinema. He then turns back and runs away, a lonely figure running in the middle of the road. When he gets back on track, amidst the traffic, Sailor is seen running on top of the cars until he stops on Lula's. The reencounter scene is acted out like that of the classic cinema – a fully passionate one no less exaggerated. Sailor offers her a hand to lift her up atop the car. Their embrace is shot from a lower camera angle, with the erotic lovers elevated close to heaven for this privileged moment of theirs. The sequence ends with Sailor's serenade *Love Me Tender* to Lula atop the car stuck in the traffic, with a 360-degree shot of the lovers' hard-won moment of romance.

Jameson<sup>76</sup> argues that what makes a film essentially postmodern is its "pastiche" or "blank parody". By recycling historical culture materials Lynch in *Wild at Heart* renovates the dead cultural signs of classical love myth with its fairytale ending. As the analysis above specifies, this happy ending scene displays a quite intentional pastiche of the classic Hollywood cinema. Jameson defines those films of the 1980s and 1990s which attempt to recapture the atmosphere and style of the 1950s American as "the

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<sup>75</sup> 1985: 120

<sup>76</sup> 1986

nostalgia film”<sup>77</sup>. The term is in essence a denomination for the attempt made by the contemporary filmmakers to recycle the classics in their lost struggle to survive from the ruins left by their modern fathers. *Wild at Heart* is arguably such an example. In this only several minutes’ ending a wide range of classic cultural signs are embodied: the Elvis Presley pop pays tribute to the mass culture, breaking the distinction of “high” and “low” culture altogether – another distinctive trait of postmodern arts, while the fairy imitates the commonly-seen magical fairytale endings of the classic Hollywood<sup>78</sup>. The actors’ performances also follow the often exaggerated classic Hollywood acting styles. The return of the stylistic elements of the past in the nostalgic films symbolizes a postmodern period when the stories told are no longer completely of its own. But of course, the pastiche of the cinematic past is not only expressed through the objects in the *mise-en-scene* that produce the feelings of the past, but also through the return to the old film genres’ narrative and imagistic signifying systems<sup>79</sup> – in the particular case of *Wild at Heart*, the triumph of the classic happy ending.

However, this pastiche of the classic texts only makes partial reference to the old genres. In this sense we may return to the argument proposed at the beginning of this chapter, in that the postmodern re-appropriation of the past is essentially a reconstruction of the dead forms in a period of absence. Contemporary cinema’s postmodern pastiche of the classic is certainly not a simple copy and paste of the old forms, but instead it develops its own stylistic techniques in the re-appropriation. Unlike that of the classic cinema, the final sequence in *Wild at Heart* is filmed with a much more radical, violent and distant tone, as well as a spasmodic montage. It is more likely that this ending leaves the spectators somewhere in between as both the current re-interpretation and the original myth are deconstructed – leaving a sufficiently large space for the audiences to probably create their own reading of the story.

The pastiche of the classics becomes a trendy style in the works of first-line filmmakers of the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Like *Wild at Heart*, these films often appropriate old elements while filming them in a contemporary style, often addressing postmodern concerns in classic love myths. One of the other attempts is Wim Wender’s

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<sup>77</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> Dika, 2003: 10

*Wings of Desire*<sup>80</sup>. Very similar to the themes of some of the classic Hollywood films that have been examined in the first chapter, *Wings of Desire* again turns to the strategy of constructing a trial – a physical separation in this case – for love, but meanwhile leaving a separated space for the protagonists for their spiritual connection so that their love can emerge as a miracle. The end of the film unequivocally eulogizes a kind of classic utopian happy ending of the two protagonists' love based on their spiritual communication and union. On the other hand, precisely for the deliberate parody of the antecedent characterized by the protagonists' "exaggerated poses and overstated mythical connotations"<sup>81</sup>, the postmodernist essence of this film becomes identifiable only in tension with classic elements.

Following the tradition of the thematic strategy repeatedly employed in the classic cinema, the love miracle in *Wings of Desire* as well lies in the magical connection between Damiel (Bruno Ganz), an celestial angel who observes and desires human life and sees everything in grey through his eyes, and Marion (Solveig Dommartin), an earthly French trapeze actress who captivates the love of the angel. The moment of spiritual connection highly resembling to the theme of classic cinema is first visualized in the concert: Marion dances to the music while Damiel approaches her, staring at her intensely. The camera captures them in medium shot when he lifts up his hand, trying to reach for hers. He leads her hands gliding down when her thoughts are spoken out – she experiences a delighted well-being, as if having a hand "softly tightening within her body". In this rather corporeal and orchestric scene, the kind of classic inexplicable connection felt only by the lovers occurs in this postmodern film: she has felt his presence – a spiritual connection of two souls formally makes its way through the lovers' plain physical separation.

The ultimate miraculous connection between the two loving souls from distinct spaces before Damiel gives up his identity as an angel and comes down to earth for Marion happens in Marion's dream – again a symbolic and rhetoric sphere for the realization of forbidden love repetitively appeared in classic Hollywood cinema. The scene features the mysterious encounter of the two in Marion's dream, with the symbolic concluding shot of the lovers' hands touching and holding closely occupying the longitude of the

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<sup>80</sup> 1987

<sup>81</sup> Kaplan, 2009



entire frame. With this gesture, the two achieve to see and unite with each other in Marion's dream.

This dream sequence turns out to be a critical impetus to finally bring Damiel down onto the human world. Damiel renounces, in our sense, his "power" as an angel to surpass the infinite distance that separates him from Marion, to be able to reach for her solitude and her longing for love – a courageous move of the classic hero. It ultimately leads to their miraculous encounter in a bar. In this scene Marion walks directly to Damiel who is sitting in the bar counter. She places herself beside him, and the two are filmed in a medium shot from their backs. For a moment, there is no movement, as if time stops for their preparation to look into each other's eyes. Finally, he turns aside, holding a cup of wine with both of his hands, while she turns to his side as well, slowly but in such a natural way as if this approach has long been anticipated. This shot, as Hoesterey<sup>82</sup> has put it, contains an enigmatic postmodern pastiche of Fritz Lang's *Die Nibelungen: Siegfried* in the classic silent era of 1924. This pastiche of the past when cinema was in its pure classicism lies in the two protagonists' gestures – Damiel offering the drink and Marion accepting it, - reminiscent of how Kriemhild received hero Siegfried.

"We have finally met each other." Not unexpectedly but at the same time miraculously, they recognize each other, as they have formerly met in the dream. When she speaks about the power of their contingent yet necessary decision, the shot is cut to her facial close-up, her eyes looking ahead and slightly above, filled with hope. This close-up resembles highly to those in the classic cinema when the gesture of looking up to heaven used to be a symbolic one in the experience of a sublime moment. In fact, Marion's strong faith in the destiny that attracts her to Damiel is no less intense compared to those in the classic cinema. Her monologue at last concludes upon the dream that has led her to believe in him and open to him body and soul, to the man of her life, now right in front of her eyes – underscoring her relentless dedication to him. At this moment naturally comes the long-awaited kiss – the closure of their miraculous encounter – when the medium close-up of the two is cut to a bird's eye view of them embracing.

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<sup>82</sup> 2001: 55

All these sequences seem to follow the conventions of a romantic myth – the existence of a separated space where a telepathic communication could exist between the protagonists despite their physical separation; their first meeting in the dream; until finally by giving up his immortality and eternity, a male hero comes down to earth for the pursuit of his sexual love; and their nearly ritualistic encounter in person. Nevertheless, the gloomy metropolis Berlin where the habitants are enclosed in their isolation and alienation, unequivocally imbed the story in a postmodern environment. The fragility of Marion's identity as a trapeze prevails in the film and constantly troubles her since the announcement of the circus' shutting down, which makes her another foreign person without roots or history. Marion's existential doubt in *Wings of Desire* specifies a thoroughly new trait in the figuration of the female character in this postmodern film, given that the same gender portrayed in classic cinema used to enjoy only a few fixed types of feminine identities. It is precisely this fragmented contemporary identity of Marion's and the emptiness that it brings that has nourished her desire to become more complete. Meanwhile Daniel, recently reborn as a mortal, experiences the feeling of breaking away from the static world and becoming present for the love story with Marion. This mutual desire of "becoming" instead of "being" constitutes, in Harvey's<sup>83</sup> point of view, the essential postmodernism of the film. No longer with a clear center where causes and effects are illustrated like that in the classic cinema, the world in *Wings of Desire* presents itself as a constantly changing and fragmented universe, where identities become unsubstantial, where nothing is absolutely fixed and eternal, where the strongest faith in love could stem from pure intuition.

However, it seems that one thing has persisted from the classic all the way to the contemporary. The strategy of creating another space beyond reality for the sublime love to happen continues into contemporary cinema. As can be seen in *Wings of Desire*, the dream sphere still makes an important vehicle for the communication and union of the lovers from different worlds. Another contemporary film where the spaces are most clearly marked is *Les Amants Du Pont-Neuf*<sup>84</sup>. The story of the film is basically situated in two different spaces – the real and solid space of the bridge where Alex (Denis Lavant) tries to detain and restrict her lover Michèle (Juliette Binoche), and the aquatic

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<sup>83</sup> 1989: 308-326

<sup>84</sup> Carax, 1991

space which symbolizes the temptation of freedom and where the truly sublime moments of the couple take place.

The first escape to the other space happens at the night of the bicentennial celebration for the fall of the Bastille. The hysterical sequence of shooting and dancing on the bridge foresees a deterritorialization of the solid reality and a possible take-over of the aquatic space, lifting the couple out of their banality to a sublime precondition. The two, drunk and completely soaked in hysterical ecstasy, leave with their intertwining dance farther and farther from their usual habitat and get closer to the fine line that marks the boundaries to sublimity.

The sublime moment happens on the waters of the Seine. Alex and Michèle are seen on the river with full speed – Alex driving a boat while Michèle water-skis behind. The scene magnificently visualizes the sublime freedom that the couple enjoys in the other layer of the space – the one that breaks exhaustively away from the usual reality. Shot from Alex's perspective, we see Michèle skiing on the river way, marking splendid curves and swinging between the banks decorated with silvery waterfalls amid the water mist. Alex is shot staring stunned at her, followed by Michèle's silhouette captured in a violent movement in front of the camera. The surreal imagery impact on the screen caused by the play of lights and movements symbolizes the same state of mind of the protagonists. When she finally lets go of herself into the river, Alex also jumps in from the boat – the final act of merging into the other space of ultimate freedom and sublimity.

This breakaway from the solid space has made their first memorable sublime moment in the wild aquatic sphere. But we know from the narrative that for Alex, it is a constant fight to detain her lover in the solid sphere of the bridge so as to constrain their romance within that space. However, the magical aquatic space at the other side of the reality exists as a temptation that the protagonists always aspire to – until the last moment of the film. The finale of the film presents a quite abrupt change that leads to a miraculous turn of the situation. It is a miraculous response to the very question that lays out the story, to which the entire film searches for an answer – now that the eye illness (which seems to be the only reason) drives the highbred Michèle to her mismatched lover, could their romance actually last? To this postmodern question, the end of the story proposes again a classic heart-moving closure. The cured Michèle visits her lover in

prison and expresses to him that her thoughts have never left him. They make an appointment that when Alex finishes his three-year prison serve, they will re-meet at the bridge.

Their reencounter proceeds like their old romance – they embrace, she paints him, she tells jokes while Alex does acrobatics above the bridge, they laugh madly like old days – all until the clock strikes three. Michèle’s face turns serious and she intends to go – a threatening postmodern doubt which could as well overthrow the possible classic happy ending. The camera at this point films a surreal approach of the two to each other, as if driven by an unknown attraction. The last decisive cut moves the camera to the point of view at Alex’s feet, looking up at him in American shot. Just within this frame, a sudden movement happens which interrupts the long sequence of montage of the two walking towards each other. The very moment when Michèle enters the frame from the other side, Alex runs towards her, furiously grabs her from the waist. For a moment they tussle in the middle of the frame before the two fall together from the bridge. This is an epic shot of a sublime fall, not only for its total suddenness and unexpectedness, but also for the grandeur of the image taken – a following general shot of the bridge where the complete fall is filmed in its full process. The next shot follows the two in the water, falling and struggling, as if the tussle continues into the water, until the two embrace and look into each other. A curious confrontation – nothing more than just staring face to face into each other – comes after the sublime jump. Alex’s last desperate attempt to detain her lover and to remove her doubts with an impulsive movement of crossing the frontier and taking her to the other space ends with a total epiphany of the capacity to see each other clearly.

This decisive movement so achieves its miraculous effect for the turn of the situation. Michèle, by escaping to the other aquatic space which nourishes love, passion and freedom with the unexpected jump impelled by her lover, succeeds in leaving her doubts and indecisiveness behind and bets on the adventure with Alex. The interplay of the two spaces along the entire film makes an interesting symbolic thread to the narrative of the story. The significance of the other space relies exactly on its decisive power to turn the situation and to protect the integrity of the classic love. Once again, a miracle of love blossoms in the constructed other space.

Another film that continues with the practice of featuring a classic kind of sublime and miraculous end which eulogizes the supreme faith in love against all odds is *Breaking the Waves*<sup>85</sup>. In the sublime epilogue of the film, Jan (Stellan Skarsgård) has miraculously overcome death and lifted up from his lying bed as a consequence of Bess' (Emily Watson) sacrifice for her boundless passion, her extraordinary faith in love and her crazy devotion to her lover. The epiphany of the entire film comes after Jan and his co-workers have rescued Bess' dead body to "bury" her in the sea. Jan is filmed lying in his inner room when his co-worker enters and calls him out to see something "unbelievable". The very moment that Jan steps out on the oil-rig platform, the camera passes through the workers' uplifted faces looking above into the sky and zooms in to Jan. He, with his walking stick, limps ahead, and confusedly looks out accompanied by the resounding bells while the camera does a travelling around him and ends with a close-up of his side face. The initial surprise quickly turns to happiness – his face in close-up, moved to tears looking up into the sky in the splendour of the bells. The final shot, visually impacting enough, is taken from high above in heaven from bird's-eye view of the ringing bells overlooking layers of clouds right down to the oil-rig platform – bells that Bess loved but the local minister refused to install in the church, – as if Bess is talking directly from heaven through the distance to Jan. Bess is finally glorified in this way for her "rare" devotion to her love and to Jan, and an ultimate transcendental communication between the two lovers occurs symbolically in the end.

This finale arguably employs an equally glorious transcendence like that of the classic Hollywood cinema, with some gestures such as looking up to heaven as emblematic as in classic images. The spiritual communication that the sequence establishes between Jan looking up and the ringing bells as an embodiment of Bess' spirit striking down to the platform, resembles that of, for example, Chico and Diane's in 7<sup>th</sup> *Heaven*. Just as what Bess claims when she is questioned for the motive and stupidity of her deeds – she has a "spiritual contact" with Jan. Her fervent faith in love and her pleasure in transcendence – at the end of the film, her self-sacrifice portrayed in a joyous tone – are what lead to the final miracle and salvation of the story, and she has deserved her celebration in the end.

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<sup>85</sup> Trier, 1996

But again, as a contemporary film like many others discussed in this chapter, apart from the highly nostalgic pastiche of the pure love often represented in classic cinema, the film exhibits its own contemporary traits in the detailed depiction of the theme. In this particular case, unlike the classic Hollywood fictions which at all expense dramatize the climax, the hand-held camera, the naturalist acting style and the bleached-out color of *Breaking the Waves* endow the film with a rather realistic documentary style. In this way, the miracle at the end of the story is made to appear naturalistic and ordinary. Unlike classic cinema, the sublimity of this film is not always “high up there”, but rather it displays a more profound opposition of the heavenly and the earthly. The tension of the sublime moment is created within the banal reality of the film. In this peculiar way, Bess’ earthbound sexuality is coupled by her spiritual aspirations and her sexuality has come to be a conduit to the spiritual miracle.

To visualize Bess’ passage to her love miracle and her spirituality as sheer madness, Von Trier distinctively resorts to the representation of hysteria as a means of Bess’ expression of her total devotion to Jan. One of these hysterical behaviors of Bess that embodies a kind of transcendence is her dancing scene in Dr. Richardson’s apartment. Bess’ dance seduction is filmed with a free-flowing camera which captures her body parts from different distances and angles. This dance scene highlights the physicality of her being but meanwhile connects her to another space where her excessive love to Jan gets released through this hysterical performance. The act of letting herself completely led by spiritual powers culminates to one of the random sublime moments along the film when her spiritual connection with Jan intensifies. This original use of hysteria – to achieve the spiritual by means of physicality – makes *Breaking the Waves* a distinctive case in contemporary cinema’s pastiche of the past.

*Breaking the Waves* is definitely not the only film that reminds us of the Hollywood classic 7<sup>th</sup> *Heaven*. On the other side of the world, Borzage’s classic equally exerts its huge influence. The 2003 South Korean film *The Classic* by director Jae-young Kwak, with its genuine style depicting pure love, constantly reminds us of the silent Hollywood classic. In both films, adversaries and separations are set up in the narratives as trails for the couples’ love – more specifically, the heroes’ joining the army for the war becomes the thematic interruption of the love affairs’ continuity. In addition, love tokens – in 7<sup>th</sup> *Heaven* the wedding medal while in *The Classic* the necklace – are used by the lovers of both films as symbols of faith in decisive moments of their stories. The

kind of faith that the hero demonstrates in *The Classic* when he comes back to look for the necklace in the middle of gunfire of the battlefield is no less persistent than that of the classic cinema. This faith in love is so strong that what happens during his reencounter with his school sweetheart after the war is already nothing else but all about pure confidence as it is. When the hero tells his lover that she looks so pretty and she hasn't changed a bit – when later she finds out that he has lost his sight during the war – what he preserves is obviously the plain trust in the beautiful image of his young lover in his mind and memory.

Apart from the parodic sublime moment of the hero's miraculous survival from the battleground – albeit coming back blind, which constitutes another phenomenal resemblance of the two films – and the lovers' reencounter after separation, the major love miracle of *The Classic* resides in the continuation of the touching love story to the next generation. In order to achieve that, the film maintains two threads of stories from the beginning, namely the old and classic love story of the elders in their epoch and the contemporary story of their son and daughter. In fact, *The Classic* intentionally leaves out a painful regret of the old love story by narratively denying the couple to final marriage, so that this story can be reincarnated in the contemporary thread of the new generation. This miraculous coincidence of the protagonists' inter-relations is revealed at the end of the film, so as to create a sense of providence in this final climax of sublime miracle.

The reincarnated romance is visualized in the scene of firefly catching at the end of the film, shot exactly the same as that in the old story, highly reminiscent of the earlier romance. The camera similarly alternates between the boy approaching fireflies in the river and the girl sitting on the bridge watching him, both in general shots situating the characters in the dreamy and lyrical nocturnal ambient by the river. This poetic and nearly supernatural atmosphere beyond reality resembling that of the midwood of *Tea and Sympathy* again constructs a space in another dimension beyond reality for the sublime moment to happen. There exist neither troubles nor sufferings in this peaceful place, only the reincarnated miracle of finally being together. The boy turns around, raising his hands hinting to the girl of his prey and walks across the river to her, with a firefly in his hands. He passes the little creature to her hands in a reaction shot from an above angle contemplating her smile. The final kiss of the sequence upsurges a sublime ending to the marvellous miracle experienced by the two. The camera follows the firefly

released from her hands, rising up slowly and leaving the kissing lovers to a farther distance. On the one hand, it highlights the misty and surreal environment of the scene; and on the other hand, this point of view from above as if symbolizing the providence leaves an even more sublime conclusion of the happy ending.

Apart from creating the miraculous sublime moment, the intertwining of the two story lines serves to highlight the contemporariness of the film with its contrastive pastiche of the classic cinema. In terms of its stylistic concerns, the camera of *The Classic* focuses frequently on the expressiveness of the rather exaggerated acting of the old love story, with quite a lot of close-ups of their facial expressions, resembling that of the classic cinema. Whereas the contemporary line of the story follows a rather contemporary formal style of mainstream South Korean series. As Doherty<sup>86</sup> has pointed out, the mixture of “Hollywood narratives and Korean attitude and locale” results in “schizophrenic” products with traits of both continents. This Korean paradigm to some extent represents the entire trend of Asian cinema, which always struggles within the dilemma of the national and the international.

*The Classic* directs our attention to the other side of the world, which to a large extent symbolizes exactly the trend of contemporary world cinema. The old occidental hegemonic film industry starts to look outside and directs its attention to other national cinemas. These other national cinemas receive larger audience by an extended exhibition in international film festivals. Apart from appropriating the classic cinema and in some case Occidentalising their productions, many of these cinemas also take great interests in the fruits of modern European cinema, while some of them attempt to develop their own styles. With the pioneer Japanese director Kurosawa Akira, Asian cinema begins its disciplined productions in the 1950s<sup>87</sup>, which almost coincides with the initial of European modernist experimentations. For many Asian countries that lack the circumstances to develop systematic national film traditions of their own before that time – as a consequence of wars or colonialism – the progress of their film industry often implicates the blending of various lines of directions at the same time, like Westernization and Easternization, modernism and postmodernism<sup>88</sup>.

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<sup>86</sup> 1984: 840-851

<sup>87</sup> Teo, 2013: 15

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*: 229



A distinguished example of employing these binaries of the West and East, the modern and postmodern, in one single film is the flowing love song directed by Nobuhiro Suwa's in *Un Couple Parfait* (2005). The film is the Japanese director's attempt to recount the famous *Viaggio in Italia* of Rossellini by means of cooperating with all French actors. *Un Couple Parfait* similarly depicts a journey that a couple are forced to take together at the point of their separation. With nearly all of its scenes highly reminiscent of the modernist classic, *Un Couple Parfait* however, all along maintains a postmodern self-reflexive consciousness to its recycle of the old version. This point is especially illustrated by the end of the film, which not surprisingly, follows a similar reconciliatory miracle of that in *Viaggio in Italia* as the closure of the couple's conflicts.

The sequence is constituted with a single long-shot in the train station, featuring a supposedly separation of the couple with the woman's farewell to her husband. The couple enters the frame from the right side and walks along until the entrance of the car. Shot from a distance, she checks her ticket and goes onto the train, while among several people her husband is positioned more behind with her luggage – a physical distance between the two symbolizes their psychological abyss. After passing her the luggage onto the car, he wanders away from the entrance waiting for her to get out for the farewell. When she gets down the train, the two stand face to face while glancing around the passer-bys. Until now, the incommunication and rift of the couple seem to have continued the same. "So when do you come back?" He finally asks her. She just stares at him, silent and still, while little by little around them there are fewer people lingering on the station. When finally, the station is clear, even the ticket-checker has gone. There are only the two, in the middle of the field depth, against the background of the train station, looking into each other, static.

To this point, it is sensed that the air begins to change and something is heralded to happen. The two, in their "peculiar" way – unlike in most cases when a crucial action is waited – face this critical moment of separation with not even a bit of movement. This confrontation is prolonged uncomfortably long, until she haltingly turns her body and looks away from him toward the side of the train, as if hesitating for her next movement. Pause, she turns back to him – before she could completely turn around as if there is a lack of drive impelling her to do that, and the magnetism of what is left of

the couple has convinced her to turn back. There are still the last passengers running toward the carriage while slowly the train starts to move. She looks slightly to them, but without turning around, without running to get on – she has stayed. The train leaves the station, and she looks up to him – a peaceful and unexpected miracle has happened, when at the very last moment, on the very edge of their separation, she has stayed. He forwards towards her and rests his forehead on hers. As the screen turns black, we hear her sound, something like weeping and laughing at the same time.

It is not difficult to see that although recounting a similar story, the miracle culminated at the end of *Un Couple Parfait* is stylistically modified from the original one in *Viaggio in Italia*. Compared to the strong and vigorous miracle in the latter, the former presents a distinctively silent and peaceful one. This may be a self-conscious alteration accommodated to the minimalist filmmaking style in narrating the story of *Un Couple Parfait* – the whole film is only consisted of approximately 35 shots. Again, although re-appropriating a classic film narrative, the style has been changed to underline the contemporariness of the film. In fact, to soften the representation of the final miracle is not entirely unfamiliar in contemporary cinema's portrayal of the sublime. A touch of realism is achieved from the moderate depiction of the miraculous finale.

Another film from a country with great tradition of modernism that upholds the representation of this kind of miracle is *Conte d'Hiver*<sup>89</sup>. The film similarly narrates a story of sublime faith in love which leads to a miracle, but like *Un Couple Parfait* the final miracle happens so peacefully like the naturalist thing in the world. In this anything but a homogenous story, Félicie (Charlotte Véry) is placed in a polygon of relationships where the occurrence of love and desire is considered in their fragmented conditions – two lovers not perfect but close, and one true love that is almost impossible. She shuttles through these multiple relationships while the realization of the haunting memory of a lost love might take a miracle to achieve.

The miracle indeed happens at the end of the film. However, once again in this contemporary production, miracle and sublimity are no longer only associated with the heavenly glory, but is often accompanied by the earthly harassment. Quite similar to *Breaking the Waves*, the female protagonist's supreme and celestial faith in love is made afflictive and tangled by her mundane surroundings. In *Conte d'Hiver*, the miraculous

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<sup>89</sup> Rohmer, 1992

reencounter of the lovers comes only after Félicie's torment in her decision-making centered over her Prince Charming. In other words, the film is dually composed of the classicism of Félicie's pure love to Charles (Frédéric van der Driessche) – an ideal love with extraordinary faith; and Félicie's postmodernist auto-consciousness of her sentimental relations to Maxence (Michael Voletti) and Loic (Hervé Furic) – those speculative ones with self-criticism. Her celestial sublime love on the one hand and her worldly involvement with her male companies on the other hand, intertwine and co-exist in the critical moments of the film.

The contemporary nature of the film makes the protagonist to go through two definitive points to turn the situation and let her reflect and “see” in this chaos. The first moment happens with Félicie's reflection in the Nevers church – the place where she takes her daughter for a walk enables her to “see” clearly about her sentiments and be driven to her first decision to leave Maxence. The co-existence of the divine and mundane is clearly reflected in this sequence. In her momentary withdrawal from her daily life with Maxence, she is taken straightly to her sublime love by the sacred alter. In the reaction shot of Félicie contemplating the alter, a short piece of violin music which appeared earlier accompanying the film's prologue of Charles and Félicie's summer romance starts to sound, as though a reminder of the past. In the quite long take of her in medium shot in an all-thoughtful mood, comes what we later know as the illumination about her love life – she decides that she must remain true to her real love Charles.

The second defining moment regards the resurrectional Hermione in Shakespeare's homonymous play *Conte d'Hiver* that Félicie watches in the theater with Loic. The specific scene selected in the film is the final scene of the play when Hermione's statue miraculously comes to life followed by her reconciliation with her husband. This sequence is basically composed of shots of the stage scene and reaction shots of Félicie's concentrated face among the audience, until at the final scene of resurrection when she is shot in a close-up with crying eyes. The miracle that happens in the theatre seems to predict a miracle in Félicie's own love life and prepare her to welcome the forthcoming moment. This viewing experience further strengthens her faith in her love for Charles and legitimatizes her hope for a miracle.

With these two critical moments, Félicie is constantly reminded of her sublime love in her mundane personal life, until there comes the final miracle. As it has been discussed earlier, instead of being endlessly glorified as a privileged moment which is emotionally explosive, the happy ending occurs with a rather tranquillity. The sublime moment in *Conte d'Hiver* is endowed with a rather realistic touch as it happens among the masses of the plain modern world. "The miraculousness of the everyday, the possibility and necessity of our awakening to it every day, call it the secularization of the transcendental"<sup>90</sup> fits best to the kind of ending presented in this film. The sequence happens on the bus, with the camera waiting Félicie getting on the bus with her daughter and sitting on an empty seat, while the familiar face of Charles appears from the opposite side. The camera fixes on him and a female friend sitting beside him when he looks concentrated on his daughter – but to him just another unknown little girl. In this peculiar moment when the spectators realize the situation earlier than they do, the camera oscillates between the two pairs of Charles and his companion and Félicie and her daughter when none of the protagonists look up to each other.

When the camera finally returns to him, he turns his eyes, glancing at her – and then comes the moment of recognition. The manifestation of this magical moment lies almost purely on acting without basically any other elements. The series of facial expressions of Charles – surprise and recognition – constitutes almost the only display of the critical moment. The recognition is then extended on part of Félicie, who exhibits a quite similar facial expression like that of Charles. He then initiates the conversation, nothing more ordinary than her asking him if he has returned to France and explaining to him the error of the address. When he tells his companion about his fault of not having left his address to her, she jumps out of the bus carrying her daughter while he follows her. During all this conversation, instead of trying to create a *mise-en-scène* to glorify the moment, the sequence is centered on the facial expressions of the characters, as if in an attempt to explore the realistic complex psychological process that is produced by this long-expected moment which seemed never to happen.

A contemporary exploration into the complex interior of the protagonists substitutes the Hollywood classic rhetoric of a romanticized epiphany. Including when Charles asks Félicie to move with him to Brittany for the new restaurant (although at last it is

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<sup>90</sup> Cavell, 2004: 437

understood that her answer will be “yes”), she again pauses for the decision; meanwhile it can be imagined that such a situation in classic Hollywood romance would be a particularly ideal and euphoric moment. To put it in another way, situated in the contemporary French society, love in Rohmer’s films, including the most sublime and miraculous one, suffers from difficulties in making choices. If not for the homage of the miraculous love as a consequence of unshakeable faith, the repetitive reflections and contemplations of Félicie may as well arrive at nowhere in her confined life cycle. Félicie’s world is unambivalently divided in two – the rational reality constantly questioned and analyzed, and the intimate world of idealist love and desire.

After an eclectic analysis of various national cinemas of our times, we might conclude with a certain tendency in contemporary cinema. In spite of having passed the revolutionary experimentations of the modern cinema, there seems to be a retro tendency of the contemporary cinema recycling the past and rereading past stories and meanings, meanwhile it is unequivocal that contemporary or postmodern filmmaking styles are embodied in the process, making the films essentially contemporary. This pastiche of the classic easily evokes what Charles Jencks<sup>91</sup> calls anamnesis. Anamnesis generates fragmented and partial memories of the past that may attach to the current narratives and constructs their own storytelling. Esposti<sup>92</sup> believes that this notion is essential for any postmodern art form in that the story-making process of these forms intends to encode a narrative but ultimately leaves the decoding and interpretation process to the spectators. In this sense, the postmodern replication of the past is repetitive as well as different – different in that every spectator acquires the pleasure of a different experience in the signifying universe that the postmodern cinema creates.

This quintessence of the postmodernist cinema relates particularly to Paul Willemen’s theory of cinephilia. The concept originally obtains its inspiration from its photographic counterpart – the notion of *punctum* proposed by Roland Barthes. Accompanying the term *studium* that refers to those cultural or ideological messages and feelings communicated through photography and shared mutually by the photographer and his audience, *punctum*, instead, deals with specific details that capture an individual spectator with the power of provoking in him a particular emotion that is only

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<sup>91</sup> 1987: 335-349

<sup>92</sup> 1998: 1-20

significant for him. Following this notion of *punctum*, the cinephilia has introduced the subjectivity of sublime moment to the cinema.

According to Paul Willemen<sup>93</sup> in his dialogue with Noel King, cinephiles often have fetish in “a particular moment and isolate an expressive detail” in the filmic images. Therefore, the discourses around cinephilia frequently comment on “a privileged, pleasure-giving and fascinating moment of a relationship to what’s happening on the screen in the form of the capture of brief and evanescent moments<sup>94</sup>. Obviously cinephilia is concerned with a subjective connection of the spectator with the image, since it deals with a kind of “recognition” on the part of the spectator of some images that ignite an “affective and emotional intensity” in him<sup>95</sup>.

In fact, the experience of a sublime moment can be very personal when one is confronted with the cinematic screen. If we can still say that in classic cinema, the audiences are supposed to identify, or at least are encouraged to identify with the fictional characters and dominant ideology in those realist narratives, this easy manipulation of the audience already begins to shatter in modernist cinema, where the spectators are distanced from the conventional identification process. A supposedly unified meaning-making process no longer exists. This aspect is made especially overt in contemporary cinema – with its ambiguity and fragmentation, the contemporary cinema often enables multiple interpretations.

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<sup>93</sup> 1994: 227

<sup>94</sup> Keathley, 2000

<sup>95</sup> *ibid.*

## Conclusion

Cinema is not only about a physical exhibition of lights and shadows – the histories narrated by the audiovisual images move the emotions of their spectators. The identification or rejection of the stories on the screen is so individual that the consumption of the images becomes quite intimate. Love as one of the most intense emotions of the human being, is often connected to the transcendental and the spiritual, which makes it a perfect theme in the cinema. The discussion of the emergence of a miraculous and sublime moment, which has occupied the earlier pages of this thesis, has been about the instant of a few minutes which reaches an infinite dimension brimming with the most transcendental human experiences.

From the start of its histories, cinema has taken great interests in articulating the discourse of love, and the experience of this great emotion has been made possible to be visualized in images. The films of the cinema's first decades often represent love as highly spiritual faith, dedication and sacrifice, given that apart from passionate kisses the physical is barely shown. Whereas entering in the modern and contemporary age, with the sexual liberation and the termination of the Hays Code, more physical aspects of intimate relations are exhibited to the gazes within and outside the screen, although the spiritual aspects of sublime love continue to be a significant discourse. The sublime love in modern and contemporary films becomes less epic compared to that represented in classic cinema, instead more quotidian and realist. From more romantic themes like infatuation, marriage and death for love in the era of classic Hollywood, to the more complex romances and more explicit elements like eroticism, sexual liberation and hindrances to love lives of the modern and contemporary era, the concept and perspectives of love have changed greatly.

I feel that it has been necessary to cinematically approach an abstract theme as love from certain sequences in films, given that the living of love, including the most sublime and miraculous moment of it, is reflected in the most insignificant gestures, gazes and words. In fact, in all of the three eras of classic, modern and contemporary

cinema, love is often sublimated in symbolic kisses, gazes or gestures. Cinema's contemplation of love certainly comes from the forms and techniques that it frames the emotion on the screen. Through the trajectory of this thesis from the earliest classic cinema to the contemporary one, we see that certain metaphors and symbols to represent the miracle of love have remained along the history while others have changed with technological advances.

Within all the gestures, there is one movement that has maintained during all the times as the privileged and preferred form of expression by filmmakers of different epochs – the kiss. When the lovers close their eyes to experience the ecstasy of the moment, the simple movement has the power to affect us with the transcendental emotion beyond space and time. Usually shot in a distinguished *mise-en-scene* in a separated space from the general narrative, the kiss of the lovers, alienated from the quotidian world, confirms their most heated passions and often culminates the films in their most sublime manifestation. The cinematic miracles of love happen in such a space, where the mundane reality that surrounds the lovers concedes to the belief of pure sentimentalism. What can be measured in time as a minimal instant becomes grandiose in the sense of its impact – the sublime moment detains time and creates a sense of eternity within this moment. This relatively scarce moment in cinema – in terms of the real timing that it occupies – which achieves an emotional impact much more significant to its measure has been the exact objective of this research.

The cinema, apart from its entertainment and aesthetic values, possesses aside a great humanistic value that achieves to reconstruct the emotional and spiritual dimension of the human life. This has been a thesis about love, about the pure philosophy and aesthetics of love in the cinema. Too often are we getting used to associate love with external elements and judge it from social or institutional standards. Meanwhile acknowledging that love indeed includes many issues as desire, sexuality, marriage, religion and ethics, this research simply wishes to restore love as it is, to return it with its innate freedom in such an imaginative realm as cinematic representations. Real love escapes definition, holding with it thousands of possibilities. The films been discussed in this thesis attempt to approach the purity of love from its miraculous and sublime potentials, even if the very nature of love sometimes positions the lovers against institutional or social prejudices.



Cinema in its centenary history has presented us with thousands of love stories. The aesthetics and forms to love may have changed, but the essence of the affectionate passion and desire of human beings remains universal. As has been poetically put by Rins<sup>96</sup>, “the feeling of love is rediscovered everyday by the man, but the word continues to preserve a magical and indiscernible aura, which reveals it still more mysterious and fascinating”. Such is cinema’s understanding of love, which constantly re-invents new aspects but meanwhile reserves its historic reflection of the term. The technical advances of the cinema contribute to the expression of this most sublime form of human emotion. Entering in the era of high-speed development of digital cinematic techniques, we still hope for more moments which could really detain our hearts in the sublime sphere within the fugacity.

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<sup>96</sup> 2001

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