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Michael Subialka

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Acting Aestheticism, Performing Decadence: The Cinematic Fusion of Art and Life

Michael Subialka

University of California, Davis

In 1917, the futurist artist Anton Giulio Bragaglia released what is today the only extant work of futurist cinema, a silent film called *Thaïs*, starring a Russian performer, Thaïs Galitsky. The overlap of performer and performance extends beyond the fact that the film shared her name: the Russian dancer portrays Vera Preobrajenska, a decadent aristocrat from Eastern Europe. Vera lives in a bizarre house constructed out of abstract geometrical shapes, equipped with secret rooms that include a gas chamber. This set, designed by Enrico Prampolini, is the most overtly futurist element of the film, as the plot consists of a typical love triangle leading to ruin: Vera seduces the lover of her friend Bianca (a countess), resulting in Bianca's accidental death, which in turn drives Vera to commit suicide by locking herself in the secret gas chamber of her labyrinthine house. Her motivation for betraying Bianca is an aristocratic desire to experiment with the lives of others – an amoral aestheticism that explains her nickname in the film, 'Nitchevo', an obvious allusion to Nietzsche that signals a futurist intertext as well as a paradigm for her coldhearted game with life and death. Her liberated sexuality and amorality shape a tragic story where ultimately Vera is trapped in her own game (in the plot) and in the bizarre architecture of her own house (on the set). This dramatic death merges her with the romantic story she has crafted as well as with the artistic setting of her aesthetic existence [fig. 1].

More than just a thematic connection to nineteenth-century models of the tragic love triangle, *Thaïs* demonstrates how a decadent-aesthetic paradigm informs the development of early film through the figure of the film diva. Thus, we can see in early film a case study of decadence as an aesthetic mode that shapes not only the content of these films but also the theorization of the medium itself. To show how this is the case, I will first excavate the aesthetic-decadent paradigm that focuses its artistic ideal on the figure of the actor or actress, examining three

decadent writers (Charles Baudelaire, Auguste de Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, and Oscar Wilde) who help create the pattern that I then trace into the acting of the first Italian film diva, Lyda Borelli. While Borelli's films reactivate key aspects of the decadent fascination with the fusion of art and life, as well as its deathly trajectory, they also add elements of modern gender and sexuality that complicate that paradigm – as well as our assumptions about the political significance of decadence. The cinematic reworking of this decadent-aesthetic paradigm not only brings it to a wider audience but also deploys it in an ambivalent way that celebrates the New Woman's independence (sexual, financial, moral) while also confining her transgression.

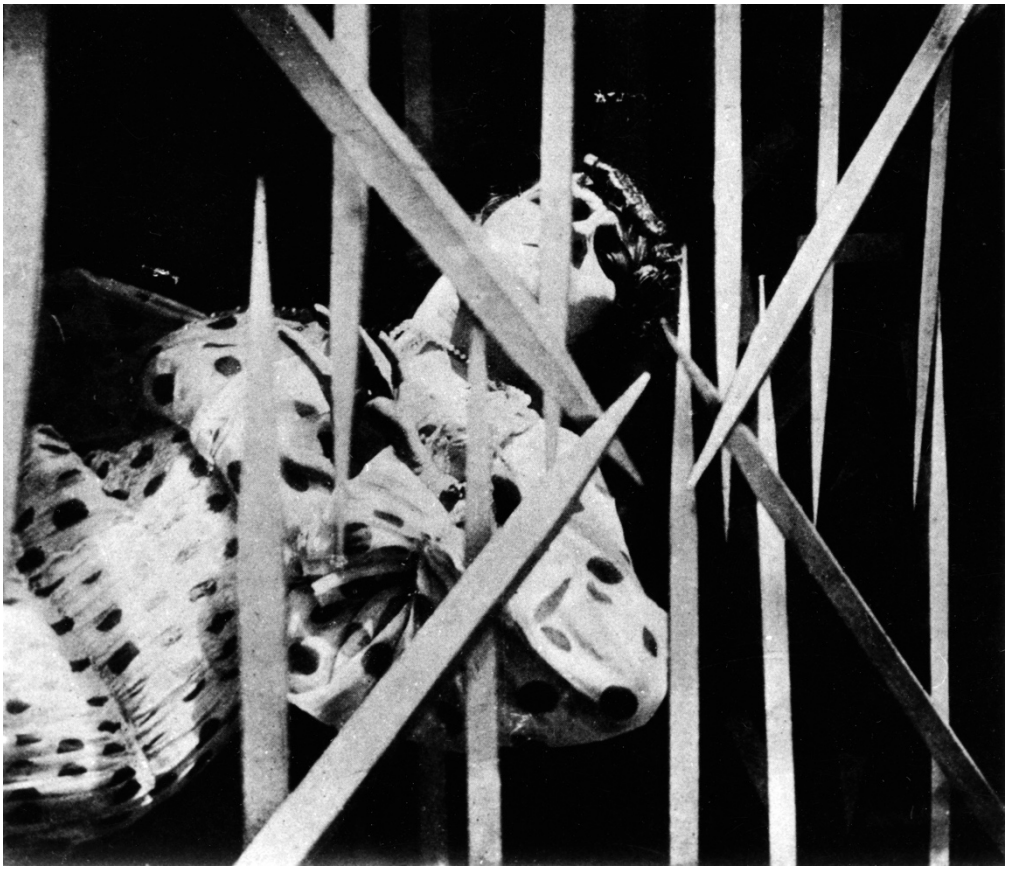

Fig. 1: Thaïs Galitsky performing Vera's death in *Thaïs* (1917).

Act I. Aesthetic Actors: The Tragic Experiment of Art as Life

Aestheticism may not begin with Baudelaire, but he is doubtless one of its primary fashioners.[1] It is thus telling that in Baudelaire's late poetic work, *Le Spleen de Paris* [*Paris Spleen*], published posthumously in 1869, the figure of the wandering aesthete/dandy relates in key ways to the ideal of performance. As Rhonda K. Garelick has put it, focusing particularly on his earlier essay, *Le peintre de la vie moderne* [*The Painter of Modern Life*] (1863): 'Baudelaire's [dandyism] rejects work and condemns the production of anything save one's own carefully tended self'.[2] This penchant for self-fashioning necessitates a fusion between life and art, and Baudelaire's aestheticism locates that fusion in the dandy's street-wandering performance, which combines the decadent's display with the flâneur's aesthetic investigation of the modern metropolis.

But the dandy's combination of performance with the search for aesthetic experiences is taken a step further in Baudelaire's vision of the actor.[3] In the prose poem 'Une mort héroique' ['A Heroic Death'], the poet depicts the actor, a buffoon named Fancioulle, as both a perfect ideal of aestheticism and the victim of a morally sick aesthetic experiment conducted by a Prince who is himself a Baudelairean aesthete fusing art and life. Indeed, 'the misfortune of the Prince was in not having a stage vast enough for his genius'.[4] The Prince instead plays with the lives of others. When Fancioulle is condemned to die for participating in a conspiracy, the Prince decides to give him a pardon so he can go on acting, allowing him to enact his revenge in a more aesthetic way. Fancioulle's performance, heightened by his near-death experience, is magnificent, and Baudelaire describes it as fusing art and life with a divine power into a 'perfect idealization, so that one could not help believing in the impersonation as alive' (p. 56). This fusion of art and life is so intense that it becomes total. The actor enters his role, but then the Prince's plot is revealed, as at the pivotal moment of Fancioulle's performance the Prince sends a boy to hiss and thus burst the artistic bubble: 'Fancioulle, awakened from his dream, closed his eyes, and when almost at once he opened them again, they seemed to have grown inordinately large, then he opened his mouth as though struggling for breath, staggered forward a step, then backward, and fell dead upon the stage' (p. 57).

The true fusion of art and life is not attained in his acting, no matter how divine and how closely aligned with the ideal of art itself. At its most radical, the fusion of art and life requires the sacrifice of the actor's own, actual life – as he gives himself over to art and takes on the reality of the artistic dream. What makes his immersion complete is his inability to return to life once the artistic dream is pierced. It is as if only the actor's death could confirm that he had entirely given himself over to the life of art.[5] This condition, I contend, forms the paradigm of a specifically decadent notion of aestheticism, one in which the perfect fusion of art and life leads down a deadly path. The aesthetic ideal of fusing art and life is pervasive in decadent literature, but it is telling that the figure of the actor takes on a special role in realizing its limit case.

It is worthwhile briefly to trace that Baudelairean paradigm to some later resonances in French decadentism and in Wilde's decadent aestheticism so as to establish that it is, indeed, a paradigm and to show how its dynamics change in ways that prefigure the cinematic diva. While the field of literature that can be classified as French 'decadentism' is a matter of some contention, here a single example will suffice.[6] Villiers published a collection of short stories in 1883 called *Contes cruels* [*Cruel Tales*], containing the story 'Le Désir d'être un homme' ['The Desire to Be a Man']. Its protagonist is an actor, a certain 'Esprit Chaudval, born Lepeinteur, known as Monanteuil', whose whole life has been so devoted to art that he has never experienced his own existence as a man. At the end of his long career he desires above all to become a man, to feel his own inner subjectivity rather than inhabiting that of his characters. Speaking in a long dramatic monologue, he reveals that motivation:

> For nearly half a century I have *acted*, I have *played* the passions of other people without ever feeling them – in fact I have never felt anything myself. […] So does that make me nothing but a *shadow*? Passions! Feelings! Real actions! REAL! They are the things that make up a MAN! Now that age is forcing me to rejoin the human race, I owe it to myself to take possession of the passions, or at least of some *real* feeling… because that is the *sine qua non* for anyone pretending to the title Man.[7]

The distinction he makes between life and art traces the familiar lines of the Baudelairean model: the consummate actor is defined by the suspension of his 'real' personhood; the imaginary life of

the artistic character, realized on stage, dominates his reality. The consummate actor has no real identity of his own and so lacks the inner experience of passions, feelings, and real actions. In this story what the actor seeks is not the fusion of art and life but rather a shift back from that fusion.

But the narrative does not allow him that happy ending, with the plot instead resulting in precisely the tragic fusion of art and life that Baudelaire's paradigm establishes: a fusion consummated in death. The actor's plan is to make himself feel remorse by committing a terrible crime; he will set a neighborhood in Paris on fire and watch it burn so that the ensuing suffering is etched in his memory, allowing him to cultivate an inner subjectivity defined by regret. He carries out the experiment and then flees, retiring to keep a lighthouse for the rest of his days. Yet he feels no remorse. At the end of the story, the actor becomes obsessed with this failure to feel, and in this way he unwittingly becomes what he had sought – a ghost of regret, not for his crime and victims but for his own failure to achieve reality and become a man. While he is unsuccessful in cultivating the kind of remorse he envisioned, quite against his own will he ends up fusing life and art into an aesthetic spectacle that is both an experiment and his own doom. He has given himself a tragic death, filled with regret, and it is only at the moment of that death that he embodies the ghosts of his tragic models in his own life. The character's failure is the story's success – that is, it depicts a limit case for the tragic fusion of art and life that the actor represents.

Villiers had always sought to become a successful playwright, and he was deeply enmeshed in the fin-de-siècle Parisian theatre scene. But neither he nor Baudelaire had the kind of theatrical experience that made Wilde into a household celebrity. It is thus unsurprising that Wilde's representation of the actress and her relation to the aesthetic ideal of fusing life with art should be more complex than his predecessors'. For Wilde, too, the actress fuses art and life in a tragic story culminating in death and serving as a kind of playground for the amoral aestheticism of his protagonists. This is the fate of Sibyl Vane in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890/1891), but it is also mirrored in Dorian's fate and resonates with Wilde's own public persona. In Sibyl's story, in the novel as a whole, and in Wilde's relation to it, what is ultimately conveyed is not only the same set

of aesthetic ideals focused on acting but also the newly gendered, and queered, understanding of that tragic ideal.

Wilde's novel is well-known and requires little exposition, but it is still worth pausing on a few details to highlight key elements of the argument here. That the actress is fetishized as a perfect ideal of the aestheticist paradigm is clear enough. From the start Dorian Gray falls in love with Sibyl Vane not for who she is but for who she performs and her ability to perform, which he figures in familiar terms as her immersion into the characters she portrays. But what is particularly interesting is the gender dynamic, which contrasts the conventionality of everyday womanhood with that of an actress who represents a transgressive figure. Thus, when Dorian first confesses his new love to Lord Henry, he says:

> Night after night I go to see her play. One evening she is Rosalind, and the next evening she is Imogen. […] I have seen her in every age and in every costume. Ordinary women never appeal to one's imagination. They are limited to their century. No glamour ever transfigures them. One knows their minds as easily as one knows their bonnets. One can always find them. There is no mystery in any of them. They ride in the Park in the morning, and chatter at tea-parties in the afternoon. They have their stereotyped smile, and their fashionable manner. They are quite obvious. But an actress! How different an actress is! Harry! why didn't you tell me that the only thing worth loving is an actress?[8]

The power of Sibyl's skill as an actress contrasts with the vulgarity of the quotidian world around her. This contrast heightens the effect of her prowess as an artist: she elevates existence. This makes her into the ideal aesthetic type; at the same time it marks her with a difference that is praised precisely because it represents a transgression of social order.[9]

Of course, the aesthete's gaze is fleeting, and Dorian tires of Sibyl as soon as she fails to conform to his ideal vision of her. He never loved Sibyl but rather the idea of her – the romance of her as a character (p. 75). After he leaves her, he finds, for the first time, that his portrait is altered in appearance, and he studies it 'with a feeling of almost scientific interest' (p. 82). The look of cruelty there convinces him he must have been unjust and that he has a duty to marry Sibyl as he promised. Yet moments later, when Lord Henry comes and tells him that Sibyl Vane has killed herself, he finds himself strangely unmoved: 'It seems to me to be simply like a wonderful ending

to a wonderful play. It has all the terrible beauty of a Greek tragedy, a tragedy in which I took a great part, but by which I have not been wounded' (p. 86). Her suicide makes his love story into a work of art – a tragic romance – repeating the Baudelairean theme of art and life fusing in the ideal death of the actor or actress.

It is perhaps unnecessary to go into great detail examining how Dorian's experiment in moulding Sibyl's life into a tragic story mirrors the experiment that Lord Henry is performing with Dorian as his subject (itself an aestheticist alternative to Basil's more typically romantic relationship with Dorian).[10] Lord Henry uses Dorian as a beautiful canvas, a piece of clay to mould and form, to play with as he will (p. 34). It is thus unsurprising that the tragedy of Sibyl's story is mirrored in Dorian's own. We can read this mirroring in aesthetic terms: both immerse themselves into art, fusing art and life (Dorian as an aesthete turns his life into art, Sibyl as an actress lives her art so intensely that it becomes her life). That perfect fusion culminates in self-destruction, as their mirrored suicides solidify the fusion of art and life in a final unity.

The novel thus features both a queer man and a woman as the figures of the Baudelairean decadent-aesthetic ideal. This independent woman with her own artistic career was certainly a transgression of gender norms, just as the effeminate and queer protagonists of the novel were scandalous enough for the prosecution to use the text at his trial to accuse Wilde of 'gross indecency'.[11] Hence, the model of the actor shifted into more transgressive territory as the decadent imagination continued to play with its own aesthetic ideals. For the aesthete, the danger of this transgression is perhaps allayed by the dynamics of aestheticism itself: the perceived 'threat' of transgression in gender or sexuality is felt by those attached to systems of power and social order, but the aestheticist outlook denies primacy to precisely those systems.[12] And so Wilde's re-articulation of this decadent-aesthetic paradigm already begins to dovetail with a new figure who would increasingly come to take centre stage in the anxious aesthetic self-reflection of modernity: the diva.

Act II. Diva as Dying Muse: The Aesthetic Actress as Femme Fatale

In the opening of her essay on the position of the actress between decadentism and modernity, Lucia Re highlights the way in which the actress's ability to take on multiple identities – and thus her own lack of a fixed or stable 'female' identity – unsettled Victorian-era viewers and led to the conception of the actress as somehow 'monstrous'. It is, she maintains, unsurprising that Gabriele D'Annunzio, Italy's great decadent-aestheticist author, places tremendous focus on actresses as he articulates his own version of the art-life fusion.[13] The most obvious instance is D'Annunzio's *Il fuoco* [*The Flame*] (1900), a novel modelled on his own love affair with the great Italian stage diva, Eleonora Duse. The great actress was somehow situated between the inner and the outer, the feminine and the masculine, and thus in tension with the act of artistic creation represented by the author's writing. At once challenging and also replicating the gender discourse of the romantic and Victorian ages, aesthetes like D'Annunzio are troubled by the actress as a figure of independence and enter into a kind of artistic battle that seeks, in various ways, to control the feminine by limiting it to its supposedly empty, decorative function, while nonetheless using it to generate the aesthetic power of their own artistic performance.[14]

Re's productive reading captures a key conflict at the core of the relationship between the author and the actress in this moment of modern anxiety over the status of the New Woman. That conflict, I argue, illuminates a new phenomenon that defined the emergence of film culture in early-twentieth-century Italy: *divismo*. The diva – a word taken from the operatic tradition and explicitly deifying the prima donna – notably had no significant male counterpart in the early years of Italian film.[15] The film diva is thus an ideal case to examine how the shifting gender dynamics of the period reconfigure the decadent-aesthetic paradigm of the actress who fuses art and life through death. The product of a new modern mass culture, the figure of the diva not only encapsulates the aesthetic ideal charted by those earlier writers but also projects it to a new, increasingly wide audience, particularly with the emergence of cinema and the celebrity culture it

helped to foster. In this context, the decadent diva becomes a figure of exoticized fascination that simultaneously celebrates and contains her transgressive sexuality and independence.

Early cinema in Italy was dominated by two primary genres: large-scale historical epics and diva films.[16] Both offered forms of tantalizing visual spectacle, though in markedly different ways. It is clear enough how the diva genre emerges out of and continues the legacies of the decadent stage. As Angela Dalle Vacche has shown, the diva of the early cinema is caught between the experimental modernity of the avant-gardes and the decadent stylings of writers like D'Annunzio; the film diva also embodies the Orientalist fantasies common to both nineteenth-century theatre and twentieth-century reconfigurations of it, like those of the Ballets Russes.[17] Indeed, many actresses moved from stage to screen and from performing in the works of decadent-symbolist artists like Wilde (*Salomé*) and D'Annunzio (*La figlia di Iorio* [*The Daughter of Iorio*], among others) to the new variations on those familiar themes offered by the diva film.

Fig. 2: Lyda Borelli as Salomé in Oscar Wilde's *Salomé*. Photo by Mario Nunes Vais.

One such artist was Lyda Borelli, who can serve as a case study here not only because she is recognized as the first diva of this new genre but also because of how she showcases the dual-faceted legacy of the decadent-aestheticist paradigm traced above [fig. 2].[18] In the content of her films, Borelli enacts the discourse of the tragically-doomed figure who merges art and life. Likewise, in her public persona, Borelli became a figure of celebrity devotion such that her actual self as a performer and her personae on screen were ultimately inseparable in the popular imagination, her screen characteristics even spilling over into the behaviour of her fans.[19] In both respects, her mode of fusing art and life plays out the gender dynamics of the femme fatale whose seductive power must be contained.

The film recognized as initiating the diva genre in Italian cinema, *Ma l'amor mio non muore* [*Love Everlasting*] (1913), features Borelli's breakout performance in a film structured around love and death. The protagonist, Elsa Holbein (Borelli), is forced to flee into exile when her father kills himself after being falsely accused of betraying the Grand Duchy of Wallenstein, where he was an officer. She goes to Paris and becomes a performer, singing and playing the piano with a new identity as Diana Cadouleur. In this guise, she meets the heir to the Grand Duchy, the Prince Massimiliano, who falls in love with the double role she is performing, meaning both her false identity and the exotic persona that false identity assumes on stage. Her true identity is, however, revealed to the Prince, who is called back to the Grand Duchy. Ultimately, he decides to ignore his orders and return to Elsa, but she has already poisoned herself, bringing the tragic love story of double identities to its predictable conclusion.

It is not just the storyline that enacts the tragic aspects of the decadent-aesthetic vision of the actress; Borelli's acting style, which helped launch the craze for diva films and for Borelli herself, is likewise a significant part of the visualization of the fusion of art and life that leads to that tragic outcome. When she moves to Paris and begins to perform on stage, Borelli's character transforms from a respectably dressed society woman to a fetishized Orientalist vision of the exotic performer adorned in a revealing, beaded dress with bracelets and arm bands, her long hair pinned

by elaborate discs. As the curtain is pulled back to reveal her figure on stage for the first time, we see her seated in a dramatic profile, her eyes cast down and her jaw sharply protruding, resting ever so lightly against her left hand. This sharp profile was already familiar in the visual repertoire of the stage diva – what critics have referred to as a typically sphinx-like portrayal of the exotic feminine.[20] If Borelli's gestures and poses represent a kind of decadent re-envisioning of the nineteenth-century Pre-Raphaelite ideal, here we see how those poses are also used as a visual code to represent the theatricality of performance itself. In the guise of the exotic, decadent woman, the diva's character represents the fusion of life with art, the immersion of her character (Elsa) into the role portrayed by that character (Diana) [fig. 3].

Fig. 3 (00:33:31): Lyda Borelli on stage as Diana in *Love Everlasting* (1913).

The scene of Elsa's transformation into the singer-performer Diana lasts but a moment on screen, offering just enough visual information to communicate the necessary point that she has been absorbed into this new role. The film then cuts to backstage where we see Diana still in costume while adoring male fans vie for her attention [fig. 4]. This kind of scene is a part of our

standard visual repertoire for the life of showbusiness. However, it is worth pausing to recognize that what such scenes represent is the way in which, for the audience, the performer is already identified in some important way with her performance, the role she has inhabited. When the Prince falls in love with Diana, he is falling in love with the persona she represents on stage, and that in turn (and unbeknownst to the Prince) is itself the performance of another persona, since Diana is a character invented by Elsa in her quest to restart her life. In this double sense, the film focuses on the fusion of art and life as an ideal, as the locus of love, passion, exotically fetishized interest, and the display of desire. It combines this amalgamation with the ambivalent fetishization of the New Woman – the independent female who is at once seductive and transgressive and therefore dangerous, an object of both adoration and male anxiety.

Fig. 4 (00:34:15): Lyda Borelli as Diana receiving fans in *Love Everlasting* (1913).

Borelli's actual life mirrored key facets of this discourse and indeed played out aspects of her first diva film's narrative in a startling way. In the wake of *Love Everlasting* Borelli became a household name. Young women in Italy began to imitate the iconic movements and gestures they had seen on screen in a dynamic reversal where life now imitated art. The verb *borelleggiare* entered

the lexicon to describe this mimicry, echoing the earlier fashion captured in the word *duseggiare*, which meant acting in the fashion of the great stage diva Eleonora Duse.[21] Borelli's presence on screen thus not only extended into her own life but also reshaped elements of how other women lived. At the same time, her subsequent film roles amplified these same elements: in *Rapsodia satanica* [*Satanic Rhapsody*] (begun as early as 1914 but first screened in 1917) and *Malombra* (1917), for instance, Borelli's characters exhibit the same distinctive acting style, the same gestures, the same iconic imprint of the diva. Likewise, in both of these films, the plot traces the familiar lines we have seen before: art fuses with life, but that fusion proves deadly.[22]

If Borelli's presence in the popular imagination made her screen performances (her art) into elements of the actual world (life) by way of the fans who imitated her, we can also say that her life story shares an eerily parallel arc to that of her protagonist in *Love Everlasting*. In 1918, only five years after her film debut, Borelli retired to marry the Count Vittorio Cini – just as her character in *Love Everlasting* had seduced a nobleman with her performance. Like Dorian's Sibyl, who calls her lover 'Prince Charming', *Love Everlasting* recognizes the fascination and danger that 'lowly' acting holds for the upper echelons of society. That Borelli's real life should act out this same script is thus somewhat uncanny. Even if, in contrast to her characters on screen, Borelli died an undramatic death, her life story nevertheless realizes the key gender dynamic at the root of the femme fatale storyline: the dangerous independence of the woman artist is in either case contained again, neutralizing the threat that the New Woman poses to the traditional, masculine social structure [fig. 5].[23] If on screen only a spectacularly dramatic death would suffice to contain her, in life it was enough that she ascended the aristocratic hierarchy and renounced her role as diva – she appeared on screen again only twice, when she briefly came out of retirement to make propaganda films during the Great War, no longer representing the same decadent New Woman as before.

The femme fatale on screen, however, inhabits a different space, and her very purpose is to die in a performance of overt theatricality. This may have been captured best in an article penned

by Colette, that famous French New Woman who had liberated herself through her art and gained thunderous notoriety through her scandalous love life and performances. Writing a series of four reflections on cinema for *Excelsior* in 1918, she answers the question of what must happen to a femme fatale: 'She dies, preferably on three stairs covered by a carpet'.[24]

Fig. 5 (01:16:25): Lyda Borelli and Mario Bonnard in the final scene of *Love Everlasting* (1913).

Act III. Cinematic Aestheticism: The Mediated Actress and Modern Decadence

Colette's words mock the by-then standard visual tropes of the femme fatale. She knew from personal experience how these tropes worked: she had fashioned them as a screenwriter herself, working with the iconic French vamp, Musidora, whom she accompanied to Italy first in 1916–1917 for the premiere of *La Vagabonde* [*The Vagabond*] (1917) and then in 1918 when *La Flamme cachée* [*The Hidden Flame*] was shot in Rome.[25] Furthermore, Colette had fashioned her own public persona in the discursive space of the exotic diva or femme fatale, an image cultivated by her scandalous early performances in the music halls and on stage where she famously bared her breasts (in *La Chair* [*Flesh*]) and kissed her lesbian lover, Missy (the Marchioness de Belbeuf), who

cross-dressed as a male archeologist in *Le Rêve d'Égypte* [*The Egyptian Dream*] (1907), performed at the Moulin Rouge [fig. 6].[26] Her 1910 novel *La Vagabonde* drew autobiographically on these experiences to build her myth and turn it to financial gain. Colette had, in other words, fashioned a literary style and public image using the vocabulary of the diva – the New Woman who was at once a seductive spectacle and a transgressive danger in a moment of rapid social change.

Fig. 6: Colette in costume for *Le Rêve d'Egypte*, 1907. Photograph by Léopold-Émile Reutlinger.

Neither Borelli nor Colette died from fusing art and life. As in the decadent literary tradition, art here holds the place of honour, for in art it is possible to fashion the 'ideal' death that life rarely allows in practice. But this, we have seen, can happen in prose or on the stage as well as on screen. And if the proliferation of film widens the audience and thus amplifies the discourse of the decadent-aesthetic paradigm for acting, this seems to be a difference of degree rather than one

of kind. All of this begs the question as to whether there is anything particular to cinema's imagination of this decadent trope. It is to this question that I now want to turn.

One answer arises from amidst the heyday of the diva film genre in Italy via the pages of Luigi Pirandello's modernist novel about filmmaking, *Si gira*… [*Shoot!*] (first published in 1915). Pirandello's book views the film business from behind the scenes, using the first-person account of a cameraman working in the wild first years of the budding new industry in Rome. Its plot deconstructs the tropes of the diva film genre by mimicking the typical narrative arc of that genre in a humorous mode. At the same time, the novel also offers a literary theorization of film and its place in the transforming landscape of technological modernity, suggesting how the medium might be thought of as dangerous or even deadly in a way that mirrors the discourse on the diva as femme fatale.

The plot of *Si gira*… follows the familiar trajectory of the diva film's own favoured doomed-love-triangle tale. The first-person narrator, Serafino Gubbio, is obsessed with a film diva at the company where he finds work as a cinematograph operator. Through the lens of his obsession, we see a double (or triple, if we count Serafino's unrequited love) set of doomed love triangles emerge. The femme fatale in question is a mysterious Russian woman named Varia Nestoroff who has a tragic love affair with the protagonist's friend, subsequently driven to suicide when he discovers that she has been cheating on him with an actor, Aldo Nuti. Now in Rome, Nestoroff has taken up with another actor, but Aldo Nuti's return on the scene creates a new love triangle with equally deadly results. Nestoroff's character in the novel represents how the diva's on-screen personae and her off-screen 'reality' blend, as her off-screen love life mirrors the deadly on-screen personae she plays. This fusion is taken a step further as the plot reaches its culminating moment: Nuti, who is unable to regain Nestoroff's affection, ultimately becomes homicidal. The fatal event occurs as they film a key scene for her upcoming film, *The Woman and the Tiger*, in which Nuti's character is supposed to shoot a dangerous tiger he hunts in the wild – in reality a caged tiger that will be slaughtered for the sake of the film. But at the critical moment, he turns the gun

and instead shoots Nestoroff, with the result that the unharmed tiger pounces and slaughters Nuti. The novel thus ends with a grisly double-homicide in which art and life overlap in confusing and deadly ways. Nestoroff's personal story has fused with that of her diva femme-fatale character completely, not only through the fatal love-triangles that drive her lovers to despair but now also through a mad passion that has resulted in what Colette identified as the only possible outcome for a femme fatale: her own death. The exotic woman and the exotic animal, the tiger, likewise fuse – beautiful, deadly, and both only apparently wild and free though actually caged and contained.[27]

Pirandello's novel offers an incisive understanding of the film system that it criticizes. The diva is a construction, an image. We are fascinated by what appears to be her wild exotic danger, but we can be fascinated by it only as long as it is false, as long as it is actually contained (not unlike the cage that contains the tiger, though it is invisible on screen thanks to the angle of the camera). At the same time, the novel also offers a clear vision of how the new medium unifies art and life in a deadly conjunction. Film allows the performer and the persona to merge in a way that exceeds what can happen in the theatre, where the performer remains an embodied individual who will disappear backstage when the performance has ended. But the image on screen has no backstage, and the actress projected in the cinema has been reduced to pure image – she is spectacle and nothing more. Throughout Pirandello's novel this aspect of film's mechanical transformation of acting is referenced by way of a repeated metaphor that figures the camera on its tripod as a giant black spider sucking the life out of the actress before it, converting her lived reality into mere celluloid and, eventually, a flickering image of light against a screen.

What Pirandello's novel shows us, then, is both how the film diva brings art and life together in a deadly fusion and also how the medium itself contributes to that fusion in a new way. This view of cinema as a medium that reduces life to a vulgar spectacle in order to appeal to the tastes of the masses recognizes the ways in which film gives rise to a new kind of audience. Similarly, while the theatre-goer may have gone backstage to see the diva in the flesh, the cinema audience

likewise expects the same kind of immersion whereby the actor or actress continues to *be* the iconic figure that they not only represent on screen but also, in fact, are. The burgeoning industry of celebrity culture, what would develop into the full culture industry in later years, is already present *in nuce* here.[28] And at its heart we find precisely the fusion of art and life idolized in the decadent-aesthetic outlook – one given literary form in the nineteenth century and lived out by the likes of Duse, Colette, Borelli, and the other divas of the silver screen.[29]

Epilogue

The endurance of this nineteenth-century outlook in the medium of modernity par excellence speaks to one of the defining traits of decadence as a mode of modernism. As Vincent Sherry has argued, decadence and modernism are two sides of the same coin, both responding to a radical temporal rupture that constitutes the feeling of modernity as a 'now' separated from the 'then' of the receding past.[30] In the diva film's decadent-aesthetic paradigm, we see the same dynamic at work: the new medium is figured as a danger, and at the same time film replicates the aesthetic ideals and tropes that animated previous media. Walter Benjamin identified this aesthetic continuity as the auratic aspect of cinema, fostered and exploited by the burgeoning culture industry of Benjamin's day (the 1930s) where the celebrity figure became a new idol for the public to worship and a new way of containing what Benjamin saw as the revolutionary capacities of cinematic vision to reconfigure modern life.[31] In the context of the early cinema this auratic aspect is thematized in the content of the films, which replicate the aesthetic fascination with the actress as a deadly site of art-life fusion. As the film industry develops, that aspect is increasingly sublimated into a celebrity culture that normalizes but also renders invisible the aesthetic impulse at its core.

This political reading of decadence follows the familiar pattern of labelling it a regressive aesthetic attitude attached, in the ultimate analysis, to fascism.[32] But the story I have told here is indicative of why we should be cautious of such broad strokes: in fact, and in consonance with

arguments by scholars who have sought to rehabilitate the critical reception of decadence, the paradigm of art fusing with life that I have articulated here works in a fundamentally ambivalent way. While it surely engages the auratic aestheticism that Benjamin decries, it also highlights the visibility of a new type of woman whose sexuality and independence challenge the old order; as a space of queer experience, decadence contributes to a shifting social imaginary that responds to the changed conditions of modernity even at the same time that it clings nostalgically to a lost past.

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[1] The literature on Baudelaire and aestheticism is extensive. Françoise Meltzer articulates Baudelaire's aestheticism in relation to his situation at a historical threshold in her *Seeing Double: Baudelaire's Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

[2] Rhonda K. Garelick, *Rising Star: Dandyism, Gender, and Performance in the Fin de Siècle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 28. Cf. Rosemary Lloyd, *Baudelaire's World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 188.

[3] Margaret Miner shows how the theatre pervades Baudelaire's imagination with what she nicely calls a 'paradoxically marginal centrality', in 'Music and Theatre', *The Cambridge Companion to Baudelaire*, ed. by Rosemary Lloyd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 145–63 (p. 144).

[4] Charles Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen*, trans. by Louise Varèse (New York: New Directions, 1970), p. 54. Further references cited parenthetically in the text.

[5] My interpretation of the 'heroic' death thus adds an important element to Francis Heck's reading: 'Baudelaire's Une mort héroique: A New Interpretation', *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature*, 33 (1979), 205–11. Heck sees the actor as a martyr of art's true, pure expression (p. 210), but we must add that it is only through this martyrdom that the ideal of art could be realized in the first place.

[6] As Matei Calinescu observes, the 'aesthetic-historical category' of decadentism is itself the product of a transformation in notions of decadence; see *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), p. 157. Likewise, the scope of the term shifts in different cultural contexts, and in Italy, as Luca Somigli observes, 'the label "*decadentismo*" has come to identify much of what in other traditions is described as "modernism"'; see 'In the Shadow of Byzantium: Modernism in Italian Literature', in *Modernism*, Vol. II, ed. by Astradur Eysteinsson and Vivian Liska (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007), pp. 911–29 (p. 922).

[7] Auguste de Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, 'The Desire to Be a Man', in *French Decadent Tales*, trans. by Stephen Romer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 36–44 (p. 40).

[8] Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. by Joseph Bristow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 45–46. Further references cited parenthetically in the text.

[9] The actress was coded as lowly and essentially a prostitute, although, as Angela Dalle Vacche shows, this label is reductive, masking degrees of complexity; see *Diva: Defiance and Passion in Early Italian Cinema* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), pp. 131–34.

[10] Cf. Michael Subialka, 'The Seduction of Innocence: Erotic Aesthetics from Kierkegaard to Decadentism', in *Innocence Uncovered: Literary and Theological Perspectives*, ed. by Beth Dodd and Carl E. Findley (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 58–75; pp. 65–66.

[11] Oscar Wilde, et al., *The Trial of Oscar Wilde: From the Shorthand Reports* (Paris: C. Carrington, 1906), p. 55.

[12] Vincent Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 25. Cf. Dustin Friedman, *Before Queer Theory: Victorian Aestheticism and the Self* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019); Matthew Burroughs Price, 'A Genealogy of Queer Detachment', *PMLA*, 130 (2015), 648–65.

[13] D'Annunzio's aesthetic fusion of art and life is partially rooted in a particular approach to artistic attention, what Stefano Bragato has analyzed as D'Annunzio's 'sixth sense' in 'Of Attention: D'Annunzio's Sixth Sense', *Forum Italicum*, 51 (2017), 408.

[14] Here I summarize Lucia Re's excellent 'D'Annunzio, Duse, Wilde, Bernhardt: Author and Actress between Decadentism and Modernity', in *Italian Modernism: Italian Culture between Decadentism and Avant-Garde*, ed. by Mario Moroni and Luca Somigli (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), pp. 86–129.

[15] The shift toward a gendered model of the actress as diva is important in this regard. Cf. Julie K. Allen, 'Doing It All: Women's On- and Off-screen Contributions to European Silent Film', in *Silent Women: Pioneers of Cinema*, ed. by Melody Bridges and Cheryl Robson (Twickenham: Supernova Books, 2016), pp. 109–30; Katharine Mitchell,

'Beauty Italian Style: Gendered Imaginings of, and Responses to, Stage Divas in Early Post-Unification Literary Culture', *Italian Studies*, 70 (2015), 330–46; Francesco Pitassio, 'Famous Actors, Famous Actresses: Notes on Acting Style in Italian Silent Films', in *Italian Silent Cinema: A Reader*, ed. by Giorgio Bertellini (New Barnet: John Libbey Publishing, 2013), pp. 255–62.

[16] Peter Bondanella, *A History of Italian Cinema* (New York: Continuum, 2009), pp. 8–14; Angela Dalle Vacche, 'The Diva Film: Context, Actresses, Issues', in *The Italian Cinema Book*, ed. by Peter Bondanella (London: British Film Institute, 2014), p. 25.

[17] Dalle Vacche, *Diva: Defiance and Passion*, pp. 253 and 86–95.

[18] Ibid., p. 180.

[19] Stephen Gundle describes Borelli as a 'template for imitation' in *Mussolini's Dream Factory: Film Stardom in Fascist Italy* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2016), p. 43.

[20] Dalle Vacche, *Diva: Defiance and Passion*, p. 142.

[21] Victoria De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy 1922-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), p. 211. Cf. Cristina Jandelli, *Le dive italiane del cinema muto* (L'Epos, 2006), p. 18; Dalle Vacche, *Diva: Defiance and Passion*, p. 142.

[22] Michael Subialka, 'Diva Decadence: Conflicted Modernity from Death to Regeneration', in *The Poetics of Decadence in Fin de Siècle Italy*, ed. by Stefano Evangelista, Valeria Giannantonio, and Elisabetta Selmi (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2017), pp. 273–98: pp. 277–86.

[23] Cf. Diana Aramburu, *Resisting Invisibility: Detecting the Female Body in Spanish Crime Fiction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019), pp. 29–30 and 81.

[24] 'Elle meurt, de préférence, sur trois marches recouvertes d'un tapis', my translation. Colette's 'La femme fatale', in Alain Virmaux, *Colette et le cinéma* (Paris: Fayard, 2004), p. 345.

[25] Virmaux, *Colette et le cinéma*, pp. 18–20.

[26] Patricia Tilburg argues that Colette's music-hall nudity is indicative of an 'active femininity' developing in the period in *Colette's Republic: Work, Gender, and Popular Culture in France, 1870-1914* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), p. 137. My argument is that this active femininity is itself a part of the ambivalence of the decadent discourse on acting.

[27] Luigi Pirandello, *Shoot! The Notebooks of Serafino Gubbio, Cinematograph Operator*, trans. by C. K. Scott Moncrieff (New York: Dodo Press, 2013). Cf. Michael Syrimis, *The Great Black Spider on Its Knock-Kneed Tripod: Reflections of Cinema in Early Twentieth-Century Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012).

[28] John Welle, 'The Beginnings of Film Stardom and the Print Media of Divismo', in *The Italian Cinema Book*, ed. by Peter Bondanella (London: British Film Institute, 2014), pp. 17–23.

[29] In this regard my reading dovetails with that of David Weir in his consideration of 'Decadence and Cinema', in *Decadence and Literature*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and David Weir (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 300–15.

[30] Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence*, p. 34.

[31] Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility. Second Version', in *Selected Writings. Volume 3, 1935–1938*, ed. and trans. by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 101–33.

[32] In addition to Benjamin, see Norberto Bobbio, *La filosofia del decadentismo* (Turin: Chiantore, 1944) and Giorgio Agamben, *L'uomo senza contenuto* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1970).