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Letter to the Editors  
*Salomé* Doesn't Dance

David Weir

The Cooper Union

In my essay on Alla Nazimova's *Salomé* published in *Volupté* 2.2 (Winter 2019), I comment on the lack of camera movement in the film and make this observation: '*Salomé* was shot in January and February 1922, and it would not be until 1924 that Hollywood directors, most likely after coming under the influence of F. W. Murnau and other German directors, began to experiment with camera movement'. The source for the information about Murnau's influence is Patrick Keating, *The Dynamic Frame: Camera Movement in Classical Hollywood* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), pp. 6, 292 n.3. The claim that Hollywood directors did not employ the moving camera or, more precisely, the mobile frame until 1924 is accurate as far as it goes but additional context is required. Recently, I finally made it all the way through D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) – not an easy film to watch – and saw that Griffith had his cinematographer mount a camera on some kind of motorized vehicle, probably the back of a truck, to film the 'heroic' members of the Ku Klux Klan riding at full gallop to rescue the fainting damsel Elsie Stoneman (Lilian Gish) from the clutches of the villainous mulatto Silas Lynch (George Siegmann), then saving a group of white southerners trapped in a cabin being attacked by a ruthless band of black soldiers. The camera is driven ahead of the charging Klansmen who are kept in frame because the speed of the vehicle matches the speed of the horses. This example could be multiplied many times to show that, indeed, filmmakers employed the mobile frame well before 1924.

But these pre-1924 instances of the practice need to be qualified in several ways. First, the moving camera seems to have been used primarily in location shots, a practice that goes back to the earliest days of filmmaking. As Keating mentions, a camera might be placed on an Eiffel Tower elevator going up and down or on a boat cruising in New York harbour to film the city's skyline. These types of films, common in the first decade of the twentieth century, are usually termed 'the

cinema of attractions', whereby, using the examples cited, a New York audience would get to see a view of Paris from the Eiffel Tower and a Parisian audience would get to see the skyscrapers of New York. This brings us to the second qualification, namely, that the moving camera was not initially a feature of narrative filmmaking. When it was used to help tell a story, in the early days, often the story was thin, just an excuse for slapstick antics and trick shots. All of this changed with Griffith, of course; in *The Birth of a Nation* the mobile frame is used to create a sense of suspense and adventure, but then around 1920, as Keating puts it, 'cinematographers began to think of themselves as artists' (p. 19), taking their inspiration from pictorial photography. This change certainly applies to *Salomé*, as there can be no doubt about Nazimova's high artistic ambitions. The camera is stationary in *Salomé* not only because the film antedates Murnau's influential *Der letzte Mann* [*The Last Man*] (1924; known in English as *The Last Laugh*) but also because it was shot in a studio, not on location; and, more importantly, because the mobile frame, partly as a result of its use in slapstick two-reelers, had temporarily lost prestige and come to be regarded as less artistic than stationary framing.

We are only just beginning to contemplate how the decadent tradition might be manifested through the art of film. Cinematic adaptation of a work in the decadent canon is an obvious area of investigation, but so is the idea that an aesthetic of decadence might be transferred from literature to film. At the same time, there is something a little perverse about rendering the decadent text – often static, sometimes hieratic, always allusive – into filmic form at all because cinema is dynamic by definition. Can you imagine a film version of *À rebours* by, say, Dziga Vertov, in which Des Esseintes' armchair adventures are represented by means of the kinds of rapid cuts and dizzying camera movements we see in *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929)? You cannot. Putting decadence on film is a bit of a challenge, then, but one that Nazimova came close to meeting. Granted, there are a lot of things about her *Salomé* that do not quite harmonize with the decadent tradition, but the immobile frame is not one of them.