SALOMÉ, MODERN DANCE AND THE LIBERATION OF THE FEMALE BODY IN EARLY CINEMA

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The image of biblical heroin Salomé offers a new point of view on women's contribution to the history of cinema by making our attention focus on the dancing body. Salomé seduces Herod with a veil dance, thus transforming her own body into a tool of seduction that is functional to her vengeance towards the Baptist.

The female body underwent deep changes following the birth of the feminist movements in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries. Starting from 1880, and until the beginning of the 20th Century, women's rights became the object of public and political debates in Europe. In the late Eighteen-hundreds feminism proper flourished: feminist national organizations grew in order to coordinate campaigns for women's rights and foster women's vote[1].

These movements involved discourses on the female body: a debate on fashion reform developed, and focused on many aspects such as the shortening of hair and skirts and the elimination of corsets. The attempt to create a reformed fashion for women had begun at the end of the Eighteen-hundreds, a time in which many associations were founded in Germany with the goal of designing garments that were "hygienic", and at once aesthetically pleasing and functional. An article from 1898 clarified the objectives of this reform: the main obstacle to be eliminated was the corset, culpable of threatening women's health by constraining chest, lungs, liver and heart[2].

In these same years modern dance was born, with pioneers such as Loïe Fuller, Ruth Saint Denis and Isadora Duncan – as if to say that when the female body is liberated from the rigid armours that constrict it, it is then free to express itself with new, free movements. For example, with her 1892[3] *Serpentine dance* Loïe Fuller created a veil dance with movements of her costume. This dance became the protagonist of numerous films of early cinema (like *Annabelle's Serpentine Dance*[4]; *Danse serpentine* n°765[5] and *Création de la Serpentine*[6]). We can therefore state that the birth of modern dance crosses paths with cinema.

Silent pictures encountered veil dances in many other circumstances (for example *Judith of Bethulia*[7]; *Rapsodia satanica*[8]; etc.), but here I will focus on two examples in which it is Salomè – emblematic image of a strong-willed woman – who performs a veil dance: *Salomè* by Ugo Falena (France/Italy, 1910) and *Salomè* by Charles Bryant (USA, 1923).

In these two movies the dance scene constitutes an attraction, following the "Primitive Mode of Representation", for which the "Monstration" - a "showing dimension" in André Gaudreault's terms - prevails on the narration[9]: in fact, in both

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[1] FRANÇOISE THÉBAUD, ed.by, *Storia delle donne in Occidente. Il Novecento*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1992, pp. 105-141.

[2] MICHELA DE GIORGIO, *Le italiane dall'Unità a oggi*, Laterza, Bari 1992, pp. 209-212.

[3] Cfr. PATRIZIA VEROLI, *Loïe Fuller*, L'Epos, Palermo 2009, pp. 33 and following.

[4] USA 1894, Director: William K. L. Dickson. Camera operator : William Heise; Cast: Annabelle Withford Moore; Prod.; Thomas Alva Edison Inc.; Col.

[5] France 1896, Camera operator: Louis Lumière; Prod.: Lumipre; Col.

[6] France 1908, Director: Segundo de Chomòn; Prod.: Pathé.

[7] D. W. Griffith, USA, 1913.

[8] Nino Oxilia, Italy, 1917.

[9] According to Tom Gunning (1991), the so-called "cinema of attractions" (1895-1915) was meant to show images more than to narrate. Gaudreault (1996) identified an ulterior distinction in the considered timeframe, that between the "system of monstrative attractions" (*Sistema delle Attrazioni Mostrative*, SAM) from 1895 to 1906, and the "system of narrative integration" (*Sistema dell'Integrazione Narrativa*, SIN) until 1915. It is in this second phase that the

films the dance scene is quite long in comparison with the duration of the entire film. Moreover, the scene is structured with a flat, frontal view that puts the spectator in a theatrical condition: he always perceives the edges of the scene and remains distant from it, thus maintaining his own conscience in relation to the diegesis instead of being drawn into it. In other words, what is important is not the story itself, but the spectacle of movement. In fact, in both cases the dance scene could be cut for the most and projected separately with no consequence for the plot.

This distance of the spectator is functional to communicating the image of an emancipated woman to the female public. In fact, if on one hand Salomé embodies the stereotype of the *femme fatale* (a woman that with her beauty determines, despite herself, the distruction of the male character), on the other she distances herself from this stereotype (and therefore from a scheme that encages women in known, and thus reassuring, parameters) because she causes this bad voluntarily: her dance of seduction is the product of a well-thought-out vengeance plot.

The image of Salomé growed popular again at the end of the XIX century because it embodied perfectly the definition of New Woman that British writer Sarah Grand coined in 1894 to indicate those characters of her narratives and those real women who intended proclaiming their independence and their right to a public role.

The World War was the event that communicated to a vast public this image of a New Woman, enabling women to occupy those places in the fields, factories and tertiary that had been freed by men's involvement in combat[10].

Despite representing the same events, the two films that I examine here differ in approach. Let's see how.

Ugo Falena's Salomè:

Salomè[11] by U. Falena was produced by *Film d'Arte Italiana (FAI)*, a production house born in Rome in 1909, daughter of the French *Pathé-SCAGL*. FAI productions were characterized by static action, static camera shots from which the various characters entered and exited, lack of close-ups, and a theatrical vision of the field of action. All these features characterize also *Salomè,* as well as so-called "cinema of attractions".

The seven-veil dance performed by robust Vittorina Lepanto as Salomè was filmed in a flat manner, from the front, with no depth of field or camera movement, in an improvised outdoor set [12].

The eleven frames that constitute the 285 meter-long film are set in a coherent narrative succession with no gaps or ellipses, following closely the omonimous work by Oscar Wilde[13] (that is coherently cited as a source starting from the opening titles). Everything contributed to highlighting the central role of drama, which was the main

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"Monstration" - a showing dimension - leaves space to the telling one. In both cases, though, the main goal was to show scenes in movement. Nonetheless, the "cinema of attractions" must not be considered something like a ancestor of cinema narrativo (Burch, 1991), but simply a different system of expression.

[10] MICHELA DE GIORGIO, *op. cit.,* Laterza, Bari 1992, p. 23.

[11] *Salomè;* Director: Ugo Falena (Roma, 04/25/1875 –09/20/1931); Year: 1910; Location: Rome; Length: 7'42"; Coloured copy ; Subject: derived from Oscar Wilde's play *Salomè*; Cast: Vittorina Lepanto (Salomè); Laura Orette (Herodias); Ciro Galvani (John the Baptist); Achille Vitti (the Tetrarch); Francesca Bertini (the female slave); Production: Film d'Arte Italiana; Artistic direction: Ugo Falena. Viewed copy remastered by: *Cineteca del Friuli* (Gemona) and *Filmsearch* (Londra) with the cooperation of Dutch *Haghefilm*.

[12] Lucio D'Ambra, in *Il Tirso*, a. VII, n. 12, 27th of March 1910.

[13] Oscar Wilde, *Salomè*, first French Edition, 1893; English edition (1894) with Aubrey Beardsley's perturbing illustrations, with their *art nouveau* feel. This second versionhas many explicit and implicit captions on the mise-en-scène, that had to follow a rigid aesthetic and kinetic structure.

Synopsis: Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee, in order to convince Salomé's stepdaughter to dance for him during a banquet, promises her anything she might wish for. She thus obtains in gift the head of John the Baptist.

scope of the film in a time in which "cinema of narrative integration" was being defined[14].

A theatrical direction of the movie enabled the definition of a "Monstration" (a showing dimension) in a narrative context. Afterall the narrated event – the one described in Wilde's text – revolved around the visual element of Salome's dance and the *mise en abîme* of the spectator, considered like the public of a theatrical performance. In fact, we can see the young woman dance in front of a public of which we are ourselves spectators. In this way we remain extraneous to the diegesis, completely aware of what happens in front of our eyes, ready to catch the emancipation message that is proposed to us.

The seven veil dance in Ugo Falena's *Salomé*:

The dance scene is about a minute, which is a quite long time considering that the whole movie lasts seven minutes and fifty-six seconds[15]. Obviously the director intended dedicating particular care to this scene. During her dance, Vittorina Lepanto performed a series of actions derived from classical ballet which clash slightly with her robust figure. In order to perform a precise analysis, I will proceed "veil after veil".

Veil one: after untying the veil from the belt that holds her red skirt, the dancer performs a *cambré*[16] bringing the veil behind her shoulders with stretched out arms, and creating a small *arabesque*[17] on the ground with her right leg stretched back in *demi-pointe*. She repeats this sequence twice: the first time towards the camera, the second towards the public (the tetrarch and his followers). This change in direction determines a change of spectators: we can imagine that the scene was designed to be performed in the portico we see around the people, with the small crowd sorrounding Salomé, but the placement of the followers behind Lepanto rather than around the dancer makes us feel the presence of the camera, especially when Salomé turns her back to us in order to offer her dance to the other public, the one on the scene. The theatrical frontal filming opens a breach in the story. Finally the dancer hands her veil to Herod.

Veil 2: While performing a *cambré*, Lepanto brings the veil behind her with stretched out arms, and then drops it at the tetrarch's feet, while stretching her right leg forwards with her foot *par terre*.

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[14] Gaudreault, 1996.

[15] According to the copy viewed at the *Cineteca del Friuli* (film library) in Gemona, that probably lacks the last minutes of the film.

[16] *Cambré* (Arched): to bend backwards the bust, from the waist. The head follows the movement of the bust. [Cfr. testo: GRAZIOSO CECCHETTI, *Manuale completo di danza classica, metodo Enrico Cecchetti, vol. 2*, edited by Flavia Pappacena, Gremese editore, Roma 2003, pp. 191-204].

[17] *Arabesque* (Arabesque): It is a very specific position in dance, in which the weight of the bodybears on a single leg, which is stretched out or bent, while the other one is extended and lifted behind. There are arabesques in which the leg is extended behind with the tip of the foot on the ground; in others the leg is extended forwards slightly diagonally, with the tip of the foot on the ground. It is the particular position of the arms that at once stabilizes and defines the arabesque: one arm is stretched forwards, higher than the shoulder, while the other one is stretched behind, lower than the shoulder, but on the same axis of the first one. The pams of the hands face down. In another version, one arm is stretched forwards higher than the shoulder, and the other arm is stretched forwards as well, but under the first one and parallel to it. Even in this case the palms of the hands face downwards. The arabesque is an elongated pose, and the dancer must turn her side to the public rivolga il fianco al pubblico in order to show it in its entirety; consequently, it can be performed only sideways or diagonally. According to the position of the body in relation to the leg that is stretched out (either backwards or forwards) and lifted or with the tip of the foot on the ground, the arabesque is defined as *Ouverte* or *Croisée*. [*Ibidem*].

Veil 3: The third veil is a black one, while all the others are white. After taking it off her belt, Salomé performs two *développé*[18], first with her right leg, then with her left one; her feet are extended, as they should always be according to classical dance technique. While she performs the two *développé*, she brings the veil in front of her face by lifting her stretched-out arms. She repeats this gesture twice, once for each *développé*. She then performs a series of simple shifts of weight by moving her hips alternately to the left and to the right with one foot in *demi-pointe* and the other to the ground. While she shifts her weight, at first she lifts the veil high up in front of herself, then she slowly moves it behind her shoulders, and in doing so her arms move to the left and to the right just like her legs. Finally, she offers the veil to the tetrarch. This movement isn't caged anymore in the rigid schemes of classical ballet; rather, it is connected to the modern choreutics that was becoming established in those years.

Veils 4 and 5: these veils appear to merge because the film "skips" – perhaps because a frame wasn't recovered by the restauration, or because it was lost when the edges of the film were joined. Nonetheless, careful observation shows that what appears to be a single veil actually splits. The "skip" happens at the 6th minute and 15 seconds; this instant is the divide. In fact, at first the veil is completely white, and after this moment it presents an evident grey nuance on one of the two corners. But let's proceed in appropriate order. After having taken the veil off her belt, the dancer moves it behind her shoulders with her arms stretched out, performing a *cambré* and at the same time a *posé*[19] with her right leg forward and her foot extended. When she brings the veil in front of herself again, towards the ground, we can see that it has changed colour. Now her right foot is forward again, but her bust, instead of being bent backwards, is facing forwards, performing a sort of *port de bras*[20] with the veil supported by her arms. At this point, while she raises again the veil and consequently also her bust, she performs a *développé* with her left leg: in this way the tip of her foot touches the veil and lifts it. She then performs a small *cambré* and at the same time a *tendu*[21] with her right foot, and in doing so she wraps herself in the veil moving her arms behind her shoulders. With her arms in this position she then performs another *tendu* with her left leg. At this point, using her right leg as a pivot, she spins around it with her bust and then with the veil held high up with her arms. She then steps to the left while moving her extended arms upwards and to the left, and then she turns to Herod to give him the fifth veil.

Even this rotation, performed using a foot *par terre* as a pivot, is different from classical ballet and closer to the characteristics of modern choreutics.

Veil 6: this veil is once again a shaded white and grey one. After having removed it from her belt, the dancer turns to the tetrarch and shows it to him by holding it with her arms while her right leg stays behind her with *demi-pointe* to the ground. She then whirls on both her feet until she collapses on the ground, exhausted – a reminiscence of bacchic furor.

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[18] *Développé* (developed): during this movement the dancer retract a leg while lifting it, bending it, and then dragging the tip of the foot along the other leg's shinbone; she then stretches completely the leg forwards, alongside or behind. [*Ibidem*].

[19] The French "*posé*" literally means "to put down". In classical dance terminology it indicates the simple movement of putting one's foot down.

[20] *Port de bras* (Moviment of the arms): this is a series of arm exercises in which the arms are moved in a sequence of various positions. [*Ibidem*].

[21] *Tendu* o *battement tandu*: Literally, the French "tendu" means "stretched out". The foot of the working leg slips from the first or fifth position to the second or fourth, without lifting the toes from the pavement, but keeping the tip well stretched out. Both knees must be kept well extended. As soon as the foot reaches the position of stretched point of the foot punta tesa, it returns to first or fifth position, depending on the position from which it began its movement. The *Battement tendu* can be performed *en avant*, *à la seconde* and *en arrière*.

So far the veils are six; it is thus logical to suppose that the seventh veil is actually the red surcoat that the dancer takes off before beginning her dance.

We have seen how Falena's approach to the story-line and to the display of the female body is mainly narrative because tightly connected to Wilde's text and to a theatrical visual approach. Moreover, the analysis of the dance scene highlights a mix of classical ballet motions and new ones that were influenced by the international context in which modern dance was being developed. The constant presence of *cambré* and *arabesque* reminds us of the revolutionary ballets of classical repertoire such as *Shéhérazade*, a dance that renewed classical ballet[22] by adding to its typical basic schemes the light and seductive motions of oriental origin[23].

On the contrary, we will now see how for Bryant it is scenography that conditions the performace and prevails on the storyline.

Charles Bryant's Salomé:

Even Charles Bryant's Salomé derives from Wilde's text. In the performance Alla Nazimova (as *Salomè*) walks almost always on *demi-pointe*, which is an evident reference to classical dance technique just like the pose she adopts when attempting to kiss Giovanni: he rejects her bending her in a *cambré*.

The work confused the critics since its first appearance the 31st of December 1922, especially because of the aforementioned strange scenography and costumes by Natacha Rambova; an example for all is the cape with train worn by Nazimova in the last scenes, decorated like a peacock tail and clearly inspired by Beardsley's drawings.

On this matter, Dolores McElroy[24] hihglights how in Bryant's film décor prevails on drama, form on content; she says that «what makes the film "excessive" is also what makes it "gorgeous", namely, the design. Salomé's triumph of design over narrative is also what makes the film avant-garde» - if it's true that in the early Twenties this essentially means fascination for form in opposition to storyline.

In fact, the set developed by Natacha Rambova is more faithful to Aubrey Beardsley's illustrations (created for the 1894 English edition of Wilde's *Salomé*) and to his *art nouveau* style than to the antique Judea[25] (White, p. 65), and ends up being the true protagonist of the movie, well beyond the narrated story.

Moreover, the mise-en-scène is characterized by an essentially horizontal quality; in other words, the set is often diplayed as a theatrical space, with Herod's court that functions as the stage wings, thus defining entrances, processions and dances[26].

The seven veil dance in Charles Bryant's Salomé:

The dance scene lasts about three and a half minutes[27]; even in this case it is therefore very long, and begins with a static shot in which a few maidservants enter aligned in two parallel and symmetrical rows on the sides of the frame. They proceed walking on *demi-pointe* with measured steps from the foreground towards the back,

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[22] Cfr. *Storia della danza e del balletto*, by Alberto testa, Gremese editore, Roma 1994, pp. 74-76.

[23] More precisely, it is a single-act choreographic drama, su libretto, set/scenery/scenography and costumes by Léon Bakst. The original choreography is by Michail Fokin, with Nikolaj Rimskij-Korsakov's music. The first representation was held at the Opéra in Paris, exceptionally performed by Sergej Diaghilev's Ballets Russes company the 4th of June 1910; the director was Sergej Grigor'ev, and orchestra director Nikolaj Čerepnin.

[24] DOLORES MCELROY, *Nazimova's Salomè: Silent Monument*, Columbia University M.A. Program, Film Studies, January 10, 2010.

[25] PATRICIA WHITE, *Nazimova's Veils*. A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema, eds. Jennifer M. Bean & Diane Negra. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2002.

[26] *Ivi*, p. 14.

[27] It goes from minute 24'18'' to minute 28'05''.

framed from behind and hidden under wide, dark cloacks that they keep open by stretching their arms as if they had big bat wings. After this, four maidservants circle Salomé hiding her from the Tetrarch's and his court's gaze: this is the beginning of the dance proper. When they leave Salomé again, they do so holding four corners of her costume while she hides behind two other veils that part from her short dress. The maidservants sorround again Salomé and when they leave her the second time we see that the four corners of fabric aren't there anymore: there are only the two veils that she is still using to hide her face. After a series of *bourrée*[28] on *demi-pointe* performed whirling, Salomé frees herself of the two veils by literally throwing them to the sides of the hall. She performs the *bourrée* holding the veils with her arms closed in a *corolle* (which means that her arms are in the fifth position of the *Cecchetti* classical dance method).

Finally, the four maidservants that had remained in the back of the scene approach again Salomé; each one of them holds over her one of the four corners of a big veil while she dances beneath it. We must consider that the veils are seven in total: the initial four held by the maidservants, the two behind which Salomé hides, and finally the big veil under which she dances; this number is indicated by Wilde's text and by the film caption that announces the «Seven Veil Dance».

The scene ends with Salomé performing a series of rotations on both her feet in *demi-pointe*[29] under the big veil that she is now holding on her own; in the end she falls on the ground, exhausted, like a bacchant. Certainly Nazimova owes to Fuller's *Serpentina* this dancing semi-hidden by fluctuating, impalbable fabric. The launch of the veil, gesture emphasized by the bust movement, and the dance under the veil itself, are elements that differ from classical ballet, and represent a shift towards modern choreutics.

Conclusion:

It is important to note that Falena's version of the dance follows more closely the classical standard than Bryant's. In fact, the American version lacks the constant presence of *developpé*, *tendu* and *port de bras* that characterize the Italian one. A first and obvious explanation lies in the corset: while by observing Lepanto's rigid movements we can suppose she wore one, on the contrary probably Nazimova didn't, given that her light tunic could not have hidden it. Moreover, the dash bending of Nazimova's bust would have been impossible with a corset: only the higher portion of her back would have been free to move, while the lower part would have been constricted.

The two film versions of Salome's story highlight a path towards a higher degree of bodily freedom, a journey that is completed between 1910 and 1923. The first step towards this freedom was embodied by Vittorina Lepanto, but despite the degree of physical rebellion that she expressed by introducing freer oriental-like movements, she was still strongly limited by corsets and trapped in classical dance schemes.

Instead, the end of this journey towards bodily freedom has the elegance of Alla Nazimova's body: free of a corset, she could move following the stylistic features established by modern dance and wearing a simple tunic that, quite coherently, resembled the Greek-inspired ones used by Isadora Duncan, whose free dance was amply

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[28] *Pas de bourrées* (burrée step): nowadays in classical dance this step almost always maintains in its various forms its characteristic tripartite structure: 1) one leg moves away from the other, which immediately gets close to it, while the feet are lifted on *demi-pointe*; 2) staying on *demi-pointe*, the leg that hadn't moved now distances itself from the other one and touches the ground on *demi-pointe*; 3) finally, the other leg gets close to it and the feet come down to the ground. [Cfr. Grazioso Cecchetti, *op. cit., vol. 2*, pp. 191-204].

[29] Foot in *demi-pointe*: the heel is lifted from the ground. [Cfr. GRAZIOSO CECCHETTI, *op. cit.*, *vol. 1*, p. 37].

renowned in 1923. In fact, the introduction of modern choreutics is more evident in Bryant's film, and its subversive potential is emphasized by the design.

The choice, present in both films, to show a new female body that moves in a new way is coherent with the coeval international drive towards female emancipation from which our whole discussion began.

Both films make reference to Wilde's play, in which the dance scene is reduced to the brief caption: «Salomé dances the dance of the seven veils». We could say that in the original text the main scene is altogether absent, thus demonstrating how a visual feature such as dance cannot be described with words, and leaving as a consequence complete freedom of interpretation to the mise-en-scène. Or perhaps we could argue that in 1839 – year in which Wilde's play is set – Europe wasn't ready yet: it's almost as if the playwright consciously left an empty page for posterity, knowing that the world wasn't ready for his sensual Salomé.

Despite this, a visual fact such as Salomé's dance could find its full expression precisely in a visual art such as film-making (also thanks to the development of feminist movements). Moreover, it is precisely the dance scene that was chosen to convey the most innovative message of the film: the image of a liberated female body. In other words, the progressive proposal of a new woman was entrusted to images rather than to words (filmic captions): like a *Biblia pauperum*, dance translated in images the coeval public debates.

As for Nazimova, the reading I propose is supported by the fact that she didn't only play the part of Salomé, but participated also in the development of the project as screenwriter (with the pseudinym of Peter M. Winters) and producer[30]. Moreover, it is generally accepted that her husband Charles Bryant was only a figurehead, while the real director was Nazimova herself. Her modernism made her the willing creator of an artistic project that conveyed an unequivocal message of emancipation.

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[30] *Ibidem.*