FROM NESTOROFF TO GARBO: PIRANDELLIAN HUMOUR IN ITS CINEMATIC VERNACULAR

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Summary. A discussion of the 1932 Hollywood adaptation of Pirandello's 1930 play, *Come tu mi vuoi*, in the context of Miriam Hansen's analysis of Hollywood cinema as "vernacular modernism" allows us to explore the relationship between Pirandello's *umorismo* and mass culture. The coexistence of multiple identity constructs in the absence of one stable identity is at the core of *umorismo* and is vividly dramatized in the play's presumably amnesiac female protagonist. The film's humoristic dimension is found not so much in its explicit discourse on identity, which the film's happy ending largely tends to resolve, as in its peculiar reconstruction of the Greta Garbo star-image, lying in excess of the film's story and diegesis, which shares with Pirandello's humour the constellation of diverse and competing images as projected onto the figure of the female protagonist.

The 1932 Hollywood adaptation of Luigi Pirandello's *Come tu mi vuoi*, a play that he completed in 1930 for Marta Abba (Bini, 89-101), allows us to explore the relationship between Pirandello's *umorismo*, an esoteric notion, and mass culture.¹ It is the story of a woman whose presumed amnesia prevents her and others from verifying her identity, and whom Pirandello aptly names, L'Ignota (The Unknown One). It dramatizes a phenomenon that is at the core of Pirandello's humour, the coexistence of multiple identity constructs in the absence of one, stable identity. The phenomenon defines numerous Pirandello characters. It is essential in what he provides as the basic model of the humoristic response, that is, the celebrated figure of the *vecchia signora imbellettata*, the old, dolled-up lady, which he devised in 1920 upon revising his 1908 seminal essay, *L'umorismo*. Among his exemplary characters is film actress Varia Nestoroff, the protagonist of his 1915 novel, *Si gira*, republished in 1925 as *Quaderni di Serafino Gubbio operatore*. In what follows, I shall argue that the appearance of Greta Garbo in the leading role of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's *As You Desire Me* displays a structural affinity not so much with

¹ For the film's conditions of production and reception, including Pirandello's financial compensation, see daVinci Nichols/ O'Keefe Bazzoni, 100-104. For a sample of both positive and negative, mostly Italian, reviews of the film see *La musa* 2: 52-59. For Pirandello's positive, if brief, responses to the film see his interviews with Rousseaux (514) and Bosio (515).

L'Ignota, on which the Garbo character is based, as with the portrayal of Nestoroff in Pirandello's earlier work, an affinity that constitutes a distinctive link between Pirandellian humour and mass culture.²

All of the works I have mentioned (essay, novel, play, and film) are marked by a dynamic interplay between two dimensions of discourse: the one is a surface narrative layer, which tends to deceive the reader/viewer into believing that the character's identity is verifiable; the other consists of those elements that function as a counterforce, exposing the verification of identity as an impossibility. To be sure, unlike Pirandello's short-lived deceptive devices, whose playful nature serves only to refuel the identity crisis of the character in question, the film's adherence to classical Hollywood cinema conventions (continuity, closure, self-effacing technique, to name a few), culminating in its happy ending, allows the viewer to formulate a rather solid hypothesis regarding the protagonist's identity. Nonetheless, we gain a perspective other than the one offered by the film's narrative surface if we read it in the context of Miriam Hansen's analysis of classical Hollywood cinema as "vernacular modernism." Hansen draws attention to those aspects of cinematic representation that she sees as reflective of twentieth-century industrial modernity and as excessive in relation to the classical narrative form that regulates them. This dimension of cinema is dominated by sensory experience and includes, among others, a strong element of melodrama, the sensory effects obtained by particular genres (such as slapstick comedy, horror, and pornography), and the effects related to the phenomenon of stardom.

In *As You Desire Me*, it is the film's star dimension, and the extent to which stardom relates to the question of identity, that provides the link between vernacular modernism and Pirandello's humour. The film's attitude towards its adapted play is one of ambivalence. On the one hand, in accordance with the play, the film is marked by an obvious Pirandellian flair, found in its plain remarks on the protagonist's unverified identity, which tends to undermine its otherwise conventional narrative structure. At the same time, this Pirandellism is neutralized by the film's narrative resolution, interweaved with the protagonist's adherence to a firm identity as that woman whom all the (good) characters in the story would like her to

² While I strongly share the argument made by Catherine O'Rawe in the essay, "From Pirandello to MGM: When Classical Hollywood Reads European Literature," I shall expose an alternative aspect of the role of Garbo and stardom in the relationship between Hollywood and Pirandello. For an additional reading of the influence of Garbo's star-image on the film, including references to Nestoroff, see Renato Tomasino, "Pirandello, la Diva, il set" in *La Musa* 1: 487-496.

be. Hence, the film's explicit Pirandellism, in being neutralized by the happy ending, is not what constitutes its humoristic dimension. Rather, a subtler conception of Pirandellian identity is achieved by the film's peculiar reconstruction of the Garbo star-image, one that Hansen's hypothesis helps to locate outside and in contradistinction with the film's diegesis, closure, and narrative moral itinerary, and which we may thus describe as the cinematic vernacular of humour. Furthermore, as I have mentioned, this particular image of Garbo bears a structural resemblance with the representation of Nestoroff in *Si gira*. I must clarify that although Nestoroff's status as a film star is relevant to my argument, my goal is neither to highlight the characteristics that Nestoroff and Garbo may share *as stars* nor to compare/contrast two historically and nationally diverse concepts of cinematic stardom. Rather, in the figure of the actress, whose professional practice and public image are defined by the adoption of fictional personae, Pirandello finds an ideal trope for the aesthetic exploration of his views on identity. What novel and film have in common is a constellation of diverse images as projected onto the figure of the female protagonist, suggesting the two works' analogous responses to contemporary industrial culture.

In a narrative-like insert that appears in the second, theoretical part of *L'umorismo*, Pirandello assumes the role of a narrator who at the sight of the old lady begins to laugh as he experiences the *avvertimento del contrario*, the "perception of the contrary," namely, as he is struck by the disharmony between her gaudy youthful style and his notion of how a proper lady of her age should look. Yet his reaction changes upon reflection, in speculating that the woman's appearance betrays a desperate wish to maintain the love of her much younger husband. The *avvertimento* gives way to the *sentimento del contrario*, the "feeling of the contrary," whose effect upon the narrator is to mix laughter with melancholy. The diachronic layout of the illustration (he laughs, then reflects, then sympathizes) is not constant in humoristic literature, be it Pirandello's own or the other works he mentions in the essay (such as Giusti's *Sant'Ambrogio*, Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, or Manzoni's *I promessi sposi*). It is a technical device that (as in the case of Giusti) authors may employ to convey humour through the mechanics of a narrative.³ Here it allows Pirandello to further elucidate his

³ In Giuseppe Giusti's *Sant'Ambrogio* (1846), the poet finds the Milanese church full of Austrian soldiers. Reminded of his homeland's subservient state, he feels hate. But once he hears the soldiers sing, reflection makes him consider their own pain, living away from home in a place where they are hated. As a result, his hate gives way to sympathy (*Saggi*, 128-129). The example also indicates that the *avvertimento del contrario* may incite feelings other than laughter.

notion of humour, answering Benedetto Croce's criticism of the 1908 version of the essay as lacking a precise definition of *riflessione* and *sentimento del contrario* (Casella, *L'umorismo di Pirandello*, 206-207, 264-270). The narrativized model demonstrates well the distinction between the comic and humour. But it also risks obscuring what is constant in humour, if not in its manifestation as technique, in its status as a disposition: the author's ability to adopt multiple perspectives on reality, thus to recognize the coexistence of multiple identity constructs in a character, in the absence of one stable identity.⁴

In fact, the pass from laughter to sympathy is potentially deceptive, as it suggests a binary false/true model by which the narrator first misunderstands the woman's behaviour until upon reflection, like a psychoanalyst, he gains insight into her deeper motives. In the humorist's reflection, however, each and every image is tentative: "Ma se ora interviene in me la riflessione, e mi suggerisce che quella vecchia signora non prova forse nessun piacere a pararsi così come un pappagallo, ma che forse ne soffre [...], ecco che io non posso più riderne come prima" 'But if, at this point, reflection interferes in me to suggest that perhaps this old lady finds no pleasure in dressing up like an exotic parrot, and that perhaps she is distressed by it [...], then I can no longer laugh at her as I did at first' (*Saggi*, 127; *Humor*, 113; emphasis added). As the terms *suggerisce* and *forse* indicate, the suffering lady is but one reading. The narrator reveals nothing essential of the woman but stages a parade of conventional identity constructs that he projects onto her appearance: the beauty ideal to which she aspires; the current norm of how a woman of her age should look; the stereotype of a sad woman who needs love. This third notion, though it explains the coexistence of the other two, is itself a construct of the narrator's sensibility. The dolled-up face could sustain additional meanings, while the woman's truth remains evasive.

The masquerade is a useful trope for humoristic representation. It also defines Nestoroff from *Si gira*, whose status as a film star entails the cultivation of a public persona beneath which a real person presumably lies. Though young and beautiful, Nestoroff displays crucial analogies with the old lady.⁵ Everything we know of her is through Serafino Gubbio, the

⁴ The scholarship on Pirandello's humour is vast. I am especially indebted to Casella, *L'umorismo di Pirandello*; de Castris; Harrison; O'Rawe, *Authorial Echoes*; and Tilgher.

⁵ Paola Casella includes Nestoroff in her list of seventeen Pirandellian female characters from 1897 to 1928 who embody the theme of the old lady ("*L'umorismo and Female Characters*").

novel's protagonist and first-person narrator. Gubbio is a cameraman at Kosmograph, the Roman production house where Nestoroff is *prima attrice*. Although he boasts his cameraman's ability to remain an objective observer, he does have a personal stake in the events that he recounts, especially those concerning the alluring Nestoroff. Years ago she was engaged to a good friend of his, the artist Giorgio Mirelli, who was driven to suicide by her disloyalty. Yet disloyalty is not her only flaw. Despite her star status, she is considered a bad actress at Kosmograph. The studio crew, typically shocked by her awkward bodily movements, discards much of the film in which she appears. She is still employed only because she enjoys the favour of a high executive. In Gubbio's view, when she sees her own image on screen, she herself is terror-stricken:

Vede lì una che è lei ma che ella non conosce. Vorrebbe non riconoscersi in quella; ma almeno conoscerla.

Forse da anni e anni e anni, a traverso tutte le avventure misteriose della sua vita, *ella va inseguendo questa ossessa* che è in lei e che le sfugge, per trattenerla, per domandarle che cosa voglia, perché soffra, che cosa ella dovrebbe fare per ammansarla, per placarla, per darle pace. (*TR*, 557; emphasis added)

She sees there someone who is herself but whom she does not know. She would like not to recognize herself in this person, but at least to know her.

Possibly for years and years, through all the mysterious adventures of her life, *she has gone in quest of this demon* which exists in her and always escapes her, to arrest it, to ask it what it wants, why it is suffering, what she ought to do to sooth it, to placate it, to give it peace. (*Shoot!*, 40; emphasis added)

It is important to note that Gubbio hardly mentions any visible signs of Nestoroff's shock. Instead, he concentrates on her inner reactions. This casts doubt on the objectivity of his report, as it makes us wonder whether Nestoroff is indeed experiencing a shock or whether we face Gubbio's projection of his own shock. Much like the case of the old lady, what we learn of Nestoroff is the product of a negotiation between diverse identity constructs, all of which are filtered by Gubbio's perception. Like the old lady's masquerade, her acting style represents some ideal to which she aspires—in Pirandellian terms, an illusory construct. For the studio crew, it is merely bad acting, only because it deviates from a norm, namely, the acting conventions of 1910s Italian cinema, whatever those may be, which is another construct.⁶ Gubbio's recognition of the clash between the two styles is

⁶ That the acting style of the 1910s Italian divas set them apart from their foreign

the *avvertimento del contrario*, until reflection intervenes to incite the *sentimento del contrario*: in her flawed acting he sees a suffering woman. But as the term *forse* again suggests, that *ossessa*, along with the clashing identity constructs that produce her, is one of many possible interpretations, hence it is a construct of Gubbio's sensibility.

The humorist, Pirandello tells us, decomposes constructs one by one, aiming to unmask all vanities (*Saggi*, 146, 149). This does not mean that he reveals an essential truth to which he has privileged access. Beneath each mask, another mask is revealed. Reality in its absolute form is not perceptible via consciousness. It is hidden under those fixed illusory forms that we construct through reason in order to arrest life's continuous flux, to comprehend its elusive nature (*Saggi*, 151). Nestoroff's essence lies in that imperceptible reality, in "una realtà vivente oltre la vista umana, fuori delle forme dell'umana ragione [...] a cui l'uomo non può affacciarsi, se non a costo di morire o d'impazzire" 'a reality living beyond the reach of human vision, outside the forms of human reason [...] which man can face only at the cost of either death or insanity' (*Saggi*, 152-153; *Humor*, 138). If it ever acquires a tangible form, it is in the fluid intersections of her multiple and contrasting portrayals.⁷ Throughout the novel, we see her in a constellation of images. For instance, besides the multilayered image of her "bad" acting, she performs a sensual Indian dance for Gubbio's camera. And her ethereal impressions in six canvases painted by Mirelli sharply contrast Gubbio's *ossessa*: "L'assunzione di quel suo corpo a una vita prodigiosa, [...] in un trasparente, trionfale accordo con una natura attorno, [...] era sei volte ripetuta, per miracolo d'arte e d'amore" 'The assumption of that body of hers into a prodigious life, [...] in a transparent, triumphant harmony with a nature round about her, [...] was repeated six times over, by a miracle of art and love' (*TR*, 688; *Shoot!*, 168). For Gubbio, such images attest to Mirelli's sensibility as a tortured soul: "Là, nelle sei tele, l'arte, il sogno luminoso d'un giovinetto che non poteva vivere in un tempo come questo" 'There, on the six canvases, the art, the luminous dream of a young man who was unable to live at a time like this'

and later counterparts speaks to the criteria of good acting as a cultural construct, a set of conventions. Marcia Landy explains how silent *Divismo* differed from later forms of stardom. Marked by an operatic and theatrical mode of presentation, the diva was "the consummate interpreter of affect through gesture." Her performances, defined among others by languid poses and slow gestures, relied heavily on the expressiveness of the body as much as on the face (Landy, 21-22).

⁷ Cf. Gatt-Rutter, 54.

(*TR*, 690; *Shoot!*, 170). But they are not less illusory, Pirandello suggests: “Anch’essa l’arte, come tutte le costruzioni ideali o illusorie, tende a fissar la vita: la fissa in un momento o in varii momenti determinati: la statua in un gesto, il paesaggio in un aspetto temporaneo, immutabile” ‘Art, like all ideal or illusory constructions, also tends to fix life; it fixes it in one moment or in various given moments—the statue in a gesture, the landscape in a temporary immutable perspective’ (*Saggi*, 157; *Humor*, 142). The device of Nestoroff’s multiple images, possibly inspired by cinema’s two-dimensional fabrications that claim an essential link to reality, maximizes the rupture between fixed ideals and the self presumably lying beneath.⁸ If isolated, Gubbio’s description of Nestoroff’s reaction to her own image is as deceptive as Pirandello’s account of the old lady. But the novel as a whole exposes its deceitfulness, just as it prepares us for its 1920 successor, which otherwise, in its vibrant simplicity, may have served as a sort of publicity gloss for Pirandello’s humour.

The tendency to deceive constitutes a primary structural mechanism through which *Come tu mi vuoi* engages its audience. Unlike the above works, the play renders the idea of the elusive identity most explicit. It presents its humour in a somewhat diluted form, in what I think is a didactic endeavour vis-à-vis the audience. A decade after the Great War, beautiful Elma, of Venetian origin and now a dancer at Berlin’s infamous Lari-Fari, lives with writer Carl Salter and his daughter Mop. She meets Antonio Boffi, the Italian inventor of stereoscopic photography. Boffi claims to recognize her as Lucia, wife of Bruno Pieri, a gallant Italian officer who ten years ago returned victorious from the front to find his villa in ruins and his wife missing, both having fallen into the brutal hands of the enemy. It takes little for her to depart for Italy, abandoning both Salter and Mop, who is also in love with Elma. Salter reacts with a failed suicide attempt, by firing the revolver with which he previously threatened Elma. Now living in the restored villa with Pieri, Aunt Lena, and Uncle Salesio, Elma/Lucia waits four months before she agrees to meet Inez, her alleged sister. But she doubts Pieri’s love, when she learns from Lena and Salesio that after a ten-year absence Lucia would be declared dead, and Pieri, no longer part of Lucia’s family, would lose the villa that he rebuilt with enormous sacrifices. Salesio had given it to Lucia as dowry and would now transfer it to Inez. Hence meeting Inez is crucial, as Pieri’s rights to the villa rest on her acceptance of the protagonist as the real Lucia. The protagon-

⁸ For extensive discussions of the novel’s theoretical implications about the medium of cinema see, among others, Gieri, 1-81; and Moses, 1-36, 99-111.

nist's astounding resemblance to an old portrait of Lucia is reassuring, until a vengeful Salter reappears, accompanied by a Viennese psychiatrist and a madwoman, claiming that this is the real Lucia and accusing the protagonist of being an impostor.⁹

Pirandello never confirms the identity of L'Ignota. Several clues suggest that she is Cia (as Pieri used to call his beloved wife), others that she is not. She suffers from amnesia caused by a war-related trauma and is unable to recall her prewar life. She maintains an ambiguous stance throughout the play, dressing like the portrait yet often claiming not to be Cia. Her demeanor, however, conveys apprehension more than mere amnesia. Her lines often express Pirandello's views on identity. When she speaks of herself as Cia, her goal is not to prove her legal identity. "Io sono Cia – nuova" 'I am Cia – the new Cia' (MN, 154; TBEP, 547), she tells Pieri, expressing a wish to change by his side.¹⁰ Having escaped Berlin's decadence, she seems to want to improve her life, not by exploiting Pieri but through a common effort that would satisfy both. She dresses like Cia in what may be a gesture of love: "Sono qua, sono tua: in me non c'è nulla, più nulla di mio: fammi tu, fammi tu, come tu mi vuoi!" 'Here I am, I am yours; there is nothing left in me of my own. Take me and make me, make me *as you desire me!*' (MN, 153; TBEP, 546). She implies not that a woman's identity is defined by male desire but that identity is something we recreate through human relations (Bini, 104-107; Champagne, 51): "Essere? essere è niente! essere è farsi! E io mi sono fatta quella!" 'To be? To be is nothing. To be is to become. And I have become her' (MN, 153; TBEP, 546). Her words convey that finding the legal Cia would not revive the past, as she would not be the Cia she once was. To seek factual truth is in vain, as truth comes in constructs: illusory, circumstantial, here comprising the prospect of love (illusory as it may be) between them.

Despite L'Ignota's instructive lines, Pirandello plays with visual clues that arouse our thirst for facts and provide momentary revelations. Her resemblance to the portrait speaks worlds to her being Cia. But as she herself remarks, the resemblance proves, if anything, that she is not Cia, who after a decade of ill fortune would not look perfect like the portrait but shabby, like the madwoman whom Salter dragged out of the asylum. And although the portrait was painted from a photograph under Pieri's supervision, Lena never thought that it looked like Cia, whose eyes are not grey

⁹ For the Canella/Bruneri affair, which inspired Pirandello's story, see Rey; and Sciascia, 11-96.

¹⁰ The English translation of *Come tu mi vuoi* appearing in TBEP under the title, *As You Desire Me*, is Marta Abba's.

but green, like L'Ignota's (*MN*, 131). The truth, Lena implies, lies in objective features, not in a portrait, which is an artwork, hence subjective. Yet if Lena remembers Cia's eyes as green, for Salesio they were blue, while the painter made them grey because Pieri saw them so. The dispute casts doubt on those purportedly objective features, which culminate in a protruding birthmark that Cia had above the hip. Pirandello exploits the melodramatic potential of this motif to incite our wish for multiple unveilings. Unlike the painting, the birthmark is objective proof, we assume hastily. And whereas the painting is shown on stage, the mark is hidden somewhere on the body. It is temporarily unavailable, like truth. We relish its unveiling, which promises narrative closure and voyeuristic pleasure.¹¹

It is in such hopes enforced by momentary revelations that the play's potential deceit lies. At the end of Act 2, L'Ignota tells Pieri that she felt his hands searching for the mark. That he has not found it does not mean a thing: "Non ho voluto più averlo; e ho fatto di tutto per farlo sparire" 'I did not want it any more; and I did all I could to make it go' (*MN*, 153; *TBEP*, 546). But she also knows that he used to search for it back then. We delight in believing that she is Cia, for how else could she know such an intimate fact? The play continues to tease us till the end, when she reveals that all she knows of the birthmark is from Cia's diary, which she found in a neglected old sandalwood chest. The psychiatrist keenly announces that his patient has the mark, thus crushing our hope that L'Ignota is Cia. But it is not red, he adds, it is black and not exactly on the hip. "Vedi?," replies L'Ignota, with an absurd remark that points to the play's scepticism about facts, "si sarà annerito — si sarà spostato — ma ce l'ha! — Un'altra prova che è lei" 'You see? It must have turned black—it must have changed its place—but she has it! Another proof that it is she!' (*MN*, 186; *TBEP*, 559). The malleability of facts that her statement implies casts doubt on additional clues. For instance, the madwoman constantly mumbles, "Le-na... Le-na." Is she reacting to seeing Lena again? But she has made these sounds for years, explains the doctor (*MN*, 167). Pirandello's stage directions promote the doubt: "balbetta qualche parola, evidentemente senza intendere quel che dice. [...] Queste due sillabe [...] per lei non significano più un nome" '[she] stammers out a few words, obviously without knowing what she is saying. [...] The two syllables [...] no longer signify a particular name' (*MN*, 165; *TBEP*, 551).

Unlike the representation of the old lady in *L'umorismo* or the construction of Nestoroff in *Si gira, Come tu mi vuoi* dispels our hopes for factual knowledge in a direct way. In the absence of a narrator proper, it is

¹¹ Cf. O'Rawe, "From Pirandello to MGM," 75.

L'Ignota's speeches that guide us. But if Gubbio tends to deceive us by claiming to know Nestoroff, L'Ignota's assertions render the absence of identity explicit. Here it is not the "narrator" but the dramatic events that momentarily deceive us, while L'Ignota offers a humorist's explication of those events. In this task, she complements Pirandello, whose "narrator's" input is pervasive, if laconic: the name "L'Ignota" never enters the diegesis, yet in productions of the play it would appear in things such as program notes, reviews, and advertisements, thus influencing from the start the audience's perception of the protagonist. Claudio Vicentini contrasts Pirandello's effort to "poke the audience in the eye" (7) with the alienating techniques of the avant-garde. Many of his plays aim to "chain" the audience to the performance, as Pirandello himself put it (16). Yet the audience cannot indulge in mere enjoyment because "the play offers no point of reference, either emotional or intellectual, from which to view and evaluate the events" (20). Although this play does not enter Vicentini's study, the drama that it builds around its deceptively reassuring clues indeed "chains" the audience till the end. But unlike Vicentini's model, its missing "point of reference" (the disqualification of those very clues) is itself made explicit in what appears to be a didactic gesture.

The play's tendency to both "chain" the audience and dilute its humour may explain in part why in the United States, where it played for the first half of 1931, produced by Lee Shubert, adapted by Dmitri Ostrov, and with Judith Anderson in the leading role (Atkinson), it won a larger audience than other Pirandello plays, with 142 performances in New York alone (*TBEP*, 47). Reviewers nationwide noted its rather accessible Pirandellism. According to Charles Collins of the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, "Sig. Pirandello, the learned Italian who writes metaphysical dramas about the mysteries of the You and the Me, is not too deeply philosophic in his, 'As You Desire Me'" ("The Stage"). "Lucid enough for the average intelligence" and made "for the enjoyment, not the bewilderment" of its audience, the play "arouses suspicions" that Pirandello "has begun writing for the popular theater" ("Two New Plays"). According to Camillo M. Cianfarra of the *New York Times*, the play was "almost unanimously defined as a melodrama, on account of the well-known shootings, birthmarks, &c."¹² The play had fared similarly in Europe. Speaking to the *New York Times*, Pirandello hinted at its wider appeal as compared to his other works: "I have two new plays that have not been produced in America: 'Questa Sera Si Recita a Soggetto' [...] and 'Come Tu Mi Vuoi' [...]. The

¹² For additional comments from American reviewers see O'Rawe, "From Pirandello to MGM," 81n13.

latter has been a big success all over Europe, the other one only in some countries. In Italy they threw vegetables at the actors, and in Germany they threw bouquets of flowers" ("In Which Pirandello"). Nonetheless, the play does not grant the audience total gratification (narrative or didactic), as two crucial parts of the plot remain unexplained. In the last Act, L'Ignota takes off the gown in which she copied Cia's portrait and leaves for Berlin with Salter. Critical readings offer diverse, if complementary, interpretations. Jerome Mazzaro sees L'Ignota's choice as a refutation of the ideal represented by the portrait, pointing to Pirandello's notion that "adherence to fixed images is an indication of play, stagnation, and non-being" (564). In his feminist reading, John Champagne claims that L'Ignota asserts control over her own identity, rejecting the one legitimated by patriarchy; if her Berlin identity is highly sexualized, "excessive sexuality ascribed to women by patriarchy has a deconstructive potential" (59-60). Daniela Bini sees a story of love and betrayal. L'Ignota feels that Pieri has less interest in her than in her dowry. She thus returns to the man who desires her for what she is (108).¹³

Following the play's American production and inspired by its relative mass appeal, MGM turned it into its next Garbo vehicle (O'Rawe, "From Pirandello to MGM," 71-72), adapted by Gene Markey and directed by George Fitzmaurice. To satisfy the aesthetic and moral demands of the Hollywood studio system, the plot underwent numerous modifications. Berlin is replaced by Budapest, Elma becomes Zara, Antonio Boffi, here Tony, is not a photographer but a painter, and the missing Lucia, here wife of Italian Count Bruno Varelli, is renamed Maria.¹⁴ Although the film retains some of the play's ambiguity, as it never verifies the protagonist's identity, it largely deploys classical conventions. The characters are divided into heroes and villains. The former include the protagonist, Varelli (Melvyn Douglas), and Maria's family, while Salter (Erich von Stroheim) is the only villain. To promote the integrity of blood bonds, Inez's interest in

¹³ For a psychoanalytic study of both the play and its 1980-81 Italian production directed by Susan Sontag see Stone, 131-176. For a moral-spiritual reading see relevant chapter in Vittorini.

¹⁴ Regarding the choice of Budapest over Berlin, Paolo Lughi speculates that Berlin was too much defined by high culture to be fitting with the protagonist's decadent character (29). O'Rawe instead suggests that Berlin was abandoned in order to avoid a direct comparison between this film and Von Sternberg's 1930, *Blue Angel*, with Marlene Dietrich ("Pirandello, Garbo e Hollywood," 259). In the name Zara, Lughi sees a reference to Zarah Leander, the other Swedish actress who in Sweden at the time tended to replace Garbo (31).

the estate is significantly underplayed, while Varelli himself is unmoved by materialistic concerns. Lena and Pietro (the play's Salesio) are made into innocent and homely creatures, oblivious to worldly matters, whose main function is to reaffirm Maria's warm welcome. It is the evil Salter who unearths the estate issue and brings it to his ex lover's awareness, to line her up against Varelli. Moreover, Salter's daughter Mop, whose lesbianism added yet another layer to the identity dilemma of the play, is eliminated, as she is evidently not indispensable to the film's formal closure, but also to satisfy the industry's standards of good taste and ensure moral integrity for a mass audience.

Yet the film's most striking intervention upon the play relates to the two key moments discussed above: L'Ignota's removal of Cia's gown and ensuing departure with Salter. Here she wears the celebrated dress until the end, when she and Varelli avow their love and chase Salter away. MGM is clearly disinterested in banishing, in either Pirandellian or feminist terms, the ideal that the painting represents. The screenwriter exploits the play's potential as a love story, but also turns that scenario on its head, aiming for a typical classical ending, that is, the formation of the heterosexual couple among heroes. The film's central theme is that of love as a noble force that prevails over all adversity. An essential two-scene sequence is added in the middle of the film, which serves to gradually build a full-fledged love story and lead plausibly to the happy ending. During an evening trip to the Adriatic coast, the couple meets a crowd of quaint Italian boatmen who play away on their guitars before sailing into the moonlight. The excess romance and picturesque notions of Italianness find a complement in the next scene, later that night. After crossing the spatial boundaries of each other's private quarters, the moonshine flooding the sea in the background, Maria's hair and dressing gown submerged in a halo, and *Torna a Surriento* filling the space in mandolin trills, they exchange their first kiss.¹⁵

That is not to say that all doubt is eliminated. The suspicion that she is an impostor persists in our thoughts. As in the play, her initial decision to avoid Inez is unclear. And when Inez secretly catches a glimpse of the newcomer at the station, she sees "very little resemblance." But love that prevails over all adversity neutralizes doubt and redeems her. Although the finale does not verify her identity, it strongly suggests that she is Maria. The birthmark motif is eliminated and replaced by further character development of the madwoman, who does not simply mumble, "Le-na... Le-na," but also, "Maria" and "Varelli," and instantly recognizes Inez. As with the birthmark, the film plays with our longing for facts, convincing us

¹⁵ Cf. Mario Gromo and Fausto Montesanti in *La musa* 2: 54, 58.

momentarily that this is the legal Maria. But then she is revealed as one of the many women who were visiting the Varelli estate during the attack. This surely does not prove that the protagonist is Maria. And as a resentful Salter asserts, "the doubts that I have planted here today will always stand between you." His threats only urge the couple to reaffirm their love. She confesses: "there isn't enough left of my memory, it may come back... perhaps we'll never know." Her amnesia and apparent sincerity ask us to relieve our suspicion, as Varelli declares his love despite all obstacles: "What does it matter? I'll simply call you... my beloved. [...] I love you for yourself only." And the soft entrance of the harp solidifies their union in a distinctly idyllic moment of formal closure.

The structural unity that the film attains through its deployment of classical Hollywood cinema conventions, with its feasible solution regarding the protagonist's identity (she is an amnesiac, not an impostor; she is honest, loving, and probably the real Maria) is certainly more deceptive than Gubbio's report on Nestoroff or the play's dramatic unfolding that often congeals in momentary resolutions. But as in those works, whose other inherent elements deconstruct the discourse's deceptive layer, the film's classical formula alone fails to contain the heterogeneity of messages that the film sends out. I am not referring to the plot's obvious Pirandellian flair, in flaunting a degree of uncertainty, which it then undermines with its treatise on amnesia and love. I am referring to the film's inherent dynamic relationship between classical unity and those aspects that the classical form fails to contain, specifically, the reconstruction of the Garbo image that reflects a range of extradiegetic phenomena, as well as specific unresolved plot enigmas whose brief and transient discursive configurations may not survive in the spectator's consciousness vis-à-vis the film's uplifting ending.

In discussing classical cinema as vernacular modernism, focusing on mid-century modernity (from the 1920s to the 1950s), Hansen challenges the conventional opposition between modernism and Hollywood cinema as "classical." She views modernism as more diverse than a set of canonized movements in art and literature that focus on the high end of the high/low dichotomy. The term, Hansen argues, encompasses a larger range of cultural practices that "register, respond to, and reflect upon processes of modernization and the experience of modernity." The spread of urban industrial technology, mass consumption, and changes in social relations, brought new modes of organizing vision and sensory perception. As one of the practices that mediated the experience of modernity at a mass scale, next to fashion, design, advertising, architecture, photography, and radio,

Hollywood cinema falls within the study of modernist aesthetics ("Mass Production," 59-60). As regards the category of classical cinema, Hansen traces its formative stages—from its celebratory conception by French writers in mid-century, through its post-1968 Marxist-Psychoanalytic critique, to its more recent, descriptive, formal analysis by David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson. For these authors, the classical narrative follows a well-integrated set of principles towards compositional unity and harmony, such as specific types of motivation, narrative causality, coherence of time and space, techniques of formal symmetry, closure, self-effacing craftsmanship, and others (62-63). But Hansen is wary of the term "classical," which evokes seventeenth- and eighteenth-century neo-classical standards in aesthetics, thus emphasizing tradition and continuity rather than the medium's newness as cultural disruption and change (63-64). She does not reject the term but aims to complicate its usage. She draws attention to those aspects of Hollywood cinema that the conventional notion of "classical" represses and that attest to the cinema's contemporaneity with twentieth-century culture and modernity's remanufacturing of the senses. She mentions the strong presence of theatrical melodrama in cinema and highlights specific genres, such as comedy, horror, and pornography, whose goal is to elicit particular sensory responses. She also argues that the classical category diminishes the role of stars and stardom, which must not be reduced to the narrative function of character, since the star's effects are largely determined by the extradiegetic spheres of distribution, exhibition, and reception (64).

Garbo's presence in *As You Desire Me* indeed has a complex relationship with the film's classical form. On the one hand, the film exploits those aspects of her extradiegetic star-image that are cohesive with the film's diegesis, specifically, those parts of the story that pertain to the protagonist's ambiguity.¹⁶ Thus it draws on Garbo's routine characterizations as silent, secretive, resistant to the intrusiveness of the press, a foreigner with an exotic accent, androgynous and possibly bisexual, and a femme fatale.¹⁷ On the other hand, as these attributes contribute to the theme of the evasive identity, the choice of Garbo may indicate a studio attempt at Pirandellian humour, thus a flexible stance towards classical conventions.¹⁸

¹⁶ On the media construction of the "star-image" as something that exists outside the diegetic constraints of any particular narrative see Dyer.

¹⁷ On Garbo's life, career, and star-image see, among others, Barthes; Corliss; de Acosta; Dyer; Erkkilä; Fischer; Gronowicz; Lunde; and Paris.

¹⁸ According to Francesco Cällari, for Garbo the "impenetrable woman and actress," the Pirandellian problem of identity was perhaps a question of playing

In a satirical column on Hollywood's recent "highbrow gesture," and during the play's success on the New York stage, Mollie Merrick of the *Los Angeles Times* reports on rumours about an upcoming cinematic adaptation. She claims that most east coast critics admitted to not having understood the play, some even suggesting that, "Luigi Pirandello really didn't understand it either." Garbo herself noted that, "at that time [Pirandello] was popular in Hollywood among so-called intellectuals" (Gronowicz, 302).¹⁹

However, more so than a radical challenge to classicism, the choice of Garbo seemed to realize Hollywood's wish to *assimilate* European high culture. The film is not exactly highbrow a project. The Pirandellian move was also a marketing strategy. It would have extended the scope of literary adaptations in Hollywood, which for two decades had been indispensable to the industry's pursuit of cultural legitimization. Pirandello's signature would have provided MGM with an imprint of not merely high culture but also art as abstract, esoteric, modern. Yet to a large extent the experiment entailed the transcription of a high literary notion into the familiar motifs of popular culture. Thus the film's treatise on love and amnesia greatly minimizes its Pirandellism. If Garbo's mysterious qualities reinforce a Pirandellian take on identity, the happy ending redeems the protagonist and suggests that she is anything but a vamp, while amnesia (unlike L'Ignota's tutorials on humour) implies the existence of an objective truth whose unveiling relies on our ability to unveil it; and considering the prospect of Maria's recovery, that may only be a matter of time. Where then are we to search for the film's modernism, and in what ways, if any, does that relate to its Pirandellian origin?

Cinema's relation to modernity, according to Hansen, was one of *sensory reflexivity*. It was "the single most inclusive cultural horizon in which the traumatic effects of modernity were reflected, rejected or disavowed, transmuted or negotiated." Drawing on Siegfried Kracauer's writings of the 1920s, she describes cinema as a new public sphere where a democratization of culture seemed feasible. It offered the possibility of self-representation to an emerging heterogeneous mass public, excluded from the tradi-

herself (325). I also direct my reader to O'Rawe's insightful analysis of the construction and mythologization of the Garbo face through the cinematic apparatus, as that element which ascribes to *As You Desire Me* its deeper Pirandellian dimension ("From Pirandello to MGM," 76-79).

¹⁹ For an extensive discussion of Hollywood's tendency to absorb European intellect specifically in the context of *As You Desire Me* see O'Rawe, "From Pirandello to MGM," 71-74.

tional institutions of art, culture, and education. Its specificity lay in engaging the public at the level of the senses, speaking directly to the impact of modern technology on human experience. Kracauer saw the prevalence of sensory reflexivity in the American slapstick comedy, not only in its "well-choreographed orgies of demolition and clashes between people and things" but also in its subversive dimension, its tendency to dismantle the very order imposed by the Fordist mass culture that created it ("Mass Production," 69-70). Hence cinema's vernacular modernism lies in those aspects of cinematic discourse that are dominated by sensory experience (such as slapstick, horror, the sensuality of stars) and are thus excessive in relation to the classical form that administers them, while affirming their reflective relation to the mindset of modernity's mass public.

The modernism of *As You Desire Me* lies precisely in those sensory aspects that exceed and contest its classical norms. In general terms, although some aspects of the Garbo star-image correspond to the character she plays, that image does not cease to recreate itself in relation to the multiple extradiegetic factors (social, economic, educational, national, regional, sexual, racial, and more) that shape the audiences' diverse experiences—what Hansen would call, cinema's "translatability" (67-69). But what is specific to the film is that beyond recreating the Garbo we already know from the usual nexus of media texts (films, reviews, advertisements, and so on), it *reconstructs* her in a way that negates its own narrative presuppositions. It develops her character in five distinct phases, thematically unified through the transformation that she undergoes as she finds true love. In Budapest, a constant drinker and smoker, Zara is sensual, lively, witty, aggressive, and cynical. But on the train to Italy she is sober, pensive, and free of bitterness. Once in Italy, she is Zara's opposite. She fails to recognize Varelli, Lena, Pietro, or the house, and acts nervous, disoriented, and distant. Upon seeing the ethereal painting and realizing that she is expected to "be that woman," panic overtakes her, until Varelli declares his faith and promises to help her become "as he desires her," responding to her own wish to change by his side. During the trip on the Adriatic, she regains her livelihood and expresses her desire, yet without Zara's negative feelings. Finally, glowing in Maria's gown, she has fully recovered her spirits, confidence, and strength of character. She does not fear the others' doubts and is prepared to face Varelli's possible rejection. She displays good judgment as she elicits information from the madwoman, whom she treats with both firmness and affection.

Her character's behavioural shifts are much more pronounced than L'Ignota's, perhaps to accentuate the melodrama and maximize the film's

mass appeal. But despite the plausibility of these shifts in mood, the unifying theme of gradual transformation from a decadent cabaret dancer to a Madonna-like bourgeois homemaker is in tension with the tendency of each segment to assert its formal autonomy. If psychological plausibility sustains debate, the *mise-en-scène* radically disturbs the film's thematic unity. For one thing, the sets take us to diverse spaces somewhat unexpectedly: from the nightclub's Caligaresque backstage area, a mixture of curves and plain polygons forming the walls of a narrow staircase leading to her dressing room, to Salter's dimly lit ornate parlour, heavy on wood and crowded bookshelves, to the luminous decor of Varelli's Italian villa, to the Adriatic's moonlight and serene waves. Yet the element that prevails in this tension between the story and its parts is Garbo's wardrobe, designed by Adrian. What remains imprinted in our memory after viewing the film is less the story of a woman who found salvation than a collection of haute couture embodied in a constellation of multiple and diverse Garbo images.

The film's most idiosyncratic costume appears in the opening, which unfolds backstage after Zara's performance. Garbo's atypically short blond hair contrasts with an all-black outfit: tight pants with a loose sweater and a tall stiff wide tube-shaped collar. Escorted by her all-male entourage to Salter's, she wears a stylish narrow black gown, her shoulders and back sensually exposed. Her frequent close-ups and the sharp contrast between her whitewashed head, often accentuated by a halo, and the black dress isolate her from the men, conveying messages of duplicity, mask, and a suppressed divine purity waiting to be released.²⁰ On the train to Italy, we see Garbo in her typical long brown hair, mild-coloured day dress, mantle, and the famed pillbox hat that Adrian created specifically for this film (Gutner, 81). At the Adriatic, she wears a black vest and small bowtie over a white long-sleeved shirt, but a black French beret steals the show. That evening she lets her hair loose, while a wide transparent nightgown draws her silhouette. She ends with the celebrated white dress from Maria's painting, traditional and frilly, and with her brown hair pulled up, in a style vaguely reminiscent of the opening's blonde.

In this constellation of images defined by their autonomous sensory qualities, the decadent blonde is not inferior to any other, despite the questionable morality that she represents in the story. Among the reviews who celebrated the protagonist's salvation, some admired the decadent Zara for her own sake. Mordaunt Hall of the *New York Times* describes the various Garbo moments as autonomous alternatives and notes the blonde's ten-

²⁰ Cf. Tomasino in *La Musa* 1: 489.

dency to supersede the narrative: "Here one perceives Miss Garbo sad, Miss Garbo pensive, a victim of amnesia; Miss Garbo affected by wine and Miss Garbo as a cabaret entertainer, her hair covered by a flaxen wig. She rises far above the story as it comes to the screen." Phillip Scheuer of the *Los Angeles Times* also notes the residue of competing images in our memory: "The actress gives us three visions to carry away with us: First, of a strange, new Hamlet-like creature in a black velvet suit, with platinum-blond wig and dark cigarro to match. Second, of the more familiar woman, the Garbo we have known of late. Third, a young girl—so fresh, so fair." And despite his overall discontent, Montesanti values the opening's sensory qualities: "Il 'domino' nero ideato da Adrian per lei era uno dei costumi più indovinati che la Garbo avesse finora indossato sullo schermo" 'the black "domino" devised for her by Adrian was one of the best-chosen costumes that Garbo had worn till then on screen' (*La musa* 2: 57; my translation).

The conception of Garbo in *As You Desire Me* is exemplary of cinema's reflexivity. In analyzing the female form in films of the 1920s and 1930s as an extension of the Art Deco aesthetic, Lucy Fischer sees Garbo as the epitome of the "New" woman: an independent, sophisticated, sexually and morally unconventional, non-motherly type, outgrowth of industrial modernity, for whom Hollywood's "rigid dichotomy of mother versus whore" had not yet drawn a place (95). She adds, however, that the stock market crash of 1929 and ensuing Depression brought a conservative turn to American society (119). Undeniably, the multiple and contrasting images of Garbo offered by Fitzmaurice, more so than a clear message in favour of bourgeois marriage, reflect the alternative roles, fantasies, and anxieties that were part of the multifaceted and rapidly changing climate of modernity. And insofar as fashion and sensuality govern the representation, it is a sensory type of reflexivity, one that transcends the film's diegesis. This becomes evident if we consider the role of Adrian in such a project. When he worked as chief costume designer for MGM, America's influence on the fashion world began to supplant that of France (Fischer, 111). The costumes he designed for Garbo filled women's magazines (112). He may have believed that costumes "were not meant to be sensational for their own sake [but] tied to the *theme of the film* and to the *actress's role within it*" (112). It is fair to assume that costumes are not chosen at random. Yet they do not cease to have a prominent existence vis-à-vis the narrative, flaunting their status as free aesthetic objects and their place in the fashion world. Moreover, films do not only copy fashion for verisimilitude but the story itself may be a pretext for inventing it. As one writer notes, after the international success of Garbo's cloche hat, women of fashion

asked Adrian to design “other romantic and frivolous hats,” to which he responded, among others, with the pillbox that Garbo wears in *As You Desire Me* (quoted in Fischer, 115). After a brief objection by Fitzmaurice, the hat achieved its purpose of making Garbo stand out in a crowded train station, before setting a new fashion and finally becoming a Jacqueline Onassis trademark (Gutner, 81-83). As Adrian stated, he wanted to “create a style for Garbo which continues to be individual in spite of styles” (81).

To be sure, the multiple images, whose *raison d'être* in the fashion world transcends their diegetic placement, poignantly erase that very thing that, in their narrative function as stages of the road to salvation, they purportedly sustain – namely, the pilgrim's core self. There is an affinity with slapstick comedy as discussed by Kracauer, and which Hansen finds exemplary of cinema's reflexivity: “Kracauer locates the appeal of the Chaplin figure in an already missing ‘self’ [...]. Whether from lack of identity or inability to distinguish between self and multiplied self-images [...], Chaplin instantiates a ‘schizophrenic’ vision in which the habitual relations among people and things are shattered and different configurations appear possible” (Hansen, “America,” 373). It is through such annihilation and multiple reconfigurations of the self, achieved by the extreme mechanized depictions of the living body, that slapstick reflects (negatively, as antidote) the very discipline that created it: “Like no other genre, slapstick comedy brought into play the imbrication of the mechanical and the living, subverting the economically imposed regime in well-improvised orgies of destruction, confusion, and parody” (373). Chaplin's mechanized body, evoking the technological processes of mass production, is like Garbo's, like the body as replicated in a chain of stunning inert modern objects, which nonetheless, in its very inertness, subverts a particular type of disciplinary regime.²¹

Pirandello's multiple renderings of Nestoroff in *Si gira* finds in the Garbo of *As You Desire Me* its vernacular counterpart. The affinity between Chaplin and Garbo encompasses the character of Nestoroff, whose identity, in the absence of a “self,” finds its single tangible existence in the humoristic negotiations between her competing images, including paintings, films, and Gubbio's impressions.²² Hansen says: “The mechanical

²¹ Cf. Roland Barthes' comparison of Garbo's face to Chaplin's (82-83).

²² It is indicative that magazine covers at the time of the film's release described the “divine Garbo” as “Una, nessuna e centomila” (Giudice, 517), thus alluding to the multifaceted character of Vitangelo Moscarda, the protagonist of Pirandello's *Uno, nessuno e centomila*, whose structural parallels to Nestoroff are worth noting (Gatt-Rutter, 54).

mediation may place mass culture in the realm of 'the inauthentic' (*das Uneigentliche*), but, since the road to 'the authentic' was blocked anyway, Kracauer increasingly asserted the reality and legitimacy of *Ersatz*" (374). There may be significant differences in the extent to which each writer (Kracauer and Pirandello) ties his interest in "the inauthentic" with a critique of capitalism, regrets the blockage of "the authentic," or ascribes the split to a historically specific or universal condition. But Pirandello himself, as Adriano Tilgher's seminal reading of *L'umorismo* affirms, had found in daily life's illusory constructs, where representation of all kinds also has its dwelling, our single *tangible* reality: "Godere della Vita nella sua nudità e libertà infinita, al di fuori di tutte le forme e costruzioni in cui la società, la storia e gli eventi di ciascuna particolare esistenza ne hanno incanalato il corso, non si può" "To enjoy Life in its infinite nudity and freedom, outside all the forms and constructs in which society, history, and the events of every particular existence have channeled its course, is not possible" (Tilgher, 192; my translation).

Does the Garbo-Nestoroff link indicate the film's wish to bypass the play's humour (L'Ignota's *explicit* tutorials, the play's tendency to dilute its humour in a didactic gesture, as I suggested above) and achieve a subtler sort of Pirandellism? I shall not describe the film as more "Pirandellian" than Pirandello. But I also hesitate to foreclose the possibility that its reconstruction of Garbo represents an *amalgam* of those practices that grant Hollywood its modernism and a properly Pirandellian (or "high" modernist) urge. The film is, after all, a Pirandello adaptation. Its most pivotal turning point, much like the play's, alludes to the *void* that is the self: "Would you help me to create her again? [...] Then perhaps I can be as you desire me." And if this is submerged by the discourse of love, the filmmaker inserted several plot details, not found in the play, whose subtlety may fail to offset the film's classical structure, yet once registered, even if unconsciously on our part, they tend to relieve (in Pirandellian fashion) any faith in the "self," and to unleash the Garbo images from their professed pilgrimage. Such details relate to Maria's portrait as the locus of truth, the ultimate point of reference for the protagonist's identity and well-being. When the Garbo character first dresses like the portrait, Boffi (who in the film is a painter and the creator of this very portrait) not only admires the two "artworks" laid side by side but also draws another small identical copy of it. Thus the large portrait, whose connection to the real Maria has dominated their lives all along, guaranteeing the existence and inspiring the recovery of an ideal past, is revealed as a mere construct. If she gives it life, Boffi exposes the procedure of its creation, suggesting that

it also constitutes a copy of something, thus diminishing its authoritative truth, its uniqueness, its aura.

The lack of foundation in Truth that this replicating process suggests is reaffirmed shortly thereafter in the film by the dispute about eye colour, which here takes a different turn than in the play. Boffi, Pietro, and Lena disagree not on Maria's eyes but on their portrayal. Boffi claims to have painted them blue (matching both the lost wife's and Garbo's), yet Lena and Pietro see other colours. The effect goes beyond merely evoking the painting's texture, status as artifice, failing claim to truth. Instead of looking at the painting to verify their assertions, they stay fixed on each other's faces. Pietro exclaims to Boffi: "Mr. Tony, leave your jokes. Imagine, painting brown eyes and calling them blue!" Lena replies to Pietro reproachfully: "They are grey eyes!" The style of delivery ascribes a sense of unreality to the scene, turning the characters into mannequins who mechanically act their roles in words that flaunt their emptiness. The director does not cut to the painting at this time, thus preventing us from formulating hypotheses for the dispute's resolution. Even if he did cut to it, the black and white photography, at best suggesting the difference between dark and clear eyes, would certainly leave the dispute unresolved for us, while drawing attention to the unreliability of the film medium itself, thus further proliferating the inaccessibility of truth. Objective features are again suspect, while the uncanny aspect of the delivery disorients us, allowing us to momentarily step outside the film's diegetic borders.

The portrait's artifice subverts the film's ending precisely when the classical code is paramount, that is, during the couple's avowal of everlasting love. In a gesture that some attributed to Fitzmaurice's inferior abilities as a director, Douglas embraces Garbo so as to completely obscure her (Paris, 273). I am not convinced that this indicates mere clumsiness, though it certainly transgresses a convention of classical cinema. What is crucial is that when he obscures her, the painting dominates the background. After ousting Salter, Varelli walks across the room to the piano where she awaits. On the way, he passes by the painting, but once he reaches her, a cut to a different angle places the painting behind them. Although the painting is in soft-focus, the director does not want us to ignore it. A few seconds before he obscures her, Varelli turns and glances at the portrait, while making a reference to, "our memory." A dolly shot to a close-up of the couple allows the painting to cover most of the backdrop. Hence when he delivers his last line, "I love you for *yourself* only," a dynamic tension between image and words is created, as we gauge this "self" against the image hovering behind it. Does the fact that he "obscures" her (or, from

our vantage point, replaces her with the painting) belie his words, suggesting that he does not truly see her for what she is, that he will always compare her to that ideal? Or, regardless of what he says or feels, does the frame composition imply that there is no such thing as “self,” that the “self” is actualized in a series of constructs, in a copy of a copy, a mask laid over another mask, a *mise en abyme*? One thing that this presentation certainly does not do is let us forget the existence of that other image and indulge in an imaginary plenitude with respect to their newly-found happiness. Inexpert or not, Fitzmaurice’s camera sets forth a dynamic interplay between classical cinematic form and its counter-forces. The film’s disorienting moments disturb its classical scenario and in a Pirandellian fashion heighten its power to unleash its image constellations from the notion of a stable, if morally rising, self. Both cinema’s “reflexivity” and humour’s “reflection,” albeit at varying degrees, appear to be gazing at the coexistence of competing alternatives in place of permanent notions of Truth. *As You Desire Me* invites us to speculate possible junctions between “vernacular modernism” and “modernism” in its traditional implications.

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