MONA LISA'S GAZE:
D'ANNUNZIO, CINEMA, AND THE 'Aura'

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The critical studies that address the relationship between Gabriele D'Annunzio and the medium of cinema have emphasized the writer's literary influence on the popular Italian cinema of the years 1910-1919. That is not surprising, considering that D'Annunzio's direct involvement with the medium was extremely sparse. It is said that his active interest in cinema began in 1908, when he visited a film studio and experimented with the tricks made possible by the medium's specific technology (Rondolino, 215-216). His relationship with cinema, however, is customarily associated with the intertitles that he wrote for Giovanni Pastrone's monumental epic, Cabiria (1914), of which the extravagant mise-en-scène and pioneering use of the dolly, next to D'Annunzio's prestigious signature, are some of the things that secured the film's inclusion in the international silent cinema canon.1 After Cabiria, D'Annunzio wrote intertitles for a few other, much less celebrated, films (Raffaelli, 46-47). He also completed three soggetti, only one of which was actualized as a film.2 The film adaptations of D'Annunzio's novels and plays were considerably higher in number than the works that D'Annunzio wrote specifically for the screen. At least nineteen films were produced in Italy between 1911 and 1920 based on his works.3

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1The bibliography on Cabiria's importance for film history is vast. For some of the most recent work, including the stylistic analyses of footage that had been excluded from the final product, see Cabiria e il suo tempo, 149-232.

2Henceforth, I shall translate soggetto as “scenario.” A soggetto is a story outline with occasional allusions to dialogue or style. It does not provide the detailed specification of dialogue and technique that one finds, for instance, in the standard screenplay of a Hollywood studio.

3Only one of these adaptations is extant: La Nave (The Ship, 1920), from his 1905 play, directed by his son, Gabriellino D'Annunzio. For an extensive list of adaptations from D'Annunzio's literature during the silent era, as well as a list of his completed and incomplete projects written specifically for cinema, see Mario Verdone (20-21). Verdone clarifies that the list is to be considered incomplete and further research would likely enrich our knowledge of D'Annunzio's activity in the field of cinema (2). Furthermore, the recent work by Ivanos Ciani doc-
Undeniably, the factor that accounts for Italian cinema’s “Dannunzianism” is not the quantity of work that D’Annunzio produced specifically for the film industry, but a cultural climate permeated by his aesthetic outlook. “Dannunzianism was in the air,” says Luigi Bianconi, one of the first scholars to study the relation between D’Annunzio and cinema. It was “breathed by actors and directors, scriptwriters and cameramen […] and by the public itself” (“Arte muta”, 16). As a critical category, Dannunzianism denotes a mode of representation defined by stylistic excess, especially in the areas of acting and mise-en-scène, and by themes deriving primarily from antiquity and decadentist literature. As a critical tool, it is typically applied to the description of two of the most popular Italian film genres of the 1910s: the film storico (of which Cabiria is the quintessential example) and the cinema in frak. The storico, aspiring to revitalize the glory of ancient Rome in the face of Italy’s political campaign in North Africa, shared the writer’s exaltation of antiquity and the national past. The cinema in frak, in its glamorous depiction of an aristocratic class living in an antiquated era barely touched by technology’s radical explosion, focusing on idle characters and fatal romantic passions taking place in lavish parlours, nearby forests, and upper-class artists’ ateliers, in a sense transported D’Annunzio’s (or a D’Annunzio-esque) high prose into the space of mass consumption.

However, while Dannunzianism affirms literature’s ability to influence film style, it does not address other crucial aspects of that style itself, especially with respect to the technical particularities of the medium or its historical development in relation to factors other than Italian literature, such as other national cinemas. In addition, while it confirms the industry’s aspirations for cultural prestige through the exploitation of nineteenth-century literature, it overlooks what I think is indispensable for any study of D’Annunzio’s relation to cinema: that is, the impact that cinema itself, documents D’Annunzio’s negotiations with the film industry over a period of two and a half decades, shedding light on numerous potential contracts that failed to come to fruition.

4 See also Bianconi’s seminal essay “D’Annunzio e il cinema.”
5 Giovanna Finocchiaro Chimirri, for instance, discusses Cabiria in relation to Italy’s 1911-1912 war in Libya (33). See also Gian Piero Brunetta (“La conquista,” 21-23) on the relationship between Cabiria and D’Annunzio’s nationalism.
6 Among the surviving films that are exemplary of the frak genre are Ma l’amor mio non muore (Mario Caserini, 1913) and Malombra (Carmine Gallone, 1917). For more on Dannunzianism in Italian cinema see: Verdone (18-19); Brunetta (Storia, 97-103).
as a dominant cultural phenomenon, may have had on the writer's own notion of art. In this essay, I shall address the question of D'Annunzio's relation to cinema by following a route other than the one laid out by Dannunzianism. _Luomo che rubò la “Gioconda”_ (The Man Who Stole the “Gioconda,” 1920), a scenario written by D'Annunzio but never actualized as a film, is nevertheless exemplary of the author's will to exercise the aesthetic techniques made possible by the medium of cinema. With very few exceptions, including a recent work by Irene Gambacorti, the scenario has received little scholarly attention, in spite of (or perhaps because of) its atypical characteristics _vis à vis_ the D'Annunzio canon. In her enlightening study, Gambacorti demonstrates that D'Annunzio had a strong interest in cinema's specific aesthetic possibilities and, in line with the aspirations of the avant-garde, used cinema as a means to challenge the traditional barrier between high art and mass culture (293-315).

While I strongly share Gambacorti's views, I shall bring to the fore a new, essential dimension present within D'Annunzio's text. In writing the scenario, precisely by being inspired by cinema's technological specificity and ability to destabilize the high-low dichotomy, D'Annunzio envisioned the creation not only of a film that would entertain the movie-going public, but also of a _film-essay_ that would address intellectual viewers (or readers) and, by means of an allegory, articulate a rather specific "thesis" concerning a fundamental question about the very definition of art in modernity. Masterful artworks, the scenario teaches, are distinguished by an element of "spirituality" that has its roots in the reverential function of art in religious ritual. The survival of this spiritual element is highly at stake in the face of technology's radical effects in the sphere of aesthetic production. D'Annunzio articulates the phenomenon that Walter Benjamin was to describe as the decay of the artwork's "aura" in the age of its technical reproducibility, notwithstanding the fundamental differences between the two writers' conceptual, ideological, and stylistic premises.

_Luomo che rubò la “Gioconda”_ was inspired by the 1911 theft of Leonardo's masterpiece from the Louvre. Through trials and sacrifices, and with a determination akin to that of a scientific explorer, the "mystical Flemish painter" Peter Van Blömen, alias Orizzonte, discovers the alchem-

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7 A reprint of the scenario appears in the collection, _Tragedie, sogni e misteri II_. All citations of the scenario refer to this source. All translations are my own. An anonymous English translation, dating back to 1920, was discovered in D. W. Griffith's papers and is now part of the D. W. Griffith Collection at New York's Museum of Modern Art. A reprint of the translation, following an introduction by Russell Merrit, appears in a 1998 issue of _Griffithiana_.

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ical principle that enables him to bring to life the human figures depicted in great paintings. For the preparation of the cordatastrum (as Van Blömen names the invented substance), it is necessary to use the warm blood of a man’s heart immediately after his death. With the assistance of his young Italian accomplice Castruccio Lunelli, Van Blömen steals the Gioconda and brings it to one of her world greatest admirers, the “famous poet” Gabriele D’Annunzio now living in “exile” in Arcachon of France. The Poet is possessed by the prospect of a flesh-and-blood encounter with Mona Lisa whom he always perceived as his ideal love. He murders Lunelli and offers his blood to the alchemist. The experiment is successful but short-lived. Soon after she is brought to life, Mona Lisa dissolves. Hoping to bring the enigmatic woman back to the now deserted landscape, Van Blömen returns to his home and applies his alchemical operations onto the canvas. During a visit by Vermeer, a man who once wilfully blinded himself for his Christian faith, Van Blömen is astonished to see that Mona Lisa indeed reappeared against her familiar background. He departs for Paris to redeem the painting “to the world’s dreams.”

The scenario is as much a list of laconically described events, seeking their actualization in a visually complex film narrative, as it is a self-sufficient piece of literary text. As a screenplay, it exploits the specific properties of film technology and adheres to existing patterns of cinema narration. Needless to say, cinematic technology facilitates the representation of things unreal, as exemplified in the animation of Mona Lisa, who walks away from the canvas and then dissolves. In addition, the scenario includes elements that suggest the use of montage and camera movement, as well as an expressive use of mise-en-scène, especially in the area of lighting.

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8The word cordatastrum, possibly invented by D’Annunzio, comprises the Latin cor (heart, soul) and astrum (star, heavenly body).

9The Arcachon setting is autobiographical. In August 1911, when the Gioconda was stolen, D’Annunzio was in France, where he lived for five years in a form of self-exile (1910-1915) in an attempt to flee his Italian creditors. Upon his arrival, he spent several months in Paris before settling in his secluded rented residence in Arcachon (Woodhouse, 249-282). For further details on D’Annunzio’s obsession with the Gioconda episode during his sojourn in France see Gambacorti (271-274). For clarity, I shall always refer to the character in the diegesis as “the Poet.” As I shall argue, the Poet differs significantly from D’Annunzio, the author of the scenario.

10This is true, for example, in the scene of the robbery. While Van Blömen and Lunelli are hiding behind a curtain in the dark gallery, they witness “[t]he periodic passing of the patrols with the flashlights [and] [t]he light of the flashlight onto the image [of the Gioconda] that alone glows in the great darkness” (1181).
 Nonetheless, the scenario also insists upon its status as a work of literature. That is not surprising, considering that several years before completing this work, and inspired by the theft of the *Gioconda*, D’Annunzio had begun to write *L'uomo* as a novel which, however, never reached completion (Gambacorti, 273-277). At its very opening, the scenario displays a lyrical tone, as well as the narrator’s culturally and historically informed approach to the events that he is about to recount: “A mystical Flemish painter, descendant of that generation of painters who gave the court of the Popes *Standardo* [sic] and *Orizzonte*” (1173). If this statement serves as intertitles aiming to introduce the protagonist to the spectator, it certainly addresses a well-informed spectator, or at least one whose delight in the myth of Dannunzianism would compensate for the lack of comprehension, since nowhere will the narration make an explicit connection between the protagonist’s actions and his cultural ancestry as presented here. But the literary approach is mainly evident in the scenario’s autonomy as a text, both in terms of its narrative closure, which does not depend on its filmic realization, and in terms of the lyricism with which it strikes the reader. “In spite of the narrative crystallization in detached scenes,” states Sergio Raffaelli, “there exists a logical continuity from episode to episode that establishes a complete and autonomous fantastic universe.” He observes that in the entire work only two statements constitute proper *didascalie*. They stand out because they deviate significantly from the narrative style of the fictional text (46). In addition, Valentina Valentini describes the scenario as the “outline of a non-written novel” in the fragmentary style of

Gambacorti offers a detailed analysis of the scenario’s cinematographic qualities (293-303).

11The opening refers to the nicknames of two Flemish brothers, both painters, who worked in Italy. Pieter Van Bloemen (1657-1729), the less renowned of the two, was named *Stendardo* (banner) because of the military content in his paintings. Jan Frans Van Bloemen (1662-1749), a landscape painter, was named *Orizzonte* (horizon) because of the wide perspective in his landscapes (Busiri Vici, 18). Interestingly, in naming his protagonist, D’Annunzio draws on both painters. The character’s name is Peter Van Blömen, while he also calls himself *Orizzonte* “in memory of his predecessor and because of his nostalgia for the beautiful Italy and for Rome, city of the Soul” (1173).

12As applied to early cinema, *didascalia* is the equivalent of the English *intertitles*. But it also denotes *screen direction*. Clearly, the *didascalie* that Raffaelli mentions serve as instructions for the filmmaker or anyone who would rewrite the scenario as tailored specifically to the process of filming. For example, when the *Gioconda* is brought back to the Louvre, D’Annunzio gives the following instructions, in parentheses: “*(To follow the real traces, to follow the episode as it was told by the newspapers of the time.)*” (1198).
D'Annunzio's *Notturno*.\(^{13}\)

We may view the scenario's formal tension between a literary and a cinematic mode of representation as a symptom of D'Annunzio's hesitation to relinquish literature for a strictly instrumental use of language servicing an aesthetic project that officially lies elsewhere. But this hesitation is also part of the larger dilemma that informs the scenario's *essayistic* dimension, namely, the question of the artwork's fate in modernity.\(^{14}\) The affinity between D'Annunzio's notion of "spirituality" and Benjamin's "aura" lies, among other things, in the inherent relation that each one has with the utilitarian function of art in religious ritual. Van Blömen's adventure with the *Gioconda* is inspired by a spiritual incident. In this Flemish city resides Gian Giuseppe Vermeer, "the Man who lost his gaze" (*L'Uomo che perdette lo sguardo*) while contemplating and adoring a painting of the Virgin at the altar of the local cathedral. His eyes "see but do not look" (*vedono ma non guardano*), specifies the narrator, obviously to distinguish the sense of vision from intellectual and inquisitive observation, the renunciation of which is a distinct mark of the eminently pious. Since that day, the canvas "bears within itself something richer, brighter, more pathetic." A passage that strikes us more as a philosophical reflection for its own sake than as a scene in a film links the event to a universal phenomenon:

The spirituality that accumulates around the great works of art, around the great human masterpieces.
The thoughts, feelings, imaginations, dreams provoked by famous paintings, famous statues.
The great mass of human emanations that weighs on the glorious images and expands endlessly their might and beauty.
Gian Giuseppe Vermeer has not only left his gaze but the best part of his soul and life on that altar painting.
Has he not *transubstantiated* himself in the divine figure? (1173-1174)

At first glance, rather than being an inherent quality of the artwork, the

\(^{13}\)Valentini insists, however, that the style bears an inherent affinity with screenwriting proper. The scenario's literary dissolution of traditional syntax is legitimized, according to Valentini, by its transitional status as preliminary to the shooting of a film. She also notes that the scene of the robbery resembles a detective story (*un racconto poliziesco*) where the "febrile rhythm of the fast action is congenial to the 'screenplay form'" (15-16).

\(^{14}\)Valentini also notes that the text often presents "interrogative sentences, cues submitted to the reader towards a reflection […], that contribute to ascribe to the text the state and tone of the page of a diary, a conversation of the author with himself […]" (15).
supernatural semblance involves the projection of a human experience onto the object. As regards the religious painting in particular, its utilitarian appropriation for ritual may very well be arbitrary. The faith projected on it will overshadow the arbitrariness. This projection is expressed in the metaphor of “transubstantiation.” The lost “gaze” of the faithful does not simply disappear but is retraceable in the image of the Virgin. In man’s possession, the will for knowledge becomes the primary cause of secular progress. In the case of the genuinely humble, however, it is willingly and totally surrendered. Such is the case of Vermeer, a man of “blind” faith, in whose eyes the Virgin appears to be alive. Having fully absorbed his soul, his will for knowledge, his critical consciousness, she gives him the impression of gazing back as omniscient.

The passage tidily separates secular categories from religious ones—thoughts, feelings, imaginations, dreams, or soul, transubstantiation—at the same time that it unites them under the indistinct notion of the “human emanations” that weigh upon the images. Immediately following the telling of Vermeer’s experience, this flexibility allows for a smooth shift of emphasis towards secular art:

There is in the world a work of art, almost magical, that for centuries fascinated the imagination of the poets. Generations of contemplators and dreamers created around it a spiritual atmosphere of an incalculable intensity.

It is the Gioconda by Vinci. (1174)

Thus the Gioconda, like the Virgin, is enshrouded by her own “spiritual” halo. In this case, however, the halo is stored up by the contemplation not of the eminently humble but of “dreamers,” whom Van Blömen will see at the Louvre in a circle of “ecstatic” men, who are fully absorbed in what the narrator now distinguishes as the painting’s “secular enigma” (1179). By juxtaposing the religious with the secular, D’Annunzio implies that the “spirituality” of secular art is a result of reverential treatment that is carried over from the function of art in religious ritual.

In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1935), Benjamin will also recognize the “basis” of the aura in ritual. Unlike D’Annunzio, however, in whose narrative the two phenomena occur synchronically, he emphasizes the historical shift from ritual proper to “secularized ritual”: “The secular cult of beauty, developed during the Renaissance [...]”, clearly showed that ritualistic basis in its decline” (223-224).\(^{15}\) He explains this change in terms of a “displacement”:

\(^{15}\)This statement is directly preceded by the following comments: “We know that the earliest art works originated in the service of a ritual—first the magical, then
The uniqueness of the phenomena which hold sway in the cult image is more and more displaced by the empirical uniqueness of the creator or of his creative achievement. To be sure, never completely so; the concept of authenticity always transcends mere genuineness. [...] With the secularization of art, authenticity displaces the cult value of the work. (244)

He has already defined “authenticity,” an essential part of the aura, as a secular condition. Beyond mere genuineness, it involves the substantive duration of the object and its resulting testimony to the history that it has experienced (221). Without a doubt, “authenticity” as a product of historical testimony is part of D’Annunzio’s description of the *Gioconda*, and not only because of its centuries-long veneration in a museum: in anticipation of the alchemist’s miracle, the Poet thinks enviously of “Bonaparte [...], who had Leonardo’s painting *in his bedroom* at Fontainebleau” (1189). Furthermore, the synchronicity of the two “rituals” in D’Annunzio does not negate the existence of a “displacement,” insofar as that is a social or psychological phenomenon as well as a historical one. That is to say, the adoration of art on the part of the aesthete or non-believer is like a religion which does not, however, eradicate from history the cult function of art in ritual proper. The text implies that what occurs in the case of the *Gioconda* is itself a form of “transubstantiation,” another projection of human experience onto the painting—if not of religious faith, of the “thoughts, feelings, imaginations, dreams” invested by “generations of contemplators and dreamers”—as a result of which, in the eyes of its “dreamers,” Mona Lisa appears to be gazing back.

The concept of the reciprocal gaze, which Benjamin presents in his essay on Baudelaire, is fundamental in the definition of the aura as experienced in natural objects. An essential characteristic of common human interactions, it refers to the anticipation that “the person we look at, or who feels he is being looked at, looks at us in return.” The projection of this human response onto our encounter with inanimate objects accounts for their aura: “To experience the aura of a phenomenon means to invest it with the capability of returning the gaze. This experience corresponds to the data of the *mémoire involontaire*.” Upon actualization of the experience, the rec-

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the religious kind. It is significant that the existence of the work of art with reference to its aura is never entirely separated from its ritual function. In other words, the unique value of the ‘authentic’ work of art has its basis in ritual, the location of its original use value. This ritualistic basis, however remote, is still recognizable as secularized ritual even in the most profane forms of the cult of beauty.”
What sustains the aura is not the image of the past, but rather the image of the past that is seen through the lens of the present. This process of remembering involves the intersection of time and memory, as described by Paul Valéry, where the past is invoked and repressed at the same time. This is how the uncanny is produced, as described by Walter Benjamin in his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1939). Benjamin distinguishes the uncanny from the familiar, noting that the uncanny is that which is “frightening in the familiar or the familiar in the frightening” (186-188). Some motifs that are associated with the uncanny include the hollow, the monstrous, and the seemingly familiar that has become alienated from its context.

Benjamin alludes to the psychoanalytic basis of the phenomenon also in his comments on art. Like objects in nature, art has the capability of realizing an uncanny experience for the subject. When that occurs, it is perceived as beautiful. Drawing on Valéry, he defines our perception of the beautiful as something that infinitely regenerates itself: “The painting we look at reflects back at us that of which our eyes will never have their fill. What it contains that fulfills the original desire would be the very same stuff on which the desire continuously feeds.” From a psychoanalytic viewpoint, the “stuff” refers to the trace of a pre-oedipal memory, whose vague invocation exhilarates because of its suggestiveness, while its immateriality sustains the desire: “What prevents our delight in the beautiful from ever being satisfied is the image of the past.” Art reproduces beauty when, upon

16 Freud defines the uncanny by observing human encounters with things that are perceived as frightening: “[A]mong instances of frightening things there must be one class in which the frightening element can be shown to be something repressed which recurs. This class of frightening things would then constitute the uncanny; and it must be a matter of indifference whether what is uncanny was itself originally frightening or whether it carried some other affect. [...] [T]his uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression” (“The Uncanny,” 241).

17 For the above remarks on the aura I rely on Miriam Hansen’s essay on Benjamin (186-188). The quotations are from Benjamin’s “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” (1939) and are presented here as translated by Hansen (cf. Illuminations, 188).

18 Benjamin also distinguishes the painting from the photograph, whose technical reproducibility he considers exemplary of modernity’s demolition of the aura: “[T]o the eyes that will never have their fill of a painting, photography is rather like food for the hungry or drink for the thirsty” (187). As I shall argue, in an analogous manner, Mona Lisa’s aura is abolished at the moment Van Blömen succeeds in “animating” her figure through alchemy—a practice that I shall interpret as a metaphor of film technology.
its sight, the subject detects a familiar yet indefinable trace: “Insofar as art aims at the beautiful and, on however modest a scale, ‘reproduces’ it, it conjures it up (as Faust does Helen) out of the womb of time” (187).19

The capability of awakening a primordial past is also a characteristic of the Gioconda—not because Freud interpreted the enigmatic smile as Leonardo’s unconscious search for the smile of his mother (from whom he had indeed been separated at a very early age) but because D’Annunzio’s scenario itself points to that direction from the start (Freud, “Leonardo,” 107-118). Van Blömen begins to experiment with alchemy and painting only to bring back the life of a lost “perfect love” (1173). More importantly, the “beautiful,” in the sense of self-regenerating, is very much a characteristic of the Gioconda, whose “spirituality,” upon her admirers’ contemplation, “continuously renews itself” (1179). Furthermore, in speaking of the ecstatic admirers’ enchantment by the female figure, the narrator emphasizes their status as her “lonesome lovers” (amanti solitarii, 1179). This lonesomeness is a result of relinquishing human relations in the search for an ideal. It forewarns the fate of the Poet who, known to be “one of the keenest lovers of the Gioconda” (1180), will forever lose Sonia, his lover in flesh and blood, as a consequence of preparing the ritual of Mona Lisa’s animation.

After Van Blömen and Lunelli arrive in Arcachon, the Poet conceals from Sonia his possession of the painting. Noticing the secrecy surrounding the arrival of the two strangers, Sonia is overcome by jealousy, as she intuitively perceives that the situation concerns a “feminine’ secret” (1188). To satisfy her curiosity, in a femme-fatale style that evokes her Dannunzian predecessors, she seduces Lunelli who consequently falls madly in love with her.20 They meet in the nearby forest during a fire, pictured in a spectacular sequence that leads to their death. Lunelli becomes the victim of the Poet’s dagger in a duel inspired by jealousy. Horrified upon witnessing the extracting of Lunelli’s heart for the preparation of the cordastrum, Sonia mounts her horse and rushes into the rapidly advancing

19The reference to Faust is significant. The underworld is a register of both past and present. Like the unconscious, where past memories still survive as repressed, it is the place where Helen, who once lived, still lives as dead. Her return is a vision of “beauty.” It stirs up the longing for a past world that is otherwise known as beyond one’s grasp.

20“Sonia, inebriated of imagination, mad of perverse curiosity, vindictive and cruel, gave a rendezvous to the young Italian in the blazing forest. She pushed him, with wise provocations, to the most desperate madness of love and desire” (1190). Sonia is also described as a “very beautiful beast” (bellissima belva) and
flames. Her death provokes no immediate emotional reaction on the Poet’s part. Only later, while speaking to Mona Lisa during her brief animation, does the Poet mention Sonia for the first time. That is less, however, an expression of longing for Sonia herself than a part of the Poet’s love confession to Mona Lisa. His words imply that Sonia’s death was necessary for the attainment of another love that is perceived as ideal: “I killed my love for you: my last love, for you who are my only and true love. [...] I gave everything to the fire [...] because you had been promised to me” (1195-1196). Any consummated love affair is a compromise, a substitute for a lost primordial love: “I looked for you in all my lovers. I looked for your smile on all those voluptuous lips” (1196).

The unsettling tone of this love confession expresses the Poet’s disappointment, in seeing that once Mona Lisa is animated she bears the gaze of a mere stranger: “No communion. The centuries stand between him and her. [...] She no longer has the mysterious smile that Leonardo drew with music from that mediocre and unaware soul” (1195). What she loses is her “spirituality,” or her “aura.” The dialectic of distance and closeness, which is essential in the experience of the aura, also defines the Poet’s perception of Leonardo’s painting. This is confirmed at the moment the aura is lost, when the Poet becomes suddenly aware of the centuries that separate them and when he experiences the distance which emanates from her now alienated gaze, not as auras but as absolute and impenetrable:

You are alive and breathe. You are alive and speak.
Or were you more alive when you weren’t breathing, when you weren’t speaking?
Or were you closer to me when you had behind your shoulders the inaccessible rocks and the tortuous waters? (1196)

The distance that now marks her gaze, bearing no familiar trace, is com-
as the “enemy” (nemica) (1187). By putting the latter in quotation marks, D’Annunzio makes an intentional reference to his own literature. “Nemica” appears in Trionfo della morte (Triumph of Death, 1894) to characterize the heroine Ippolita Sanzio. Seductive and irresistible, yet made of “ill, weak and lecherous flesh,” only when she dies will Giorgio Aurispa be freed from her “empire” (850).

21 The search for an ideal through art at the cost of sacrificing one’s lover in flesh-and-blood is also the central theme in Poe’s “The Oval Portrait” (1842). Amazed by the life-likeness of a female portrait, the protagonist traces the painting’s history. A painter’s total devotion to the making of his lover’s portrait allowed him to overlook the physical suffering of the lover herself. When she died, the life that had escaped her body was retraceable in the painting (235-238).
parable to the stare of the eyes described by Baudelaire, in those verses that Benjamin reads as an expression of the demolition of the aura. Those eyes do not return the gaze but instead “look at us with a mirror-like blankness.” Thus they “know nothing of distance,” insofar as “distance” encompasses what is seemingly its opposite, that is, something familiar, a deep-rooted closeness (Benjamin, 189-190). To be sure, the enigmatic smile, which the alchemist unwittingly eradicates, is not exclusive to the figure of Mona Lisa, but is D’Annunzio’s equivalent of the “aura” in art. Its meaning reaches beyond its literal association with a person’s facial composure: “In the figure-less painting the divine rocky landscape remains, where the tortuous water seems to divinely perpetuate the human smile” (1194). That the artwork’s ability to grab the subject is not tied to the depiction of female beauty is reconfirmed when Mona Lisa disappears. Van Blömen and the Poet turn to the painting to see whether she resumed her original post: “No. She did not return. The background is deserted. But the town of rocks and water smiles like Mona Lisa” (1197).

Benjamin finds a definition of the aura in Proust. He quotes a statement whose affinity with D’Annunzio’s comments on “spirituality” is unmistakable:

“Some people who are fond of secrets flatter themselves that objects retain something of the gaze that has rested on them.” (The ability, it would seem, of returning the gaze.) “They believe that monuments and pictures present themselves only beneath the delicate veil which centuries of love and reverence on the part of so many admirers have woven about them.” (Benjamin, 188; emphasis added)

The idea that the admirers’ gaze accumulates around the artwork leads to a different concept of the aura than what is suggested by its definition in terms of a projection or transference. While the latter concerns the momentary invocation of a past that resides permanently within the subject, the former implies that the aura resides upon the object itself, that it is stored up over time. Like Proust’s “veil,” D’Annunzio’s “spirituality” is the residue of the gaze that “accumulates around the great works of art,” an “atmosphere” that “generations of contemplators and dreamers created around” the Gioconda (1173-1174). Proust’s narrator, however, views those “people who are fond of secrets” with critical distance: “This chimera […] would change into truth if they related it to the only reality that is valid for the individual, namely, the world of his emotions.22 Similarly, the passage

22 The passage that Benjamin quotes is from Proust’s Le temps retrouvé. The original reads: “Certains esprits qui aiment le mystère veulent croire que les objet
on “spirituality” ostensibly represents the reflections not of the author, but of a fictional character. It immediately follows Van Blömen’s “conversations with the Man without a gaze,” carried by Van Blömen only because he is “attracted by this mystery” (1173). From the alchemist’s metaphysical perspective, “transubstantiation” (which I have thus far interpreted as a metaphor) is literal: “Has he not transubstantiated himself in the divine figure?” (1174). This rhetorical question favours the empirical verifiability of transubstantiation and posits Vermeer’s testimony as proof.

D’Annunzio’s text, however, establishes a particularly ambivalent position as regards the permanence of “spirituality” in the artwork. For one thing, the narrator’s separation from the characters is not always evident. The scenario oscillates between the objective remarks of an omniscient narrator and those that may or may not express the characters’ thoughts. The interrogative sentence mentioned above, for instance, is not explicitly attributed to the mystic. Arguably, the writer uses this ambiguity in order to mimic, with irony, the characters’ sensibility. At the same time, however, he does not definitively mock the idea that a mystical element resides in art. It is important that Mona Lisa’s reappearance occurs in the presence of Vermeer, who now is not only “without a gaze” but literally blind. Fascinated by the mystery surrounding Vermeer’s lost “gaze,” Van Blömen steals the painting of the Virgin from the altar. His goal is to make the spiritual substance “precipitate” and apply it towards the recovery of the man’s “gaze.” Vermeer, however, is sharply opposed to this prospect. He rejoices in having donated something so valuable to the “Woman of Heaven.” “No. You will not commit this sacrilege,” he says to Van Blömen. The zealous alchemist, nonetheless, carries out his own plan. Vermeer instantly notices a change in the image: “The splendor has diminished.” He also recognizes his own image in a mirror. He realizes that his “gaze” has been restored and “the votive offering made to the divine creature” has been annulled. To compensate for the “sacrilege,” he grabs a knife and repeats “the desperate act of Oedipus” (1175-1176).

Whether Vermeer’s “gaze” stands for empirical observation or the probing into one’s repressed past, the knowledge that it bestows is of a secular kind. Vermeer blinds himself because, momentarily, he is confronted

conservent quelque chose des yeux qui les regardèrent, que les monuments et les tableaux ne nous apparaissent que sous le voile sensible que leur ont tissé l’amour et la contemplation de tant d’adorateurs, pendant des siècles. Cette chimère deviendrait vraie s’ils la transposaient dans le domaine de la seule réalité pour chacun, dans le domaine de sa propre sensibilité” (Proust, 884). Benjamin, who agrees with Proust’s conclusion (although he calls it “evasive”), further elaborates on it, drawing on Valéry and Baudelaire (188).
by his own capability of seeing truth with a secular eye. His self-sacrifice transforms him into a vessel of pure “spirituality.” It is his mere presence, apparently, that brings Leonardo’s Mona Lisa back to her mysterious landscape. Perhaps, D’Annunzio allows us to speculate, what makes a secular artwork a masterpiece is that it is not completely secular. The painting of the Virgin (any painting of the Virgin) absorbs the soul of the pious only by virtue of its religious function, regardless of its artistic qualities. But can any secular painting be arbitrarily deemed a masterpiece? What is it that makes it “almost magical” and worthy of adoration? Perhaps something divine dwells therein, whose essence evades the intellect, and for which reason D’Annunzio selects “spirituality” as its name.

Despite the autobiographical allusions, the Poet alone does not represent the author’s viewpoint. The scenario’s thesis on art encompasses the different attitudes exhibited by the characters of the Poet, Vermeer, and Van Blömen. In the Poet, D’Annunzio rehearses his own popular image as an aesthete, which he contrasts with the figure of Vermeer. Though in different ways, the reference to Oedipus describes both characters. Vermeer’s voluntary blindness is a reaction against the trauma of knowledge. It makes him a model of Christian faith, but also of repression. The Poet, on the other hand, wishes to possess the enigmatic woman in flesh and blood. What attracts him to Mona Lisa is her “aura,” her uncanny quality, that element of hers that is familiar yet alienated through repression.23 This familiar trace arouses in the Poet a pre-Oedipal wish, namely, the wish to return to a state of complete un-repression. Hence, differently from Vermeer, the Poet would like to be an Oedipus whose eyes would remain intact. That is, he would like to have his cake and eat it too.24 Overall, while Vermeer’s reli-

23 See Freud, “The Uncanny,” 241. The Poet’s desire for Mona Lisa also recalls those encounters that, according to Freud, evoke the mother’s body and thus involve a play of the unfamiliar and the familiar: “It often happens that neurotic men declare that they feel there is something uncanny about the female genital organs. This unheimlich place, however, is the entrance to the former Heim [home] of all human beings, to the place where each one of us lived once upon a time and in the beginning. There is a joking saying that ‘Love is home-sickness’; [...] [T]he unheimlich is what was once heimisch, familiar; the prefix ‘un’ [‘un-’] is the token of repression” (“The Uncanny,” 245; the brackets are included in the cited source).

24 Needless to say, any fulfillment of the wish is by necessity imaginary, a fantasy, the transience of which is confirmed by the brevity of Mona Lisa’s rebirth. The “distance” is not really overcome, Mona Lisa is elsewhere, the landscape, which still “smiles,” retains its physiognomic quality, and thus the desire is sustained.
giosity affirms that art is sacred, the Poet's aestheticism draws a "secular
enigma." The juxtaposition of the two attitudes, whether contesting or
complementing each other, proposes a complex characterization of tradi-
tional art. But the anachronism of an alchemist in 1911 presents a case
about the re-definition of art in the era of modern technology. 25

As an alchemist, Van Blömen needs to reconcile his metaphysical out-
look with his experiential one. Not only does he believe in transsubstan-
tion, he also advocates its practical use: "With which art can one recognize,
sever, isolate, restore these accumulated elements?" (1174). Once he suc-
ceds in restoring Vermeer's "gaze," he develops a higher ambition: "The
spiritual substance may be alchemized, it may be converted into percepti-
ble apparitions" (1177). He invents the cordastrum and is ready to steal the
Gioconda. His goal of making the intangible tangible, along with his refusal
to please Vermeer upon whom he imposes a secular view of the world, indi-
cates that his drive for empirical experimentation surpasses his reverence of
the mystical. As in the case of the Virgin, his experiment with the Gioconda
produces a woman without a "smile." But let us remember that Van
Blömen is above all a painter. His alchemical ventures, anachronistically set
in 1911, refer allegorically to his role as an artist. He represents a time of
ambivalence as regards the very notion of art: between an object of rever-
ence and a phenomenon whose negotiation with modern technology
threatens its aura. Evidently, without Vermeer's presence, Van Blömen's
devices fail to recover Mona Lisa. By this day, his sense of "spirituality" is
diminished.

In spite of the qualities that "spirituality" and "aura" share, the weak-
ening of the phenomenon as represented in the allegory of the "fallen"
alchemist is different from Benjamin's analogous idea in "The Work of
Art." 26 In this essay, "the decay of the aura" bears a vast social significance.
It rests on "the desire of contemporary masses to bring things 'closer' spa-
tially and humanly," to overcome "the uniqueness of every reality by
accepting its reproduction" (222-223). 27 Van Blömen's attempt to animate

25 Generally speaking, alchemy was outmoded by chemistry in the eighteenth cen-
tury (Read, v). For a more extensive discussion of this historical transition see
Taylor, 190-212.

26 If we view Van Blömen's loss of spirituality in light of alchemy's transformation
into chemistry, we may speak of his "fall": "From the alchemist's point of view,
chemistry represented a 'Fall' because it meant the secularization of a sacred sci-
ence." (Eliade, 11).

27 Benjamin's essay on "The Work of Art" seems to present a resolute apology for the
decay of the aura, while his view of the aura is neutral in the essay on Baude-
Mona Lisa for the Poet’s pleasure obviously has little to do with the masses’ radical takeover of culture. The Poet, who bears traits of the Dannunzian aesthetic and Superman, is neither troubled by the reverential quality of the masterpiece nor excluded from the institution of high art. On the contrary, he is enchanted by those very things that account for the painting’s “aura”—its authenticity, uniqueness, permanence, and inapproachability—while he considers himself entitled to the rare privilege of having unlimited access to the masterpiece. Furthermore, with respect to technique, the decay of Mona Lisa’s “spirituality” is an effect not of technical reproduction but of the alchemist’s ability to transform the intangible (the sacred, or the enigmatic) into tangible.

However, if the transition from Leonardo’s painting to Van Blömen’s “dull” Mona Lisa bears an allegorical function, the allegory points to a juxtaposition that occurs outside the diegesis: between Leonardo’s painting and D’Annunzio’s screenplay. As in the case of reproduction that entails the technological nature of the medium, it is D’Annunzio’s consideration of cinema’s technical specificity that warrants the literal depiction of the alchemist’s achievement. Mona Lisa’s animation consists of a display of cinematic tricks:

The prodigy.
The animation of the image.
The alive figure detaches herself from the painting.
She exits entirely. (1194)

Hence compared to the Poet, the painter/alchemist, whose reverence for the mystical is in crisis, is a more accurate representative of D’Annunzio himself—the lover of sublime art, yet the real-life inventor of a “dull” Mona Lisa. Moreover, should this invention aspire to upset the social function of the traditional artwork as an object of reverence, it is only through the process of mechanical reproduction (insofar as the scenario is written with a film in mind) that its ideological repercussions would be actualized.

Both essays speak of a “unique phenomenon of a distance,” historically based on the cult function of art: “The essentially distant is the inapproachable: inapproachability is in fact a primary quality of the ceremonial image” (“The Work of Art,” 243 n.; “Baudelaire,” 188). Yet the Baudelaire essay emphasizes the notion of the aura as the return of the gaze, alluding to the psychoanalytic dimension of “distance.” For an extensive commentary on the redemption of the aura, indicating that its indispensable role in aesthetic experience is already implicit in “The Work of Art” (in Benjamin’s notion of the “optical unconscious”), see Hansen, 202-224.
in the sphere of reception.

Does the scenario indeed question the status of the artwork as an object of reverence?\textsuperscript{28} What distinctly characterizes the scene of the “dull” Mona Lisa is the conspicuous manner in which it advocates, through cinematic tricks, not merely the adaptation of an artwork originating in another medium (which was common in cinema) but the visual modification, in a literal sense, of an already visual work. It thus constitutes an intervention whose outcome is a candid distortion of the original. Furthermore, one does not fail to perceive the humour with which D’Annunzio conceived this distortion. Once we try to imagine Mona Lisa’s animation through film, we think of the technical factors that come into play. Such is the question of acting. Which one of the Italian divas will play Mona Lisa? Will she appear with no visible make up (or eyebrows) in order to reproduce her ethereal beauty? Will she be instructed to suspend the diva’s usual histrionic gestures to convey the sobriety that marks the Florentine lady? Or will she retain make-up, gestures, and all the rest, in order to draw out the enigmatic lady’s “fatale” side (adhering, of course, to the period’s cinematic conventions of the femme-fatale style)?\textsuperscript{29}

With its irony, the scenario participates in what was to become a “tradition” of Gioconda send-ups, still at an early stage in 1920. Its earliest known example is Sapeck’s drawing of Mona Lisa with a Pipe (1887), while its most famous one from this early period is probably Marcel Duchamp’s provocative L.H.O.O.Q (1919) (Gambacorti, 312).\textsuperscript{30} Furthermore, the animated Mona Lisa is very much in line with the radical experiments pro-

\textsuperscript{28}For D’Annunzio’s desecration of the Gioconda see also Gambacorti, 311-315.

\textsuperscript{29}Relying in part on Mario Praz’s seminal study of the femme fatale in literature, Donald Sassoon argues that it was not until the nineteenth-century, when the femme fatale became a standard type comprising the traits of beautiful, seductive, and castrating, that the image of Mona Lisa underwent a “transmutation [...] from a cheerful housewife into a mysterious, ironic woman” (92, 93-117).

\textsuperscript{30}This constitutes one of Duchamp’s “ready-mades,” his radical challenge of the institution of high art: ordinary objects of no aesthetic worth by traditional standards, sometimes slightly modified by the artist, displayed in a context that endows them with artistic status. On a postcard of the Gioconda, Duchamp drew a moustache and a beard, adding underneath the image the infamous L.H.O.O.Q. When it is read uninterruptedly in French, this series of letters produces the phrase elle a chaud au cul (she is hot in the butt). For more on this work in the context of Duchamp’s avant-gardism, see Seigel, 115-147. Another famous Gioconda send-up preceding D’Annunzio’s work is Kasimir Malevich’s Composition with Mona Lisa (1914), a collage in which the Mona Lisa image is almost hidden by the other elements while her face and neck are each marked
posed by Marinetti and the futurists in their 1916 manifesto on film: specifically, filmic transcriptions of *passéiste* poetry that faithfully turn metaphors into images, thus rendering them literal. The “irreverent” result, for the amusement of modernity’s ardent public, is the complete ridicule of the poem. Such would be, for instance, the transcription of Carducci’s “my heart fled over the Tyrrhenian Sea,” depicting the poet’s heart that “pops out of his jacket and flies like a huge red balloon over the Gulf of Rapallo” (142-143). Likewise, to animate Mona Lisa means to render literal the “enigma,” the live gaze, the chimera sustained by generations of “dreamers”; and in the footsteps of Marinetti, to distract the contemporary spectator, whose adoration of high art, or his exclusion from it, shall yield to freshly articulated aesthetic and cultural horizons.31

Surely, this “irreverent” treatment throws further light on the question of “spirituality.” It indicates a tongue-in-cheek attitude, rather than a sincere conviction, on the author’s part when he speaks of art as sacred or enigmatic. This, however, does not definitively negate the ample space and thematic gravity granted the stories of Vermeer and the Poet, and thus their personal encounters (sacred or secular) with the artwork. The mockery—which contests, rather than rejects, tradition—produces an overall irresolve position regarding the question of art’s role in society. In closing with

with a red cross. For more on the *Gioconda* send-ups, including other famous and more recent examples, see Sassoon, 207-214. Molly Nesbit also discusses the transformation of the Mona Lisa image into an icon of mass and consumer culture, especially after her theft in 1911.

31 The “irreverence” towards tradition is also found in the casual use of personal names that bear cultural significance. Orizzonte (see note 11) was a younger contemporary of the Dutch painter Vermeer (1632-1675). A secondary character, the young Antonio Van Diemen, who willingly dies in order to donate his heart to Van Blömen for the invention of the *cordastraum*, is named after a Dutch colonialist in the East Indies (1593-1645). It is unlikely that we may draw any consistent metaphors or allegories based on these names. But some observations may be made regarding the choice of a “Flemish city” as the place where the *Gioconda* theft is planned. In creating a Flemish protagonist who is both a painter and an alchemist, D’Annunzio may have been inspired by the many Flemish and Dutch painters known for their depictions of alchemy (Read, 63-84). Furthermore, following the *Gioconda*’s theft in 1911, the main suspect was the starving artist Géry Piéret, friend of Apollinaire and Picasso, and apparently of Belgian origin, who had previously stolen two statuettes from the Louvre (Nesbit, 10). Obsessed with the *Gioconda* and the tales about her theft, D’Annunzio invented his own tale, telling his French translator, André Doderet, that he had received the stolen *Gioconda* (Sassoon, 196).
the recovery of the Gioconda, D’Annunzio restates his respect and love for the Renaissance masterpiece. Yet, he does so only after having declared his separation from it, the scenario’s distinctiveness as a non-traditional work of art. After all, he reminds us that Leonardo’s Gioconda is shut inside the Louvre, while his own “Gioconda,” potentially a film, shall meet us in numerous other spaces.

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