

LOSING CONSCIOUSNESS TO A LOST ART

What could be the nature of a drug whose effect was to induce alarm and stupor simultaneously? Not exhaustion fast on the heels of fear, not a spentness, but a state of suspension: what could be the nature of an art that lulled *and* startled you? Silent film, I came to feel, was a film art mostly made up of perils that drew one into a well of sleep. Language is wily: to have a *sound* sleep is to have a noiseless sleep. But not one without sound. To fall to sleep before a silent movie is also to be strangely roused.

I had traveled to a film festival held in two theaters, one of which abutted the slackening waters of a quiet canal, the other of which stood adjacent to an abbreviated piazza covered in bright neon-blue felt supplied for the occasion. Sometimes the festival provided pianists who recreated the music an original audience might have heard while they watched, one hundred years ago; other times, they gave us the chance to hear a contemporary orchestral interpretation of the film space or an image repertoire by sound.

Even a novice to the devices of film art can see that the speed of a silent film is often faster than that of contemporary film, and I start to wonder if Charlie Chaplin, filmed in eras early and "late" in cinema's development, continued to move as though he were being filmed by an earlier camera. As though he came to embody a film speed, and to picture it rather than be pictured by it. Maybe this is because we associate his rapid, graceful movement with that earlier silent technology, technology in its infancy. The speed of the silent film is faster . . . but its effect on a contemporary audience is to slow us down.



Charlie Chaplin at his animated best in *The Gold Rush* (1925), a classic of the silent film era

Evanescent. Anodyne. Somnambulant. These are words that my fellow travelers produce in the aftermath of a silent film's recalcitrant stupor, the yoyo in a palm that opens and closes, the fluttering eye, this place to which we cannot *really* fully return: the days of silent cinema (Le Giornate del Cinema Muto).

Film lovers, now more than then, I would venture, seek to enter the space of a moving-image theater as they might a cocoon. If film going encourages a flight or egress from the outside world, in some sense it does not matter if one sleeps through a film. Movie going makes for a licensed nap in public. And we need such things. But if we fall to sleep before a silent movie, it might be because we have to retrain our senses to stay awake. Sound-tracked films must operate on our attention, our wakefulness, and create a differently contoured liminal space (between sleep and waking) than silent films—even as silent films “come with” the sound of the piano player, and the sound of the voice inside our heads when we are suddenly required to read an intertitle. I do not suppose that silent cinema's earliest audiences routinely slept inside its theaters because, certainly, they were awed and alerted by the novelty of the picture show, but I think we have come to rely on sound to maintain our attention at the implicitly spectatorial affair that is cinema. There is no cinema today that can keep us awake or keep our attention without sound.

In the image-saturated world, sound in film is like the gong that keeps our heads perched vertically on our bodies, our eyes trained open. At the movies, we watch sound. For a contemporary moviegoer, it is sound that moves the images (and bodies), sound that animates them and emanates from them (even though, technically speaking, sound is added to a film track). This is what we believe we are experiencing—sound as intrinsic to the images that we see rather than supplementary to them—so that, confronted with, awash in, the space of a silent film, we can only experience the relation of sound to image as an evacuation, a subtraction, a hollowing out, a void, like an eggcup minus its egg, and this makes us slowly nod, and later snore.

The piano music that accompanies a silent film—and one might ask why not a banjo, cello, or trombone?—never pretends to be wed to the image, but runs like a ribbon alongside

it, partly dependent on the hat to which it is attached and partly distracted by wind or whim. The piano sometimes simply thrums, chords become beats, arpeggios suggest speed, notes are disarticulated into percussions as though the film were a parade and the piano its oom-pah. Even if the music that accompanies a silent film plays subtler parts in its unfolding, for example, when the music is scored to work in concert with the images to create an atmosphere or affect, sound does not appear to share a space with, to emerge from, or to move the images on the screen. In fact, the piano accompaniment might only serve the purpose of *blocking the silence* whose uncanniness would otherwise overwhelm us. A perceived asymmetry between sound and image works as a soporific on a contemporary viewer of silent film, whereas sound films keep us awake by virtue of the apparently seamless, the copacetic symbiosis of sound and image that we project onto them.

It is in some ways a counterintuitive state of affairs: seamlessness holds our attention while disruption draws our eyes to a close. First there is the notice you take of other bobbing heads in the silent film theater, as though nervous systems were collectively provoked, tickled, and finally disturbed when fellow viewers jerk awake in their seats, each a separate Frankenstein responding to a mild application of electricity to a node. These are the part-zombies we become when we sleep inside of a silent film screening. And then you yourself are overtaken and give way. Your eyes give out, one before the other rather than both at once, and when only one eye opens, the backs of fellow spectators appear transparent (filmic), and vaguely doubled.

At a certain point in the Italian silent classic, *Cabiria* (1914), a character is shown to be dreaming, and the way this is shot is in the form of a miniature boxlike panel that appears above the sleeper's *body* (not over her head *per se*). What is the content of her dream? That she is caught between the jaws, in flames, of the mouth of a building, caught in the jaws of Moloch. It's a nightmare, and the dreamer's maidservant shakes her awake (she grabs her hand), at which moment the images inside the panel above her body, like the objects in a magic trick, disappear. It's not so distant from the ineffable sense one has on waking *to* a silent film—of waking

up in the movies: reality is not, in these instances, the continuous swatch we take it to be, but a series of *carpaccio*, of slices, a set of flimsy borders passing as frames filled with ephemera convinced of their permanence.

Sleep comes on like grains moving through a chute, first slowly, then at top speed until the silo entirely empties. The body collapses into this sleep like the closing of a favorite familiar umbrella, but there is an image that lingers, promising to hold and threatening to release one simultaneously: an afterimage of the silent film screen as abstractly real as any one person's transitional object, stilled, unimbued now while its owner sleeps.

Scholars had spoken of celluloid melted down to "retrieve dregs of silver" and of films turned into combs morphed from celluloid plastic. Imagine such a magic comb, a comb for combing your hair in your sleep. Imagine a wristwatch like mine: the face, not just the hands, of my watch had rotated while I slept inside a silent movie. A kind of mechanical break that to this day I can't explain. And if you woke, what might you wake to? To paper curtains, scrolls, and braziers, to frocks, jackets, or hose tinted yellow, sepia, or pink, to candlesticks, columns and wreaths, to the black-lit bright light of a single word. To assembly lines, or a handkerchief tucked inside of a sleeve, to cigar smoke billows, a mirror that is a door, to a man disappearing inside a woman's fan. To the shape, speed, fervency, necessity, to the arbitrariness of assembly lines. To gendarmes, or a woman in a pale blue tuxedo, to scenes tragic or droll, to the atmosphere created by soundless xylophones, to a woman so close to the edge of the screen she might fall into your lap, to cacophony controlled or unloosed, to limbs entangled, and to many visibly sandaled feet, to antics, to an (hallucinated) voice. To assembly lines, frantic or calmly deliberate. To assembly lines.

You could wake to and stay awake for a relay of that-which-you-thought becoming that-which-IS (and is not), as in the opening scene of Hitchcock's early silent, *Easy Virtue*, which begins with a shot of a knob that turns out to be the knot at the top of a judicial figure's wig. When the owner lifts his head, the object mutates to reveal its place in a courtroom of optical illusions and blurred views: the cinema? In Paul Fejos's *The Last Performance* (1929), the audience in the film

thinks they are witnessing a magic act (the conventional act in which swords are thrust into a bejeweled box replete with the body of the magician's assistant), but they have really witnessed a murder, and even though this is what they secretly had wished to witness, they flee the theater within the theater in horror, as though they are, or will be, the victims of the murderer (played by Conrad Veidt) rather than his guilty accomplices.

You could wake now to something newly possible in silent film theater: a man checking instant messaging on his cell phone, the nearly blinding glow of it, like a beam, shockingly, multiply colored like a meteoric source held in the palm of a hand. What appears for him there—I glimpse it on the thumb-nail-sized screen—and just as the three-hour *Cabiria* reaches its denouement (the suicide of Sophonisba), is a photograph of a figure holding a baby in its arms, prompting the cell phone owner altogether to take his leave.

The cell phone user forces a familiar frame, a miniaturized, visual reach-out-and-touch-someone holdable square of light, onto all that silent cinema wants from us that we cannot give to it, including the unwanted inductions into sleep, midday, the unwanted waking to we know not what. Waking in the silent cinema theater, I feel crumpled inside a red velvet curtain uncertain whether I'm before, behind, or beneath it, a clown waiting to be called on stage or a piccolo player in the orchestra pit below, a mere bystander with no hat to draw down over my eyes. There is nothing gradual here; the iris is shocked open, like a swimming pool formerly empty now all at once full. And the eye cannot accommodate the fullness nor can it know what precisely prompted it to, once again, *open* unless it was something akin to the record needle caught in the dusty groove at the music's end. It cranks and rotates and leaves you ajar and groping. How do you know when to wake up? The piano music cannot tell you that; only the silence of the silent screen can.

Awakened by the snoring of a friend mid-night is a different kind of, a forceful interruption of, sleep whose source is too easily located in one's fellow unless silent cinema intervenes as an aid to thinking about sound. Waking to a friend's snore, I realize that I'm not really awakened by the sound of the snoring, but by the way the sound *interrupts my breathing*.

The sputtering in sleep of a fellow human—and maybe it matters more the more beloved the fellow sleeper—makes me want to follow it with my own breath; my imitation of this dramatically staccatoed, arrhythmic sound is what makes it impossible to sleep, not the sound itself. A fellow breather breathing unevenly disarms me. We learn the language that we speak by imitation, an extraordinary trait this knack for mimicry, and might this mean we imitate silence too? A relation to silence? The breathing of others? We associate sleep with silence—even though some people need the din of sound in order to sleep and others can talk in their sleep (and snore in their sleep) without waking. We associate sleep with our own silence; we imagine we are silent when we sleep and that we therefore do not hear when we sleep, but the light or heavy sleeper sleeps by hearing, by hearing the sound of his own breathing.

See the strange (to our eyes) histrionic breathing conventions of silent cinema. We cannot hear the tone of the heroine's voice in *Cabiria* to understand her emotional state, and so she *breathes* for us—the more upset she is, the more she heaves, and there are fine differences in how her bosom, coaxed by the propulsions of her chest cavity, moves to indicate passion, sadness, anger, or alarm. Outside the silent screen, our breathing is visible in our voice; inside it, the body visualizes breathing in its frame. Who would have thought there were conventions for breathing, and yet there are, just as there are conventions for dreaming, and conventions of noise or silence.

During the silent film festival, I have a kind of dream I never otherwise have. It's a dream that implicates and activates the body in such a way that you forget you are in bed and are forced awake by the miming of the physical actions of the dream. I dream of steps made slick by centuries of footsteps smoothing them (neither Eisenstein nor a cobbled ascent to a medieval Italian castle are far off). Tripping, slipping on the steps, I fall, feeling my feet fall from under me, I fall into wakefulness as though I'd lost my footing in bed, my feet *literally* rise up and point, heels headed toward the ceiling. Exposed, so to speak, to days of silent cinema, my dreams are both more embodied and more dislocating because the line between the dream and the body has dissolved.

And I hear silence differently. The total silence of a canalled town not far from Venice, on this particular day, Treviso, is a form of silence simply not available at home. Neither the post-ness of a poignantly empty New York street nor the still surface of a pond dotted with rocks high inside an American forest's hills can match it. It's a silence built out of archways, cobbles, of streets within streets lined with walls, of tunneling ways, no thoroughfares, neither intersections, but arcs; a silence immanent in the scale of the square over and against a footbridge and a roundabout. The silence suggests a life *somewhere*, you can hear it breathing, but you're not sure where. You can be sure only of the audibility of your own footsteps; you claim to be sure that you will recognize the sound when they turn a blind corner, of at least one other person, the only other person walking in Sunday morning silence—a freak, an anomaly, a disturbed sleeper, a troublemaker, a man fed up with the town's traditions out for a stroll. Neither the loudness of pumpkin-colored pants nor the crumpled red cardboard of some children's MacDonald's lunch carried by their father can break it; neither the sound of your swallowing a sandwich made of artichokes and cured meat, nor of your pen tracing words onto paper or your feet cracking chestnuts under foot. And I know that this silence has something to do NOT with the sudden absence of otherwise daily noise but with a bedrock of sound indicative of a great deal of living, immanent in the walls and in the streets. If the silence is total, it's because the streets of the town are structured to hold rather than release the sounds of its inhabitants, and the silence is a ricochet, a whorl, a volume in evidence of that living. Nothing can break this total silence, and yet many such towns have been bombed, and the people who devised such paeans to total silence have been killed by bombardments.

The orchestral accompaniment to a rare World War I silent documentary, *Battle of the Somme* (1916), reproduces, by way of a hollowed-out tympanum forcefully struck, the sound of detonated bombs. Each time the musician simulates the sound of explosion, I know what to expect, and yet, each time I am more disturbed by it. The musical mimesis succeeds only in disquieting me while my eyes try quietly to regard the images: for example, of a small troop of men convened not exactly in a trench but in an area nearby to one, more dusty

than muddy-seeming. The men are faces, open or in profile, bending, gesturing singly or as a group; they dwell in a stillness: they wait. In black and white, the texture of their wool pockets and diminutive stripes is vividly felt. But the intertitle reports that, ten minutes following the filming of these men, every one of them was killed. The image, sans unsettling tympanum, disturbs by a slow waking, the necessity quietly to regard the men. The image does not vibrate, it does not sound, it sits in a crouch-like pose, it settles upon you and cannot be shaken.

Imagine the world's aggressions, wars presumably based on religious differences, border disputes, or the thirst for capital, as the result of having been forcefully awakened. The world's violences an effect of the nature of the form interruptions to our sound sleep takes. How does it matter, the reality on the other side of sleep to which one wakes? What awakens you? To what do you wake? A belligerent noisemaker. The sign of a friend's breathing. What will forcefully fill you or confront you on the other side of interruption, and how will you respond to being shaken awake, numismatically drilled at the ear awake, made to wake, to break, your silence? What's disorienting about waking to silent cinema is the stark insistence set before you of another, outer dream-in-progress so that you cannot be sure of sunlight or of sound outside the door.

It's easy to sentimentalize last sounds (maybe especially given that old saw about hearing being the last sense to go), unless they are the sounds last heard by lives abruptly taken. When an eight-year-old child was murdered in my home town, we heard first, and then saw. We heard the sound of the bullet, that was the sound that called, that woke us, but the sound was severed from the act. We only saw the violence to the child's small head left in its wake. A mere dot of blood marked the death of the child and you couldn't fancy it the blot of ink, a perfect dark circle out of which the silent animator's character, Junko the Clown, might rise, rise to life. Was it loud, the severed sound that took the child's life? Not at all. It was sound as of a row of snaps on a jacket forcefully undone. It was a blunt sound, not a breaking sound, even though the bullet sped through an air. A cool autumnal air, of change in the air, in a neighborhood dispersed, diffuse, a neighborhood of all too cloying row homes. A hedge failed to protect her

or her father (the intended target), and most of all, worse than the image of the girl's small neck limp on her body, was the lingering gap in a sensory sequence to those she left behind: the trauma of experiencing the death as first a sound, and second as a wholly soundless sight, the child's silent body.

In the opening days of the festival, *Le Giornate del Cinema Muto*, the news of Amish girls lined in a row in their one-room schoolhouse in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and shot in the backs of their heads by a roving violence, a happenstance, a burst, a fateful interruption of a man, fully awake or fully asleep (?) across their threshold haunts. The murderer began, it was said, by asking if the girls, members of a community known for its peacefulness, had ever *seen* a gun. And then he turned their eyes away from looking, and killed them with its sound.

It's unbearable to think of girls who will wake no more, and impossible to consider how a mind might hear the very sound that would silence it. Worse still if the sound emanates from an instrument held in the hand of one human directed toward another it means to kill. The murderer of the Amish girls terrorized them by tyrannizing their still-developing senses. A perversely violent muting; the violent application of a blindfold. Such extreme human acts leave us bereft: we can choose befuddlement or a sense of things imperceptibly, overwhelmingly clear.

Living, breathing, in a deeply violent world, I try to let silent cinema act on me, but as I have tried to document here, I end up falling asleep. In "real" life, sounds rarely match up with things, and things, the stuff of life, are different from images. Silent film comes more dangerously close to the way things work before we make them mesh than its contemporary progeny: the movies. It's a cryptic cinema that will not explain itself. It invites a gauziness. In silent cinema, on floors made of glass, bodies are allowed like gondolas to float. Silent film plays naturally weighted gestures and careful choreography against each other; it puts the indexical and the impressionistic side by side; it sets a radiance, a gleam, a glint, a flicker on the flat black floorboards of a stage.

At *Le Giornate del Cinema Muto*, we amble along canals toward parts of the town of Sacile that other festival goers might not have discovered. To a park, for example, with a stream banked by trees and a view of the Dolomites. We eat

pizza stuffed with ricotta, polenta, and wild mushrooms in season; we sip mineral water flavored with lemon. A foot-bridge arcs so dramatically here that boys must push rather than ride their bikes across it. Buckles on school satchels clank, and a fish flops, swimming sideways and against the stream. The festival's madding crowd remains hobbled like a sculptured mass at the café directly adjacent to the theater. Roaming the bright streets of Italy or sitting in a darkened theater normally would present no competition to me. But the theater isn't dark: it is lit by something magical these days, the days of silent cinema.

What would it take to at once stay awake and let silence reign? To let our imaginations stretch farther than our fears?

NOTES

The author gratefully acknowledges support from the Beaupre Hope and Heritage Endowment and the Alumni Association Faculty Development Fund at the University of Rhode Island that made possible her attendance at the twenty-fifth annual Le Giornate del Cinema Muto Festival, Sacile, Italy, 2006. Thanks, too, to Erika Goldman for help with this essay's title.