

# THE GLOWING FACE: A REDEFINITION OF THE CONCEPT OF *PHOTOGÉNIE* FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF CONTEMPORARY CINEMA

JOSEP LAMBIES

## ON THE NOTION OF GLOWING

---

From a historical perspective, the idea of the glowing face explored in this article cannot be dissociated from the early years of cinema. The connection between the two is reflected in the writings of Jean Epstein, where we can find various references to the experience of those first spectators who, in the solitude of the dark theatre, were the first to see a gigantic face appear on the screen in a close-up. That face seemed like a spectre made of supernatural light, a light that could only belong to the cinematic medium. In one of this best-known books, *The Intelligence of a Machine*, Epstein writes: "Inside the well of the eye's pupil, a spirit crafts its oracles. This immense gaze, one would like to touch it—if it weren't so laden with a possibly dangerous power. Nor does it appear to be a fable that light has a tangible mass" (2015: 65). In relation to this immense face, Epstein introduces a concept which, as Francesco

Casetti (2005: 17) points out, has become irrevocably associated with the early days of film theory: *photogénie*.

While it is true that in Epstein's work the meaning of the word *photogénie* is broad and variable, it is clear that in most cases it refers to a fantastical or even phantasmagorical quality of filmed faces. Epstein argues that cinema has the power to transform the human face or to draw out something of its beauty and weirdness. It is a power rather like Sigmund Freud's notion *unheimlich*, which affects things that look familiar and yet at the same time seem strange, as if unknown to us. In a later essay, Epstein would write: "In the expressions of a face that filled the whole screen, a world was revealed with a much finer movement. It was still a physical movement, but one that meticulously translated the movement of the soul" (2021: 417). With their oversized dimensions on the big screen, the actors' and actresses' faces

were endowed with microscopic movements never before perceived by the human eye.

This subtle movements of the photogenic event described by Epstein is evocative of the world of moving images in Marcel Proust's work. For example, it recalls the series of dreamlike visions around Albertine Simonet's face in the last part of *Within a Budding Grove* (1918). When the protagonist meets Albertine and looks closely at her face, he notices a mole on her chin that occupies a very specific place in the topography of her features. However, when he tries to conjure up the image of Albertine in his mind, he sees this same mole that he believed to be perfectly positioned moving from one side of her face to the other, making an invisible journey across her skin. The mole is thus transformed into what the ancient Greeks called a *phantasia*, a point of contact with a concealed dimension characterised by its volatile nature and its fragility, like the insects in flames to which the philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman dedicated the two books comprising his *Essais sur l'apparition: Phasmes* (2015a) and *Phalènes* (2015b).

Like the gigantic face described by Epstein in *The Intelligence of a Machine*, Albertine's face glows. This happens at the moment that the protagonist leans forward to kiss her and sees her close up:

In the state of exaltation in which I was, Albertine's round face, lit by an inner flame as a night-light, stood out in such relief that, imitating the rotation of a glowing sphere, it seemed to me to be turning, like those Michelangelo figures which are being swept away in a stationary and vertiginous whirlwind (Proust, 2010: 594).

In his article "The Image of Proust", included in the first volume of *Illuminations*, Walter Benjamin writes that "the free-floating forms of the *mémoire involontaire* are still in large part isolated, though enigmatically present, visual images" (1968: 214). From Benjamin's perspective, the glow radiating from Albertine's face in the passage of the kiss could be described as suggestive of an image that

penetrates the memory. What is particularly interesting is that it very clearly possesses the same qualities as the huge face on the film screen.

For Epstein, the question of *photogénie* has to do with the unfathomable. Epstein argues that cinema teaches us to be taken aback by "a reality of which perhaps nothing has yet been comprehended, of which perhaps nothing is comprehensible" (2021: 410). Years later, in *The Cinema, or The Imaginary Man*, Edgar Morin would revisit the idea of *photogénie*, suggesting that "ethereal spirits" and "ghostly doubles" are incarnated in cinema in proportion to "the visible limit of their invisibility" (2005: 65). Following in Epstein's wake, Morin seems to be saying that like the face of Albertine Simonet, cinematic faces possess a secret life. This article proposes an interpretation of this unfathomable or invisible movement that defines *photogénie* as the set of signs of a mnemonic dimension of the image that points towards a historical kind of knowledge.

In methodological terms, the notion of "glow" used here is related to Benjamin's reflections on dialectical images that can bring unrelated timeframes into contact and conflict with each other. For Benjamin, dialectical images are living, luminous images: images that glow. In *The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire*, he writes: "The dialectical image is a flashing image. Thus, the image of the past is to be held fast as an image that flashes in the 'now' of recognition" (quoted in Wolin, 1994: 126). In Benjamin's work, the flashing image has a regressive quality; it returns to and invokes the atavistic. This is a point of view he would repeat not long after writing his work on Bau-

---

**THE NOTION OF GLOW IS RELATED TO BENJAMIN'S REFLECTIONS ON DIALECTICAL IMAGES THAT CAN BRING UNRELATED TIMEFRAMES INTO CONTACT AND CONFLICT WITH EACH OTHER**

---

delaire, in the paraliomena to his *Theses on the Concept of History*, where he suggests that “the dialectical image is an occurrence of ball lightning [Kugelblitz] that runs across the whole horizon of the past” (1998: 403).

Drawing on Benjamin’s theories, and especially on the temporal formula that gives rise to the ball lightning that flashes across the horizon of history, this article examines the survival of the glowing face motif in a contemporary context shaped by the discourses that digital images have inspired. In this sense, this study is aligned the perspective of Christophe Wall-Romana, who suggests that Epstein’s work seems “much closer to our new yet unsettled digital regime” than it is to classical cinema (2015: 13). My study begins with the analysis of a selection of glowing faces featured in recent films, which, despite being mutually distinct, all share a common denominator: they are all presented in a luminous atmosphere that makes an ephemeral connection to early 20<sup>th</sup>-century writings on the question of *photogénie*. In these faces, we can glimpse the possibility of a return to the experience of the

first cinematic images, as if that glowing light that exposes them were a manifestation of the light of primitive cinema.

## **GRETCHEN THROUGH THE LIGHTNING**

There is a scene in *Faust* (Aleksandr Sokurov, 2011) that revolves around the glow of a face. It is the moment when Gretchen’s eyes meet Faust’s and suddenly, as if by a spell, a shaft of light of unknown origin shines into the bedroom and envelops the two characters (played by Isolda Dychauk and Johannes Zeiler). All falls silent, and time slows down almost to the point of stopping. Faust’s gaze grows larger on the screen, while in the reverse shot, Gretchen’s face appears bathed in radiant light, as if floating in the ether. Her features fade to the point of invisibility, immersed in light and gradually dissolving until at last they are no more than a vague outline: a trace. In his book *Image et mémoire*, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben defines the trace as that which “evokes an origin at the very moment of its disappearance” (1998: 60). From this perspective, Gretchen’s

Figure 1. *Faust* (Aleksandr Sokurov, 2011)





Figure 2. *The Fall of the House of Usher* (*La chute de la maison Usher*, Jean Epstein, 1928)

face vanishing in the light has a quality of reminiscence.

In 1927, while making his film *Napoléon* (*Napoléon vu par Abel Gance*), French filmmaker Abel Gance, a friend of Epstein's, wrote an essay titled "Has the Age of the Image Arrived?", in which he discusses the power of such overlit faces—literally "inflamed by their own luminosity"—that fill up the frame in close-up. At the end of his essay, Gance expresses a dream of using cinema one day to "conjure up the great bonfire from which all beings come" (quoted in Romaguera i Ramió & Alsina Thevenet, 1989: 455). These words clearly take on new meaning in the image of Gretchen's face in *Faust*, the numinous image that does not conceal its digital plasticity, touched by a contemporary light, a light that belongs to "now" yet at the same time possesses a timeless quality. It is a light that contains a foundational memory that speaks to us of the place from which the first images came. Sokurov might be said to lose himself in Gretchen's face as if in hope of rediscovering in it the first faces of cinematic history.

It is no mere coincidence that the meeting of gazes in *Faust* bears marked similarities to a scene in one of Epstein's most acclaimed films, *The Fall of the House of Usher* (*La chute de la maison Usher*, 1928). In the scene where Roderick (Jean Debucourt) is painting Madeleine's portrait (Marguerite Gance), his gaze appears enlarged in the shot; he lunges forward, as if wanting to engulf the screen, just like Faust. In the next shot, Madeleine's body, constrained in a position of agony, begins to droop like a wilting flower. It is a body suspended between restlessness and stillness, between life and death. Her face flickers, like the flame of one of the candles that illuminates it in the scene. There follows a montage of shots from different angles, very typical of 1920s avant-garde cinema, in which the image of a marble bust suddenly appears superimposed over the blurred image of Madeleine. Finally, we see it in a negative exposure, as if to indicate the place of a vacuum; a shot containing little more than a glowing light marking the outline of her face, as if it were an image of both her ghost and her death mask.

From Benjamin's theoretical perspective, there is a secret connection between the two faces shown in Epstein's and Sokurov's films. Both combine the absent and the illuminated, the trace that vanishes and the lightning flash that crystallises it. The parameters of these two elements determine how they relate to each other and, consequently, how they relate to time. The dialogue between these two images of faces is encompassed in the rich methodological framework of anachronism that underpins much of Didi-Huberman's work. The underlying premise of his essay *Devant le temps* (2006) is that Benjamin's dialectical image possesses an anachronistic dimension. According to Didi-Huberman, the dialectical image should be understood as the result of a series of overlapping presents, heterogeneous timeframes that meet and clash in the image, thereby charting a constellation. From the perspective of anachronism, Didi-Huberman recasts the idea of lightning in the following terms:

*Lightning power, as if the glow produced by the clash were the only light possible to render visible the true historicity of things. There is a fragility in this fleeting appearance, as the very moment they are made visible, these things are doomed to being immersed again almost immediately in the darkness of their disappearance, at least in virtuality* (2006: 151).<sup>1</sup>

Gretchen's shining face in Sokurov's film is the lightning apparition which, just before being extinguished completely, is charged with time, as if this were the power that her luminous aura grants her. The idea of charging images with time can also be found in the work of Didi-Huberman (2006) and Agamben (2010). Both authors express a desire to study the history of images from a phantasmagorical perspective, in terms that continue the model established by Aby Warburg in close to fifty panels of the *Mnemosyne Atlas*. This is a model that seeks in every image the memory of its past lives, the record of the successive inscriptions in time; a model that sheds light on the

---

## A FACE LIKE GRETCHEN'S IN FAUST IS THE RESURGENCE OF CINEMA'S FIRST FACES

---

eternal return of those secret spectres that lurk in the subconscious of images and their history. Following Warburg, the glowing face could be said to exhibit a spectral quality. As early as 1921, in his acclaimed publication *Bonjour Cinéma*, Epstein wrote: "I find all the faces I have ever seen in [the cinematic face], a ghost of memories" (2021: 72).

The glowing faces are shapes emerging out of the memory. In this sense, a face like Gretchen's in *Faust* is the resurgence of cinema's first faces. Like Sokurov, many filmmakers in recent years have shown an interest in placing the human face once again in the throes of a luminous trance, as if they were trying to recall the experience of those first spectators described by Epstein in *The Intelligence of a Machine*. This is the common theme that connects three very different films: *Despite the Night* (Malgré la nuit, Philippe Grandrieux, 2015), *The Lighthouse* (Robert Eggers, 2019) and *Inglourious Basterds* (Quentin Tarantino, 2009), whose respective depictions of glowing faces contain the memory of a primitive gesture expressed in contemporary terms. In filming these faces, these directors reveal a longing to descend to ground zero, the origin point of all images, and perhaps also the place to which they all must one day return.

---

## A RETURN TO CINEMA'S INFANCY

---

*Despite the Night* begins with the face of Lola, a dancer who dances, shimmers and vanishes into an amnesiac darkness as it passes through the visions of the protagonist's subconscious. This film is essentially a ghost story imagined by a sleepwalker or a dying man, which could be interpreted as a kind of Proustian nightmare. It even ends with a Proustian reference to a mother's kiss, although in this case it is not a child wanting to be



tucked in at bedtime but an adult corpse beginning to decompose who wishes to be bid farewell with a final gesture of affection. In this descent into hell, Grandrieux speaks to us of the nature of the cinematic image. The face of the dancer, Lola (Lola Norda), right at the beginning of the film, explodes like the projector lights in the opening frames of *Persona* (Ingmar Bergman, 1966) before the faded image of Bibi Andersson's face begins to take shape on the white wall of the morgue. Like that scene, the beginning of *Despite the Night* is an allusion to the first gasps of cinematography.

Lola's face possesses a blazing quality. Grandrieux seems to find in it the same flammable vibration of Loïe Fuller's serpentine dance that so fascinated the Lumière brothers and that was described by Didi-Huberman in his *Essais sur l'apparition* as the trajectory of a moth in flames, who before being consumed by the fire offers its most magnificent flight (2015b: 36). To this vision of the flaming moth we could add the words of

Jacques Rancière, who in an essay titled "Le moment de la danse" argues that Loïe Fuller's whirling performance is not the expression of a type of universal movement of life but an image that generates other images (2018: 77). In this sense, Fuller's serpentine dance is like the primordial bonfire referred to by Abel Gance. It could thus be argued that what Grandrieux is seeking to do with the dancer's glowing face in *Despite the Night* is to confront us with the luminous energy that radiated from cinema's first images.

The above confirms Robert Stam's suggestion in his book *Film Theory* that "[p]re-cinema and post-cinema have come to resemble each other" (2000: 318). This idea has been taken up by many of the authors who, in an effort to make sense of the idiosyncrasies of digital filmmaking, have recognised in it a return to the beginning. In *Hacia una imagen no-tiempo*, Sergi Sánchez asserts that the digital image "looks back without anger and sees itself in the mirror of cinema's origins" (2013:

**Figure 3. *Despite the Night* (Malgré la nuit, Philippe Grandrieux, 2015)**

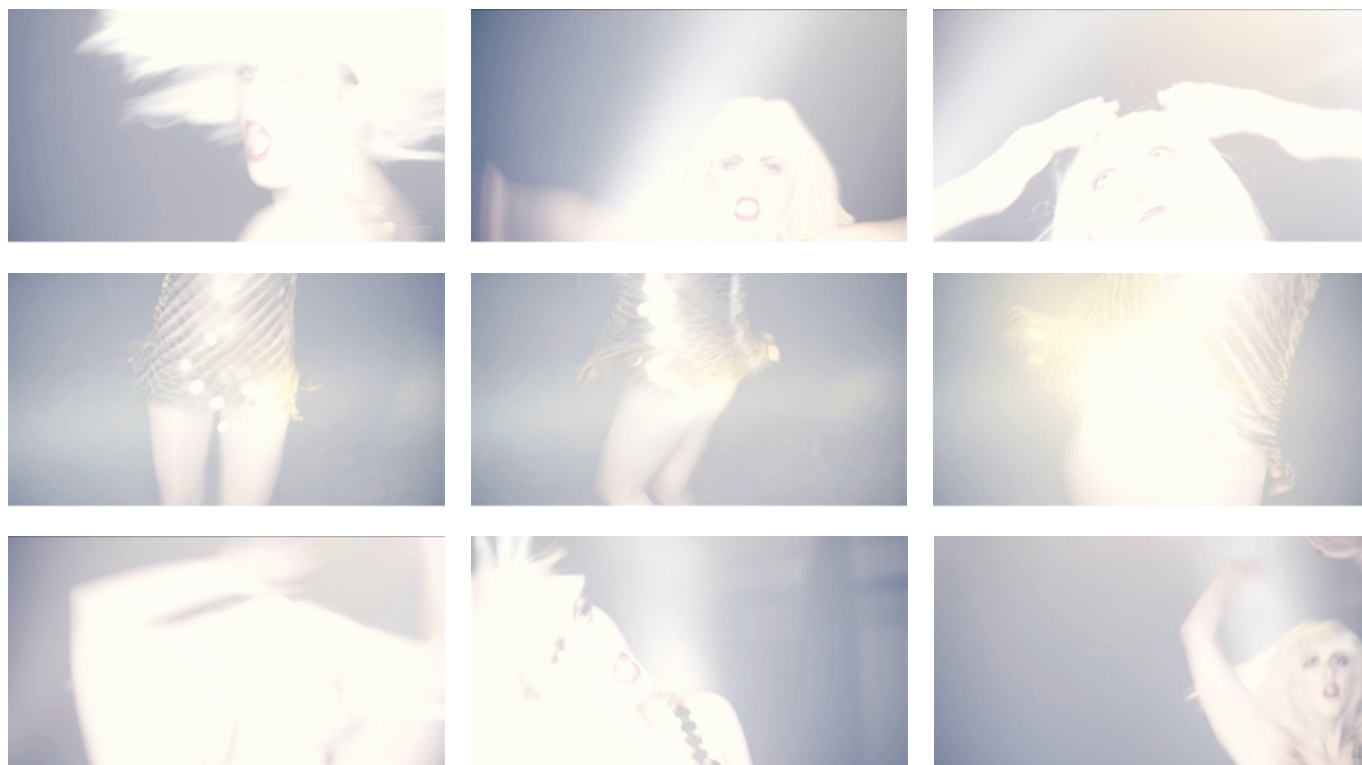




Figure 4. *The Lighthouse* (Robert Eggers, 2019)

136). It is curious that Robert Eggers's *The Lighthouse*, a film shot on celluloid but subsequently processed and enhanced using digital technology, should be one of the recent films that has represented this idea most effectively. In the film's final sequence, Howard (Robert Pattinson) climbs madly up the stairs of the lighthouse, like Prometheus stealing fire from the gods, determined to make the power of the light his own. He reaches the lantern, takes it between the palms of his hands and electrocutes himself with it. His face is then transformed by a colossal scream. Beneath his electrified grimace, what we see is the power of an archaic image.

It is here that *The Lighthouse* offers a particularly interesting reading. On the one hand, it is an old sailor's tale, close to the world of Herman Melville, set on a small island off the coast of New England around 1890. On the other, it is also a story about cinema, a fact made explicit in the cinematography, in the use of a high-contrast black and white, and in the grainy texture of the

images. The light of the lighthouse itself hints at a metaphor for the cinematographic apparatus. That the story should be set at the end of the 19th century, in the decade of the invention of the cinematograph, suggests a return to the infancy of the art form that Jean-Luc Godard discusses in his *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988-1998): an infancy characterised by experiments with chronophotography and optical toys. The lantern room of the lighthouse, with its glass mechanism revolving in the centre, is like the inside of a praxinoscope, the successor to the zoetrope, with its pyramid of mirrors on an axis that put the images in motion and gave them a kind of luminosity.

Robert Pattinson's scream also bears a dialectical resemblance to the first moving portrait of which there is a record, taken by Étienne-Jules Marey's student Georges Demenÿ in 1891, with a device he himself had designed, which he called the phonoscope. The portrait consisted of 18 images showing the face of a man (Demenÿ himself) over the course of one second, while he

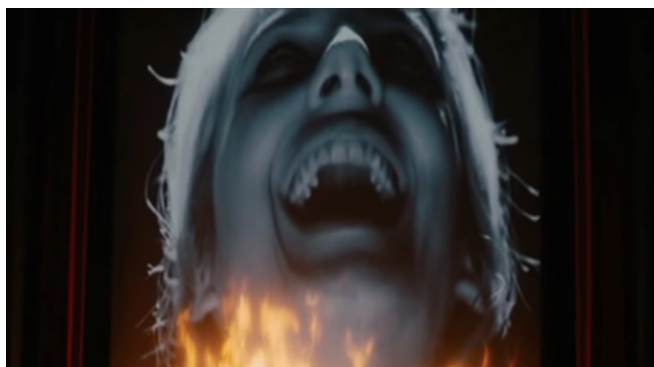


Figure 5. *Inglourious Basterds* (Quentin Tarantino, 2009)

## AT THE END OF *INGLOURIOUS BASTERDS*, THE SCREEN IS ENGULFED IN A CLOUD OF SMOKE ONTO WHICH ARE PROJECTED THE HAZY FEATURES OF SHOSANNA'S GHOST

spoke three words: "*Je vous aime*." In his book *Du visage au cinéma*, Jacques Aumont explains that to ensure sufficient exposure, Demenÿ inserted two mirrors to redirect the sunlight into his eyes. His efforts were so aggressive that the light ended up blinding him (1998: 36-37). Thus, while he tried to utter his declaration of love, his face was constrained in a grimace of discomfort, with his eyes shut tightly, while the blinding sunlight hit him full in the face. Pattinson's pained expression when he becomes possessed by the light offers an amplified replica of the effect of this pre-cinematic incident.

There is another, perhaps less obvious precursor to Pattinson's face in *The Lighthouse*, which offers a new perspective on its relationship to cinema's origins: *How Green Was My Valley* (John Ford, 1941), a film articulated entirely by the voice-over of a man whose melancholy tone leads us through the landscape of his childhood memories, confirming that cinema speaks a language very similar to the language of memory, with its murky terrain and its dark corners. It is significant that the furthest depths of this memory should be found in the shadowy recesses of a mine, rather like Plato's Cave, where a boy with a coal-blackened face (like Pattinson's face in *The Lighthouse*) pushes a cart with a burning oil lamp hanging on the front. The oil lamp swings from side to side, casting its light on the boy's face. This image seems to hint at the very memory of cinema itself, a memory made of flickers and shadows. We might even interpret the protagonist's childhood memories as a kind of allegory for the infancy of the medium.



Quentin Tarantino evokes the giant face of cinema's first years at the end of *Inglourious Basterds*. After Shosanna (Mélanie Laurent) is gunned down by Frederick (Daniel Brühl), her lifeless body is shown sprawled on the floor of the projection room in a puddle of blood. Meanwhile, the projector, where the film reels are rolling, emits a flickering light that once again alludes to the cinematic apparatus. Suddenly, a close-up of Shosanna's face appears projected on the movie screen, looking down on all the Nazis sitting in the audience. A short time later, the screen catches fire, and the vision presented to the spectators is the black-and-white image of Shosanna's vengeful ghost, laughing behind the flames. The glowing face here quite literally becomes a burning face. At the end of the scene, the screen is engulfed in a cloud of smoke onto which are projected the hazy and all but extinguished features of Shosanna's ghost, which dissolve while the echo of her infernal laughter resounds from beyond.

In a manner so graphic that it perhaps verges on the ironic, Tarantino expresses Didi-Huberman's idea that the glowing image is destined to disappear in order to enter the virtuality of time. For Didi-Huberman, that time is complex. On the one hand, it is a retrospective time, a time remembered. But on the other, it makes a promise for the future. This idea appears in *Essais sur l'apparition*, when he establishes that every image contains within it "the past retold and the memory of the future" (2015a: 142). From this perspective, very close to Erich Auerbach's notion of the figure (1998), these luminous faces charged with memory would also be expected to prompt reflection on the future of the cinematographic image. This is the context in which we find Robin Wright's glowing face in *The Congress* (Ari Folman, 2012), a prophetic fable with dystopian pretensions, based on Stanislaw Lem's *The Futurological Congress* (1971), reconstructed around the mirages and illusions of digital culture.

## **ROBIN'S FACE LOOKING TO THE FUTURE**

Ari Folman conceived *The Congress* as a story about the future of the cinematographic image. It is the story of an actress (Robin Wright, playing an alter ego of herself) who is offered a large sum of money by a studio in exchange for full rights to her digitized image: a timeless image that will never age, and that can be multiplied, reproduced *ad infinitum* and exploited for commercial purposes. Pressured by difficult circumstances, Robin ends up taking the offer. In the next scene, we see Robin waiting in a hallway. She is welcomed by a man whom she recognises at once as a former cinematographer, who explains to her that he has had to adapt to the changing times, the transformation of the industry, and thus he has reinvented himself as the official scanner of the stars. Robin gapes at him in surprise. "You were such a great cinematographer," she blurts out. He replies: "Come on, don't feel sorry. The other guys are at home, doing nothing. [...] At least I get to work with the actors, and... light." These last words hint at the encounter between faces and light in cinema's early days.

In *The Congress*, the memory of cinema's origins comes to the surface when Robin steps inside a sphere-shaped structure fitted with countless photographic cameras. The device looks rather like a sophisticated version of the contraptions that Muybridge and Marey used to capture the very first moving pictures. From the control room, Robin's agent (played by Harvey Keitel) begins telling her a moving story with touches of humour and a dramatic ending. Every detail of his story is reflected in Robin's expressions, beginning with a smile that quickly turns into a laugh, then a look of concern, worry, and finally a grimace of terror. The scene's composition is evocative of the beginnings of classical Hollywood cinema. The nature of the relationship established between the two characters stirs up the ghosts of directors and actresses of the silent period: Keitel could easily be

a contemporary version of D. W. Griffith giving instructions while the camera moves in on the trembling, tear-streaked face of Lillian Gish.

While the agent continues with his story, the cameras flash all around Robin, who remains standing in the middle of the structure with her arms extended, like a prisoner in front of a firing squad. This image recalls Baudrillard (2006) description of the culture of the simulacrum as a perfect crime. The contract that Robin has signed includes a clause that stipulates that she can never act in a film again, or appear on television or even on the stage. She can never again show herself in public. Folman depicts a time when actors are no longer necessary, when cinema no longer requires a pre-existing reality because morphing, CGI and digital animation can invent new faces, new landscapes, new galaxies and new bodies out of nothing (De Felipe & Gómez, 2014). These illusions are severing the relationship between the image and the physical, tangible world. In this sense, when Robin enters the scanner a rupture takes place: on the one hand, the scanner will produce a multiplicity of similar images, like the scientist's machine in Adolfo Bioy Casares's novel *The Invention of Morel* (1940); on the other, Robin knows that she is being consigned to a life in the shadows, i.e., she must disappear.

*The Congress* consolidates what Paul Virilio called the aesthetics of disappearance, a concept described in his book of the same name. The book contains stories like that of Howard Hughes, the business magnate who locked himself away in a vault and projected a kind of omnipresent shadow around the world, in a manner similar to Dr. Mabuse: a shadow that Virilio describes as a "ubiquitous absence" (1988: 27). Hughes's vault is not very different from Robin Wright's scanner in *The Congress*: in both cases something is multiplied, and at the same time something is extinguished. At the same time, these two architectural devices both bear a resemblance to the hall of mirrors in *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947), where Orson Welles shows us the huge round face of Rita Hayworth, distorting it and fragmenting it in a series of close-ups that the actor Everett Sloane limps through again and again, pulling himself along on his crutches. The sequence ends with a shoot-out, the mirrors crack and the gigantic face breaks apart until it finally collapses, leaving the space of the frame empty.

At the end of *The Lady from Shanghai*, Welles breaks classical Hollywood cinema's codes of transparency and clarity to take it to its conclusion. Folman tilts in the opposite direction, but the effect is analogous. The camera pans around Ro-

Figure 6. *The Congress* (Ari Folman, 2013)

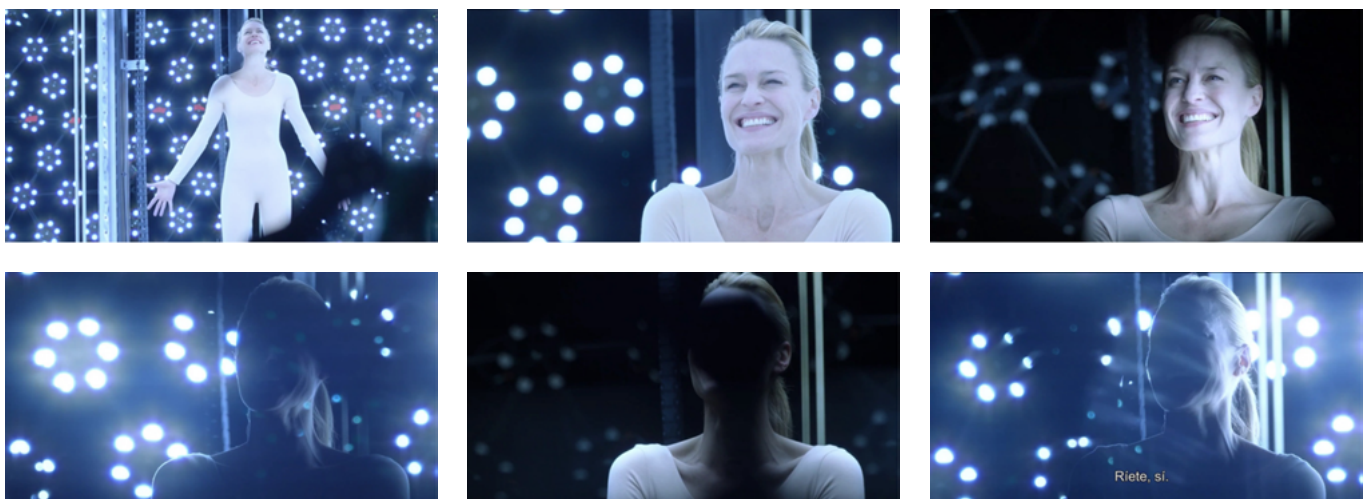




Figure 7. *The Lady from Shanghai* (Orson Welles, 1947)

bin's luminous face, and in her terrified stare, her anxious eyes, there appears a foreboding abyss. It is the sign of the dawning of a new age of the image. The second part of the film thus takes place almost entirely in a psychedelic animated world that has totally replaced the real world; a neo-Baroque universe (Calabrese, 1990) that all mortals have fled to, under the influence of a drug, to escape a devastated planet whose atmosphere has become unbreathable. Folman makes Robin's face a myth for this new era, interpreting myth here literally as a narrative that seeks to explain our origins, or at least to explain the mysteries of an age that preceded our own. Inside the luminous sphere, glittering with camera flashes, Robin's face becomes the primordial image that burned in Gance's bonfire; the image that has disappeared, that will always be missing, and to which all other images hereinafter will owe a debt.

## THE CONTEMPORARY GAZE

Over the last twenty years, various authors have been arguing that the technological changes resulting from the rise of digital imaging require us to rethink the very nature of cinema. Some, such

as Paolo Cherchi Usai in his book *The Death of Cinema* (2005), have suggested these changes may represent the end of the medium. Others, including several cited here, such as Robert Stam and Christophe Wall-Romana, see the digital transformation as a chance for a new start, or at least for a return to an embryonic stage of images that will echo the beginnings of film history and its capacity for experimentation. Based on this idea, in each of the faces analysed in this article it may be possible to glimpse the expression of a discontinuous, non-linear time in line with Walter Benjamin's view of history as a dynamic temporal vortex that is constantly regenerating and reformulating itself. Influenced by Benjamin, Didi-Huberman takes a similar position in the opening pages of *The Surviving Image* when he asserts that "historical discourse is never 'born'. It always recommences" (2018: 1).

Out of this chorus of voices emerges a specific, complex definition of the concept of the contemporary. In his talk "What Is the Contemporary?" delivered at the University of Venice's Faculty of Art and Design, Giorgio Agamben clarified this definition with an eloquent metaphor when he suggested that identifying the contemporary is

like looking at the night sky and trying to find the light of the stars that are moving away from us. "To perceive, in the darkness of the present, that light that tries to reach us but cannot, that is what it means to be contemporary" (2008), he argues. This unearthly light speaks to us of the invisible trajectories and constellations that demarcate the ages. This is the idea that conveyed in the fable Ari Folman composes in *The Congress*: around Robin Wright's face converge the vanishing lines of a series of infinite pasts that flash for an instant in the present and signal the point where the historical narrative must open up to the uncertainty of the future.

Epstein developed his theory of *photogénie* at a time when cinema was consolidating its own language of thought. To understand today that the term *photogénie* could be used to connect the faces of recent films with those of cinema's early years is to assign it a function that is not only obviously aesthetic but also ambitiously historical. The concept of the glowing face discussed in this article speaks to us of how the image relates to time, how it is positioned in relation to it and interrogates it, all of which points to the notion of anachronism as described by Didi-Huberman in his essay *Devant le temps*. The glowing face today possesses a contemporary dimension that directs its gaze across film history. The concept of *photogénie* thus ceases to be of value solely to classical theory and gives rise to a visual formula capable of articulating or even containing a history of images. It thus becomes an operational concept that enables us to integrate the past and to continue explaining cinema in the future. ■

## NOTES

- \* This article summarises one of the lines of research explored in the doctoral thesis "*El rostro y su ausencia. La supervivencia de la fotogenia en el cine contemporáneo*" ("The Face and Its Absence: The Survival of *Photogénie* in Contemporary Cinema" completed in the Department of Communication at Universitat Pompeu Fabra, which at the time of writing has yet to be published.
- 1. Translated from the Spanish: "Poder de *relampagueo*, como si la fulguración producida por el choque fuera la única luz posible para hacer visible la auténtica historicidad de las cosas. Hay una fragilidad que conlleva esta aparición fulgurante, puesto que, una vez hechas visibles, las cosas son condenadas a sumergirse de nuevo casi inmediatamente en la oscuridad de su desaparición, al menos de su virtualidad."

## REFERENCES

- Agamben, G. (1998). *Image et mémoire*. Paris: Éditions Hoëbeke.
- Agamben, G. (2010). *Ninfas*. Valencia: Pre-Textos.
- Agamben, G. (2008) *¿Qué es lo contemporáneo?* Retrieved from <https://19bienal.fundacionpaiz.org.gt/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/agamben-que-es-lo-contemporaneo.pdf>.
- Auerbach, E. (1998). *Figura*. Madrid: Trotta.
- Aumont, J. (1998). *El rostro en el cine*. Barcelona: Paidós.
- Baudrillard, J. (2006). *El crimen perfecto*. Barcelona: Anagrama.
- Benjamin, W. (1998). *Iluminaciones I*. Madrid: Taurus.
- Benjamin, W. (1998). *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Benjamin, Walter. (2003). Paralipomena to "On the Concept of History." Trans. Edmund Jephcott and Howard Eiland. In Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, eds., *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938 – 1940*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Benjamin, W. (2006). Materiales preparatorios del escrito «Sobre el concepto de historia». In R. Mate, *Media-*



- noche en la historia. *Comentarios a las tesis de Walter Benjamin «Sobre el concepto de historia»* (pp. 305-325). Madrid: Trotta.
- Benjamin, W. (2012). *El París de Baudelaire*. Buenos Aires: Eterna Cadencia.
- Calabrese, O. (1990). *La era neobarroca*. Madrid: Cátedra.
- Casetti, F. (2005). *Teorías del cine*. Madrid: Cátedra.
- Cherchi Usai, P. (2005). *La muerte del cine*. Barcelona: Laertes.
- De Felipe, F., Gómez, I. (2014). *El sueño de la visión produce cronoendoscopias: Tratamiento y diagnóstico del trampantojo digital*. Barcelona: Laertes.
- Didi-Huberman, G. (2006). *Ante el tiempo*. Buenos Aires: Adriana Hidalgo.
- Didi-Huberman, G. (2015a). *Ensayos sobre la aparición 1. Falenas*. Santander: Shangrila.
- Didi-Huberman, G. (2015b). *Ensayos sobre la aparición 2. Fasma*s. Santander: Shangrila.
- Didi-Huberman, G. (2009). *La imagen superviviente. Historia del arte y tiempo de los fantasmas según Aby Warburg*. Madrid: Abada Editores.
- Didi-Huberman, G. (2018). *The Surviving Image: Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms: Aby Warburg's History of Art*. Philadelphia: Penn State University Press.
- Epstein, J. (2015). *The Intelligence of a Machine*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Epstein, J. (2021). *Escritos sobre cine (1921-1953)*. Santander: Shangrila.
- Morin, E. (2001). *El hombre imaginario*. Barcelona: Seix Barral.
- Morin, E. (2005). *The Cinema, or the Imaginary Man*. Translated by Lorraine Mortimer. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Proust, M. (1990). *En busca del tiempo perdido. A la sombra de las muchachas en flor*. Madrid: Aguilar.
- Proust, M. (2010). *In Search of Lost Time, Vol. 2: Within a Budding Grove*. London: Vintage.
- Rancière, J. (2018). *Tiempos modernos. Ensayos sobre la temporalidad en el arte y la política*. Santander: Shangrila.
- Romaguera i Ramio, J., Alsina Thevenet, H. (eds.) (1989). *Textos y manifiestos del cine*. Madrid: Cátedra.
- Sánchez, S. (2013). *Hacia una imagen no-tiempo. Deleuze y el cine contemporáneo*. Oviedo: Universidad de Oviedo.
- Stam, R. (2000). *Film Theory: An Anthology*. London: Wiley.
- Stam, R. (2001). *Teorías del cine*. Barcelona: Paidós.
- Virilio, P. (1988). *Estética de la desaparición*. Barcelona: Anagrama.
- Wall-Romana, C. (2016). *Jean Epstein*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Wolin, R. (1994). *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

## THE GLOWING FACE: A REDEFINITION OF THE CONCEPT OF PHOTOGÉNIE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF CONTEMPORARY CINEMA

### Abstract

As Francesco Casetti (2005) suggests, there was an initial period in film theory, up to around the 1940s, that was defined by what has come to be known as classical theory. During this period, a series of discourses were developed that sought to provide the cinematographic image with its own language of thought. Those discourses included the first reflections on the question of the human face on screen. This paper draws on the work of certain pioneering authors—especially Jean Epstein's concept of *photogénie*—to analyse the motif of the human face and how it is being revived in contemporary cinema in the context of the digital image. Taking the perspective of the dialectical method developed by Walter Benjamin, which offers a rich array of concepts such as the *lightning flash* and *glow*, the aim of this article is to identify connections between certain images of contemporary faces and those of early cinema.

### Key words

Face; *Photogénie*; Anachronism; Origins of Cinema; Dialectical Image; Jean Epstein.

### Author

Josep Lambies holds a doctorate in audiovisual communication from Universitat Pompeu Fabra. He has combined his academic research with teaching at educational institutions such as the Cinema and Audiovisual School of Catalonia (ESCAC). He also has extensive experience working as a cultural journalist and film critic. For ten years he was part of the editorial staff of *Time Out* magazine. He has collaborated with and appeared on television and radio programs such as *Àrtic* (Betevé), *La Tribu* (Catalunya Ràdio), and *Tot és comèdia* (SER / Ràdio Barcelona). He currently resides in Washington, D.C. Contact: mail. joseplambies@gmail.com.

### Article reference

Lambies, J. (2022). The Glowing Face: A Redefinition of the Concept of *Photogénie* from the Perspective of Contemporary Cinema. *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, 35, 171-184.

## EL ROSTRO QUE FULGURA. UNA REDEFINICIÓN DEL CONCEPTO DE FOTOGENIA DESDE EL CINE CONTEMPORÁNEO

### Resumen

Según indica Francesco Casetti (2005), existe un primer período de las teorías del cine, el de las así llamadas teorías clásicas, que llega aproximadamente hasta la década de los cuarenta del siglo XX, durante el cual se desarrollan una serie de discursos que tratan de proporcionar a la imagen cinematográfica una forma de pensamiento que le sea propia. Entre ellos, se encuentran las primeras reflexiones sobre el tema del rostro en el plano. El presente artículo toma como referencia los escritos de algunos de estos autores —en especial, los textos de Jean Epstein sobre la *fotogenia*— para empezar a analizar la cuestión del rostro humano tal y como se reaviva en el cine contemporáneo, en el contexto de la imagen digital. Al amparo del pensamiento dialéctico de Walter Benjamin, que ofrece conceptos tan exuberantes como *relampagueo* y *fulgor*, las páginas de este texto pretenden trazar líneas que conecten los rostros de la contemporaneidad con el cine de los orígenes.

### Palabras clave

Rostro; Fotogenia; Anacronismo; Cine digital; Cine de los orígenes; Imagen dialéctica; Jean Epstein.

### Autores

Josep Lambies (Barcelona, 1987) es doctor en Comunicación Audiovisual por la Universitat Pompeu Fabra. Ha combinado su investigación académica con la docencia en centros como ESCAC. Cuenta, además, con un extenso currículum como periodista cultural y crítico de cine. Durante diez años formó parte del equipo de redactores de la revista *Time Out*. Ha colaborado en programas de televisión como *Àrtic* (Betevé) y en programas de radio como *La tribu* (Catalunya Ràdio) y *Tot és comèdia* (SER/Ràdio Barcelona). Actualmente, reside en Washington DC. Contacto: joseplambies@gmail.com.

### Referencia de este artículo

Lambies, J. (2022). El rostro que fulgura. Una redefinición del concepto de fotogenia desde el cine contemporáneo. *L'Atalante. Revista de estudios cinematográficos*, 35, 171-184.

recibido/received: 19.10.2021 | aceptado/accepted: 23.11.2022

Edita / Published by



Licencia / License



ISSN 1885-3730 (print) / 2340-6992 (digital) DL V-5340-2003 WEB [www.revistaatalante.com](http://www.revistaatalante.com) MAIL [info@revistaatalante.com](mailto:info@revistaatalante.com)