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## **‘Grecian dances’ and the transformations of corporeality in the age of moving images**

**Pantelis Michelakis**

The presence of dancing girls ‘in desert tents or in the courts of Roman emperors or within the palaces of oriental monarchs’<sup>1</sup> is a well-established theme of films related to the worlds of the ancient Mediterranean and Near East throughout the twentieth century. In fact, dancing girls are so common in such films that they often go unnoticed by both the characters within the film narratives themselves and their spectators. As David Meyer argues, these dancers are little more than ‘set-dressing – part of the furnishings, mood enhancers – which add nothing to the narrative.’<sup>2</sup> But in parallel to the dancing girls of epic and sword-and-sandal films, and completely independently from them, another type of dancer inspired by antiquity developed in the course of the twentieth century. This is a type of dancer associated with experimental, avant-garde choreography by and with the film camera. From Martha Graham’s *Night Journey* to Pina Bausch’s *Orpheus and Eurydice* and DV8’s *Enter Achilles*,<sup>3</sup> the art form of ‘dance film’ returned to the concept of the Greek body to explore complex ideas about alternative forms of aesthetic, personal and political freedom.<sup>4</sup> The aim of this chapter is not to examine these two distinct types of dance film but to return to a point in time before this bifurcation between commercial and avant-garde forms of film takes place, to explore the

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<sup>1</sup> Mayer (2013) 100.

<sup>2</sup> Mayer (2013) 100.

<sup>3</sup> All three are available on DVD in *Martha Graham: In Performance* (Criterion 2007), *Orpheus und Eurydike* (Bel Air Classique 2009) and *Three Ballets by Dv8* (Arthaus 2007) respectively.

<sup>4</sup> This is a point made by Zanobi (2010) 254 specifically in relation to Pina Bausch and her return to Isadora Duncan’s ideas, but I argue that it has wider applicability. On the art of film dance more broadly, see Brannigan (2011). On the role of antiquity in modern dance, see the collection of essays in Macintosh (2010).

significance of some of the ‘roads not taken’<sup>5</sup> by cinema for the conceptualisation of the relation between the modern body and ancient Greece.<sup>6</sup> The emergence of cinema at the end of the nineteenth century marks a profound shift in the way in which Greece is conceptualised in the modern world. A culture previously perceived as remote and inaccessible, the object of contemplation from a distance or the product of the imagination, is suddenly transformed into a vivid but fleeting reality to be experienced through the senses. Early cinema makes possible the generation of new modes of perception and thought in modernity within which Greece becomes not only more vivid, but also more complex, dynamic, and enigmatic. Dance is one of the most distinctive features of this reconceptualisation of Greece in cinematic modernity.

The popularity of dance in early cinema is probably not surprising in view of the emergence of modern dance as an art form at around the same time as cinema itself. Pioneering dancers of the end of the nineteenth century and of the first two decades of the twentieth century such as Isadora Duncan, Loie Fuller, Vaslav Nijinsky, Florence Fleming Noyes, and Ruth St Denis made limited appearances on film, but their profound influence is felt throughout early cinema. The most dominant among the styles of ‘ancient’ dancing that remain in vogue throughout the silent cinema period are the exotic and orientalisng dances associated with Pharaonic Egypt and the lands of the Bible.<sup>7</sup> But in addition to them, there is a distinct style of dance commonly identified in the critical and commercial discourse of the time as ‘Grecian’. For instance, ‘Grecian dance’ features prominently among the ‘seven exquisite dances’ that ‘every girl, every woman ... can learn at home’, as put by an advertisement for a fictitious mail order dance course in the early 1920s, a course complete with a fictional dance master.<sup>8</sup> By this time, ‘Grecian dances’ are so popular that generic, ‘eleventh-hour

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<sup>5</sup> Gunning (1983) 366.

<sup>6</sup> On the challenges posed by early cinema to the later divide between mainstream and art-house cinema and to its generic configurations of antiquity, see Michelakis & Wyke (2013) and Michelakis (forthcoming).

<sup>7</sup> See Mayer (2013).

<sup>8</sup> This full-page advertisement can be found in the issues of *The Motion Picture Magazine* and *Shadowland* for July 1923 and of *The Picture Play Magazine* for March and June 1924. On the invention of this fake dance course and its dance master Sergei Marinoff by the novelist and screenwriter Vera Caspary, see her autobiographical account in Caspary (1979) 57-63.

suggestions' for relevant film sets begin to appear in trade journals of the film industry.<sup>9</sup> The story of the cultural phenomenon discussed in this chapter can be sketched out in different ways: in relation to the biographical trajectories and artistic networks of the directors, actors, choreographers, dancers, and artist's models involved; in relation to the aesthetics and politics of other dancing styles of the period on which Grecian dances draw and which they influence, including classical ballet, the variety-style dances of popular theatre, artistic and experimental dance, dance as a social practice (especially ragtime), and dance as a means of female education and emancipation; or through an evolutionary scheme of successive stages in the history of Grecian dance, from lowly or, conversely, lofty beginnings (depending on whether those beginnings are sought in popular stage entertainment or in modern dance pioneers and in scholarly beliefs of the time about the possibility of reconstructing ancient Greek dance from vase paintings and sculpture<sup>10</sup>) to the peak of a distinct and popular style and finally to a descent into mannerism and parody. In what follows I undertake a close look at a selective sample of the many, broadly forgotten and difficult to access, archival films produced before the advent of sound which feature this style of dance, with two aims. First, I want to explore some of the fault-lines of this seemingly homogeneous and uniform style of dance. Second, I want to argue that despite its internal tensions, 'Grecian dance' must be set apart from other 'ancient' dances celebrating the lightly-clad or naked body of the dancer on screen because, unlike them, it strikes a precarious but important balance between cinema's drive for entertainment and its drive for moral uplift. More broadly, it must be set apart from other cinematic investments in the human body because it responds to cinema's preoccupation with the corporeal catastrophes of modernity with dynamism and energy.<sup>11</sup>

A good starting point for thinking about the issues to be explored in this chapter is the film *Sunnyside* which was produced and directed by Charlie Chaplin in 1919.<sup>12</sup> The scene of 'an unconscious Charlie dreaming of dancing with wood-nymphs' that features half way through

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<sup>9</sup> See the 'Temple Muse' setting offered as a solution to such dances in *Moving Picture World*, 3 October 1925, p.401.

<sup>10</sup> On the influential work by Emmanuel (1896) and its impact, see Naerebout (2010) and Albright (2010).

<sup>11</sup> On the bodily crisis that occurs around the turn of the twentieth century, i.e. at the time of the emergence of cinema, see Väliaho (2010) with bibliography. On the role of early modern choreography in developing aesthetic responses to that crisis, see McCarren (2003).

<sup>12</sup> The film is available on DVD in *The Essential Charlie Chaplin - Vol. 11: Sunnyside / A Day's Pleasure / The Kid* (Cobra Entertainment LLC, 2010).

the film can be seen as a digression from the film's main narrative but also, in many ways, as 'the film's centrepiece' (**Figure 1**).<sup>13</sup> At a most concrete level, this sequence can be seen as a parody of the modernist ballet *Afternoon of a Faun*, choreographed by the Russian dancer and choreographer Vaslav Nijinsky in 1912,<sup>14</sup> a parody filtered through Chaplin's distinctive pantomime, disrupted by comic gags, contaminated by gestures and movements associated with Pharaonic Egypt (among other ancient cultures), and eventually cut short by the resumption of the film's main narrative as Charlie regains consciousness, and 'the fair maidens bulge out into worldly creatures, headed by the vengeful boss.'<sup>15</sup> At the same time, this sequence engages with a much more diffuse but persistent iconography of classical nymphs dancing in the pastoral landscapes of literature and of visual, plastic, and performing arts. The protagonist of the film is a stranger in an exotic world, yet he interacts with this world as if he was always at home in it. A number of themes are in operation here, supported by but also extending well beyond specific references to this or that work of art: Greece as a land of pastoral bliss, as a land of dreams, as a land of sensorial excitement and of amorous license to be enjoyed through a body in effortless, fluid and graceful movement. The sequence engages with and provides a snapshot of such themes, freezing them in a pregnant moment in time around 1919. At the same time, the sequence sets in motion a wider set of ideas around modernity and antiquity. Greece is not just antithetical to modernity but also linked with it causally: what makes possible or indeed necessary this fantastical world is the shocks of modernity. The whole sequence is presented as a dream, the direct consequence of the frantic life on a modern farm, and more specifically of a ride on an uncontrollable bull that results in an accident that leaves the protagonist of the film unconscious. Getting to Greece is presented as the failure to cross a bridge, as the impact of a near fatal road accident, a pagan equivalent of the Christian haven that can only be reached when the human body has been pushed beyond its limits. Greece is linked with modernity not only antithetically and

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<sup>13</sup> Nye (2012). On the reception of the scene in French film and art critics of the time, especially Élie Faure and Louis Delluc, see Tsivian (2004) 149-155 and Huff (1951) 110. On James Joyce's novel *Ulysses*, see Briggs (1996) 180. On Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Pnin*, see Tsivian (2004) 149-150. On the German film theorist Siegfried Kracauer who discusses it as an example of fantasy embedded in a realist mode of filmmaking that works because of its playfulness, see Kracauer (1960) 86. On dream sequences as a thematic preoccupation in Chaplin's work and as a technique of revealing character nuances, see Lemaster (1997).

<sup>14</sup> On the relation between Chaplin and Nijinsky, see Tsivian (2004) 149-155. On Nijinsky's *Afternoon of a Faun*, see Burt (1995) 73-97 and Farfan (2008) with further bibliography.

<sup>15</sup> Huff (1951) 110.

causally but also analogically, as it replicates the constant movement, the restlessness, and the shocks and thrills of chance encounters with the enigmatic and the unpredictable. To dismiss such a sequence as a narrative digression adding little to the development of the film's plot, or to dismiss it as an example of pure escapism, is to seriously misunderstand its function and significance. This Greece in movement is not an antidote to modernity to be administered in a controlled environment in order to counter the effects of modernity. Rather it is a symptom, a side-effect, a reaction that cannot be controlled rationally that is at once compulsive and inevitable.

This dream-like sequence of dancing with 'phantom girls in Greek costumes from a never-never land'<sup>16</sup> in Charlie Chaplin's *Sunnyside* can only make sense when viewed in the larger context of the craze for Grecian dances at the beginning of the twentieth century: in vaudeville houses and music halls, in modernist ballet, photography, painting, literature and poetry. But also and above all in numerous, now forgotten, films of the period that, like *Sunnyside*, both capture the diversity and complexity of this rich cultural phenomenon and open new possibilities for it. The films in question range from one-minute or two-minute recordings of stage dances in the late 1890s to feature-length films in the late 1910s containing carefully choreographed dance sequences. Arguably, Grecian dances on film oscillate between two distinct but interrelated dancing styles. On the one hand, there is a very popular dance style that is mimetic and character-based, engaging with and 'bound to pictorial modes of choreography and perception.'<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, a new dance style emerges during this period that exceeds its narrative function and the parameters of the still image, accentuating uninterrupted and often abstract movement as 'an "affective" force',<sup>18</sup> a force exemplifying the movement of modernity.'<sup>19</sup> *Sunnyside* illustrates the oscillation between these two styles, and sometimes their uncomfortable coexistence, but other films from the period seem to be much less divided on their choice between the two and on the affective responses they trigger.

### **Pictorialism and abstraction**

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<sup>16</sup> Kracauer (1960) 86.

<sup>17</sup> Brannigan (2011) 34.

<sup>18</sup> Brannigan (2011) 34.

<sup>19</sup> Brannigan (2011) 34. On this broader phenomenon of abstraction in early film and dance, see further Andrew (2012) with bibliography.

The American film *Purity*, directed by Rae Berger in 1916 and featuring the artist's model Audrey Munson,<sup>20</sup> invites us to think about dance in relation not to movement but to still images. More specifically it illustrates what the Renaissance dancing master Domenico da Piacenza called 'phantasmata' (phantasms):

I say that whoever wants to learn this art, needs to dance through phantasmata [...] at each tempo you appear as if you had seen Medusa's head, as the poet says; after having performed the movement, you should appear entirely made of stone in that instant and in the next you should put on wings like a falcon moved by hunger, according to the above rule, that is to say, employing measure, memory, manner with measure of ground and air.<sup>21</sup>

As Giorgio Agamben notes, 'Domenico calls "phantasm" (fantasma) a sudden arrest between two movements that virtually contracts within its internal tension the measure and the memory of the entire choreographic series.'<sup>22</sup> In *Purity*, those sudden arrests between movements give structure, pace and flow to a whole series of dance sequences. But seen from such a perspective, 'the true locus of [dancing] is not the body and its movement but the image as a "Medusa's head," as a pause that is not immobile but simultaneously charged with memory and dynamic energy.'<sup>23</sup>

Arguably it is no coincidence that in the same film that dancing is dominated by the aesthetic of the pose, the female protagonist appears not only as a dancer but also as a performer embodying a whole stream of famous classical and neo-classical statues showing 'the interplay between the fantasy of the inanimate object that comes to life and the dream of the living body that turns to stone.'<sup>24</sup> *Purity* features dance sequences alongside a type of live performance which was very popular in the second half of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth, called tableaux vivants or living statuary 'in which live models

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<sup>20</sup> The only surviving print of the film is held at the Archives françaises du film du Centre national du cinéma et de l'image animée in Paris (Bois d'Arcy) and is available for onsite viewing.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Agamben (2013) 7-8.

<sup>22</sup> Agamben (2013) 8.

<sup>23</sup> Agamben (2013) 10.

<sup>24</sup> Nead (2007) 69.

reproduced a well-known painting or sculpture and held the pose for a set period of time.<sup>25</sup> More specifically the film engages with poses plastique, ‘a more specialist form of representation in which models assumed the position of nude figures in well-known works of art or generic mythological and classical subjects.’<sup>26</sup> In a single scene, the film’s protagonist poses in a whole series of works of sculpture: ‘Spring’ by Albert Toft, ‘Abundance’ by Charles Bitter, ‘Allegro’ by A. Fern, ‘Aphrodite of Cnidus’ by Praxiteles, and ‘Descending Night’ by A. A. Weinman for the Panama Pacific International Exposition. As Lynda Nead argues, ‘tableaux vivants ...enjoyed a range of cultural identities from sleazy, vaudeville nudity at one end of the scale to the artistic and edifying reproduction of the finest examples of Western art at the other.’<sup>27</sup> But whereas the performers of living statuary and poses plastique ‘were not naked but were generally covered by close-fitting [and flesh-coloured] body stockings’,<sup>28</sup> *Purity* takes the tension between artistic ambition and sexual titillation to a new level, pushing the limits of representation and representability to an extreme. The dispute between the film’s producers and the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures resulted into a demand on the part of the Board for the drastic reduction of frontal nudity and of sexual suggestiveness in the title cards.<sup>29</sup> As a classical nymph, the film’s lead actress Audrey Munson was at once a source of artistic inspiration for poets, painters and other artists and of financial and sexual exploitation or moral condemnation by much of their environment. The film suggests that an encounter between modernity and classical nymphs can only have two possible outcomes: the more ‘optimistic’, suggested by the fate of the female protagonist at the end of the film, is that the nymph, object of inspiration and desire, will eventually be transformed into a wife, disappearing from the limelight under the cloak of domestic invisibility. The less optimistic outcome, suggested by Audrey Munson’s own tragic fate, is that a modern Greek nymph, object of insatiable spectatorial consumption, media reproduction, and commercial exploitation, will eventually suffer a combination of depression, schizophrenia and paranoia, ending her days away from the lights of publicity, in

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<sup>25</sup> Nead (2007) 70.

<sup>26</sup> Nead (2007) 70.

<sup>27</sup> Nead (2007) 72.

<sup>28</sup> Nead (2007) 70.

<sup>29</sup> See further Chris (2012). Much of the relevant correspondence can be found in the file for *Purity* in the ‘Controversial Films’ subseries in box 106 of The National Board of Review of Motion Pictures at the Manuscripts and Archives Division, New York Public Library.



an asylum.<sup>30</sup> This is a complex and dynamic snapshot of how, why, and at what cost a classical nymph can be brought back to life around 1916, a snapshot that, like Walter Benjamin's concept of the dialectic image, encapsulates different ideas converging, colluding, or clashing: nudity and morality, emancipation and oppression, entertainment and regulatory control, artistic inspiration and commercial exploitation, and all of them under the heading of images in motion.

Grecian dances can be conceptualized through still images, poses that capture the complexity and the dynamism of movement upon its engagement with other art forms and media. This mode of dance can be traced in other films of the 1910s, from D. W. Griffith's drama *Oil and Water* (to be discussed below) to the mythological fantasy *Diana the Huntress* (dir. C. W. Allen and F. T. Miller, USA 1916),<sup>31</sup> that features dances by divinities and forest nymphs (among which 'The Bubble and Scarf dances by pupils of Florence Fleming Noyes') accompanied by paintings identified in title cards and brought to life on the screen. However, Grecian dances can also be associated with a style of dance that privileges constant movement, a more abstract form of movement that cannot be distilled with the help of still images and that cannot be adequately caught on camera or even on film. The shift 'from dance styles bound to pictorial modes of choreography and perception to dance as a force exemplifying the movement of modernity'<sup>32</sup> can be seen most clearly in the case of the celebrated dancer Loie Fuller and her many imitators. Consider the photographic depiction of the blurred figure of a ghost-like Loie Fuller whose movement cannot be caught on camera against the museum-like display of Greco-Roman and neoclassical artefacts that surround her (**Figure 2**). Or the constantly transforming shapes of an imitator of Loie Fuller 'waving her voluminous costume-like wings' against the backdrop of a classical temple and a rural landscape recorded on film by Pathé frères (France) in 1905.<sup>33</sup> Both provide us with competing models for thinking about antiquity, articulating a clash between still images and

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<sup>30</sup> On the life of Audrey Munson, see Bone (2016), Geyer (2007), and Rozes & Gottehrer (1999).

<sup>31</sup> The film is available for onsite viewing at the Library of Congress. A four-minute excerpt is available on DVD in *Unseen Cinema: Early American Avant-Garde Film (1894-1947)*, Image Entertainment 2013.

<sup>32</sup> Brannigan (2011) 34.

<sup>33</sup> A digital copy of the film is available for online viewing via the NYPL Digital Collections under the collective title 'Three curiosities (Motion picture)' at <<http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/bd378590-f875-0130-00c1-3c075448cc4b>>, accessed 14 March 2016.

movement that ‘obscures and dissolves the dancing body’,<sup>34</sup> a clash between a museum of lifeless images and a museum of movement that even the technological capabilities of photography and cinema struggle to contain. Be it as a ghost haunting the museum of Greek antiquities or as a bat flying in the twilight of pastoral Greece, the arrival of this type of abstract and automatic movement alters its environment radically, while also seeking to inscribe itself within it.

This dancing style can be traced throughout the 1910s and early 1920s in films influenced by Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis such as *Blue Bird* (dir. M. Tourneur, USA, 1918),<sup>35</sup> in which a whole series of different types of joy and happiness are visualized through female dancers in white drape dresses, and *The Soul of the Cypress*, featuring a dancing Dryad on ‘California’s romantic coast’ (dir. D. Murphy, USA, 1921).<sup>36</sup> This dancing style, however, can also be traced back to some of the earliest films on antiquity produced in the 1890s and early 1900s. The ability of the body of the dancer to create a new reality in space and time affects not only *pictorial* representations of classical antiquity such as sets and costumes but also *textual* representations of antiquity such as title cards and film titles. In some of the earliest film dances ever produced such as *Neptune’s Daughters* (1900), *A Nymph of the Waves* (1900), and *Cupid and Psyche* (1897) there is very little other than the film title itself that allows us to draw a firm link between the affective ‘mixture of ballet and variety-style dancing’<sup>37</sup> on the screen and the world of classical antiquity. The search for ‘rhythm, order and harmony’ as values of movement rather than as ‘traditional pictorial values’ can be traced one step further back, to the motion studies of Eadweard Muybridge’s chronophotography, especially those featuring female models wearing fluttering and semi-transparent classical drapery (such as *Animal Locomotion*, Plate 187 – Dancing, fancy, no. 12, Miss Larrigan).<sup>38</sup> As much as a pragmatic ploy for respectability and artistic legitimation on the part of early cinema and its nineteenth-century predecessors, this mode of referencing classical antiquity

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<sup>34</sup> Brannigan (2011) 23.

<sup>35</sup> Available on DVD in a standalone edition by Kino Lorber, 2005.

<sup>36</sup> Available on DVD in *Viva la Dance: The Beginnings of Ciné-Dance*, Image Entertainment 2005.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted from the Library of Congress catalogue entry for *A Nymph of the Waves*, <<http://lccn.loc.gov/96520492>>, accessed 14 March 2015. *Neptune’s Daughters* and *A Nymph of the Waves* are available on DVD in the collection *Viva la Dance: The Beginnings of Ciné-Dance*, Image Entertainment 2005. *Cupid and Psyche* can be viewed online via the Library of Congress at <<https://www.loc.gov/item/00694186/>>, accessed 14 March 2016.

<sup>38</sup> Prodger (2003) 233-34, quotations from p.233.

has far reaching implications for antiquity itself. It reduces its linguistic and pictorial identity to a bare minimum, to isolated signs such as the temple, the white robe, or a classical name. And it promises the replacement of text-based and image-based models of antiquity with a new aesthetic of an embodied antiquity in motion, exemplified through dance as an affective force devoid of narrative context.

### **Affective responses**

*Dances of the Ages* was scripted and directed by the pioneer American dancer Ted Shawn in 1913.<sup>39</sup> Using trick photography, it shows miniature dancers performing brief dances evoking different historical eras ‘upon a banquet table before an assemblage of old dancing masters.’<sup>40</sup> The film foregrounds a way of thinking about dance not as a static pose, nor as unfilmable movement, but as an event to be experienced in space and time. More specifically, *Dances of the Ages* highlights the attention demanded by the work of art as a spectacle. It shows how dance can be seen as a field that, following Jean-François Lyotard’s ‘work on aesthetic production and reception’,<sup>41</sup> one might call gestural. The film foregrounds a circulation and exchange of gestures that go beyond the interaction between the body of the performer and its immediate narrative context (the costumes, sets, or title cards) and beyond the intertextual encounter of the body of the performer with other works of art. It foregrounds ‘a translocation’ which turns dance into a model for thinking more broadly about the work of art in relation to the responses it triggers as a ‘performative and affective mode of aesthetic experience.’<sup>42</sup>

The evolutionary narrative of the *Dances of the Ages* situates classical Greece at a point in history when for the first time dance becomes a performance not for but by the whole

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<sup>39</sup> On Ted Shawn’s contribution to choreographic development and its legacy, see Terry (1976) and Burt (1995) 104-115. On Ted Shawn’s choreographic work inspired by ancient Greece, see Michelakis (2010).

<sup>40</sup> The film is held in the Ted Shawn collection of the Jerome Robbins Dance Division of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. A digital copy of the film is available for online viewing via the NYPL Digital Collections at <<http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/d08ab170-f875-0130-dc17-3c075448cc4b>>, last accessed on 14 March 2016. Quotation from an advertisement of forthcoming Edison Films in *Motography*, 17 May 1913, p.7. For a more detailed description and review, see *The Moving Picture World*, 24 May 1913, p. 840 and 7 June 1913, p.1032.

<sup>41</sup> Brannigan (2011) 183.

<sup>42</sup> Brannigan (2011) 172.

community, a dance associated not with refined symmetry but with ecstatic emotion and energy. In contrast to ‘the slow, crawling incense and weird, snakelike movements of the Dance of the Priest of Ra’ that precedes it and the ‘Oriental dance’ of the couple that follows it, the ‘Greek Bacchanalia’ features a *community* of revellers that ‘give forth their joy in the abandonment of youth and gladness’,<sup>43</sup> thus breaking down and rendering meaningless the distinction between performer and spectator. What is more, the festive atmosphere of the scene, the seemingly improvisational and instinctive celebration, the sense of crossing different spaces created by the classical columns on either side of the stage, the openness illustrated by ‘the thrust of the performers’ arms through the space of the *mise en scene*’,<sup>44</sup> they all have a direct impact on the modern spectators embedded within the film. Many of the middle-aged and elderly spectators who enjoy the other ancient dances seated on their chairs now stand up, clapping enthusiastically and starting to participate in the Dionysiac abandonment of the miniature dancers on the table. The sequence of the ‘Greek Bacchanalia’ suggests that, as a performance event, dance can inspire an instantaneous, affective response, a response that, before becoming the subject of rational analysis and before being articulated linguistically, “constructs” a spectatorial body that can meet the call of the originary gestures of the dance.<sup>45</sup> Equally importantly, the gestural calls of the dancers are met by the modern spectators of the film’s narrative not mimetically but ‘on their own terms.’<sup>46</sup> Dance demands a response the nature of which can be impulsive, improvisational, but also to a large extent independent from what triggers it.

Another film that features a collective dance of Dionysiac abandonment and invites reflection on the affective responses it triggers is *Oil and Water*, which was produced by D. W. Griffith (for the company Biography, USA) in 1913, the same year as *Dances of the Ages*. *Oil and Water* features Blanche Sweet as Mlle. Genova, a ‘good actress on and off’<sup>47</sup> and Henry B. Walthall as The Idealist to whom ‘she appeared the living goddess of the dance and as such

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<sup>43</sup> *The Moving Picture World*, 24 May 1913, p.840.

<sup>44</sup> Brannigan (2011) 177.

<sup>45</sup> Brannigan (2011) 175.

<sup>46</sup> Brannigan (2011) 177.

<sup>47</sup> *The Moving Picture World*, 1 February 1913, p.494. The only surviving print of the film is available for onsite viewing at the BFI National Film Archive. An out-of-print VHS version of the film, included in *An Anthology of Silent Films by D. W. Griffith in 1912* by Grapevine (1980), is only available through certain USA libraries.

she entered his home.<sup>48</sup> As the goddess gradually becomes ‘the actress longing for the life that was past’, oil and water begin to separate and the marriage falls apart. ‘The Idealist returns to his books and dreaming; the actress to her gay public life.’<sup>49</sup> The initial meeting between the two characters takes place during a performance of ‘The Dance of the Fleeting Hours’ in which the female protagonist features as Venus. The dance consists of eight numbers, identified through close-ups of the programme that The Idealist holds in his hands.<sup>50</sup>

First – Venus, the Goddess of Love, ushers youth into Earth’s enticing promises.

Second – Jupiter holding aloft the roses of happiness descends among the mortals.

Third – Unseen, the Sands of Time run on.

Fourth – Stirred by the world-old desires, the mortals dance after the impossible.

Fifth - Time, the silent reaper, shadows their excesses

Sixth – The endless chase in quest of phantom happiness.

Seventh- Time reaps its fruitful harvest.

Eight - Ashes

A minority of critics have criticized the dance as a ‘pseudo-classical silliness’, in which the lead actress, who had taken time off from movie-making to perform with Gertrude Hoffman’s dance troupe, is ‘sitting in a chair while the rest of the company does the dancing.’<sup>51</sup> Most contemporary spectators, however, saw the dance as ‘sensational’,<sup>52</sup> ‘a magnificent spectacle’,<sup>53</sup> ‘remarkably graceful’,<sup>54</sup> and as ‘a beautifully pictured classic dance which is

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<sup>48</sup> *The Moving Picture World*, 1 February 1913, p.494.

<sup>49</sup> *Supplement to the Bioscope*, 27 March 1913, p.xi.

<sup>50</sup> The programme can be glimpsed in the title cards, but it is also reproduced in *The Moving Picture World*, 5 April 1913, p.40, courtesy of one of its readers.

<sup>51</sup> Kaufman (2002) 222-23.

<sup>52</sup> *Moving Picture World*, 4 September 1915, p.1721.

<sup>53</sup> *Moving Picture World*, 4 September 1915, p.1669.

<sup>54</sup> *Moving Picture World*, 22 February 1913, p.780.

made to symbolize life and its pursuit of happiness'.<sup>55</sup> Much more than a convenient backdrop for the meeting of the lead characters, this dance, taking up half of the film's total length, carries symbolic significance and demonstrates the film's artistic ambition. The American poet Vachel Lindsay, who wrote a poem about Blanche Sweet inspired by her performance in the film,<sup>56</sup> described the dance 'and speculated as to its origin' as follows:

Blanche Sweet is the leader of the play within a play which occupies the first reel. Here the Olympians and the Muses, with a grace that we fancy was Greek, lead a dance that traces the story of the spring, summer, and autumn of life. Finally the supple dancers turn grey and old and die, but not before they have given us a vision from the Ionian islands. The play might have been inspired from reading Keats' *Lamia*, but it is probably derived from the work of Isadora Duncan.<sup>57</sup>

As David Mayer notes, choreographed dance episodes were 'a critical component of [Griffith's] film work', often functioning as prologues and employed 'as both allegorical and diegetic narrative elements.'<sup>58</sup> Unlike the Orientalizing and eroticized dances of other films by Griffith such as *Judith of Bethulia* and the Babylonian story of *Intolerance*, the 'Greek' dance of *Oil and Water* transcends its historical specificity, and its allegorical function feeds into the characters' own perception of their roles within the narrative. The dance dramatizes the passage of time as a Bacchic spectacle initiated and measured with an hourglass by Venus, orchestrated by Jupiter, and brought to an end by Time as the Grim Reaper. Despite the complex and meticulously choreographed performance (by a very young Gertrude Bambrick lured by Griffith 'away from Gertrude Hoffman's Ballets Russes'<sup>59</sup>), the focus of the narrative remains equally divided between the dance itself and its spectators. On the one hand there is the Idealist whose initial engagement with the 'passing show' (as the film's first title card puts it) is cognitive, informed by his life-long devotion to books and the textual medium of the programme that he holds in his hand, which gives structure and meaning to

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<sup>55</sup> *Moving Picture World*, 22 February 1913, p.780.

<sup>56</sup> The poem, entitled 'Blanche Sweet-Moving Picture Actress [After seeing the reel called *Oil and Water*]', was originally published in *The Little Review*, June 1914, p.4. Reproduced in Mayer (2013) 102-3.

<sup>57</sup> Lindsay (1915) 81; cf. Mayer (2009) 175 and (2013) 102.

<sup>58</sup> Mayer (2009) 3-4. See also Kendall (1979) 134-49.

<sup>59</sup> Kendall (1979) 139.

the performance.<sup>60</sup> This approach to the dance quickly gives way to an impulsive engagement with the spectacle and to his falling in love with the goddess of the dance to whom he proposes immediately after the performance. On the other hand, there is the actress herself who, although part of the spectacle, remains emotionally detached and physically distanced from the dancing group of mortal revellers, as befitting the divine character of Venus she performs,<sup>61</sup> while also observing her captivated audience and exchanging looks with the Idealist. The film dramatizes two distinct and arguably irreconcilable visions of life informed by two similarly distinct and irreconcilable visions of ancient Greece. The first, personified by the Idealist, relates to contemplation and devotion to solitary reading in a temple of knowledge (complete with a classicizing façade, as the external shots of the Idealist's grand house make clear). The second, personified by the actress, relates to embodied emotions, role-playing, and the appeal of living in the public eye. The dance becomes a catalyst for the encounter between these two approaches, setting in motion the narrative of the film but also for exposing their limitations that bring the narrative to an end. If in the film *Purity*, discussed above, the domestication of a classical nymph holds the promise of narrative closure, in *Oil and Water* the 'living goddess of the dance'<sup>62</sup> can only enter a modern household through practices of projection, role-playing and make-believe whose allure cannot withstand the passage of time.

The issues of emancipation and oppression return in the 'Grecian' dance of the war comedy *Johanna Enlists*, directed by William Desmond Taylor and starring Mary Pickford, produced in the USA in 1918.<sup>63</sup> Like Charlie Chaplin's *Sunnyside*, with which this chapter began, *Johanna Enlists* joins a group of films that respond to the early twentieth-century craze for Grecian dances with the help of parody. Other films of this kind include *The Mothering Heart* (dir. D.W. Griffith, USA, 1913) featuring a sequence in a nightclub where a 'Bacchus dancer

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<sup>60</sup> One the novelty of 'a special program for the dances' as 'something that will emphasize the feature', see *Moving Picture World*, 5 April 1913, p.40.

<sup>61</sup> On Venus as a key mythological model for thinking about cultural views on womanhood in the age of the new woman, social dance and subscription magazines, see Malnig (1999). On Venus' role in the emergence of silent film stardom, see Williams (2013).

<sup>62</sup> *The Moving Picture World*, 1 February 1913, p.494.

<sup>63</sup> The film is available for online viewing via the Internet Archive at <<https://archive.org/details/MaryPickford4>>, accessed 14 March 2016. For a reading of the film as a comical portrayal of the home front during the Great War, see Tholas-Disset (2015).

flings a woman through aerial moves’,<sup>64</sup> *Don’t Change Your Husband* (dir. Cecil B. DeMille, USA, 1919) in which Ted Shawn appears as a dancing Pan with flute in a Vision of Love sequence,<sup>65</sup> *Oh Doctor* (dir. Harry A. Pollard, USA, 1925) in which the protagonist daydreams of himself as Pan chasing a nymph,<sup>66</sup> and *The Prodigal Bridegroom* (dir. Lloyd Bacon and Earle Rodney, USA, 1926) which features a young couple in love doing a slow motion dance with scarves in the Grecian style of the period.<sup>67</sup> For the purposes of this discussion, however, *Johanna Enlists*’ more important contribution lies in that it makes possible to situate Grecian dances in relation to the broader issue of women’s education.<sup>68</sup> In doing so it joins other films of this period such as the Western comedy *Rowdy Ann* (dir. A. Christie, USA, 1919) in which Fay Tincher as a wild, frontier girl is sent to a women’s boarding school to learn, among other things, to dance gracefully,<sup>69</sup> and *Golden Shower* (dir. J. W. Noble, USA, 1919) in which Gladys Leslie takes the role of ‘a college girl who is the prime “figer” in a Grecian dance given on Commencement Day.’<sup>70</sup>

In *Johanna Enlists*, the sequence in which the young protagonist turns to Grecian dance in search of ‘a higher education’ (as the relevant title card puts it) brings together many of the issues discussed in this chapter, and as such it serves as a good example with which to conclude. First, it draws attention to the intertextual links between dance and a pictorial mode of choreography that is here illustrated through poses in a book that the aspiring, self-taught dancer consults as she goes along. In addition, the sequence demonstrates the unfulfilled promises and the limitations of the emancipatory and transformative potential of embodied learning, Johanna herself arguing that she is ‘getting grace’ when her parents think she is ‘getting fits.’ And finally, the sequence draws attention to dance as a performance event open

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<sup>64</sup> Rodney Sauer in <<http://www.nirateville.com/viewtopic.php?f=3&t=16238>>, accessed 14 March 2016. The film is available on DVD in *Griffith Masterworks: Biograph Shorts (1908-1914)*, Kino Video 2002.

<sup>65</sup> Available on DVD in *Don’t Change Your Husband/The Golden Chance*, Image Entertainment 2005.

<sup>66</sup> Available on DVD in a standalone edition by Grapevine Video, 2011.

<sup>67</sup> *Motion Picture News*, 25 September 1926, p.1189, relates it more specifically to the classically inspired and pantomime- and tableaux-based style of the Marion Morgan Dancers. The film is available on DVD in the collection *The Silent Comedy Mafia, Volume 1 (1918-1928)*, Unknown Video 2006.

<sup>68</sup> For the broader relation between Hellenism and women’s education around this period, see especially Fiske (2008), Olverson (2010), Koulouris (2011), and Gregory (1997).

<sup>69</sup> The film is commercially available on DVD in the collection *Slapstick Encyclopedia (1909-1929)*, Image Entertainment, 2002 and in *Scarlet Days*, Grapevine Video 2008.

<sup>70</sup> *Film Daily*, 21 December 1919, p.15. To my knowledge no print of this film survives.



to contingency. The amusement of Johanna's little sisters, no less than the initial disbelief and subsequent anger and disruptive intervention of Johanna's mother and father, illustrate the impulsive, spontaneous and unpredictable nature of the gestural encounters between dancer and spectator on screen. The scene suggests that the gestural economy of film dance can affirm itself even when everything around it goes spectacularly wrong.

## Conclusion

The emergence of cinema took place at a pivotal moment in the modern history of ancient Greece usually associated with the decline of the study of Greek in schools and universities.<sup>71</sup> At this same moment, however, a profound reconceptualization of ancient Greece was under way across a range of critical and artistic discourses ranging from psychoanalysis and anthropology to modernism in literature, the visual and performing arts as well as anthropology.<sup>72</sup> The transition from the rich diversity of Victorian Hellenism to the diffuse Greece of popular culture after the Second World War cannot be understood or debated without taking into account the greater but largely unfulfilled potential of the reception of ancient Greece in early cinema. More than any other medium of this historical juncture, film encapsulates an epistemic shift that takes place at the turn of the century, a transformation in the way in which knowledge can be transmitted, stored and retrieved, that could not leave ancient Greece unaffected. Cinema is instrumental in thinking about ancient Greece not as a narrowly defined subject of language-based or archaeologically-oriented academic expertise, but as a culture; not as the object of cognitive engagement with the past but as a lived experience to be inhabited and embodied. While many aspects of this encounter between early cinema and ancient Greece lie outside the scope of this chapter (or any other stand-alone chapter for that matter<sup>73</sup>) and call for a larger-scale discussion, the analysis undertaken in this chapter has sought to demonstrate that such a broader discussion cannot be conducted without acknowledging the significance of dance. As the close look at the films explored in this chapter suggests (from *Sunnyside* to *Purity*, *Oil and Water* and *Johanna Enlists*), and as the larger trajectory of the phenomenon of Grecian dancing on early film indicates, the transformation of ancient Greece that takes place at the turn of the twentieth century would

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<sup>71</sup> Stray (1998), esp. 202-270.

<sup>72</sup> Fiske (2008); Winterer (2002) and (2007).

<sup>73</sup> As argued in Michelakis & Wyke (2013) and Michelakis (forthcoming).

come at a cost. A Greek world previously inaccessible because of its association with the intricacies of a dead language or with the challenges of broken vases and columns would give way to a Greek world in constant motion, a sensual, fluid world that, like the experience of film-viewing itself, would capture the appearance of life so well as to become transient and ephemeral itself.

## **Illustrations**

Fig. 1 Charlie, in delirium, sees visions of girls dancing on bridge of country road. Production still, *Sunnyside*, dir. Charlie Chaplin, 1919 © Roy Export S.A.S. Scan courtesy Cineteca di Bologna

Fig. 2 Loie Fuller as blurred figure in room. Photograph, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations

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