

## Time and Theatricality in the Films about the Stage

*Sandra Pietrini*

During the last decades, the interaction between theatre and cinema has been the object of investigation by several scholars. Though the theoretical approach has brought forth relevant issues, there is a field in which the relationship between the two arts and languages has not yet been as much studied: the vast array of films about theatre, a subject deserving much more attention than that it has received.

The films which have theatre as subject are numerous and heterogeneous.<sup>1</sup> The first example of the genre is *A Drunkard's Reformation* (1909) of David W. Griffith, a short film in which the protagonist goes to theatre with his son and sees a pièce about the damages of alcoholism. In fact, the cinema meets the stage from its very origins, since Edison's first short films show acrobats, clowns and mimes, often the same performers who exhibited themselves in the variety halls and café-concerts. In this article I will try to rethink some questions concerning the negative or positive vision of the stage. I will restrict this study to few examples taken from a very heterogeneous context, but I will particularly focus on the concept of theatricality in relation to the circularity of time opposed to the flux of existence.

As a preliminary overview on the intercourses between cinema and theatre, it is necessary to take into consideration the concept of theatricality, mostly for its use as a quality to apply to movies. In general terms, the idea of theatricality as an unnatural and mannered language is accompanied by the myth of transparency of cinema, regardless of its artificial character. Where are the reasons for this widespread idea to be found? With the advent of cinema, has theatre lost its relationship with dreams and the imaginary? If we look at films about the stage, we soon discover that theatricality has frequently been used to suggest a well defined or even prejudicial idea of stage and actors, based on duplicity, insincerity and rhetorical emphasis.

The pervasiveness of theatre imagery is often employed by the cinema in order to suggest metalinguistic reflections, but the spreading of a language no longer bound to actual space and time has cast theatre into a sort of conventional frame. Theatricality can be a great resource (as in *To Be or Not To Be* by Lubitsch and *Le carrosse d'or* by Renoir) as well as a path of tragic circularity (as in *O' thiasos* by Anghelopoulos or in films showing an artist's decline, like Mankiewicz's *All About Eve*). While theatre supplies the essential structure of *representation*, the cinema reworks the concept of theatricality itself, forcing it to implode. In other terms, the art of cinema has deeply transformed the concept of theatricality, absorbing from it the idea of spectacle but rejecting the fictitious nature of representation back to the

<sup>1</sup> On this subject see the essays contained in the volume *Le théâtre à l'écran*, «CinémAction», 93, 1999 and S. Pietrini, *Il mondo del teatro nel cinema*, Bulzoni, Roma 2007.

stage. Through some examples taken from the rich variety of films on theatre, this paper is aimed to illustrate the concept of time in two different meanings: as a subject hinting to the passing of generations on the one hand and as a manipulation of a story on the other. Apparently, the topic of actors' aging has nothing to do with the diachrony of a plot. Nevertheless, as I will try to show, these very different perspectives can even intersect and superpose, giving birth to peculiar conceptions of the stage and theatricality.

As a starting point, I will briefly discuss some common features on which the similarity between the two artistic forms is based. The affinity between theatre and cinema is rooted in the concept of *dynamic representation*, from which the idea of theatricality ultimately derives. To represent means above all 'to stand for something' (to perform a character by an actor, to reproduce an environment by the setting), making perceptible to the spectator some information conveyed by the two main sensorial channels, sight and hearing. As a matter of fact, the concept of representation derives from the original and primitive model of theatre, whose expressive forms are inherited by the cinema. As is known, the art of movies abandoned very soon the initial vocation towards the manipulation of objects in order to create a fantastical and magic world, shifting from Méliès's approach to that of Lumière. In spite of the early invention of editing techniques, the art of cinema seems to have retained the idea of reproducing a piece of (even casual) reality, if not one to be observed as through a key-hole. The myth of transparency has prevailed also regardless of the narrative structure of films, virtually in opposition to the idea of theatricality as fictitiousness and insincerity.

Which are in fact the signs of theatricality in the cinema? The first use of this term dates back to 1951, when it appeared in an article by André Bazin on the film adaptations of dramatic works ("filmed theatre").<sup>2</sup> Out of this specific context, theatricality has been seen as a negative quality, implying a distance from everyday life, an indulgence in pompous gestures and attitudes, a prevalence of affectation on naturalness. But why is this so? If Erving Goffman considers social communication and the individual interactions as a continuous representation of self in everyday life,<sup>3</sup> Nikolaj Evreinov discerned forms of theatricality even in the animal kingdom, and more obviously in men's expressions and attitudes.<sup>4</sup> Thus theatricality on the stage and in the other arts would be a mere extension or stressing of a quality which is present in the real world, though reposed in more or less conventional forms and codes. Considered from this point of view, the attribution of an artificial

<sup>2</sup> A. Bazin, *Théâtre et cinéma* (1951), trad. it. di A. Apra, *Che cos'è il cinema*, Garzanti, Milano 1979, pp. 142-190. Cfr. J. Araszkievicz, *La genèse de la théâtralité*, in *Cinéma et théâtralité*, eds. Ch. Hamon-Sirejols, J. Gerstenkorn, A. Gardies, Aléas, Lyon 1994, pp. 21-27.

<sup>3</sup> E. Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Penguin, London 1990.

<sup>4</sup> N. Evreinov, *Teatr dlja sebja* (1915-1917). On theatricality see also E. Burns, *Theatricality: a Study of Convention in the Theatre and in Social Life*, Longman, London 1972 and *European Theatre Iconography*, eds. Ch. Balme, R. Erenstein, C. Molinari, Proceedings of the European Science Foundation Network (Mainz, 22-26 July 1998, Wassenaar, 21-25 July 1999, Poggio a Caiano, 20-23 July 2000), Bulzoni, Roma 2002.

nature to theatricality seems to be a sort of paradox. Nevertheless, on this idea are founded most of our ideas and perceptions on the language of cinema.

An exception to this topos can be found in a very original film by Ingmar Bergman, *Larmar och gör sig till* (1997), whose title draws inspiration from the celebrated monologue of *Macbeth* (V, 4).<sup>5</sup> Bergman doesn't want to describe the ephemeral character of theatre, but to underline its nature of basic structure of the imaginary. The escamotage of Carl, who tries to produce the first sound film by means of actors pronouncing their lines behind the screen miserably fails because of a short circuit. And just this failure causes the theatrical instinct to prevail. While the magic box of movies reveals its rudimentary and ineffective mechanisms, the charm of theatre is rediscovered through the human side of the event. The proposal to continue the representation in a more traditional way is made while actors and spectators are sitting on the floor in a circle, chatting and drinking tea. If theatre is an art of the past, it is also something strictly linked to human vitality, while cinema recalls the coldness and perfection of a reality that can be modified by machines.<sup>6</sup> By re-affirming the homology of signs between theatre and cinema, Bergman overturns the traditional relationship linking up the two arts and shows the performance as something more natural and empathic, based on human complicity and inventiveness. The power of theatre stands on participation and actual presence, in the sharing of the same level of reality. Through an original view of the question, Bergman deviates from the commonplace which associates theatre and artifice to attribute an anthropological function to the representation, where every gesture can make the audience startle – just as happens with the whipping of Frizzi.

The idea of theatre as a resource showing all the power of imagination had already emerged in several films of Bergman. In *Ansiktet* (1958), the shabby troupe of strolling performers is pathetically unmasked during a mesmeric experiment whose tricky nature is soon revealed, but eventually triumphs over the pretentious scientist and the prefect of police. After being humiliated, and begging in vain the money for survival from their enemy (the doctor), the artists are invited by the royal court, with a sudden turn of fortune which perfectly matches with their unsettled condition, their flexibility and their unstable nature. It is in fact with a magistral *coup de théâtre* that Bergman alludes to the dialogue between the two arts, making the rain abruptly cease just when the royal messenger arrives to announce the happy news to the troupe already in the coach. The manipulation of film techniques casts an ironic light on the ever changing conditions of the performers' lives.

Approaching more closely the topic of time, a peculiar dialectics between theatre and cinema characterizes *Le carrosse d'or* (1952) by Jean Renoir, where a troupe of *comici dell'arte* arrives in a Spanish colony of a fabulous South America: a mythical dimension, though historically set in a defined period, the XVIII century,

<sup>5</sup> «Life is a walking shadow / A poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage / and then is heard no more».

<sup>6</sup> A. Martini, *Convergenze parallele in Ingmar Bergman: scrittura, regia, drammaturgia*, in *Lo schermo e la scena*, ed. F. Deriu, Marsilio, Venezia 1999, pp. 103-114, a p. 112. See also *Ingmar Bergman o della trasparenza*, in «La Valle dell'Eden», X, 20-21, 2008, pp. 61-78.

since it goes beyond the geographical limits of history (the artists of *commedia dell'arte* have never roamed so far as to reach such lands). The comedians immediately reveal their active, efficient and mercantile conception of time, opposed to the indolent and disorderly way of life of the natives. They readily rebuild the crumbling theatre and begin to offer their performances to an audience made of rough peasants. In the film, the comedians represent a joyous vision of theatre, as the realm of a spontaneous invention, perfectly specular to the rigid ritual and formalities of the court (not surprisingly, the viceré is longing to get rid of his wig and falls in love with the vital Camilla, interpreted by an exuberant Anna Magnani). The film presents some elements worth pointing out. One is the metaphorical inclusion of cinema within the imaginarity of theatre: this is accomplished by the first and last framing slowly zooming in (and out) in order to make the spectator enter into (and then exit from) the ideal context of the story, that is the stage, framed by the curtain and the proscenium arch. This zooming in and out, later used also by other film directors, in particular Ingmar Bergman, alludes to the fictitious nature of cinema and to its relation with the primitive model of the stage. It is not only a formal stratagem, but a metalinguistic proceeding hinting at the art of theatre, which the movies can host repositing its core.<sup>7</sup>

In the film's last scene, after the *coup de théâtre* in which Camilla donates the golden coach to the bishop, the actress is pushed out of the closed curtain on to the proscenium, that is on a space which has recovered the initial aspect of a stage, and questioned by the troupe director if she regrets the disappearance of her suitors. They now belong – as Don Antonio explains in a commentary often quoted – to actual life, from which the actors detach themselves to enter another dimension. Since this is the essence of their lives, just turning into other persons they can really express their selves. After Don Antonio's speech, the curtain closes behind Camilla, abstracting her from reality, just as a creature of the myth who belongs to art and must live for these "two hours' traffic" on the stage (as she had confessed not to be able to do immediately after his arrival in the colony). This scene, which has been often mentioned as an exemplary statement on the nature of performance and acting, has also telling implications related to the manipulation of time and space. If the art of cinema reveals its mechanism through the image of the stage, theatre is finally triumphing as a never-ending reality to live in, as in a magic box in which repetition combines with a continuous transformation. For a sort of paradox, the flow of time can be virtually stopped on the stage, regardless of the typical impossibility to escape from the *hic et nunc* of the performance, as opposed to the reproducibility of a film.

Theatricality and metaphorization in Renoir's films have been analyzed mostly in relation to the treatment of space, stressing for instance the scene framing and the recurrence of the frame within the frame. If the spatialisation in *Le carrosse d'or* has been studied for its reference to the model of theatre, not only for the initial and

<sup>7</sup> Cfr. G. De Vincenti, *Il teatro nel cinema di Jean Renoir: forma simbolica di una pratica di cineasta*, in *Senso e storia dell'estetica*, ed. P. Montani, Pratiche, Parma 1995, pp. 799-830.

final device,<sup>8</sup> the conception of time has not yet received the attention it deserves. Showing the history as a representation, Renoir attributes to theatre a wonderful power of abstraction from space and time, using the mythical dimension to reinforce this conception.<sup>9</sup> While «the pièce of life is acted on the stage of Power»,<sup>10</sup> it is also true that theatre finally affirms itself as the realm of possible, as opposed to the schematisms which characterize the representations of the court and the Church. Even the inclusion of cinema within the frame of theatre clearly hints at the recursive nature of fiction, which is out of reality and time just as fables are.

This rather idealistic vision of theatre and artifice is to be found in some more recent films, such as *Being Julia* (2004) by István Szabó, from Maugham's novel *Theatre* (1937). Such as in the novel, the protagonist's natural inclination to fiction and pretence allows her to live in a dimension of continuous representation, even before herself. Acting is in fact her unique escape from the destructive action of time and aging. Her performances are addressed to an extended audience, including all the persons with whom she has to do in real life. Theatre is the only reality, affirms her old director and secret advisor, appearing in the film as a ghostly virtual guide. With specular circularity, the sense of this observation will be repropounded in the ending, in a refined restaurant hall. The representation of self can virtually replace the stage and be the antidote to aging and love's pains. As it is clearly stated: keep always acting. The solution is not a magic abstraction from the scene of the world – such as in Renoir's film – but a theatricalization of life and attitudes. While Renoir closes up Camilla in the timeless space of fiction (privilege and prison at the meantime, since it implies the renunciation to the flux of existence), Szabó makes the essence of theatre come out of the stage and pour into everyday life. Theatricality thus becomes a sort of filter through which to happily interact with the world, a winning instrument for the manipulation of reality through a keen representation of self.

The circularity of time acquires an original and joyful connotation in one of the most brilliant films on theatre, *To Be or Not To Be* (1941) by Ernst Lubitsch. The film is particularly rich in suggestions and topics, which it would be impossible to discuss here.<sup>11</sup> The use of repetition is in fact to be found in almost all Lubitsch's movies, in a complex network of allusions and specularities.<sup>12</sup> In *To Be or Not To*

<sup>8</sup> See for instance F. Curot, *La dualité de l'espace et la théâtralité dans "Le Carrosse d'or" (Jean Renoir, 1953)*, in «Le Deux», Revue d'Esthétique, 1-2, 1980, pp. 349-355 e F. Curot, *Théâtre, théâtralité e style d'espace filmique dans Le carrosse d'or de Jean Renoir*, in *Le théâtre à l'écran*, cit., pp. 42-50.

<sup>9</sup> Moreover, in the transition from the adaptation to the script, the film has abandoned some realistic and explicative passages: see D. Serceau, *Jean Renoir et la question du réalisme à l'époque du Carrosse d'or*, in *Le cinéma, l'après-guerre et le réalisme*, ed. D. Serceau, Jean-Michel Place, Paris 1996, pp. 138-187 (particularly pp. 160-167).

<sup>10</sup> G. De Vincenti, *Jean Renoir. La vita, i film*, Marsilio, Venezia 1996, p. 258.

<sup>11</sup> See S. Pietrini, *Poveri guitti e grandi attori sul palcoscenico della storia*, in «L'asino di B.», 14, 2009, pp. 89-99.

<sup>12</sup> Recurrence and reiteration have been seen as a peculiarity in Lubitsch's production at large: see E. Del Monaco e A. Pamini, *Ernst Lubitsch: L'arte della variazione nel cinema. L'opera di Lubitsch come sistema reticolare di variazioni narrative ed espressive*, Ente dello Spettacolo, Roma 1995.

*Be*, properly based on the ambiguity of signs between appearance and reality, the actors' inventive power succeeds in deceiving the nazi officers, stiffly clung to their roles and to the formal representation of power. Through an exhilarating series of disguises and stratagems, the actors succeed in stopping the project of a nazi spy and to fly away from Poland in a plane seemingly carrying Hitler and his guards. The film shows a recurrent interposition between reality and fiction, with recursivity reinforced by the circular structure. The final frame, where Tura's boastful declamation of Hamlet's monologue is disturbed by his discomposure in seeing that a spectator is leaving the theatre, is perfectly specular to the scene through which the film had introduced us in the bizarre world of stage artists. 'To be or not to be' is in fact the fixed moment for the adulterous meeting suggested by Tura's wife to the young officer, who thus abandons his place for reaching her in the greenroom. Just as the actors will offer their best tirades over and over, with an obsolete and ridiculous declamation, so the actresses will continue to be unfaithful to their husbands, in the merry-go-round of love. The art of theatre is presented by the incomparable mastery of Lubitsch in all its ambivalence: on the one hand it reveals all its misery and artifice, on the other it is a precious and unexpected resource, capable of a mingling of signs between reality and fiction through the actors' extemporaneous creative genius. Repetition and circularity are pivots of a positive consideration of theatricality founded on the essential isomorphism of human actions and their representation, actual life and stage performances. The timeless art of acting, based on repetition, is thus an ironic filter through which the foolish representations of power and history can be unmasked.

Beside being the realm of an inevitable circularity, theatricality can also be a hellish mechanism which entangles and chokes, because it condemns the actor to a fixity which clashes with real life. In the American films of the 50's, this impasse is preferably shown through the illustration of the rise and decline of a star, a course assuming the value of a parabola on age-related decadence. The professional and personal decline of theatre artists is a recurring theme in films about the stage. *La fin du jour* (1939) by Julien Duvivier is properly set in a house for retired actors, seen with a caressing as well as disenchanting and biting irony.<sup>13</sup> Marked by a diversity rooted in their personalities and biased by the practice of theatre, the actors keep living in a dream of passion, where remembrances of their past glories and success mingle with the memory of emotions really felt or simply feigned. The hard condition of old age and retirement is rejected by the protagonist, Saint-Clair, who doesn't resign to a poor life and pretend to be the *viveur* and *tombéur de femmes* he was in his best days. In his personal folly, made of vanity and aspiration to tragic, theatre and life are confused, causing pathetic simulations and the final

<sup>13</sup> According to Y. Desrichard, *Julien Duvivier. Cinquante ans de noirs destins*, Durante, Paris 2001, p. 51, Duvivier presents a sort of balance between empathy and "jeu au massacre". Completely different the opinion of Eric Bonnefille, who interprets the film as one of the few by Duvivier in which it is shown «a hope in human kind, and the almost totality of the characters are observed with a certain tenderness»: E. Bonnefille, *Julien Duvivier. Le mal aimant du cinéma français. Volume I: 1896-1940*, L'Harmattan, Paris 2002, p. 283.

self-exaltation which nearly leads to tragedy (the young maid induced by him to commit a romantic suicide is saved at the last moment). In Duvivier's view, there is no chance for aged actors, who can only accept their decline with a sane resignation in order to avoid the drift of a foolish protagonism.

The artistic work is seen through a completely different perspective in *Limelight* (1952) by Charlie Chaplin. It is not by chance if the topic of the actor's decline emerges in the Hollywood films of the '50, when cinema begins to show a disenchanting reflection on the frailty of its own myths. Strictly related to the idea of life as representation, the stage is much more suitable than the cinema to illustrate the parabola of ascent and decline. The debacle of Calvero, a tramp comedian slipped into alcoholic addiction and condemned to misery by a lack of inspiration connected to old age, is counterpointed by the rise of a new young star, helped and encouraged by the old actor himself. Calvero's death will occur during his triumphal *rentrée* culminating in the successful performance with Buster Keaton and marks a paradoxical victory over the doom to decadence. Nevertheless, the direction of time can't be overturned, and at the same moment of Calvero's death in the rear stage, the new star of dance makes his *début* under the limelight, marking the generation gap. While Duvivier considers the stage an artificial dimension, which absurdly tends to oppose a fake projection to the natural course of human life, Chaplin sees in the theatre a metaphor of life and its seasons, clearly expressed by the initial caption: «The glamour of limelight, from which age must pass as youth enters». Notwithstanding the inevitable tragic issue, Chaplin's vision of theatre is not negative at all. The final redemption of Calvero takes place in a sort of dimension out of time and space, that is on the stage. The performance with Keaton is an absolute vision, in front of which the audience is reduced to a mute presence (Chaplin preferred not to make hear the laughing of the spectators, creating in fact a bizarre effect, since until that moment the gags had been accompanied by the enthusiastic reactions of the audience). Neither is the stage frame visible, since the movie camera closely follows the two performers. The circumscribed space of the scene takes up the whole movie frame, plunging the film spectator into a magic suspension of diegesis, scanned by the speedy rhythm of action.<sup>14</sup> The abstraction of performance from time and space hints to the peculiar nature of theatre, capable to provide a metaphorical frame to life and to save artists from the inexorable law of time. Not forever, but just for the time of the show, after which the flowing will resume its natural course, leading to the necessary change of guard between generations. Time is in fact a sort of obsession in the conception of *Limelight*. It is not a coincidence if Chaplin writes down a page of notes to the inescapable logic of time,<sup>15</sup> which is expressed in the film through a series of dichotomies, concerning both script and visual language.

<sup>14</sup> It is not by chance that in the directing notes emerges Chaplin's concern for any least slowing down («too slow»): *Limelight. Luci della ribalta (documenti e studi dagli Archivi Chaplin – documents and essays from Chaplin Archives)*, eds. A. Fiaccarini, P. von Bagh, C. Cenciarelli, Le Mani, Bologna 2002, pp. 192-193.

<sup>15</sup> Ivi, p. 77.

Calvero's last performance is a wonderful utopia, occurring in a place which is a nowhere, the stage, in which time seems to suspend its course for a while. As with Milan Kundera's motorcyclist – who experiencing the thrill of speed clings to a fragment of time split from past and future,<sup>16</sup> and so abstracts himself from the stream of existence – so the rhythm of performance gives the actor an enchanting levity, magically balanced between time and space. Chaplin celebrates this way the acme of comic theatricality, based on the idea of rhythm and repetition (in the Bergsonian sense). To the conception of time devouring his sons he opposes the *hic et nunc* perception of the stage, a roundabout capturing the audience with its movement. The intrinsic temporality of human existence – the Heideggerian “to be-for-death” – can't be eluded, but the magic abstraction from time places the stage among the most accomplished illusions of life.

The transitory nature of theatre success is the main interpretation key for one of the first films on the stage, *Morning Glory* (1933) by Lowell Sherman. Here the leading character is a would-be actress, who finally succeeds in attaining the craved success and popularity. In Sidney Lumet's remake of the film, *Stage Struck* (1958), the topic is enounced in a more explicit way: to an observation meant to call her back to reality, Eve retorts in fact with an unexpected hymn to *carpe diem*, proclaiming her intention to live in a timeless present. That is, on the stage, sublime mephistophelian temptation foreshadowing the inevitable fall. «I would I can stay here forever», whispers Eve to Lewis (Henry Fonda) on the dark and desert stage. But her guilt is not only the Faustian ambition to catch the moment. Putting aside the romantic allurements of the romance with Lewis, Eve makes up her mind to go to the feast only when she knows that her entry will be accompanied by an applause. Delivering her image to the audience, in pursuit of popularity and success, the actress plunges again into the evil circuit of time, thwarting the magic power of theatre. While in *Le carrosse d'or* Camilla triumphantly overcomes the greed of worldly goods and her female vanity, in *Stage Struck* the power of sublime abstraction of theatre is defeated by the artist's ambition to popularity. And time plays an important role in this ambition track.

The artist is condemned to a tragic impasse: he aspires to the immortality of fame but cannot live in a never-ending present. In the films about theatre before the '50, actors' lives are revealed by a disenchanting floodlight focused on the idea of the ephemeral, while later on the reflections about the industry of entertainment become more caustic and bitter. Moreover, the influence of films on cinema has been determinant in showing the fatal consequences of stardom, which implies an intruding on privacy made by the newspapers' gossip and voyeurism.<sup>17</sup> In other terms, the mechanisms of star worship are applied even to stage *vedettes*. In Hollywood's imaginary, success is strictly connected to publicity, that is to advertisement and representation of privacy, to the building of an image which allows

<sup>16</sup> M. Kundera, *La lenteur*, transl. by E. Marchi, *La lentezza*, Adelphi, Milano 1995, p. 10.

<sup>17</sup> “You belong to the audience”, says the director to the protagonist of George Cukor's *What Price Hollywood?*, combining the topic of the tragic issue of success with a concept derived from the narrative and metatheatrical imaginary about the stage.



the worshipping audience to vicariously live an ideal life. In fact, in order to achieve success it is primarily necessary to become a personality, a recognizable face – as it is well realized by the protagonist of George Cukor's *It Should Happen to You* (1954), a simple girl who becomes famous by resorting to a brilliant stratagem: she rents a huge advertising poster writing her name on it. From form comes substance, and from publicity fame.

In the cinema of the '50, the topic of time is frequently related to the decline of an artist, often addicted to alcohol such as Calvero in *Limelight*, Frank in George Seaton's *The Country Girl* (1954) – taken from the homonymous pièce by Clifford Odets – and Dodo in Robert Z. Leonard's *The Clown* (1953). In this last film, the crisis of a circus artist finds a peculiarly pathetic outcome, since it intertwines with paternal and filial affection. It is worth noting that, just like Calvero, Dodo will die behind the scenes after a triumphal *rentrée* (though in the world of television entertainment and not on the stage), redeeming his image from obliviousness and delivering it to posterity in the culminating point of success.

A different view of actor's aging emerges when the decline involves a female artist. Since the fame of actresses is more connected with their beauty and charm, the decadence implied by aging turns to be a more hellish condition. The decline surprises the female artists just at the passage point from youth to middle age, and not much later as it happens to their male counterparts. Except for the brief apparitions of old actresses shown as eccentric characters (such as in Cukor's *Dinner at eight*), the showing of female artists' decline tends to confirm the well-rooted topoi of a male prejudice. Not disjoining the artistic abilities from aesthetics, that is from attraction and power of seduction, this prevailing mentality implies – as in *All About Eve* (1950) – an anticipation of the breaking point, foreshadowing ruin without showing it.

In Mankiewicz's film the inexorability of aging assumes the appearance of a new would-be star, Eva Harrington, who cunningly succeeds in entering the private life of the star, Margo, becoming her personal secretary, until she finally replaces her on the stage, obtaining the Siddons award as the best actress (which moreover has been later really appointed). After reaching the climax of success, Eve herself is doomed to be overthrown by a new usurper, the young aspiring actress she finds in her room coming back from the award's ceremony. The final frame in which Phoebe is looking at her image in the three-faced mirror, wrapping herself in Eve's mantle and holding the award evokes the scene in which the protagonist had been discovered by Margo while she was admiring herself in the backstage with the star's costume. Recurrence and repetition reveal the transitory nature of glory. This is expressed by Mankiewicz through analogies between the scenes and resorting to objects which assume a strong symbolic meaning, like the mirror. Despite its pleasant approach to the stage milieu, *All About Eve* shows a very negative view on theatre, seen as a place in which things are bound to pass while they would (and pretend to) last forever. In *All About Eve*, during the quarrel with Margo, Lloyd says that actresses think themselves to be immortal: «The stars never die and never change». Applied to theatre, the absurdity of this pretension is more evident than

ever, since the stage represents just the ephemeral. To be “an ageless star”: the foolish ambition of Norma Desmond in Billy Wilder’s *Sunset Boulevard*, could be in principle satisfied by the permanence of films (the problem of Norma is that she wishes to transfer this privilege to real life), while the nature of stage performance itself definitively prevents this chance.

The circular and tragic vision of actresses’ career can be found also in films not belonging to the hollywoodian context. In several films the set is not dramatic theatre, but the variety, which can be considered one of the by-products of the entertainment industry. In the last frame of Renoir’s *French Cancan* (1954) the manager Danglard (Jean Gabin) approaches a new possible dancing *vedette* through the allurements of success,<sup>18</sup> creating a sort of analogy between the joyous and almost frantic movement of the cancan and the never-ending turning of the wheel of success. In fact, the stars are created from nothing by managers, as it is clearly affirmed in Steno and Monicelli’s *Vita da cani* by the director of a shabby touring company, wishing to replace the soubrette with a simple young girl: «Soubrettes do not exist! – Why, don’t they exist? – What exists are four feathers, two legs, four pretty moves and two shrills. What exists is he who makes up them».<sup>19</sup>

In *Luci del varietà* (1951) by Alberto Lattuada and Federico Fellini, the ascent of the would-be *vedette* Liliana (Carla Del Poggio) is encouraged and supported by the troupe director Checco Dalmonte (Peppino De Filippo), who at last is abandoned by the new star. The open ending hints to the most cruel mechanism of easy success: during one of the company tours by train, Checco meets a new aspiring girl, ready to enter the dream of becoming a star.<sup>20</sup> This ending has been considered a sort of «failure of the narrative frame», but in fact it perfectly sums up the sense of the plot and the disenchanting vision of the stage. Moreover, the scene was not part of the script and was introduced by the director during the work with the actors.<sup>21</sup>

The model of *All About Eve* has probably influenced these films on theatre. The originality of Mankiewicz’s film is not to be seen only in this recursivity: it consists in the well-made combination of the narrative pattern with the manipulation of the structure, that is the specific syntax of cinema. In the last part of the film, the narrative flow lets prevail a more introspective view. Eva has renounced to go to

<sup>18</sup> The film is inspired to the life of Charles Zidler, the glorious founder of Moulin Rouge.

<sup>19</sup> «Ma le soubrette non esistono! – Ma come non esistono? – Esistono quattro piume, due gambe, quattro mosse e due strilli. Esiste chi le fabbrica».

<sup>20</sup> The original story is by Federico Fellini, while the direction has been claimed by Alberto Lattuada. The script is the result of a collective writing, but the role played by Fellini in the transposition from text to film has been predominant: see L. Boledi, *Block-notes di un autore. Alberto Lattuada e la sceneggiatura di Luci del varietà*, in *Luci del varietà. Pagine scelte*, eds. L. Boledi and R. De Berti, Il Castoro, Milano 1999, pp. 62-92.

<sup>21</sup> However in the photo-strip story version of the film a more reassuring ending was adopted, suited to the popular culture: R. De Berti, *Dal film al fotoromanzo*, in *Luci del varietà etc.*, cit., pp. 53-61, p. 58. The script has been published by A. Cattini, Mantova 1994.

the feast in her honour to enjoy her triumph alone, letting her mask finally drop.<sup>22</sup> And just in this moment she becomes vulnerable, victim of others' representations, just as it had happened to Margo. As a recurring scheme in Mankiewicz's films, the climax of success corresponds to the most dangerous moment of weakness.<sup>23</sup> *All About Eve* shows the recursivity of a mechanism which engulfs the individual just in the moment it seems to turn him into an idol or a lasting monument. And time is the key element of this process. The allusion to the sense of vacuity after attaining one's goal made by Eve in the ceremony hall recalls the sentence of another Eve, the protagonist of *Morning Glory*, who had whispered with lapidary melancholy: «success is so empty». The main topic in *All About Eve* is duplicity and deceitfulness, with an overturning of *Limelight*'s easy association beauty-youth-heartedness. The entire story is based on the gap between reality and appearance, terms traditionally related to theatre. The film's most evident theme, aging and generational turnover, is played within a context in which the professional lines of business are virtually linked to personal fulfilment (Margo seeks, for instance, a sort of compensation to her loss of the role in Lloyd's play with the marriage with Bill, renouncing to her power of charming a multitude to be content with a most common role of wife). This implies a continuous interpolation of signs between the personal and professional sphere. In a film clearly inspired by the masterpiece of Mankiewicz, *Forever Female* (1953) by Irving Rapper, the actress induces the playwright to change the age of the leading character in order to be more fitted to the role. But finally she has to give up her secret resistance against time leaving the protagonist role to a younger actress and interpreting that of the mother. The line of business system, derived from XIX century theatre organization, is employed as a sort of mirror pointing to the metaphor of life as a stage.

Irving Rapper emphasizes and simplifies the theme of aging, which is unquestionably present in Mankiewicz's film (even the pièce acted by Margo at the beginning, *Aged in Wood*, ironically alludes to it). In *All About Eve*, however, the topic is mingled with implications who invest the structure of the plot and the manipulation of time made by the editing. Let's analyse more in detail the intertwining of these two levels. In the film of Mankiewicz, the cruel mechanisms governing the theatre milieu do not simply originate from the laws of nature, as in Chaplin's film. In *All About Eve* the linearity of advancing time goes within the concept of circularity as a condemnation to repetition. This is not only for the open ending, which casts a light of exemplarity on the story, but also for the film structure, leading the spectator along the paths of memory, with an immersion in the past from which he will finally re-emerge, only to discover the cyclic nature of theatre success.

<sup>22</sup> Mankiewicz explains her indifference as a sort of depression *post premium*: G. Carey, *More About All About Eve* (1972), Bantam Books, New York 1974, p. 28. Moreover, just in the period he was writing the film script, Mankiewicz himself experienced the ephemeral nature of such gratifications: K.L. Geist, *Pictures Will Talk. The Life and Films of Joseph L. Mankiewicz*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York 1978, p. 167.

<sup>23</sup> The fall down of a powerful character because of an usurper's action, later overthrown in turn for a sort of nemesis, is a recurring plot in the scripts by Mankiewicz.

The most striking feature is however the manipulation of diegesis. Telling the story through a long flashback introduced by three different voices, Mankiewicz employs subjectivity to play with time. In *The Barefoot Contess* (1954) he implements this procedure to the extreme, making begin the second flashback at a moment preceding the end of the first one.<sup>24</sup> The relativity of points of view is thus accompanied by a re-definition of the natural flowing of time. But in my opinion the most original choice is the convergence of this remodelling of the structure with the content, which can be seen in *All About Eve*. Here the turning point of immersion in the past is placed at a particular moment of the film by means of a special effect, frame freeze. This is employed in two specular moments, which mark the transition from present to past through the flashback. The freezing of the frame is thus used as a sign through which the audience is introduced into the long flashback and then led back to the present. The photogram shows the company oldest actor handing over the award to Eve, marking the generational turnover. The thematic content, that is the old actor's rhetoric discourse alluding to aging and to the new generations, converge with the elaboration of time in the diegetic structure of the film. This is stressed by the artificial suspension of time made by the freeze, an exception to the illusion particularly meaningful if we consider Mankiewicz's persuasion that films require an invisible editing.<sup>25</sup> The visual language meets the common topic of generation gap in a discourse which involves the conception of theatre itself.

Unavoidable from the existential point of view, time can be manipulated by art – as is evident also in Mankiewicz's *The Honey Pot* (1967), where life is conceived as a stage where everybody tries to represent his own script, but where time finally upsets all the plans.<sup>26</sup> In this context, theatricality is not only a mirror revealing the useless struggle against time, but also a static model, doomed to clash against reality. An extreme example of this interpretation of theatre and theatricality could be found in a rather obscure and even unappealing film, *O' thiasos* (1975) by Anghelopoulos, showing the familiar saga of a shabby Greek troupe in the years from 1939 to 1952. The story takes place out of a linear sequence of time: political events are intertwined to the mythical dimension of the family tragedy, inspired to Oreste's myth, but not in a diachronic order, so that the spectator finds himself shifted from one historical period to another.

Within this sort of epic narration strongly connotated from an ideological point of view, theatre is seen as an art of the past, based on the dull repetition of an edulcorated play, far from reality and continually interrupted by violent events – that is by history. The bloody family revenge and theatre can be ascribed to a mythical and circular dimension, in which time is uselessly revolving. Apparently far from histo-

<sup>24</sup> Cfr. M. Turim, *Flashbacks in Film. Memory & History*, Routledge, Chapman and Hall, New York-London 1989, p. 138.

<sup>25</sup> J.L. Mankiewicz, quoted in E. Martini, *Il cinema a più dimensioni*, in F. La Polla (ed.), *L'insospettabile Joseph Leo Mankiewicz*, XLIV Mostra internazionale del cinema, Venezia 29 agosto-9 settembre 1987, Edizioni La Biennale di Venezia, Venezia 1987, pp. 49-59, p. 54.

<sup>26</sup> Inspired to Ben Jonson's *Volpone*, the film tells the story of a ruined aristocrat who pretends to be dying, with the complicity of a servant, and summons his past lovers in order to get money out of them.

ry, the actors are nevertheless absorbed by it and can react with their unique resource, which is also a limit: repetition. After Oreste's death, a new young actor is appointed in the rear stage by Electra (who names him Oreste) and in the ending a new troupe arrives at the village station, in a scene perfectly specular to the film first frame.

*O' thiasos* has been interpreted as an optimistic film, where the analogy between stage and history implies the final victory of the revolution over tyranny, in spite of the lost of individuals (during the funeral of Oreste, killed as he fights to affirm his ideals, actors applaud as congratulating with a performer who has well accomplished his role).<sup>27</sup> But Anghelopoulos's ideologic and marxist vision does not explain the gloomy idea of theatre as an art only capable of a dull resistance to change. Despite the political engagement of some of the actors, most of them remain indifferent or incapable to understand what's going on around them. They are as dull and obtuse as rolling stones on the slope of history (which is in fact a tragedy). They survive by chance, often unaware of the situations in which they are involved. While chanting and marching up through the hills in order to reach other villages to offer their performance, they abruptly come across a hanged man: the ever rising vitality of the little bloody group cannot elude the violence of history, interrupting the mythical circularity of nomadism, a sort of vain going around also evoked by the film structure. Quite differently from what happens in *To Be or Not To Be*, theatre reveals his dullness and incapacity as an instrument of concrete action, since it is a static art, characterized by an ever rising but senseless energy, just like the never-ending cycle of life and death governing our existences. Which is in fact the same cycle that in other films the actors desperately try to stop, pursuing the illusion of living forever as in the myth.

<sup>27</sup> M. Ciment e H. Tierchant, *Théo Angelopoulos*, Edilig, Paris 1989, p. 43. Other scholars have pointed out the fact that the Christian and marxist conceptions tend to exclude the idea of tragedy: the former for the waiting of a reward beyond this world, the latter because the individual death can be a means of collective rescue : G. Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*, Knopf, New York 1961. On the film see also Th. Anghelopoulos, "A Journey through Greek Landscape and History: The Travelling Players" (1974), in *Interviews*, ed. D. Fainaru, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson 2001.