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Playing with Desire: Asta Nielsen as Comedic Ingenue

The term “early German silent film” probably evokes very few associations with comedy, even for most international film historians. Thomas Elsaesser observes in his essay in *Before Caligari*, a valuable compendium of recent scholarship on early German cinema:

Two obstacles seem to have beset the study of early German cinema. One is the assumption that German output “before CALIGARI” was, with one or two exceptions, insignificant and worthless ... The other danger is that critics are looking, more or less obsessively, for something typically German about this cinema ... which posterity has so relentlessly identified with the German soul ... : themes of the fantastic, the atmosphere of the uncanny, the brooding torment of inner divisions, psychological intensity, and morbid introspection. (p. 338)

Elsaesser’s and other scholars’ essays that appear in *Before Caligari*, along with Heide Schlüpmann’s groundbreaking book on early German social dramas, *Unheimlichkeit des Blicks*, have begun to document a wide diversity of genres and styles and a long unappreciated visual and narrative sophistication in pre-Weimar German films. My own on-going research into German film archival holdings from 1910-19 has given me a glimpse particularly into a wealth of comedies of many styles, from slapstick to sophisticated farces. Some of these are not only pre-Caligari, which is to say, pre-Weimar, but also pre- Ernst Lubitsch, whose comedic turns as actor and director in Berlin in the teens is the early German comedy that many film scholars are most likely to have heard about. Indeed, I have discovered that many early films conventionally classified (also in archival descriptions) as dramas and even tragedies offer many sustained comedic moments or elements. And many individual stars of early German cinema, who had already by 1912 begun to play a role in the marketing of films, participated in a broad spectrum of conventional film genres – and a mixing of those within single films.

For example, the Danish-born actress Asta Nielsen, a leading light in German cinema from the early 1910s to the late 1920s, now has a dominant image as a dramatic, even a tragic actress. This reputation derives largely from her roles in Weimar cinema, including in films of the sort that Elsaesser points to, such as *Fräulein Julie* in 1921, *Erdgeist* in 1922/23, *Hedda Gabler* in 1924, *Die Freudlose Gasse* (*Joyless Streets*) in 1925, and *Dirnentragedie* in 1927. Those who recognize Nielsen's name also frequently know that she played Hamlet on film in 1920, and that she made her debut as a film actress – and became arguably the first international film star – in the 1910 Danish production *Afgrunden* (German: *Abgründe*, English: *The Abyss*. The title itself adequately suggests the film's dramatic – indeed, its melodramatic – tone!)

But in fact Asta Nielsen had a well-established reputation in Germany in the teens also as a comedic actress, including in some cross-dressing comedies such as *Das Liebes-ABC* (*The ABC's of Love*) in 1916, in which a comic premise allows her to masquerade as a man for much of the film's length. Just that minimal description points to a particular style of comedy also not generally associated with German cinema, namely gender and even explicitly *sex* comedy. The balance of this essay explores the production and reception of one of Nielsen's early sex comedies, *Engelien* (*Little Angel*).

Asta Nielsen made *Engelien* in Berlin in 1913, under the direction of the Danish director and screenwriter Urban Gad, with whom she collaborated constantly from 1910-1915. (The two married in 1912 and separated three years later.) The film casts Nielsen, who was 32 years old when the film was made, as a feisty seventeen-year-old named Jesta. Jesta is the only child of a newspaper editor, who, the witty, elliptical titles over a backstory prologue tell us, was so busy that he didn't get around to marrying her mother until Jesta was 5 years old. Her mother having died, Jesta has been packed off to a proper girls' boarding school as the main narrative begins, but she makes so much mischief there, including sneaking her boyfriend onto school grounds, that she is soon thrown out.

What is her father to do with such a wild and, the film implies, sexually precocious child? Happily, his rich brother, also a widower and childless to



Asta Nielsen as
Engelien.

boot, has just returned to Germany after making his fortune in America, and he would like to have Jesta visit and perhaps make her his heiress. The only problem is that this rich uncle is also puritanical and so has been led to believe that Jesta was born only after his brother married, making her now only twelve years old. That's, then, the rather complicated premise for a comedy of errors and mistaken identity. But wait – the plot thickens: as some twelve – or is it seventeen? – year-olds are wont to do, Jesta falls in love with her uncle, who thinks her infatuation rather cute, but of course fends her off – for she's too young. Then comes Jesta's coup – she reveals herself to be really of marriageable age, and she and her uncle promptly get engaged, under her father's beaming gaze.

Janet Bergstrom, in an essay on Nielsen's early films in *Before Caligari*, characterizes this narrative premise as a "bizarre conceit," without going into detail, however. Heide Schlüpmann discusses the film only briefly in her work, where she calls it "one of the most obscene, boldest comedies ever, which plays with men's proclivity for the naive, presumably 'innocent' child-woman" (p. 270). I find quite interesting in both Bergstrom's and Schlüpmann's discussions – but even more so in the printed criticism of the film upon its release in early January 1914 – what is *not* explicitly said or even addressed: namely, that the film comedically depicts incest. Indeed, the particular sexual taboo the film narratively violates is not that between uncle and niece, but rather arguably that forbidding sexual relations between father and daughter, for from early in the narrative the uncle clearly serves as a substitute for – indeed, displacement of – the father, who stands by so approvingly as his daughter and his brother celebrate their engagement.

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Film scholars interested in the social and historical circumstances that may influence or even determine (in some cases fostering, in others disallowing) specific cultural representations and their impact, must needs explore *Engelien's* initial reception. Happily, one finds some comparatively detailed reviews and accounts. In a long essay published in the Berlin film quarterly *Bild und Film* soon after the film's release, a critic, Dr. Alexander Elster of Jena, described the film as a social comedy that arose from Asta Nielsen's desire to try out a new, challenging role. Elster praises the film as technically good and points to a few instances of what he deems its artful humor. But he also asserts that the work is essentially "uncinematic," altogether better suited for the stage than the screen. He especially criticizes the directorial choice that Nielsen should continue to play a twelve-year-old when other characters are observing her. However, like most reviews of the period, most of Elster's comments focus on recounting the film's plot, including the conclusion, which he evidently finds unobjectionable. His only objection is to scenes near the beginning of the film, when Nielsen depicts a bratty teenaged school girl whose infractions of institutional rules get her dismissed and sent home. But even this behavior Elster excuses, by arguing that it is probably not unduly damaging to school children who see the film.

However, the point that Elster makes most emphatically, from the outset of his review, is the exceptional popularity that *Engelien* enjoyed. He opens the essay, "Asta Nielsen 'attracts' as much as ever" and goes on vividly to describe the crowds gathering for the film:

People are scrambling over each other as if at a baker's door during famine and almost breaking their necks to get tickets. And many of those people have already seen the film two or three times within a short period, and are charmed every time. One scarcely hears any dissent. The reason clearly lies in the fact that virtuosity and the personal cult aids success in all areas of modern life (p. 205).

Other reports confirm the film's wide-spread popularity - again without explicit mention of its incest theme; indeed, the film - and Asta Nielsen's role in it - was so popular that a sequel, *Engeleins Hochzeit* (*Little Angel's Wedding*), was made within the year, although not released until 1916, it being initially withheld under the stipulation, "for the duration of the war." Wide inquiries among film archives suggest that no print of this film has survived, and I have also as yet discovered no press reports on it that reveal whether or not Engelein actually marries her uncle in that film. Instead, I rather expect that the film continued the Shakespearean-style comedy of misunderstandings and identities, and that at the film's end she married someone else, perhaps a long-lost male cousin, also heir to the uncle's fortune, who emerged in the nick of time. Alas, we may never know. But a film archivist in Copenhagen assured me that, although she had not viewed the lost film, Asta's character would definitely *not* commit such a socially inappropriate act as marrying her uncle.

I mention this archivist's response because I remain curious about why viewers and critics in 1914 did not experience or at least not voice - in print - the evident discomfort or even outrage expressed by many people I have spoken to about *Engelein*. And exploring that is my aim in this essay, not, that is, to account for *Engelein's* well-documented success, but rather, to attempt to explain why there has been no overt criticism of the film as one of the most obscene comedies ever, as Schlüpmann calls it in passing.

It is important to note that the film did face official censorship, prior to release. But again, it now seems remarkable what was evidently found objectionable, and what was not. In a serialized account of her career written in 1928 for *Bildzeitung am Mittag*, under the title "Mein Weg im Film" ("My Way in Film"), Asta Nielsen herself reports on censorship of the film, as follows:

At one place, the Gentleman Censors got a view of my garter belt - immediate eruption of moral indignation! And when it then emerged, that I was playing an illegitimate child - the cup was full. The film was forbidden. After a three-day battle, it was finally approved. But the prohibition stood for youthful viewers. And precisely for this film we'd also counted on the children's audience. (BZ am Mittag, 3 Oct. 1928, reprinted in Seydel and Hagedorff, p. 110).

Of course, we cannot take that report at face value, but read it also initially only as symptomatic of the film's cultural inscription and as an instance of Nielsen's own contribution to her star persona. Yet in this case that anecdotal account tallies with other records of the film's censorship and reception - with the possible exception that Dr. Elster thought school-aged children would be attending. To date I've found no record at all that *Engelein* received any contemporary objections, criticism, or even explicit mention of what now seems the film's most striking feature - its taking uncle-niece - or, as I've suggested, scarcely disguised father-daughter - incest as a subject for popular comedy.

How, then, can we account for what seems a remarkable cultural repression that has largely continued to current discussion of this film? That question of course poses a logical dilemma, for while it is difficult to ascertain with any historical nuance the reasons for a given event's happening, it is really impossible to prove why a thinkable event or reaction did *not*, in fact, occur. Yet the question remains intriguing and, I believe, worth pursuing in an attempt to grasp early German cinema in cultural and historical context.

Context must, indeed, be the point of departure for this and many other film historical questions; in this case, one should first not presume any universal or historically static definitions of incest. Given that first cousin marriage has traditionally been legal in both Danish and German society, one cannot initially rule out that uncle-niece marriage might be or have at the turn of the century been permitted at least in some circumstances. But Danish and German friends and acquaintances, historians among them, tell me this is not the case. One might also consider that even when sexual relations are perceived as somehow taboo or incestuous, cultural perceptions of these relations' potential for causing psychic trauma may vary widely between societies and over time. This, indeed, does seem a plausible explanation for some of the discrepant responses in the 1910s and the 1990s. As James Kincaid argues in his 1992 book *Child-Loving*, which explores erotic values and practices in Victorian England, generations before our own often had much more diverse and even contradictory attitudes about sex than the standard historical record – or we ourselves – allow.

Still, the very narrative of *Engelein* makes an embedded cultural presumption of the uncle-niece relations as somehow taboo. Precisely therein – in what I see as the daughter's playful seduction – lies much of the film's comedic appeal. Indeed, *as* a comedy, the film is, in principle, comparatively culturally unfettered as to what topics or fantasies it may address, as long as it takes these as objects of fun. British media scholar Jerry Palmer has offered a useful model for understanding potentially offensive comedy. He argues that to strike a given audience as funny, as *Engelein* clearly did, a gag or narrative must seem neither too plausible nor too shocking; its suggestion must be improbable, yet somehow imaginable. For most contemporary North Americans, at least, who in recent years have frequently heard about familial sexual abuse as a media topic, the idea of uncle-niece – or father-daughter – incest is, along Palmer's continuum from shocking to plausible, far less the former than the latter. Thus, because the plot twist seems less shocking than regrettably plausible, it now may seem much more a matter of serious social concern, rather than a fit subject for comedy, as it apparently was deemed in the early years of the century, in the flush of early Freudian theories which made children's sexual desire a public topic. By contrast, precisely the comic portrayal of Jesta's unchecked infatuation with her uncle – her very *desire* for sex with her male relative – is what may now seem most shocking to contemporary audiences. But the German audiences that Elster describes evidently did not share the present-day conscious anxiety about intrafamilial child sexual abuse.

Elster himself does offer two reasons for the film's popularity, which may otherwise explain why this film did not excite widespread moral opposition; his reasoning is grounded not in general social context, but specifically in film history. The key explanation lies, I believe, in Elster's comment

concluding his review's opening paragraph, accounting for the film's popularity – and specifically the lack of dissenting voices about the film – in terms of “virtuosity and the personal cult.” In other words, Asta Nielsen's performance style and her star image. Therein, indeed, lies a doubly cogent explanation for *Engelein's* untrammelled and long-term box office and critical popularity – even to the point of the film's being rereleased in 1928. I would argue that Nielsen's particular performance style and her early star image successfully negotiated the film's potential social outrage, as no other actress of the period (at least no actress now known to us through films and reports) could have pulled off.

Perhaps most memorable in Nielsen's acting is her vivid physical mime, which involves a remarkable plasticity of body and face, especially around her eyes. While her acting style has features in common with other stage-trained film actors of the period, including a rather frequent semi-direct



Asta Nielsen and her daughter Jesta.

address to the audience, yet Nielsen stands out as a particularly expressive actor whose presence even now seems vital and fresh. What particularly comes across even to contemporary viewers of her films or even film stills and photographs is the energy and will that Nielsen embodies. This impression arises in part from her visually dominating most frames she appears in, with the aid not only of camera placement, but also of her deft gestures and her highly textured and patterned costumes. Such costumes and her physical movements, which typically communicate barely suppressed action and passion, contribute to another enduring characteristic of Nielsen's style: namely, her aura of modernity.

Altogether, Nielsen's stance, appearance, and actions in most of the narratives in which she appeared suggest that she is a thoroughly modern, autonomous woman – and this suggestion remains on the level of spectacle, even when, in many of the tragic melodramas, her character suffers abandonment, despair and sometimes death, often at her own hand. In *Engelein*, certainly, Nielsen's character does not commit suicide – though she does try, comically, to drown herself in a nearby river which quickly proves too cold even to her toes. Nor does she suffer any despair, and certainly not the victimization that 1990s audiences might read into the tale's denouement. Rather, she remains active and playful throughout, even when pining in frustration at her uncle's failure to see her as a sexual being. Her initial response to her frustrated desires, before she tries wading for a few seconds in the cold river, is to drive her uncle's fiancée away through stealthily dropping a cat on the seated woman's upswept hairdo and committing other such attention-getting acts of mischief. Nielsen's comedic performance in this film thus offers a delightfully obvious, teasing masquerade, indeed, a masquerade within a masquerade. Whether Nielsen is at any given moment enacting a seventeen-year-old, or a seventeen-year-old-enacting-a-twelve-year-old, the performance consistently foregrounds Nielsen's star presence and thereby sustained audience recognition of the thirty-plus-year-old woman of the world.

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Thus, I have argued, "Engelein" as character and film always literally and vividly incorporates Nielsen and what she stands for, which for German audiences in 1914 would have been a very great deal. The film was clearly produced and circulated as a vehicle for Nielsen, who audiences would have recognized as perhaps *the* leading star in German films at that time, along with the more conventionally Germanic-looking Henny Porten. *Engelein* was Nielsen's 24th film, 23 of which had been made in the previous three years, at the rate of eight per year, one released each month fall through spring, following her arrival in Germany in early 1911. Already in November of that year, an Asta Nielsen Theater had opened in Düsseldorf, featuring performance of an original waltz composition dedicated to Nielsen. Some filmgoers might also have learned of Nielsen's marriage to Urban Gad in May 1912, perhaps from announcements of the event such as appeared in film journals like the Berlin-published *Lichtbild-Theater* and the *Erste International Film-Zeitung*. They might even have known that the character Nielsen played, "Jesta", shared a name with the actress's daughter, who was about 13 years old at the time the film was made.

Further, 1914 audiences would very likely have known Nielsen as an established comedic performer. Although only three of her first two dozen films are commonly categorized as comedies (*Die Kinder des Generals* (*The General's Children*) from 1912 and *Die Suffragette* (*The Suffragette*) and *SI*), the latter two of those opened in September and October 1913, respectively, within a few months of *Engelein's* release in January 1914. *Der fremde Vogel*, released in November 1911, is also very funny in parts, primarily due to Nielsen's skillful physical comedy – as, for example, she shrugs her indifference to one unwanted suitor and outraces another in a punt boat.

Audiences would also likely have thought of Asta Nielsen as a competent, mature artist who herself generally controlled her roles and her films overall. In her remarkable 1913 film *Die Sünden der Väter* (*The Father's Sins*), Nielsen plays an artist's model who at the end of the film, in anguish and anger over the painter's sexual and emotional abuse of her, slices his large finished portrait of her to shreds. In her November 1913 release, *The Film Primadonna*, a kind of film *auto-*"biopic", Nielsen plays a film star who refuses roles she finds unworthy of her and seeks out and approves her own scripts, and then engages in all further stages of the production.

Such extracinematic information would certainly have infused a 1914 viewing of Nielsen's playing a sexual ingenue who was actively and happily pursuing her desires, however socially inappropriate. The film was successful as a comedy precisely because the social realization of such childish female fantasies seemed so implausible, and yet not really impossible, for in 1914 Germany, it apparently depicted taboo pleasures that for most viewers clung just on the edge of outrage. Its pleasures for those viewers – as well as for some contemporary ones – arise also from the subtle slapstick and teasing masquerade in Nielsen's performance throughout. Combined with her star image as an intelligent, autonomous, modern woman, Nielsen's performance made *Engelein* an acceptably playful representation of forbidden desire.

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