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CAMOUFLAGED TECHNIQUE

Optical transitions in the films of Victor Sjöström



In *L'idée et l'écran: Opinions sur le cinéma* (The Idea and the Screen: Opinions on Cinema) from 1925 Henri Fescourt and Jean-Louis Bouquet presented the idea that the technique in Swedish films was camouflaged, practically invisible.¹ They maintained that only the superimpositions in *The Phantom Chariot/Körkarlen* attracted attention to the actual image technique as such. They claimed that Swedish films had had little influence on contemporary French cinema, since in France the technique was considered *à la mode*.² Their opinion is interesting because it adequately encompasses the prevailing view of the films of the Swedish Golden Age, and perhaps of the films of Victor Sjöström in particular.³ At the same time it is problematic because this view builds on a dichotomization of technique and narrative content which is far too schematic. The examination of the various narrative devices used by Sjöström clearly indicates the equal importance of technique. I have in the following chosen to concentrate on the optical transitions in six of Sjöström's films from the so called Golden Age (approx: 1917-23): *Terje Vigen* (1917), *The Girl from the Marsh Croft/Tösen från Stormyrtorpet* (1917), *The Outlaw and His Wife/Berg-Ejvind och hans hustru* (1918), *His Lordship's Will/Hans nåds testamente* (1919), *The Monastery of Sendomir/Klostret i Sendomir* (1920) and *The Phantom*

Chariot/Körkarlen. (1921). The central role played by optical transitions in the films of Sjöström on the whole also clearly indicates the absurdity of both considering them isolatedly – as stylistic features without relation to the narrative content – and in seeing them as simply and solely a subordinate narrative vehicle, having the singular purpose of mediating a certain content. Style and motif, shot transitions and image content are, and remain, closely interconnected in Sjöström's camouflaged technique.

An Aesthetics of Tableaux

The aesthetics of Sjöström can be characterized as an aesthetics of tableaux. At first, this might seem to be nothing else than a remnant of an earlier period in the history of cinema. However, as the reader will notice, the tableaux of Sjöström appear as part of an overall stylistic strategy.

In his films, the mobility of the camera is used with utmost moderation, and is almost exclusively motivated by the movement of characters within the image. In most cases the motion appears as minor adjustments of the camera's position. One exception is presented by the opening shots of *The Girl from the Marsh Croft* where two landscape pannings immediately follow one another: for Sjöström this is a

completely new and outstanding narrative device. What differentiates the mobility of the camera here from other instances where Sjöström employs this device is the immobility of the subject within the image. The result is that the actual camera movement becomes more pronounced compared to when he follows a character walking a small distance. In this film the number of camera movements is incidentally relatively generous: they occur in a further six instances. First there is the presentation of Helga, the girl from the Marsh Croft, which is accomplished through a pronounced backward motion. The other five times the movement is sparce, and results from someone moving within the shot. One of them is a tilt when a person stands up.

Terje Vigen contains only two examples of mobile camera: one is a minimal movement motivated by Terje stepping out of his former home, one is a downward tilt that tracks Terje as he comes running down a hill towards his boat on his way to pilot the wrecked yacht. Furthermore, the illusion of movement is created in the scenes at sea where the camera is situated on a boat and consequently moves in accordance with the waves. *The Outlaw and His Wife* display three instances of mobile camera, one of which is a fairly long tilt upwards along the precipice that the outlaw Kári has gone over. The spectator sees him hanging from below, clinging to the side of the mountain. The two other camera motions are – again – minimal trackings motivated by a character moving in the shot.

In *His Lordship's Will* the camera moves on seven different occasions. Two of these are tilts, the first is in the beginning when the camera is lowered from its position down to a static boy who lies on the ground, and later when the camera moves part of the way down a slope and stops by a couple of young lovers who are sitting on the grass. The carriage in which his lordship's sister and her sons arrive is also tracked in two different camera adjustments. Here, however, the camera takes a fixed position in regards to the carriage, focusing on the characters, which subdues the background and thereby diminishes the impression of motion. It can principally be compared to the aforementioned boat movements at sea in *Terje Vigen*. The other three camera movements follow the usual pattern of minimal tracking when following a character.

In *The Monastery of Sendomir* we find twelve examples of minimal camera movement, all following characters. One of the cases is more

marked, however, as the camera there turns a quarter of a round, which is caused by the rounding of the stairwell.

Even a comparatively late and expressively rich film as *The Phantom Chariot* is almost completely narrated in tableaux. Of the total number of the 787 shots in the film, 755 shots can be characterized as tableaux in the sense that the camera there is completely static. In addition to this there is the fact that even in the remaining 32 shots the use of camera movement is restrained, and in several cases barely noticeable. This strict economy of camera motion is further amplified in comparison with some of the films of Mauritz Stiller. *The Song of the Scarlet Flower/Sången om den eldröda blomman* and *Sir Arne's Treasure/Herr Arnes pengar* (both 1919) use a mobile camera significantly more often than Sjöström's films of the same year – the first film uses pannings, for instance, in the dramatic descent of the rapids, and the latter has several long tracking shots backwards and sideways, of a kind that does not occur in Sjöström's work. Likewise in *Erotikon* (1920) the device is used in interior as well as exterior scenes, and even in *The Song of Gösta Berling/Gösta Berlings saga* (1923/24) the potential of the camera is used diligently to create a moving image. Stiller lets Elisabeth Dohna's gaze from the horse and carriage create a reciprocal subjective image of a moving landscape, and in the latter film Stiller tracks Gösta Berling travelling in a carriage.

Sjöström, however, hardly ever moves his camera, even when motion could be motivated, as for example in the opening sequence of *The Phantom Chariot* when the spectator gets to follow the chariot around on its various tasks, but contents himself with registering the characters' movements within the image. On the occasions when the camera actually moves in this film it is in 30 out of 32 cases in interior scenes, when a person enters a room or alternatively moves some distance within the room. The two remaining scenes are exteriors from the street, when the main protagonist of the film David Holm, alone and in the company of the Salvationist Gustafsson respectively, approaches the front door of the home on his way in. The classical Hollywood film of the same period presents an interesting antithesis to Sjöström's method. Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson present the incipient use of mobile camera as one of the primary factors of the transition from the primitive period of film narration to the classical period. The aesthetics of tableaux are here

abandoned as early as the mid-1910s and in all events prior to 1917, the year which Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson put down as the definitive establishing point of the classical Hollywood style.⁴ Sjöström is, in other words, by comparison several years 'late'.

John Fullerton notes in his discussion of the representation of space and time in early Swedish film several similar stylistic 'delays'. He points to the fact that the division of the narrative into separate scenes appears comparatively late in the Swedish silent film; around 1917 – as an example he mentions *The Girl from the Marsh Croft* as well as others. Another stylistic device which was introduced late in Swedish film was the descriptive shot – a scene without anthropomorphic or narrative interest. This, according to Fullerton appears for the first time in the beginning of *Terje Vigen*, as does the descriptive syntagm (the linking together of several descriptive shots) which is first introduced in *The Girl from the Marsh Croft*, with the previously mentioned sequence consisting of three separate shots (two of which are pannings) in the opening of the film.⁵ One may seek a number of explanations for these delays. One assumption is that American film would be ahead in this respect, while an early narrative praxis would have lived on considerably longer in Swedish film. However, while there still does not exist any quantitative study of Swedish – or Scandinavian – cinema as a whole of the same type as that produced by Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson that question cannot be answered with any certainty. But the hypothesis seems – as Fullerton has observed – less reasonable as Swedish filmmakers had access to contemporary American and Danish films, which had in this respect, developed further.⁶

To the degree that Swedish films work with 'primitive' codes, this should in all likelihood indicate another kind of film practice, an alternative to Hollywood, rather than that it should be a remnant of a passed stage. One example of how Swedish film of this period is far from uniform, apart from the already mentioned films by Stiller, is presented by Carl Th. Dreyer's *The Parson's Widow/Prästänkan* (1920), which incidentally is considered part of the Swedish Golden Age. This film functions completely in accordance with the classical norms of the American narrative of that time, presenting a host of camera movements, both in the room – sweeps over characters – and in exterior scenes: landscape pannings and the like. The aesthetics of tableaux used by Sjöström should in this light

be seen as a choice, as an alternative model for shaping the room and the spatial process.

Transitions: cuts

The issue of transitions – 'clean' cuts, dissolves, etc – is closely related to the former issue of tableaux. Similarly it is again interesting to make a comparison with classical Hollywood narrative. If one uses *The Phantom Chariot* as example it is striking how the cutting rhythm of the film, as well as the number of shots, correlate with the average of the Hollywood film of that time. This correlation constitutes yet another argument for the above presented hypothesis that the aesthetics of tableaux should not be seen as a remnant of a primitive period.

David Bordwell states that the typical Hollywood film between 1917 and 1928 contained between 500 and 1000 shots, he has even calculated an average ("ASL" or average shot length) of 5-7 seconds.⁷ For *The Phantom Chariot* the average of 7 seconds is valid. Likewise as regards the cutting rhythm's variations in relation to the story the film concedes to prevalent stylistic norms of Hollywood narrative. When the action is escalated on a purely dramatic level this is accentuated by an increased cutting pace, as for example in the scene where the wife locks David Holm in an inner room while preparing her escape from the home, and David hacks his way out with an axe at the same time as she is dressing one of the children. Here there is a rapid cross-cutting between the two rooms over and over which certainly contributes to escalating the suspense, but which also functions as a time detractor – it seems the child will never be dressed.

The clean cuts dominate heavily in all of the examined films: the prevalent number of transitions between images (or between image and text) is accomplished by cutting. Therefore, the cutting technique of the films deserve closer study. Sjöström cuts the room together, he develops a special method for 'cutting in' the viewer in the room of the image, which also points to the aesthetics of tableaux as strategy. The tableaux narrative of early cinema was distinguished by the peep-show like character of the room, which kept the camera/viewer at a relatively constant distance from the action. In Sjöström's films, on the contrary, there is a constant process of cutting so that the viewer alternately approaches and retreats from the



Victor Sjöström, *The Outlaw and His Wife*

characters in the image: from medium shots, or close-ups which occur relatively sparingly, to long shots or plan amricain. The hesitance towards the use of close-ups, which D.W. Griffith commented upon and criticized as early as 1914,⁸ lingered for a long time in film narration. Kristin Thompson notes that certain critics of the 1910s claimed that the close-up violated traditional aesthetic principles of creation.⁹ The presence of the close-up in Sjöström's films is in other words not sparing according to the norm of the time.

Apart from bringing the viewer inwards or outwards in relation to the image, the cut is also made to substitute camera movement on those occasions when the narrative/camera wishes to follow a character exiting the image. Perhaps the most striking feature, however, of the spatial construction that arises from the cutting is that Sjöström cuts across the 180-degree line in four of the six films examined, thus making the filmic room circular, 360 degrees. The device is most frequent in *The Phantom Chariot*: occurring a total of 28 times. In *Terje Vigen* it is employed

on three occasions, in *The Girl from the Marsh Croft* five times and in *The Outlaw and His Wife* it occurs three times. Most often it is integrated in central scenes in the films and thereby stands to function as a sort of direct visualization of turning-points in the narrative. This is an illustrative example of the intertwining of style and motif that I have found to be a characteristic of Sjöström's.

In *Terje Vigen* a first such cut occurs as Terje says goodbye to his wife by the jetty before he embarks on his perilous journey to bring home food: as it turns out it is also the last time that he sees her. The second time it occurs is when Terje sets out for home, his boat loaded full with goods. The third time it is used is in the dramatic scene where Terje is chased by the British navy and is

consequently captured.

In *The Girl from the Marsh Croft* the first occasion a cut across the 180-degree line occurs is perhaps also the least obvious: when Gudmund meets Hildur (whom he is supposed to marry) for the first time in the film. The second time is at the entrance to the courthouse, in the central trial scene where Helga's role is shifted from the periphery to centre stage. She lingers here, hesitant, outside the entrance. The third occasion is in the courthouse, a shot of the judge seen from the front and then another from the back. On the fourth occasion we are at Marsh Croft, when Gudmund tells Helga's parents of what has passed at the trial. The last time occurs in the scene where Gudmund acting on his mother's instructions informs Helga that she wants to speak to her (she intends to dismiss Helga). Interesting to note in regards to this last cut is a marginal note in the script which appears to be in Sjöström's handwriting. Next to the line "You may go in to mother..." is the note: "to be shot from two directions - Gudmund at the other door, Helga turns by the door to the hall."¹⁰ This may

confirm that the cuts across the 180-degree line was a conscious stylistic device of Sjöström's.

In *The Outlaw and His Wife* there is a cut across the line for the first time in the opening scene where first a herd of sheep is seen coming towards the viewer and a gate where someone sits counting them is located on the right in the picture. Next, after a cut, we instead have the view from inside the pasture with the sheep walking away and the character counting located on the left. This scene may seem comparatively peripheral in the story and does not (due to its being placed in the beginning of the film, as opposed to the other scenes mentioned) constitute any turning point in the narrative. The second occasion on which a cut of this type appears is in a crucial scene where the outlaw (who at this juncture goes by the name of Kári) meets Halla, who later becomes his wife, for the first time. The third instance occurs in the transition to the second part of the film where yet another decisive meeting between Kári and Halla takes place.

In *The Phantom Chariot* one could mention the scene in the beginning of the film when Georges is about to recount the story of the chariot. Directly after the cut across the 180-degree line comes the cut to the text insert: "There is an old, old chariot -."¹¹ Another occasion is the previously mentioned scene where David hacks his way through the door to the room where his wife and children are, and where the cut unites the two adjoining rooms in an integrated 360-degree filmic room which allows the viewer to partake of both the combatting parties' point of view.

These cuts across the 180-degree line should be viewed as one of the more important stylistic characteristics of Sjöström's work, particularly in *The Phantom Chariot*. With the establishment of the classical Hollywood narrative the 180-degree rule had become a law. Cutting across the 180-degree line was considered as being too confusing for the viewer's orientation in the film room.¹² In the case of Sjöström, however, it is not perceived as particularly confusing. Thereby this pattern functions as an alternative way of implicating the viewer in the room, to render him/her mobile in regard to the viewed scene.

A comparison with D.W. Griffith's *Way Down East* (1920) is interesting here. The cutting technique of this film calls to mind the one used in Sjöström's films in that the camera movements are extremely sparse and that the cutting is used instead to suggest motion. However, Griffith's spatial composition is far more conventional than

Sjöström's, and consequently it completely lacks his dynamics: here we find to a much greater extent a striving towards centred and balanced images and thus no breaches of the 180-degree rule. Paradoxically this has the effect that Griffith's narrative – which according to the catalogue of classical film narrative norms would be more "advanced" than that of Sjöström's, and which constitutes a clear albeit relatively early example of the classical style – can be perceived as far more static and tableaux like.

Transitions: variants

Beside direct cuts in the examined films we also find three other types of optical transitions: I) fade-outs and fade-ins, II) iris closings and openings, III) dissolves. The actual set of types of transitions does not stand apart in any significant way from contemporary stylistic norms. However, the way that Sjöström varies different kinds of transitions seems to indicate a searching attitude towards his material. The films borrow a set of common devices which they utilize in different ways, thereby slightly changing their function, or their meaning.

According to Bordwell fade-outs and fade-ins and iris openings and closings are the most common types of transitions used to mark temporal ellipses between 1917 and 1921. In 1921 the use of the iris shot disappears, while the dissolve becomes commonplace only with the advent of the sound film.¹³ Sjöström's use of these devices, however, cannot be reduced to temporal transitions only. In *Terje Vigen* there are 9 fade-ins and 12 fade-outs. In script II this is referred to as "the image brightens" or "the image darkens."¹⁴ These are the only alternatives to clean cuts present in this film, and they are primarily used to mark a transfer in time and space. The first fade-in occurs at the jetty where Terje has loaded food, in other words it is a transfer from the previous scene where he is being chased by the British navy. Later, when Terje is captured by the British, there is a fade-out of his sinking boat, which, after an intertitle, is followed by a fade-in of the prison: a distinct temporal ellipsis where Terje has even become grey-haired. Likewise the fade-in is employed for the temporal ellipsis which includes Terje's journey home: a fade-out in the jail when the decision of release has come is followed after a clarifying text insert, by a fade-in of the jetty at home. Finally they also indicate visual memories

and ideas. Three examples could be mentioned that are integrated in the prison sequence: a fade-in of a subjective memory of Terje and the child, which is followed by a fade-out; then a new fade-in of another subjective memory of Terje, his wife and the child, which is then faded out; and finally a picture (of Terje's imagination) which is faded in and then out again, of the wife waiting with the child. This three step sequence functions effectively as an image of his mounting anticipation.

The Girl from the Marsh Croft, on the other hand, uses both fade-ins and -outs as well as iris openings and closings (10 fade-ins, 12 fade-outs, 19 iris openings and 21 iris closings). All of the fade-ins and fade-outs here mark transfers in time and/or space. Four of the fade-outs also mark a change of act, and are followed by text signs: "To be continued..." The first image of the film is made up of an iris opening on the croft, followed by a closing. After this there is a fade-in to the first landscape panning (of the valley) which is then faded out only to be followed by a new fade-in to the second panning (of the bog), this shot also being followed by a fade-out. The iris opening is also used in three cases for introducing characters. One might expect that this device would be reserved for the three main characters and, accordingly, the principal male character Gudmund and his fiance Hildur are introduced in this manner. The third introductory iris opening, however, is of Mårtensson, the presumed father of the child, who at the beginning of the film appears to be at the centre of the story, but who shortly hereafter completely vanishes from it. The film here seems to sidetrack the viewer, to give a false clue to the orientation of the story. The actual main character Helga again is introduced through reversed establishing, as previously mentioned; a tracking backwards with the camera after a cut. This introduction of Helga interestingly follows up the establishing shot's opening which locates the spectator directly at the centre of events: the film begins by showing the croft and thereafter expands the perspective to encompass its surroundings as well, and continues thereafter by focusing on Helga in a medium shot, then backs up to allow a long shot of Helga on one side so that her surroundings become visible as well. As to the rest of the film, iris openings and closings are used for spatial and temporal transfers. It is of interest to note that the film does not establish a consistent pattern of fade-out followed by fade-in or an iris closing followed by a corresponding

opening, but uses instead in five of the cases mixed forms, in other words an iris closing is followed by a fade-in, or a fade-out is followed by an iris opening. One case is particularly worth noting. The image of Helga after her conversation with Gudmund's mother (when she is dismissed because of the jealousy of her rival, Hildur) is ended with an iris closing on her face. It is followed by a fade-in of Gudmund and Hildur embracing - that is to say the very cause of Helga's dismissal. After an intertitle following the parting ways of the two young lovers comes a new iris closing on Gudmund. This also functions to clarify the central conflict of the narrative: Gudmund's position between the two women. The iris closing separates him from Hildur whom he has just embraced and unites him with Helga in the previous image.

Likewise, in *The Outlaw and His Wife* fade-ins and fade-outs are used as well as iris openings and closings (11 fade-ins, 9 fade-outs, 14 iris openings and 13 iris closings). These function in the same way as those in *The Girl from the Marsh Croft*: they mark transfers in time and space, three iris openings are used to introduce the three main characters and the two patterns (fade-ins/fade-outs and iris openings/iris closings) may be cross-combined, which happens in three cases. However, here no fade-outs are used to designate changes of acts.

His Lordship's Will uses only iris openings and closings which occur 12 and 11 times respectively. The use is basically analogous to that of the other films where the device is employed to designate transfer. The introductory iris openings, however, are here reserved for places and not for characters: the palace itself in the opening shot, and somewhat later the valet's room, as well as his lordship's bedroom. In this film there is also a variant introduced. The iris closing is in two cases used for focusing on central characters at the end of the introductory scenes. The scene in the valet's room is thus ended with an iris closing which focuses on Vickberg, and the scene in his lordship's bedroom focuses on his lordship himself.

The Monastery of Sendomir, like *Terje Vigen*, uses only fade-ins and fade-outs, which furthermore are relatively few in number: 7 and 3 respectively. However, here there is also a dissolve. Two fade-ins are used as establishers in the beginning of the film. The dissolve - which is discussed further in the section on transformations below - is made to mark the transition between the film's frame story and the retrospective



Victor Sjöström, *The Outlaw and His Wife*

narrative which forms the major part of the action. The other fade-ins and fade-outs occur within this flashback, as markings of ellipses in the monk's story, and, lastly, the spectator is returned to the frame story by a fade-in.

Finally, before examining in more detail how the devices are integrated in *The Phantom Chariot*, attention should be turned to how this film as a whole is structured temporally. As the film moves to such an extent between different time planes – and in this regard substantially departs from the other films, which for the most part are linear narratives – such a thorough survey may be in order. Shots 1-96 in this film take place in the present, mainly at the Salvation Army and at the graveyard. In take 97 David Holm's story about Georges leads to a visualization of past time, and this story continues until shot 129. There Georges – inside David's story – takes

over and begins to recount the story of *The Phantom Chariot*, a story located out of time. This lasts until take 152, where the narration returns to the same point in the past as in shot 129, and where the plot remains in shots 153-156. In take 157 the narration returns to the graveyard of the present where it remains until shot 222. In 223 the plot is again removed to the past. David is dead, and the spectator hears (and sees) the chariot's driver Georges recapitulate his life story until shot 302. In 303-306 the story is once again anchored in the graveyard of the present for a moment, only to revert to the past in 307 where the spectator hears the continued story of David's descent into alcoholism, and remains there until 381. In shot 382 Georges leaves the graveyard accompanied by David's soul and sets out for sister Edit's. In 438 there is one long final flashback to the past (starting from sister Edit's room), until shot 663, which depicts the Salvationist's hitherto vain attempts to convert David. In 664 the narrative returns definitively to the present (that is up until 787),

where David also eventually re-enters his body. The mere fact that such a large part of the film – 441 shots as opposed to 346 – takes place in the past is striking, but even more astonishing (particularly if one keeps in mind the prevalent set conventions for transfers in time at the time of the making of the film¹³) is the fact that Sjöström moves so freely between now and then, between different times and different locations. Even within the sequences from the past there are internal temporal transfers, and the initial construction of two stories spilling over into each other. From a purely stylistic point of view this is undoubtedly one of the most remarkable aspects of the film. How then do the temporal transitions occur in *The Phantom Chariot*?

The fade-ins and fade-outs (26 fade-ins and 28 fade-outs) function in the majority of the cases completely in accordance with the norm as

markers of transfers in both time and space. However, on some occasions the fade-ins and fade-outs function only as a spatial transfer (as, among others, between sister Edit's deathbed and the graveyard where David Holm is at the same time). The function of the three iris openings – also in accordance with the norm – is to mark a shift in time and space, while the two iris closings (which aren't completed but combined with a time displacing fade-out followed by a fade-in) have a focusing function. Both occasions on which they occur are central to the two main characters: the first is when David leaves the Salvation Army and sister Edit thoughtfully gazes after him and then becomes centered in an iris shot; and later when David is sitting at the beerhouse with his drinking buddy (Gustafsson) who leaves him to go to the Salvation Army. Here in an iris shot the spectator sees David choke on his scornful laugh.

The dissolves – 8 in all – are also particularly interesting despite (or due to) their sparing presence. Five of them only constitute spatial transfers in one and the same room, at one and the same time. These five dissolves can thus not be assigned to any specific function in the narrative. The three remaining dissolves are transfers in both space and time, and thus also narratively motivated. Two of these constitute specific cases: they use the dissolve as transformation. I return to them below.

Another exception in the film that is worth noting is the presence of a wipe with a soft edge, from right to left – wipes didn't otherwise become common until the Hollywood film of the 1930s.¹⁶ The wipe appears after Georges has found David on the tombstone, and forms a transition to the part of the story that takes place in the past and which tells of David's happy years with his family. This wipe is like the turning of a leaf, whereby one discovers things hidden.

Transformations

Even though the above mentioned wipe constitutes a unique case, it is interesting to consider both its presence and its use in the context of the film. In order to condense the narration, Sjöström here makes use of technique in an innovative way. This is also valid in the case of the dissolves, which are outstanding among the narrative devices employed in the Sjöström films. Even though they remain rare if

considered quantitatively, they nevertheless form one of the most distinct examples of the alliance between stylistic and thematic patterns that I have tried to sketch throughout these pages.

In the section on transitions between shots above, the presence of a dissolve in *The Monastery of Sendomir* was mentioned. The dissolve appears when the monk, compelled by the two strangers visiting the monastery, begins to recount the story of its coming into being. The narration at this time is located in a large room with a centrally placed table and a sculptured relief on the wall to the left in the shot. The monk has recently uttered the following: "Starchensky was the name of the man, a count by birth, who owned all this surrounding land".¹⁷

After the intertitle the image of the monk in the aforementioned room recurs, after which the image is dissolved into another: the image of a man with a child on his lap. Next to the man there stands a table and shortly after the sculptured relief on the wall reveals that the room is the very same one as shown before, and thus that the monastery in the past has been a castle, i.e. the residence of the count Starchensky. The attentive viewer may also recognize that the man, Starchensky, is in fact identical with the narrating monk. This identity gets its explicit confirmation only at the end of the film when we have returned anew to the frame story. The dissolve works, in other words, as an independent device, which does not in this context receive any clarifying support from any other narrative patterns. The monk does not yield any indication that he would be identical to Starchensky. This device, which I here call dissolve as transformation, is found here for the first time in the examined material by Sjöström. For in this single changing of images, through a motion in reverse direction, the whole drama that the film portrays and which turns the count into a monk and the castle into a monastery, is concentrated.

On the plot level of the film this condensed image can be expressed through a series of transformations. Initially we meet the monk who rejects the title "Father" and insists on being called "friar" by the visitors. In the previous mentioned transition he transforms into Starchensky, the family father. However, the family bliss turns out to be founded on a lie as Starchensky is not the father of the child, and thus his non-paternity occurs twice in the film, although in different ways. This in turn leads up to the next transformation, where he becomes a murderer. The murderer then, in turn, transforms

into a penitent and a monk. On the narrative plane of the film the spectator has thereby been made to witness a circular transformation.

In *The Phantom Chariot* the dissolve is used on two occasions as transformation, in a way that is strikingly reminiscent of the method used in *The Monastery of Sandomir*. The first occasion on which this occurs is in a scene where the first shot contains a triangle constellation with the wife in the middle flanked on either side by David and his brother. The dissolve then leads to another image which also contains a triangle whose base is made up by David and his brother, but where at the centre the wife has now been replaced by their drinking buddy Georges. This dissolve (which is part of the driver Georges's story) functions thereby as one of the film's most dense transitions: elliptically it sums up all of the intermediary events which have transformed David Holm's idyllic family bliss into alcoholism and destitution. It also functions ironically: the wife replaced by Georges as a metonymy for alcoholism.

The second dissolve takes place towards the end of the film. After having said a prayer David's spirit throws itself on the floor in front of the driver (they are in the room of the wife who is planning her suicide and the murder of the children). Next the spectator is transferred to the graveyard where David is now lying in the same position on the tombstone while the figure of the driver fades away. David's spirit has, in other words, been transferred from the wife's room and has now re-entered his body on the stone in the graveyard. David has been given his life back, and *The Phantom Chariot*, i.e. death, has vanished from his life.

This latter dissolve obtains its full importance only if one truly accepts that David has been dead. Neither in Selma Lagerlöf's story, nor in the film's script is there any room for doubt. Bengt Idestam-Almqvist as well as Rune Waldekrantz, however, have chosen to consider



Victor Sjöström, Terje Vigen

David as unconscious and not dead and his experiences as nightmares. Idestam-Almqvist writes: "The viewer assumes from the context that he has died, but he has not. He is only dreaming".¹⁸ This urge to find realistic motivations for the film's plot is both peculiar and unfortunate because it reduces the dramatic force of the film's transformations.

If the two dissolves described above constitute the film's most dense visual expressions of transformation, then this transformation can simultaneously be seen as the consistent thematics of the whole film. In the most remarkable way, the dissolves also blend with the film's most explicit stylistic devices: the superimpositions. The combination of these two patterns sets the transformation of focus in Sjöström's film, as well as his film style. The sophisticated change between the many levels that the story contains form a series of transformations that David Holm goes through. To begin with he at first appears as evil in the film. After that follows the sequences with David as dead and eventually as a spirit, when the spectator also finds out that he has once been a good person. Then he is transformed again to the living and becomes, in juncture with this, good



Mauritz Stiller, *The Song of the Scarlet Flower*

again. The same series of transformations on the level of the underlying story, that is to say in chronological order, could be summed up in the following description of evolution: good family man – drinking buddy – dead – living and once again good.

This interpretation connects with previous thematic analyses of the film, for example Rune Waldekranz's discussion of David Holm's conversion.¹⁹ The point is thus not primarily that it says something new about the Sjöströmian motifs, but that the interpretation is anchored in the style of the film and in the purely narrativistic transformations.

If one considers the earlier films in the perspective of *The Monastery of Sendomir* and *The Phantom Chariot* one can on this point discern a distinct development in Sjöström's narrative. For in all of the earlier films the transformation is also important on the thematic level, whereas the visual presentation of it varies. Only with the transformatory dissolve in *The*

Monastery of Sendomir does Sjöström seem to have found an adequate stylistic device for portraying one of the most central of his narrative themes. This also tallies with the fact that Sjöström in the period around 1920 was experimenting with stylistic devices, stylistic experiments that are easily discernible in the analysis of the films. As an example one could mention his lack of consistency in using different kinds of transitions, such as changings between an iris shot and a fade-in and fade-out where he tests various possibilities, discards and tries anew. A couple of film examples from his later production also show how the dissolve becomes a recurrent stylistic device which is consistently employed to portray various kinds of transformations.

First we can mention a sequence from *Love's Crucible/Vem dömer* (1922), a drama which takes place in the late Middle Ages, and which is the film that follows directly *The Phantom Chariot*. The main female character Ursula is

suspected of having poisoned her husband and must prove her innocence in an ordeal by fire. She is to walk through the fire up to a large crucifix. After the initial shot of her (just as she is to begin her walk) there is a cut to the crucifix. Christ on the cross is now transformed through a dissolve into the dead husband, who comes to life again. Thereafter there is yet another transformation of the husband to an earlier stage in life, and in this dissolve the cross is also faded out. Then there is a cut back to Ursula by the fire in the filmic present, whereupon she is also transformed through a dissolve to the earlier stage of life. After a cut the husband comes towards Ursula with his arms open. They take each other's hands, he backs up and leads her to the right in the shot. In a new transformation back to the present and the pyre, the dead husband now leads Ursula to the right in the same manner. When Ursula finally in this way has passed the ordeal and looks up at the cross the husband still hangs there, appearing alive, bending his head in the position of the dead Christ, whereupon a concluding transformation back to the Christ figure can take place. It is, in other words, a series of five transformatory dissolves in a row. On the thematic level there are also several factors which motivate and condense the sequence: the dead husband was a sculptor, Ursula had modelled for a statue of the Virgin Mary, and, finally, the husband assumed in death (by heartattack) the very same position as that of Christ on the cross.

In an article on *He Who Gets Slapped* (1924), Sjöström's second film of his American period, Örjan Roth-Lindberg analyzed the dissolves of the film.²⁰ The dissolves occur on five occasions in the story. Firstly – in the film's opening sequence – the image of a clown with a large ball is dissolved into a man (who turns out to be the film's main character; the scientist Beaumont) who is spinning a globe. On the next occasion the clown appears anew with his ball. The image then focuses on the ball which is again dissolved to a globe, which at a third stage is dissolved into a circus ring.²¹ The third instance is made up of a series of several transformations, some of which take place through dissolves. The scientist, who has now become the clown 'He', is in the ring in front of a group of other clowns. The image is dissolved, and instead of the clowns the spectator now sees an academy of scientists with stiff appearances, a visual memory of an earlier humiliating situation that 'He' found himself in. After a cut back to 'He', there is a new cut to the

men, who are now wearing clown hats and laughing. After yet another cut to 'He', the same scientists in clown hats reemerge. This image is finally dissolved into the original group of clowns. On the fourth occasion we see the film's villain, the baron (who is the reason for 'He' having had to become a clown), in the company of the greedy Mancini, who is about to give his daughter away in marriage to the wealthy baron. He is absent-mindedly fingering a necklace, which is focused upon through an iris closing. However, this closing is not completed. Instead the image is dissolved to another pair of hands that are fiddling about with a garland of flower, followed by an iris opening to reveal it is the girl's beloved who is holding the garland. Lastly we meet 'He', in clown make-up again, who in a dissolve reverts to his actual self – the scientist Beaumont – and thereafter again becomes 'He'. This dissolve marks the baron's discovery of the clown's true identity.

Interestingly, Roth-Lindberg divides these dissolves into different categories. He distinguishes the following functions of the dissolves (the numbers refer to the respective occasions on which they appear chronologically):

1. as a portent of change (of Beaumont's future transformation into a clown)
2. as a turning-point (transfer from the globe to the circus ring, which marks Beaumont's actual change)
3. as comparison (the scientists who are compared to the band of clowns)
4. as analogy (between pearl necklace and garland, between a trade using the symbols of love)
5. as turning-point (the moment of recognition).²²

One could, however, take it one step further by comparing *He Who Gets Slapped* with the previously analyzed transformatory dissolves, starting from other grounds for division, to also see on which level in the narrative they function. The dissolve in *The Monastery of Sendomir* – from monk to Count – constitutes the transition to a subjective narrative, but (as we have already seen) without this being marked in any other way than through the intertitles and the actual dissolve. It is in other words not a question of subjectivity in a technical respect, but rather in a transferred sense. For example the first transformatory dissolve in *The Phantom Chariot* – when David the family man is transformed into the drinking buddy – has a similar function as it is part of the beginning of Georges's story of the devastating effect he thinks he has had on David. The other transformatory dissolve lacks this type

of subjective function, but it plays a key role on the diegetic level by marking David's return from the state of a spirit to his body on the tombstone, and the living.

In *Love's Crucible* the chain of dissolves is also subjective in so much as it constitutes a visualization of an inner experience of Ursula's. But it is also – for the first time in Sjöström's narrative – a case of a 'classically' portrayed subjective image in connection with a transformatory dissolve. Thus there are several cuts, respecting the lines in the image, for example, in a scene where Ursula stares at and walks towards a burning cross. The chain of dissolves functions, furthermore, partly as metaphor, partly as a time displacement. If Ursula has not actually poisoned her husband, she has indeed intended to do it – which was the cause of his heart attack. In other words, the metaphors used here serve to express a double forgiveness, both from Christ and from her husband. Her husband's forgiveness in turn becomes possible and is motivated diegetically by the transfer in time back to the past, to a stage before the sin. Two of the dissolves in *He Who Gets Slapped* – numbers 3 and 5 above – are subjective mental images or insights, and here as well as in *Love's Crucible* they are that in a purely technical sense: we see that 'He' sees, respectively, what the baron sees. The other three instances (1, 2 and 4) all differ from previous transformatory dissolves used by Sjöström, by being located at the level of narration rather than at the level of plot. Even if they do not lack relation to the film's diegesis their task is not primarily to express intra-diegetic events. Instead, they play a role on the level of narration, that is they take place, so to speak, between the narration and the viewer, as they are addressed to the viewer.

If I in the preceding have for a moment allowed myself to digress from the six films which constitute the actual object of study in this text, it has been to clearly show the development in Sjöström's film style in this respect. The two latter films do not only establish the use of transformatory dissolve as a Sjöströmian key device, but as we have seen they also introduce two novel aspects to it. Partly it becomes a means for expressing a subjective inner process that simultaneously follows the more general conventions of film language, while allowing the narrative patterns to become further complicated by allowing the narration to be discerned on a separate level. Here Sjöström simultaneously

abandons the dual meaning of the stylistic device of both transformatory dissolve and dissolve as transformation (within the fiction). The dissolves on the level of narration no longer transform anything, other than the actual story. The pearl necklace remains a necklace and the flower garland remains a garland. They offer themselves for the consideration of the viewer, for him or her to transform. The viewer sees that the value of the garland is higher than that of the pearl necklace, that true love is more valuable than the love trade.

Conclusion

In examining six films by Victor Sjöström from the Swedish "Golden Age", I have tried to point out the somewhat problematic questions arising from earlier research on Sjöström, where technique and narrative content are often considered separate from each other. On the contrary, these examples show clearly the close interrelation between style and motif in Sjöström. The analysis of certain technical devices related to the overall narrative structure, such as the employment of space, the cutting technique, or the movements of the camera all indicate that Sjöström's film style differs considerably from that of contemporary Hollywood cinema. The originality of this style, however, lies less in its uniqueness than in the fact that it varies and combines different patterns of style in new ways. Devices often considered as "primitive" in the Hollywood context here appear as parts of a conscious stylistic strategy, which I have called a camouflaged technique. The film style of Victor Sjöström – together with other directors of the Swedish Golden Age, as I hope to show in a forthcoming dissertation – can thus be considered as a coherent national alternative to the dominant cinema.

Notes:

¹ Henri Fescourt and Jean-Louis Bouquet, *L'idée et l'écran: Opinions sur le cinéma*, vol I. Paris: Haberschill and Sergent 1925, 15.

² Ibid.

³ See Bengt Forslund, *Victor Sjöström - hans liv och verk*. Stockholm: Bonniers 1980, 133, and Gösta Werner, *Den svenska filmens historia*. Stockholm: P.A. Norstedt & Sners frlag 1978, 54-55.

⁴ David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema. Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*. London, Melbourne and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1985, 157-158.

⁵ John Fullerton, "Spatial and Temporal Articulation in Pre-Classical Swedish Film". In Thomas Elsaesser (ed.), *Early Cinema: Space - Frame - Narrative*. London: British Film Institute 1990, 380.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 375.

⁷ Bordwell, Staiger, Thompson 1985, 61.

⁸ Robert E Welsh, "David W. Griffith speaks", *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 71, 14 January 1914, 49, 54, quoted by Bordwell, Staiger, Thompson 1985, 190-191.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ "Du kan gå in till mor..."; "...tas från två håll - Gudmund vid andra dörren, Helga vänder sig vid dörren till förstugan." *The Girl from Marsh Croft*, Script II, the archives of SFI.

¹¹ "Det finns en gammal, gammal kärra -."

¹² According to Kristin Thompson there are after 1915 at the most one or two breaches against this rule per film. Bordwell, Staiger, Thompson 1985, 205.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁴ "...bilden ljusnar," and "bilden mörknar" respectively. *Terje Vigen*, Script II, the archives of SFI.

¹⁵ This is, moreover, not only true for this period: David

Bordwell observes that script manuals during all of the classical Hollywood era advised against using flashbacks, partly because they slow down the pace of a film. Also he points out that they were used more sparingly than what is generally assumed. Bordwell, Staiger, Thompson (1985), 42-44.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁷ "Starchensky hette mannen, till börden var han greve, som ägde hela den här omkringliggande trakten."

¹⁸ "Åskådaren tror av sammanhanget att han slagit ihjäl sig, men det har han inte. Han bara drömmer." Bengt Idestam-Almqvist, *Filmen som konst*. Stockholm: Natur och kultur 1946,124. Also cf. Rune Waldekrantz, *Filmens historia. De första hundra åren från zoopraxiscope till video. Del I: Pionjäråren*. Stockholm: P. A. Norstedt & Sners förlag 1985, 505-506.

¹⁹ Waldekrantz 1985, 505.

²⁰ Örjan Roth-Lindberg. "Den bedrägliga bilden. Om den visuella fantasin i Victor Sjöströms *He Who Gets Slapped*." ("The Deceptive Image. About the Visual Fantasy in Victor Sjöström's *He Who Gets Slapped*"), *Chaplin* 196, no.1 1985, 28-36.

²¹ We can also see a group of clowns lowering themselves down the sides of the globe in a double exposure, subsequently they land on the supporting ring of the globe, i.e. the circus ring.

²² Roth-Lindberg 1985, 35.