

EGON FRIEDEL

Dubarry

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Ernst Lubitsch's *Madame Dubarry*, a lavish historical epic of the French Revolution (with Emil Jannings as Louis XV and Pola Negri as Jeanne/Dubarry), opened with great fanfare in Berlin on September 18, 1919. Under the title "Passion," it was also the first German film after World War I to open in New York on December 12, 1920 to enthusiastic reviews and overwhelming public response. Egon Friedell (1897-1938), a Viennese theater critic and cultural philosopher, writes about this film (two years after the failed Workers' Revolution in Germany) to meditate on the relationship between the revolutionary event and its historical memory that is shaped by cinematic representation. (See also Friedell's earlier text from 1912/13, "Prologue before the Film," no. 78)

A while ago you could see *Dubarry*, a film in six acts with an epilogue, as it played in cinemas. The film, free of stupidity and bad taste, is loosely based on the novel of the countess Dubarry, the last mistress of that Louis who was called the "Well-Beloved" by his people, even though he bankrupted them during his equally long and hollow reign. I can't generally agree with the lament of the worried aesthetes, who see cinema leading to the complete brutalization of society. When this artistic medium finds a director with enough artistic touch,

then it can be more enjoyable, but also more instructive and moving than most current stage performances. Cinema has the ability, precisely because of its silence, to let the soul speak even more powerfully through sight, faces and gestures. It is able to evoke mood in ways nearly impossible for stage drama, above all, because cinema assigns such an important role to the inanimate realm. Houses, forests, clouds, mountains, entire cities and landscapes suddenly begin to open their mouths and tell their stories. This is how the slice of history detailing the declining Rococo era in the hit film *Du Barry* rolls by, in its arrangement of grand images. The epilogue is the most powerful part. With some degree of historical inaccuracy, which we have always allowed the great poets, the filmmaker has the revolution break out immediately after the death of Louis XV. Then, almost incarnate, as if personified, we catch a glimpse of the wonderfully terrible monster, the dreadfully exquisite leviathan, called the "French Revolution." We see how it slowly rises, lumbering its bloody dragon body throughout the city of Paris and greedily thrusting its savage claws into the people's bodies and homes. We see the storming of Bastille, the battle with the Swiss Guard, the procession of people toward Versailles: I can't think of a more memorable or illustrative history lesson.

At this point some thoughtful moviegoers (and there are sure to be some) will probably ask: Ok, so how does a revolution come about? Considered on its own, there appears no more peculiar or absurd a phenomenon than a revolution. First of all, because there is nothing more deeply rooted in humans, even in the most seemingly enlightened of them, than belief in some kind of authority. The atheist sees a church as nothing more than a clubhouse, yet would it ever occur to him to smoke a cigar there, even if were not prohibited? And if one of us today

were walking in the forest and suddenly happened upon Kaiser Wilhelm, would we not automatically salute? Our brain, our logic, our education can override a bunch of “preconceptions,” but our nerves, our senses, our entire remaining corporeal system will still cling to the old beliefs. The novelty, we might say, has not yet made its way through all the parts of the body; and it often takes generations until it does. There are a bunch of things we think we don’t believe in with our intellect, but our being still believes in them, and it is always the more powerful part. If this can already be observed daily among the so-called thinking members of society, then it must be even more pronounced among those who live primarily by instinct. And in France the situation was seemingly unfavorable for such a radical shift in thought, as occurred toward the end of the eighteenth century. [. . .]

The curious ethnological phenomenon of a revolution is not made particularly comprehensible to us when we are actual participants. At first glance, it still seems strange, which is, in principle, only too natural. The contemporary figure never sees the historical event in its totality, only in pieces. He only gets the story in randomly divided installments, which seem erratic and more often than not fail to appear at all. In order to identify the face of a mountain I have to examine it from a certain distance. As long as I am climbing the mountain I won’t see it. The life I lead with my fellow human beings is also stripped down to a bunch of little molecular interactions and beyond that I can’t arrive at an overall picture. With temporal perception the distance has a different significance for the viewer than it does with spatial perception, namely the exact opposite: it does not minimize things, rather it affects them in a converse manner, like a magnifying glass. Through a certain temporal distance,

movements gain a panoramic visibility, which they did not have for their contemporaries. Yet, they appear to us much more rapid than they actually were and precisely this aspect increases their intelligibility. If we observe a drop of water under a microscope we see a bunch of tiny organisms shooting around at amazing speeds. In actuality, these little creatures are not as agile as they appear; they are really quite slow and inactive. However, since the lens magnifies them a hundred times, their movements also appear a hundred times faster. Historical interpretation is similar, in that the further back a development took place the quicker it seems to happen in our time microscope, which we always carry with us. The history of Egypt, for example, seems no longer than the history of Prussia: we have the general impression of a few series of leaders, who reigned over their lands with varying degrees of success. And yet Egyptian history is more than four times longer than European history, ten millennia! However, precisely because of this the history of Egypt becomes manageable, enlightening and straightforward. This is why we understand the past better than the present, not because, as is often claimed, we are in a position to more objectively evaluate the past through our intellectual distance. The fact that the past is so foreign to us mentally is all the more reason for our inability to understand it. [. . .]

So I ask a third time: how does a revolution come about? And I'll add the question: What makes a revolution beautiful? A revolution is normally a senseless, destructive, animalistic and thrillingly nasty thing: dead horses, houses in shambles, plundered stores, bridges blown sky high, charred human bodies torn to pieces. Yet, although terrible, the French Revolution does not appear ugly to us: there is something demonically picturesque about it, like the spookiness of an enchanted marionette theater. How is a revolution, essentially a furious chaos

full of avarice and lunacy, made into an aesthetic impression? How does it become, to put it another way, to seem absolutely made for the movies?