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Overlooking the Ephemeral*

Carolyn Abbate

It came by mail, and by mistake.

I had ordered stills from movies with scores by Allan Gray, a film composer who worked in the 1930s–50s. He was a pupil of Arnold Schoenberg, and his real name was Józef Żmigrod.[1] Among the stills I received was this photograph, unidentified, obviously a vintage piece

Figure 1.

*Originally published as "Das Ephemere übersehen," in *Latenz: Blinde Passagiere in den Geisteswissenschaften,* ed. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and Florian Klinger (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2011), 24–50.

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from the 1940s. But from what film, and who were the people? One of them is pointing to paper with what looks like small illustrations or bundles of writing. A natural assumption: if we could see what is written, we could discover a clue about the photograph's identity. Magnification is needed.

To use a strong magnifying glass, you put it right next to one eye and focus by closing the other eye and bringing your face up to the surface, so everything goes dark except what one eye sees. With this photograph, the camera lens had been so expensive, the film and aperture speed so balanced, that the photograph under a lens became stereoscopic—almost holographic. The result is being transported into a room from seventy years ago as if entering into black-and-white reality. And what we can see once we are there is everything at point-blank range. We can see threads composing the weave in the fabrics. We can see how thick the face powder is, and even what is in the shadows under the table. And, when our passage through the space gets us to the left hand of the seated figure, we can see that it had moved in the instant the shutter clicked, leaving a trace in the image.

Figure 2.

That is a heart-stopping moment. But before interrogating this claim—why should it be?—it is worth thinking about the captured motion as a kind of counterpoint to *latency* as a concept. This captured motion seems precisely not latent—since latent implies developing or realizing what is otherwise concealed, whether by means of thought or by some chemical or physical process. To understand "realizing the latent" as

extracting hidden meaning is simply to reconstitute the hermeneutic under another guise. To understand it as a chemical process—bringing up invisible fingerprints with special powder—is to reduce it to mechanics. The image of the shifted hand is not in need of development in either sense. It is not something invisible that is made to appear through a hermeneutic reading or interpretation of the object, or through some chemical treatment: it is simply there in plain sight.

What is interesting about it, as an error in the medium, is that an actor's physical movements—movement being that which disappears in the situation of still photography—have nonetheless been preserved. Furthermore, the error in the photograph does show that the "latent" can be brought forth by pure observation, by attentiveness to the concrete or the material, in the special case where ephemera—which by definition should have disappeared without a trace—are accidentally caught in the wrong recording medium. Eventually I am going to show that this same attentiveness allows us to see how another ephemeron—actual musical sound from the past—left traces in a medium equally wrong for its capture, in the image track in silent films. The unasked-for photograph, however, is not yet exhausted as a philosophical toy.

Gnostic Burdens

Interpreting aesthetic objects according to certain academic norms means reading signs, and when we see a paper with enigmatic markings, the impulse is to interpret them, make them make sense. We have a document, a photograph that depicts an unknown drama—the impulse is to identify the film through whatever visual clues we might be able to pick up. We have a document in another sense, as it turns out, a photograph produced by the Hollywood marketing machine during World War II—we could cite it as historical evidence of the industry's aspirations or purposes. This would be easy. The photograph could easily sustain the academic preference for interpreting works or texts, as opposed to dealing with aesthetic experience as phenomena.

The boxes seen on the papers in the photograph are postage stamps, and the characters' poses suggest conspiracy. With that start, and with online film databases, it takes very little time to identify the movie, which is *Nazi Agent* (1941), directed by Jules Dassin, and to discover that this photograph was in fact widely used in publicity for the film, its flaw apparently having been considered too unnoticeable to count.

Figure 3.

Other stills from the same session, though without flaws, do not have the same punch:

Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4. Production stills and Lobby Card from *Nazi Agent*, directed by Jules Dassin (MGM, 1941). Photographs by Clarence Bull. Public Domain.

As we can see from the lobby card, the postage stamps are a code used by Nazi spies to transmit information about Allied military convoys. What a Nazi spy movie in 1941 has to do with world history and the Hollywood culture industry goes without saying. So the photograph—simultaneously a kitsch illustration of reading-as-cryptography, and a demand to be itself demystified by being identified—could in turn easily become a document supporting, say, an academic exegesis on film and politics in America in the 1940s.

But suppose we return to my claim that seeing the flaw in the photograph is a heart-stopping moment: an aesthetic experience, having an immediate physical effect, engendered by the present object. Such experiences do resist activities like investigating, penetrating, seeking the deeper meaning, exposing, unveiling, deciphering, explaining, interpreting, accounting for, and getting beyond the surface. Looking into the photograph with complete focus and attentiveness means taking in the material object itself and the material objects it captured, coming in as close as possible—and then, signifiers with their allegories are not what you discover. Once within the photograph, the textures and the physicality they convey are overwhelming.

These are actors—

Who have immobilized themselves—

In makeup that cannot hide their scars and age—

And all this is painful knowledge. The performers assume life in defiance of physical law (since they are all dead) at the very moment when whatever characters they were impersonating fall away. There are forms of knowledge that these textures and presences convey, but is there a place in academic culture for them? And if so, how do you articulate it?

Against Interpretation and For Expression

The provocation is not new. In *Against Interpretation* (1961), Susan Sontag famously argued for attention to surfaces. "The contemporary zeal for the project of interpretation is often prompted not by piety toward the troublesome text (which may conceal an aggression), but by an open aggressiveness, an overt contempt for appearances."[2] Elizabeth Prettejohn rephrases the question for visual art in the most straightforward terms: "What are we saying about these works when we call them beautiful, rather than finding them useful or informative, morally edifying or politically progressive?"[3] Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht cites the 1980s as a moment when academic culture revivified the material, as a self-conscious gesture against the "endlessness of interpretation," and without being made sluggish by Marxist ancestries.[4]

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In academic circles, one can see a contemporary turn to media, to modalities of communication, to actor-networks, to delivery systems for the aesthetic, as a turn to the material channels and physical manifestations of things that we no longer want to call texts precisely because that term denies their embodiment and, in enabling the abstraction, encourages cryptographic habits. It is important to remember that these habits persist, however, in part because they are fun. Reading for signs and clues produces cryptographic intoxication, and the intoxication factor may explain why this becomes the default condition for humanists engaged with works and texts. What the opposing voices would have us recall is that while there may well be "signs taken for wonders" (the title of Franco Moretti's 1983 rhapsody to the political significance of art),[5] there can also be wonders taken for signs. There can be boring knowledge.

Gumbrecht, however, identifies the dilemma inherent in the turn from the hermeneutic. It is a double crisis. One crisis concerns occupation—what are we choosing to be attentive to? To hear, and to think about? Yet there is also a crisis of expression: How do we give expression to insight? How do we negotiate between objective and subjective voices, since if experience is at issue we can hardly dodge the latter? In terms of occupation, he argues that exegesis, interpretation, and hermeneutics have reached an impasse. As Gumbrecht says, humanists' default activities are explaining texts and resolving interpretive or theoretical issues, "obsessively attributing meaning and thereby providing solutions" (*PP* 127–28). Messages lie concealed within or behind artworks whose surfaces are to be transcended: that idea has worked well for texts but is hopeless when it comes to presence and its effects. But if there are things that meaning cannot convey, what are they? What is conveyed, he asks by the experience of musical performance, hedonist pleasures, epiphany, and sports, to name just a few? Humanists excel at the activities belonging to "meaning culture," but things like aesthetic experience as it happens, in the here-and-now, belong to "presence culture," and it is here that words have failed—academia seems unsure about what to do with aesthetic experience, and overlooking it has impoverished the humanities and hastened their marginalization. Thus whenever and wherever events and their presence are demonized, or submitted to the routine of textualization, Gumbrecht would have us resist.[6] He identifies a "desire for presence" diagnosed as the desire for an antidote: "Aesthetic experience can prevent us from completely losing a feeling or a remembrance of the physical dimension in our lives"(*PP* 116).

But the second crisis is the challenge to expression. Speaking about aesthetic experience prescribes embarrassment, since it means being open

about one's subjective position, and allegiance to individual subjectivity can be seen as intellectually unsound or simply not acceptable. And does it not demand a new language? Thus Gumbrecht proposes speaking in a different rhetorical style, using different epistemological turns, "drawing . . . attention towards complex phenomena and problems," or "stag[ing] complexity," thereby recalling that aesthetic encounters take place in the modality of lived experience (*PP* 128). This is a rhetorical style he calls "deixis"—from the Greek word meaning to indicate with one's hand. Furthermore: "If aesthetic experience is always evoked by and if it always refers to moments of intensity," then the rhetorical expression of such a moment is right to become the briefest of gestures (*PP* 101).

Now we need to return to the unasked-for photograph, to mark that moment when we see the captured motion for its intensity as an experience. Not frightening, not morbid: it is no use citing standards like photography as mortuary or ghostly blurs. For one thing, the discourse that deems recording media macabre has become rote and routine. But it is also of no use because the movement trace, as powerful as it is, is not necessarily disquieting. To have an instant reaction in a close encounter with a photograph must bring us back to the idea of aesthetic experience, its intensity, and how such encounters can lead us to where we never imagined we would be. In the photograph, what remains transfixing and not boring at all is that elegant hand and its pluperfect ephemeron: the motion at the wrong moment, recorded inadvertently in the wrong medium, a photographic medium whose whole point is to arrest movement. What is paradoxical is that the intensity of the aesthetic experience is in part based upon a partial absence: a motion that leaves only its indirect self.

Reticence

Pace Gumbrecht, perhaps the right thing to do when we encounter something beautiful is in fact to be silent. According to Rousseau, reticence, remaining distant, is a form taken by love—love doesn't attempt to possess its object through loquaciousness or forced proximity.[7]

Figure 5. Production still from *The Thief of Baghdad*, directed by Ludwig Berger, Michael Powell, and Tim Whelan (London Films/MGM, 1940). Unknown photographer. Public Domain.

But proposing silence, or even just reticence—is that not simple nonsense? So although Gumbrecht imagines a "deictic style" in intellectual discourse, he also suspects it: "How will such a deictic teaching style not end in silence and, worse perhaps, in a quasi-mystical contemplation and admiration of so much complexity?" (*PP* 128). The mute gesture will be transmuted into a way of knowing and an attendant rhetoric that risk collapsing back into silence. Hand gestures come at the point when words fail.

Once we are preoccupied with aesthetic experience and presence, however, rather than works or texts, is the failure of words the worst possible thing? This is a particularly urgent question if we are dealing with temporal art, like musical performance, which is ontologically ephemeral (even though it can of course be recorded). A shift in occupation to phenomena like musical performance may prescribe a repeated failure of words in that what is ephemeral and experienced cannot or perhaps should not be made into a text, and the forms of knowledge that honor ephemera like a musical performance are elusive. The em-

phasis is on "should not"—it is not just that events resist hermeneutic pressure by their very nature as ephemeral phenomena. Maybe it is up to us to choose silence. Such restrictions, in that they have the potential to impoverish eloquence, thus put to the test any convictions about the moral superiority of holding one's tongue.

Intensity and Distraction

The still from *Nazi Agent*, sent by mistake, created an intensity of experience that can be measured by the distraction it engendered.

The stills that came with it were indeed from films with scores by Gray, who worked with Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger in the 1940s. Gray is interesting because he was not averse to reusing music from one film in another, thus making some nonsense of the idea that film music is ideally tied to a specific scene or mood, for which it will be uniquely conceived, and which it will in turn make hyperlegible. In a very general sense, Gray's reused music has the potential to mean or express two dissimilar things in two different dramatic contexts.

Movies have in fact given voice to conflicting vernacular philosophies of musical meaning for almost a hundred years. The idea that musical themes or forms can be aligned with a decipherable meaning has been hammered home by cinema as successor art to the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*.[8] This conviction about reciprocal legibility can be traced historically in the meaning assigned to *synchronization* in film production. It meant coordinating image and sound technologically. As early as 1915, however, synchronizing also meant ensuring that the musical accompaniment for silent films matched what was seen on screen in its mood or referential aspect; in the crudest form this meant minor key for tragedy, and "God Save the Queen" (not the Marseillaise) to suggest England. To synchronize a film's music with its narrative, in short, asserts that music has discursive meaning in general. And associating image or action with the music heard at any given moment uses music to enhance the drama while simultaneously defining a narrative or symbolic import for the musical sounds in question. The theoretical documentation for this understanding of synchronization is immense, and counterarguments—as in Theodor W. Adorno and Rudolf Eisler, or René Clair, about synchronization as regressive ideology—testify to its power as default choice.

To match sound effects to physical gestures, or to coordinate symbolic music with visible action and dialogue, would seem to go without saying. But in practice it was not universally respected. To cite only one example:

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sound technicians, very early in the history of talkies, developed a love-hate relationship with the real sounds made by real musical performance. Should they be kept as signifiers of authenticity, or eliminated in the interests of acoustic perfection? Thus in innumerable musicals the foot lands loudly but without a tap sound, or the pianist's hand hits keys that do not correspond to the notes being heard. These are antisynchronic impulses, and in effect they express reservations about coordination, about music's correspondence to the world, in what might be called a technological protest against the gross legibility of sound.

Gray's work, then, serves a general argument about these antisynchronic aspects of film music.

But when the still for *Nazi Agent* arrived, it stopped an entire research enterprise cold, which speaks for the photograph's capacity to engender what Hans-Georg Gadamer indentified as the "transformational" experience of art, aesthetic experience as *Erfahrung* rather than *Erlebnis*.[9] Because, isn't that what a chance encounter with something beautiful is supposed to do? To move from point X, foreseen through reason as leading to point Y, then planned and executed—is that as far as human aspirations go? However, if we are diverted by the crumbs laid out for us, which tempt us toward something we never considered, would that not mean wasted time and fruitless labor?

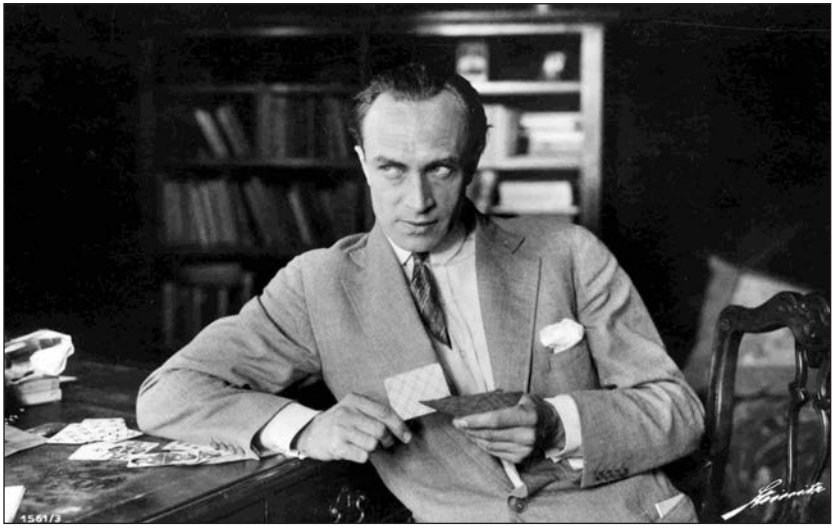

Figure 6. Ross Verlag Berlin, Postcard No. 1561/3, ca. 1922. Unknown photographer. Public Domain.

Improvisation

What anxiety predicts as fruitless labor, however, insouciance calls playing, or improvisation. Vladimir Jankélévitch ascribes great moral value to musical improvisation—it is his master trope—as a model for continuing when outcomes are uncertain, for departing from scripts that are wrong. For Jankélévitch, we are called upon to waste time. Not just to *risk* wasting it in hope that something will bear fruit after all (for that would be like *calculating* how to achieve epiphany, or *planning* how to feel remorse), but to waste it for real in a process without guarantees, assuming futility.[10] There is an affinity between improvisation and insouciance, even though Jankélévitch is himself at pains to dissociate them: he dislikes the implications of irresponsibility that insouciance implies, and praises responsibility as their antithesis.[11] But since in performance improvisation is something that leaves no written trace and insouciance is a sense that time cannot be wasted because there is no importance to the production of material end products, are they not indeed related? Insouciance is having made peace with the ephemeral. It is what you see in performers who know that what they are doing will not last and does not matter—which frees them to return the next day, and the next, with something even better.

And Being Led Astray

If the unasked-for photograph, the intensity of the experience it created, encouraged an improvisatory swerve in an unanticipated direction, where then did it lead? It led to German silent movies from the earlier '20s (for reasons explained later). The photograph as philosophical toy, however, had also taught a lesson about attentiveness, had suggested that knowledge is gained by immersing oneself in surfaces, which are in fact attitudes that in turn enable us to perceive the latent trace of ephemeral music in early silent films.

Where the photograph led, there were many silent movies about composers and instrumental virtuosi, real and fictional.

Figure 7. Screen capture from *Orlacs Hände*, directed by Robert Wiene (Ufa, 1925).

There was a 1923 film biography of Niccolò Paganini, and according to an extraordinary essay by Béla Balázs, written upon seeing the film, musical virtuosity was reexpressed as virtuosity of *Gestalt* and *Gebärde*—in the human figure and in gestures.[12] In so many German silents from the 1920s, there was singing and dancing; there were whole operas and operettas, long scenes with instrumental performance. In Paul Leni's *Das Wachsfigurenkabinett* from 1924, Ivan the Terrible orders "Music! Dance!" and at least five minutes of terrified merrymaking follow, as Ivan claps his hands in glee.

What is going on here? What desire *for* music's presence is expressed in silent performance scenes? They have been irritants for film and music historians, and there have been formal explanations, sociological explanations, even a generic explanation—that opera characters and musical virtuosi, being guaranteed emotional wrecks, were perfectly matched to silent film's melodramatic excesses. Indeed the proliferation of explanation around silent operas and operettas, the perpetual reversion to the supposed enigma of their very existence—as each new historian rediscovers them as an aesthetic problem in turn—testify to a present ontological disharmony, though not, of course, to any necessary sense of disharmony in the era of their creation. Yet however normal or unproblematic silent music-making may have been for contemporary audiences in the teens or twenties, that disharmony cannot now be swept away.

In an experience of silent performance scenes, the absence of music belonging to the space in which the images were recorded can threaten to intensify a dead silence, a persistent excess silence that is a consequence of the visible music-making gestures, so persistent and so heavy that it continues to exist and to weigh upon the ear even during the musical accompaniments provided when these films are exhibited. Musical performance implies sonic plenitude and acoustic presence; enfolding musical performance into a silent text is perverse; and music-making in silent movies has an incorrigible strangeness that no explanation redresses. That something could be incorrigibly strange should be cause for celebration. There are effects arising from aesthetic experience, in other words, that do not yield to any biographical, hermeneutic, historical, or sociological disarmament strategy, yet the real scandal, in academic terms, is to acknowledge any such thing.

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The Ephemeral

Unfortunately, we cannot see the 1923 Paganini movie. It is lost. In dealing with silent film, one is perpetually dumbstruck by how much was lost: for instance, of F. W. Murnau's first five films from 1920–1924—and these were major productions, widely reviewed and admired—only one survives, *Der Gang in die Nacht* from 1921. Such institutional and presumably artistic insouciance about preservation forces one to stand back from the curatorial dementia that characterizes academic attitudes nowadays, whereby what is lost is most desired, and what you cannot have becomes a hypostatized, injurious lack. This is fetishization of loss, and it easily degrades into cheap mourning. What we should really worry about, what is alarming in the extreme, is losing the cultural optimism expressed by those who were able to say: if we lose one film (or one aria, or painting, or idea) it does not matter, because tomorrow we will be making a better one to lose.

German silent films are nonetheless a repository for music. But the "repository" takes forms that no one seems yet to have noticed, because you have to look very hard to see that the music is there.[13] Music was played on the set during the filming of silents, as we know, and this practice was not confined to music-making scenes. Music was played all the time, played for all to hear, in scenes that had nothing to do music, singing, performing, or dancing. This practice of supplying continual music on the set is documented in memoirs and production stills, and was depicted in *Singin' in the Rain* (1953) as comic relief—Gene Kelly starts in the silent movie business as a "mood music" violinist who one day volunteers to do some stunts. Accounts from Hollywood in the '20s refer to music played to inspire the actors and to entertain them between takes. But this practice is largely unknowable—in an engrossing book on silent film and sound, 400-plus pages long, Rick Altman summarizes the phenomenon in one sentence: "The early history of music on the set remains clouded in mystery."[14]

Latent Music

Unrecoverable, unidentifiable music is not available to be analyzed or interpreted. Yet at this border between music that is permanently gone, and music whose identity can be fully reconstructed, lies the music that an unasked-for photograph teaches us to perceive. This music is *materially* manifest in silent film—even though it cannot ever be heard. There is no acoustic trace. It is manifest in the wrong medium, just like the hand

movement in the photograph. In other words, it left *visible* traces caught by the camera, the visible imprint of a musical beat in the movements and gestures of the actors.

This is not common knowledge, not at all. It is something that can only be seen by going into the films, with obsessive attention to the human actors without concerning oneself with their roles or the filmic fiction. The epiphany—when I *saw* the music to which the actors seemed to move—was drastic knowledge arrived at during a point-blank encounter. Historical sources, asides about this practice in memoirs, accounts from the 1920s, and production-photograph research had nothing to do with it, though they are easily mustered as addenda. It seems important to note that sequence, and important as well that we find a place for self-consciousness about the order through which we move to knowledge and seek historical authority. And there is a place here for self-consciousness of another sort: Would the phenomenon cease to exist were it undocumented? Does the search for objective confirmation become a deformation, and was it ever a pure virtue?

The point-blank encounter involved *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* (1920), a cultural icon, Ur-Expressionist Silent, subject of numerous social-sociological-political-historical-psychological exegeses. In all this, in every account, the fact of music's agency upon the actors has gone unseen.[15] Going into *Caligari*, however, meant being caught by the physical exercise involved in the actors' work, a sense for how difficult, or how weightless, movement itself could become. Focusing in this way on movement, I watched the final asylum scene and, with a kind of perceptual hiccup, began to *see* the musical beat in the scene. Here was the experiment: in one four-second sequence, there is a close-up of a madwoman who thinks she is playing the piano. She is playing to a certain beat. If one assumed that the actress were reacting to music played during filming, would the same beat be perceptible in other gestures?

Yes. You can conduct the shots in the asylum scene from *Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* to a phantom duple-meter piece being played at quarter-note equals sixty-three, and this is most evident in the longer sequence where Cesare the somnambulist plucks petals from a flower, with his hands moving in perfect timing with the hand gestures of another man he is not looking at (to his left), with the hero Alan's footsteps as he walks away, and the pianist's hands seen again in the background. You can even see Cesare begin at one point to pluck a bit early and then hold the motion until the beat arrives, like a French horn player who almost flubs his entrance.

And the Expressionist Actor in Motion

One reads in Lotte H. Eisner's *The Haunted Screen* (1952) of the choreographic visual style of German silents, from "brusque, exaggerated gestures," and "abrupt, incisive movements," to an actor who "dances a kind of Expressionist ballet, bending and twisting extravagantly."[16] Eisner identifies the antinaturalist intent of such an approach, citing Paul Kornfeld's claim that the "rhythm" inherent in this stylization is more powerful than natural physical gesture.[17] Expressionist cinema's use of light, she argues—famously so—evolved directly from staging experiments by Berlin theater director Max Reinhardt, and she also notes connections between the composition of crowd scenes in Reinhardt's productions and in German silent film. Yet even a writer so concerned with theatrical ancestry is unable to locate a source for the choreographies in expressionist actors' movement. They are (for Eisner) without genealogy.

They were not, however, without direct, physical cause. I would argue that such a consistent aesthetic of *gestus* cannot have arisen without direction, and that music is an excellent puppeteer, an excellent director. On-the-set music was the alchemical addition that produces the astonishing to-the-second timing and control that is evident in certain scenes in Henrik Galeen's *Der Student von Prag* (1926), or the clockwork polyrhythmic footfalls in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1928). It was not just a general imperative of style, or a notion that big, controlled gestures are powerful. It was specific, audible musical performances that directed the hand gestures and the feline adagios, and the held-back immobility that breaks out into furious exits, and the arabesques and all the rest. In German silent production, musical sound was not only present on the set, but also seems to have been used not just—not primarily—to bolster mood or inspire emotionalism, but rather as a metronome to control actors' timing, to stylize, and to give rhythmic order to ensemble movements.

But to arrive here—with the permanent trace left in human bodies by ephemeral music—means rethinking the benign rapture that musical performance is said to entail, the Great Performances feeling, the Got To Dance feeling. When music is sculpting gesture in this way, this indeed has ecstatic implications, but morbid ones as well.

Figure 8. Production still from *Le joueur d'echecs*, directed by Jean Dreville (Gaumont Paris, 1937). Photographer Walter Limot, © 1937 Limot. Reproduced by permission of André Limot.

The ecstatic view is that music has given rise to physical grace. This would be the place where Gumbrecht's vision—wordy explanations falling away to a gesture that does not attempt explanation—finds a parallel in art as the acoustic becomes the deictic. The morbid view is that music turned the actors, as sometimes it does all who hear it, into automata whose bodies are transfixed and subjected to a force that constrains them. To arrive here is also to confront the limits and humilities of professing to know or explain music. All that is left is actors timing movement according to lost sound. Music and gesture are unmediated—or mediated in irretrievable ways.

I did go looking for evidence and found something unusual. The archive of the Berlin Film Museum has a dollhouse-sized model of the *Caligari* film set, made by Hermann Warm (one of the designers), showing not just the décor and the actors but also the lights, light booms, cameras, the director, the technicians—and the piano and the pianist, with a tiny score in front of him, on which are microscopic notes, staves, and clefs, completely random and nonsensical signs that represent music itself and not any actual musical work.

Those tiny music-like scrawls were the truth that for *Caligari*, the question of whether on-the-set music's mood or meaning in any way

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corresponded to (or was wildly inappropriate for) the nightmarish fiction being filmed, was yet an open one. Music cannot be deduced from raw beat. This forecloses the foundational hermeneutic move of saying that some musical passage means or expresses, that some chord symbolizes desire or madness and thus inspired or corresponded to a certain facial expression or physical gesture. We cannot argue that gesture has resulted from or been scripted by a music that corresponds to it, as in Romantic opera's penchant for choreographing motion with thick slices of pantomime music. And to arrive here, at this impasse, with inaudible music and human motion, is to arrive at Gumbrecht's instance of deixis: one can point, but one cannot interpret.

From Caligari to Operetta

The silent era practice of using on-the-set music does have underappreciated historical significance as a continuous bridge from silent to sound film production. Put it this way: in making the silent operetta film *Ein Walzertraum* in 1925, director Ludwig Berger filmed actors miming singing and dancing to music played on the set, which everyone involved could hear perfectly well. While making the operetta film *Walzerkrieg* in 1933, Berger once more filmed actors miming to music that everyone involved could hear perfectly well, and that was subsequently also included on the soundtrack, where it can be heard to this day. This had become the standard *modus operandi* for the movie musical. The second waltz movie gives us access to music played on the set—but the silent operetta and the sound operetta were made in the same way. So, in terms of actual production, of what went on while filming and of the physical control exerted by music over the ensemble, the asylum scene in *Caligari* was indeed a kind of operetta number.

To cite Berger's silent vs. sound operettas also underlines an important distinction: aesthetic experience in general is not experience based on mere apperception of what is not present. An absence in itself does not translate into an experience—at most, as noted above, it can be appreciated in the negative, as a fetishized loss. What is positive and present in the silent image tracks is not musical sound, but musical movement caused by sound. Those movements suggest the acoustic plenitude that was once there without mournfulness: they are its realization.

The crumb trail started by the unasked-for photograph did eventually arrive at actual German film operetta, where insouciance comes into play. Sound film operettas were produced in great number at Ufa in Berlin from 1929 to 1933, to be dismissed as a regressive amnesiac by

Siegfried Kracauer in 1947—a famous critique in *From Caligari to Hitler* that has been repeated ever since.[18]

Ten years earlier, though, the same Kracauer had published *Jacques Offenbach and the Paris of his Time*, a physiognomy of the French capital based in contemporary operettas, which, Kracauer argues, trace the political realities and unrealities of the French capital.[19] If, however, operettas are a sensitive cultural thermometer in the 1860s, why by the 1930s have they become an inert surface and a pointless diversion? The answer is that Kracauer's sociological a priori leaves no other option—interpreting an Offenbachiad as cultural measuring device at one historical time and place makes any Offenbachiad in any other era into a cenotaph.

But it was precisely the dismissive characterization of German film operetta as inert that cannot be reconciled with the operettas themselves seen through the magnifying glass.

Once more: what insights were conveyed by the photograph from *Nazi Agent*? To assume no displeasure in experiencing an aesthetic object in terms of "how things are made," even though this experience will perpetually extract us from the illusionary world of the fiction the object may portray. To see surfaces. To see defects—visible makeup, falling out of character, the actress who does not make us forget who she is or obscure herself in the fictional character—neither as defects nor as something to be made transparent in order to get at the text.

Lessons in Insouciance

This interplay turned out to be striking in a 1933 Ufa operetta, *Ich und die Kaiserin*, directed by Friedrich Hollander, the famous cabaret composer. The musical score was by Franz Waxman in the days when he was Franz Wachsmann, before his emigration to Hollywood in 1934. Jacques Offenbach is a character in the movie, as is a Hortense Schneider-like diva (Offenbach's star soprano); several scenes are set at the Théâtre des Bouffes-Parisiennes, and the songs with one exception are based on nineteenth-century pieces by Offenbach, Charles Lecocq, and Edmond Audran.

Offenbach observes in the movie that life around him sounds exactly like operetta: the heroine has been neglected by her fiancé, who is Offenbach's assistant conductor, and she falls for an aristocrat who is for his part infatuated with the Empress Eugénie, whom he believes had saved him from dying by singing to him as he lay blinded after a riding accident, though it was actually the heroine who did the singing. When the heroine wonders which man she really loves, Offenbach says to her,

"In operettas the heroine ends up with the right person in the last scene." In one sequence, Offenbach conducts the overture to *Orphée aux enfers*; backstage, a coloratura soprano complains of being neglected by the aristocrat, who shows up and ignores her only to run into the assistant conductor, whom he solicits to help identify the mysterious song that saved him from death, and then, after dismissing the assistant conductor, wanders back into the path of the star soprano. The overture becomes background music for gesture and interaction that, once more, take on the organized panther fluidity of motion under musical control.

Despite the fact that cinema (like all forms of recording and unlike live performances) is repeatable and reproducible, film does what the ephemeral does so well: while going by, it creates the desperation for it to endure, along with the knowledge that endurance, were such a thing possible, would mean ennui. Watching the Offenbach movie produces a form of rapture at its silliness, and raises the absurd question whether we could theorize glee. But the riddle of why something strikes us with such intensity can be left intact by the ways in which we respond to it.

One could seek protection from experiences of glee, or delight, or disquiet, or terror, which is to say experiences that follow standard interpretive procedure, by taking the work whose performance produced those reactions as a text, and by devising objectifying mechanisms in response. The methods are standing so ready to command that coming up with the appropriate operations risks falling into parody. In the case of German film operetta, one could argue from a sociological angle, with the intent of correcting film operetta's reputation as the Weimar Republic's drug of choice. A critical response to cultural conditions in 1930s Germany could be discovered in screenplays or musical styles.[20] This would not be hard: the Offenbach movie, for example, uses film music in sardonic ways and makes antileitmotivic jokes that seem to speak to a subversive, anti-Germanic impulse.

You could argue that film operetta's reputation as an idiotic sugarplum for working girls is undeserved by talking about formal sophistication, about shadows and camera movements. That would not be hard. In all operetta movies, as in musicals and in filmed opera, filming silently to playback of numbers freed the cameras from sound blimps and restrictions on motion, making operettas and musicals a last refuge for silent film's complex visuals once sound arrived. Directors who cut their teeth in the 1920s adored the genre on this basis—as Powell said with great contentment, "I was so happy! I swore that this was the only way to make films; and so, of course it is, if they are silent films or musical films."[21]

But to make any of these objectifying arguments takes the Offenbach movie as a symbolic fiction and a formal representation and gives no

insight into the question, why glee, why delight, why sadness? And it once more overlooks aesthetic experience. It also overlooks, in ways that are familiar and disheartening, the performance and the performers. If the experience of cinema *is* of an ephemeron, the performers and their labor constitute an aspect of film that *was* ephemeral but has been, as it were, invisibly preserved. Thus what is hard is going into the film with a magnifying glass and being again within point-blank range of the physical details, the human efforts recorded. These are the very things that—as the work of the hand, as mere technology or production— are too low, too concrete, or too difficult or too temporary. And to put it this way is to express the very "contempt" that Sontag identifies as the emotional ground note in interpretation, the "contempt for appearances." Gadamer for his part also rejects these same "appearances" and forms of attentiveness within an argument for the relevance of the beautiful. And his terms are conventional to a fault: "We go to the opera because Callas is singing, rather than because a particular opera is being performed. I recognize this as a fact, but I would claim that such an attitude is incapable of mediating an experience of art in any real sense. When we become aware of an actor or singer or any creative artist as mediator, we exercise a secondary level of reflection. When the complete experience of a work of art is genuine, however, what amazes us is precisely the unobtrusiveness of the performers."[22] No. Aesthetic experience can devolve from human efforts, which are in themselves beautiful, and this experience can be as much *Erfahrung*—Gadamer's term for a transformational experience—as *Erlebnis*, his more dismissive alternative.

The human efforts: many involved in *Ich und die Kaiserin* emigrated before its premiere in March 1933, when its producer, director, film-music composer, and three of its six big stars departed for Paris, London, and Los Angeles. The Reichsfilmkammer condemned the film, which as it turned out was the last made by the fabled Jewish aristocracy at Ufa before their collective dismissal. But if Offenbach represented anathema suddenly in 1933 (as he did for Wagner decades earlier), it was not just because he, too, was Jewish. He was anathema for the silliness in his librettos, for the fact that his works left so much to the performers and had no serious cultural aspirations. Thus Wagner's contempt shows exactly where their value might lie: to be content with impermanence. Do the delights of the movie mark the evident peace its many creators had made with improvisation and nonchalance? That peace is evident as plot nonsense—the heroine ended up with the aristocrat (which made no sense whatsoever) and not her fiancé the assistant conductor, and it turned out that the director had altered the script at a late stage of the filming at the leading lady's behest.

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The performers are palpably insouciant. The movie was a multilingual production, acted and filmed three times, in German, French, and English, with different casts on the same sets one after the other, so we have three different performances of the same text, a rare case with films. Decades later Hollander, the director, recalled the two actors who played the aristocrat, one German, one French: "Where the one, brow never furrowed by the pallor of serious thought, simply did his inimitable lady-killer number without excess bother" (the German), "in the case of the French Marquis there were interruptions lasting for hours, with cleverness and logic brought into play."[23]

Figure 9. Production still from *Reigen*, directed by Richard Oswald (Oswald Film-Gesellschaft, 1920). Photograph by Oswald. Public Domain.

The French actor who agonized and conferred over the role, insisting on perfecting his character's presentation, ends up being dull in both the French and English versions. Two performances turned out to have come about through different approaches and dispensations of energy, just not in the order one might, as a critic, hope or predict.

But these two performances and their methodological origins (if one can possibly lump being "inimitable" under "methodology") give us a parable that crosses decades and breaches professional quarantines to resonate with Gumbrecht's reservations about obsessive explanation, and his hope for noninterpretive ways of knowing. When drastic knowledge is devalued, and as long as aesthetic experience—which leaves us unguarded—is somehow beneath our majesty, then a higher irrationalism takes root, the mysticism of a cryptographic intoxication in which the whole world and everything that happens in it must be taken as a signifier, thus being put at a distance.

The contrast between the two actors' attitudes is worth savoring precisely because the notion that critical engagement and the furrowed brow lead to dullness is such sacrilege, such anathema in any academic

context, while being a familiar insight to anyone involved in theater and performance. It is this piety—the obsessive public allegiance to critical interpretation—that marks the first withdrawal from aesthetic experience and drastic knowledge. And yet it is not that the mute deictic hand gesture could or should supplant the face pale with thought, as *the* new regime, promising that beautiful ephemera would never be overlooked. At the very moment a guarantee is issued or a solution found—it is then that the shock of an aesthetic encounter is most dishonored. Insouciance and improvisation can fail. And still, they are a drastic step, the attitudes in which doing matters more than saying, and that might do honor to that shock.

Figure 10. Production still from *Lady Hamilton*, directed by Richard Oswald (Oswald Film-Gesellschaft, 1922). Photograph by Oswald. Public Domain.

As for reticence—there are times when silence must sit.

Attentive to Pure Materiality?

So, what has emerged here? An "important discovery": a demonstration that music controlled movements of silent film actors even when they were not dancing or pretending to play the violin, and what that discovery reveals about the ubiquity and efficacy of the music played during shooting in the silent film era. In teaching film and music and lecturing on silent film, I do a metronome-and-*Caligari* stunt that invariably produces an instant of astonishment, as if something magical had just been revealed. You could say that the discovery about *Caligari* and German expressionist silents is a practical "what" in this essay—adding that documenting past praxis, or something forgotten but engrossing, or a strange difference, is just what historians do. But this discovery is embedded here in the wrong setting: buried in the center, without disciplinary semaphore signals, neither from film studies nor from the methodology of historical studies, with no determined objectivity, or anything else that might sing consolingly about the transparency of the past. Such signals accomplish their purpose even in the most delicate and self-conscious historical scholarship. Moreover, there was that provocation about documentary evidence: does it matter? This does not seem to be the discipline of history at work, though it is.

This wrong setting—which raises questions of "how"—involves not just the philosophical discussion before and after the "what," involves not just moving away from "what," but in fact involves self-conscious attention to "how." First in this sense: how does one arrive at the moment when unheard music can be observed in silent-film actors' bodies? That is the question about experience, about aesthetic experience in particular, and forms of attention. These issues might or might not be worth our intellectual energy or worth risking the trapdoors that open when we acknowledge our subjective position. Obsessive attention to execution, in other words to the surface of ephemeral art, is "how," and musical performance is one such ephemeron. I argued that my "how" works through some of Gumbrecht's diagnoses of intellectual deformations in the humanities. If one takes beautiful objects or transfixing events to be compacted sign collectives, this means a particular blindness to surfaces, tactile presence, what Gumbrecht, à la Heidegger, calls material Being. Well, sometimes rightly so. Sometimes surfaces or materiality, or an executed play or musical piece, can be just hulking presence or ineloquent mass.

So "how," the setting for "what," raises a philosophical point beyond the discovery about *Caligari*, and—depending on your disciplinary tastes and comfort zones—that may be more interesting than the discovery, or significantly less so. The past is perpetually engrossing? Maybe being engrossed by historical minutiae is another form that affection for surfaces can take. To catch the smallest glimpse of what transpired in Berlin in 1920, on a film stage where a future classic was being thrown together in a few weeks' time (and the actors went out to thrift shops, in some cases, to find their own costumes): isn't that exactly a form of attention to production and execution, rather than to the text that was produced, its ex post facto dissemination into meaning culture? Now we seem to be very far from the "important discovery." The point of course being that this important discovery was made possible only through a particular attitude toward seeing and doing.

But can this, the theorizing, the attention to "how," be reconciled with my peroration that proclaiming a method is a first step in the acquired blindness to surface and experience? Maybe my "how" is more debatable still. The polemic about attention to surfaces is itself nested within another setting, proposals about human attitudes like reticence, improvisation, and insouciance that could enable a state where ephemeral phenomena and their surfaces would not be overlooked and would in some sense get their due. The attitudes are navigational. And they are deliberately upsetting, as with the suggestion that curatorial dementia, the overinvestment in preserving texts, is culturally pessimistic and inimical to the persistence of creativity. Furthermore, as I said, what on earth is one supposed to do with a navigational exhortation to reticence, to not saying, or even to silence? That provocation would seem to go too far for academic praxis, even as we acknowledge its practical virtues (less is more, and so forth).

Thus it seems to me critical to explore an instance of silence, and this brings us to "why." Why would this photograph, which came in the mail by mistake, lead to movies starting with *Caligari* and ending up with operetta? This question is answered by the images reproduced in this essay. As I will explain, their largely uncommented presence reflects an experiment in perception and deformation. It tests the depth of our contempt for pure materiality.

In this essay's original form—which was verbal and live—the photographic images reproduced here, along with many others, were projected in between various film clips shown. On different occasions the order of the images was changed and there were substitutions and alternates, but a core group remained fixed. With the exception of Images 1–4, identified within the argument, I said nothing about them. And on five separate

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occasions, in five different academic settings with large audiences and long discussions following, only once did an audience member mention a specific image. Having suggested repeatedly how to read Image 1, I presented a series of images to be read the same way: for the materiality of the performer(s) caught by the camera, the concrete details of their physicality, and not as signs. The suggestion, evidently, fell on deaf ears. The images, along with the film clips, turned out to elicit the very deformation—overlooking surfaces—that my argument deplored.

All the photographic images reproduced here and shown in the lectures, all the films discussed and illustrated, and all the extensive film clips I exhibited during the lectures, have one simple, visually arresting thing in common: the same *performer*, Conrad Veidt (1893–1943), a German character actor whose silent-film career took off after his appearance as Cesare in *Caligari*. He was the seated figure in the still I received by mistake, and the detour that the unasked-for photograph carved out was time spent investigating his oeuvre, an unanticipated agenda. But such distraction—or more precisely, what it entails, the intensity of aesthetic epiphany, the intellectual improvisations, and, to an irritating degree, the insouciance—has strong potential to reform habits of thought.

What does it say about academic *déformations professionelles* that at no point in any of the lectures, and indeed in no case where I gave readers the printed script with the images inserted, did anyone remark that everything they were looking at showed the same performer? Or, if anyone did see it, that this insight was considered so uninteresting or elementary as to not warrant intervention or comment?

When confronted with a series of aesthetic objects, and despite some serious hints about not overlooking presence, the images, as it turned out, were indeed another invitation to a decoding. Exhibiting the film clips from *Caligari*, *Wachsfigurenkabinett*, *Das indische Grabmal*, and *Ich und die Kaiserin* left their central actor invisible, apparently because the clips cofunctioned as examples within a film-critical survey. But what I had experienced as repeated wonders—beginning with that unasked-for photograph, with its special defect, the almost tactile, thick face powder, the holographic quality, the actor's striking face and expression in other photographs and films—all these were, once more, taken as signs.

For the image sequence per se was invariably *read*, but read as being a demonstration of "the performative" on my part—meaning more or less something historians do to liven up their talks with fancy touches. This reading demonstrates the degree to which that word—performative—has become so vague as to be meaningless. And yet even so: the evident attraction exerted by flair suggests impatience, even hunger, for a different "how" in intellectual discourse.

As is often the case, when you are told what you overlooked, you tend to say, "Of course." Yet I think an answer to the question of why something is overlooked—which properly would involve a digression into research on perception and cognition—is not as important as recalling the state of impatience. That is the positive symptom of a desire for a change in the humanities that cannot in fact be met by mere charisma, by fancy touches or a really good show.

HARVARD UNIVERSITY

NOTES

1 Allan Gray had emigrated from Berlin to England in the 1930s, and changed his name accordingly.

2 Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (1966; New York: Picador, 2001), 6.

3 Elizabeth Prettejohn, *Beauty and Art 1750–2000* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005), 9.

4 Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2004), 7 (hereafter cited as *PP*).

5 Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms* (1983; New York: Verso, 2006).

6 I am making a telegraphic summary of "Beyond Meaning: Positions and Concepts in Motion," in *PP* 51–90.

7 Eli Friedlander, *J. J. Rousseau: An Afterlife of Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2004), 2–3 and 46–48.

8 Scott D. Paulin, "Richard Wagner and the Fantasy of Cinematic Unity: The Idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* in the History of Theory of Film Music," in James Buhler, Caryl Flinn, and David Neumeyer, eds., *Music and Cinema* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 2000), 58–84.

9 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. William Glen-Doepel (London: Sheed and Ward, 1975), 316–19.

10 Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Music and the Ineffable*, trans. Carolyn Abbate (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2003), 84–86 and 121–25, and "De l'improvisation," in *Liszt: Rhapsodie et Improvisation*, ed. Françoise Schwab (Paris: Flammarion, 1998), 107–73, especially 143: "Le détour est le chemin lui-même: comme la très gracieuse et très vaine *Leggerezza*, la musique est tout entière cette circonvolution sans but. Comment son inutilité, qui est sa grâce même, ne créerait-elle pas en nous l'état de grâce?"

11 Jankélévitch, "De l'improvisation," 110: "Certaines natures sont plus que d'autres accordées pour ces grâces de l'heureuse fortuité et de l'extemporaniété flagrante. On pourrait dire qu'elles ont le don du Kaïros, et que ce don est le contraire même de l'insouciance. L'insouciant s'affolera; l'insouciant est celui qui improvise où il faudrait prévoir."

12 Béla Balázs, "Paganini," *Der Tag* (Vienna), Nov. 6, 1923, reprinted in *Conrad Veidt: Lebensbilder*, ed. Wolfgang Jacobson (Berlin: Argon/Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek, 1993), 49–50.

13 This is not a reference to the musical accompaniment provided when silent films were exhibited. Nor does it refer to music played on sets during musical performance scenes in silent operas, operettas, and musician biographies, because we do know a great deal about it, even more, in a sense, than we know about the exhibition accompaniments. For musical performance scenes, the piece being "performed" was played during filming so that the actors knew how their hands and lips should be moving to match the work they

were, ostensibly, engaged in executing. This practice is well documented, and although one can only rarely access the actual performance those actors heard—famous recordings were sometimes played on a gramophone—the name of the piece is of course obvious.

14 Rick Altman, *Silent Film Sound* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2004), 369.

15 For instance, in an excellent and encyclopedic article about *Caligari* and music by Julie Hubbert, only the exhibition music is discussed. See her "Modernism at the Movies: *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and a Film Score Revisited," *Musical Quarterly* 88, no. 1 (2005): 63–94.

16 Lotte H. Eisner, *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt*, trans. Roger Greaves (1973; Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 2008), 140, 141, 145.

17 Eisner, *The Haunted Screen*, 141.

18 Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*, revised and expanded edition, foreword by Leonardo Quaresima (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2004). "The operetta profited more than any other escapist genre from the possibilities offered by sound" (207; see also 207–14).

19 Kracauer, *Jacques Offenbach and the Paris of his Time*, trans. Gwenda David and Eric Mosbacher, foreword by Gertrud Koch (New York: Zone Books, 2002).

20 As argued by Thomas Elsaesser, "It's the End of the Song: Walter Reisch, Operetta and the Double Negative," in his *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany's Historical Imaginary* (London: Routledge, 2000), 330–58.

21 Michael Powell, *A Life in Movies: an Autobiography* (New York: Knopf, 1987), 583.

22 Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, trans. Nicholas Walker, edited with an introduction by Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986), 52.

23 Friedrich Holländer, *Von Kopf bis Fuß. Revue meines Lebens* (Berlin: Aufbau Taschenbuch Verlag, 2001), 246: "Wo jener, unbekümmert und von keines Gedankens Blässe angekränkelt, einfach seinen alten Schwerenöter hinlegte, gab's beim französischen Marquis stundenlange Unterbrechungen mit Geduldspielen der Logik."