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Printed in the United States of America

on acid-free paper ©

Designed by C. H. Westmoreland

Typeset in Granjon with Bodoni display

by Tseng Information Systems, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

appear on the last printed page of this book.

An earlier version of Siobhan B. Somerville's essay "The Queer Career of Jim Crow: Racial and Sexual Transformation in *A Florida Enchantment*" appeared in her book *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (2000), published by Duke University Press.

An earlier version of Sumiko Higashi's essay "The New Woman and Consumer Culture: Cecil B. DeMille's Sex Comedies" appeared in her book *Cecil B. DeMille and American Culture: The Silent Era* (1994). It appears courtesy of University of California Press.

Gaylyn Studlar retains copyright to her essay "Oh 'Doll Divine': Mary Pickford, Masquerade, and the Pedophilic Gaze."

Mary Anne Doane's essay "Technology's Body: Cinematic Vision in Modernity" originally appeared in the journal *differences*. It appears courtesy of Indiana University Press.

Catherine Russell's essay "Parallax Historiography: The Flâneuse as Cyberfeminist" originally appeared in *Scope: An Online Journal of Film Studies* [<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/film/journal/>]. It appears courtesy of the Institute of Film Studies, University of Nottingham.

Essays by Diane Negra, Jennifer M. Bean, Lucy Fischer, Gaylyn Studlar, and Zhang Zhen originally appeared in the journal *Camera Obscura*, Special Issue No. 48, "Early Women Stars," published January 2002 by Duke University Press.

A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema

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Duke University Press Durham & London 2002

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Nazimova's Veils

Salome at the Intersection of Film Histories

With its early date and esoteric aura, Alla Nazimova's 1922 *Salome* seems to "guarantee" the historical presence of lesbians in film. Yet the film's iconic status itself deserves further interpretation. In his authoritative biography *Nazimova*, Gavin Lambert acknowledges a spate of 1990s studies of famous theatrical and Hollywood lesbians; the implication is that an actress like Nazimova owes any widespread contemporary interest in her story to this sudden chic. The phenomenon represents a welcome lifting of the gag order that has distorted the historical record of lesbian and gay lives, but it makes asking methodological questions about writing the history of sexuality and culture all the more necessary. The "outing" of *Salome* tends to pop the film out of historical context. This essay approaches questions of lesbian representability through Nazimova's film and argues that while *Salome*'s avant-garde pretensions have preserved its cult value and sexual cachet, interesting historical dimensions of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity, as well as of authorship, art, and entertainment have remained obscured. In what follows, I hope to indicate how current film scholarship might re-contextualize the film; however, I also want to maintain the importance of *Salome*'s notoriety as a starting point for a queer historiography that could illuminate Nazimova's contribution as a lesbian auteur.

This once-celebrated stage and screen star made herself visible in her own time through one of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Western high culture's most overexposed icons of sexualized femininity, Salome, the biblical princess who danced for the head of John the Baptist. Nazimova's film adaptation of Oscar Wilde's 1893 play turned out to be ill timed and financially and professionally disastrous, but her tribute to the gay 1890s resonates in this later turn-of-the-century moment. Recent studies of the cinema of the 1910s and 1920s bring out the important role of women filmmakers in the period and stress the receptivity of female audiences emerging into the modern.¹ Particular star personae and story

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choices expressed female sexuality and social aspirations and at the same time "contained" and dictated the limits of female transgression—the era's popular vamp type illustrates this paradox well.² Nazimova, in taking on the role of Salome, participated in this wider solicitation of female audiences and paid tribute to notorious stage actresses and dancers before her who had made Salome their own. As writer, producer, and, evidence suggests, de facto director of the film, Nazimova also affiliated herself with Oscar Wilde—with his *authority* as well as with his notoriety. Hers was a twentieth-century, decadent, American, cinematic, woman-made Salome. If lesbianism signifies here, it is at the intersection of these discourses, or veils. My metaphor is meant to emphasize both the lack of transparency in interpretive acts and the aesthetic dimensions of historical performances.

Salome can be illuminated by current film research in a number of ways. These include the centrality of the star system and its articulation of female sexuality with the cinema as alternative public sphere (in Miriam Hansen's phrase); women's economic and creative power as filmmakers in early cinematic production; Hollywood orientalism as thematic and aesthetic and as discourse operating in the construction of American ethnicities; the intertextuality of silent cinema; and new periodizations of the American avant-garde and of Hollywood modernism. These are shorthand designations and I will not be able to pursue all of them in this context. What I hope to emphasize is how particular aspects of the film appear or disappear under different critical gazes, suggesting ways that strategies of veiling and unveiling characterize lesbian authorship and historical interpretation alike. Available, mostly cinephilic accounts of her film—as "cult" or camp favorite, Wildean tribute, or protounderground film—can be destabilized by feminist work on silent-film history, and perhaps some of the premises of that new historiographic work tested in turn. In the next section, I offer an overview of the film and its place in Nazimova's career. Then I go on to introduce several approaches to *Salome*, starting with its latter-day reception and then turning to contextualizing theories. I argue that the Salome intertext should be seen in relation both to women-oriented film culture and to Wilde as an authorial precedent. Nazimova's film is an effort toward, a unique event in, female movie modernism.

Alla Nazimova's *Salome* sometimes seems like a hallucination of film history. The independent film's release was delayed by United Artists for nearly a year. Finally, the film premiered in New York on New Year's Eve 1922; there was a second midnight screening. On an art nouveau set "with silver cherries bobbing in her hair, the face of a petulant imp and a pertly



1. Portrait of Nazimova

boyish frame”³ the forty-two-year-old star portrays Oscar Wilde’s heroine as a fourteen-year-old, dancing the dance of the seven veils in what the *New York Times* reviewer perhaps uncharitably characterized as “an exceedingly tame and not remarkably graceful performance that Herod wouldn’t have given standing room in his kingdom for.”⁴ Nazimova, hitherto a popular box-office draw, though one threatening to become too powerful or too “temperamental” for mainstream tastes, lost most of her financial resources and a great deal of her professional standing with the film’s box-office failure. She left Hollywood and returned to the stage; her later film appearances were infrequent.

Salome was not without defenders. The *New York Times* itself applauded it as an “unusual and . . . visually satisfying spectacle” and Robert E. Sherwood called it “exceptional in every noteworthy sense,” continuing, “The persons responsible for ‘Salome’ deserve the whole-souled gratitude of everyone who believes in the possibilities of the movies as an art.”⁵ But *Photoplay* and other mass-market publications warned audiences that the film was “bizarre.” In a time of increasing censorship, some of this negative sentiment was generated by the source material.

Salome follows Wilde’s text closely, emphasizing the play’s stylization

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and repetitions, its air of doom and decadence. The well-known story is this: The heroine’s desire is ignited by the ascetic Jokanaan (John the Baptist, played by Nigel de Brulier), who has been imprisoned by King Herod (Mitchell Lewis). The king, though married to Salome’s mother, Herodias (Rose Dione), cannot stop leering at the young princess. When the prophet refuses Salome’s advances, she agrees to Herod’s lustful entreaties that she dance for him — at a price. After the dance of the seven veils, she names her fee, demanding the prophet’s head. Her mother applauds her; Herod is appalled. He keeps his oath, but when Salome satisfies herself by kissing the severed head, he orders her death. In three remarkable costume changes, Nazimova shifts from pert and boyish dancer to a diva of the grand gesture who, drawing her peacock cloak over the head, ducks under for the kiss with a shudder of orgasmic pleasure.

Alla Nazimova was a legend of American silent cinema of the outsized style and stature that *Sunset Boulevard*’s (dir. Billy Wilder, 1950) Norma Desmond memorializes. Indeed the faded star’s planned comeback in that film is what could only turn out to be a monumentally outdated treatment of the Salome story. A Russian Jew who apprenticed with Stanislavsky at the Moscow Art Theatre (an episode she embellished later), Nazimova (born Mariam Edez Adelaida Leventon in 1879) arrived in New York in 1905 with the early Zionist play *The Chosen People*. She rapidly learned English and became the American stage’s foremost interpreter of the great female roles of Ibsen and Chekov. In 1917 the *Philadelphia Telegraph* reminisced: “It soon became ‘the thing’ to see Nazimova in a matinee performance of Ibsen. . . . Her Hedda and Nora became the talk of the town and were discussed in great detail by fair young critics, who raved about symbolism, universality and dramatic influence.”⁶ In the 1910s Nazimova became one of the first Broadway actresses to match and even surpass her stage success when she became a screen star, reportedly drawing the highest salary in Hollywood from Metro, and creating the type of European exotic with which Pola Negri and, in a different way, Garbo and Dietrich would later become identified. Her fan base, like that of most female stars, was female, whether she performed on stage or screen. The *Washington Star* reported in 1917: “Ten years ago Alla Nazimova played to an audience of Smith College girls and went to their dormitory after the play. Sitting before the fire, she answered their . . . questions about the stage. She has had deep interest in college girls.”⁷ Later *Motion Picture Magazine* referred to her “seemingly overwhelming appeal for the feminine sex.”⁸ She produced her own films at Metro, and although her persona differed considerably from contemporaries such as Lois Weber and Mary Pickford, it is worth considering these

women producers as part of a common phenomenon of the period. Nazimova was also well known for her extravagant entertainments at her Sunset Boulevard estate, the Garden of Alla, which in 1927 became the hotel Garden of Allah. At a period when the movie colony was becoming established as the "dream factory," Nazimova helped define the components of its lifestyle—a heady mix of opulence and orientalism, Eurocentric high-culture pretensions and California "new thought"—everything from spiritualism to diet fads. Fan magazines reported that her swimming pool—supposedly designed in the shape of the Black Sea—was "crowded with Hollywood ingenues."⁹

If her Hedda and Nora are now forgotten, Nazimova is remembered for those ingenues. In 1916, in what Lambert calls "her first known lesbian affair—which is not to say that it was her first," she met and was briefly involved with Mercedes de Acosta, who in her 1960 memoir *Here Lies the Heart* notoriously, if obliquely, details her relationships with Garbo and Dietrich, as well as her alliances with Nazimova and many others.¹⁰ Nazimova was also involved with Eva le Gallienne (who was to have a more lasting liaison with de Acosta) and later, in 1928, joined le Gallienne's influential (and famously sapphic) New York theatrical company, the Civic Repertory. Nazimova's highly publicized artistic collaboration—rumored affair—with flamboyant designer-choreographer Natacha Rambova (née Winifred Shaughnessey) culminated in the pair's work on *Salome*. There are a few important relationships with men; most notable and enduring is what was publicly understood as a marriage to her leading man and business manager, minor English actor and *Salome*'s credited director Charles Bryant (Nazimova had never divorced an otherwise inconsequential Russian husband). Nazimova spent the last sixteen years of her life with another protégée, Glesca Marshall. As Elaine Marks asserts in her study of lesbianism and French literature: "Name-dropping in this instance is an essential preliminary activity, for if Gomorrah, as Colette observed in a criticism of Proust, is not nearly as vast or as well organized as Sodom, it is nonetheless a small, cohesive world in which connections between bed and text are numerous."¹¹

Perhaps it was Nazimova's outrageous behavior, or perhaps it was the threat of her power or desire for artistic autonomy, that eventually led to her parting of ways with Metro. She formed her own production company, initially with the idea of combining several shorts in one "repertoire" film.¹² Ultimately Nazimova spent \$400,000 of her own money on two projects with personal significance. Unfortunately only tantalizing production stills remain of Nazimova's 1922 film of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*,

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her signature stage vehicle. The film was generally well reviewed, with some criticism of the star's attempts at acting girlish at the beginning of the film that anticipates certain assessments of her *Salome*. For both films she enlisted the design and choreography talents of Rambova, who had designed strikingly antirealist sets for Nazimova's 1921 production of *Camille* at Metro, the star's last film at the studio. *Camille* had helped launch Rambova's husband-to-be, Rudolph Valentino, as Armand opposite Nazimova. (Nazimova's association with Valentino ensures her place in Hollywood legend; not only Rambova but another of Nazimova's lovers, Jean Acker, married Valentino, and there are sex scandals attached to both alliances.) Nazimova employed a talented professional, Charles Van Enger, as cinematographer. She used the pseudonym Peter M. Winters for her scenarios. Although Bryant, the man known as Nazimova's husband, is credited with both films' direction, he appears to have been director in name only. Perhaps Nazimova wished to defuse criticism that she had received at the end of her Metro years for overreaching, but the star clearly had full authority on her independent productions.¹³

Oscar Wilde characterized the subject of his play as "a woman dancing with her bare feet in the blood of a man she has craved for and slain,"¹⁴ and the grande dame Nazimova turned in a stunningly stylized portrayal of the teenage femme fatale. Her choice of subject matter was not obscure, but the production's loyalty to the play was notable. Rambova's art direction and costume design were directly inspired by Aubrey Beardsley's famous illustrations of the play's first English edition. The film used only two, defiantly antirealist sets. Beardsley's black-and-white color scheme and circular motifs were picked up in visual excesses such as African American court slaves in Marie Antoinette wigs. But if Beardsley had upstaged or mocked the play's author in his graphic rendition of *Salome*, as many have argued, Rambova's visual design amounts to full collaboration in the film's aesthetic—and in its unmistakable homoeroticism.¹⁵ The film's faithfulness in depicting the desire of Wilde's Page (Arthur Jasmina) for the Young Syrian (Earl Schenck), and Nazimova's casting decisions—although Lambert was not able to confirm the rumor of an all-gay cast, he suggests that several principles and extras were gay men and lesbians¹⁶—were matched by visual ambiance such as the painted nipples on the Syrian, the Executioner's (Frederick Peters) bold S/M look, Jokanaan's uncanny asceticism, and Nazimova's gamine minitunics. The film was at least as much designed as directed; who can say which of the two women had the idea to feature drag queens at Herod's court? Though a striking visuality was quite appropriate for and common in films of the period, *Salome*'s artiness made

it an oddity. Possibly because of the film's excesses and fear of censorship, or possibly because of a dispute with Nazimova arising from their need to exercise control over an independent production, United Artists delayed and finally mishandled its limited release. The result was financial disaster and mixed critical reception. Nazimova never produced again.¹⁷

Salome is early 1920s Hollywood decadence self-consciously rendered. The ambitions a pair of female modernists had for cinema as an art form are pinned on a notorious text written by the very type of the modern homosexual. While it was certainly a star vehicle, even a vanity production, its design and staging emulated European art cinema, which had recently made its mark in the United States with the release of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (dir. Robert Wiene, 1919), as well as experimental theatrical and dance sources. Such Hollywood avant-gardism would have few successors. Certainly, the film's pervasive aesthetic of gender-bending wouldn't be seen again in American film for decades. In the very year of the film's production, Will Hays came to Hollywood to establish industry self-censorship. Henceforth stars' contracts included a moral turpitude clause to distance film production from a wave of major drug, sex, and murder scandals, most notoriously the trials of Fatty Arbuckle. Indeed, much of *Salome*'s promotion and reception struggled to emphasize its tastefulness and lack of offense to censors. This historical juncture proved to be a turning point for women directors, scenarists, and producers in Hollywood, whose power declined precipitously after the war and, ironically, coincidentally with the achievement of women's suffrage. Undoubtedly the failure of Nazimova's film and her subsequent eclipse add to its myth.

"Nazimova's Veils" is not a phrase meant to suggest merely that the actress's achievement has remained shrouded in the cinematic past and is in need of uncovering. Although the magnitude of her stardom on both stage and screen does make her subsequent obscurity notable, she is present in all the standard Hollywood histories. Certainly the vicissitudes of her career were documented extensively in the contemporary press. Even the identities that were not proclaimed aloud in such sources—lesbian, Jew, writer-director—have not precisely been hidden from subsequent generations who cared to look for them. Rather I invoke the veil as an epistemological figure something like the closet; the way Nazimova is remembered has meaning that resonates beyond the simple act of exposing her sexual and affective affinities. The veil has specifically feminine and orientalist connotations that make it a more apt trope for *Salome* than the closet would be. The homosexual secret the closet figures is veiled in this text by the public

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sexualization of the female body. The acts of revelation and silence clustering around *Salome* and its star are multiply and unpredictably bound up with changing historical constructions of homosexuality and gender, ethnicity and agency. Nazimova's "veils" trace the contours of these contradictions.

Nazimova's outing was a standard, though not an unambiguously queer-positive, gesture before the phenomenon had a name—the word "lesbian" is almost always coupled with mentions of Nazimova in contemporary accounts. She is gratuitously though accurately referred to as "Nancy Reagan's lesbian godmother" in biographies and video guides. Perhaps Nazimova's exoticized persona allowed for the production and othering of lesbianism that kept other female Hollywood stars safe from the appellation and recuperable for wholesome heterosexuality. Kenneth Anger makes the following comparison: "[Dietrich's] passel of girlfriends was dubbed Marlene's Sewing Circle. They were not lesbians, like Nazimova's gang, but good-time Charlenes who, like Marlene, swung both ways."¹⁸ Dietrich here is rendered nearly as American as apple pie. Nazimova's vaguely orientalized persona also veiled her identity as a Jew—though she did not advertise this ethnicity, she was always identified as of Russian nationality and could not be assimilated within nativist codes of white femininity. Nazimova's veils allure us today as her challenge to notions of core identity and transparent meaning; but we can also consider how her identities informed her film's difference in ways that have not previously been addressed. Perhaps the accoutrements of aestheticism hid in plain view a more subversive project to claim the right to public authority. Performing as a signature role *Salome*, the Jewish princess who died for her perverse desire, could be construed as a layered act of coming out. After discussing how contemporary and cult impressions of the film veil—that is, suggest but also obscure—this authorial act, I turn to discourses that informed the film's historical emergence.

Notably, Nazimova has been veiled as an author through the latter-day reception of her film and through the relationship to Oscar Wilde, for camp and aestheticism both enhance and undermine the lesbian specificity of her authorial performance. Lesbianism is too easily assimilated to the more defined gay male aesthetic in this case, and Wilde as a presence overwhelms the precarious authorial position of a powerful female performer-turned-producer in the Hollywood of the 1910s and early 1920s. Nazimova's film has been to a large extent preserved and put into circulation in the last several decades via its revival in the late 1960s. The *New York Times* advertised a presentation of a forty-five-minute version in 1967. The screening was

presented by silent-film collector Raymond Rohauer in conjunction with an exhibition of Beardsley's drawings. It provided the occasion for a U.S. visit from Wilde's son Vyvyan Holland, whose translation of the play the program credits as the basis for the print's titles. In his program notes, Rohauer recounts gaining interest in the film, locating the original camera negative, and obtaining the exhibition rights from Nazimova's executrix.¹⁹

The contemporary perception of the film has been shaped by the aesthetic and social evaluations of that time and cultural context. Some sources, such as this pronouncement on the occasion of a London screening around the same time, believe that "*Salome* stands forth from the welter of ephemeral productions of the past as one of the few American pictures made with the sincere purpose of creating a work of art,"²⁰ whereas others echo Bosley Crowther, who, reviewing the film in 1967, called *Salome*, "One of the silent movies' more notorious Tiffany lamps, relic of a style of artsy acting that blazes as present day camp."²¹ Arguably it is exactly the film's sincerity of artistic purpose that makes it camp. In her 1964 "Notes on 'Camp,'" Susan Sontag defines the sensibility in part as "failed seriousness."²² Crowther's comparison of the film to a Tiffany lamp—a notorious one at that—betrays the influence of Sontag's definition: Tiffany lamps and the drawings of Aubrey Beardsley are featured in her sampling of "the canon of Camp."²³

Saying the film is campy is not exactly the same thing as saying it is gay. Sontag herself is circumspect about this issue. "The peculiar relation between Camp taste and homosexuality has to be explained," she writes, but since she concedes this point in number fifty-one of her fifty-eight notes, the only appropriate response is, "Indeed." Perhaps her essay's dedication to Oscar Wilde stands in for such an explanation. However, it seems evident that the mid-to-late-1960s revival of *Salome* established the film's gay reputation. Crowther may describe Nazimova's film without reference to homosexuality. But I detect an implicit avowal of the connection in his very disdain for the film. His review continues: "Don't take this old film too seriously. . . . It's a preposterous bit of pretense—in its day regarded by serious critics as a limp piece of studio fashioned Art." What is connoted in an attack on a woman's work as "limp"? The "gayness" of a camp film like *Salome*—like the "gayness" of Wilde—may go without saying, but this very "obviousness," carried in the male-oriented homophobic epithet "limp," renders the meaning of Nazimova's lesbianism, and how she used the film to configure it, less historically legible.

We would do better to look to Kenneth Anger than to the *New York Times* for insight into camp sensibility and for a fuller appreciation of *Salome's*

artistry. The gay avant-garde filmmaker and "magick" practitioner all but defines cinematic camp in his scandal compendium *Hollywood Babylon*, the French publication of which shortly preceded *Salome's* revival and Sontag's essay. Anger's work made a kind of gay-inflected excess characteristic of Hollywood—of "studio fashioned Art"—as a whole. The gay male affiliation Crowther hinted at is marshaled explicitly in Anger's canonization of Nazimova's film. He reports that she "employed only homosexual actors as 'homage' to Wilde," and his pronouncement has become central to the lore of the film.²⁴ It is in part in homage to Wilde that the extravagantly stylized *Salome* has maintained a steady gay cult following in recent decades. Yet if it is unintentional camp that is produced by what might be called the failed seriousness of Nazimova's interpretation of Wilde's highly self-conscious, literate work, then an attribution of conscious authorship to Nazimova becomes somewhat compromised. Nazimova is certainly not ignored in this cult celebration; she is honored as a diva, of course, and her own deviant sexual identity seems to earn her bonus points in Anger's reception. But, I argue, her agency is veiled by her gender. As a woman, she is a spectacle, or at best she is seen as paying homage to Wilde rather than as making her own contribution.

Andrew Ross understands camp as a response to aesthetic forms that correspond to an earlier mode of cultural production; these "become available, in the present, for redefinition according to contemporary codes of taste."²⁵ Thus a typical assessment from a recent screening: "In the annals of film history, . . . *Salome* stands out like a shriek at an afternoon tea. . . . As the wicked *Salome* the great dancer [*sic*]/actress Alla Nazimova often looks and acts like the Bride of Frankenstein, moving stiffly and dreamily under the madly stylized coiffure erupting from her head."²⁶ If camp evaluations since the film's 1960s revival have the virtue of celebrating Nazimova's excess—keeping her daring before us—they fall short of illuminating the situation of women and Hollywood, sex and power in 1922. In the context of this essay, I can do little more than point to new directions in film historiography that might help us reconstruct and analyze these conditions of production and reception. My aim is to begin to restore the film's historicity while preserving its strangeness.

Salome's status in film history as a curio might be modified by placing it among attempts to define an early American avant-garde. Whereas France and Germany developed distinct art cinemas in the 1910s and 1920s, it is generally accepted that in the United States the rapid establishment of an industrial model eliminated experimentation. But Jan-Christopher Horak's anthology *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Film Avant-Garde*,

1919–1945 draws more meaningful connections between the United States and Europe and begins to map historical precedents to the acknowledged avant-garde that emerged with the work of Maya Deren and others in the 1940s.²⁷ *Salome* is thus an important touchstone; what reviewers saw as bizarre about Rambova's designs, or strange about the film's acting style and pace, can be reevaluated as part of a genuinely avant-garde experiment. C. A. Lejeune describes Nazimova's difference from her peers in a 1931 profile:

Her face was always a fine mask. . . . It was her body that was her language, and a body trained and persuaded to the limits of the camera. Her gestures had been shaped in the flat, not in the round, and always with a sense of pattern; she knew every pose and poise of expression in two dimensions—how to use limbs and throat and tilted head to strengthen and complete the design on the screen.²⁸

The pictorial qualities Lejeune highlights were fundamental elements not only of Nazimova's work but of Rambova's modernist designs.

Locating *Salome* in terms of its aesthetic difference certainly makes sense in light of the "artiste" image Nazimova herself cultivated. A characteristic profile shortly after her arrival in Hollywood tells us: "Nazimova doesn't speak of her venture into picture work as the 'movies'; she calls it photodrama. Neither does she think she has sacrificed her ideals; but rather, she talks of creative principles as serious as does the sculptor, painter or composer. She actually calls it an art."²⁹ Rambova's pretensions went even further. In her contribution to *Lovers of Cinema* on the limits of experimentation within the classical Hollywood paradigm, Kristin Thompson cites *Salome* as a fairly "extreme" example of the "mild modernism" that was incorporated into the industry in the 1920s, particularly through set and costume design. Thompson concedes that the film "shifts the usual classical emphasis on the primacy of the narrative system," which here is subordinated to the spectacular sets and to an overall emphasis on design. Yet in Thompson's functionalist terms, the film's "innovations are motivated largely by the simple and familiar story" and its "sets and stylized acting seek to create an overall tone of decadence appropriate to the play."³⁰ Concepts such as "motivated" innovation and "appropriate" decadent tone neutralize the film's transgressiveness—and that of its literary source—and awkwardly press the film into the service of a teleological narrative of Hollywood's aesthetic norms. Its difference is recontained.

Yet we should be wary of encouraging *Salome*'s simple introduction into a newly expanded formal "avant-garde" canon, not least because this rec-

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ognition too could come at the expense of queer visibility. Formalist and romantic models of avant-garde practice and authorship, and strict typologies and criteria of admittance to the alternative canon, have often downplayed the gayness and mutual influence of films from James Watson and Melville Webber's *Lot in Sodom* (1930) to the work of Anger, Warhol, and other contributors to underground cinema. Even popular magazine coverage hints that Rambova and Nazimova's collaboration is responsible for the "bizarre" elements of *Camille* and *Salome*, and this coding of sexual deviance as artistic flamboyance deserves attention.

Moreover, I agree with Thompson that the film cannot be set in direct opposition to Hollywood product. Most importantly, it is crucial to acknowledge that the film's search for a filmic language to express female desire had affinities with the goals of more commercial Hollywood production of the 1910s; far from losing its avant-garde stamp through such a repositioning, *Salome* could be seen as linking up artistic modernism with mass-media solicitation of female desire, making the female artist persona visible in/as the spectacularized, performing female body. Feminist film scholars, among them Miriam Hansen and Shelley Stamp, have documented the importance of female audiences to the emerging narrative, visual, institutional, and broad cultural forms of the cinema of the silent era. The stress Thompson places on the "assimilable" modernisms of set and costume design (and one might extend this, as Gaylyn Studlar does in her work discussed below, to dance) ought to be considered in terms of these discourses' privileged relationship to women (and indeed to gay men). Once again we are faced with a paradox of interpretation: is *Salome* considered a "milder" attempt at avant-gardism because it is trivialized by the association of design and dance with women and the masses; or might the film's ambitions indicate that the particular kind of modernism so integral to the movies was emblematically female?

The work of Miriam Hansen provides background for these questions. In *Babel and Babylon*, Hansen argues that during the transition to what we call the classical period, the cinema functioned as an alternative public sphere—a unique experience of modernity—for women. The discourse of consumerism "cater[ed] to aspects of female experience that hitherto had been denied any public dimension," Hansen argues. Commercialized leisure provided a newly gender-integrated public space that built on consumer culture's transformation of the female private sphere.³¹ "More than any other entertainment form, the cinema opened up a space—a social space as well as a perceptual, experiential horizon—in women's lives," Hansen writes.³² Having outlined cinema's "chameleon" response, in the

transitional period, to a modernity in which the social reorganization of gender was crucial, Hansen has turned to questioning the status of classical cinema itself. In recent work on the movies as vernacular or popular modernism, she argues that too heavy a stress on the "classical" in Hollywood cinema ignores the fact that its very medium and mode of expression belong irrevocably to modernity.³³ Hollywood's "mass production of the senses" can be taken to express a cultural logic of modernity that takes new relations of production and consumption into account in ways high modernism could not. The challenging of the modernist canon through questions of consumerism and mass culture has been an important direction in feminist studies; Hansen's thesis, though not emphasizing gender at this juncture, provides crucial support for such work.

The artistic and literary modernism with which *Salome* allies itself would seem to be distinct from vernacular modernism, however; the film's fin de siècle homage was dated even in 1922. A common criticism is that the film is hardly a *movie*; its aesthetic is one of stasis and pantomime (and the repetitions in the play's language, which are incorporated, although to a lesser extent, in the more condensed film's titles, seem to reiterate this). Yet Wilde's symbolist ambitions in the play could be seen as fitting with the cinema's "synesthetic" capacities — here mobilized in ways that attempt to speak to the embodied experience of women in this period. Nazimova was a star of sensational films; she was marketing her independent productions to the audience she had already attracted (even in the theater she played to the masses, touring with a repertory in vaudeville). Rambova and Nazimova were enthusiastic about turning the film medium to artistic purposes; but they must also have been interested in turning art into an experience well rendered by Hansen's phrase "mass production of the senses."

Salome's debt to Beardsley's erotic and stylized drawings might have departed from Hollywood practice of its era, but attempts were made to integrate the film with the consumerism that drove Hollywood's fascination with design.³⁴ The very same "Salome hat" described above, in the 1991 review from the *L.A. Weekly*, as a "madly stylized coiffure erupting from [Nazimova's] head" was heralded in a London press release during the film's first run in this fashion: "The Salome headdress, with its myriad tiny, white pearls that in the light seem moon-silvered and stand upright on flexible stems, is apparently to be long with us."³⁵ High modernism and mass culture are bridged in this self-conscious promotion of European influence: "There is the best of reasons to believe Nazimova's 'Salome,' which made its mark on students of motion pictures when it had its premiere in this country will, in the roundabout way of passage through London

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2. Nazimova in her distinctive *Salome* headdress (1922).

and French appearances, imperatively influence fashions in America at an early date." The reference to "students of motion pictures" injects a note of serious culture without compromising the film's populism. Similarly, Lejeune's tribute to Nazimova opens with a memory of encountering both her charwoman and "a certain learned professor . . . engrossed in a book on philology" waiting outside a cinema for the premiere of a new Nazimova film.³⁶ The intertextual figure of Salome herself may be one of the most productive intersections of a high-culture fascination coded male and a vernacular, sensory, consumerist modernism coded female. I first explore this figure and then turn to the related and similarly intertextual discourse of stardom.

If today we recognize the figure of Salome as aestheticism's touchstone—Wilde's interest followed that of Moreau, Huysmann, and Flaubert among others, and Strauss's widely produced opera based on Wilde's play brought the obsession into the twentieth century—the female tradition of appropriating Salome is now almost forgotten. In her essay, "Out-Salomeing Salome": Dance, the New Woman, and Fan Magazine Orientalism," Gaylyn Studlar writes compellingly of the prominent cultural role of dance in the reconfiguration of gender in the early twentieth century. Specifically, she explores dance iconography in the movies and in fan magazines addressed to female audiences, noting the emphasis on the sensuality of movement, costume, and the body. Dance's high-art connotations were also crucial in the appeal to women. Studlar points out: "Dance as a 'classic' art stood as an ideal symbolic merger between traditional middle-class female gentility and contemporary ideals of feminine freedom from bodily and imaginative restraints."³⁷ Nazimova is often misremembered as a dancer in contemporary tributes, and Rambova, as Studlar puts it, "became the ultimate High-Art Dance Vamp" in the popular press.³⁸

Salome dancers were a craze in the first decades of the twentieth century, and the figure "became [one of] the representational foundations for Hollywood's proliferation of vamps in the late 1910s and 1920s," according to Studlar.³⁹ Canadian dancer Maud Allan caused a sensation in 1905–1907 with her much emulated "Vision of Salome" dance, and "Salomania" spread: "By the summer of 1908," dance historian Elizabeth Kendall writes, "Mlle. Dazie [of the Ziegfeld Follies], was [training and . . .] sending approximately 150 Salomes every month into the nation's vaudeville circuits, each armed with the same routine—an incoherent mix of gestures and undulations addressed to a papier-mâché head."⁴⁰ The year 1908 saw a Vitagraph production of *Salome*, and additional film versions followed. Female vaudeville and early film audiences watched sensational renditions of the dance of the seven veils that signified and embodied female desire and expressiveness, and they imitated the dance in private theatricals. By producing her own version of *Salome*, Nazimova added another dimension of agency to spectators' active viewing and dancers' making the role their own through performance. Coming late in the cycle, her film inevitably made use of earlier versions—those of male modernists as well as those of modern women.

The Salome story revolves around the gaze—Salome arrests the circuit of gazes objectifying her (Herod's, the Young Syrian's) and uses her to-be-looked-at-ness to get her will in the dance of the seven veils. She looks at Jokanaan and desires him; her nature is transformed by the admission of

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desire her look entails; she enumerates his body parts in a reversal of the fragmentation so often visited on the female body; her punishment for appropriating the gaze is absolute. The male artist, Linda Saladin argues, often found his substitute in the "mythologization of femininity," and this took on favored form in "the myth of Salome, used to obsessive lengths in the late nineteenth century."⁴¹ The femme fatale was a way of symbolizing the mysteries of the artist's own act of creation; her perversion of procreative power was sublimated in his art. In Nazimova's production, both the character's and the artist's transgressive acts are present; the appropriation of the gaze is their common mode. One striking sequence encapsulates the film's thematizing of the gaze, extending to that of the narrational role of the gaze behind the camera. A petulant Salome looks across the terrace toward the cage over the cistern where the prophet is incarcerated, and her gaze is followed by an extreme close-up of the lock on the gate. She next looks over at the Young Syrian, who is huddling with the Page who loves him, the men depicted in a two-shot that appears frequently in the film (fig. 3). This gaze is followed by a close-up of the key tucked in the sash at the Syrian's waist (fig. 4). Next Salome, in profile and on point, exaggeratedly bends her head forward, staring with great concentration at her target, and the next shot is a remarkable frontal extreme close-up of her eyes, the frame masked so they appear, heavily outlined with makeup, in a bar across the center of the screen (fig. 5).

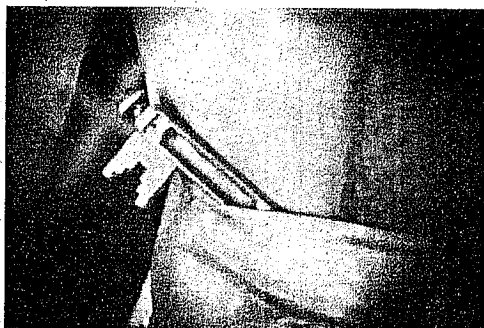
In a film featuring mainly long-shot tableaux on a dominating set, the use of point-of-view editing and extreme close-ups—particularly the shot of Nazimova's eyes—underscores the transgressive looking and desire that drive the film. Her gaze is castrating; the Young Syrian will kill himself after surrendering the key. The scene's stylized posing also shows that the influence of dance is not restricted to the choreographed set piece, the dance of the seven veils. Nazimova is the object of the gaze, certainly; yet her small, lithe figure in a straight, short sheath offers a different version of the spectacle of the female body. And although we look with her at Jokanaan, neither he nor the other men are coded as conventional objects of female desire. *Variety* complained that "the heroic figures were given a decided appearance of effeminacy and the slaves of color were beefy instead of muscular."⁴² The film's circuit of looks demands a powerful and unusual alliance among filmmaker, heroine, and female spectator.

Thus despite the Salome figure's association with a male literary tradition, portraying the role in a star vehicle was also an attempt to solicit the historical female film audiences who, Studlar emphasizes, were passionately involved in female-stars' fandoms and in the popularity of dance

3. The Young Syrian and the Page who is devoted to him shrink from Salome's desire.



4. The key that Salome needs in order to release Jokanaan, singled out by her gaze.

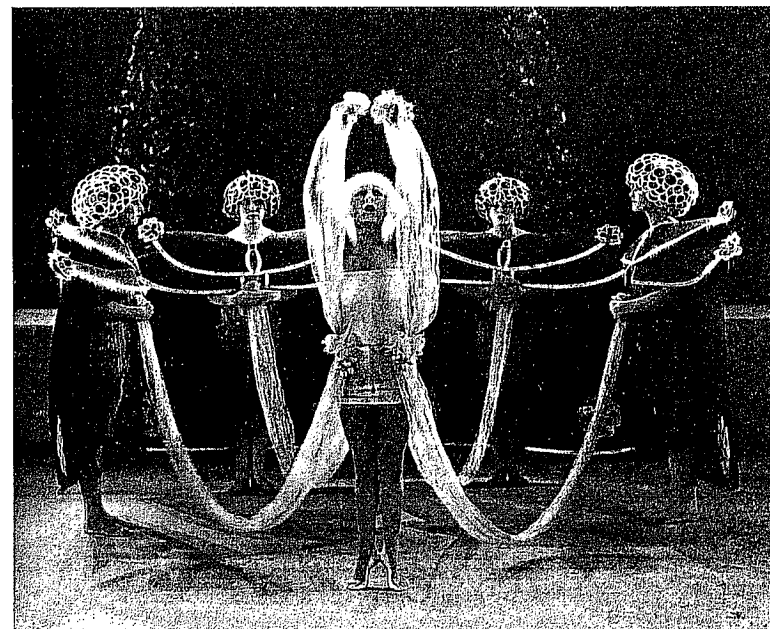


5. Salome's gaze stands in for the gaze of Nazimova as filmmaker.



and orientalism in the period. The "fit" between Nazimova's star persona and the role of Salome can help us read her significance, for, as Richard Dyer and others have argued, stars powerfully express cultural contradictions around gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity.⁴³ The transgressiveness of Salome's desire is consonant with Nazimova's "foreign" persona.⁴⁴ Such connotations are evident in an item appearing well before Nazimova went to Hollywood: "there are critics who contend that . . . the art of the actress has been seriously handicapped by an apparently studious avoidance of roles that are entirely free from a note of morbidity."⁴⁵ The morbidity

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6. Nazimova dances the dance of the seven veils (*Salome*, 1922).

of Ibsen's new woman (the term was also associated with lesbianism in the period) would soon be transferred to that of the screen's avatar of the femme fatale, the vamp. Yet as much as Nazimova's exoticness and inscrutability overlap with the vamp persona, she also departs from the type. Her Russianness is played up in almost all accounts; her national identity facilitated high-art connotations more easily than did the Arabic trappings of vamps such as Theda Bara, although I would argue that Nazimova's Jewishness, veiled behind her Russianness, provided an orientalist link. Nazimova's publicity insists on calling her Madame; "unusual" and "temperamental" are frequent epithets. She is above all an artist, and the press surrounding her independent productions gave this aspect of her persona even more emphasis. *Motion Picture World* felicitously describes *Salome* as "One of the most artistic screen portrayals along the line of what is popularly termed 'high art.'"⁴⁶ In keeping with this notion, Salome's deal with Herod—whom she tricks with her dance so that she can call the shots—might be seen as allegorizing Nazimova's transition from performer to filmmaker.⁴⁷

At the crucial turning point of her film career, on the release of *Camille* and her announcement of her intention to produce *A Doll's House* and

Salome independently (the period of her partnership with Rambova), Nazimova was interviewed by Gladys Hall and Adele Whitely Fletcher for *Motion Picture Magazine*. The encounter is interestingly framed by Hall's refusal to allow what one might call the Norma Desmond aspects of Nazimova's persona to be dispelled. At the premiere of *Camille* she stares at Madame in the audience: "I'm not looking at a celebrity so much as at an esthete . . . a tragedienne . . . a Woman of Sorrows," and she is shocked when the next day "Nazimova steps briskly into the room . . . in a blue tailored suit, mannishly tailored. Her feet are shod in low-heeled oxfords . . . her hair is parted on the side, sleek, boyish."⁴⁸ The star informs the interviewers that it is only on set that she is addressed as Madame; her friends call her Peter, and sometimes Mimi. The interviewers "feel at a loss. This is not the Nazimova they had prematurely visualized. No incense wreathes in serpentine about her definite, boyish head. She wears no chiffons, no morbidities, she thinks, succinctly, as a man thinks." Other profiles note Nazimova's originality in dress, but few type her new-woman persona through such masculine iconography. Despite Nazimova's having concluded the interview with a "Peterish handshake," Hall goes off still muttering "sphinx of the marble mien . . . empress of hate . . . you turn men's blood to ice."⁴⁹ Thus just before *Salome* went into production, Nazimova's star image was defined in terms of its contradictions; the aesthete qua femme fatale meets the new woman qua lesbian. Sexology's characterization of the "mannish" woman as invert was an accessible discourse during this period—Nazimova even tells her interviewers that her favorite reading is medical books.⁵⁰ At this juncture, such contradictions were still manageable, but with the film's failure came increasingly critical press coverage of the star, and the connotations of mannishness and of what a *Photoplay* profile called "bizarrerie" or "diablerie" were likely to have become more legibly lesbian.⁵¹ The *Variety* review of the film brings issues of form, sexuality, and lack of popular acceptance together: "*Salome* as a picture is going to please a few who are Nazimova devotees, a few that like higher art in all its form perversions, and then its box office value will end."⁵² Claiming this constellation of connotations in her own way, Nazimova as artist and as unconventional, even deviant, woman met in the *Salome* project.

To take on the role of this particular femme fatale is also to take on the legacy of the stars who had previously been identified with the figure and thus to ally oneself with women-artists as well as female audiences. Especially when performed by a Jewish celebrity, the Jewish princess became a powerful vehicle for articulating a modern sexual identity. First among stars associated with the role is an actress who never played it: Sarah Bern-

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hardt, who was in rehearsal with Wilde in 1892 when the production was shut down by England's examiner of plays. Sander Gilman notes that the star "was represented as the quintessential 'modern' woman in the stereotypical discourse of the late nineteenth century."⁵³ Through readings of the anti-Semitic elements of discourse on Bernhardt, he concludes that "La Divine Sarah is the embodiment of the sexuality of the Jew and, therefore, of the modernity which this sexuality comes to represent."⁵⁴ Nazimova's selection of Wilde's heroine is a way of affiliating with and reinterpreting from a female position the styles of European decadence and its figures *belle juive* and lesbian, specific incarnations of the femme fatale. By virtue of her own stage reputation, Nazimova exploits the high-art imprimatur of the role as associated with Bernhardt and later with Ida Rubinstein, the Ballets Russes star who was widely celebrated for dancing *Salome*.⁵⁵ Peter Wollen details the importance of the Ballets Russes at the intersection of modernism and mass culture (particularly fashion), and Michael Moon builds on this work to bring out the queer dimensions of the ballet's legacy, including that of Rubinstein's lesbian fandom.⁵⁶ Finally, Studlar stresses that the Ballets Russes decisively influenced early-twentieth-century women's popular culture. Thus Nazimova's movie version of *Salome* exploited an emerging mass-cultural topos—a sexualized, crypto-Semitic, and crypto-feminist other. Even the Hollywood *Salome* whose performance immediately preceded Nazimova's could be considered as figuring her own Jewishness as well as her sexual agency through the exotic, erotic persona. In 1918, quintessential vamp Theda Bara included a large-budget version of *Salome* among the vehicles for her wildly popular femme fatale persona. While a range of male authors, painters, and composers each had his *Salome* in the fin de siècle period, powerful women performers intervened in their construction of a female, Jewish other when embodying the role themselves.

Nazimova's performance must be situated in relation to other interpreters of the role, but her direction/production of her film distinguished her *Salome* through a particularly canny affiliation to Wilde. I argued above that Wilde tends to overshadow Nazimova in contemporary interpretations of the film; at the time of the film's production, the connotations of the association were variable. Sometimes her fidelity to the play was declared unique; at other times, the overfamiliarity of the play was grounds for dismissal of the film. In my view, a cross-gender identification with Wilde lent Nazimova the discourse of aestheticism through which to make her originality and agency visible. She and Rambova are promoted in Allied's press release as "gifted young women artists"; the characterization is enabled by the aura of Wilde's "exquisite poem drama" and the reputation of Beards-

ley's illustrations. But of course Nazimova borrowed more than an artistic signature from Wilde; she borrowed a queer one. Putting herself in Wilde's place, as opposed to just performing in his text, she asserted her sexual difference. In this queer film artifact, authorship and performance intersect in the star's body. Wilde's name is synonymous with homosexual perversion; his heroine connotes sexual voracity. Nazimova's visibility depends on her manipulation of these veils.

The metonymic association of Salome's impersonator with the vice of the play's author had a precedent: the strange case of Maud Allan. Allan had notably less control over the association with Wilde's perversion than did Nazimova, as it took on evidentiary status in a court of law. As I noted above, the Canadian dancer's "Vision of Salome" had been a phenomenal international success, but it was her appearance in a private London production of Wilde's play in 1918 that provided one of the most bizarre episodes in Salome studies. Noel Pemberton Billing, MP, suggested in print—as part of his campaign to expose German sympathizers during the war—that those attending Allan's performance were themselves perverts, hence traitors. (He claimed to have a black book containing the names of forty-seven thousand such homosexuals/subversives.) His dark intimations appeared under the title "The Cult of the Clitoris." Allan sued for libel and lost, after some remarkable testimony that implied that if she knew what the word "clitoris" meant, she must be the initiate of dangerous and seditious sexual practices. As Jennifer Travis recounts in her article on the trial, Billing testified that Allan's performance was "designed so as to foster and encourage obscene and unnatural practices among women."⁵⁷ The "cult of the clitoris" named an audience turned lesbian by a particular interpretation of a work of art. Nazimova went into production a few years after the Billing trial; I have no doubt that she was aware of this case that had identified Wilde's play with lesbianism by way of the actress's reputation, the play's symbolism, and its content, the princess's "sadism."

Obviously it was the stigma of the play's author, the figurehead of the cult of sodomy, that set the drama in motion. (Wilde was imprisoned during his play's Paris premiere and never saw it performed.) A common reading of *Salome* sees the transgressive sexuality of the heroine as an encoding of the author's homosexuality, and a homophobic reading views the punishment with which it concludes as just. Jane Marcus, in a passionate early 1970s defense of the play's feminism, "Salome: The Jewish Princess Was a New Woman," insists that Wilde drew a "link between the suffering artist and the aspiring woman."⁵⁸ Elaine Showalter queries, "Is the woman behind Salome's veils the innermost being of the male artist?" and reproduces a

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widely circulating photograph that is credited as Wilde himself costumed as his heroine.⁵⁹ Nazimova's auteurist impersonation of the heroine can also be seen as a reading of Wilde's identification with Salome.

Lesbianism, not "visible" in her performance even as her costumes spectacularize her putative lover's designs, is another veil that opens on further discrepancies. Generally accepted as the first lesbian filmmaker, Nazimova, like Salome, solicits our gaze at what appears to be an obvious feminine spectacle in order to enact a duplicitous female desire and subjectivity. She further encodes and veils her lesbian authorship by appropriating the authority of Oscar Wilde and the discourse of aestheticism. Her performance of lesbian authorship is also an authorization of lesbian performativity.

William Tydeman and Steven Price's thorough study of the production history of Wilde's play includes a very insightful reading of Nazimova's film, asserting that "the return to Wilde and Beardsley . . . represents . . . the first attempt fully to integrate a common reading of the play's sexual subtext with a design concept and performance style fully informed by that subtext."⁶⁰ Their important observation nevertheless begs the question for me of how "the play's sexual subtext," if understood as male homosexuality, might signify in the hands of a lesbian auteur. I have been implying that autonomous (albeit destructive) female sexuality, male homosexual notoriety, and a bid for female authorial recognition converge to provide the conditions of lesbian representability in the film. Tydeman and Price continue their evaluation of Nazimova's effort: "That [the film] attempts this [presentation of the sexual subtext on the level of production] covertly, and in Hollywood, makes it possible to see Nazimova's *Salome* as a coded act of resistance to perhaps the most influential contemporary medium in the regulation of sexual behavior."⁶¹ I would add that it is crucially the regulation of *female* sexuality that is contested in the film, and, according to scholars such as Hansen, in the public sphere of silent cinema. Nazimova may be using Wilde to resist Hollywood, as the authors imply, to style herself as an auteur, and to make her deviant sexual identity visible, as I have argued. But importantly she is also using Hollywood, with its mass female audience in mind.

As I have reiterated, Nazimova was a star with a large female fan base—she confided to Hall and Fletcher in *Motion Picture Magazine* that "most of her friends are young girls."⁶² This attempt to exploit the popular female audience in relation to what aimed to be a new discourse on both sexuality and film art is to me what is most exciting about the film and most daring about Nazimova's aesthetic bid. Hence the disappointment of the film's failed 1923 release. Partly because her version did not manage to

reach female audiences—who had a demonstrated taste for Salomes, at the time of its release—it did not reach them later, in its 1960s revival or its gay film festival afterlife. Retrospective programming requires a certain connoisseurship that has not been built into the history of lesbian spectatorship. But Nazimova seemed explicitly to be trying to fashion such taste, perhaps such an audience, among her fan base. I like to imagine an alternative history originating in a silent-film-era “cult of the clitoris”—that is, a history that recognizes the possibility of lesbian identifications forming among female film audiences.⁶³ Fascinatingly, *Salome* has been kept visible by its “queerness”—in both senses, strangeness and gayness. It is now possible to nuance that visibility in relation to histories of female sexualities, ethnicities, and subcultures. While there is no denying that Nazimova’s attempt to queer the female mass culture of her era through an avant-garde experiment failed spectacularly, the utopian desire to exploit the modernist elements of the popular medium on behalf of marginal subjects is memorialized in the film’s cult following.

Feminist scholars have identified the veil as a double-edged figure of feminine masquerade. The veil incites the desire to see, attracts the gaze and blocks its penetration, covers the woman and gives her cover to look. The set piece of *Salome* is the dance of the seven veils, a performance that so blinds Herod with lust, and binds him within a male code of honor, that he grants Salome’s desires for the head of the one who refused to return her look. The woman gets what she wants through a performance of femininity; a similar play of receptivity and agency, surface and depth, is at work in Nazimova’s veiling of authorial control in her visibility as star. As I have argued, Nazimova’s use of stardom as a vehicle for authorship becomes a complex performance, involving appropriation of traditional male authority via Wilde as well as intertexts and collaborations through which a lesbian signature can be decoded. What remains fascinating is the ways the performance and the audience to which it was directed did and did not match up. Like Salome’s, Nazimova’s transgression is significant, her defeat cautionary.

There is a notable gap in Wilde’s play: he provided no stage directions for the dance of the seven veils. Its performance thus functions as a kind of supplement. Sometimes in stagings of Strauss’s opera, a second Salome substitutes here, adding an interesting twist to the seduction. In other contexts it is exclusively through dance that the performer makes the role her own. Reviewing Nazimova’s film on its release, the *New York Times* was disappointed that her dance was so unrevealing: “But someone may reply that the real dance wouldn’t be allowed, and that if it were decent people

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wouldn’t want to look at it. Exactly. The real *Salome* is impossible on both counts.”⁶⁴ Nazimova reveals the possibilities of a spectacularly fake, constructed Salome, one unconstrained by what is allowed or by what decent people might want to look at. In homage, rather than an act of stripping back successive veils, our present-day interpretation of her film’s multilayered performance must consist in their artful arranging.

Notes

- 1 See for example, Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991); Shelley Stamp, *Movie-Struck Girls: Women and Motion Picture Culture after the Nickelodeon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Janet Staiger, *Bad Women: Regulating Sexuality in Early American Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995); Gaylyn Studlar, *This Mad Masquerade: Stardom and Masculinity in the Jazz Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), and the essays in this volume. The Women Film Pioneers Project, based at Duke University, collects information about and coordinates events related to women producers and directors of the silent era.
- 2 See Gaylyn Studlar, “‘Out-Salomeing Salome’: Dance, the New Woman, and Fan Magazine Orientalism,” in *Visions of the East: Orientalism in Film*, ed. Matthew Bernstein and Gaylyn Studlar (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 116–119; Staiger, “The Vamp,” in *Bad Women*, 147–162, and Sumiko Higashi, *Virgins, Vamps, and Flappers: The American Silent Movie Heroine* (St. Albans, Vt.: Eden Press Women’s Publications, 1978).
- 3 Program, National Film Theatre (London), 1966, *Salome* clippings file, New York Public Library, Library for the Performing Arts.
- 4 Unsigned review, *New York Times*, 1 January 1923.
- 5 Scrapbook, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Also appears in *Best Films of 1922–23* (New York: Small, Maynard, and Company, 1923), 103.
- 6 B. D., “Ibsen, Nazimova, and Henry Miller,” *Philadelphia Telegraph*, 5 May 1917, Nazimova scrapbook, New York Public Library, Library for the Performing Arts.
- 7 Unsigned, *Washington Star*, 17 March 1917, Nazimova scrapbook, New York Public Library, Library for the Performing Arts.
- 8 Quoted in Gavin Lambert, *Nazimova: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 198.
- 9 Quoted in Lambert, *Nazimova*, 249.
- 10 Ibid., 175. De Acosta was hopelessly starstruck; her introduction to the celebrated Nazimova came through New York lesbian social director Elizabeth Marbury. Their meeting is recounted in de Acosta’s *Here Lies the Heart: A Tale of My Life* (New York: Reynal, 1960), 74. On de Acosta’s relationships with

- Dietrich and Garbo, see my essay "Black and White: Mercedes de Acosta's Glorious Enthusiasms," *Camera Obscura* 45 (2001): 225-265.
- 11 Elaine Marks, "Lesbian Intertextuality," in *Homosexualities in French Literature*, ed. George Stambolian and Elaine Marks (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), 355.
 - 12 An undated press release announces that screenwriter June Mathis is joining with Nazimova for her "first 'repertoire' film." Nazimova clippings file, Museum of Modern Art Film Study Center. Nazimova uses the term "repertoire" to describe her planned project including both *A Doll's House* and *Salome*, in Gladys Hall and Adele Whitely Fletcher, "We Interview Camille," *Motion Picture Magazine*, January 1922, 24.
 - 13 After the association with Metro terminated, *Photoplay* coverage of Nazimova turned critical. "An Open Letter to Mlle. Alla Nazimova," *Photoplay*, August 1921, 31.
 - 14 Quoted in Lambert, *Nazimova*, 255.
 - 15 For an overview of opinions on Beardsley's contribution, see William Tyde-man and Steven Price, *Wilde: Salome*, Cambridge Plays in Production (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 113-122.
 - 16 Lambert, *Nazimova*, 261.
 - 17 In his biography of Rambova, Michael Morris details positive audience and mixed critical responses to several advance screenings of *Salome*. Morris, *Madam Valentino* (New York: Abbeville, 1991), 90-92. The screenings were held to drum up interest while United Artists delayed the film's release; when *Salome* was finally released by Allied Producers and Distributors, a UA subsidiary, in February 1922, it was undermarketed. On the release history, which was probably more responsible for the film's failure than its subject matter or aesthetics, see also Lambert, *Nazimova*, 259-260.
 - 18 Kenneth Anger, *Hollywood Babylon* (New York: Bell, 1975), 177.
 - 19 Program, Gallery of Modern Art (New York), 1967, *Salome* clippings file, Museum of Modern Art Film Study Center. Rohauer's program notes state that Vyvyan Holland "wrote a new translation of his father's play which provided the basis for the sub-titles of the silent film"; if this means that new titles were added or other changes were made for the release, they might have been the basis of Rohauer's copyright. He presented the film with Wurlitzer accompaniment of music from Strauss's opera "just as Nazimova had used it originally." In fact, the original score did not incorporate the opera *Salome*.
- The original release print of *Salome* was 5,595 feet, with its running time put at sixty-five to seventy-nine minutes by *Harrison's Reports* (13 January 1923). 16mm and video versions of *Salome* in circulation since run as short as thirty-two minutes. I have not yet been able to determine whether these are based on Rohauer's materials. In 1990 the George Eastman House restored a 35mm print at 5,032 feet, which runs approximately sixty-seven minutes.
- 20 Program, Motion Picture Guild, 26 June 1967, *Salome* clippings file, New York Public Library, Library for the Performing Arts.
 - 21 Bosley Crowther, review of *Salome*, *New York Times* 15 February 1967.

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- 22 Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp,'" in *Against Interpretation* (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1965), 287.
- 23 Ibid., 277.
- 24 Anger, *Hollywood Babylon*, 113.
- 25 Andrew Ross, "Uses of Camp," in *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 139.
- 26 Mary Beth Crain, *L.A. Weekly*, 17 May 1991.
- 27 Jan-Christopher Horak, ed., *Lovers of Cinema: The First American Film Avant-Garde, 1919-1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995).
- 28 C. A. Lejeune, "Nazimova," in *Cinema* (London: Alexander Maclehose, 1931), 81.
- 29 Lillian Montanye, "A Half Hour with Nazimova," *PhotoPlay Classic*, July 1917, 36.
- 30 Kristin Thompson, "The Limits of Experimentation in Hollywood," in *Lovers of Cinema*, ed. Horak, 75-77.
- 31 Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*, 116.
- 32 Ibid., 117.
- 33 See Miriam Bratu Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism," in *Reinventing Film Studies*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Arnold, 2000), 332-350.
- 34 Lucy Fisher's work in progress on art deco and cinema is especially relevant to these questions. See her essay on Greta Garbo, for instance, in this volume.
- 35 E. A. Bachelder, *Salome* clippings file, Museum of Modern Art Film Study Center. Admittedly, other commentators had less confidence in the hat: "We are not sure whether we like Madame Nazimova's idea of Salome as a petulant little princess with a Freudian complex and a headdress of glass bubbles. We rather believe such a Salome would not have stirred men so in those good old pagan days. You have our warning: this is bizarre stuff." Scrapbook, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. The source of the clipping is *Photoplay*.
- 36 Lejeune, "Nazimova," 78.
- 37 Studlar, "'Out-Salomeing Salome,'" 113.
- 38 Ibid., 119.
- 39 Ibid., 116.
- 40 Elizabeth Kendall, *Where She Danced* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 75.
- 41 Linda Saladin, *Fetishism and Fatal Women: Gender, Power, and Reflexive Discourse* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 57-58.
- 42 Review signed "Fred," *Variety*, 5 January 1923, 42. The reviewer expressed a common unease about Nazimova's body and presentation in the film: "the box office won't get any great draw because of any lack of dress on the part of the star."
- 43 Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: British Film Institute, 1975).
- 44 One profile opens by noting that Nazimova's "exotic *bizarrierie*" has generally been attributed to her Russianness. Then the author finds that even in her theater work in Russia she was cast as a foreigner. "Even her pantomime has an

- accent," he concludes. Herbert Howe, "A Misunderstood Woman," *Photoplay*, April 1922, 24.
- 45 *Philadelphia Telegraph*, 5 May 1917.
- 46 *Motion Picture World*, 3 January 1923. A story in the same publication cited Salome's poster design for "conveying the desired idea of art rather than sensation." Museum of Modern Art memorandum dated 29 October 1959, quoting *Motion Picture World*, 24 February 1923, 783, *Salome* clippings file, Museum of Modern Art Film Study Center.
- 47 A colorful passage from 1913 on Nazimova's stage performance in *Belladonna* fills in the orientalist and femme fatale dimensions of her persona: "If I went somewhere beyond Egypt, off up there beyond the source of the Nile, and came upon a community that adhered strictly to customs of centuries before the Christian era, I should expect to go into the temple and find a young lady serving at the altar. . . . She would have a graceful, undulating figure and . . . she would appear to be some remarkable creature, half serpent and half woman. . . . I would recognize this high priestess . . . because I have seen her reincarnated in the year 1913. I have seen and chatted with Alla Nazimova. . . . I have seen her flashing eyes, heard her panther-like moans, watched her writhe and undulate like a python. She loves sin, this woman, she glories in death and destruction—for artistic purposes. The decent little critters who swarm over the earth and live out their thoroughly respectable and moral lives are to her like a pack of worms." Archie Bell, "Remarkable Little Russian Actress Who Comes to Opera House This Week," *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 18 November 1913, scrapbook, New York Public Library, Library for the Performing Arts.
- 48 Hall and Fletcher, "We Interview Camille," 98.
- 49 *Ibid.*, 100.
- 50 *Ibid.* For the classic debate on the relationship among the new woman, sexuality, and lesbian self-definition, see Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The New Woman as Androgyne," in *Disorderly Conduct* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 245–296, and Esther Newton, "The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Woman," *Signs* 9, 4 (summer 1984): 557–575.
- 51 Howe, "A Misunderstood Woman," 24.
- 52 Review signed "Fred," 42.
- 53 Sander Gilman, "Salome, Syphilis, Sarah Bernhardt, and the Modern Jewess," in *The Jew in the Text: Modernity and the Construction of Identity*, ed. Linda Nochlin and Tamar Garb (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 111. His approach to *Salome* focuses on the anti-Semitic German discourse surrounding Strauss's opera.
- 54 *Ibid.*, 115.
- 55 Elaine Showalter calls Rubinstein "one of the first of the feminist Salomes" in her genealogy of the figure, which includes a discussion of Nazimova's film. Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (New York: Viking, 1990), 159.
- 56 Peter Wollen, "Fashion/Orientalism/The Body," *New Formations* 1 (spring 1987): 5–33; Michael Moon, "Flaming Closets," in *Out in Culture: Gay, Les-*

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- bian, and Queer Essays in Popular Culture*, ed. Corey K. Creekmur and Alexander Doty (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 285.
- 57 Quoted in Jennifer Travis, "Clits in Court," in *Lesbian Erotics*, ed. Karla Jay (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 151.
- 58 Jane Marcus, "Salome: The Jewish Princess Was a New Woman," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* (1974): 100.
- 59 Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*, 151. The photograph, which I am told depicts not Wilde but a German diva in the role, appears on page 157 of Showalter's book.
- 60 Tydeman and Price, *Wilde: Salome*, 165.
- 61 *Ibid.*
- 62 Hall and Fletcher, "We Interview Camille," 98.
- 63 I speculate that certain films of the 1930s fostered a similar identification in chapter 1 of *Uninvited: Classical Hollywood Cinema and Lesbian Representability* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).
- 64 Unsigned review, *New York Times*, 1 January 1923.