

**Words and Stardom:  
Modernist Poetic Responses to Asta Nielsen**

**Karl Toepfer**



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Asta Nielsen in *Den sorte Drøm* (*The Black Dream*, 1911), directed by Urban Gad.

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### *Nielsen*

Asta Nielsen (1881-1971) was a great star of the European silent film and perhaps the first film performer to embody the idea of stardom. Born in Copenhagen in humble circumstances, she made her film debut in the Danish production of *Afgrunden* (*The Abyss*, 1910), a sensational erotic melodrama about theatre life that featured Nielsen performing a memorable “gaucho dance” while smoking a cigarette. Even at the time, critics and viewers perceived this production as a major contribution toward establishing film as an art, and Nielsen's “cinematic” performance received much of the credit for constructing the perception.<sup>1</sup> The international success of *Afgrunden* was such that she made only two other films in Denmark, the excellent *Den sorte Drøm* (*The Black Dream*, 1911) and *Mod Lyset* (*The Torchbearer*, 1919). German film companies in Berlin and Frankfurt offered her far greater opportunities to display her artistry than Danish companies ever contemplated. Consequently, Asta Nielsen was a major star of the German cinema between 1910 and 1925. Some of her most distinctive films include: *Der Tod in Sevilla* (1913), *Rausch* (1919), *Der Reigen* (1920), *Irrende Seelen* (1921), *Fräulein Julie* (1922), *Erdgeist* (1923), *Hedda Gabler* (1925), *Die freudlose Gasse* (1925), and *Dirnentragodie* (1927).<sup>2</sup> She also played the title role in her own bizarre production of *Hamlet* (1920). However, the international public for her films always perceived her as a Scandinavian rather than German actress, and the roles she performed quite often represented women whose desires estranged them from the social milieu depicted.



Asta Nielsen performing the gauchito dance in *Afgrunden* (*The Abyss*, 1910), directed by Urban Gad.

Moreover, her admirers included a complex cross-section of European society. Her primarily tragic performances, which owed much to the aesthetics of naturalism, appealed to the broad, unprivileged mass of movie-goers, possibly because she never depended on any conventional or idealized notion of beauty to signify her right to love. Artists from different disciplines perceived her as a mysterious emblem of “modern” woman, insofar as she established the “feminine” power of the *performer* to “humanize,” to awaken an intensely emotional response to the illusions generated by cinema technology.<sup>3</sup> In The Hague, a marvelous, modernist movie theatre was named after her. And many performing artists, including Greta Garbo and Elisabeth Bergner, regarded her as the definitive model of the artistic cinematic performer.<sup>4</sup> For a major European intellectual like Bela Balazs, Nielsen was a significant artist because she linked the modernity of cinema technology to a performance of feminine eroticism which was more complex and daring than film was expected to offer.<sup>5</sup> Though she was not an especially beautiful woman in the sense that she conformed to an easily consumable image of female desirability, Asta Nielsen nevertheless possessed a magnetic physicality, a voluptuous seductiveness. Her large dark eyes consistently suggested

a person who saw more of the world than those around her. She was a master of subtle gestures, delicate bodily inflections, which conveyed a complex range of emotional responses to any dramatic situation. Yet she created powerful, bold figures, women whose desires are too strong or too great to achieve fulfillment within the milieu to which they “belong.” Her performances equated cosmopolitan glamour and sophisticated eroticism, not with “decadence,” but with a restlessness, a demand, a hunger for a state of freedom that the world had never considered.



Asta Nielsen (left) in *Der Tod in Sevilla* (*Death in Seville*, 1913), directed by Urban Gad

Much has been written about Asta Nielsen, mostly in the conventional genres of biography, cinema journalism, film history, and film acting theory.<sup>6</sup> Nielsen herself published extensive memoirs (1946).<sup>7</sup> But what has received little attention is some of the radical, modernist poetry that her screen image inspired. Four poets (Hans Schiebelhuth, Paul van Ostaijen, Rudolf Broby-Johansen, Franz Behrens), writing in three different languages (Dutch, Danish, German), produced fascinating poems that take Asta Nielsen as their subject and in doing so, disclose the power of a “star” image of woman to motivate highly “modern” constructions of poetic language. What follows, then, is a comparative, intercultural examination of modernist relations between language and image catalyzed by the condition of stardom Nielsen projected. I must emphasize: these excursions into the poetic language of modernism constitute an unstable, male response, not so much to cinema or even to specific performances by Nielsen, but to a *female* image, which, because it is “greater” than any medium of its transmission, because it is as much the creation of a powerful, archetypal desire or fantasy, is a peculiar feature of that phenomenon, that realm of ambivalent, seductive signs we call *stardom*.

### ***Schiebelhuth***

The German Hans Schiebelhuth (1895-1944) wrote the earliest of the poems about Asta Nielsen considered here. “Asta Nielsen” appeared in his first major collection of poems, *Wegstern (Starpath 1921)*, after a slightly different version was published in a Berlin anthology devoted to *Der Frauenlob (The New Praise of Women, 1919)*.<sup>8</sup> But apparently Schiebelhuth wrote the poem in the summer of 1913, and the publishers of the Berlin anthology had accepted the version which appeared there in 1914. At the time of *Wegstern*, Schiebelhuth had a rather obscure reputation as an experimental “language poet,” whose chief interest was to expose the sensual and autonomous vitality of, in Aleksei Kruchonykh’s (1886-1968) famous phrase, “the word as such,” but whose relation to specific modernist trends was not clear. At first, in *Der kleine Kalendar (1919)*, he seemed cautiously aligned, through his mentor, Karl Wolfskehl, to the aestheticism of Stefan George, but the following year, he published his five “neo-dadaistic non-poems,” *Hakenkreuzzug (Swastikatrain)*, while editing for several months the Hannover

expressionist journal, *Der Zweemann*. In 1923, he married a wealthy American heiress and from then on lived a peripatetic existence in Italy, Berlin, Darmstadt, Santa Monica, and New York (East Hampton), where he died. After *Wegstern*, Schiebelhuth published only one more little book, a collection of three long poems bearing the untranslatable title of *Schalmei vom Schelmenried* (1933). Until the 1950's, his reputation in literary circles rested primarily upon his translations of William Beckford and Thomas Wolfe. As his friend and biographer, Fritz Usinger, has observed, Schiebelhuth had hardly any interest at all in publishing his poetry, for he perceived publication as the death of the very words which gave him his own life. "Every word was for him a living body of unfathomable expressive power."<sup>9</sup> He apparently did not regard any of his poems as finished, and he constantly revised everything he wrote. Indeed, the manuscript image of the poem, with its messy layers of revision, was the "real" poem, rather than any "final" draft of it. Among his friends he enjoyed reciting his poems, in their different versions, and it seems that he revised his writing according to how words sounded, not theoretically, but as resonances exclusively peculiar to his own voice. In other words, the modernism of his poetry remains deeply embedded in the desire to construct a distinctively modern *voice*, which blurs the difference between the presumed inorganic word and the living body. All the poems in *Wegstern*, including "Asta Nielsen," comprise the most overtly expressionistic aspect of Schiebelhuth's output, and of all the Nielsen poems considered here, Schiebelhuth's is perhaps the most conservative from a formal perspective.<sup>10</sup> The poem consists of twenty-two unrhymed lines, divided into four stanzas of four, five, six, and seven lines respectively.<sup>11</sup> Like many other poems in the volume, the Nielsen poem discloses a hymnic complexion in which the poet addresses the subject of his poem in an ecstatic fashion that produces the sensation of words surging against formal constraints like great waves against a breakwater. Yet of all the Nielsen poems, this one perhaps awakens the most complex emotions, even though it is the work of an adolescent.



Asta Nielsen playing two Asta Niensens in *Die Falsche Asta Nielsen* (1915), a comedy directed by Urban Gad.

It is a dark, melancholy poem, insofar as the poet's ecstasy, his adoration of the film star, connect him to a perverse, "demonic" region within himself.<sup>12</sup> He begins by addressing her directly: "Du bist der Mord, der irgendwo geschah/In mir, als ich noch Knickerbockers trug (You are the murder which happened somewhere/Inside me when I still wore Knickerbockers)." Since then she is "ein schwarze Engel (a black angel)," "Der mich nie lasst, der meine Träume mit Gift säugt (who never leaves me, who sucks my dreams with poison)." In the second stanza, the poet describes to her the stirring features of her body. Her eyes are "worlds," which make him "sad," while her hairs are forests, through which he wildly wanders in his sleep. Her walk "flows unutterably" through his blood, so that her being presses and drives him all the way home.<sup>13</sup> But surprisingly, all these ostensibly lugubrious sentiments motivate the extravagant, sacerdotical gratitude of the third stanza. The poet informs the star that he has built for her a city in the "heart of secrets," where the "happiest house" belongs to her. Everything sings, he has consecrated a thousand doves to her, and for her the beautiful giraffes are meant for riding.<sup>14</sup> He has also designed for her a "Sternbeet (starbed)," and "Dort bist du gebettet, wenn mir der Wahn bellt (There are you bedded



when my delusion howls).”

But this fantastic playfulness abruptly disappears. In the final stanza, we encounter a monumental mood of self-abandoning obsession. The poet “can no longer think,” for she always surrounds him; he has given away his songs to her “many lips.”<sup>15</sup> “So süß ist mir, mein Selbst um dich zu versäumen (It is so sweet to neglect myself for you).” Repeatedly he must crouch in the movie house, where “steer-eyed” he tears her out of every film.<sup>16</sup> Vexed, there remains only that part of his life, which “dunkelleise vor der Leinwand nach dir weint (dark and soft before the screen weeps for you).” In one sense, the poem describes the loss, the “murder,” of a boy’s innocence through cinema, which produces an image of male desire that is unattainable, a “delusion.” To lose boyhood innocence is to see death: the “black angel,” the *image* of a woman whose body contains “worlds” and “forests” of sensations, pressures which distract the spectator from his “way home (Wegheimat).” The image of the star estranges the man from any kind of external, “objective” reality and instead plunges him into the interior world or “city” of the “heart,” the imagination, dreams, in which he discloses a fantastic power to transform nature, indeed the cosmos, into the “happiest” home for her and himself. The image of the star makes the poet aware of a great, “secret,” repressed *potential* to redefine reality as a strange territory *within himself*--a typically expressionistic attitude. This potential manifests itself above all through *language*. Of all the Nielsen poems considered here, Schiebelhuth’s makes the most of Nielsen’s identity as a star of *silent* films. The silent, deathly image projected by the star awakens in the poet a powerful voice, which exposes the strangeness, the utter uniqueness of his being.

Cryptically, he gives away all his songs to her “many lips.” But more significant is the hymnic form by which he addresses every word to her, a woman who never speaks herself or has any voice within the poem. An intriguing ambiguity results. On the one hand, the poem seems to express the profound loneliness of a man for whom there is no “other” but this *femme fatale* image of death, before which he “crouches” darkly, softly, anonymously. The speaker submits masochistically to the remote idol who “poisons” him with her indifference, her mute image. At the same time, however, the words he addresses to her resonate with a power which contradicts any perception of him as a weak or fragile boy. The power of the language derives from an intense compression or economy of signification, whereby the

speaker, using a very simple syntax, ties a rather sprawling constellation of images to the “you,” who is “the murder which happened somewhere inside” him. Each line brings a new image; the poet never lingers over any image but presses on with each line or clause within a line, to introduce a new “view” of his ever-expanding interior world.<sup>17</sup> This “secret” world, this “city of the heart,” is a huge, turbulent montage of distorted objects, extreme actions, and swollen conditions, melancholic and ecstatic at the same time. So many images confined within such a small space on the page construct the perception that “inside” the “steer-eyed” spectator is a great, even violent strength to see “another world,” so to speak within the body, within the voice. The remote, external image of the star compels the discovery of the unique, “secret,” and “demonic” male self; but this discovery coincides with an impulse to abandon the self, ecstatically, through poetic utterance. The discovery of the self, then, through the image of the star, is the discovery of a language which transforms the self it creates into the dark expression of an absolute love that provokes in its object no return, no answer, no voice.

Now, it should be said that many other poems in *Wegstern* employ poetic devices found in “Asta Nielsen,” especially the direct address to a mysterious woman.<sup>18</sup> Various other women, very obscure, even anonymous, compared to the great star, are capable of inflaming “demonic,” turbulent emotions in the poet, as are the weather, the seasons, and the night, which constitute the subjects of those poems not directly addressed to a specific person. In the context of the book, Nielsen appears as one of a large gallery of phantoms and images that chart the inner cosmos or “starpath” of the poet and motivate expressionistic word-storms, the release of a mighty, multifaceted voice: language is the “starpath,” and each poem glows as a distinct constellation of stars (words). The Nielsen poem in no way dominates the collection, even if sentiments, motifs, and devices in it reappear in other poems. Yet the poem is like no other in the collection in linking the expression of absolute love to a woman, a “star,” who is exclusively an image, only an illusion, a magnified fantasy (“eyes are worlds”), for which cinema is the modern mirror.



Asta Nielsen in *Dora Brandes* (1916), directed by Magnus Stifter (1878-1943).

### ***Van Ostaijen***

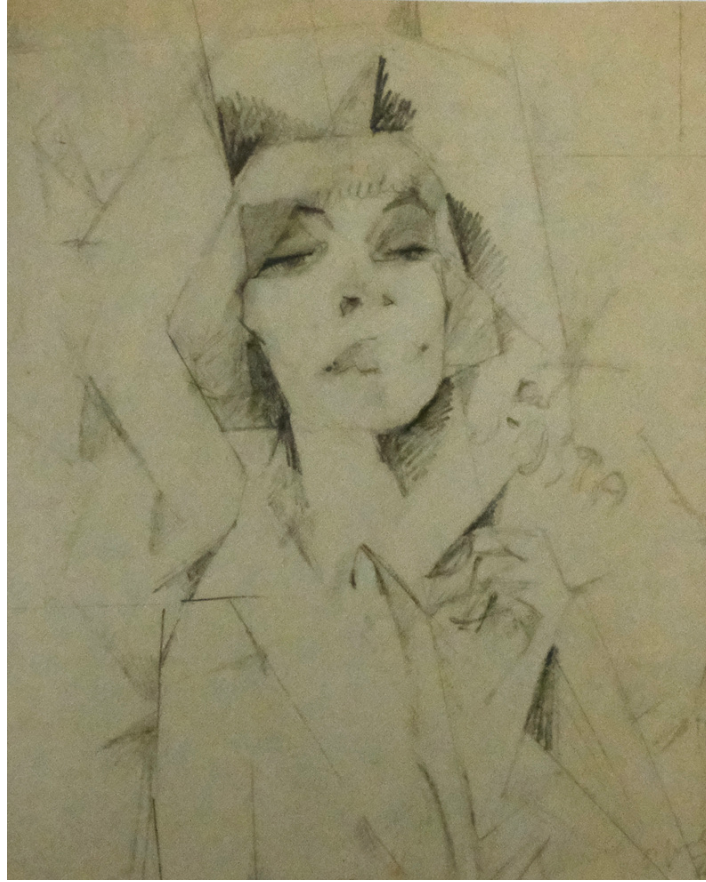
One of the most astonishing and complex poetic intelligences in the twentieth century, Paul Van Ostaijen (1896-1928) was from his adolescence until his death a leader of the Flemish modernist circle in Antwerp. His strong theoretical perspectives enabled him to campaign on behalf of modernist art outside of literature, including, painting, sculpture, photography, film, theatre, and music. Like Schiebelhuth, he had an unstable relation to modernism, for he could embrace futurism, dadaism, expressionism, constructivism, and surrealism. Yet he never detached his modernism from an intense attraction to mysticism.<sup>19</sup> His personality was bewilderingly complex: he consistently displayed the manner of a dandy, an aesthetic *provocateur*; yet he did not find this pose altogether inconsistent with a passionate expression of romantic humanism, nor with a deeply introspective, even ascetic, intellect. Much of the commentary on Van Ostaijen has devoted itself to deciphering the

mysteries of his personality and to establishing his identity, his historical significance as a Flemish writer within an international context of modernist “influences.”<sup>20</sup> Like other modernists in Flanders, Van Ostaïjen perceived modernist aesthetics as central in preserving and enhancing the vitality of a distinctly national (Flemish) culture. As Reynaert has observed: love of the “expressive” word was for Van Ostaïjen a symbol of his love for the fatherland and for the intuitive, mystical realm of knowledge we associate with the notion of “fatherland.”<sup>21</sup>

But Van Ostaïjen’s modernism was always radical, driven by daring innovation, sudden change, and a dramatic sense of discovery. His radicalism ultimately implied, however, that the expression of a modern national culture was not synonymous with the expression of a popular culture or of some specific collective will, memory, or consciousness, although he was quite passionate in appropriating signs of popular culture for his poetic collages. In 1925-26, he gave a memorable lecture in Brussels and Antwerp on the “Gebruiksaanwijzing der lyriek (Operating instructions for poetry),” in which he asserted that the “expression” of ecstasy is the dominant aim of “lyrical emotion,” and poetry achieves this aim when the “transcendent word” is no longer reducible to either its sound or its sense, but has become an “organism” which lives independently of both the unconscious and conscious desires that “use” it.<sup>22</sup> It seems, then, that the significance of a national culture lies in the possibilities of ecstatic experience it offers the individual within it; the language contains the “transcendent word,” but the language itself has no special salvational power. With his stress on the word as an “organism,” Van Ostaïjen moves toward the “mystical” position that poetic intelligence is a biological phenomenon which resists convincing explanation through analysis of conscious or unconscious historical pressures. Moreover, the ambiguity of identity he ascribes to the “transcendent word” in relation to national culture entails further ambiguity in the relation between language, voice, and inscription. In his poetry, Van Ostaïjen experimented boldly with typography, orthography, and even color.<sup>23</sup> The *image* of the word is ever in dramatic tension with its sound, and while it is always a pleasure to read his poems, it is very difficult to recite them, for he often fragments words typographically, discards syntactically correct relations between words, and arranges words on the space of the page in ways that do not make clear to the reader the “correct” sequence for reading

them.<sup>24</sup> Thus, unlike Schiebelhuth, Van Ostaijen did not ground poetic signification entirely in the voice. For him, the organic, “transcendent word” is a product and a sign of divided being. Seeing and speaking do not complement each other as they do for the “steer-eyed” spectator of Schiebelhuth’s poem. Rather, the image of the word distorts the voice, the body which reads with such physicality that one feels poetry is not the discovery of a “secret” self buried “inside” the body, but the discovery of some other being which penetrates the body from “outside.”

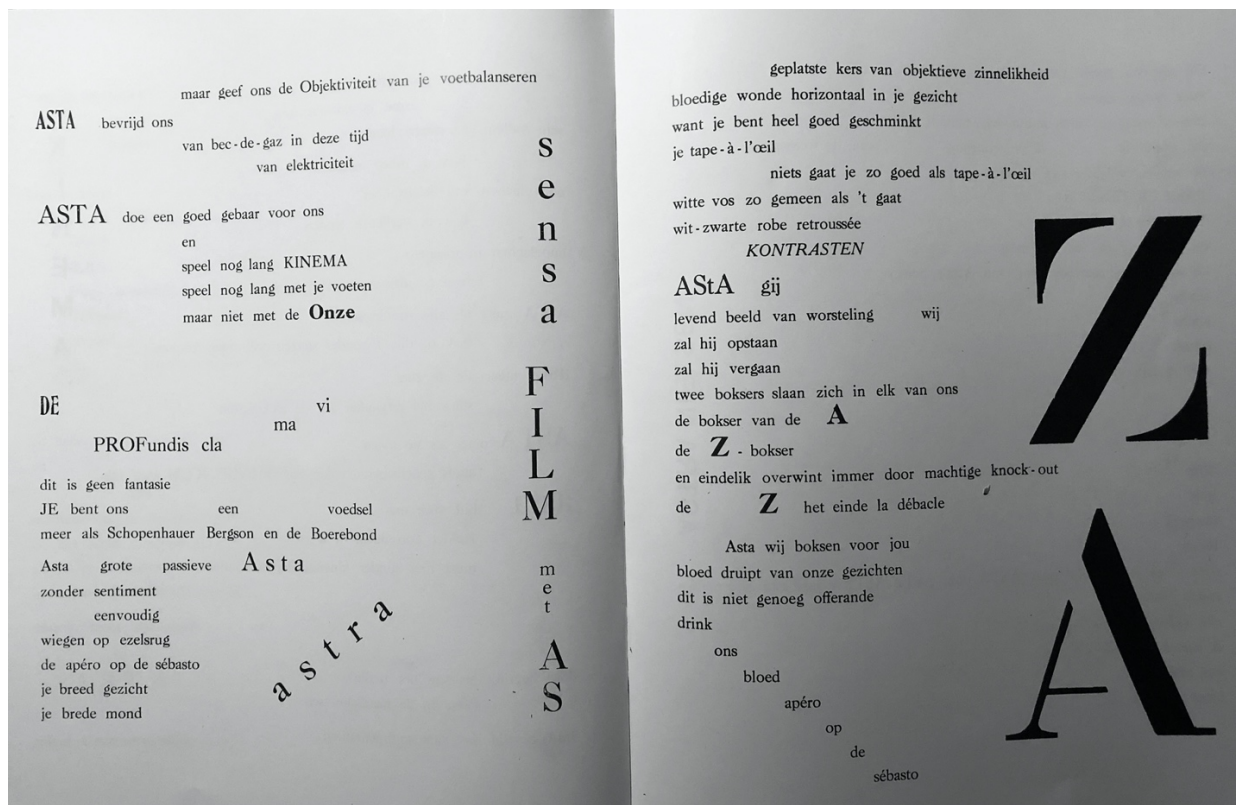
Though his first book of verse, *Music Hall* (1916), appeared during the Great War, these poems refer largely to the urban world in which the poet had lived as a child and youth, and it was as if a certain dandy-esque and gregarious spirit of the boulevards could not be stifled even by so great a disaster as the war. In *Het Sienjaal* (*The Signal*, 1918), however, Van Ostaijen adopted a more overtly expressionist style, which “signaled” the impending transformation of familiar zones of reality. Between 1918-1920, he lived in Berlin, where the revolutionary implications of modernist art became more apparent to him.<sup>25</sup> Upon his return to Antwerp, he produced two stunning volumes of poems. *De Feesten van Angst en Pijn* (written 1918-1921, but published posthumously in 1928; *Feasts of Fear and Agony*, 1976) introduced radical orthographic experiments and an unprecedented use of collage arrangements of words to achieve a profoundly mysterious, indeed tragic, complex of emotions, while *Bezette Stad* (*Occupied City*, 1921) employed spectacular typographical experiments in constructing a fantastic, almost hallucinatory portrait of Antwerp during the occupation. After *Bezette Stad*, Van Ostaijen published no more books, though he continued to publish much fascinating prose in various Flemish arts journals and to work on the collection of haunting little poems published posthumously, *Het Eerste Boek van Schmoll* (1928).



A drawing of Asta Nielsen by Paul Joostens, 1916, from *Paul Joostens* (2014: 25).

Van Ostaïjen's eight-page poem entitled "Asta Nielsen" appeared in *Bezette Stad*; it is therefore part of a larger view of the relation between urban life and war. The poet dedicates the poem to his friend, the painter Paul Joostens (1896-1960), who produced numerous drawings, paintings, and photo-collages featuring the images of female movie stars, including Asta Nielsen.<sup>26</sup> The poem itself constructs a collage effect upon the reader. Different typefaces and type sizes call attention to particular words or letters, as does the occasional use of boldface and italics; margins are unstable and many words float suspended in the space of the page; some words appear vertically or in a "staircase" fashion which makes them rise upward as one reads them; language always appears in fragments, phrases, words, "free" of containment within sentences; some words come from foreign languages (Spanish, English, French, Italian); the poet occasionally repeats phrases in a chanting style but always introduces a startling variation within each repetition; and some words, such as "sensa," "KINEMA," "hip top," and "ASTA NIELSEN," appear in both horizontal and vertical formats that remind the reader of the writing on a marquee or in a neon sign. Some of the

collage consists of language quoted from silent film intertitles, “official reports” in newspapers, labels or names of alcoholic beverages, and scraps of cafe-style chatter; other pieces of language form a kind of parody of liturgical incantation.<sup>27</sup> The poet addresses many phrases directly to Nielsen (“en je tanden bijten de slappe bloem/and your teeth bite the soft flower”), but in other lines he describes her, “objectively,” either to himself or the collective “we,” for whom he claims to speak: “de sideriese slinger beweging van Asta’s benen (the trembling liltng motion of Asta’s legs); “zij is zoveel zo oneindig veel (she is so much so endlessly much).” For the most part, the poet seems to cultivate the voice of a collective “we”--he speaks for an audience of worshipful cinema fans (“arme kinemabezoekers/poor cinema patrons”): Nielsen is therefore “Our Asta Astra,” “Our dear Lady of Denmark,” she “liberates us from the *malheur*,” she is “our one nourishment,” “Asta we box for you/blood drips from our faces.” But occasionally the poet speaks for himself alone: “nog zie ik het wiegen van je heupen (yet I see the cradle of your hips).” With these shifts in address and point of view, the poem becomes a sign of a body divided by different voices, and Nielsen herself appears as a figure who is more than any “objective” statement about her yet difficult to take seriously as the fetishized idol of the subjective “we.”<sup>28</sup>



Two pages from “Asta Nielsen” in *Bezette Stad* showing Van Ostaijen’s typographical organizational of words.

Such devices as these occur in other poems by Van Ostaijen, but in this case, the poet relates these disturbances of language to the power of a single woman’s image to produce a “panopticum” mode of perception and “free us from sentimentality,”

free us  
from the gaslamp in this age  
of electricity

Though the electric luminescence of her image interests him “more than the sun,” that image, “Asta great passive ASTA,” remains fragmented, transmitted through scattered phrases (“bloody horizontal wound in your face”). He mentions only one Nielsen film (*Tod in Sevilla* [1913]) and does not attempt to situate her image within any narrative context or performance aesthetic, for her “cinematic” image transcends all of its incarnations and looms over war-ravaged European civilization like a great astral glow. The poet seems to assume that his readers are already familiar with Nielsen movies. The objective of the poem, however, is not to define or “capture” Nielsen’s image, but to allude to it, to treat it as a transformative power over perception and language. The cinematic image of the modern “stock market queen” nurtures the desire of the poet to expose the word as an image in itself, and the collage-like constellation of words-as-images that forms the poem as a whole signifies a modern condition of freedom, a modern mode of erotic desire, the object of which is the (Nordic) female body whose “manifold” (collage) image transcends all the tensions defining a war-torn European society divided above all by different languages. The word collage is the image of the modern, “veelvuldig (manifold)” collage-woman, embodied by Nielsen, who is the stock market queen, Carmen, a beguine, madonna, artist—“zulke een grote harem en dees ene ASTA (such a great harem in this one ASTA).” As an “electric,” cinematic luminescence, “astral ASTA” is “more than all stars together,” “more than the sun,” and “more than the moon,” insofar as her image frees the spectator from exactly the sort of obsession defining the “steer-eyed” spectator in Schiebelhuth’s poem. The poet plays with her image as he plays with her name, with words: he deconstructs it, he recombines its components, he frees it from the “inner” compression and constraint swelling Schiebelhuth’s voice.



Words float luminously in space. The image of the star and the image of the word are “outside” of the monumental subjectivity which has created the oppressive reality of the “occupied city,” the catastrophic obsession with possessing and consuming otherness, the war.

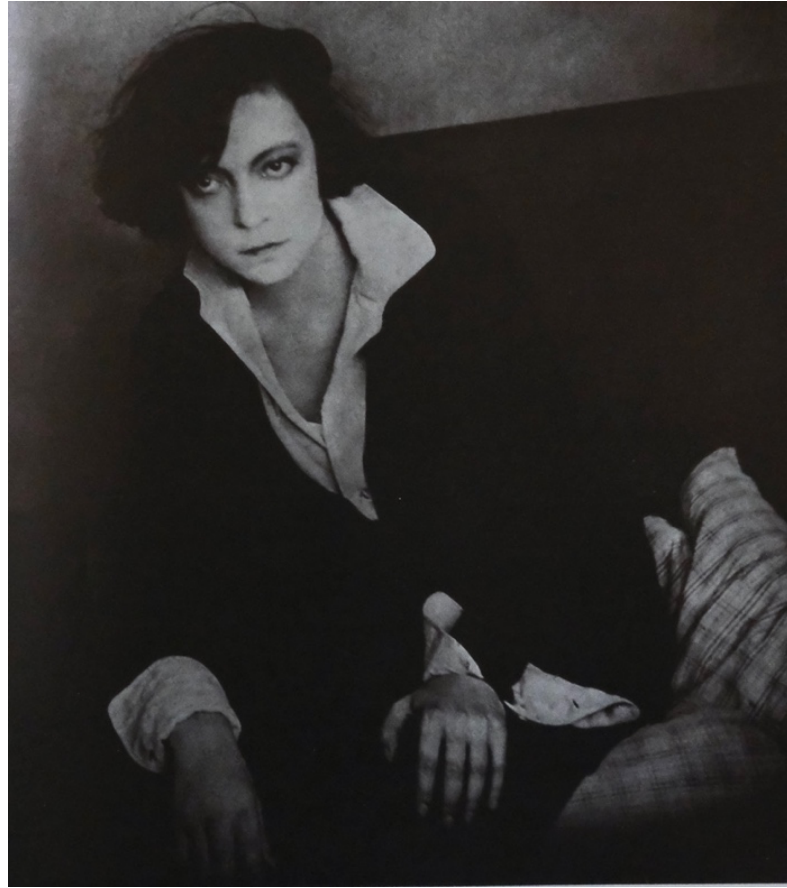
niet Paul J?  
ja Paul v O

Poet (Van Ostaijen) and painter (Joostens, mentioned twice in the poem), playfully compete against each other to transform the star’s image into a sign of a new power of vision, in which “we” at last can see the sign itself (the word), rather than the referent of the sign, as the true condition of reality; “everything else” is “mere fantasy.” The pairing of the two Pauls echoes the divided (collage) body motif: the same name contains a divided perception of the image: the word as image and the image as “another language.” It seems that Van Ostaijen lightly implies that seeing “freely” means seeing “objectively,” not the woman, but the word behind the woman, the name we give to the image. Yet the poem concludes by “pairing” Asta Nielsen with neither the poet nor the painter nor any man of the twentieth century:

Aspéro  
Sébasto  
Weib  
Liszt  
Asta Nielsen en Franz Liszt

The image of the modern woman created by new technologies in the end remains coupled to the old image of the male romantic artist as a flamboyant, spellbinding composer and performer of *tones*. Perhaps music of Liszt accompanied Antwerp screenings of Nielsen’s films. The use of the German word “Weib” (woman) to designate the sex of the star may suggest that for the poet modern woman is an utterly foreign identity. But then, as an image of male stardom, Liszt is as foreign as Nielsen. Moreover, he needs only half his name to summon up a monumental image of stardom from another century. The French (“apéro”) and Spanish (“sébasto”) names for drinks link the aural-optic, erotic-cinematic emblems of stardom to a pleasantly foreign and completely physical mode of intoxication. Drinking

aperitifs before, during, or after Nielsen films is apparently one of the “litanies” of daily life during the occupation.<sup>29</sup> Only one word (“en”) of the last eight in the poem is in Dutch, and yet this perfectly “Flemish” piece, with its Breugelesque sense of the fantastic, concludes with a collage of foreign words, as if to signify that the “transcendent,” ecstatic word, in *any* language, is always foreign and that, given a collage image, which dissolves all the transparency in the “litanies” of daily life, “our” own language, “our” own culture becomes as foreign to us as the other sex, the other century, the other art, and, indeed, the other culture which occupies “our” culture. “Asta Nielsen” is a poem about the pleasures of modern city life, the pleasures of seeing reality as collages of sensations, of the sign “itself.” War brings great, tragic transformation of this reality and reduces it to a “panopticum” ritual of going to the movies. War provokes a powerful hunger for a new image of woman: “YOU are for us a nourishment.” Stardom implies a capacity to satisfy this hunger through the projection of a collage image of a body that contains “manifold” other bodies within it. The sign, the word of the communal “we” always conceals within it some “other” identity, which we do not see until we see the sign itself, and then we see how foreign we are even to “ourselves.” The image of the “transcendent,” organic word is the image of a foreign body, and with its revelation occurs an even greater disruption of “our” culture than that imposed by an occupying culture--an ecstatic upheaval in *language* which frees the body from destructive, blinding subjectivity and takes it outside the whole oppressive myth of a pure, undivided self.



Asta Nielsen in *Fräulein Julie* (1922), directed by Felix Basch (1885-1944).

### ***Broby-Johansen***

Despite its sardonic tone, Van Ostaijen's poem reverberates with considerable revolutionary implication. Nevertheless, it is still an idea of revolution which feeds on illusions, on the power of an *image* to move culture toward utopia. But of course, language can embed even more virulent, and certainly more sober, strains of revolution. Rudolf Broby-Johansen (1900-1987) published his small collection of "expressionist poems," *Blod* (*Blood*), in 1922, while a student at the University of Copenhagen. Broby-Johansen was a radical socialist whose thinking was so idiosyncratic that it hardly fit in with orthodox communist ideology. After *Blod*, he wrote very little poetry, but devoted himself to journalism, producing many articles on modernism in the arts from a militantly socialistic perspective; he published numerous books on the history and enchantments of particular Copenhagen neighborhoods, as well as on the communal nature of Danish medieval art.<sup>30</sup> In 1953, he published his brilliant and enormously successful social history of fashion, *Krop og*

*klaer* (*Body and Clothes*, 1968), which was translated into many languages. In this book, he made ingenious use of stereotypical silhouette figures to illustrate historically specific attitudes toward the body and its image. He amplified the technique in producing a dictionary of art styles defined by their cultural and historical specificity, *Kunst und Stilfibel* (1988). But even this technique had a primitive precedent in *Blod*, which still strikes me as his most impressive achievement.

Published by a university student fund, *Blod* created a sensation when the Danish government successfully prosecuted it on charges of obscenity and subversive political content, and the book remained unavailable until 1968. Though the poems are not nearly as radical in their formal construction as those in *Bezette Stad*, they definitely display signs of a modernist sensibility. Every word of every poem (16 altogether) appears in capital letters, as if one were reading lines of poetry as a sequence of newspaper headlines. One poem (“Natlig Plads”) inserts stamp-size silhouette woodcuts of lamps between words. Like Van Ostaijen, the writer builds poems out of short word and phrase lists, a telegraphic style; he creates complex rhythms by his use of space between lists and between words. But the poems project an expressionistic directness of feeling which is not nearly as demanding of the reader as an Ostaijen’s collage technique--at least from a formal perspective. Recurrent reference to blood, death, toxic contamination, suicide, genitals, abortion, menstruation, lust, murder, masturbation, excrement, orgy, poverty, narcosis, syphilis, and other “symptoms” of social pathology produce a quite intense, visceral reading experience.



Asta Nielsen in *Rausch* (*Intoxication*, 1919), directed by Ernst Lubitsch.

The Danish prosecutor found especially irritating the opening, two-page poem, “ODALISK-SKØNHED” because the poet dedicates it to Asta Nielsen.<sup>31</sup> The prosecutor felt the poem libeled a great Danish artist, although Nielsen herself, having worked exclusively in Germany for over a decade, apparently had no knowledge of the book’s existence. But even more peculiar is that nowhere in the poem does the reader find any specific reference to Asta Nielsen, to any of her films, to any perception of woman that her image somehow embodies, or to any representation of “odalisque beauty.” Instead, the poet constructs a collage of images which expose the poverty, social pathology, and misery afflicting the streets of a “GREAT CITY UNDER THE NIGHTMOON.” For example, in a tenement, “SITS MAN WITH BLOODY BRAIN BENT OVER CHILD’S CORPSE”; “BLIND WOMEN FONDLE DRAINED BREASTS”; “PIMP HIDES HALF-NUDE DEAD WOMEN IN GUTTER”; “BLOODY LIPS [. . .] PLAGUE-SPONGED SHOULDER”); “I/ SUICIDE CAST MYSELF FROM THE SCAFFOLD”; “GREENISH LIGHT BURNS EYESOCKETS BLIND.” The last line of the poem: “IN HEAVEN HARP THE PLEIADES.”<sup>32</sup> Obviously the title of the poem and the dedication to Asta Nielsen assume an ironic purpose. The poet makes no reference to the actress, her image, or her films because he assumes the reader is already familiar with these and their relation to a cinematic projection of “odalisque beauty.” The unscribed movie-star image of the odalisque not only contrasts violently with the wretched images of humanity described in the poem; it is somehow responsible for the misery the poet wants “headlined.” Nielsen’s fame derived in large part from her sympathetic portrayal of “stigmatized” women whose erotic allure saved them from the tragic oblivion of “the street” and the “fateful” poverty from which they emerged: models, prostitutes, courtesans, mistresses, demi-mondaines, worldly entertainers.

But the tension between the title of the poem and its contents suggests that Nielsen's cinematic image is quite remote from the “real” poverty and prostitution witnessed by the poet. Moreover, by the time of the poem’s publication, Asta Nielsen had been a star of the German cinema for over a decade. The poet expects the reader to know that the Danish press continually honored her for having affirmed the international importance of a Danish artist. But the reader also knows that this importance was possible because Denmark is too poor to

offer her the wealth she can amass in Germany. No matter how remote and foreign, the image of odalisque beauty, the image of the great Danish artist, a contrivance of cinema technology, cannot transcend the image of prostitution offered by the poet. By dedicating the poem to her, the poet reproaches Nielsen for embodying a myth of modernity which blinds us to the magnitude of suffering actually defining modern urban reality. The strongest antidote to this mythic image is presumably the expressionistic image of the word, in which the “headline” inscription of poetic language makes stardom equal to prostitution. By dedicating images of degradation to her, the poet degrades the star. For him, radical, poetic language achieves “revolutionary” political consciousness when expressionistic descriptions of desecrated lives have their own power to desecrate the mythic, star-remote imagery of “odalisque beauty” (the modern woman who pretends to exist outside the morbid world the poet inhabits).

Each poem in *Blod* uses the same expressionistic devices found in “ODALISK-SKØNHED”; each little poem presents an image of bodies bloodied, squandered, debilitated, or sullied by a condition of modernity. In a sense, Broby-Johansen’s “headlining” technique brings him even closer to the organic, transcendent word than Van Ostaïjen, for his vocabulary is larger, containing strange neologisms, taboo sex words, and clinical terminology. Each “headlined” word seems shockingly new, as if magnified, like bacteria, under a microscope. The poet does not build poems out of quotations or scraps of appropriated language. The real chronicle of the modern world does not result from newspaper language made poetic, but from poetic language read like a newspaper. Unlike Schiebelhuth, Broby-Johansen does not see poetry as a dialogue between the (female) image of death and the organic (male) voice. Nor does he follow Van Ostaïjen in treating the image of the word as a sign of a body divided by “inside” and “outside” formations of identity. For Broby-Johansen, the image of the word makes the world *naked*--it exposes, not what is hidden “inside” us, but what is hidden *behind* the word, which is neither death nor one’s own foreignness, but the ruined body itself, the naked image of which is “outside” desire and therefore “outside” the tragic (Nielsen) image of ruined lives perpetrated by the cinema, mass media, popular culture, and respectable poetry. Of all the Nielsen poems, this one has perhaps the most disturbing effect upon the reader, and not just because of the vehemence

with which the poet desecrates the star and the idea of stardom. It is partly because one senses that this vehemence, this incendiary language, arises in response to a woman who is “innocent,” utterly unaware of what she “really” represents or of the blinding effect of her “odalisque beauty.” Who, then, can feel “innocent” when encountering either such “naked” language or the image which inspired it?



Asta Nielsen in her production of *Hamlet* (1920), directed by Sven Gade (1877-1952) and Heinz Schall (1885-1933).

### ***Behrens***

Of all four poets, only Franz Behrens (1895-1977) enjoyed any close professional relation with Asta Nielsen. He was also an expressionist, and between 1916 and 1925 he contributed many poems to the Berlin expressionist journal *Der Sturm*, which was important for Van Oostaijen’s development, and other expressionist journals. Like Schiebelhuth, he fought in the Great War, but unlike Schiebelhuth, he made overt use of his war experiences in his poetry, which was highly experimental and eccentric. For example, he composed about a hundred ten-line poems on the backs of postcards; *B = C. Der Roman der*

*Lyrík* (1921), published by *Der Sturm*, mixes stock market commodity quotations with strange “quotations” from world history. He was fond of making poems entirely out of curious names or nouns from different languages, and he himself employed several pseudonyms throughout his career. According to the experimental poet Gerhard Rühm (b. 1930), who has retrieved Behrens’ work from literary oblivion, this poet assumes a historical significance, between the word-centered poetry of August Stramm (1874-1915) and the concrete poetry of the 1950s, similar to that of Anton Webern between Arnold Schonberg and serial music.<sup>33</sup> Living in Berlin almost his entire life, Behrens was active as a sports journalist and newspaper editor, although after 1925 he apparently stopped writing poetry. Between 1919 and 1922, he worked, under the pseudonym of Erwin Gepard, as a screenwriter, mostly for Richard Oswald’s (1880-1963) film production company.<sup>34</sup> In 1920, he wrote the screenplay for Nielsen’s strange production of *Hamlet*, in which she played the Prince of Denmark as a woman who disguised herself as a man. Behrens probably completed his “Asta-Ode” in 1923, with his Erwin Gepard pseudonym inscribed above the title on the manuscript, but the poem did not reach publication until 1979, after he had spent decades in poverty, completely forgotten.<sup>35</sup> Rühm speculates that Behrens had a deeper personal interest in Nielsen than is perhaps evident from the poem, and for that reason he declined to publish it. In any case, the poem came to light only because Rühm discovered it (1977) in a private archive maintained in East Berlin by Behrens’ brother, the painter Herbert Behrens-Hangeler (1898-1981).

The “Asta-Ode” is a rather long poem, twenty-two pages in Rühm’s edition. The poet dedicates the work to the star. It is for the most part a monumental hymn of praise for Nielsen; formally, the poem eschews the radical disturbances of syntax and “word-image” favored by Van Oostaijen, Broby-Johansen, and even himself. The left margin is totally uniform, and although he uses very little punctuation and no periods, Behrens tends to rely on conventional sentence structure to put words in relation to each other, which is hardly the case with the great bulk of the poetry he wrote.

Yet the poem is quite complex and ambitious. It opens with the poet addressing Nielsen as a goddess (“Asta ist Astarte”) whose image redeems “Millionen Menschenseelen (millions of human souls)” who have “langst Maschinen geworden (gradually become



machines)” in an “Ozean von Gift (ocean of poison)” and “schwarzen Lettern (black letters),” perpetrated by the “täglichen Lügen (daily lies)” of the print media. The mysterious darkness of the star’s cinematic image allows her to “look at us and not see us (Du schaust uns an und siehst uns nicht),” and this image enables its spectators “not to fear the night and not to fear the shadows.” It is an image which devalues the power of language to reveal or “see,” and for this reason, “One cannot describe thy art,” for the star’s art goes “where the logic of language can go no further.”

Klassiker ist ein Schimpfwort  
 Klassiker liebt man nicht  
 Von Dir spricht man  
 nicht  
 Man sieht Dich liebend

Classic is a word of  
 reproach  
 One does not love  
 classics  
 One does not speak of you  
 One sees you and loves

The first part of the poem therefore describes the collage-like dissemination of this image in movie houses, posters, and newspapers throughout the world. As a global cultural phenomenon, the image of the star unites in the poet a vaguely archaic language of hymnic adoration with the language of modern publicity, promotion, and advertising. Hyperbole dominates this section as the poet relies on his love of strange names to compile an international inventory of places where the image of Asta Nielsen awakens the adoration of “millions.” Of course, it is all a fantastic exaggeration. For example, he declares that “Asta astral” “electrifies” New York, and “quotes” (in English) the rave reviews her performances inspire, before mentioning the worship she inspires in San Francisco, Pasadena, Hong Kong, Valparaiso, Greenland. In reality, however, Nielsen was a star only in Central, Eastern, and Northern Europe, because distribution of her films outside those areas was so poor, and indeed, when Nielsen herself visited America in 1917 for five months as part of a long vacation from the war, she found the culture uncongenial to the sort of films that interested her, and in any case, her contacts in New York came about through an American consul in Denmark rather than through film people.<sup>36</sup> No matter: the poet loves her, and so it is inconceivable to him that people everywhere in the world would not love her as he

does. Every expression of love appears excessive to those who do not feel it. It is difficult for the reader to take the poet seriously--yet it is doubtful that the poet expects the reader to take him seriously. What he offers, rather, is a kind of exuberant satire on the inflated language by which "modern" culture promotes itself. In striving to reveal the "limit" of language to express love, the poet discards the Weberian minimalism pervading most of his other poetry and plunges cheerfully into a rhetoric of excess. Too many words, too many superlatives, too many structural repetitions, too many cosmic metaphors--such excesses of signification occur when language no longer has the authority to "tell" credibly what the writer has seen--it searches always for another word, it reinforces through repetition. The writer sees more than language can "tell," because love makes him see that which ought not be told, which has no "classic" precedent. Without "classical" control over language, it is indeed difficult to tell the difference between the language of love and the language of modern publicity, which never directs our attention upon itself, but always upon the image of our desires.

In the second part of the poem, the poet describes, in chronological order and in stanzas of varying lengths, each of Nielsen's thirty-five films made between 1910 and 1923, with each stanza headed by the title of the film. Within each stanza, the poet names the character played by Nielsen and presents language which differentiates the film from all the others. This strategy suggests the complexity and instability of the star's image: with each performance, she introduces a different perception of herself and her relation to feminine being. This manifold "darkness" of her image awakens an intense erotic desire which exposes the poet's loss of command over language: "Das Wort ist bankrott/Die Sprache hat keinen Kredit mehr (The word is bankrupt/Language has no more credit)." Nevertheless, the poet constructs a complex relation between language, image, and feelings which have exhausted the credibility of words. In some of these stanzas, he directly addresses the star as "Asta," as in his descriptions of *Nachtfolten* (19 11): "Ach Asta/Viele haben lange in Deinen Herzen gelegen (Oh Asta/Many have lain long in Thy heart)," or *Vanina* (1923): "Asta, bist Du/Alle Menschen mit gleichen Leid wie Du (Asta, art Thou/Everyone with the same pain as Thee)." In the other stanzas, he directly addresses the character performed by Nielsen, as in his comments on *In dem grossen Augenblick*

(1911):

Annie, ich liebe Dich  
 Du hast die Welt erfunden  
 Darum wurdest Du  
 verführt

Annie, I love Thee  
 Thou hast discovered the world  
 And thus art Thou seduced

or *Si* (1913): “Gertrud von Hessendorf/Generalstochter, kennst Du die Sehnsucht (Gertrud von Hessendorf/General’s daughter, knowest Thou desire).” And in a couple of stanzas, he addresses the star and the character together. The motive for complicating the use of direct address is to reveal how love finds its object in an identity which is neither wholly real nor wholly fictional, but both. Within the direct address in each “film stanza,” Behrens inserts very compressed language which describes, aphoristically, even sloganistically, the meaning of the entire film. He does not describe plots, conflicts, or even dramatic situations; he distills the unique meaning of each film as if stating an axiom. *Der Totentanz* (1912): “Die Liebe ist ein Tiger, dem die Kehle durchbissen wird (Love is a tiger which bites into the throat).” *Der Film-Primadonna* (1912): “Eine Primadonna kann nur als Pierrot sterben (A primadonna can only die as Pierrot).” *Die Suffragette* (1913): “Freie Menschen machen sich selber frei (Free people make themselves free).” *Irrende Seelen* (1921): “Ein letzter offener Mund im Sterbezimmer. Das ist die Liebe (One last open mouth on the deathbed. That is love).” *Erdgeist* (1923): “Plötzlich kommt Schicksal über uns (Destiny grabs us suddenly).” Mixed in with such language are epiphanic summations of archetypal costumes, actions, images, or moods, as in these lines ascribed to *Komffdiaten* (1913): “Der ockergelbe Domingo/Der dunkelrote Harlekin (The ochre yellow Domingo/The dark red Harlequin).” Or these lines ascribed to *Hamlet* (1920): “Du hebst die Hand und Stille sinkt über die Welt/Ein schwarzer Samt vorhang (Thou raiseth Thy hand and silence sinks over the world/A velvet curtain).” Occasionally the poet seems to separate his own voice from that of the “we” or “us” that often marks the aphoristic statement: “Ich weiss, was einst was (I know what once was),” but it is difficult to differentiate this “I” from the “I” attributed to the characters played by Nielsen: “Soll ich die wilde Rosen pflucken (Shall I pick the wild roses).” The “I” is as real-fictional as the “Thou.” But what is most curious about each “film stanza” is that it reads like a sequence

of silent film intertitles. We (the spectators) do not see the film or the story, we see instead the language “in between.” But it is not at all the language of the “real” intertitles; it is poetic language the poet wishes to insert into the film to make the film tell us something which otherwise it does not tell us. It is an illusion, created by language itself, to assume that language is bankrupt in relation to the image of desire, for the value of the image depends entirely upon the (poetic) language ascribed to it.

In the third part of the poem, the hymnic tone gives way to the ecstatic rhetoric of a love-letter. The poet finds an even more cosmic language with which to possess the idol-image and experience some consummation of his desire for her. Orgasmic and perhaps masturbatory, the language is dense with extravagant metaphors (e.g., “Asta’s smile is a metaphysical scream”). But the chief source of energy driving this ecstatic outpouring remains the glaring irony embedded throughout the poem as a whole: that words fail to express adequately the love Nielsen’s image inspires. Now, however, the poet devotes fifteen stanzas to an “excessive” overstatement of the irony. Queen of fantasy, prosecutor of poets, priestess of the psyche, Beethoven of the eyes, the “panther who has seduced me,” Asta Nielsen has created a new language, “Astaesperanto” or “Astaido,” of the body, of the face, of the eyes, of pinched eyebrows, flashing eyelashes, and sinking eyelids. She has “stolen” all her gestures from the realm of animals, plants, minerals, and stars. Three seconds of Nielsen’s image eclipse

Hundert enggedruckte Zeilen Dostojewski  
 Tausend qualend genau erwogener Worte  
 A hundred narrowly printed lines of Dostoevsky  
 A thousand tortuously pondered words

But then it becomes evident that this “Augen Unruhe,” this female “disturbance of the eyes,” which disturbs the heart (“Mein Herz wird unruhig”), carries with it a world-wide potential for political disturbance, for although the educated person has two hundred thousand words, the Bantu Negro has “Milliarden mehr Gefühle (billions more feelings),” which, unspoken, can produce an apocalyptic explosion of rhythm, a movement of the entire world, an unending melody of life, a vast ecstasy, “eine Liebe, die unsagbar ist (a love that is unspeakable).” The archetypal “professor” claims that “Kino sei nur

Reproduktion Surrogat/Seele könne nicht photographiert werden (Cinema is only a reproduction surrogate/Souls cannot be photographed).” But “Asta meint, das sei langweilig und sie sei objectiv (Asta signifies that is boring and she is objective).” Because her image has “freed us from erotic conventions,” “Man will das Celluloid zum Tode verurteilen (We want to condemn celluloid to death).” The image destroys faith in the existence of an invisible power over life, symbolized by the word.

Die Polizei hat die Hypnose verboten  
 Sie muss nun alle Asta filme verbieten  
 Und überhaupt Ekstase

The police have forbidden hypnosis  
 Now they must forbid all Asta’s films  
 And certainly ecstasy

But of course, the poem treats as an illusion the idea that the modern image of woman will overthrow the definition of reality through language. On the contrary: the cinematic image spawns an “excessive” outpouring of language. The value of the individual “word as such” may decline, coincident with the development of modern image technology, but one needs more words than ever to “see” anything worth loving. Indeed, even though he can write no more of his love-letter (“Liebesbrief”), having used up all of his violet ink, the poet exclaims, “Asta, ich könne nie zu Ende (Asta, I’ll never reach the end).” Because her image awakens in humanity an urge to say what ought not be said, written, or published, an urge to say that which is not so much invisible as unspoken or “unspeakable,” namely the expression of love, Nielsen is a socialist (“Asta ist eine Sozialist”). “Sehen ist Fatalität (Seeing is fatality)” insofar as it drives us to speak the “unspeakable.”

Obviously, Behrens’ socialism is virtually opposite that of Broby-Johansen, just as his expressionism bears little resemblance to that of the other three poets. Unlike van Ostaijen or Broby-Johansen, Behrens does not build his response to the image out of the image of the word “itself,” for he does not believe the image of the word “itself” has any special power to enhance perception of reality. Rather, for him the power of the word depends on its ironic relation to what it says. We define the value of the image, not by exposing the image of the word, but by saying what the image implies is “unspeakable.” And while, within individual stanzas, Behrens favors the compression of expression adopted by Schiebelhuth, he finds that as long as he has ink, he can write another stanza and another, for the image is

not an encounter with death and finitude of being, it is, as the object of love, the window on infinity, a borderless condition of ecstasy. Behrens' blatantly hymnic style, with its comparatively stable visual and tonal rhythms, softens perception of the violent "difference" between the male word and the female image defining the work of Schiebelhuth, van Ostaijen, and Broby-Johansen. The power of the female image to disrupt syntax, typography, and narrative structure is less evident in his work than in that of the other three poets, because for him the relation between word and image has little basis in sexual difference. What he feels toward the image is what everyone ("Jeder Mensch") feels toward an object of love. The other poets objectify male power and desire, not through the image of woman that language constructs, but through the image of language itself or, in Schiebelhuth's case, through a powerful voice in tension with the image. For Behrens, however, the image of the female star is so complex that male power and desire manifest themselves, less through the image of the word or through the resonance of a strange voice, than through the manifestation of a compulsion to go on writing well after one has said more than "enough." Neither sex can say what is "unspeakable," what can't be said, but man says that he cannot say something by saying more than "enough," while woman says she cannot say something by never saying "enough," by being an image about which it is impossible to say "enough."

### ***Modernism and Stardom***

These four poems about Asta Nielsen indicate a complex range of modernist responses to a "modern" image of woman produced by the "modern" technology of cinema. Modernism by no means indicates a unified or homogenous perception of reality or woman. Indeed, although all the poems adopt an expressionistic aesthetic, it is evident from this analysis that expressionism has nothing to do with a consistent worldview and everything to do with introducing further inconsistency. However, a gendered perspective is obvious: the poets are all men, and it is indeed very hard to locate any poems related to Asta Nielsen written by women. It is a male experience, this power of the image of a "modern" woman to rupture, fragment, distort, or convolute language and exert an intense pressure to produce an image of language (writing) that is "modern." One might even say that female identity achieves stardom when woman projects an image with no power to unify perceptions or desires--and

great power to fragment them, to awaken different passions that make people different. What is common to the poems and to modernism is the assumption that seeing a “modern” woman entails a radical disturbance of language. Radical language is poetic. Strong responses to a new image of woman require new, stranger deployments of language that require the reader to read differently, to see signs perhaps more clearly than their referents. Such is the message of the modernist men regarding the modern woman, in whom modernity is inescapably synonymous with stardom, with an image that is larger yet more remote than the woman “herself.” Of course, Nielsen did not become a star because she inspired modernist poetry, but because the meanings of her performances were so ambiguous that one could not see them without feeling that one had to find some new way of speaking about what one had seen. Such is the message of the modernist woman regarding herself.

### Notes

1 For information about *Afgrunden*, its significance, and critical responses to Nielsen’s early artistry, see Engberg I, 256-262; Reumert, 52-59; Brusendorff, 130-137; Seydel and Hagedorff, 38-41; Nielsen, *Die schweigende Muse*, 121-127.

2 The most comprehensive published assessment of Nielsen’s life and career is the enormous two-volume anthology edited by Heide Schlüpmann and Karola Gramann and published by the Austrian Film Archive in 2010. Seydel and Hagedorff also provide a comprehensive assessment informed by an East German socialist perspective; but see also Langsted. Barbara Beuys’ 2020 biography includes previously unknown documents. An interesting analysis of her acting style appears in Christiansen, 295-308. Her first husband, Urban Gad (1879-1947), directed 33 of her films.

3 Notable artists who produced memorable images of Nielsen include the Germans Ernst Haeckel and Jan Tschihold, the Dutch Pyke Koch, the Flemish Paul Joostens, and numerous designers of dramatic movie posters; see Schlüpmann and Gramann, 252-280, 288-299.

4 See, for example, Seydel and Hagedorff, 221-223.

5 Balazs, *Theory of the Film*, 64-69; *Essay, Kritik 1922-1932*, 206-209, 225-227, 266-267, 301-302; and “Die Kameliendame.”

6 In addition to previously cited sources, one should also consult Jacobsen, 14-24, 112-115; Preiss, 43-54; and Diedrichs, 44-45, 115-116, 131, 149-150.

7 Nielsen’s autobiography was especially successful in Germany, where it has been republished several times, most recently in 1992. Some of the book first appeared in 1928 in a Berlin newspaper. However, the best edition remains the 1979 German version, which contains many more photographs than any other editions. One needs many

images of her to see her “completely.” The original 1945-1946 Danish edition, *Den tiende muse*, reappeared in 1966, and has since been reprinted several times.

8 The handwritten manuscript of the poem has disappeared. Scant facts about the poem’s origins appear in Schiebelhuth, *Gedichte 1916- 1936*, II, 297.

9 “Jedes Wort war ihm ein lebendiger Körper von abgründiger Aussagekraft,” Usinger, “Nachwort,” 96.

10 Usinger did not include “Asta Nielsen” in his republication of *Wegstern* in 1967, presumably because he knew that the poem predated the other poems in the collection by several years and therefore represented a “premature” or “immature” fragment of the poet’s work. However, if one does not know when the poem was written, it is very difficult to see how it represents either a “lesser” or an earlier achievement. It would seem, then, that the poem is “immature” because only an adolescent would write a poem about a movie star.

11 All my quotations from the poem come from the 1921 version published in *Wegstern*, 8.

12 Usinger, “Nachwort,” 90-91: “So kommt es auch, dass . . . Gestalt und Geist Odins durch sein Werk gehen, des unberechenbarsten, und begreiflichsten aller Gotter und doch wieder des begreiflichsten: er ist mehr Dämon als Gott. Sein Reich ist von dieser Welt. Er ist die Urgewalt irdischen Daseins.” Further documentation of Schiebelhuth’s curious life appears in Barth.

13 “Dein Gang ist von dir in mein Blut geströmt unsäglich/Dass mich dein Dasein drängt und treibt durch die Wegheimat.”

14 “Ich habe dir eine Stadt erbaut im Herz der Geheimnisse;/Dort hört dir das fröhlichste Haus. Die Dinge singen./Tausend Tauben habe ich für dich getäuft, Asta,/Und dir die schöne Giraffe zum Reittier gerichtet.”

15 “Ich kann nicht mehr denken, immer umstellst du mich./Meine Lieder sind längst deinen vielen Lippen verschenkt.”

16 “Immer and immer muss ich im Kino hocken,/Stieräugig reisse ich dich aus jedem Film.”

17 The poet combines multiplicity of images with complex alliterative effects, for example: “Tausend Tauben habe ich für dich getäuft, Asta”; “Immer und immer muss ich im Kino hocken”; “Der dunkelise vor der Leinwand nach dir weint.”

18 These include the poems, “Für eine Freundin,” “Für ein Kind,” “Mädchen von Bordenach,” “Traum,” “Notturme,” “Du wächst eine Hecke,” “Strofen an die Blaue Madonn,” among others.

19 See Reynaert for extensive discussion of Van Ostaijen’s reconciliation of mysticism and modernism.

20 Criticism of Van Ostaijen’s work has been dominated by “context”- oriented searches for “influences” on his work at the expense of detailed analyses of the texts themselves. Such is the case with Devree, de Roever, Gobbers, Uyttersprott, Hadermann, and Schoonhoven. The biographical study of influences prevails in Burssens, Gilliams, and Muls, all of whom knew Van Ostaijen. These are quite insightful. But Borgers’ gigantic



biography is the most complete.

21 Reynaert, 54: “de liefde tot het uitdrukken wordt bij hem m.a.w symbool van zijn ‘liefde’ tot het vaderland van de volmaakte intuïtieve kennis.” Also, 57: “Van Ostaijens ‘mystiek’ is een mystiek zonder godheid, een mystiek zonder zon dus.”

22 The essay appears in Van Ostaijen, *Verzameld werk. Proza II*, 369- 379.

23 For examination of Van Ostaijen’s ideas about the relation between words and colors, see Beekman, 132-149. But Van Ostaijen’s orthographic and typographic experiments have not been explored very seriously, partly because detailed analysis of them requires the critic to write a complicated book, with many *pictures* of words that one cannot quote and comment on in conventional philological ways.

24 But these complexities have not stopped people from trying to “perform” Van Ostaijen’s more radical poems. Several recordings of his poems have appeared since the 1950s, and a couple of adventurous Dutch rock groups have tried to make music theatre out poems from *De Feesten van Angst en Pijn*.

25 For an account of Van Ostaijen’s experience of Berlin, see Hadermann, “Paul van Ostaijen and *Der Sturm*.”

26 In 1917, Van Ostaijen published an article praising Joostens’ art. Poet and painter collaborated in setting up a gallery. The same year, Joostens produced two beautiful drawings of Asta Nielsen, now in a private collection. See *Paul Joostens*, 164. *Bezette Stad* appears in Van Ostaijen, *Verzameld werk. Poezie II*, with no pagination. Facsimile reprints of *Bezette Stad*, which reproduce the original large, unnumbered pages and large font sizes, have appeared periodically since 1973, most recently in 2021. Boyens has published an elaborate, opulently illustrated account of the Flemish-German cultural context in which Van Ostaijen composed *Bezette Stad*.

27 Strietman discusses *Bezette Stad* as an example of modernist preoccupation with new images of the city, but she devotes only one small paragraph to “Asta Nielsen” (each poem in the collection receives about a paragraph).

28 It is because Van Ostaijen fetishizes the word rather than the star that Muls, 121, can remark: “The question can well be asked if 50 years from now Asta Nielsen will still have enough recognizability to give the letters of her name the evocational power [evocatie-kracht] which they then had in the piece dedicated to her. Will people still be able to feel what her appearance on the screen was for people compelled to put up with war reports in an occupied city?”

29 “Onze lieve Vrouw van Denemarken

dragen wij u onder baldakijnen  
[ . . . ]

dag in dag uit  
paternoster Van berichten  
litanie van stervende sigaretten  
als uit het licht werd donkerte  
en uit de donkerte licht

*Bliksem*

In de Hoofdrol Asta Nielsen”

- 30 He published an anthology of some of his best journalism in *Imprimatur*. Dester and Kjeldsen provide a comprehensive bibliography of his prodigious output.
- 31 See Petersen for an account of the trial.
- 32 “STORBY I MÅNENAT” . . . “I HUSES SLUGTER SIDDER MAEND MED BLODIGE HJAERNER/BØJET OVER BØRNS LIG” . . . “BLINDE KVINDER TASTER TØMTE BRYSTER” . . . “SKURK SKJULER HALVNØGENT KVINDELIG I KLOAK” . . . “LAEBER BLØDER . . . PEST-SVAMPEDE SKULDRE” . . . “JEG/SELVMORDER KASTER MIG UD FRA STILLADS” . . . “GRØNLIGT BRAENDER ØJENHULER / BLIND” . . . “PÅ HIMLEN HARPER SYVSTJERNE.”
- 33 Rühm, 362. Rühm’s argument is persuasive, but, unfortunately, he does not analyze the “Asta-Ode” in relation to the argument.
- 34 However, Belach and Jacobsen present a comprehensive listing of all known Oswald productions with their credits, and Behrens’ name or pseudonyms appear nowhere in the book.
- 35 The poem appears in Behrens, 259-283, with Rühm’s notes on 353-354.
- 36 See Nielsen, *Die schweigende Muse*, 283-289.

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