

Silent Features

The Development of Silent Feature Films
1914–1934

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The Phantom Carriage (Körkarlen)
(1921)

John Gibbs and Douglas Pye

The reputation of *The Phantom Carriage* is in some respects securely established. In film histories and surveys of Scandinavian cinema the film is cited frequently as a highlight of director Victor Sjöström's pre-Hollywood career and as one of the great films of Swedish silent cinema. Yet the film has attracted surprisingly little detailed discussion. Almost invariably, writers note its unusually elaborate temporal structure and its powerful and extended multiple-exposure special effects, but have very little to say about other aspects of the film.¹ Even in the field of silent cinema scholarship, which has transformed received histories of film in recent years, *The Phantom Carriage* tends to have a walk-on part. It may be that the film's two most striking stylistic features, as well as what can seem its overt didacticism, have deflected or discouraged closer scrutiny. Tom Gunning, for instance, partly establishes his case for *Mästerman* (1920) as 'Victor Sjöström's Unknown Masterpiece' by reference to *The Phantom Carriage*:

In contemporary historiography, *Mästerman* has been eclipsed by . . . Sjöström's *Körkarlen* (*The Phantom Carriage*; French title *La Charrette Fantôme*, 1921). I don't intend to deny the beauty and quality of this famous film but, frankly, I think it is unfortunate that for many people, if they know one silent Swedish film, this is the one . . . *Körkarlen* wears its technique on its sleeve, overtly displays its unquestionable mastery of superimposition and complex narrative

structure. *Mästerman* tucks its mastery of editing and composition up its sleeve, so to speak, and refuses to make explicit its character's psychology as does the rather too-pat allegory offered by *Körkarlen*.²

Our view of *The Phantom Carriage* is rather different. We do not wish to promote its claims to recognition over those of other Sjöström films. But we do want to argue that the film's remarkable qualities are not limited to the widely noted multiple exposures and complex narrative structure—that in fact they include a 'mastery of editing and composition', a flexibility and fluidity in the construction of dramatic space that has been largely overlooked in discussions of Sjöström's, and the cinema's, stylistic evolution. We will also argue that Sjöström's dramatic achievements in *The Phantom Carriage* go well beyond 'too-pat allegory'.

The Novel and the Film

The Phantom Carriage was adapted from a short novel by the Nobel-Prize-winning Swedish writer Selma Lagerlöf, whose work formed the basis of several major films in what is often referred to as the 'Golden Age' of Swedish cinema. Of the eight features Sjöström himself directed between 1917 and 1921, four were based on Lagerlöf's work. In the afterword to his translation of *Körkarlen* (first translated into English as *Thy Soul Shall Bear Witness* but here as *The Phantom Carriage*, the most familiar English title of the film), Peter Graves describes Lagerlöf's 1912 book as 'both a novel of social realism, set in the slums and focusing on the evils of alcohol, family abuse and tuberculosis, and a ghost story, in which the focus is on the reforming and healing power of love'. He also makes clear that Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, a story frequently evoked by viewers of *The Phantom Carriage*, was very much in Lagerlöf's mind as she wrote.³ Like Dickens, Lagerlöf tells a story of the moral redemption of a character who is taken on a supernatural journey during the course of a single night (New Year's Eve in *The Phantom Carriage*).

The novel has two interconnected narrative centres: a young Salvationist, Sister Edit, dying of consumption in her mother's house; and David Holm, spending a drunken New Year's Eve in a churchyard with two companions. Edit repeatedly asks for David to be brought to her and for her colleagues go out to search for him. Talking among themselves, Edit's colleagues relate parts of the backstory of her meeting with David the previous New Year's Eve, her love for him, and her later attempts to reunite him with his wife and family. In the churchyard, David tells his companions the story of a friend, Georges, who was terrified of dying

at the stroke of midnight on New Year's Eve and having to become the driver of death's cart (the phantom carriage), charged with collecting the souls of the dead. When the companions fight over David's refusal to go to Edit and he dies after suffering a consumptive fit, the carriage, driven by Georges, comes to collect his soul and Georges informs him that David must replace him as death's driver. Georges both relates the other parts of the backstory and takes David on a ghostly journey to show him what is happening to Edit and to his family in the present.

In the novel, then, we gain access to the past entirely through dialogue, one character talking to another. What is told in the novel is shown in the film: scenes of the past are bracketed in the film's present by a character looking back, their dialogue given to us in titles, but the scenes are dramatized so that we witness rather than merely hear about them. This gives the film its unusually elaborate temporal structure, with four main flashbacks, one of which contains a further, embedded dramatization—not strictly a flashback—of what one of the characters relates.⁴

Sjöström's adaptation is in many respects faithful to the novel, but he also made significant changes. One major subplot involving David's brother is omitted. The role of David's wife is considerably enhanced so that she becomes a substantial third character and the value of the marriage is given greater weight. Sjöström also rationalizes the ways in which the backstory is introduced so that in the film only David and Georges introduce flashbacks. Perhaps most significant in dramatic and filmic terms is that Sjöström both expands brief passages in the book into major sequences, including the mission hall scene, in which Edit first realizes that David is married, and invents new scenes to develop or replace those in Lagerlöf's original, including the film's most shocking episode, in which David deliberately sets out to infect his children with tuberculosis and then, after being locked in an inner room by his wife, hacks his way out with an axe.

We want to develop our analysis, however, from the detail of sequence construction and to move from there to some broader perspectives on the film. Specifically, we will look at a segment which is in several respects at the heart of the film: it shows the first meeting between the two central characters, David Holm (Victor Sjöström) and Sister Edit (Astrid Holm); it spans the film's exact midpoint; and at almost twelve and a half minutes, it is the longest uninterrupted passage to take place in a single setting.

The Meeting between David Holm and Sister Edit

This segment forms the third of the four extended flashbacks and the

second in which Georges (Tore Svennberg), Death's coachman, requires David to recall crucial episodes in his life. The setting is a new Salvation Army hostel (Slumstation) on New Year's Eve, the first night on which it is ready to receive guests, and the action extends from the two Salvation Army Sisters, Edit and Maria (Lisa Lundholm), making final preparations for the hostel's opening and David's unexpected arrival just before midnight seeking a bed for the night to his departure the following morning. The flashback contains three sequences, divided by elisions of time marked by fades to black: (1) the two Sisters hanging a final framed text in the dormitory, David's arrival, his falling drunkenly asleep and Edit beginning to mend his tattered jacket; (2) later that night, Edit completing the sewing, praying for David, taking the jacket into the dormitory, covering David with a blanket and going to bed; and (3) David finding the jacket the next morning, being given breakfast by Maria and asking to see the person who did the mending; when Edit enters, David violently ripping out all of Edit's work; and Edit eliciting David's contemptuous agreement to return on the following New Year's Eve.

Most of the action takes place in the large living/dining room of the hostel, though in each sequence one or more characters move into and out of the adjoining dormitory for guests and the bedroom which Edit and Maria share. Sjöström gradually reveals that four doors open from the central room, respectively into the entrance lobby, the kitchen, the dormitory and the bedroom, and he makes significant use, as he does throughout the film, of doors and doorways, including here shots from one room into another. The only room the camera does not enter is the kitchen, seen briefly behind Maria as she carries David's breakfast to the table. The set was clearly designed to accommodate intricate stylistic intentions, and the dramatic and structural centrality of the hostel segment is paralleled by its remarkably rich and fluent articulation of the relationships between action, character and space. Our discussion will centre on the third sequence, from David discovering his mended jacket to his departure, which can be broken down as shown in Table 1.

By the beginning of this sequence, Sjöström has already introduced most of the spaces he will use. We have seen, for instance, both ends of the dormitory in which the sequence begins, the end farthest from the door in the first shot of the flashback, in which the two women are seen through the doorway hanging the framed text, and the opposite end in a number of set-ups when David is shown into the room and falls asleep, and again later when Edit returns his jacket. We have also seen enough of the main room to place the doors to dormitory, bedroom and entrance lobby in relation to each other.

THE PHANTOM CARRIAGE (KÖRKARLEN) (1921)

Table 1

Shot	Camera set-up	Action and visual field
1	A	David, framed knees up, sitting on bed, smoking, pulling on jacket. Head of second bed visible behind him right rear, table and chair behind him left rear. Looks down and discovers mending. Examines it in detail, begins to look up.
2	B	Main room. Part of table at right with lamp above. Part of window visible on wall left, doorway looking into what seems to be kitchen centre frame on rear wall. Maria walking through doorway towards camera, carrying tray. Places it on table and looks out of frame front left.
3	A	David looks up out of frame front and right (as though hearing Maria). Looks down, up and down at coat again, smiles, then coughs.
4	C	Looking into corner of main room with dormitory door partly visible left, harmonium along wall left, door to lobby at rear right, table in foreground with lamp upper right partly visible. Maria behind table, looking towards door at left, hands still on tray (i.e. 90 degrees to set-up B). Maria goes to door, camera adjusts left. She listens, with hand on knob.
5	D	Same axis as A, but slightly wider, with more of stove visible right of frame and part of head of David's bed. David looking out of frame towards door, laughing, looks down and coughs again.
6	E	Inside dormitory, looking at door (i.e. reverse of D). Door opens, Maria stands in doorway, looking out of frame down and left. Main room, including table, lamp and bedroom door at rear.
7	A	David looks up and out of frame front and right.
8	E	Maria opens door wider, smiles, seems to greet David.
9	D	David coughing, looking out of frame as before and returns greeting.
10	E	Maria, looking at David out of frame, gestures with her head towards main room.
11	A	David nods out of frame towards Maria, coughs, begins to rise.

SILENT FEATURES

Shot	Camera set-up	Action and visual field
12	F	Wide shot on same axis as D, looking towards door, table partly visible in foreground left, parts of two beds beyond, another right of door. Maria in doorway, facing David, seen from rear, standing up. Pulls on jacket, picks up hat, walks past Maria through door. Maria closes door.
13	G	Bedroom, facing window. Edit, seen almost full length wearing dressing gown, her hair down, making bed. She is looking out of frame front and left as though hearing noise from main room.
14	H	David sitting where Edit was sewing the night before. Maria leaning on table in left foreground towards David. David opens coat and gestures to mending.
Title		'Did you mend my coat?'
14 contd	H	Maria shakes her head. David speaks again.
Title		'Would you mind fetching the person who did this?'
14 contd	H	Maria nods and smiles, turns and leaves frame left.
15	I	In bedroom. Edit at mirror left; door right of frame opened by Maria, who speaks to Edit, smiling. Through doorway, view of main room, table with David seated behind and door to dormitory beyond him. Edit nods and turns back to mirror as Maria closes door.
16	J	Reverse field of I, looking from between David and dormitory door, David in foreground, looking away towards Maria closing door. She turns and smiles at David. Her smile fades as he doesn't respond but slowly puts down his cup, puts on hat, stands and leaves frame left.
17	K	Iris. Close to lobby door, centre frame, David approaching from left, large shadow behind him. Turns at door, buttoning coat and looks unsmiling out of frame front and right (towards Maria).
18	L	Reverse angle of K, Maria standing centre frame next to bedroom door (at left) and looking with concerned expression out of frame front and left (eyeline match).
19	K	David looking fixedly out of frame (at Maria).
20	L	Door opens and Edit comes out. Maria staring out of frame at David. Edit closes door. Turns front and left, looking at David and smiling, her shadow on door behind her.

THE PHANTOM CARRIAGE (KÖRKARLEN) (1921)

Shot	Camera set-up	Action and visual field
21	K	David staring out of frame and doing up coat.
22	M	Iris round Edit. Same axis as L but closer (waist up). She looks out of frame towards David.
23	N	Iris round David. Matching scale to M. Same axis as K. David staring stony-faced out of frame at Edit.
24	M	Edit smiles and speaks to David, rubbing hands together gently at waist height.
25	N	David stares but does not respond
26	M	Edit walks forward and out of frame left.
27	O	Framing to left of K. David and door to left of centre frame; Edit enters from right, stops in front of David and speaks to him, rubbing/twisting hands. Both cast large shadows. David sneers and hands move down to his coat.
28	P	Iris. David alone in front of door, closer framing than O. Violently rips out all the repaired sections of his coat, pushes hands in pockets and laughs, looking out of frame right (at Edit).
29	O	David laughing at Edit, who stands back, startled.
Title		'It's a shame you went to all that trouble, Miss, but I'm used to having it like this.'
29 contd		David looking down, smiling and gesturing at coat. Turns away from Edit and opens door. She catches his arm and pulls him back.
Title		'Before you leave, I'd like to ask you to visit me next New Year's Eve.'
29 contd		David turns to Edit. She speaks to him.
Title		'You see, I prayed that our first guest would have a good year. And I wanted to find out if my prayers were answered.'
29 contd		Edit speaking to David. He laughs and replies.
Title		'Oh, I'll be there. I'll come and show you God didn't give a fig for your twaddle.'
29 contd		David finishes speaking, laughs, turns and leaves, closing door behind him. Iris in on Edit looking after him. Iris closes to black.

Across the three sequences, Sjöström uses a large number of camera set-ups (39 in the 65 shots) to develop our understanding of the hostel's layout,⁵ each defining a relatively small arc but each meticulously designed and juxtaposed to build a clear and coherent sense of the space. The dormitory and bedroom are filmed using reverse angles (in the third sequence, set ups A & E, G & I), a method Sjöström had used extensively in earlier films.⁶ Here, however, direct reverse-field cuts only occur some way into the episode, and initial shots in each direction are separated in time and show only fragments of each room. The space in the main room is also built up in fragments, but the camera angles are much more varied.⁷ At different points during the hostel episode, action is staged in ways that show each of the four walls of the central room, although we never see any of them in their entirety. It is a method which would have been both time-consuming—the large number of set-ups—and technically challenging—the creation of coherent space.⁸

It would have been perfectly possible for Sjöström to use wide shots showing significant areas of the room, but he chose a riskier strategy. Crucially, there are no establishing shots—we never see even half the room in a single view, and those shots which directly connect different rooms (shots from dormitory or bedroom across the width of the main room towards the other door) are deployed some way into the episode rather than at the outset (shots 25 and 27 of the first sequence). Across the three sequences, twenty-three set-ups are used for the main room, but there is no sense of a modified 'fourth wall' view of the action, with frontal staging and closer views cut in on the same axis, the method still in common use at this period, including, for instance, much of Sjöström's *The Monastery of Sendomir*, made just a year before *The Phantom Carriage*.⁹ Here it is as though the camera can look, and characters can move, in any direction.

Sjöström's scene dissection means that our understanding of space is developed in a number of inter-related ways: through overlapping decor from shot to shot, match cuts, consistent screen direction and lighting, and eyeline matches—the whole repertoire of continuity editing. The third sequence opens (1) with a medium shot of David discovering his jacket has been mended, followed by a cut to Maria crossing the main room towards the camera from a doorway—to the kitchen—we have not previously seen (2). David looks up (3), registering the sound of Maria in the other room, and we are shown Maria from another angle (4), facing left of frame and putting the tray down on the table, the camera panning slightly to the left as she moves to listen at the door. Although we have not previously seen the kitchen door, it is characteristic of Sjöström's method

THE PHANTOM CARRIAGE (KÖRKARLEN) (1921)



Figure 1

that the second shot of Maria (4), matching action and screen direction with shot 2, enables us to place the kitchen within our evolving sense of the main room's layout. At the same time, David's eyeline in shot 3 both shows us that he is responding to the sound of Maria in the other room and matches her direction in shot 2—in effect, a reverse-field cut through a wall. There then follows a passage of precise angle/reverse angle editing with eyeline match (shots 6–11), and with parts of the main room visible behind Maria (E, F).

When David leaves the dormitory (shot 12), there is a cut to Edit making her bed (shot 13), and she in turn seems to respond to sound from the next room by looking out of frame front and left towards her door and David and Maria beyond. Shot 14 is almost at right angles to Edit's eyeline and to the view of David leaving the dormitory, and shows David sitting for breakfast, with Maria in the left foreground, leaning on the table towards him (Figure 1). Sjöström now juxtaposes two shots cut across 180 degrees along the axis between the doors to bedroom and dormitory, the first framing Edit at the mirror in the left foreground and a view to her right through the bedroom doorway across the main room to where David is sitting at the table, and the second with David in the



Figure 2



Figure 3

foreground, looking across the table to Maria closing the bedroom door (Figures 2 and 3). In the run of shots 14–17 (set-ups H, I, J and K), the space is viewed from four different 90 degree angles, triangulating, or quadrangulating, the positions of characters, revealing parts of all four walls and showing variously in the background a Christmas tree and a sofa (14), the door to the dormitory (15), the doorway to the bedroom shared by Edit and Maria (16), and the door to the lobby (17).

In its context, the most striking aspect of the hostel sequences is the confidence with which, using multiple set-ups, Sjöström creates a detailed and coherent three-dimensional environment for the characters, a commitment to the creation of naturalistic space that even extends to the mirror on the chest of drawers at which Edit is attending to her appearance seeming to reflect the wall behind the camera (shot 15)¹⁰ (Figure 2). At the same time, there is a strong reciprocal relationship between this spatial naturalism and the film's performance style. Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs identify Sjöström as a film-maker who in these years pursued 'the renunciation of expressive gesture' and 'systematically explored naturalist technique in this sense', and they associate 'this reduced style' with a high cutting rate.¹¹ Certainly, here the fluid articulation of space through editing, together with the proximity to the characters that Sjöström's methods makes possible, is paralleled in the naturalism of the acting. Across the film as a whole this is particularly marked in the subtlety and restraint of Astrid Holm as Edit and Hilda Borgström as Mrs Holm. But they are not alone. As David, Sjöström engages the broader, declarative register appropriate to a character determined to assert his bitterness and malevolence, but this is by no means unvaried. Here, on one of the few occasions when we see David alone and in repose (shots 1, 3, 5, 7 and 9), Sjöström's framing and the restraint of his performance create a moment of significant ambiguity. David's reactions to discovering the repairs to his coat—in shot 1 registering some degree of bewilderment and in shot 3 looking down at the coat after hearing Maria put the tray down in the next room, a half smile playing across his face before he breaks into a cough—could suggest either genuine pleasure at the act or amused contempt at the effort someone has taken on his behalf. As he interacts with Maria, in the dormitory and the central room, his manner seems benign and his conversation measured, polite in its phrasing, nothing he does contradicting the optimism with which Maria receives and conveys his request to meet the person who repaired the coat. In shot 15, we watch Maria joyously talk to Edit, and can see David sitting at the table, searching but impassive, observable by us but not by the others. Then, in the reverse (16), it seems that something in David's face—partially

obscured to us—causes Maria’s expression to change and the mood of the moment to darken. It is Maria’s sudden uncertainty as she returns to him that suggests the imminent reversion to his public persona. The whole brief passage of action is beautifully modulated in the relationship between the understated acting and Sjöström’s staging: the shift from the apparent mutuality of the angle/reverse angle exchange to the wider, more layered framing of the performances across the extremes of main room.

Cinematography, Lighting and Decor

The stylistic development in the films Sjöström directed, from the wonderfully expressive long takes in *Ingeborg Holm* (1913) to the mastery of *découpage* displayed here, owed a great deal to his collaboration with two cinematographers, the brothers Henrik and Julius Jaenzon.¹² Julius shot *The Phantom Carriage* and was responsible with his team for the remarkable multiple exposure special effects. But his cinematography, which includes, as Casper Tybjerg notes in the commentary for the Criterion release, the dramatic (and at this point still unusual) night-for-night shooting in the graveyard, is also the vital basis for the complex orchestration of large spaces such as the mission hall and the bar, and for the effects achieved in the hostel sequences, while Jaenzon’s handling of light—notably the sophisticated use of practicals—is also central to the clarity with which space is developed here.¹³ Even when a lamp is not visible, Jaenzon’s lighting evokes its off-screen presence. For instance, the lamp in the dormitory which Edit has insisted, in the first hostel sequence, on leaving lit for the sleeping David is not visible until the twelfth shot of the third sequence, but the light it sheds helps us to orientate ourselves in the conversation between David and Maria in the doorway. The ornate lamp which illuminates the dining room also helps our apprehension of the different angles on the space, and is a unifying physical presence in every shot in our sequence which features that room, until David moves towards the exit (shot 17), in readiness for his confrontation with his benefactor. But it is also a bright, welcoming illumination, lighting the dark of a Scandinavian winter’s breakfast.

Jaenzon’s lighting, which provides plausible sources of illumination throughout, also adjusts to create heightened effects. In the later stages of the sequence, when the emphasis shifts from the hospitality of the Salvationists to its rejection by David, the direction of the dining room lamp, now off-screen, remains consistent, but the contrast of the light is greatly increased, casting strong shadows on the wall behind David, Maria and Edit as the tension of the situation increases with Maria

beginning to doubt David's motives, or as Edit responds to David ripping the patches out of the coat. (The close-up of David savaging the coat is an exception here, and while it shows a prominent use of iris, as do a number of other shots at this end of the sequence, the lighting in this close-up is more diffuse.)

Other aspects of Sjöström's *mise-en-scène* take on a more discrete interpretive force. This section of the film is partly built on the extreme contrasts between David and Edit, evident throughout but sharply present at the end with David's hostility and contempt. But the hostel sequences also represent the chronological starting point for the most surprising dimension of Lagerlöf's tale, Edit's love for David. In the novel, Maria reveals to her Salvationist companion, just before she relates the events of that New Year's Eve, that Edit is in love with David. The film omits this revelation, dramatizing Edit's feelings for David through her actions, particularly in the later Mission Hall scene, but subtly preparing the ground by paralleling the characters in their first encounter here. Each responds from their bedroom to noise in the adjacent room, their eyelines just off camera, in David's case to the right and in Edit's to the left, the shots separated in time but matching in action and staged almost as reverse angles. They sit in the same chair at the table, that nearest the dormitory door, Edit to mend David's coat and David to take breakfast, the framing for each not identical but closely related, both characters viewed with the dormitory door to frame right and at the rear of the shots the adjacent walls with sofa and Christmas tree (Figure 4). These parallels, seemingly against the grain of the drama's moral contrasts, form part of the film's negotiation of Lagerlöf's tale, in which the impossibility of a relationship between David and Edit in this life is shadowed by suggestions of their spiritual kinship.

Sjöström's design and staging create other links between the pivotal hostel section and the rest of the film. The film is keenly interested



Figure 4

in the materiality and social distinctions of its world, even as it tells a story of the supernatural. It is a film of textures and differing decors: from the middle-class conviction of the Slumstation to the horrendous shack in which Mrs Holm and the children live in the film's opening and closing sequences; from the mansion of the wealthy suicide in the film's first flashback and the well-dressed apartment in which Edit reunites David with his family to the deserted flat to which he returns from prison. The ornate lamp, prominent in the hostel, is a slightly less elaborate version of Edit's mother's lamp, noticeable in the room next to the one in which Edit lies dying as the film opens. Indeed, the hostel is decorated as a middle-class home, with Christmas tree, sofa, pictures and intricately printed wallpaper. It is as though Edit is trying to export the ideals, and perhaps values, of her mother's house. Even the dormitory is papered in a decorative nineteenth-century print—no rough rendered finish like the walls of the prison cell or the other hostel dormitory where David encounters Georges in an earlier flashback. Indeed, our first view of the Slumstation and the first shot of this segment of the film is of Edit and Maria positioning the sampler which is the finishing touch to the establishment, a shot which foregrounds the neat symmetry of the room, viewed through the doorway (Figure 5). David rages or crashes against the ambitions which Edit's designs imply: tearing at the repairs to the coat, slumping drunkenly across the harmonium on arrival at the hostel, arriving ominously late, a shadowy figure who becomes the first guest, a challenging response to the women's careful preparations and attempt to imbue respectability alongside redemption.

Perhaps the most insistent element in the film's design and staging is the use of doors and doorways. David's assault on the coat takes place in front of the door to the lobby, his movement towards the exit seemingly premeditated, preparation for a swift departure that will preclude any further interaction with the women. It is one of many moments featuring



Figure 5

doors and doorways in the hostel sequences—the opening or closing of a door and/or movement of characters through a doorway occur no fewer than twenty times, with eight in the third sequence alone. In addition, there are numerous shots through doorways, looking from one room to another, or in which the action is staged in front of a closed door. There are naturalistic dimensions to this plethora of doors and doorways: as part of the action, characters move or look from room to room in the hostel, while in filmic terms movements through doorways facilitate cuts on action, a set-up in one room smoothly replaced by one in the next. Cumulatively, these movements from one room to another are important in developing the sense of three-dimensional space we have been describing. But there was nothing inevitable about either the deployment of rooms and doors in the set or Sjöström's staging. The mutually informing decisions taken by the film-makers enable the seemingly naturalistic deployment of doorways to become the material basis for the wider resonance that the motif takes on.

To the best of our knowledge, only Darragh O'Donoghue, in his perceptive short piece on the film in *Senses of Cinema*, has commented on the film's use of doors. Making a wider point about the significance of thresholds and liminal spaces, he notes the 'many doors that physically, psychologically and spiritually block characters'.¹⁴ As O'Donoghue indicates, one major dimension of the motif's significance involves the characters being 'blocked', physically separated and enclosed or even imprisoned. This gives further weight to the studio-bound nature of the film and its predominantly night-time setting.¹⁵ The cumulative presence of the motif allows Edit's opening of doors for David in this section of the film—she leads Maria to the external door to answer David's ring and opens the dormitory door to gesture him towards his rest—to carry an unforced metaphorical significance: it is her Salvationist role to 'open doors' spiritually and in terms of life chances. Yet in the material world of the film, the affirmative connotations of 'opening doors' are overshadowed by darker implications of the motif. There is, for instance, a systematic patterning of the spaces in which Mrs Holm lives, two of which are similar both in appearance and in their orientation to hallway and stairs, and all three of which are marked by contested access through the door. The prison, too, with its heavy gate at which no one waits for David and the movements along a row of cell doors between David's cell and that in which his brother is incarcerated, shares an emphasis on doorways, corridors and difficulties with access—the film's most extreme vision of separation and isolated lives.

The prison sequence ends with David being released, seemingly

determined to reform and re-establish his family life. On his return to the family home, however, he finds the door locked against him and his family gone. As he vows revenge, listening to the mocking laughter of his neighbours in the corridor, he leans against the closed door of the apartment. After Edit persuades Mrs Holm to take David back and brings them together in a bright new apartment, we see David return drunk and vengeful to the family. Finding the door locked, he kicks at it in fury until his wife lets him in. Set on a hideously destructive course, he roughly wakes his children, coughing in their faces with the intention of infecting them with his tuberculosis. When he moves into the adjacent room, his wife locks him in, in order to escape with the children, and David savagely hacks the door open with an axe.

Spiritual Dimensions

Even though, in the material world of the film, doors often 'block' and isolate, inhibiting human connectedness, they still feature in its spiritual dimension, though not as barriers. As spirits of the dead, Georges and David can pass through the material world without impediment. Yet, rather than taking advantage of the spectacular opportunities for them to pass through walls, windows and floors, Sjöström restricts them to the same entrances and exits as the living. In the first part of Georges' tale, the Coachman passes through the doors of a fine mansion to collect the soul of the suicide within, and thereafter Georges and David enter and leave only through doorways. There could well have been practical dimensions to these decisions in some cases, such as economizing on set design, using camera set-ups required for the living as the basis for the double exposure, but the effect as the film goes on is both to parallel and contrast the living with the dead. In the spirit world, material constraints do not exist; what constrains Georges and David is that they cannot make contact with the living, except those on the point of death. Obstruction operates on both material and spiritual planes.

Like doorways, David's disease and accompanying cough have both naturalistic and metaphorical significance. The mending of the coat, so brutally rejected, has a keen physical cost. In his commentary, Casper Tybjerg talks of tuberculosis in the novel as being 'a metaphor for the harm the characters do to one another', and it carries a similar charge in the film. That the characters cough is the symptom and means of transmission of the illness. But beyond this, and beyond its status as a manifestation of the dangers of human contact, the choice as to when David coughs is Sjöström's. In the third shot of our sequence, his smile

(and chuckle?) in response to the discovery of the patches in his coat, and at the sound of (Maria's) movement next door, lead into a cough. The night before, he suffers an attack of coughing as he enters the dining room, surveys the space, falls into a chair and slumps across the harmonium. Elsewhere in the film, he coughs on rejecting Edit's request, conveyed by Gustafsson (Tor Weijden), to attend her deathbed; he coughs on being woken by Georges in the dosshouse; next in screen time, but the first time chronologically, we see him cough viciously as he hardens his heart with thoughts of vengeance, leaning against the door of the empty apartment, listening to the neighbours' laughter after discovering that his family have fled. He breaks into a cough at the mission hall, after laughing at Gustafsson's conversion, and at the point of being perceived by his (unseen) wife. His deliberate cough over the children, at least partly a way of distressing his wife, is another way of rejecting the home which Mrs Holm and Edit have restored for him, an impulse then taken up with the axe. David tends to cough at moments of psychological disjunction. With the partial exception of the cough in the company of Georges, all these moments of physical breakdown coincide with situations where the two aspects of David's life—family man and self-absorbed drunkard—come into painful relief, where David rejects the social, the spiritual and the respectable, or where this rejection is challenged by the attempts of others at making a human connection.

Such moments, often involving touch, are associated particularly with Edit and Mrs Holm. In the hostel sequence, after David has rejected the offer of connection made manifest in the repairs to the coat, Edit's dismay is expressed by the way she holds her hand to her side, as if feeling a physical injury from the assault on the garment. However, though dismayed, she tries again, reaching for his arm to prevent his departure, and pulling him back into the room to ask him to return in twelve months' time. In the next flashback after the hostel section, we see Edit offer David a handbill in the bar, which he crumples into a ball and throws back, hitting her in the face. In another doorway—that of the mission hall in the same flashback—Edit again reaches out to restrain David, this time at his determination to leave the town. Edit's gesture—echoing her attempted restraint in the hostel—and a second, moments later, unwittingly expresses an interest in David that is not purely spiritual. David registers, and Edit implicitly acknowledges, what she has revealed and when she discovers shortly afterwards that the person David is seeking up and down the land is his wife, guilt at her feelings for a married man inspires her plan to restore the Holm family, a reconciliation that proves disastrous.

The one occasion on which David does respond to these different



Figure 6

attempts to touch his soul, or his body, is in the scene which ends with Edit's death. She is able to see Georges and realizes what his presence portends, but David, increasingly distressed and remorseful at what he has heard and seen, is still invisible to her, on the floor at the foot of her bed. He manages to free his hands (Georges had earlier bound him hand and foot) and struggles to Edit's side, reaching to touch her hand, and she is suddenly able to sense his presence and to feel his touch, though she cannot see him (Figure 6). It is a moment that movingly dramatizes the dying Edit's uncanny ability to 'see' and to 'perceive' and to connect in ways not normally given to the living, but it is part of the film's telling mixture of the material and the supernatural that this touch is realized through David's translucent spiritual body rather than his earthly one. At the moment of Edit's death, there is a mutual connection through touch that is paradoxically both physical and yet intangible. It is an uncanny bond that signals that David has responded to her, acknowledges her desire for him as a man and promises that his redemption is possible, although this is predicated on the restoration of the Holm family, to the inevitable exclusion of Edit. Georges now frees Edit's spirit and she falls back onto her pillows.

Conclusion

This is, perhaps, a fitting image on which to conclude our discussion. We have wanted to demonstrate aspects of Sjöström's achievement in *The Phantom Carriage* that go beyond the widely recognized multiple exposure cinematography and complex narrative structure. The hostel sequences are the most complex examples in the film of what in its context is a remarkably sophisticated—but largely uncelebrated—construction of three-dimensional dramatic space, incorporating a strikingly confident handling of continuity. At the same time, we have pointed to a range

of ways in which the film's drama and its social themes are inflected and enriched by the inventiveness of Sjöström's direction, both within individual scenes and across the film's informing motifs and patterns. Edit and David's ghostly meeting of hands can stand as a culminating example of the ways in which the technical and stylistic virtuosity of *The Phantom Carriage* is fully integrated with its dramatic situations and thematic concerns.

A two-part audiovisual essay, made to complement this chapter, can be found at https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/film/movie/contents/gibbs-pye._the_phantom_carriage.pdf

- 18 Epes Winthrop Sargent, 'The Photoplaywright', *Moving Picture World*, 16 October 1915, 432.
- 19 See e.g. Epes Winthrop Sargent, 'The Photoplaywright', *Moving Picture World*, 4 December 1915, 1828–29.
- 20 'The Wishing Ring', *Variety*, 31 October 1914, 27.
- 21 'Davis Forsakes Way of Melodrama', *New York Times*, 21 January 1910, 11.
- 22 Epes Winthrop Sargent, 'The Photoplaywright', *Moving Picture World*, 4 December 1915, 1829.
- 23 'The Wishing Ring', *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 4 November 1914, 35.
- 24 Horak, 'Good Morning Babylon', 3.
- 25 The cutting rate was determined using the copy of *The Wishing Ring* included on the 2003 Image Entertainment DVD, *Before Hollywood, There was Fort Lee, N.J.*
- 26 Maurice Tourneur, 'Movies Create Art', *Harper's Weekly*, 29 April 1916, 459.

Chapter 5

- 1 Cinematographer Julius Jaenzon and his team used multiple exposures of the same lengths of film to produce the ghostly transparency of the carriage and its occupants, moving through and within the solidity of the material world. 'The backdrop, the setting, had to remain dark for the spirits to stand out . . . First they shot the background. Then they would run the same strip of film through the camera a second time in order to catch the spirits against a dark, neutral background . . . Jaenzon had to keep detailed notes about film lengths and crank speed . . . An occasional film strip had to be used four times to properly complete a scene. Of course, the spirits were transparent, so the furniture in back of them had to shine through. At the same time, the furniture in front of them needed to obscure them.' Louis Delluc, quoted by Bo Florin, *Regi: Victor Sjöström/Directed by Victor Seastrom* (Stockholm: Cinematek/Svensk Filminstitutet, 2003), p. 75.
- 2 Tom Gunning, 'A Dangerous Pledge: Victor Sjöström's Unknown Masterpiece, *Masterman*' in John Fullerton and Jan Olsson (eds), *Nordic Explorations: Film Before 1930* (New Barnet: John Libbey Press, 1999), p. 205.
- 3 Graves quotes from Lagerlöf's letters: 'For years now I've had in my head the plan to write a Christmas story of the kind Dickens used to write'; 'If I could get my Christmas Carol finished and about 90 to 100 pages long I would bring it out as a little book for Christmas'. These are cited in Selma Lagerlöf, *The Phantom Carriage*, trans. by Peter Graves (Stockholm: Norvic Press, 2011), p. 115.
- 4 As David relates the story of Georges, a flashback takes us to the scene and, as Georges begins to tell David and the other men present about death's

- carriage, that in turn is dramatized—our first view of the phantom carriage—with Georges’ ‘voice’ continuing in the intertitles.
- 5 Where titles are inserted into continuous action from a single set-up we have counted only one shot.
 - 6 Bo Florin notes of these earlier films that ‘systematic cuts across the 180 degree line to a completely reversed camera position, thus creating a 360 degree cinematic space’ were common in Swedish films of the period but particularly frequent in Sjöström. See Bo Florin, *Transition and Transformation: Victor Sjöström in Hollywood 1923–1930* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013), pp. 20–21.
 - 7 In a discussion of *Girl from the Marsh Croft* (1916), Gunning notes that Sjöström uses closer shots than those typically found in Swedish film in the mid-1910s, together with an increase in the number and variety of camera angles. See Gunning, ‘A Dangerous Pledge’, p. 208.
 - 8 Bo Florin’s concept of ‘lyrical intimacy’ evokes significant aspects of the sequences here: ‘lyrical intimacy, created through downplayed acting, *mise en scène* and montage privileging a circular space with a clear centre, towards which movements converge’. See Florin, *Transition and Transformation*, 20–21. However, the ‘circular’ space established here is considerably more complex than those in the films Florin is discussing.
 - 9 Barry Salt, *Film Style and Technology: History and Analysis* (London: Starword, 1992 edition), p. 171, states that the ‘basic Griffith style of scene dissection, with cuts into a closer shot made from a frontal direction, continued to be practised by many film-makers into the early 1920s, both in America and particularly in Europe’.
 - 10 Sjöström had made use of mirrors in similar ways in other films, notably *The Girl from the Marsh Croft*.
 - 11 Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs, *Theatre to Cinema: Stage Pictorialism and the Early Feature Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 133–34.
 - 12 Charles Barr, ‘Sjöström and Seastrom’, *Norwich Papers in European Languages, Literatures and Culture*, no. 1 (1994), argues that Sjöström was unique in making the transition fully and successfully from the ‘pre-classical’ period to the ‘classical’. Barr juxtaposes *Ingeborg Holm* (1913) and *The Scarlet Letter*, which was made in Hollywood in 1926. But the transition was made while Sjöström was still working in Sweden.
 - 13 Salt notes in *Film Style and Technology*, p. 125, that the use of arc lights for night scenes was beginning to appear around 1916–17 and cites Sjöström’s *The Outlaw and His Wife* (1917).
 - 14 Darragh O’Donoghue, ‘*The Phantom Carriage*’, <http://sensesofcinema.com/2010/cteq/the-phantom-carriage/>.
 - 15 Unlike many of the films to which Sjöström owed his eminence at this time,

which were celebrated for their use of landscape and the natural world, *The Phantom Carriage* is predominantly set in interiors, and rarely in daylight.

Chapter 6

- 1 Tom Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of Vision and Modernity* (London: BFI, 2000), p. 99, argues that these are not playing cards but *cartes de visites*, ‘hand sized photographs introduced in the nineteenth century bearing one’s portrait to be exchanged with friends and relatives’. However, as he himself points out, these photographs ‘blend two realms of reference, one of which is gambling’ (which often involves the playing of cards), the other of which is acting.
- 2 Ursula Hardt, *From Caligari to California: Eric Pommer’s Life in the International Film Wars* (Providence, RI: 1996), pp. 52–53; Klaus Kreimeier, *The Ufa Story: A History of Germany’s Greatest Film Company, 1918–1945*. Trans. Robert and Rita Kember (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), pp. 88–89. According to Kreimeier, the final instalments were accompanied by stills from the forthcoming film.
- 3 David Kalat, *The Strange Case of Dr Mabuse: A Study of the Twelve Films and Five Novels* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001), p. 16.
- 4 For details on the production process, see Bernard Eisenschitz, *Fritz Lang au Travail* (Paris: Cahiers du Cinéma, 2011), pp. 32–37. A number of books claim incorrectly that the two parts of *Dr Mabuse* were premiered on consecutive evenings (27 and 28 April), among them Kalat, *The Strange Case of Dr Mabuse*, p. 52, and Patrick McGilligan, *Fritz Lang: The Nature of the Beast* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1997), p. 86. The Ufa-Palast am zoo was one of Ufa’s flagship cinemas. Ufa and Decla-Bioscop had merged to form a vertically integrated corporation in November 1921, so the Ufa-Palast was an obvious premiere venue.
- 5 The first act in Part Two is introduced as a ‘Prelude’, its conclusion as the ‘End of Act One’. The fifth act in Part Two concludes with the announcement of a ‘Finale’ prior to notification of the end of Act Five and the beginning of Act Six.
- 6 Quoted in Kalat, *The Strange Case of Dr Mabuse*, p. 55.
- 7 Rudmer Canjels, *Distributing Silent Film Serials: Local Practices, Changing Forms, Cultural Transformation* (New York: Routledge, 2011).
- 8 *Ibid.*, pp. 83–87.
- 9 Unlike *Les Vampires*, and with the exception of *Juve Contre Fantômas*, most of the episodes of *Fantômas* were self-contained.
- 10 For a detailed account of *Die Herrin der Welt* and its distribution in Germany, see Canjels, *Distributing Silent Film Serials*, pp. 63–75.