Passion at the threshold: Doctor Glas the flaneur in the films of Rune Carlstén and Mai Zetterling

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Abstract
This article explores tropes of modernity in film adaptations of the 1905 novel Doctor Glas written by the Swedish author Hjalmar Söderberg. Drawing on Walter Benjamin and Miriam Hansen among others, the article attempts to show that certain expressive categories perceived as mutually exclusive by the contemporary audiences, in fact co-operate in order to constitute certain “points of impossibility” in the narrative and visual flow, where modern (gender) identities mutate and manifest themselves.

Keywords: modernity; body; gender; identity; flaneur; etui; interor/exterior

“I believe in carnal lust...’ It is the very Hjalmar Söderberg that Mai Zetterling wants to accentuate. It is in consequence with all her work and goes as a straight line from Misses von Pahlen to Night Games, brushing off the false Stockholm-romanticism: the flaneur-pose, the dusty smell of heavy furniture and the smothering air round Doktor Glas, the story.”¹ This opening of an article in a weekly magazine that reports on the shooting of Dr. Glas the film—based on Söderberg’s novel Doktor Glas and directed by Mai Zetterling—condensates some central cultural and ideological aspects that get their expression in the thematic and textual elements of the two film versions of the novel: the one directed by Rune Carlstén in 1942 and the other by Mai Zetterling released in 1968.

The citation gives air to certain 1960s attitudes in Sweden claiming that (unlashed) realisation of “carnal lust” would make everybody free from what was understood as an inhibited and hypocritical bourgeois living—what with its mindset regarding marriage, social conventions, and matters of life and death. The article on its whole gives the impression that “dusty smell of heavy furniture” and “carnal lust” would be in opposition to each other, establishing the former as a metaphor of (bad) obsolete bourgeois conventions, the latter belonging to the sphere of (good) modern life.

The aim of this essay is to show that it is precisely the interplay between those elements—one being a prerequisite of the other—that gives air to the specifically modernist bearings in both film versions. However, due to their different production

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contexts in the 1940s and 1960s, respectively, each version expands in a different way on matters regarding narrative, mise-en-scène and gendering—or rather, sexualisation—of visual practices, to name a few tropes of the modernist venture as they appear in these two particular versions.

It is my understanding that modernisms are many, as well as modernity, and that they may be traced in different places at different times. Modernity “may be defined as peoples’ loss of security markers in the society where systems of values, ideas and trends are constantly under process of change without any real, definite goal,” as the philosopher Shmuel Eisenstadt put it in an newspaper interview. Eisenhower, among others, holds that it is not possible to principally define these modernities as positive or negative. In good and bad, the core sentiments of modernity are loss and change. Under such conditions cinema has emerged as a global institution to reflect all contradictory sentiments, and it is my understanding that nothing has replaced it since its birth.

Miriam Hansen puts it as follows: “Cinema was above all the single most expansive discursive horizon in which the effects of modernity were reflected, rejected or denied, transmuted or negotiated. It was both part and prominent symptom of the crisis as which modernity was perceived, and at the same time it evolved into a social discourse in which a wide variety of groups sought to come to terms with the traumatic impact of modernisation.” Provided that modernity be defined in its broadest sense as a profound feel of loss and change in the society, I think it is safe to change the citation’s past into a present tense.

Hjalmar Söderberg, one of the constituents of the Swedish literary canon, published his novel written as a diary, Doktor Glas, in 1905. This novel, as already his earlier production, carries traces of inspiration from Charles Baudelaire’s poems: apart from the themes of a lonely flaneur and the city of Stockholm that foregrounds the story, the main character Glas quotes Les Fleurs du Mal twice to comment what he has observed in the streets and his position to the seen. Earlier, in 1898, Söderberg had published a small work of prose poems called Historietter in line with Baudelaire and his Le Spleen de Paris, or Petits poèmes en prose (The Prose Poems).

Le Spleen may provide an interesting and illuminating key to the novel and the two films. In Baudelaire’s work it is possible to recognise fragments of a number of scenes repeated in both film versions: the dusk falling over the summery parks, the mixture of fragile reveries, and city asphalt—and the flaneur dwelling in the sun-drenched park as well as in the shades of an alley arch. The ninth poem of Petits poèmes en prose begins with a reflection that comes close to describing Doctor Glas himself:

There exist certain individuals who are, by nature, given purely to contemplation and are utterly unsuited to action, and who, nevertheless, under a mysterious and unknown impulse, sometimes act with a speed which they themselves would have thought beyond them.

The sort of man who, for fear of finding that his caretaker has a distressing piece of news for him, prowls in a cowardly fashion before his door for a while before daring to go home; or the sort who keeps a letter a fortnight before opening it, or who takes six months to resign himself to taking steps which have been necessary for a year; such men sometimes feel themselves suddenly hurled into action by irresistible force, as if they were arrows shot from a bow. The moralist and the medical man, who claim to know everything, are unable to explain why these lazy and sensual souls find so abrupt a source of insane energy and how it is that they who are incapable of performing the most simple and necessary tasks discover at a particular moment an excess of courage to carry out the most absurd acts, acts which are often even highly dangerous.

This ninth poem is called “The Bad Glazier” and, thus, it is not only the description above that may typify the main character of Söderberg’s novel, but his name, Tyko Gabriel Glas (meaning glass) gives echo to the yearning of beauty, disappointment, and destructivity of the poem. “The Bad Glazier” tells the cruel story of an impulsive artist, the I of the poem, who gets enraged when the glazier he has called up to his attic room doesn’t have coloured glass for sale. Still enraged, the artist looks down to the pavement and sees the glazier who painstakingly has made his way back, and sends a flowerpot to crush his merchandise into a thousand pieces of splitter. The discourses of modernity are to be found in the fragments and debris that the novel and the films, in a sense, are made of.
Doctor Glass indeed: the likeness between the work of Baudelaire and Söderberg—and in their aftermath Carlsten and Zetterling—is one of the kind that the Swedish literary scholar Inge Jons-son, in his effort to explain the power a symbol, has on a reader—or a spectator—has named “differentiated similarity” (olikartad likhet), a moment that in comparison or juxtaposition with something that is “not exactly similar and not quite different but at the same time both similar and different, waking our interest.”5 The meaning arises from the ambiguous space between the semblance and disparity, an aperture where the spectator/reader repeatedly returns in order to obtain confirmation for his/her understanding.

Evidently, not only the similarities and differences, but the gaps and inequities between the three versions become signifying marks. Söderberg does not, then, stage any entire poem of Baudelaire in his novel but copies fragments of them, images, sensations, shadows—as in passing, just as he deliberately may allow Glas to misquote the poem “Spleen I” in Les Fleurs du Mal. Similarly, Mai Zetterling sometimes in her version copies a seemingly indifferent image or scene from Carlsten’s version, but leaves out parts that might be considered as seminal.

The 1942 version of Doktor Glas follows the structure of the “classical” (Hollywood) pattern of narrative and, therefore, one might ask whether it should be discussed in the modernist context at all. However, drawing on Miriam Hansen’s definition of vernacular modernism in her seminal article “The mass production of senses: classical cinema as vernacular modernism”, which embraces all cinema as part of the historical formation of modernity understood “as a larger set of cultural and aesthetic, technological, economic, social and political transformations”, it is possible to consider both film versions as parts of one and the same discursive field instead of seeing them in opposition to each other.6

The Mai Zetterling version, Dr. Glas, was produced in the aftermath of the French New Wave and counts as a “neomodernist” film as defined by John Orr, who in his book Cinema and Modernity writes about the reflexive nature of the “modern” film, “its capacity of irony, pastiche, for constant self reflection and for putting everything in quotation marks” that has been an essential feature of the cinema’s continuing encounter with modernity.7 With the “modern film” Orr means film made after the New Wave—but while it is easy to see that such a definition may apply to the visual (editing and camera work) level of Zetterling’s film very well indeed, I think these characteristics may also be found in “classical” modes like the one of the 1942 version, even if on other levels such as in the dialogue, narrative logic, and in the actor’s depiction of their characters—for example, in Rune Carlsten’s interpretation of Reverend Gregorius who in his guise gets features from a comic book character.

THE STORY AND CONTEXTS

The story conveys a diary written during a period of four months by Doctor Glas, a general practitioner in the city of Stockholm, a bachelor of 33 years who—according to his own words—has “never been near a woman”. The life Glas sees around him during his long walks on the streets of a smothering hot summer in Stockholm disgusts him in its banality, its carnal concreteness, and its lack of sophistication. He depicts himself as a loner who finds the life of his patients petty and banal, admitting his inability to participate in it, and when tormented by his indecisiveness says: “I was born to be a spectator, let me stay that way!”

Glas especially detests an elderly parson, Reverend Gregorius—for no reason at all, it seems—and as the Reverend’s young wife Helga asks him for help to avoid a sexual exchange with her husband, he agrees to manipulate hers and then Gregorius’s diagnosis recommending celibacy as part of the cure. Helga Gregorius admits to Glas that she has a lover, and Glas monitors the relationship at a distance. He secretly loves Helga too, and when her despair is further intensified by the Reverend’s reluctance to follow doctor’s orders, Glas poisons him at a proper occasion. Glas gets away with his crime easily while Helga is abandoned by her lover who marries another woman. The murder remains meaningless in the sense of not providing any solution for the predicaments of the main characters whose lives continue in solitude.

Söderberg’s novel made a huge scandal on its release, as it openly took sides for euthanasia and abortion, criticised marriage as an institution, and of course, in extension, the society that is built on such an institution. The first film version was
released in 1942 only a year after Söderberg’s death, in a period where the Swedish film industry was working hard to give film a status of “culture”—as in high arts—instead of being perceived as “entertainment”. The company in charge, Svensk Talfilm was one of the smaller enterprises in the field, usually a producer of wispy comedies. *Doktor Glas* was designed to be a major investment in an effort to improve the status of the company: a “literary drama”, a well-made, mainstream-style film based on an acknowledged piece of work. The film starred the heavy-eyed Georg Rydeberg—one of the leading male actors of the period (perceived as a perfect Glas)—and the upcoming star Irma Christensson as Helga Gregorius. The director of the film, also known as one of the directors at the Royal Dramatic Theatre, Rune Carlstén appeared as Reverend Gregorius.

The reviews were excellent and respectful, underlining the full-bodied quality of the film. The camera work, depicting enchanting views over the city of Stockholm was especially notified and prised. In 1942, quite in the midst of a World War, nobody seemed to take offence regarding the positive ideas of abortion and euthanasia. In this context one should not forget that between the 1930s and 1950s Sweden was one of the vanguard countries to study eugenics, to promote racial discrimination, and sterilisation of lesser individuals. Of the ongoing World War nothing can be found in this film with contemporary settings, except perhaps for a sequence where doctor Glas in his dream sees flames flashing in through an open window with white lace curtains, hearing a woman’s voice twice utter the words “The world is burning, the world is burning”. The stir and scandal of 1905 was long gone.

Scandal had, however, become associated with the name of Mai Zetterling by 1966 when a Danish film producer approached her by the way of an American financier, offering her to direct a remake of *Doktor Glas*. Zetterling’s first feature *Loving Couples* was based on the 1935 novel cycle by Agnes von Krusenstierna who had been accused of having revealed her family and societal class as a bunch of hypocrites in her outspoken and merciless description of the gentry in *fin-de-siécle* Sweden. But especially Zetterling’s second full-length feature, *Night Games*, depicting a semi-incestuous relationship between a mother and her young son, had started out with waves of protests and pleas of banning the feature in film festivals at both Cannes and Venice.

The reasons for the Americans to approach the Danish producer suggesting Zetterling to direct the film are unclear, but it seems quite safe to assume that the recent upheaval of Scandinavian porn, the success of Vilgot Sjöman’s *491* (1964) and the excitement around Night Games this very year had something to do with it. Thus, the scandal, the outspokenness regarding “carnal pleasures” on one hand, and criticism towards an outdated social system on the other hand merge in the image of Zetterling, bringing her closer to the authors such as von Krusenstierna and Söderberg than her contemporaries focussing on working-class life and dilemmas.

Mai Zetterling did underline the difference between the original novel *Doktor Glas* and the first film version by calling her film by the acronym *Dr. Glas* but in Sweden, nobody really paid any attention. The film premiered in Copenhagen in 1968 and in Stockholm in January 1969 starring Per Oscarsson as Glas, Ulf Palme as Gregorius—both distinguished and well-known actors—whereas Helga was played by a Danish actress Lone Hertz, who had appeared in numerous Danish films but was not well known by the Swedish audiences. As Monica Dofs Sundin has pointed out, the reviews generally compared the Zetterling production, most unfavourably, to the first film version—and to the novel of course. One could say that in regard to *Dr. Glas*, two kinds of expectations clashed: the audiences’ understanding of and expectations for the persona of Zetterling herself and their understanding of Söderberg, his novel, and the previous film version—more understood (and therefore accepted) as an illustration of the book.

The transcription of the diary narrative was an obvious problem for the writers of the film scripts. Both versions reduce this feature, even though Glas often is portrayed at his desk, writing—whether it be prescriptions, patient journals, or the open in the diary-novel an outdated social system on the other hand.

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into a verbal account under the intense gaze of the listening doctor.

In the Zetterling version, Glas’s thoughts are presented as a voice-over monologue or as his dreams and fantasies depicted in overexposed images that sever deep rips in the narrative. Sometimes Glas mumbles to himself, sometimes he addresses the chair where Helga Gregorius had recently been sitting, or argues with his shadows. In company with other people, he gives air to his real thoughts under his breath while saying aloud something quite different. In all, the loneliness of the doctor is depicted here in a more comprehensible manner than in the first version, whereas the voice of Helga is literally and definitely more subdued and suffocated in the 1968 version.

Also, the film by Zetterling opens up with a contemporary 1960s frame where the doctor, now old and half blind, wanders in the streets and the underground of Stockholm City. Using a subjective camera out of focus, the milieus turn up blurred, the faces impossible to distinguish. The aged Glas is just a shadow on the pavement, mumbling for himself, remembering the past days in clear focus. The story is, then, depicted as Glas’s memories that develop in long sequences interfoliated by the hazy present tense and his dreams and fantasies that are identified by manifest overexpositions. Needless to say, the addition of the contemporary frame was one of the features that was met with the most severe criticism.

THE DUSTY FURNITURE

The surname Glas (glass) brings about profound associations with the imagery of modernity, not only by way of Baudelaire and his poetry as shown above, but obviously through Walter Benjamin and his writings on glass architecture at the end of the 19th century. One of the recurrent themes at the centre of his work is explicitly the meaning of the transparency, function, weight, and durability of this material used in construction of the spaces and pathways designed for the modern life.

In his article “Exterior as Intérieur”, Tom Gunning calls attention to the fact that Benjamin regards the glass arcades of Paris as exterior spaces conceived as interiors; “houses and passages having no outside—as in the dream”. Benjamin shows, he says, how the arcade, in its unique ability to combine the functions of opening up (like a landscape) and closing around (like a room or an etui) becomes an indicator for the loss of security markers in the society, one privileged expression for modernity.

Gunning points out further that this “house with no outside” is the inversion of or a kind of opposite to the bourgeois home: “the ambiguous spatial interpenetration [i.e. the interior–exterior of the arcade] responds to an essential division on which the experience of the bourgeois society is founded, namely the radical separation of the interior from the exterior”. In this division, the bourgeois home had become designed as “a cocoon of consumption” where the inhabitants may give way for uninhibited dream life, protected from the outside world.

Benjamin describes spitefully in Einbahnstraße (One-way Street), in a piece called “Manorially furnished ten-room apartment”, a residence equipped for people of good family, a place that could be Doctor Glas’s home in both of the films. Such a home is furnished according to what might be called appropriate standards signifying the congestion, stiffness, and control (the downside of comfort and protection) of bourgeois life. In this specific piece Benjamin refers to the genre of detective novels, the dynamic centre of which is the horror haunting such an apartment. In his description he itemises “gigantic sideboards distended with carvings, the sunless corners where palms stand, the balcony embattled behind its balustrade, and the long corridors with their singing gas flames”—interiors, he concludes, which gain sufficiency only as a dwelling for a corpse: “On this sofa the aunt cannot but be murdered.”

As mentioned above, the tale of Doctor Glas in the film from 1942 takes place in contemporary settings, while the 1968 version locates the story in its past, at the turn of the century where the now old doctor’s memories belong. Thus, the interiors in the Zetterling version could be a loan from the studio furnished for shooting of the earlier film. The bourgeois home decoration in 1940s did not differ very much from the one of 50 years earlier. The apartment is weighed down by attributes of a wealthy home as described by Benjamin: thick and voluminous curtains, gloomy drapes framing doors, patterned wallpapers, large dark oil paintings with heavy gilded frames, palm trees in overtly decorated pots, and lace tablecloths on
hardwood furniture. A big weighty desk, silver chandeliers, and a leather sofa with additional chairs and a sideboard complete the scene of Doctor Glas’s study—where indeed the horror registered by Benjamin is expressed in the doctor’s murder plan, in the abortions suggested and denied, and where the despair and misgivings of many (especially young women suffering from consequences of their sexuality) are at display.

The barristers of the windows cast their shadow on the walls of the apartment giving it the air of a comfortable cave or a detention centre. Even if Glas takes his long walks saying he loves to wander about the city and dines with his friends in different public places, he does live in this house. Evidently, the flaneur is first and foremost a character who is enthusiastic and at awe with the city lights, the crowds, with the novelty, the speed, and movement. Yet as stated, Doctor Glas is more like the flaneur found in Baudelaire’s work: the melancholic passer by, a character on a threshold, a disappearing figure who—while he may look both in and outside reflecting what he sees—still is a part of the past, unable to take the step out and into the future. The life in the summery city leaves Glas an outsider: “Life has passed me by”, is one of the last remarks in the diary, a peculiar remark for a person of 30 odd years, but not surprising for a Baudelairean flaneur.

In all, Doctor Glas remains a character whose home becomes his refuge, his etui as Benjamin puts it. In his article, Gunning quotes Benjamin further and concludes that the separation between the exterior and interior as a foundation for bourgeois existence, does not have the capacity to withstand the assault of the exterior (life), but it only is able to optically transform the nature of the invasion. Thus, the security of this bolstered bastion actually is built on disguise and illusion: “The 19th century parlour became not only the protective shell one fashions oneself but also the locus of devices that seem to open the viewer’s gaze onto a different world—but only under the dominion of the image and semblance”.12 As an example of such a defensive instrument Gunning mentions the “window mirror”, a common device in houses at the turn of the century, enabling the inhabitants of the interior to create an illusion of control and governance of the exterior. There is no window mirror in the house of Doctor Glas, but in the 1942 film he often closes the panes of his study in order to keep the sounds of the street outside, while he himself—especially in the second film—stays hidden behind the white lace curtains, monitoring at a sufficient distance the life on the pavement outside his home.

Thus, the intrusion of the exterior life is inescapable: “the insistently ringing doorbell cannot be exorcised simply by being ignored”.13 In Glas’s case the doorbell is constantly made use of by his patients—in this story mostly women—making their way not only into his study but into his mind, into his fantasies, and into his dreams. In both film versions of Doktor Glas; namely, the inner screens of the doctor’s psyche replace the optical surfaces of the bourgeois parlour. A perfect metaphor for this replacement is the above mentioned dream scene with the open window and the flames hitting from outside into the room setting the curtains in fire, accompanied by a voice of a woman: “The world is burning!”

Rather than being devices of control then, Glas’s inner mirrorings structure themselves as a genuine disturbance, failing him like the optical paraphernalia in the bourgeois parlour does. An interesting complication is namely that, as Gunning insists, “the optical transformation [of the exterior life into controllable images] may easily be a source of anxiety instead of feel of security because it figures a return of repressed”.14 This notion may be brought together with the anxiety that Glas’s fantasies indeed evoke in him: Not only in their capacity of uncanny and disturbing sensations that nightmares always are, but also by the shattering effect they have on his already uneasy relationship to sexuality—witnessed for instance by his disgust towards the pregnant women, who do not only stand as immediate signs of the fact that a (hetero)sexual intercourse actually has taken place, but also reminds of the most primitive bodily functions—and of the alarming concept of an interior/exterior in itself.

That the fantasies haunting Glas upset his gender identity—and indeed the entire politics of masculinity in both film versions—resides in the option that the house and the man’s body and are, in a sense, the same. Namely, as Benjamin puts it, the interior of a bourgeois home seems to be constituted by the person living in it: “the encasing forms of the bourgeois interior, its protective shell, are literally shaped by a habit” (both as in a dress and as in a customary
behaviour). Gunning reminds that in this particular discussion Benjamin calls attention to the manner of the individual in his room, in the moment of his dreaming and awakening, attempts to reconstruct the structure of his own body in relation to the interior of the home and vice versa.15

If the home of Glas is like a shell or etui for his body; its contours following the contours of his being, then he is in the process of “awakening”, as he reshapes his perception of the rooms, even reshapes his perception of his body, including gender identity and sexuality. The assaults from outside—in the guise of the life stories of Helga and the other women, and their spillover from within Glas himself—all affect the process of his composing himself: the matter of his own (gendered) organism.

Yet, the shape of an etui does not fit closely to the body of its inhabitant, neither is it a dress, but it follows the contours of its inmate, leaving “laxity” in between, irregular spaces where ambiguities of his identity may dwell, giving rise to uneasiness and ultimately compelling the narrative to reshape the gender positions in the film again and again. Namely, provided the unstable scenario of Glas’s troubled fantasies, it is difficult not to pursue the idea of him as a flaneur on another level too; namely, a gestalt dwelling not only on the threshold of a new modern world, but also on the threshold of a closet still unable of stepping out.

The fantasies that torment Glas are of two different kinds: the killing or death of Gregorius, and—especially in the Zetterling version—the sexual behaviour and voluptuous body of Helga. The showcase of such fantasies is the inmost of the bourgeois home, the bedroom of the Gregoriuses. The fifth of the prose poems of Baudelaire is called “The Double Bedroom”, initially describing a “bedroom resembling a reverie, a bedroom which is truly spiritual, in which the stagnant atmosphere is faintly tinged with pink and blue. There your soul can bathe in idleness, spiced with regret and desire.—It is something vaguely crepuscular something bluish and pinkish; a dream of pleasure during and eclipse”.16

This opening of the poem reflects what especially in the 1942 film version depicts as acquiescent features of sexuality, relationships as described by Helga when she speaks about reveries in her youth and her affair with her lover Claes Recke, breathlessly attended by doctor Glas. The poem continues: “O bliss! What we generally call life, even in its happiest expansions, has nothing in common with this supreme life that I now know about and that I savour minute by minute, second by second!” Yet, in the end, the protecting comfort of the inmost of the interior falters, too. The interference of the unrelenting time destroys the sight of the blissful lit: there is a knock on the door: “Oh Horrors! I remember! I remember! Yes, this hovel, this abode of eternal boredom is indeed my own. Here is the stupid furniture, dusty and down-at-a-heel: the fireplace with neither frame nor embers, soled with spittle, the gloomy windows down which the rain has traced furrows in the dust...”.17

The possible site of desire and delight turns into a place of dismay and abuse. During the scene where Helga confides to Glas that Gregorius raped her, she questions bitterly the contradictions in the common views of woman’s sexuality. She tells that nobody forced her to marry Gregorius, that she did it out of her own will because she thought that this was how God had arranged the life for her: “By the side of this man my longings would disappear and my desire would die. But he could not kill my dreams, just pull them into dirt. Instead, he killed my faith and I do not long for it, it was such a strange faith: everything you longed for, everything that was lovely to think about, was sinful. A man’s embrace was a sin if one craved for it, but if one thought that it was unattractive and awful, a torment, a pain—then it was a sin not to want it. Isn’t that very odd?”

Glas’s own bedroom shows itself as an abode of nightmares and fantasies of sleepless moments while he in his mind’s eye sees the possible incidents in the Gregoriuses’ bedroom. Such fantasies incorporate only the beds—solid, matri-monial pieces with high, elaborated bedheads—where the Reverend imposes himself on his young wife. In the 1968 version Glas’s bedroom fantasy is repeated in several occasions precisely as a fantasy, in harshly overexposed, shadeless scenes that accentuate contrasts and sharpen the contours. Scenes like this include close-ups on Helga’s face as she attempts to evade her husband’s approaches. Interestingly, such close-ups inevitably remind about those on St Joan of Arc (Falconetti) in La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc, Carl Th. Dreyer’s famous film from 1928.
In the film from 1942, the bedroom scenes are realistically incorporated in the narrative. There are two of them, both followed by Helga’s visit to Glas, as she tells her doctor what happened during the night—and also confirming in dialogue what may have been too provocative to visualise as moving images. The first scene opens with the camera on a photo portrait of Helga Gregorius. The camera then pans to the left, showing the parson sitting, playing his harmonium, with his hunched back turned to the camera. The light falls on a ridiculous curl on the top of his balding head. All and all, he reminds of a troll in his shadowy cave or a character in a comic book.

There, then, is a cut to Helga doing her toilet in front of a bathroom mirror, glancing behind her shoulder as if in agony. Gregorius looks at her when she passes a doorway on her way to the bedroom. Helga makes a hesitant gesture and stands still for a moment while the light falls on her from behind, revealing the contours of her body under the whiteness of her gown. Her husband joins his hands like in a prayer—but the gesture may also allude to a merchant rubbing his hands together—and then he continues his playing while Helga goes to bed, surrounded by shadows, soon followed by Gregorius. A musical score that express a fierce mood accompanies the parson’s movements and the scene ends abruptly: a sudden darkness falls over the screen. The man’s, the husband’s, desire is thus embedded in the shadows, in a closed room with no windows and no way out, as well as in the ferocious music accompanying his steps as he approaches his sleeping wife.

The second bedroom scene takes place after a few weeks of involuntary celibacy of Gregorius. He tells about his day and Helga pretends to be in sleep while her husband in the end sits down at her bedside, reaching for her hand. She pulls her hand back and wishes him good night. Gregorius then takes off his spectacles looking at Helga with a deep sigh. Finally, he enfolds his glasses in a decisive gesture while the musical score goes up in crescendo. In the next scene Helga tells Glas that her husband had raped her. She also recalls how she wanted to go out and walk, “walk throughout the night on the streets until dawn”. For her, the streets come to signify escape and freedom but in saying so she also compares herself to the female flaneur of the nocturne streets, the prostitute. What kept her from flight, from becoming a walker on the streets—an explorer, a nomad, a free spirit—imprisoning her (sexuality) within the walls of the bedroom is her husband’s grip: “He held me tight, he was strong, he would not let me go!”

THE CARNAL BODY

When Helga Gregorius visits Glas as one of his patients, she is in both film versions immediately subjected to an intense scrutiny: benched on a low chair, looking up to the doctor who either sits behind his desk or paces around the room. That her most intimate verve is being spotlighted by the stare of the doctor, filtered and rearticulated by and through his writing in his diary, would make her a standard object of the privileged male gaze, were it not for the fact that she, in the 1942 version, takes the lead of the verbal discourse on her own story, probing deeply the conditions and motives of her choices in life. Such a manoeuvre shatters, at least temporarily, the given positions of a “classical” narrative, promoting the unsteady conditions of gender constellations.

Worth noticing is that the disposition of the dramatis personae in the story of Doktor Glas produces a sort of an imbalance implying in itself a sort of (modernist) breach against the systems of binary oppositions characteristic to the theatre melodrama of the 19th century where the origins of narrative cinema lays. There are three main female characters in the story: Eva Mertens and Helga Gregorius who both are heterosexual—the former in love with and ardently courting Glas—and Kristin the old housekeeper who is unmarried. Of the five men are Reverend Gregorius and Claes Recke pronounced heterosexual. Merkel, Brick, and Glas are all bachelors with a propensity to strikingly homosocial culture, living mundane, professional lives in restaurants, and public milieus.

Lee Edelman states that in a culture that naturalises maleness and situates the femaleness in the place of representation, even a hint to the male homosexuality appears in the aspect of destabilising misrepresentation. In his specific study on the 40s noir-film Laura, “Imagining the Homosexual, Laura and the other face of Gender”, he maintains that the gay body seems to perform a self-commodification (by an act of display as in gestures and posing for instance)
that threatens to “infect” not only the image of a male body but also the masculine politics in any film. Drawing on Paul de Man, he introduces a hypothesis according to which there in each (narrative) system arises a “point of impossibility” in the process of that specific system constituting itself as a textual system, a point that it endlessly tries to refuse (or “counterprove” and argue against it).

This [point of impossibility] comes to signify the capacity of language to posit and to produce entities that it then misrepresents itself as merely having recognised or perceived. In the film Laura (1946), Edelman maintains, the “point of impossibility” is the figure—or image—of the male homosexual, who in his facility of being different from both male and female, destabilises the basic heterosexual dichotomy of the narrative: It is the kind of disturbance that the signifying systems of a film constantly need to dismiss and deny in order to uphold the manichean binary order of things. It is, however, my understanding that, in fact, a mere acknowledging of the bulk of a male body, its carnality, and tangible vulnerability as represented in Doktor Glas, is enough to bring about unease in the narrative. The actual mass of the body of a man, a body that might become inoperative and out of control is a source of anxiety, is in itself a kind of “point of impossibility”.

In the 1942 version the weakness, infirmity, and, nonetheless, desire-ridden body of Gregorius juxtaposed with the narcissism of Glas himself—discussed below—create tensions and crevices that the narrative struggles to proceed against (or rather: to lash into its logical system to make “sense” of them). As already stated, the Reverend is pictured as something of a needy gnome, while Georg Rydeberg who plays Glas was well known for his distinguished looks and his trait of self-conscious posing, lending those qualities to the image of the doctor, too. In this film, Rydeberg seemed to have played down his mannerisms, but surely his extracinematic image contributed to reading of his character—not as feminine, but as a conspicuously coquettish man.

Rydeberg’s aristocratic posture with his head slightly cast back, half open eyelids, eyelashes shadowing his cheeks, his lips slightly pressed together as if in tasting something, create an air of a dandy. His pace on the streets is swinging, he handles his walking stick with grace and, in all, he seems to be aware of being seen, being looked at, evaluatingly, just like he looks at the people while he sits in the park cafés and restaurants. In short, his mimics and gestures communicate sophistication, taste, and mundanity—all characteristics conventionally signifying a man with an ambiguous sexual identity.

The three friends, Markel, Birck, and Glas sit with their afternoon drinks on the veranda of the GrandHôtel as if on display with a flowerbed on the windowsill between them and the camera that tilts up towards the company. They let their eyes wander idly over the dining people and through the large windows of the restaurant, discussing Helga Gregorius. The beautiful looks, love life, and sexuality of the young woman are set in focus and scrutinised even before she has appeared on the screen. In their detest of the ugly Reverend, they pity Helga who has to live with the disgusting old man. Markel states that yet, she probably submits to her “marital duties” in the fear of losing “her reputation, her future and her position instead of running her way which ought to be the most decent way to act”.

The scene fades out, and the next one—referred above as the first bedroom scene—fades in on a lovable portrait photo of Helga. In the process of the dissolve, the portrait and Glas’s gaze fall on the same spot as if Helga already were there in his mind, like an ideal or an icon. In his analysis of Laura, Edelman refers to an exactly similar construction where a male character’s face dissolves in a portrait of a woman, the title character of the film. The dissolve of the male (body) into a portrait of a female character—n.b. not a “real” person but an image—connotes, according to him, the man’s suppressed desire to become a/the woman or his closeted gayness. I think that even if such a visual figure would not signify outright suppressed homosexuality of a character, it still establishes an inkling of sameness between the male and the female and thus promotes a discourse preoccupied by the similes of body and gender.

On the same note, the third conversation between Helga and Klas underline his intimate discernment of her being in this version. The conversation takes place after the Reverend’s funeral when Glas detects Helga in the Skeppsholmen Park. She is sitting on a rock looking straight ahead over the harbour bay while the wind slowly moves her mourning veil. Her husband is dead and her lover has left her.
She tells Glas she wants to die. “I have never been as happy as during this summer. I have learnt to know my body! There is no life, no joy, no mourning other than through it—but the body knows it has to die . . .” “Oh your body,” Glas says in a lingering close-up, asking if it is all right for him to talk about “these things”. She replies that he may speak to her about whatever he wants.

Glas then stands up and walks behind her so they both are looking at the water. Helga’s face is close to the camera that is placed in a low angle looking up to them both. Glas’s gaze wanders from the nape of the neck of Helga over to the harbour bay as he continues: “Your body knows it will die once, that is true. But it does not want to die now—it wants to live! It does not want to die until it is worn out and burdened by years, consummated by suffering, burned out by lust. Not until then it wants to die”. The intensity of the words of Glas when he speaks is impossible not to take notice of, nor is the attentiveness—absorption really—of his looks even in the earlier scenes when he listens to Helga: he speaks of his intimate knowledge. This scene, thus, articulates a “point of impossibility” where the male and female merge: the two of them, namely, do not meet en face in spite of the intimacy of their words. Instead, Glas’s body “contours” Helga Gregorius’s body while he stands close behind her, both looking at the same view. They are positioning sameness, not an encounter of a heterosexual couple.

In the second film version, the role of Helga is cut down but, paradoxically, her body becomes more physical, and literally more visible. She appears as a naked, lewd, and sexualised being in Glas’s fantasies. He imagines her posing for him, walking towards her, smiling seductively either nude or barely covering herself with a corner of her mantle. Glas’s first daydreams of Helga deal with her husband forcing himself into her bed—as described above—in a gradually more and more brutal way in order to turn more or less pornographic in the end. Two of the fantasies are especially noteworthy in that they depict an intercourse where the camera is partly in Helga’s place, demonstrating the situation from her point of view.

The first coital fantasy takes place at the moment when Glas has examined Gregorius’s heart and told him that his condition requires celibacy so he would not die. The fantasy scene is created by means of a subjective camera as the face of the Reverend moves back and forth above Helga, his head popping in and out of the image frame. When his face comes close to the camera lens (i.e. Helga’s eyes) it gets distorted and out of focus. Perhaps it expresses the dismay Helga feels. However, what is truly interesting here is the fact that this is a fantasy of another male, of Glas, imagining himself in the place of the woman involved in an intercourse on the verge of rape.

The second coital fantasy consists of five shots: first a subjective camera take from the point of view of Gregorius, a close-up on Helga who lifts her hands to her face in an averting gesture. The second take is the popping head of Gregorius seen from Helga’s point of view and the third, the middle one is an outright image of penetration. This image is but 2 seconds long and over-exposed: the lack of grey nuances accomplish exaggerated whiteness of the body parts that together with their dark contours create an enigmatic sketch, a graphic figure that is impossible to make sense of unless studied separately in slow motion. It is a reprehensible image that seems to have passed the eyes of the Swedish censorship authorities and most critics as well. The fourth and the fifth clip are repetitions of the first and the second one. Thus, the image of heterosexual penetration is embedded in a context of exploitation and mistreatment taking place in wedlock. Yet, an intriguing trait, a “point of impossibility” is that the subject positions, whether male or female, are both fantasies of a man.

But still, such images are but flights of the imagination. Instead, the material body in the Zetterling film belongs to men, no matter how much the talk is about Helga Gregorius. Per Oscarsson—an actor given to embodying strange and bizarre characters—plays a doctor Glas quite different from the one personified by Georg Rydeberg. Oscarsson gives life to a skinny creature with insecure coordination, a man who stumbles on his feet and almost gets overrun by an alarming group of schoolboys or bicycling youngsters. Far from posing in the streets, he walks with downcast eyes, self-consciously avoiding other people as he hurries home from his walks. Worth noticing however, is that the dandyish air of Georg Rydeberg lingers on, as a quiet but persistent outline from the previous version: the confident pace, the
swinging cane, and the stylish white linen dress are now surpassed to Klas Recke (Lars Lunøe), Helga’s lover. The idea of a male body that needs to be indulged, trimmed and tended is elaborated in the 1968 version in scenes that are new both for the novel and the first film version. Thus, for instance, Glas comes across Recke in a barber saloon where Recke gets his shave and manicure done—complete with finger massage observed in two lengthy close-ups. Both men exchange polite nods of recognition while they have their cheeks frothed, shaved, and patted with cologne. The function of such a scene seems to be to display the narcissism of the male characters and the need for caretaking of the male body.

Also, no less than two scenes with Glas and Merkel involved in conversation on personal issues are staged in the distinguished Turkish bath Sturebadet in Stockholm. Under such scenes too, the flashes of naked Helga break into Glas’s mind, especially when he sees Recke. In one scene on the Sturebadet set in the end of the film, the two friends Merkel and Glas merely dive naked into the pool and swim around planning their forthcoming dinner, but by then the film has established bath-visits as one of their pastimes.

The first scene in Sturebadet opens up with the two gentlemen wiping sweat from their faces in a sauna, facing the camera that depicts them in a medium-shot, from their waists and up. They then turn around pacing away from the camera towards a relax-lobby, appearing in full figure with their bare buttocks in sight. As they sit down to continue their conversation, Klas Recke is seen at the rear, behind a window pane lying on his stomach, being scrubbed clean by a bath attendant, a bulky woman dressed in white with a no-nonsense air around her. When she is finished with him, she slaps him briskly on his bottom, he picks his towel and proceeds to a neighbouring relax compartment. Recognising Merkel and Glas through the glass walls, he greets them with a slight bow. It is very difficult for any man to appear dignified with his buttocks bare, and in spite of the next cut where Merkel and Glas sit in the relax-lobby wrapped in their towels like Roman noblemen and exchange deep thoughts of happiness, they are surrounded by heat, moist, and fat sweating male bodies with the idea of bare buttocks lingering on: regardless of high thoughts, the body dwells still on the ground.

THE SHADOW

Tom Gunning points out that, quite rightly, the opposition between the exterior, the street, and the interior—the secluding apartment, “does not form a simple dichotomy; the significance [of the arcade] lies in its simultaneous embodiment of both aspects of this apparent contradiction. A dialectical development of this spatial contradiction must unfold through its optics: both the close-up scrutiny—and a disorienting process of reflection”.22 Doctor Glas is not only an observer of the life in the streets, but his gaze is one of his most privileged professional instruments as well. However, his “diagnosis”, his pondering of Helga and her life is saturated by reflections of his own sentiments expressed in his writing as in the novel, or in his fantasies, as in the both films. His fantasies are of her, but also of Gregorius’s body while his own physiognomy, ignored and repressed for and by himself, becomes concrete and visible only for the spectator.

Yet, in the case of Glas, the “repressed” does not only concern eventual instable gender identity but also, importantly enough, the innermost concept of him as a flaneur and his inability to take action. Glas’s indecisiveness regarding the murder of Gregorius is, namely, but one manifestation of his agonies regarding a more general emotional paraplegia he feels, something he confides to his diary saying he would give anything for a “genuine deed”: “Position, respectability, future. As if I were not ready, any day or any moment to stow these packages aboard the first ship to come laden with action!” The three first words depict values he’d be ready to trade just to be part of any powerful or decisive deed, and are also words that Merkel in the first film version applies to Helga Gregorius trying to explain what might keep her back from leaving her husband, from action.23 The original version of the book, that the both film scripts follow, repeat the sentence: “En verklig handling/A genuine deed”—to further emphasise the intensity of Glas’s longings.24

The 35th poem of Baudelaire’s prose poems is called “Windows”, and it says:

Someone who looks in from the outside through an open window never sees as
much as someone who looks through a closed window. There is no object more profound, more mysterious, or fertile, or more shadowy, more dazzling than a window lit by a candle. What one can see in a sunlight is always less interesting than what happens behind a pane of glass. In that dark or glowing hole life lives, dreams, suffers”.

This is to set in juxtaposition with a scene where Glas stands in the shadows outside Helga’s window, not daring or wanting to approach her, as she carefully seals a letter to someone—Glas decides it is for Klas Recke, her lover.

The passer-by of the poem decides about the fate of the woman he sees in her room: “from her face, her clothes her gestures from almost nothing at all, I have reforged the life story of that woman”.

Glas creates a fantasy of Helga Gregorius out of bits and pieces she and the others tell, without being able to see his own position in relation to her, to himself or, for that matter, any other person. Thus, he remains balancing on the threshold, an ever ambiguous character with nowhere to go.

NOTES
1. Jag tror som Hjalmar Söderberg pó köttets lust VeckoRevyn no. 30 (July 28, 1967): 44, 23–24.
2. Svenska Dagbladet, March 23, 2006, culture section.
3. Miriam B. Hansen, ‘America, Paris the Alps: Kracauer and Benjamin’ in Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life, ed. L. Charney and V. R. Schwartz (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1995), 365 and following.
4. Charles Baudelaire, The Prose Poems and La Fanfarlo (Oxford World’s Classics, Oxford and NY: Oxford University Press, 1991), 38.
5. Inge Jonsson, I symbolens hus, Nio kapitel om symbol, allegori och metafor (Stockholm: Norstedts, 1983), 38–9.
6. Miriam B. Hansen, ‘The Mass Production of Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism’, reprinted in Reinventing Film Studies, ed. C. Gledhill and L. Williams (London: Arnold, 2000), 332 and following.
7. John Orr, Cinema and Modernity (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), 2.
8. Maja Hagerman, Det rena landet, om konsten att uppfåtna sina förfåder (Stockholm: Prisma, 2006).
9. Monica Dofs Sundin, ‘Två ganger Doktor Glas—en dialog mellan Mai Zetterlings och Rune Carlsténs filmatiseringar’ in Dialoger, Feministisk filmteori i praktik, ed. T. Soila (Stockholm: Aura, 1998), 294–30.
10. Tom Gunning, Boundary 2 30, no. 1 (2003): 105–30.
11. Walter Benjamin, Reflections. Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings, ed. P. Demetz (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 64–5.
12. Gunning, 106–7 (italics mine).
13. Benjamin quoted in Gunning, 106.
14. Gunning, 107.
15. Gunning, 107–8.
16. Baudelaire, 34.
17. Baudelaire, 35.
18. Lee Edelman, Homographesis, Essays in gay literary and cultural theory (London: Routledge, 1994), 219.
19. Edelman, 208.
20. Edelman, 195.
21. Bonnier’s Litterära Magasin nr 10 1942, xx.
22. Gunning, 109–10.
23. Hjalmar Söderberg, Doctor Glas, trans. Paul Britten (1963, New York: Anchor Books 2002), 19.
24. Hjalmar Söderberg, Doktor Glas (Stockholm: Bonnier 1987), 16.
25. Baudelaire, 87.
26. Baudelaire, 87.