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Celluloid Gardens in the Time of Consumption

Abstract: This article critically focuses on two out of the approximately one thousand films directed by Alice Guy-Blaché (July 1, 1873 - March 24, 1968), commonly hailed as the first narrative filmmaker and female director. In *La Fée aux Choux* (*The Cabbage Fairy*, 1896) and *Falling Leaves* (1912), Guy-Blaché introduced two gardens as crucial characters within the narrative, depicting them as living breathing entities in the time of consumption or tubercolosis. Tuberculosis was the leading cause of death in Europe from the 18th to the 20th century, impacting on the way art was made. The first narrative films by Guy-Blaché reflected this continuation and exploration of the interrelationship between the arts and the disease. Accordingly, the present paper investigates a set of relevant metaphors unfolding through poetry, painting, opera and, specifically, the two films mentioned above, in an overlapping of scientific, artistic, and cultural discourses. My analysis concludes with an optimistic view linked to a scientific breakthrough that explores the world of bacteria as the starting point for a cure for TB, and possibly other diseases. It also refers to the magic of places like gardens, as emblematically suggested by the opening lines of "Fairy Song", a poem by John Keats, who died of tuberculosis in 1821: "Shed no tear – O, shed no tear! / The flower will bloom another year. / Weep no more – O, weep no more! / Young Buds sleep in the root's white core".

Keywords: Alice Guy-Blaché. Silent Film. Tuberculosis. *La Fée aux Choux*. *Falling Leaves*. First Feminist Filmmaker.

1. *Introduction*

Consumption, or tuberculosis, is an illness caused by bacteria primarily affecting the lungs, but which can occur in any organ of the body, including the spine.[1] It was first recorded in a legal text retrieved on an ancient stone pillar and connected with Hammurabi, the sixth king of the First Babylonian dynasty, who lived in the second millennium BCE.[2] In modern times, Italy, and Lucca in particular, were ahead in identifying consumption as a contagious disease. The first official record dates back to 1699 and, in 1735, it resulted in a declaration by the Health Council of the Republic of Lucca which ordered the compulsory notification and isolation of consumptives, forbidding admission in public hospitals and establishing specific places for their treatment (the "sanatoriums").[3] The first poetic

[1] See Mayo Clinic, "Tuberculosis: Symptoms and Causes", https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/tuberculosis/symptoms-causes/syc-20351250 (last accessed on 29 December 2019).

[2] See Y. Agarwal, R.K. Chopra, D.K. Gupta, and R.S. Sethi, "The Tuberculosis Timeline: Of White Plague, a Birthday Present, and Vignettes of Myriad Hues", *Astrocyte*, 4 (1), 2017, pp. 7-26. In particular: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/The-Hammurabis-inscription-in-Babylonia-writes-of-tuberculosis-as-a-chronic-lung-disease_fig4_320882628 (last accessed on 21 February 2020).

[3] See, among others, I. Barberis, N.L. Bragazzi, L. Galluzzo, and M. Martini, "The History of Tuberculosis: From the First Historical Records to the Isolation of Koch's Bacillus", *Journal of Preventive Medicine and Hygiene*, 58 (1), 2017, pp. E9-E12.

description was recorded in the 8th century BCE in Homer's *Odyssey*, which commented on the illness as taking the "soul from the body".[4]

This was the beginning of an artistic impetus that coped with suffering and death caused by tuberculosis; an interrelationship emerged between the illness, science and art within works characterised by literary, operatic and filmic virtuosity. In the 18th and 19th centuries, tuberculosis had become epidemic in Europe, where annual mortality rates ranged between 800 to 1,000 per 100,000 per year. Between 1851 and 1910, in England and Wales, for instance, four million people died from tuberculosis, more than one third of them aged 15-34 and another half aged 20-24.[5] In France, the stigma attached to having tuberculosis resulted in underreporting, but it is reckoned that, up to 1914, the national rates amounted to 100,00 per year.[6] Just as COVID-19 now targets primarily the elderly, robbing us of our parents and grandparents, tuberculosis was called the 'robber of youth'. It was the youth that often suffered from the disease, or were surrounded by those dying and suffering, who sought to make sense of it by also drawing on the arts.

The disease thus became romanticised in society thanks to many poets, writers, and artists who sought to understand life's meaning in this time of death. John Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale", written two years before his death in Italy in 1821, happened to prophesy his future through poetry, as in the line "Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies".[7] Importantly, the changing metaphors of consumption in the arts reflected the unfolding scientific understanding of the disease itself. As with COVID-19 today, with the memes and comedic reflections on the scientific recommendations to ward off illness and death, so too in the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries.

In particular, three operas written within a forty-year period can be said to show the evolution in thinking about the disease. First, Giuseppe Verdi's *La traviata* (1853, *Lady of the Night*) tells of concubine Violetta Valery, who is dying from consumption and, through this consuming illness, is absolved of all her wrongdoing. Secondly, Jacques Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffman* (1881, Act III) presents a story about medical impotence which reflects the reality of the last decades of the 19th century, when doctors could merely diagnose the disease. However, the ailment was by that time believed to be hereditary, so that Antonia is no longer burdened by sin as Violetta in *La traviata*. Indeed, the sardonically named Dr Miracle asks, "[Has she] inherited [consumption] from her mother?", and suggests she sings to purge the illness. Thirdly, Giacomo Puccini's *La bohème* (1896) builds on a dramatic situation with arguably no attempt at a constructive understanding of such a pathology. No one is saved: the heroine Mimì dies surrounded by a philosopher, a poet, a painter, and a singer, the message probably being that the wisdom that thinkers, artists, and scientists may have contributed in the past is now help-

[4] See Y. AGARWAL, R.K. CHOPRA, D.K. GUPTA, and R.S. SETHI, "The Tuberculosis Timeline: Of White Plague, a Birthday Present, and Vignettes of Myriad Hues". In particular: https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Homers-epic-poem-Odyssey-penned-in-8th-century-BC-refers-to-tuberculosis-as-a-grievous_fig1_320882628 (last accessed on 3 December 2019).

[5] See A.H. GALE, "A Century of Changes in the Mortality and Incidence of the Principal Infections of Childhood", 1945, https://adc.bmj.com/content/archdischild/20/101/2.full.pdf (last accessed on 3 December 2019).

[6] See A. MITCHELL, "An Inexact Science: The Statistics of Tuberculosis in Late Nineteenth-Century France", *Social History of Medicine*, 3 (3), December 1990, pp. 387-403.

[7] J. KEATS, "Ode to a Nightingale", 1819, l. 26, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44479/ode-to-a-nightingale (last accessed on 25 March 2020).

less against tuberculosis. There are no remedies, no logical explanations or clear answers.

Conversely, in that same year, 1896, Alice Guy-Blaché (July 1, 1873 - March 24, 1968) took up the artistic cudgel through her use of cinema, which would place her more in line with the scientific understanding that consumption, eventually known as 'tuberculosis', was caused by contagious bacteria.[8] This first narrative and female filmmaker harnessed the new medium and engaged in an artistic conversation about tuberculosis through film. Her first movie, entitled *La Fée aux Choux* (1896, *The Cabbage Fairy*), can be approached as an affirmation of life. In 1905, it was followed by *Esmeralda*, her first film about consumption and a work based on Victor Hugo's renowned novel *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1831), or *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* (1833).[9] Set in 15th-century Paris, Hugo's story centres on Quasimodo, a bellringer at Notre-Dame Cathedral who is afflicted with severe spinal deformity due to tuberculosis of the spine, and who falls in love with a 16-year-old gypsy woman named Esmeralda (Agnes). Hugo writes that, long after the main events depicted in the novel, workmen discovered two entwined skeletons, one of a young woman, and the other of a man with a twisted spine. The French book's literary affirmation of life and of the unassailable power and beauty of love continued on screen thanks to Alice Guy-Blaché, who thus commended the cinematic medium: "In the silent cinema, we had discovered a fresh, limpid spring, joyously reflecting the grasses, watercress and willows that bordered it; we had only to wet our lips in it to staunch our thirst".[10] From 1896 to 1920, she innovatively laid the groundwork for an art medium "at whose birth [she] assisted",[11] and which became such a thriving industry that, she later bemoaned, it would shift away from her notion of "a fresh limpid spring"; indeed, from "every corner of the world gold hunters"[12] reached and capitalised on that spring.

In this paper, attention will be drawn to the settings of two films by Guy-Blaché, through which she critically explored the importance of wellness, well-being, and "being in herself".[13] In fact, *La Fée aux Choux* and *Falling Leaves*[14] place the garden as an indispensable character within the narrative, as a projection of Eden but also as an emblem of insight, integrity, and acuity. In the former movie, the story ironically takes place in a garden of cabbages; working as legendary symbols of interconnectedness, these vegetables are seen as giving birth to male children from beneath their leaves, rather than from between the "two lips" and legs of women.[15] *Falling Leaves* was released sixteen years later, when Alice had

[8] A key figure for these modern advances in clinical medicine was Heinrich Hermann Robert Koch (1843-1910), a German physician and microbiologist as well as a pioneering scientist in the field of bacteriology (including the identification of the bacteria responsible for consumption).

[9] See *Esmeralda*, Dir. A. GUY-BLACHÉ and V.-H. JASSET, 10", 35 mm, Société des Etablissements L. Gaumont, France, 1905, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Esmeralda (last accessed on 1 September 2019).

[10] A. GUY-BLACHÉ, *The Memoirs of Alice Guy Blaché*, Engl. trans. R. BLACHÉ and S. BLACHÉ, ed. A. SLIDE, Lanham, MD, Scarecrow Press, 1996, p. 30.

[11] *Ibidem,* p. 1.

[12] *Ibidem*, p. 30.

[13] This phrase is taken from J.-P. SARTRE, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, Engl. trans. and with an Introduction by H.E. BARNES, New York, Washington Square Press, (1943) 1984.

[14] See, respectively, *La Fée aux Choux* (*The Cabbage Fairy*), Dir. and Prod. A. GUY-BLACHÉ, 60", 35 mm, France, 1896, 1900 and 1902, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-_cYhqVblLc and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_Fée_aux_Choux (last accessed on 10 December 2019); *Falling Leaves*, Dir. and Prod. A. GUY-BLACHÉ, Solax Studios, USA, 1912, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-_cYhqVblLc (last accessed on 3 November 2019).

[15] See on this point L. IRIGARAY, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Engl. trans. C. PORTER and C. BURKE, New York, Cornell U.P., 1985, p. 24.

moved to the United States and became the co-producer of the Solax Company. It shows an autumnal garden as a prominent scenario, which, however, must be thwarted and tricked by "Little Trixy" in an effort to stop the death of her sister, who is suffering from tuberculosis.

2. *Alice Guy-Blaché and the 'Beginning in Being'*

> Thus Being cut from Essence which is its ground becomes 'mere empty immediacy'. This is how the Phenomenology of Mind defines it by presenting pure Being 'from the point of view of truth' as the immediate. If the beginning of logic is to be the immediate, we shall then find beginning in Being.[16]

In 1896, Alice Guy-Blaché directed her first film about a subject matter of which she had full awareness, since, when she was seventeen years old, she had worked for a year taking care of pregnant textile workers and their babies. Many of the mothers undoubtedly would have died of tuberculosis leaving babies orphaned with many dying before their first birthday.[17] This heralded the beginning of a career that impacted on the way film was made, moving away from the theatrical to the catch cry of 'being natural', 'acting natural'.

Guy-Blaché was born on July 1, 1873, in Paris, after her mother (Marie Clotilde Franceline Aubert) and father (Emile Guy) made an arduous seven-week journey to France from Chile in order for Marie to have one of her children (being born) French. The woman stayed three months and then left Alice in Belgium in the care of her maternal grandmother, who lived in Carouge, "a Geneva suburb dear to artists",[18] and thus exposing her from infancy to the artistic culture of the 19th century. Marie Aubert's marriage had been an arranged settlement with Emile Guy's family, who were established book editors and sellers in Valparaíso and Santiago, Chile. This connection to books and reading subsequently allowed Alice to recognise the potentiality for cinema to tell stories, rather than what was the norm, as of 1896, for 'demonstration films'. In her memoir, she observed that, "daughter of an editor, I had read a good deal and retained quite a bit […] and I thought that one might do better than these demonstration films".[19]

When Alice was three years old, her mother, whom she says she had forgotten, returned to collect her daughter and take her back to Chile. Learning Spanish quickly, Alice lived as an upper-middle-class child in fairly luxurious circumstances until she was six. She was then brought back to France by her father to be bordered at the Sacred Heart Convent's school in Viry on the Swiss border. There she found her three sisters, who had been previously ensconced. After violent earthquakes in Chile, her father, now poorer, returned to France to place the children in a less expensive school. At the same time, in 1886, Alice's brother died of "rheumatic heart", and this precipitated her mother's return to France, while her father passed away soon after, at the age of fifty-one, "more broken by sorrow than of illness".[20]

[16] J.-P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, p. 45.

[17] See "Infant Mortality in France", Institut National d'Études Démographiques, https://www.ined.fr/en/everything_about_population/demographic-facts-sheets/focus-on/infant_mortality_france/ (last accessed on 19 March 2020).

[18] A. Guy-Blaché, *The Memoirs of Alice Guy Blaché*, p. 3.

[19] *Ibidem*, p. 25.

[20] *Ibidem*, p. 11.

Alice's mother subsequently attained the position of Director at the 'Mutualité maternelle', having worked similarly in Chile, and insisted that sixteen-year-old Alice accompany her. The task was demanding, insofar as it required her to carry newborn babies with running eye-infections to the surgery, where a wait of a few hours might have made the babies blind. This early and taxing work experience was to precipitate feelings of sympathy, pity, and admiration in her. Besides, it was channeled and translated not only in her first cinematic production (*La Fée aux Choux*), but also in other films.

After less than a year, both mother and daughter resigned, due to Marie's disagreement with the authorities. It should be remembered that, although French female textile workers had no rights at the time,[21] the women paid into unions which, in turn, provided maternity and child-birth support through the Mutualité maternelle. They nonetheless had no vote or say in the way things were administered and it is highly probable that the 'disagreement' was over the injustice of the system. Alice was then seventeen years of age and, at the suggestion of a friend of the family, she began her study of shorthand typing. Her first position was that of a secretary at a varnish manufacturer, where she experienced continual verbal sexual abuse that resulted in her being reprimanded for fighting back.[22]

In 1894, a position as secretary at 'Le Comptoir général de la photographie' came up and Alice enthusiastically met the challenge. Her prior experience in an all-male work environment had instilled in her a sense of resilience and determination. Such qualities were essential in the context linked to the invention of the typewriter, which, like early computer work, was primarily considered the domain of men, who "had a near monopoly in clerical and administrative work".[23] This meant that women's chances of getting such posts were problematic. It was difficult and, as evidenced by Guy-Blaché, it required one to be persevering and daring:

> Timidly I offered my letter of recommendation, he read it, examined me in silence and finally said "the recommendation is excellent but this post is important. I fear mademoiselle that you may be too young." All my hopes crumbled. "But sir," I pleaded, "I'll get over that." He looked at me again, amused. "Alas that's true," he said, "you shall get over it, so let's give it a try".[24]

The following year the company was sold to civil engineer Gustave Eiffel (who became the president), alongside Joseph Vallot, Alfred Besnier, and Léon Gaumont. When Gustave Eiffel was implicated in the political and financial scandal regarding the failed construction of the Panama Canal, the company was named after Gaumont, who was thirty years Eiffel's junior.[25] The fact that so many well-known engineers, physicists, scientists, writers and inventors were connected to Alice Guy-Blaché, either through her work or personally, meant that she was at the vanguard of the social, industrial, and scientific thinking of her day. Her being a trailblazer was also confirmed by her foreseeing the possibilities of film technology

[21] See P.V. DUTTON, *Origins of the French Welfare State: The Struggle for Social Reform in France, 1914-1947*, Cambridge, CUP, 2002, p. 43.

[22] See A. GUY-BLACHÉ, *The Memoirs of Alice Guy Blaché*, p. 11.

[23] D. CARDON and L. LIBBRECHT (trans.), "Editorial", *Réseaux. The French Journal of Communication*, 6 (2), 1998, Tools for Communication and Work, pp. 125-28.

[24] A. GUY-BLACHÉ, *The Memoirs of Alice Guy Blaché*, p. 7.

[25] See "Panama Scandal in Court; The Trials of the Accused Men To Begin To-Day", 10 January 1893, *The New York Times Archives*, https://www.nytimes.com/1893/01/10/archives/panama-scandal-in-court-the-trials-of-the-accused-men-to-begin.html (last accessed on 3 December 2019).

to tell stories. Her first film, *La Fée aux Choux*, is a birth story that metaphorically reflects the dawning of an art medium and industry, with Guy-Blaché 'assisting' in the birth itself. By using humour and satire, this seminal narrative film can be interpreted as an affirmation of life whilst simultaneously focusing on the inequality of the sexes.

3. La Fée aux Choux*, or* The Cabbage Fairy

Our considerations might start with a direct comment by the French filmmaker:

> Gathering my courage, I timidly proposed to Gaumont that I might write one or two little scenes and have a few friends perform in them. If the future development of motion pictures had been foreseen at this time, I should never have obtained his consent. My youth, my inexperience, my sex, all conspired against me. I did receive permission, however, on the express condition that this would not interfere with my secretarial duties.[26]

In order to shoot *La Fée aux Choux*, Guy-Blaché first spent her working day at the office in the centre of Paris, and then took the trolleybus to get to the laboratory on the outskirts of Paris and concentrate on her film. After staying four hours in the laboratory, she returned to the office at 4:30 p.m. and handled administrative matters there until 10:00 or 11:00 at night.[27] The film was so successful that it sold eighty copies and had to be remade at least twice, because the original prints disintegrated owing to celluloid's high flammability.

Projection was the major problem at the beginning, so much so that there was a race between Gaumont, Lumière, and Pathé; according to Guy-Blaché, this led to shenanigans between the companies with appropriation of discoveries and techniques accepted as fair game. The first narrative film ever made was likely to have been shot by means of a 60 mm camera; Gaumont, however, would quickly shift to the more functional 35 mm Lumière camera. Astonishingly, such freshly made films found their way to Melbourne (Australia), which in the late 19th century was known as the 'Paris of the South', with the introduction of electricity and its enthusiastic embracing of all things French. In 1896, at the Athenaeum Theatre, the first films are said to have been screened,[28] and there is every likelihood that *The Cabbage Fairy* was one of those pioneering productions.

La Fée aux Choux historically puts woman at the centre of her own story, both in front of the camera and behind it, thereby redefining the feminine. Guy-Blaché successfully assumed the feminine role by "convert[ing] a form of subordination into an affirmation"; in so doing, she played with the concept of nemesis as theorised by Luce Irigaray, and thus recovered her discursively exploited place while resisting any straightforward reduction to it. In Irigaray's words:

> There is, in an initial phase, perhaps only one "path", the one historically assigned to the feminine: that of *mimicry.* One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a

[26] Guy-Blaché's comment is quoted by J.M. Bean and D. Negra, *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema*, Durham, Duke U.P., 2002, p. 105.

[27] This reconstruction is given in *The Lost Garden: The Life and Cinema of Alice Guy-Blaché*, Documentary Film, Dir. M. Lepage, Prod. J. Beaudet, 53", National Film Board of Canada, Montreal, 1995.

[28] See "Melbourne Athenaeum Archives", http://www.mahistory.org.au/ (last accessed on 3 September 2019).

form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it. Whereas a direct feminine challenge to this condition means demanding to speak as a (masculine) "subject", that is, it means to postulate a relation to the intelligible that would maintain sexual indifference. To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit her self – inasmuch as she is on the side of "perceptible", of "matter" to "ideas", in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make "visible", by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language. It also means "to unveil" the fact that, if women are such good mimics, it is because they are not simply reabsorbed in this function.[29]

It was no accident that Guy-Blaché chose to tell her sardonic tale of procreation in a garden of cabbages: as we have already seen, her first job was as an assistant to her mother in the care of young women and their children at the Mutualité maternelle. This afforded her an understanding of the diseases and ailments that babies and mothers endured and of the serious challenges faced by pregnant working women. In the film, the notion of procreation bringing the world into ordered existence via the act of giving birth is critically investigated through zeroing in on the absurdity of babies being born under the leaves of cabbages. As a matter of fact, Guy-Blaché meant to heighten the reality of women's contribution as life-givers. The extent to which her message successfully embraced the idea of 'mimesis' is testified to by an article appearing in a French newspaper on July 30, 1896, where the film was assessed as a "chaste fiction of children born under the cabbages in a wonderfully framed chromo landscape".[30] The fact that *La Fée aux Choux* was described as a "chaste" film, meaning that it was pure, unsullied and sinless, precipitated in the audience a magnification of the folkloric legend according to which babies are born from the leaves of cabbages. At a deeper level, though, this brought with itself sexual overtones, an unspoken unveiling of the reality that women were vital and visible by an effect of playful repetition. Women, the film messaged, might well be 'sinful' because sex was a necessity for reproduction.

This was a time when women in France, like women all over the world, had basically few rights; it was only in 1944 that, during Charles de Gaulle's government in exile, French women were finally allowed the suffrage. It had been a long, hard-fought struggle, and, via her leadership in a new communication medium, Guy-Blaché was in the forefront of it. She was clearly a feminist, and her understanding of a woman's difficulty living and working in society, and of the necessity for equality, was to find expression in *Les Résultats du féminisme* (1906, *The Results of Feminism*), one of her most innovative films.

This sardonic take on the life of women – specifically in France, but resonating with audiences worldwide, as far away as Australia – shrewdly and skilfully 'educated' the viewing public about the female question. By cuttingly exploring women's unfair position in society, Guy-Blaché exposed the depth of the inequality between the sexes. This she did with sarcastic humour, guaranteeing audiences immersion into her revolutionary assertion that women should be equal to men.

[29] L. Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p. 76.

[30] *Gil Blas*, 30 July 1896, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alice_Guy-Blach%C3%A9 (last accessed on 3 September 2019).

4. *Early Technology and Film*

> There is nothing connected with the staging of a motion picture that a woman cannot do as easily as a man.
>
> A. GUY-BLACHÉ

Technology proved pivotal for the film industry. A crucial discovery was celluloid, a first type of plastic created by the Hyatt brothers in New Jersey in 1869 and distributed in France by the French celluloid company in 1876. Prior to this discovery, glass or metal had been used for photographic reproduction, and the possibility for images to be impressed on a continuous plastic substance now allowed one to focus upon the process of projection. In those days, patents for film equipment were in their infancy, too: the phonoscope, for instance, was patented in 1891 by Georges Demenÿ. Rejected by the Lumière brothers, it was bought by Léon Gaumont and became the basis for the Gaumont 60 mm camera; it was also called the 'chronophotographe' and, as mentioned above, is believed to be the camera utilised by Guy-Blaché in the *The Cabbage Fairy*. A year later, Gaumont switched to the more marketable Lumière/Edison 35 mm camera.

The first films were produced to study motion, with a main focus lying in the so-called 'realistic reproduction' of life and in solving the mechanical problems that concerned the equipment. In other words, the intended sale product revolved around the appliances for making and projecting films, while the potentiality of the equipment itself for entertainment purposes had not been fully realised yet. Indeed, there was no film industry for the purpose of entertainment and Alice Guy-Blaché was the first to harness this potentiality, shifting away from the hardware mechanics or the selling focus and towards the arena of a cinema conceived for amusement and education.

It is worth remembering that this was the time of peak technological inventions with parallels between cinema knowledge and aeronautical research, to the point that the same people were involved in the development of both.[31] The environment for entertainment had already been established to some degree thanks to the 'Magic Lantern', or 'Stereopticon events' in Europe, America, and Australia. These performances attracted huge crowds, with the Stereopticon industry thriving from the 1840s to 1903 and also involving the first woman in the world to stand for political power, viz. Australian Vida Goldstein.[32] Drawing in huge crowds, the Stereopticon experience prepared audiences for the burgeoning cultural phenomenon of 'going to the movies'. People familiarised with the concept of intervals and there was a collective willingness and acceptance to meet in enclosed places for the purpose of viewing light-sourced entertainment. Expressions such as 'in the limelight' originate from this time, as lime was used as a light source for Stereopticon projections.[33] An added part of the excitement often consisted in the blowing up of the projection machine.

Initially working independently, Alice Guy-Blaché was later supplied with extensive stage equipment that copycatted operatic-stage requirements along with an "enormous

[31] See S. DURANT, "Gustave Eiffel: Aerodynamic Experiments 1903-1921", *Proceedings of the Institution of Civil Engineers – Engineering History and Heritage*, 166 (4), November 2013, pp. 227-35.

[32] For an in-depth analysis of this social reformer and suffragette, see K. BUCZYNSKI-LEE, *Mourning Becomes Electric: Vida Goldstein Takes on Politics and* When Vida Met the President*: A Documentary Film Script*, Master's Research Thesis, Film School, Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne, Australia, 2010.

[33] See A. GUY-BLACHÉ, *The Memoirs of Alice Guy Blaché*, p. 39.

glass cage freezing in winter and burning in summer"; besides, "to remedy the frequent absence of sunlight, two heavy scaffolds had been constructed supporting twenty-four lamps of thirty amperes which caused us bad electric insulation".[34] By 1896, the artistic footprint for film had been provided by opera and, although Guy-Blaché recognised that the 'opera model' might scarcely be realistic in that it was incompatible with the mechanics of the filmic medium, she nonetheless took what was workable.

Opera included flying bridges, slanted floorboards and trapdoors, which in themselves hardly allowed for the flexibility required by filmmaking. She therefore created scenarios that could reflect the life and condition of the people surrounding her, in a transformation that dialogued with a growing understanding of tuberculosis. From one of her most operatic films about the disease – *Esmeralda* (1905), the earliest filmic adaptation of Victor Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris* – to *Falling Leaves* (1912), Guy-Blaché endeavoured to explore the impact of this illness in the arts and society.

5. *Artistic Mirrors vs a Factual Appraisal of Tuberculosis*

Briefly focusing our attention again on Puccini's *La bohème*, it is notable that, although consumptive Mimì is surrounded by a philosopher, a poet, a painter, a musician, and a singer, none of these wise truth-seekers has an explanation for her death. It is as if Puccini could do nothing but depict a hopeless situation where neither the arts, nor science were able to offer solace to the dying loved ones left behind. In the moments before her passing, Rodolfo tells Mimì that she is "beautiful as the dawn". "You've mistaken the image", she corrects him, "You should have said, beautiful as the sunset" (Act IV). The heartbreak and pain caused by such deaths were memorialised not just in opera and literature, but also in painting.

When making her way each day by trolleybus to the Gaumont studios in Paris, Alice Guy-Blaché quite possibly passed the workplace of a young man residing in St Cloud and intent on producing paintings about a subject that haunted him. These works converged on a scene that was shot through with dreary emotions being experienced all over Paris, Europe and America at the time, and which memorialised dying through consumption, or tuberculosis. The reference is to Edvard Munch's *The Sick Child* series (1885-1926), which recorded the moment before the death of his sister Sophie, with grieving Aunt Karen at her bedside. Munch's family had been devastated by tuberculosis: his mother had died of the illness when he was very young and the same doom lay in wait for his older sister. Munch was clearly traumatised and racked with a myriad of emotions (from desolation to suffering and self-reproach), which were to powerfully transpire in his paintings, one of them dating back to 1896, the very year *La Fée aux Choux* was released. Munch probably suffered from a sort of 'survival syndrome' that triggered the channelling of his creative energy towards the exploration of a theme he would return to throughout his whole life. Indeed, he produced six related paintings along with a number of lithographs, dry points and etchings for over thirty years, actually bringing forth a "soul painting".[35] He undoubtedly instilled intense emotions and feelings within such visual representations, which were

[34] *Ibidem*, p. 33.

[35] S. PRIDEAUX, *Edvard Munch: Behind the Scream*, New Haven and London, Yale U.P., 2005, p. 83.

rich in metaphoric meaning and thus reinforced the connection between artistic endeavour and the nightmare of tuberculosis.

Importantly, however, the last decades of the 19th century also saw a cultural shift whereby the romantic notion of the illness began to be regarded disapprovingly and even with revulsion. Coming to the fore was a lag between artists and public perception, as if it were no longer acceptable for the public to 'romanticise' tuberculosis (added to this was the fact that TB tended to be manifestly associated with poverty).[36] In sum, the evolving understanding of *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* was bound to foster a different kind of relation between the arts and science and pave the way for a more conscious familiarisation with the illness.

6. *Tuberculosis and Metaphor: Consumption Considered as an 'Essential Requirement' for Artistic Manifestations*

> I could not have accepted as a lyrical poet anyone weighing more than ninety-nine pounds.
>
> T. GAUTIER

When looking back at the Romantic period, one notices how consumption was generally believed to be linked to poetic and aesthetic qualities. The central metaphor for consumption in the 19th century stemmed from the idea that the phthisic body, as it was called, was consumed, devoured and overcome from within by the person's passions (as P.B. Shelley famously wrote in *Adonais*, VI, l. 53, the bloom's petals "died on the promise of the fruit"). Edgar Allan Poe described his young wife Virginia, who had tuberculosis, as being "delicately, morbidly angelic" and remembered how in 1842, while they were having dinner, she had a sudden coughing fit followed by haemoptysis, as "suddenly she stopped, clutched her throat and a wave of crimson blood ran down her breast […]. It rendered her even more ethereal".[37] In Alexandre Dumas's phrasing, "it was the fashion to suffer from the lungs; everybody was consumptive, poets especially; it was good form to spit blood after any emotion that was at all sensational, and to die before reaching the age of 30".[38]

Individuals affected by the disease went through severe weight loss owing to an inability to eat; blood filled their lungs and gave rise to a 'fashionable' wane look. The consequences of blood-filled lungs resulted in shortness of breath, paroxysmal cough and fatigue, and all these characteristics were figuratively transposed onto the stage as well as in literature, music, and film. There was a well-defined linguistic and performative codification associated

[36] It is interesting to point out that, among contemporary critics, Susan Sontag perceives a continuation up until the present with what she describes as the "cult of thinness", a sort of disconnection between the "reality" of dying from a disease and the level of "appearance". While the latter is acceptable, the sheer portrayal of a sombre reality turns out to be unacceptable. See S. SONTAG, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989.

[37] See H. ALLEN, *Israfel: The Life and Times of Edgar Allan Poe*, New York, George H. Doran, 1926, Vol. II, p. 519.

[38] For a recent, illuminating investigation of these aspects see K. LOUGHEED, *Catching Breath: The Making and Unmaking of Tuberculosis*, London, Bloomsbury, 2017.

with the disease, to the extent that, when such a code was not adhered to, artistic transpositions were likely to result in public outcry and derision.

A case in point is the 1853 *première* of Giuseppe Verdi's *La traviata* – based on a play adapted from Alexandre Dumas *fils*'s novel *La Dame aux camélias* (1848) – with curvaceous soprano Fanny Salvini-Donatelli playing the consumptive. Since she did not fit the collective understanding of the slender, sallow figure commonly associated with consumptives, the tragedy eventually dwindled to comedy at its first performance in Venice, with the audience breaking out into laughter when Violetta was told she had only hours to live. Differently put, for the 19th-century audiences Salvini-Donatelli did not have what Susan Sontag calls the "manner of appearing".[39] She was perceived as vulgar, her plumpness suggesting that she whole-heartedly enjoyed her food: in her impersonation, she could not possibly have been consumptive and on the verge of death. Again, as underlined by Sontag:

> Consumption was understood as a manner of appearing, and that appearance became a staple of nineteenth-century manners. It became rude to eat heartily. It was glamorous to look sickly. "Chopin was tubercular at a time when good health was not chic," Camille Saint-Saëns wrote in 1913 […]. Saint-Saëns was right to connect an artist, Chopin, with the most celebrated *femme fatale* of the period, who did a great deal to popularize the tubercular look. The TB-influenced idea of the body was a new model for aristocratic looks – at a moment when aristocracy stops being a matter of power, and starts being mainly a matter of image. ("One can never be too rich. One can never be too thin," the Duchess of Windsor once said.) Indeed, the romanticizing of TB is the first widespread example of that distinctively modern activity, promoting the self as an image. The tubercular look had to be considered attractive once it came to be considered a mark of distinction, of breeding. "I cough continually!" Marie Bashkirtsev wrote in the once widely read *Journal*, which was published, after her death at twenty-four, in 1887. "But for a wonder, far from making me look ugly, this gives me an air of languor that is very becoming." What was once the fashion for aristocratic *femmes fatales* and aspiring young artists became, eventually, the province of fashion as such. Twentieth-century women's fashions (with their cult of thinness) are the last stronghold of the metaphors associated with the romanticizing of TB in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.[40]

Sontag argues that metaphors used to describe illness risk legitimising the false notion that the ailment's cause is to be found in an inward process of 'repressed passion', as though the affected person were responsible for the disease itself. Central to her thesis is that metaphors associated with illness tend to discourage, silence and blame patients, therefore proving detrimental to wellness. This continues to be a matter of debate, as testified to by, among others, Elena Semino's book *Metaphor in Discourse*, where it is claimed that metaphor is indeed essential to human communication.[41] And whilst Sontag strongly argued against the resort to metaphor conjoined with illness, nowadays metaphors still underpin communication about infection globally. This is illustrated by how President Trump and his Surgeon General pictured tackling the COVID-19 pandemic in the USA in terms of a "Pearl Harbour moment",[42] or Queen Elizabeth II's strong ap-

[39] S. SONTAG, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*, p. 57.

[40] *Ibidem*.

[41] See E. SEMINO, *Metaphor in Discourse*, Cambridge, CUP, 2008.

[42] "Americans Warned of 'Pearl Harbor Moment' as Trump Tells Parts of the Nation to Brace for 'Peak'", *Washington Post*, 5 April 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/04/05/coronavirus-latest-news/ (last accessed on 10 April 2020).

peal to nationalistic sentiments in her statement "We will meet again" and "succeed in fight".[43]

Thus metaphor seems to be essential in the characterisation of diseases and responses to them. Just as tuberculosis isolated the individual from society, so does COVID-19: the introduction of safe distancing, mask-wearing and lockdown measures in many ways parallels the 19th-century global understanding that tuberculosis was a contagion. The first successful remedy against TB consisted in a sanatorium-based cure, contemplated for the first time in Hermann Brehmer's doctoral dissertation *Tuberculosis is a Curable Disease* (1854). This accelerated the 'industry of sanatoriums' across Europe, including visits by poets, artists and aristocrats to a number of sought-after spa destinations in the continent (such as Bagni di Lucca, Italy). Pauline Bonaparte (Napoleon's sister), Elizabeth Barrett Browning and many others flocked to the continent in a desire for cure and artistic inspiration. Gradually there was a decline in tuberculosis cases, despite there being no pharmaceutical treatment yet. It was not until 1944 that a remedy was found, although there continued to be a notion that artistic activity necessitated the 'tuberculosis illness', so much so that the alleged decadence in the arts was linked to a corresponding decrease in tuberculosis cases.

Film, the newest of art forms, can be said to have taken up from where Puccini's *La bohème* left off. In 1911, the *Moving Picture News* wrote that Alice Guy-Blaché, "the first female filmmaker in history, was a 'fine example of what a woman can do if given a square chance in life'".[44] If still in the operatic manner, her *Girl in the Armchair* (1912) further testified to the perspectives opened up by this bright female pioneer. The film tells of a girl who, while lying in an armchair, overhears that her arranged marital spouse has stolen a sum of money for gambling purposes. Being individually wealthy, the betrothed girl decides to cover up the theft and pay the money back with her own. Intriguingly, this circumstance coincides with Alice Guy-Blaché's efforts to support her husband, Herbert Blaché, who had worked as her camera assistant in Paris and accompanied her as a translator to Germany, with a view to promoting moving pictures. Prior to her marriage in 1907, she had been the French head of production; soon after she announced that she was to marry, Gaumont sent the couple to the United States and appointed Herbert as head of the company there, since married women were customarily discouraged from work.

However, in 1910, Alice managed to set up her own moving-picture industry, named 'Solax Film', which, over a short period of time, would become the biggest film company in the East Coast of the United States. 'Be Natural', the slogan associated with her studios, inculcated the spirit of a method of directing that was part and parcel of her huge success. In 1912, the *New York Clipper* weekly quoted her as saying: "I have produced some of the biggest productions ever released by a motion picture company".[45]

[43] "Coronavirus: Queen Tells UK 'We Will Succeed in Fight'", 5 April 2020, *BBC*, https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-52176222 (last accessed on 10 April 2020).

[44] See A. MCMAHAN, "Alice Guy: Overlooked No More", 23 September 2019, https://aliceguyblache.com/news/alice-guy-overlooked-no-more (last accessed on 28 November 2020). Needless to say, that kind of chance was only allowed to women when male interpretation saw no threat (either financial or political). As the author wrote in her *Memoirs*, if "the future development of motion pictures had been foreseen at this time, I should never have obtained [a man's] consent".

[45] See again A. MCMAHAN, "Alice Guy: Overlooked No More".

7. Falling Leaves *Between Opera and Medical Advancement*

Falling Leaves was praised by the *New York Dramatic Mirror* as a film "developed and played with a compelling naturalness", focusing on a "captivating little girl" who sets out to "thwart fate when it decreed that her sister should die of consumption when the leaves had all fallen".[46] Guy-Blaché's knowledge about filmmaking, gained in France over an eleven-year period, meant that her understanding was thorough and had been sharpened by her place within the industry from the inception. Her working experience in a man's domain had provided her with the necessary skills to assert her role as a leading light in the burgeoning film industry.

While taking her cue from one of O. Henry's short stories,[47] she also established a symbolic link between this film and Robert Koch's investigation and discoveries related to tuberculosis, for which he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 1905. Indeed, the singling out of the TB bacterium was pivotal for her filmic rendition, which fulfilled the role of both story-telling and factual-knowledge reporting. In other words, *Falling Leaves* dialogued with an updated, scientific understanding of tuberculosis that was committed to finding a viable cure, and, by means of its artistic representation, it strengthened the idea that women hit by this illness should live, rather than tragically pass away. Guy-Blaché had a keen interest in science and tried to keep abreast with medical developments, as also confirmed by her early camera work. Describing how she "often helped [director of the institute Francois Frank] photograph ataxic persons, the respiration of animals with hearts laid open and frogs which I marked with white flags before registering their palpitations",[48] she demonstrated a passion that made it natural for her to scientifically opine in her films, and specifically in *Falling Leaves.*

On yet another level, some elements underpinning Puccini's *La bohème* can be found again in *Falling Leaves*, which partially endorsed the 19th-century view of consumption and its emotionally-laden operatic interpretation. Both *La bohème* and *Falling Leaves* cast the central female figure as a young, slender and pale woman assailed by weakness and a dainty cough. In Puccini's work, Mimì sings of her love of "all things that have gentle magic, that talk of love, of spring", the "things called poetry". *Falling Leaves* similarly depicts the protagonist as willowy and artistic (she attempts to play the piano), but, whereas Mimì is hopelessly doomed, the film's tragic heroine is saved from death thanks to both scientific intervention and a touch of the magical by her little sister Trixy. Guy-Blaché thus introduces a paradigm shift that hinges on a surviving heroine who, by replacing the stereotype of the young pale creature portrayed in opera and literature, leaves room for a more robust and resilient kind of woman. This character, one might argue, is willing to survive just as the filmmaker herself was determined to survive in her business enterprise.[49]

[46] "Review of *Falling Leaves*", *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 67 (1735), 20 March 1912, p. 32, https://fultonhistory.com (last accessed on 28 November 2020).

[47] See O. Henry (William Sydney Porter), "The Last Leaf", in Id., *The Trimmed Lamp, and Other Stories of the Four Million*, New York, McClure, Phillips, 1907, pp. 198-208.

[48] A. Guy-Blaché, *The Memoirs of Alice Guy Blaché*, p. 18.

[49] Guy-Blaché's determination is suggested by various factors and circumstances, such as when, pregnant with her second child, she built a studio in Fort Lee, New Jersey, completing one to two films per week. By pushing the boundaries, she innovatively honed the medium. Notably, her film *A Fool and His Money* (1912), only recently discovered in a Sunday junk market in the USA, was the first to show an all African-American cast.

Falling Leaves departs from opera's commonplaces in other ways, too. If operatic young women were assumed to die or commit suicide for the sake of love, Guy-Blaché's new heroine treads a rosier path. A different context comes into view as the bacterial doctor not only saves the young pale patient from an artistically extolled past, but also serves her. This film can therefore be said to make retribution for the wrongs suffered by a whole family of foredoomed consumptive heroines. In 1912, it was time for a less prejudiced assessment of the consumptive patient's condition and life expectancy, and the French director's imagined interpretation of a cure for tuberculosis by a bacteriologist was closer in fact to the three operas of the preceding century.

Unfortunately, however, more time was necessary for this ray of hope to pierce the darkness, to the extent that, in real life, Little Trixy's sister would have succumbed. Indeed, the enthusiasm fuelled at the turn of the 20th century by Robert Koch's identification of *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* was bound to wane when the German researcher's attempt at introducing a tuberculin-based treatment did not prove effective. It was only in 1949 that a compound against consumption would be discovered: this was 'streptomycin', an antibiotic classified by Jewish-American biochemist and microbiologist Selman Abraham Waksman (1888-1973), who focused his studies on soil microbes. In 1952, like Koch before him, Waksman received the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine.

8. *Conclusion: Future Cures to Be Found in Garden Soil?*

Alice Guy-Blaché's life could in its own way be defined as 'operatic', since it continued to be theatrical and intense. After deciding to concentrate on production, she passed on the financial side of the company to her husband Herbert, who, however, was unable to adopt successful strategies for the sales of her films, particularly with regard to *The Lure* (1914). Initially banned, this film was based on the homonymous 1913 controversial play by American writer George Scarborough, and it cautioned about white slavery by telling a sympathetic story of how young women were lured into prostitution.[50] While Herbert Blaché was persuaded that it was near worthless, that film actually went on to make a fortune for the lucky buyer.

Leaving his wife bankrupt and with two dependent children, Herbert moved to California along with the lead actress and set up his own company. Sadly, Alice was now forced to work under his direction and found herself in a traumatic predicament. When she decided to return to France with her children, work for her in the film industry was hopeless, and she consequently resorted to writing children stories for newspapers to make ends meet.[51]

In her pathbreaking productions, Guy-Blaché also went to great lengths to portray 'naturalness' by humanely depicting immigrants from Eastern Europe and placing them in outdoor locations, as is the case with *Making an American Citizen* (1912). This film's sense of humanity toward poor immigrants is hard to find in the United States' establishment of our days, as one gathers from "Trump Migrant Separation Policy: Children 'In Cages' in Texas", 18 June 2018, *BBC News*, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-44518942 (last accessed on 3 September 2019).

[50] See R. ABEL (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Early Cinema*, London and New York, Routledge, 2005, p. 693.

[51] See "Nature to Lead Fight Against Tuberculosis", 24 August 2018, *UQ News*, The University of Queensland, Australia, https://www.uq.edu.au/news/article/2018/08/nature-lead-fight-against-tuberculosis (last accessed on 3 September 2019).

A still photograph from that time sees her seated in a garden, as if that backdrop were a metaphor for a now frozen existence in a filmic shot about her life. Interestingly, in Canadian Marquise Lepage's recent documentary *The Lost Garden: The Life and Cinema of Alice Guy-Blaché* (1995), Alice's lifetime achievements are illustrated by her own words from interviews and with an emphasis on the garden theme, which she had recurrently equated with her very place in the film industry.

Both the garden of cabbages in *La Fée aux Choux* and the autumnal one in *Falling Leaves* appear as environments conjoined with the strength and continuity of life. For its part, consumption, or TB, still represents a major problem in various areas of the world, being the leading cause of death due to a single bacterium. The incidence of multi-drug-resistant tuberculosis is of concern to all medical practitioners and researchers in the field. Approximately 10 million cases of tuberculosis are diagnosed annually, with the disease causing 1.7 million deaths every year.

What is more, owing to the fact that the antibiotics used for treating the infection have serious, toxic side effects, a search for alternatives has led medical directions to turn to gardens for possible answers. Specifically, the research has centred on the soil of gardens and the millions of bacteria thriving there. Such minuscule, one-celled organisms are absolutely essential to the garden environment, performing important services related to water dynamics, nutrient cycling, and disease suppression. A mere teaspoon of soil generally contains between 100 million and 1 billion of these organisms. With reference to the present article, it is worth underlining that, in our days, Professor Antje Blumenthal from the University of Queensland has identified a compound naturally made by soil bacteria, which has been found to be effective against tuberculosis. Added to this major advancement is another scientific breakthrough linked to the vegetable world, namely to Persian shallots (*Allium stipitatum*), which seem to have an enormous potential for antibiotic assistance. Indeed, it has been proven that the synthesised active substances present in the bulb of the Persian shallot can inhibit the growth of tuberculosis by 99.9 percent.[52]

In the upshot, one might surmise that Guy-Blaché's garden of *Falling Leaves*, with its millions of bacteria at its roots, quite possibly holds scientific secrets yet to be discovered. From beneath the earth in the gardens, as John Keats famously eulogised in his poem "Fairy Song", the "flower will bloom another year": one must not weep, because "young Buds sleep in the root's white core".[53]

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[52] See "Persian Shallot 'Could Help Fight TB Antibiotic Resistance'", 20 January 2018, *BBC News*, https://www.bbc.com/news/health-42751095 (last accessed on 25 March 2020).

[53] J. KEATS, "Fairy Song", ll. 1-4, https://internetpoem.com/john-keats/fairy-song-poem/ (last accessed on 25 March 2020).

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