« Sauver l'artiste avec l'homme »: Representations of a Pianist and His Hands in Robert Wiene's *Orlacs Hände* (1924)

For Alexandra, my storyteller

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Abstract. « To save the artist as well as the man »: the surgeon who endeavours to save the life and the hands of Paul Orlac, the protagonist in Robert Wiene's silent film *Orlacs Hände* (1924), sets himself an ambitious goal. In a successful operation, the world-famous pianist who lost both hands in a train crash is given the hands of a convicted murderer. It is Orlac's impression that the hands live a life of their own, and that they drive him to commit crimes himself.

How important is it that Orlac is a pianist? Could he have been any other artist? And which image of the pianist as an artist is conveyed by Robert Wiene? A close reading and comparison of Wiene's film and its literary source (Maurice Renard's novel *Les Mains d'Orlac*, 1920) allows us to answer these questions in greater detail, while other contemporary films provide a further frame of reference.

Keywords: *The Hands of Orlac*, Robert Wiene, Maurice Renard, Pianist, Artist Status

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« Sauver l'artiste avec l'homme » : les représentations d'un pianiste et de ses mains dans *Les Mains d'Orlac* (Robert Wiene, 1924)

Résumé. « Sauver l'artiste avec l'homme » : le chirurgien qui s'efforce de sauver la vie et les mains de Paul Orlac, le protagoniste du film muet *Orlacs Hände* (1924) de Robert Wiene, se fixe un objectif ambitieux. Lors d'une opération réussie, le pianiste de renommée mondiale, qui a perdu ses deux mains dans un accident de train, reçoit les mains d'un meurtrier condamné. Orlac a l'impression que les mains ont une vie propre et qu'elles le poussent à commettre lui-même des crimes.

Quelle est l'importance du fait qu'Orlac soit pianiste ? Aurait-il pu être un autre artiste ? Et quelle image du pianiste en tant qu'artiste est véhiculée par Robert Wiene ? Une lecture attentive et une comparaison du film de Wiene et de sa source littéraire (le roman de Maurice Renard, *Les Mains d'Orlac*, 1920) nous permet de répondre à ces questions plus en détail, tandis que d'autres films contemporains fournissent un cadre de référence supplémentaire.

Mots-clés : *Les Mains d'Orlac*, Robert Wiene, Maurice Renard, pianiste, statut de l'artiste

> In the spring of 1924, the premiere of *The Hands of Orlac*, one of the gems of Expressionist film, made such an impression on its Austrian audience that when it was over many of them began to cry out in anger. The lead actor, Conrad Veidt, had to go up on the stage to explain how the filming had been done. The great actor, with his commanding presence and voice, managed to calm the viewers that had been stirred up by the silent film (Bartra, 2014: 113)[1].

Have you ever cried out in anger after viewing a silent film? It is unlikely that almost a century after its first screening, a film such as Robert Wiene's *Orlacs Hände* would stir up an audience as it did in 1924[2]. Were people in 1924 shocked by its expressionist style, or rather by its veracity? Considering the recent scholarly attention to *Orlacs Hände*, it is apparent that the film continues to stir the minds of its viewers. Moreover, the critical literature discussed below demonstrates that the film prompts analyses from a wide range of viewpoints. Given that the film's protagonist is a pianist, however, it is surprising to see that an analysis from a musical perspective is still lacking; it is this analysis that the present article attempts to make.

1 The quotation contains a factual error: *Orlacs Hände* was premiered in Austria on 30 September 1924, not in spring. Regrettably, Bartra does not mention his source for this interesting piece of reception history; I have not been able to trace it thus far. The title of this essay quotes from the conversation between Dr. Cerral and Rosine Orlac early in the novel (Renard, 2020: 40).

2 The correct German spelling of the title is *Orlacs Hände*; nevertheless, the film was released with its title spelled as « *Orlac's Hände* ». Both spellings are found in the literature; the former is retained here.

Orlacs Hände, an adaptation of Maurice Renard's novel *Les Mains d'Orlac* (Renard, 1920), is the tale of the celebrated pianist Paul Orlac who loses his hands in a train crash[3]. A surgeon, Dr Serral, grafts the hands of a murderer who has just been executed onto Paul's stumps[4]. He does so unbeknownst to Orlac, until the latter has a vision of a *manus ex machina*, a fist trying to crush him in his dream. When he wakes up, Orlac finds an anonymous note on his bed revealing the origin of his new hands.

Gradually, Orlac becomes convinced that his transplanted hands have their own will, are taking control of his mind, and urge him to commit crimes. Dr Serral tries to convince him that his own willpower needs to gain control of his body and his « new » hands. Despite Serral's pleading, Orlac becomes frightened by the new, foreign hands attached to his body. He does not dare touch his wife, Yvonne. Orlac's housemaid Regine, on the instigation and manipulative orders of Serral's malicious assistant Nera, tries to « seduce Orlac's hands » into attacking her, but does not succeed. Orlac tries to play the piano with his new hands, picks up a pen and tries to write, but his hands have lost their former dexterity and sensitivity. His only contact with his former piano playing is listening to the recordings he made previously, but this proves to be too confronting: he stops listening and, frustrated, smashes the record to pieces.

His new situation brings the Orlacs in economic difficulties, because Paul's hands are no longer able to play the piano. Yvonne goes to Orlac's father to ask for financial help to settle their debts, but the old man refuses. When Orlac's father, with whom he has a troubled relationship, is murdered, Orlac is convinced that he committed the murder himself –despite having no memories of the act. Subsequently, Orlac is blackmailed by a person who pretends to be the executed murderer and to have been resurrected thanks to a head transplant carried out by Nera.

A plot twist at the end of the film is set in motion by Regine's confession to the police. It is revealed that Vasseur was actually innocent: both the crime for which Vasseur was convicted and the murder of Orlac's father were committed by Nera, who also turns out to be the blackmailer. In contrast to the relatively slow development of the film, this faster-paced final may strike the viewer as rather abrupt. Neither does it answer all the questions: if Orlac's hands are innocent, then why did he feel the criminal urges exerted by his hands?

The preceding brief overview of the story enables us to understand the many interpretations found in recent literature. As the following examples will illustrate, critical responses to *Orlacs Hände* touch upon the many semantic fields created by the film. *Orlacs Hände* features particular topics in Gothic films, such as railways and their inherent possibility of accidents (Ballhausen, 2011: 93-95), and the First World War soldiers' return to society (Hans, 2010; Wittmann, 2011). Common readings view the film as a specimen of « pros-

3 Synopses of *Orlacs Hände* of varying length are given in most publications discussing the film; one of the most detailed is Steiner and Liebrand, 2003: 5-6.

4 I use the spelling « Cerral » when referring to Renard's novel, « Serral » when referring to Wiene's film (cf. Table 1).

thetic » horror about missing, severed or mutilated body parts, viewed from the perspectives of neurology (Bartra, 2014), Orlac's afflicted masculinity (Hans, 2010), and the wider implications of his « disability » (Olney, 2006). The film has frequently been linked to psychoanalytical leitmotifs such as dreams (Sipiora, 2016), guilt and sin (Wittmann, 2011; Trifonova, 2018), and *Kriegsneurose* (Hans, 2010). More philosophically inclined studies point out the classical *topos* of the body-versus-mind problem (Bartra, 2014). Film historians, on the other hand, tend to point out the film's stylistic features in the context of German expressionism (Ballhausen, 2011; Cánepa, 2010; Morato Zanatto, 2016) and focus on the film's haptics (Ramalho, 2016) and gestural language (Steiner & Liebrand, 2003; Morato Zanatto, 2016).

The present article will focus on the starting point of the film's main character –Orlac the pianist– rather than on his transformation throughout the film. Does it matter that Orlac is a pianist, and how is Orlac's musicianship played out in Wiene's portrayal of his protagonist? We will see how Wiene's adaptation of Renard's novel resulted in an atypical « pianist film », but still relates to certain trends in the portrayal of musicians in early film.

Les Mains d'Orlac and Its Adaptations, 1920-1963

In 1920, Maurice Renard published what would be his most popular and most translated novel, *Les Mains d'Orlac*. The novel reflects Renard's awareness of, and interest in the scientific progress of his time in areas such as biology, psychology, and physics (Morton 1920/2020; Evans, 1994: 385; Després, 2009). In addition, it is clear from Renard's work that he equally nurtured an interest in spiritualism, as shown by the spiritualist séances Orlac attends.

Renard's novel was first published as a 58-episode *feuilleton* in the French newspaper *L'Intransigeant* between 15 May and 12 July 1920[5]. The norms and conventions of its original format remain visible in the novel's structure in two parts of 13 chapters each, its fairly long-winded exposition (*Première Partie. Les Signes*) and its rather laborious working towards the resolution of the murder mysteries. This accounts for certain elements that have not been retained in the film adaptations: several characters, including Monsieur de Crochans, and a previous murder are left out, as well as Orlac's post-operatory job as a conductor and his *chambre des mains*, the room in which he stores and uses appliances destined to regain the original dexterity and flexibility of his hands.

5 Digitized issues of the newspaper can be consulted at the database Gallica, https://gallica.bnf.fr (last visited 12.06.2021).

Table 1.
***Les Mains d'Orlac* and its adaptations, 1920-1963**

Year	Title	Author / director	Medium	Protagonist	His wife	Surgeon	Blackmailer / murderer	Music
1920	*Les Mains d'Orlac*	Maurice Renard	Novel	Stéphen Orlac	Rosine Orlac	Dr Cerral	Eusebio Nera	Composers mentioned in the novel include Beethoven, Chopin, Debussy, Dukas, Lekeu, Liszt, Ravel, Saint-Saëns, and Smetana
1924	*Orlacs Hände*	Robert Wiene	Film	Paul Orlac (Conrad Veidt)	Yvonne Orlac (Alexandra Sorina)	Dr Serral (Hans Homma)	Nera (Fritz Kortner)	Unknown composer Reference to Chopin, *Nocturne op. 55/2*
1935	*Mad Love*	Karl Freund	Film	Stephen Orlac (Colin Clive)	Yvonne Orlac (Frances Drake)	Dr Gogol (Peter Lorre)		Dimitri Tiomkin
1960	*Les Mains d'Orlac / The Hands of Orlac*	Edmond T. Gréville	Film	Stéphen Orlac (Mel Ferrer)	Louise Cochrane Orlac (Lucile Saint-Simon)	Professor Volchett (Donald Wolfit)	Néron/ Nero the magician (Christopher Lee) Régina / Li-Lang (Dany Carrel)	Claude Bolling Reference to music of Chopin, Liszt, Schubert; Beethoven, *Sonata op. 27/1* « Mondschein »
1960	*The Blind Man*	Alfred Hitchcock	Unrealised film project[6]	Jimmy Shearing (James Stewart)	-	-	-	-
1962	*Hands of a Stranger*	Newt Arnold	Film	Vernon Paris (James Stapleton)	Dina Paris (Joan Harvey)	Dr Gil Harding (Paul Lukather)	-	Richard LaSalle
1963	*The Crawling Hand*	Herbert L. Strock	Film	Paul Lawrence (Rod Lauren)	Donna (Allison Hayes)	-	-	Marlin Skiles

Renard's novel was adapted as a movie on several occasions (Table 1): the most famous are *Orlacs Hände* by Robert Wiene, Karl Freund's *Mad Love* (1935), and *Les Mains d'Orlac* by Edmond Gréville (1960). Wiene, who had gained recognition for *Das Kabinett des Dr. Caligari* in 1920, released his *Orlacs*

6 In this unproduced project of Alfred Hitchcock, blind pianist Jimmy Shearing regains his sight after receiving the eyes of a dead man. Having visions of being shot, Shearing comes to realize that the dead man was in fact murdered and the image of the murderer is still imprinted on the retina of his new eyes.

Hände in Berlin on 24 September 1924 and in Vienna on 30 September. The script had been elaborated by Wiene and Ludwig Nerz, on the basis of the German translation of Renard's novel by Norbert Jacques, published in 1922[7]. The Luxembourgian Jacques was no stranger to the film scene: he had created the character of Dr Mabuse, who appeared in his bestselling novel *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler* (1921), adapted by Fritz Lang in his film of the same title (1922).

As was already suggested earlier, the film met with a mixed public and critical response. In his review, the influential film critic Béla Balázs commented in a positive manner, but not without ambiguity:

> One of the best films of recent years […]. It is not of the very fine kind of psychologically refined, intimate cinematography that we have actually come to expect from Wiene and Veidt. It is more attuned to coarse crime romance and mysterious complications of the plot. But in its way, as dime-novel [or pulp] if you will, it is excellent[8] (Balázs, 1924).

The next adaptation of Renard's novel was Karl Freund's *Mad Love* (1935), with Peter Lorre in the title role[9]. The principal difference with the earlier Orlac is that the surgeon plays the evil part, and that Orlac indeed commits a murder. Orlac's new hands have retained the skill of knife-throwing and eventually put it to good use at the end of the film, when Orlac saves his wife's life by killing the doctor-criminal Gogol who is about to strangle her.

In 1960, a third remake of the Orlac story appeared, directed by Edmond T. Gréville. In this adaptation, there is an incident in which Orlac nearly strangles his wife –in contrast to the 1924 version where he does not dare touch her. More importantly, he resumes playing the piano after the operation (07:17, 12:30, 23:38, and 54:20). Orlac attempts to return to the stage with a solo recital, but fails miserably (60:00). When playing the first movement of Beethoven's *Mondscheinsonate* (Moonlight Sonata), he has a vision of Vasseur's gloves appearing on his own hands and is unable to continue his performance.

Later in the 1960s, Hollywood's apparent fascination with the Orlac theme continued with a number of thrillers loosely based on Renard's original story. For example, in *Hands of a Stranger* (1962), pianist Vernon Paris loses his hands in a taxi accident. The film departs from the original story as Paris's girlfriend finds his post-surgery scars repulsive and accidentally dies –unlike Yvonne or Rosine Orlac who always support Orlac throughout the story. Furthermore, Paris commits several murders and is eventually killed by the police.

7 Renard (trans. Jacques), 1922. In the film credits, only Nerz is credited for the script. The principal biography of Wiene is Jung and Schatzberg, 1995; see also summarily Jung and Schatzberg, 1993.

8 My translation of: « *Einer der besten Filme der letzten Jahre […]. Er ist nicht von der ganz feinen Sorte der seelisch differenzierten, intimen Filmkunst, die wir von Wiene und Veidt eigentlich erwartet haben. Er ist eher auf derbe Kriminalromantik und geheimnisvolle Komplikationen der Handlung eingestellt. In seiner Art, als Kolportage, wenn man will, ist er aber hervorragend* ».

9 A synopsis is given in Trifonova, 2018: 124-125.

Orlacs Hände (1924), an Atypical « Pianist Film »

Orlacs Hände is atypical on various accounts, such as the film's genre and its use of diegetic and non-diegetic music. Furthermore, Wiene's attempt at (scientific) veracity or credibility –it would be misleading to speak of « realism » in a literary and cinematic narrative in which the fantastic occupies pride of place– in a number of aspects should be taken into account. These aspects do not relate to Orlac's piano performances, but to his hands.

Robert Wiene's film of 1924 is difficult to classify in terms of genre. It is neither a real nor a fictional musician's biography –as little as Renard's novel is one. By contrast, *Orlacs Hände* has been labelled as a mixture of various film genres, such as (psycho)thriller, police mystery, psychological suspense, fantasy, and *Kammerspiel* (e.g., Steiner and Liebrand, 2003: 4). A contemporary (1928) American reviewer for *Variety* labelled the film as « an absurd fantasy in the old-time mystery-thriller class » (Anonymous, 1928).

Equally unusual for a film protagonized by a musician is the film's use of diegetic and non-diegetic music. Our knowledge of the intended non-diegetic music in the film is extremely limited, given that no original music for *Orlacs Hände* has been preserved. New film scores have been composed by Jan Kunkel and Pierre Oser in 1993, by Henning Lohner in 1998, and by Paul Mercer in 2008.

Although there are a few scenes depicting musical performance and listening to music, the diegetic music in *Orlacs Hände* remains very restricted as well. In the opening sequence of the film, after his photo as a star appears in a newspaper article (at 01:44), Orlac is seen playing the piano (from 01:48 until 02:09). Conrad Veidt's piano playing in this scene is rather credible but does not qualify as realistic. During ten seconds (01:48 to 01:58), Orlac is shot from the front, the camera showing his upper body and his hands moving, but the keys are not visible. Orlac seems to be playing successions of broken chords, rising from the lower to the upper register of the keyboard. At one point, he is seen performing what might be a glissando with both hands, followed again by fast passagework, rising from the lower to the upper range. The pianist uses the whole span of the keyboard during this shot, in which the hands seem to have relatively little independence from each other –they almost constantly move in parallel motion. Such writing for piano might be found in large-scale concert pieces for piano solo, or in concert pieces for piano and orchestra, such as Franz Liszt's *Hungarian Fantasy* (*Fantasie über Ungarische Volkslieder*, S. 123, 1852). It should be mentioned that Liszt's *Fantasy* is repeatedly referred to in Renard's novel but remains absent from the film. The *Fantasy* contains all the elements described here, but never in such close succession as to correspond to this particular sequence. Unlike the opening scene of Greville's *The Hands of Orlac*, an orchestra is not shown in Wiene's film, although Orlac's grand and virtuoso gestures at the keyboard might have been intended to suggest its presence.

During the next ten seconds (01:59 to 02:09), the camera shows a close-up of hands touching the keys, shot from the pianist's left side. Here, our pianist

seems to be playing a different piece of music altogether. The movement of the hands is much calmer and slower, and they use only the middle part of the keyboard, not the upper or lower registers. The right hand plays a melody with repeated notes, while the left alternates between bass tones and middle-range chords. The hands move more independently of each other. It is my impression that this second sequence was played by a genuine, uncredited pianist. As a whole, Orlac's piano playing comes across as unrealistic on account of the grand gestures, the lack of finer motor skills, and the absence of independent hand movements in the first sequence. The unrealistic nature of his playing is reinforced by the contrast with the second sequence and its completely different hand movements.

In a later scene in the film (69:29), Orlac is seen listening to the gramophone playing one of his own recordings: a « *Nocturno* » *op. 55 no. 2* by « Friedrich » Chopin, according to the label on the record. Chopin's second *Nocturne op. 55 no. 2*, in E flat major, conveys an atmosphere of tranquillity and elegance in a 12/8 time signature. The left hand consists of an undulating waltz-like accompaniment of widely spaced chords across two or three octaves. It underscores the quiet melody in the right hand that seems to go on without interruption or change in character. We might imagine a film accompanist playing the opening phrases of the *Nocturne* during the screening of the film, thus creating a stark contrast between Orlac's frustration over his inability to play the music on the one hand, and the undisturbed elegance of Chopin's music on the other[10]. From 70:00 until 70:25, we see Orlac putting the record on the gramophone and trying to play along with the music, his hands playing imaginary keys in front of him. After 15 seconds, his hands stiffen into shaking claws. Orlac snatches the record off the gramophone and smashes it to pieces.

If not for Conrad Veidt's piano playing, some contemporaries of Wiene have lauded the veracity in Wiene's film particularly on account of the scene depicting the train crash site after the accident (Anonymous, 1924, quoted in Ballhausen & Krenn, 2006: 37; Anonymous, 1928). More closely related to Orlac's status as a Very Important Pianist, two elements in the film stem from Renard's predilection for the use of scientific elements: transplantation and fingerprinting[11].

The driving scientific element of the film is the transplantation of both of Vasseur's hands onto the arms of Orlac. The operation and transplantation of body parts was a current topic in the years immediately after World War I. The surgeon portrayed in Renard's novel, Dr Cerral, was based on the French surgeon Alexis Carrel (1873-1944). Carrel's breakthroughs in surgical grafting and reconnecting arteries and veins earned him the Nobel Prize for Medicine in 1912 (Goffette & Chabot, 2008: 296-297). Renard was inventive in combining the actual science of his time with procedures that in 1920 were science fiction:

10 For a historical performance of Chopin's *Nocturne op. 55 no. 2*, cf. the recording by Ignaz Friedman, originally made for the Columbia label in 1936, at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iYuXYE3MpiQ (last accessed 27.07.2021).

11 Further insights in Renard's relationship to science are offered by Després, 2009.

the first successful transplant of two hands was performed only in January 2000 (Goffette & Chabot, 2008: 289).

Furthermore, it is remarkable that the intrigue in both Renard's novel and Wiene's film adaptation is resolved by means of the still young scientific discipline of fingerprinting: Orlac's innocence and Nera's guilt can be established thanks to fingerprints. Fingerprinting was scientifically established by Darwin's cousin Francis Galton. Galton elaborately studied the composition and patterns of fingerprints, and their use as evidence in personal identification. In 1892, he published his first book on the subject, and largely based on his work, its use was gradually introduced by police forces worldwide. Until today, fingerprints are directly related to the concept of (unique) identity.

In *Orlacs Hände*, Dr Serral's assistant Nera makes wax casts of his friend Vasseur's fingertips, and subsequently crafts rubber gloves bearing Vasseur's fingerprints. Nera uses the gloves when he commits the murder for which Vasseur is condemned and when he kills Orlac's father –a murder for which Orlac himself is the principal suspect. The techniques used by Nera, as described by Renard, were certainly possible in 1920: Galton already mentions the use of casts among the possibilities for collecting fingerprints, recommending casts in wax or gutta-percha, a natural type of latex (Galton, 1892, 49-50).

It is striking that more than 30 years after Galton, German authorities considered the methods mentioned in the film as nothing more than a « theoretical possibility ». This occurred in the decision of the German *Film-Oberprüfstelle*, when it assessed the complaint of the Saxon Ministry of the Interior. On 10 January, 1925, that Ministry had asked for the withdrawal of the film, because it would make the use of fingerprinting known to the public and might thus inspire criminals (Seeger, 1925: 3). The Berlin *Oberprüfstelle* disregarded those arguments. It had consulted the head of the Identification Service at the Berlin police headquarters as an expert, who admitted the theoretical possibility, but stated that such forgeries had never gone beyond the scope of the laboratory (Seeger, 1925: 3-4). It thus seems that the plot twist at the end of *Orlacs Hände* has its importance. Not only does it provide the clue to the mysterious events and to the murder of Orlac's father, but the declaration of Regine and of the police officers also serve to bring back the plot to the reality of 1924.

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Pianist

A reality that certainly must have appealed to the viewers in 1924, was the social status of the film's protagonist. Indeed, Orlac's high social status is made clear from the outset, and the film gives various indicators of his success. Orlac is invited to play concerts, his star portrait appears in the newspapers, and he lives in a large and beautiful home, which Yvonne lavishly decorates with flowers while she awaits his return. Orlac is targeted and blackmailed by Nera, which indicates that Orlac is perceived as well-to-do. After the train crash, Orlac becomes a different person altogether. Plagued by uncertainty, his life has

become unsettled, and his artistic activities have come to an end. As a consequence, the Orlacs' economic situation has become much worse and they incur debts.

It is telling, for the sense of mental and social isolation *Orlacs Hände* wants to convey, that Paul Orlac is barely depicted in situations where he interacts socially with others. The exceptions are the opening concert scene where he only has musical contact with the (presumed, but invisible) audience, the murder scene where Orlac shuns every direct confrontation with the police officers investigating the crime, and the final scene in the pub where he confronts Nera, the police officers, his maid and his wife. It is indeed Yvonne who faces any other social contact that occurs in the film: she visits Orlac's father, and confronts the couple's creditors.

Wiene's choice of showing Stephen Orlac first and foremost as a pianist during performance has its importance. In a matter of seconds, Wiene conveys an image of the film's protagonist as an accomplished musician performing publicly. In addition to the intellectual and artistic qualities of concentration and mastery pointed out by Laurent Marty (2013)[12], this opening scene not only communicates social status, but at the same time invokes Orlac's solitude: only Orlac is seen, playing against a black background. The audience and its reaction to Orlac's performance are invisible.

After focusing on Orlac's posture at the piano, Wiene shows close-ups of the pianist's hands in action. A logical and significant choice, given that throughout the film Orlac's hands are portrayed as cause and effect. The reason for Orlac's decline from artist to almost-criminal, and from an elevated to the lowest social status, is the dramatic change caused by the transplantation of Vasseur's hands onto Orlac's body. The operation affects Orlac's mind, and leads him to believe that he is a potential criminal and the victim of these hands. Orlac exclaims to Dr Serral: « I'm telling you: they demand blood, crimes, murder! » (60:27).

The effects of the changes that happen to Orlac are equally visible through his hands and their movements. In line with the body language common in German expressionistic film, *Orlacs Hände* is rich in contorted countenances, in which especially the eyes of both Yvonne and Paul Orlac articulate a large repertory of expressions (cf. also Cánepa, 2010). In *Orlacs Hände*, however, the hands are at least at the same level of importance and expression as the eyes: « one reason that hands abound in silent films is because they speak » (Leutrat, 1995: 85; see also Van Elferen, 2012).

In their fascinating study on the portrayal and use of body parts in Gothic film and literature, Ian Conrich and Laura Sedgwick articulate very precisely how hands are part of the Gothic filmic language (2017: 131):

> Hands physically express the body's intelligence and creativity, enacting the wishes of the mind. As highly dextrous parts of the body, they display the skills and expertise that emphasise an individual's

12 These qualities recall the observations by Taillandier-Guittard, 2017, in her analysis of a filmed performance by Alfred Cortot.

> proficiency and professionalism, from handiwork and handicraft and the trade of a handyman, through the precision of watchmaking and surgery, to the deftness and nimble fingers needed to play a musical instrument.

The transformation that Orlac undergoes because of « his » hands thus becomes visible in the way he carries them. Originally, Orlac's hands were supple and dexterous, the artistic and virtuoso hands of a celebrated and sensitive pianist, capable of refined handwriting and of tenderness. In his elegantly written letter shown in the opening sequence of the film, he expresses his desire to caress his wife's hair and feel her body beneath his hands. From the outset of the film, Orlac's hands take on a tactile and explicitly carnal, eroticised dimension (Marty, 2013). This dimension might be read as laying the groundwork for Orlac's nearly criminal impulses later on in the film: touching the other, in order to possess him or her, to the point of taking his or her life. Orlac's « first » hands already demonstrate how closely related Eros and Thanatos are.

His new replacement hands are big, uncivilised, coarse, and unable to play the piano or to write decently. After realizing that they carry inherent danger, Orlac refuses to touch his wife. For a large part of the film, Orlac is seen holding his hands far away from his body, his arms stretched out, his hands rigid, or cramped like claws, sometimes held up in front of his face. Wiene shows a return to animality, and to the resurfacing of primary impulses which threaten to take over and jeopardise the integrity of the individual. It is a typical feature of expressionist cinema, as well as the imaginary of the graft as an extreme experience of otherness within oneself (cf. Després, 2009).

The larger part of the film spells out how Orlac's crisis is the crisis of his hands. This crisis disconnects Orlac from his independence as an artist, from his masculinity, and from his integrity as a man. It leads him from Eros to Thanatos, from a status as an artist to that of a murderer. Saving Orlac means saving his hands, a salvation that will affect both the artist and the man.

Both Renard's novel and Wiene's film miss no opportunity to make the reader and viewer understand that, indeed, Orlac *is* his hands. In the film, Yvonne Orlac pleads with Dr Serral to « save his hands, his hands are his life, more than his life » (scene starting at 12:30). Renard states the identification even more explicitly during the first post-operational conversation held between Rosine Orlac and Dr Cerral: « He loves me, yes. Oh, yes! But not as much as his hands! If he would have sold his country, if he would be sentenced to death for treason, you wouldn't see him more desperate. It's not him anymore! »[13] (Renard, 2020: 69-70).

In a narrative in which the protagonist is so strongly and completely identified with his hands, an important question arises: does it matter that Orlac should be a pianist, or could he have been any other artist or musician? Goffette

13 My translation of: « *Il m'aime, oui. Oh ! oui ! Mais pas tant que ses mains ! Il aurait vendu son pays, il serait condamné à mort pour trahison, vous ne le verriez pas plus désespéré. Ce n'est plus lui !* »

and Chabot (2008: 298) argue that the choice of a piano-playing protagonist was made for reasons of dramatic impact, because their hands are an essential asset for virtuoso pianists. There is little doubt that this is the case, but one might easily object that this does not necessarily exclude other instruments: are not all instruments played by hands? But indeed, I would argue that from a visual and performance perspective, portraying Orlac as a pianist was certainly the best option.

From a performance setting perspective, i.e. from the perspective of an audience in a concert hall or cinema watching a musician play an instrument, one can distinguish instruments in which the hands modulate the sound either directly or indirectly (i.e., by means of another device), in which the hands are used equally or unequally, and in which the hands are fully or only partly visible while playing. In order to avoid a lengthy discussion of the performance features of the various instrument groups (strings, winds, percussion, keyboard instruments) with regard to the role and the position of the hands, their (in) direct impact on the sound, and their visibility to the public, it suffices to say that only keyboard instruments can serve well in a story in which hands are the main characters[14].

The harpsichord can be excluded from consideration here, because it only began its revival in earnest from the 1920s onwards, especially in France, so that it would have been too « niche » for Wiene's German and Austrian audiences. Similarly, the organ is less adequate for the Orlac narrative, given its completely different, « transcendent » connotations, either with church and religion, or with its opposites, evil and the devil. An early example can be found in *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925), where the phantom is seen playing the organ during the famous « unmasking scene ».

The foregoing implies that the piano in particular meets important conditions for inclusion in a film in which the hands of a musician play the *main* role. During a pianist's performance, both hands are equally active, they are directly and visibly responsible for the sound production, and thus for the artistic result intended by the performer. The piano can be played as autonomous, self-sufficient instrument, and can boast several centuries of artistic and social prestige. By making Orlac a pianist, both Renard and Wiene significantly enhanced the veracity of their story.

Musicians in Silent and Early Sound Film

The credibility attained by Renard and Wiene may account for the audience's rather extreme reactions to *Orlacs Hände*, as described by Bartra (cf. *supra*). Such a response, however, inevitably also stems from the public's expec-

14 The only non-keyboard alternative presenting equal visual qualities is the theremin, an electric instrument played by both hands, hovering over the instrument without touching it. It was only patented in 1928, however, and is therefore not considered here.

tations of a film protagonized by a pianist. At this point, it is worthwhile to consider the interrelations between music, musicians, and early film.

There is no lack of music in silent film: pianists and other musicians, sometimes entire orchestras, accompanied silent films in the film theatres of the early 20th century. They improvised *ad libitum* or on the basis of a given set of musical models, adapted to the content and atmosphere of the scenes they were accompanying (Fuchs, 2016)[15]. For more prestigious and expensive film productions, entirely new film scores were composed[16].

Occasionally, musicians appear on the screen as well, as principal or secondary characters in the story. In absence of larger studies, the following paragraphs offer some few observations about prominent musicians in selected (silent and early sound) films between 1907 and 1927, the year of the first feature-length film with a synchronized recorded music score, *The Jazz Singer* (see Table 2).

Table 2.
Selected silent and early sound films with prominent musicians, 1907-1927

Year	Title	Director	Duration	Musician	Musician character
1907	*Le piano irrésistible*	Alice Guy	04:17	Pianist	The Pianist (anonymous actor)
1908	*Lully ou le violon brisé*	Georges Méliès	*c.*04:00 (fragment)	Violinist	Jean-Baptiste Lully, cook and violinist (anonymous actor)
1909	*The Voice of the Violin*	D.W. Griffith	16:00	Violinist	Herr von Schmidt, music teacher (Arthur V. Johnson), his student, Helen Walker (Marion Leonard)
1911	*The Musician's Daughter*	Jay Hunt	14:23	Pianist, violinist, singer	Carl Wagner, musician and composer (William S. Rising), Alma Wagner, his daughter (Grace Scott), The Prima Donna (Dorothy Gibson)
1916	*A Movie Star*	Fred Hibbard	24:00	Pianist	One-Man Orchestra (Harry McCoy)
1916	*The Vagabond*	Charlie Chaplin	26:41	Violinist	The Vagabond (Charlie Chaplin)
1919	*Anders als die Andern*	Richard Oswald	*c.*50:00 (fragment)	Violinist	Paul Körner (Conrad Veidt)
1920	*Humoresque*	Frank Borzage	71:16	Violinist	Leon Kanter (Gaston Glass)
1920	*The Penalty*	Wallace Worsley	91:11	Pianist	Blizzard (Lon Chaney)
1921	*The Play House*	Buster Keaton	23:16	Band	Buster Keaton (« Buster » Keaton)

15 Costa de Beauregard, 2013: 18-20, briefly refers to the use of cue sheets in her study of the role of the pianist in three films between 1941 and 1987.

16 As mentioned earlier, this musical aspect of *Orlacs Hände* remains a blind spot.

1924	*Greed*	Erich von Stroheim	*c.*02:10:00 (fragment)	Concertina player	John McTeague (Gibson Gowland)
1925	*The Phantom of the Opera*	Rupert Julian	01:46:29	Organist and singers	The Phantom (Lon Chaney), Christine Daae (Mary Philbin) and Carlotta (Mary Fabian), both prima donnas (sopranos)
1925	*Soul-Fire*	John S. Robertson	01:20:42	Pianist-composer	Eric Fane (Richard Barthelmess)
1927	*The Jazz Singer*	Alan Crosland	01:36:11	Singer	Jakie Rabinowitz, the jazz singer (Al Jolson)
1927	*[Das Leben des] Beethoven*	Hans Otto Löwenstein	01:10:00	Pianist-composer	Ludwig van Beethoven (Fritz Kortner)
1927	*The Way of All Flesh*	Victor Fleming	*c.*07:00 (fragment)	Violinist	August Schiller jr. (Donald Keith)

Within this handful of early films between 1907 and 1927, we can distinguish various types of musicians in a prominent or protagonist role. In the earliest films listed in Table 2, they are portrayed as « artist(ic) » stereotypes, with matching outfits and behaviours. Both the pianist in Alice Guy's *Le piano irrésistible* (1907) and the violinist in *The Voice of the Violin* (1909) wear shoulder-length hair, a large bow tie, a white shirt and a black suit. Lully, the violinist in Méliès's *Le violon brisé* (1908) is a cook at the same time, and wears a hat, a white suit and long hair. Musicians in these early silents are characterized as performers by their outfits. The stereotype they represent is that of the humble artist who belongs to the category of entertainers, magicians, and circus performers –not unlike Al Jolson as the stereotype of the blackface jazz singer in *The Jazz Singer* (1927) (Shipton, 2007: 76, 413).

In his celebrated *The Vagabond* (1916), Charlie Chaplin combines this artist stereotype with his own persona of the Tramp, positioning his character unquestionably on the margin of society, and elevating the stereotype to a character with both comic and tragic aspects. In France, the film was screened as *Charlie Musicien* (Guyonvarch & Thibault-Starzyk, 2016). A famous scene shows the Vagabond competing with a wind band in and outside a coffee house.

From the later 1910s onwards, films appear in which musicians are portrayed explicitly as the skilled and virtuoso performer, without losing their characterization as comic and often marginal figures. In *A Movie Star* (1916), the movie theatre pianist is a one-man orchestra, who is seen accompanying a silent film, adding a drum, « Indian » sounds, and other sound effects to his piano playing. In a more humoristic fashion, also Buster Keaton plays an entire band on his own in *The Play House* (1921).

Unabashedly idealistic and romantic musicians also appear. Herr von Schmidt, the music teacher in the *Voice of the Violin* (1909), goes at great lengths to demonstrate his infatuation with his student Helen. Likewise, both Carl Wagner and his daughter Alma make great sacrifices to show their devotion to their loved ones in *The Musician's Daughter* (1911); a similar kind of affection is seen between August Schiller senior and junior in the surviving fragment of *The*

Way of All Flesh (1927). Similarly, love is what heals not only the hearts but also the body in *Humoresque* (1920), the fictional life story of the Jewish violinist Leon Kantor. Kantor gets injured on his arm during World War I and is unable to play his instrument, until he is ultimately rescued by love.

On the other side of the spectrum a number of criminal characters appear, villains that happen to play an instrument as a way to lend more depth to their characters. In Erich von Stroheim's legendary *Greed* (1924), McTeague plays the concertina. In *The Penalty* (1920), Blizzard (Lon Chaney) is a legless crime boss who lost his legs as a young boy. He is also a classical pianist; because of his handicap, his mistress works the pedals for him.

Around the turn of the decade, and as an extension of the tragicomic, with elements of the romantic and negative characters as well, musicians as tormented artists begin to appear in silent and early sound film. In *Anders als die Andern* (1919), Orlac-actor Conrad Veidt appears as a gay violinist, caught up in, and blackmailed for his illicit love for a male musician. Because the film was intended as a polemic against the infamous Paragraph 175, which made homosexuality a criminal offence, it was banned from public theatres. The film only survives as a fragment. In the 1925 adaptation of *The Phantom of the Opera*, we see the tormented Phantom play the organ during the already mentioned unmasking scene. In *Soul-Fire* (1925), the protagonist Eric Fane is a struggling, tormented composer and pianist, who lets himself guided through the world by the women he pursues, in search of both romantic and musical success. A better-known example is certainly Hans Otto Löwenstein's biopic *Beethoven* (1927), in which Beethoven is played by Fritz Kortner, the actor portraying Nera in *Orlacs Hände*.

As noted earlier, just a handful of films does not provide a basis solid enough to draw general conclusions. Further research will be necessary to confirm the emergence, around 1920, of a trend that increasingly depicts musicians as tormented artists. It seems, however, that together with Paul Körner, the Phantom, Erik Fane, and, in a certain sense, Blizzard, Orlac finds himself in the larger filmic context of the topos of the tormented artist, consisting mainly, though not exclusively, of keyboard players[17].

Conclusion

As we have seen, Robert Wiene's *Orlacs Hände* (1924) is a rather atypical pianist's film. This is, first of all, on account of the various genres it refers to. Second, *Orlacs Hände* is atypical because the very restricted amount of diegetic music and the as yet unconfirmed existence of any original (non-diegetic) film score.

17 Chion, 2018, mentions a number of titles of the 1940s elaborating the topos of the tormented musician: *Hangover Square* (John Brahm, 1945), *The Beast with Five Fingers* (Robert Floreym, 1946), and *Rope* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1948).

Orlacs Hände attempts to lend a certain degree of credibility to its representation of the storyline. While the performance of a double hand transplantation was still science fiction in the 1920s, it took its inspiration from real life in the person of the (in)famous surgeon Alexis Carrel, who made crucial breakthroughs in surgical grafting. Furthermore, *Orlacs Hände* lends an important place to the use of fingerprinting, a technique so intimately connected to the discovery of « true identity » that in 1925, German censors considered banning the film from cinemas. These scientific elements put the importance of the hands of Orlac even more in the limelight.

By choosing to make Orlac a pianist, Renard and the directors who subsequently adapted his novel for the screen, created as a protagonist an artist and husband whose social and relational status is crumbling, and whose situation enables him to identify utterly and completely with « his » hands –or rather, with the alien hands attached to his body. Orlac perceives the transplanted hands of the robber and murderer Vasseur as both cause and effect of his predicament.

The choice for a pianist as a protagonist generated a more realistic, credible and relatable viewing experience for Wiene's public. Music being performed by equally active and visible hands, on an instrument that enjoyed considerable autonomy and social status, was yet another strategy to enhance the story's credibility. Indeed, the film's credibility and veracity lent a new impulse to the developing trend of casting musicians as « tormented artists » in the silent and early sound films of the 1920s. It was possibly the combination of all these factors that might explain how viewers in 1924 strongly related to the most expressive portrayal of a tormented pianist they had seen until then –to the point of getting stirred up, and crying out in anger.

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