

# “Our Bravest and Most Beautiful Soldier”: Pola Negri, Wartime and the Gendering of Anxiety in *Hotel Imperial*

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## Abstract:

This article focuses on Pola Negri, one of the most iconic stars of the silent era, and concentrates on her performance and image in the Hollywood film *Hotel Imperial* (Mauritz Stiller, 1927). Assessing Negri's character within the wartime context of the plot, her screen presence and narrative function are analysed in relation to wartime anxiety, gender roles, and the role of the home front. Specifically, this article argues that Negri's exceptional display of anxiety, in contrast to the acting of her male co-protagonists, can be fruitfully understood as a distinctly “female”, empowering quality, aiding her role of main agent in the film. In the light of selected texts by Sigmund Freud, Charles Bachelard, and Lindsey Stonebridge, this article offers a close reading of Negri's performance, showing that Negri productively unblocks and mobilises the inherent anxiety of the film's time and place. Positioned in traditionally female locations, the home front and the domestic space, Negri acts upon the former by controlling the latter, enabling not only her own rescue, but also that of her menfolk: her soldier lover and, indirectly, the whole Austro-Hungarian army. This discussion is linked to the dramatic shift in Negri's image in *Hotel Imperial*, a shift which has traditionally been criticised as a weakening of her persona; this article instead argues that, far from being “tamed” by the shedding of her vamp connotations, Negri emerges as the film's strongest presence, gaining agency and power while explicitly rejecting patriarchal constructions of female sex-appeal.

**Keywords:** Pola Negri; Freud; Anxiety; Wartime; Home; Performance; Stardom.

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Pola Negri is one of the most iconic stars of the silent era, with a remarkable body of work produced in her native Poland, Germany, and Hollywood. A woman of great beauty and sensational glamour, she was also a very fine actress, whose performative skills could alone carry a whole film. This article focuses on Negri's performance in *Hotel Imperial* (Mauritz Stiller, 1927), a Hollywood production and star vehicle for Negri, whose undisputed screen dominance allows her acting to vastly shape the narrative. To concentrate on a star's performance means to unlock not only key meanings created by and around the star, but also the cinematic structure of feeling which these meanings in turn produce. In the case of *Hotel Imperial*, Negri's star presence is strongly defined by her physical crafting of a specific mental state: productive anxiety. As the only female character in an all-male wartime setting, and the only performer of this particular shade of feeling, she presents a gender-specific brand of anxiety; her privileged star status, not shared by any other actor in the film, makes her female anxious agency the main drive behind the plot. This article will therefore employ a conceptual framework resting on theories of anxiety, and will interrogate them in the light of gender roles and functions pertaining to the film's context; equally, the home front setting, and the allocation of the domestic sphere to Negri's role, will be brought to bear on discussions of gendered anxiety. Through her strong performance in *Hotel Imperial*, Pola Negri gives form to a unique female subjectivity, imbuing her star image with new meaningful layers. To best highlight Negri's key performative patterns in the film, a crucial sequence will be first presented and analysed, as a springboard for the theoretical and textual analysis of Negri's overall screen presence.

An important sequence of *Hotel Imperial* sees the protagonist Anna Sedlak (Pola Negri) in a highly dangerous situation. In the middle of WWI, employed as a hotel maid in an Austro-Hungarian border town, she is trapped in the bedroom of a man who plans to rape her. This is an officer of the invading Russian army, General Juschkiewitsch (George Siegmann), who has established his headquarters and soldiers at the hotel, and is currently drinking in the adjoining living room. As Anna looks out from the bedroom, she sees him asleep in a drunken stupor. She advances towards him, visibly holding her breath and wringing her hands in agitation. Scared yet rapid and skilful, she finds the door key in his pocket and takes it, then turns towards the exit: her back and neck are hunched in tension (Figure 1).

As she steps outside, she is faced by a Russian sentinel; she slips the key inside her dress, straightening herself up with confidence, and tells the Russian that the General must not be disturbed. She now runs towards

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*Figure 1. Anna Sedlak (Pola Negri) in Hotel Imperial (1927).*

a flight of stairs, but she is stopped by the old receptionist Elias (Max Davidson): he gives her alarming news of her lover, Lieutenant Paul Almasy (James Hall), whom Anna has been hiding in the hotel in the guise of waiter, after he got separated from his army unit. Elias says that Almasy has gone to the room of the Russian spy Petroff and has not returned. Anna springs up the stairs. The film cuts to Petroff, who is preparing to take a bath, after carefully laying nearby the strategic Austrian maps he has stolen. In the corridor outside, Anna meets Almasy on his way to shoot Petroff. Fearing for Almasy's life, Anna tries in vain to disarm him and runs after him. Almasy goes into Petroff's bathroom and shoots him dead, while Anna listens from outside; she then opens one of the many doors lining the corridor and enters a room adjoining the bathroom, meeting again Almasy who has also repaired there. Anna gets out a key and locks their door, while her lover explains he had to prevent the maps from getting into Russians hands; he adds that he is now ready to die. While he remains still, with the maps in one hand and looking utterly bewildered, Anna shows her furious thinking through her restless movements and shifting gaze. She then takes maps and gun from Almasy, and opens the door into Petroff's bathroom. Careful and

quick, she stages a suicide by leaving the gun near the spy's hand, while simultaneously throwing the maps in the fire. Going back to Almasý, who is still frozen and rooted to the spot, she gently moves him towards another room; once they are inside, she pushes a bed against the door, hides it with a curtain, and locks it all behind them. Meanwhile, in the corridor, a Russian soldier knocks repeatedly at their door. When he finally leaves, Anna checks there is no one else outside, instructs Almasý on how to reach his own room, leads him out, and locks this last door too.

This tense sequence foregrounds Anna as a pivotal agent in the film's plot, while also pointing to crucial aspects of her role and narrative context. The only woman in a crowd of men (Almasý, Juschkiewitsch, endless soldiers, and the hotel's other staff), Anna also stands out through her behaviour: protective and proactive, she navigates with assurance the spatial complexities of the hotel, and this topographical mastery aids her rescuing of both herself and Almasý. By contrast, male conduct is erratic and awkward: the Russians are ineffectively aggressive, drunk, or unaware, while Almasý's daring feat remains a lone moment of military prowess. As soon as he has killed the spy, Almasý is back to his state of non-fighting, camouflaged soldier in a hotel, miles away from the front or even from his own army: the result is bewilderment, together with emotional and spatial disorientation. Anna shows a far superior capacity to think rationally and act tempestively; yet, these accomplishments are not matched by calm and *sang froid*. On the contrary: through Negri's performance, Anna displays a high nervous charge, a constant anticipation of possible dangers, and an extreme level of alertness. In other words, Anna exhibits a great deal of anxiety, a very different emotion from the static worry, freezing uncertainty, and muddled urge to act which define Almasý in these scenes. This article will argue that Anna's successful actions, ultimately leading to saved lives and the retreat of the Russian enemy, are achieved not despite her anxiety, but because of it. Furthermore, this anxiety can be framed and understood as "female", and carries an empowering function for the heroine.

With its WWI setting, enemy-invaded location, and a plot hinging on the ever-present threats of sexual assault and death, *Hotel Imperial* is obviously drenched in anxiety; doubling as the film's title, the hotel's name connotes a chronotope where various apprehensions are knotted together. Arne Lunde (2010) sees *Hotel Imperial* as a typical work of director Mauritz Stiller, whose authorial stamp finds expression in "highly destabilized, claustrophobic, and anxiety-ridden border spaces" (p. 66). Claustrophobia indeed mixes with disorientation in the film, as while focusing on dramatic events happening in the heavily-guarded

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Hotel Imperial, this tightly-structured plot is set amid the general, fearful uncertainty defining home fronts in wartime. However, if anxiety pervades the film at its narrative, affective, and atmospheric levels, it is not part of the whole cast's performative style: the only markedly, incessantly anxious character is Anna. This article will refer to critical works on emotions at times of war, and on anxiety in particular; specifically, by engaging with selected texts by Sigmund Freud and with Lindsey Stonebridge's research on the writing of wartime anxiety, it will argue that Pola Negri, as Anna, productively unblocks and mobilises the inherent anxiety of the film's time and place. Positioned in traditionally female locations, the home front and the domestic space, Anna acts upon the former by controlling the latter, enabling not only her own rescue, but also that of her menfolk: her lover Paul Almasy and, indirectly, the whole Austro-Hungarian army.

In 1915, writing from war-torn Vienna, Sigmund Freud described the psychic effects of wartime as experienced on the home front:

the individual who is not himself [sic] a combatant – and so a cog in the gigantic machine of war – feels bewildered in his orientation, and inhibited in his powers and activities [...] stands helpless in a world that has grown strange. (2001, pp. 275, 300)

Like so much of Freud's writing, these words suggest a self-referential component. Freud was almost fifty-nine at the time. Unable to fulfil orthodox expectations of manhood – he was not a soldier but a “non-combatant” – he felt powerless. The inability to function as a “cog” in the structure of fighting produced great disorientation, even a suspension of his “powers”; so severe were these symptoms that Freud specified again his concern with “the mental distress felt by non-combatants” (2001, p. 275). It is notable that while using strong terms such as “bewildered”, “helpless”, and “inhibited”, Freud does not refer to anxiety. It was not for lack of interest: his research on anxiety bears significantly on *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, published five years later, and will be further expanded in 1926 in *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*. If anxiety is missing from Freud's WWI account of “the distress of non-combatants”, it is because this distress was not, in his view, anxious. It was instead catastrophically self-limiting, it was paralysing. These nefarious attributes are not those he will later associate with anxiety, indeed they are rather the opposite. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1991), Freud claims that anxiety works as a protective shield against fright and traumatic neurosis (pp. 275–338). In 1926 he writes that, while he had previously believed that anxiety arose from repressed instinctual

impulses, he now believes that anxiety arises mostly from situations of danger. Anxiety has, according to Freud,

an unmistakable relation to *expectation*: it is anxiety *about* something. It has a quality of *indefiniteness and lack of object*. In precise speech we use the word “fear” [*Furcht*] rather than “anxiety” [*Angst*]. (1936, p. 161)

Freud proceeds to state that not all reactions of anxiety to traumatic situations are neurotic; instead, some can be quite “normal”. He terms the first reaction “neurotic anxiety” and the second “realistic anxiety” and he continues by contending that “real danger is a danger that is known, and realistic anxiety is anxiety about a known danger of this sort. Neurotic anxiety is anxiety about an unknown danger” (1936, p. 165). Reactions of individuals to situations of real danger can vary between “affective reactions”, such as an outbreak of anxiety, and “protective actions”, these protective actions forming a mechanism potentially allowing the individual to stay in control: it is nothing less than the ego “hoping to have the direction of [trauma] in its own hands” (1936, p. 162). To steer the direction of trauma is clearly at odds with “bewilderment and disorientation”, and it hinges on the power of anxiety to “foresee and expect a traumatic situation of this kind entailing helplessness instead of simply waiting for it to happen” (1936, pp. 160–161). Yet in 1915, caught in a global conflict at home in Vienna, Freud could not summon this productive, protective anxiety, but he could only “stand helpless”, a male surplus to war requirements, out of place in a world he did not recognise. Was this, would this necessarily be the emotional reaction of “non-combatants” during a war? According to Lindsey Stonebridge (2007), who has researched British accounts of the home front experience in WWII, it would not. Although examining a different national context, Stonebridge identifies anxiety as a prime civilian response to wartime, and as a constructive and self-protective emotion. In the face of horrific, incomprehensible news from abroad, and of domestic bombing and fear, anxiety allowed the subject to fill the gap “between reason and imagination” (2007, p. 2). A major coping strategy, anxiety thus kept the individual safe, rather than helplessly stuck between the unreasonable and the unimaginable. If the war produced stunned disorientation, anxiety offered a counter feeling, a mode of participation which simultaneously preserved distance: it was “a way of staying in relation to history without being consumed by it” (2007, p. 4). In other words, and in explicit agreement with Freud’s view of anxiety as protection against trauma, Stonebridge conceptualises the anxious subject as someone able to connect to external upheavals (thus replacing disorientation with

relation) while achieving a degree of self-preserving detachment. This precarious, yet enabling psychic combination, would allow the subject to function from a position of proactive anticipation. Stonebridge does not consider gender as a differentiating factor, and it is obviously impossible to claim that anxiety would be rigidly separated along gender lines. However, for the sake of locating the primary emotions linked to wartime triggers, it seems feasible to see the “inhibition of powers” discussed by Freud, emphatically ascribed by him to the “non-combatants”, as a default male position on the home front. Women, despite the new tasks brought to them by the war, remained firmly entrenched in their traditional, socially sanctioned place, namely the domestic sphere, far away from the front where male soldiers were fighting. Yet, in a context of civilian warfare or bombing, not to mention potential or factual enemy invasion, women were de facto combatants, and highly skilled at that, on their own turf: the home, now transformed into the home “front”. If the war news were stupefying and hard to make sense of, as Stonebridge reminds us again and again, their effect was partly offset by home front anxiety, an emotional anchoring to time and place, to familiar topographies and everyday activities. As declared by one of the first intertitles in *Hotel Imperial*, “Thrones and empires may be tottering – but there were still floors to be swept in the Hotel Imperial”; the film then cuts to Anna, shown energetically sweeping a staircase. As Anna lives in the hotel, which is threatened by a foreign invader, this is a poignant representation of a woman dealing with her allotted tasks in her endangered home. Gaston Bachelard (1994) claims, “all really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home” (p. 5). It is worth reflecting on the stress on “inhabited” and “essence” here. The act or condition of inhabiting a certain space is clearly not the same as simply occupying it, as the etymology makes clear. *Habité* or *habiter* in French, the language of Bachelard’s text, has its roots, via Old French, in the Latin *inhabitare*, itself derived from *habere* which means “to have”. A space, then, becomes a home when human beings are not merely inside it, but they “have” it: the place-as-home is a core property of their being, as indeed “having” a certain place bestows what Bachelard calls the “essence” of home on it. In *Hotel Imperial*, the invading Russians are defilers of this precious essence, which is itself a core part of Anna, the hotel’s rightful inhabitant. It is therefore hardly surprising that anxiety should drive her so powerfully, as the home being violated is her core possession – with the terrifying possibility of sexual assault as an extension of this first violation. Anna is thus literally and symbolically a home guard, in relation to her own self, her living quarters, and the nation which contains them. Paul Almas, Anna’s co-protagonist, is also her narrative foil: practically

and metaphorically displaced, a soldier forced to act as a waiter in a domestic space he does not know, he is the film's prime example of a bewildered "non-combatant". If Almasy felt any anxiety (and nothing in Hall's performance points to it), it would be secondary to the sense of redundancy, frustration, self-doubt, even identity crisis experienced by a non-soldiering soldier. After killing the Russian spy, Almasy is effectively paralysed by his own action, and literally unable to find a direction: just like Freud in 1915, he is "inhibited in his powers". Gender, therefore, and gender-marked anxiety, is key to appreciate the film's structure of feeling; it is equally crucial to the understanding of Pola Negri's narrative and performative function, and thus of the meanings accrued by her star presence.

The different relation of men and women to the home front is set up at the film's beginning, beautifully depicted in the sequence showing the unlikely convergence of Anna and Almasy in the hotel. After being thrown off his horse, during a night-time charge by the Russian cavalry, Almasy seeks shelter in the unknown, deserted town he finds himself in; he breaks into the first available building, which is the Hotel Imperial. Once inside he finds a bed and, giving way to exhaustion, immediately falls asleep on it. Almasy's sleep is populated by vivid dreams: dreams of war. The power and lure of the front are so strong that its images keep Almasy from being woken, even when forcefully shaken by the hotel staff grouped around him. Across Almasy's sleeping face, the film stages a haunting montage of cavalry, fires, marching soldiers, drums and flags, as the dreamer's visions take over the screen. This oneiric spectacle is intercut with shots of Almasy laying on the bed, restlessly stirring, his facial expressions a mixture of ecstasy and torment; it could almost be an erotic experience. He is clearly both comforted and troubled by his war dreams, reliving and craving his defining identity – what Freud calls "a cog in the gigantic machine of war". But he finally wakes up because the noise of the Russian army outside has penetrated his sleep. Brought back to consciousness in an unfamiliar room, in an anomalous position in regards to the enemy, Almasy now appears stunned and frightened. From the window, he watches the invading Russians with dismay. The very same spectacle is being observed by Anna in another room, and though she nervously fidgets with her apron strings, she also takes charge of the situation, just as the Russians enter the hotel and declare it their headquarters. The two male staff are scared for their lives, while Almasy, trapped in the bedroom upstairs, can only grab his now useless gun: he has no way out. Rapid and nervous, Anna tells him that she will disguise him as their waiter, who fled in fear of the Russians. With this proposal, the only possible solution to keep Almasy free and alive,



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Anna brings him into her own field of action, the domestic sphere; at the same time, she enters the fight with the (male) enemy on her own (female) terms.

This sequence highlights two key aspects of Anna's role: the ability to think productively on her feet and the capacity to take command of a difficult situation. At the same time, these scenes introduce another, crucial attribute of her character, that is, a remarkable and constant anxiety. Pola Negri's performance builds an anxious thread through her every action and reaction, in stark contrast with the film's other actors. As Anna's male co-protagonist and love interest, James Hall provides the most poignant comparison, opposing Negri's proactive anxiety with a mixture of stunned fear, ashamed dejection, and compulsive action. Since he wakes up in the Hotel Imperial, until the moment he is told to dress up as a waiter, Hall presents his trademark performative pattern in the film, which can be fruitfully analysed against Negri's radically different, and more wide-ranging, style. Roused from his dreams by the clamour of the invading Russians, Almsy is first seen completely immobile, head still on the pillow, his eyes dilated in terror. Without changing expression, he lifts himself up, unblinking, head slowly turning towards the window; he then gets up to look out, his face now expressing both sorrow and bewilderment. He has thus established a stunned and helpless consciousness of danger. The film cuts to Anna, who is also watching the invaders; however, rather than frightened, she initially seems attentive and vigilant, absorbed by what she sees. She then turns away from the window, her gaze rapidly shifting upwards as to follow a train of thought, then returning to the Russians outside. These rapid eye movements are accompanied by her arms and hands, the left one raised to almost form a fist, the right one gesticulating towards her inept male colleagues, Elias and Anton (Otto Fries). Indeed, Anna's whole person is agitated and in motion. Quickly she leaves the room, making her way to the trapped Almsy. Although quite brief, the meeting between the two is layered with meaning, because of the actors' vivid performances. Seeing the door handle being turned, Almsy automatically reaches for his gun, standing up against the wall in a curiously hunched, virtually frozen posture: it is a terrified, yet almost robotic appearance, the look of a man scared out of his wits but still compulsively performing a learnt military gesture – not unlike his shooting of the spy Petroff later on. When he sees Anna entering the room, he does not alter his expression, his wide-open eyes now fixed on her; while relaxing slightly one shoulder, he remains with his back against the wall, moving stiffly and as little as possible. Anna, after a first exchange of looks, advances towards him, and pulls down the blind on the window. She is an endless source of motility: fidgeting with

her clothes, pinching her arms, restlessly moving her hands over her fingers, while her eyes are constantly darting away from Almasý, to then focus again on his face. A cut shows the invading Russians being obsequiously greeted by Elias, while Anton runs to hide. The film returns to Anna and Almasý in conversation, although it is mostly Anna who speaks. While Almasý wipes his brow, she nervously plays with her apron strings, becoming increasingly animated, her body almost swaying as she bends at the waist, nervously gesticulating as she explains the situation. Intercut by shots of the Russians, the scene between Anna and Almasý grows in intensity, although the quality of their intensity could not be more different since Almasý has shifted from stunned apprehension to ashamed dejection, lamenting that he was left to sleep while he should have rejoined his army. He appears drained and upset. Anna, with her whole body tensed towards him, her arms and hands moving restlessly, shakes her fists, her eyes now glued to his in a concerted effort to gain his cooperation. But the lieutenant seems crashed by the events and only reacts when he hears Elias and Anton coming in by reaching again for his gun, uselessly waving it in the air. As the hotel's male staff, looking almost hysterical, communicate the news that the hotel is now the Russians' headquarters, Almasý's desperate position is clear to all. In a posture which he repeats throughout the film, Almasý keeps his body rigid almost like a puppet's, while turning a lost, expectant gaze on Anna, mutely asking her what to do. Immediately explaining her plan, and with the help of Elias, Anna starts to turn Almasý into a waiter look-alike. Her movements are very rapid, almost convulsed, as she clasps her hands together in nervous wringing; but this bodily frenzy contrasts with her face, where a triumphant smile is only slightly clouded by her edgy physical energy. Anxious to the core, yet supremely capable, Anna has rescued Almasý for the time being.

As previously mentioned, Lindsey Stonebridge sees home-front anxiety as "filling a gap between reason and imagination". This definition, used by Stonebridge to elucidate on anxiety as a coping strategy, can be usefully expanded upon by envisaging this strategy as the filling or bridging of a gap – that is, of a blank, unproductive place in the psyche – and making it not only safe, but open to a range of possibilities. The mental vacuum caused by the war is replenished by potential actions and solutions, and the anxious subject is enabled to behave productively. Unlike the non-fighting men in *Hotel Imperial*, the anxious Anna retains a significant degree of control over space, her own actions, and those of others; the exercise of this control is performed by Negri in conjunction with another performance, the performance of anxiety. It is remarkable that hardly anything has been written on the acting out of anxious feelings on screen.

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An analysis of Negri's presence in this film, therefore, may be seen as a step towards a mapping of the expression of feelings for the camera, all the more salient in this case because devoid of the aid of speech. As well as the gestures and facial expressions already observed in Negri's acting, it is striking that her commonest posture in the film is a slight stoop forwards, a tensing of the body in anticipation, a prelude to springing into action, accompanied by a searching, hyper-alert gaze. In this habitual pose, Negri literally embodies Freud's description of productive anxiety: "to foresee and expect a traumatic situation [...] instead of simply waiting for it to happen". It is notable that, once her action is undertaken to prevent or cope with the traumatic situation arisen, Negri straightens herself up like a dart, suggesting decision and strength. As an essential checklist for performative signs of anxiety, I would suggest primarily "muscular tension" and "gaze pattern"; specifically, the tensing of back and neck, eyes held on something too long or too briefly, and the hands' incapacity to manage stasis.<sup>1</sup> It is evident that Negri's performance in *Hotel Imperial* is consistently defined by these features; while their absence in the acting of her co-actors, and especially of James Hall, is equally obvious. As Paul Almas, Hall shifts from dejection to frustration to stunned, frozen awareness, but never to anxiety (Figure 2).

Because of the specificities of the film's narrative context, Anna's anxiety is a direct response to historical developments, contemporary to the film's temporality, and these developments are the very foundations of the plot. If, as Stonebridge claims, anxiety on the home front is "a way of staying in relation to history without being consumed by it", I would argue that, in *Hotel Imperial*, anxiety is Anna's way to stay in relation to the plot without being consumed by it. This conceptualisation of Anna's role in the film brings us again to gender issues, as a central aspect of the plot is the male sexual threat hanging over the heroine. Anna's managing of men's sexual voracity, and of her own sex-appeal, is in line with her anxiety-powered functioning: she is anxious about the sexual dynamics of her situation, and anxiety gets her through them. We have seen how Anna's initial escape from General Juschkiewitsch was accomplished in the grip of high anxiety; in that occasion, and for the rest of the film, she avoids to be literally "consumed" by the Russian enemy. Her anxious performance, present almost at all times, is markedly evident whenever sexual menace follows her; what is also remarkable is that this anxious handling of sex-related issues is a radical departure from

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1. Many grateful thanks to Professor Sue Harper for her crucial help and suggestions with these specific points.



Figure 2. James Hall as Lt. Paul Almsy.

Negri's previous, established star image, which may be summed up by the term "vamp".

Pola Negri's arrival in Hollywood in 1922 was preceded by her reputation as a femme fatale, men-eater, and intense performer (Figure 3).

This image rested on her striking work in films such as *Carmen* (Ernst Lubitsch, 1918), *Madame DuBarry* (Ernst Lubitsch, 1919), and *Sappho* (Dimitri Buchovetzki, 1921). American publicity for *Madame DuBarry* (renamed *Passion*) mentioned Negri's "strange personal magnetism, which [...] makes all men vie for her smile" (quoted in Delgado, 2016, p. 31), while Photoplay described her as "a tiger woman with a strange slow smile" (Howe as quoted in Frymus, 2016, pp. 294). The vamp image was to remain closely associated to Negri throughout her Hollywood career, despite the relative range and unevenness of her Paramount films. It was also corroborated by the ample press coverage of her alleged diva tantrums and of her much-debated love affairs with Charlie Chaplin and Rudolph Valentino, among others. Negri's early Hollywood roles, and her own performance in them, tended to uphold the vamp identification: even in a sophisticated comedy such as *A Woman of the World* (Malcolm St. Clair, 1925), Negri exudes

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Figure 3. Publicity shot of Pola Negri (real name: Apolonia Chalupec).

dangerous and knowing seductiveness, wrecking sexual havoc on the inhabitants of a conservative, respectable mid-west town she happens to visit. A lot is made of the fact that, in her role as a glamorous European countess, she not only smokes but has tattoos on her body. *Hotel Imperial* marks an abrupt shift in her image, as the archetype of the vamp – manipulative and threatening towards the opposite sex, and lethally self-assured – could not be more distant from Anna (Figure 4).

No true vamp was ever anxious, of course, least of all in regards to lecherous men. Incidentally, in her next film, *Barbed Wire* (Mauritz Stiller & Rowland V. Lee, 1927), Pola Negri is also cast in a WWI background, as a French girl who falls in love with a German POW; while brave and defiant, she is again utterly removed from her previous vamp persona.

*Hotel Imperial* first crystallised this shedding of vampishness which, coupled with the film's happy ending as the lovers are reunited, has been severely judged by today's film scholars, who have equated Negri's changed image with a sell-out and a weakened female identity. Diane Negra (2001) criticises *Hotel Imperial* as the film that "tamed" Pola Negri, a deliberate move, she argues, to make Negri "meaningful in an American



Figure 4. Promotional shot of Pola Negri for *Hotel Imperial* (1927).

context”, stating that by the film’s end Anna has “accepted a more subdued and passive role in a coupling relationship” (p. 162). Arne Lunde (2010) sees the plot of *Hotel Imperial* as a “Cinderella-like” story (p. 74), with Negri clearly playing Cinderella herself.

I would argue that these critiques are missing a crucial point: far from being “tamed” and “passive”, or a man-dependent domestic goddess, Pola Negri’s Anna is the main agency in *Hotel Imperial*, propelling the narrative forwards, unblocking the latent energy of time and place, and rescuing highly-skilled army men. All this is accomplished through productive anxiety. Being a vamp is not something Anna has need or interest for, and her defiant clinging to a non-vampish identity (a hotel maid sweeping stairs, a working-class woman with unglamorous clothes) is clearly spelt out in the film; most significantly, it is stressed in two key scenes which see Anna countering the sexual threat embodied by General Juschkiewitsch.

A centrepiece of *Hotel Imperial*, the sequence in which Anna rescues Almsy for the last time, effectively freeing him from his entrapment and allowing him to re-join the war, also marks the end of Anna’s sexual

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endangerment. Crucially, Anna's own liberation is articulated through her rejection of fetishised female glamour, which she exposes as a creation of Juschkiewitsch, the film's patriarchal and rapist figure.

The scene shows Almasy surrounded by the whole Russian unit on the hotel's ground floor, being accused of having killed the spy Petroff. Anna, beautifully clothed and bejewelled with Juschkiewitsch's expensive gifts, runs anxiously down the stairs, looking at her lover who returns a desperate gaze on her. The impromptu Russian military court asks Almasy for his alibi at the time of Petroff's death, but the Lieutenant does not have one. The film cuts from Almasy's terrified face to Anna's hyperventilating countenance, to the Russian officer threatening to hang Almasy; at last Anna stands up, looking exceedingly nervous, and says that Almasy was with her in her room at the time Petroff was shot. While this declaration saves her lover's life, it also provokes Juschkiewitsch's jealous rage. Turning his attention to Anna, Juschkiewitsch shouts that she has tricked him, and that if she belongs to a waiter she will not keep her expensive clothes and jewels. After some moments of simmering anger, Anna erupts in a magnificent display of liberating fury: she frantically tears apart her clothes and pearls, literally breaking them to pieces, and stands ragged and defiant in front of the Russian (Figure 5).

In a sense, all the sexual anxiety felt by Anna throughout the film has prepared her for this dramatic catharsis: a fearless action which irrevocably destroys her chains of sexual servitude. Far from using her glamorous attire and sex-appeal to manipulate and control her sexual nemesis, she rejects the symbols of female seductiveness and throws them back at the enemy.

The scene, however, does not end on this triumphant note, as the spiteful Juschkiewitsch seeks to humiliate Anna for what she has done. Throwing an ashtray on the floor, he orders her to clean up the mess of broken crockery and ash, while his words appear on screen, "You want to be a servant – then down on your knees where I found you!". Still standing in front of him, Anna breathes heavily, her hands clenching and unclenching, her gaze increasingly downcast; at last, she bends down towards the floor. The film's rapid editing cuts to the gleeful General, then to Anna's hands collecting the dirt, and lastly to the outraged Almasy, who is being physically restrained from rushing to her defense. Finally, Juschkiewitsch tells his men to kick out the Lieutenant, who thus finds himself outside the Hotel Imperial, alive and able to flee – the goal Anna has worked towards for most of the narrative. Her humiliation at the hands of the General is a painful yet temporary defeat, and arguably not a defeat at all, as once it is over Anna has achieved a



Figure 5. Anna (Pola Negri) in *Hotel Imperial* (1927).

double victory: she has freed herself of Juschkiewitsch's threat, and has once again saved her lover.

This complex sequence, in which Anna's apparent servility brings independence from male oppression, recalls a brief scene at the beginning of the film, after Anna's first meeting with the General. With her hair partly covered by a headscarf, and wearing the apron and peasant clothes befitting her servant status, the beautiful yet deceptively humble-looking Anna immediately catches Juschkiewitsch's eye; she is therefore dispatched to light a fire in his bedroom, where he quickly joins her, with lecherous intent. As Anna is busy kneeling by the fireplace, the Russian gets very close to her and starts touching her hair. To Anna's protests, his response appears on a title, "Wouldn't you prefer a general in your hands – instead of a broom?". Looking up with a fearless, ironic expression, she tells him "Thanks, your Excellency – I prefer the broom!", and she leaves. Through this exchange, a traditional symbol of downtrodden womanhood has acquired a rebellious, liberating meaning. Similarly, in the face of the humiliation inflicted on her through the ashtray scene, Anna seemingly plays a game of submission, but is in fact free to move away from it, in unthreatened possession of her



## *Pola Negri in Hotel Imperial*

own person. She is now also able to help Almasy escape and rejoin his army. Repeatedly saved by Anna, who also burnt the stolen Austrian maps, the Lieutenant will be now instrumental in a surprise attack against the enemy, who will be forced to retreat. The film shows this key military event, before cutting to the Austro-Hungarian troops entering previously occupied areas, to the ecstasy of the local population.

This momentous section of *Hotel Imperial*, from Anna tearing up her glamorous clothes to the town's liberation, does not break the link between plot and anxious protagonist. On the contrary, a striking aspect of these developments is their intervention on Anna's anxiety, which they effectively terminate. It is notable that Negri's performance, consistently anxious for most of the film, changes dramatically in this last part. First in her defiance of Juschkiewitsch, then in her apparent humiliation at his hands, and finally in her last assistance to Almasy, whom she guides to safety and watches climbing a wall and disappear, Negri relinquishes any sign of anxiety because her character has no need of it anymore. Anna's aims are achieved, or about to be achieved. *Hotel Imperial* now switches from claustrophobia to freedom, showing for the first time Anna outside the hotel, in the streets, greeting her victorious army; at the same time, the film explicitly validates the protagonist as a fighter and as a pivotal agent in the favourable turn of the war.

As Austro-Hungarian soldiers march through the town and the jubilant crowd, Anna is shown standing next to Elias, hoping to spot Almasy of whom she has had no news. Suddenly, he appears riding with the cavalry, smiling broadly at the people's greetings. Anna, ecstatic with happiness, is seen in turn by Almasy, and the lovers exchange tender glances; their reunion is delayed, however, as a solemn decorating ceremony is about to take place. In a large square, at the presence of military officers and Church dignitaries, the army Commander announces, "And now – I must thank the men whose bravery and devotion are their lasting glory". The very first man called to receive a medal is Almasy, who stands to attention while the Commander thanks him for "the great service rendered to his country". At this point the Lieutenant looks in Anna's direction, and the titles report his words, "If you please, your Excellency – I ask leave to present the one who made that service possible". Beaming with joyful pride, in stark contrast to his performance in the entire film, Almasy rushes to Anna, who appears overwhelmed; he takes her hand and brings her in front of the Commander. There Anna stands, just as her lover had before, to receive the thanks of the army. The Commander begins, "My dear young lady, I am honored to thank you in the name of our country", and at this point Anna automatically motions to kiss his hand, but the man stops her by saying "It is my privilege to salute our bravest

and most beautiful soldier!”. He then shakes and kisses her hand. The film cuts to Almasy, who is observing the scene and bursting with satisfaction; his countenance attracts the attention of the Commander, who promptly grants him some time off duty to marry his brave girlfriend. The two lovers kiss, yet this happy ending is not the film’s last image. As if to leave no doubt that this is a war narrative, and that war has been the defining context for the characters’ actions, the very last shot is of endless marching troops. This final military framing underlies Anna’s role as a warrior, fighting her own war against the Russian enemy. In contrast to the film’s men and especially to Almasy, inhibited most of the time by his position as a “non-combatant”, Anna has staged a home-front, anxiety-driven defence/offence, bringing about a triumphant conclusion. Far from being a Cinderella figure, Anna is a soldier among equals, indeed she is even superior to the others: not just for being more beautiful, but for being braver, the “bravest” of all.

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