The Educated Spectator: Cinema and Pedagogy in France, 1909-1930

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation draws on a wide range of sources (including motion pictures, film journals, and essays) in order to analyze the debate over the social and aesthetic role of cinema that took place in France from 1909 to 1930. During this period, as the new medium became the most popular form of entertainment, moralists of all political persuasions began to worry that cinematic representations of illicit acts could provoke social unrest. In response, four groups usually considered antagonistic — republicans, Catholics, Communists, and the first film avant-garde known as the Impressionists — set out to redefine cinema by focusing particularly on shaping film viewers. To do so, these movements adopted similar strategies: they organized lectures and film clubs, published a variety of periodicals, commissioned films for specific causes, and screened commercial motion pictures deemed compatible with their goals. Tracing the history of such projects, I argue that they insisted on educating spectators both through and about cinema. Indeed, each movement sought to teach spectators of all backgrounds how to understand the new medium of cinema while also supporting specific films with particular aesthetic and political goals. Despite their different interests, the Impressionists, republicans, Catholics, and Communists all aimed to create communities of viewers that would learn a certain way of decoding motion pictures. My main focus is on how each group defined its ideal spectator, on the tensions manifested within their pedagogical projects, and on the ways in which these projects intersected. Ultimately, the history uncovered here sheds new light on key questions about cinema’s impact that marked the twentieth century.
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Introduction

What should cinema be? This question marked debates about film in France throughout the 1910s and 1920s, prefiguring the key question André Bazin would ask in the 1950s: “what is cinema?”

During the early twentieth century, film was a new yet somewhat familiar medium, a product of the vibrant visual culture of this period that also harked back to the older traditions of theater and pantomime. As cinema became more and more popular, the question of what it should be morphed into a question about how it should address and shape spectators. In the early 1910s, moralists of all political stripes became increasingly alarmed by what they saw as the corrupting influence of motion pictures and accused popular crime serials such as Zigomar (1911-1913) or Fantômas (1913-1914) of encouraging a dangerous process of imitation.

Influenced by these debates, four seemingly incompatible groups – republican officials and schoolteachers; Catholic clergy and laity; Communist activists; and the avant-garde cinematic Impressionists – set out to redefine cinema, appropriating it for their own purposes.

In this dissertation I trace the history of these projects to reform cinema and argue that they focus on educating spectators both through and about cinema. To do so, these groups adopted similar strategies: they organized lectures and film clubs, published a variety of periodicals, commissioned films for specific causes, and selected commercial motion pictures deemed compatible with their projects. The Impressionist filmmakers became public figures and

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1 André Bazin, Qu'est-ce que le cinéma? (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1958-62).

2 These connections have been thoroughly explored in film history studies; among the most relevant are Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz, eds., Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Vanessa R. Schwartz, Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs, Theatre to Cinema: Stage Pictorialism and the Early Feature Film (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

3 I follow standard spelling conventions and do not capitalize the word “republicans” because it designates adopters of a political philosophy rather than members of a specific political party.
often explained their work in ciné-clubs and magazines; republicans had regional Offices of Educational Cinema that offered afterschool screenings throughout the country; Catholics organized similar sessions in their youth clubs and parishes; and members of the Communist Party founded the first mass ciné-club, Les Amis de Spartacus. Each movement pursued a dual goal, aiming to teach spectators of all backgrounds how to understand the new medium of cinema and also to advocate a type of cinema with specific aesthetic and political goals. The extent to which each group emphasized the political or the aesthetic dimension varied, but, as I will explain, the two remained deeply intertwined.

At first glance, the convergence of interests of these four movements may seem surprising. Three of them (the republicans, the Catholics, and the Communists) were enemies who vied for political power. Those typically designated as republicans were associated with the two center-right parties (l’Alliance démocratique and the misleadingly named le Parti radical-socialiste) that constantly participated in government coalitions during the first decades of the twentieth century. In this context, the republicans occupied a comfortable middle ground, upholding the standard middle-class values that had been enforced through the policies of the Third Republic since its establishment in 1871. Republican politics had two main pillars: solidarism (the social philosophy of the Republic, defined as a third way between free-market liberalism and socialism) and positivism (the belief in science and reason above else). Both were clearly reflected not only in public policies but also in public education, which republicans had revamped in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The republicans’ conflict with the Catholic Church, which dated back at least to 1789, reached its climax in the early twentieth century with the separation of Church and State in 1905 – a law that weakened all religious

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4 Chapter 2 explains the impact of these two concepts on how republicans understood cinema’s role in society.
institutions but hit Catholics particularly hard because they held more symbolic and financial power in French society than any other religious group. Throughout the 1910s and 1920s, republicans continued to brand the Church as reactionary, while Catholics regularly complained that the state persecuted them. Nevertheless, the two institutions slowly came closer as they both began to worry about a new common enemy: the Communists. Founded in 1920 after a split from the Socialists, the French Communist Party (PCF) was seen as a dangerous entity because it was aligned with the Soviet Union and embraced the idea of a workers’ revolution that would bring the bourgeois Republic to an end. In the first decade of its existence, the PCF was indeed staunchly uncompromising and never hesitated to make its revolutionary intentions clear through pamphlets and the official newspaper, *L'Humanité*.

While these three groups had clear political interests, the avant-garde movement known as cinematic Impressionism is usually described as apolitical. Its members (Germaine Dulac, Louis Delluc, Jean Epstein, Marcel L’Herbier, and Abel Gance) have enjoyed a reputation for contributing to the establishment of cinema as the seventh art (rather than another form of entertainment) through their many articles, lectures, and films. What also set them apart from other filmmakers was their cinematic style. They preferred to use a wide range of optical devices, such as superimpositions, filters, and soft focus, in order to depict a character’s subjective impressions. By contrast, other contemporary film movements had different interests: the German Expressionists focused on creating a specific atmosphere through lighting and décor, while the Soviet directors of the 1920s theorized the political impact of dialectical montage. Critics have often mocked the Impressionists for their elitist pretentiousness and contrasted them with the Surrealists, who expressed a more radical artistic view, made explicit political claims.

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5 Chapter 4 discusses their status and reception.
and, in the process, also offered their own biting critique of Impressionism. However, as the examples given throughout this dissertation will demonstrate, the Impressionists had a much more complex role and made crucial contributions to the debate about the social status of cinema in the 1920s than has previously been understood. Indeed, despite their different ideological interests, the Impressionists, republicans, Catholics, and Communists all aimed to create communities of viewers that would learn a certain way of decoding motion pictures. In emphasizing this aspect, I do not mean to downplay the substantial differences that existed among these movements; rather, my goal here is to show that each group’s stance was much less monolithic than it might first appear.

The standard narratives of film history, which used to focus on directors, stars, and production studios, have been consistently challenged and rewritten in the past three decades, as film scholars have begun to work at the intersection of film theory and history. Perhaps the best example is the extraordinary impact of the concept of “cinema of attractions,” which describes the first years of the new medium, before narrative film came to predominate (from 1895 to 1907, although the endpoint remains a subject of debate). Tom Gunning and André Gaudreault first proposed the term in 1985 and then expanded on it in several articles. In their view, early cinema, which used to be designated pejoratively as “primitive cinema,” is better described as a “cinema of attractions” and understood in its specific reception context. Since the first films (be

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they fiction or nonfiction) were one of the many “attractions” offered by fairground shows, alongside pantomime or circus acts, they operated on the same level – that is to say they were more concerned with showing, performing, and directly addressing the audience instead of constructing seamless narratives. As cinema moved toward narrativization in the late 1900s and 1910s, the “cinema of attractions” did not completely disappear. Rather, moments of attraction were integrated into mainstream narrative films and also recuperated by avant-garde artists like the Italian Futurists, the Surrealists or the Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein, from whom Gunning and Gaudreault borrowed the term “attraction.” The work done by Gunning and Gaudreault on early cinema has thus produced a remarkable shift from an excessive emphasis on classical narrative film toward a reconsideration of the very first years of cinema.\(^7\) Other scholars have since contributed to a reevaluation of this period by exploring the connection between early cinema and popular spectacles or the medium’s relation with legal and medical discourses.\(^8\)

While the concept of cinema of attractions has proven extremely timely and led to a vibrant scholarly conversation about how this new medium worked at the turn of the twentieth century, the cinema of the 1910s and 1920s is only now beginning to be revisited. Richard Abel’s studies and anthologies have laid a solid foundation for a recontextualization of French cinema as he has offered nuanced analyses of French film industry’s meteoric rise until World War I and of the many financial and aesthetic issues it faced after 1918, when American studios

\(^7\) Noël Burch, whose influence Gunning has acknowledged, made a similar distinction between two periods but preferred the more problematic term “primitive,” which he defined against the “institutional” mode of representation, *La Lucarne de l’infini* (Paris: Nathan Université, 1991).

became the leading producers and distributors. In recent years, a new generation of scholars has turned to lesser-known topics such as the extensive archives of nonfiction films that had previously been deemed irrelevant to film history. Paula Amad has studied the collection of films commissioned by the philanthropist Albert Kahn, Peter Bloom has focused on French colonial documentaries, while Alison Murray Levine has examined agricultural films screened both in metropolitan and colonial France. French historians and archivists, such as Béatrice de Pastre-Robert, Valérie Vignaux, and Christophe Gauthier, have simultaneously explored the history of educational cinema promoted by French republicans. All of these studies can be inscribed into the broader effort currently undertaken by scholars of American film to reevaluate “useful cinema,” which, as Charles Acland and Haidee Wasson write, is “a body of films and technologies that perform tasks and serve as instruments in an ongoing struggle for aesthetic, social, and political capital.”

And yet, although such interventions have significantly expanded our knowledge of French cinema of the 1910s and 1920s, there is still a gap between these new discoveries and the

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standard narratives of influential film historians like Georges Sadoul and Jean Mitry. To give but one example, in his informative book on cinephilia, Christophe Gauthier reiterates the assumption that ciné-clubs and specialized cinemas, with their emphasis on the artistic merits of certain motion pictures, are inherently superior to republican projects that tend to see film as a useful pedagogical tool rather than an art with its own rules. What I would like to propose here, however, is that this separation, heavily influenced by Bourdieu’s theory of cultural fields, was not quite as clear-cut in the 1920s. At the time, avant-garde filmmakers like the Impressionists shared with republican, Catholic, and Communist activists an interest in educating spectators with and about cinema. So deeply entwined are the two concepts in their projects that they cannot be easily separated and made to fit our current distinctions.

The four groups persistently kept an eye on each other’s activities, becoming interconnected in various ways. The Impressionists found themselves in the center of this network. In the early 1920s, both Germaine Dulac and Jean Epstein made motion pictures commissioned by republican institutions. Epstein’s first film, Pasteur (1922), was supervised by Jean Benoit-Lévy, one of the most prolific producers of republican educational films, and it was screened in school amphitheaters across the country. Epstein then went on to make both commercial and independent films. His sister, Marie Epstein, who had initially wanted to be an actress and indeed played a supporting role in her brother’s Coeur fidèle (1923), became Benoit-


14 Christophe Gauthier, *La Passion du cinéma: cinéphiles, ciné-clubs et salles spécialisées à Paris de 1920 à 1929* (Paris: Association française de recherche sur l'histoire du cinéma, 1999). Amad’s *Counter-Archive* is an exception because she weaves a complex narrative that does not make any hierarchical claims.

Lévy’s assistant and co-director of several motion pictures.\textsuperscript{16} Dulac too made an educational feature film, \textit{La Mort du soleil} (1922), commissioned by organizations fighting against tuberculosis and screened both in commercial movie theaters and through the republican Offices of Educational Cinema. While Epstein rarely mentioned his first film before writing about it in his memoir, Dulac often used excerpts from \textit{La Mort du soleil} in her lectures in order to explain Impressionist aesthetics – a connection between Impressionism and republican pedagogy that has so far been overlooked.

What is more, the Catholic Cinematographic Committee also appreciated the work of the Impressionists and generally gave them positive ratings in their journal, \textit{Dossiers du cinéma}. The archbishop of Paris even invited Epstein to work on a religious melodrama, and the filmmaker accepted but eventually backed out because of financial issues. At the other end of the political spectrum, one of the earliest supporters of the Impressionists, the film critic Léon Moussinac was a member of the French Communist Party and wrote a regular film column for their newspaper, \textit{L’Humanité}. In 1928, he became the driving force behind the mass ciné-club Les Amis de Spartacus, where he introduced the films of Soviet directors, such as Sergei Eisenstein and Vsevolod Pudovkin, while also promoting the work of the Impressionists and other canonical motion pictures that had influenced their aesthetics. As noted above, analyzing the Impressionists in this broad political and social context enables us to complicate their standard depiction as elitist defenders of the art of cinema. At the same time, this juxtaposition also shows the other three groups in a new light, suggesting that rather than being staunchly ideological, they remained open to a variety of perspectives and, in some cases, made choices that complicated their stated goals.

\textsuperscript{16} Richard Abel recounts in \textit{French Cinema} that Marie Epstein (who worked at the Cinémathèque française) gave him access to many unexplored documents on which he based his study of 1920s French film.
In the following pages, I draw on a range of primary sources, including film journals, motion pictures, and legal documents, to explain how each group imagined its ideal spectator. Constructing these ideal types involved a complex back and forth between official declarations of intention and the films each movement chose as representative – be they commissioned films or commercial pictures. Each chapter thus pays attention both to the ideological discourse of each institution and to the narrative address of the films they preferred. Since some of the discourses examined here come from groups that held a certain disciplinary power (namely, republican teachers and Catholic clergy), they could lend themselves to a Foucauldian analysis of the kind Jonathan Crary pioneered in his studies of visual culture.\textsuperscript{17} I am, however, more interested in what these powerful groups have in common with movements that held almost no political power (the Impressionists and the Communists) and yet still developed their own pedagogical projects. My contention is that studying all of them together allows us better to notice the moments when ideology breaks down and to concentrate on what remains ambiguous and unsaid in each movement’s project.

If the title of this dissertation echoes that of Jacques Rancière’s essay “The Emancipated Spectator,” it is because I want to suggest that, contrary to his argument, pedagogical projects and emancipation are not necessarily antagonistic. “The Emancipated Spectator” critiques two approaches to the idea of educating theater audiences, one coming from Bertolt Brecht and the other from Antonin Artaud.\textsuperscript{18} In Rancière’s view, when the two playwrights and theorists responded to the old accusations against theater, famously associated with Plato’s dismissal of mimesis, they accepted the premise that the passivity of theater spectators rendered theater less


useful to the community. As a result, both Brecht’s epic theater and Artaud’s theater of cruelty set out to jolt spectators into action: the former by insisting that they have to experience a form of estrangement, distancing themselves from what they see on the stage, and the latter by asking spectators to allow themselves to be completely drawn in and have a mystical experience of the play. These responses have generally been considered antagonistic, but Rancière describes them as two sides of the same coin – two pedagogical projects based on the assumption that viewers need to be taught how to see and understand a play. He then draws on his previous work in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1987), where he uncovered the unusual pedagogical technique of Joseph Jacotot, an exiled French teacher who devised a method for teaching a language (Dutch) he did not know, and argues that only by adopting a similar approach, one that starts from the principle of the equality of intelligence, could theater practitioners encourage intellectual emancipation.19

While “The Emancipated Spectator” focuses on theater and Rancière does not take up the same issues in his writings on cinema, the argument he makes can serve as a general critique of any discourse meant to teach spectators a certain way of understanding what they see. And yet, even as Rancière convincingly argues against rejecting a proposition simply by inverting the terms, as Brecht and Artaud did with Plato’s attack on theater, he does something similar in his conclusion. After rejecting binaries such as “viewing/knowing, appearance/reality, activity/passivity,” he insists on the opposition between education and true intellectual emancipation.20 I would argue, however, that in the context studied here, the two concepts are not necessarily contradictory. Rather, the examples analyzed in the following chapters suggest a more complex relation. Republicans, Catholics, Communists, and the Impressionists all set out to

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20 Rancière, “The Emancipated Spectator” 12.
teach spectators how to understand cinema and to convey certain social messages, but this process was complicated by ideological and stylistic ambiguities and occasional blind spots that opened up new ways for spectators to interpret films in their own terms. Consequently, these groups took into account viewers’ response, often looking for ways to integrate them into their initial project. These case studies, then, suggest that the spectators the four groups imagined could be simultaneously educated and emancipated.

On the whole, the dissertation focuses on constructed spectators rather than on empirical moviegoers. When I began researching this topic, I fully agreed with an oft-repeated lament regarding the lack of early sociological studies of French moviegoers that would provide the kind of invaluable primary source that scholars of German film have in Emilie Altenloh’s 1914 analysis of film going practices.21 Such a contemporary study dedicated to early twentieth-century France would certainly enhance the body of work on this period. But during the course of my research, I came to realize that discourses on imagined spectators are equally relevant because they offer a snapshot of institutional thinking about cinema at a key time in the history of the medium – after the transition from attractions to narrative (which happened around 1908-1911) and before the establishment of the classical Hollywood paradigm.22 Moreover, the theories of spectatorship put forth in the 1920s by the groups studied here anticipate many of the issues that would become crucial in film studies in the second half of the twentieth century, particularly questions about ideology and the affective impact of film on audiences.


During the foundational years of the discipline of film studies (the late 1960s and the 1970s), the predominant theoretical trend, known as apparatus or screen theory, relied on Louis Althusser’s version of Marxism and on Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalysis to explain how motion pictures, especially those coming from Hollywood, enforced an inescapable viewing position inflicted by capitalist ideology. Jean-Louis Baudry’s comparison of the film spectator with a prisoner trapped in Plato’s cave remains one of the best examples of the type of argument made by apparatus theory, which has been very influential but also increasingly critiqued.  

Scholars who have argued against this theory have contended it constructs a rigid universal model that precludes any form of resistance on the part of spectators. If apparatus theory allows for resistance, it is mostly through avant-garde films that offer radical political perspectives but, in doing so, it still pins viewers to a specific (in this case resistant) position rather than allowing for a variety of experiences.

Different schools of thought have challenged these universalizing assumptions. While Laura Mulvey’s extremely influential essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” published in 1975, had all the hallmarks of apparatus theory, it also opened up a new line of feminist inquiry by pointing out that classical cinema only enabled a masculine gaze. In the following years, feminist critics debated and refined this point, thoroughly exploring the options available  


to women spectators. The rise of cultural studies has also led to a more nuanced redefinition of the position of the spectator. Rather than accepting the viewer’s passivity, Stuart Hall has identified three possible responses to mass-media products: the dominant reading, the negotiated reading, and the resistant reading. Since the 1980s, scholars of film and cultural studies have often tended to focus on the resistant and negotiated readings coming from communities of viewers defined by their gender, class, race, and sexual orientation – often pointing out the complications that arise when taking into account more than one category. Some have viewed this development as considerably more optimistic than apparatus theory because it highlights the viewers’ ability to interpret freely and sometimes subversively, but critics have also argued that cultural studies risk downplaying the impact of unequal power relations.

More recently, David Bordwell and Noël Carroll have not only rehearsed the main arguments against “High Theory” but also insisted on the need to develop what they call “middle-level” theories that would be adapted to particular case studies. At the same time, they also tend to prefer analyses drawing on cognitive studies, which in turn have been critiqued for

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minimizing the role of cultural differences and of affect. A new theoretical trend focusing on the emotional impact of films is on the rise today, influenced in part by Gilles Deleuze’s work and the so-called “affective turn” in the humanities. This still-evolving trend integrates varied approaches (phenomenology, psychoanalysis, cognitivism) and creatively uses them in order to explore viewers’ emotional response to cinema. In some cases, scholars discuss a range of specific emotions, such as fear, empathy or disgust, while in others they focus on how film can mobilize the sense of touch in addition to vision and hearing.

My approach here is primarily historical and influenced by cultural studies. I pay attention to issues of class, gender, and age as they were explicitly and implicitly formulated in the pedagogical project of each group and as they connected to broader social issues in early twentieth-century France. Chapters 2 through 5 study types of ideal viewers as constructed through each movement’s official discourse while also emphasizing the ambiguities of each theoretical model. But before analyzing each type of ideal spectator, the first chapter provides the historical background necessary for understanding why a certain type of viewer was considered dangerous and what exactly led to the development of these pedagogical projects. I begin by focusing on the rhetorical strategies of social commentators and government officials who expressed their concern about the impact of cinema on the audience, particularly on teenagers, because, they claimed, young spectators could be tempted to imitate what they saw. After

examining their assumptions and the precedents that informed their theories, I study some of the films banned in France in the 1910s (Zigomar, Fantomâs, Les Vampires) and argue that the spectator they construct is significantly different from the one imagined by cinema’s detractors. Rather than encouraging imitation, as commentators and the authorities feared, these motion pictures provoked spectators to decode each image and to remain wary of all visual representations. The greatest danger was thus located not in the viewers’ bodily reactions but rather in their minds.

The following two chapters analyze the response of the most powerful groups in French society – republicans and Catholics – to this perceived threat of cinema. Republicans were among the first to realize that the power of the new medium could indeed be harnessed for their own purposes if films were made more easily legible. Their ideal spectator was a model citizen, able to analyze the moving image but also vulnerable to emotions that led to social solidarity. In the late 1910s, the Ministry of Public Instruction encouraged the development of instructional cinema – short documentaries used in schools to enhance students’ comprehension of particular subjects. From this point of view, cinema was valuable only insofar as it could support the positivist agenda of the Republic: teachers could use the moving image as an aid to show their students how to reason and articulate everything they saw. A few years later, some activists and schoolteachers took the lead and created the regional Offices of Educational Cinema, a nonprofit association partially sponsored by various Ministries. The Offices organized screenings for students and their families, typically showing non- and semi-fiction films that upheld republican values such as temperance and solidarism. But, as Chapter 2 explains, in addition to these commissioned films, the Offices also screened a number of motion pictures that were not as easily legible and whose reception they could not fully control.
Faced with the republicans’ appropriation of cinema, Catholics responded by founding the Catholic Cinematographic Committee, an institution that rated motion pictures and coordinated previously disparate projects of distributing religious films. This Committee and Catholic journalists like Pierre L’Ermite argued that cinema could further the cause of social apostolate. Accordingly, they aimed to reach not only practicing Catholics but also non-Catholics. Like republicans, Catholics considered nonfiction and melodramas (especially family melodramas) to be the most legible and thus safe genre. But they also had to decide how to approach films with religious themes that were not officially sanctioned by French clergy: lavish American Biblical epics such as *Ben Hur* and commercial motion pictures about Joan of Arc. This third chapter explains how they navigated the different genres and addressed what they called a “universal” spectator – a charged term, given that “Catholic” is derived from the Greek word for “universal.”

The last two chapters turn to the movements that had less political power: the cinematic Impressionists and the Communists. Chapter 4 examines the films and public interventions of the Impressionists, explaining that a crucial part of their efforts to legitimize cinema as an art involved teaching spectators how to go beyond the plot and understand cinematic techniques. Although they sometimes attacked commercial cinema, the Impressionists adeptly used popular magazines and popular genres such as melodrama to attract a broader audience. I contend that the oft-repeated dismissal of the Impressionists as elitist precludes a more nuanced discussion of their pedagogical project and overlooks the connections between their work and that of the other groups interested in educating spectators. Seen from this perspective, the Impressionists embody a series of contradictions. They are, to borrow Kristin Thompson’s phrase, “a commercial avant-garde” because they take every opportunity to experiment but also use the laws of the
marketplace to their advantage; they build an entire pedagogical project on an idea, *photogénie*, they present as indefinable; and they insist that cinema should be understood as an art while also working with groups that see film as a means to accomplish their social and political goals.\(^{34}\)

The fifth and final chapter traces the efforts of French Communists to introduce Soviet films to French audiences. While the first mass ciné-club, Les Amis de Spartacus, worked as a Communist organization, it was also heavily influenced by the Impressionists’ pedagogical project because the coordinator, Léon Moussinac, had been an early champion of Impressionism. The first part of the chapter examines the place of this ciné-club within French film culture. The second part then explores the reception of Soviet films after the banning of Les Amis de Spartacus in 1928, focusing in particular on two cases: the Soviet films commercially distributed in France the late 1920s, when most films from the USSR were still banned, and the visits of two influential Soviet directors, Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein. At a time when some French film critics began to claim that politics and the art of film had to constitute two separate spheres, French Communists forcefully proposed a different model. If they promoted both revolutionary Soviet motion pictures and what they considered quality films from the West, it was with the declared aim of teaching viewers to recognize quality cinema so that they could rebel against the corrupt capitalist film industry. Overall, I argue, French Communists created a hybrid model of spectatorship that drew on revolutionary political ideas as much as on the Impressionists’ theories.

While this last chapter’s subject leads me to adopt a more obvious comparative perspective, the previous chapters also take into account each group’s understanding of certain key foreign films: for instance, republicans and the Danish film *Master of the House* by Carl

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\(^{34}\) Kristin Thompson uses the term “commercial avant-garde” to designate the Impressionists, the German Expressionists, and the Soviet school of montage in “National or International Films? The European Debate during the 1920s,” *Film History* 8 (1996): 281-296.
Dreyer, Catholics and American Biblical epics, and the Impressionists’ fascination with certain American and Swedish directors. Indeed, as film scholars have often pointed out, it is impossible to discuss cinema solely in a national context given the unavoidably international nature of film trade. This is also true at the level of discourse – similar debates about the social impact of cinema took place in other countries, from Germany and Japan to the United States. However, before a truly comparative analysis is possible, we still need more case studies that take into account the particular makeup of each national context. What is specific to France is precisely the convergence of pedagogical projects coming from groups with different ideological and aesthetic interests. The following pages uncover this little-known history.


CHAPTER 1. The Dangerous Spectator

A poster for the Cinématographe Lumière from 1896, a year after the first public screening of short films at the Salon Indien du Grand Café in Paris, depicts this new spectacle as a very respectable form of entertainment (Figure 1.1). Middle-class families and a jovial police officer happily watch one of the most popular early comedies, L’Arroseur arrosé, making cinema look like a self-contained, family-friendly spectacle. Ten years later, the Lumière Brothers, uninterested in entertainment, had left the burgeoning film business, while Pathé, one of the first big production companies, came up with an updated version of this advertisement (Figure 1.2). The poster for the new Cinéma Pathé also shows a respectable audience, this time made up only of well-dressed men who take their children to the pictures. A closer look at these spectators reveals they are in fact contemporary royal figures (Nicholas II of Russia; the German Emperor, Wilhelm II; the King of the United Kingdom, Edward VII; Alfonso XIII of Spain; and King Leopold II of Belgium) accompanied by the French President, Armand Fallières.¹ And, in a clever mise-en-abîme, the image on the screen is a recording of their official meeting. Even more significant than the idea that such respectable men would go to the cinema, is the suggestion that they would also bring their children or grandchildren. This is precisely what the text emphasizes (“Everyone takes their children to Cinéma Pathé!”), explicitly defining cinema as entertainment for the entire (royal) family.

Throughout the 1900s, cinema remained mostly a form of popular entertainment, often incorporated into fairground shows. In this context, the poster for Cinéma Pathé sought to

¹ My interpretation of this poster is indebted to Jean-Jacques Meusy, Paris-Palaces ou le temps des cinémas (1894-1918) (Paris: CNRS, 1995) 190-198.
present film as an enjoyable yet sophisticated spectacle – part of a broader effort made in the 1910s toward the legitimization of the new medium. During this decade, the main film companies, Pathé and Gaumont, redefined cinema on several levels. Most importantly, they decided to sell rather than lend copies, which led to the building of more movie theaters and the eventual disappearance of fairground exhibitors.² By 1916, Paris had luxurious “movie palaces” on the Grand Boulevards, boasting thousands of seats, but also many small neighborhood movie theaters.³ This geographic distribution suggests that the big film companies targeted as many audiences as possible: working-, middle- and upper-middle-class. To do so effectively, they also began to diversify their production, offering the usual actualités, travelogues, comedies, and dramas as well as some productions billed as “artistic.” While these early efforts to cater to different audiences had some degree of success, it was especially during World War I that cinema attracted an eclectic audience. Not only did it draw new spectators with the promise of newsreels from the front but, for a while, it also became the only available form of entertainment as theaters and cafés-concerts closed down because of the war. By the early 1920s, cinema’s impact was so far reaching that the Jesuit writer Louis Jalabert felt compelled to denounce the “hunger for spectacle that raged everywhere, from the well-to-do bourgeois to the worker, from the working-class girl to the lady” [“une fringale de spectacle qui sévit dans tous les milieux, du bourgeois cossu à l’ouvrier, de la midinette à la dame”].⁴

What made cinema so popular, then, was also what made it dangerous: it appealed to people of all classes whose reactions could not be fully predicted or controlled. Miriam Hansen


³ This geography of Parisian movie theaters is very well-documented in Meusy, *Paris-Palaces*.

has influentially argued in her study of early American modes of spectatorship that the new medium could function as an alternative public sphere for marginalized groups like women and immigrants. In France, where cinema attracted spectators of both sexes and from diverse social backgrounds, such an alternative public sphere was more inclusive and thus more threatening to the Republic. In the early twentieth century, French authorities were particularly worried about the supposedly increasing crime rate, so much so that the popularity of crime series and serials led them to start policing the cinema more seriously in the 1910s, after an initial effort to define its legal status in 1909. Even if crime films all but disappeared after World War I, partly as a result of strict control, and gave way to other popular genres, such as melodramatic serials or historical reconstructions, this initial link between crime and the moving pictures profoundly influenced the debate about cinema’s social role.

Ironically, the first cinephobes – government officials and social commentators of all political stripes – were also the first reluctant theorists of cinema. Their discourse against cinema is in many ways the opposite of the better known critiques of this medium developed after the 1930s, once Hollywood’s narrative cinema became the norm. In the 1910s and 1920s, cinema’s critics did not condemn it for encouraging escapism and consumerism as Georges Duhamel or, more famously, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer would later argue. Nor was cinema seen

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5 Hansen 90-125.


as an agent of bourgeois ideology that inescapably positioned the spectator as a transcendentental disembodied gaze — the standard definition offered by apparatus theory in the 1970s.⁹ If early detractors of cinema saw the new spectacle as a threat, it was because they understood it as encouraging a circular form of mimesis: film first reproduced reality and then moved spectators to reenact what they had seen. To be sure, this condemnation of mimesis has a long and complicated history, harking back to Plato’s argument in the Republic against poetry as imitation.¹⁰ In France, the issue had come to the fore most poignantly in the mid-nineteenth century, particularly during the trial against Gustave Flaubert’s Madame Bovary, which worked in fact as a trial against realism and the effects of imitation.

In the first part of this chapter, I investigate the ways in which cinephobes recycled such old claims against imitation and what they deemed to be excessive realism in order to emphasize the perils of the new medium of cinema. Then, in the second part, I turn to the films that came under attack (particularly Zigomar, Fantômas, Les Vampires, Les Mystères de New-York) and argue that they propose a much more nuanced take on the function of cinema. By showing both the world of criminals and that of detectives without offering any explicit hints or moral lessons, these motion pictures provoke viewers to decode each image and perceive more than is shown. Crime series and serials like Zigomar and Fantômas celebrate the elusiveness of their own medium. Ultimately, I contend, the greatest danger such motion pictures posed was precisely this elusiveness rather than viewers’ imitation of the criminal acts depicted on screen, as cinema’s detractors usually claimed. The type of cognitive work they encouraged risked leading spectators to question their own status and, more broadly, the social order of the French Republic. The key

⁹ As discussed above in the Introduction.
¹⁰ Plato, Republic, especially books II, III, and X.
problem thus came from how spectators would learn to think rather than from their mindless imitation of motion pictures.

**Policing a New Spectacle**

The birth of national film censorship took place on the day the French Republic resumed public executions after four years of commuted sentences. On January 11, 1909, the town of Béthune witnessed the beheading of the four members of the Pollet gang that had terrorized Northern France for years. What triggered the first act of governmental control of cinema was the presence of cameramen working for the production company Pathé. Although they had been banned from filming the execution, the Minister of Interior worried that the cameramen might have found a way around the interdiction, or that film companies could reenact the scene and record it, as they sometimes did with other current events. To prevent this from happening, the Minister sent a circular to all prefects, asking them to remind mayors of their power to ban fairground shows (*spectacles de curiosités*) which, from then on, officially included cinema:

> In regard to the quadruple capital execution at Béthune, the judicial authority decided that there will be absolutely no usage of any device or process for the reproduction of the scene of the execution. Despite the watchfulness of the police, plates of this scene could have been taken through a ploy in order to be used for cinematographic spectacles; it is also possible that manufacturers create purely imaginary plates for the same purpose. I consider it necessary to drastically

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prohibit all such public cinematographic spectacles, which may provoke
demonstrations that could disturb public order and tranquility.

[L’Autorité judiciaire a prescrit à service d'ordre requis pour la quadruple
exécution capitale de Béthune de s’opposer absolument à ce qu'il fût fait usage
d'appareils ou de procédés quelconques pour reproduction de la scène de
l'exécution. Malgré la vigilance de la force publique, des clichés de cette scène
auraient pu être pris par subterfuge ou surprise en vue de leur utilisation pour des
spectacles cinématographiques ; il se pourrait également que, dans le même but,
des industriels établissent des clichés purement imaginaires. J'estime qu'il est
indispensable d'interdire radicalement tous spectacles cinématographiques publics
de ce genre, susceptibles de provoquer des manifestations troublant l'ordre et la
tranquillité publics.].

Since the execution was public and a huge crowd had gathered to see it, the concern over its
recording is puzzling. The circular gave the stock answer of the French government to any
question having to do with censorship: it must be done in order to preserve public order. A
more complicated response is suggested by how passionately the crowd reacted during the execution.
Newspaper reports described in violent terms the enthusiasm of la foule, the French word for
“crowd” that also carries the negative connotation of “mob”:

When Auguste Pollet comes forward, roars rise up from the bloodthirsty crowd;
they scream: ‘To death! We want to see!’ […] Finally, it is the turn of Abel Pollet,
the cruel chief of the gang of bandits from the North; the anger of the crowd is
exacerbated again, if one may say so: ‘Here he is! they cry. It’s him; death to the

13 Bancal 71-72. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.
While the police managed to rein in the angry crowd gathered in Béthune, it is clear the Minister of Interior feared that the audience of the recorded execution could be an equally furious mob. It is less clear, however, whether this audience would have been a mob that asked for more executions or one that protested against the cruelty of the death sentence. The public could, of course, read about it in the newspaper or see photographs, as they had before, but the power of the moving image was still unknown, and thus a potential threat to public order. The uncertainty the new medium triggered is also suggested by the word choice of the Minister of Interior: some words are borrowed from the theater (spectacles cinématographiques) while others come from the vocabulary of printing and photography (clichés), in an attempt to draw on familiar vocabulary to describe a worrisome, unfamiliar phenomenon.

The thorny issue of the death penalty compounded the problem. From 1906 to 1908, the Chamber of Deputies heatedly debated the abolition of capital punishment only to conclude that it had to be retained. During the long debate, the penny press was on the side of the retentionists, doing everything in its power to convince the public that capital punishment had a deterrent effect and that it was absolutely necessary to maintain it because, they alleged, crime was on the

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15 Michel Foucault examined the early nineteenth-century folklore (broadsheets, almanacs, songs) developed around criminal figures in his Surveiller et punir: naissance de la prison (Paris: Gallimard, 1993) 66-68.
rise. Newspapers such as *Le Petit Parisien* reported daily on the misdeeds of every gang of *apaches* – groups of young people from the industrialized suburbs who showed up in different parts of the country to rob and occasionally kill people of all classes. In response, the abolitionists accused the popular press of stoking public fear and warned that “the crowd” could become too “unreasonable, imperious, ferocious.”

As Susanna Barrows has demonstrated, this fear of crowds and of their volatile reactions went back to the 1870s, the first tumultuous years of the Third Republic. This incarnation of the Republic was predicated on a double defeat: of the Second French Empire by the Prussians and of the Paris Commune by republicans defending bourgeois interests. Even though the Commune of 1871 only lasted two months, it was the first time in French history when the working class took hold of power. Having been founded on the bloody suppression of this workers’ government, the Republic remained, for years to come, fearful of new rebellions. Gustave Le Bon’s study on the psychology of crowds (*Psychologie des foules*) popularized this issue in 1895, the same year as the first cinematograph show. While the first decades of the Republic had reinstituted a clearer division between its ruling class (made up mostly of property owners, from farmers to industrialists) and the working class, Le Bon argued that these distinctions disappeared in the crowd and that no one, regardless of class, gender, or age, was immune to the contagion of *la foule*. Around the same time, Gabriel Tarde’s *Les Lois de l’immitation* (1890) and *L’Opinion et la Foule* (1901) claimed that imitation constituted the


foundation of society, a law of social interaction that could have both positive and negative effects.

At the turn of the century, the dystopian view of the crowd as a mob coexisted with another, more positive depiction, which defined the masses as avid consumers of entertainment. In the rapidly developing commercial culture of the fin de siècle, a great variety of urban spectacles were geared precisely toward pleasing the crowd. Vanessa Schwartz has explained that “spectacular realities” such as wax museums, the Parisian morgue, mass press, and early cinema functioned as a key factor in the creation of a mass society because they offered the crowd a sense of a shared experience. Instead of feeding its discontent and fearing it, they invited the crowd to be part of modern urban culture. This double-edged definition of la foule – an angry mob ready for revolt and a consumerist crowd devouring images – is crucial to understanding how authorities of the Third Republic began to address the dangers of cinema.

If in 1909 government officials worried about what it meant to record reality or reenact a real event and project it in front of an uncontrollable crowd, in the next three years they were more alarmed by the increasing popularity of series and serials depicting crimes. Zigomar (1911-1913), Tom Butler (1912), Fantômas (1913-1914), Le Masque aux dents blanches (1916), and many others drew a wide audience through their representation of the illegal actions of apache gangs – that is to say, of those who followed in the footsteps of the Pollet gang. The authorities may have managed to censor the screening of the gang’s execution, but now they had to deal with kilometers of film depicting the adventures of a new generation of inventive

19 Schwartz 6.
20 There is a slight difference between a series or a film à épisodes (which has self-contained episodes) and a serial or a ciné-roman (which has shorter episodes that usually end with cliffhangers). For a history of this genre, see Abel, The Ciné Goes to Town 354-355 and “The Thrills of the ‘Grande Peur’, as well as Francis Lacassin, Pour une contre-histoire du cinéma. (Lyon-Arles: Institut Lumière-Actes Sud, 1994).
brigands. Their focus thus shifted from the reality of newsreels to the realism of feature films.  

Claiming that cinema was teaching spectators how to rob and kill, some mayors simply banned all films that depicted criminal acts. Exhibitors could still show them but would then risk being taken to court and fined – much like authors, publishers, and printers could still be fined or jailed every time book censorship was suspended during the nineteenth century.

In 1913, after several crime films had been banned in Hyères and the decision contested in court, the judge decided to send a philosophy high school teacher from Toulon to watch the films and decide whether they were indeed, as the mayor described them, “liable to disturb order and whether they constitute[d] a demoralizing spectacle” [“de nature à troubler l’ordre et s’ils constituent un spectacle démoralisant”]. The teacher’s decision has not been preserved, but what is more relevant is the need to appoint such a “superviewer” who could establish once and for all the true meaning of a motion picture. In this spirit, from 1912 to 1916 a number of French towns instituted a visa for public distribution that had to be issued by the mayor. A similar system of visas was adopted on a national scale in 1916 through the establishment of a national censorship board, the Commission de contrôle des films, initially appointed by the Ministry of Interior. Even though this institution has undergone many changes, the visa for public distribution continues to be required in France to this day.

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21 This is not to say that the authorities stopped monitoring newsreels; instead, they found better ways to control and use them to their advantage, especially during World War I. See Laurent Véray, “1914-1918, the First Media War of the Twentieth Century: The Example of French Newsreels,” Film History 22.4 (2010): 408-425.

22 The first mayors to take advantage of their power to ban cinematographic spectacles came from the South and Southeast of France (Belley, Lyon, Hyères, Marseille, Aix-en-Provence, Avignon). See Bancal 79-90 and Abel, Ciné Goes to Town 364-365.


24 I am adapting here the idea of a “superreader” from Elisabeth Ladenson, who has historicized Michel Riffaterre’s concept of the architecteur and presented the imperial prosecutor Ernest Pinard as a superreader, acting “as a collective, neutral reading machine” in “The Imperial Superreader, or: Semiotics of Indecency,” Romanic Review 93.1-2 (2002): 81-90.
Cinephobia

If the local measures taken in 1912 and 1913 were very much in line with the 1909 circular, the authorities’ view of cinema audiences had become more specific. Instead of worrying about the reaction of the crowd, mayors frequently invoked one particular category of spectators: children and teenagers. Edouard Herriot, the mayor of Lyon who would later became a prominent supporter of educational cinema, gave a typical response when the Central Cinematogaphic Agency, an organization established by film producers and exhibitors, contested his decision to ban crime films:

I was led to take this measure in order to put an end to the exhibition of images that are shown in cinematographic institutions and could easily be seen as incitements to crime and murder. These institutions are frequented by families and children. By issuing the attacked order, I wanted to protect children from spectacles that could show them actions society condemns. I did not want to allow that in Lyon young people be shown images representing crimes committed by the worst enemies of law and order.

[J’ai été conduit à prendre cette mesure pour mettre fin à des exhibitions de vues faites dans ces établissements cinématographiques, et qui pouvaient trop facilement être considérées comme excitant au crime et au meurtre. Ces établissements sont fréquentés par les familles et les enfants. En prenant l’arrêté attaqué, j’ai voulu protéger les enfants contre des spectacles qui pouvaient paraître, à leurs yeux, la fabrication d’actes que la société réprouve. Je n’ai pas

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25 See Zeldin 315-343 on how childhood was understood in France and in Europe more generally throughout the nineteenth century and in the first half of the twentieth. For an analysis of how U.S. social scientists analyzed children’s responses to cinema in the late 1920s and 1930s, see Garth S. Jowett, Ian C. Jarvie, and Kathryn H. Fuller, *Children and the Movies: Media Influence and the Payne Fund Controversy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
voulu permettre qu’à Lyon on montrât à la jeunesse des vues représentant des 
forfaits accomplis par les pires ennemis de l'ordre et de la légalité.].

In his insistence that he was only trying to protect children who went to the cinema with their families, Herriot suggested that he was in fact protecting the family from itself in the name of “order and legality.” His stance reflected the Third Republic’s focus on children and the family. Jacques Donzelot has argued that the end of the nineteenth century saw “a transition from a government of families to a government through the family,” which involved a crusade in the name of hygiene and morality meant to reshape the working-class family according to the bourgeois model. This campaign turned workers away from the café with its many temptations and toward the home, where they were supposed to focus on child rearing and supervision. Cinema might have seemed a more benign form of entertainment when compared to the café because, as the posters discussed earlier suggested, families could go to the movies together. But Herriot and others considered this new spectacle to be even more threatening and blamed it for the alleged increase in teenage crime, persistently decried in official reports and newspapers.

Around the same time, the juvenile justice system went through its own transition, shifting its emphasis from the punishment of child criminals to their protection and rehabilitation. Under the influence of criminologists and social theorists from the late nineteenth century who sought to explain the causes of the “degeneration” of French society, it was believed that these young criminals had been shaped by heredity, their social milieu, and other factors beyond their control. A law promulgated in 1912 required a full-fledged

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26 11 Nov. 1912, quoted in Bancal 84-85.
investigation into a criminal child’s background so that all influences could be assessed before establishing the defendant’s own responsibility. As mayors started to ban crime films that same year, cinema became a likely culprit. Some of the cases publicized in newspapers show the wide range of crimes motion pictures supposedly provoked: a group of teenagers vandalized shops wearing black masks like the gang from *Fantômas*; two girls tried to kill a painter after drawing their inspiration from a motion picture; and two young boys attempted to rob an elderly lady, again like in a serial, only to be scared and run away the moment she complied and raised her hands.\(^{29}\) In other, more benign cases, teenagers claimed they had been attacked, but later admitted they had only seen an attack at the movies.

For social commentators and government officials, the sheer accumulation of such stories pointed to one single problem: adolescents were unavoidably tempted to copy what they saw on the screen. In 1917, lawyer Bertrand de Laflotte went so far as to downplay the influence of the family on young criminals and blame it all on the cinema. In his report to a special committee for the defense of children brought to court, Laflotte described two imaginary young boys who saw the same motion picture that presented criminal acts in a positive light. One of these invented boys, whom he called Pierre, had already been involved in an incident at work, when he had tried to steal from his employer, but he confessed and promised never to do it again.\(^{30}\) The other one, Jean, always acted properly and never even thought of committing theft. Yet, according to Laflotte, the film emboldened both boys to think about stealing and reassured them that they could get away with it. Their upbringing did not seem to matter; all it took was to see that one could steal without being caught. This idea that cinema could have even more influence than

\(^{29}\) For a long list of such cases see Bancal 12-60.

heredity found its way into governmental discourse, as seen in the transcript of a proposition put forth by the Chamber of Deputies:

The confessions of minor delinquents recorded in court attest to the dangers of this regrettable excitation. Many of them declare that they only had such an idea of misdemeanor and crime and executed it because they were carried away by the desire to imitate the disturbing exploits staged by the cinematographic representations they had seen.

By giving motion pictures so much power over the audience, this type of argument allowed some defense lawyers to blame cinema for their clients’ behavior, thus denying any agency on the part of spectators. Official reports very rarely invoked the concept of hypnosis, but the idea that the moving image could completely influence viewers and make them act in ways in which they would never have done if left on their own prefigures the importance of the comparison between cinema and hypnosis after World War I. In these first decades, however, French cinephobes did not draw on medical discourse. Nor were they interested in the work done by Hugo Münsterberg in the mid-1910s in the United States, using perceptual psychology and

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31 Proposition de résolution de la Chambre des députés, 28 juin 1917, quoted in Pierre de Casabianca, Comment préserver l’Enfance des Dangers du Cinéma, Ile Congrès international pour la protection de l’enfance (Bruxelles, 1921) 12.

studies of hypnosis to explore the impact of film on viewers. Instead, French cinephobes appropriated the type of arguments that had justified the proliferation of literary censorship during the Second Empire (1852-1870). At the time, those in favor of censoring literature contended that books were dangerous because they had led to the revolution of 1848 and could again contribute to a new uprising against the bourgeoisie. To this, cinema’s detractors also added a moralist discourse infused with arguments about the decay of French society, ideas so often repeated, particularly by right-wing commentators, that they had become widely accepted even when the evidence did not necessarily support them.

According to this line of thought, the teenagers who could have put an end to this decay were growing up without any male authority figures because their fathers and brothers were away, either at work or, during World War I, fighting for their country. In defense of a young man who worked at a post office and had been stealing money from envelopes addressed to soldiers, lawyer Edmond Bloch mounted a passionate attack on cinema, which he described as a more frightening adversary than Germany:

Today, gentlemen, you are members of the jury. Take advantage of your role to look for the cause of the social evils that we will spread out in front of you and to give legislators a warning through your verdicts. Here, like in almost all cases involving young people, the great criminal is cinema. Ah! cinema’s examples! The educational film! In the past, when we used to read, we criticized young women because they were romantic or wanted to be like the characters in a novel.

Today, they go crazy. They want to be like that unhinged woman, Elaine [the

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34 Nye 104-144 discusses these worries about decay and degeneration.
main character from *The Exploits of Elaine/Les Mystères de New-York*, played by Pearl White. Same for young men: Red Beard or the Clutching Hand [characters from *Les Mystères de New-York*]! Here is what we give the young while their elder brothers are meeting their glorious end.

[Aujourd’hui, Messieurs, vous êtes jurés. Profitez de votre passage ici pour chercher la cause des plaies sociales que l’on va étaler sous vos yeux, et pour donner par vos verdicts un avertissement au législateur. Ici, comme dans presque toutes les affaires où il y a de tout jeunes gens, le grand criminel c’est le cinéma. Ah! les exemples de cinéma! Son film éducateur! Autrefois, à l’époque où on lisait, on reprochait aux jeunes filles de devenir romantiques ou romanesques. Aujourd’hui, elles deviennent insensées. C’est à Elaine, cette déséquilibrée, qu’elles veulent ressembler. Et les jeunes hommes: Barbe-Rouge ou la Main qui étreint! Voilà la pâture intellectuelle qu’on donne aux cadets pendant que les aînés se font tuer superbement.].

Bloch’s reference to reading here is strangely tinted with nostalgia. As his description of young women readers suggests, reading itself was not necessarily good, but it was a less harmful way of passing time than going to the cinema. Even more importantly, whereas critics of the novel focused mostly on the effect it had on women, Bloch and other detractors of cinema recognized that this new form of entertainment could affect both genders equally. Their main concern continued to be young spectators, be they male or female, working- or middle-class because these adolescents belonged to one of the first generations who grew up during the Republic.


36 This idea also came back in the American Hays Code of the 1930s, but the social scientists who conducted studies about the influence of motion pictures for the Payne Fund suggested that they could have different kinds of effects depending on viewers’ gender.
They were the children who had access to free secular primary education, who had been raised in the spirit of a civic morality. Allowing cinema to become their secondary school meant undermining the efforts of the Republic to create good citizens. And while it is difficult to know with certainty how many teenagers actually went to the cinema during this period and how they understood it, the Surrealists, who were adolescents during World War I, testified to the powerful effect of crime films such as Fantômas or Les Mystères de New-York, which they described as formative for their generation. As much as they tried to anticipate and preempt the impact of these films on young spectators, the officials who policed them had no way of knowing that they would be so important for one of the most defiant avant-garde movements.

**Excessive Realism**

If discussions of the impact of new media on the audience, especially on teenagers, sound so familiar to us today, it is because the arguments against cinema studied here are part of a long line of accusations against any new medium — television, video games, the internet — that could influence users and move them to act violently. But, as noted above, detractors of cinema did not invent this type of discourse. They, too, rehashed old arguments about the impact of representation on the audience, particularly on theatergoers and on readers of novels. The fears provoked by cinema mirrored those previously triggered by theater, which had long been considered problematic by all French regimes, regardless of their ideology. In her study of the

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relationship between the French Revolution and theater, Susan Maslan has argued that the first republicans associated theatricality with the monarchy’s artificiality and corruption to such an extent that they remained wary of the theater even as they tried to align it with the new regime of transparency and direct representation.\(^{39}\) As the first mayor of Paris during the Revolution, Jean-Sylvain Bailly, put it “one must exclude from the theater, where many men assemble and mutually electrify each other, everything that might tend to corrupt morals or the spirit of government.”\(^{40}\) This take differed from Rousseau’s better-known argument against theater in his *Lettre à d’Alembert sur les spectacles* (1758), where he claimed that theater did nothing but corrupt spectators and disrupt their productivity, whereas festivals could truly express the republican spirit of freedom and participation. For Bailly, theater could have the same positive role in society as a Rousseauian festival but, if left unsupervised, it also posed a significant threat because it could incite the audience to action by modeling ways to rebel against the establishment.

This remained a serious issue throughout the nineteenth century, when France saw a remarkable number of revolts, from full-blown revolutions to more localized strikes. By the time theater censorship died a slow bureaucratic death and was finally abolished in 1906, the status of theater as a prestigious art form was no longer questioned but rather staunchly defended against popular spectacles like the cinema. Some film companies, such as the Film d’Art, tried as early as 1908 to co-opt theater’s prestige to legitimize cinema but were not very successful.\(^{41}\)

Throughout the 1910s, cinephobes continued to hail theater as an art for the elite, with enormous


\(^{40}\) Quoted in Maslan 37.

\(^{41}\) Alain Carou has studied these companies in *Le Cinéma français et les écrivains: histoire d’une rencontre, 1906-1914* (Paris: École nationale des chartes, AFRHC, 2002).
aesthetic value, while also attacking cinema for corrupting moviegoers with depictions of criminal acts. Anti-theater discourse was thus recycled as anti-cinema discourse, just as arguments against cinema would later be used against television.

The connection between cinema and the novel, particularly the serial novel (feuilleton), came with a similar set of pitfalls. The 1910s saw the emergence of two related trends: some of the most popular films were adaptations of older serial novels, while others led to the publication of serial novelizations as tie-ins. Fantômas may be the best known example of the first phenomenon. The five films of the series loosely adapted Marcel Allain and Pierre Souvestre’s best-selling novel, which was said to have sold more copies than the Bible. The filmed version of Fantômas, directed by Gaumont’s Louis Feuillade, turned out to be as popular as the novel but more problematic for the authorities. The second phenomenon, the novelization of serial films—the publication of a narrative describing each episode before it was released—started with The Exploits of Elaine (1914-1915). Directed by Louis Gasnier, George B. Seitz, and Leopold Wharton for Pathé in the United States, this series was released in France in 1915-1916 in a recut version titled Les Mystères de New-York. Before the weekly release of a new episode, the newspaper Le Matin printed the novelized version in its pages, then also published a separate dime novel illustrated with pictures from the episode (Figure 1.3).

The idea had been imported from the U.S. but it seems to have been particularly successful in France, where there was a huge market for serial novels. The new French title made very clear the connection between film serials and the French tradition of the feuilleton, whose best-sellers included Eugène Sue’s Les Mystères de Paris (1842-1843), followed by an

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43 For a comparison of these discourses in the American and German context, see Patrice Petro, “Mass Culture and the Feminine: The "Place" of Television in Film Studies,” Cinema Journal 25.3 (1986): 5-21.
44 Lacassin 53.
avalanche of Mystères, from Sue’s Les Mystères du peuple (1849–1856) to Zola’s Les Mystères de Marseille (1867). In the 1840s, enemies of the feuilleton argued that this “roman corrupteur” overly stimulated the imagination and presented immoral actions in a positive light. The genre’s main target, its critics said, tended to be women and working-class readers who could be easily influenced by what they read. In the early nineteenth century, cases like that of Marie Lafarge, accused of poisoning her husband, quickly turned into a trial of the popular novels available to women at the time, such as Les Mémoires du diable by Frédéric Soulié, the book she was reading before killing her husband. In the 1910s and 1920s, these anxieties provoked by the “roman corrupteur” were transferred onto what Jalabert called the “film corrupteur,” more specifically the ciné-feuilleton, or the ciné-roman. It should come as no surprise, then, that Fantômas and Les Mystères de New-York were among the films local authorities banned across France.

And yet, critics of the cinema did not solely rehash some of the old arguments that had been used against other forms of representation – particularly the idea that a certain medium could “corrupt” the audience and it was thus necessary to protect the general public from it immoral influence. Cinema’s detractors also identified the specific threats posed by this new spectacle, threats that were completely new and therefore more unsettling. Even if popular novels were still considered somewhat risky in the early twentieth century, at least they raised well-known issues. In the words of the moralist Edouard Poulain, it was better to want to be a Don Quixote than a bandit. Cinema’s techniques, however, especially the close-up, worked more insidiously. According to one critic, cinema functioned as a “monstrous magnifying class”


46 Édouard Poulain, Contre le cinéma école du vice et du crime, pour le cinéma école d’éducation, moralisation et vulgarisation (Besançon: Imprimerie de l’Est, 1917) 32.
[“une loupe monstrueuse”] that could zoom in more than any other medium and take apart every gesture.\textsuperscript{47} This phrase implicitly referred to Stendhal’s famous description of the novel as “a mirror being carried along a road” [“un miroir qu’on promène le long du chemin”] but updated it to highlight one of the most worrying techniques of the new medium – the close-up.\textsuperscript{48}

What made matters worse for cinephobes was that crime films used this technique to present illegal acts in great detail. Had the close-up focused on moral actions, as it eventually did in educational films of the 1920s, it would not have been so problematic. An oft-cited example is a close-up that shows how bandits used gloves to avoid leaving their fingerprints behind: “the film will push documentation to the point of representing separately – by enlarging them – the naked fingers and the gloved fingers, so as to show very well the danger of the former and the safety of the latter” [“le film poussera la documentation au point de représenter séparément,– en les grossissant,– des doigts nus et des doigts gantés, pour bien montrer le danger des uns et la sécurité des autres”].\textsuperscript{49} The close-up, then, was one of cinema’s many forms of excess; spectators could not avoid looking at the image that took up the entire screen. If the thief’s fingers had not been magnified, perhaps viewers would not have noticed the difference. But, since the close-up would not let them see anything else, it inescapably drew them in. In the 1920s, theorists of cinema such as Jean Epstein and Béla Balázs went on to explain how this technique elicited an emotional response from spectators, especially if it focused on a face.\textsuperscript{50} Although cinema’s detractors were more interested in ethics than in aesthetics, they too identified the close-up as a


\textsuperscript{48} Stendhal, Le rouge et le noir (Paris: Gallimard, 2000) 134. Toward the end of the novel the narrator gives a slightly different version of this sentence: “un miroir qui se promène sur une grande route” 479.

\textsuperscript{49} Laflotte 10.

crucial cinematic technique early on. The main difference between these critics and full-fledged film theorists from later decades is that cinema’s detractors aligned the close-up with one of the main policing procedures, fingerprinting, since their incipient theory of cinema served disciplinary purposes first and foremost.

However, the much maligned crime films complicated this function of the close-up. In the 1910s, the transition from deep-staged tableaux to continuity editing, which combined a variety of shots, was still in full swing. In an analysis of Feuillade’s mise-en-scène, David Bordwell has shown that this prolific director of crime films and melodramas preferred deep pictorial shots to the kind of continuity editing that D.W. Griffith was beginning to use in the United States. Most French films from the same period resort to tableau shots, which the director arranged for the camera. If there are any clues meant to direct the attention of the audience, they usually come through staging instead of close-ups.51 The majority of close-ups in Fantômas, for instance, are only cut-ins of calling cards or newspaper articles, used in order to push the narrative forward.

Close-ups of fingerprints are very rare in the Fantômas series, but when they are used, they are more complex and even more subversive than in Laflotte’s general example. To give a striking example, the third film of the series, Le Mort qui tue, shows at length how the police investigate the theft of a necklace from a princess. A series of close-ups follows their procedure: one of the fingerprints found on the victim’s neck, another one of the picture taken by an officer, and, later, yet another one of the identification sheet that gives all the anthropometric details of the suspect. Despite this wealth of details, it turns out that the suspect was already dead at the time of the crime. Fantômas had killed him and made a glove out of his skin, which he then used

to commit the theft.\textsuperscript{52} And while we do not see this gloved hand in close-up, we do see police procedure step by step. By magnifying the fingerprints before we know whether they belong to the real criminal or not, the film draws our attention to them and plays with our expectations. These scenes could be extolling the complex identification techniques of the police, or, based on what we already know about the master criminal, they could be leading up to another one of his tricks, one that happened off-camera. Once we find out what Fantômas had done, we also realize that the close-ups in fact suggested the unreliability of police procedure. Such visual and narrative uncertainty, repetitively undercutting viewers’ expectations rather than offering clear lessons in crime, is the main ingredient of crime films.

This did not, however, stop detractors of cinema from attacking it for what they saw as its excessive realism. When film exhibitors from Hyères challenged the legality of banning films at a time when theater was no longer censored, the local court judge upheld the original decision, arguing that the banned crime films were only interested in “the depiction of the feats of bandits against officers or the reproduction of scenarios of a realism that would not have dared to appear on the stage of a theater” [“l’évocation d’exploits de bandits aux prises avec les agents de l’autorité ou dans le reproduction de scénarios d’un réalisme qui n’aurait pas osé s’afficher sur une scène théâtrale”].\textsuperscript{53} A few years later, a judge from Dijon used similar language to denounce the effect of cinema on two gangs of teenagers who, he claimed, had fought like they had seen in the movies, which showed crimes “with a realism that had no trace of art” [“avec un réalisme exclusif de toute note d’art”].\textsuperscript{54} “Realism” had been a tainted word since the mid-nineteenth


\textsuperscript{53} “Spectacles cinématographiques” 35-45.

\textsuperscript{54} “Gazette des Tribunaux,” \textit{Le Figaro}, 16 Oct. 1916: 3.
century, when it began to designate an aesthetic movement. During Gustave Flaubert’s trial for *Madame Bovary*, the defense stayed away from the word “realism,” while the prosecution used it regularly in order to argue that his novel was morally and aesthetically questionable. By the time cinema came under attack, more than half a century later, the term “realism” had lost its bite and in fact had become a rather benign category when compared to the gruesomeness of Zola’s naturalist school.55

To show how threatening realism could still be, critics of the cinema seemed to feel the need to qualify it further (realism *without* art), or to refer to its more grisly version, naturalism. A journalist from *Le Temps* explained it best when he argued that cinema destroyed “the last artifice of art” [“le dernier artifice d’art”] standing between the eye of the spectator and reality, thus accomplishing the agenda of the naturalist school and giving the audience “a slice of life” [“une tranche de vie”].56 The shock of the moving image, he added, came precisely from “this absence of any artistic element, this brutal carbon copy of reality” [“cette absence d’élément artistique, ce décalque brutal de la réalité”].57 According to this argument, one of the most worrying traits of cinema was the ability to reproduce life mechanically, without the mediation of an artist who could invest it with meaning, idealize it, or moralize it, and who could also be blamed for not having done so, as it had been the case with Flaubert. Such claims were turned on their head a few years later as some of the avant-garde filmmakers, including Jean Epstein, would define cinema as a machine that both records and adds a new layer to reality.58 In the 1930s and 40s, the filmmakers associated with poetic realism (Jean Renoir, Marcel Carné)

55 My understanding of this trial is informed by Elisabeth Ladenson, *Dirt for Art's Sake: Books on Trial from Madame Bovary to Lolita* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007).
56 J.B., “L’Écran et la vie.”
57 Ibid.
revisited this issue and insisted on the intricate connection between cinema and ontological realism – an idea that André Bazin made famous after World War II.\textsuperscript{59} For early twentieth-century cinephobes, however, the new medium, with its mechanic reproduction of reality, could not be judged in aesthetic terms. Even Ricciotto Canudo, who would later become a champion of cinema’s aesthetic merits, had initially declared in 1911 that film could not yet be an art because it remained primarily a “mechanical mode of expression.”\textsuperscript{60}

Faced with these repeated attacks on their realistic depictions of the underworld, film industry professionals quickly pointed out that newspapers and serial novels often presented horrid crimes whereas crime films, with their exaggerated plots, full of disguises and chases, were anything but realistic. The whole point of these motion pictures, they argued, was to create a fantasy world, not to offer lessons in crime. Insisting only on the plot rather than on the impact of the image, Guy de Téramond, a writer of ciné-romans, explained the difference between real life and serials in these terms:

For instance, to go from the Madeleine to the Opera in daily life, you would simply walk along the boulevard. Not so in a movie! You take a cab, get out of Paris, take a hike at full speed across the countryside and fall in a ravine that turns out to be a hundred feet deep, then you are attacked by a tribe of Redskins that just happened to be camping there, you swim across a river and jump in a plane that drops you off on a roof. All you have to do after that is go to the apartment where the female protagonist is waiting for you, and to do so, you slide down a chimney, slip through the drain and suddenly appear through a trap door.


\textsuperscript{60} Ricciotto Canudo, “The Birth of a Sixth Art,” \textit{French Film Theory and Criticism} 60.
Pour aller de la Madeleine à l’Opéra, par exemple, dans la vie courante on suivrait simplement le boulevard. Pas au cinéma ! On prend un taxi, on sort de Paris, on fait, en quatrième vitesse, une randonnée à travers la campagne, on tombe dans un ravin profond de cent pieds, on est attaqué par une tribu de Peaux-Rouges, campée là par hasard, on franchit une rivière à la nage, on saute dans un avion qui vous dépose sur un toit. Il ne vous reste plus qu’à gagner l’appartement où vous attend l’héroïne, en vous glissant par une cheminée, en traversant un égout et en surgissant par une trappe.].

More recent discussions of these films have tended to highlight precisely this type of fantastic realism, their mix of elements of two modes of excess: fantasy and melodrama. In fact, the category of the “cinema of uncertainty” that Vicki Callahan has developed for Feuillade’s work could describe most films that were banned in France in the 1910s — they all play with unstable identities and question the kind of knowledge that moving pictures can produce.

Decoding Crime Films: Who Is Who?

While producers and directors of crime films aimed first of all to entertain the audience and make a profit, they also challenged spectators to decode what they saw and, in the process, suggested what cinema could and could not do. In 1911, Feuillade argued against the idea that “the audience [was] stupid” [“le public est idiot”]. For him, “the soul of the crowd [was]
generous, fair, sensitive, and perceptive” [“l’âme des foules est généreuse, juste, sensible et

63 Callahan 4.
perspicace”] as shown by its appreciation of such works of art as Corneille’s *Le Cid* or Victor Hugo’s *Hernani*, which critics had initially dismissed. The crime film genre in general (not only Feuillade’s work, though he is better known) relies precisely on such a perceptive viewer. Even before they entered the movie theater, spectators were positioned as detectives and drawn in with crimes they had to solve. The poster for *Les Vampires* (1915-1916) used the inherent opacity of the crime film genre as a marketing strategy, teasing the audience with a huge question mark and a series of questions: “Who? What? When? Where?” [“Qui? Quoi? Quand? Où?”] (Figure 1.4). The woman represented on this poster (the anagrammatic Irma Vep, a member of the gang *Les Vampires*) wears a black hood, associated at the time, particularly after *Fantômas*, with bandits.

With their constant efforts to hide and to reveal, these motion pictures offered an ambiguous system of points of view. In fact, the most serious threat they posed, never fully acknowledged by cinema’s detractors, was their all-pervasive ambiguity. Criminals and detectives have a myriad disguises and hide in plain sight; bandits often look like respectable bourgeois, while aristocrats turn out to be brigands; clues that seemed trustworthy are in fact tricks; everything always moves, changes, disappears. The five films of the *Fantômas* series often go back and forth between the perspective of the master criminal Fantômas, with his multiple incarnations, and that of the law, represented by detective Juve and journalist Fandor.

To complicate matters, the series also plays with extreme positions: it allows viewers to feel omniscient for a while only to thrust them in the middle of a scene without giving them any clues. The opening scenes for three of the five films (the first, *A l’ombre de la guillotine*, the

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65 My analysis will focus on the best known crime films that were banned. Many others have been lost but, based on their synopsis and other primary sources, it is safe to say they generally followed the rules of the genre.

66 Gunning discusses the opacity of the detective genre in “Lynx-Eyed Detectives and Shadow Bandits” 74-88.
second, *Juve contre Fantômas* and the fifth, *Le Faux Magistrat*) seem to guide and reassure spectators by showing them at the very beginning the characters that Fantômas will impersonate (Figure 1.5). Even more generously, *Juve contre Fantômas* also includes detective Juve’s disguises (Figure 1.6). According to Tom Gunning, this technique constitutes a departure from the novel on which the motion picture was based. Spectators could right away see Fantômas’s (and, in one case, also Juve’s) disguises in the prologue, whereas readers of the novel were kept in suspense and did not know from the beginning what new personalities Fantômas might take on. The reason for this change, Gunning writes, may be that Feuillade tried to appease the authorities by showing them his work was not nearly as dangerous as the book (which had not been banned) or other earlier films. Indeed, the *Zigomar* series made by the Victorin Jasset for Éclair a few years prior to *Fantômas* did not give such helpful hints to its viewers. For instance, when the moment of his disguise is shown in *Zigomar contre Nick Carter*, Zigomar stands with his back to the camera while he puts on a wig and other accessories. We only see his face once the transformation is complete, when he looks at himself in the mirror.

By contrast, the entire first film of the *Fantômas* series, not just the opening scene, seems to train viewers in how to recognize Fantômas and what to expect from him. In this first film, Fantômas has one main persona: Gurn, a criminal who is imprisoned and becomes the subject of a theater play. After we see Valgrand, the theater actor who is about to play Gurn, on stage putting on his make-up and wig, we can also observe the theatergoers as they quietly watch him with the full knowledge that he is Valgrand impersonating Gurn. The actor is then followed by his admirers to his dressing room, where he seems to enjoy his star status. Taking advantage of this play, Fantômas enrolls his accomplice, Lady Beltham, to help him escape from prison and be

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replaced by the actor Valgrand, still in character. To make this switch possible, Lady Beltham
invites Valgrand over, drugs him and, with the help of two guards, replaces Fantômas/Gurn with
Valgrand. In the book, Valgrand is decapitated on the day when Fantômas was scheduled to be
executed, but the film softens the story. Detective Juve notices that Valgrand is wearing a wig
and discovers his real identity. Meanwhile, Fantômas and Lady Beltham watch from a hotel
window as the guillotine is prepared, a scene which, as Richard Abel writes, offers two possible
viewing positions: the immoral perspective of Fantômas, who rejoices thinking his plan worked,
and the more ethical view of Lady Beltham, who has been ambivalent all along and seems to
have gone along with the plan only because of Fantômas’s threats. Beyond these two positions
is also what I would call the supra-position of the film viewer who has by now understood how
unstable Fantômas’s identity is and, even more importantly, how unreliable vision can be.

To reinforce this unreliability, the omniscient point of view constructed by the first film
in the Fantômas series is repeatedly undercut in other scenes from the series, in which the
spectator does not know enough to establish who is and who is not Fantômas. The most complex
of them happens during a mainstay of the crime genre: a masked ball. In the fourth film,
Fantômas contre Fantômas, the ball includes no less than three Fantômases, all dressed in his
trademark black bodysuit. An intertitle makes it clear that one of them is in fact the journalist
Fandor, who decided to wear Fantômas’s costume because he “hoped to provoke a reaction from
the criminal.” We also see a police officer dressing up as Fantômas, and, once everyone is in
costume, there are a few other subtle clues that help us recognize each Fantômas. For example,
when the two false Fantômases meet face to face, Lady Beltham, who is organizing the ball,
seems apprehensive. But she looks truly scared only when another Fantômas shows up. Judging

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Abel, “The Thrills of the ‘Grande Peur’” 8. Abel also discusses the “ambivalent or even contradictory […]
ideological positioning” of crime films in The Ciné Goes to Town 387.
by her expression and because we have not seen who this Fantômas is, we can assume that he is in fact the actual criminal.

However, once Lady Beltham is no longer shown, it becomes impossible to know who is who, and we are left with two Fantômases walking away and fighting while another one follows them. Only when one Fantômas attacks the other and an intertitle indicates “a cry in the night” do the masks come off. The dead Fantômas turns out to be the police officer, the one following them and arriving too late is Fandor, and, implicitly, the one who disappeared was the real Fantômas. To find the criminal, the spectator has to look carefully at the deep staged shots that offer no leading close-ups, search for clues, and monitor the characters’ facial expressions. Such scenes sharpen viewers’ perception and provoke them to decode every image without relying on the help of the camera or intertitles.

**Viewing Positions**

Released a year after *Fantômas*, *Les Vampires* stays true to its poster and seems intent on confusing spectators from the beginning. There are no opening scenes to make clear who is disguised as whom, and only a few intertitles identify the newly introduced characters. Sometimes, even the bandits seem to have a difficult time recognizing each other. In this long series, made up of ten episodes, the viewer is offered two reference points: the investigative reporter Philippe Guérande and his sidekick, Oscar Mazamette, who earnestly joins the Vampire gang in the first episode only to change his mind and turn into a good petit bourgeois for the next nine episodes. Throughout the series, they embody two parallel modes of seeing. Guérande is a rational viewer who searches for clues and deciphers them, while Mazamette is a more emotional spectator who follows his instincts.
From the first episodes, Guérande adopts the classic detective method. He gets a hold of a codebook listing all the crimes the Vampires committed, sets out to decode it, and eventually figures out how to read the letters in the right order. This act of deciphering is modeled in two other scenes, when letters jump around on the screen and anagrams solve themselves for the viewers. The first one takes place when Irma Vep, played by Musidora, is introduced in episode three (*Le Cryptogramme rouge*). Right after we see her name on a poster for the cabaret where she performs, the letters rearrange themselves to spell the word “vampire” (Figure 1.7). The second scene comes in the eighth episode (*Le Maître de la foudre*), when an imprisoned Irma Vep is on a boat headed toward a penal colony in Algeria and the Grand Vampire sends her a secret message that initially reads “la vérité sera à nu” [“the truth will be revealed”]. As Irma figures out its hidden meaning, we too see the letters move around to show the actual message: “le navire sautera” [“the boat will explode”]. Not only do these anagrams reinforce the idea that nothing is what it seems, but they also warn viewers to look for connecting threads – a more complex technique of creating suspenseful continuity than the cliffhangers popular at the time in other serials.

The second perspective, that of Mazamette, complements Guérande’s and offers some comic relief. In almost every episode, Mazamette addresses the audience directly. He looks at the camera and winks at it, reverting to an acting style that used to be prevalent in the first fiction films, when actors still acknowledged the presence of the camera. In episode six (*Les Yeux qui fascinent*), Mazamette embodies the enthusiastic spectator who cannot help but scream and gesture at the big screen. When he and Guérande go to the movies, they see a film called *L’Assassinat du Notaire*, which, through a strange twist, stars the Vampire gang. A deep shot

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69 Both Musidora and her character, Irma Vep, have reached mythical status. Musidora’s work as director and producer in the 1910s and 1920s turned her into an icon for a feminist film collective that adopted her name in the early 1970s. Irma Vep has made a new appearance in Olivier Assayas’s eponymous film (1996).
shows the screen with *L’Assassinat du Notaire* in the center, while Mazamette is in the lower left-hand corner (Figure 1.8). As he starts moving and gesticulating, we recognize him just as we identify the Vampires in the movie within the movie – a double moment of recognition that reinforces the connection between the audience and Mazamette.

Perhaps mindful of the authorities’ reaction against *Fantômas*, Feuillade explicitly inscribed in *Les Vampires* these two viewing positions, both on the side of justice. But the series also opens up a more complicated viewing position through Musidora’s Irma Vep.70 Despite the many resemblances between her and Fantômas (their black bodysuit, most famously), what sets Irma Vep apart is that she is always recognizable, by spectators as well as by Mazamette and Guérande, no matter what disguise she wears. Yet her intentions and her actual status remain a mystery throughout the series. It is never clear whether she is the unofficial leader of the Vampires or a victim of the rivalry between the Great Vampire and Moreno (the leader of a rival gang), or whether she plays her own game. The questions raised by the poster for the series never receive a full answer. What Guérande and Mazamette succeed in making clear, Irma Vep undoes and complicates until the last episode, when Guérande’s wife kills her. Irma Vep’s ambiguous presence thus haunts *Les Vampires* and establishes what Callahan has called “indeterminacy as a mode of knowing.”71

*The Exploits of Elaine* – a film made by the U.S. branch of Pathé then reedited and retitled *Les Mystères de New-York* in France – proposes a different feminine perspective, one that, at least on the surface, would seem less fraught with ambiguity. The main character is presented as a typical upper-middle-class young woman from the first episode, *La Main qui


71 Callahan 145.
which begins with a shot of Elaine Dodge (Pearl White) at home, playing happily with her dog. After her father is killed by a gang called the Clutching Hand, Elaine is exposed to a remarkable number of plots. But she always manages to escape, usually with the help of detective Justin Clarel, whom she eventually marries. Most episodes include at least one shift in perspective, allowing viewers a glimpse of the criminal world but always going back to Elaine’s own viewpoint. For instance, the second episode (Le Sommeil sans souvenir) focuses on the Clutching Hand’s plan to drug the young woman with scopolamine, a substance that would provoke sleep without memories. After a scene that takes place in Elaine’s living room, showing her again as the loving daughter ready to avenge the death of her father, we follow a Swedish doctor during his visit to a sanatorium where a team is working on this new drug. There is at first no hint that the Swedish doctor is not who he says he is, but later in the episode we see him stealing a few doses of scopolamine. The perspective then shifts from that of the doctor/criminal to that of Elaine. All we see is that a bandit woke her up. The next scene is set in detective’s Clarel office, where he receives a letter from Elaine asking him to stop investigating her father’s death. We do not know what happened to Elaine, just as she cannot recall anything when Clarel calls to ask why she wrote the letter. It is only when she is given an antidote for scopolamine and she remembers what she did, that we also see, with her, what went on while she was drugged – she was made to open the safe, then had to write the letter to Clarel. Elaine’s perspective thus brings us back on the side of justice and offers some closure before the next adventure.

Even if the French title shifted the focus from Elaine to the enigmas of the criminal world, the serial still offered more occasions to adopt Elaine’s perspective rather than that of the criminals. Though some French mayors banned Les Mystères de New-York for the same reasons they invoked for all crime films, its narrative structure is closer to what Ben Singer has called
“the serial-queen melodrama” – a paradoxical type of serial that features powerful female characters but presents them both as victims and as heroes.72 In this context, lawyer Edmond Bloch’s harangue against cinema quoted earlier, in which he railed against “that unhinged woman, Elaine,” points to a different reason for adding *Les Mystères de New-York* to the list of banned films. It is not only because the film depicts the underworld, but Elaine herself is perceived as dangerous although she is the main positive character. At first glance, Elaine would seem less threatening than Irma Vep. After all, Elaine has nothing of Irma Vep’s unsettling indeterminacy; Pearl White’s character remains a well-behaved bourgeois woman even when she does stunts.73 But Bloch’s diatribe represents a rare instance when the official discourse against cinema deals with gender, however obliquely. In doing so, it suggests that representing powerful women on the screen, even if, or perhaps because, they are middle-class, is considered as threatening as showing criminal acts.

**Elusive Medium, Perceptive Viewers**

The bans imposed by French mayors and the creation of the national Commission de contrôle during World War I convinced producers that they needed to address the concerns of government officials as early as possible. As has often been noted, the poster for the Fantômas series preemptively represented the criminal without the dagger that he was initially holding on the cover of the novel (Figure 1.9). The advertisements for *Judex* (1916), another serial by Feuillade, starring Musidora again, became even more explicit in their use of keywords such as

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“healthy,” “patriotic,” and “for families.” Beyond such strategic attempts to clear cinema’s reputation, I would argue that the vilified crime films themselves already include a complex response to those who emphasized the absolute power of the moving image over everything else. *Fantômas, Les Vampires* and other such motion pictures often acknowledge their own unstable meaning and stage it by comparing cinema to other media (photography, novels, devices reproducing sound) which, they suggest, are more reliable.

Cinema’s role, these films imply, is not to offer such reliable, realistic depictions, but to question them. For instance, *Zigomar contre Nick Carter* presents photography as cinema’s more trustworthy counterpart, especially when it comes to identifying an elusive subject. After getting an anonymous tip that Zigomar will be disguised as a prestidigitator to rob the home of an aristocrat in Paris, the police prepare to catch him. But Zigomar proves once again to be the “elusive bandit” [“l’insaisissable bandit”], as an intertitle calls him. An electrician accomplice turns off the light and the police are left with the gentleman they tied up, while Zigomar disappears in the dark. That same evening, in Marseilles, a jeweler hides a photo camera in a painting and programs it so that if a thief opens his safe, the camera catches him in the act and takes a photograph. This is exactly what happens when Zigomar, who turns out to have been in Marseilles, opens the safe to steal the jewels. When the jeweler and the police arrive, the bandit manages to escape, but he leaves behind a picture in which, for once, he is not disguised. The last image of this part of the film shows detective Nick Carter looking wistfully at the photograph, magnified in a rare close-up. The movie camera never catches the “elusive bandit,” as his identity keeps changing in front of our eyes, but a photograph can seize his image. At a time when the republican police was experimenting with different ways of identifying criminals for

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74 *Le Film* 16 Dec. 1916: n.p. Richard Abel has argued that medium-length films such as *L’Erreur tragique* (Feuillade, 1913) also took it upon themselves to highlight the positive role of cinema in society and suggested that those who blamed the new spectacle for so many crimes misunderstood it, *The Ciné Goes to Town* 364-365.
their records—anthropometrics was fashionable, as we see in Fantômas — Zigomar suggests that while the police can use photography for their purposes, the moving image cannot serve them well.

Two other supplements for cinema are introduced in Les Mystères de New-York: the feuilleton and the vocaphone, a machine that reproduces sound. As noted earlier, the idea of selling a novelized version of the film as a tie-in came from the United States but quickly adapted to French culture. According to Alain Carou, the popularity of this hybrid genre of ciné-roman suggests that such a textual supplement was not at all redundant for moviegoers. Reading the script in advance enabled them better to understand the narrative and perhaps also allowed them to go beyond the plot and enjoy the images. This reliance on external narratives goes back to the first decade of cinema, when the incipient narrative form depended on viewers’ ability to recognize old stories, or on the storytelling skills of a barker (bonimenteur), who narrated the action during the projection.

Cinema’s other supplement, the vocaphone shown in episode eight (La Voix mystérieuse), acknowledges the medium’s vexed relationship with sound. It, too, looks back to the era of the bonimenteur, but also forward to experiments with recorded sound in the following years. In his efforts to protect Elaine from the Clutching Hand, detective Clarel invents the vocaphone, which works like a small telephone, and installs it in her house in the helmet of an armored soldier. When the bandits are in Elaine’s house looking for some official papers, the

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77 Germain Lacasse, Le Bonimenteur de vues animées. Le Cinéma “muet” entre tradition et modernité (Québec: Nota Bene; Paris: Méridiens Klincksieck, 2000).
detective can hear them from his own office thanks to the vocaphone. Since he is across town and cannot intervene to save Elaine, he starts to speak through the vocaphone, attracting the attention of the other inhabitants who come to Elaine’s rescue. While the detective can hear but not see, the viewer of this silent film sees but cannot hear – the two complement each other.

One of the main functions of supplements such as the extradiegetic serialized novel and the intradiegetic vocaphone was to help spectators to gain a better understanding of cinema’s possibilities at a time when it was undergoing a complex transition from “the cinema of attractions” to “a system of narrative integration” and then further on to full-blown narrative cinema. According to Gunning, the cinema of attractions was characterized by

- a drive towards display, rather than creation of a fictional world;
- a tendency towards punctual temporality, rather than extended development;
- a lack of interest in character ‘psychology’ or the development of motivation;
- and a direct, often marked, address to the spectator at the expense of the creation of a diegetic coherence, […] along with its power of “attraction,” its ability to be attention-grabbing (usually by being exotic, unusual, unexpected, novel).

As is common in historical studies, the actual periodization has been a subject of debate: some scholars argue that the label of cinema of attractions could be applied to films made from 1895 until 1908, others see 1904 as the last year when “attractions” predominated, while still others find this label useful only for the first two years of cinema (1895-1897). Most would agree,

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78 See note 3 of the Introduction for an overview of the complex history of this concept.
80 The initial periodization was indicated by Gunning in “The Cinema of Attraction[s]”; Abel adopts the second position in *The Ciné Goes to Town*; and Charles Musser has argued that this concept should be restricted to only a few years in “Rethinking Early Cinema: Cinema of Attractions and Narrativity,” *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded* 389-417 (originally published in 1994).
however, to designate the early and mid-1910s as a transitional period when cinema increasingly attempted to tell more complex stories yet still incorporated sequences of attractions.

Some of the crime films discussed here have rightfully served as case studies for this transitional period, especially from the point of view of production. Focusing on how spectators were positioned in these films allows us to add another layer to this discussion. According to a widely accepted definition, the implied spectator of the cinema of attractions was often addressed directly and occupied an external position, usually as part of a community of spectators who talked and sang while watching the films. By contrast, the spectator of narrative cinema was absorbed into the story told on the screen, separated from the other viewers, and asked to follow the logic of the camera. It seems to me that the implied viewer of crime films negotiates an intermediary position, moving back and forth between attraction and narrative, exterior and interior. Even when these films provide enough clues to recognize the real criminal, they never encourage complete absorption into the narrative because their many disguises and unstable identities constantly question the limits of vision. As a result, they provoke the spectator not only to search for clues but to perceive more than is shown. Thus, the implied viewer constructed by crime films could not have been any more different from the one imagined by cinema’s detractors. The former was a perceptive spectator, able to decipher clues and interpret the moving image, whereas the latter was naïve and ready to imitate any motion picture. What cinephobes should have feared, it turns out, was that cinema could make spectators perceive the world differently rather than mindlessly imitate what they saw.


While we can easily glean a range of arguments against cinema from articles penned by social commentators and some government officials, it is difficult to tell exactly how the national censorship board, the Commission de contrôle, understood these films because no records of debates from this period have been preserved. France never had an explicit production code similar to the American “Don’ts and Be Carefuls” of the 1920s or the Hays Code of the 1930s, which made clear what could and could not be presented on the screen, drawing a sharp distinction between wholesome images and anything that involved violence, sex, and any type of “immoral” behavior.83 By contrast, the laconic declarations of the French Commission usually referred to the need to preserve an immutable “public order” without giving any further details.84 Nevertheless, the Commission certainly adapted its understanding of public order to the social and political context of the time. Crime films were no longer an issue after World War I, most likely because producers were so afraid they would be banned that they stopped making them, and perhaps also because the public had tired of them.85 Yet the Commission continued to perceive the threat of cinema in similar terms throughout the 1920s, when they usually targeted explicitly political works, such as Soviet motion pictures depicting the Bolshevik revolution – an issue addressed in Chapter 5. Furthermore, it is remarkable, especially given the very different way these issues were dealt with in the United States, that French government officials did not seem to worry about obscenity, not even when some local leagues started to ask for stricter

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84 Writing in the early 1930s, Bancal reproduces a few memos from the Commission that now seem to be lost.

85 Monica dall’Asta explains that the serial underwent a process of “moral uplift” in the early 1920s by presenting melodramatic stories rather than crimes, “Forms of Excess” 236-241.
control of what they considered to be “pornographic” films.\(^{86}\)

One of the most noteworthy changes in the Commission’s outlook happened in 1919, when the Ministry of Interior started running it jointly with the Ministry of Public Instruction. The two institutions would continue to appoint members of the Commission throughout the next decades but would also sometimes come into conflict with each other as well as with local prefects and mayors who complained that the Commission’s decisions were too lax. The involvement of the Ministry of Public Instruction marked a significant shift in the French understanding of the social role of cinema: film did not have to be only a “school of crime,” as Edouard Poulain had called it; it could also teach viewers valuable lessons. As the next chapter explains, it was around the same time that government officials began to search for ways of using cinema in the service of republican pedagogy.

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CHAPTER 2. The Republican Spectator

The anxiety provoked by cinema in the 1910s was intimately connected to a perceived failure of the republican school system after its reform in the 1880s. The foundational Ferry laws of 1881-1882 had made primary school (ages seven to thirteen) free, mandatory, and secular. Reorganizing the educational system seemed particularly urgent in the early years of the Third Republic because of the traumatic legacy of the previous Republic (1848-1852) whose fall was often blamed on the fact that its citizens had not been trained for their new democratic duties and thus did not understand the responsibilities that came with universal (male) suffrage.\(^1\) By making the first years of school free and compulsory, the Third Republic tried to ensure that all children would grow up to be responsible citizens. The other dimension of the republican school, its secularism, aimed to undercut the long-standing influence of the Catholic Church, whom the Republic perceived as the main reactionary enemy.\(^2\) The secular school replaced religious education with moral and civic instruction – a new school subject meant to instill republican values such as self-governance, temperance, and patriotism.\(^3\) During the debate on the dangers of cinema, socially conservative critics were quick to point out that both the *apaches* and the young corruptible spectators were products of this new system that had failed to offer an appropriate moral education after banning religion from public schools.

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In response, the state attempted to harness the power of the new medium for its own purposes. In 1916 the Minister of Public Instruction, mathematician Paul Painlevé, announced that a special extra-parliamentary commission would begin to study the possible uses of cinema in schools. This commission’s report focused solely on turning cinema into an auxiliary for teachers – the only type of cinema it accepted and saw as beneficial was designated as instructional cinema (*cinéma d’enseignement* or *scolaire*). At the same time, other republican institutions, such as the regional Offices of Educational Cinema, adopted a broader view of what they preferred to call educational cinema (*cinema éducateur*). Where instructional cinema used only documentaries associated with the school curriculum and was aimed at students, educational cinema welcomed all types of motion pictures and intended to reach a very wide audience.\(^4\) If instructional cinema could only work in the classroom under the supervision of the teacher, educational cinema was less restricted – screenings took place in amphitheaters, city hall rooms, or factories.\(^5\) This is not to say that instructional and educational cinema represented completely different categories. Rather, they functioned as two sides of republican pedagogical cinema: the former focused first and foremost on using nonfiction films in public school classrooms, while the latter remained open to all types of motion pictures that had the potential to contribute to popular education.

This contiguous relationship between public instruction and popular education had been defined during the French Revolution and revisited by the Third Republic during moments of crisis such as the Boulanger affair (1886-1889) and the Dreyfus affair (1894-1906), which

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\(^4\) I have translated the phrase *cinéma éducateur* as “educational cinema” to avoid the awkward although more accurate translation “cinema-educator” or “cinema-as-educator.” The adjective *éducatif* was also used sometimes in the 1920s but became predominant only after World War II.

\(^5\) Guillaume Michel Coissac gives one of the most thorough explanations of this distinction in *Le cinématographe et l’enseignement. Nouveau guide pratique* (Paris: Larousse, 1926).
threatened to derail the democratic project. In these instances, the danger came from far-right forces that, according to republican politicians, took advantage of uneducated citizens easily seduced by extremist rhetoric. Following this line of thought, some intellectuals and politicians recognized that it was not enough to make primary school free and mandatory if access to the paying secondary school remained the privilege of middle-class children. To compensate for the disparities reinforced by this two-tiered system, republican educators from university professors to schoolteachers reached out to people of all ages through a patchwork program of continuing education which offered lectures on a range of subjects and was open to anyone interested but usually targeted the working classes.

Inscribed within this educational system, the project of pedagogical cinema also raised its own set of issues. Seeking to explain how republicans appropriated the new medium, this chapter examines the two types of pedagogical cinema they developed (instructional and educational) and their implicit assumptions. It aims to demonstrate that while students exposed to instructional cinema learned a specific way of deciphering and describing films, especially nonfiction, spectators of educational cinema were encouraged to have an emotional response only to those motion pictures that idealized the family and equated the personal with the social. These parallel attempts to define the viewer threw into sharp relief the difficulty of fine-tuning the balance between reason and emotion, a balance taken to be crucial to the strength of the Third Republic. In his study on the invention of the social sphere as a counterpart to the political

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sphere, Jacques Donzelot has argued that republicans created a new set of social policies, usually designated as “solidarism,” in order to contain the eruption of political passions into the public sphere because they were well-aware of the devastating effects that such eruptions had during the Second Republic and in the first years of the Third. The social philosophy of solidarism, developed by republicans such as Léon Bourgeois at the turn of the 20th century, tried to find a centrist position that supported the working class through a series of welfare reforms without weakening the political power of the middle class. To govern efficiently, Donzelot writes, republicans tried to ensure that citizens of all classes were both rationally and emotionally committed to this particular political regime so that they would not contribute to new upheavals. This explains why republicans also attempted carefully to calibrate the traits of their ideal film spectator, who had to be self-reliant enough to rationalize the meaning of the moving image but also vulnerable to the pathos of officially sanctioned films. Their model spectator was a model citizen.

Bringing Cinema into the Classroom

The commission appointed by the Minister of Public Instruction to study the possible uses of cinema in schools was made up of politicians, film industry professionals, and teachers from different branches of the school system. This group, which came to be known as the Bessou commission, began to work two years into World War I, the same year when the government centralized its censorship efforts by establishing the Commission de contrôle des films. Some

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10 Scholars have recently begun to explore the connection between politics and emotions in the Third Republic. See, for instance, Judith Surkis’ analysis of the ways in which the Republic attempted to govern through affect, controlling the emotional and sexual lives of its citizens, *Sexing the Citizen: Morality and Masculinity in France, 1870-1920* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2006).
journalists saw the Bessou commission as the positive counterpart of the Commission de contrôlé – a friendly hand extended by the government to film professionals just as they were complaining that censorship was destroying the film industry.\(^{11}\) When he announced the creation of the Bessou commission, Painlevé explained that, once the war was over, the school would have to “hurry and increase the intellectual and moral development of the country” [“de hâter et d’accroître le développement intellectuel et moral du pays”].\(^{12}\) Cinema could play a crucial part in this project if used correctly; the goal of the commission was precisely to figure out how to redefine cinema so as to create moral citizens rather than bandits. It is no coincidence that Édouard Herriot, one of the first mayors who censored crime films, sat on the commission, that the final report praised his fight against cinema in Lyon, and that, as we will see later, he was also involved in the creation of the Offices of Educational Cinema. Herriot’s own trajectory seems to be the perfect republican success story. Coming from a lower middle-class family, he went to school on a fellowship and worked as a teacher before joining the centrist Radical Party and embarking on a remarkable political career. Not only was he mayor of Lyon for almost fifty years, he also served in different Ministries (including Public Instruction), was Prime Minister three times, and held the presidency of the Chamber of Deputies.\(^{13}\)

While the work of the Bessou commission was the first official institutional attempt to integrate cinema into the school system, the idea of instructional cinema had been circulating for

\(^{11}\) *Le Film*, one of the first cultural magazines dedicated to cinema, went back and forth between supporting and denouncing both commissions for doing either too much or not enough. See for instance the editorials “On a sifflé” *Le Film* 29 Apr. 1916: 5 and “Le Cinéma et l’Enseignement” *Le Film* 30 Sept. 1916: 3, and Jean Socquet, “Le cinématographe et la jeunesse” *Le Film* 13 May 13 1916: 11.


a few years as a new addition to the widely spread practice of visual instruction through still images and magic lanterns. The final report praised such early independent promoters of cinema as elementary school teacher Adrien Collette, high school teacher of natural sciences Emile Brucker, and a number of other educators who used the new medium in vocational training classes and university lectures. The commission found these early examples so convincing that it recommended the expansion of instructional cinema to all levels, encouraging teachers to use it whenever it could enhance students’ comprehension of their daily lessons. Though generally enthusiastic in its description of the positive effects of instructional cinema, the report also offered a few caveats meant to preempt common critiques of their project. First and foremost, it repeatedly stated that the moving images should not do the work of the teacher but only serve as an auxiliary device, a prop like any other visual aid. Instructional films would not completely replace still images, but rather work as their complement whenever they would be more enlightening, for instance in the study of geography and of natural sciences.

Most importantly, all instructional films had to be nonfictional. Advocates of instructional cinema stayed away from fiction films because they considered that the only way to legitimize the introduction of this medium in the classroom was to deny its entertainment function. To those who insisted that such a distinction was not tenable because any film had a certain entertainment value, they replied that using film in the classroom would not take away from the seriousness of the curriculum but would, in fact, make it more accessible to all students. According to an often-repeated argument, most children had a visual imagination; catering to their needs by projecting moving images meant that even the laziest students could follow along

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14 Rapport général par Auguste Bessou 7-12.

15 This point is emphasized in primary sources and in analyses of pedagogical cinema such as Christophe Gauthier, “Au risque du spectacle: Les projections cinématographiques en milieu scolaire dans les années 1920,” Cinéma pédagogique et scientifique 91.
and absorb what they saw. This type of discourse reworked a common idea in the early decades of cinema that cast the new medium as the democratizing spectacle par excellence because people from all countries could understand the moving images and would thus come to better know each other.

Three years after the release of the report, André Honnorat, the Minister of Public Instruction at the time, sounded a similarly optimistic note that would be echoed by most politicians who held this office in the 1920s: “At all levels of instruction, from elementary school to higher education, in all subjects, from science to literature and even philology, cinema can and has to be the essential supplement.” [“Dans tous les ordres d’enseignement, depuis le primaire jusqu’au supérieur, en toutes matières, depuis l’enseignement scientifique jusqu’à l’enseignement littéraire et même à l’enseignement philologique, le cinéma peut et doit être l’auxiliaire indispensable.”]. Like Honnorat, most proponents of instructional cinema contended that the new medium would perfectly serve the purpose of the republican school because it had an equalizing effect. And yet, during the same period the school system and its inequalities were again the object of heated public debate. This time the discussion centered on the creation of an école unique, which entailed the establishment of a common primary school (rather than a primary school for “the people” and another one for the elite) and free secondary education for all students. Although constantly discussed throughout the 1920s, this reform was

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17 For more on this topic in connection to American cinema, particularly in D.W. Griffith’s work, see Hansen 173-187.

18 Le Cinéopse 1 Jan. 1923: 66.

fully enacted only after World War II. The introduction of cinema at all levels was, by contrast, optional and had lower stakes. If cinema became, to some extent, the kind of equalizing instrument envisioned by Ministers of Public Instruction from Painlevé and Honnorat to Herriot, it was mostly through the efforts of some enthusiastic teachers who experimented with the new medium within the parameters set out by the Bessou report.

In practical terms, the report encouraged the Ministry and interested teachers to work closely with film companies in order to produce appropriate films in line with the curriculum and to make small affordable projectors for classroom use. The most important companies, Pathé and Gaumont, both of which had representatives sitting on the Bessou commission, eagerly cooperated with educators. When the Pathé Baby projector came out in 1922, it was advertised as perfect for schools. To back it up, the Pathé Baby film catalog included a wide range of pedagogical shorts for a variety of subjects, while the magazine *Le Cinéma chez soi, revue illustrée du cinématographe de la famille et de l’école* worked as an extended advertisement for these films. 20 Their strategy paid off – most schools chose the 9.5mm or 16mm Pathé Baby format because it was cheaper and easier to handle than the 35mm format. Gaumont too created a *cinémathèque d’enseignement*, which included new pictures made especially for their *Encyclopédie* program and older short-subject films from the late 1900s that could be used for geography lessons or vocational training. 21

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Jean Benoit-Lévy, an enterprising filmmaker and producer who came from a family deeply committed to republican causes, took the lead in 1922 by creating l’Édition française cinématographique, a new company catering specifically to the needs of educators. So successful was his company’s collaboration with republican institutions that his biographer, Valérie Vignaux, has called Benoit-Lévy “the authorized filmmaker of the Republic” [“le cinéaste patenté de la Troisième République”]. After the transition to sound, he continued to make educational films until he immigrated to the United States during the Occupation along with other Jewish personalities and their families. In the U.S., he taught at the New School and collaborated with American and Canadian officials interested in his previous experience as a filmmaker and producer. Although he never stopped writing about cinema and planning new films, in his memoirs Benoit-Lévy describes the 1920s as the heyday of his activity – a time when it seemed that pedagogical cinema could have a profound impact on viewers and the idea gained increasing support from the French state.

Indeed, to encourage those teachers interested in using instructional films, the Ministry of Public Instruction offered partial subventions for purchasing projectors. It also worked with the Pedagogical Museum to put together a catalog of free films lent to schools upon request. Other institutions such as the Cinemathèque de la ville de Paris and that of Saint-Etienne, the Ministry of Agriculture, and the Ministry of Health had their own collections of films that teachers could borrow for their lessons. These efforts, however, never seemed to be enough. Despite Benoit-

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24 The annual directory Le Tout Cinéma listed all such lending institutions with their contact information. On the
Lévy’s rosy recollection of the 1920s, documents from this period note that the demand for films exceeded the supply and teachers clamored for more support from the government.25 The state’s involvement in instructional cinema had not only legitimized it but in fact enshrined it as a particular genre.

Object Lessons

After the Bessou report, pedagogues continued to discuss the value of instructional cinema in a number of specialized magazines such as Ciné-Schola and Cinédocument, which published everything from theoretical articles to sample lesson plans, synopses of instructional films, and occasional letters from teachers and students. Following the suggestions made by the report, these magazines argued that cinema should be fully integrated into the new pedagogy elaborated since the Ferry laws. In their rejection of the old pedagogy, republican educators blamed the maîtres d’école of the Second Empire for relying too much on memorization and on rhetoric instead of encouraging students to think for themselves.26 The influential Dictionnaire pédagogique, edited by director of primary education Ferdinand Buisson in 1887 and revised in 1911, presented the intuitive method and the attendant object lesson (leçon des choses) as the pillar of republican education because they encouraged children to use their senses in order to understand the world that surrounded them instead of passively absorbing information.27 The workings of these organizations, see Béatrice de Pastre, “Une archive dédiée à la pédagogie du cinéma,” 1895 41 (2003): 177-186; Vignaux, Jean Benoit-Lévy, ou, le corps comme utopie 15-51; Alison J. Murray Levine, Framing the Nation: Documentary Film in Interwar France (New York: Continuum, 2010) 19-35.

25 Reboul 19-25 lists these complaints.


object lesson, first theorized by the Swiss educator Johann Pestalozzi in 1798, had the teacher ask increasingly complex questions about any object so that the students described their perception process, slowly moving from concrete details to abstract ideas. According to republican pedagogues, this new method adopted the children’s perspective, allowing them to explore and enjoy learning whereas previous methods had been devised by adults without taking into consideration how children actually thought.28 The object lesson was thus presented as the perfect tool through which students could empirically learn how to understand their environment and become independent – one of the main goals of republican pedagogy. Yet even the entry in the Nouveau dictionnaire de pédagogie acknowledged that the intuitive method had its limitations. Not only did object lessons have to be done right, with the appropriate progression of questions, but the teacher had to know how to orient the attention of the students so as to make sure that they did not tire and lose interest. Moreover, opinions were divided on whether this method should be used beyond primary school; some argued it was only appropriate for young children, while others thought it worked for all ages.29

At first glance, cinema would not seem to be the most appropriate aid for an object lesson: rather than offering the actual object for inspection, so that students could touch it, smell it, or hear it, the moving pictures only gave them access to its likeness. But republican educators had already accepted “representations” as useful tools for these types of lessons in those cases where it was too difficult to have the actual object at hand, for instance for zoology or geography lessons.30 Advocates of instructional cinema saw the moving images as a valuable contribution to

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29 The entry on “Leçons des choses” in Nouveau dictionnaire thoroughly reviews these arguments.
30 Ibid.
object lessons precisely because they moved and offered “living observations.”\textsuperscript{31} Films might not give full access to a tiger; students would not be able to touch it or hear it, but they would at least see a more realistic representation of it on the screen. The realism of cinema, heavily criticized when it represented crimes in feature films, was reinvested with value in this context because it could stimulate the imagination of children if properly monitored. The Bessou commission firmly believed in the adage that “to see is almost to know” [“voir c’est presque savoir”].\textsuperscript{32} The great benefit of instructional cinema was that the act of seeing could be controlled and transformed into knowledge, effectively turning the medium into a scientific pedagogical tool.

Describing the instructional film \textit{La Montagne} that he had made with the assistance of a high school teacher from Lille, Benoit-Lévy explained how they tried to orient students’ attention so that they would observe geographical facts successively rather than simultaneously, as it would happen during a hike: “We tried to dissociate these [geographical] facts by dividing the film into five parts, each one offering to the eye and the mind a small number of exact observations.” [“On a cherché à dissocier ces faits en divisant le film en cinq parties dont chacune propose à l’œil et à l’esprit un petit nombre d’observations précises.”].\textsuperscript{33} The first goal of such films, then, was to divide the world into discrete pieces that would not give way to too many different interpretations and would not distract the students from the task at hand. This is also why instructional films tended to be divided into short sequences and why pedagogues recommended that they be stopped after a few minutes and discussed.

As they gained more experience with this new tool, teachers adopted a standard way of

\textsuperscript{31} Reboul 8-9.

\textsuperscript{32} Rapport général par Auguste Bessou 3-4.

\textsuperscript{33} Benoit-Lévy, \textit{Les Grandes Missions du cinéma} 40-41. For a later example of a teacher’s take on cinema and the natural sciences in the classroom, see Josette Ueberschlag, \textit{Jean Bréaulet, l’instituteur cinémaste (1898-1973)} (Saint-Etienne: Publications de l’Université de Saint-Etienne, 2007).
using it and devised exercises to test students’ comprehension. They usually played only a few scenes from an instructional film, then paused, offered a few comments including, if necessary, new vocabulary connected to the lesson, then asked students to draw what they had seen, give an oral description of their images, and finally write a composition about them. The activities associated with instructional films thus followed a standardized pattern: watching led to drawing, then to talking, and finally to writing. Some teachers noted that children found it easier to draw images than to explain exactly what they had seen, but they argued that the hard work the students did in going from images to words was more valuable than any other exercise because it allowed them to show their own personality.  

In the words of H. Miraton, an inspector for elementary schools, cinema lessons were “a precious instrument of intellectual culture” [“instrument précieux de culture intellectuelle”] precisely because they cultivated the habit of naming what had been seen, classifying it, and rationalizing it. If this “precious instrument” was to function as a defense mechanism against the elusiveness of commercial motion pictures (such as the crime films discussed in the previous chapter), it had to teach students how to articulate the mechanism of a motion picture without being too engrossed by it. Yet, while the educators’ avowed purpose was to encourage students to use their senses and provide their own analysis of the world, they only offered them instructional films that were made to be as legible as possible. By contrast, when visual education classes were introduced in the United States in the 1930s, some educators worked with Hollywood feature films and designed exercises centered on making students aware of how

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35 Reboul 8.
The fact that French republican pedagogues only allowed nonfiction films into the classroom suggests that, rather than tackling the issues brought up by fiction films, particularly the problem of imitation and the ambiguity of the moving image, they preferred to avoid them altogether.

The Offices of Educational Cinema and Solidarism

While proponents of instructional cinema avoided the question of using fiction films in the classroom, advocates of afterschool educational cinema expressed their interest in screening all types of motion pictures as long as they could be integrated into their stated goal of bringing “education, information, and entertainment” [“éducation, documentation, distraction”] to every corner of France. The first scholars who published a study on the Offices of Educational Cinema, Raymond Borde and Charles Perrin, have argued that this openness to fiction had to do with the fact that one of the most enthusiastic advocates of educational cinema, Gustave Cauvin, was not a teacher but a social activist. Cauvin founded the first Office of Educational Cinema in Lyon in 1921, worked as its president until it was shut down during World War II, and then revived it for a few more years. Legally, the Office was a nongovernmental association but its creation would not have been possible without the moral and financial support of influential Lyon-based politicians such as Herriot and Joseph Brenier, senator and Vice President of the

37 Gustave Cauvin, Dix ans après... Rapport sur l’activité et le développement de l’Office régional du cinéma éducateur de Lyon en 1930 (Lyon: Office régional du cinéma éducateur, 1931) 99.
Within a few years, the Lyon Office became a model for an entire network and by 1930 there were eight regional Offices scattered throughout France in cities such as Nancy, Paris, and Alger. These Offices functioned like film lending libraries: they designed a range of programs and sent them to their subscribers, most of whom were teachers and self-proclaimed “friends of the secular school” who believed in the mission of popular education. In 1929, the Lyon Office reported receiving 915 requests for its programs, followed by Lille with 730, and Alger with 500. There were free programs for teachers who wanted to organize screenings for their students after class or on Thursdays (a day off), and four additional types of paying programs for screenings meant for a broader audience, programs that included some short-subject documentaries, educational films, and old motion pictures. When these commercial pictures finished their theatrical run and were no longer profitable on the market, the Offices bought inexpensive copies which they then circulated for several years. The motion pictures they distributed included comedies with Charlie Chaplin, the dog Rintintin, and the young Jackie Coogan; other American films like D.W. Griffith’s The Birth of a Nation and Robert Flaherty’s Moana; and some productions by filmmakers associated with the French or the international avant-garde such as Germaine Dulac, Jean Epstein, and Carl Theodor Dreyer.

Although they did not shy away from entertaining the audience, the Offices’ foremost concern was to teach the general public how to behave as responsible citizens. In order to do so,


42 In the first years of the Offices these programs cost 50, 80, 110, and 150 francs according to Cauvin’s annual reports; my account draws on the reports preserved at the Bibliothèque du Film quoted throughout this chapter and on the short film L’Office régional du cinéma éducateur de Lyon, 1928.

43 I am referring here to the lists offered by Cauvin in his annual reports and to the more complete list put together by Borde and Perrin 43-54. The actual catalogs circulated by the Offices do not seem to have survived.
they relied on educational films that came from the Ministry of Agriculture and from various organizations concerned with public health (commissions against syphilis and tuberculosis, and the Ministry of Hygiene, Assistance, and Protection). After World War I, these institutions started to commission films for their own “propaganda” – a charged word today because of its association with totalitarian politics but commonly used in France in the 1920s to designate any type of advocacy program. Some of these films taught spectators basic hygiene rules, others focused on vocational training, while still others offered lessons in modern farming techniques. The question of how exactly to define the responsibility of citizens and that of the state had been at the core of political debates during the first decades of the Republic as politicians recognized that the development of industrial capitalism had led to growing inequality thus exacerbating the “social question.”

At the turn of the century, one of the leaders of the centrist Radicals, Léon Bourgeois, formulated an influential response that redefined the social contract by drawing on Emile Durkheim’s concept of “organic solidarity,” according to which citizens had not only rights but also duties toward the others. These duties formed the basis of the doctrine of solidarism, which became the social philosophy of the Republic, and was enshrined as an alternative to the two extremes of economic liberalism and Marxism. What solidarism proposed was a gradual reform program meant to help the working class while preserving social order and defending

44 On this distinction, see Levine 170 and Vignaux, “Un cinéma éducateur dit de propagande sociale dans l’entre-deux-guerres en France” 199-201.
45 My focus here will be on hygiene films because they represented a significant part of the films circulated by the Offices and were shown to all types of audiences. On vocational films, see Valérie Vignaux, “The Central Film Library of Vocational Education: An Archeology of Industrial Film in France between the Wars,” Films that Work: Industrial Film and the Productivity of Media, ed. Vinzenz Hediger and Patrick Vonderau (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009) 315-328; and on agricultural cinema, see Levine 36-88.
46 Léon Bourgeois, Solidarité (Paris: Armand Colin, 1897); Émile Durkheim, De la division du travail social (Paris: PUF, 2007 [1893]).
private property. The state intervened on behalf of those who were in weaker positions to make sure that employers and heads of families did not exert too much authority, but it refused a complete restructuring of economic and social relations as proposed by the socialists. This social policy agenda was slowly enacted during the Third Republic through piecemeal legislation that often came under attack for its top-down approach or for not doing enough but is today credited with having established the foundations of the French welfare state.48

Solidarist reforms encompassed a series of public health initiatives designed to eradicate the dreaded “social scourges” (fléaux) of tuberculosis, syphilis, and alcoholism. Whereas these issues had previously been blamed on the working class and policed from a moral high ground, solidarism proposed a more active involvement through the creation of a vast public hygiene program that included funding for more dispensaries, different types of health insurance, and prophylaxis through education.49 Many of the educational films the Offices distributed were part of this solidarist program designed to show the public how to contribute to the well-being of the country, and, implicitly, to their own health and security. The great advantage of cinema was exactly the same as its greatest danger: the fact that it could reach people of all backgrounds and address them simultaneously.

To persuade spectators, the genre of educational cinema relied on two intertwined strategies: microcinematography and emotional narratives. Perfected around 1909 by scientists such as doctor Comandon, the technique of microcinematography allowed viewers to observe


bacteria in their living state through a microscope connected to the camera. Besides their scientific usefulness, Comandon’s films also contributed to a wider trend of popularizing science. In the 1910s they became part of the Pathé catalog while the other main companies, Gaumont and Éclair, scrambled to come up with their own science films. What was original about educational films of the 1920s was that they integrated microcinematography into a complex narrative rather than presenting it as a separate short film. Microcinematography’s role in educational films was to make visible microbes that had long remained unknown and unseen; it legitimized this genre by backing up the narratives it told with scientific proof. At the same time, educational films went beyond what we might call the gaze of the bacteriologist and constructed touching narratives that encouraged the audience to empathize with characters that were weak, ill, or poor. And yet, filmmakers and scriptwriters who worked within this genre did not seem to fully trust the images to do all the work. While instructional films kept intertitles to a minimum to allow teachers and students to discuss the images they had seen, educational films usually came with a significant number of intertitles that provided a wealth of details, quotations, and exhortations.

*Pasteur* (1922), one of the first educational films commissioned by the Ministry of Agriculture, shows how the genre of educational film started to differentiate itself from instructional film while also incorporating some of its features. Produced by Benoit-Lévy’s l’Edition française cinématographique, this one-hour long biographical film worked as a testing ground for the company, which eventually produced around three hundred educational films for the main governmental institutions interested in using cinema. *Pasteur* was also Jean Epstein’s

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first attempt at directing. He then went on to make more experimental films while his sister, Marie Epstein, became Benoit-Lévy’s close collaborator. Following an initial screening during the centennial celebration of the scientist’s birth, Pasteur had a long career as the center piece of several programs distributed by the Offices for Educational Cinema. Though advertised as a biographical picture, the actual plot is kept to a minimum; for the most part, the film concentrates on presenting and popularizing Pasteur’s main discoveries. In an effort to prepare spectators to understand the images they are about to see, each experiment is introduced by lengthy intertitles explaining what the scientist is doing and why. When the scientific experiment is finally shown, we usually see beakers, microscopes, and microbes. In the rare occasions when the scientist’s presence in the laboratory is acknowledged, it is through a close-up of his hands rather than his face (Figure 2.1). With this technique, Pasteur reinvests the close-up with positive meaning. The hands shown over and over are the hands of a scientist who, the intertitles explain, is curing illness and saving the world. They could not be any further from the close-ups of hands used by crime films to show how to steal without getting caught – the close-up that detractors of cinema considered dangerous, as we have seen in the previous chapter.

Given this emphasis on the close-up and Epstein’s theorizing of the technique, it is remarkable that his first film is barely mentioned in discussions of his work. This is perhaps because Pasteur’s didacticism is an awkward beginning for a director associated with the cinematic avant-garde. It would seem like this attitude is beginning to change now, thanks to a renewed interest in Epstein’s work, which has led to the publication of a collection of essays and a retrospective of his work, including Pasteur, at the Anthology Film Archives in New York.

52 Vignaux discusses the film’s production and promotion in Jean Benoit-Lévy, ou, le corps comme utopie 81-87.
53 Sarah Keller and Jason N. Paul, eds., Jean Epstein: Critical Essays and New Translations (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012). The first part of the retrospective, showing his silent films, took place in June 2012.
Nevertheless, the essays collected in *Jean Epstein: Critical Essays and New Translations* barely mention *Pasteur*. It would be too much to blame scholars, however, since Epstein himself seldom talked about how his first motion picture fit into his theory of cinema. *Pasteur* is notably absent from his many articles and lectures on film, and when he finally discusses it in his posthumously published *Mémoires inachevés*, he readily admits that he accepted to make a commissioned film because he wanted to gain some experience, but he had a difficult time seeing the final product as his own.\(^{54}\) Epstein explains that as a young poet with no filmmaking experience he had been dreaming of making a motion picture that would push the boundaries of cinema by filming the rapid movement of a merry-go-round – a scene he in fact included a year later in *Cœur fidèle*, one of the key works of the cinematic Impressionists to which we will return in Chapter 4. But, he writes, this was not the type of work he was allowed to do in *Pasteur*, since he could hardly have the scientist go on a merry-go-round.\(^{55}\) Nonetheless, in his *Memoirs* he explains that even though it was difficult to experiment in an educational film, he tried to find ways to show spectators something they had never seen before. The example he gives is that of the close-up scenes showing the scientist’s tools and his hands, suggesting that those scenes resonate with his aesthetics because they manage to make the invisible visible – a key idea for the cinematic Impressionists.\(^{56}\) Indeed, as we will see later in this chapter through another example from Germaine Dulac, educational film and cinematic Impressionism were conjoined twins in the early 1920s although their kinship has rarely been acknowledged.

To return to the pedagogical message of *Pasteur*, it should be noted that the film works like a reverse object lesson: it weaves together a series of science lessons where the intertitles

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\(^{55}\) Ibid. 50.

\(^{56}\) Ibid. 53.
stand in for the words of the teacher, and the close-ups carefully direct viewers’ attention. In this case, the spectators do not need to do the work asked of the students who watched instructional films because everything is already explained and interpreted for them. After the scientist’s discoveries have been thoroughly catalogued, the last part of the film spells out the moral lesson. Pasteur is held up as a model for having saved France’s wine, animals, and citizens through his “most noble work and great self-sacrifice” [“(le) plus noble travail, (…) la plus haute abnegation”]. The film’s strategy parallels that of republican textbooks, which, according to Dominique Maingueneau, move back and forth between dictionary-like description and moral education, simultaneously depicting the world and emphasizing the norms that should be followed. The heavy-handed last scenes also make clear the extraordinary status of the scientist in a republican system defined by positivism and anticlericalism. Not only do the intertitles explicitly and repeatedly call Pasteur a savior, but when Joseph Meister, the little boy he inoculated against rabies, kisses the doctor’s hand to thank him, the scientist looks very much like a benevolent spiritual figure or, as Epstein put it, “a secular saint” [“un saint … laïc”] (Figure 2.2).

A Healthy Nation

Most subsequent educational films were equally “pasteurized” to borrow the witticism from Bruno Latour’s study of the scientist’s impact on French society. The solidarist national


system of prevention redefined Pasteur’s legacy in political terms; it aimed to “inoculate” citizens against illnesses that had social consequences. Two widely distributed medium-length educational fiction films illustrate this process: *La Future Maman* (1925) and *Il était une fois trois amis* (1928), both directed by Benoît-Lévy and based on scripts by Louis Devraigne, a well-known obstetrician and lecturer. One of the few films approved by three Ministries (Agriculture, Public Instruction, and Work, Hygiene, and Prevention), *La Future Maman* explicitly addresses women from its very title. The main character is not the mother who has just given birth to a baby girl, but the baby’s sister, Margot (played by Léone Balme who had several parts in educational films), a teenager who learned all the modern precepts of newborn care at school. Childcare classes (*puériculture*), introduced in girls’ primary schools in 1923, provide perhaps the most obvious example of how gendered republican education was. These classes were a product of the agenda shared by solidarists and “familial feminists,” an agenda that promoted a partial reform of women’s status based on the idea of “equality in difference.” Spearheaded by middle-class women, familial feminism made it a point to eschew the radicalism of British and American suffragettes. Rather than publicly agitating for women’s rights, this type of pragmatic mainstream French feminism promoted “a positive concept of women’s special

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60 Bruno Dumons and Gilles Pollet mention this political use of the idea of vaccination in their article “La Solidarité,” *Dictionnaire critique de la République* 256-261.

61 Thierry Lefebvre notes that Devraigne and Benoît-Lévy were good family friends and the doctor delivered the filmmaker’s children, “Les médecins et le natalisme. De quelques représentations cinématographiques sous-jacentes,” *Cahiers de la Cinémathèque* 70 (1999): 55-63.


nature, or womanliness,” writes Karen Offen, and attempted “not to overthrow the economic basis of patriarchy but to reorganize the existing society to the greater advantage of women.”

As solidarists started to co-opt the ideas of familial feminism, they put forth a series of reforms aimed precisely at enhancing women’s status within the family. They worked on laws that allowed married women to control their own earnings, gave them as much authority as their husbands when making legal decisions for their children, and introduced obligatory childcare lessons in order to lower the mortality rate among newborns.

*La Future Maman* did more than represent the benefits of teaching childcare to teenage girls; it could also be screened during puériculture classes because it was already divided into six parts explicitly labeled as lessons. To make these lessons as straightforward as possible, the film casts a villain opposite the knowledgeable Margot – Mabu, an old village midwife, explicitly criticized in one of the first intertitles for her “false erudition in childcare” [“fausse erudition en puériculture”]. It is precisely this “false” knowledge that the film sets out to attack through a two-pronged strategy: like Pasteur, it offers long intertitles to explain what needs to be done while also showing how it should be done. The intertitles alternate direct quotations from well-known experts (such memorable words as “The heart and the milk of a mother can never be replaced” [“Le cœur et le lait d’une mère ne se remplace jamais”] by Professor Pinard from the Academy of Medicine) and direct orders from an external omnipotent authority (“Always check the temperature of the water before bathing the infant” [“Toujours s’assurer de la temperature de l’eau avant d’y mettre l’enfant”]). Margot then demonstrates these lessons. She shows her parents how to feed the baby, sterilize everything, keep track of her weight, and many other details that they presumably had not known while they were raising Margot. Mabu’s initial

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64 Offen, “Depopulation, Nationalism, and Feminism in Fin-de-Siècle France,” 654.
resistance to the new science of raising babies does not fully break down until a later scene when Margot explains to her why the baby should not use a pacifier, a scene that makes good use of microcinematography to punctuate an emotional narrative. Margot begins by citing a hygiene book; then, to make sure that Mabu understands the dramatic consequences of her old habits, she vividly recounts how a baby can die because of a dirty pacifier. A close-up of Margot’s face as she starts to tell the story is followed by the image of a mother who gives her newborn a pacifier after dropping it on the ground. The film then cuts to a microscope view of microbes with the word “tuberculosis!” superimposed, followed by a close-up of the baby with the pacifier. A new series of close-ups models the expected reaction of the viewers: we see Margot sobbing, Mabu crying, then again a sad Margot who adds that the baby died (Figure 2.3). Unlike the close-ups used in Pasteur, these focus solely on the faces of the characters, suggesting that Benoit-Lévy fully understood the emotional impact of such a technique.

As in most educational films, an authority figure sums up the moral of La Future Maman. In this case, the doctor of the village clinic announces that “Salvation will come from these future mothers who are getting rid of old fatal prejudices and will be admirable mothers!” [“Le salut viendra de ces petites futures mamans débarrassées des préjugés séculaires et meurtriers et qui seront des mères admirables!”]. To make even more obvious this idea of salvation, the last shot has Margot holding a baby in a staging reminiscent of the Virgin and Child (Figure 2.4). While Pasteur illustrates the sanctification of the scientist, La Future Maman suggests that in order to join the ranks of republican saints, women have to conform to a certain type of scientifically-approved motherhood. Benoit-Lévy noted in his memoirs that female audiences in girls’ schools and factories responded positively to the film. Yet, as Valérie Vignaux has

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pointed out, the status of the characters – who live in a village – is significantly different from those of urban working women who could not be with their babies all day long to follow all the rules of childcare, including regular breastfeeding.\textsuperscript{66} The project of educational cinema was in fact complicated by this gap between the empirical audience (which, depending on the location of the screening, could include people from all social backgrounds or only workers or peasants) and the ideal spectators, who were expected to act and react in one proper way regardless of their milieu and status.\textsuperscript{67}

If educational films bypass these issues in keeping with solidarism’s effort to downplay social differences, they actively emphasize the distinction between genders. While \textit{La Future Maman} addresses female audiences, \textit{Il était une fois trois amis} works as its counterpart for male audiences. Made for the League against Venereal Danger three years after \textit{La Future Maman}, this fiction film is framed as a moralizing story told by a doctor to his young son – a stand-in for the model viewer. The different medical issues raised by \textit{La Future Maman} and \textit{Il était une fois trois amis} paralleled the curricula for the \textit{écoles normales}: hygiene textbooks for men’s schools included information on venereal diseases, while the equivalent books for women’s schools focused on childcare.\textsuperscript{68} What future fathers had to learn was not how to care for their babies but rather how to make sure they were born healthy. Two of the three main characters of \textit{Il était une fois trois amis}, Georges and Jacques, know they got syphilis during the Great War but Georges is the only one who seeks medical help. Although their friend Charles does not have the disease, when his first baby dies he learns that the cause was hereditary syphilis transmitted from his own

\textsuperscript{66} Vignaux, \textit{Jean Benoît-Lévy, ou, le corps comme utopie} 99.

\textsuperscript{67} See also Peter Bloom’s critique of such educational films screened in the colonies, \textit{French Colonial Documentary: Mythologies of Humanitarianism} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008) 123, and Levine 56–88 – a discussion of the parallels and differences between films screened in metropolitan France and those shown in the colonies.

\textsuperscript{68} Clark, \textit{Schooling the Daughters of Marianne} 83.
father. This is a teaching moment for the doctor/narrator who first explains to his students the
development of this illness and then gives Charles a lengthy account of the causes and cures of
hereditary syphilis. To reinforce the message through one more poignant story, Il était une fois
trois amis continues with Jacques’s tragedy. When his newborn baby does not survive, he finally
understands that he should seek treatment.

Rather than explaining how to avoid getting syphilis, as most educational pamphlets did,
if somewhat obliquely, Il était une fois trois amis focuses only on the impact of the disease on
babies and on the family. The actual cause of this sexually transmitted disease is never directly
addressed; the first time the three friends discuss it, they do so indirectly without naming the
illness. Furthermore, women’s role in this story is kept to a minimum. Those who carried the
disease, presumably prostitutes, never come up, and although the wives of the three friends are
briefly shown, they do not have names. The doctor even tells Jacques that he can be cured
without his wife ever finding out about it. In a reply meant to make the disease less shameful,
Jacques refuses to hide the truth and says his wife will understand. In this context, it is worth
noting that the film was screened not only in boys’ secondary schools but also in girls’ schools
and in special mixed sessions at the Sorbonne, which suggests that even though women are all
but absent from it, it is addressed to them too in an effort to demystify the disease and to alert
them of potential dangers. This goal is implied throughout the film and stated explicitly at the

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69 See Surkis 189-212. For an overview of films on syphilis, see Thierry Lefebvre, “Représentations
cinématographiques de la syphilis entre les deux guerres: séropositivité, traitement et charlatanisme,” Revue de

70 The structure of American military films on venereal disease, shown to soldiers during World War I, was similar
to Il était une fois trois amis: they contrasted the behavior of several friends and presented abstinence as the only
form of prophylaxis. See, for instance, Skip Elseheimer with Kimberly Pifer, “Everything Old Is New Again; or,
Why I Collect Educational Films,” Learning with the Lights Off 448-451, and Eric Schaefer “Exploitation as
Education,” Learning with the Lights Off 316-337.

end when the doctor, played by well-known actor Camille Bert, tells his son what he should take away from his account (Figure 2.5):

Remember this story so you can tell it to your friends. Tell them that there are no shameful diseases, only ashamed people. [...] Wisdom is the best prevention strategy while waiting for marriage. But, in case of... accident, parents and the doctor should be the first confidents of young people because they are the best qualified to avoid the disasters often provoked by ignorance or carelessness.

[Retiens bien cette histoire pour la raconter à tes amis – Dis-leur qu’il n’y a pas de maladies honteuses, mais seulement des malades honteux. [...] Aussi la sagesse est-elle encore la meilleure prophylaxie en attendant le mariage de bonne heure. Mais, en cas... d’accident, les parents et le médecin doivent être les premiers confidents des jeunes gens parce qu’ils sont les plus qualifiés pour éviter des désastres, souvent engendrés par l’ignorance ou la négligence.]

This emphasis on the joint role of the doctor and the parent has to be seen in the context of contemporary discussions about the limits of the involvement of medical professionals in their patients’ lives. In the early twentieth century, syphilis experts such as Alfred Fournier struggled to define the function of the doctor in educating teenage boys. While asserting the father’s primacy, Fournier also suggested that education on such matters would work better if it came from a doctor, who held a different type of authority.72 This reflected the broader issue of who should educate children and teenagers in the name of the Republic. Buisson’s *Nouveau dictionnaire de pédagogie* proclaimed the primacy of the mother’s care in the early years and then insisted on the transference of authority over to the schoolteacher. In the same dictionary,

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the entry for *Famille* notes that two types of families, Catholic and socialist, resisted this system because they did not agree with the idea of handing over their children to teachers who defended the interests of a Republic they did not support.\(^73\) *Il était une fois trois amis* sidesteps this debate by having the doctor be the biological father of the boy he addresses. Nonetheless, both here and in *La Future Maman*, the family is protected from its own ignorance through the more or less direct intrusion of external authority figures such as doctors and teachers. Their intervention is presented in solidarist terms as an act of civic responsibility and is intimately connected to the pro-family and pro-natalist discourse that held sway in the 1920s.\(^74\) From this perspective, the genre of educational cinema contributed to the redefinition of the family in republican terms, which involved both the idealization of the family unit and its inscription within a broader solidarist framework, where all citizens were responsible for each other and thus part of a convoluted “family romance” that went back to the French Revolution.\(^75\)

**Family, Melodrama, and the Republic**

This focus on the family is paramount in the feature-length motion pictures distributed by the Offices. Whether openly educational or commercial, most of them had at least some melodramatic elements when they were not full-blown melodramas. As an aesthetic practice, or mode, melodrama has been notoriously difficult to pin down even though its main characteristics – innocent characters persecuted by villains, heightened emotions, an avowedly moral message –

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readily come to mind. Discussing melodrama’s social implications, particularly its representations of gender, class, and race, film scholars have argued that this mode can be either progressive or conservative depending on how its constitutive elements are manipulated and read. In the French context, Peter Brooks’s explanation of the rise of melodrama in theater and the novel in the aftermath of the French Revolution can help us to understand why this mode held such significance in the context of educational cinema. In the nineteenth century, writes Brooks, melodrama functioned as a secular attempt to reinvest the world with meaning and morality after the revolutionaries eliminated all traditional hierarchies. While recognizing that melodrama worked as a double-edged sword that could have either conservative or revolutionary implications, Brooks contended that it was “in all cases radically democratic, striving to make its representations clear and legible to everyone.” It was the lure of this legibility, I would argue, that attracted proponents of educational cinema. Rather than playfully and subversively highlighting the ambiguity of the moving image, as the crime films analyzed in Chapter 1 did, melodrama was supposed to offer a straightforward story with a message that could be easily decoded. Furthermore, in its equation of the social with the personal and its emphasis on emotional identification with suffering characters, melodrama seemed to provide a perfect

76 For an overview of the different categories used to defined melodrama, see Christine Gledhill, “The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation” Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman’s Film, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: BFI, 1987) 5-42. See also the essays anthologized in Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film and Television Melodrama, ed. Marcia Landy (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991).


framework for the solidarist agenda, encouraging all spectators, regardless of class, gender, or age, to see themselves as responsible for the welfare of all fellow citizens. Yet, as we will see, the function of melodrama in the context of French educational cinema remained ambiguous. While it could reinforce a republican view of the perfect family, it was also able to open up new ways of reconsidering traditional gender roles. Two educational films concerned with the prevention and the treatment of tuberculosis – *Ames d’enfants* (1927) and *La Mort du soleil* (1921) – show how melodrama cut both ways.

Directed by Benoit-Lévy with Marie Epstein, *Ames d’enfants* is one of their three silent feature films, followed by several sound films in the 1930s. While their other silent films, *Peau de pêche* (1929) and *Maternité* (1930), were backed up by commercial companies, *Ames d’enfants* had the support of the Ministry of Health and was still for all intents and purposes an educational fiction film. The opening intertitle, however, makes a point of proclaiming the objectivity of the camera and of the filmmakers in an attempt to tone down the genre’s didacticism: “A story of everyday life that we present such as it has been recorded by the camera and by us so that you can draw your own conclusions.” [“Histoire de tous les jours que nous vous soumettons telle que l’objectif et nous l’avons enregistrée pour que vous en tiriez vous-mêmes la conclusion.”]. It then proceeds to tell the story of two working-class families, the Berliets and the Valereux, who move out of the slums due to a new welfare program that allows them to live in the Cité-Jardin, a hygienic housing project. The film repeatedly juxtaposes the exemplary actions of the allegorically-named Valereux to the less commendable choices of the Berliets. While Jean Berliet spends his paycheck at the café, Pierre Valereux goes home with flowers; when the Berliet children are scolded and poorly fed, the Valereux children learn about

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vegetables; and once they move to the Cité-Jardin, the Valereux house could not be cleaner while the Berliet home continues to be as dirty as it was in the slums. The social worker who checks in on the Berliets finds their lifestyle so appalling that they lose the new house and have to return to the slums. As a consequence, their youngest child, Charlot, falls sick with tuberculosis. His sister, Zélie, tries to save him by selling her body, whereas the other boy, Mimile, struggles to find a moral way to help his family. In the end, Charlot gets better with the help of the Valereux and the reformed Berliets can return to the Cité-Jardin. The neutrality claimed by the initial intertitle is consistently undercut not only through this parallel cross-cutting construction that pits the Berliets against the Valereux, but also through the use of written text. When Charlot falls sick, he innocently writes the word “light” on his dark window; a hopscotch has “heaven” and “hell” as endpoints; and, most glaringly, the last scenes do offer a clear interpretation of the film by intercutting a series of keywords with specific images: alcoholism/Jean Berliet, syphilis/Zélie, tuberculosis/Charlot, air and light/the houses of Cité-Jardin.

This effort toward extreme readability, typical of pedagogical films, also influences the construction of the characters. The adults work as one-dimensional characters similar to those in *La Future Maman* or *Il était une fois trois amis*. They are supposed to prove a point, to show the difference between a good family who knows how to protect the children and a bad family that does not make the most of the chance provided by the state to lead a healthy life. While it could not be clearer that the Valereux represent an example of virtue, as even their name suggests it, we never gain access to what motivates their actions nor do we actually see the world from their perspective. Children, however, are presented in a more nuanced way, particularly Mimile who single-handedly redeems the Berliet family. Benoit-Lévy and Epstein’s films usually do not have
children playing negative roles, not even if they come from morally corrupt families. Mimile’s playful grimaces and his earnestness immediately mark him as different from his parents, and his actions confirm his special status. Reviews and advertisements for this motion picture never failed to mention that Boby Guichard, the actor who played Mimile, was well-known and loved by the audience (Figure 2.6).

In his reading of *Ames d’enfants* as a solidarist parable, Pascal Laborderie suggests that through its focus on Mimile and Charlot, the film addresses both working-class and middle-class spectators. According to him, the spectator’s social status becomes less salient when the story focuses on children because it is assumed that everyone, regardless of background, would be moved by the story of children in distress. It seems to me that this insistence on the young characters also does something else: the idealized children function as a reversal of the image of dangerous young spectators described in the previous chapter. Mimile could be exactly the kind of child prone to the bad influence of cinema and yet here he is the personification of moral virtue despite hardships, a model for children and their parents. *Ames d’enfants* in fact constructs spectators not as individuals but rather as families and addresses them as a unit through this image of the perfectly innocent child.

*La Mort du soleil* (sometimes distributed with the alternative title *Le Fléau*) has a similar melodramatic construction that places the health of children and the unity of the family at the center of the story, but what sets it apart is its construction of characters and its use of cinematic technique. Made by Germaine Dulac, *La Mort du soleil* was commissioned by the delegation of

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81 Flitterman-Lewis, *To Desire Differently* 158-160 compares their films and Poulbot’s drawings of children.


the Rockefeller Foundation to France. From 1917 to 1922, the American delegation worked with French authorities to eradicate tuberculosis through the training of medical professionals and the distribution of educational materials.\textsuperscript{84} In making one of the first feature-length educational fiction films around the same time when she and other filmmakers were beginning to define cinematic Impressionism, Dulac found a way to bring the two trends together. The main characters are thoroughly appropriate for educational films: Marthe Voisin (Denise Lorys, with whom Dulac had worked before), a hard working doctor, assists the famous scientist Lucien Faivre (André Nox, another well-known actor) in searching for a cure for tuberculosis (Figure 2.7). But as they try to reconcile their scientific research with their own personal lives, the two doctors turn out to be more than omniscient experts who objectively instruct the audience. While Faivre is driven by the loss of his only child to this disease, Marthe struggles throughout the film to balance work and family. Misinterpreting her relationship with the scientist, her husband leaves and takes their son, only to return when the child falls sick with tuberculosis and needs the medical help of his mother. After Marthe gives up on her career to care for her sick boy, Faivre steals the child in an attempt to cure him and to bring Marthe back because he is convinced that he cannot finish his research by himself. After many twists and turns, the boy is cured and Marthe returns to work with her husband’s encouragement.

While this happy ending idealizes the family as much as in any other educational film, \textit{La Mort du soleil} also gives viewers a glimpse of the complex life of a working woman professional. From this point of view, the motion picture only integrates some of the tenets of “familial feminism.” Marthe’s special role as a mother is certainly emphasized, but since she is a doctor rather than a nurse, she represents one of the few women who gained access to what was

still an essentially masculine profession.\textsuperscript{85} According to Tami Williams, Dulac’s work as a journalist for the magazine \textit{La Française} from 1906 to 1913 had allowed her to start developing a strategy for a feminist critique that could attract even more conservative readers.\textsuperscript{86} In her journalistic portraits of women, Dulac depicted their femininity while also subtly undercutting traditional tropes and showing how professional women could accomplish what society expected of them and much more. \textit{La Mort du soleil} could then be seen as the cinematic staging of the same theme, paving the way for Dulac’s more radical feminist films such as \textit{La Souriante Madame Beudet} (1923), discussed in Chapter 4.\textsuperscript{87}

Like Benoit-Lévy’s productions, which generally ask spectators to identify with the characters and rely on pathos to make their point, \textit{La Mort du soleil} does not shy away from encouraging this type of identification, particularly when Marthe has to decide whether she wants to adopt an abandoned sick girl. But the film also draws spectators in through a novel use of cinematic technique: several scenes show a character’s inner life in ways typically associated with Impressionist cinema. For instance, when Marthe realizes her child had been kidnapped, we follow her descent into despair and temporarily adopt her perspective as she looks for the child and sees him everywhere. Another example comes toward the end of the film, when the perspective shifts back and forth between the two doctors. We witness the scientist’s delirium as he decides to commit suicide and we see what Marthe feels after finding out what the scientist intends to do. Dulac reportedly planned to include more subjective shots but she complained in an interview that they were cut because distributors considered they would have been too much

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\textsuperscript{87} Flitterman-Lewis, \textit{To Desire Differently} 47-97 discusses Dulac’s feminism, mostly from a psychoanalytical perspective.
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for the audience.\textsuperscript{88} If distributors viewed this exploration of the inner life of characters with reluctance, it is because at the time it was still a new idea championed by the Impressionists. While most commercial films continued to focus on plot rather than subjectivity, the Impressionists were exploring new optical techniques that allowed them to access a character’s feelings and generally make the invisible visible.\textsuperscript{89}

Even if \textit{La Mort du soleil} only has a few such scenes, the exploration of the characters’ psyche through the shots that were kept marks it as one of the first Impressionist motion pictures. Unlike Epstein, Dulac did not hesitate to claim the film as her own, although it was a commissioned work. Not only did she mention \textit{La Mort du soleil} in her lectures on cinema, but she sometimes screened the sequence depicting the scientist’s delirium as an example of how film can give spectators access to a character’s interiority.\textsuperscript{90} When \textit{La Mort du soleil} is briefly mentioned in film histories it is precisely for this reason, as a precursor to Dulac’s better-known \textit{La Souriante Madame Beudet}, which skillfully depicts the inner life of a bored middle-class housewife.\textsuperscript{91} As one of the first educational films and one of the first Impressionist motion pictures, \textit{La Mort du soleil} demonstrates that the avant-garde films of the Impressionists were not necessarily disconnected from social issues and only concerned with a certain type of purely artistic sensibility – an issue to which we will return in the chapter dedicated to this group. In the context of the educational cinema movement, the status of \textit{La Mort du soleil} and of \textit{Pasteur} also helps to explain why the Offices selected other works by directors usually associated with the


\textsuperscript{89} David Bordwell studies the main traits of Impressionism in \textit{French Impressionist Cinema: Film Culture, Film Theory, and Film Style} (New York: Arno Press, 1980). I will return to this topic at length in Chapter 4.

\textsuperscript{90} Dulac, “Les Esthétiques, les entraves, la cinégraphie intégrale” 41-44.

\textsuperscript{91} Alan Williams 101-102; Richard Abel, “French Melodrama Before and After the Great War,” \textit{Imitations of Life} 558-559; and Tami Williams, \textit{Beyond Impressions} 188.
avant-garde such as Dulac’s *Le Diable dans la ville* (1924) or Epstein’s *La Belle Nivernaise* (1923) and *Le Lion des Mogols* (1924).

**Wholesome Entertainment**

Before acquiring commercial motion pictures, the administrative board of each Office of Educational Cinema previewed them to make sure they were appropriate because they had not been made specifically for educational purposes and thus did not necessarily deliver an explicit message. While Cauvin did not explain every individual choice, he emphasized the Offices’ intention to distribute only “wholesome entertainment” [“des saines distractions”], a wholesomeness that usually came from the same sustained focus on the family and its expression through the melodramatic mode. Sometimes these motion pictures lent themselves easily to an interpretation that could be aligned with the main tenets of the Offices. *La Belle Nivernaise*, directed by Jean Epstein for Pathé right after he made his first Impressionist film, *Cœur fidèle*, provides a good case in point. Based on a story by Alphonse Daudet, *La Belle Nivernaise* follows Victor, an abandoned child adopted by a poor family who lives on a barge. (Incidentally, the actor who starred as Victor, Maurice Touzé, had also played the young Pasteur in Epstein’s first film.) The boy grows up with them until they find out that his father is a petty bourgeois who would like to take him back and give him a proper education. Victor accepts his biological father’s offer and goes to a good school, only to feel very homesick and decide he needs to be with his adoptive family because he has fallen in love with their daughter – a kind of quasi-incestuous story that also appeared in Abel Gance’s *La Roue* (1922). Victor eventually returns to

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live with them and they continue their quiet life together on a new barge bought with the help of his biological father.

Due to the many long shots of the water and of the surrounding landscape, film scholars have described *La Belle Nivernaise* as a realist or pictorialist work in the tradition of André Antoine, whose *L’Hirondelle et la mésange* (1920) also centered on life on a barge. This does not mean that Epstein’s interest in capturing the characters’ interior experience is completely absent from *La Belle Nivernaise*. When we first encounter the abandoned child, we discover the world through his eyes, filmed from his height as several adults gather around him trying to decide how to help him – a more powerful rendition of a child’s perspective than in *Ames d’enfants*, which asks us to look at children but not with them. The second such moment from Victor’s point of view comes when he is at school falling sick. We first notice signs of sickness on his face, then gain access to what he starts to see as he becomes more feverish and goes into a delirious semi-conscious state, where the image on the wall turns into his beloved Clara. Weaving together these moments of subjectivity and the realist representation of landscape, the narrative reinforces the main principles of solidarism. The poor family does not hesitate to do their duty and adopt an orphan, and their choice is validated when Victor returns to live with them although he could have led a more comfortable life with his biological father. Perhaps when *La Belle Nivernaise* was screened in a commercial cinema or in a ciné-club this aspect would have been less salient than Epstein’s camerawork, but in the context of educational cinema, the film could be easily interpreted as buttressing the idea of social solidarity.

Other commercial motion pictures may have seemed to be logical choices for the Offices

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but upon closer inspection turn out to complicate their message. The Offices programmed several films in line with familial feminism, which accepted the sexual division of labor in society and in the family and argued for cross-class solidarity – Benoit-Lévy and Epstein’s Maternité, for instance, and other films designated in the program as “social feminist dramas,” such as Le Réveil d’une femme or L’Inspiratrice. Among them, the Danish film Le Maître du logis (1925), directed by Carl Theodor Dreyer, stands out because it subverted familial feminism and did so with a sense of irony rarely found in the context of educational cinema. The film follows the transformation of the “master of the house,” Viktor, from tyrannical ungrateful husband into loving partner who understands that his wife, Ida, is not his slave. The parallel structure of Le Maître du logis highlights the necessity of sharing house chores between partners. The first part shows the wife’s daily routine, her many tasks, and her attempts to make Viktor’s life as comfortable as possible while suffering his constant daily abuse (Figure 2.8). Viktor’s old nanny, Mads, watches silently but makes her disapproval very clear until one day she convinces Ida to leave her husband for a while to show him what it means to live without her. Once Ida leaves, the second part of the film has Viktor doing the daily chores (Figure 2.9). The learning process made very rigorous by nanny Mads, who does not relent until Viktor fully grasps the effort that goes into taking care of the household. After a few weeks of doing what used to be Ida’s work, Viktor acknowledges his ignorance in a conversation with his mother-in-law: “What fools we men are! Just because we bring home the wages, we imagine we do all the work, whereas … Whereas the wives do three times the work – and get no wages but grunts or blank looks!” The last scenes show a reformed husband who now understands his wife’s life and presumably will continue to work with her rather than act as a “master.”

95 David Bordwell offers a formal analysis of this film (translated into English as Master of the House or Thou Shalt Honor Thy Wife) and compares it with other early Dreyer films in The Films of Carl Theodor Dreyer (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981) 29-41.
The first intertitle of the film frames it ironically by proclaiming that “This is the story of a spoilt husband, a type that is extinct in this country [Denmark], but still exists abroad.” Indeed, the story could not have been timelier in the French context. As already noted, familial feminism worked within the political boundaries of solidarism and accepted the premise that women had a special role in the home. The slogan of “equality in difference” in fact broadcast the idea that women should be responsible for the domestic sphere while men were in charge of the public sphere. *Le Maître du logis* subverts this narrative by shooting most of its scenes inside in the home and having the husband be a part of it as much as the wife. What, then, should we make of Cauvin’s full-throated endorsement of a motion picture that is certainly feminist but in a much more radical way than the familial feminism typical at the time? Cauvin’s strategy for all feature films, whether made for educational purposes or not, was to recommend that they be accompanied by a talk explaining how they should be understood in connection to a broader social issue. When the Offices screened *Le Maître du logis* during the Quinzaine du cinéma éducateur in Lyon in 1928, the film was preceded by a lecture entitled “La Maison, le foyer, comment nous devons l’aimer” delivered by the director of the Ecole Normale des Instituteurs, a lecture that, according to the published summary, reinscribed *Le Maître du logis* in the logic of familial feminism.96

An incident from the same year suggests that Cauvin had a very strict idea of how each motion picture should be interpreted. In 1928 teachers from Oullins, a suburb of Lyon, sent a letter to the mayor, the prefect, the Minister of Public Instruction, and several school inspectors to complain about the “chauvinism” of a film that the Offices of Educational Cinema had sent

them. The problematic film was D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation*, which the teachers had screened during a Thursday session for children without previewing it because they trusted the Offices to select appropriate films. The fact that *The Birth of a Nation* was distributed through the Offices is surprising, not only because the film had faced a serious backlash in the United States, but especially because it had been banned in France twice, in 1916 and in 1923. In both cases the authorities expressed their concern that viewers would be influenced by the film’s depiction of the Ku Klux Klan, which would then lead to outbursts of racism. Although the ban had been lifted by 1928, this official interpretation marked the film’s reception. Another widely accepted response, put forth by some film critics and filmmakers such as Abel Gance, focused solely on its aesthetic merits. When the administrators of the Offices met to discuss the issue, Cauvin presented his own original take on *The Birth of a Nation*: he staunchly defended it as an important film for pacifist propaganda. As the annual report of the Offices claimed, the greatest interest of *The Birth of the Nation* was that it “showed the stupidity and the horrors of war” [“montrant la stupidité et les horreurs de la guerre”]. While recognizing it was a mistake to have included it in a program addressed only to children rather than to a wider audience, Cauvin insisted that they had never received any complaints although the film had been circulating through the Offices for three years.

To prove this point, the Offices quickly conducted an informal survey among the subscribers of the Lyon branch and concluded that everyone except the teachers from Oullins agreed with Cauvin’s reading of the film. This led Cauvin to conclude that the teachers who had

97 Cauvin, *Persévérer* 14-17.
99 See for instance an enthusiastic article published as soon as the second ban was lifted: Edmond Epardaud, “La Naissance d’une Nation,” *Cinéa-Ciné pour tous* 15 June 1923: 16-18.
100 Cauvin, *Résister* 100.
complained had no reason to be outraged and that, in fact, they were to blame because it was their duty to “comment on and explain” the film to the audience.\textsuperscript{101} What they had failed to do, in Cauvin’s view, was to contextualize the motion picture so as to make sure that it was presented as truly wholesome and appropriate for an educational program. To emphasize this idea, the first part of the film was screened during the Quinzaine du cinéma éducateur of 1928, where one of the administrators of the Offices, Doctor Sahuc, prefaced it with “a lecture against war,” in which he explained that the film shows the reaction of American citizens appalled by the horrors of the Civil War much as the people of Europe had recently been horrified by the Great War. Focusing only on the film’s pacifism, Sahuc followed Cauvin’s lead and elided the issue of racism. Such an obstinate reading of \textit{The Birth of the Nation} as a pacifist film shows that, even as they extolled the ability of motion pictures to touch hearts and minds, advocates of educational cinema were still too wary of the power of cinema to allow it to be understood on its own, without explaining its meaning to the audience. This is not to say, however, that alternative readings were not possible. The response of the teachers from Oullins offers only one example of how the intentions of the Offices could fail or indeed be subverted by their own choice of films. The ideal republican spectator thus remained just that: an ideal.

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Republican pedagogical cinema saw its heyday in the late 1920s, before the transition to sound film was complete. In 1927 and 1928, activists and politicians intensified their calls for the creation of an autonomous National Office for Cinema under the supervision of the Ministry of Public Instruction, an office that would bring together all types of pedagogical film (instructional

\textsuperscript{101} Cauvin, \textit{Persévérer} 18.
and educational) to coordinate their distribution and exhibition. In an address to the Senate in 1927, Joseph Brenier made the case for such an Office by appealing to national pride and noting that other countries had already centralized their efforts to educate through cinema and were well ahead. Among the models he cited were the Soviet Union and Italy, where the government had gotten very involved in the creation of an educational cinema network. A member of the centrist Radical Party, Brenier did not have any Fascist or Communist sympathies. He did not expand on the obvious ideological differences but only assumed that pedagogical cinema was by definition valuable for any regime. Hopes for a more sustained involvement of the French state were dashed in 1928 when Herriot resigned his post as Minister of Public Instruction just as he was getting ready to approve the creation of the National Cinema Office. Around the same time Catholics started to mount a sustained campaign for their own bon cinéma as a counterpart to the republican project. Their attempts to reclaim the contested medium are the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3. The Catholic Spectator

In his report on the activities of the republican Offices of Educational Cinema during 1928, the President of the Offices, Gustave Cauvin, included a diatribe against Catholic clerics who attempted to appropriate cinema. After reading an article from the Catholic newspaper *La Croix* about the need for more religious films, Cauvin complained that the “enemies of the Republic” already had too many resources and requested that the government do more to help the Offices in their fight against the “forces of reaction.”¹ *Dossiers du cinéma*, the monthly journal of the Catholic Cinematographic Committee (*Comité Catholique du Cinématographe*, C.C.C.), distributed in parishes and Catholic organizations throughout the country, replied with a conciliatory article that asked why the Offices were so intent on attacking them instead of focusing on their own educational projects.² The anonymous writer of this response also took the opportunity to remind readers that the C.C.C., an organization that brought together Catholic clerics and activists, had been founded in 1927 precisely in order to collaborate with anyone interested in making “moral” films, including those republicans who were open to it.³

Compared to this reply, Cauvin’s stance is strikingly anachronistic. His attack would have been appropriate at the turn of the century, when anticlerical discourse was at an all-time high because a significant part of the clergy still expressed hopes of restoring the monarchy and thus remained the most powerful enemy of the Republic. But by the time Cauvin was writing, the

¹ Cauvin, *Persévérer* 136.
power of the Catholic Church had been significantly diminished by a series of anticlerical laws, from the Ferry school laws that secularized public education to the 1901 law of associations that put an end to most Catholic congregations, and the 1905 law of the separation of Church and state that confined religion to the private sphere. The battle between Catholics and republicans subsided during World War I, as the two camps began to work together in the name of patriotism and formed the so-called Sacred Union government. Although temporary, this union continued to influence the tenor of the debate between the two camps throughout the 1920s. Even if republicans and Catholics still argued periodically over old issues such as education, most Catholics, encouraged by the fact that the government had reestablished a French embassy at the Vatican, accepted the Republic as a legitimate regime and sought new ways of working within its bounds. The conciliatory article published in response to Cauvin’s diatribe reflected this shift and was very much in line with the tone adopted by the C.C.C. Not all Catholic publications had a similarly positive attitude toward cinema; some of the more conservative Catholic periodicals, such as Revue des lectures, continued to view the new medium with some suspicion. But the C.C.C. constantly argued it was time for the Church to understand that cinema could help further its mission of social apostolate both by reinforcing the faith of the devout and by reaching out to nonbelievers.

The idea of social apostolate – explained in the papal encyclical Rerum Novarum (1891), which encouraged all Catholics to become involved in supporting and educating the working

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5 On how Catholics worked within the Republic see the essays in Bruno Duriez, ed. Les Catholiques dans la République, 1905-2005 (Paris: Les Editions de l'Atelier, 2005). A notable exception was the right-wing group l’Action française, which continued to attack the Republic.
class – paralleled the republican project of solidarism discussed in the previous chapter. Both attempted to solve the “social question” raised by rapid industrialization by defining a third paradigm situated between capitalism and socialism. The main difference, of course, was that solidarism drew on secular ideas such as Durkheimian sociology, whereas the concept of social apostolate had theological underpinnings.  

Defining itself as a national institution (“the official organ of French Catholics in charge of questions pertaining to cinema”), the C.C.C. aimed to keep in touch with all Catholic groups dedicated to social apostolate and appointed representatives who communicated with each of them.

Although the C.C.C. board frequently asserted that it did not want to impose overtly “didactic” films, this argument was complicated and undercut in practice. One of the first articles published in *Dossiers du cinéma* mocked a worker from the Communist neighborhood of Belleville for having requested films that could make spectators think [“des films qui font penser”]. The article claimed that such motion pictures would quickly tire viewers who would be unwilling to watch “didactic” films because cinema’s main purpose was to entertain. Unlike republican reformers of cinema, C.C.C. members never condemned film for this entertaining function; instead, they claimed they accepted it as such and insisted that explicit didacticism would only alienate spectators. What the C.C.C. called the *bon cinéma* had to be rhetorically structured so as to move viewers through a wide range of emotions, but only the type of emotions that they imagined would lead to religious sentiment: a mix of empathy, fear, and awe. This reliance upon sentiment was one of the main tenets of ultramontane piety, which had been

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6 This comparison is pursued in Denis Pelletier, “1905-2005. Un siècle d’engagements catholiques” and Bruno Dumons, “Combattre la pauvreté,” both in *Les Catholiques dans la République* 19-50 and 143-152 respectively.

7 Articles on the C.C.C. usually insisted on this national impact; see, for instance, the presentation from the annual directory *Le Tout Cinéma* 1928: 164.

on the rise in France throughout the nineteenth century. Associated with the Jesuits and with the
surge in female religious orders during the mid-nineteenth century, ultramontanism defined itself
as the opposite of the austere Jansenism of the indigenous Gallican church that had characterized
Catholic life before the French Revolution.\(^9\) While Jansenists fashioned themselves as rigorous
and intellectually inclined, ultramontanes favored sentimental forms of piety that integrated
popular rituals and beliefs previously considered too superstitious to be sanctioned by the
Church. Fully embracing an anti-intellectual discourse, ultramontanes encouraged the cult of
relics, devotion to miracle-working saints and, most importantly, the veneration of the Virgin,
who was believed to have made several apparitions in France in the nineteenth century.

In keeping with this ultramontane emphasis on sentiment, Catholic advocates of cinema
argued that the new medium should be used for social apostolate precisely because it could move
viewers of all ages and from all social classes regardless of whether they were believers or not.
Yet, as this chapter will show, they also had to grapple with the fact that the emotional impact of
cinema could not be fully controlled. Their biggest challenge, I argue, was to find a way to
address simultaneously both devout Catholics and non-Catholics. The first part of this chapter
explains how the C.C.C. established a hierarchy of spectators through their innovative system of
ratings. The following sections then focus on the types of films generally preferred by Catholics
interested in harnessing the power of cinema: family melodramas, historical reconstructions of
the lives of saints, and Hollywood biblical epics. An analysis of the reception of several
emblematic films, such as *Ben Hur* and *La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc*, will highlight the

\(^9\) Ultramontanism literally meant “from beyond the mountains,” pointing to the Vatican as the highest authority. The
following account draws on Jacques M. Gres-Gayer, “Ultramontanism,” *Encyclopedia of Christian Theology*, vol. 1,
European Culture Wars,” *Culture Wars* 11-46.
difficulties Catholics faced in their attempts to fashion what they imagined to be a “universal” spectator.

**The C.C.C.’s Film-Rating System**

At first glance, the moving image fits perfectly with the Catholics’ interest in iconography. French clerics were indeed among the early adopters of the new medium because it resembled the projected images they had been using for years thanks to the magic lantern. At the turn of the century the company La Bonne Presse, which had been making and distributing images with religious themes for decades, quickly added short films to its catalogue. From 1895 until around 1912 clerics saw the new spectacle as “an innocent distraction, neither better nor worse than any others.” In some of the more devout areas, such as Brittany, parish priests even screened short-subject films in church after their sermons to reinforce their points. This changed in the early 1910s for two main reasons, one internal to the Church, the other external. First, although Pope Pius X had initially approved the use of projections in churches, he reconsidered his position in 1912 and prohibited them because, he claimed, they diminished the status of the sacred space. Second, the increasing popularity of crime films during the same period compounded the problem. As discussed in the first chapter, these motion pictures provoked a flurry of attacks on the new spectacle, some of which came from conservative


Catholic commentators. Given the Pope’s decision and this general distrust of commercial motion pictures, most Catholic clerics became wary of cinema’s impact on their parishioners. This attitude began to change only in the mid-1920s, when some clergy members started to argue that carefully selected motion pictures could be an integral part of the program of social apostolate and could in fact attract both Catholics and non-Catholics.

During the first C.C.C. Congress held in 1928, its founders acknowledged that they could not get involved in making motion pictures because they lacked the necessary funds. Some Catholic companies such as L’Etoile were able to produce a few films every year and distribute them widely through the Catholic network, but, although the C.C.C. board encouraged such films, they also worried that specialized production was not a long-term solution. What was less costly to do and could prove to have a more powerful effect was to concentrate on film reception. Well aware of their weak political position and of the need to work within the constraints of the marketplace, members of the C.C.C. argued that their focus on reception would eventually have an impact on production: if the number of Catholic spectators increased, the main commercial film companies would have to respond to their demands. As they pragmatically put it, Catholic moviegoers “counted because they could be counted” [“ils comptent parce qu’ils se comptent”]. The main task of the C.C.C., then, was to inform and educate these spectators so that they could eventually pressure the film industry.


14 For more details on the geography of this Catholic network, see Vezyroglou, “Les Catholiques, le cinéma et la conquête des masses” 121-124. His main conclusion is that this map matches the classical map of Catholic influence: the influence of the C.C.C. and of Catholic production companies was predominant in Brittany, the Massif Central, the western Pyrenées, the extreme north, and Alsace-Lorraine.

In this spirit, a programmatic article from 1927 defined the Catholic spectator as a “universal” type because Catholicism itself was universal, as already apparent in the etymology of the word, derived from the Greek *katholikos* meaning “universal.”\(^{16}\) At the same time, the C.C.C. established a board of reviewers (made up of clerics and lay members of the organization) who rated films by taking into account what kind of spectator could see them without being exposed to any “morally dangerous” images. Unlike the Catholic League of Decency, which worked with other (mostly religious) American groups in the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s to convince Hollywood to regulate its production, the C.C.C. board did not explicitly develop a morality code for motion pictures.\(^{17}\) The C.C.C reviewers certainly worried about the same major themes – sex and violence – but, as we will see, they also made some unpredictable pronouncements.

Their ratings were published every month in *Dossiers du cinéma*. Each issue included at least a dozen reviews that usually followed the same pattern: after a synopsis and an appraisal of the film’s “interest,” or relevance, based on its main themes, the board of reviewers judged the esthetic qualities of the film (cinematography, the actors’ performance) and its moral value. At the end, they delivered the rating that indicated what type of audience would be appropriate for the film. In doing so, the board effectively established a hierarchy of spectators – a view of the audience that went against the idea of a universal Catholic spectator. Every issue reprinted the legend for the rating system without further explanation:

- **P** – the film can be shown anywhere, even in [Catholic] boarding schools and youth clubs
- **S** – the film is more appropriate for charities designed for the general public rather than

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youth clubs

T – the film cannot be shown in our charities, but one can watch it with one’s family
R – the film is reserved for religiously trained people, but for them it is almost harmless or even beneficial
D – the film is not without dangers even for religiously trained people
M—the film is clearly immoral or against religion

[P – le film peut être passé partout, même dans les Pensionnats et les Patronages
S – le film convient plutôt qu’aux patronages aux salles d’œuvres qui s’adressent au grand public
T – le film ne peut guère passer dans nos salles d’œuvres, mais on peut généralement aller le voir en famille
R – le film est réservé aux personnes formées, mais pour elles il est à peu près inoffensif ou même bienfaisant
D – le film n’est pas sans dangers même pour des personnes formées
M – le film est nettement immoral ou irréligieux].

This film-rating system seems to have been the first ever established in France. If the national Commission de Contrôle had its own classification criteria, it never made them public and no archives have been preserved. Compared to the current national rating systems, which typically only take into account the age of the viewer, the C.C.C. ratings are striking because they mix several categories: age, social status, and education level. It is also notable that, despite the

19 The current French film-rating system sanctioned by the Ministry of Culture has three age-based categories in addition to the U rating (all audiences): films unsuitable for children younger than 12, 16, and 18. TV shows and DVDs have an additional category for children younger than 10. The United States ratings are not very different, although they have a special category: “Parental Guidance Suggested,” usually understood to designate films that could be inappropriate for children younger than 10. The other age-based categories have cutoff points at 13 and 17.
differences established among these categories, a film could and often did receive multiple ratings: P/S and R/D were among the most common double ratings.

The safest rating, P, indicates those films considered appropriate for all ages and that could be screened in Catholic schools (private schools that were not under the jurisdiction of the state and could thus have a religious affiliation) and in youth clubs. These clubs had been designed specifically so that Catholic laymen and women could supervise teenagers when they were not at school. One of their main goals was to make sure that the young did not abandon the Church after their first communion – a frequent occurrence due to the secularization of public education. The clubs usually offered a variety of physical activities in addition to some catechism lessons; they often had their own sports teams and their own theatrical troupe.20 Cinema sessions were construed as a reward after several hours of such “healthy” activities – a project that mirrored the republican efforts to tame the new medium by inscribing it into a specifically educational context in which it could be contained and regulated.21

There was in fact a significant overlap between the films rated P and those preferred by the secular Offices of Educational Cinema. Republicans and Catholics seemed to have a shared sense of humor: they all appreciated Chaplin’s comedies and films starring the dog Rintintin. Both groups also considered that short-subject nonfiction films had an important educational

function although, predictably, Catholics preferred documentaries with religious themes. This included films recounting the life of a saint, “catechism films” that supplemented catechism lessons with staged Biblical scenes, and non-fiction films showing pilgrimage sites in Italy, Palestine, and France.\(^{22}\) While many comedies received a double rating of both P and S, these religious documentaries were only rated P because the board worried that they would not be well received in charities, for which they had devised the S rating.\(^{23}\) Compared with youth clubs, charities attracted a wider public. They were coordinated by upper-class Catholics who considered it their mission to reach out to working-class men and women and “guide” them.\(^{24}\) Some left-leaning Catholics had already begun to critique the paternalistic model of charities in the late 1920s, but they were still a minority, and the C.C.C. never addressed the issue. Instead, the board took into account the complex social makeup of charities and recommended that they stay away from documentaries with obvious religious themes, worrying that such films would seem too didactic and could alienate those who were not devout Catholics.

What this example suggests, then, is that the C.C.C. paid careful attention to the composition of the audience and took into account the impact it could have on one’s viewing experience. The first three ratings identified three different communities or groups of spectators: teenagers supervised by an authority figure (P), a mixed group of adults gathered together as part of the Church’s mission of social apostolate (S), and the family (T). A report presented at the second Catholic Congress of Cinema talked about the need to recognize that “collective


\(^{23}\) A magazine dedicated to Catholic youth clubs, \textit{La Vie au Patronage} reprinted reviews from \textit{Dossiers} and sometimes revisited this question of the distinction between P and S. For instance in “Chronique Lumineuse,” \textit{La Vie au Patronage} Dec. 1927: 422.

\(^{24}\) On the history of Catholic charity in nineteenth century, especially on the first charities organized by the royalist Albert de Mun, see Gibson 216-218 and Gérard Cholvy, “L’homme et la femme d’œuvres,” \textit{Les Catholiques dans la République} 217-224.
psychology often exacerbates individual impressions [...] a middle-school student sitting between his father and mother will not react the same way as he would if he were among his friends and saw the same spectacle with his friends.” [“une psychologie collective qui exaspère souvent les impressions individuelles. [...] un collégien assis entre son père et sa mère ne réagira pas de la même manière que s’il était au milieu de ses camarades et s’il assistait au même spectacle au milieu d’un petit groupe d’amis.”].

C.C.C. board members often mentioned this “psychology of the spectator” in terms drawn from Le Bon’s theory of crowds and late nineteenth-century determinism – the same type of discourse French cinephobes were using in the 1910s. But the C.C.C. firmly believed that the right films seen in the right context could be beneficial. From the first issue, Dossiers presented its mission as helping parents make the right choices by giving them enough details about the motion pictures they could see with their family. Articles published in the magazine often addressed families directly, reminding them of their duty to protect their children and to prepare them for what they were about to see on the screen.

The impact of clerics on the family through their influence on women had long been an important trope of anticlerical discourse and one of the arguments used by the left against granting women the right to vote. To downplay this issue, the C.C.C. reviewers usually addressed “the head of the family” and made sure to emphasize that the members of the board were either spiritual fathers (clergy members) or actual heads of families. At the same time, and unlike the all-male republican Offices of Educational Cinema, the C.C.C. included a woman, Eve Baudouin, who was affiliated with the Union féminine civique et sociale (UFCS), an influential

26 Jules Michelet’s Le Prêtre, la femme et la famille (1861) was one of the first books to attack the interference of clerics in family life. Historians have recently reexamined women’s interest in religion and argued that religious life offered women more freedom to define their social role than previously acknowledged; see, for example, Caroline Ford, Divided Houses: Religion and Gender in Modern France (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).
Catholic organization that advocated for the return of working mothers to the home. While the republican “familial feminists” mentioned in the previous chapter worked toward giving women more rights within the family, Catholic women’s organizations such as the UFCS idealized the family as a safe space that was in no need of reform. The C.C.C. seemed to subscribe to this view insofar as they considered that films too complex to be rated P or S were perfectly adequate if seen with one’s family. Yet one of the crucial missions of Dossiers was to help parents to decide which films were appropriate for their families – a paternalistic attitude that we will encounter again later in this chapter when discussing Catholic family melodramas.

For the following two ratings (R, “reserved for religiously trained people” and D, “not without dangers even for religiously trained people”) the imagined spectator was an educated Catholic who seemed to be classless and genderless. When explaining the difference between the P and the R rating, the board argued that the former only went to “harmless” films, that is to say films considered to be unambiguous and moral, while the latter was typically given to more complicated motion pictures that required nuanced interpretation. Most films reviewed in Dossiers were rated R, which implied that spectators who had been trained in a Catholic environment could see them because the board expected them to be able to make up their mind about the film by drawing on religious principles that had become their second nature. The D rating, by contrast, was designed for those films that could raise some issues even for educated devout Catholics. Most D-rated films were adaptations of books by authors who had been put on

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27 In La Mère au travail et le retour au foyer (1931), Baudouin argued for the professional status of housework. In Dossiers she published articles from the perspective of mothers, such as “L’inquiétude des Mères,” Dossiers du cinéma 2 (1927): 57-58.


the Index, for instance Emile Zola’s *Thérèse Raquin*, directed by Jacques Feyder in 1928.\(^{30}\) It was even worse if the adaptation came from Germany, as was the case of *Le Rouge et le noir* in 1929, because the C.C.C. board was staunchly anti-German.\(^{31}\) Nevertheless, the board often suggested that after a few cuts, a D-rated film could receive an R. Sometimes the producers made these cuts themselves—Pathé for instance, was open to reediting films for this purpose—while in other cases the cutting was done by Catholic companies such as La Bonne Presse or L’Étoile.

Compared to the other ratings, the M rating, which designated the film as “clearly immoral or against religion,” reads as a definitive condemnation. No cuts could make it appropriate because the very core of the film was deemed too dangerous. Yet even this rating was often softened by an accompanying note indicating that the film was also “strictly R” [“strictement R”], which suggested that M-rated films could not in fact corrupt trained Catholics. This double R/M rating was generally assigned to films that dealt with the recent history of the Soviet Union. A case in point is *Le Village du péché/The Women of Ryazan* (directed by Olga Preobrazhenskaya in 1927), which shows the hardships endured by Russian villagers during the First World War, especially the particular problems faced by women, and is usually discussed today as one of the few feminist silent films produced in the U.S.S.R. – a double problem for Catholics wary of both secular feminism and Communism.\(^{32}\) The *Dossiers* review praised this motion picture for its cinematography and for its “intelligent” filmmaking but harshly criticized the general atmosphere it created: “The overall impression would be depressing if it were not

\(^{30}\) *Dossiers du cinéma* 9 (1928): 224.

\(^{31}\) *Dossiers du cinéma* 17 (1929): 66.

\(^{32}\) On the antagonism between Catholics and Communists and also on how both groups dealt with gender issues, see Susan B. Whitney, *Mobilizing Youth: Communists and Catholics in Interwar France* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009). The reception of Preobrazhenskaya’s work in France will be discussed in Chapter 5.
disgusting” [“L’impression serait déprimante, si elle n’était écœurante”]. While this particular review did not explain the possible political implications of *Le Village du péché*, this concern is clearly expressed for other films set in the Soviet Union. Even though it was made in the United States, Cecil B. DeMille’s *Le Batelier de la Volga/The Volga Boatman* (1926) was rated R/D because it depicted the Soviet Revolution. According to the C.C.C. board, the film did not seem “too reprehensible” from a moral standpoint, but it was “not without danger” from a social point of view. Some films produced in the Soviet Union, however, received positive ratings provided they did not depict any Communist activities. For instance, *Volga en feu/The Capitan’s Daughter* (Yuri Tarich, 1928) and *Neiges sanglantes/The Club of the Big Deed* (Grigori Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg, 1927), both set in early nineteenth-century Russia, were rated T although they included some revolutionary scenes. But, since these scenes took place in imperial Russia and did not involve any Bolsheviks, they were deemed safe enough.

Although the C.C.C. reviewers followed certain guiding principles, typically condemning politically problematic films as well as excessive violence, nudity, and erotic scenes, they generally seemed open to compromise. The board’s pragmatic attitude most likely came from the fact that the C.C.C. remained a private association and as a result did not have many tools for enforcing the ratings it gave. A comparison with the American Catholic League of Decency is instructive here because the C.C.C. was far from having the kind of influence that the League held in the U.S. in the early 1930s, when it became a crucial pressure group that made sure production companies followed the provisions of the Hays Code. Given the Church’s weak

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33 *Dossiers du cinéma* 20 (1929): 189.
34 *Dossiers du cinéma* 21 (1929): 252.
35 *Dossiers du cinéma* 20 (1929): 185, 188.
36 Walsh; Black.
political position in France, the C.C.C. realized it could only be effective if it avoided intransigence and remained open to negotiation, positioning itself as an intermediary between the Catholic audience and the film industry. As part of this process, the C.C.C. board attempted to reconcile the laws of the marketplace with its program of social apostolate.

Family, Melodrama, and Catholicism

The existence of the T rating, which specifically targeted families, indicates that the C.C.C. placed as much emphasis on the family as the republican Offices of Educational Cinema. Although republican natalist policies and Catholic familialism were distinct ideological projects, historians have argued that, despite their undeniable tensions, the two groups found common ground in their “defense of the family.” This consensus can also be seen in the context of the debate on the social role of cinema because some of the family melodramas screened by the Offices were equally appreciated by the C.C.C. To give only a few examples that have already been mentioned in Chapter 2, Jean Epstein’s La Belle Nivernaise and the feature films made by Benoit-Lévy with Marie Epstein all received positive reviews from the C.C.C. However, the reverse was not necessarily true. The family melodramas produced by Catholic companies were either ignored or directly attacked by republicans, particularly by someone like Cauvin. I would argue that this rejection was motivated by the fact that explicitly religious motion pictures, such as Julien Duvivier’s La Tragédie de Lourdes (1923) and Alexandre Ryder’s Comment j’ai tué

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39 For instance, Cauvin, Persévérer 17.
mon enfant (1925), reworked the main tropes of family melodrama to depict a story of conversion. While republican melodramas typically end with a happily reunited family that has learned how to avoid dangerous illnesses, Catholic melodramas tend to focus on widowed parents who keep their children away from religion only to find out that they have been jeopardizing the children’s life. This depiction of the family reflects the Church’s representation of its own role as a parent. Not only are priests seen as spiritual fathers, but the Church itself is often figured as a mother. For instance, in a discussion of the project of the C.C.C., Cardinal Verdier explained that “The Catholic Church is maternal; she knows that man, this big child – her child – needs distractions.” [“L’Eglise Catholique est maternelle: elle sait que l’homme, ce grand enfant – et son enfant – a besoin de distractions.”]. Catholic melodramas that depict single parents repeatedly make this type of argument, suggesting that the missing parent should in fact be the Church.

Comment j’ai tué mon enfant was one of the first Catholic motion pictures distributed both in Catholic institutions and in commercial movie theaters. Directed by a little-known filmmaker, Alexandre Ryder, the film was based on a novel by Pierre L’Ermite, one of the most enthusiastic proponents of a Catholic cinema. L’Ermite (the pseudonym of Canon Loutil) wrote a regular film column on the front page of La Croix and served as president of the C.C.C. Moreover, L’Ermite himself supervised the production and even acted in Comment j’ai tué mon enfant. The first scenes show L’Ermite playing the part of a priest, listening to a mother’s confession about how her actions unwittingly led to her son’s death (Figure 3.1). Told through

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41 As the film seems to have been lost, the following account is based on reviews from Catholic newspapers and the trade press.

flashbacks, the story follows Dominique, a teenager who takes an interest in religion after befriending a priest. His mother, an upper middle-class secular woman, tries to stop Dominique from joining the clergy by introducing him to a beautiful young girl who eventually becomes his fiancée. After the death of his friend the priest during the First World War, Dominique deeply resents his mother’s attempts to keep him away from the church. Tragedy strikes one stormy night when Dominique sees a young boy drowning. As the boy’s mother keeps asking for help and no one reacts, she calls the onlookers cowards. This motivates Dominique to go to the boy’s rescue but he drowns too, leaving behind his guilt-ridden mother, who convinces herself that it was in fact her decision to stop him from becoming a priest that led to her son’s premature death. Much like Fantômas and other adaptations of literary works, Comment j’ai tué mon enfant softened some details of the original novel that risked being too shocking on the screen. The most relevant change comes at the end. In the novel, Dominique is so unhappy that he commits suicide (although suicide is an unpardonable sin according to Catholic doctrine), whereas in the film he dies as a hero, trying to save someone else’s life. Such reluctance to depict a suicide would seem to anticipate the American Hays Code and its many rules against showing shocking scenes, but it also works as a way of bringing Dominique closer to his friend the priest and, more generally, to a Christ figure, willing to sacrifice himself for others.

In his column in La Croix, L’Ermite often talked about the reception of this film, usually focusing on the reaction of the audience. Describing how the motion picture was received during its premier in Brussels, he noted that “in the dark, while the film was screened, I noticed manly tears on the scarred cheeks and the chests of priests.” [“dans le noir, quand le film se déroula, j’aperçus des larmes d’hommes sur des joues balafrées et sur des poitrines de prêtres”].43 He

went on to depict a comparable scene in Paris with a similar audience that included the archbishop of Paris, Cardinal Dubois. In both cases, the film had deeply moved educated Catholics, the kind of spectators for whom the R rating had been devised. But if it was to prove L’Ermite’s point about the usefulness of cinema for social apostolate, *Comment j’ai tué mon enfant* also had to reach nonbelievers. Several months later, L’Ermite published a new story which he had heard from a priest from Ivry-sur-Seine, a fiercely Communist town, where *Comment j’ai tué mon enfant* had been screened in a casino. In this unusual context, the local priest decided to encourage his parishioners to go to the casino and join the Communists in watching the motion picture. Unsure of what to expect, the priest imagined that these devout Catholics could at least defend the film from anticlerical insults. Yet, as he happily wrote to L’Ermite, the atmosphere was “magnificent and deeply moving” [“magnifique et profondément émouvante”] and at the end “you could see handkerchiefs in rough hands” [“on voyait des mouchoirs en de rudes mains.”] – a description that echoes the one offered by L’Ermite a few months earlier. This emphasis on tears makes sense given that ultramontanism allowed and even encouraged public displays of emotion. But, as Anne Vincent-Buffault has argued in her study of the history of tears in French modern culture, this kind of reaction has a more complex history, harking back to the early nineteenth century when “a questioning of the philosophy of the Enlightenment led to a neo-Catholic movement to repopulate the heavens, to give a meaning to unhappiness, to the duality of body and soul: tears rediscovered a religious meaning.”

In this context, the positive reception of *Comment j’ai tué mon enfant* made the priest from Ivry-sur-Seine meditate on the power of cinema to convert those who had never visited his

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45 Ibid.
church and who were now confronted with a different image of the clergy: not the caricature
propagated through anticlerical newspapers but the benevolent figure presented in *Comment j’ai
tué mon enfant*. This attitude mirrored L’Ermite’s declared intention of showing nonbelievers the
“honor of priesthood” [“l’honneur du sacerdoce”] in the spirit of Christ’s words that “I did not
come for the righteous but for the sinners” [“Je ne suis pas venu pour les justes, je suis venu pour
les pécheurs.”].

To prove that cinema was a valuable tool in the hands of the Church, if enough
clerics were willing to use it, L’Ermite often mentioned the young men who were so moved by
his film that they decided to join the clergy.

L’Ermite’s focus on the emotions triggered by the
motion picture suggests that he attributed this response to empathy rather than to the imitation
effect typically condemned by critics of cinema. This empathy also extended to Dominique’s
mother since the story was told from her point of view (the *je* in the title). The review published
in *Dossiers* made this clear with one sentence summarizing the “moral” of the film: “A strong
lesson is given to mothers for the education of their sons.” [“Une forte leçon est donnée aux
mères pour l’éducation de leurs fils.”].

The mother’s story is in fact one of conversion – she goes from being a staunchly secular
woman to confessing her sins and repenting. An article in the trade journal *La Rampe* picked up
on this issue asserting that, although the film was widely distributed, it would probably not reach
a wide audience because

The author wanted to glorify Christian morality and only managed to sow doubt
about God’s justice in the spectators’ hearts. But doubt is unholy and the Church
firmly condemns it… Canon Loutil certainly did not want this, but it is

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1925: 14.


49 *Dossiers du cinéma* 2 (1927): 108.
nevertheless the result. Since he wanted to make a film of religious propaganda, he should have chosen a different topic.

[L’auteur a voulu en faire l’apothéose de la morale chrétienne et il ne réussit qu’à semer dans le cœur des spectateurs des doutes sur la justice de Dieu. Or le doute est impie et l’Église le condamne résolument… M. le Chanoine Loutil n’a certainement pas voulu cela ; mais c’est cependant ce à quoi il arrive. Puisqu’il voulait faire un film de propagande religieuse, il aurait dû choisir un autre sujet.].

This argument against the film could be reinforced with a reference to ultramontane piety, which had moved away from the image of a terrifying God promulgated in previous centuries – what Jean Delumeau has called “the pastoral of fear” – toward a more benevolent all-loving God. In fact, members of the C.C.C. often drew on ultramontane rhetoric when they insisted that they did not want to diminish the pleasure brought by cinema. According to Canon Reymond, editor-in-chief of *Dossiers* and secretary of the C.C.C., this organization was “neither ‘puritan’ nor ‘Jansenist,’ it [was] not among those who would like to take away the color or the scent of flowers” [“ni ‘puritain’ ni ‘janséniste,’ il ne se range point parmi ceux qui voudraient enlever aux fleurs leurs couleurs ou leurs parfums.”]. Yet Catholic family melodrama, one of the genres most appreciated by the C.C.C board, typically relied on guilt and fear in conveying its message.

Duvivier’s *La Tragédie de Lourdes* increased this emotional effect by bringing together characters from both Catholic and republican melodrama – priests and doctors – and having

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50 “Comment j’ai tué mon enfant,” *La Rampe* 17 May 1925: 15.


religion prevail over science. In his review of this film, L’Ermite again described the audience’s reactions in emotional terms very similar to those he used for his own Comment j’ai tué mon enfant: “When the lights go on, we can see tears all around” [“Quand on rend l’électricité, on peut voir des larmes en bien des yeux”]. It should be noted, however, that, unlike those involved in the production of Comment j’ai tué mon enfant, Duvivier did not define himself as a Catholic filmmaker. Film scholars consider him an eclectic director and usually associate him with poetic realism due to his 1937 film Pépé le Moko, although he also continued to make a number of motion pictures with religious themes such as Ecce Homo/Golgotha (1935), the first sound film about the life of Christ. Alan Williams has suggested that if Duvivier periodically made religious films it was probably because he had been educated by the Jesuit brothers and he remained connected to the Church. Duvivier, however, did not write much about his understanding of faith and religious institutions. In fact, in his interventions in the trade press, he insisted that La Tragédie de Lourdes was not “Catholic propaganda” and often complained that his work had been misunderstood. Yet Isis Films, the company that produced the film, was one of the most prolific Catholic companies, and the picture had initially been screened in the presence of Cardinal Dubois, after which it was distributed both commercially and through the Catholic network. Moreover, its Manichean plot clearly pitted science against

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53 The film is also known as Credo ou la Tragédie de Lourdes, but articles from the time of its release only refer to it as La Tragédie de Lourdes.


56 Alan Williams 192.

57 For example in a letter by Duvivier to the newspaper Bonsoir, quoted in the conservative Catholic magazine Romans-revue 15 Jan. 1925: 74-75. In the same article from Romans-revue a reader is quoted as asking for more films like La Tragédie de Lourdes, which she sees as a model for Catholic films, but the editors respond sarcastically.
religion and took the side of the latter.

*La Tragédie de Lourdes* tells the story of an atheist scientist, Vincent Leverrier, whose positivist anticlerical theories have become extremely influential and who has refused to give his two children, Michel and Suzanne, any kind of religious education. In the first scenes, the scientist is worried about his libertine son but proud of his daughter, who shares his passion for science. However, as Suzanne gets involved with a group of freethinkers, she slowly drifts apart from her father and from her fiancé, who is troubled by her association with them because he comes from a religious family. At the same time, she starts to show the first signs of a mysterious disease that had killed her mother and proven to her father the limits of his scientific prowess. Confronted again with the development of this illness, a desperate Leverrier blames himself for not being able to help his daughter. This is when Suzanne’s fiancé and his family suggest that she go to Lourdes – the town known for its miraculous curative powers and one of the most important Catholic pilgrimage sites. Despite Leverrier’s initial opposition, Suzanne makes the pilgrimage and he too eventually joins her. The last scenes show Suzanne cured and both of them on the verge of converting.

*La Tragédie de Lourdes* may have a happy ending when compared to *Comment j’ai tué mon enfant* but its moralizing tone is certainly similar. While in *Comment j’ai tué mon enfant* Dominique seemed to attract as much sympathy from the audience as his mother, if not more, reviews of *La Tragédie de Lourdes* tended to concentrate on the role of the father and to see Suzanne as a mere accessory. L’Ermite went so far as to compare the scientist with Saint Paul because he finally “broke” and allowed “faith to envelop him” [“il casse”… “la foi l’envahit”].58 Moreover, the synopsis presented in *Dossiers* included an unusual sentence predicting the future:

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58 L’Ermite, “Un film”.
“Leverrier will convert” [“Leverrier se convertira”]. The film ends the moment Suzanne says “I believe” [“credo”] because she feels cured, but we never see her father acknowledging his conversion. For Catholic journalists, however, the conversion seemed obvious and necessary to the narrative. This Catholic appropriation of melodrama seems particularly ironic when we consider Peter Brooks’s explanation of the rise of stage melodrama in the wake of the French Revolution as a secular attempt to reinvest the world with meaning and morality after the revolutionaries eliminated all traditional hierarchies. If, more than a century later, Catholics found melodrama perfectly appropriate for their program of social apostolate, it was, I would argue, precisely because they assumed it would resonate with a wide secular audience. This assumption, however, proved incorrect. As noted above, reviews of *Comment j’ai tue mon enfant* in the non-Catholic press were lukewarm at best. When it came to *La Tragédie de Lourdes*, they tended to gloss over the religious implications but joined Catholic journalists in praising Duvivier for transforming Lourdes into one of the main characters by filming on location. It was in fact this aspect that turned out to interest both believers and nonbelievers because, after the actualités filmed there by Pathé and Lumière in the late 1890s, Lourdes seldom appeared on the big screen.

**Lourdes: Seeing the Miraculous**

By the 1920s Lourdes, a small town in South-Western France, had become one of the most famous Christian pilgrimage places. Well-known for its miraculous healings, the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes celebrates the apparition of the Virgin in 1858 to Bernadette Soubirous,

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59 *Dossiers du cinéma* 9 (1928): 246; L’Ermite, “Un film”.
60 As discussed in Chapter 2, with reference to Brooks’s take on melodrama.
a young girl from a peasant family. After a lengthy process of certification and a careful redesign of the area around the Grotto where Bernadette had seen the Virgin – an area which eventually became the Sanctuary – the town began to attract an increasing number of pilgrims. Lourdes’s popularity continued to grow in the first decades of the Third Republic even as anticlerical discourse was becoming fiercer. The publication of Zola’s novel *Lourdes* in 1894 sparked an animated debate on the issue of miraculous healing. For anticlerical republicans such as Zola, those who declared they had been healed at Lourdes – most of them women – were only victims of hysteria or delusion. The story he told in *Lourdes* drew on real cases but rewrote their ending so as to emphasize the deceptiveness of the cure. The Catholic reply was swift and the dispute continued in the pages of newspapers, leading to a series of rewards offered to those who could prove the “truth” of the cure. While this debate set up religion and science as antagonistic terms, the clergymen who administered Lourdes had already taken steps toward integrating medicine into their system of certification. In the late nineteenth century, Lourdes became the only Christian pilgrimage place to have a Medical Bureau, where doctors verified the patients’ illness and their subsequent cure or, more rarely, lack thereof.

Duvivier’s film built on this complicated relationship between science and religion by presenting the town through the eyes of the scientist Leverrier. When the sick gather in front of the shrine, we see them through the scientist’s eyes; an intertitle then clarifies his feelings by stating that he is irritated with the imploring crowd. The following close-ups of praying pilgrims are thus implicitly seen from his condescending perspective. When Suzanne joins the crowd, we follow Leverrier as he walks toward the shrine. A shift in perspective in these scenes

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foreshadows his conversion. The first shot is a panoramic high angle that shows the town from Leverrier’s point of view, suggesting he is literally and metaphorically above the religious spectacle of the pilgrims. Next comes a low-angle shot in which we look up with him toward the crosses that guard the entrance to the shrine; the shot clearly places him below the crosses, establishing that the scientist is part of a religious hierarchy whether he accepts it or not. These scenes preface a conversation with a freemason who warns Leverrier that his actions are highly unusual for an atheist and that he should be going back to Paris if he wants to save his reputation. As Leverrier insists that he is there as a father and that his reputation does not matter, a long shot shows that their conversation is taking place under the statuary, emphasizing again that Lourdes has a certain hierarchy that cannot be undermined by scientific theories.

When the conversation is over, Leverrier goes to the Medical Bureau, where the local doctors show him a recently-healed woman and confirm her miraculous cure. In the following scenes, Leverrier is part of the crowd walking toward the procession, a sign that his journey has convinced him to join the pilgrims. In his review of *La Tragédie de Lourdes*, L’Ermite noted that these scenes depicting Lourdes and Leverrier’s trajectory through the town were particularly moving because the miracle that was about to happen – Suzanne’s healing – could not be filmed. Indeed, Suzanne’s healing is never shown, but her peaceful face and her declaration of belief (“credo”) ask the audience to perform an act of faith and accept the truth of the miraculous cure without actually seeing it.

The issue of what can be seen at Lourdes and how exactly it can be made visible also marked a later film tracing the biography of the young peasant who had the Marian vision, Bernadette Soubirous. Directed by Georges Pallu, a little-known filmmaker who often worked on 64 L’Ermite, “Un film.”
films explicitly marketed as Catholic, *La Vie merveilleuse de Bernadette* (1929) was one of several biographical pictures of saints considered to have led a “marvelous” or “miraculous” life. For instance, Duvivier also filmed *La Vie miraculeuse de Thérèse Martin* in 1929.\(^6^5\) Much like Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Ten Commandments* (1923), which first stages episodes from the Old Testament and then shows how the Commandments affect the life of a modern family, *La Vie merveilleuse de Bernadette* uses a present-day story to frame Bernadette’s biography. The film begins in a French village and follows the daily life of Antoinette, a young peasant girl whose name conveniently rhymes with Bernadette and whose social status is very similar to that of the saint. (The young girls who played Antoinette and Bernadette were not professional actors – perhaps because the production had a low budget but also because they could give the film a certain realism.) Her peaceful life is disrupted when Antoinette is caught in a storm, struck by lightning, and paralyzed. After the doctors say that nothing can be done about it – a crucial trope in all miraculous healing stories – a friend suggests that she go to Lourdes. While her godfather prepares Antoinette’s trip, he hears Bernadette’s story from an old lady who claims to have known her. The rest of the film then focuses on Bernadette, only to return to Antoinette for a few minutes at the end to show that she has been healed during her pilgrimage to Lourdes.

The very first scenes with Bernadette introduce the young girl as a reliable narrator: we can immediately see her visions with her, whereas the friends who accompany her do not see anything. According to historical accounts, at the time of the first vision, neither her parents nor the authorities believed the girl’s story, but the film invites spectators right away to side with Bernadette since they can confirm what she sees. After establishing Bernadette’s authority, the

\(^{65}\) Georges Pallu is seldom mentioned in film history books but there is a short biographical note in *Dictionnaire du cinéma français des années vingt*. For more on Bernadette’s representation on the screen, particularly the American film *The Song of Bernadette* (1943), see Pamela Grace, *The Religious Film: Christianity and the Hagiopic* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009) 78-89.
motion picture also includes other point-of-view shots. A brief sequence shows what her friends perceive while she is having the vision: they observe Bernadette and her reactions but cannot see the Virgin. Then, in an unusual point-of-view shot, we see Bernadette through the Virgin’s eyes – a blurred image of Bernadette with a halo around her head. Viewers thus gain access to all characters and when the local priest does not believe Bernadette’s story, the audience is presumably expected to empathize with her, knowing that she is right. This is not exactly a process of identification, however, because at any given moment, we know more than Bernadette does. Not only are we already aware of how the story ends, we also know that the apparition she sees is the Virgin, whereas in the film Bernadette initially calls her la Dame, unaware of who she is until the woman identifies herself as the Immaculate Conception.66

*La Vie merveilleuse de Bernadette* and *La Tragédie de Lourdes* thus present Lourdes from two radically different perspectives: that of a visionary peasant girl and that of a freethinker. What these two perspectives have in common, however, is that they can accommodate both believers and nonbelievers and speak to them simultaneously. It is no coincidence that the scientist and the child are also important characters in republican educational films, as shown in the previous chapter. Catholic films reappropriate these familiar figures to tell their own story about religious sentiment and to suggest the existence of the divine. In doing so, they vividly dramatize an important Christian story, that of Doubting Thomas, and address both practicing Catholics, whose faith they are meant to reinforce, and non-Catholics, whose doubts they represent through characters like Leverrier or Bernadette’s neighbors only to insist that they are unfounded. In this context, then, seeing is not directly equated with knowing, as in the Bessou report for the Ministry of Public Instruction, but rather with a particular way of

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66 The film offers a nationalized version of the story, ignoring the fact that Bernadette spoke patois and called the apparition a gender-neutral “it” (*Aquero*). For more historical details, including the importance of the concept of Immaculate Conception, see Harris 55-165.
perceiving a transcendental reality.\textsuperscript{67}

\textbf{The Bible According to Hollywood}

While Catholic proponents of cinema seemed unanimous in their appreciation of motion pictures that dealt with French Catholic topics such as the pilgrimage to Lourdes, there was significant disagreement over the impact of Hollywood biblical epics such as Cecil B. De Mille’s \textit{The Ten Commandments} (1923) and \textit{King of Kings} (1927) or Fred Niblo’s \textit{Ben Hur} (1925). At the time of their release, these films drew praise for the spectacular scenes for which they are still remembered today, for instance the parting of the Red Sea in \textit{The Ten Commandments} or the chariot race in \textit{Ben Hur}.\textsuperscript{68} From a Catholic perspective, the obvious advantage of these lavishly produced films was that they attracted millions of spectators, believers and nonbelievers. \textit{Ben Hur}, for example, was shown at the fashionable Madeleine Cinema in Paris for more than a year and was often sold out.\textsuperscript{69} Moreover, the readers of \textit{Cinéra-Ciné pour tous} – an influential film magazine that promoted both commercial and avant-garde films—voted it the best film of 1928, ahead of Chaplin’s \textit{The Circus}, Abel Gance’s \textit{Napoléon} and Fritz Lang’s \textit{Metropolis}.\textsuperscript{70} \textit{(Ben Hur} was widely released in France in 1928, three years after its premiere in the United States.) Never

\textsuperscript{67} The 2009 film \textit{Lourdes}, directed by Jessica Hausner, revisits some of these questions without pretending to offer any direct answers.

\textsuperscript{68} On the production of these motion pictures, see Kevin Brownlow, \textit{The Parade’s Gone By...} (New York: Ballantine Books, 1968) 179-188 and 385-414. It should also be noted that their sound versions, made during the Cold War, were even more successful. Ben Hur is now more readily associated with the actor Charles Heston than with Ramon Navarro who played the character in the 1925 version. Heston also famously played Moses in DeMille’s sound version of \textit{The Ten Commandments} (1956).


one to miss an opportunity to make his argument about the crucial role of cinema for the Catholic mission, L’Ermite interpreted *Ben Hur*’s positive reception in France as a sign that the religious idea, or more, the Christian idea, is becoming more and more ‘appealing’. … It is because fashionable people, who are especially interested in money – the most important criterion for them! – feel confident about the power of this Christian idea, do not hesitate to give it breathtaking budgets and pay attention to the minutest details of historical reconstruction.

[l’idée religieuse – plus que cela, – l’idée chrétienne, redevient chaque jour plus ‘appelante’. … C’est que les gens du monde, qui se placent surtout au point de vue de l’argent – pour eux, critérium suprême ! – ont confiance en la puissance de cette idée chrétienne, et qu’ils n’hésitent pas à lui consacrer des budgets effarants, et soignent leurs films jusque dans les moindres détails de reconstitution historique.].

However, not all clergymen agreed with L’Ermite’s enthusiastic assessment. One of the most frequently invoked arguments against these films had to do with their liberal depiction of sexuality: *The Ten Commandments, Ben Hur,* and even *King of Kings* all included some scenes of seduction or representations of orgies. French prelates repeatedly asked that all such scenes be cut if these motion pictures were to be shown in Catholic institutions. This is where Catholic distribution companies and, later, the C.C.C., intervened. While it was hard for them to influence commercial movie theaters, they were able to recut the films and distribute the new sanitized version through youth clubs and charities.

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The French Catholic suspicion of American religious films also had a more insidious reason: some complained that Hollywood’s biblical epics presented a version of Christianity that was too Americanized and thus did not fully correspond to French Catholic “sensibilities.” The more conservative Catholic reviewers did not fail to mention that Hollywood productions were the product of Jewish and Protestant filmmakers and producers. Biblical epics unavoidably provoked anti-Semitic remarks, both in the U.S. and in France. Ben Hur, for instance, came under attack in the French Catholic press for vilifying the Romans and presenting the main character, Ben Hur, who is an aristocratic Jew, in a positive light – a curious reproach considering that the narrative is clearly one of conversion and that the films ends with Ben Hur’s decision to become a Christian. The attitude of French Catholics toward Hollywood is connected not only to anti-Semitism, which had shown its fierceness during the Dreyfus affair, but also to ultramontanism, which saw France as the Vatican’s “eldest daughter” and emphasized an inextricable link among Latin Catholic cultures. Ultramontanism explains why French Catholics remained wary of American biblical epics although they had warmly welcomed similar epics produced in Italy such as Quo Vadis (1912) and Christus (1916) because their country of origin legitimated them. By contrast, even a film like King of Kings, for which DeMille consulted Catholic and Protestant clergymen as well as rabbis, was open to attacks from French Catholics who, as previously noted, asked that some parts be excised.

Another frequent critique brought up a more difficult question that could not be resolved


76 La Vie au Patronage Dec. 1928: 448. On the production of King of Kings see Babington and Evans 110-126.
simply by cutting certain scenes: Christ’s representation on the screen. This was not an issue for films that explicitly announced themselves as telling the story of Christ; French Catholics accepted and appreciated *King of Kings* once the offending nudity scenes disappeared. This motion picture became an emblematic example of the Christ film, which had been legitimized in France by the many Passion-play films made in the early twentieth century both by commercial companies such as Pathé and by Catholic producers like La Bonne Presse.\(^7\) It was another sub-genre, the Roman/Christian epic, particularly *Ben Hur*, that sparked debate among French Catholics because Christ’s face was never shown. The film’s plot focuses on the rivalry between the young Jew Ben Hur and his childhood friend, the Roman Messala. When a corrupt Messala sends Ben Hur to the galleys, the young man briefly encounters Jesus, who gives him water. After Ben Hur escapes from the galleys and defeats Messala in a cinematically dazzling chariot race, he finds his mother and sister suffering from leprosy. Hearing that Jesus could cure them, Ben Hur asks him for help and offers him military assistance in exchange. Jesus refuses his offer but heals the two women and, in the process, convinces Ben Hur to convert to Christianity. Throughout the film, Jesus remains a secondary character who only intervenes at key moments. When he does, we usually only see his hand or arm reaching in from outside the frame. This convention is slightly altered in two scenes toward the end, when he is shown from the back during his trial and hidden by an apostle during the Last Supper. In a review written for the very conservative *Revue des lectures*, abbé Bethléem railed against the fact that Jesus’ face remained unseen and interpreted it as an attempt to downplay his role and to undercut his authority. He

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even went so far as to state that the director’s choice had to do with the preferences of “a sect from the United States,” presumably a reference to the difference between Catholicism and Protestantism when it came to pictorial representations of the divine.\(^78\) In his diatribe, abbé Bethléem paused to praise the 1880 novel by Lew Wallace on which the film was based, a book that had been well-received in France and translated at least twice, then concluded that the motion picture was a failed adaptation. This line of thought ultimately led to an argument against the use of cinema by Catholics, precisely the type of claim that the C.C.C., founded only a few months after the debate surrounding \textit{Ben Hur}, sought to counteract.\(^79\)

In his favorable review of \textit{Ben Hur}, L’Ermite put forth a different argument. He praised the filmmaker’s choice to show only parts of Christ’s body and saw it as an acknowledgement of the limits of cinema in representing the divine: “there is something moving in this admission of inability coming from respectable artists who have access to millions and to all the modern means of filmmaking. This restraint is akin to an act of faith.” [“il y a quelque chose d’émotionnant dans cet aveu d’impuissance de la part d’artistes considérables, qui disposent de tous les millions et de tous les moyens modernes de réalisation. Cette abstention est déjà une sorte d’acte de foi.”].\(^80\) In L’Ermite’s assessment, then, the filmmaker’s stylistic choices suggested a desire to make not just a profitable motion picture but a religious film. The much-discussed spectacular scenes, such as the chariot race, were only one of the film’s strengths. What struck L’Ermite as truly innovative was that the director knew when to stop relying on spectacle so as to create “a messianic atmosphere” that suggests the presence of the divine instead of showing it directly. A reviewer for the moderate Catholic magazine \textit{Le


\(^79\) An article in the first issue of \textit{Dossiers} discusses the debate sparked by \textit{Ben Hur} as proof that it is difficult to interpret artistic intentions, J.R., “Les Difficultés de la Critique,” \textit{Dossiers du cinéma} 1 (1927): 8.

Correspondant, Paul Saint-Hugon, agreed with L’Ermite that the director’s choice showed respect toward the Christian belief and could be read as an indirect evangelical message. In his view, painters and sculptors had already created enough works of art representing Jesus. It was when the film attempted to imitate painting that Saint-Hugon found it unfitting. For example, he singled out the scenes representing the Last Supper, which copied Leonardo’s painting but, in keeping with the film’s conceit, never showed Jesus. To do so, an apostle was seated in front of Christ so as to block the spectators’ view and his presence was indicated through a ray of light – a staging fiercely criticized by Saint-Hugon, who found it useless and simply “bad.”

While Saint-Hugon generally shared L’Ermite’s views, he also raised a new question about how spectators were positioned through the use of close-ups. In particular, he took issue with the scenes in which each of the three Wise Men was shown in an extreme close-up while presenting a gift to the Child:

This is how I, a very humble spectator just like any other in that packed room, saw myself being offered the gold, the frankincense, and the myrrh by three Wise Men proceeding seriously, one by one, and contemplating us with solemnity and reverence. If this is a convention of cinema, it is undoubtedly a bad one. There should be no convention that has to or is able to put the spectator on a bed of straw to replace the Child, not because it is irreverent but because it is ridiculous!

[C’est ainsi que je me suis vu offrir, moi, très humble millième spectateur, au même titre que les autres, dans une salle comble, l’or, l’encens et la myrrhe, par les trois rois mages, procédant avec solennité, chacun à son tour et solitaire, en nous contemplant avec componction et révérence. Si c’est encore une convention

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The problem here is one of perspective: seeing the Wise Men up close means that viewers are invited to adopt Christ’s position. The French Catholic productions analyzed earlier in this chapter may have encouraged spectators to empathize with the characters, but it was because they were common people with whom one could identify. What worked for the genre of Catholic melodrama did not seem appropriate in a biblical epic such as *Ben Hur*, particularly when it came to Christ. (Briefly adopting the Virgin’s perspective was not an issue, as we have seen with *La Vie merveilleuse de Bernadette*, perhaps because the Virgin had a different status as a figure who intermediated between the human and the divine and showed herself through apparitions.83) For all the emphasis on sentimentalism and ritual in ultramontanism, French Catholics remained ambivalent about Hollywood’s version of the spectacular. Overall, they preferred national productions, especially family melodramas and historical reconstructions with melodramatic elements that focused on French sacred figures, such as Bernadette or Joan of Arc.

**The Lives of Joan of Arc**

Two much-publicized films about Joan of Arc were released in 1928: Carl Dreyer’s *La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc* and Marco de Gastyne’s *La Merveilleuse Vie de Jeanne d’Arc*. At the time, both motion pictures were described as historical reconstructions because de Gastyne chose to depict a series of key events in Joan’s life, from her childhood to her death, while Dreyer

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82 Ibid.

83 On the history of Marian devotion see Gibson 255-265; Harris 283-284.
focused on her trial and execution, using the original documents. The historical reconstruction film, Richard Abel has argued, was particularly popular in French cinema for two main reasons: economic (it imitated American “superproductions” with their spectacular decors and famous actors) and ideological (it offered narratives of national restoration). In their promotional materials, both motion pictures attempted to capitalize on the popularity of this genre and of their heroine, who had recently been canonized and proclaimed “la sainte de la patrie.” But even before their release, it became apparent that the two films only shared the main character and not more; their production history, cinematic style, and reception (both in the trade press and in the Catholic press) were very different.

Although it was made by a Danish director in France with many local actors and financed by a pan-European company, the Société Générale des films, La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc was officially classified as a foreign film. This mattered bureaucratically because France had instituted a quota for foreign films in an effort to protect the national film industry. It also predictably opened up Dreyer’s work to nationalistic attacks since a Danish Lutheran filmmaker was portraying the French heroine who had long been claimed by both republicans and Catholics. The other film about Joan of Arc, La Merveilleuse Vie de Jeanne d’Arc, sought to capitalize on its Frenchness by proclaiming itself a “national film.” Promotional materials reminded the audience that the motion picture had the blessing of a Catholic member of the 

84 Abel, French Cinema 161-162.
86 Jens Ulff-Moller explores the intricacies of this decision and Herriot’s role in his Hollywood’s Film Wars with France: Film-Trade Diplomacy and the Emergence of the French Film Quota Policy (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2001).
Académie Française (Mgr. Baudrillart) and the support of the government, which had allowed the crew to film in historical places relevant to the story. The film’s premiere at the Paris Opera under the patronage of the President of the Republic – an honor usually reserved for ambitious historical reconstructions – was meant to enshrine it as “the French motion picture” par excellence.

In contrast, both republicans and Catholics requested specific cuts from the producers of La Passion. Unsurprisingly, given the history of film censorship outlined in the first chapter, the Commission de Contrôle targeted scenes they found too “realistic,” for instance a sequence showing Joan’s bloodletting. The archbishop of Paris also asked for the elimination of a few scenes that depicted the clergy in a particularly negative light – a request fiercely attacked both by republicans such as Cauvin and by Communists such as the film critic Léon Moussinac. For its part, the C.C.C. presented the Catholic intervention in Dreyer’s film not as an act of censorship but rather as one of its first successful campaigns. In their view, this was the type of collaboration the C.C.C. had always envisioned: the board worked closely with the producers so that the end product would be appropriate for believers and nonbelievers alike. These first controversial cuts turned out to be only the first stage of the complicated circulation history of La Passion. A few weeks after the film was released, the negative, held in Berlin, was destroyed in a fire and Dreyer had to recreate it. For decades, the final cut was considered lost and audiences could only see a copy that had been modified by the distribution company and had acquired too

much extraneous material, such as new wordy intertitles and music that Dreyer found inappropriate.  

It was only in the early 1980s that an original print from 1928 resurfaced, improbably, in a psychiatric hospital in Norway, prompting comparisons between the strange fate of the film and that of its heroine.

Despite this tumultuous history and perhaps also because of it, La Passion is one of the most appreciated of all silent films. The use of extreme close-ups, the constant disruptions of cinematic space, and the actors’ performances (among them Renée Falconetti from the Comédie française as Joan and Antonin Artaud as Jean Massieu, a young priest who is on Joan’s side) all continue to be praised today by both film scholars and theologians. For its part, La Merveilleuse Vie has been clearly marked as a nationalistic production, an exemplary motion picture for what film historians have called the arrière-garde of French cinema – the academic style defined in opposition to Hollywood and to avant-garde practices. This distinction between the two films echoes their contemporary reception. Most reviewers writing in the late 1920s preferred Dreyer’s La Passion even if they acknowledged that de Gastyne’s production had some noteworthy scenes and skilled actors. Cinéa-Ciné pour tous’ contest for the best motion pictures of 1929 confirmed this hierarchy. Neither film made it into the top five, but La Passion placed eighth, while La Merveilleuse Vie was only eighteenth.

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93 Drouzy 62-67.
97 “Notre Concours des meilleurs films de 1929,” Cinéa-Ciné pour tous Mar. 1930: 41. The Jazz Singer (1927) was number one that year because it had been widely released in France only in 1929.
Femme de France explained that even though both films reconstructed Joan’s life, they clearly targeted different types of spectators. Those who wanted a mere “heroic, popular film” introducing a young actress (Simone Genevois) would prefer Marco de Gastyne’s work, whereas those willing to go along with Dreyer’s experimentation and interested in seeing the well-known theater actress Renée Falconetti would eventually be more satisfied (Figures 3.2 and 3.3).98

The opinion of the C.C.C. board did not differ from that of the mainstream press. While La Passion received a positive review and an S rating, La Merveilleuse Vie raised some eyebrows and was rated R, with a note adding that, should the final version of the film change, the C.C.C. board was willing to reconsider. This difference might have come from the fact that the C.C.C. thoroughly vetted La Passion before it was widely released, but it had no input on La Merveilleuse Vie because the producers preferred the advice of a clergyman who was not associated with them but rather with the more prestigious Académie française. Dossiers’ evaluation of the two films was, as always, made with an eye toward what lessons the spectators would take away after viewing them. The problem with La Merveilleuse Vie came from its script, which was “too fictionalized” and presented a very “secular” Joan rarely shown praying.99 The board also found the insertion of an episode about Gilles de Rais unnecessary in a film dedicated to Joan of Arc. In fact, the greatest problem was that “the whole film lack[ed] cohesion” [“l’ensemble manque inévitablement d’unité”] – perhaps the worst critique one could make of a film that sought to depict the story of Joan in a classical paradigm, adopting an academic aesthetic that was predicated on the very idea of cohesion and unity of action.100 Overall, Dossiers found La Merveilleuse Vie appropriate only for trained Catholic spectators

100 Ibid.
who were so familiar with the Catholic version of Joan’s story that they would see what the film had left out or modified. Once they understood that the motion picture was not an accurate depiction of Joan’s life, these spectators, the review noted, should be able to enjoy some of the well-composed scenes, particularly the battle scenes, and to appreciate the actors, especially Simone Genevois, the young actress playing Joan.

The issue of the viewer’s education was more complicated in the case of Dreyer’s film. Even though the S rating for La Passion meant it could be screened anywhere except in youth clubs, Dossiers added a sentence warning readers that the film was better “for a cultured audience” [“pour public cultivé”].\(^{101}\) The use of word cultivé rather than formé (as in the description of the R rating) suggests that what was at stake was not necessarily Catholic instruction but rather aesthetic maturity or good taste. The C.C.C.’s praise for Dreyer’s film was indeed presented in Dossiers as proof of the board’s good taste because they sided with those commentators who appreciated Dreyer’s daring stylistic choices. When discussing the artistic value of the motion picture, Dossiers lavished praise on the director, stating that his is an “uncommon art” as well as “a significant effort and an indisputable success” [“un art peu commun,” “un effort considérable et une réussite indéniable”].\(^{102}\) Most reviewers from the non-Catholic press discussed this “uncommon art” in terms of its emotional impact on viewers – an infrequent approach for journalists writing in the mainstream press but one that, as we have seen, was favored by Catholics who usually drew on the sentimental discourse of ultramontane piety. The newspaper Le Gaulois, for instance, praised the filmmaker’s style and insisted particularly on the effect of the extreme close-ups, which did not tire spectators, as a few critics argued, but rather allowed them to notice every nuance of the characters’ feelings. According to this review,

\(^{101}\) Dossiers du cinéma 12 (1928) 30.

\(^{102}\) Ibid.
Dreyer’s masterful technique managed “to unveil the soul of his characters and delve into their most secret thoughts” [“mettre à nu les âmes de ses personnages et fouiller leurs pensées les plus secrètes”].

In a similar vein, a review written by a reader named Sacha for Cinéa-Ciné pour tous highlighted the spectators’ empathetic response. The first sentences describe the reactions of an ordinary spectator, who sits comfortably before the screen and expects to see a film like any other but is deeply moved by a “feeling of immense pity and a profound admiration” [“un sentiment d’immense pitié, et une profonde admiration”] upon seeing Joan’s suffering. The article then continues with a passionate plea addressed directly to the actress playing Joan, Renée Falconetti, and written in the first person plural as if to channel the reaction of all spectators watching her on screen:

O Falconetti, we would want to whisk you away from these despicable executioners who are tearing your heart out […] We would like to say to you:

‘Watch out, Loyscleur is dishonest, he is out to get you!’ We cry with you, Joan, over your torture, over your fear. We forget what History ruthlessly tells us: ‘And Joan of Arc was burned alive in Rouen…’ We hope until the last moment that she will get away, that her healthy confidence will prevail over hatred and we bemoan your death, Falconetti…

[Nous voudrions, ô Falconetti, vous arracher à ces infâmes bourreaux, vous déchirant le cœur en petits morceaux […] Nous voudrions vous dire: ‘Prenez garde, Loyscleur est un fourbe, il veut vous perdre!’ Nous pleurons avec vous, Jeanne, sur vos tourments, sur vos angoisses. Nous oublions ce que l’Histoire

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The oft-repeated “we,” the direct exhortations, and the wide range of emotions expressed here all suggest the kind of empathetic reaction prized by Catholic proponents of cinema. The fact that this review was published in an influential magazine that supported the work of the cinematic Impressionists only makes it more relevant. It suggests that a film like La Passion, with its remarkable technique and its religious subject, could reach a broad audience of believers and nonbelievers and move them so deeply as to bring them closer to understanding religious sentiment. Recent readings of La Passion often include such remarks on the religious power of this film, remarks made in an inclusive first person plural, much like the reviewer for Cinéa-Ciné pour tous. For instance, in the context of a detailed formal analysis, David Bordwell pauses to say that Dreyer’s technique is so skillful that “we feel engaged in the process of achieving faith.” Similarly, Gilles Deleuze states in connection to Dreyer and Rossellini’s work, that “Restoring our belief in the world – this is the power of modern cinema (when it stops being bad). Whether we are Christians or atheists, in our universal schizophrenia, we need reasons to believe in this world.” It would seem, then, that the “universal” reaction the C.C.C. envisioned could be best reached not through Catholic family melodrama or biblical epics but through an experimental film that retains a religious theme yet treats it in a thoroughly innovative way.

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105 Ibid.
106 Bordwell, Filmguide to La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc 68.
The relationship between the Catholic Church and the filmic avant-garde has historically been one of perceived contrast and incompatibility. When standard histories of French cinema mention the Church it is usually in the context of the scandal provoked by Luis Buñuel’s *L’Age d’or* (1930), which was considered sacrilegious and boycotted by far-right Leagues associated with the Action française – a protofascist religious organization that had been condemned by the Vatican in 1926.108 The C.C.C., however, ignored *L’Age d’or* when it was released, probably because it only reviewed motion pictures that were widely distributed, which was not the case of this film made for the ciné-club circuit. A different, parallel picture emerges if we focus on the connection between the C.C.C. and the “commercial avant-garde” (which includes Dreyer and the French cinematic Impressionists).109 Films by Dulac, Epstein, L’Herbier, and Gance were usually rated R in *Dossiers* and given mostly positive reviews which made clear that the board appreciated their cinematography and their scripts, when they did not include too many “indecent” nightlife scenes.110 Moreover, a few years before the C.C.C was established, when the archbishop of Paris first began to contemplate the ways in which the Church could get involved in film production, he invited Jean Epstein to collaborate on a film with the working title *Le Chemin de croix*, a family melodrama in the tradition of *La Tragédie de Lourdes* and *Comment j’ai tué mon enfant*. Epstein accepted and began to work on the film but he had to back out because of financial issues: the Church could only provide a fourth of the necessary funds and


109 The term “commercial avant-garde” comes from Thompson, “National or International Films?”

110 One notable exception was Gance’s *J’Accuse*, which received a D because of its anti-war stance – the Great War being a crucial moment of redemption in the French Catholic imagination.
Epstein’s independent company did not manage to come up with the rest. A less well-known director, Jean Choux, eventually took over the project and made the film, which was released as *Chacun porte sa croix* in 1929.

As Epstein’s initial interest in making this film suggests, the avant-garde filmmaker, born in Poland to a Jewish family, had no qualms about contributing to the project of Catholic cinema. In fact, a few years earlier, a frequent contributor to *Cinéa-Ciné pour tous*, Dr. Paul Ramain, had already called upon Epstein to make a religious film, arguing that his style and theory of cinema were fully appropriate for this endeavor. We will return to the Impressionists in the next chapter, but in the context of the Catholic interest in film, this connection suggests that the relationship between Catholics and cinema in the interwar period was more nuanced than has been acknowledged. The Catholic project had certain undeniable paternalistic aspects, such as the insistence on the role of the family. But, at the same time, some of the clerics and activists most invested in making cinema Catholic had a complex understanding of how the new medium could depict religious sentiment, taking into account the impact of different types of works, from melodramas and biblical epics to avant-garde films.

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111 Vezyroglou, “Les Catholiques, le cinéma et la conquête des masses” 119-120.

CHAPTER 4. The Impressionist Spectator

The cinematic Impressionists – the group made up of Louis Delluc, Germaine Dulac, Jean Epstein, Marcel L’Herbier, and Abel Gance – received mixed reviews while they were active in the 1920s. Film producers often considered them too experimental; most film critics appreciated their new techniques but disliked their melodramatic plots; and the Surrealists never missed a chance to mock their pretentiousness. Yet, as the previous chapters have shown, the Impressionists found some unlikely allies among republicans and Catholics, who generally praised their films and, in some cases, collaborated with them.

Even the designation of this group of filmmakers as Impressionists has a somewhat complicated history. When discussing their own work, Dulac, Delluc and the others tended to use “Impressionism” and “avant-garde” liberally and interchangeably. While they never offered a unified theory of cinematic Impressionism, these directors saw the Impressionist painters as their forerunners because they shared an interest in visual depictions of movement and subjectivity. At the same time, they also often referred to their films simply as “avant-garde” in order to distinguish them from standard commercial motion pictures. If in the late 1920s Surrealists like Robert Desnos rejected the label of avant-garde for their own work, it was precisely because they associated this idea with L’Herbier, Dulac, Gance, and Epstein, whose interest in aesthetics they repeatedly ridiculed. This terminological distinction between the two

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1 Gance is sometimes presented as an influence on them rather than their peer because he was older and began to work earlier. For their biographies, see Alan Williams 77-125 and Sadoul, Histoire générale du cinéma, vol. 5 51-162.


3 Robert Desnos, “Cinéma d’avant-garde,” Documents 7 (1929): 385-387. However, the Surrealists appreciated Delluc, perhaps because he was friends with Louis Aragon.
groups has, however, been reversed by Georges Sadoul in his influential history of cinema, where he stated that the true avant-gardists were the Surrealists (with whom he had been affiliated) and the proponents of abstract cinema. After claiming the mantle of the avant-garde only for these filmmakers, Sadoul had to resort to a different label for Delluc, Gance, Dulac, L’Herbier, and Epstein. He naturally settled on Impressionism because the filmmakers had already embraced the term. Most film scholars have since followed Sadoul’s lead, usually referring to this group as the cinematic Impressionists.

By the 1920s Impressionist painting had lost the shocking effect it had four decades earlier, but the filmmakers who appropriated this label were far from doing traditional work. If they considered themselves avant-garde, it was because they were provoking spectators to understand cinema differently – not as a form of entertainment but as an art with its own specific traits. According to the definition of the avant-garde proposed by Peter Bürger, such movements make it their mission to mount a relentless attack on the bourgeois institution of art. From this point of view, the Impressionists (never mentioned in Bürger’s theoretical study) would not qualify as avant-gardists because they wanted cinema to be understood as part of the very institution of art that the avant-garde would supposedly work to dismantle. And yet, to ignore their explicit self-identification as avant-gardists would mean to discard crucial portions of their theories.


5 A notable exception is Richard Abel, who prefers to reinscribe these filmmakers into a broader “narrative avant-garde” in his *French Cinema*. Gilles Deleuze famously refers to them as “the pre-War French school” but also includes other non-Impressionists directors in *L’Image-mouvement* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1983).


The Impressionists defined their work in contrast to the two genres that dominated French film production: serials and adaptations of literary works. In their view, such films, which presented a series of actions or anecdotes just for the sake of telling a story, did nothing to explore cinema’s true power. This power or cinema’s specificity, they claimed, was that it could make the invisible visible. The Impressionists sought to prove this point in their films by using two intertwined strategies: they depicted the inner states (impressions) of characters and of the filmmaker while also highlighting those characteristics of objects and people that could not be seen with the naked eye – a phenomenon Delluc and Epstein described as *photogénie*. To accomplish this, the Impressionists mobilized a wide range of filming and editing techniques including dissolves, superimpositions, out-of-focus shots, filters, unusual angles, and rhythmic montage. Although other filmmakers also used such techniques, what set the Impressionists apart was that they did so with the specifically stated goal of exploring cinema’s revelatory power. As David Bordwell has pointed out, this group of directors drew heavily on Romantic aesthetics, assuming cinema could and indeed had to express the artists’ feelings and vision of the world. I would add that their idealistic belief was inextricably connected with a pedagogical impulse that could not be further from the confrontational attitude of other avant-garde groups, such as the Surrealists or the Dadaists.

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8 Delluc is usually credited with having redefined for cinema the term *photogénie*, which had been used in connection with photography since the nineteenth century; see his *Photogénie* (Paris: M. de Brunoff, 1920) and also Jean Epstein, “De quelques conditions de la photogénie,” *Cinéa-Ciné pour tous* 15 Aug. 1924: 6-8, *Écrits sur le cinéma*, vol. 1 (Paris: Seghers, 1975) 137-142.

9 Malcolm Turvey has explained Epstein’s central place in what he calls the “revelationist tradition” of cinema in *Doubting Vision: Film and the Revelationist Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Turvey compares Epstein to Dziga Vertov, Béla Balázs and Sigfried Kracauer without including the other Impressionists. Although Epstein’s writings certainly offer more examples of this view, the other Impressionists also shared his ideas about the revelatory power of cinema.


11 Film historians have tended to overlook this pedagogical project. Recent work on Germaine Dulac, however,
In brief, the Impressionists’ pedagogical project involved a thorough explanation of film style in the hope of making the audience aware of why a filmmaker chose certain cinematic techniques. These directors imagined that once viewers understood the syntax of cinema, they would be open to experiencing what Epstein called “cinematic emotion,” [“l’émotion cinématographique”] – that is to say, an emotion derived not from identification with the characters but rather from a deep understanding of how moving images worked.12 Their ultimate goal, then, was to prepare viewers for those rare revelatory moments of photogénie: a key idea that the Impressionists never fully defined because, they insisted, it had to be experienced to be understood. According to Epstein, photogénie involved “any aspect of things, beings, or souls whose moral character is enhanced by filmic reproduction” [“tout aspect des choses, des êtres et des âmes qui accroît sa qualité morale par la reproduction cinématographique”].13 The Impressionists thus based their pedagogy on a concept that was both crucial to the art of cinema and, they claimed, impossible to grasp rationally.14 From this perspective, these directors represent the only group analyzed here that recognized the limits of pedagogy. Though they wanted to guide spectators toward experiencing a specifically “cinematic” feeling, they also realized that this feeling itself could not be taught or imposed. What they proposed instead was a dialectical movement between estrangement and full absorption, the two positions that would later come to be identified with Brecht's epic theater, on the one hand, and Artaud's theatre of

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12 Jean Epstein, “Grossissement”. The other Impressionists make similar points in their lectures and articles; for instance, Dulac in “Les Esthétiques, les entraves, la cinégraphie intégrale.”


14 Paul Willemen has analyzed the concept of photogénie in psychoanalytic terms in Looks and Frictions: Essays in Cultural Studies and Film Theory (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994) 124-133. For a more historical approach, see Abel, French Film Theory and Criticism 95-124.
cruelty, on the other.\footnote{As discussed above in the Introduction in connection to Rancière's “The Emancipated Spectator.”} Their understanding of pedagogy is symptomatic of their generally moderate approach, both aesthetically and politically.

In this chapter, I focus first on the complicated reception of the Impressionists’ early films, particularly L’Herbier’s *El Dorado* and Gance’s *La Roue*, in order to explain why they found it necessary to address the audience directly through lectures and articles. After this contextualization, I study the innovative way in which the Impressionists fashioned themselves as public figures, defining their position within the film industry and the artistic avant-garde. The Impressionists have often come under attack for addressing only a cultivated or elite audience because of their involvement in the ciné-club movement of the 1920s.\footnote{Bordwell, *French Impressionist Cinema* 252-254; Abel, *French Film Theory and Criticism* 201-202; Albera, *L’Avant-garde au cinéma* 89-90; Dudley Andrew, *Mists of Regret: Culture and Sensibility in Classic French Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995) 40.} While it is true that ciné-club members were, for the most part, cinephile intellectuals and university students, in this chapter I seek to show that the Impressionists themselves aimed to reach a very wide audience. Unlike other avant-garde filmmakers, such as Luis Buñuel or Man Ray, whose short films were sponsored by private individuals and screened in noncommercial contexts, Impressionist directors typically worked for big commercial companies.\footnote{The idea of a “commercial avant-garde” is useful here – as noted earlier, this label has been used by Kristin Thompson to describe the Impressionists, the German Impressionists, and the Soviet montage directors in “National or International Films?”} As such, they had to take into account how their work fit into the marketplace. Their pedagogical drive thus also had a more pragmatic reason: the need to create an audience for their more innovative work. The Impressionists understood early on that a crucial step toward gaining the freedom to make the kind of films they wanted and distribute them widely was to educate the audience so as to create more demand – an argument very similar to the project developed by the Catholic
Cinematographic Committee only a few years later, in the late 1920s. This is not to say that the Catholics modeled their initiative on that of the Impressionists but rather to suggest that, beyond their differences, both pedagogical projects shared a pragmatic understanding of the capitalist system within which the film industry was operating.

**The Art of Melodrama**

Two films are usually cited as key works for the evolution of Impressionist aesthetics: L’Herbier’s *El Dorado* (1921) and Gance’s *La Roue/The Wheel* (1922). To highlight the importance of these two motion pictures, Epstein went so far as to compare L’Herbier and Gance to Ronsard and Malherbe because, like these early modern poets who drew on the classical tradition to create a specifically French poetry, the two filmmakers relied on the work of their predecessors, particularly American directors like Griffith, to create a specifically French cinematic style with *El Dorado* and *La Roue*. Epstein’s characteristically hyperbolic comparison highlights the Impressionists’ eagerness to create a canon of films that would help them legitimate cinema as an art. The general public appreciated both motion pictures, but *El Dorado*’s distribution was mishandled by the unenthusiastic producing company Gaumont, while *La Roue* received contentious reviews from most film critics, including supporters of the Impressionists, such as Léon Moussinac. In the early 1920s film critics and producers came to represent two extreme positions, pushing filmmakers in contradictory directions: while the

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18 They were not, however, the first Impressionist films. Among the candidates for this title are *La Folie du docteur Tube* (Gance, 1915, never released commercially), *Rose-France* (L’Herbier, 1918) and *La Dixième Symphonie* (Gance, 1918).


former mostly cared about the commercial success of a motion picture and tended to reject any experiments, the latter generally valued a film’s avant-garde aspects and often denounced the more commercial elements.

The reception of *El Dorado* highlights the standard configuration of this conflict between the commercial and the experimental. On the one hand, Gaumont did not appreciate L’Herbier’s innovative technique and decided to distribute the film only in a few movie theaters in France and abroad. On the other hand, film critics applauded L’Herbier’s experiments and continued to refer to *El Dorado* as an influential film even long after L’Herbier himself was no longer considered a relevant filmmaker. What set *El Dorado* apart from contemporary French films was L’Herbier’s use of a wide variety of optical techniques in order to illustrate a character’s feelings and process of perception – precisely the type of technical skill that came to define the Impressionists. One of the most daring moments comes in the first minutes, when we are introduced to the characters who work at the El Dorado, a rundown cabaret in Grenada, Spain. After showing several performers on stage, the camera lingers on a group of women watching the show. Sitting in the middle is the dancer Sibilla (Ève Francis, who acted in several Impressionist films and was Delluc’s wife).21 While we do not yet know that she will be the main character, it is immediately striking that her face is out of focus although the rest of the image is very clear (Figure 4.1). L’Herbier explained that the out-of-focus shot, still unusual in the early 1920s, was meant to suggest Sibilla’s absent-mindedness.22 As we soon find out through a series of crosscuttings, she is indeed thinking of her sick child, who is in bed upstairs, while she has to perform her dance in the cabaret. According to an anecdote recounted by both L’Herbier and

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21 Paula Amad has proposed a reconsideration of Francis’s role in French film culture, arguing that she was more than a muse “‘Objects Become Witnesses’: Ève Francis and the Emergence of French Cinephilia and Film Criticism,” *Framework* 46.1 (2005): 56-73.

Jacque Catelain (who plays a young Swedish painter in the film and was L’Herbier’s favorite actor), the director of the production company, Léon Gaumont, found the out-of-focus image so puzzling that he assumed it had to be a technical mistake. Confused, he scolded the projectionist for not paying attention to what he was doing until L’Herbier intervened to clarify his intentions. Even then, Gaumont remained unconvinced, which probably explains why the company organized only a limited distribution for the film.

By contrast, most film critics, particularly those sympathetic to the “young cinema” of the Impressionists, reacted favorably to L’Herbier’s experiments with such out-of-focus images, distortions, and other optical techniques that show the world through a character’s eyes. One critic, for instance, praised the director’s innovative technique and mused about how film historians would have to refer to this motion picture as a key moment in the development of cinema. And indeed, in one of the first books on film history published in France, Naissance du cinéma, 1920-1924 (1925), Léon Moussinac summed up the impact of El Dorado in these terms:

Visual deformations, done for the first time, allowed us to enter into the true sensibility of certain images. Marcel L’Herbier has also revisited these out-of-focus shots used by Griffith that strangely accentuate the expression of the image by substituting interior emotion for exterior emotion.

[Les déformations plastiques, réalisées pour la première fois, nous ont permis de pénétrer la sensibilité vraie de certaines images. Marcel L’Herbier a également repris ces ‘flous’ de Griffith qui accusent étrangement l’expression de l’image en

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If this connection with Griffith served at the time to legitimate L’Herbier’s stylistic choices, it also works today as a reminder of the extent to which the Impressionists were indebted to American films such as Griffith’s *Broken Blossoms/Le Lys Brisé* (1919) and Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Cheat/Forfaiture* (1915). By 1920 both films had acquired mythical status among French artists and *The Cheat* is often credited with having convinced Delluc and L’Herbier that cinema could indeed be an art. Film historians have rightfully pointed out that, while the Impressionists appreciated DeMille and Griffith, they did not simply imitate them; rather, they pushed their experimentation further and multiplied the use of optical devices, taking it well beyond what the American directors had done. What is less often noted, however, is that in terms of content, the first films of the Impressionists are melodramas, much like *Broken Blossoms* and *The Cheat*. This is true not only for *La Roue* and *El Dorado* but also for Delluc’s *Fièvre/Fever* (1921), Epstein’s *Cœur fidèle/Faithful Heart* (1923), and Dulac’s *La Souriante Madame Beudet/The Smiling Madame Beudet* (1923). The best-known Impressionist motion pictures all adopt the structure of melodrama and use the varied cinematic techniques preferred by these directors in order to give viewers more access to the interiority of the main characters. As shown in the previous chapters, the Impressionists shared this penchant toward melodrama with republicans and Catholics. But, while these two groups were seduced by the supposed legibility of

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28 An exception is Richard Abel’s discussion of the impact of bourgeois melodrama on filmmakers from the 1910s and 20s, including the Impressionists, in “French Melodrama Before and After the Great War,” *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film and Television Melodrama*, ed. Marcia Landy (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991) 542-568.
melodrama, the Impressionists were more interested in using the melodrama’s framework as a basis for their experiments in depicting interiority.\textsuperscript{29}

L’Herbier himself fully embraced the term “melodrama” when promoting \textit{El Dorado}: the word showed up in advertisements, in the first title of the motion picture, and in the novelization written by one of the actors.\textsuperscript{30} But L’Herbier defined melodrama in a very specific way that emphasized the connection to music and thus made it an integral part of his artistic intentions. \textit{El Dorado} was one of the first films to have its own musical score, composed specifically for the film. All movie theaters received this score so that their orchestras could play it exactly as it had been written. In his interviews, L’Herbier insisted that the film was a melodrama precisely because of this mix of \textit{melos}/music and drama. According to him, the two could not be separated and the music was just as crucial to understanding the characters’ feelings as the visual technique.\textsuperscript{31} This interest in music and its inextricable connection with the moving image is a recurrent theme in the Impressionists’ thought, one to which we will return later, when discussing abstract cinema.

What is also relevant here, however, is the extent to which \textit{El Dorado} has the narrative structure of a typical film melodrama. At several crucial moments, the plot of \textit{El Dorado} can be compared to the 1937 \textit{Stella Dallas} by King Vidor, which has become a key film in discussions of melodrama’s structure and impact. In \textit{Stella Dallas}, a working-class mother (played by

\textsuperscript{29} Dudley Andrew explains how Griffith redefined melodrama as art for his \textit{Broken Blossoms} in \textit{Film in the Aura of Art} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984) 16-27.


Barbara Stanwyck) makes the painful decision to send her daughter to live with her rich father so that the girl can have a more comfortable life. In El Dorado, the Spanish dancer Sibilla is faced with a similar dilemma: her sick son can only get better if he leaves town. But since his rich father does not want him, Sibilla tries to find a different solution, eventually deciding to send him away with an upper-middle-class young couple, while she continues to work in the rundown cabaret. This is where El Dorado makes a more radical statement than Stella Dallas, which ends with the image of the mother’s resigned smile after seeing her daughter marry an upper-class man, as she had planned. Sibilla reacts differently. Realizing she would not be able to give her son a better life even if he recovers, she commits suicide. The last scenes show her backstage stabbing herself, while in the background a clown is performing his act in front of the cabaret’s audience (Figure 4.2). By bringing the backstage to the forefront and showing the inner turmoil that leads to a suicide, El Dorado’s ending affirms cinema’s ability to make visible what usually remains unseen – a fitting metaphor for the Impressionists’ project and one that points to the inextricable connection, both stylistic and narrative, between cinematic Impressionism and the mode of melodrama.

Form and Content

While film critics accepted El Dorado’s melodrama label, their attitude changed quickly and radically when it came to Gance’s La Roue. Produced by one of the big studios, Pathé Consortium Cinéma, and released only a year after L’Herbier’s film, La Roue once again pitted film producers against film critics. This time, however, the former fully supported the motion picture whereas the latter were more ambivalent. The reaction of the general audience confirmed

32 See especially Linda Williams’ influential analysis of this film, “‘Something Else Besides a Mother’: Stella Dallas and Maternal Melodrama,” Imitations of Life 307-330. The novel Stella Dallas by Olive Higgins Prouty was published in the U.S. in 1923 and an American silent film based on it was released in 1925.
the producers’ confidence in the film. *La Roue* is said to have received a standing ovation when it premiered in December 1922 and was voted best film of 1923 by the readers of *Cinéa-Ciné pour tous*, well ahead of American films such as *Robin Hood* (featuring the very popular Douglas Fairbanks) and Griffith’s *Way Down East*. This enthusiasm for *La Roue* should come as no surprise from a magazine that generally promoted the work of the Impressionists, particularly because *Cinéa* had been founded and edited by Delluc before his death, after which it merged with *Ciné pour tous*. Yet in an analysis of the votes for the best film, the editorial board of *Cinéa-Ciné pour tous* expressed some reservations about *La Roue* because of the mismatch between the experimental style and the melodramatic content.

According to this line of thought, Gance’s style was even more daring and praiseworthy than L’Herbier’s: not only did he rely on superimpositions and out-of-focus shots to convey a character’s turmoil but he also used several innovative sequences of rhythmic montage, juxtaposing the actions of a train and those of human beings in order to emphasize the relationship between the human and the machine. The rhythmic montage sequences that showed in quick succession a train crash and its aftermath were often cited as the most remarkable moments of the film. What the board of *Cinéa-Ciné pour tous* found problematic was the melodramatic plot, which centers on a quasi-incestuous love triangle. After saving a little girl, Norma, from a train wreck, the railroad engineer Sisif raises her as his own daughter. When Norma grows up, Sisif slowly realizes that both he and Elie, his biological son, have fallen in love with her. For her part, Norma continues to think that they are her real family. After many twists and long sequences depicting Sisif’s tormented passion, Elie and Norma’s husband die in a fight, leaving Sisif and the young woman to live together quietly in a cabin up in the

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33 "Notre Referendum du plus beau Film, *La Roue* d’Abel Gance est désignée par nos Lecteurs," *Cinéa-Ciné pour tous* 15 Apr. 1924: 5. Abel describes the audience’s reaction at the premiere in *French Cinema* 326-328.
mountains. The last scenes show a partially blind Sisif dying while clutching a miniature train and trying to decipher the last blurred images he sees around him. Uninterested in such twists, the editors of Cinéa-Ciné pour tous argued that the film would have benefited from a simpler story that would have allowed viewers to enjoy the experimental sequences.

This type of analysis, which praised Gance’s cinematic style but dismissed his penchant for melodrama, quickly became the standard critique of La Roue. For instance, René Clair, who would go on to make his first film, the Dadaist Entr’acte, two years later, explained that for him “the real subject of the film [was] not its odd story, but a train, tracks, signals, puffs of steam, a mountain, snow, clouds” [“le véritable sujet du film n’est pas sa bizarre intrigue, mais un train, des rails, des signaux, des jets de vapeur, une montagne, de la neige, des nuages.”].\textsuperscript{34} Taking this idea even further, the Cubist painter Fernand Léger claimed that the film was remarkable only for its technical innovations – namely, Gance’s ability able to take apart an object (the train) and rework the different parts into a decomposed artistic image.\textsuperscript{35} In Léger’s view, Gance’s representation of the machine constituted nothing less than the first adaptation of Cubist ideas for cinema. As if to reinforce this interpretation, the poster Léger made for La Roue is a Cubist painting that could not be more different from the other poster commissioned by Pathé, which only shows Sisif and his coworkers (Figure 4.3).\textsuperscript{36} In his enthusiasm for these innovations, Léger completely downplayed what he called “the emotional and dramatic aspects” of the motion picture, which for him were something of an unnecessary supplement that would eventually have to be eliminated if one wanted to make a truly Cubist film. Two years later, Léger pursued this

\begin{footnotes}
\item[36] As far as I can tell, both posters were used when the film was released.
\end{footnotes}
very project when he worked with the American filmmaker Dudley Murphy to make *Le Ballet Mécanique* (1924), a noncommercial film that famously did away with all narrative and staged a dance of machines.\(^{37}\) For his part, however, Gance never claimed any affinity with Cubism.

Compared to Léger and Clair, Emile Vuillermoz – one of the most influential critics, writing for the newspaper *Le Temps* and a variety of magazines – was less willing to ignore the film’s content. He found the story so problematic that he bluntly asked Gance to decide whether he wanted to make motion pictures for the general public or for the elite.\(^{38}\) If he only wanted popular success, Vuillermoz added, then Gance could stick to making melodramas; otherwise, he would have to continue the explorations he had begun in *La Roue* by developing his theory of rhythmic montage and focusing on how best to represent objects, such as the train, from a cinematic perspective. Ultimately, in an attempt to exculpate Gance, Vuillermoz suggested that the director might not have added so many excessively sentimental elements if the producers had not pressured him to do so. Like most critics, Vuillermoz implicitly relied on the traditional distinction between highbrow culture and lowbrow entertainment. From their point of view, if Gance wanted cinema to be seen as highbrow, he needed to distance himself from the pressures of the market and avoid a lowbrow genre such as melodrama.

Nevertheless, as the Impressionists often argued, the nineteenth-century idea of a fully autonomous artistic sphere, untainted by commercial considerations, could not be applied to cinema because the new medium was unavoidably both an “art and an industry.”\(^{39}\) This is why in

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\(^{39}\) This idea of autonomy has been famously studied by Bourdieu in *The Rules of Art*. The phrase “art and industry” was often used to describe cinema in the 1920s and eventually became the title of Jean Mitry’s study *Histoire du*
their defense of *La Roue*, the Impressionists, particularly Epstein and Dulac, reframed the question of form and content and sought to show how the two were in fact deeply interconnected in this motion picture. In a lecture on cinematic technique given on several occasions, Dulac screened one of the rhythmic montages from *La Roue* that critics had been praising: a scene where Sisif is driving the train taking the newly-married Norma to the city but he is so blinded by jealousy that he starts driving extremely fast and seems intent on provoking a crash (Figure 4.4). Dulac insisted on this narrative context before describing the main components of the scene:

speed, rhythm, the darkness of the tunnel, light, whistles, the vibration of the wheels, quick glimpses of faces experiencing conflicting feelings, and suddenly calmness, the majestic and normal arrival of the locomotive to the station.

[vitesse, rythme, obscurité du tunnel, lumière, coups de sifflet, trépidation des roues, visions brèves de physionomies aux sentiments opposés, et soudain le calme, l’arrivée majestueuse et normale de la locomotive en gare.].

What is remarkable in her analysis compared to the critics mentioned above is that Dulac did not try to downplay the melodramatic elements – in this case, Sisif’s emotional response to Norma’s marriage. On the contrary, she explained how the narrative and the technique went together and then concluded that it was precisely this interplay between form and content that made the film “absolutely original” and kept it from merely copying theater or literature. Epstein made a similar point in his articles and lectures, criticizing those who had been single-mindedly praising Gance’s rapid montage scenes while dismissing the rest of the film. This was a mistake, Epstein

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argued, because Gance’s “true genius” could in fact only be grasped if one understood how the entire motion picture worked by paying attention both to its narrative and its style.41

The Impressionists’ participation in the debate surrounding *La Roue* shows that in the early 1920s these filmmakers became public figures, ready to intervene in debates so as to clarify their artistic intentions. Of all the directors working before World War I only Feuillade and Jasset sometimes published articles in the trade press, but their interventions were never as forceful or theoretical as those of the Impressionists. One reason for this might come from the fact that, in the early 1910s, the filmmaker’s role had yet to be defined. Not only was a film director still identified by the same word for a theater director (*metteur en scène*), some also insisted that the scriptwriter had to be seen as the real author of the film. It was the Impressionist Delluc who, after the war, coined the word *cinéaste* to designate a filmmaker. With this new word, I would argue, also came a certain cultural status and a new sense of responsibility toward the audience.

**The Filmmaker as a Public Figure**

The complicated reception of *La Roue* and *El Dorado* convinced the Impressionists that they had to persuade both producers and film critics of the viability of their films. Moreover, if they wanted the audience to appreciate their experiments and understand their artistic choices, they needed to address spectators directly, explaining both their intentions and the new language of cinema. As a result, the Impressionists became increasingly involved in the promotion of their motion pictures. They not only gave countless interviews to film magazines and the popular press but also lectured extensively in front of a range of audiences made up of regular

moviegoers, film professionals, and university students (Figure 4.5).

The youngest of the Impressionists, Epstein was also the most combative, always ready to respond to film critics and to expand on his theories. His *Cœur fidèle* (1923), produced by Pathé Consortium Cinéma, was criticized, much like *La Roue*, for inelegantly mixing the melodrama of a love triangle (involving a waitress, a sailor, and a petty thief) and experimental sequences such as the rhythmic montage of the carousel scene, where we see the fairground from the dizzying perspective of a couple riding on a merry-go-round.\(^{42}\) Epstein addressed his critics head on, explaining that he had deliberately chosen to make a melodrama for two main reasons. First, to gain the trust of producers and distributors, who thought that only a melodrama could attract the audience and, second, to show that a melodrama was not necessarily a “low” genre but rather a very flexible one that could be innovatively used so as to come closer to the “more noble” genre of tragedy.\(^{43}\) He insisted that

this melodrama is so symbolic that the woman would not have needed to be called Marie; the woman could only be called the woman.

Petit-Paul is the terrible force of man: brutal desire; human and animal, drunk and passionate like Dionysus.

Jean is pure and noble love, the moral force, superior to any brute force, and of an Olympian peacefulness.

[ce mélodrame est tellement symbolique que la femme n’aurait point besoin de s’appeler Marie ; la femme n’y pourrait s’appeler que la femme.

\(^{42}\) An overview of these critiques was published in “*Cœur fidèle* et l’Opinion de la Presse,” *Cinéa-Ciné pour tous*, 15 Dec. 1924: 27-28. See also Katie Kirtland’s analysis of the film, “The Cinema of the Kaleidoscope,” *Jean Epstein: Critical Essays and New Translations*, ed. Sarah Keller and Jason N. Paul (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012) 93-114. Hitchcock later used a similar technique in *Strangers on the Train* and in fact he sometimes mentioned Epstein as an inspiration in his interviews, although he usually talked about a later film, *La Chute de la Maison Usher*.

\(^{43}\) Jean Epstein, “Présentation de *Cœur fidèle*,” *Ecrits*, vol. 1 123-125.
Petit-Paul est la force mauvaise de l’homme : le désir brutal ; humain et animal, ivre et passionné comme Dionysos.

Jean est l’amour pur et noble, la force morale, supérieure à la force brute, d’une sérénité olympienne.  

Epstein’s mix of pragmatism and idealism is characteristic of the Impressionists and goes back to the argument they consistently made about seeing cinema as both an art and an industry. But it is also noteworthy that he showed no interest in making an explicitly political point, although this hybridization of high and low and the use of working-class characters can be read as making a democratic claim. The political potential of such films became explicit in the 1930s through the work of directors like Jean Renoir. Indeed, as Dudley Andrew has suggested, if the Impressionists had any influence on poetic realism, it was mostly because in some of their early films they had begun to explore the life of the working class. Nonetheless, neither Epstein nor the other Impressionists offered a full-fledged justification for their choice of milieu, leaving it open to debate.

This is in fact a crucial aspect of the Impressionists’ pedagogical project and, more generally, of their moderate stance – while they sought to correct those analyses they considered erroneous, they did not impose any particular interpretation. Rather, they attempted to give spectators more interpretive tools and then allowed them to reach their own conclusions. In another lecture, for instance, Epstein found it necessary to offer a new corrective, aimed at those who were praising *Cœur fidèle* only for its technical complexity, or what they called its “artistic” aspects. He insisted that his film should not be limited to the merry-go-round scene, just like Gance’s *La Roue* had to be understood as a whole rather than as an example of rhythmic

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44 Ibid. 124.

45 Andrew, *Mists of Regret* 35.
montage. Here again, Epstein did not offer a definitive analysis of his film, but only tried to steer the discussion away from dominant interpretations of *Cœur fidèle*.

One of the most compelling examples of Impressionist pedagogy came from Dulac. While she could be just as contentious as Epstein in interviews, her lectures were patient explanations of the basics of film style. In one of these lectures, given at the Musée Galliera with the occasion of an exhibition on cinema and then repeated in different venues, Dulac methodically described each technique (different shots and angles, superimpositions, deformations) and screened a number of sequences to illustrate it. Some of them came from directors not affiliated with Impressionism, such as the popular filmmaker Henri Diamant-Berger, but, for the most part, they were taken from films made by herself and the other Impressionists. These clips, then, gave her an opportunity to highlight the issues that most preoccupied the Impressionists and to introduce the audience to their thought process. For example, as mentioned above, when discussing rhythmic montage, she chose a sequence from *La Roue* and used this opportunity to correct what she considered to be a misreading of these scenes by film critics.

She also screened the first part of her film *La Souriante Madame Beudet* to show the impact of different types of shots and to explain the use of superimpositions – a technique the Impressionists used more frequently and adroitly than other directors (and one that the Surrealists later criticized as a sign of their excessive “aestheticism”). The decision to use scenes from *La Souriante Madame Beudet* may seem like a natural choice since it was her own film, but

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it takes on a new meaning in the context of its reception. Unlike *El Dorado, La Roue*, and *Cœur fidèle*, *La Souriante Madame Beudet* did not provoke any controversy nor did it receive many reviews. The few articles dedicated to it were in fact more likely to mention that the film starred the actor known for playing the criminal Zigomar in the early 1910s, Alexandre Arquillère, as the tyrannical husband M. Beudet.48 In some cases they also praised the leading actress, Germaine Dermoz, for embodying a “modern Bovary,” but on the whole, they generally did not pay attention to Dulac’s technical choices and their implications.49 The film, however, used a wide range of techniques to explore the inner thoughts of this “modern Bovary” – a bored wife living in the provinces who fantasizes about a more exciting life and plans to kill her husband by loading his gun (which he used to play Russian roulette) with real bullets. As Dulac explained in her lecture, superimposition was one of the most effective techniques for depicting Madame Beudet’s turmoil:

 [...] the poor woman, overwhelmed by her noisy husband, dreams of a strong, powerful man who will deliver her from her husband, the accountant. The man summoned forth is only glimpsed in a dream. He is impalpable and unstable. It is a phantom that enters to do battle with the pusillanimous soul of M. Beudet. A transparent scene is grafted onto the more distinct one – one seen by Mme. Beudet through the eyes of her imagination. Superimposition is thinking, the inner life…

[(…) la pauvre femme, excédée par son bruyant mari, rêve d’un homme puissant et fort qui la délivrerait de son comptable d’époux… L’homme appelé n’est entrevu qu’en rêve. Il est impalpable et fluide. C’est un fantôme qui entre en lutte

48 For example, *Cinémagazine* 9 Feb. 1923: 239.
49 *Cinéa-Ciné pour tous* 15 Sept. 1924: 13.
In the film Madame Beudet begins to fantasize about this man, a tennis player, after reading a magazine. At first, he is only playing tennis as in the magazine photograph, but in the next scenes he is superimposed on an image of her husband at work, where he attacks Monsieur Beudet and attempts to kill him (Figure 4.6). What is truly innovative about La Souriante Madame Beudet, film scholars have argued, is the use of optical devices (such as this superimposition) to offer a complex representation of female desire. This becomes clearer if we compare Dulac’s use of the superimposition with a scene from Epstein’s Cœur fidèle, where he resorts to the same technique to illustrate the thoughts of Jean, the lovelorn sailor who dreams of his lost lover, Marie, and sees her face superimposed on the water (Figure 4.7). While Epstein’s superimposition is visually striking and remains one of the most memorable scenes of Cœur fidèle, it relies heavily on the impact of the extreme close-up and is less intricate than Dulac’s orchestration of an entire scenario of female desire and revenge. Yet, although her film has become an important feminist work, Dulac never explicitly described the film in these terms, much like the other Impressionists never dwelt on their choice of working-class characters. Indeed, while Dulac’s feminist and socially-progressive beliefs came across clearly in interviews if she was asked openly political questions, and she in fact joined the Socialist Party in 1925, she did not voice these opinions during her film lectures. This resistance to adopting an explicit

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50 Dulac, “Les Procédés expressifs du cinématographe” 37. Trans. Stuart Liebman, French Film Theory and Criticism 311. (I have slightly modified Liebman’s translation.)

51 See, for instance, Flitterman-Lewis, To Desire Differently 47-140.

52 Dulac’s feminism is discussed in Judith Mayne, The Woman at the Keyhole (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Flitterman-Lewis, To Desire Differently; and Tami Williams, Beyond Impressions.
political label may have exposed the Impressionists to criticism, but it was perfectly in line with the stance of moderate socialists in 1920s France.\footnote{Of all the Impressionists, Dulac was the only one who was a member of a party. In the early 1920s, all Impressionists seemed to be socially progressive but, toward the end of the decade and especially later on, Gance and L'Herbier would begin to be perceived as more center-right, although they still did not make direct political statements.} Making films with social themes seemed enough for the Impressionists. They did not find it necessary to insist on their political significance, which they trusted spectators to perceive on their own.

In a revised version of her lecture for the ciné-club Les Amis du cinéma, Dulac clarified the main purpose of her talks and, by extension, of the Impressionist pedagogical project:

I am here to ask you that, when one of us uses a short sequence of film to get away from the theatrical fabrications that go against the spirit of cinema and to attempt to move you only through a sensation, through sensibility, or through the movement of things seen in and of themselves, that you help us, that you understand it.

[Je viens seulement vous demander, quand dans nos films, l’un de nous veut, l’espace d’un court passage, échapper aux affabulations théâtrales qui sont contraires à l’esprit du cinéma, et tenter d’émouvoir par la sensation seule, par la sensibilité, par le mouvement des choses vues en elles-mêmes, pour elles-mêmes, de l’aider, de le comprendre.].\footnote{Dulac, “Le Mouvement créateur d’action” 48.}

Learning how cinematic technique functioned was thus not an end in itself. Instead, it worked as a first step toward enabling spectators to experience cinematic emotions – that is to say, emotions that come from a deeper understanding of the medium rather than from being drawn into the plot and tempted to identify with the characters. This dialectic move is, as noted earlier, emblematic of the Impressionists’ moderate stance and their understanding of the limits of pedagogy.
never advocate for extreme absorption or estrangement, but rather insist that spectators would profit from moving back and forth between a somewhat distanced cinematic analysis and a more involved experience of cinematic emotions.

**Avant-Garde/Commercial/Mercantile**

The Impressionists continued to address the audience through lectures and magazines until 1928-1929, when their movement came to an end (for reasons discussed further below). At the same time, they were involved both in commercial and independent productions, trying to find the best way to reach a broad audience. Dulac, for instance, worked with big companies such as the Société des Cinéromans for *Gossette* (1923), *Le Diable dans la ville* (1924), and *Antoinette Sabrier* (1926) and with Aubert for *La Princesse Mandane* (1928), while also independently producing *L’Invitation au voyage* (1927), a cinematic staging of Baudelaire’s poem, and several short abstract films in 1929. The year Pathé Consortium Cinéma released his *Coeur fidèle*, Epstein also worked with them on *La Belle Nivernaise* (1923), then went on to make four motion pictures for Albatros, a commercially-successful studio established by Russian émigrés. He also founded his own company, Jean Epstein Films, producing some adaptations and what are considered to be his most avant-garde films: *Six et demi onze* (1927), *La Glace à trois faces* (1927), and *La Chute de la Maison Usher* (1928). L’Herbier too created his own company, Cinégraphic, which produced, among others, Delluc’s last film, *L’Inondation* (1924). It also co-produced with Albatros L’Herbier’s well-received *Feu Mathias Pascal* (1925) and, with Cinéromans, one of the most lavish and experimental films of the late 1920s, *L’Argent*.

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56 François Albera has chronicled the history of this company in *Albatros, des Russes à Paris, 1919-1929* (Paris: Cinémathèque française, 1995); Alan Williams 109-112.
For his part, Gance had a more peculiar trajectory, given his penchant for big scale projects. After *La Roue*, he made only one film, the short comedy *Au secours!* (1924), for his own production company, Films Abel Gance, and then directed the enormously ambitious *Napoléon vu par Abel Gance* (1927), supported by the Société Générale des films, the pan-European company that commissioned Dreyer’s *La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc* a year later. The Impressionists readily admitted that this mix of projects was due to the pressures of the capitalist film system and often decried the lack of funds for their projects. But they also suggested that one could make avant-garde films within the commercial system as long as the audience understood them and was willing to follow along, which was, after all, a crucial goal of their pedagogical project.

In a retrospective article written in 1932, Dulac proposed an important distinction among three categories of films: avant-garde, commercial, and mercantile. Cinema could never stop being an industry since making films was unavoidably an expensive endeavor, she explained, rehashing an old argument. As a result, a “commercial” film did not necessarily imply that filmmakers had to compromise their ideals. To make her point clearer, Dulac introduced the term “mercantile” onto which she displaced all the negative connotations of “commercial”:

> We should understand mercantile films as those films that give in to all concessions only to pursue financial gain, and commercial films as those films that do their best to make use of cinematographic expression and technique,

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58 See Roger Icart’s biography, *Abel Gance ou le Prométhée foudroyé* (Lausanne: L’Age d’homme, 1983).

sometimes producing interesting works while also justifiably seeking profit. This is the union of industry and art.

[Il faut entendre par films mercantiles ceux qui, se soumettant à toutes les concessions, poursuivent un simple but financier et par films commerciaux ceux qui, s’emparant au mieux de l’expression et de la technique cinématographiques, produisent parfois des œuvres intéressantes tout en visant des gains justifiés. C’est alors l’union de l’industrie et de l’art.].

From this point of view, the avant-garde had to explore the expressive possibilities of the medium and open the way for commercial cinema by introducing the audience to new modes of seeing. Dulac thus described a dialectical process involving the experimentation of avant-garde cinema and what she called “commercial” cinema. For her, the final result was simply “cinema” – without any qualifying adjectives. Dulac’s reasoning was unusual at the time, especially after the International Congress of Independent Cinema held in 1929 in La Sarraz, Switzerland at the initiative of the newly-established left-leaning French magazine Revue du cinéma. During this Congress, a number of avant-garde filmmakers and film critics (including Moussinac and Sergei Eisenstein but not the Impressionists) proclaimed a clear qualitative distinction between commercial cinema (unavoidably compromised) and independent cinema (intrinsically valuable). The tripartite classification offered by Dulac not only complicates this opposition, but also helps to answer the “enigma” of the Impressionists’ willingness to make both independent and commercial films.

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61 Ibid. 364.
62 Archives 84 (2000), ed. Roland Cosandey and Thomas Tode is devoted to the history of this Congress.
63 Jacques Aumont mentions this “enigma” in passing in “Cinégénie, ou la machine à re-monter le temps,” Jean
The Impressionists’ style and intentions did not radically change depending on the production context. Although it cannot be denied that they made some concessions to producers’ requests, even their most commercial films included clearly Impressionist sequences that explored subjective states and showed objects and people in a new light. For instance, the same year she made *La Souriante Madame Beudet*, Dulac also directed *Gossette* (1923) – a serial in six episodes about an orphaned girl (Figure 4.8). While she had to work within the rules of this genre, which the Impressionists had been dismissing since their early days because it only offered a string of adventures, Dulac also added an experimental dimension. Superimpositions and out-of-focus shots convey Gossette’s feelings of anxiety and disorientation on several occasions where a typical serial would only show the action without giving viewers access to the character’s interiority. Moreover, at the beginning of a new episode, the previous episode is recapitulated through a character’s point of view rather than from an omniscient perspective. This quick recapitulatory montage thus serves as another way of introducing the characters’ impressions and suggesting that the serial does not have to be devoted only to plot but can, in fact, incorporate an Impressionist sensibility. Dulac even used some scenes from *Gossette* in her standard lecture on cinematic technique, although she never declared it to be on par with *La Souriante Madame Beudet*, which she continued to see as her best film. Nevertheless, Dulac’s take on the serial suggests that her “commercial” motion pictures deserve more attention precisely because they are not, to use her term, “mercantile.”

The same can be said of the motion pictures made by the other Impressionists for the big commercial companies. To give just one example, film historians have often dismissed *Le Lion*.

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64 Delluc critiqued all serials in “La Foule devant l’Ecran,” *Ecrits cinématographiques*, vol. 1 70-75, and attacked Feuillade in “Judex,” *Ecrits*, vol. II.2 91-93. Dulac did not offer a sustained critique but often dismissed the serials in her interviews. See also François Albera’s take on *Gossette* in “Germaine Dulac et l’essor définitif de l’avant-garde,” *Au-delà des impressions* 75-91.
des Mogols/The Mongol Lion as a motion picture that Epstein made only to earn a living and from which he felt quite detached.\textsuperscript{65} Yet several scenes show that Epstein was still able to experiment, employing typical Impressionist techniques to give the characters more depth. The film is an Orientalist story about a Mongol officer, Roundghito (the famous Russian émigré actor Ivan Mosjoukine, Figure 4.9), who is forced into exile in France, where he falls in love with a French woman, Anna, only to discover that she is his biological sister and that he is in fact a prince.\textsuperscript{66} When Roundghito finds out that Anna does not love him, he spends the night in a club with his friends – an occasion for Epstein to explore the character’s inner turmoil by mobilizing a whole range of Impressionist techniques. Out-of-focus shots seen from Roundghito’s point of view suggest that he is getting drunk, while an image of Anna superimposed on dancers and then on the faces of people around him imply that Roundghito is thinking of her. The following scenes show Roundghito getting into a taxi and asking the driver to take him anywhere, driving as fast as he can. A dazzling rapid montage, cutting back and forth between the buildings that go by, the car, Roundghito’s face, the road, and the feet of the passersby, recall the merry-go-round scene from Cœur fidèle.

This montage also serves as a counterpart to La Glace à trois faces/The Three-Sided Mirror (1927), one of Epstein’s most critically acclaimed films, made three years after Le Lion des Mogols and distributed mostly through the ciné-club circuit. La Glace à trois faces ends with a car crash that kills the main character – a mysterious nameless man who has been described

\textsuperscript{65} Such is the case of one of the first studies dedicated to him: Pierre Leprohon, Jean Epstein (Paris: Seghers, 1964) 74-75. A notable exception is François Albera, who has begun to study Epstein’s work for Albatros in “Sociologie d’Epstein: de Pathé-Consortium à Albatros,” Jean Epstein: cinéaste, poète, philosophe 225-248. The title of Le Lion des Mogols has sometimes been spelled differently (Le Lion des Mongols) but I am using here the spelling adopted by the Cinémathèque française, which recently restored this motion picture.

successively from the point of view of each one of his three lovers. His crash is preceded by a montage similar to the one in *Le Lion des Mogols*, but, in this case, Epstein juxtaposes a variety of shots that culminate with a striking close-up of the driver dead on the ground. Comparing *Le Lion des Mogols* with two of Epstein’s more celebrated films highlights certain continuities within his work. These scenes from *Le Lion des Mogols* also contributed to the Impressionists’ goal of exploring the characters’ interiority and of showing objects (in this case especially the car) in a new light. Motion pictures such as *Le Lion des Mogols* and *Gossette*, widely distributed in commercial theaters without provoking any controversies, worked as a way of naturalizing the Impressionist style. Indeed, the publicity materials for these motion pictures only presented the actors, the filmmaker, and the production company as well as a brief summary. They did not, however, discuss cinematic technique, leaving viewers to decipher it on their own. These films can thus be understood as the last stage of the dialectical process Dulac described: the stage where the categories “avant-garde” and “commercial” converge to become solely “cinema.” Furthermore, they can also be seen as part of the Impressionist pedagogical project – after having explained their techniques in articles and lectures, the Impressionist simply use them in these widely-distributed films in the hope that they will by then be understood without any clarifications.

A Continuing Project

This process of naturalization ran alongside a continuing project of experimentation, sustained by what Richard Abel has called the “alternate network” of ciné-clubs and specialized

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67 For a formal analysis of this film, see Abel, *French Cinema* 456-462.
cinemas. It is no coincidence that it was the Impressionist Delluc who first developed the concept of the ciné-club in 1920. In his initial definition, the ciné-club worked as an independent, nonprofit organization, open to anyone interested in cinema. Its main purpose was twofold: to screen films with a certain artistic value that had only a short run in mainstream theaters, and to offer lectures by directors and film critics that would help the audience better to understand the films. Although Delluc’s actual ciné-club and the magazine it published (Le Journal du ciné-club) were short-lived, the concept of the ciné-club had a tremendous impact throughout the 1920s and in the postwar period. Delluc’s friendly rival, the film critic Riciotto Canudo, also attempted to bring together a group of people interested in advancing cinema, but he chose to model his Club des Amis du Septième Art on the more traditional salon gatherings, therefore inviting only film industry professionals. After Canudo and Delluc’s untimely deaths (in 1923 and 1924 respectively), their two ciné-clubs merged to form the Ciné-Club de France, which then became an influential professional organization. At the same time, more ciné-clubs, open to all cinéphiles, were organized around the country, either by popular film magazines such as Cinémagazine, which founded one of the longest running clubs, Les Amis du Cinéma, or by passionate individuals eager to find kindred spirits.

The ciné-clubs remained crucial to maintaining a direct line between spectators and filmmakers, and the Impressionists continued to use them to their advantage throughout the 1920s. They also became involved in the administration of the Fédération française des ciné-

68 Abel, French Cinema 241-271. Abel’s designation is now widely used.
70 In addition to Abel’s description of the French ciné-club movement, see Gauthier, La Passion du cinéma. Malte Hagener offers an international comparison of these clubs in Moving Forward, Looking Back: The European Avant-Garde and the Invention of Film Culture, 1919-1939 (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007) and Antoine de Baecque describes the postwar period in La Cinéphilie: invention d’un regard, histoire d’une culture, 1944-1968 (Paris: Fayard, 2003).
clubs, which brought together all such organizations so as to coordinate them more effectively. In 1929 Dulac served as co-president and treasurer of this Fédération, while the other Impressionists were among the honorary members. By then, France had around twenty registered ciné-clubs and probably more that functioned as informal gatherings.\footnote{“Le Congrès des ciné-clubs,” *Cinéa-Ciné pour tous* 1 Dec. 1929: 25-28. Gauthier includes a comprehensive list of ciné-clubs and specialized cinemas in *La Passion du cinéma* 362-370.} In order to screen their chosen films, these ciné-clubs usually rented a movie theater for an evening. They initially worked with commercial movie theaters, but the mid- and late 1920s saw a significant shift thanks to the foundation of several specialized cinemas – commercial institutions that, like the ciné-clubs, were committed to screening “quality films,” both revivals and new works.\footnote{This shift is briefly described in Dulac, “Le Cinéma d’avant-garde” 357-364.} Jean Tedesco opened the first specialized cinema in 1924 at the Vieux-Colombier, an old theater where Jacques Copeau had staged a series of avant-garde plays.\footnote{Ironically, after such avant-garde beginnings, the Vieux-Colombier functions today as one of the locations of the Comédie française.} An entrepreneur interested in cinema, Tedesco also succeeded Delluc at the helm of the magazine *Cinéa* and merged it with *Ciné pour tous* to create *Cinéa-Ciné pour tous*, which, together with the Vieux-Colombier, became instrumental in promoting a film canon heavily influenced by the Impressionists.\footnote{*Cinéa-Ciné pour tous* published a plethora of articles on the Vieux-Colombier and advertisements for it. See for instance Jean Tedesco, “La Question du répertoire du film. Bilan 1926-1927,” *Cinéa-Ciné pour tous* 1 July 1927: 9-12 and his defense of specialized cinemas as viable institutions, “Pots de terre contre pots de fer,” *Cinéa-Ciné pour tous* 15 Oct. 1926: 11.}

The list of films screened by the Vieux-Colombier in its first years accurately reflects the tastes of the Impressionists. Prominent on this list are foreign motion pictures the Impressionists had praised in the early 1920s and that had become impossible to see outside of the alternative network: American classics (*Broken Blossoms, The Cheat*) as well as Swedish motion pictures, such as Mauritz Stiller’s *Sir Arne’s Treasure/Le Trésor d’Arne* (1919) and Victor Sjöström’s *The
Phantom Carriage/La Charrette fantôme (1921). Just as importantly, the Vieux-Colombier contributed to a revival of Impressionist films no longer running in commercial theaters. Among them were the films that became mainstays of the alternate network, constantly screened and discussed for their exemplary camerawork and masterful editing: La Roue, La Souriante Madame Beudet, Cœur fidèle. In the late 1920s, the success of the Vieux-Colombier led to the opening of more specialized cinemas in Paris (Studio des Ursulines, Ciné-Latin, Studio 28, and L’Œil de Paris) as well as in other French cities. These cinemas quickly became the main distributors for French and foreign experimental films including the work of the Impressionists, the Surrealists, and the German Expressionists.

After the explicitly pedagogical lectures of the early 1920s, the Impressionists’ talks for specialized cinemas and ciné-clubs tended to be broader and to discuss film and its future in general terms. Since their style had stabilized and become well-known, there was no more need to explain the basic syntax of cinema. Yet, when they experimented with new techniques, the Impressionists still addressed the audience directly. This was the case, for instance, with Epstein’s La Chute de la Maison Usher/The Fall of the House of Usher (1928), produced by his own company and distributed through specialized cinemas. As the opening intertitle announced, the film reworked several themes from Edgar Allan Poe – and indeed, while La Chute de la Maison Usher does not faithfully stage Poe’s story, it achieves its main purpose of constructing a supernatural atmosphere, heavily ambiguous and confusing. In his writings on this film, Epstein made two apparently contradictory statements symptomatic of Impressionist pedagogy. On the one hand, Epstein claimed not to be interested in technique as an end in itself because a

75 On the impact of these films in France in general and on the Impressionists specifically, see Moussinac, Naissance du cinéma 35-46. By contrast, the Surrealist Desnos dismisses these motion pictures as too artistic and superficial; see, for instance, Cinéma 95-97, 122.

76 Abel, French Cinema 463-471 discusses the film in detail.
filmmaker who thought only about how to use optical devices and editing would be like a poet
who only worried about calligraphy. According to him, filmmakers used a variety of cinematic
techniques to get to something bigger: that indefinable “soul” of cinema. On the other hand,
Epstein very eagerly discussed his main technical innovation in La Chute de la Maison Usher:
the sustained use of slow motion. While scientific nonfiction films often used slow motion in
order to explain certain phenomena, fiction films rarely resorted to this technique. An article
published by Epstein upon the film’s release reads like a paean to slow motion – a technique he
thinks spectators would not be able to notice immediately, but which he claims to have chosen so
as to enable a different way of seeing, one appropriate to a film about supernatural events.
Although he does not mention photogénie directly, Epstein’s description of slow motion suggests
it works very much like photogénie in that viewers have to experience it to understand it.
Nonetheless, according to this line of thought, to do so, viewers first need to be made aware of
the underlying technique. This tension marked the Impressionist pedagogical project throughout
the 1920s—their desire to explain cinematic language was consistently complicated by their
insistence on the idea that the concept of photogénie remained indefinable and had to be
experienced to be fully grasped.

Gance adopted a similar pedagogical strategy for his Napoléon vu par Abel
Gance/Napoleon Seen by Abel Gance (1927), which was released both in commercial theaters
and in specialized cinemas. These cinemas usually only screened the most experimental parts

79 On this conceptual link between photogénie and slow motion, see Ludovic Cortade, “The ‘Microscope of Time’: Slow Motion in Jean Epstein’s Writings,” Jean Epstein 161-176.
80 Kevin Brownlow has chronicled the convoluted history of Napoléon’s editing and restoration in Napoléon, Abel Gance’s Classic Film (New York: Knopf, 1983). The saga of the film’s restoration seems never ending: Brownlow presented a newly restored version in 2012.
of the motion picture, especially those sequences involving a mobile camera (for instance during a snow fight, when the camera acts like a snowball) and the triple screen Gance had invented specifically for the battle scenes (Figure 4.10). While Gance did not feel the need to explain the familiar Impressionist techniques used throughout Napoléon, he often wrote and spoke about the new experiments, presenting them as an attempt to expand the limits of vision.\footnote{Abel Gance, “Je veux faire du spectateur un acteur,” Un Soleil dans chaque image, ed. Roger Icart (Paris: CNRS/Cinémathèque française, 2002) 83-90. On Gance’s triple screen, see Jean-Jacques Meusy, “La Polyvision, espoir oublié d’un cinéma nouveau,” 1895 31 (2000): n.pag. 12 Apr. 2012 <http://1895.revues.org/68>.} Beyond these clarifications, Gance, like his fellow Impressionists, asked spectators to allow themselves to fully experience the film without being influenced by what film critics had to say.

This interpretive freedom, however, could also prove to be problematic, especially in the context of a politically charged film such as Napoléon. As film critics from Vuillermoz to Moussinac argued when the film was released, Napoléon made glaringly apparent Gance’s right-wing populism.\footnote{Emile Vuillermoz, “Napoléon,” Le Temps 9 Apr. 1927: 3 and “Abel Gance and Napoléon,” Cinémagazine 25 Nov. 1927: 334-340, both translated in French Film Theory and Criticism 401-408; Léon Moussinac, “Napoléon,” Panoramique du cinéma (Paris: Au Sans Pareil, 1929) 53-61. See also Norman King, Abel Gance: A Politics of Spectacle (London: BFI, 1984) 146-163.} According to these critics, the motion picture’s mesmerizing style only made things worse. Even as they criticized the political implications of extolling Napoléon, Vuillermoz and Moussinac admitted that they admired Gance’s stylistic choices. This was again an issue of form versus content, as it had been for La Roue, only now the content posed even more problems because presenting Napoleon as a stylized hero meant contributing to the radicalization of the right at a time when fascism was on the rise in Europe. Gance defended himself from these accusations, denying any political ambitions and arguing that he only intended to explore the early life of a “great man.”\footnote{Gance, “Je veux faire du spectateur un acteur,” Un Soleil dans chaque image 83-90.} Beyond the specific example of Napoléon, the type of argument made against this film brings into focus the main blind spot of the Impressionist pedagogical
project: the tendency to downplay any social and political associations even when they are clearly present, whether in the right-wing leanings of Napoléon, the left-wing implications of working-class melodramas like Cœur fidèle and El Dorado, or the feminist La Souriante Madame Beudet. This blind spot, I would argue, is a direct result of the Impressionists’ moderate stance and of their perspective on the limits of pedagogy.

**Impressionism and Its Others**

According to the standard periodization of the cinematic avant-garde of the 1920s, Impressionist theories had been fully developed and codified by 1925. After this high point, writes Bordwell, the movement began to disintegrate due to several factors including the impact of new avant-garde groups and the idiosyncratic interests of each director.\(^4\) However, if we shift the emphasis to take into account the Impressionists’ pedagogical project, the continuities also become apparent. Dulac in particular continued to pursue this project while making films more closely affiliated with the other avant-gardes of the time: Surrealism and abstract cinema (also called “pure,” “absolute” or Cubist cinema).

Although the international abstract cinema movement began in the early 1920s, it only became a hot topic of debate in France around 1926. Some of the artists making abstract films were associated with the Dada movement and worked in Germany (Viking Eggeling, *Symphonie Diagonale*, 1921-24; Hans Richter, *Rhythmus 21*, 1921; Walter Ruttmann, *Opus I-IV*, 1921-25), while others had a Cubist background and were based in France (Léger and Murphy, *Ballet Mécanique*, Picabia and Clair, *Entr’acte*, both from 1924). Regardless of their trajectories, they all sought to create a non-narrative cinema for which they used a variety of optical devices such

\(^4\) Bordwell, *French Impressionist Cinema* 240-246. Alan Williams adheres to a similar periodization.
as filters, prismatic fragmentations, and negative images.\textsuperscript{85} This idea that non-narrative film was superior to mainstream cinema came under attack in \textit{L’Idée et l’écran, Opinions sur le cinéma} (1925-1926), a pamphlet in three installments written by the popular filmmaker Henri Fescourt and his assistant Jean-Louis Bouquet, who together had just released an adaptation of \textit{Les Misérables} that was the box office hit of 1925 and 1926.\textsuperscript{86} Their ironic dismissal of abstract cinema as useless and uninteresting to most moviegoers sparked a debate hosted in the pages of \textit{Cinéa-Ciné pour tous}. One of the most ardent defenses of abstract cinema came from Henri Chomette, the director of the abstract \textit{Cinq minutes de cinéma pur/Five Minutes of Pure Cinema} (1925) and René Clair’s brother.\textsuperscript{87}

While they were no strangers to the devices used in abstract cinema, the Impressionists were split on the issue. L’Herbier was the only one who remained silent. Epstein declared himself against the idea of “pure” or abstract cinema as a movement. Even though he appreciated Eggeling’s early experiments, he argued that there was no point in imitating him.\textsuperscript{88} Epstein’s position was probably influenced by his distaste for those film critics who continued to single out only the moments of rhythmic montage from \textit{Cœur fidèle} and \textit{La Roue} instead of considering these films as a whole. For his part, Gance defined “pure cinema” in terms that did not truly distinguish it from Impressionism: “We should try […] to represent things differently so as to

\textsuperscript{85} Their work is discussed in Lawder and Malcolm Le Grice, “German Abstract Film in the Twenties,” \textit{Film as Film: Formal Experiment in Film, 1910-1975}, ed. Philip Drummond et al. (London: Arts Council of Britain, 1979) 31-36.


expand our sensibility.” [“Il faut s’attacher (…) à représenter les choses différemment pour enrichir notre sensibilité.”].

It was Dulac who pushed this connection even further by defining non-narrative cinema as the natural endpoint of any avant-garde project.

Her argument was bolstered by the fact that she was the only Impressionist who made abstract films: *Disque 957, Arabesques/Étude cinégraphique sur une arabesque,* and *Thème et variations,* all from 1929. Like previous works of abstract cinema, these very short films (5-10 minutes), discard all narrative, play with a wide array of optical devices, and offer unusual juxtapositions of images. Given their experimental nature, they were mostly screened in ciné-clubs and specialized cinemas. Léon Gaumont publicly expressed his willingness to show such works in commercial movie theaters once in a while, but it is unclear whether he actually did so.

Although Dulac often spoke about the idea of “pure cinema,” she seems not to have given any lectures in connection with her three abstract films. This was in keeping with the other directors who made similar films and never attempted to explain them. It would in fact seem counterintuitive to explicate such a work, since the main assumption was that it presented the personal vision of the filmmaker and then allowed viewers to make their own connections without being led by plot or characters.

Yet Dulac still found ways to guide the audience, particularly for her first abstract film, *Disque 957.* To do so, she resorted to long introductory intertitles, which had become one of her favorite strategies of commenting on her work without interrupting the flow of the film. She had already used such a long intertitle in 1927 for *L’Invitation au voyage,* where it functioned as a *captatio benevolentiae* technique by summarizing the film and asking spectators to support her

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90 Dulac, “Le Cinéma d’avant-garde” 357-364. She also published one issue of a journal devoted to this question, *Schémas* Feb. 1927.

experiment in making a film devoid of any other intertitles. Similarly, *Disque 957* begins with a prefatory intertitle and never uses any other words again. The film is described first as “Visual impressions by Germaine Dulac. Listening to Preludes 5 and 6 by Frédéric Chopin” [“Impressions visuelles de Germaine Dulac. En écoutant les Préludes 5 et 6 de Frédéric Chopin”] – an introduction that suggests the film belongs to Impressionism as much as it does to the abstract cinema movement. At a time when Impressionism is considered to have been an idea of the past, Dulac thus implies that it is still very much influencing her work. The following intertitle then quotes Chopin’s lover, George Sand, and her description of the evening when the music was composed:

Referring to the Sixth Prelude in B minor, George Sand wrote in “His winter in Majorca”: ‘One of them came to him during a gloomy rainy evening and it makes one feel horribly despondent. That evening his composition was full of those raindrops that resonated on the tiles of the Chartreuse.’

[C’est du Sixième Prélude en si bémol mineur que George Sand a écrit dans ‘Son hiver à Majorque’ : ‘Il y en a un qui lui vint par une soirée de pluie lugubre et qui jette dans l’âme un abattement effroyable. Sa composition, ce soir-là, était bien pleine de gouttes de pluie qui résonnaient sur les tuiles sonores de la Chartreuse.’].

The film proceeds to translate this account into a series of juxtaposed images: a disk on which several abstract images are superimposed, the rain on the window, hands playing the piano, clocks that dissolve into one another, plants shot from a variety of angles (Figure 4.11). The second intertitle encourages viewers to see these images as a staging of Sand’s description of the

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92 Hers was not the first film without intertitles. Earlier examples of such films include Lupu Pick, *Scherben* (1921), distributed in France as *Le Rail*, and Marcel Silver, *L’Horloge* (1924).
context in which Chopin composed the music. But they could also be seen as a depiction of a
listener’s reactions, the subjective “visual impressions” brought about by Chopin’s music. This is
where pure cinema and Impressionism intersect: after all, one of the latter’s declared goals was
to represent subjectivity, be it that of a character or of the filmmaker. The recent resurgence of
interest in Dulac’s abstract films, which had long been ignored, has indeed explained how these
films connect to her earlier work. At the same time, I would suggest, her first abstract film also
contributed to the project of Impressionist pedagogy but did so mostly through intertitles rather
than lectures.

The other influential avant-garde movement of the 1920s, Surrealism, was something of a
latecomer to filmmaking even though members of the group had been writing about cinema for
years. La Coquille et le Clergyman (1928) directed by Dulac from a script by Antonin Artaud
is usually cited as the first film in which a Surrealist was directly involved. This description is
problematic not only because Artaud had a complicated relationship with the Surrealist group,
with which he was affiliated from 1925 to 1927 and again in 1928, but also because the
Surrealists themselves interrupted the premiere of La Coquille et le Clergyman and disparaged
Dulac. For Breton and his group, the only truly Surrealist films were Buñuel’s Un Chien andalou
(1929) and L’Age d’Or (1930) as well as some of Man Ray’s works. Artaud, however, continued

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93 For instance, Flitterman-Lewis, To Desire Differently 321-329; Tami Williams, “Germaine Dulac: Du figuratif à
l’abstraction,” Jeune, dure et pure! Une histoire du cinéma d’avant-garde et expérimental en France, ed. Nicole
166.

94 The bibliography on Surrealism and cinema is extensive. My account is based on the anthologies edited by Alain
Double: Surrealist Writings on the Cinema (London: British Film Institute, 1978) as well as on Henri Béhar, ed. Le
Cinéma des surréalistes (Lausanne: L’Age d’homme, 2004); Steven Kovacs, From Enchantment to Rage: The Story
of Surrealist Cinema (London: Associated University Presses, 1980); and Linda Williams, Figures of Desire: A
to claim *La Coquille et le Clergyman* as his own, publishing the scenario and discussing his intentions, while also generally avoiding any mention of Dulac.\(^95\)

Their collaboration may seem strange now, in light of the contrast between the Surrealists and the Impressionists emphasized in their own writings and in historical accounts, but in 1927, when Artaud asked Dulac to film his script, the two groups had more in common than they would later acknowledge.\(^96\) In an article written during the making of *La Coquille et le Clergyman*, Artaud expressed his belief that cinema had to show objects in a new light and explore human psychology – a description that echoes Impressionist theory.\(^97\) The connection between the two groups is also clear on a more anecdotal level: Artaud not only acted in Gance’s *Napoléon* and in L’Herbier’s *L’Argent* but actively lobbied to get the part of Roderick in Epstein’s *La Chute de la Maison Usher*.\(^98\) While Artaud’s wish did not come true, Epstein’s assistant on that film was Buñuel. Like Artaud and Dulac, Epstein and Buñuel had a falling out in 1928 – the year when the differences between the Impressionists and the Surrealists became insurmountable. The following years saw a flurry of attacks from both sides (though more forceful from the Surrealists), each group claiming that the other did not understand the true nature of cinema.

The Surrealists’ outrage upon seeing *La Coquille et le Clergyman* has come to define this film more than its technique or impossible-to-summarize plot, which depicts the phantasms of a

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96 Jacques Brunius attacks the Impressionists in his *En marge du cinéma français* (Lausanne: Éditions L’Age d’homme, 1987). Brunius was associated with the Surrealists in his youth, much like Georges Sadoul, whose bias against the Impressionists is less obvious but often apparent in his *Histoire générale du cinéma*, vol. 5. Ian Christie discusses the distinctions between the Impressionists and the Surrealists in “French Avant-Garde Film in the Twenties: From 'Specificity' to Surrealism,” *Film as Film* 37-46.


98 Artaud expressed his wish to play the part in a letter to Gance; *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 3 129-130.
clergyman.\textsuperscript{99} When the Studio des Ursulines first showed the film, several Surrealists (Breton, Aragon, Desnos and others) verbally abused Dulac for having distorted Artaud’s vision. The evening ended with a physical fight between the Surrealists and Dulac’s supporters.\textsuperscript{100} The main issue, more clearly articulated by Artaud after this incident, was one of style: Dulac had used the typical Impressionist techniques, which the Surrealists considered out-of-date and unable to express Artaud’s exploration of the human psyche.\textsuperscript{101} In their historical study of this event, Alain and Odette Virmaux have suggested that what was truly at stake was the status of the film author in that period.\textsuperscript{102} According to them, Artaud claimed that Dulac had modified his initial script and pushed him aside, while Dulac had in fact carefully followed his script but did her best to exert full authorial control over the film as a finished artistic product. Adopting a different approach, Sandy Flitterman-Lewis has interpreted this conflict as proof of the clash between two ideas of spectatorship: Artaud intended to shock spectators and destabilize their expectations (as Buñuel will successfully do in his \textit{Un Chien andalou} a year later), whereas Dulac focused on creating a sense of “harmony” and “euphoria.”\textsuperscript{103} It seems to me that equally relevant is Dulac’s pedagogical impulse, namely her dedication to helping spectators understand what they see through intertitles and lectures. In fact, the only disagreement between Dulac and Artaud that is apparent from their correspondence involved the inclusion of a prefatory intertitle.\textsuperscript{104} Dulac

\textsuperscript{99} Artaud initially referred to the film as a dream but then changed his mind whereas Dulac still considered it a dream. See Alain and Odette Virmaux. \textit{Les Surréalistes et le cinéma} 28-30.

\textsuperscript{100} Alain and Odette Virmaux have compared several accounts of that evening in \textit{Artaud-Dulac: La Coquille et le Clergyman, essai d’élucidation d’une querelle mythique} (Paris: Éditions Paris Expérimental, 1999).


\textsuperscript{102} Virmaux, \textit{Artaud-Dulac}.


\textsuperscript{104} Artaud’s letter to Dulac from 25 Sept. 1927, \textit{Œuvres complètes}, vol. 3 128-129. This volume includes all
wanted to add one, as she had recently done for her *L’Invitation au voyage*, but Artaud disagreed because he considered the film to be self-sufficient.

While Dulac conceded on that point, she seems to have intended to compensate for this lack of guidance through her lectures. In 1928, she referred to a screening and a lecture for a Dutch audience, but, as far as I can tell, this is the only mention of a lecture that includes *La Coquille et le Clergyman*. This lack of lectures on the film may be a direct result of the scandal provoked by the Surrealists, after which she distanced herself both from the motion picture and from the collaboration with Artaud. From this point of view, even though the Surrealists remained convinced that *La Coquille et le Clergyman* was not a Surrealist film, their idea of spectatorship, famously associated with shock, prevailed. Yet the complicated history of this film, particularly the fact that it was rarely screened until it was rediscovered after the Second World War and hailed as a *film maudit*, also suggests that the Impressionists’ pedagogical impulse was not necessarily misguided. While the Surrealists’ critique of the Impressionists as elitist has stuck and has been rehashed in film history books, it could also be argued that it was, in fact, the Surrealists’ view of the spectator that was more exclusive. As has often been pointed out, the Surrealists assumed most spectators would be unable to understand what they saw and would thus be scandalized. Their discussion of cinematic experience is typically couched in violent terms, from an insistence on “whipping” spectators to the opening scene of *Un Chien andalou*, which shows the cutting of an eye. The Surrealists were their own ideal spectators, so much so that this could be one of the reasons why they made very few films

available letters from Artaud to Dulac 119-123; 125-129. Dulac’s letters do not seem to have been preserved.

105 Germaine Dulac, “Rythme et technique,” *Ecrits* 111.

106 Kuenzli 7-10; Virmaux 84-85.

and instead wrote about the motion pictures they saw. In contrast, the Impressionists based their pedagogy on the more moderate idea that their intervention through lectures or intertitles would help all viewers to understand their films and enable them to experience each motion picture according to their sensibility.

By 1930, the sound revolution had rendered these distinctions among different avant-garde groups obsolete. Buñuel was one of the few avant-gardists able to adapt to sound cinema and to continue to make truly provocative works. For most independent directors, however, sound cinema raised new technological and economic challenges – the high cost of the new technology made it hard to produce the kind of short noncommercial films that had flourished in the previous decade. Having worked both independently and with big studios, the Impressionists did not necessarily face this particular problem. But they had to deal with an even more pressing aesthetic issue. Namely, their theories about the specificity of cinema, photogénie, and visual impressions proved difficult to reconcile with dialogue-based cinema, which was bringing film closer to theater than it had ever been.

Unable and, to some extent, unwilling to redefine this initial view of cinema to include sound, the Impressionists went their separate ways. Gance, the only Impressionist truly enthusiastic about this new technology, remained interested in melodramas and historical films, but his convoluted sound films seldom received any praise. L’Herbier gravitated toward adaptations, founded the first film school in France (l’Institut des hautes études cinématographiques, now La Fémis), and also worked in television. Dulac’s choices were perhaps the most surprising: she turned toward nonfiction, producing newsreels for various companies, and never directed another fiction film again.\(^{108}\) Epstein too became interested in

\(^{108}\) Tami Williams has analyzed Dulac’s turn toward documentary in Beyond Impressions 248-308.
documentaries but opted to make a number of semi-fictional works, several of them filmed on location in Brittany, then later returned to fiction.\textsuperscript{109} Throughout the 1930s, he also attempted to update the concept of \textit{photogénie} to include sound.\textsuperscript{110} By then, however, the dominant discourse was quickly changing: poetic realism became the most significant movement in French film, and directors such as Renoir redefined the role of cinema, innovatively drawing on the legacy of Surrealism and Impressionism while adding a dose of politics to the mix.\textsuperscript{111}

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When Peter Wollen distinguished between “two avant-gardes” in an influential essay from 1975, he was referring primarily to the difference between, on the one hand, the filmmakers associated with the American Cooperative movement of the 1960s, mostly interested in aesthetic issues, and, on the other, the more politically committed European filmmakers such as Godard or Straub and Huillet.\textsuperscript{112} To reinforce his argument, Wollen traced this opposition back to the 1920s, emphasizing the distinction between abstract cinema, as a movement that made apolitical films seen by a limited audience, and the Soviet directors, whose openly political motion pictures were meant to reach a mass audience. Wollen did not mention the impact of the Impressionists, most likely because he was writing at a time when they were rarely discussed, especially in the Anglophone world.\textsuperscript{113}

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\textsuperscript{109} Sarah Keller provides an overview of his career after the sound revolution in her “Introduction” to \textit{Jean Epstein: Critical Essays and New Translations} 40-43; she also explores the connection between Epstein’s early work and his semi-fictional films in “Jean Epstein’s Documentary Cinephilia,” \textit{Studies in French Cinema} 12.2 (2012): 91-105.


\textsuperscript{111} Dudley Andrew discusses these connections in \textit{Mists of Regret} 25-52. Renoir had begun to make films in the 1920s and became the most celebrated auteur of the 1930s.


\textsuperscript{113} At the time, the Impressionists were hardly ever mentioned even in France. One exception was the work of Noël...
At first glance, the Impressionists’ reluctance to directly address political issues would seem to bring them closer to abstract cinema. Yet, as I have suggested above, even though the Impressionists did not make explicit political statements, their work was far from devoid of social value. Their definition of the filmmaker as a public figure and their involvement in the ciné-club movement has had a long-lasting effect on how avant-garde directors understand their role. Equally important was their working relationship with republicans and Catholics sketched in the previous chapters: not only Dulac and Epstein’s willingness to make films for these groups but also the fact that the Offices of Educational Cinema and the Catholic Cinematographic Committee generally appreciated their work. I would thus argue that the Impressionists constitute a third avant-garde, one that adopts a moderate position (both aesthetically and politically) and that complicates this dichotomy between the avowedly political and the purely aesthetic, just as it blurs the line between independent and commercial cinema.

Burch and Jean-André Fieschi, who published a short article with directions for further study, “La Première vague,” Cahiers du cinéma 202 (June-July 1968): 20-24, and produced a documentary on the same topic, also entitled La première vague (1968). It was only in the 1980s, due to Bordwell and Abel, that the Impressionists became better known in the Anglophone world.
CHAPTER 5. The Communist Spectator

Film scholars have repeatedly pointed out a puzzling gap in the history of workers’ cinema in France: in the 1920s French leftist groups made no political films with and for workers.¹ This gap is all the more significant because France has a long history of militant cinema associated with key moments such as the Popular Front, the late 1960s, and the mid-1990s.² The first French workers’ films were produced just before World War I, in 1913-1914, by Cinéma du peuple, a group made up of anarchist libertarians and members of the major trade union confederation (the CGT).³ While it should come as no surprise that the war brought these projects to a halt, the lack of interest in continuing this work after 1918 is unexpected for two main reasons. First, because Lenin had famously announced in 1919 that cinema was the most important art for the Communist cause and, as a result, making films “for the masses” became a crucial goal for the Soviet state.⁴ Second, because Communist groups from Western countries generally responded to Lenin’s exhortation and became involved in the production and distribution of workers’ films through their own national organizations.⁵ Germany remains the

¹ For instance, Jonathan Buchsbaum, Cinéma Engagé: Film in the Popular Front (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988) 1-42, and Alain Weber, Cinéma(s) français 1900-1939, pour un monde différent (Paris: Séguiier, 2002). Michel Cadé explains that workers tended to appear only in films with no militant goals, L’Ecran bleu: la représentation des ouvriers dans le cinéma français (Perpignan: Presses universitaires de Perpignan, 2000); Nicole Brenz argues that it is particularly the lumpenproletariat that is underrepresented in avant-garde films throughout the 20th century, Traitement du lumpenproletariat par le cinéma d’avant-garde (Paris: Archimbaud, 2006).
⁴ Lenin’s statement on the role of cinema was often quoted in L’Humanité on the page dedicated to culture and also used as a motto by Léon Moussinac in his Le Cinéma soviétique (Paris: Gallimard, 1928).
most famous example due to the flourishing of a veritable mass-media complex spearheaded by Willi Münzenberg – a colourful character who led the Workers’ International Relief and mediated between Soviet studios and Western exhibitors.  

The most obvious explanation for this lack of interest in producing workers’ films in France in the 1920s is that the Socialists and the Communists, the two left-wing parties that could have gotten involved in such a project, were engaged in a prolonged fight over who could best represent the interests of the working class. Formed in 1920 after a split from the Socialists, the French Communist Party (PCF) adopted a revolutionary program that consistently followed the guidelines of the Communist International (Comintern). The Comintern’s policy of “class against class,” heavily promoted in the mid- and late 1920s, led the PCF to intensify their attacks on what they saw as a deeply corrupt bourgeois French Republic and the Socialists who supported it. The French government reacted forcefully, periodically arresting members of the PCF and generally keeping an eye on their activities. As a result, the PCF had to focus most of its efforts on surviving the government’s attacks, creating a reliable apparatus, and attracting more supporters. 

Had they embraced Lenin’s stance about the political impact of cinema, French Communists could have used film to gain more members. But a brief debate between the well-known Communist film critic, Léon Moussinac, and a fierce supporter of the bolshevization of the PCF, Virgile Barel, quickly settled the issue. In a pragmatic article discussing strategies for recruitment, Barel suggested that, if the PCF wanted to bring more people to their party

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meetings, they could screen short documentaries showing the daily lives of workers and events organized by PCF, such as celebrations and strikes. He added that the Party could also get involved in film production, giving workers amateur cameras and encouraging them to make short films. These assumptions about the empowering effect of films made by and for workers have underpinned all workers’ cinema projects throughout the twentieth century. But Moussinac vehemently disagreed with Barel. Although he was not necessarily against the idea of screening short nonfiction films for political purposes, he found them appropriate only as accompaniments to motion pictures rather than as main features. Most importantly, he claimed that making films was better left to trained directors with a sophisticated understanding of the art of cinema.

Instead of giving workers a camera, Moussinac believed that the best way to engage them in the fight against capitalism was to train them to be better spectators. In his view, spectators could revolt only once they understood that the capitalist film industry intended to brainwash them and that there existed an alternative to this industry: the work of avant-garde directors from the USSR and Europe. This is not to say that he encouraged the estrangement typically associated with Brecht’s Marxist aesthetics; rather, as we will see, Moussinac’s discourse was a peculiar blend of Communist politics and Impressionist aesthetics.

In the first decade of its existence, the PCF followed Moussinac’s lead and considered it more efficient to concentrate on modeling a specific type of film viewer instead of producing workers’ films. This was certainly due to a lack of funds and to the PCF’s precarious political position but also to Moussinac’s overwhelming influence. Throughout the 1920s he remained the foremost Communist film critic, respected not only by readers of the Communist daily

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L’Humanité (where he had a regular film column from 1926 until 1933) but also by intellectuals of all political stripes who were familiar with his early texts on cinema for the prestigious literary magazine Le Mercure de France. His book Le Cinéma soviétique (1928), written during a trip to the USSR in 1927 for the anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution, came out from the influential publishing house Gallimard and received good reviews both in mainstream newspapers and in specialized magazines. Moussinac was thus well-positioned to shape the image of the Communist spectator in the 1920s. His rejection of workers’ films and oft-repeated preference for the avant-garde are essential to understanding the relationship between revolutionary politics and cinema in France during this decade.

I begin this chapter by tracing the history of the first mass ciné-club, Les Amis de Spartacus, founded by Moussinac in 1928 with the support of the PCF, and then turn to the reception of Soviet films in France after the police banned this club. My main focus is on how French commentators understood the interplay between film and revolutionary politics during these years. Walter Benjamin famously concluded his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility” (written from 1936 to 1939) with the claim that if Fascism aestheticized politics, Communism responded by politicizing art. In contrast, film critics working in France in the 1920s, particularly those not affiliated with the PCF, such as Jean Tedesco, viewed politics and cinema as separate spheres. The Impressionists complicated the distinction between a purely aesthetic and an explicitly political cinema, as shown in the

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10 Emmanuelle Toulet discusses Moussinac’s early articles for Le Mercure de France in “Léon Moussinac et le cinéma: un intellectuel s'adresse aux intellectuels,” Cahiers de la Cinémathèque 70 (1999): 22-32. Moussinac had a film column in Le Mercure de France from 1921 until 1923 (with a few articles published until 1926), then moved to L’Humanité in 1924.


12 As noted in Chapter 4, this idea of film as a separate sphere echoed the concept of literature and art in general as an autonomous sphere – a concept analyzed by Bourdieu.
previous chapter, but the screening of Soviet films in France brought this issue into sharper relief.

Like the other types of spectators analyzed in this dissertation, the Communist spectator remained an ideal that was difficult, if not impossible, to translate into practice. And like the other groups discussed here, the Communists also aimed to reach a wide audience, well beyond their Party members. However, their relationship with the Soviet Union turned out to be problematic. Soviet theories on how cinema should work on the masses – motivating them to embrace Bolshevik policies such as collectivization and nationalization – did not fully resonate with many French Communists, Moussinac among them. At stake, then, was the issue of cultural translation: what did it mean to take Soviet films out of their specific social context (the USSR as it was being built in the 1920s) and show them to French audiences made up of working- and middle-class spectators? How could a mediator like Moussinac manage the reception of these films in a country that remained far from the Soviet social revolution?

**Les Amis de Spartacus**

Commercial French cinemas screened very few Soviet films before 1929. The general public only had access to those Soviet motion pictures considered safe enough by the censorship board (the Commission de contrôle) because they included no obvious calls for social revolution. The first film from the USSR to be commercially distributed in France was *Polikouchka/Polikushka* by Aleksandr Sanin, made in 1919-1922 and screened in Paris and other French cities in 1924. The Commission’s decision to grant it a visa for public distribution probably had something to do with the film’s cultural cachet. Based on a short story by Tolstoy, *Polikushka*

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13 Some Russian films made before the Bolshevik revolution were screened in France before World War I. Ivan Mosjoukine, a Russian actor who immigrated to France in 1919, became one of the best-known actors in the 1920s.
featured many actors from the prestigious Moscow Art Theatre, which had long been associated with Constantin Stanislavski’s naturalistic acting method.\textsuperscript{14} It was only two years later, in 1926, that another Soviet film, Yuri Tarich’s \textit{Le Tsar Ivan le Terrible/Wings of a Serf}, received the visa for public distribution in France. This historical melodrama set in sixteenth-century Russia shows a serf inventing a flying mechanism – an idea that triggers the wrath of Ivan the Terrible and leads to the serf’s death. Politically-minded spectators could certainly see \textit{Wings of a Serf} and \textit{Polikushka} as supporting the Communist cause because both films depicted the disastrous results of social inequality. Indeed, the French branch of Workers’ International Relief and \textit{L’Humanité} chose \textit{Polikushka} for one of a handful of screenings they organized in 1926 in the working-class neighborhood of Ménilmontant. A prominent member of the PCF, Jacques Duclos, gave a talk at this event, presumably in order to tease out the film’s revolutionary message.\textsuperscript{15} Yet the two motion pictures could also be easily appreciated only for their entertainment value because they followed the standard structure of melodrama.\textsuperscript{16} This was true, Denise Youngblood has argued, even in the USSR, where most spectators still preferred to watch old-fashioned melodramas rather than the agitprop films commissioned by the Soviet government for the supposed enlightenment of the masses.\textsuperscript{17}

In contrast to \textit{Wings of a Serf} and \textit{Polikushka}, the motion pictures of Eisenstein and


\textsuperscript{16} Such is the case of a review by William Bernard written for \textit{La Tribune de Genève} and reprinted in \textit{Cinéa-Ciné pour tous} 1 May 1927: 22-23.

Pudovkin – two directors associated with the so-called Golden Age of Soviet cinema – offered unmistakable paeans to Communism. Several of their best-known films were commissioned by the Soviet government to celebrate key moments in the history of the USSR. \textsuperscript{18} Battleship Potemkin (Eisenstein, 1925) and Mother (Pudovkin, 1926) both depict strikes associated with the social unrest of 1905, which paved the way for the Communists’ seizure of power a decade later during the October Revolution of 1917. This revolution was celebrated through two other films by the same directors: October (Eisenstein, 1928) and The End of Saint Petersburg (Pudovkin, 1927). Since such motion pictures exhorted workers to seize power from bourgeois governments and showed successful revolutionary actions, they were often banned in Western European countries. The many bans against Battleship Potemkin have been very well documented given the film’s iconic status, but the other three motion pictures also raised similar issues for governments wary of Communism. \textsuperscript{19} In France, the Commission de contrôle did not hesitate to ban not only Battleship Potemkin but also Mother, The End of Saint Petersburg, and October. While no records of their decision have been preserved, it is not hard to imagine that, as Jean Bancal has suggested, the Commission invoked the issue of “public order” – the standard justification since its founding during World War I. \textsuperscript{20}

Most journalists and film industry professionals accepted the Commission’s decision as such. At the same time, those who were able to see the banned films abroad – sometimes in the

\textsuperscript{18} Leyda, Kino 193-244.


\textsuperscript{20} Bancal 45; see also Leglise 66-67.
USSR but more often in Germany – were quick to praise them.\textsuperscript{21} One of the few journalists to attack the ban was Moussinac, who harshly criticized the Commission for its inability to appreciate the artistic value of these motion pictures and for its subservience to the right-wing government. Pointing out the Commission’s reactionary attitude was only the first step for the film critic. What was truly necessary and more effective in the long run, he argued, was “to organize spectators” [“organiser les spectateurs”] around a ciné-club that would screen films with “a certain cinematographic interest, films that have been banned by censors or despised by commercial companies” [“un intérêt évident au point de vue cinématographique et que la censure interdit ou que la boutique méprise”].\textsuperscript{22}

Eager to put this idea into practice, Moussinac founded such a club, named Les Amis de Spartacus, in March 1928. He was joined by Jean Lods (a little-known filmmaker and his brother-in-law) and other members of the PCF including the editor-in-chief of \textit{L’Humanité}, Paul Vaillant-Couturier, and the mayor of Ivry-sur-Seine, Georges Marrane. Legally defined as a private association, Les Amis de Spartacus was able to screen films that did not have a visa thanks to a loophole in the French legislation: the Commission and the police only had power over public screenings and could not control private gatherings. From March to October 1928, Les Amis de Spartacus organized screenings at the Casino de Grenelle, an amphitheater owned by the PCF that had been used for political gatherings for several years. As more and more members joined the organization through a national subscription program advertised in \textit{L’Humanité}, Les Amis de Spartacus branched out into the suburbs of Paris and in several cities including Strasbourg, Marseilles, and Lyon. By June, the founders happily announced that the

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\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Cinéa-Ciné pour tous} seems to have published the first article on Potemkin in French, even before Moussinac discussed the film in articles sent to \textit{L’Humanité} from his trip to the USSR in 1927-- Ida Bantiger, “Quelques mots sur Potemkine,” \textit{Cinéa-Ciné pour tous} 15 Oct. 1926: 31-32; excerpts reprinted in \textit{L’Humanité} 21 Oct. 1926: 4.
\textsuperscript{22} Léon Moussinac, “‘Des Trente-deux’ aux ‘Amis de Spartacus,’” \textit{L’Humanité} 10 Mar. 1928: 5.
\end{flushleft}
club had 10,000 members and asked them to encourage their friends to subscribe.\textsuperscript{23} For the fall, the organizers gave wildly varying membership numbers, from 34,000 to 80,000, but even the more modest estimates indicate a huge success for an organization associated with a party as beleaguered as the PCF was at the time.\textsuperscript{24}

However, it should be noted that Les Amis de Spartacus never identified itself as a Communist organization but rather as an association dedicated to “the informational study of French and foreign films” [“l’étude documentaire des films français et étrangers”].\textsuperscript{25} Its advertisements made it clear that the club was open to anyone interested in cinema, calling on “all those, intellectuals and workers, who love the seventh art and see it a means of progress and civilization rather than an ordinary merchandise or a brainwashing mechanism.” [“tous ceux, intellectuels et manuels, qui aiment le septième art, le considèrent comme un outil de progrès et de civilisation et non comme une vulgaire marchandise ou une vaste entreprise d’abrutissement”].\textsuperscript{26} And yet, even if one did not have to be a PCF member to join Les Amis de Spartacus, the link between the ciné-club and the PCF could not be more obvious. Not only were all the founders members of the Party, but the activities of Les Amis de Spartacus were promoted primarily through \textit{L’Humanité} and funded by the Communist bank, la Banque ouvrière et paysanne.\textsuperscript{27} Furthermore, the very name of Spartacus, the leader of rebel slaves, had an evident Communist implication: for example, German Marxist revolutionaries had formed the Spartacus

\textsuperscript{23} “Bien partis!” \textit{Spartacus, bulletin mensuel des Amis de Spartacus} 15 June 1928: 1.
\textsuperscript{25} This phrase was printed on their membership card and used in all advertisements for Les Amis de Spartacus.
\textsuperscript{26} \textit{L’Humanité} 4 Mar. 1928: 4.
League in the mid-1910s and, starting in the late 1920s, the Soviet Union designated the Communist response to the Olympics as Spartakiads. In this context, the club’s attempt to bring together spectators of all social backgrounds was, as scholars have noted, remarkably anachronistic because they were taking place while the PCF remained committed to the doctrine of “class against class,” which saw even the Socialists as enemies. Nevertheless, Lods and Moussinac nostalgically remembered decades later that Les Amis de Spartacus attracted an eclectic audience made up of working- and middle-class spectators of all ages, eager to see quality films not available in commercial movie theaters.

A typical screening organized by Les Amis de Spartacus began with a few short documentaries or newsreels, usually made in the USSR or in Germany. It then continued with the main feature and a lecture given by a Communist activist, usually one of the founding members of the club. During the first month, the main feature was one of the Soviet films officially banned in France (*Battleship Potemkin*, *Mother*, *October*, and *The End of Saint Petersburg*). But in addition to these banned films, Les Amis de Spartacus also showed a range of motion pictures that by then belonged to the standard repertoire of the alternative cinema network. They included Delluc’s *Fièvre/Fever* (1921), Robert Flaherty’s, *Moana, A Romance of the Golden Age* (1925), Mauritz Stiller’s *Sir Arne’s Treasure* (1925), and several Charlie Chaplin films. While these motion pictures had never been officially banned, they were no longer screened in commercial cinemas, thus illustrating a key point made by the organizers of Les Amis de Spartacus: that most distributors and exhibitors only wanted to make a profit and had no interest in showing quality films. This varied selection of films clearly bears the mark of

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28 This point is made by Weber 156-172 and Barnard, “From Impressionism to Communism.”

Moussinac’s taste and suggests his affinity with the Impressionists. And, as we will see later, it also points to a complicated relationship between cinephilia and revolutionary politics.

For the National Police (the Sûreté générale), however, Les Amis de Spartacus was nothing but an attempt at Communist propaganda. As a result, seven months after its foundation, the ciné-club was shut down when the Paris police prefect, following orders from the National Police and the Ministry of Interior, formally prohibited the screening of Eisenstein’s October by this association and threatened the organizers with prison if they did not cease all activities.  

(This police prefect, Jean Chiappe, would go on to become famous for his unwavering support for far right factions and his involvement in the banning of Buñuel’s L’Age d’Or in 1930.) An official statement from the police claimed that Les Amis de Spartacus had broken the law because it was screening films without a visa in a public place, the Casino de Grenelle. The board of L’Humanité immediately replied that, as a private association, Les Amis de Spartacus could legally organize such screenings. But after the initial outraged response from L’Humanité and from several journalists, particularly from the newly-established Revue du cinéma, the organizers gave in and disbanded Les Amis de Spartacus. Their acquiescence may have been connected with the fact that the ban came during a period when many leaders of the PCF were being arrested, making it difficult to defend an association dedicated to cinema while the Party had more pressing issues to attend to.

32 Ibid.
This swift reaction of the police against Les Amis de Spartacus suggests that government officials still understood cinema in terms of imitation, fearing that it could have a direct physical and psychical effect on spectators – a response that went back to the earlier debate about crime films studied in Chapter 1.\footnote{I have not been able to find any police files pertaining to this issue, but general statements from police about Soviet films can be found in newspapers and Bancal 42-50.} Although the threat no longer came from anarchistic criminals like Fantômas and Zigomar, but rather from crowds of workers ready to seize the means of production, government officials continued to make the same assumptions about cinema’s impact. Ironically, their suppositions were not far from the theories developed by Soviet filmmakers, especially Eisenstein, throughout the 1920s.

To explain the effect of cinema on spectators, Eisenstein did not draw on psychology, which he and other Soviet artists perceived as bourgeois; instead, he turned to Pavlov’s behaviorist theories.\footnote{My explanation of Eisenstein’s theories draws on Jacques Aumont, \textit{Montage Eisenstein} (Paris: Albatros, 1979), David Bordwell, \textit{The Cinema of Eisenstein} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), and Greg M. Smith, “Moving Explosions: Metaphors of Emotion in Sergei Eisenstein’s Writings,” \textit{Quarterly Review of Film and Video} 21.4 (2004): 303-315.} Although the filmmaker frequently revised his theories, one of his basic assumptions was that the film viewer had a tendency to mimic the action seen on screen. This led to a motor reaction, which in turn triggered emotion. Eisenstein’s oft-repeated goal was to turn this biological imitative impulse into a tool for “reforging” the psyche of the spectator by using a specific type of montage, which he regularly redefined. What was initially a montage of attractions (for his first films, \textit{Strike} and \textit{Battleship Potemkin}) became intellectual montage (for \textit{October}) and dialectical montage (for his other films, especially for his projected adaptation of Marx’s \textit{Capital}).\footnote{The fundamental texts for his theory are “The Montage of Film Attractions” (1924); “The Problem of Materialist Approach to Form” (1925); “The Dramaturgy of Film Form (The Dialectical Approach to Film Form)” (1929) all translated in \textit{Selected Works}, vol. 1, ed. and trans. Richard Taylor (London: BFI; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988) 39-58, 59-64, 151-160. Aumont discusses these theories in his influential \textit{Montage Eisenstein}.}
Pudovkin and Dziga Vertov, the other influential Soviet directors, did not fully subscribe to Eisenstein’s theories – Pudovkin preferred to mix continuity editing and dialectical montage, whereas Vertov only made nonfiction films, dismissing fiction as bourgeois artifice. But they all generally agreed that cinema had a very specific political purpose in the USSR: to encourage viewers to participate in the social revolution initiated by the Bolsheviks and teach them the basics of dialectical materialism. Their implied audience was what we might call the new Soviet spectator – one that subscribed to the tenets of the Bolshevik revolution regardless of his or her initial social background. Moreover, all three directors agreed that form and content had to work together. In every film they searched for new, experimental ways of influencing spectators’ behavior in order to construct a sense of social solidarity. Their work had direct political implications in the USSR insofar as the Soviet government supported and even sponsored their avant-garde experiments until the late 1920s and early 1930s, when Stalin’s new cultural policy redefined the cinematographic industry, condemning avant-garde formalism and only accepting socialist realist films.

While the theories of Soviet filmmakers were more intricate than the assumptions made by the French police and the Commission de contrôle, which still drew on Le Bon’s crowd psychology, they all shared a belief in the extraordinary ability of cinema to trigger bodily responses. By contrast, the organizers of Les Amis de Spartacus never defined cinema’s impact in these terms, although they, especially Moussinac, had some knowledge of Eisenstein’s theories. To be sure, only a few of Eisenstein’s texts, and not the most complex, had been

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38 Historians have demonstrated that this ideal implied audience was far from the real one. See especially Youngblood; Kenez; Alexandre Sumpf, “Le Public soviétique et Octobre d’Eisenstein: enquête sur une enquête,” *1895 42* (2004): 5-34.
translated into French at the time.\textsuperscript{39} But Moussinac and Eisenstein were life-long friends, who frequently corresponded and met several times both in Europe and the USSR, which suggests that Moussinac must have been familiar with the director’s theoretical approach (Figure 5.1).\textsuperscript{40} Nevertheless, in \textit{Le Cinéma soviétique}, Moussinac offered only a brief overview of Eisenstein’s theory of cinema, preferring to focus on the emancipatory message of his films. At no point did Moussinac discuss what scholars now consider to be a crucial tension between Eisenstein’s theory and his practice, a contradiction which, writes Jonathan Beller, comes from the fact that whereas Eisenstein’s films aim to show how workers can be emancipated, his texts work in the opposite direction, amounting to a “calculated orchestration of the audience’s emotions and activities.”\textsuperscript{41} Eisenstein’s visit to France in 1930 (discussed further below) gave the French a first glimpse of his complex theoretical system with its complicated political and aesthetic underpinnings. But it was not until the late 1960s that all of Eisenstein’s texts became available in French, thanks to a massive translation project undertaken by \textit{Cahiers du cinéma}, and that film critics and directors began to engage with them.\textsuperscript{42}

\textbf{Revolutionary Politics and Cinephilia}

If the organizers of Les Amis de Spartacus did not subscribe to Soviet theories of spectatorship, how exactly did they imagine and address viewers? It was Moussinac’s connection


with the Impressionists, I would argue, that ultimately prevailed. As Timothy Barnard has pointed out, Moussinac and the Impressionist directors all believed in “the unique formal properties of the medium” that gave cinema “transformative powers.”43 Moreover, Moussinac and Delluc were high school classmates who remained good friends as they began to publish in the same cultural magazines and make similar arguments about the aesthetic value of cinema. Once Delluc became a filmmaker, he also gave Moussinac a small acting part in Fièvre (1921), where he played a sailor.44

Beyond these anecdotal details, Moussinac’s definition of the role of Les Amis de Spartacus suggests that he implicitly subscribed to the Impressionists’ pedagogical project. Like them, he assumed that the best films provoked a specifically cinematic emotion, and one of his main tasks as a critic involved helping spectators to understand cinema in such terms without imposing any strict interpretations. This is why Les Amis de Spartacus screened not only Soviet films but also classics of ciné-club repertoire. An article explaining the choice of two Swedish films (Stiller’s Sir Arne’s Treasure/Le Trésor d’Arne and Victor Sjöström’s The Outlaw and His Wife/Les Proscrits) claimed that

By presenting these two capital works of Swedish cinema, Les Amis de Spartacus accomplishes one of its goals, a major goal in fact: the education and cinematographic initiation of the audience.

Indeed, if the spectator is not well-educated enough to respond to the value, the quality, and the nuances of a film like Sir Arne’s Treasure or The Outlaw and His Wife by Sjöström, then it is impossible to grasp and to understand the many

43 Barnard, “From Impressionism to Communism.”

44 This seems to have been Moussinac’s only foray into acting if we do not count his role as D’Artagnan in a short film jokingly shot by Eisenstein at the La Sarraz Conference (now lost).
significant details of works that are higher and closer to cinema, such as Pudovkin’s films. In that case, the spectator will only understand the most basic elements and the rough form of these films without truly experiencing their power and spirit.

[En présentant ces deux œuvres capitales du cinéma suédois, les Amis de Spartacus remplissent un de leurs buts, et un but capital, celui de l’éducation et de l’initiation cinématographique du public.

En effet, si le spectateur n’est pas encore assez éduqué pour rester sensible à la valeur d’un film comme le Trésor d’Arne ou les Proscrits, de Sjöström à sa qualité de nuances, il lui est impossible de saisir et de comprendre, par exemple, mille détails significatifs de certaines œuvres plus hautes et plus proches du cinéma, tels les films de Poudovkine. Il n’en comprendra que l’aspect le plus brutal, la forme la plus grossière, sans en vivre profondément et réellement la puissance et l’esprit.]

By exposing spectators to a wide variety of what they deemed “quality” films, the organizers of Les Amis de Spartacus also worked toward an explicit social revolutionary goal. They assumed that viewers would learn to reject all productions that were made only for a profit and thus help save the medium of cinema from the hands of capitalist producers, distributors, and exhibitors (Figure 5.2). The endpoint thus reflected a Communist agenda insofar as it could have brought about a radical change in the capitalist system of production. Yet the strategy devised for getting there was heavily influenced by the Impressionists’ understanding of spectatorship – namely, the idea that viewers had to learn how to experience cinema in its specificity.

45 “Films,” L’Humanité 30 June 1928: 4. The article is unsigned but the style and arguments sound very much like Moussinac.
To buttress this idea, Moussinac spent his first year at *L’Humanité* offering readers a veritable glossary of cinematic terms, including quotations about the role of superimpositions, visual deformations, and *photogénie*. The *Bulletin* of Les Amis de Spartacus published similar explanations as well as excerpts from Delluc and Epstein.\(^{46}\) In both contexts, readers were encouraged to go see both the Impressionists’ newest films and their old motion pictures (when they were shown in specialized cinemas) because, the critic argued, their work remained exemplary.\(^{47}\) Gance was the only one who did not have his full support because, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the film critic strongly disliked the right-wing populism evidenced by *Napoléon*. Nevertheless, Moussinac still appreciated the filmmaker’s stylistic experiments. In fact, his book *Le Cinéma soviétique*, written before *Napoléon*’s release, is littered with comparisons between Gance and the Soviet directors, particularly with Eisenstein. Making no distinction between Gance’s rapid montage and Eisenstein’s intellectual montage, Moussinac noted that the two filmmakers have a lot in common, but also criticized Gance for his inability to cut unnecessary scenes and “rein in” [“domine”] his motion pictures.\(^{48}\)

Moussinac’s peculiar stance – his interest in both the revolutionary films of Soviet directors and the work of the Impressionists – repeatedly came under attack from two different groups: Surrealist artists and prominent cultural activists involved in the alternative cinema network. It was Jean Tedesco in particular who most vehemently disagreed with the use of a ciné-club for political purposes. As the owner of the first specialized cinema, the Vieux-}

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\(^{46}\) For example, Delluc’s take on *photogénie* in *Spartacus, bulletin mensuel des Amis de Spartacus* June 15 1928: 4 and a quotation from Epstein in the same issue 5.

\(^{47}\) There is a discussion of L’Herbier and Epstein’s latest films (*L’Argent* and *La Chute de la Maison Usher*) in *Spartacus, bulletin mensuel des Amis de Spartacus* 15 May 1928: 3. In *L’Humanité* 31 Dec. 1927: 5 Moussinac recommends Epstein’s *La glace à trois faces*; in *L’Humanité* 7 Jan. 1928: 4 he praises Epstein’s *Six et demi-onze*; and in *L’Humanité* 30 Nov. 1928: 4 he notes his appreciation for Dulac’s films in general, lamenting that she is out of work.

Colombier, and of the magazine *Cinéa-Ciné pour tous*, Tedesco had often relied on Moussinac’s collaboration. When Les Amis de Spartacus became popular, Tedesco stated that he appreciated all actions in favor of films that had been banned, but also accused the club of “Bolshevist propaganda”: “We defend the freedom of filmed thought but we will not champion any cause other than that of cinema.” [“Nous défendons la liberté de la pensée filmée, mais nous ne serons pas les champions d’aucune autre cause que celle du cinéma.”].

The organizers of Les Amis de Spartacus quickly retorted that “the cause of cinema” was indelibly connected with politics because cinema could not be separated from the flow of capital.

Their reply did little to convince Tedesco. A few months later, he brought up the same issue, this time in connection with the restoration of Delluc’s *Fièvre*. As copies of this film became increasingly difficult to find, several cinephiles who admired Delluc’s work asked Moussinac to help them acquire the deteriorated negative, restore it, and distribute it through the alternative cinema network. Moussinac agreed but went through Les Amis de Spartacus rather than creating a new association called Les Amis de Delluc as the others had suggested. This decision had a practical impact: it meant that the association could decide whether it asked for a fee when lending the restored copy. The organizers of Les Amis de Spartacus chose to lend *Fièvre* for free to ciné-clubs because they were not making a profit, but to charge specialized cinemas, which in fact operated as commercial entities. This led to a furious attack against Moussinac in the pages of *Cinéa-Ciné pour tous*, as directors of specialized cinemas, including Tedesco, accused him of monopolizing Delluc’s work.

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49 Spartacus, bulletin mensuel des Amis de Spartacus 15 June 1928: 3.
50 Ibid.
51 According to Gauthier 228-229, the restoration of *Fièvre* shows that cultural activists were beginning to understand the need to generate institutional support for the preservation of old films.
52 The issue was brought up by Les Amis de Louis Delluc in “Echos et communiqués,” *Cinéa-Ciné pour tous* 15
had no choice but to use funds from Les Amis de Spartacus; otherwise, no one would have been willing to pay for the film’s restoration.53

Beyond the logistics of this acquisition and the ensuing squabble, the fact that Les Amis de Spartacus owned a copy of *Fièvre* and screened it for its members shows the extent of this association’s pedagogical program. As the founders of Les Amis often stated, one of their most important tasks was to give their audience access to films they considered fundamental to the artistic development of cinema. *Fièvre* accomplished this because it was one of the first Impressionist films and it imaginatively reworked motifs from Griffith’s classic *Broken Blossoms.*54 What is more, the plot was also appropriate for the political goals of the club implied in its affiliation with the PCF. Like other early Impressionist films, *Fièvre* focuses on working-class characters. Set in a bar on the Marseilles waterfront, it follows the interaction between a group of sailors returning from a trip in the East and the locals, particularly the couple who owns a rundown bar. Ève Francis stars as the owner’s wife and a sailor’s mistress – an object of desire that triggers a fight leading to the death of a sailor. The plot attracted the attention of the Commission de contrôle, which asked Delluc to change the title (originally *La Boue/Mud*) and to cut several violent scenes, particularly the killing of a character at the end (Figure 5.3). This offers yet another reason why *Fièvre* was appropriate for Les Amis de Spartacus since the organization made it a point to attack the interference of the Commission de contrôle.

Those who critiqued Moussinac for having bought *Fièvre* for Les Amis de Spartacus also claimed that he was appropriating Delluc’s memory and using it for his own political purposes. Moussinac, however, attempted to walk a very fine line, as evidenced in this biographical note he

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54 This comparison with Griffith was made in the 1920s by reviewers, including Moussinac in *Naissance du cinéma,* and it has been more fully developed by Andrew, *Mists of Regret* 36-40.
Louis Delluc was not a revolutionary but, let us say it again, he was the first writer and filmmaker who announced the great destiny of a new mode of expression that was just coming into being. He created the first independent and assertive film criticism. He never tired of fighting against those who misunderstood cinema and of denouncing film merchants.

Even though Moussinac carefully notes that Delluc was never “a revolutionary” – that is to say, he never expressed his support for the Communist idea of social revolution – he insists that Delluc’s actions made it clear he abhorred the influence of capitalism on cinema. In other articles from L’Humanité and the Bulletin of Les Amis de Spartacus, Moussinac uses a similar strategy with L’Herbier, Dulac, and Epstein. He stops short of presenting them as Communist sympathizers but suggests their outlook is not very different because they too find that the film industry is controlled by companies that only want to make a profit. Yet, as noted in the previous chapter, the Impressionists, especially Dulac, had a more complicated understanding of this dynamic, as expressed by the triad avant-garde/commercial/mercantile, in which the first two

56 In the 1930s Delluc became something of a patron saint of independent film critics and directors. In 1937, an association of independent film critics established the Prix Louis Delluc for the best French film of the year. The first prize went to Renoir’s Les Bas-fonds. Abel discusses the political implications of this prize in French Film Theory and Criticism, vol. 2 150.
57 For instance, in Spartacus, bulletin mensuel des Amis de Spartacus 15 May 1928: 1, and 15 June 1928: 5.
terms could happily coexist and support each other, whereas the third was indeed presented as the enemy of quality cinema. It is also relevant here that Dulac was the only Impressionist who joined a party (in 1925). But it was the Socialist Party rather than the PCF, which suggests that, although she was socially progressive, she had a more moderate view than Moussinac and his fellow Communists.

This is not to say, however, that all Communists agreed with Moussinac’s approach. On the contrary, the Surrealists – several of whom were card-carrying members of the PCF – critiqued Moussinac in no uncertain terms. Early in 1928, two months before the foundation of Les Amis de Spartacus, Moussinac organized a private screening of Pudovkin’s *Mother* for the Ciné-Club de France, a professional association whose members were affiliated with the film industry. This screening angered the Surrealists, who sent Moussinac an outraged letter, accusing him of stripping the Soviet film of its charged political meaning by presenting it merely as a remarkable work of art instead of insisting on its revolutionary ethos:

> We think you have every reason to be happy about the conditions in which this screening took place, in front of an audience made up of bourgeois scoundrels. Your initiative and your collaboration in such an event seem to us to be a dirty trick both from the point of view of the execution, which disgusted the most impassive, the most patient, and the most scornful among us, and from a revolutionary point of view, more extra-cinematographic than your job at *L’Humanité* would allow you to know (we mean from a Communist point of view).

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[Vous avez tout lieu d’être satisfait, pensons-nous, des conditions dans lesquelles cette présentation, devant un public de crapules bourgeoises, a eu lieu. Tant du point de vue de l’exécution de cette entreprise, à dégouter les plus impassibles, les plus patients, les plus méprisants d’entre nous, que du point de vue révolutionnaire, plus extra-cinématographique que vos fonctions à L’Humanité vous le laissent supposer (nous voulons dire au point de vue communiste), votre initiative et votre collaboration en pareille matière nous ont fait l’aspect d’une parfaite saloperie.].

The Surrealists’ stance was thus the opposite of Tedesco’s. Rather than accusing Moussinac of using apolitical films for political purposes, they confronted him for screening a political film for an audience made up of spectators who, the Surrealists assumed, had no interest in revolutionary action.

Moussinac brushed off these accusations, sending the Surrealists a curt letter in which he derided their “lack of character” [“absence de caractère”]. He implicitly gave a better answer when he screened Mother again, this time for Les Amis de Spartacus. I have not been able to find any proof that the Surrealists attended the screenings of Les Amis de Spartacus and it is hard to hazard a guess given their complicated relationship with the PCF. What is more relevant here, however, is how Moussinac presented Mother and other Soviet films for Les Amis de Spartacus.

The association’s Bulletin published a lecture Moussinac had given at the Sorbonne for a research group (le Groupe d’études philosophiques et scientifiques) where he rehashed many of

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59 The letters in the Fonds Moussinac, Département des Arts du Spectacles, Bibliothèque nationale de France, 4°-COL-10/38 (16), Deux lettres signées André Breton, Marcel Noll, Jacques Baron, Jacques Prévert, Yves Tanguy, Pierre Unik, Jacques-André Boiffard, Marcel Duhamel, Benjamin Péret, Louis Aragon, Paul Eluard, Antonin Artaud, Roger Vitrac et Raymond Queneau adressées à Léon Moussinac à propos de la projection de La Mère à la Comédie des Champs Elysées, Paris, 16 et 26 janvier 1928.

60 Fonds Moussinac, 4°-COL-10/38 (17), Réponse de Léon Moussinac à la lettre du 16 janvier 1928, Paris, 20 janvier 1928.
the ideas presented in his book on Soviet cinema. This in itself already suggests that Moussinac
never tailored his message to his audience. His take on Soviet films and their role remained the
same whether he addressed university students or an eclectic audience that included middle- and
working-class spectators.

In his discussions of *Mother*, Moussinac always emphasized the same elements, focusing
more on the director’s aesthetic choices than on the political implications of the film. Pudovkin’s
work was important for him especially because he found a certain balance that was missing from
Eisenstein’s or Griffith’s work. With Pudovkin there was “always an equilibrium, a sense of
proportions, a kind of strangely alive neoclassicism” [“toujours l’équilibre, le sens des
proportions, une sorte de néoclassicisme étrangement vivant”].  The only mention of politics
comes at the very end of the article, and even there it is not very explicit:

Pudovkin’s art deftly moves us, rekindles in us the eternals meditations of man,
extends our thoughts, justifies our revolts and appeals to what he considers to be
the most pure in us, to the only forces we dominate.

[L’art de Poudovkine nous émeut avec science, ravive en nous les éternelles
méditations de l’homme, prolonge nos pensées, justifie nos révoltes et fait appel à
ce qu’il estime le plus pur de nous-mêmes, aux seules forces que nous
dominons.].  

The idea of “revolt” is present in this passage, as one would expect from a Communist critic
talking about a Soviet film, but rather than emphasizing it, Moussinac inserts it into a broader
humanist argument about the effect of Pudovkin’s film on spectators. His main point here is less

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61 Léon Moussinac, “Sur Poudovkine, Le réalisateur du Film La Mère,” *Spartacus*, bulletin mensuel des Amis de
*Spartacus* 15 Apr. 1928: 3. He made similar arguments *Le Cinéma soviétique* 104-107 and in “A propos du film de

about radical social change than about a supposed universal response provoked by a skillful artist.

From this point of view, the Surrealists’ critique was correct – Moussinac’s enthusiastic descriptions of Soviet films seem to have convinced intellectuals and journalists with no Communist inclinations that they should pay more attention to the work of an Eisenstein and a Pudovkin. When the editor of the magazine *Cinéma-Spectacles*, Hubert Revol, asked a number of journalists and cultural organizers for their opinion on the new Soviet cinema, even those who did not agree with the Communist agenda noted their appreciation of Soviet directors and often praised Moussinac for having brought them to France. At the same time, Moussinac persistently argued that workers should have access to quality motion pictures rather than the standard commercial fare found in neighborhood movie theaters. For a brief period, Les Amis de Spartacus managed to bring together a heterogeneous audience made up of working- and middle-class spectators in their appreciation of cinema. I do not mean to overemphasize the impact of Les Amis de Spartacus, since the ciné-club was so short-lived. But the very fact that it made available banned Soviet films and juxtaposed them to mainstays of the ciné-club circuit suggests that their ideal Communist spectator had a sophisticated understanding of cinematic language. If this spectator could be moved to political action, it was not through bodily reflexes, as Eisenstein had it, but rather through aesthetic appreciation.

**Depoliticizing Soviet Films**

The dissolution of Les Amis de Spartacus did not mean that Soviet films were no longer available in France. It did, however, atomize the eclectic audience of this mass ciné-club. Now

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63 The answers to his survey were published in *Cinéma-Spectacles* from 25 July 1928 to 26 Jan. 1929.
one could watch Soviet films in smaller ciné-clubs with like-minded cinephiles or go to the irregular screenings organized by the cooperative La Bellevilloise for its working-class members. While the Soviet motion pictures shown by Les Amis de Spartacus remained banned well into the 1930s or even later, a handful of new Soviet films were granted a visa for public distribution in 1929: Neiges sanglantes/The Club of the Big Deed (Grigori Kozintsev and Leonid Trauberg, 1927), Volga en feu/The Capitan’s Daughter (Yuri Tarich, 1928), Tempête sur l’Asie/Storm over Asia (Pudovkin, 1928), and Le Village du péché/Women of Ryazan (Olga Preobrajenskaia, 1927). The lack of documents from the Commission de contrôle makes it impossible to know why these particular films were considered safe enough for public distribution, but reviewers often praised the distributors, a Franco-Russian couple who owned Pax Film, for their ability to negotiate with the Commission and their willingness to accept some cuts and reediting.

Another possible explanation for the Commission’s attitude toward these motion pictures is that, like the earlier Wings of a Serf and Polikushka, they too lent themselves to apolitical interpretations. The Club of the Big Deed and The Capitan’s Daughter were both historical reconstructions that took place in tsarist Russia and made no direct apology for the Bolshevik government. As noted in Chapter 3, even the Catholic Cinematographic Committee considered these two films safe enough to recommend them for family viewing. The other two films that received the visa for distribution dealt with more recent events, but the standard synopses used in advertisements made them sound innocuous. According to them, Storm over Asia told the story of a young Mongol herdsman, while Women of Ryazan presented a portrait of a Russian village

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64 This cooperative’s history and interest in cinema are traced in Jean-Jacques Meusy, ed., La Bellevilloise: une page de l’histoire de la coopération et du mouvement ouvrier français (Paris: Créaphis, 2001) 171-197.

65 To avoid any confusion, I am using here the standard French and English titles, even when they do not correspond to each other or to the original Russian title.
during World War I. At first glance, these films would seem less partisan than the four Soviet motion pictures banned by the Commission and screened by Les Amis de Spartacus (*Battleship Potemkin, Mother, October*, and *The End of Saint Petersburg*), which had all been commissioned by the Soviet government to enshrine historical events crucial to the foundation of the USSR. And yet, there was much more to *Storm over Asia* and *Women of Ryazan* even after cuts and a few new intertitles.

In addition to describing life in a Russian village during the war, *Women of Ryazan* explicitly focuses on the exploitation of women. One of the main characters, Anna, is raped by her father-in-law, while her husband is away at war. Just as she gives birth to her father-in-law’s child, the husband returns home. Desperate and ostracized by everyone, Anna commits suicide. After her death, Anna’s child is raised by her sister-in-law, Vassilisa, a strong woman who marries her lover despite her father’s opposition. When the film was released, most Soviet commentators understood it as a feminist work. Not only was it made by a woman at a time when this was rare, but it exposed the oppression of women before the Bolshevik revolution and implicitly praised the work done since the war for the emancipation of women.\(^{66}\) If Anna was the victim of the backward tsarist regime that did not educate its citizens, Vassilisa’s resilience designated her as an example of the new Soviet woman – assertive and equal to men rather than exploited by them as Anna had been.\(^{67}\)

*Storm over Asia* also had a political message: it showed the devastation of colonial rule and denounced Western imperialism, thus echoing one of the key political causes of the

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\(^{67}\) Although she does not discuss *Women of Ryazan*, Judith Mayne provides an important overview of the status of Soviet women and their complicate representations in classical Soviet films in *Kino and the Woman Question: Feminism and Soviet Silent Film* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1989).
Comintern in the 1920s. The French Commission de contrôle believed it could erase this message by having all intertitles rewritten so that the British colonizers would be presented as the Tsarist army. This decision led to a rather strange version of the film, in which actors wearing the uniform of the British army were simply called “White Russians.” Nevertheless, this reediting did little to alter the film’s basic plot. The main character, a young Mongol named Bair, joins the Soviet resistance against the British (in the original)/White Russians (in the French version) after they cheated him during a transaction. When the invaders catch him, they find out that he is in fact a descendant of Genghis Khan and decide to install him as a puppet leader. In the end, the young man turns out to be more than a puppet as he leads a rebellion against the occupiers, chasing them out of the country. Storm over Asia thus remains an explicitly revolutionary film, despite the Commission’s efforts to change the identity of the invaders.

French commentators, however, rarely picked up on these political issues. Some reviewers made fun of the cuts requested by the Commission, noting that even the most naïve spectators still recognized the uniforms of the British in Storm over Asia although they had been given Russian names. But rather than engaging in a critique or even a more thorough discussion of the practices of the Commission, these reviewers only discussed the “atmosphere” of the films. Most of them described both Storm over Asia and Women of Ryazan as ethnographic works that greatly benefited from the Soviet mastery of cinematographic technique, especially savvy lighting and editing. From this perspective, Storm over Asia was first and foremost a beautifully filmed, semi-documentary view of a Mongol tribe. To emphasize this

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70 One exception was Moussinac, who severely criticized the Commission’s request in “Censure et ordre public, Le camouflage des films soviétiques,” L’Humanité 27 Apr. 1929: 5.
point, reviewers routinely compared it with Flaherty’s *Nanouk* and *Moana* because, like them, it was filmed on location and relied mostly on non-professional actors (with the notable exception of the lead actor, Valéry Inkijinoff). In a similar vein, French journalists saw *Women of Ryazan* as an accurate depiction of the Russian countryside, an idea supported by the French posters for this film (Figure 5.4). They also often cited the long shots of the village as the film’s best scenes while glossing over Anna’s horrendous death.

By focusing only on the ethnographic value of these motion pictures, most reviewers downplayed the filmmakers’ political commitment. Those who noted that the films were coming from the USSR quickly added that all spectators, including those with no Communist inclinations, would find them interesting. Two somewhat incongruous reasons were offered for this: the films showed areas and communities rarely seen on the screen (the ethnographic aspect) but they also depicted feelings and situations which everyone could understand. Writing about *Women of Ryazan*, a journalist described it as

> a very instructive study of the customs of Russian peasants. First of all, because it is full of local color, and also because we learn that the moral principles and the prejudices of the Russian populace were not at all different from those of other European countries, at least not from 1914 until 1918. This is why *Women of Ryazan* should be successful with the French audience: they won’t find any way of thinking or seeing that won’t seem familiar.

[une étude des mœurs paysannes russes des plus instructives. D’abord, parce que cela est plein de couleur locale, ensuite parce que nous y apprenons que les principes et préjugés moraux de la plèbe russe ne différaient guère de ceux des

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71 For comparisons with *Nanouk*, see R.S. *Cinéma-Spectacles* 22-30 June 1929: 2.

autres pays européens, tout au moins de 1914 au 1918. Et voilà pourquoi *Le Village du Péché* doit remporter un bon succès auprès du public français : il ne trouvera là aucune façon de penser et de sentir qui ne lui soit familière.].

The quick insertion of dates ("at least not from 1914 until 1918") is the only acknowledgment that something changed in Russia after World War I and that the new order might indeed seem unfamiliar to French audiences. In a similar vein, a review published in the influential *Le Temps*, claimed that it was not hard to admire *Women of Ryazan* precisely because, unlike Eisenstein’s films, it had no propagandistic intentions; instead, all it did was to present the “primitive existence and the strict conventions of Russian peasants” [“l’existence primitive et tout empêtrée de conventions strictes de la vie paysanne russe”].

This idea was pushed further by reviewers for the cultural magazines *Les Nouvelles littéraires* and *L’Art vivant* who defended the nineteenth-century concept of art for art’s sake and extended it to cinema. As a result, they could not imagine that Soviet filmmakers could make remarkable films while also being committed to the Communist cause. Reviewers writing in these magazines, such as Alexandre Arnoux and André Levinson, insisted that Pudovkin only pretended to agree with Soviet politics so that he could continue to work. According to them, if his film included a revolutionary message, it could safely be ignored because Pudovkin did nothing but pay lip service to the Bolsheviks. What truly mattered for these critics was that the filmmaker offered new experiments with lighting and editing, thus contributing to the art of cinema.

Always vigilant, Moussinac fought back against such interpretations. In a response to

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reviews of *Storm over Asia*, he revisited a point he had already made in *Le Cinéma soviétique* and in numerous articles: that the Soviet directors could never have made films of such high artistic quality in any other country because they would have had to conform to the pressures of the market.\(^\text{76}\) To support this argument, he offered a quotation from an interview with Eisenstein conducted in 1927 in which the filmmaker stated that the goal of any artist should be precisely to “express their era” [“exprimer leur époque”].\(^\text{77}\) These directors were, according to Moussinac, the exclusive product of the Bolshevik Revolution – had they been living in a capitalist country, they would have been forced to make commercial blockbusters or work in advertisement.\(^\text{78}\) Eisenstein’s unsuccessful attempts to shoot a film in the United States in the early 1930s would indeed prove Moussinac right.\(^\text{79}\) But this hypothetical argument was complicated by a crucial shift in film policy in the USSR after 1928. As mentioned above, during Stalin’s “cultural revolution,” Party officials turned against the avant-garde films of Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Vertov and their followers because they were “too experimental” for the masses; instead, the Party began to promote socialist realism as the official artistic doctrine.\(^\text{80}\) The irony of Moussinac’s stance, then, is that even as he was defending the work of these Soviet directors and chastising the French for not being able to understand them both artistically and politically, the same directors were coming under attack in their own country. To be fair though, it is possible that at the time Moussinac was not yet aware of the change of politics in the USSR. He would in fact become much more critical of Stalin’s new policy in the early 1930s as the effects of this

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\(^\text{77}\) Moussinac, *Le Cinéma soviétique* 97-98.

\(^\text{78}\) Moussinac, “Tempête sur l’Asie de Poudovkine.”

\(^\text{79}\) Most books on Eisenstein discuss this U.S. trip; for Moussinac’s take and the letters he received from Eisenstein while the director was in the U.S. see Moussinac, *Sergei Michailovitch Eisenstein* 17-86 and 120-126.

insistence on socialist realism were beginning to be felt.\textsuperscript{81}

While Moussinac continued to look for new ways to reach a wide audience, he argued that the commercialization of films from the USSR with so many cuts and changes could not serve this purpose because it constituted a perverse use of Soviet cinema for the benefit of capitalist companies.\textsuperscript{82} His temporary solution to this issue was to invite Soviet filmmakers to France to discuss their work. By exposing more journalists and cinephiles to their theories, the film critic hoped to gain more supporters for the cause he had been advocating since the creation of Les Amis de Spartacus. Pudovkin’s plans to visit never materialized, but Dziga Vertov and Eisenstein visited France in quick succession, the former in 1929 and the latter in 1930.

**Vertov and Eisenstein Go to Paris**

In July 1929, Dziga Vertov gave a talk at the specialized cinema Studio 28 in Paris. The main organizer of this event was La Ligue du Noir et Blanc, a newly founded ciné-club that aimed to continue the work of Les Amis de Spartacus but confined it to the ciné-club circuit, screening films only in specialized cinemas rather than launching a national subscription. Among the supporters of La Ligue du Noir et Blanc were Moussinac and other prominent figures of the Ciné-Club Federation, including Germaine Dulac. This lecture and the screening that followed it constituted Vertov’s first introduction to the French public. Compared to the other Soviet directors, he was little-known in France. Les Amis de Spartacus had planned to show some of his films but they did not have a chance to do so before being shut down.\textsuperscript{83} His name usually came

\textsuperscript{81} In 1933 Moussinac wrote an article for the Soviet newspaper *Pravda* criticizing the recent actions of Soviet film professionals, but the newspaper declined to print it. It was eventually published in France as “Où en est le cinéma soviétique?” *Pour vous* 4 Apr. 1935: 8-10. The manuscript is in Fonds Moussinac, 4°-COL-10/37 (16).


\textsuperscript{83} *L’Humanité* 21 Sept. 1928: 4 published a list of films that were to be shown by Les Amis de Spartacus. It included Vertov’s *Onzième Année*.
up in articles on Soviet cinema as one of the best directors working in the USSR, but Moussinac’s *Le Cinéma soviétique* offered the only (very brief) discussion of his theories.\(^8^4\)

Vertov’s visit is not well-documented, especially when compared with Eisenstein’s trip a year later. The difference might have come from their opposing personalities. During his stay in France, Eisenstein met with a number of artists, from Gance to Colette, and visited a variety of sites including working-class neighborhoods, cathedrals, and the South of France.\(^8^5\) Vertov preferred the company of his brother, Boris Kaufman, who was living in Paris and would go on to be Jean Vigo’s cameraman for, among others, *A Propos de Nice* (1930) – a biting social documentary that focused, like Vertov’s *A Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), on the daily rhythm of city life.\(^8^6\) Moreover, while Eisenstein bragged about his mastery of French jargon and happily responded to all questions, Vertov seemed shy about public speaking.

Vertov’s talk at Studio 28 was followed by a screening of excerpts from *Onzième Année/The Eleventh Year* (1928) and the whole *L’homme à l’appareil de prises de vues/Man with a Movie Camera* (1929). Both documentaries illustrated his theory that the camera functions as an objective mechanism (the Kino-Eye), which has the power to perceive more than the fallible human eye and, as he famously put it, “to catch life unawares” (Figure 5.5).\(^8^7\) The Kino-Eye was a concept he had been developing since the Bolshevik Revolution with his group of assistants. As Vertov explained:

> The past of the school of the Kino-Eye is a fierce battle to change the course of

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\(^8^5\) The trip is recounted by Eisenstein in “Beyond the Stars: The Memoirs of Sergei Eisenstein,” *Selected Works*, vol. 4 188-195 and 230-236.

\(^8^6\) It is unclear to what extent Boris Kaufman contributed to the dissemination of his brother’s films and theories in France, but he certainly mediated between the director and his French hosts during Dziga Vertov’s visit.

world cinema, to impose on all cinematographic production the predominance of a film in which there is no ‘acting’ (...), to substitute the documentary to ‘staging,’ and to leave behind the arena of theater so as to enter into the arena of life.

[Le passé de l’école du Ciné-Œil, c’est une lutte acharné pour modifier le cours de la cinématographie mondiale, pour imposer dans toute la production cinématique la prépondérance du film où il n’y a pas de ‘jeu’ (...); pour substituer à la ‘mise en scène’ le documentaire, pour sortir de l’arène du théâtre et entrer dans l’arène de la vie.].

The filmmaker also made a passionate plea for the expansion of his theory of the Kino-Eye throughout the Western world but, perhaps because he was mindful of the French police, he stopped short of explaining what this expansion would mean in political terms. His lecture, however, included a typical attack on bourgeois “artifice” and left no doubts about the director’s commitment to the principles of Marxist-Leninist doctrine.

The event drew the attention of the French press but received only lukewarm reviews. One journalist acknowledged that *Man with a Movie Camera* had many qualities but rather than expanding on this, he quickly added that the film also had “an abscess, a delirium of technique that [was] tiresome, offer[ed] nothing new, and turn[ed] out to be completely useless” [“un abcès, un délire de technique qui fatigue et, n’offrant aucune nouveauté s’avère, en fin de compte, parfaitement inutile”]. Similarly, J. Bernard Brunius, a critic affiliated with the Surrealists who was writing for the increasingly influential magazine *Revue du cinéma,*

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88 Excerpts from this talk were published in “L’Ecole du Ciné-Œil,” *L’Humanité* 27 July 1929: 5.
89 A rare enthusiastic review was written by Boisyvon, “Ce que l’on peut espérer du Cinéma Œil,” *L’Intransigeant,* 3 Aug. 1929: 4.
contrasted the “lyricism” [“le lyrisme”] of Flaherty’s documentaries to Vertov’s “plodding algebra” [“l’algèbre laborieuse”] and concluded that the Soviet filmmaker was trying too hard to give Marxist-Leninist lessons. Another fierce critique came from Emile Vuillermoz, who noted that “This fantastically puerile presentation show[ed] an endearing ignorance and an insufferable vanity.” [“Cet exposé d’une puérilité invraisemblable révèle une ignorance attendrissante ou une insupportable vanité.”]. He then went on to admit that Vertov had a certain talent, but it was only apparent when he broke his own rules, for example when he used superimpositions although he had proclaimed that his films would avoid all artifice.

Moussinac had in fact made a similar point in *Le Cinéma soviétique*, where he stated that Vertov’s system was built on a theoretical contradiction since he often used “artistic” techniques even as he claimed he was not making an “artistic” film. Writing two years later, in 1929, Moussinac adopted a more inflexible attitude in order to counteract the critiques coming from mainstream journalists. In his rebuttal, he claimed that French critics stubbornly limited their understanding of documentary to Flaherty rather than attempting to grasp the importance of Vertov’s theories even if they disagreed with him.

There is a lot left to learn here, and it is common for artists who are ahead of their time to be misunderstood by many of their contemporaries. However, in this case, this misunderstanding seems to be limited to France. Dziga Vertov provoked a broad polemical debate in Germany and in the USSR, but at least he saw that he was being followed and that, on the whole, his ideas were understood.

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Il reste donc ici beaucoup à apprendre et c’est le propre des artistes qui devancent leur époque que de rester incompris d’un grand nombre de leurs contemporains. Cependant cela semble spécial, dans le cas présent, à la France. Car, en Allemagne et en URSS, Dziga Vertov, en soulevant une large discussion polémique a pu se convaincre qu’il était suivi et qu’il avait trouvé dans ces pays une large compréhension de ses idées.\textsuperscript{94}

History proved Moussinac right: when, in the wake of May 1968, Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin founded a collective that made political films, they called it the Dziga Vertov group. Four decades earlier, however, Vertov remained strikingly underappreciated in France.

If Eisenstein’s visit a year later, in 1930, proved more successful, it was mostly because his reputation had preceded him. Paradoxically, although his motion pictures had been banned in France, his work was well-known. By 1930, his films, particularly \textit{Battleship Potemkin}, had been screened not only by Les Amis de Spartacus but also by other, smaller ciné-clubs; some of his texts were translated and published in \textit{L’Humanité}; and film magazines such as \textit{Cinéa-Ciné pour tous} periodically dedicated some pages to his work. Yet the film Eisenstein came to promote, \textit{La Ligne générale/Old and New} (1929) turned out to be his least appreciated motion picture not only in France but also in the USSR. Eisenstein began to shoot \textit{Old and New} in 1927 to support the official policy on farm collectivization.\textsuperscript{95} At the request of the government, the project was put on hold while the director worked on \textit{October} for the anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution. By the time he was able to return to \textit{Old and New}, the agricultural policy had changed and the script had to be updated to include more attacks on the kulaks, the rich farmers


who resisted collectivization. What resulted was a highly idiosyncratic paean to the Soviet village. *Old and New* followed the party line and showed a poor peasant woman, Marfa, fighting to convince her village of the benefits of collectivization. But Eisenstein filmed and edited this straightforward story based on his theories of dialectical montage. When *Old and New* was finally released in the USSR, it came under attack for including too many “intellectual” scenes at a time when cinema was expected to become more easily legible “for the millions.” Although the film’s topic corresponded to the government’s requirements, the cinematic technique was dismissed as too experimental.

While this debate was raging in the USSR, Eisenstein and his crew had already embarked on an international journey approved by the Soviet government so that they could learn the new sound technology from Western Europe and the U.S. and then help implement it in the USSR. During this long trip, after going to Switzerland and Germany and before coming to the U.S., Eisenstein spent a few weeks in Paris. While there, he was invited by Moussinac and Dr. Robert Allendy on behalf of a research group in philosophy (le Groupe d’Etudes philosophiques et scientifiques pour l’examen des tendances nouvelles) to give a lecture at the Sorbonne followed by a screening of *Old and New*. The event was strategically billed as an academic lecture with no political goals. This, however, did not stop the Paris Police from showing up at the Sorbonne right on time and prohibiting the screening. Faced with this interdiction, Eisenstein and his hosts decided that he should give a longer lecture instead and then answer questions from the audience. Soon after this event, two magazines disseminated Eisenstein’s theories and his take on his recently banned film. *Documents*, the periodical founded by Georges Bataille, published a highly

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96 Kenez 100-103.
97 Hagener 186-195 discusses this trip.
positive review of *Old and New* written by Robert Desnos and illustrated with stills from the motion picture that Eisenstein had specifically chosen for this publication, while *Revue du cinéma* printed Eisenstein’s talk and the ensuing debate, prefacing the text with an attack against the police for having stopped the screening.99

In this lecture at the Sorbonne, Eisenstein gave a host of practical details about Soviet cinema: he explained how the Soviet film industry worked and talked about the new five-year plan devised for cinema by the government in consultation with film industry professionals. He then briefly outlined his theory of montage and his understanding of how film should work on spectators, shocking them into action. In the process, he compared his views with those of Western avant-garde directors interested in pure or abstract cinema, explaining that, while he appreciated abstract films, he did not agree with the fact that they had no interest in “triggering social emotions in the audience” [“provoquer les émotions principalement sociales de l’auditoire”].100 By contrast, his main goal was precisely to elicit such emotions and to lead viewers “from image to feeling, from feeling to the thesis” [“de l’image au sentiment, du sentiment à la these”] – that is to say, a revolutionary Marxist-Leninist thesis.101

When one member of the audience asked Eisenstein if he truly believed that a Russian peasant would be able to offer a useful critique of his film, as he had claimed during the lecture, the filmmaker gave a typically witty answer:

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101 Ibid. 23.
Of course, I have to say that the best kind of critique comes either from those reviewers who understand art but who are, unfortunately, very rare, or from the primitive, the peasants, people who are truly sincere and direct. Those who are in-between these two categories are of no use to us.

[Mais oui, je dois dire que la meilleure critique provient ou bien des critiques qui comprennent l’art mais qui sont malheureusement très rares, ou bien des primitifs, des paysans, des gens vraiment sincères et directs. La plupart des gens qui sont entre ces deux catégories ne nous sont d’aucune utilité.].

His reply managed to level a double critique: he obliquely referred to the attacks against his work that were taking place in the USSR while also mocking the assumptions made by the French audience he had in front of him. Tedesco had recounted a similar anecdote a few years earlier: when a French reporter asked Eisenstein if it was necessary to include such violent scenes as the Odessa stairs massacre in *Battleship Potemkin*, the director replied that he did not understand the question because the reporter was “thinking like a Parisian” [“vous raisonnez comme un parisien”]. His quip suggests that although his work had a wide international appeal, some aspects of it were still very specific to the history of the USSR and thus remained difficult to translate into a different cultural and political context.

This issue was perhaps more poignant in the case of *Old and New* because of its peculiar topic: the focus on the process of collectivization. Aware of this, Eisenstein confessed to Jean Mitry – the young journalists who was his tour guide in Paris and would become an influential film historian – that he did not expect Parisian audiences to understand his paean to tractors and cream separators since this world could not have been any further from that of city dwellers.

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102 Ibid. 25.
And indeed, a few months after Eisenstein’s lecture, when the board of Revue du cinéma invited journalists to a private screening of Old and New, Battleship Potemkin, and the documentary Turksib (Viktor Turin, 1929), it was especially Old and New that was critiqued for heavy-handed propaganda.\textsuperscript{105}

One journalist wrote that this film clearly showed the perils of accepting a commissioned work with a fixed topic and a predetermined conclusion: “In Old and New, all the propaganda, every scene that wants to teach something is as infantile and annoying as certain American films.” [“Dans La Ligne générale tout ce qui a trait à la propagande, tout ce qui veut enseigner, est aussi puéril et ennuyeux que certains films américains.”].\textsuperscript{106} Pursuing this unflattering comparison with capitalist cinema, another critic suggested that “It is no longer possible to dissociate Russian films from their utilitarian purpose. Just as an American film has to make a fortune for its producer, so a Russian film has to ‘sovietize.’” [“Il n’est guère possible de dissocier un film russe de son but utilitaire. De même que le film américain a pour but de rapporter une fortune à son ‘producent’, le film russe a pour but de ‘sovétiser.’”].\textsuperscript{107} But even the harshest critics still praised Eisenstein’s technical skill in Old and New, particularly his montage sequences. Benjamin Crémieux stated the issue most clearly when he wondered what “an average Western audience” [“un public moyen occidental”] thought of this film and whether it could only offer “a purely technical pleasure, not to say a little snobbish” [“un plaisir d’ordre purement technique, pour ne pas dire un peu snob.”].\textsuperscript{108}

\textsuperscript{104} Mitry is quoted in Moussinac, Sergei Michailovitch Eisenstein 186-187.

\textsuperscript{105} “Quelques opinions sur le film soviétique,” Revue du cinéma Sept. 1930: 59-74. Ironically, the same issue of Revue du cinéma also published the first part of this film’s script, because the editors’ aimed to print a variety of “quality” scripts.


\textsuperscript{107} Alfred Fabre-Luce, Revue du cinéma Sept. 1930: 68-69.

\textsuperscript{108} Benjamin Crémieux, Revue du cinéma Sept. 1930: 64.
These reactions to *Old and New* as well as to Vertov’s works stand in stark contrast to the reviews of *Storm over Asia* and *Women of Ryazan*. Whereas the commercialized motion pictures were appreciated both for their plots (their ethnographic interest) and for their cinematography, Vertov and Eisenstein’s films were understood as somewhat interesting formal experiments obscured by the filmmakers’ overt political commitment. Moussinac’s efforts to mediate between French commentators and the most influential Soviet directors thus turned out to be less successful than the initial screenings of Soviet films by Les Amis de Spartacus. In this context, the ideal French Communist spectator – who would experience cinema on its own aesthetic terms while also fighting for the restructuring of the capitalist film industry – proved to be all the more impossible to attain.

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While Moussinac’s crucial role as a cultural activist in the 1920s is undeniable, there is no consensus on his legacy. This is in part because of the stark contrast between his relentless organizing activities throughout this decade and his subsequent disappearance from public debates about cinema. In 1932 Moussinac joined Vaillant-Couturier and Louis Aragon to found the Association des Écrivains et Artistes Révolutionnaires (AEAR) – a Communist cultural association with sections devoted to literature and the various arts, including film and theater. Rather than coordinating the film section, Moussinac turned toward the theater, which he saw as offering a more direct way of interacting with spectators. In 1934 he published his last film column in *L’Humanité* from the USSR, where he spent a year working with workers’ theater groups. By then he found the Soviet film industry and Stalin’s lack of support for experimental

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109 One of Moussinac’s last ideas for his column in *L’Humanité* was to invite readers to send in reviews of films they had seen. This moderately successful attempt is chronicled in Bert Hogenkamp, “Sur l’avenir de l’enseignement du cinéma. Leon Moussinac and the Spectators’ Criticism in France (1931-34),” *Film International* 1.2 (2003): 4-13.
directors deeply disappointing. Back in France during World War II, he was imprisoned for participating in the Resistance. After the war, he wrote primarily on the history of theater while also becoming more interested in decorative arts. His last text about cinema was published a few months after his death in 1964. It was a strangely apolitical book on Eisenstein that focused more on their friendship and on the director’s larger-than-life personality than on his films and theories.\textsuperscript{110}

In Timothy Barnard’s view, if anyone could be blamed for the PCF’s failure to use cinema more forcefully in the 1920s, it was Moussinac, who single-handedly shaped the Party’s film policy during this period.\textsuperscript{111} Adopting a broader perspective, Valérie Vignaux has recently argued that Moussinac’s activities in the 1920s had a positive influence on the PCF’s film policies in the following years.\textsuperscript{112} Vignaux contends that even though Moussinac no longer signed articles in \textit{L’Humanité} after 1934, he in fact authored several of them and fully supported the development of a leftist cinema during the Popular Front. Indeed, although he was not the most prominent activist, he became involved in the Ciné-Liberté film collective, which made a series of left-wing documentaries and, most famously, the fiction film \textit{La Marseillaise} (Jean Renoir, 1938).

It is crucial to note in this context that the difficulties Moussinac faced in his attempts to shape a French Communist spectator in the 1920s had disappeared by the mid-1930s. As mentioned above, Les Amis de Spartacus was founded at a time when the Comintern and the PCF were committed to the doctrine of class against class. Even though Les Amis de Spartacus

\textsuperscript{110} Moussinac, \textit{Sergei Michailovitch Eisenstein}. Georges Sadoul edited the book, adding more documents and testimonies after Moussinac’s death.

\textsuperscript{111} Barnard, “From Impressionism to Communism.”

aimed to address spectators of all social backgrounds, the police ban proved that it was impossible to do so while the PCF was embracing this radical line and the French government viewed the Party with suspicion. Once the PCF changed its position in 1934, reaching out to the Socialists and to the centrist Radical Party to form a united Popular Front against fascism, the definition of a Communist spectator could also become more inclusive and flexible than it had been possible in the 1920s.
Conclusion

By the end of the 1920s, the republicans, Catholics, Communists, and Impressionists had put forth competing and complementary theories of spectatorship. Their pedagogical projects responded not only to one another but also to the concept of the dangerous film spectator that government officials and social commentators had discussed throughout the 1910s. For republicans, the ideal spectator was a model citizen. They sought to teach students from an early age how to decode the moving image but also encouraged viewers of all ages to respond emotionally to particular films – an affective response that enabled spectators to feel part of a broader community and show solidarity with fellow citizens. Catholics also valued certain films for the emotional impact they could have on both believers and non-believers. However, instead of connecting spectatorship and citizenship, they envisioned what they liked to call a “universal” viewer who gained a more profound understanding of transcendental truths, divinity, and the basic tenets of Christianity through certain motion pictures. The Impressionists, too, aimed to reach a wide audience but they also grasped the limits of pedagogy. In their public interventions, they explained the basics of film technique and at the same time encouraged spectators to experience a specifically cinematic emotion – one that could not be described, taught or in any way imposed on the audience. French Communists drew on these Impressionist theories and added a more explicit political layer. Their imagined spectator had the same aesthetic response as that of the Impressionists. Yet, rather than being an end in itself, this experience of “quality” cinema was then supposed to be mobilized for left-wing political purposes, moving viewers to make radical demands from what Moussinac often described as the “mercantile” film industry.
Each movement thus grasped the affective impact of cinema and sought to calibrate it differently, depending on their underpinning ideological goals. Throughout the dissertation, I have argued that these groups imagined spectators who would be educated through and about cinema and that each project had its own contradictions and tensions, allowing for multiple ways of understanding specific films and, more broadly, the social function of cinema. In these last pages, I would like to examine the ways in which these four groups became involved in broader projects and, in doing so, to point out their long-lasting impact on French film culture.

The first institution that brought some representatives of these movements together was the International Educational Cinematograph Institute (IECI). Founded by the League of Nations in 1928 to promote international cooperation on the topic of educational cinema, the IECI welcomed the contribution of educators, sociologists, politicians, and filmmakers committed to using cinema for educational purposes. The League of Nations saw cinema as an unexplored resource, that famous new universal language that had the potential to contribute to the League’s pacifist project. When the idea of establishing such an institution dedicated to educational cinema first came up in the mid-1920s, France offered to host it in Paris, which was already the home of the League of Nations Committee on Intellectual Cooperation, the advisory organization that debated the creation of the IECI.¹ But the League of Nations decided to accept Mussolini’s competing proposal, and the IECI was headquartered in Rome. In the only comprehensive study dedicated to this Institute, Christel Taillibert has noted that, if Italian government officials were eager to have the IECI in their country, it was in order to show their support for the League of Nations’ pacifism at a time when Mussolini’s Italy wanted to make clear that it was open to

¹ This Committee included Albert Einstein, Henri Bergson, Paul Valéry, and Marie Curie. The President of the Committee, Jean Luchaire, had long been interested in the role of cinema and brought it up with the League of Nations in a report titled “Le Cinématographe dans ses rapports avec la vie intellectuelle, rapport présenté à la Commission de coopération intellectuelle de la Société des nations” (1925).
international cooperation. This all changed within a few years and the IECI disintegrated in 1937, when Italy withdrew from the League of Nations. Zoë Druick suggests that this association with Fascist Italy probably explains why the IECI rarely shows up in film histories even though its sponsorship of a film library, a journal, and an unpublished Encyclopedia make it a key institution in the development of the discipline of film studies. But, as she points out, this reluctance to discuss the IECI is not wholly justified because most of the Institute’s activities were in tune with the League of Nations’ liberal projects rather than the Italian government’s increasingly extremist politics.

The IECI’s declared goal was to encourage the production and international circulation of films made specifically for educational purposes – commissioned works on topics as varied as hygiene, agriculture, and ethnography that could be used in schools and other non-theatrical contexts, such as occasional screenings organized in factories or villages. Even well after the transition to sound cinema, the majority of educational films the IECI catalogued continued to be silent due to obvious economic reasons: not only were they less expensive to produce, but most of the organizations that requested them still had old projectors unable to screen sound films.

While the IECI did not actually sponsor many films, it worked toward developing a comprehensive catalog and a library of such works from all member countries of the League of Nations. Just as importantly, it lobbied for the decrease and eventual elimination of international circulation taxes. To support its mission as an intermediary among countries, the Institute also published a monthly journal, the Revue internationale du cinéma éducateur/International Review of Educational Cinematography, issued simultaneously in French, English, Spanish, Italian, and

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German. The journal is now the main source of information on the IECI’s activities and the table of contents shows that the IECI succeeded in bringing together a variety of commentators from several countries, including France, the United States, Italy, Germany, and Japan. Many of the articles published in the *Revue* rehashed assumptions analyzed throughout this dissertation, especially the idea that cinema could have a pernicious effect on viewers, particularly on children and teenagers prone to imitation, but it could also exert a tremendous positive influence when films were carefully chosen.  

The most substantive French contribution to the IECI came from republicans, who had a longstanding connection with the League of Nations through Léon Bourgeois. One of the most vocal proponents of solidarism in France, Bourgeois sought to expand this idea and enact it at an international level when he became the President of the Council of the League of Nations after World War I. The IECI’s understanding of the function of cinema echoed that of French republicans in that the Institute preferred easily legible instructional films and family melodramas with clear moral themes and emotional impact. It is not surprising, then, that Jean Benoit-Lévy was named Secretary General of the French delegation to the IECI, and that both he and teachers such as Adrien Collette (who had worked with the republican Bessou commission in the late 1910s) wrote articles for the *Revue*, explaining their take on educational cinema.  

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example. This included his non- or semi-fictional short films as well as the feature-length fiction film *Maternité* (1929), which he co-directed with Marie Epstein and to which the *Revue* dedicated an unusually long review.7

*Maternité* presents a traditional view of women’s role in society, showing the transformation of an upper-middle-class beauty from a self-centered socialite who emphatically refuses motherhood into a desolate old woman who regrets her adventurous life. So tortured is the main character by her past choices that she eventually decides to work as a kindergarten teacher to be closer to children because she can no longer have her own. The film’s support for the pro-natalist movement of the interwar period is quite obvious, so much so that, decades later, in an interview with Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, Marie Epstein shied away from discussing *Maternité* because she considered it “a very bad film.”8 The IECI’s preference for this motion picture and the ample space it dedicated to it thus suggest a conservative penchant. This is further confirmed by the fact that the journal also printed articles by Canon Reymond, the secretary of the Catholic Cinematographic Committee, who summed up the pedagogical projects of French Catholics and their view on the social and aesthetic role of cinema, highlighting the impact on the family as a whole.9 In return, the C.C.C.’s *Dossiers du cinéma* enthusiastically endorsed the work of the IECI.10

Nonetheless, despite the IECI’s affinity with republicans and Catholics, the *Revue* also published articles written from differing perspectives. One of its first issues, for instance,

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8 Flitterman-Lewis, *To Desire Differently* 153. Cheryl A. Koos compares this film with their better-known motion picture *La Maternelle* and, unlike Flitterman-Lewis, who offers a feminist reading, she argues that both films were conservative, “The Good, the Bad, and the Childless: The Politics of Female Identity in *Maternité* (1929) and *La Maternelle* (1933),” *Historical Reflections* 35.2 (2009): 3-20.


10 *Dossiers du cinéma* 21 (1929): 224 praises the IECI and the *Revue internationale du cinéma éducateur*
included a positive overview of educational films made in the USSR, which supported Bolshevist policies that had a less traditional take on family life. They did not extoll the benefits of marriage and encouraged Soviet women to do jobs that used to be reserved only for men. The journal did not, however, publish any articles by French Communists, probably because, as explained in the previous chapter, their cinematic projects had less breadth compared to their Russian counterparts. Another somewhat unexpected contributor to the *Revue* was Germaine Dulac, who wrote two articles for this journal in the early 1930s. By then, she was no longer making fiction films and had become increasingly preoccupied with the impact of newsreels and documentary films in general. In one of her texts, she asserted that

> Like the scientific film, the newsreel reveals the kind of truth about life everywhere which cannot be gained from comments, books, newspapers or textbooks. Understood in these terms, the cinema is an individual experience, enabling everyone to see and live something rather than only ‘conjuring’ it up.

[Comme le cinéma scientifique, le cinéma d’actualité dévoile la vérité de la vie universelle que l’on ne saurait deviner à travers les commentaires, les livres, les journaux, les manuels. Le cinéma ainsi considéré est une expérience individuelle qui permet à chacun de voir, de vivre et non ‘d’évoquer’.].

This last sentence suggests that Dulac’s understanding of cinema had not radically changed after she stopped making fiction films. Although she now focused on how newsreels could be used for

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didactic purposes, she still resorted to one of the key arguments she and the Impressionists had put forth in the 1920s: the notion that the moving image had the power to make the invisible visible and to provoke a specific kind of emotion that remained impossible to attain otherwise.

The IECI thus welcomed a range of perspectives on all sides of the political and aesthetic spectrum, without attempting to impose a homogenous view. Rather, the *Revue* became a clearinghouse for a variety of theories of educational cinema supported by a growing cinémathèque. Nevertheless, as noted above, this project came to a halt a few years later because the Italian government’s increased right-wing extremism contradicted the pacifist goals of the League of Nations. When the IECI was dissolved in 1937, the Italian representatives took over some of its tasks, while the French Comité international pour la diffusion artistique et littéraire par le cinématographe, founded in 1930, attempted to continue the IECI’s project before shutting down during World War II. After the war, the United Nations revived the project of educational cinema and delegated most of it to UNESCO.\(^{14}\) Thanks to the IECI, the pedagogical projects developed in France throughout the 1920s not only converged but did so in an international context, where they were also juxtaposed with similar projects from other countries. More work remains to be done on this topic, especially on the extent to which the IECI actually led to international dialogue and cooperation.

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In the mid-1930s, Communists, republicans and some of the Impressionists came together again in a very different context: to work in the service of the film collectives formed around the Popular Front, the coalition of leftist and centrist forces that fought against Fascism. (French Catholics, for their part, became more involved in the Organisation catholique

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internationale du cinéma based in Brussels.) Of all the film groups associated with the Popular Front, Ciné-Liberté remains the best known thanks to productions such as *La Marseillaise* (1938), directed by Jean Renoir and financed in part through a national subscription. In addition to making newsreels, short documentaries, and a smaller number of feature films, Ciné-Liberté also established ciné-clubs in Paris and other cities, often showing their new leftist productions alongside works that had been consecrated through the alternative network of the 1920s. The group also published a journal that had Léon Moussinac among its editors. As noted in Chapter 5, by the early 1930s Moussinac had stopped being the most prominent Communist film critic. But the fact that ciné-clubs associated with Ciné-Liberté were still screening old silent films that belonged to the classic repertoire of the alternative network suggests that he had, at least in part, influenced their understanding of cinema. This is not to downplay the role Renoir and other cultural activists played in Ciné-Liberté, but rather to highlight the continuities between *Les Amis de Spartacus* and this film collective.

What was new, however, was Ciné-Liberté’s involvement in the production of newsreels and explicitly educational films. The latter were directed or supervised by Jean Painlevé, a documentary filmmaker admired by the Surrealists and the son of mathematician Paul Painlevé—who, as Minister of Education during World War I, had initiated the Bessou commission that studied the pedagogical possibilities of cinema. Moreover, when Ciné-Liberté worked with trade unions to produce films about workers’ lives, it reached out to Jean Benoit-Lévy,

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16 My account is based on Ory and Buchsbaum.

17 As noted in Chapter 5, Valérie Vignaux expands on Moussinac’s contribution in “Léon Moussinac et L’Humanité du cinéma.”

acknowledging his experience in the field of educational documentaries.\textsuperscript{19} Benoit-Lévy brought in his former collaborator Jean Epstein and asked him to direct the documentary \textit{Les Bâtisseurs} (1938), sponsored by the builders’ trade union in conjunction with Ciné-Liberté.\textsuperscript{20} This was Epstein’s second and last collaboration with Benoit-Lévy, and like the first one, for \textit{Pasteur}, the filmmaker was free to experiment within the imposed documentary form. In the case of \textit{Les Bâtisseurs}, the experimentation came mainly from the editing of image and sound, especially the juxtaposition of images of builders’ work with the theories of modernist architects like Le Corbusier. Although Impressionism had come to an end, Epstein still sought to revise his theory of \textit{photogénie} and \textit{Les Bâtisseurs} could be understood as a new attempt to make the invisible (in this case, the physical act of constructing) visible.

This idea had more explicit left-wing implications in this context than in his previous work because the film had been commissioned by the builders’ trade union and Ciné-Liberté. Nevertheless, both contemporary critics and film scholars have deemed \textit{Les Bâtisseurs} less politically effective than earlier films coming from the Ciné-Liberté collective. Critics usually give two reasons for this lukewarm reception. First of all, Epstein’s documentary came at the very end of the Popular Front, when the initial enthusiasm had subsided. Second, Epstein did not experiment with the documentary form whereas the earlier \textit{La Vie est à nous} (1936), produced by the PCF with the collaboration of several directors, including Renoir, made a powerful political statement by mixing fiction and nonfiction.\textsuperscript{21}


\textsuperscript{20} Vignaux discusses this partnership in “Léon Moussinac et \textit{L’Humanité} du cinéma.”

\textsuperscript{21} Buchsbaum 226-233 pursues this comparison.
juxtaposition of the everyday work of builders and the theories of modernist architects can be read in a democratizing key that resonates with the politics of the Popular Front – a movement that put the needs of workers front and center without encouraging class warfare. From this perspective, the Impressionists, who had been negotiating these issues of class politics and aesthetics since the 1920s, were in fact a good fit with the Popular Front.

Indeed, Epstein was not the only Impressionist involved with Ciné-Liberté; Dulac participated in it too. A few months after its foundation, Ciné-Liberté incorporated the film unit May 36, initially created by the Socialists and headed by Dulac. In this context, Dulac worked with a schoolteacher who had been making instructional films, Jean Bréhart, on a short semi-fictional film titled *Le Retour à la vie* (1936).\(^{22}\) The film resembles Benoit-Lévy’s earlier *La Future Maman* in that the narrator is a young girl who knows the exact solution for a key issue of her time. Here, the topic is the economic crisis and the girl seeks to convince her parents to buy new equipment for the farm in support of Léon Blum’s new policies. *Le Retour à la vie* includes charts, statistics and other clarifying devices meant to explain every point and directly address spectators. Given this straightforward presentation, Jonathan Buchsbaum has described *Le Retour à la vie* as “anodyne politically and flaccid formally.”\(^{23}\) What is more relevant for my point here, however, is that both Dulac and Epstein decided to work with Ciné-Liberté, thus making their political commitment clearer than in the 1920s. It is also worth noting that, of all the Impressionists, Epstein and Dulac were most involved with the republicans’ pedagogical project in the early 1920s and, in fact, came to work with Ciné-Liberté in conjunction with republicans (Benoit-Lévy and Bréhart). This can explain why their work was not as politically

\(^{22}\) Josette Ueberschlag suggests that Dulac only supervised the film while Bréhart executed it, *Jean Bréhart, l’instituteur cinéaste (1898-1973)* (Saint-Etienne: Publications de l’Université de Saint-Etienne, 2007). Other scholars list Dulac as a co-author.

\(^{23}\) Buchsbaum 217.
and aesthetically radical as that of Renoir and other filmmakers from the same collective, thus adding another layer to our understanding of the Impressionist filmmakers’ complex relationship with politics.

Conversely, these collaborations also suggest how the film groups surrounding the Popular Front understood the role of spectators. Rather than focusing on kindling and sustaining revolutionary class consciousness, as the Soviet filmmakers had done in the first decade of the USSR, the French collectives drew on the earlier projects of Communists, republicans, and the Impressionists and creatively adapted them for their purposes. On the whole, collectives like Ciné-Liberté worked to help viewers of all classes understand the new policies of the Popular Front. Part of this involved showing the lives of workers to spectators from different backgrounds, in an attempt to create solidarity while also recognizing the key political role played by workers. At the same time, members of Ciné-Liberté continued to praise what they deemed to be quality films and sought to introduce them to eclectic audiences through ciné-clubs and different types of non-theatrical screenings. Such projects, however, remained “a beautiful illusion” stopped short by the demise of the Popular Front and World War II.  

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Banned during the Occupation, ciné-clubs resurfaced immediately after the war and proliferated in the following years. Although the alternative network of the 1920s had disappeared, new ciné-clubs continued its legacy. Film historians Georges Sadoul and Jean Mitry were instrumental to the continuation of this project because they had witnessed the network of the 1920s as college students who were avid moviegoers and eager contributors to film

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24 I am borrowing here Pascal Ory’s title, *La Belle illusion*. See also Dudley Andrew’s nuanced discussion of the Popular Front film projects in *Mists of Regret* 213-220.
Some of the film clubs that appeared after World War II also had clear ideological orientations that followed the same patterns we saw in the 1920s. The republican Union française des offices du cinéma éducateur laïque (UFOCEL) continued the tradition of the Offices of Educational Cinema; the Communist Travail et Culture, working with Peuple et Culture, were successful far-reaching left-wing projects; and the Catholic Fédération Loisirs et Culture Cinématographique (FLECC) had the kind of infrastructure that the interwar Catholic Cinematographic Committee had only imagined. Thanks to the enthusiasm of a number of cultural activists and film critics, these groups were as interconnected as their equivalents had been throughout the 1920s. For example, the republican Gustave Cauvin, whose activism I described in Chapter 2, advised the new UFOCEL but also became a staunch Communist and worked with Communist film clubs. UFOCEL’s bulletin included an article praising Jean Epstein’s early films and also commended the work of their Catholic counterpart, the FLECC.

These fervent activities unavoidably triggered a backlash from avant-garde artists. After World War II, it was the Lettristes who reacted much like the Surrealists in the 1920s—they mocked attempts to educate spectators on how to understand cinema and instead came up with happenings meant to shock and annoy viewers.

Going beyond these parallels, I would argue that the most remarkable synthesis of the movements that originated in the 1920s can be found in André Bazin’s writings and cultural activism. Throughout his career, Bazin collaborated with Catholic magazines (Radio-Cinéma-

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Télévision, which later became Télérama), Communist journals and organizations (L'Écran français, Travail et Culture), and various cinephile ciné-clubs. Bazin’s education had strong Catholic and republican components: he studied with the Jesuit brothers as a child, then entered the public school system and trained to be a teacher before failing his exams and leaving the institution because he had become disenchanted with it. Ludovic Cortade has speculated that Bazin probably saw a number of instructional films during his studies, which had an impact on his understanding of cinema’s realism. At the same time, the film critic continued to be influenced by a certain strain of socially progressive Catholicism even though he did not get involved in any Catholic activist organizations. Rather, the Catholic influence in his writings came via Roger Leenhardt, who wrote for the journal Esprit, and whom Bazin described as one of the few film critics “with a conscience” alongside Delluc and Dulac.

Despite these words of praise for Delluc and Dulac, Bazin never dwelt on the Impressionists’ films, perhaps because their use of rapid montage and optical devices was far from his preferred long takes and deep-focus shots. But through his involvement with ciné-clubs, he carried out the type of work they had begun in the 1920s. Like the Impressionists, Bazin tried to walk a fine line between teaching viewers how to understand cinema and allowing them enough interpretive freedom to enable them to experience it on their own. And, again like them, he was heavily critiqued for not being dedicated enough to a specific political cause. These

29 Bazin did not write much on religious films; the best example is “Cinema and Theology,” Bazin at Work: Major Essays and Reviews from the Forties and Fifties, trans. Alain Piette and Bert Cardullo (New York: Routledge, 1997) 61-72. See also Philip Rosen, “Belief in Bazin,” Opening Bazin 107-118.
attacks came despite the fact that Bazin had been working with the Communist association Travail et Culture and animated many ciné-club sessions in factories – actions that confirmed his socially progressive attitude. But when he did not agree with his Stalinist colleagues’ unconditional praise of Soviet cinema and wrote an article comparing Tarzan and Stalin, the editors of the Communist L’Écran français critiqued him for being only interested in aesthetics and unwilling to make a political commitment.³²

The debates about cinema that took place in the 1910s and 20s were thus rehashed, expanded, and refined after World War II. The idea of educating spectators through and about film was adapted to the goals of each institution. The context had certainly changed and new artistic and philosophical trends had emerged, but the same patterns are discernible. In a recent study dedicated to the history of film studies in the United States, Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson have suggested that early twentieth-century American efforts to educate moviegoers, such as the Payne Studies Fund, were central to the development of this field.³³ The story I have told here can be understood in similar terms in the French context. The pedagogical projects of the republicans, Catholics, Impressionists, and Communists were indeed foundational for the study of cinema in France. Not only did they shape generations of film viewers and scholars, but many of the key questions they formulated about the social and aesthetic impact of cinema remained salient throughout the twentieth century.

³² Antoine de Baecque studies these debates in “Bazin in Combat,” Opening Bazin 225-233.
³³ Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson, “The Academy and Motion Pictures,” Inventing Film Studies xi-xxxii.
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Figure 1.1. Poster for the Cinématographe Lumière by Marcelin Auzolle, 1896.

Figure 1.2. Poster for Cinéma Pathé by Adrien Barrère, 1906.
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Figure 1.4. Poster for *Les Vampires*, 1915.
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