

“From the French theatrical melodrama to the first American feature films, and beyond”

Jean-Marc Leveratto

► **To cite this version:**

Jean-Marc Leveratto. “From the French theatrical melodrama to the first American feature films, and beyond”. Comparative Melodrama, American Comparative Literature Association Congress, Harvard University, 2016, Cambridge (Mass), United States. hal-03201676

HAL Id: hal-03201676

<https://hal.univ-lorraine.fr/hal-03201676>

Submitted on 25 Apr 2021

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

From the French theatrical melodrama to the first American feature films, and beyond.

(Jean-Marc Leveratto, University of Lorraine)

The aim of this paper is to approach the shaping of the filmic melodrama as a transnational process, allowing filmmakers to escape the limits of local traditions of entertainment, film technique's conceptions and models of taste. It adopts an anthropological point of view, taking in account the role played by the body of the actors as well as the body of the spectators in the international circulation of the technique of the melodrama¹.

Exploring the melodrama from the point of view of the consumer — in other words as a situation of entertainment requiring one's personal involvement² —, implies to recognize the unsteadiness of the melodramatic quality. According to the circumstances, a melodrama can become an authentic farce, depending on the performance of the actors and the connivance of the spectators, or an authentic tragedy, for exactly the same reasons. According to the habits of classification of the industries of entertainment, the category melodrama may promise rather a sensational action, like in America, or rather an occasion of compassion, like in France. And last but not least, according to academic traditions, melodrama can be studied specifically as a theatrical product, which is still the case in France³, or as a kind of story appropriated by the silent film industry to fit the expectations of its newborn audiences, a very fruitful research trail opened by the American scholars (Singer, 2000).

Turning back to the situation of consumption is a way to admit this unsteadiness, and rather than restricting the melodrama to a unique kind of technical product, to focus on the experience of the consumer and his own assessment of the melodramatic quality of the product he is experiencing. It is, in other words, a way to reactivate the role of the ordinary consumer's body as the place of expertise of the melodramatic quality, a measure usually sacrificed to the technical expertise of the professional, artist or scholar.

¹ In other words, this anthropological approach focus on the « technology » of the melodrama, in the specific sense given by Marcel Mauss to the term. It designs, beyond the study of the morphology of the material objects, devices and apparatus needed for its production and circulation, the observation of the « techniques of the body » it requires, not only of the actor, but of the spectator. The originality of Mauss's technology lies in « this complete change of perspective, that leads him to conceive the technique inside the man rather than outside the man », François Vatin, « Mauss et la technologie », in *Revue du MAUSS*, 2004/1, n° 23, *De la reconnaissance. Don, identité et estime de soi*, p. 418-433, p. 427

² Which is the pragmatic posture adopted by Sergei Balukhatyi in his modelization of the melodrama — characterized as the combination of « emotional teleology » and « moral teleology » (Gerould, 1978) —, and taken for granted by the « organic » interpretation by Boris Tomashevsky's history of the melodrama as the hybridization of successful popular body techniques of the fairground theatres with the formula of the Bourgeois drama (Gerould, 1978).

³ Except for some scholars like Muriel Andrin (2005)

This approach of the melodrama unites what is usually separated and often opposed on behalf of the sociology of the audiences (the popular melodrama and the bourgeois drama, of the history of techniques (the theater play and the film), of the science of aesthetics (the material and the semiotic) and, last but not least, of the national identity (the industry and the market). It emphasizes the “transtextual” nature of the melodrama, the fact that « both very loosely constructed plots and the tightly controlled ones of the *pièce bien faite* could equally been utilized for nineteenth century English melodrama »⁴. It explores its “tranhistoric” nature as a formula of entertainment passing from the theatre industry to the film industry and its “transcultural” value as an artistic product able to cross the borders. It thus takes into account the role played by the geographical circulation between the nations of various objects — texts, engravings, photographs, films, technical tools but also techniques of the body —, in the local shaping, by each national film industry, of its own version of the filmic melodrama. This circulation has begun, long before the birth of the international film industry, with the emergence, at the beginning of the XIXth century, of a world market of entertainment. The translation of theatrical plays and novels, but also the touring of very talented Continental players have thus contributed to promote in America, at the end of the XIXth century, the melodrama.

1. From theatrical melodrama to filmic melodrama

The reception of the “Fin de siècle” French theatre in New York gives us a glimpse of the role of the French theatrical melodrama in the birth of the film industry both in the USA and in Europe. It reveals the constitution of the melodrama, in this peculiar period of the « first globalization »⁵ as a transnational form of spectacle.

The exhaustive identification by Alexander Mason IV of the list of French plays, performed in English as well as in French, German, and Italian in the borough of Manhattan, from 1889 (a time when New York was the center of the US theatrical market) to 1939 (the “Chant du cygne” of the French theatrical play in New York), is very convenient to observe different kind of mediators of the French melodrama in the USA during this period⁶. The book industry and the theatre industry have both served its importation, like in the paradigmatic example of *La dame aux camélias*, at the same time a novel, a theatre play and a very popular opera. Not only the recent Parisian theatrical successes are systematically adapted on the New York stages, but the French melodrama is regularly performed by famous European players touring in the USA, the most popular being, of course, Sarah Bernhard⁷. That performed French melodrama, whose highest

⁴ Earl F. Bargainnier, « Melodrama as formula », *Journal of Popular Culture*, n° 1, 1975p. 728,

⁵ Suzanne Berger, *Notre première mondialisation. Leçons d'un échec oublié*, Paris, Le seuil, 2003.

⁶ Alexandre H. Mason IV, *French Theatre in New-York. A List of Plays : 1889-1939*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1940.

⁷ Beside Molière, the French authors the most performed in New-York from 1889 to 1939, peculiarly before the WWI (whose end marks the end of the appeal of the French Theater for the American theatre buffs) were Sardou (76 productions), Dumas fils (62), Dumas Père (39), Rostand (38), Brieux (37), Bernstein (36). Cf. Jean-Marc

achievements are Dumas's *Camille* and the « Sardou play », the « four A » (*Cleopatra, Tosca, Fedora, Theodora*) differs from the plain, ordinary, popular melodrama. But it offers the same type of emotional climax, which it brings, thanks to the theatrical gifts of Sarah Bernhardt, to a superior level⁸. Furthermore, it is popularized through her numerous successful tours with her company all over the country, but also through the interpretations in English of her most famous plays by young local actresses anxious to show their personal talents by competing with the Divine. The long lasting success of her performances was clearly not only due to her talent, but also, as noted by the great French critique Francisque Sarcey, to the emotional efficiency of the « tailored play », the result of the mediation that her acting operated between the written melodrama, the feminine characters it staged, and the American audiences. She has contributed, with her company, to the promotion in America of a new standard of theatrical performance, a high-quality melodrama in terms of story, production and interpretation. But also to its commodification through the success of new kinds of theater entertainment, a reality illustrated by the appropriation of the most famous performances of Sarah Bernhardt by the Vaudeville industry in her last tours. The American tour of 1912 organized by Martin Beck, for example, exploited a program composed of selected excerpts of her most successful melodramas, the death of *Camille* notably, a famous « morceau de bravoure » that popular patrons could discover, the same year, on the screen (as she noted with pleasure in some of her interviews).

Victoria Duckett and, more recently, Charles Musser have recalled the popularity of the films of Sarah Bernhardt, now underestimated⁹. *Queen Elizabeth*, his greater film success, released in 1912 in the USA is not only the first biopic of the first queen of England, but, as Richard Abel notes, « mainly a melodrama combining two love triangles, a script written according to the conventions of the “pièce-bien-faite” »¹⁰. In the commercial context of the American market, *Queen Elizabeth* was a big hit not only because of Sarah Bernhardt, but also of the content of a spectacle meeting the expectations of different audiences, of high brow as well as low brow spectators¹¹. Thanks to the recording by the camera of the gorgeous historical settings and costumes of the Parisian production and to a musical score specially written for the touring of the film, the ordinary theatrical melodrama exploited on the American territory by the Touring Companies acquired under the eyes of its audience the superior quality of the « Sardou play », the historical melodrama specially manufactured by Sardou for the emotional conquest by Sarah Bernhardt of wealthy American audiences¹².

That successful passage of an historical melodrama from the stage to the screen brings a hint of the crucial role played by the French melodrama, as a formula of entertainment,

Leveratto, « Le théâtre français à New York (1880-1917) », in Jean-Claude Yon (ed.), *Le théâtre français à l'étranger au XIXe siècle*, Paris, Éditions du Nouveau Monde, 2008, p. 230-254.

⁸ Jean-Marc Leveratto, « La réception de Sardou aux USA » in Isabelle Moindrot (dir), *Victorien Sardou, le théâtre et les arts*, Rennes, PUR, 2010, p. 357-369

⁹ « SB et le cinéma muet » in Noëlle Guibert (dir), *Portrait(s) de Sarah Bernhardt*, Paris, BNF, 2000, p. 182-196.

¹⁰ Abel, R., *The Ciné goes to town*, University of California Press, Berkeley et Los Angeles, London, 1994, p. 315.

¹¹ See Charles Musser on Bernhardt in America

¹² Jean-Marc Leveratto, « Sarah Bernhardt dans *Queen Elizabeth* (1912), du théâtre (français) au cinéma (américain) » in Agathe Torti-Alcayaga et Christine Kiehl (dir.) *Théâtre, destin du cinéma, Théâtre, levain du cinéma*, Paris, éditions Le Manuscrit, 2013, p. 25-43.

in the elaboration of the artistic standard of the film in America¹³. Henri Langlois, the famous creator of the Cinémathèque Française, used to deny this contribution, in the name of the technical break accomplished since 1911 by the American filmmakers, the inventors, in his opinion, of the art of filming an action. He thus opposed the genius of the American film industry to the old recipes used by the European film industries attached to the « literary and theatrical traditions of the XIXth century ». When the USA were inventing the « cinematic language », it is always « the same theater, classical and romanticist, that inspires the cinema » in France en Italy.

Contrary to this romantic celebration of the American artistic revolution, the American filmmakers have not completely split with the melodrama, but have progressively tamed its objects, needed to produce a quality entertainment¹⁴. Eager to establish a clear-cut between tradition and modernity, mass and elite, theatre and cinema, Langlois denies evidences like the American adaptations as soon as 1907 of successful theatrical melodramas, notably the *Two Orphans*. The man he greets as the creator of the « cinematic language », David Griffith himself has realized with *Orphans in the Storm*, 1921, the already fifth filmic adaptation of the play. And, symmetrically, he neutralizes the melodramatic quality of the plays by Henry Bataille and Henri Bernstein — that he highly praises because their adaptations have helped to inject « the modern spirit » in the European cinema¹⁵ — melodramatic quality which explains not only their general appeal for European filmmakers, but their greetings by the American audiences. Bataille's *The naked woman*, for example, has been adapted three times by the Italian industry of the silent film, and obtained a great success in America through the mediation of the Diva Lydia Borelli¹⁶. It attests in the same time the international appeal of the melodrama and the transnational dynamics of its filmic elaborations. In fact, it is the popularity and the modernity of the American melodrama that Langlois opposes to the old melodrama of the old Europe, embodied by the *Two Orphans*. Therefore he underlines, against this old popular French melodrama, the modernity of Louis Feuillade

¹³ Jean-Marc Leveratto, « Queen Elizabeth (1912), le mélodrame et la formation du feature film », in Dominique Nasta, Muriel Andrin et Anne Gailly (ed), *Le mélodrame filmique revisité-Revisiting Film Melodrama*, Peter Lang, Bruxelles, 2014, p. 145-156.

¹⁴ « The American cinema, under the impulsion of Griffith, was not only following the trail of the pioneers, but was exploring all the discoveries useful to analyze the range of its action, and inventing, film after film, a synthesis of the cinematic language, a “cinematurgy”. Then, suddenly, one day, in 1914, having made all the first steps, Griffith revealed with *The Birth of a Nation*, what the silent cinema could be and must be, the fusion of the plastic and of the rhythm. He split the cinema from the stage. He gave each image a value of time appropriate to its framing and founded a metric of the cinema ». [Le cinéma américain, sous l'impulsion de Griffith, ne se contentait pas de suivre les pionniers, mais d'étudier toutes leurs découvertes instructives pour en analyser la portée et mettre au point, film par film, une synthèse du langage cinématographique, une cinematurgie. Puis, un jour, en 1914, après avoir posé tous ces jalons, Griffith révéla soudainement, avec Naissance d'une Nation, ce qui pouvait et devait être le cinéma muet, qui est la fusion de la plastique et du rythme. Il arrachait le cinéma aux planches. Il donnait à chaque image une valeur-durée appropriée à son cadrage et constitua une métrique du cinéma] », Henri Langlois, *Trois cents ans de cinéma. Ecrits*, Paris, Cahiers du Cinéma-Cinémathèque Française-Fondation européenne de l'image et du son, 1986, p. 27.

¹⁵ Henri Langlois, op. cit., p. 26.

¹⁶ Lydia Borelli's films were hugely advertised in the USA as high-quality melodramas. The adaptation for example of Henry Bataille's play, *La femme nue*, (*La donna nuda*, Carmine Gallone, 5 reels, 1914) was launched in 1915 aux USA under the title *The Naked Truth* with display advertisements in the corporate press, celebrating the direction (« its arrangement shows the hand of the master craftmann »), the interpret, « *The Naked Truth*, featuring the beautiful Lyda Borelli », « the wonderful acting of Lydia Borelli was the sensation of the night ») and the melodrama (« a story of a woman's love and her disillusionment. It's a story of infinite pathos and wonderfully strong appeal »).

and Leonce Perret's *serials* which are the French equivalent of the American melodrama studied by Ben Singer — the sensational or "blood and thunder" melodramas (e.g., *The Perils of Pauline*, *The Hazards of Helen*, etc.) — using the sensory environment of the metropolis and young and fresh actors and actresses to screen thrilling stories¹⁷. Because of his reduction of the world history of the cinema to the invention of technical prototypes, embodying the merit of each nation in the competition for the progress of the film technique, he disregards the role of the market and, thus, of the ordinary spectators in this history. This view of the world cinema ignores the way the circulation of melodramas on this market has played its part in the shaping of the feature film as a standard of quality¹⁸.

2. The normalization of the filmic melodrama seen from France.

We have seen how the systematic importation in the USA, before the WWI, of the last French plays — a systematic importation made in the name of the « French quality » — was partly responsible not only for the filmic adaptation of successful French melodramas but for the research of a melodramatic quality of the film by the first American directors. Conversely, the massive importation in France of American feature films during and just after the WWI explains the importance taken by the melodrama in the French film industry.

The admiration of the French « cinéphiles » of the 20s, a young Parisian elite, for the « American Quality » of the cinema is well-known by the scholars. But the place taken by the filmic melodrama in this admiration is often underestimated, due to the influence of the Auteur Theory and of its exclusive attention to the artistic project of the director in the French film studies. We must remember that, like the Young Turks of the 50's, the Parisian "cinéphiles" of the 20s stuck to the same taste, in matter of films, than the popular audiences of their time. Cecil B. DeMille's *The Cheat*, the "cult film" of the future French Avant-garde of the 20s, L'herbier, Dullac et Gance especially, was a huge commercial success, not a secret gem for connoisseurs. It's a true melodrama, a « mélodrame bourgeois »¹⁹ (L'herminier, on Delluc) renewed by a sober type of acting and a peculiar technical skill acquired in the use of lighting and setting by the American studios. And it is its commercial success, its emotional efficiency, and not only its technical interest, the quality of its direction, continuity and editing, that has led to its recognition as an artistic model. Even Henri Langlois underlines this entertainment

¹⁷ The irony of the situation is that Langlois credits the French film industry of the creation and the importation of the genre in the USA, a French creation made under the influence of the Vitagraph quality films, released in France around 1910. Henri Langlois, « Paris-New-York », in Henri Langlois, op. cit., p. 275.

¹⁸ Cf. Daniel Manny Lund, « Writing Film History : The Struggle for Synthesis » in Sari Thomas (ed), *Film/Culture. Explorations of Cinéma in Its Social Context*, Metuchen (N.J.) and London, The Scarecrow Press, 1982, p. 13 : « Exploring the interplay of film content and the markets of exhibition trivializes neither the writer's skill nor the producer's vision ; it merely helps us understand the film in relation with its intended distribution in a consumer's market »

¹⁹ Pierre Lherminier, *Louis Delluc et le cinéma Français*, Paris, Ramsay Poche Cinema, 2008.

value which explains the sensation made by *Forfaiture* (the French name of *The Cheat*) at the time of its release in France, in 1916²⁰, together with some of the films produced by the Triangle, on members of the intellectual elite as well as on the popular patron of the theatres : « That's the way the popular theatres of the suburbs became the first school, the popular press the first laboratory, the optimism and the enthusiasm of the public the *momentum* of the Avant-Garde coming to life [C'est ainsi que les salles de quartier furent la première école, la grande presse le premier laboratoire, l'optimisme et l'enthousiasme du public le moteur de l'avant-garde naissante] »²¹. We thus need to reconsider the French film production from the beginning of the Film d'Art to the end of the 20's from the point of view of the research of new standards of film entertainment, rather than the will of experimentation of an avant-garde. The French aesthetical and technical impact of *The Cheat* brings the best confirmation that the melodrama was already a central issue for the French film industry. In 1913, the commercial success of *Les Misérables* (by Albert Capellani), of *Elizabeth Reine d'Angleterre* and of *L'enfant de Paris* confirm the triple emergence of the story value, of the production value (renowned actors and expensive settings), and of the picture sense (the mastering of the images) as quality standards, mocked 22 years later as typical American values by Bardèche and Brasillach. Each film satisfies particularly these quality requirements, by benefiting of Victor Hugo's art of storytelling (in the case of *Les Misérables*), of the skills and costumes of Sarah Bernhardt and company (in *Queen Elizabeth*), of Léonce Perret's craft in the use of the camera in *L'enfant de Paris* (superior, according to Georges Sadoul, to its use by Griffith in *Birth of the Nation*²²). But what's the most striking is the common use by these 3 films of the melodramatic emotion, sophisticated psychologically by the exploration of the intimacy of a person (*Queen Elizabeth*) or managed as the sympathy produced by familiar characters caught in action. As emphasized by George Sadoul, from 1912 to 1914, « the evolution of all the French firms follows the same path [...] The melodrama, that has settled down in the cinema, and that is derived from the so-called « popular » literature and theatre, tends to split around 1914 in two different genres, the detective film and the high-society drama, set in rich drawing rooms with luxury furniture »²³. For Georges Sadoul, this « high-society drama » illustrates the denaturing of the melodrama by the film industry, the loss of its appeal for the French popular classes, and the sign of the commercial domination of the « mélo » at the expense of the « social study »²⁴ that explains, from his point of view, the incapacity of the French films of this period to conquer an international audience²⁵. But this critic against the « dream factory » uses the story as the unique basis of the pleasure supplied by a film. It denies the continuity between theatre and cinema linked to the actor's performance, a continuity that Sadoul recognizes himself when he celebrates the exceptional quality

²⁰ Contrary to the retrospective idealization of the « eye », in the sense of the connoisseurship, of the first French « cinéphiles », *The Cheat* was a huge commercial success in France, helped by its commercial launch. It was shown during 5 months in « first exclusivity » in 5 of the best movie theaters of the Boulevards, notably the Omnia-Pathé at this time « the most beautiful movie theatre of Paris ».

²¹ Henri Langlois, « Paris-New-York », op. cit., p. 231

²² Ibid, p. 257-258, p. 3.

²³ Ibid, p. 263

²⁴ Georges Sadoul, Histoire Générale du Cinéma, Tome III, *Le cinéma devient un art (L'avant-guerre) 1919-1920*, Paris, Denoël, 1951 (rééd. 1973), p. 270

²⁵ Ibid., p. 275.

which young comedians, trained in the Faubourg theatres thanks to their casting in « classical popular melodramas », have brought to some of the « social dramas » produced by Pathé²⁶.

He recalls implicitly that the commercial transition from the short to the feature film, required, in France as in America, not only an improvement of the camera's techniques but the recruiting of actors able to master the emotional efficiency of their acting. In this context, the emotional rightness reached by the performances of young unknown actors has been an essential aspect of the technical taming of the feature film in France. Summarizing the period 1916-1919, Langlois underlines the artistic progress, especially in matter of acting, due to the influence of the American feature films in France²⁷. France « has at last found her Fanny Ward » in the person of the young actress Emmy Lynn, whose playing can match the model given by the actress of *The Cheat*. Young actors and actresses, notably Eve Francis, the future leading woman of the films of Marcel L'herbier and Louis Delluc, and Severin-Mars, the impressive leading man of *J'accuse* (1919) by Abel Gance, have shown their ability to embody a sexually provocative young woman (like the American vamp played by Louise Glaum), or a tough young man (like the American cow-boy played by Dustin Farnum in the first Cecil B. DeMille's films). They can compete with American players on the level of the mimicry, when acting by the means of their gaze (her « beautiful eyes » were the trademark of Bessie Bariscare) or controlling their facial expressions (the « Bouddha's mask » of Sessue Hayakawa in *the Cheat* according to Colette).

This importance granted to the style of acting as a means of production of the melodramatic quality by the French industry is confirmed by the French careers of the performers of *The Cheat*. Fanny Ward will play in *La rafale* (1920), an adaptation of a drama of the young Bernstein by Jean de Baroncelli, and in *Le secret du Lone Star* (1920), by the same director²⁸. Beginning in 1923, the French career of Sessue Hayakawa will last till the beginning of the WWII²⁹. The remake by Marcel L'Herbier of *The Cheat*, in 1937, brings a confirmation that the melodrama has supported, as a showcase, the aesthetical efficiency of his acting, just like his acting, by fitting the expectations of the French spectators, has favored, the exploration of the melodrama as a new standard of

²⁶ Ibid., p. 268

²⁷ He signals what we could call today the « transfer of competences » operated at the beginning of the Teens thanks to the circulation of the American films : « France at least got it's Cheat, its Fanny Ward, its Emmy Lynn, its Manhattan Madness without Douglas Fairbanks, and Séverin-Mars, Eve Francis summarized in their two persons Dustin Farnum and Louise Glaum, Bessie Bariscare and Hayakawa » (Henri Langlois, « Paris-New-York », op. cit., p. 231.)

²⁸ A drama tailored by Kistemaekers on exactly the same ingredients — love, money, suicide — and characters — the gambler ruining his live, the loving young woman suffering of the situation — than the play of Bernstein

²⁹ Sessue Hayakawa begins his career in France by playing the melodramatic role of the Japanese officer in *La bataille* (1923), that he co-directs with Edouard Emile-Violet²⁹. All his French career illustrates the complicity between his acting's resources, including his ethnic appearance, and the filmic melodrama

cinematic quality³⁰.

By counting, in 1922, « hundreds of French films » based on a simple « plagiat » of the « American film »³¹, Louis Delluc confirms this assertion, *The Cheat* being, on his opinion, the standard of quality intimately adopted by much of the young French Filmmakers. Thus to re-watch, in 1921, the Cecil B. DeMille's film is « to watch again once in just one time almost all the French films released for the last four years »³². But this negative qualification of the first French production of feature films as a “*Forfaiturica*”³³— especially the first films of the young Abel Gance, *Mater Dolorosa* and *The Tenth Symphony* — is balanced by Delluc's celebration of the promises these films contain, in matter of acting, and thus their contribution to the shaping of the future French quality film³⁴.

A close look at the French production of the twenties and at the debates between French filmmakers confirms the central issue that the melodrama was in this period, even in the production of the French Avant-Garde. Rather than for the « cinematic language » praised today in the commentaries of the surviving films of these famous auteurs, they were received and praised for their contribution to the mastering of the quality of the « average film » (Delluc) needed by the cinema as a daily entertainment. As well as the first films of Gance and Dulac, the films of Louis Delluc (*Fièvre*, 1921, *La femme de nulle part*, 1922) and Marcel L'herbier (*Eldorado*, 1921) were attempts for taming the specific skills, not only in matter of image but also in matter of acting, required to produce a quality melodrama, a goal exemplified by the last silent film of L'herbier, *L'argent* (1928). The silent melodrama needing an embodiment of the character more and more different than the one performed on this stage — due to the necessity to touch, to convince and concern an audience more and more used to the medium — the role played by the actress in the international normalization of the cinema melodrama in the

³⁰ For Langlois, the first films of Abel Gance and Germaine Dulac were first and foremost successful attempts to introduce « the lightning, the devices, the technique of the American films » in the French « commercial production », a work pursued by their less known « followers », Fescourt, Raymond Bernard, Baroncelli, René Hervil, Feyder..

³¹ Louis Delluc, *Le Monde Nouveau*, août 1922, re-published in Pierre Lherminier, op. cit., p. 271. In *Paris-Midi*, 9 mars 1920, he already mocked the French industrial passion for *The Cheat* : « For the French, *The Cheat* is the whole cinema, and that's why *The Cheat* has given birth to Gance, who has himself given birth to *Mater Dolorosa*, whose son is *J'accuse*, and Gance has generated hundred of small traders of *The Cheat*, and *The Cheat* duplicated *ad infinitum* under the form of *The Fault of Odette Marchal* and of *La Rafale* is raining on our poor world like perpetual bi-colored *confettis* », Pierre Lherminier, op. cit, p. 261.

³² Louis Delluc, *Paris-Midi*, 8 février 1921, re-published in Pierre Lherminier, op. cit., p. 269.

³³ Louis Delluc, *Paris-Midi*, 28 avril 1919, in Pierre Lherminier, p. 309,

³⁴ He greets particularly the quality of the acting in the same films he criticizes for duplicating slavishly the American tricks of the trade, mocking the arty style of Abel Gance, eager to show his ability to write a « cinematic poem ». He praises the sincerity of Emmy Linn in *Mater Dolorosa* and *The Tenth Symphony*, the « precious talent » of Séverin-Mars in *J'accuse*, the ability of Eve Francis to play “with the eyes” the heroin of *Ames de fous* (by Germaine Dulac). Eve Francis embodies the main character, a desperate Flamenco dancer, in *El Dorado*, labeled « melodrama » by its author, Marcel Lherbier, a film that Delluc will put among the first significant artistic achievements of the French cinema of the beginning of 20's.

age of the silent film deserves a special consideration.

3. Stardom, nationality and silent melodrama

Rather than a simple confirmation of the power of male gaze, the special attention given to the female player can be related to the feminization of the entertainment audience (Singer, 2000) as well as the appeal on the consumers of the high quality melodrama, requiring a personal involvement of the actress in the character she plays. The systematic practice of the *antonomasia* by the corporative press during the Teens, especially in America, to point out the need of a young « Bernhardt » or to assess the excellence of the performances of the « Bernhardt of the North », Asta Nielsen, expresses this search of a female personality, in the double sense of a superior actress and a feminine character. Henri Langlois signals that duality in his apology of the Italian actresses of the 10's, who are « the first stars of the world cinema », due to their invention of the acting required by the silent film, but also to their « invention of the *femme fatale* » in 1910³⁵. Holding the Italian film industry as the inventor of the main devices of the filmic storytelling — the « myth of the « *femme fatale* », of the womanizer, of the big-hearted gangster, of the crooked policeman, of the sportive leading man, of Tarzan, of the film direction, of the « film noir » » — he sees in the « lesson given by Torino » to Hollywood, the secret of its future supremacy on the world market. So doing, he isolates Hollywood from Broadway and of the Vaudeville industry, he forgets the continuity between theatre and film industry, as well as he reduces the history of the cinema to a unique matter of technical know-how and of competition between filmmakers. And he ignores the emotional and, therefore, moral aspects of the film considered as an entertainment, hence the way consumers have contributed to the evolution of the feature film by their supports and rejections. As the figure of the cowboy, the figure of the vamp finds its roots also in the theater and novel industries. The shaping of the American filmic melodrama thus mixes the efficiency of a local tradition of entertainment — the vamp played by Theda Bara in *A Fool There Was* is the result of the adaptation by Frank Powell of the Broadway's success of 1909 — with the distribution in America of films featuring modern actresses like Lydia Borelli or Asta Nielsen. And the appeal of this character on the audiences must be related, as well as the dynamic image of the female hero of the American serials of this period (Singer, 2000), to the change in the perception of the gender roles in America and in Europe.

Thus, by re-inscribing the melodrama in the networks of relations, physical, discursive as well as mental, experienced by its spectators — the source of the emotions generated by their affective involvement in the action and their ability to cooperate to its achievement — film studies can restore in the same time the importance of the movie acting in the history of cinema and the way it resists to the manipulation of the film director, because of its social stakes. The second film directed by Jean Renoir, *Nana*, in 1926, is a melodrama today very difficult to watch, in spite of its evident technical qualities, because of the acting of the leading woman, Catherine Hessling. She plays Nana, the character imagined by Zola, but whose features are ridiculously exaggerated by the script, caricatured to an absolutely laughable extent. And her acting is so over the top that it becomes an obstacle to the immersion of the spectator in the film, an acting sometimes very close to a performance in a Keystone comedy from 1914, a real anachronism in the context of the cinema of the 20s. In contrast, Werner Krauss — who appeared in Wiene's "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari" and Pabst's "The Joyless Street" — and

³⁵ Henri Langlois, « Le cinéma italien », in Henri Langlois, op. cit., p. 177-8.

the rest of the cast play very well, i.e. with soberness and sincerity. The “kunst wollen” of the young director — he has clearly imposed this kind of acting to the actress — leads to the opposite of what he wanted.³⁶

This anecdote about the commercial failure of a melodrama staging a « heroine maléfique » — a central figure of the filmic melodrama studied by Muriel Andrin³⁷— because of its lack of melodramatic quality can act as a conclusion of our paper. Knowing the future masterworks of Jean Renoir, notably *La chienne* (1931), we easily understand the way his admiration for the American melodrama has contributed to the failure of *Nana*, due to his fascination for the director’s craft displayed by Stroheim in *Foolish Wives*³⁸. It summarizes the difficulties met by the French Cinema just after WWI to reach the level of quality of the American industry, not only because a lack of money, but also because of an « artistic » vision of the cinema which, confusing the film with a visual poem, was more attentive to the confirmation of its cultural value than to the pleasure of the spectator. The invention of the talking picture, fortunately, by giving back to the spectator his linguistic competence, sacrificed to the importance of the visual language by the Avant-Garde, has soon revealed the interest and offered the opportunity to produce plain melodramas. Thanks to the « dialectical cooperation between working class and elite » that characterized, since the birth of the feature film, the « cultural construction of motion pictures »³⁹, the French filmmakers have had the opportunity to acquire the legendary craft of the French « poetic realism », whose films could compete on the world film market, and not only on the art house networks.

³⁶ As noted in a post on IMDB, that melodrama « on the power of the female, and the manner in which a woman can trigger a maelstrom of chaos in the lives of the men who fall at her feet, and who set aside everything — even that most precious social status and respectability — in order to attain the object of their passion [...] has the potential to be feminist, of course, but not here. The film's sympathies are almost entirely with the despairing male characters, and the female tantalizer is depicted as an absolutely ridiculous human being (although she is ultimately afforded a small degree of humanity) ». The expertise of this anonymous consumer is shared by the specialist : « The biggest flaw of *Nana* is that Hessling manages to overact even in a role that begs for some measure in overacting » , Nicholas MacDonald, *In Search of La Grande Illusion : A Critical Appreciation of Jean Renoir's Elusive Masterpiece*, Jefferson and London, McFarland, 2013 p. 155. But for the specialist « the film survives her excesses and holds up as a convincing melodrama ».

³⁷ Muriel Andrin, *Maléfiques. Le mélodrame filmique américain et ses héroïnes (1940-1953)*, Bruxelles, Peter Lang, 2005.

³⁸ Nicholas MacDonald, idem, signals that « influence by *Foolish Wives* », on an aesthetical, « *Nana* has some of the perverse elements of a Stroheim movie with an attention to gritty details », but also technical point of view, « it is an impressively conceived film, especially for a neophyte » (p. 124-125). A close look to the mimicry of Hessling confirms the weight of the director on her style of acting. She plays obviously his idea, she embodies when she moves and parades the figure of a hen, the high class prostitute being called, in the French Fin-de-siècle, a « cocotte ».

³⁹ W. Bernard Carlson, « Artifacts and Frames of Meaning : Thomas. A. Edison, His Managers and the Cultural Construction of Motion Pictures », in Wiebe E. Bijker and John Law (ed), *Shaping Technology/Building Society. Studies in Sociotechnical Change*, Cambridge and London, The MIT Press, 1992, p. 175-198, p.

