In the spring of 1914, Musidora was offered another option for expanding her already versatile talents as an actress:

I have acted in vaudeville plays...
And a man came to fetch me for acting in a drama...
Another one, who had seen me in the drama, carried me away to the revue...
The one who had seen me in the revue, wrote to me:
“The cinema is an art, come and act in films.”

The man who saw her in the revue and who solicited her collaboration was Louis Feuillade, leading film director of the second largest film company in France at the time, Gaumont.

Musidora’s nearly three year affiliation with Gaumont is most strongly marked by her acting in films directed by Louis Feuillade, although, in 1915, she also worked with other Gaumont directors such as Gaston Ravel, Léonce Perret, and Jacques Feyder. Louis Feuillade (1873-1925) was not only the leading film director at the company, but, since 1907, was its artistic supervisor as well. That year, he succeeded his mentrix Alice Guy-Blaché, who left for the United States after having occupied the position of leading filmmaker and supervisor of the Gaumont production for the previous ten years. By 1914, Feuillade was one of the most prolific, versatile, and established of French filmmakers. Because of company policy, his name was still unknown to the public, but his films usually did very well at the box-office. He made his films within the disciplined rhythm maintained at the Gaumont studios and
amounted during the pre-war years to an average of one or two films per week.\(^6\)
They included the entire array of popular film genres at the time, including historical and contemporary dramas, crime series, and, above all, a variety of comic subjects. The high production rate and the hybrid nature of Feuillade’s work were significantly sustained by the fact that he was able to work with a large but select troupe of actors and actresses, that he had gathered around him throughout the years. Some of them were employed for their versatility, like Renée Carl and Yvette Andreyor, others for a specific quality they brought to films, as was the case with René Navarre, Marcel Levesque, Musidora, and the child actors Bébé and Bout de Zan. But all of them were enticed to relatively restrained acting drawing from their “genius”, as Feuillade preferred to call his actors’ distinctive presence and ingenuity.\(^7\) His joyous nature and fertile imagination in combination with his longstanding experience and his feeling for what the public wanted to see created a highly productive work environment of shared respect and of pleasure and playfulness. Casts and crews at Gaumont felt that they were special and that they were making something special.\(^8\) This climate was cultivated for two reasons: it helped bear the financial and disciplinary restraints imposed by the boss, Léon Gaumont, whom Feuillade secretly but tellingly nicknamed “le barbelé” (the barb wire), and
it helped sustain the competition with Gaumont’s primary rivals Pathé and, after 1916, American cinema.\textsuperscript{9}

Feuillade took great pride in writing original scripts and deviating from them while shooting, although he also made use of theatrical and literary sources by 1914. He was a well-read man with a great knowledge of painting and had a vivid interest in the popular stage. All of this was unknown to Musidora when Feuillade solicited her collaboration, and she claims that her first response to him had been negative: “Film? You are kidding me. I am no acrobat!”\textsuperscript{10} But Feuillade managed to change her ignorant attitude, after which the spirited, literate, versatile, and doubtlessly ambitious rising star quickly recognized in him a soul mate:

His volubility, his manners, I liked everything in this man who got through his work in an animated, intelligent and comprehensive move. [...] Behind his pince-nez, one saw a thousand scripts dancing, passing by, being spun out, one more poignant than the other... His great intelligence, his adaptability made him a true friend to me right away.\textsuperscript{11}

Feuillade, in turn, was particularly charmed by Musidora’s extraordinariness, as speaks from this, to my knowledge, only retrievable statement from him about the actress:

your pretty oval little face is one of those to which my memory attaches itself with the greatest pleasure; first, because you are not ordinary and second because you have always approached me with an attitude filial and respectful at once, which is a peculiarity of spoilt children.\textsuperscript{12}

During her Gaumont time, Musidora participated in at least 31 films made by Feuillade. In addition to the two famous episode films, \textit{les vampires} and \textit{judex}, which consisted of ten and twelve episodes respectively, but which I tally here as one film each, she appeared in a historical drama, a contemporary drama, some patriotic films, and a series of comic subjects. My discussion of them along generic lines allows me to point out the extent to which these films exemplify the close ties of Feuillade’s cinema with the popular stage culture of the times. Because Feuillade not only recruited acting talent from music-hall and boulevard theater, but also took inspiration from the stage’s tried and trusted generic formulas and subject matter. In contrast to contemporary and later assessments that consider this aspect of his work a drawback or a defiance of cinematic specificity, some of which will be discussed in due course, I argue that Feuillade’s self-confident drawing from the popular stage constituted a significant element of his understanding of cinema as a \textit{popular} art.
This is particularly pertinent to the two genres in which Feuillade used to cast Musidora, comic and episode films, but equally relevant to the two dramas in which Feuillade first tested his new asset.

The chronology of titles in which Musidora appears and some surviving anecdotes suggest that Feuillade’s initial idea of how to employ Musidora’s talent was in dramas. Musidora’s first screen appearances in Gaumont films were in a historical drama and a contemporary drama in which she played supporting parts.13 Musidora’s own recollections include that Feuillade had asked her to play the Virgin Mary in a biblical film and that she declined the offer because it was planned to be shot in Palestine, whereas she had no intentions to quit the revue at the Folies-Bergère, which was bound to run until June 30th.14 Feuillade’s colleague and friend, Henri Fescourt, who accompanied the filmmaker to watch Musidora perform on stage, recalled that they were searching for “beautiful women, colorful figures, archetypes”15 to act in their films. They were primarily impressed by Musidora’s dance act, which, probably, was included in the third tableau, “Paul et Virginie à Paris”;16

We saw, supported by a quite handsome partner, a young woman flexible like the stalk of a plant, with slim and long legs, with a pure bust exposed by a bright bodysuit, skipping like an antelope in front of a mesmerized public. The body, as soon as having lightly touched the floor, relaxed, swung up again, fell back, turned around on its axis in the air with a nervous grace. This play of graphic rhythms unfolded in a harsh lighting that gave it an at once crisp, somewhat savage and strangely sensual note.17

If Fescourt understood the crisp note as an effect of the lighting, Musidora’s reminiscences foreground a combination of sensual presence and mode of acting:

I played a Virginie that [the novelist] Bernardin de Saint-Pierre definitely had not conceived of. Three leaves embroidered on tulle covered my breasts and fifteen blades of grass arranged like a large comet hid my navel. A noble expression of purity and ingenuousness sat on my face. This ingenuousness caused me to be summoned to the Gaumont studio.18

Feuillade himself, according to Fescourt, pointed out the features of Musidora’s face that specifically qualified her for working in front of the camera: “The face is very good at close distance. The eyes will be marvellous in projection.”19 The expression of ingenuousness, Musidora’s eye-catching presence, and her striking eyes, apparently, initially enticed Feuillade to try her in the dramatic genre.
Musidora’s first appearance on the screen of the Gaumont-Palace, the cinema where Gaumont’s and Feuillade’s films usually premiered, was on June 5, 1914, in the historical drama SEVERO TORELLI.²⁰ It was a film in the series “Grands Films Artistiques”, a collective name for Gaumont films that made up the main feature of the program, but which were not exclusively directed by Feuillade.²¹ With its 1208 meters, SEVERO TORELLI was one of the longest films Feuillade had made so far, and, with its lush costuming and richly embellished sets, was also one of the more costly ones. Half of the announcement of the film in Comoedia went into raptures about how varied and well-taken care of the sets were, and Musidora also recalled it for this aspect:

First there is my debut film at Gaumont: SEVERO TORELLI, with a leaning tower of Pisa made of painted card board, with a street made out of pebbles on the floor, with a fake bridge and costumes from La Reine Fiamette!²²
Musidora’s sniggering reflection six years after date notwithstanding, the surviving print of the film demonstrates that those painted backdrops were no less than stunning: the tower of Pisa was drawn in graphic detail and the water underneath the fake bridge really seemed to sparkle. The film also contains an impressive trick scene in which white-clad and carefully choreographed specters stagger the spectator as much as they do the main characters. According to Richard Abel, the spectacle of sets and costumes constituted one of the main attractions of the genre of the historical film. This aspect of the critical appreciation brought to the genre, then, paralleled the enthusiasm about the sets and costuming in popular stage genres such as fairy plays and *revues à grand spectacle*.

The *Comoedia*-announcement acclaimed the film not only for this ornamental aspect, but also for its dramatic power and its compelling emotions:

The hesitations, the disgust, the remorse... Dona Pia’s disgrace, her outraged pride and her final gesture, the revolt of the people of Pisa, make up the most tragic plot which one can imagine.

Dona Pia was the mother of the protagonist of the story, Severo Torelli, and was played by Renée Carl. She was the star of the film and her role and name were not only singled out in the announcement, but also in the opening shots of the film. The drama is set in fifteenth-century Italy and weaves political and emotional motifs into a fatal plot centering on men. The political motifs include the son’s duty to carry out his father’s unfinished task of overthrowing Florence’s governor, Barnabo Spinola, who tyrannizes Pisa. The emotional motifs include Severo’s discovery that Torelli is not his genuine father, but is, in fact, Spinola, who once claimed the handsome Dona Pia in exchange for Torelli’s life. With her, according to Fescourt, “intense and tragic physiognomy” and “so controlled and expressive acting style”, Renée Carl invigorates an otherwise aloof drama with emotions relatable for spectators. Feuillade, who, since Carl’s entry at Gaumont in January 1907, cast her in virtually every film he made, granted her various lengthy shots and scenes that allowed her to exploit her solid demeanor and glowing eyes to the maximum effect. At one point, at least, she directly addresses spectators by looking into the camera. The function of this gaze is to intensify the emotion—the mother’s determination to stand by her son, regardless of his choice—and communicate this to spectators. If it is true, as Fescourt contends, that Renée Carl was among the first actresses in France to understand the secret of acting in silent cinema, and if it is also true, as the Gaumont and Feuillade actress Yvette Andreyor has reported, that Renée Carl was gentle, fair, and benevolent towards debutantes, Musidora may have picked up
some valuable tricks of the trade from her experienced forerunner as Feuillade's favorite actress.

In SEVERO TORELLI, Musidora played the relatively modest part of Portia, the mistress of Barnabo Spinola who is secretly and vainly in love with Severo Torelli. She appears several times veiled and indiscernible, but is prominently visible in three scenes: two lighthearted and cheerful, the third perturbed and dramatic. In the cheerful scenes, which were set at a store and in a street, she talks Spinola out of liquidating one of his contestants who was an ally of Severo’s. A little later, she runs into Severo and his friends. The friends thank her with admiration for her courage, but Severo, to her great sorrow, hardly notices her and behaves perfunctorily. In these scenes, Musidora’s acting style comes across as breezy, agile, and artless. In the scene with Spinola, she inserts an actor’s strategy that she carries on in many of her subsequent screen roles: moving her eyes to solicit complicity from the spectators. If she, in the process, looks into the camera, it is to the effect of communicating to the public her thoughts on what is going on within the diegesis. As Fescourt observes, “she brought out the features of her characters through the way she gazed, listened, contemplated…” Traces of this method are already present in this screen role. The dramatic scene emphasizes, above all, her remarkable beauty. In it, a veiled Portia approaches Severo to profess her love for him. Torn between curiosity and a sense of fatalism, he takes away the veil and discovers who the mysterious woman is. The shot exhibits Musidora’s gorgeous neck and décolleté. Rejected by Severo, Portia soon falls into distress. She collapses, stretches out her arms, and, once more, the camera renders her unearthly handsome. Whereas in dramatic scenes Musidora’s way of acting resembles Carl’s, it differs in cheerful scenes. Musidora brings to the fore her character’s sentiments with natural ease. The roles that Feuillade conceives for her, from the beginning and throughout her affiliation with Gaumont, enables her to fully exploit her eye-catching presence as well as her artless way of acting.

As we have seen, Musidora demonstrated such artlessness already in her stage performances, and, in this respect, her acting in cinema can be understood as a continuation of her way of acting developed for the popular stage. This suggestion turns out less far-fetched than it seems at first sight if additional connections to practices borrowed from the popular stage are taken into account. Succeeding a highly successful stage play, SEVERO TORELLI constituted the first adaptation to the screen of the epic poem with the same title written by François Coppée. As the staging was explicitly mentioned in the publicity, one may assume that it contributed considerably to the popularization of the literary text, similar to the staging of Colette’s Claudine-plays. Furthermore, a luxuriously produced 63-page booklet was handed out to the public, a sort of story in pictures, with various stills, a cast list, a detailed
plot outline, and many dialogues on rhyme, probably taken from the literary
source. This practice brings to mind the often equally posh printing matter
that accompanied programs and revues in café-concert and music-hall. In sum,
SEVERO TORELLI was not only connected to the popular stage in some of its
representational strategies, such as the spectacular sets and costumes and the
ways of acting, but also in the conceptual framework of its public presentation.
Similar representational strategies and a similar framework of presentation
apply to Musidora’s next film directed by Feuillade, LE CALVAIRE (The Agony).

Two weeks after SEVERO TORELLI, the programs of the Gaumont-Palace
and the Tivoli Cinema offered a second film with Musidora, the mundane dra-
ma LE CALVAIRE, another “Grand film artistique” with Renée Carl en vedette in
the role of a tragic mother of a son in trouble. In this 859 meter film, MUSI-
dora played the part of a music-hall actress who, unknowingly, was the source
of the trouble, and this offered her a more extensive appearance than in her
preceding Gaumont film. She not only played the character, but, in a direct
reference to the stage, also wore the headdress designed by Poiret, which she
had worn in the “La Revue Galante” at the Folies-Bergère. It was common
practice at Gaumont for actors to bring their own wardrobe when cast in con-
temporary parts. The gown that she wore in this part, however, made her less
proud:

My head covered with pearls, my feet in shoes of satin and with tapering
heels, which made it difficult to keep my balance, half hidden under a
veil of silky cotton, in the Greek way, of a somewhat silly kind, such was
the way how I had to consolidate my position on the silver screen.

The reference to the popular stage was emphasized even further in the public-
ity for LE CALVAIRE, in which Musidora’s name was singled out by the caption
“des Folies-Bergère”, where she indeed continued to perform while the film
was shot. Her status as a music-hall actress was considered to give the film
extra esteem. No print of it is known to survive, but there are advertisements
with six stills, of which three include Musidora, and there is, just like in the
case of the previous film, a twenty-three-page publicity booklet that contains
five additional stills featuring Musidora. The photographs invoke a connec-
tion between the part and Musidora’s work on-stage, although the film itself
seems not to have lived up to that expectation. According to the summaries
and outlines, the story does not contain any scenes with the actress on-stage or
otherwise at work. Hence, the references to Musidora’s stage fame were arbi-
trary with respect to content, and thus only served publicity aims. For this con-
temporary drama, then, the suggestion of truthfulness was a positive point,
and the association with music-hall an additional asset.
LE CALVAIRE nonetheless seems to have offered Musidora two major scenes that unleash the drama. In both, her character goes through an escalating quarrel with her jealous lover, who is the good-for-nothing son who runs into trouble and is spoiled by his mother. The first scene is set in her dressing room at the music-hall, the second, in his car and at her apartment, successively. In her dressing room, she wears her music-hall outfit, and the pictures show her upset yet resolute. In the scene at her apartment, she wears a somewhat homely outfit, and is pictured once talking her lover round and once with an expression of shock, because he, in his drunken rage, has smashed a carafe on the table. The summary discloses that she eventually throws him out. In the drama that unfolds, the actress is murdered, her lover becomes a chief suspect, and his mother has to face the dilemma of standing by her son or letting him down. The actress’ murder causes her disappearance from the diegesis, which continues to focus on the agony of the mother. Despite the fact that no moving images of the film are available, the stills indicate a similar correspondence between role and acting style as pointed out previously: Musi-
Dora seems to have acted with ease and ingenuousness, giving her character an energetic and dynamic quality.

Neither of the two films has been discussed in extant studies of Feuillade’s work, but Lacassin mentions them in his booklet on Musidora as examples of how Feuillade, from the beginning, employed her “qualités plastiques”, a phrase that remains ambiguous as to whether it refers to her visual attractiveness, her pliability, or both. In the above, I have tried to complicate this view on the collaboration between filmmaker and actress through emphasizing her mode of acting. As she had done on stage, Musidora showed confidence in the creation of types, held up artlessness in her way of expressing sentiments and thoughts, which she moreover communicated to spectators through moving her eyes. In addition to the historical and contemporary drama mentioned, Feuillade and some of his colleagues later utilized Musidora’s qualities in another dramatic genre, the patriotic drama that emerged from the war. Feuillade cast Musidora in three patriotic films, Léonce Perret in two, and some nine were directed by Gaston Ravel after scenarios by Nora Januxi. Of this lot, only Ravel’s L’AUTRE VICTOIRE (The Other Victory) is known to survive, although in an incomplete print. The extant fragments of the film do nonetheless corroborate the above observations about Musidora’s screen presence.

I have pointed out that SEVERO TORELLI and LE CALVAIRE were released as “Grands Films Artistiques”. As Richard Abel has shown, this caption refers to Gaumont’s answer to a direction in French film production, which, in 1909, had been initiated by Pathé’s satellite firms Film d’Art and its immediate successor, the Société Cinématographique des Auteurs et Gens de Lettres (hereafter, the SCAGL). In response to the 1908-1909 crisis in cinema attendance, both the Film D’Art and the SCAGL had promoted the active involvement of dramatists, writers, and stage actors in filmmaking to liberate cinema from its current status as a music-hall attraction and to attract more sophisticated audiences to the newly established cinemas. In their unremitting competition with Pathé, Gaumont and Feuillade meanwhile disputed the tactics of drawing from the stage and printed sources by internally and publicly cultivating a preference for original scripts and for actors they themselves had molded for working in front of a camera. In trade paper advertisements, they claimed a set of aesthetic principles and artistic intentions that guided their pre-war production, such as Feuillade’s series of the “Films Esthétiques” in 1910 and his “Scènes de La Vie Telle Qu’elle Est” in 1911. As a referential model for the first series, the art of painting was specified: “because its address is to our eyes”. For the second, truthfulness was invoked as a guideline: “These scenes want to be and are slices of life.” In such adveritized statements, the stage and literature were referred to as cultural forms from which film turned: “We do not believe that the cinema is condemned to remain exclusively tributary of
the theater and to restrict itself to adaptations.” In another, it was asserted that their plan was “to divert the French cinema from the influence of Rocambole in order to raise it toward a higher destiny”.

In light of such declarations of intent, the multi-layered connections to the stage of films like SEVERO TORELLI and LE CALVAIRE seems at odds with the profile Feuillade and Gaumont constructed for their film production. But even if they did not profess so in public, I would argue that these films, and several others, testify to the fact that they, much like their rivals, did turn to the stage and to literature for subject matter and inspiration. For instance, one year before SEVERO TORELLI, Feuillade filmed the serial novel written by Pierre Souvestre and Marcel Allain, FANTÔMAS, and, as is generally known, with considerable success. When it comes to stage actors working before the camera, moreover, Musidora was not the first or the last candidate. Fernand Hermann, the actor who played the lead in both SEVERO TORELLI and LE CALVAIRE, to name but one of her peers, had a twelve year career on the popular stage. The key to what Gaumont and Feuillade adopted and adapted from stage and from literature, however, was not the legitimate theater or high literature. The keyword was that they looked for what appealed to a large public: that is to say, they looked for popular culture.

According to Fescourt, Feuillade’s motto for his own films and for the supervision of Gaumont’s film production was: “A film has to sell. Let us look for what it needs to please the public.” Fescourt called Feuillade a virtuoso in this regard, whose flair for pleasing crowds came close to divination. In Gaumont’s advertised statements for Feuillade’s films, which were arguably drafted by the director himself, a former journalist, the crowd was invariably invoked as the final judge. This was already the case in 1911, when the announcement of the “Scènes de la Vie Telle qu’elle est” read that the public would tell them if the effort had been successful, and still held for 1922, when Feuillade, in the presentation of his ninth serial LE FILS DU FLIBUSTIER (The Son of the Buccaneer), directly addressed the public in such terms: “oh public, sovereign judge of our films and master of our destinies.” In the 1916 statement to announce JUDEX, Feuillade gave his vision of his films’ spectators:

> What is JUDEX? [...] A film... which we have wished to be popular in the largest and the most wholesome sense of the word, a family spectacle inciting the most noble sentiments in which we have made every effort to please Children and Adults, thanks to a plot with the most diverse and unforeseen intricacies.

In this description resonates the broadness of the music-hall and popular stage public, the public of the pre-eminent entertainment industry of the
time, which before and during the war, determined what was to become popular. As much as Feuillade and Gaumont professed aesthetic innovation and artistic aspirations, the films had to sell and to appeal to a broad public. Seen from this perspective, Feuillade’s adoption and adaption of popular stage talent and subject matter to the screen becomes less contradictory. The idea of a genuinely popular art was indebted to the conceptual framework of pre-war music-hall and revue, which was the paramount divertissement for the eye and the mind. For Feuillade and his contemporaries, this was a matter of fact, but today, this conceptual context needs reconstruction. And, indeed, were “the address to the eye” and the “exposure of slices of life”, as Feuillade phrased them, not also two of the primary aims of the revue, as I argue in my discussion of them? Was the Folies-Bergère not the select site for him and Fescourt to find beautiful women, colorful figures, and archetypes? Had music-hall and revue not also had the intermediary function of distributing and popularizing knowledge of art and literature? And did the claim of a naturalistic or realistic aesthetic, as Abel has argued, not mask the melodramatic origins of Feuillade’s fiction and the close interconnection that existed between melodrama, realism, and sensationalism in late nineteenth-century French stage drama and fiction?52

By consequence of the negation of popular literature and theater as sources of inspiration, the further ramifications of the interconnections between Feuillade’s cinema and French popular culture of the mid-teens have long remained obscured.53 However, looking at Feuillade’s films from the perspective of how they drew from the stage, provides a context for understanding how they could attain popularity. And, most interestingly, Feuillade appears to have copied the strategies of the Film d’Art and the SCAGL much more extensively than he and Gaumont were willing to admit. These strategies include the involvement in film of popular stage actors and actresses like Musidora and a brief discussion of them may illuminate my point.

The Film d’Art took its actors from high theater and adapted literary classics, but, because of the varying success of its films, this strategy was considered controversial by 1914. One of its achievements, however, was that it revived the genre and elevated the status of the historical film.54 As Severo Torelli illustrates, this was also the case beyond the Film d’Art’s own productions. In addition to that, the Film d’Art initiated the promotional strategy of drawing the spectator’s attention specifically to the actors, along with their theatrical associations: “Le Bargy, de la Comédie Française” as the poster for their film L’ASSASSINAT DU DUC DU GUISE (The Assassination of the Duc du Guise, 1908) read.55 We have seen already that Feuillade used such phrasing to advertise Musidora in the publicity for LE CALVAIRE. Even more than the Film d’Art, however, it was the SCAGL, a company headed by the feuilleton
writer and boulevard playwright Pierre Decourcelle, which productively drew from France's literary patrimony, to the wide circulation of which the popular stage adaptations had been instrumental. But, as Jean-Jacques Meusy has contended, even more so than the renown of the authors and script-writers, it was the fame of the actors that attracted audiences to the SCAGL films. The SCAGL actors did not come primarily from the Comédie Française, as those of the Film d'Art, but from the popular stage and music-hall, as, for instance, the boulevard theater actress Polaire, the dancer from the Odéon and the Olympia Stacia de Napierkowska, the comic actor from the Variétés Prince, and the music-hall vedette, Mistinguett. These popular actresses, as Abel points out, began to display the latest fashions in playing seductive figures, sometimes associated with the theater. Musidora’s part in le calvaire exemplifies this trend as well. Feuillade, at about the same time as he secured the collaboration of Musidora and Hermann, further engaged the comic actor and Musidora’s future partner in comedy Marcel Levesque, “du Palais Royal”, a vaudeville theater. Of the SCAGL actresses, Polaire and Mistinguett, in 1914, can be seen as forerunners of Musidora, both in terms of their careers and the type of roles they chose.

Previously, I described how Polaire’s status shifted from, during the 1890s, gommeuse épileptique and vedette of the café-concert, to one of the leading ladies of the boulevard theater in the 1900s through her interpretation of Colette’s Claudine. Polaire, whose real name was Emilie-Marie Bouchard-Zouzé, was of Algerian descend, and, according to Jacques-Charles, her muscular body resembled that of a little Arab. Her special feature was her “taille de guêpe” (wasp waist, 40 centimetres all around, according to legend), which, as Colette observed, was emphasized by her exceptionally high and wide chest. Both on- and off-stage, moreover, Polaire cultivated an exotic intonation in her French. This combination of androgyny and color deviated from the beauty standards for Parisian women in the Belle Époque, which required a curvaceous body and pale skin. The success of the role of Claudine subjugated Polaire to being typecast again: “For a long time people wished to see in Polaire only the irresponsible and depraved little brat, with her nude calves, her short curly hair, and the black apron.” She countered the problem in 1910 through proceeding to music-hall, where she, according to Curnonsky, could demonstrate her versatility and mastery of the métier. At the Olympia, “she was in turn playful, mischievous, creative, sad and cynical.” By the end of the decade, Polaire had secured the second position in the top five of female music-hall stars in France, right after Mistinguett.

Polaire and Musidora shared more than a fascination for the figure of Claudine and a close friendship with Colette. The popular stage enabled each of them to demonstrate the mastery of her métier and the versatility of her tal-
ent. Yet, Polaire too was “fetched” by the cinema, that is to say, by the SCAGL, just a few years before Musidora. One of Polaire’s SCAGL films, of which a print exists, _La tournée des grands ducs_ (Going Out On a Spree, 1910), was directed by the stage actor and author of revues, comic plays, and operettas, Yves Mirande.63 It is a mischievous ten-minute sketch about what the French called _apaches_ (tough guys) and what Abel characterizes as the “most publicised deviant ‘other’ supposedly threatening French bourgeois social order” of the era, first, in the daily newspapers and, as of 1904, in film.64

The story is set in two places, a restaurant and an underground joint, and Polaire plays the female protagonist of the gang.65 Polaire adopts a provocative air and moves around with her arms characteristically akimbo to emphasize both the character’s vulgarity and her own legendary waifish waist.66 In addition, her character, which was not given a name in the film, engages in the _apache_ dance, a rough skip in which the male partner slings and flings the woman around the floor.67 Polaire’s part precedes Musidora’s roles of the mid-teens in Feuillade’s serials _les vampires_ and _judeex_, and Musidora stylized her screen presence following this model.

The _Apache_ Dance, which is also featured in _les vampires_, was created for the _music-hall_ stage in 1907, at the Moulin Rouge, by the _fantaisiste_ (all-round entertainer) Mistinguett and the _chanteur anglais_ Max Dearly, in their famous act “La valse chaloupée” (The Apache Dance).68 After performing for ten years at the Eldorado in the genre of the _gommeuse épileptique_ created by Polaire, Mistinguett’s position rose to that of _demi-vedette_ at the Moulin Rouge. In the course of the 1910s, she acquired _vedette>-status in her partnership—professional and in private—with Maurice Chevalier, which began in 1911 in a revue at the Folies-Bergère and ended in 1920, when La Miss was unwilling to share with her partner her top-of-the-bill position as _meneuse de la revue_ (leading lady of the revue) at the Casino de Paris.69 By then, Mistinguett had already reached the first place in the top five female _vedettes_ of the French revue, and entered a subsequent, two-decade period of unparalleled stardom, as a sign of which may count the inclusion of her pet name “Miss” in the titles of revues, a prestige hardly any other _music-hall_ star of the time ever attained. Examples include: “Celle à Miss!” at the Ba-ta-clan in 1917; “La Revue de Mistinguett” at the Moulin Rouge in 1925; and “Paris Miss” at the Casino de Paris in 1929.70 Already a crowd favorite by the early 1910s, Mistinguett was, like Polaire, lured to the cinema by the SCAGL, with the result that, between 1909 and 1917, she was featured in numerous films.71 Several of these appear to have parallels with films in which Feuillade cast Musidora and at least one of them seems to have drawn from Musidora’s work. A brief discussion of some of the films may illuminate such parallels.

Just like Musidora in _le calvaire_, Mistinguett, in at least two contempo-
rary dramas, was cast as “herself”, that is to say, as a famous popular stage actress. In one of these, L’ÉPOUVANTE (The Trepidation, 1911), which was directed by Georges Monca and based on a script by Decourcelle, she played an actress returning to her apartment after the show to find a jewel thief in her bedroom. Abel depicts it as an utterly suspenseful and exciting action film that narrates how the actress handles the situation and manages to retrieve her jewels. The film print, preserved at the EYE Filmmuseum, shows that she handles it by saving the thief from a perilous position in which he finds himself while escaping from the police. Grateful that she saved his life, he returns the stolen jewels to her.

Emmanuelle Toulet has pointed out that one of the differences between the Film d’Art and the SCAGL was that the latter not only adapted stage dramas, but also comic subject matter such as the immensely popular vaudeville plays by Labiche and Sardou. In her first years with the SCAGL, Mistinguett indeed played various comic roles, as, for instance, in LA RUSE DE MISS PLUMCAKE (Miss Plumcake’s Trick, Georges Monca 1911), in which she parodies and lampoons Parisian men’s idolatry with American women. LA FIANCÉE RÉCALCITRANTE (A Will of her Own, 1909) and LA DOCTORESSE (The Female Doctor, Georges Monca, 1910) are likewise comic subjects. In this latter film, a parody about a woman’s choice between love and career, Mistinguett was seconded by a colleague of hers from the popular stage, Charles Petitdemange, who used the stage name Prince, and, in the cinema of the 1910s, was known as Rigadin, as, for instance, in LES TIMIDITÉS DE RIGADIN (A Shy Youth). According to Richard Abel, the Rigadin figure drew from the tradition of vaudeville plays and light stage comedies and often parodied serious bourgeois drama and its principal subject of love. In his retelling of the film, Abel does not exactly specify Mistinguett’s acting, but her role seems farcical. It also implies a great deal of narrative agency, as she plays the animator of the situations that constitute the fun and render Prince as the (anti-) hero of the farce. Light stage comedy as a conceptual source of inspiration for filmmaking as well as the utilization of stage actors’ comic talents for the screen, appears to be highly pertinent to Musidora’s collaboration with Feuillade, because, in the first month of her affiliation with Gaumont, Feuillade tested Musidora not only in the two dramas discussed, but also in the comic genre, and he would cast her time and again in his ciné-vaudevilles (vaudeville films). These comic films constitute a substantial part of Musidora’s career at Gaumont, but have thus far received little attention among historians and scholars interested in Musidora’s roles and films. My discussion of the ciné-vaudevilles may equally provide insights in the extent to which this segment of Feuillade’s oeuvre drew inspiration from the popular stage.

Feuillade began making ciné-vaudevilles before the war and prolonged the
genre during the war years. Initially, they were launched as a series, under the motto “La Vie drôle” (The funny life), which premiered on December 12, 1913 and carried on with a frequency of one film per month until its last release on June 26, 1914. This seventh and final film in the series was also the first one with Musidora in the cast. After that, the motto of “La Vie drôle” was abandoned, but the generic indication of ciné-vaudeville, which had been coined by Gaumont and Feuillade and remained exclusive to them, was, as the advertisements document, subsequently applied to almost all of the vaudeville films featuring Marcel Levesque.\footnote{Levesque was the comic actor who, as of the fourth ciné-vaudeville released on February 6, 1914, invariably played one of the films’ main characters until he quit Gaumont in December 1917. In the course of these four years, Feuillade made at least 26 films in the genre, in fifteen of which Musidora played a supporting part.}

Only one of the ciné-vaudevilles with Musidora in the cast is known to survive, namely, Lagourdette Gentleman Cambrioleur (Lagourdette, Gentleman Burglar).\footnote{It was first released in December 1916 and parodied the reception of the notorious crime series Les Vampires (1915-1916). In addition to this print, there is an almost three-minute fragment extant, Le Réveil de l’Artiste (The Awakening of the Actor), from a comedy released in January 1917 as a benefit film for the war orphans and a joint effort of French film companies, C’est pour les Orphelins (It’s for the Orphans), which I include in this discussion as it features both Musidora and Levesque in comic roles. Otherwise, only contemporary paratextual material—synopses, advertisements, reviews and stills—is available for the study of Musidora’s vaudeville films at Gaumont. The actress never mentioned these films in accounts of her career.} Marcel Levesque, in contrast, paid ample attention to them in his reminiscences and described them as a core section of his oeuvre with Feuillade, who built them to a large extent, albeit not exclusively, around his comic talent. While the lack of surviving prints admittedly limits the scope of my discussion, I shall nonetheless attempt to explore their significance in the context of Feuillade’s comic oeuvre and Musidora’s career. To that aim, I shall draw from a range of primary and secondary sources, including an article written by Laurent Le Forestier, which argues against Francis Lacassin’s assessment of the ciné-vaudevilles as “articles de pêche”, unambitious quickies made to keep the business going and to allow Feuillade to go off fishing in the afternoons.\footnote{In the process, I will also render homage to Marcel Levesque, whose contribution to the ciné-vaudevilles deserves more attention than film historians have hitherto granted it.}

Unlike previous series in which Feuillade announced a new aesthetic or genre, the ciné-vaudevilles did not come with a public address proclaiming the filmmaker’s considerations and intentions. According to Marcel Levesque,
they came about beside Feuillade’s core productions, such as the grand films artistiques and the series and serials, on which the filmmaker worked from Monday through Thursday mornings, but it usually took a similar time span—Thursday through Saturday afternoons—to manufacture one ciné-vaudeville. They hence can hardly be considered a by-product of the firm’s more prestigious output, as Laurent Le Forestier has also pointed out. According to this historian, comic subjects were an important source of income and, by 1913, began making up the majority of Gaumont production, in fact a bit more than half of it. Within that category, a division was maintained between so-called “scènes comiques” and “comédies”, which, according to Le Forestier, in the final analysis can only be distinguished by the degree of ambition they exemplify. Feuillade, until 1913, availed himself primarily of “scènes comiques” with the child actors Bébé and Bout de Zan; these less ambitious productions allowed him a greater freedom to live out his naughty and facetious imagination. He simultaneously assigned the production of further comic one-reelers to his colleague Jean Durand, who created the series of calino, zigoto, and onésime. According to Richard Abel, the Gaumont comic one-reelers had their repetition of gags and their slapstick-like, physical comedy that “put their actors through pratfalls, pummelling and pursuits” in common with series by other firms, but simultaneously deviated from other series in that they were “especially adept at turning this kind of comic film into social commentary”. According to Le Forestier, Feuillade’s series with Bébé and most
notably Bout de Zan showed a high interest in character, in situations, and in the linearity of the story. For Feuillade, human behavior was more important than physical effects. This made his “scènes comiques”, more than those of others, closer to the works of popular theater, which otherwise found their cinematic equivalent in what were called “comédies”.89

**BÉBÉ APACHE** provides an early example of the nature of Feuillade’s “scènes comiques”.90 In the film, made and released in 1910, the children Bébé (Clément Mary) and Fonfon (Alphonsine Mary) imitate the attitudes and gestures of gangsters, including the famous *apache*-dance. Feuillade’s interest in character, situations, and narrative linearity shows in the children’s performances as much as in the plot. Notwithstanding the fact that the children perfectly imitate the criminals as stylized for the stage, they remain child performers in that they regularly communicate to each other and to the audience their fun with disguising as and outwitting the gangsters. In such instances, they seem to forget their parts, burst into laughter, glance at the camera, and make visible the effort to get back into their roles. The ten-minute film conveys a clear and neat little narrative, in which all loose ends are tied. Even the medals the children are awarded for their daring and smart act are made of chocolate.

The Bébé series was succeeded by a series of short comedies featuring Bout de Zan as played by René Poyen, in one of which Musidora is said to have been cast. This film, *BOUT DE ZAN ET L’ESPION* (Bout de Zan and the Spy) was set to be released in early 1915,91 but was forbidden by the censors, because, as one critic assumed, the title alone was already offensive.92 Only from its initial title, *BOUT DE ZAN ET LE BOCHE* (Bout de Zan and the Kraut) could one read that the spy was a German;93 the term of abuse indicated that it concerned a sly and evil character. The surviving synopsis discloses yet another smartly constructed little plot, with Bout de Zan now in the pivotal role of preventing his prospective stepfather—a naval officer and inventor of a new torpedo—from divulging his secret to the enemy. The summary mentions only one part for a woman, which Lacassin ascribes to Suzanne Le Bret, who took over the role of playing Bout de Zan’s mother in the series after Renée Carl left Gaumont after the outbreak of the war. It therefore remains uncertain what part Musidora had in this film or if she appeared in it at all.94

Apart from some incidental samples by Feuillade, the making of what was called “comé"dies” at Gaumont up to 1913 was predominantly the business of Léonce Perret, whose series _LÉONCE_ was intended to compete with the relatively refined comedy of manners in the _RIGADIN- and MAX-series_ by Pathé.95 Léonce Perret shared with Prince a career history in popular theater: both had worked with Antoine at the Odéon and acted several years at the famous boulevard theater the Variétés before entering cinema around 1907.96 According to Abel, Perret’s Léonce was a more solid, assured bourgeois type than
Prince’s Don Juan, yet, in contrast to the latter’s conventionality, very modern in his habits. The relatively modern attitude in Perret’s characters was, at least in part, an effect of the involvement of Suzanne Grandais, who co-starred in most of his LÉONCE-films of 1912 and 1913 and who enacted the type of the modern ingénue in the series.

Within this context of Gaumont comic film production of 1913, Feuillade’s ciné-vaudevilles can be understood as having pushed the genre towards lengthier and more sophisticated comedies. As Le Forestier has pointed out, with their seven to eight hundred meters, the ciné-vaudevilles may have been shorter than the average Grand Film Artistique Gaumont, but, at the same time, they were significantly longer, and hence arguably more prestigious, than any of the scènes comiques and comédies made thus far, even the LÉONCE-series, which ran an average length of thirteen minutes or 230 meters. It seems, moreover, that the generic indication coined for them in the publicity, set them apart from the usual comic subject. As Abel has noted, the overt reference to vaudeville plays was a new way to capitalize on the popularity of such plays and also to lure their audiences into the cinemas. In a remark concluding his jottings on one of the ciné-vaudevilles, Feuillade identifies the intended audience as the intellectual elite: “Completely silly but played by genre actors, [it] may make the intellectual elite smile.”

The popular stage audience, as we have seen in the previous section of this careerography, was accustomed to being addressed in their knowledge of generic rules, which made the move of adapting stage vaudeville to ciné-vaudeville and the inclusion of the reference to the popular stage genre in its generic title even more pertinent. The continued use of the genre-label throughout the years, then, suggests that the films benefitted from the reference to such a well-established popular stage genre and that it became a trademark adding to their prestige. Contemporary reviews confirm the working of both the trademark and the knowledge about the genre:

La peine du talion (The Punishment of Revenge) is a vaudeville played by Marcel Levesque from the Palais Royal, that is to say that the script stands in the tradition dear to Labiche, Gondinet and other entertaining authors of drama. [...] The imbroglios of this well directed vaudeville will amuse even the most morose audiences.

As was common in reviews of the stage genre, special attention was drawn to the acting: “Granted, the idea is not very novel, but how it has been interpreted makes out its entertaining charm.”

One more parallel between the popular stage and the screen needs elaboration in order to understand the status of the ciné-vaudevilles and the
knowledgeable appraisal they met at the time. The parallels in their reception stretched beyond the individual films and performances, beyond the specific genre references, as well as beyond the contributions of actresses and actors, which I have outlined so far. This additional parallel concerns the formats in which stage and screen programs were offered throughout much of the 1910s. Both kinds of programs showed more similarities than histories of cinema and of music-hall, which discuss the relationship between screen and stage as a competitive struggle for autonomy and survival, tend to acknowledge. To be sure, I am not disputing that a competitive relation existed as well, that cinema was still struggling to gain legitimacy and to become independent from the popular stage within which it had matured, and that the popular stage, which had so wholeheartedly embraced the novelty of cinema, now found itself battling for the sustenance of its position of the pre-eminent amusement of the time. What I am suggesting, and shall exemplify, is that simultaneously with and alongside this competitive relation, another connection can be detected as well: a coexistence and integration of stage and screen acts within both program formats and that this coexistence and integration was more continuous and regular than a perspective of competition allows for. It is precisely Musidora’s travelling from stage and screen and vice versa, which has led me to pay attention to this non-competitive and mutually constitutive relation between the two modes of entertainment before the war and throughout the 1910s.

Coexistence Cinema and Stage Performance

By 1914, the non-competitive coexistence of cinema and stage performance had taken various shapes. Films were included in music-hall and popular stage programs. This most notably applied to two genres, “actualités” and trick films, of old genres for which the popular stage, with its visualization of marvels and prominence of spectacle, provided a conceptual habitat. Musidora’s performance in the filmed insert of the revue at the Folies-Bergère, LA VILLE DE MADAME TANGO, constitutes an example, as well as the Éclair films preceding the revue. The correlation in the perception of cinema and of music-hall was pointed out by Curnonsky, who, in 1914, grumbled:

Our big music-halls satisfy this almost unanimous taste for spectacle, which lures the crowds to the cinema, to boxing and soccer championships, to racing circuits and aerodromes,—hence, anywhere where it suffices to watch.
After 1909, the trick film genre declined in terms of production, and, because the tricks were largely known to the public, they were given a comic dimension. The comic was, as we have seen in the previous section, as much as the spectacular, one of the pillars of the Parisian popular stage and therefore it may not come as a surprise that the comic trick film was able to survive within *music-hall* and revue programs.

As Jean-Jacques Meusy asserts in his study of how cinema procured its position among the “spectacles traditionnels” (traditional performances), such fusion of staged and screened scenes was so ubiquitous in Paris on the eve of the war that some foresaw in it the settlement of the rivalry between stage and screen. It was an exhibition practice in the non-comic as well as in the comic genre. An early instance of a non-comic fusion of staged and screened scenes was the filmed *Ballet du Feu* (Ballet of the Fire) at the Châtelet in 1896, which was projected within the play “La Biche au Bois” (The Doe of the Forest) and in the shooting of which Feuillade’s predecessor and mentor at Gaumont, Alice Guy, had probably been involved. Filmed scenes included in staged plays allowed for flashbacks; for the representations of dreams, memories, obsessions; and other deviations from the narrative flow. The tangoing objects in the revue at the Folies-Bergère constitute an instance of how revues also used to expand their illusionary space through the use of film. Henri Fescourt remembered a similar tableau in a revue he watched at the Folies-Bergère in 1913 or 1914:

Right and left on a screen hiding stage props, filmed landscapes were projected, which were shot in travelling and unfolded from the back of the stage towards the audience. At the centre of the set, the back of an American railway carriage was reconstituted as realistic scenery. On the platform, “live” characters walked up and down, shouted and played, while on the front stage, that is to say centre stage, an actor, seen from behind, called them, ran on the spot and seemingly pursued the train. It seemed to be moving, because at either side of it telegraph posts, wisps of smoke, meadows, forests and rivers passed towards the spectators.

Most commonly, however, the mix of screen and live appearance was a feature of acts by entertainers and comic actors in *café-concert* and *music-hall*. By 1913, it was often applied by comic actors who had ventured into cinema. In a 1904 revue at the Folies-Bergère, the *fantaisiste* Fragon let his live appearance be preceded by the screening of a film of a wild automobile race through Paris; similarly, the film comedian Max Linder’s live sketch, in 1913, was preceded by a film showing his arrival in a balloon at the Alhambra music-hall roof top, after which he descended to the stage sliding down a long rope. According
to Paul Adrian, who has written about the interaction between *music-hall* and cinema in the history of *music-hall* and revue, such “integrated acts” in which the film served as a prologue to the live appearance of an artist, occurred in revues until 1948.\(^{109}\) As already pointed out in Part I of this book, Linder even gave his mix of screen and stage appearances a distinct name—“Kinéma-Max-Sketch”—and held on to the formula even beyond his already extensive film production.

The coexistence of stage and screen performances not only took shape in stage performances, but also in cinema programs. By 1913, in the middle of the second boom of cinema construction in Paris, only a minority of permanent or temporary cinemas offered film exclusively, or continuous screenings foregoing live acts.\(^{110}\) Most of them inserted live acts in the film program, much like the film act had been inserted in the *music-hall* program. A primary, and in the context of Musidora’s oeuvre with Feuillade, most pertinent example, were the Gaumont cinemas, such as the Gaumont-Palace and the Tivoli-Cinema. The Gaumont-Palace, with its 3,400 seats, was the largest cinema in the world at its opening in 1911, and it remained one of the most prestigious film temples of Paris throughout the decade.\(^{111}\) In addition to film screenings, the program offered “Attractions sensationelles” (sensational attractions)\(^{112}\) or “Attractions inédites et variées” (new and varied attractions),\(^{113}\) usually clowns, acrobats or other virtuoso acts. An undated program flyer reprinted in a booklet issued on the occasion of Gaumont’s centennial featured the screening of Feuillade’s comedy *Bout de Zan vole un éléphant* (*Bout de Zan Steals an Elephant*, 1913) followed by “Les 4 Daltons, Strong-Acrobots [sic] et Équilibristes”,\(^{114}\) and the 1914/1915 Gaumont program flyer for the ciné-vaudeville with Musidora, *Le coup du fakir* (The Feat of the Fakir), announced as the live act “Le Trio Charley Meteor (Trapèze).”\(^{115}\) Likewise, the June 1916 program featuring “Le grand film mystérieux: les vampires: l’homme des poisons” (The great mystery film: Les Vampires: The Man Of The Poisons) was preceded by the “Attraction: Le Trio Monika, jongleurs fantaisistes”, and even the March 1917 program, with the seventh episode of Feuillade’s *Jude*, still included a performance by “Alphonso Silvano (Sensationnel Equilibriste)”,\(^{116}\) implying that the practice of inserting live acts in the film programs was sustained throughout the war. This programming practice was not only common at Gaumont cinemas, but elsewhere too, as, for instance, at Lutetia-Wagram, the Rex, and the Alhambra.\(^{117}\)

Emmanuelle Toulet has argued, that the insertion of virtuoso acts may be read as a sign of a continuous relationship between *music-hall* and cinematographic spectacle. She also contends that such acts constituted an element of luxury in the cinemas and not, as is often assumed in film histories, a distracting relic of the cinema’s *music-hall* heritage.\(^{118}\) Toulet’s assessment can
be further underscored by the findings of my examination of French music-hall, which concludes that the deft acts were highly appreciated and constitutive elements of the programs and that they contributed to the prestige of the house when brought in from abroad. Deft acts, moreover, graciously survived the shifts from café-concert to music-hall and revue as they primarily catered to the eye and hence kept up the revue’s ambition to speak the “international language of pleasure”. The foreign names of the acrobats programmed at the Gaumont-Palace suggest that the virtuoso acts may have had a similar significance within film programs, which otherwise offered merely French film productions. A further circumstance supporting the idea of continuity between music-hall and cinematographic spectacle can be read from a side remark in the Gaumont centennial booklet: “In the back of the theater, small tables with lamp-shaded lights permitted customers to eat and drink while watching the film, a common practice at café-concert halls.” Finally, just like an evening at the music-hall, the cinema program at the Gaumont-Palace started at 8.00PM and lasted the entire evening. And, much like revues, which typically consisted of two acts, the cinema program was divided into two parts. All of these circumstances, the roominess of the theater, the presentation of live acts, the occasion for eating and drinking, as well as the resemblance of how the program was structured, shaped the experience of cinema-going after the model of attending popular stage performances.

A final yet significant parallel between film programs and music-hall programs was the significance attributed to variety and genre differentiation. Richard Abel points out how film producers from early on used the concept of genre as a strategy to offer subject variation within “cinema of attraction” programs at music-halls and the like. In the previous section, I explored the importance of the notion of genre in the context of the French popular stage, as it offered audiences the assurance of what to expect as well as the pleasure of recognition. For the marketing of their novelty, then, film producers, who at the time mostly simultaneously worked as exhibitors of their films, adopted a tried and trusted strategy in the very stage context in which they entered. By consequence of the repetitiveness inherent in the emphasis on genre and the familiar, variety was required, and the film program obviously met this requirement within its own niche of a numéro visuel as well. Not only were early and short film programs constructed upon the premises of variety and genre emphasis, but long evening film programs such as those offered by Gaumont during the 1910s as well.

The coexistence of live and screened performances, the circumstances reminiscent of music-hall, and the sustained prominence in the perception of film of concepts like genre, variety, and spectacle imply that in France, the primary, and, for over two decades, foremost, film-watching experience
was strongly marked by the expectations for pleasure and entertainment as shaped by the popular stage. From such a perspective, Feuillade's creation of the genre of ciné-vaudevilles becomes less of an anomaly.

**Ciné-vaudeville and Stage Vaudeville**

In the mid-nineteenth century, French vaudeville came to be a distinctive genre from the more pensive comedy of manners. Theater historian J.P. Thomasseau offers a concise overview of the development and features of the genre. From 1815 to 1850, the genre was dominated by the playwright Eugène Scribe; from 1850, by Eugène Labiche; and from 1892 through the 1910s, by Georges Feydeau. These three authors successively developed the structure and characteristics of this genre of comic plays, which was considered utterly French because of its thematic focus on romantic relationships and its linguistic focus on dialogue and word-play. It drew from and mocked contemporary social realities, and—more particularly—the bourgeoisie that sought pleasure and wealth. Vaudeville plays had in common the unexpected and explosive encounters, the combination of incompatible situations, and the confrontations of characters who did not yet know one another. The characters themselves were defined by neither a past, nor a psychology nor an awareness of their inner drives. Instead, they were solely guided by their actions and by their reactions to those of the other characters. Such compulsive logic notwithstanding, the nonsensical chain of events always ended in the heavens of happiness.

The philosopher Henri Bergson assigned to vaudeville plays, and most notably those by Labiche, a pivotal role in his theory of laughter, Le Rire, Essai sur la signification du comique. Central to his study of vaudeville plays and comic acting was the notion of “raideur mécanique” (mechanical rigidity), that ought to be internalized in both the narrative and the character. Bergson argued that the comic was generated by “the mechanical in the living”. The endeavor of the writer of the plays, the vaudevilliste, was to make such rigidity transparent, to reveal to the public the strings that made the puppets dance. This, however, had to be handled discreetly, so that the exterior appearance of probability was maintained. The endeavor of the comic actor was to present such rigidity as an automatism, but without taking away the spectator’s impression of watching a living being. The more precisely the two impressions of a mechanism at work and being human overlap, the more comical it is. For that reason, repetition and imitation generate laughter automatically, according to Bergson, as they draw attention to the mechanical in a person and in life. Bodily obstinacy, when the attention is drawn to the physique of a person instead of to his inner state, has the same effect.
Vaudeville plays not only presented comic characters, but also employed a specific set of plot devices. The plots were constructed upon the basis of “situations”, sets of circumstances that generated an internal logic of events. The procedure to make such situations comical were repetition, inversion, and, what Bergson calls “interférence des series”, the interference of two altogether independent series of events that can be interpreted in two entirely different meanings at the same time. Repetition of situations may include the coincidental meeting between two people. A ubiquitous application of the device of repetition is between masters and servants, in which the servants repeat in another tone and a philistine style what the masters have done previously. The situational application of inversion could be found in the inversion of roles and situations that turned against the one who created them. It was the logic of the prosecutor being prosecuted, the deceiver deceived, or, to add a phrasing related to both comic theater and cinema, “l’arroseur arrosé” (the waterer watered). One application of the interaction of series in vaudeville was the “quiproquo” or the mistaken identity: the interpretation that the actor offers as opposed to the meaning that spectators attribute to that identity.

Feuillade’s ciné-vaudevilles were, by no means, adaptations of the two- and three-act plays written by Labiche and Feydeau and staged in theaters like the Palais Royal and at café-concerts like the Ba-ta-clan to close off the music-hall program. Le Forestier calls Feuillade’s films “pastiches” in the sense that the filmmaker freely borrowed the principles of the genre, while keeping in mind that he made films instead of staging plays. The lead actor of the ciné-vaudevilles, Marcel Levesque, proclaimed himself an adherent of Bergson’s theory of laughter, which makes it probable that Feuillade was familiar with the theory as well.

The primary sources, from the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Département des Arts du Spectacle in the “Dossier Gaumont scénarios”, allow for a more detailed generic assessment of the ciné-vaudevilles featuring Levesque and Musidora. This file includes synopses of most of the ciné-vaudevilles under scrutiny here, as they were deposited for copyright reasons in the “Dépot légal”. The texts raise a set of questions with regard to Feuillade’s working method on the ciné-vaudevilles, some of which seem to speak against the widely held assumption of Feuillade’s penchant for improvisations on the plots.

Although none of the synopses are signed with an author’s name, there is little reason to doubt that Feuillade had drafted them himself. The synopses have been jotted down in a graphic writing style, obviously by someone who was used to “think” film. They often denoted precise shots: “head of Blairot”, or dialogue lines like “My Birdie, aren’t you hiding something?” A question prompted by these documents and by the lack of surviving prints is to what extent the plots of the finished films paralleled those in the summaries. It can-
not be answered from a comparison of the surviving print of *Lagourdette Gentleman Cambrioleur* with its synopsis, because this summary appears to be one of the few missing from the collection in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. However, these texts were drafted not only for copyright deposit, but literally identical drafts appeared in special sections reserved for such summaries in film periodicals like *Le Film* and *Le Courrier Cinématographique* as well as in program flyers of the Gaumont Palace. This practice suggests large similarities between films and summaries, which justifies two, albeit divergent, assumptions about Feuillade’s working method with regard to the ciné-vaudevilles: either he closely followed the plots as once drafted (which would conflict with the assumption of improvisation on the plots during shooting as also held by Le Forestier) or he drafted the texts after completion of the production. A comment in *Le Courrier Cinématographique*, which had begun to add to the synopses brief remarks on the films’ qualities, contradicts the latter possibility. One comment on the ciné-vaudeville, débrouille-toi! (Fend for yourself!), suggests an ending deviant from the one in the synopsis. However, because the deviation seems noteworthy, it may have been an exception rather than the rule.

Another possibility may have been that Feuillade largely drafted the plots, but left their endings open for improvisation. This practice would be suggested by another type of document, of which I have found only one in the archives with respect to the ciné-vaudevilles, preparatory notes in Feuillade’s handwriting, for *le coup du fakir*. Set against the film’s synopsis, the notes offer information on Feuillade’s process of thinking and working procedure, and the importance he assigned to the contribution of the actors. In the notes, the main characters do not yet have plot names, but are denoted with the names of the actors: “Mr. and Mrs. Lévesque are visiting Mrs. Renot, in order to take her daughter Musi to a garden party at the home of admiral Facalamer.” In the synopsis, the Levesque couple has turned into a Mr. and Mrs. Blairot, “tante Renot” into aunt Sidonie, Musidora’s pet name “Musi” into Suzette, and the admiral into Captain Rascasse. Moreover, in his synopsis, Feuillade speaks to Lévesque’s character in a direct mode, warning him: “That will cost you dearly…” The author-director’s organization of the plot suggests that he allowed for, and counted on, a substantial contribution of the actors he had in mind, a practice to which, as will become apparent further on, both Levesque and Musidora’s recollections attest. Second, after two introductory sentences, the notes are not further drafted as a narration, but turn more and more into sketchy indications of scenes of encounters and events, which were left to be developed later on: “Poitel and his father will be asking the hand of the girl; is accepted” and “crazy dance, little handle.” Parallel to the increase of sketchiness, the handwriting itself shows signs of hurry. Nonetheless, the
major imbroglios correspond with those recorded in the synopsis deposited for copyright purposes. Third, the jottings end with several lines crossed out. If set against the synopsis, this correction appears to have concerned the ending. The notes are closed off with the remark that I have cited previously to point out the audience that Feuillade envisioned for his ciné-vaudevilles: “played by genre actors, [it] may make the intellectual elite smile...” I repeat it because, in the context of the present discussion of Feuillade’s working method, it is illuminating for another reason. It discloses that, for the intellectual elite that the ciné-vaudevilles targeted, the involvement of stage actors skilled in the genre was crucial.

Among the principles of stage vaudeville employed by Feuillade, were, as Le Forestier has noted, the two- and the three-act structure. Levesque remembered that this structure was abandoned after the third film in the series, which, in his opinion, transformed the stage vaudeville entirely into cinematic vaudeville. After the seventh and final film of the “La Vie drôle”-series, upon which Le Forestier largely based his analysis, the indication “en 3 actes” indeed no longer appeared in advertisements. Unfortunately, Levesque did not specify how Feuillade further transformed the theatrical vaudeville into the cinematic vaudeville. Le Forestier, for his part, precisely focuses on this topic in terms of theatrical and cinematic aesthetics in the first place and in terms of techniques and organisation in the second. That is to say, he has analyzed how Feuillade solved the problems of space and time posed by some of the stage conventions, such as the recurring appearance of the vaudeville door and the limited variation of locations and sites. Le Forestier’s examination of the solutions and innovations that Feuillade developed to solve such problems with cinematic devices such as shot-shot relationships and editing is illuminating, but not my primary concern here. Instead of examining the differences between the theatrical and cinematic genres, I explore the continuities between the two. Those were the “details” that, in my opinion, spectators, and the press, as will become apparent, used to appreciate in Feuillade’s ciné-vaudevilles. This appreciation drew from the experience of watching stage vaudeville, and it equally applied to the actors’ performances in the films. The continuities between stage vaudeville and Feuillade’s ciné-vaudevilles, then, can be located in the employment of typical plot devices and physical comedy, in raising particular themes, and in the actors’ performance styles, both Levesque’s and Musidora’s.

Feuillade’s ciné-vaudevilles featuring Levesque and Musidora made ample use of the devices of repetition, inversion, and intersecting series of interpretations. As the synopsis of Tu n’épouseras jamais un avocat (You’ll never marry a lawyer) discloses, the second act of the film was entirely built around the repetition of the doorbell ringing, and, by consequence, the unexpected
meeting, time and again of different people. The narrative function of these meetings is to obstruct the lawyer’s desire to be alone with his girlfriend. Another cinéma-vaudeville built around a running gag was DÉBROUILLE-TOI! The title refers to the repetitive advice an uncle gave to his nephew, who prefers leisure over working and who repeatedly proposes an occupation that his uncle loathes. The complication is that both uncle and nephew court the same girl, and that the nephew’s occupations interfere with the uncle’s dream of winning the girl for himself. The story ends with an inversion: the nephew marries the girl, so that he fends for himself in a way contrary to what the uncle would have expected. Repetition and inversion are also the structuring devices of LE COLLIER DE PERLES (The Pearl Necklace), in which a married couple falls victim to their mutual suspicion. She is too curious, he repeatedly lies to her, and, with the pearl necklace from the title as the catalyst, each of them ends up as a “deceiver deceived”. The “deceiver deceived” motif is applied in LES FOURBERIES DE PINGOUIN (Penguin’s Rogueries) as well. Here, it serves to give a husband who is having an affair, a dose of his own medicine. Likewise, Feuillade applies the device of the “quiproquo” or mistaken identity, as, for instance, in LE SOSIE (The look-alike), of which the very title points to the device. In L’ESCAPADE DE FILOCHE (Filoche’s escapade), finally, it is a jealous husband who, initially mistaken for a bachelor himself, mistakes the identity of his brother-in-law, whom he has never met before, for his wife’s lover. In these plots, the mistaking produces series of hilarious situations in which misunderstandings and divergent interpretations tumble over one another. If anything, the adroit use of such devices highlights Feuillade’s outstanding propensity for plot construction and comic character composition.

This attention to narrative and character notwithstanding, Feuillade also created comic effects by drawing attention to the physical, whether or not in combination with the devices of repetition or inversion. TU N’ÉPOUSERAS JAMAIS UN AVOCAT presents a judge who repeatedly falls asleep and otherwise roams the streets to molest women. Both narrative motifs serve to ridicule the authority that he exercises over the lawyer and his daughter and eventually invert the relation between the men. In L’ESCAPADE DE FILOCHE, the entire first act is constructed around Gustave Filoche’s hunt for his second shoe, in the process of which he gets stuck with his nose between pickets in the fence. Levesque’s large nose was the comic actor’s trademark.

Faithful to the rules of the theatrical genre, Feuillade’s cinéma-vauvedilles invariably resulted in a happy ending. In the construction of the plots, Feuillade capitalized on his capability to weave ludicrous situations and antic intricacies and to resolve neatly the intrigue. Simultaneously, he kept up the appearance of plausibility. Feuillade’s vaudeville films do not drive at the absurd (as Feydeau’s plays) or at destructiveness (as the comic series), but
their logic seems natural. Henri Fescourt remembers Feuillade’s “sens de la gouaillerie” (sense for mocking) based upon “beaucoup d’observation” (much observation) and his simultaneous abstention from illogicality and absurdity in the plots. At a thematic level, the rule of the happy ending had consequences for how the principal topic of the ciné-vaudevilles was managed. Like their Pathé counterparts, the RIGADIN- and the MAX-series, Feuillade’s ciné-vaudevilles made fun of romantic relationships between men and women. As in the stage genre, moreover, many of the characters were involved in pre-marital or extra-marital relationships, making men’s penchant for flirtation with and courting women a staple motif of the plots. But whatever the imbroglios, the misunderstandings or the misbehavior the heroes engaged in, so do the synopses disclose, the obligatory happy ending ensures that lovers get each other, husbands and wives forgive each other, and that rivalry, jealousy, and unfaithfulness is settled and forgotten. By consequence, men’s flirtation and courting may have earned them an incidental cuff on the ears, but, in the final analysis, it was tolerated; whether the object of the men’s infatuation was married or engaged or not, whether she was responsive or not, and whether the wives or girlfriends were present or not. Men’s insatiable desire for women
was presented as an inevitable fact of life and often provided the drive for the male characters’ unusual behavior. Just like Bout de Zan’s naughty actions usually turned out guileless, enamored men’s behavior usually turned out inculpable. In this regard, Feuillade’s ciné-vaudevilles were neither judgmental nor moralistic, and hence met with the expectation of audiences to have a good time rather than to endure a sermon.

Other aspects of social behavior were criticized, though mildly. If the plots commented on generational conflicts within families, they usually sided with the youngsters. In tu n’épouseras jamais un avocat, the alleged authority of the father figure was ridiculed in three regards: the individual, the institutional, and the paternal. He is the judge with the two tics that I mentioned earlier. His repeated narcoleptic episodes and molestations of women in the streets ridicules him as an individual. As a judge, moreover, his sleepiness prevents him from hearing the lawyer’s plea, while he calls the lawyer a liar nonetheless. As a father, he refuses his daughter’s hand to the lawyer because he considers him a liar. The judge’s misjudgment and his dirty old man behavior eventually undermines his paternal authority too. Dirty old man’s conduct was perhaps one of the few forms of men’s behavior that was rendered unacceptable in Feuillade’s ciné-vaudevilles.

In the treatment of behavior or attitudes ascribed to men or women separately, one general line can be discerned in the summaries of the ciné-vaudevilles. Jealousy and obsessiveness are never spared Feuillade’s mocking, whatever the gender of the character. Examples include “that wonderful friend Blairot” in le coup du fakir, who is jealous of the lover of his illegitimate flame, and Madame Pingouin in les fourberies de pingouin, the synopsis of which gives her obsessiveness as the reason for her husband’s escape in the very first line: “Mrs. Penguin adores her husband, but her affection grows tyrannical, to the extent that Penguin more and more attempts to liberate himself from it.” Nonetheless, in both plots, the men, prior to the happy ending, receive “a resounding slap in the face” from their wives for their misconduct. The role of guardians of decorum was more often reserved for the female than for the male characters. si vous ne m’aimez pas (If You Don’t Love Me) even makes men’s selfishness its explicit theme:

Angèle is wise to men’s mentality; she silences Turlupin, who is in no way ready to die for her, and reveals the viciousness of Seraphin, whom Turlupin throws out, affirming to (his sister and Seraphin’s fiancée) Simone that she better remain an old spinster with the man of honor he is than marry such a pain-in-the-neck.
LE COLLIER DE PERLES, in turn, ridicules women’s curiosity:

There is in the world no woman nosier than the wife of Mr. Jéricot. Her instinctive jealousy and curiosity, which are prodded by the talk of two of her pals who repeat at every occasion: “one has to watch out with men”, prompt her to meticulously search the pockets of her husband and examine the contents of his desk with an accuracy worthy of better employ.\textsuperscript{156}

However, because such commentary on family and gender relations occurred within the context of \textit{vaudeville} in cinema, the purpose was to entertain people, not to affront them or teach them a lesson. In sum, Feuillade’s jocose view of people and their behaviors targeted men and women, young and old, authoritarian and romantic. Although his sympathy was rather with the youngsters and the rebellious, it was often, but not always, with the women too. Most interestingly, in order to get the types right, that is to say, credible and comic at once, and to appeal simultaneously to the intellectual audience envisioned for the \textit{ciné-vaudevilles}, the filmmaker sought the collaboration of professional comic actors from the popular stage.

Casting comic stage actors in the \textit{ciné-vaudevilles} was against the principles professed by Feuillade and Gaumont, but not against the actual practices of the firm. Apart from Perret’s involvement and the specific collaboration of the music-hall comedians “Les Pouics” in Durand’s \textit{scènes comiques}, the firm’s adage was to work with actors and actresses unaffected by stage acting, so that experienced filmmakers and colleagues could coach the newcomers to act in front of the camera. To a certain extent, Renée Carl and Suzanne Grandais exemplified this practice.\textsuperscript{157} For the \textit{ciné-vaudevilles}, Feuillade hired Madeleine Guitty from the Palais Royal and added her colleagues Charles Lamy and Marcel Levesque to the troupe.\textsuperscript{158} If seen from this perspective, the inclusion of the music-hall actress Musidora in Feuillade’s cast was not singular. All of them exemplify the continuity between stage and screen that existed throughout the 1910s, but the actor whom Feuillade made indispensable to his concept of \textit{ciné-vaudeville}, was Marcel Levesque.

Marcel Levesque (1877-1962) made his stage debut in 1896, played for five years at the Athénée of Paul Deval, for four years at the Odéon of Antoine and proceeded in 1909 to the Palais Royal, one of the pre-eminent \textit{vaudeville} stages of Paris, which offered plays by Labiche, Sardou and Feydeau.\textsuperscript{159} About this part of Levesque’s career, a raving Louis Delluc recalled:

He perfectly played poetic comedies [...] [he was] unaffected, sensitive and touching. [...] But Marcel Levesque has turned away from the plumes, the rhymes and the silk capes to venture into the vaudeville
genre. He has created a type, a tone, a genre, and the Palais Royal owes to him evenings of amazing cheerfulness.\textsuperscript{160}

In 1913, the actor was asked by Perret, whom he knew from the Athénée, to act in two of his LÉONCE-films.\textsuperscript{161} Levesque remembered that he found his first screen appearances a great deception, although he did not explain why. Nevertheless, Feuillade noticed his finesse and invited him to collaborate with him.\textsuperscript{162} In Gaumont advertisements, Levesque was furthermore publicized with the epithet “du Palais Royal”.\textsuperscript{163} Although he loved working for the screen, and, after the years with Feuillade, he returned to it periodically, stage acting remained his primary occupation throughout his career.\textsuperscript{164}

By the time Musidora was added to the troupe that played the ciné-vaudevilles, Levesque’s involvement was a staple part of their formula. As of the forth film in the series of “La Vie drôle”, SOMNAMBULES (Sleepwalkers), which premiered on February 6, 1914, he played the male protagonist of the subsequent ciné-vaudevilles, of which there are more than twenty, and his comic presence was constitutive of the genre. In the advertisements, his name was always prominently mentioned and, in later years, portraits and stills featuring him were included in these advertisements as well. By May 1916, when his fame was rising because of his role of Mazzamette in the crime-series LES VAMPIRES, the Gaumont advertisements bestowed him with the epithet “L’inimitable comique du Palais Royal” (The inimitable comic actor from the Palais Royal), which, as of August 1916, was replaced with “L’irrésistible Marcel Levesque” (The irresistible Marcel Levesque).\textsuperscript{165} Levesque’s face was provided with traits readily perceived as comical: his large nose, big eyes, and almost bold head automatically drew attention to the obstinacy of his body. In his performances, some critics reprimanded him for doing too much\textsuperscript{166} or for acting with too much zeal.\textsuperscript{167} LE RÉVEIL DE L’ARTISTE indeed contains scenes in which Levesque flails about wildly, simultaneously putting on his jacket and dashing off, not standing still for a moment, tumbling over people and objects, and barging through the scenes. These shots full of movement significantly speed up the film.

The opening and closing scenes, in contrast, testify to the actor’s finesse and subtlety. I have rarely seen someone sleep in such a farcical manner. One arm above his head, the other on top of the sheet, he acts the breathing of the deep sleeper, while his mien connotes blissful dreams. Once awake, he reads the invitation to come to the studio with a deadpan expression, thus inciting the spectator’s curiosity. In the closing scene, in which he listens to the instructions of the director, he wipes his forehead and neck with a handkerchief, signalling the sweat it has cost him to arrive at the studio, and makes a droopy face. Once he learns about his role, his look turns disappointed,
because the story has Bout de Zan outwitting and catching him. Then Bout de Zan tells the director that he is making a “navet”, a trashy piece of art, and Levesque boasts: “so I am not the only one who says so!” Levesque rendered these varied expressions plainly and without exaggeration.

Levesque’s excellence in combination with his experience in film acting made him, during and right after the war, one of the pre-eminent comic actors of French cinema. This was not just suggested in Gaumont’s publicity, but also articulated in reviews of the ciné-vaudevilles:

When I say that the amusing film si vous ne m’aimez pas (530 metres) is being acted by the high-spirited Musidora and the excellent artiste Marcel Lévesque, I’ll find myself spared from telling you its imbroglios, because everyone knows how entertaining the imagination of these two actors is whilst they always keep up a correct and tasteful tone.168

His facial expressions and his comic movements and gestures were praised.169 Delluc, by then a prominent film critic, lauded Levesque in 1919 as “the most visual, the most cinematic of our actors”.170 Delluc’s colleague Albert Bonneau, re-evaluating comic film production in France and lamenting the virtual disappearance of the genre by 1923, asserted:

His irresistibly comic silhouette, his most preposterous gestures immediately spotlighted him. [...] During the period of 1915-1917, one can certainly affirm that he grew into a favorite of the masses together with Pearl White and Musidora.171

A most graphic and comprehensive description of Levesque’s comic performance appeared in the paper Le Crapouillot, in their rubric “Les rois de l’écran” (The kings of the screen):

A nose. The nose of Levesque, if it had been shorter, the entire aspect of its owner would have changed: so much is obvious... but the entire aspect of the world of cinema as well. [...] At once grotesque and human, that is how the talent of the artiste appears. It is a double and paradoxical impression, which only he, or almost only he, is capable of creating. An agile marionette, which seems to be moved, in fits and starts, by strings: and suddenly the mechanical movements stop; the immovable marionette turns human; the fixed gaze softens; and see how from the eyes role two tears—two tears that came from a heart.172
From nose to heart, from comic appearance to expression of feelings, from marionette to human being; these delineations of Levesque’s comedy echo Bergson’s views. Levesque knew how to bring the obstinacy of the body in conjunction with the flexibility of the soul, and how to play out the mechanical in the alive. As a comic actor, he made visual the physical and mental strings, which let the character move and to which it was attached, and simultaneously remained convincing as a living being. It was a balancing act, which, according to contemporary critics, Marcel Levesque performed in a way that few others in French silent cinema were capable of.

Different from the MAX-, RIGADIN-, and even the LÉONCE-comedies, in which the plots centered around one male character and his female co-star, Feuillade’s ciné-vaudevilles were usually based upon a relatively even distribution of more than two protagonists. Although Levesque constituted the films’ principal asset in the publicity, most plots as handed down include roles as focal as his, in the first place for Musidora, but also for the Gaumont vedettes Édouard Mathé, Suzanne Le Bret, and Lise Laurent. The stories were often composed around two befriended or rivalling couples, in addition to a young woman with whom one of the male characters would flirt, or some more distant brother or friend who added to the imbroglios. The average was four to six characters in well-matched positions, at least two of which were male and one was Levesque’s role. They used to be complemented with a couple of supporting parts. In two films—LE SOSIE (1915) and SI VOUS NE M’AIMEZ PAS (1916)—such supporting parts were played by Levesque. From such a combination of characters emerged the premise required for the story to take its inevitable run to more complications and the happy ending. By consequence, the ciné-vaudevilles offered Levesque quite a choice of roles, instead of one recurring character. He played an honest lawyer courting the dysfunctional judge’s daughter, as in TU N’ÉPOUSERAS JAMAIS UN AVOCAT (1914), or a good-for-nothing nephew who courts the same woman as his uncle in DÉBROUILLE-TOI! (1917). In other ciné-vaudevilles, he impersonates a painter, or a writer, who (mis)takes artistic license for the license to be unfaithful to his girlfriend. Although flirting, courting women, and unfaithfulness were staple motifs of the ciné-vaudevilles and the principal drive of their male protagonists, Levesque also played dedicated husbands, as in HOTEL DE LA GARE (1914) and LE COLLIER DE PERLES (1915). Feuillade hence did not pin Levesque down to one recurring type, but offered him an assortment of characters with miscellaneous traits to exploit comically.

By consequence of this choice of characters played by Levesque, Musidora’s roles in the ciné-vaudevilles varied accordingly. Of two of the sixteen vaudeville films in which she acted, her role is unknown, and in four of them, it seems of minor importance. In the remaining ten films, her parts were as var-
ied as Levesque’s. For instance, Musidora could play someone’s nubile daughter or niece, as in *Tu n’épouseras jamais un avocat* or *Les fiançailles d’Agénor*; a solidly married wife, as in *Le collier de perles*; an artist’s muse or model, as in the films with the painter and the writer; or, in a parodying reference to her role as the female cat-burglar in *Les vampires*, an adventurous woman as in *Lagourdette gentleman cambrioleur*. Feuillade wrote roles for Musidora ranging from the modern ingénues Estelle Tapir and Amélie Bigoudette to the *music-hall* actress Aliette, from the cranky wife Madame Jéricot, to the loyal friend exposing men’s selfish mentality Simone Turlupin, from the painter’s model Rose Laroze to the mistress Miss Friquette. More than Musidora herself ever acknowledged, then, Feuillade in his comic films made use of her versatility and, more specifically, of her resourcefulness as a comic actress. On the basis of the synopses, then, it seems safe to emphasize that the significance of the *ciné-vaudevilles* within Musidora’s career is that they highlight her as a comic film actress.

One tip of the veil of Musidora as a comic actress can be lifted by examining the fragment from the benefit film, *Le réveil de l’artiste*, and Musidora’s performance as the maid of the artiste and his family. In the opening
scene, her character applies the *vaudeville* device of imitation, and, as pointed out previously, the device becomes extra comical if the servant imitates the master. I have described the pose of Levesque sleeping, which is striking and evocative in its own comedy. The maid imitates his pose and, in doing so, highlights and parodies it. The parody emanates from the fact that Musidora did not faithfully copy the pose, but added to her movements an affected flavor and to her expression a smirk. At this point, the otherwise bored look in her eyes turns sardonic, while, a little later, it changes into that of a goody-goody. As no one else but the sleeping Levesque is present in the room at that moment, the addressee of her imitation act is the camera. Her play-acting, however, exceeds mischievousness within the diegesis. It calls to mind the suspicion that she was not a proper maid, but merely disguised as one. This was yet another level of comedy, above the imitation and the parody, and was evoked by her glances and gestures. She could put it into effect because disguise or mistaken identity was, as is well known, a central narrative device used by Feuillade in his crime series *LES VAMPIRES* and *JUDEX*. At the time of the release of *LE RÊVEIL DE L’ARTISTE*, *LES VAMPIRES* had closed off its successful first run in Parisian cinemas, while *JUDEX* opened on the very same day as the benefit film did. In both series, Musidora played a criminal heroine—the cat-burglar Irma Vep in *LES VAMPIRES* and the malicious Diana Monti in *JUDEX*—who disguised herself as, for instance, a telephone operator or a private teacher to execute her exploits. One of Irma Vep’s disguises in the third installment of *LES VAMPIRES*, had been that of, precisely, a maid, and, like in *LE RÊVEIL DE L’ARTISTE*, she wore the standard maid’s garb and had an utterly goody-goody mien. In the series, spectators knew that she was impersonating this Irma Vep disguise. What Feuillade and Musidora suggested in the opening scene of *LE RÊVEIL DE L’ARTISTE*, then, was that spectators were not watching the actress in merely the role of a maid mocking her master’s artistic sensibility, but that they were offered yet another appearance of the scheming Irma Vep, much in the same way as in her role as Diana Monti. No matter that the remaining minutes of the short comedy did not follow up on this expectation, but, instead, turned to spoof the vanity of film actors, including the maid’s/Musidora’s. The point of the play-acting, then, was that Musidora communicated to audiences not merely the mischievousness of her part within the diegesis, but that she added another dimension. What in drama could be read as contemplation, in Musidora’s comic acting was linked to her screen presence beyond the diegesis: it became intertextual.

Three of Feuillade’s *ciné-vaudevilles*, among which is the surviving *LAGOURDETTE GENTLEMAN CAMBIOLEUR*, likewise refer to the popular series. In the two missing films, the references are comprised in Levesque’s roles, yet in the surviving one, it is in Musidora’s again. In *LES FOURBERIES DE PINGUIN*, the
allusion concerns Levesque’s own role as Mazzamette in Les Vampires. Penguin seeks escape from his over-possessive wife and opportunistically utilizes his resemblance to the character from the series as a means to approach the married woman whom he, in established vaudeville tradition, fancies. In other words, the reference functions as a narrative motif to help the vaudeville hero achieve his questionable goal. The film was released on June 23, 1916, one week before the tenth and final episode of Les Vampires reached cinemas.\textsuperscript{174} Both Lagourdette Gentleman Cambrioleur and Mon Oncle (My Uncle), in contrast, were released some six months after the closing episodes of the series Les Vampires and the serial Judex, respectively. With these two ciné-vaudevilles, one may say that Feuillade and his actors not only kept alive the memory of the series and serial, but also seized their chances to comment on the reception of these crime series. Most notably, Les Vampires had provoked a debate about cinema as “l’école du crime” (the school of crime). The term was a favorite of moralists advocating a more wholesome cinema than the romantic and adventurous representation of criminal exploits, because it was feared that youngsters took inspiration from and imitate the heroes.\textsuperscript{175} Partly in response to this debate, the heroic protagonist of Judex was no longer a criminal, but a romantic gallant and the righter of wrongs.\textsuperscript{176} In the ciné-vaudeville Mon Oncle, then, Feuillade himself spoofed the idolatry of the righteous character he had created:

Next he cries out, while taking a rigorous decision... (Because that old fogey of a Tourteau only looks at things through the eyes of Judex and only swears by him, it is Judex in person who will ask him for the hand of his foster daughter...) How so?... it was simple... Baptistin, sitting astride on the shoulders of the banker Favraux and wrapped in the wide black cape of Judex, will once more knock on the door of the inhospitable house, which, by miracle, will open up in front of him.... What uncle Baptistin Poufluquet did not manage to obtain for his cousin the day before, Judex, the great righter of wrongs, obtains for his protégé immediately.\textsuperscript{177} If Mon Oncle enabled Levesque as Baptistin to pose as Judex, but with a wink, Lagourdette Gentleman Cambrioleur granted Musidora the part of the gang leader, and with a vengeance. In Les Vampires, she had been several successive grand vampires’ girlfriend, but, in the ciné-vaudeville, she spurs her new admirer, Lagourdette, into burglary in order to earn her adoration. And, after the necessary vaudeville twists and turns had offered this admirer a chance to outwit her, they allow her to regain command. This notwithstanding the obligatory happy ending, which eventually required that both of them admit their tricks, forgive each other, and commit to one another romanti-
cally. In this ciné-vaudeville, Feuillade and Musidora play along with a reading of Les Vampires in which Irma Vep was the “Grand Vampire”, rather than the successive leaders of the gang.

The targets proper of Feuillade’s spoofing and vaudevilliste craftsman-ship, however, were the moralist reception and its institutional guardians, the police, who, in fact, had tried to ban parts of Les Vampires. The ciné-vaudeville introduced Musidora’s (nameless) character while reading in the novelization of Les Vampires, and shows her raving about the protagonists and mesmerized by their alleged ubiquity. In the first place, then, Feuillade seemed to reclaim his story from the social and moral realm and to resituate it in the realm of fiction and fantasy. In addition, he indeed let Musidora enact a youngster inspired by and imitating the fictional models’ exploits against which the moralists warned. To further complicate things, Feuillade set against the scheming female character a no less scheming Lagourdette, who pays and instructs his servants to have themselves robbed of the jewels he first provided them with and, in this manner, solves the dilemma in which he was caught. This vaudeville twist transfers the adventurous woman’s acclaimed wickedness to a rather guileless and playful sphere. A successive twist, moreover, turns it into astuteness. Because, whereas the servants put on their imposture convincingly, Lagourdette goes about his task so clumsily, that his heart’s desire sees through his game. In reaction, she copies his trick and instructs the servants to pretend to be outraged by the burglary so that Lagourdette is then arrested by the police. At the police station, finally, all of them confess to their set-ups, which leaves one single party as the ultimate fools: the police. The contemporary press noticed Feuillade’s joking with consent and teased whomever they expected not to be able to appreciate it, as in this case of the editor-in-chief of the newspaper L’Oeuvre, Gustave Féry:

But good gracious, watch carefully for Féry! I bet that he will cry out, [...] “There she is, the school of crime. There she is!” In any case, we have had a jolly good time with the unexpected twists and turns that poor Lagourdette was put through, who, for the beautiful eyes of a coquette, “appears a loser from a challenge of which Chimène is the award” and who conquers her nonetheless, his Chimène. Anyway, I do not believe that his method of burglary will seriously harm our children’s morals!

Lagourdette Gentleman Cambrioleur was Feuillade’s twentieth ciné-vaudeville and advertised as Gaumont’s Christmas comedy of December 1916. The ads for it were as large and as classily designed as those for Gaumont’s prestigious dramas; they often measured an entire page of a periodical and included several stills, two of which showed Musidora and Levesque
and one the actors playing the servants. As was now typical, Marcel Levesque “du Palais Royal” was listed as the film’s main attraction. More exceptionally, Musidora’s name was listed too. Her inclusion signals the acumen of Gaumont’s publicity policy, which capitalized on the rise of Musidora’s fame both in cinema and on-stage. In cinema, this rise had been prompted by her performances in the ciné-vaudeville and in les vampires as well as by her articles on the making of the series, to which I will return later in that context. On-stage, she had reached the top of the bill for the first time in September 1916, in a revue at the cabaret La Pie qui Chante. Advertizing her name along with Levesque’s could only increase the high expectations created by the slogan that accompanied lagourdette gentleman cambrioleur: “Thirty-five minutes of FRANK MERRIMENT!”

In the press, the response to the film was solely positive. All reviews took for granted that this ciné-vaudeville went even further than ridiculing the objections of moralists and the police and that it likewise could be read as a veiled commercial for the novelzation of the series. The publication disclosed to the public Feuillade’s name as the author of the film series and the co-author, with George Meirs, of the novelization. From the perspective of a veiled commercial, this becomes a salient detail. In the ciné-vaudeville, Feuillade made the adventurous woman not only read the story and rave about it, but also made her ostensibly display its cover page to the camera. If the novelization had not been as much a Gaumont and Feuillade production as was the film, one could nearly speak of witty product placement—of the novel and its author alike. By the same token, Feuillade seems to have claimed his credits as the author and director of the ciné-vaudeville lagourdette gentleman cambrioleur and for the entire series with Levesque and/or Musidora.

This ciné-vaudeville of Feuillade provides a good example of the matching of the male and the female protagonists. This not only applies to the fact that each follows a distinct obsession, but also to their trading of narrative agency. In the scenes of Lagourdette’s visit to his heart’s desire, she is the narrative agent: she is reading, she appears disturbed by the interruption of the visit and bored with her visitor’s stories and amorous attention, and tells him to demonstrate his heroism. In the following scenes at Lagourdette’s home, he is the narrative agent: he ponders how to pull himself out of the situation, shows the details of his plan to his servants, instructs the couple and provides them with the necessary attributes, and appears highly contented with the prospect of his solution to the problem. In the next scenes, which take place at a public place, the foyer of a music-hall, he is the agent at first, but she takes over halfway through. In these scenes, he greets her chivalrously, escorts her into and out of the hall, and steals the watch chain from his servant, albeit with his help. Musidora observes this with a puzzled look. These scenes are followed
by an intermission in which the servant misbehaves, after which Lagourdette mimes to his heart’s desire that he will continue burgling and does so by stealing his female servant’s necklace. The servant reacts affirmatively, which is followed by a shot of Musidora with an expression of disbelief: what the heck is going on here? From this moment on, the narrative agency is again hers: she makes clear that she understands, confronts the servants and, sneers. She also reveals that she has stolen Lagourdette’s address book without him noticing. (At this point in the surviving print, a scene is probably missing that was mentioned in one of the reviews and was said to have included Musidora paying and instructing the servants.)

The part at the music-hall concludes with reactions and events following from her action, with, as I recounted above, the servants acting outraged and the police arresting Lagourdette. At the police station, the servants carry on with their new roles, Musidora scolds Lagourdette for his clumsiness and Lagourdette is interrogated by the superintendent. Eventually, he takes over again and reveals the set-up and his motivation—“I did it for her”—to the fooled police. The final scene of the film is for the servants, back home in Lagourdette’s kitchen, where they share with one other their fun with the imposture, yet also their preference to remain their ordinary selves.

Feuillade used the scenes with the servants to insert a great deal of physical comedy in this ciné-vaudeville, that is to say if the definition of physical comedy is expanded beyond Levesque’s application of it to scenes of chase, crisis and chaos. The understanding of physical comedy which I would adopt, does not only derive from the deftness of the numéro visuel, but also from the physical and visual tools utilized by comic stage performers. The tools may have included exalted movement, gestures, grimaces, and attributes such as typifying dress, makeup, and characteristic objects. In LAGOURDETTE GENTLEMAN CAMBROLEUR, the servants were played by actors whose appearances and acting styles brought to mind such stage comedy. The makeup, physiognomy, and gestures of the female servant—played by Léontine, as the curator Mariann Lewinsky has identified her, a comic Gaumont actress whose real name is unknown—in particular tended towards burlesque and caricature. The male servant was played by Paul Montel, an actor not known from cinema and not belonging to Feuillade’s stable: Lacassin’s filmography only lists him in the cast of one prior ciné-vaudeville, SI VOUS NE M’AIMEZ PAS, and in none of Feuillade’s further films. Stills with both actor and actress were included in the advertisements, a detail that suggests a high degree of popularity. With their acting styles, they add a flavor of comic stage acting and its attention to the physical as a means of expression to this ciné-vaudeville.

In Feuillade’s pastiche of the vaudeville genre, the role of the servants is not to simply ridicule upper class people’s behavior, but to comment on it as
well. The commentary finds expression in gestures and movement. The male servant, for instance, repeatedly taps his forehead in response to Lagourdette’s proposal, in a mode of direct address to the camera and out of sight of his master. In the same direct address mode, the servants present themselves dressed up, partly contented, partly ill at ease; curtsying in particular needs more practice. In the scenes set at the music-hall, their imposture is convincing, whereas Lagourdette does the opposite and hams up his role. His hamming is presented physically as well, through gesturing that he searches the jacket of his victim and only accomplishes the theft of the servant’s watch after the latter has guided his hand to the right spot. The male servant, on the other hand, forgets about his imposture when ordering a drink: he uses the barstool as a table and puts his feet on another bar stool while getting terribly drunk. Back home in the kitchen, then, the servants become their joyous selves again, making jokes, miming their contentment with each other as well as their freshly acquired skill in curtsying, and enjoying the servants’ privilege to lick the ladle.

Musidora almost entirely refrains from physical comedy in this ciné-vaudeville. She applies it only in one instance, when she, alone again after Levesque has left, gets up from her chair and imitates his dance around the room and, through facial expression and by looking straight into the camera, communicates to spectators her vivid interest in Lagourdette’s promised burglary. In most of the film, her acting method is to exaggerate things only slightly. If she is compelled with her reading, her physiognomy expresses that she is very compelled. If she is captivated by the story of les vampires, she moves her eyes emphatically around to indicate that they could be present in the room. If she is bored by her admirer’s visit, she raises her eyes to heaven and sighs a few times to communicate extreme boredom. And if she is talking about the novel she’s reading, she talks animatedly and with great ardor. Most significantly, she plays this while seated in an armchair, a position that seriously reduces the possibility for physical comedy. Her main means of expression, hence, are her face and eyes and what makes it comical is her measured exaggeration. In her comic acting, then, Musidora maintained a degree of truthfulness in the creation of types, and ingenuousness and lightness in the way of expressing thoughts and intentions as in her dramatic roles. Feuillade exploited her mastery of such comic acting in two close shots of her face that appear later in the film, in the first of which, she expresses her astonishment about Lagourdette’s method of burgling and, in the second, her disdain for it. While the first shot is dominated by her huge eyes, which she opens as widely as possible, the second is focuses on her lips, which she presses together while curling up the corners of her mouth. The point is that she, precisely through the subtlety of her comic exaggeration, not only communicates with the char-
acters within the diegesis, but also appealed to her audience to engage with her gibing. Whereas play-acting proper, as Levesque did in the direct address mode, solicits the spectator’s complicity with the comic character’s point of view within the diegesis, Musidora’s comic acting solicits from the audience a complicity beyond her role. She communicates, and from this surviving print still communicates to me today, her pleasure in the act of comic acting.

Feuillade’s Serials with Musidora

Returned from three months of war service in July 1915, Louis Feuillade returned to Gaumont and set out to further develop the genre of crime films that he had undertaken with Fantômas before the war. Alongside his continuous production of ciné-vaudevilles and dramas—which, due to the war, primarily dealt with patriotic themes—he wrote and directed two episode films featuring Musidora and Levesque within less than two years: Les Vampires, in ten installments, was released in 1915-1916, and Judex, in twelve installments, was released in 1917.188

These two crime series belong to the most widely discussed productions from Feuillade’s and Musidora’s cinematic oeuvres, since the 1940s from film historical perspectives and, since the mid-1990s, also from a critical feminist approach. Both strands of research testify to the fascination with the Irma Vep-figure that Musidora plays in Les Vampires. This figure, however, had already acquired an afterlife during the 1910s and 1920s. A brief survey of the reappearances of the Irma Vep-figure in the French theater and literature may illustrate how it, historiographically seen, became an icon of Feuillade’s cinema and of Musidora’s contribution to the French silent cinema. It will also disclose who has had a hand in the icon’s afterlife.

In chronological order, one of the first to create an afterlife for the Irma Vep-figure was Musidora herself, who, as a stage actress, appeared in the black tight bodysuit that was made into the trademark of the figure and the series right through Gaumont’s publicity. Musidora performed in the suit in sketches in revues from 1916 onward189 and, throughout her lifetime, invoked her Irma Vep role time and again in fictional and non-fictional accounts of her experiences. The relationship of the actress with the figure, I have argued on the basis of these recurrences, ran from ambivalence to the eventual acceptance of its capability to survive film history.190 While in the 1910s playing with the figure in her theatrical and published work, because it offered her both narrative and artistic agency as well as a continuity of fame, she simultaneously emphasized that she, Musidora, was not Irma Vep, even not a bit like her.191 In later years, she no longer rejected the conflation because it had preserved
her from the film historic oblivion she might have been subjected to other-
wise. It may be illustrative in this respect, that the Commission des Recherch-
es Historiques, installed by Henri Langlois at the Cinémathèque française in
order to establish an oral history of French silent cinema as remembered by
professional eye-witnesses, indeed included sessions on Les Vampires and
Louis Feuillade, but none on Musidora’s own film production. This was the
case notwithstanding the fact that Musidora herself had the responsibility to
gather her former colleagues in these sessions and to make typescripts of the
audiotapes recorded there.
A further contribution to the afterlife of Irma Vep, as is widely known,
was made by the Surrealists in the mid-twenties, who ardently payed tribute
to the figure in their writings and plays. The Surrealists became instrumental
in the commemoration of the Irma Vep-figure in film histories because they
provided two discursive conditions: they articulated their perception of the
figure as tailored to teenage boys’ erotic and rebellious fantasies and, in their
roles of film critics and members of a recognized art school, they created an
entry for it in cultural history. This detour from cinema in the afterlife of Irma
Vep paved the way for film historians such as René Jeanne and Charles Ford
and the former Surrealist Georges Sadoul to include Irma Vep in the film his-
toric standard works they published at the end of the 1940s. At the same time,
Musidora’s research at the Cinemathèque française, from which these film
historians obtained much information on the silent era, drew their attention
to Musidora’s career as a film producer and a director in the silent cinema.
This line was continued in the publications by Feuillade’s and Musidora’s
former colleague Henri Fescourt (1959), Feuillade’s as well as Musidora’s first
biographer Francis Lacassin (1970), and Musidora’s second biographer Pat-
rick Cazals (1978). A first English language reassessment of Feuillade’s serials
was written by the American film critic and historian Richard Roud (1980).
In his study of Musidora’s film career, Lacassin designates the Irma Vep-
figure baffling and cruel, or disturbing—the classic femme fatale. He also
points out that she could become the only true star of the series because of the
war circumstances, which forced Feuillade to regularly replace his male actors
and hence have the Grand Vampire eliminated at one point or another. As
for Cazals, he could not choose whether the Irma Vep-figure comes closer to
a goddess or a demon, but he openly refrains from further elaborating on it
out of fear of spoiling its perennial charm. The scenes in which Irma Vep
appears in her black silken bodysuit are, in this biographer’s view, among
the most erotic ones in the first quarter century of cinema. Richard Roud has
emphasized that the presence of Irma Vep indicates that the battle between
good and evil that underlies the series is not only political or social, but sexual
as well. He also underlines the narrative twist that Irma Vep is not killed by
the police or the journalist, in which he sees an indication that it does not matter at all that the bandits were captured in the end: the audience is well aware that this is just a kind of self-censorship to get the series past the police.

From a feminist viewpoint, Monica Dall’Asta has analyzed the figure of Irma Vep as an allegory, a personification of ambiguity. Looking in particular at the iconographic qualities of the silkiness and the blackness of Irma Vep’s famous bodysuit, she detects how the suit reveals the feminine shape of the body and simultaneously covers the suggested nudity like a pair of stockings. It creates a tension between utter closeness and utter distance. Also, because the suit is at once identical with and different from the black suits worn by the male members of the gang, according to Dall’Asta, a new feminity is presented that is both androgynous and mobile like a cat.

Vicky Callahan sees in the Irma Vep figure a designation of criminality as female in which the source of anxiety (criminality) is linked to sexual difference. She also argues that the suit functions both to reveal and to conceal the female body, but in a more abstract sense: as the site of the female body as difference. Much like Roud, Callahan questions the death of Irma Vep; in fact the figure escapes from death and in later series by Feuillade “she ‘returns’ to the scene of the crime” through references and reminders—even if Musidora, after JUDEX, was no longer cast in the films themselves. This is how the figure, according to Callahan, in one film after another, increasingly becomes the personification of crime and evil. On the other hand, the ever-changing relationships of Irma Vep and of Diana Monti in JUDEX mock the monogamous heterosexual couple, Callahan notes. According to Eva Warth, finally, Musidora in her black suit constitutes “a site in which the body is shown and experienced differently” than in modern day cinema, which is one of the specific pleasures and fascinations that early cinema offers viewers today. Its emptiness of meaning opens a space for a sensual, affective perception and experience.

In sum, these film historic and feminist accounts treat the figure of Irma Vep in the black bodysuit as an embodiment of eroticism, evil, criminality, sexual difference, ambiguity, mobility, and silent film-experience. It seems as if a good many concepts of concern to the viewer can be projected onto the black bodysuit, attesting to Warth’s observation of its emptiness of meaning. However, as I have pointed out in my article on the afterlife of Irma Vep, the figure appears in this suit only in some eight minutes of screening time from the over six hour-long series! In all other scenes, she is dressed in contemporary fashion or in a costume that suits her disguise, and in JUDEX, she does not wear the suit at all, but instead appears at one point in a much less suggestive bathing suit. This raises the question if the contemporary reception of
Les Vampires was dominated by the figure in the suit as it came to be in film historic and feminist memory.

In the discussions referred to, moreover, both Les Vampires and Judez are primarily treated as crime series; their dark and mysterious sides wholly catch attention. The large portions of comedy and wit they also offer, are either overlooked, relegated to marginal significance, or, as indicated most emphatically in Roud, connected to the rebellious minds of anarchist criminals of the times. I wish to highlight that these comic and witty elements had important functions in the reception of the series and the female figures. For this aim, I will explore the cinematic and non-cinematic devices from which these elements were drawn, reconstructing the contemporary cultural framework within which the series and the roles of Irma Vep and Diana Monti were conceived and received in the process.

For inserting comic elements in Les Vampires, Feuillade borrowed from 19th century stage melodrama, ciné-vaudeville and the pre-war Parisian revue. To guarantee the success of this inclusion, the filmmaker called upon the vaudeville actor Marcel Levesque, the child actor Bout-de-Zan, and, as I will suggest, Musidora in her capacity as a witty and comic revue actress.

Like the melodramas that had attracted the crowds to the “Boulevard du Crime” in the 19th century, Feuillade capitalized on the fascination with criminals, but also adapted its treatment to the spirit of the times. In the early 1910s, anarchist criminal gangs like the notorious Bande à Bonnot mesmerized large crowds of people as much as they scared them. An important influence on this public fascination had been the contemporary press and the actuality film, which represented the offenders not as downright criminals, but as “tragic bandits”, who exposed the authorities' and the police’s ineffectiveness to catch them and thereby heroically defied the institutions maintaining law and order. In Les Vampires, it is indeed a journalist who chases the bandits, rather than the police who are largely incompetent or too late to accomplish much. With this in mind, it becomes understandable that the exploits of Les Vampires were also seen as defying authorities and the police, which led to the police’s temporary ban of the fifth episode of the series, as is well-known thanks to Musidora’s mention of it. Like the Bande à Bonnot, moreover, who primarily robbed banks, the Vampires burgle and steal from the wealthy. But, in order to escape from the grimness with which criminality was doomed in real life, Feuillade had recourse to a formal device brought up by Marcel Levesque, one of the principal actors of Les Vampires and Judez. Levesque explained that, after Feuillade had proposed the role to him, that is to say a comic part in a drame noir, he was initially puzzled by the combination, but:
Being a man from the stage, I eventually decided that, after all, a comic character was an element of relief, that should benefit the atmosphere of the dark drama through contrasting it. The theater gives many an example of this function, from the old melodramas of the *boulevard du crime* to the modern ones at the Ambigu. Richard Abel has observed that, with the integration of comedy into another genre, Feuillade and Levesque initiated a trend that would persist well into the 1920s and that became the way in which French comedy survived beyond the decline of the comic shorts during the war. Feuillade’s strategy, indeed, went beyond inserting Levesque’s comic presence and contrasting it with the noir side of the drama: he incorporated a whole range of elements from the comic generic environment that he had designed for the actor, the *ciné-vaudevilles*. The fact that the comic character was embedded in his cultural habitat, I’d like to argue, has had an important impact on the reception of the series as a whole.

One of the *ciné-vaudeville* elements was the word-punning with names. Mazzamette, the name of Levesque’s character, brought to mind the joyous and good-natured mentality of the south of France, of which Feuillade himself reputedly was the very incarnation. In the fourth part of the series, Mazzamette poses as a wine merchant selling Muscat de Lunel, a dessert wine from Feuillade’s hometown and a reference to his descent, which was a wine-growing family. Although such biographical information about Feuillade was unknown to the contemporary public, the references served to contribute to the joyous tone. Whereas further “good” characters in *les vampires* were given common names, those of the gang leaders were bestowed with imaginative associations. The name of the gang itself is already jocose, because its members are no blood sucking vampires, but burglars and jewel thieves. Among them, there is a baron “des Mortesaigues” (of the acute deaths), a “Vénéños” (vénéneux = poisonous), and a “Satanas.” The most exquisite word-pun was reserved for Irma Vep, whose name was an anagram of the word vampire. With a trick film device—of letters on a poster changing their position back and forth between Irma Vep and Vampire—the anagram play was visualized in the third episode of the series, and in the eighth, it reappears as a communication tool applied by the criminals. As soon as the imprisoned Irma Vep has recognized Satanas in his disguise of a prison priest, she knows that she has to make an anagram of the message in order to decipher it. Through “Le cryptogramme rouge” (The red cryptogram), which is the title of the third episode and the name given to a notebook containing coded indications for the vampires’ schemes, the word-play also acquires a narrative function. As soon as the journalist chasing the Vampires, Philippe Guérande, has secured the
notebook, he treats its contents as a puzzle, providing him with information on where to look for the bandits. One of the effects of this punning on names and words was that the element of play was emphasized in the criminals and their exploits.

Another element taken from the ciné-vaudevilles—and from the comic genre in general—was physical and visual comedy, of which a great deal was inserted in LES VAMPIRES. Many of the criminals’ actions were cinematically represented as gags, involving trickery and virtuosity to make the impossible seem possible. In the fifth episode, for instance, Guérande was kidnapped by means of a hook, which suddenly clutched his neck when he was leaning out of the window to search the street for suspects and pulled him outside and down to the street. The sequence consists of an interior shot, tinted light brown on the video copy of the American print,209 of Mathé leaning out of the window of his office; an exterior, tinted blue to mark the difference, of him further leaning out of the window and getting caught with the hook; and another exterior down on the street, in which Irma Vep and her helpers pull Guérande down and stuff him into a clothes hamper on a car. What has been visibly pulled down and popped into the basket was a doll. The mise-en-scène, together with the use of the doll and the swiftness of the action, gives the entire sequence a slapstick flavor, addressing spectators’ sense for pranks rather than fuelling their alleged admiration for the gangsters. The series contains many more instances of characters hiding in baskets and trunks, a motif that Feuillade made use of in his ciné-vaudevilles210 and that, from early on in French cinema, was ubiquitous in comic shorts. According to Musidora’s recollections, Feuillade deliberately made the bandits simulate virtually impossible actions:

He did all of this to his full amusement, like a little boy who would say: “I am going to make an electric and silent cannon; they won’t take that seriously, will they?” And he did it in jest.211

Physical comedy was also what Levesque’s participation brought to les vampires. Oscar-Cloud Mazzamette was a friend and acolyte of Philippe Guérande, who appears in every episode of the series. His somewhat silly and goofy actions had much better results than viewers might expect. This motif brings to mind the BOUT DE ZAN-series, in which naughtiness usually turns out to be much more clever than could be foreseen. In the third episode of les vampires, the device of repetition is used: Mazzamette whizzes down the chimney and tumbles into the room just like Philippe had done before him, but, in addition to that, he carries something important with him; the poisoned pen that he has stolen from the Vampires. In the fourth episode, Mazzamette pos-
her noticing—a case of mistaken identity. In the fifth episode, Mazzamette is unable to sleep, and, while droopily watering the plants on the windowsill, he notices two suspects entering a door across the street. He takes a look, plots a way to copy the key, enters the building, and eventually sets Philippe free from captivity by the Vampires. Once more, Levesque’s character is rendered less goofy than it first seemed, and, more significantly even, as one of the few in the series who is repeatedly able to outsmart the bad guys. Often, he directly acts towards the camera as if he were telling spectators to take precise notice of his perceptiveness and smart solutions. The significance of Levesque’s role in Les Vampires, then, is to suggest that smartness is inherent to unruly and comic characters rather than to the outright vicious ones.

The association with the Bout de Zan character was made manifest in the eighth episode of Les Vampires and most notably in two sequences that provide excellent illustrations of both Bout de Zan’s and Levesque’s physical acting. The acting devices include disguise and drawing attention to the physical, as well as direct address to the camera. Bout de Zan appears in these scenes as Mazzamette’s son Eustache and constitutes a redoubling of the presence of comic actors in the series. The son, moreover, takes after his father, as he has been dismissed from school because of his unruliness and the practical jokes he performs on his teachers. In the presence of the concierge, who has escorted the boy home, Mazzamette pretends to be annoyed with the situation and angry with his son, and initially keeps up that attitude when alone with the boy. While Mazzamette sees the concierge out, Eustache communicates directly to the spectator how pleased he is to have fooled school and his dad. Shortly thereafter, Mazzamette lets go of his pretended sternness, acts towards the camera too, and presents his son to the spectator with a forgiving expression and gestures as if to say, “look at him, isn’t he adorable.” Next, the father informs his son to his latest plan: to dress up as tramps find out the address where Satanas, the then Grand Vampire, is staying. Disguise here serves as a comic device in itself already, most notably in Eustache, who has transferred his familiar tramp outfit from the Bout de Zan-series to Les Vampires. Just as in those scènes comiques, disobedience is rewarded with the success of outsmarting the bad guy(s).

The scenes with Levesque often have a vaudeville flavor. Many are set at Mazzamette’s or Guérande’s apartment, invoking the homeliness typical of the genre as well as contrasting with the exterior environments and public spaces where the Vampires usually operate. Philippe Guérande is not quite a vaudeville type because he has a mother and a fiancée and does not allow himself to be distracted from his work or his love by any circumstance. Towards Mazzamette, he has a corrective role, telling his friend how to behave and how to pay attention to more serious things than he usually does. Mazzamette, in
turn, slips more and more into his *vaudeville* character in the course of the episodes. He becomes wealthy in the sixth episode, after which he makes a habit of having a ball and flirting with women in episode seven, and definitely falls in love and “gets his Chimène” in episode ten. The two final scenes of *LES VAMPIRES*, moreover, were not reserved for the very last Vampire to be killed, Irma Vep, but offered the happy ending to the *ciné-vaudeville* running through the series: that is to say, they present Mazzamette proposing to Augustine—a widow and the maid of the newlyweds Philippe and Jane—and Philippe giving his blessing to the marriage after Mazzamette has assured his friend that he will mend his ways. The closing shot shows the couples kissing.

A fourth and final element in which Feuillade may have been inspired by his *ciné-vaudeville*, is the complexity of plot construction combined with clear resolutions of the intrigue. *LES VAMPIRES* is one extensive testimony of Feuillade’s pleasure in weaving ludicrous situations and antic intricacies, while he simultaneously—and carefully—maintained the appearance of probability.
The intrigue, moreover, is merely based upon action and reaction, and quite in the tradition of the popular theater, not on psychological character motivation. Feuillade applied such principles not only to the comic scenes, but to the “noir” parts of the episodes as well, rendering the narrative set-ups wondrous and the intricacies compelling, while, through his on-location shooting, maintaining plausibility and closeness to that with which the public was familiar. One of the rare scenes of interaction between Mazzamette and Irma Vep, in the ninth episode, provides a good example of this. Irma Vep lies on the pavement after having been overthrown and tied up by Guérande. Mazzamette approaches driving a car and the two men lift their captive into the vehicle with the expectation that Venenos will come to her rescue so that they can catch him too, but Irma Vep manages to caution her colleague by honking the horn three times by banging on it with her head. Together, they manage to escape in the car. Such vaudevillesque elements in LES VAMPIRES cause spectators to follow the intricacies and the characters not with anxiety or shivery, but with a smile.

If Levesque’s presence in LES VAMPIRES is embedded in an array of comic and vaudevillesque narrative and visual devices, Musidora’s appearance as Irma Vep is borrowed from music-hall and revue conventions. As has often been noticed, the scheming Irma Vep preferably popped up in one or another disguise, be it a maid or a telephone operator, a sailor or a viscount. However, it usually goes unnoticed that, first, the disguises concerned recognizable types as in a fairy play or a revue, and that, second, they often played along with well-known Parisian music-hall conventions such as female cross-dressing and the tradition académique. In her sailors’ suit, Musidora’s cross-dressing turns out gamine, in the elegant suit of the viscount, it becomes androgynous, while in both she is breathtakingly seductive. This becomes all the more salient if the prohibition of cross-dressing in France is taken into account, which, after 1909, allowed women to wear trousers only for biking and horseriding, or, indeed, on the stage—but not in public or in daily life.

Musidora acted the various types so true to life that spectators had trouble recognizing her: “My character, Irma Vep, [...] changed from episode to episode, to the extent that even the public itself did not recognize me immediately.”213 The degree of pride ringing through this assertion brings to mind the truthfulness and ingenuousness that marked her acting on the stage. To help spectators solve the puzzle that this acting style brought to LES VAMPIRES, then, music-hall sign language was utilized: Musidora had Irma Vep place her arms akimbo—a gesture which, as I have pointed out, signified the apache woman ever since it was introduced to the popular stage by Mistinguett and transferred to the screen by Polaire.
Fig. II.15: Irma Vep incognito and with her arms akimbo in the cabaret. Film still from LES VAMPIRES III, LE CRYPTOGRAMME ROUGE, a film by Louis Feuillade, Gaumont production, 1915.
Scenes at a cabaret, where the Vampires meet, further back up the apache association. In the tenth episode, the Vampires even perform the Apache dance. But the most shrewd reference to the revue, which continued to be Musidora’s professional terrain parallel to the cinema, was the famous black bodysuit that she wore in two of her appearances as Irma Vep “herself”, that is to say while burgling. This suit was—and in none of the discussions of the suit and the figure referred to above was this noticed—an adaptation to the screen of the culte du maillot and the tradition académique, the witty tradition established in French music-hall and revue to display women’s bodies’ shape-liiness wrapped in a tight skin color suit. Musidora herself has pointed out what about the suit was new to the screen:

In the stunning Vampires, I introduced the most discrete luxury. The black tight bodysuit had been worn before me by Josette Andriot, but it had been made of decent cotton. The micromesh silk of my suit would for a long time set astir the youth of 1916. The micromesh quality of the cloth made possible the tightness of the suit and was reminiscent of the luxury for which the revue was famous. The quote is taken from a letter that Musidora wrote to Georges Sadoul at the end of the 1940s and that the film historian included in his Histoire générale du cinéma. It was, as I have noted, the time in which Musidora herself participated in film historical research through the oral history project of the Cinémathèque française. Therefore, it ought to be noticed that Musidora, for the sake of film history, recorded that she had introduced the lavishness of the silken suit. One possible interpretation of her phrasing would be that she was enabled to do so through the mere fact that she had played the part; however, her way of putting it may likewise imply that Musidora had had her say in the choice of the suit. This is what she suggests twice in fictionalized recollections of her acting for les vampires and once in the interview for Radio Suisse Romande.

In the fictionalized accounts, she reconstructed her dialogues with Feuillade. In one, the young girl playing “la belle Irma” confided to the director: “You see, what I have been after is the excessive delicacy of the mesh of silk, so that the skin plays through the transparency, I so much wanted it to be quite adorable!” In the other, Feuillade said to her: “I agree with all of your innovations. Your delicate bodysuit of transparent silk... the bodysuit of the female vampire, you did well in demanding that it was made of silk.” These fictional dialogue lines could be considered mere products of artistic license, if it had not been that Musidora had claimed her “demanding” the silken material in a non-fictional context. For the Swiss radio in 1947, Musidora answered the
interviewer’s question as to whether the *maillot noir* had been invented for other reasons than to impress the boys:

I believe that the reasons were foremost aesthetical, because I had demanded that it was made of silk as I found that the transparency of the silk on the skin and on the body—I had a well-shaped body at the time—made it possible to truly offer the audience a small sculpture […], something at once quite wondrous and highly chaste and very eye-catching too. […] Half man, half woman, one can not quite be certain what it is.²¹⁷

Given the information that, for contemporary films, actors were supposed to provide their own wardrobes, Musidora may have even been in charge of supplying the suit.²¹⁸ She may have kept it to herself throughout her lifetime, using it for stage appearances and reportedly still possessing it in 1957, when she gave an interview a few months before her death.²¹⁹ Regardless of whether she or Feuillade, or both of them in consent, introduced the silken stretch suit to the screen, its effect was to invoke the connotation of the luxury, the sexual

Fig. II.16: Musidora posing in the silken black body suit at her home, photo Louis Silvestre, 1915.
ambiguity, and the frivolous eroticism that French audiences in the mid-teens were acquainted with from French *music-hall* and revue. As documented earlier on in this careerography, the contemporary viewers indeed associated the suit and the Irma Vep-figure with *music-hall* culture.

The connection to popular stage culture not only emerges from contemporary reception or historical knowledge. The reference has been inserted into the grain of the text of the series as well. As a matter of fact, the black tight bodysuit was not only worn by Musidora in *LES VAMPIRES*, but also—in an earlier episode—by Stacia de Napierkowska, the dancer known from the Châtelet and the Folies-Bergère. In the second episode, Napierkowska’s character of the dancer Marfa Koutiloff—a hint at the Ballet Russes in which she used to excel—is killed by a poisonous ring, given to her by the Grand Vampire, because rumor had it that she was Philippe Guérande’s girlfriend. Feuillade narrativized her brief and tragic appearance as a dance act that she performed on a theater stage. On the popular stage, dance was, after the *tableaux vivants*, the foremost act for women in which the exposure of the female body could be enveloped in artistic virtuosity. Napierkowska’s scenes provide us with a fine example of this combination. On the one hand, we watch a professional ballet dancer at work, on the other, her body shapes are well exposed to the camera. Just as in Musidora’s scene, the use of the light adds to the exposition of breasts and belly, which is further highlighted through a close shot of the camera. The narrativization of the scene as a dance performance, however, frames the exposition of the female body as an element of art and training. The potential sleekness of the suit on Napierkowska is undermined by a few additional accessories—large ears on her cap and a cape like the wings of a bat—, which Musidora, later on in her screen appearance, would omit. The ears ridicule the costume, whereas the cape animalizes it, placing the character in the tradition of literary and filmed batmen such as Zigomar and Fantômas.

Josette Andriot, whom Musidora mentioned to have worn the black bodysuit before her, had done so in two films by Victorin-Hippolyte Jasset: the last of his three ZIGOMAR-films and the spy film *PROTÉA*, both made in 1913. A closer look at these appearances has become possible thanks to the rediscove ry of a *PROTÉA* print long considered to be lost. A comparison of the scenes in which Andriot wears the suit with those in which Musidora wears hers, moreover, highlights how the mise-en-scène and the camerawork capitalized on the qualities of the silk on the body.

In *ZIGOMAR*, *PEAU D’ANGUILLE* (Zigomar Eelskin) Andriot plays Rosaria, the accomplice of the bandit Zigomar. She wears the high-necked black suit in about half of the 45-minute film and always in scenes in which the emphasis is on her undauntedness, her physical control, and her mobility, and her equalization to the master bandit. When she climbs up a wall or jumps from
balcony to balcony, the shape of her buttocks is pronouncedly visible, but with the connotation of muscular strength rather than erotic attraction. Towards the end of the film, there is a scene in which she and Zigomar are caught in a flooded cellar and in which their suits turn wet and stick to their bodies. Still, hers does not look sexy, even when she is pulled backwards up to the floor. A very brief frontal shot of her body in the wet suit indeed shows the shape of her breasts, but, again, not in a suggestive manner. In the following shot, she stands next to Zigomar and the suit is, quite significantly, dry again: it rather serves to conceal than to reveal sexual difference.

This is also the case in PROTÉA, a French detective story with a female master spy as its protagonist. Although Protéa does appear in the suit in much less screen time than Rosaria, rendering it relatively extraordinary, the camera and the mise-en-scène present it as a working suit: the outfit worn by burglars for protection, as the model and the blackness of the costume conceals them in the dark. The first shot of Protéa in her black suit shows her putting on a black cap, an action that distracts from the suit and how it looks on her. The camera frames her waist-up, and this shot is followed by a closer shot of her head and cap, which draws attention to her large eyes. In the subsequent shot, she opens a door and sticks her head through, an action that, again, draws

Fig. II.17: Josette Andriot in PROTÉA wearing the black body suit at work. Set photo.
attention to her head rather than to her body. The surviving print of the film does not contain a shot with Protéa’s entire body in the suit. In the following sequence, we see her at work wearing the suit, but from a distance and against a dark background. There is no exposition of body or suit that brings to mind the *culte du maillot* or the sculptural quality that Musidora attributed to it.

If we compare this to how Feuillade and his cinematographer Georges Guérin introduced Musidora in the black suit in the fifth episode of their series, the differences in approach and effect become obvious. Like Protéa, Irma Vep is shown at work, but not obscured by the dark and the distance, so that the sculptural and female shapes of her body are highlighted right away. Both the sleekness of her suit and her elegant movements, moreover, are set against those of her fellow burglars who all wear blouse-like shirts as tops above their black tights. In the sixth episode, moreover, the silhouette of the female body in the suit is framed as a spectacle by means of the lighting and mise-en-scène. Within the diegesis, these scenes present Irma Vep searching a hotel room, after which she gets caught by the leader of a rival gang, Moreno. After he has dragged her into his room, Moreno eyes his catch from top to toe. The camera duplicates his gaze without overlapping with it, revealing the duplicity of the male gaze. A little later, we see Irma Vep vainly struggling against Moreno’s grip and the chloroform that he uses to numb her, her body lying in an armchair. In these images, the skin and the nipples clearly shine through the suit—most notably in big screen projection and to an extent that some onlookers believed to have seen everything it covered.

Musidora has suggested that the effect of transparency of the cloth was intensified by the use of the light. In her play, “Le prince des ténèbres” (The Prince of the Darkness), she claims that Feuillade told her: “We will play with the light on the silk of your translucent bodysuit and you, you will play this for me like a great actress.” But even in case Musidora just invented the dialogue after having had a chance to see a surviving print of *les vampires* in 1947, the images illustrate that the mise-en-scène, lighting, and framing charged Irma Vep’s appearance with an eroticism that seems absent from Protéa’s. The same holds for the cross-dressing scenes, which occur in both series as well. Whereas Jasset renders Protéa wearing an army uniform purely as a narrative function in the spy plot, Musidora, Feuillade, and Guérin portray Irma Vep’s cross-dressing as a model illustration of bisexual seductiveness.

Irma Vep was not only much more seductive and mysterious than her predecessor, but also unabashedly evil. Protéa is a female genius spy, about whom the title cards quite tellingly declare “Mais il fallait beaucoup plus pour décourager Protéa” and “Il fallait beaucoup pour s’emparer de Protéa” (It takes much more to discourage Protéa and it takes a lot to seize Protéa). What Abel concludes on the basis of synopses and reviews, can now be confirmed
The character was a French older sister of the American serial queens Helen and Elaine, whose intrepidity mesmerized cinema audiences overseas from November or December 1914 and constituted the breakthrough in France of American serial queen melodramas in 1915. The Protéa played by Josette Andriot was as intrepid and athletic as the Elaine played by Pearl White. She performed her tasks, moreover, in order to protect the interests of the government that hired her. In other words, her exploits sprang from righteousness and loyalty to her commissioner, however ambiguous his motives may have been. Elaine’s, Helen’s, or Pauline’s motives sprang from their daredevil ways of coping with dangerous situations, but they also appealed to the spectators’ sympathy and sense of justice.

Irma Vep, in contrast, was the female criminal impersonated, and, instead of a serial queen copy-cat, she constituted an ingenious alternative to their forthrightness. Her scheming and burgling was driven by mere evil. Her image was conceived in contrast to the one of Elaine Dodge and probably Protéa too: although dark-haired like Protéa, Irma Vep was malicious and alluring. The alluring aspect of her image drew, as I have argued above, from music-hall iconography in conjunction with shrewd mise-en-scène, framing, and lighting. In other words, it brought a Parisian flavor to the darkness of the drama, which was enhanced with the insertion of (ciné-)vaudeville devices that embedded it in a sphere of comedy and playfulness. The point of the cinematic style of LES VAMPIRES, its fantastic realism, its comic aspects, as well as its foreclosing character identification, was that it discouraged spectators to take the matter and the Irma Vep character too seriously, and instead let themselves be enchanted by the series’ game of mischievousness. Musidora, once asked if, among her fan mail, she had also received letters of protestation for embodying a female icon of evil, affirmed this playful view on the character of Irma Vep:

No! Never, never; I have not received any letter of protest. I believe that between the public and me a certain understanding existed. They figured that she murders, but she does so to amuse us. Because, after all, one laughed and realized, no, she has not murdered for the killing, but she has murdered to entertain us—not to frighten us.

LES VAMPIRES, still today, makes spectators smile rather than shiver and it is the insertion of comedy and Parisian allure that makes it differ substantially both from its French predecessor and its American counterparts.

The contemporary reception of the series, nonetheless, oscillated between appreciation and disapproval. Disapproval was often fuelled by moralists’ and authorities’ worries about the social impact of the representation of crime in the series. Moralists feared that the films would work like a school of crime,
because they did not only display, in detail, the preparations for a variety of criminal acts, but also rendered the bandits extremely romantic and attractive. Some critics also worried about the larger demoralizing effects of the ubiquity of phantasmagorical tricks in the series, through which crime was represented as an enterprise of conjuring conducted by the villains. Authorities such as the police, moreover, protested the ridicule of their competences. Generally, such objections did not apply to Musidora’s part in the series, except for one comment attesting to the provocative allure of her performance:

It is almost unbelievable that Musidora, who all the same has such beautiful eyes, would nourish such evil plans as carried out by L’HOMME DES POISSONS. It is obvious that the crime films, by living themselves up through the presence of beautiful women, will delay their death-struggle and will ensure for themselves a death in beauty.

Beyond moralist considerations, disapproval was fed by concerns of film critics worrying about the quality and future of cinema in general and in France in particular. Guillaume Danvers in Ciné-Journal, for instance, blamed most crime series, including LES VAMPIRES, for playing too many tricks on feasibility:

Remember that our working class people, the habitual cinema goers, in matters of electricity, mechanics and so forth, are judges of a rare competence whom one should not try to fool. The cinema, which by way of photography should faithfully reproduce facts and events, ought not to accommodate tricks: it should leave that to the theater which has shown itself a master in presenting works of art made from cardboard. The cinema ought to be sincere; that is its invincible force, that is its appeal throughout the world.

Danvers belonged among the critics who argued that the cinema ought to turn away from the theater, which made him reject the entire genre of crime films. Another critic, who wrote under the pseudonym, Le Voyeur in Hebdo-Film, grumbled about every instance of improbability that struck him. At times, he also pointed out editing problems, when shots or narrative sequences ran too long, in his taste. Nonetheless, the pseudonymous critic appears to have intended his criticism constructively, as he accepted the genre and consequently enveloped his comments in assertions of how interesting the films were in terms of cinematic craftsmanship. He admired the complexity of the narration, complimented the acting in general terms, and once, even called Levesque better than Chaplin. Le Voyeur also compared LES VAMPIRES to
LES MYSTÈRES DE NEW YORK: “Well, it is every bit as good as the MYSTÈRES and it is quite better in terms of camera and acting. [...] it is French cinema, and much better than many another.”

The competition between the French and the American series went beyond aesthetics and most notably concerned aspects of marketing strategy and production policy. LES MYSTÈRES premiered in France on December 3, 1915 in 156 cinemas throughout the country and was bound to offer a weekly installment for three and a half months. The American serial was completed by the time it reached France, whereas the production of LES VAMPIRES went on during its run in the cinemas. In addition to that, episodes of the latter were released much more irregularly and with longer intervals, roughly once a month. Most importantly, LES MYSTÈRES was accompanied by a publicity strategy novel for France, that is to say, the publication of its novelization in one of the major newspapers paralleled the weekly release of the fourteen subsequent episodes of the film. Although, as I have pointed out, French cinema- and theater-goers were accustomed to synopses of performed plays and exhibited films, the regular and long-standing publication in a newspaper with millions of readers was of a different order. It nonetheless prompted Gaumont and Feuillade to issue a publication of LES VAMPIRES as well, which was available to critics by mid-April 1916 and was written jointly and signed by Feuillade and the crime novelist George Meirs. Lacassin has reproached the novelization for giving the characters an internal life and for its far too wordy style compared to the poignant images. Contemporary critics, however, applauded the initiative and sang the praises of the fantasy necessary for devising such plots.

By May and June 1916, when these considerations were published, French cinema was in a precarious position due to the war. The pride of being the foremost film producing country in the world gave way to concerns about the imminent loss of that position, most notably vis-à-vis the American expansion to the European market, of which the large-scale launch of LES MYSTÈRES DE NEW YORK and other serials was one of the signals. This concern about the future of French cinema resonates in the constructive criticism conveyed in such reviews as those of Le Voyeur, and even more so in the enthusiasm about the popularity of LES VAMPIRES with audiences in the provinces and abroad. Reviewers invariably stated that it was excellent French cinema, as if the public’s enthusiasm, which they always mentioned, and the increasing distance, in terms of both time and space, helped to turn goodwill into outright appreciation of the series’ cinematic qualities.

If relatively few reviews of LES VAMPIRES appeared in print in 1915 and 1916, the reason was not just the initial distaste for the genre. Most obviously, Ciné-Journal kept silent editorially on LES VAMPIRES, despite the fact that it ran the entire series of ten advertisements. However, Ciné-Journal, only by excep-
tion, reviewed individual films during this period and rather published overviews of trends and debates, such as the ones by Danvers’ cited above. Quite a few other film periodicals had suspended publication because of the war and only some had begun reappearing by June 1916, when the tenth episode of \textit{Les vampires} premiered in Parisian cinemas. \textit{Le Courrier Cinématographique}, for instance, resurfaced only in December 1916, and \textit{Filma} did so in February 1917. The war stop of the quotidian for the performing arts, \textit{Comoedia}, which from March 1913 onwards, ran a daily column “Cinématographes” edited by J.-L. Croze, even lasted until September 1919.\cite{249} It is hard to tell, therefore, if the reviews and background articles that were published in \textit{Le Cinéma et l’Écho du Cinéma réunis} and \textit{Hebdo-Film}, in fact do represent the full scope of the debate provoked by \textit{Les vampires} and the genre of crime series. Nonetheless, they seem to justify two conclusions: first, objections hardly ever concerned Musidora’s role in the series, which underpins my argument that the reception of the Irma Vep figure went along the lines of expectations of popular stage performance, that is to say, expectations to be amused and seduced by, rather than to be shocked or provoked to imitate her or her gang; second, the moral and cinematic objections that were initially brought forward melted away with the growing popularity of the series with the public, both in France and abroad, and gave way to hope for the survival of French popular cinema.

One contemporary voice mixing in the debates incited by \textit{Les vampires} and \textit{Les mystères de new york} deserves extra consideration here: the voice of Musidora, who recounted her experiences in film production in a selection of periodicals. Her first intervention on the issue appeared in the “magazine gay” \textit{Fantasio}, for which she wrote short stories. Her fictionalized report “Les dangers du cinema” spells out the danger of cinema for actresses doing their own stunts. In the story, she emphasized the truthfulness of the images of \textit{Les vampires}, and simultaneously aligns herself with the intrepidity and athletic skills so widely admired in the American serial queens and, most notably, Pearl White.\cite{250} The single page story contains the following dialogue between her and her friends after the shooting of a scene of \textit{Les vampires}, for which she had to lie flat underneath a moving train:

– I have been under a moving train “for the sake of cinema”!
I am greeted with a general burst of laughter. I protest:
– Now you see! I risk to hurt myself in order to amuse the public, and my best friends do not believe me: it is disgusting!
René, who just returned from the front, covered with medals, wounds and glory, says with a sceptic smile:
– You must have been under a train made of cardboard, with wheels turning on the spot; a trick of the kind they perform at the Châtelet.
But no [...]! I repeat to you, to all of you, I have been under a real train, at Brunoy! The most interesting aspect of this dialogue is the contrast between the filming on location and the spectacular yet fake backdrops for which the Châtelet theater was known. Musidora, here, engaged in the very debate that Danvers had invoked: that cinema ought to distinguish itself from theater through truthfulness. Her argument, however, was that it did already: no cardboard sets were used.

Once the actress in the story has convinced her friends of the truth of her anecdote, they talk about the danger she has been in, after which she details how she experienced the event, what she saw, how the train sounded and felt, and so forth. This latter part of the text, written in a style at once realistic and evocative, was apparently considered so pertinent that it was reproduced in several further papers and periodicals, from the film paper Le Cinéma et l’Écho du cinéma réunis to the daily Paris Midi. Its significance was, as Musidora pointed out in another text, that it denied what everyone thought, namely “that the scene contained trick effects”. In a second story, Musidora expanded the topic of courage involved in acting for the camera to a variety of efforts and crafts indispensable to filmmaking. Those involved in the shooting of a film were now set against an ignorant snob and his equally ignorant flirt, who think that making films is nothing but fake and easy to do. Their visit to the studio teaches them otherwise. The story enables Musidora to depict, in vivid style and graphic detail, some of the ins and outs of the work, not only of actors and director, but of extras, cameramen, and props men too. Again, the story deals with risks taken for the sake of cinema and the references to LES VAMPIRES are thinly veiled: instead of a Grand Vampire, there is a Grand Von Pyr with his accomplice Irma and, without his name being spelled out, there is “one of our great comic actors with the famous nose.” The described scene from the crime film in-the-making was one of the more spectacular ones of the series, in which Satanas blows up a cabaret with a cannon shot from his hotel room window. In the scene showing the effects of the blow, we see a chandelier falling down from the ceiling, a profusion of panic among the guests and a cloud of dust, suggesting chaos and damage. The point of Musidora’s story was that the explosion was closely reproduced on-set:

Everyone actually seemed to be having a good time. Launched by a dexterous hand, the bomb explodes right in the middle of the cabaret, a bang resounds, a horrible and harrowing bang. The walls topple over, the chandeliers come down, a young extra faints for fear. A black velvet soot slowly comes down.
In her recollections published in the early 1940s, Musidora recounted how she and Fernand Herrman, who played her lover Moreno, were actually hurt in the blow: her arm was dislocated and Herrman’s cheek bled from being hit by a falling piece of scenery. The personal risks that Musidora—and other actors—took for the sake of cinema was a recurring topic throughout her writings on film. The necessity for stressing the “truthfulness” of actions and locations in Feuillade’s work and, as we will see, in her own work as well, then, sprang from the debate in which the quality and future of cinema was related to the plausibility of what was shown and to the extent to which it distinguished itself from theater and its way of make-believe.

The detailed depiction of the work in front of the camera in Musidora’s story reveals a second concern. Her description of the considerations of the cinematographer suggests a clear sensibility for how images were produced in the cinema:

The cinematographer, who supervises the shape of the shadows and the patches of light, orders the carts [with the lamps, A.F.] to be moved, so that the head of our grand Von Pyr does not produce two or three shadows on the wall of painted cloth which are fused, blurry and of unequal intensity. Instead, one, very neat cut-out dramatises this tableau of the crime film.

Given the hindsight that Musidora, within three years from this date, made her debut as a filmmaker herself and that she also talked about how images were created in that context, it does not seem unreasonable to read in this story of hers an announcement of her ambitions in that direction. Musidora’s main point, however, was that she knew very well what she was doing as an actress, even though she enveloped the description of her specific way of acting in an observation made by the snob:

The snob has come to see the grand film, in which the young girl triumphs whose round eyes follow him in their somewhat peculiar manner of slowly looking from right to left, while fixing for a moment their iris towards the spectator.

This is an accurate and adroit characterization of Musidora’s way of acting with her eyes in LES VAMPIRES, which she applied throughout, only varying the duration of the glance towards the observer. The sidelong glance—both in its literal and in its metaphorical sense—was ubiquitous in the series as Irma Vep’s trademark. In its indirect address, her glance implied an acknowledgment of the spectator’s presence. Three effects can be ascribed to it, one
diegetic and two extra-diegetic.\textsuperscript{259} Within the diegesis, it intensified the sense of mystery and scheming to be associated with the presence of the Vampires and of Irma Vep in particular. In the fourth episode of \textit{LES VAMPIRES}, for instance, we see her eavesdropping behind a wall, while moving her eyes from side to side and making them skim over the camera, representing her high interest in what she hears. Beyond the diegesis, her eye movement may have addressed spectators in two ways: as she describes in her story, and as has been contended throughout history, it often mesmerized people and enticed them to become enamored, both with Irma Vep and Musidora; as Musidora has pointed out in her interview for Swiss radio, moreover, it also invited spectators to complicity, not with her evil scheming within the diegesis, but with her playing a game for their amusement. In 1920, she articulated her enchantment with the role thus:

\begin{quote}
I will spare you the titles which I have forgotten among, by the way, all of my Gaumont films. I will make an exception for \textit{LES VAMPIRES}, which has been for me an unalloyed pleasure. The idea to be a bad woman and to assassinate in each episode the innocent victim, had countless charms for me.\textsuperscript{260}
\end{quote}

What is special to Musidora’s acting, then, is that she, in \textit{LES VAMPIRES}, much like in the \textit{ciné-vaudeville} parody of it, \textit{LAGOURDETTE GENTLEMAN CAMBRIOLEUR}, communicates to spectators this pleasure in the act of acting. That, in my view, is one of the qualities that makes the series and Musidora’s contribution to it fascinating still today: she invites and enables me to share in that pleasure through giving a knowing wink and making people smile. Musidora’s way of representing the femme fatale or bad woman, then, transcends the weighty and fraught connotations usually associated with these terms: her knowing winks flavors her candid acting with playfulness and wit.

In the role of Diana Monti in \textit{JUDEX}, Musidora was given yet another chance to play an evil character and, in each episode, harm the innocent victim. It is very possible to see in Diana Monti a recurrence of Irma Vep, as Callahan more emphatically has done than anyone before her.\textsuperscript{261} Still, there are some significant differences as well. Even more seductive and wicked than Irma Vep, Diana Monti is far less mysterious. There are several scenes in which she explicitly instigates her accomplice to killing or kidnapping, suggesting that she rules the roost, but the bandits have no heroic connotation of rebellion against moralists or authorities. The men are, rather, victims of the spell of this wicked female character in which attractiveness completely overlaps selfish villainy. Diana Monti’s motive is to become rich through blackmail. Her seductiveness does not exceed the narrative; its aim is to subdue her lovers. In
this role, Musidora wears the most exquisite dress and is often filmed in a way that renders her, like in other Feuillade films, breathtakingly beautiful, but this is also motivated from within the diegesis. A good example is the scene in the fifth episode in which she schemes with Morales while lying stretched out in all her glory on an polar bear rug, with her elbows resting on the ferocious head with its gaping jaws. Seductiveness and ferociousness captured in one image.

As one can observe, the mysterious and romantic figure in Judex is not one of the bandits, but the male hero. He constantly uses disguise in order to perform his tasks of avenging his father and of protecting or rescuing the woman he is secretly courting, Jacqueline (Yvette Andreyor). So Feuillade made this Judex (René Cresté) the radiant star of the series rather than Diana Monti. His story of avenging and courting is at the heart of the narrative, while Diana’s and her accomplices’ crimes seem only marginal, even more so against the backdrop of the crimes committed by the banker Favraux, who has driven several people into ruin and misery. In Diana’s disguises, moreover, she is easy to recognize throughout, even in her cross-dressing scenes in the tenth and eleventh episodes. More importantly, her leadership is repeatedly questioned, because either her partners in crime refuse to follow her orders or her wicked plans fail. In such a context, Diana Monti’s main crime is seduction: not only of her accomplices, but even the banker, the “good” son of one of his victims, and the detective are not safe from her.

I agree with Callahan that this reduction of Diana Monti to a classic femme fatale is largely due to the melodramatic dichotomy of the bad Diana versus the good woman, Jacqueline. But I also think that there are other factors involved. Again, this can be closer analyzed if references to the popular stage and Musidora’s way of acting are taken into account.

The scene that parallels the one with Irma Vep in the black suit appears in the fifth episode and is set in an abandoned mill, where Diana and her partner in crime Morales keep the chloroformed and kidnapped Jacqueline hostage. Morales refuses Diana’s order to kill Jacqueline, Diana threatens to stab him, and Morales manages to overthrow her. They are caught in the act by one of the victims of the banker Favraux, the former owner of the mill, Kerjean, who has returned to the place to commemorate his wife, who died of grief over her husband’s misfortune. Diana Monti escapes and hides behind a door, listening to the dialogue that develops. Morales reveals to Kerjean that he is, in fact, his son and that Diana Monti has seduced him into crime. Morales convinces his father, Kerjean, that he wishes to return to honesty. We see Diana behind the door make a fist and scold him. Next, and this is the moment in the series that I consider to parallel the one between Irma Vep and Moreno, Diana starts to take off her clothes piece by piece, until she wears only a bathing suit.
Although this is a reference to the tradition académique, it is not one to the culte du maillot, and it is not as refined and shrewd as the black bodysuit. It is more vulgar, and simultaneously more athletic. It is more vulgar, because, before Diana descends through a hole into the water underneath the mill, we are shown her naked legs and allowed a peek between her breasts; it is more athletic because the bathing suit looks as if it is made of cotton (!), and rather conveys sports than luxury or eroticism. The sporty connotation is affirmed by Diana’s next action: she dives into the water and swims away. The association with sports is reaffirmed in a scene in the final episode, in which Daisy Torp, a dancer from the Nouveau Cirque, swims in the cold sea, ascends the ship where Diana and Morales are keeping Judex hostage, and frees Judex. Later, Daisy is shown climbing in the stays of the ship’s mast. While the reference to the popular stage is present in the character of Daisy, the emphasis is on her training, not the art of dancing. The vulgarity, on the other hand, is further buttressed in the final scene of Diana Monti in the series, which shows...
her corpse being washed ashore. Lying on her back, with her head bent backwards, the skirt washed up by the sea to the effect that her knee stockings, bare upper legs, and even a glimpse of her black panties become visible—a more disgracing and lifeless image is hard to imagine.

Another reference to the popular stage are the vaudevillesque scenes with Levesque that have been inserted in the melodrama, much like in Les Vampires, although there are three episodes in JudeX without his comic presence. In these episodes, other characters take over the comic function, as in the third episode with Le Môme Réglisse (Bout-de-Zan), or in the fourth episode with the pack of dogs belonging to Judex. The comic character, Cocantin, moreover, acts as the detective, who, from the beginning, casts doubt on his capabilities in investigation. These doubts are additionally raised because initially he is hired by the malicious banker who wants him to find out who is the mysterious Judex threatening him. Neither is Cocantin suspicious of Diana, who believes that he is Judex, and hence flirts with him each time they meet. There is only one aspect in which Cocantin has a constructive function, which is that he unconditionally believes that Judex is right in accusing Favraux of bringing others to ruin. But unlike Mazzamette’s goofy actions, Cocantin’s hardly ever lead to solving a problem or saving a victim. This becomes fully apparent in the scenes in which Daisy dives into the sea while Cocantin stays behind on the beach helplessly running up and down the shore because he cannot swim. Not the detective, but his date defeats the villains.

In his statement announcing the series, Feuillade assured the public, most likely in response to the conflicting reception of his previous series, that JudeX was a popular and wholesome family spectacle as well as a spectacle of emotions, joy and art that wished to offer a truthful story, full of adventure, love, laughter, and tears. Accounting for the imagination from which the story sprang, he placed himself confidently in the tradition of the French popular literature of Alexandre Dumas. All of this was cheered in the contemporary press, which confirmed that the series was not a vindication of crime from which candidate burglars would learn new methods. Rather, it was considered a heroic-comic series, in which the dramatic was gripping and the comic was always poignant. Levesque’s role was received as a satire on the usual detective and a Parisian, witty satire at that.

Musidora’s role engendered a range of comments. One was the familiar projection of eroticism, most notably on her scene in the bathing suit, which met with both admiration and disapproval. Another response pointed to a degree of pleasantry in the figure of Diana Monti: “Miss Musidora, who has to flee in great haste, plunges into the river in such a marvelous way, that one forgets the blackness of her soul for the moment.” A final remark linked her dramatic and comic acting:
and the adventuress ready for every crime, is Miss Musidora who, after having made herself a deserved name as a comic performer, adds to her glances that we have known to be so smiling, dramatic flashes which are all the more frightening because they come as a surprise.\textsuperscript{270}

In other words, in the contemporary reception, Diana Monti was not taken seriously in her villainy. It was obvious to (most) spectators that she committed her crimes to entertain them, not to scare them. To my knowledge, Musidora herself has written only one brief line about the figure of Diana Monti: “\textit{Juex, whom I have chased with my intense dislike, has earned me the reputation of bad girl.”}\textsuperscript{271} It is an acknowledgement of the success of the series, which was much bigger than that of \textit{Les Vampires} and which consolidated her status as a French film vedette. Her acting continued the style that she had developed in her role of Irma Vep, including, right from the first shot of \textit{Juex} onward, her sidelong glance and her arms akimbo. What she added were two instances of downright play-acting. In the opening episode of the series, she applies this comic acting device in a scene with the malicious banker, Favraux, and, in the sixth episode, in a scene with the detective, Cocantin. In both cases, Diana Monti ostensibly pretends to seduce the man opposite her, while, to the audience, displaying her disgust with the banker and her contempt with the detective. Also in these cases, the play-acting undercuts the seriousness of her seductiveness and instead presents it with a knowing wink to the spectator while simultaneously communicating her pleasure in the act of comic acting.
MUSIDORA AS AN ACTRESS 1916-1918

Already during Musidora’s affiliation with Gaumont, which seems to have ended in the late summer or early fall of 1917, announcements appeared in the trade papers of projects with other firms and filmmakers, among which the production company of the filmmaker André Hugon, who proudly lined up Musidora’s engagement with Mistinguett and Marie-Louise Derval, fellow music-hall vedettes who had established a career in film as well. Musidora indeed took leading roles in three dramas directed by Hugon: CHACALS (Jackals, released in April 1917), JOHANNES, FILS DE JOHANNES, (John, Son of John, released in June 1918), and MAMZELLE CHIFFON (Miss Chiffon, released in March 1919). CHACALS was welcomed as the first of a series promising a happy collaboration between Musidora and Hugon; the film was deemed powerful, earning a ranking as “Bien, Presque Très Bien” (good, almost very good). More mixed were the responses to the following two productions, which earned just an “Assez Bien” (passable). Musidora, however, was said to have shown that she definitely had the stature to handle dramatic leading roles. In CHACALS and JOHANNES, FILS DE JOHANNES she played similar parts as a treacherous seductress triggering the misery and death of more than one man, but both plots are, as the titles indicate, really about the fates of the men seduced and betrayed. In MAMZELLE CHIFFON, which received severe criticism for its lack of drama and its implausible plot, she played an unwed and poor teenage mother, who nonetheless finds happiness and a rich man. The potential agency in the role was traded for coincidence. As far as the reviews and plot summaries disclose, the three films seem rather depraved of profundity, which prompted Le Film to advise directors to cast Musidora in psychological comedies instead of in adventurous and melodramatic plots. The actress occasionally mentioned the titles of her production with Hugon, but never published anything substantial about them. I read this as an indication that Hugon had been barely able to fulfill Musidora’s ambitions in playing dramatic leading roles.

Much more positive, in contrast, was the response to Musidora’s collaboration with Colette, which occurred parallel to Musidora’s affiliation with Hugon, for providing subject matter and plots. In 1916 and 1918, Musidora was involved in three films drawing from Colette’s work: MINNE, after the novel L’INGÉNUE LIBERTINE (The Libertine Ingénue); LA VAGABONDE (The Vagabond), after the novel with the same title; and LA FLAMME CACHÉE (The Hidden Flame), after an original scenario written by Colette for Musidora. No prints of these films are known to be extant, and, of MINNE, it is even doubtful if it was ever actually made or finished. In these films too, Musidora played the leading roles, while, according to Lacassin, she also contributed to the
“adaptation” [shooting script] of LA VAGABONDE (directed by Eugenio Perego) as well as to the direction of MINNE (“adaptation” by Jacques de Baroncelli) and LA FLAMME CACHÉE (co-directed by Roger Lion).\textsuperscript{280} For the latter claims, I have found no support in the contemporary press, advertisements, reviews, or articles from Musidora’s own pen published at the time.\textsuperscript{281} If Musidora actually contributed to the scripts and the direction, then, she did not go public with the fact—or, more precisely, not yet, because she would do so with the film she wrote, produced, and directed in 1919 and was released three weeks after LA FLAMME CACHÉE in the spring of 1920, VICENTA.\textsuperscript{282} Handled by the same distributor, Union-Éclair, these two films were advertised together, whereby Musidora was listed as the director of VICENTA but not of LA FLAMME CACHÉE.\textsuperscript{283} The latter film was solely announced as an “unpublished dramatic plot by Colette”,\textsuperscript{284} perhaps out of reverence for the well-known writer turned scenarist. One of the few other French women filmmakers making her debut in
those years was Germaine Dulac, and right from her first film released in 1917, she insisted on claiming production, scenario, and direction credits. As is widely known, Dulac further underpinned her position as a filmmaker with theoretical texts. The analogy with Musidora fails insofar as Dulac had been a journalist before venturing into film direction, not an actress; neither did she act in her own productions. It may nonetheless be concluded, that, until 1919, acting meant more to Musidora than anything else she did in film. Even after having proclaimed the direction of Vicenta, Musidora presented herself first and foremost as an actress. Echoing Colette’s title “A Short Manual for the Aspiring Scenario Writer” published in 1918 in Filma, Musidora wrote for the same periodical two years later her “Petit cours à l’usage de ceux qui voudraient devenir vedette de cinema” (Little manual for the Aspiring Vedette of Cinema), the topic of which I shall discuss in due course. Here, I refer to it to point out that Musidora in her 1916-1918 films and writings most productively sought the collaboration of the noted novelist and essayist on music-hall and cinema, Colette, and that she therewith affiliated herself with the invigorating views on cinema advocated by her friend that were adopted and debated by the new generation of French film critics and filmmakers. This is the reason why Colette’s experience and thought figures again in this portion of Musidora’s careerography.

Colette’s first known article on cinema appeared in the newspaper Le Matin on March 19, 1914, and, from May to July 1917, she wrote for Le Film. In her reviews and comments, she argued against vaudeville plot constructions, grotesque imbroglios, improper studio settings, cheap and inaccurate costumes, and dramatic overacting, of which she saw too much to her taste, especially in French and Italian films. Although she, to my mind, paints a bit of a caricature of French cinema of the time, her observations abound with knowing wit and genuine enthusiasm for new forms of cinematic representation. The position she spoke from was that of the guileless but perceptive spectator, who brings to mind the sincere but acute public of pre-war music-hall and revue described by Laloy and Curnonsky. Colette demanded from cinema “spectacle, marvels, incontestable miracles”. In the third year of the war, which had deprived music-hall and revue of its main assets, she asked: “What is left for the public? Where can it bath itself in decorative illusion, adventure and romance, high life, society, inexhaustible splendor? At the cinema.” In Colette’s view, American films, and a few French ones, promised new and enthralling forms of cinematic representation, of which her successor at Le Film, the former music-hall critic Louis Delluc, became one of the most prominent spokesmen, and, which, in film history and theory, is known under the tag of photogénie.

In the fall of 1917, Colette published her impressions on the shooting of La Vagabonde, the film based on her 1910 novel that starred Musidora and
was directed by Eugenio Perego for Film d’Arte Italiana (Pathé Italy). The title of the article, “L’Envers du Cinéma” (The Seamy Side of the Cinema), brings to mind Colette’s 1913 collection of sketches L’Envers du Music-Hall, therewith promising another keen and compassionate observation of performance and performers on the film set. Her astute bystander’s view, moreover, obviously drew from her experience as an actress. In the article on the shooting of La Vagabonde, Colette discusses Musidora’s relation to the camera in photogenic terms:

There is nothing whiter than her white, powdered face, unless it is her naked arms, her bare neck, the white of her eyes. Every time I look at her eyes my memory whispers to me the phrase of Charles-Louis-Philippe: “She had eyes of great expanse...” Black, her hair; black her eyelashes; her dark mouth is open over her white teeth—she is already just like her cinematic image, and the professionals of Italy and France will compliment her to you in a manner that permits of no reply: “Anything more photogenic than her you couldn’t find!”

As with music-hall actors, Colette notices the features brought to the image by the actress’ disposition, but, beyond them, depicts the skills and command required to achieve the quality of *photogénie* in film. It was not enough to apply whitening powder and blackening lipstick, she argues. The necessary skills included adaptability to the most austere circumstances on outdoor locations and a stoic tolerance of the heat under the glass-top studio, supplemented with astute reflection and utter concentration:

They film. They film “fillers”, “transitions” [...] which, placed like ingenious sutures between the important scenes, will give the audience the illusion of truth, of real life, of ubiquity... Attentive to the director’s instructions, the beautiful black-and-white young woman sways into the magnificent light at 3 P.M. “You come in here, you go out there, in between you stop a moment and listen uneasily to see if your husband’s following you.” She listens, reflects, poses this Sibylline question: “How much?” “Six feet, maybe seven...” A hermetic dialogue, in which the initiated can understand that this “transition” must be acted at a pace that will allow it to be captured on at most seven feet of film.

After the director had called it a day, the vedette was given an additional task:

“Basta per oggi! È finito! È finito!” Nevertheless, as the adolescent cries of joy of the released resound, the director detains the photogenic young
woman, who is listening to the program for tomorrow: “Tomorrow, little one, we’re filming at Nemi and the car leaves at 8 A.M. Bring the costume for the flight, the dress for the garden, the evening dress with the coat, all the accessories. Don’t forget anything, all right? Nemi isn’t just around the corner....” She listens in hopeless submission, nods “yes, yes” and recites in a low voice the litany of her baggage: “The pink dress, the grey stockings, the doeskin slippers, the black tulle robe, the violet coat, the white gloves, the diadem, the kimono, the furred mules, the blue suit...” And as if until this minute, by an effort of will, she had been in command of nature, she suddenly begins to sweat freely and goes off toward her dressing room reciting her psalms: “The violet coat, the blue suit (etc.)...”

If I quote Colette’s text at length, it is not simply for the intensity of her account, but also to underscore her insistence on the actress’ command of her pro-filmic appearance and performance. Rather than about acting in terms of expression, she writes about presence before the camera based on adaptability, concentration, and insight. The issue of the right attire, moreover, was one of Colette’s favorite topics and, for her, a sign of the “luxury, magnificence, fantasy” spent on the mise-en-scène. This focus complies with the assumption undergirding the conception of photogénie, as Richard Abel has summarized it, that the “real” was a prerequisite of film representation and signification. “But it also assumed”, Abel cautions, “that the ‘real’ was transformed by the camera/screen, which, without eliminating that realness, changed it into something radically new.” According to Colette’s observation, then, the actress prepared for that transformation in that she already resembled her cinematic image, which Musidora accomplished in every regard.

Musidora Speaking about Acting in LA VAGABONDE

Musidora, in a self-presentation in Le Film, detailed her acting work from her own experience:

And all the same, how difficult it is to really comprehend that complex art. To know how to “think” even only a little slop. To have “fifteen metres” of fear and “twenty metres” of tears; to withdraw into oneself to the point of no longer seeing the cranking machine, nor the cruel light which burns the pupils and yellows the cornea; to truly merge into a painted backdrop if you are summoned to “act as if you are leaning, the wall moves, please bend over without disappearing from the field [of
vision of the camera]...” How difficult it is to barely use make-up, on the cheeks, the lips and the eyes, to discern which hairdo will be fine, the dress that will not become too outdated. And how much one has to train one’s memory for the thousand details of one’s outfit that will return in the course of a film.296

More specifically on LA VAGABONDE, she contended:

I have attempted to render my whole heart, my whole thought in my face, very much like the Roman sun did cast transparent, even translucent shadows all over the white canopy under the glass roof.297

What Musidora is saying here, it seems to me, is how “being already like her cinematic image” was achieved. Louis Delluc corroborated Colette’s impressions after having seen the film:

LA VAGABONDE gives us Musidora back; Miss Musidora has been popular since JUDEX. But she was sincere before that and had a very interesting visual grace, which had been noticed at the Cigale, at the Châtelet and elsewhere. Since, she has appeared little on the stage. Too bad for the stage. But she has filmed a lot. Nonetheless, this is the first time that I see her on screen in a proper role. Let us hope that this will just be the first of a nice series. And that this artiste with the beautiful face, with the remarkable immobility, with the exquisite spirit, will not be condemned to cat burglars and other phenomena of the popular cinema. She deserves better than that. Much better.298

Also according to Delluc, then, an actor was good when she or he was sincere, herself in beauty and spirit, and, as Colette had measured Hayakawa, “immobile” in front of the camera. What counted was her character, her taste, and her intelligence, in short, her personality. When Musidora articulated her own conception of photogénie for actors in her “Petit Cours...”, she defined it along the same lines:

To have a face that is “photogenic”, a word created on behalf of the screen, means a face that comes across well on a picture. It may be round, bony, unpleasant or friendly, as the role requires; but it has to surpass ordinariness, or to be that ordinary that it comprises an entire race, an entire people, an entire personality.299
Among the types beyond ordinariness, she listed stars also figuring in Colette’s and Delluc’s pantheon: Sessue Hayakawa, William Hart as Rio Jim and Charlie Chaplin, describing them as “those we had not imagined and who have ‘invented’ and imposed themselves only through their personality.” The ordinary or prototypical kind of star, on the other hand, was epitomized by Douglas Fairbanks and Pearl White:

Pearl White epitomizes the beautiful American girl. [...] all youngsters who imagine an American adventure heroine, imagine her with Pearl’s face. Therefore ordinariness by absence of personality, but perfection and complete reunion of all perfections. The perfect being loses its personality because it is the ideal of an entire world.

Like Colette and Delluc, Musidora considered the stars’ silhouettes, as she called them in café-concert idiom, to be created from features the actors possessed already. Drawing from their acting experience, moreover, both Colette and Musidora pointed out that such features required handling in front of the camera. The vedette achieved photogénie through gearing her or his personal appearance to being photographed by, what Musidora called the “docile camera”, and what Abel has denoted as “the impassive camera’s eye”, even though it was entitled to discover “the new within the already given.” The person conditioning the photogenic, in Colette’s and Musidora’s views, was the featured actress or actor, not the cameraman or the director. “I considered the cinematographer an instrument just like the camera and the tripod,” Musidora would claim in retrospect. This importance accredited to the actor may be at the heart of Musidora’s aloofness in publicly claiming the co-writing of the scenario or co-direction of the films in which she acted, in these as well as in subsequent years.

Musidora obviously consented and was pleased that influential critics like Colette and Delluc depicted her work in terms of photogénie, as it probably gave her parts and films an allure of promise and progress in comparison to her anterior oeuvre. As I will illustrate in my discussions of the films she subsequently produced, co-directed, and starred in, she also adopted some of the criteria relating to mise-en-scène as advanced by Colette and shared by the post-war generation of filmmakers. This notwithstanding, it would be a misrepresentation to frame Musidora as fully adept of the “school” of photogénie, as there are also signs that she retreated from its requirements. A closer look at how she did, may further illuminate her views on and aspirations with screen acting and filmmaking.

A sign that Musidora indeed questioned photogénie is a photograph published in Delluc’s newly established film periodical Cinéa in July 1921, which,
Il faut être “photogénique” des pieds à la tête. Après ça il est permis d’avoir du talent.

Musidora

Fig. II.21: Musidora wittily challenging the concept of photogénie. Cinéa, 8 July 1921, 19.
in its timing and placement, may be read as the conclusion of and full stop behind Musidora’s public statements on the topic. Whereas her articles had been frank, pensive, and supportive, this photograph and its caption in her handwriting was bold, witty, and subversive. It shows Musidora seated on a stone bench in a park. She is naked, the picture is taken from a slightly low and left angle and displays her bare legs and arms from the side, while she covers her belly, breasts, and neck with a lamb she holds in her arms. Her chin is just above the lamb’s head, her head leans back, her eyelids are almost closed, yet she glances down into the lens through her eyelashes. A small black dog low in the frame stands with its back to the camera looking at her with the lamb in her arms; two stone lions that form the legs of the bench, face the camera. The handwritten caption reads in English translation: “It is imperative to be ‘photogenic’ from top to toe. After that, it is permitted to have talent. Musidora.”

The photograph undercuts the weightiness of the appraisal implied in photogénie in a number of ways. Through Musidora’s nudity, it visually links photogénie to the tradition académique, and thereby suggests that there is little new under the sun (also literally: the picture was taken in the sun). As she posed in the nude, (she put her feet in a pose that displayed her toes spread out), the picture even seems to say that photogénie is stripping the actress more bare than the culte du maillot did. The dog in the lower frame looks up at her as if to caution: take care!, and the solid stony lions enhance the protectiveness of the animals with their guarding poses. Musidora looks down at the camera through her eyelashes, and thereby acknowledges its presence. She covers her body’s feminine signs with the emblem of virtuousness (the lamb) and thus suggests the camera’s gaze to be impertinent. The knowing smile on her lips indicates that she does not take impertinent gazes for granted. Perhaps it also says that she has experienced the camera to be far less docile than she used to believe, and that what its gaze discovered in was less new than expected. Musidora’s handwritten text, finally, can be read as an ironic overstatement exposing the effacement of talent inherent in the overexposure of beauty and personality in the concept of photogénie. In other words, Musidora wittily and subtly told Delluc and company that she wished to distance herself from the concept as it was applied to her acting and rather to judge her for her talents and skills than for her femininity and looks.

Musidora also subtly countered Delluc’s assessments of Feuillade’s serials as facile and her roles in them as improper to her caliber. Delluc’s remarks in this regard were part of his crusade against the still prolific and successful Gaumont filmmaker, whom he blamed for wasting his and his actors’ talents on “serialised abominations”. Or, rather, as Delluc specified two years later, his crusade against the genre of serial films, which he admitted not to under-
stand at all and considered formulaic products and insults against the art of film he sought. Delluc was, as I have pointed out, by far not the only critic who deplored the serial vogue on artistic grounds. Musidora countered the critique on serials indirectly but consistently in her texts, through obstinately mentioning LES VAMPIRES and JUDEX for having given her pleasure and fame, while additionally expressing her esteem for Feuillade, as with these lines concluding her notes on LA VAGABONDE:

Before finishing, I’d like to thank Mr. Feuillade, whose tremendous fantasy has created LES VAMPIRES. It was so much fun working with him, that I cannot forget the man to whom I owe, a bit, what I am. Musidora.

On another occasion, she hinted at her understanding of differences in the reception of the series by different audiences: “And I will always be grateful to Mr. Feuillade for having entrusted to me an Irma Vep who has made me famous in the world of the ‘suburban street urchins’ and even beyond.” In a 1921 interview, she called Feuillade “my great friend [...], because thanks to him I could leave (Gaumont) without being troubled by all my crimes.” In other words, thanks to Feuillade’s fantasy, Irma Vep’s and Diana Monti’s criminal acts were not to be taken seriously. Also, in later years, Musidora would not forget to pay tribute to the filmmaker. Against the background of the repeated calls upon Feuillade to turn to something more elevated than crime series, Musidora’s recurrent tributes can be read as not only expressions of gratitude and loyalty to the filmmaker who had offered her the status of a film star, but also as subtle acts of revolt against the denigration of the genre.

MUSIDORA WRITING, DIRECTING, ACTING AND PRODUCING FILMS 1919-1924

In December 1919, Filma casually stated in its section “On dit que...” (Rumor has it that...): “Musidora has founded a production company of which she will be at once the author, the director and the star actress.” It is the only reference to the establishment of Film Musidora, or Les Films Musidora, as the company would be indicated in advertisements, that I have come across in the film periodicals that I have scrutinized. Musidora herself, apparently, had not made public the establishment of her own film production company, although it must have been incorporated several months earlier, before the shooting of VICENTA, which, according to Lacassin, had taken place in August and September of 1919. As noted above, however, Musidora claimed the scenario and direction credits for the film in the publicity and the distributor, Union-Éclair, advertized it accordingly.
Comoedia Illustré published in February 1920 a personal statement from Musidora on her concerns with the scenario and the film. The term *photogénie* does not occur in it, not even with regard to the beauty of the scenery surrounding the location, an attractive chateau “dusty with legend” that was situated in the Basque Pyrenees, where the story was largely set and the film was shot. Musidora nonetheless mentioned a masquerade party, for which she had obtained eighteenth-century Venetian costumes and white masks. While the on-location shooting, the choice of extant settings and the attention to details of costume and luxury in the mise-en-scène invoked ideals of photogenic cinema, these ideals do not resonate in Musidora’s discussion of the acting, the story, or the female protagonist.

In the article, Musidora does not talk about her own acting, but articulates praise for her co-actors: Jean Guitry for creating a multifaceted character that is “at once prodigious, oblique and friendly” and Ginette Chrysias for acting her American character “with so much truth that, when she says ‘oui’ on the screen, you’ll be convinced that she said ‘yes’.” If Musidora—the-director expected a degree of “truth” from her actors, she emphasized that this was achieved in the acting: “Guitry has some very specific gestures that delight me and that will make an entire personality.” In other words, she emphasized the work the actors’ had to do, instead of its effacement before the camera.

I am surprised to notice, that Musidora, in the role that she has constructed for herself, only modestly has employed herself. Musidora the director does not favor Musidora the artiste. More than that, she sacrifices herself. I would reproach her, for instance, for not bringing out the photogenic qualities of the pretty woman she is.

The evaluation is interesting, because if Musidora indeed sacrificed her photogenic qualities, she may have been prompted to it by something other than modesty. That is to say, perhaps she had been searching for alternatives for the disregard for her acting talents that the concept of *photogénie* seemed to entail for her, as my interpretation reads of the picture discussed above (which, moreover, was published between the release of *Vicenta* and Musidora’s next production). Colette, in a letter to Musidora after having watched her in Hugon’s *Johannès, fils de Johannès*, intimated already that capturing prettiness and using talent were not the same thing:
You have a range of incomparable faces, in close-up, those in the circus in particular. Your features are beautiful, your expressions are subtle and focussed. One cannot do better. The film itself, in which you are very good (even though no one has considered to infer from you and from the character you enact only a quarter of the necessary effect), has a ridiculous ending, entre nous. [...] You are also very pretty in the little episode of the “sergeant” with the billet. That’s about all I can say. But it seems to me—which may be pure pride on my part—while knowing you as I do and well aware of the assets of your face and your gesture, it seems to me that, just through simple advices, through fully unselfish observations, I would contribute, when the occasion arises, to a maximum effect which no one so far has inferred from you...

Rather than modesty, the search for this maximum effect, even if it failed, may have been Musidora’s very motivation in abstaining from highlighting her prettiness in VINCENTA.

VINCENTA told a romantic adventure story with a female protagonist. Although Musidora called her heroine courageous, she also depicted her as a contradictory character:

Vicenta is kind of a heroine. She loves only pleasure. She prefers the modern civilisation of our grand Paris over the healthy security of the Basque country. [...] But the day on which our way of understanding life will crush her heart, she will ask her Basque Country the simple act of devotion, namely revenge.

According to the brief plot summary offered by Lacassin, the heroine asks the lover from her youth in Basque Country to kill the prince who, in the dangerous Paris, has seduced her but has rejected her for a rich American woman. No print of the film is known to survive, and I have not come across a more elaborate synopsis of the story, so it is difficult to know how the character dealt with the dilemmas with which Musidora-the-scenarist confronted her. The lack of print and documentation is all the more regrettable, because the contradictions involved sound quite intriguing: modern (urban) mores versus traditional (provincial) protection, (masculine) opportunism versus self-sacrifice, a woman’s thirst for pleasure versus her call for revenge once that pleasure turns against her. In addition, the film was made after one of the few original scenarios by Musidora and the character of Vicenta was less obviously modelled on herself than the protagonist of the other original scenario she filmed, LA TERRE DES TAUREAUX (The Land of the Bulls), which I shall discuss later. Nonetheless, story and characters seem to have mattered to Musidora.
In *Le Film*, Musidora depicted Vicenta as one of her “méchante femme” (bad women) figures, in which she included the Feuillade serials as well as *la flamme cachée*:

For that reason, Colette has written *la flamme cachée*, in which I do not have the most pleasant attitude. For that reason, in my next film *Vicenta* I exploit a poor man in love and committed to the point of self-abnegation, in order to dispose of the man who failed to keep his word.\(^{322}\)

The question is to what extent the contradictory nature of the character of Vicenta can be reduced to “badness”. Irma Vep’s scheming and killing indeed emanates from sheer viciousness, but even if Annie Morin, the protagonist of *la flamme cachée*, seems to act out of cool calculation, she seems driven by an understandable self-righteousness.\(^ {323}\) Musidora’s protagonist seems to have been provided with an emotional justification for her mean actions: her broken heart. The fact that, as Lacassin has noted, in the contemporary press the badness of character was not subjected to moral judgment, may also
point to such a motivation. That is to say, as far as the film was reviewed at all. If, as Musidora suggested, her protagonist had something in common with Colette’s, it seems non-conformist self-righteousness rather than plain viciousness.

On the basis of the scarce documentation on VICTENTA, it is my assumption that Musidora as a producer-director aspired to integrate some of the ideals of photogenic cinema, most notably, those of mise-en-scène, and the role of the camera, with a popular story and its subject matter of adventure and romance, and a non-conformist female protagonist. However tentative this conclusion may be, it can be further substantiated with what Musidora said about and did in her next film, POUR DON CARLOS (For Don Carlos).

POUR DON CARLOS (1921)

In the spring of 1919, during the preparations for shooting VICTENTA, Musidora secured from the best-selling writer Pierre Benoit the film rights of the novel he was currently writing. She was well aware that Benoit’s award-winning novel published that year, L’Atlantide, was being adapted to the screen by one of her former directors at Gaumont, Jacques Feyder, although the film’s phenomenal and exceptional box-office success were yet to come. Benoit was writing his third “roman d’amour et d’aventures géographiques” (romance and geographical adventure novel), Pour Don Carlos. The genre, setting, and heroine of the novel were so similar to those of the scenario that Musidora had previously fashioned for herself, that it seemed to have been written for her. One similarity concerns the geographical setting, the Basque Pyrenees region; another, the protagonist of the adventurous woman, or, in Musidora’s “bad woman” characterization:

And I definitely promise you that Allégria will kill at least one person and will let suffer quite a few others. [...] With a keen eye, I will continue scheming atrocious plots, in which I determine the hour of the rendezvous, the method of attacking, the kind of death and... of course I will reserve for myself the right to escape.

Like Colette’s Annie Morin and Musidora’s own Vicenta, Benoit’s Allégria was rather non-conformist than plainly vicious. A fantasy figure all the same, her scheming and killing was justified by a historical cause: the 1873-1876 guerrilla in favor of the claimant to the Spanish throne, Carlos de Bourbon-Molina. The fictional character of Allégria Detchart was a Carlist commander, whose non-conformist actions were motivated by the struggle against the French and...
Spanish armies, and by love. The contemporary press classified the character as a “peculiar type” and a heroine with “a quite passionate temperament and [...] not the model of all virtues.” Despite the ambivalence resonating in these assessments, Allégria was considered a gripping character because of her devotion and her peculiarity.

Reviewers critical of Benoit’s writing blamed the novel for historical inaccuracies and improbabilities in character constructions. This criticism is reminiscent of the improbabilities and machinations for which Feuillade’s serials were reproached. Thirty years later, the Belgian poet, novelist, and literary and film scholar, Johan Daisne, drew attention to the generic connection between the work of Benoit and that of Feuillade. In his eulogy on JUDEX, Daisne put Feuillade’s serial on one line with Benoit’s novels and pointed out that their adventure plots offered a realist diegetic universe, yet appealed to fantasy in terms of events and characters. To render plausible the improbabilities in the plots, Daisne argued, writers of adventure stories had to be masters of narration and of imagination. It seems to me that Musidora recognized that quality in Benoit’s work as she had done in Feuillade’s serials.

Critics favorable of Benoit’s book praised it for its truthfulness in particular:

That task [of bringing Don Carlos back to the throne], which has been treated by the novel with high impartiality and which was inspired by the cult of truthfulness, at times reaches a powerful lyricism, the magnificent result of a thorough study, of documentation and historical discovery. The works of Pierre Benoit possess, in addition to various other merits, that of documentary sincerity, which is a prelude for literary sincerity, and both are illuminated by the eternal truth which revives and enlightens the pure conscience of the novelist.

From what Musidora has told about the shooting of POUR DON CARLOS, it seems that she and Benoit fully agreed on the indispensability of truthfulness of the images and plausibility of the diegetic universe. As an extra guarantee, Benoit insisted on the involvement of someone familiar with the Carlist movement and the Basque Country, for which he appointed the same person who had provided him with the necessary documentation for the story, Don Carlos’ own son, Jaime de Bourbon, also known as de Lasuen, who, for the film’s credits, took on the nom de plume Jacques Lasseyne. Proudly, Musidora declared:

POUR DON CARLOS will be a bit like L’ARLÉSIENNE (The Woman from Arles), Don Carlos will not be visible on screen, or barely, but there will
be the splendid and unknown Carlist country, the wild Jaizkibel. That entire, essentially peasant war in the middle of the huge mountains and the small farms, with the most docile, the most sincere and the most poignant extras; extras who are still unaware of the cinema, and who pass by in an “exodus” from the village with the same donkey as in 1875. A touching old woman, aided by a kid, had prepared her cart on her own. She remembers the war so well. Nothing was missing, not the old Basque chest, not the cat in the cage, not the donkey, not the peppers and the onions hidden in the folded mattresses.335

It is significant that Musidora invokes as her model not L’ATLANTIDE, but L’ARLÉSIENNE, a film made by theater and film director André Antoine, who was known for having introduced amateur actors and naturalist aesthetics to the stage. Between 1915 and 1921, Antoine directed eight films336 in which he translated to film his ideas on how to create realism, thereby emphasizing the differences between the techniques involved in the two modes of representation.337 He shared with the champions of photogénie the pursuit of a self-evident and self-effacing style of cinematic representation, but had different views on how to achieve it. Not all of Antoine’s ideas, but some of them seem to have inspired Musidora’s approach to the direction and shooting of POUR DON CARLOS.

For instance, Antoine not only advocated the use of extant locations for sets, but also the inclusion of local inhabitants for small roles.338 This principle resonates in Musidora’s inclusion of locals as extras. Also, Antoine insisted on the employment of stage actors for the main parts, among whom, in L’ARLÉSIENNE, a nude dancer from the Casino de Paris, Marthe Fabris.339 Musidora likewise assigned stage actors to the cast of POUR DON CARLOS, including Lucien Guitry and Abel Tarride. Following Antoine’s admonishment to employ multiple camera sets in order to film actors and occurrences in their aspects unawares, Musidora also hired two cinematographers, Frank Daniau-Johnston and Crouan.340

One of the main differences between Delluc and Antoine concerned the importance of subject matter.341 Antoine did not prefer original scenarios, but, in seven out of his eight films, chose nineteenth-century realist or naturalist fiction, such as, for L’ARLÉSIENNE, the novel by Alphonse Daudet, which, like Benoit’s, mixed naturalism with fantasy.342 This choice earned him the reprimand from Delluc that the plots were too convoluted and too romantic compared with the pictorial quality he brought to his films.343 However, such stories, according to Abel’s paraphrasing of Antoine, “would allow the narrative cinema to represent life ‘as it really was,’ to hold up a window or mirror for the spectator.”344 The idea to represent “life as it really was” echoes Benoit’s
“historical” approach and Musidora’s care for the accuracy and authenticity of extras and props. The idea of opening a window for the spectator, moreover, reverberates in a rhetorical question with which Musidora concludes her account of how she shot POUR DON CARLOS: “Nonetheless, is it not an advantage, for each country, to inform the entire world of the marvels of its architecture and its landscapes?”345 This question additionally invokes the final rapport that links Musidora’s films to Antoine’s views: the role of regions and landscapes. Like POUR DON CARLOS, L’ARLÉSIENNE was set in one of the southern regions of France, the Camargue.346 POUR DON CARLOS is also akin to L’ARLÉSIENNE in the way in which the camera approaches the landscapes, although Antoine’s film much more graphically and extensively depicts daily life in a rural area. With a few exceptions, action and dialogue take place in the open air and the film abounds with scenic shots and scenes with domestic animals such as sheep, goats, horses, bulls, and chicken. These shots add to the fatalism of the romance a flavor of inevitability: it has always been like this and will always be like this. In Musidora’s film, the landscape, animals, and locals are likewise framed, lighted, and graphically organized in such a way that they convey atmosphere: “The dead horses, the pools of blood, the blue flies will contribute their own bits of emotion and will be playing along with the groups of houses in fire and with all the great actors.”347 Although it is difficult to say from the documentation available if these effects were the work of Musidora herself, her cameramen Frank Daniau-Johnston and Crouan, or even Jacques Lasseyne, they seem nonetheless to have met with her directorial aspirations with this film.

If this was the conceptual background chosen by Musidora, Delluc’s opinion on POUR DON CARLOS does not come as a surprise:

Pierre Benoit’s novel accumulates so many themes, characters and dramatic or adventurous themes, that the director, in order not to let anything escape, first had to construct a film of exaggerated proportions. Intelligent revisions have lightened and improved this profuse film and made it more common and accessible. Not everything in it is convincing. But some passages are of a remarkable photogénie. The feeling of the camera for the landscape is particularly striking. Which is rarer than you may think. Musidora has been able to adapt to her qualities an eminent role that the novelist, doubtlessly on purpose, had left somewhat vague. She expresses in it a sense of simplicity, which we appreciate, and her death, which is modest and balanced, is a beautiful page on which we can hear the sigh of the sea.348
Because of the conceit in Delluc’s tone, one wonders if he himself had been involved in the “intelligent revisions” that had simplified the film’s plot and shortened the print with one-fifth of its, probably, original 2400 metres. At any rate, André de Reusse of *Hebdo-Film* also considered the new cut an improvement.

For this book, I viewed on the editing table a print of *Pour Don Carlos* that was missing 551 of the 2000 meters of which were most likely released. It lacked opening credits, several titles, and, probably, some shots explaining transitions in space and time between sequences and occasionally shots within them. I have also read an undated typescript of a synopsis with a selection of intertitle texts translated into German, of which, however, it is not clear if it summarizes the initial cut or the shortened one. A comparison of print and synopsis fosters the assumption that the print is missing entire scenes as well, while the order of sequences at times seems to have been mixed or broken. Scenes missing are, for instance, those in which De Preneste avows his enamored feelings for Allégria and his wavering between her and his fiancée to which both the synopsis and some of the reviews refer; the print only contains scenes with De Preneste doubting his fitness for the job and scenes with Allégria trying to control and conceal her desire for him. Also, the synopsis suggests a structuring of the plot in a prologue and eight parts, but, in the print, this structure has not been lived up to or was eradicated at one time or another. According to Musidora, moreover, the opening image of the film, a painting, was accompanied by intertitles representing five stanzas of a song written by Benoit and recounting the history of Allégria Detchart’s commitment to the Carlist cause. These titles were missing from the print, but their placement in the film’s opening explains how it was possible to cut that story from the scene in which Allégria tells her history to someone else in the diegesis. In this scene, we see them sit and talk, and Allégria’s conclusion is that she has told everything, that her father was a Carlist and that she grew up among the soldiers. In my viewing experience, the state of the print hampered narrative intelligibility, but it seems safe to blame the problem on the lost meters, because none of the reviews published in 1921 criticized the film for that reason; quite the contrary: notes of disapproval expressed concern that it was still a little too long. But because, as I have argued, story and character mattered to Musidora, I will offer a concise, yet inevitably tentative, plot summary of *Pour Don Carlos*.

Allégria Detchart is a commander in the Carlist guerrilla against the army of the Spanish government. The year is 1876, and the Carlists control part of northern Spain. Their struggle is supported by the inhabitants of the area, who adore Allégria as much as her comrades do. This is all unknown to Olivier de Préneste, a young duke from Biarritz, who is about to marry Lucille
de Mercoeur and accept the vacant post of sub-prefect in the Basque town of Villeléon. After his arrival, strange things happen until he finds out that his position has been seized by someone else. This person appears to be Allégria Detchart, who, from their first encounter onwards, shows Olivier that he is in her power and who pushes him to join the Carlists. To achieve this, she first convinces Olivier that he will be unable to cope with his task of fighting the Carlists because of the support they enjoy from the locals, and, second, she befriends and wins over Lucille. Olivier, however, not only gives in, but also begins to fall in love with Allégria. Allégria has the same feelings for him, but she hides them for the sake of Lucille.

Then the situation changes. The Carlists begin to lose ground against the Spanish army and the people flee from the town. Several of the Carlists are killed in the battles, and Olivier and the faithful Magnoac are arrested by the royalist French, delivered to the Spanish army, and await their execution. Allégria, who used to visit the battlefields in the company of Lucille, orders...
the young woman to leave and find a safer place. Incognito, Allégria crosses the Spanish border in search for Olivier and Magnoac. At the police station, she is recognized, but nonetheless follows up on her plan to free Olivier. She blackmails an officer and seduces and kills the general after having secured his signature for the release of Olivier.

Allégria and Olivier have fled to a mountaintop and hear the shot with which Magnoac is executed. Exhausted and wounded, they arrive at the house of the old shepherd and loyal, Carlist Pedro, where he and his granddaughter, Conchita, were visited by Don Carlos just two days before. When they learn that there is a price on the fugitives’ heads, Allégria orders Pedro to help Olivier escape to Biarritz, where Lucille waits for him. Allégria herself hides in an old pirate castle near the shore and is taken care of by Conchita, but Conchita is followed by a traitor who informs the police. When the police turn up at Allégria’s hide-out, Conchita manages to escape, and Allégria shoots the traitor. The police kill Allégria and, while Olivier and Lucille are reunited in Biarritz and trustfully wait for news from Spain, Pedro and Conchita quietly bury Allégria on a ridge by the sea.

Musidora herself repeated one point on which her adaptation deviated from Benoit’s novel, the ending, which she had changed with the writer’s consent. In the book, Olivier was not reunited with Lucille in Biarritz, nor did Allégria die in Spain, but the women sailed off in a boat to a new destiny:

Olivier de Prénéste watching his fiancée Lucille de Mercoeur depart in a close embrace with Allégria Detchart... I have preferred to let Allégria die for the cause of Don Carlos, which in my opinion was more simple, easier to understand.354

In the interview for Radio Suisse Romande, Musidora called the ending she had chosen “less Parisian”.355 The expression implies that the two women embracing would have had a socialite and romantic, probably even libertine connotation, also given the narrative motif that they, in the book as in the film, were in love with one and the same man. I find Musidora’s reasoning somewhat peculiar, especially given the fantasy character and the popularity of Benoit’s work, and given the fact that a subtext of romantically afflicted women’s bonding was a recurrent plot device in the author’s novels.356 Neither Daisne nor Thévénot clarify what Musidora had meant exactly. (And in case they did ask her, her answer remains off-the-record.) Contemporary reviews, moreover, do not include objections against the novel’s ending. One of the reviews of the film, however, hints at what may have been a more plausible reason for the change:
The melancholic, bitter ending which is one of the best parts of the book, disappears to be replaced by an ordinary and melodramatic conclusion, of which the final tableau—the burying—reminds one, too much, of the ultimate scenes of L’ATLANTIDE.\textsuperscript{357}

The comparison lends support to the assumption that Musidora wanted a death scene for herself, as Marie-Louise Iribe had performed, to the highest acclaim, in L’ATLANTIDE. In a letter to Benoit, Musidora graphically recounted how she had created, acted, and directed her interment:

It was a grave like any other, ordinary, simple and moving! A wooden cross. A spade, a rifle, wild flowers. That was all. The shepherd put me down in the cold earth. All of us were moved. I heard the sound of the waves and held my breath. As soon as the cameras had been adjusted, I inhaled a big breath of air while the old shepherd, trembling, began to throw his heaps of ground on me. The ground was heavy, and cold on my imprisoned legs, on my entire stiffened body, of which only the head protruded. And this time, the cameras had to move closer, because I had wanted my face to be covered as my body, so that the impression of getting buried would be genuine. I took another deep breath, and searched for total immobility. And I gave myself the sign: “Action...”. The first scoop of ground fell on my chin and cheeks... The second covered my eyes. The third left only the tip of my nose free. The ultimate, heavy and definitive one had forever hidden my face. It was about time! All of this had lasted barely twenty-five seconds, but I suffocated; my mouth ate crunching earth, my ears were stuffed with mud, I kept my eyelashes closed out of fear to fill my eyes with scratching grains of sand. And it was with the word “Damn!...” that I regained my friends, the air, the sun, warmth and life.\textsuperscript{358}

Simplicity, immobility and truthfulness were the keywords of Musidora’s approach, and they resonate in the appraisal from critics that she earned for the death and burial scenes:

her death, which she has brought on to herself when defending herself against the soldiers charged with capturing her; her immediate and unceremonious burial by a Carlist shepherd luckily are more interesting than the rest. Mrs. Musidora has acted the final scene very well—which is difficult.\textsuperscript{359}
Boisyvan, in *L’Intransigeant*, was likewise impressed: “This death has provided us with a moment of dramatic expression which makes Musidora into a very grand artiste. It only lasts for a few metres, but it is unforgettable.” In a letter to her friend, Colette voiced her approval as well:

> In the film, you are utterly remarkable. The final part, which is yours, is truly faultless, irreproachable where you are concerned. Austerity, expression, you have it all in there. The part with you in amazon attire is excellent, nothing equals a faithful reconstitution of costume. [...] and did you hear the spontaneity with which your death was applauded? The fading of your eye, the immediate collapse, it matches Hayakawa.

Colette could not have expressed her opinion in more flattering terms. For all the attention the death and burial scenes were given, then, my assumption reads that Musidora was eager to demonstrate that she could infer the maximum effect from her dramatic acting and that this ending served that aim better than Benoit’s.

For my discussion of the part of Allégria, and how Musidora shaped and acted the character, I shall select four sequences with a different appearance of the character in each. In the first, she is cross-dressed as the sub-prefect while overpowering De Prénéste. In the second, she is in Amazon attire and inspecting the battlefields in the company of Lucille. In the third sequence, we see her in tatters seducing an anti-Carlist general; and, in the fourth, she is, in rustic dress, being shot and buried. I will probe each sequence to the extent to which it lends substance to my observation that Musidora, even if she adopted the requirements of photogenic acting for the burial scene, also gave the character of Allégria an ambiguity and created a complicity with viewers that referred to the act of acting.

The opening sequences of the surviving print present the character of Olivier de Prénéste and his perception of diegetic events. The point made in the scenes is that he finds himself in a new situation and that strange things happen: he cannot trust his perception. The trustworthiness of his perception is further put to doubt in his first encounter with Allégria. This doubt concerns two aspects: the sex and the power of the person in front of him. In order to feed that doubt, Musidora renders the dress and demeanor of Allégria incongruous. She is cross-dressed in a pair of trousers and a classy frock with a front richly embroidered in Spanish style, silver on black, but her hairdo and make-up are more ambiguous in terms of gender. She is introduced by a title card “Un étrange sous-prefect” (A strange sub-prefect) that had no relation to a diegetic character, but belonged to an implied narrator who spoke to viewers, yet with a wink. De Prénéste’s response—he believes that he sees “une amu-
sante mystification” (an amusing make-believe)—pulls her appearance into a sphere of staging, as if it concerned an act of costuming and play-acting, but her facial expression and gestures counter the play-acting invoked by the costume. While clarifying to De Préneste that he is at her mercy, Allégria’s facial expression remains stern and unmoved, her posture straight and authoritative, and she holds her arms crossed in front of her chest. At the moment that he begins to understand and to succumb to her will, she slams the desk with her hand. This is not play-acting, but a clear-cut display of power.

The location is the sub-prefect’s office. Allégria stands behind and beside a wooden desk and De Préneste sits opposite her. Another character present in the room is Maypur, a local and a Carlist, who has let in De Préneste, but, instead of welcoming him as his new superior, has neglected him and locked him up in the reception room. Maypur (dressed in striped trousers and with a kerchief on the head, which, given the attention to details of costume, was probably Basque clothing) stands in a corner, watching the interaction, and, after a while, demonstrates his loyalty to Allégria by firing at a bust representing the Spanish authorities. The grit falls on her frock, and she dusts it down with a superior gesture. In the entire sequence, then, Musidora’s costume communicates that Allégria acting, but Musidora’s acting conveys that she is in character. The implicit reference to popular stage cross-dressing extends the incongruousness between appearance and performance beyond Olivier’s perception in the diegesis. While the ambiguity is solved within the diegesis, it lingers on in the perception of viewers.

Allégria’s amazon appearances suggest an ambiguity as well, but of a different sort. By the time that we see her in this attire, we know that she has made friends with Lucille, Olivier’s sweetheart, and that Lucille is unconditionally devoted to the Carlist cause. But the Carlist guerrilla is waning and the loyal locals are fleeing. In Lucille’s company, Allégria watches the exodus of the locals with contentment and a sense of triumph, as if she considers it her achievement, instead of showing empathy with the people. Both women ride horses, and Allégria wears an austere black amazon costume: tight jacket with stitched loops over a long skirt and a Carlist, or Basque, beret. Both women, moreover, think of Olivier, who is on the battlefield vainly attempting to defend of the positions of the Carlists together with the faithful Magnoac. This is shown in lengthy combat shots edited parallel to the exodus scene. Having reached the battlefield, the women learn from Maypur that there are casualties among the warriors. Maypur admonishes the women to take care and holds Lucille back, but Allégria makes her way to the lines in search of Olivier. In stark contrast to the helpless Lucille, Allégria behaves tough and bossy, one hand on her hip, head straight up, not afraid of anyone, whether low- or high-ranked. But she does not find Olivier, for whom she searches.
In a narratively somewhat bizarre scene, Allégria is knocked out by one of the men on the battlefield. After Allégria has regained her composure, she summons Lucille to leave, because, as she tells her, her role is over. In these sequences, the character of Allégria wavers between, on the one hand, friendliness and indomitability, and, on the other, unscrupulous superiority over others, including Lucille and the locals. The contrast with the credulous and docile Lucille further bolsters Allégria’s unscrupulousness. Musidora acts this ambiguity and contrast without batting an eyelid, that is to say, playing both aspects as if completely self-evident and integral to each other. Instead of being solved within the diegesis, this ambiguity in Allégria’s character is to a certain extent sustained in consecutive scenes.

Allégria’s appearances in rags occur in a new situation. The Carlist battle is practically lost. Both De Prénéste and Magnoac are held prisoner by the Spanish police, but Allégria does not know where exactly. She is disguised as a beggar and—dressed in rags and with tousled, fuzzy hair—, roams the countryside searching for them. In a village, the women put her to work because they do not like beggars. After a while, they nonetheless help her to get to the police station, where she is unmasked by a commander straightaway. Wide-eyed underneath her bushy hair, she looks contrite; she straightens up, looks at the commander, and asks how his son is doing. He answers that he does not know; she tells him that he is in the Carlists’ hands and shows him his son’s army badge for evidence that she is not bluffing. The commander sighs and asks her what she wants. She replies that she wants to see the general to set free the French hostages. He tells her, “impossible”, because the French will be executed at four o’clock the next morning. In the medium close-up of Allégria’s face in response to this announcement, Musidora employs three different facial expressions. First, she tilts her head and looks aside in fright and fear; next, with her head still slightly to the side, her eyes roll towards the commander and her lips curl in a knowing smile, connoting Allégria’s scheming; then, looking straight ahead with a winning and sly glance, Allégria informs the man that his refusal will not do any good to his son. Cut to the commander, sighing again. Cut back to Allégria, same position and framing as before, but now looking to the side in Musidora’s trademark sidelong glance. Within the diegesis, it signifies that Allégria has been only pretending contriteness, while all the time scheming and thinking of what to do next.

In the following scene, Allégria obtains from the general the ticket to Olivier’s freedom. The price for it, however, she offers point-blank and on her own accord. In exchange for his signature, she offers him her body. She lets the man know through baring one shoulder. In rags and with bushy hair, Musidora makes Allégria look gorgeously seductive and savage; she does not act provocatively or vulgarly, but she is inviting and beguiling. In my opinion,
this has a twofold function: one within and one beyond the diegesis. Within the diegesis, it motivates her desirability for the general, who cannot resist the offer. Beyond, it seems to evince that Musidora does not rely on the photogenic qualities of her body and face: narratively, as unsympathetic as possible, and dressed and made up as unbecoming as possible, she employs her acting skills to appear beautiful, even in rags, and beguiling without becoming tasteless.

Although Allégria is in the asking position within the diegesis, she is in charge throughout the scene. She communicates her command over the situation with her eyes, through looking to the side, while pretending willingness to the general. It is as if Allégria keeps reminding viewers that she is not doing things simply because she is vicious, but because she has a purpose and a scheme. Nonetheless, she plays the game she has initiated. When the moment arrives, she moves backwards towards the bed, while the general faces and follows her. Her facial expression is seductive, his is excited and leering. She holds his hand and pulls him as if on a string in a harmoniously choreographed movement. While she lays on her back in the cushions, he turns away to undress. At that moment, she scrunches her face, she moves her hand to her forehead, signifying potential worry to the viewers. With one shoulder bared she continues to exhibit her beauty. Then follows a medium close-up of the leering face of the general approaching her again and a medium close-up of her with an expression between hope and fear, with wide eyes conveying willingness and anguish at the same time. The synopsis contains a caption, “Holophernes”, an intertextual reference to the biblical story of Judith and Holofernes, which reads that Judith seduces the enemy general and kills him to save the city of Bethulia. Reviewers, too, mentioned the story and other viewers familiar with it probably understood right away why Allégria was wavering between hope and fear and how the encounter with the general would end. Musidora’s way of acting the scene seems to indirectly address that knowledge among spectators.

From this sequence, the print cuts to a title card reading “Ceux qui veillent” (Those waking), which is followed by a shot of De Préneste and fellow prisoners in a dungeon. Another title card reads “Ceux qui dorment” (Those sleeping) and is followed by, a shot of a dozing guard, and one of Allégria on the desk of the general with her head on her arms. She awakes with a jolt and says “Mon Dieu, j’ai dormi” (My God, I’ve slept). She seems alone in the room, so she tells herself, or us, or both, what she has been doing. Next, she looks around, takes the note of the general, rings the hand-bell, and, only then, we get to see a shot disclosing what has happened: a long shot shows the bed with the canopy closed and a limp hand protruding from it, dangling above a pool of blood. Like Judith, Allégria has killed the enemy general. The sequence earned praise in contemporary press for its intensity:
we understand that from the moment that the piece of paper is in her possession, the other will not live much longer. And the drama unfolds in a flash. It is one of the most moving scenes of the film. Simple, dense, bold, the effect is perfectly achieved by the very austerity of the means and the acting.365

In the death and burial scenes, Allégria is gunned down in front of a brick wall, which allows Musidora to drop down slowly, her legs crossed, arms wide, and with an expression of agony on her face. Leaning against the wall, she remains seated so that the camera views her frontally. As Colette and others have observed, she acts fully photogenic in this scene: with austerity, expression, and intensity. Within the diegesis, her death comes suddenly, although, in the preceding scenes, she is often shown alone in a deeply melancholic mood. This mood, however, seems to stem from the renouncement of her love for Olivier and her unfulfilled wish to reunite him with Lucille. This is most notably suggested by the parallel editing with scenes set in Biarritz, of Olivier and Lucille hoping for news from her. Allégria has indeed written them a fare-
well letter and the moment that it is handed over to them is the very moment that she is shot. After that, the policemen approach her dead body, push it a little to see if she has indeed died, and prop it on its side. The policemen handle her body like an object, and Musidora acts truthfully limp. After a cutback to Biarritz, with Lucille and Olivier enjoying one another’s company, we see Pedro and Conchita digging the grave, putting the body in it, and filling it with flowers and dirt. The close shot showing the face being covered with earth, unfortunately, is missing from the surviving print. The final shot, a high angle extreme long shot, shows Pedro and Conchita as tiny figures kneeling beside the freshly dug grave on top of a cliff by the sea that splashes far below them.

These scenes match and translate into images conveying the change Allégria has undergone and the turn the story has taken. From an ambiguous, at once passionate and unscrupulous character that schemes for a cause, to a mundane woman in love that schemes and kills for loyalty and love. If this change “normalizes” her initial non-conformity, it also leaves her empty-handed and lonesome. The closing scenes accentuate precisely the loneliness and ordinariness and therewith render her a woman that is a victim of love. On the other hand, these images do replace the perspective with which the film opens and the novel ends, that is to say, that of the male protagonist. They replace it with the perspective of the female character, whatever one may think of her.

To round off this discussion of Musidora’s acting in POUR DON CARLOS, I shall quote two contemporary and contrary assessments of it. A favorable one reads:

But the pivotal role, Allégria’s, if I may say so, the pillar of everything, is played by Musidora, who has moulded it into a truly personal and poignant creation. Very elaborated, detailed till the bottom of her soul, her character has been shaped with the mastery, the authority which the public likes. Musidora is a versatile artiste who no role can deter. To every one of them, she contributes her talent and her artistic conception, and the role of Allégria is definitely one of those in which she can give free rein to her artistic temperament.366

A more critical note highlights the acting:

She knows how to be poignant, tragic even; she will be more still when she has become entirely self-confident, she will be able to abandon herself and adapt to the movement of the drama, and no longer create the impression that she is watching herself play.367
Rather than lack of self-confidence, I would argue, the issue seems to have been Musidora’s artistic conception of the role of Allégria and the change she undergoes. As I have illustrated with my discussion of the four appearances, Musidora’s acting initially involved references to the act of acting and an indirect address to spectators, as in her comic and adventure roles. In the subsequent dramatic scenes, she omitted the references to acting and complied with the effacing of the act of acting required by photogenic acting. That was, it seems to me, what the critic expected her to do throughout, and therewith bid farewell to her adventurous roles of the 1910s, both in terms of character and of acting style.

SOLEIL ET OMBRE (1922)

With her next feature film, SOLEIL ET OMBRE (Sun and Shadow), Musidora continued on the chosen path.\(^{68}\) The story’s setting in Andalusia called for shooting on location and on extant sites. It fit in with what Abel has categorized as “Spanish films”, a French film genre that enjoyed a brief vogue in the early 1920s and in which Abel included POUR DON CARLOS.\(^{69}\) Other than Musidora herself in dual roles, only one other professional actor was cast in the film, Paul Vermoyal. Locals play themselves as extras, and the Cordoban bull breeder and rejoneador (torero on horseback) Antonio Cañero plays the character of Janara.\(^{370}\) The degree of authenticity of most notably the bullfighting scenes may be attested to by the fact that this and Musidora’s subsequent film featuring Cañero are now considered historical documents about Spain’s first rejoneador, which allow historians of bullfighting to discern his style and skill.\(^{371}\) Directed and shot by the same crew as POUR DON CARLOS, moreover, SOLEIL ET OMBRE has a similar graphic quality in the images of objects and sites that conveys atmosphere and moods. The film’s black and white exteriors are highly pictographic and make the most of the harsh contrasts between sun and shadow as well as of the local architectural features and landscape. Objects speak for themselves; for instance, the Spanish scarf that the Andalusian girl, Juana, wears or throws away, or the fan that she holds above her eyes to shield them from the sun, which underscores the dark expression in her face. A shadow of Juana on the wall behind her pictures her indecision. A shot showing her face behind traditional Andalusian gratings, with her most beautiful makeup but also holding the gratings with her hands while looking down the street, is an evocative representation of her sentiments of being rejected and caged by her love.\(^{372}\)

The plot was based upon a novella, L’Espagnole, by the popular novelist Maria Star.\(^{373}\) It tells an intensely bitter story of love in vain of an Andalusian
Fig. II.25: Juana admiring the scarf Janara has given to her in SOLEIL ET OMBRE. Still.

Fig. II.26: Juana feeling rejected and caged by her love. SOLEIL ET OMBRE. Still.
waitress engaged to a bullfighter, who abandons her for a rich blonde from abroad. Musidora cast herself in both women's parts, therewith implicitly referring to the act of acting. In the role of the Andalusian Juana, Musidora enacts with concentration and sincerity her initial bliss and the pangs of jealousy, grief, lethargy, and other shifts of mood. There are several moments in which she looks into the camera, but these glances remain diegetic: they communicate Juana’s emotions to spectators. The nameless blonde, in contrast, was molded by Musidora into an insensitive and conceited figure, which is how the Andalusian girl may have perceived her, but which also makes the disparity between the two characters rather static. While consistently telling the story from the perspective of Juana, the film’s tone is inescapably fatalistic: death is announced from the beginning and, in the end, the bull kills the torero and the Andalusian girl kills the foreign blonde. Likewise, her friend and protector, the hunchback antiquarian, renounces his love for her. There is one scene towards the end in which he, with his cape and hat—reminiscent of Judex, but, otherwise, is the opposite of a young and handsome hero—, who will get the girl he loves. Nonetheless, he saves Juana by taking her to the nuns. The ambivalence in this resolution, however, does not rupture the conformity that follows from the pervading fatalism. Within Musidora’s professed preference for unruly heroines, this seems the odd one out. Or should we conclude that Juana killing her rival was a pardonable revenge act and that she simply gets away with it? The seven-page program booklet, with a summary of the plot and two stills on every page, tells the story as dryly as the film does, but motivates it by stating that it takes place “in a land very bitter, very rough, where everything has a special value, every action an unknown effect.”

It might well be that Lacassin’s interpretation that soleil et ombre demonstrates “the simplicity of cruelty” comes closest to the film’s point. It certainly explains the gloomy fates of the characters.

The simplicity of cruelty would also explain the fashion in which the practice of bullfighting is depicted in SOLEIL ET OMBRE. While the torero shows off his supremacy by planting one weapon after the other in the bull, the pain, rage, and exhaustion of the animal are being displayed as well. Interesting is the subtle parallel drawn in the editing (by Nini Bonnefoy) between Juana and the animal, which seems to mirror the girl’s sentiments. This analogy is reversed in a shot (also to be found on YouTube) in which Musidora approaches the camera with such a menacing expression on her face that Juana seems to mimic the tortured bull. During the bullfight the blonde is unusually sensitive, looking away because she can’t bear to watch the brutal spectacle. She nonetheless applauds the torero, who has promised his life and that of the bull to her by tossing his cape to her before the fight, which he previously, as is shown in a flashback, had done to Juana. Being publicly thrust aside in this way,
Fig. II.27: Musidora as the foreign blonde in SOLEIL ET OMBRE. Set photo.
Juana observes the torero’s actions in the ring grimly and with a tense face, but refrains from applauding. Later on in the film, there is a scene at the bull farm, in which Juana desperately tries to draw the torero’s attention by challenging a bull with her scarf. Janara succeeds in chasing the animal away from her, but, after she has been run over and is lying on the soil, he does not recognize her or show any consideration for her well-being. He simply returns to the blonde, as indifferent to Juana as to a bull after it has died. At the end of the film, in a scene set in the deserted bull ring, Juana once more acts like a torero by killing her rival with the poisoned lances used to weaken the bull. This is not to say that I read her acting as a torero as an act of transgressing gender boundaries, because Juana kills a woman instead of a bull. Her vengeful murder conforms to the rules of cruelty. Seen this way, the film seems to make the point that love or passion inevitably leads to suffering and death.

In 1924, after having made a second film in which both Cañero and bullfighting are prominently present, Musidora publicly explained her fascination with the controversial type of spectacle: “I have been a ‘torera’ out of love.” Her love concerned, as she explained, the man and, more importantly, the danger and the risk to die involved in the “art” of bullfighting. She had learned to view bullfighting as a heroic and courageous fight against death and as a glorification of life. Although this sounds like an awkwardly romantic view on the cruel tradition, it does shed light on another point of soleil et ombre: the film may have been a study of the connection between love and death.

The connection between love and death must have fascinated Musidora extraordinarily, because it was likewise at the heart of her novel Paroxysmes. De l’Amour à la Mort (Paroxysms. From Love to Death), which was published twelve years after the film was made. The novel has several striking parallels with the film, such as the consistent female perspective, the romance with the famous torero, the rich woman from abroad for whom the torero leaves the protagonist, the cruelties committed in the name of love, and the immeasurable heartache of the woman who is abandoned by the man whom she had hoped would be hers. These parallels or repeated motifs may point to two distinct possibilities: one would be that Musidora took the motifs from Maria Star’s novella and her own film as a framework to further elaborate on and contemplate the topic, or, if the novel indeed was as autobiographical as it presents itself in tone and references, the novella and the film may have addressed Musidora’s curiosity for what might await her if she would really fall in love with an Andalusian man. Curiously, because the film scenario was obviously written before 1922, while the romance with the torero seems to have taken place during a few months in 1924 before it ended with Cañero leaving Musidora for a Russian princess. It may therefore be illuminating to take a look at the differences between Musidora’s film and the novel.
The novel extensively deals with the woman’s mental struggle not to surrender to the fatalism inherent in her love, not to become a man’s slave and pine for him, as well as to regain the zest for life and love without him. In fact, it depicts love between woman and man as an inherently sadomasochistic relationship, literally in these words: “I have met the man of my life, the man I have chosen as a master. He quite liked me as his concubine for a few months, but he refused me as a wife and rejected me as a slave.”

In the novel, the loving woman finds an escape from the rules of cruelty, which she notices everywhere around her in Andalusia. Whether or not this matched Musidora’s experiences in her affair with Cañero is less significant here than that the novel allowed such an escape while the film did not. First, the protagonist of the novel is not the local girl, but a celebrated Parisian dancer, Flora, who, for the first time in her life, loves with her heart. In other words, the central perspective has been shifted from the Andalusian girl in the film to the foreign woman in the novel. The first part of the novel recounts how she leaves behind her Parisian lovers for whom she merely feels lust or tenderness, not love, and how she discovers

Fig. II.28: Juana observing the torero’s actions in the ring in SOLEIL ET OMBRE. Still.
in Spain that making love and loving passionately are different experiences. In the middle of the novel, her struggle with her emotions and her observations of the rules of cruelty is depicted. This is when the local girl appears, and, observing how the torero treats this girl, the Parisian dancer infers the slave-master relationship that awaits her as well. In addition, the cruelties committed in the name of love are now explicitly depicted as specific to Andalusian culture and traditions. Still, in this part, the foreign woman feels ready to accept the rules of cruelty, but her willingness is roughly marred by the man’s rejection of her love and his disappearance. He enters into a relationship with a third woman, another woman from abroad who is, unlike Flora, rich. For a while, Flora stays in Spain performing on-stage while wallowing in heartache to such an extent that she would rather be dead. In the third and final part of the novel, Flora returns to France to bid farewell to her dying mother and to recover from her heartsick depression. In other words, the character of Flora in the novel is much more multilayered than the character of Juana in the film. In addition, the perspective of the outsider character of the Parisian dancer allows for observation and contemplation of Andalusian culture and women’s lives, which, in the film, occur as well, but never acquire the complexity and depth that they reach in the novel. Third, and this may be the most important difference, not jealousy is the drive of the narrative, but heart-searching and thinking about the impossibility of this love. In contrast to the film, the novel suggests that women are able to fight death and to glorify life in ways far less cruel than Andalusian men would demand of them. Nonetheless, looking at the film through the lens of the novel illuminates dimensions of the character of Juana that, in the film, remain under the surface.

Despite its conveyed conformance to the rules of cruelty, SOLEIL ET OMBRE can then be seen as a tale about the clash between traditional and cosmopolitan morals as they affect women’s love relationships, which is a recurring theme in the stories that Musidora chose and which she explored from various perspectives. The fact that Musidora played both characters herself, moreover, has fascinated other scholars as well. Whereas the French critic Jacques Durand conjectures that Musidora would have reserved the dual role for herself out of passion and unwillingness to share Cañero with another woman, even on the screen,\textsuperscript{383} feminist scholars such as Vicki Callahan and María Camí-Vela offer more than biographical readings. Callahan proposes that “Musidora might not be gesturing toward any one definitive commentary on her public/private persona but rather might be demonstrating the multiple possibilities that could exist within any particular identity.”\textsuperscript{384} Callahan relates the aspect of performance in the dual role to the performance of the bullfighter, which Musidora, in the opening titlecard in her subsequent film, characterized “the Art of Gesture”. In Callahan’s analysis, the gesture stands for the
excess of possibilities, as do the performance and the image. Camí-Vela expands this argument with a detailed analysis of a surviving Spanish print of *SOLEIL ET OMBRE*. Departing from the various roles that Musidora performs in and around the film—local/foreign woman, director/actress—Camí-Vela explores the conflicting positions that mark the narrative. Through the, in her words, nearly ethnographic shots of the rural village and its inhabitants, a confrontation with modernity is suggested in the arrival of the foreign blonde, a femme fatale, who is eyed in astonishment and curiosity by the locals. Via the differences in belief—Juana is religious, the foreign blonde is agnostic—she points out the virgin/whore dichotomy that divides the two characters. In this redoubling or dissociation, Camí-Vela goes on to argue, following Callahan, that the dual role defies the fixedness of an identity, while there are also several moments in which the Spanish girl virtually transforms into the foreign woman and vice versa. Such transformations go hand-in-hand with a change of the gaze. While the first regularly looks into the camera and therewith acquires subjectivity, the second is always the object of the gaze. This is how Musidora the director, in Camí-Vela’s analysis, both exposed and subverted the objectification and erotization of the body of Musidora the filmstar in fiction and in life. Camí-Vela’s point is that *SOLEIL ET OMBRE* refuses to resolve these conflicting possibilities and instead proposes an “I” that accommodates ambiguity and contradiction. I do consent that Musidora was interested in and studied conflicting possibilities for herself and for other women, but, in my opinion, she does not expose them in this film but depicts them within conventional boundaries and clichés.

Thus, remains the question, addressed by neither Callahan nor Camí-Vela, as to why Musidora once again did not claim the direction nor the co-direction for this film in French publicity, not even in the publicity booklet mentioned above, even though she was credited for the co-direction in the opening credits of the surviving French print. The publicity booklet and the contemporary press attributed the director’s credit solely to Jacques Lasseyne, whose only fame consisted of the fact that he had also co-directed Musidora’s preceding film. I cannot but conclude that acting still mattered more to Musidora than directing, which may have been her professional reason to cast herself in dual roles. She might have wished to display her versatility and adaptability as an actress. My comparison of the film and the novel points to her thematic interest in these roles, and why, as a producer, she chose the story for her film: Musidora wanted to investigate the rules of cruelty to which a woman in love with a man of Andalusian culture might be subjected. But were these choices understood in the contemporary reception of the film? The few reviews of the film that I have traced attest to the mixed response that *SOLEIL ET OMBRE* met in France. *Cinéa* and *Ciné-Journal* raved about the film’s visual
accomplishedness and narrative clarity, and praised Musidora’s acting in her dual role for being varied and moving.\footnote{388} *Hebdo-Film*, in contrast, reproached the direction for lacking rhythm and Musidora for having taken on the role of the foreign woman. In addition, the French were said not to like the inequality, the slaughter involved in Spanish bullfighting, and that it did not suffice to state in a title that one does or does not love the cruel tradition.\footnote{389} Perhaps this revulsion explains the silence about the film in other periodicals and papers, but it definitely did not discourage Musidora from venturing into a new, yet entirely different project on the same topic.

**LA TERRE DES TAUREAUX (1924)**

Musidora made *LA TERRE DES TAUREAUX* after an original scenario that she wrote. She produced and directed it and played its female protagonist opposite Cañero. It differs from Musidora’s previous productions in several ways. First, it is a satire, not a drama, and second, it was not intended to be presented as a film, but the film parts were meant to be screened along with and between live performances by Musidora and Cañero. It likewise differs in Musidora’s self-presentation: she was not only present on-stage and on-screen as an actress, but also cast herself in the role of filmmaker and signed, as Vicki Callahan has justly pointed out, the production with her name and signature on the title-cards that opened and closed the film.\footnote{390}

The satirized issues concern everything that hitherto had seemed dear to Musidora: her star image in the cinema and on-stage, filmmaking, adventurous women’s roles, bullfighting, and romantic love. For these reasons, and because of the self-irony that pervades both the filmed and the live parts of the performance, I would like to consider *LA TERRE DES TAUREAUX* a self-reflective rather than an autobiographical production, even though Musidora, in the opening title of the film, suggests that autobiography played a role in her conception of the project. It obviously does, but indirectly. Rather than a story about Musidora’s personal or love life, it is a humorous statement about popularity in the silent cinema and a clever, sincere, and playful reflection on a film world and a film press that did not take sufficient notice of her aspirations as a filmmaker and primarily wished to see her in dramatic parts and in closely defined acting styles. What I admire most in *LA TERRE DES TAUREAUX* is that it does not exhibit bitterness at all, but instead comes across as an at once reflective and ironic self-portrait of Musidora as a professional silent film actress and director.

The two Musidora-scholars that so far have discussed *LA TERRE DES TAUREAUX*, treat it in ways that different from one another. Lacassin, basing his
assessment on a scenario, describes it as a film and stage show, of which the filmed parts are a far cry from the norms of commercial cinema because they were made with very limited financial resources and without the support of a professional cast and crew. He distinguishes three elements in the production: documentary parts about bullfighting, a satirical part about the world of spectacle, and a part that he assesses as an autobiographical reverie about Musidora’s romance with Cañero. A reverie because the scenario that Lacassin read ended with the torero proposing marriage, and Musidora, on stage, singing songs about the marriage, while, in reality, Cañero had left her by the time she presented the film in Spain. Vicki Callahan does not consider the staged parts or the satirical and comic aspects, but focuses, in the filmed parts, on the recurrence of the bullfighter’s motif, the ways in which Musidora presented herself as a filmmaker, and the significance of performance. The kinship between bullfighting and film acting that Callahan derives from Musidora’s characterization of bullfighting as “the Art of Gesture” indeed provides a more professional and cinematic explanation for the star’s fascination with this “sport” than her infatuation with a torero would do because it calls attention to the performative aspects that the actress and the torero share. Drawing a line from Musidora’s choice of a pseudonym, via her alignment with Colette, the mythic status of the Irma Vep figure and Musidora’s playful treatment of it in her writings and stage appearances down to la terre des taureaux, Callahan discerns an ongoing project of establishing, what she calls, “zones of indeterminacy”. While I fully agree with Callahan that “Musidora was someone extremely attentive both to her public persona and her ability to construct the narrative(s) that surrounded this persona,” I would be more hesitant to attribute to her that she “might be pointing to the inability to limit or define identity itself”. This hesitance follows from an alternative reading of the question in the opening title card that is central to Callahan’s argument. The question reads in French: “Pourquoi la vie ne vaudrait-elle pas un roman?”, which Callahan translates as “Why isn’t life as good as a novel?” and interprets this as if Musidora would not have accepted a life or an identity as a married woman without a novel or a performance. While this may be true for the real life Musidora—as it would be for any actress, director, and writer of her stature—I would like to question if this is what she intended to say here. My translation of the question would read “Why should life not be worth a novel?”, emphasizing the phrase’s rhetorical bearing as well as the suggestion that life is often considered not to be worth a novel. The next lines of the intertitle state that “this is an adventure story about the real Spain” and that “it has been made in the middle of constant danger”, referring to the local reality and bullfighting as much as to Musidora’s practice of performing the stuntwork of her adventurous roles, which placed her too in constant danger, as she repeat-
ed tirelessly in public statements.\textsuperscript{396} In other words, in my reading, Musidora does not contrast life and novel, but points out—as in most of her projects—the lifelike caliber of the story that spectators are presented. She additionally stated that it was the “love for sports, journalism and autobiography”—all three non-fiction—that enabled her to present \textit{La terre des taureaux}. That these statements were not entirely devoid of irony becomes apparent from the surviving film print only after the initial factual part about bull raising and bullfighting has ended and the tone shifts to comedy and satire. My impression, therefore, is that Musidora’s concern with this particular project were the historical experiences, images, and performances that shaped and continued to shape her career on- and off-screen. The moderate production conditions and, most notably, the absence of the pressure to please the French film press may have worked as a catalyst to choose a style and a tone more close to her work on the stage than to film production. This perspective becomes more pertinent when the production’s live acts are taken into account.

The knowledge that the production was intended as a mix of live performance and film screenings can be verified from Musidora’s handwritten scenario dated 1922 and preserved at the BiFi. After the title, the text specifies: “scenario drafted by Musidora for a grand tour, in part film, in part stage.”\textsuperscript{397} Unfortunately, the scenario does not clarify which scenes were intended for live performance and which for the filmed sequences, except for two scenes, to which I shall return. Also, scenes and title cards in the scenario that are missing from the print do not always match or fit in the scenes present in it. From the material at hand, then, it is difficult to reconstruct with certainty the presentation as it may have been performed. Nonetheless, from the two live acts described in the scenario, it can be inferred that they enhanced the self-reflective and ironic tone of the presentation.

The surviving film print contains a mix of factual, comic, and romantic adventure sequences. The factual sequences present the cult of bull raising and bullfighting in Andalusia, with the bulls and Cañero as the protagonists; the comic sequences deal with star images on-stage and in the cinema, with Musidora as the protagonist; and the romantic adventure sequences, with both Musidora and Cañero as the protagonists, comment on male and female heroism and romance. The point is that all of this is subjected to ironic reflection, and that an important tool for this reflection are references to Musidora’s public persona and preceding roles and films. Musidora applies here the intertextual form and satiric tone of French \textit{music-hall} to the personal mode that she had maintained in her writings and blends them into a self-ironic portrait of a celebrated actress and an underexposed film director.

The scenario contains a scene, quite early in the narrative that is absent from the print and in which Musidora tells an interviewer from a film maga-
zine that her next film will be exclusively about bulls. In other words, she introduces herself not as a fictional character, but as Musidora the filmmaker. The print contains various title cards that narrate the story as a first person account and, in them, she presents herself as a filmmaker as well: “I was in Spain to search for an actor for a film about the art of bullfighting.” The titles can be read as the filmmaker’s narration because, in the shot after the cited title, we see her in a Spanish town, getting out of a car and acting as if looking for something. A second reason, of course, was that it was publicly known that Musidora had already made one film in Spain with a torero as the leading man. In the subsequent shots, she is shown attending a bullfight, enjoying the show, applauding the torero, and deciding that she has found the protagonist for her film: “After the bullfight, I congratulated Antonio Cañero and offered him to become one of the grand stars of the screen.... by shooting a film with me.” If this intertitle did not already mock her status of film director, the next title did so in no uncertain terms: “I left with a refusal.”

As a film about bulls and bullfighting, LA TERRE DES TAUREAUX seems, at certain points, an ironic reworking of SOLEIL ET OMBRE. Whereas the “constant danger” the bulls pose is stated and described in the intertitles, it is absent from the images or the actions. At times, the danger is even almost ridiculed, for instance in the scene in which the bullfighter “exercises” fighting with a young bull and the animal’s flippant jumping and running acquires a jolly touch. Likewise, the parallel in the drama between suffering fiancée and fighting bull as victims of the torero is revisited in the epilogue, in which Musidora merrily stands in for a bull (holding a chair with horns tied to it) and comments in an intertitle that this is the only way in which a woman should carry horns—that is to say, for fake.

The most hilarious scenes are those in which Musidora pretends to be a would-be film star. In them, she ridicules both Cañero’s and her own vanity as stars in their respective fields. First, she has Cañero act upon his vanity and has him place an advertisement in the newspaper, in which he offers money to a film star or a rising star to make a film on bulls. But, instead of simply accepting, the star decides to beat the torero at his own game. To that aim, she disguises as a most ugly and clumsy would-be film actress. (That he fails to recognize her may be read as a reference to her roles in the Feuillade serials). Her imposture leads to a series of downright slapstick scenes, in which she acts as ill-mannered, ungracious, and unattractive as possible. Musidora’s visible pleasure in playing the “ugly girl”, as the character is called in the title cards, may be read as accentuating the act of acting and as an ironic reference to her legendary photogenic star image. The slapstick scenes follow Cañero’s scheming of how to get rid of her and culminate in a scene in which he hopes that she will be knocked out by “une vache brave” (a cow of the breed of the
fighting bull, called “toro bravo”). Not she, however, but he gets tossed on the
cow’s horns, after which she saves him by pulling the cow’s tail. With this “act
of bravery”, as it is characterized in the subsequent title card, Musidora ri-
cules female film heroism as well as the courage of the bullfighter whom she
saves. The scene furthermore looks like an inversion of the scene in SOLEIL ET
OMBRE in which the Andalusian girl was run down by a cow and the torero did
not pay any attention to her well-being.

After this scene, the film star’s metamorphosis from ugly girl into her
beautiful and beguiling self takes place. The fact that Musidora visibly enacts
the metamorphosis can be read as another accentuation of the act of acting.
Her combing her hair in the act seems a reference to a picture postcard in
the Comoedia-series—“Our artists in their dressing room”—, which likewise
shows her with a hairbrush in her hand. Of course, the torero wants her to
stay after the transformation, but now she is the one to refuse. The reasons she
tells him are professional: that he did not want to be in her film and that she
has been summoned back to the theater to play. In the scenario, she even says
to him: “I belong first to the public, to my art, to my contracts.” Right after the
title card with his question “You refuse to follow me?” a medium close shot
shows her pondering and glancing sidelong at the camera. From this glance,
which we know from her roles as Irma Vep and Diana Monti, it is obvious that
the answer will be no. After these scenes, she turns into the adventurous hero-
ine of an action plot, in which she travels from the land of bulls to the stage in the city. But this heroine is subjected to irony from the start, for which the narrative device of competition between female and male heroism has been applied and reversed.

Cañero tells her that she can go, but takes his horse back and announces that he will catch up with her easily. She starts out cross-dressed, but soon changes into a woman’s dress. This action is motivated by the fact that the hero will be looking for a woman in Andalusian men’s costume. The irony derives from a contrast in the range and speed of the means of transportation used by heroine and hero. While she starts out on foot, then buys a donkey, exchanges it for a horse and jumps on a train, he starts out on horseback with a group of helpers, but gradually loses tempo, the horse, a bicycle, and his men, who are unable to find the cross-dressed woman. Nonetheless, they meet again in Musidora’s dressing room in the theater in the city. In the surviving print, the hero arrives first in the city by eventually taking a plane, as a deus ex machina concluding the mockery of his heroism. In the scenario, however, the heroine is the one who takes a plane and arrives first, which would fit the accumulative

Fig. II.30: Ironic citation of Les vampires: Musidora riding the front of the train in La terre des taureaux. Still.
series of faster means of transportation that she used. The scene with the train cites the scene in *Les Vampires* in which she lay flat on the rails underneath the riding wagons: now she climbs onto the locomotive and rides its front end straight towards the camera.

The scenario suggests two live acts inserted at this point in the presentation. These live acts allow Musidora to thank her devoted stage public and to mock the film press. The first act goes as follows: at the theater, the director and the public wait for Musidora, who is late for the performance. The director fears that she will not come at all. The public continues to wait patiently, and a woman makes a favorable remark on her live performances: “I like to hear the sound of her voice. The screen and the stage are very different things.” Eventually Musidora arrives, offers the public her excuses, and recounts her adventures.

In the second live act, she receives an interviewer from the film press in her dressing room. He begins talking to her while she changes behind a folding screen. He does not ask any questions, but continues talking, while her head behind the folding screen nods yes and no. Eventually, he says goodbye with the line: “My article along these lines will appear tomorrow. It is a revelation for our readers. It is utterly interesting.” In short: while her devoted stage public waited to hear her stories and views, the film press was only interested in its own.

Seen from a perspective of ambition and choice, Musidora used the freedom from commercial or artistic filmmaking for witty references to her fame as a film actress and to her failure to gain recognition as a film director. She additionally used it to pay tribute to her popular stage audience that she, it seems, experienced as more faithful than her film audience. Most importantly, she seems to have taken distance with this project from the ambitions in filmmaking and acting as were expected from her. Much like with the photograph with which she commented on *photogénie*, she looked at these ambitions with irony and humor, and, between the lines, criticized them for curtailing her versatility. This reading of *La Terre des Taureaux* is prompted once the comic scenes and combination of screen and stage performance are taken into account. In my opinion, the production illuminates why Musidora, for many years, refrained from filmmaking, why she acted in a supporting part in only one more film in 1926, but continued acting on the popular stage as she had done throughout her career in the silent cinema.
Musidora produced and directed another short film in 1950, *La magique image*, which is not known to survive today. According to *L’Écran français*, it is a tribute to Louis Feuillade and the myth of Irma Vep: “At the sight of feminine beauty, the ‘Magic Image’, the young boys wake up and are overwhelmed by the desire to touch the elusive woman.” At the time, Musidora was working for the Cinémathèque française in an oral history project and collecting the testimonies from her colleagues from the silent cinema for the Commission des Recherches Historiques. In 1926, she was elected “Reine du Cinéma” (Queen of Cinema). In 1927, she married a friend from her youth, her mother’s local doctor, Clément Marot (not to be confused with the poet with the same name). She did also act on-stage after the marriage, but, after the birth of her son in 1931, less so than she had before. Instead, she turned to sculpting and writing. She published two novels, the previously discussed *Paroxysmes. De l’Amour à la mort*, and the serialized *Arlequin et Arabella*, as well as a collection of poems and a children’s book, in addition to the essays and lectures on Colette, Pierre Louÿs, and on the shooting of *les vampires* cited in this careerography. Musidora died on December 10, 1957.
Fragment from an advertisement for *Back to God's Country* emphasizing Nell Shipman's nude scene, Boise State University (see page 354).