In Conclusion

As my careerographies treat Adriënne Solser, Musidora, and Nell Shipman individually, I wish to highlight, in conclusion, some of the insights into the work of women in the silent cinema in Europe and the United States that their parallel careers may offer.

The three careers, in the first place, draw attention to the significance of female performers on the silent cinema of the 1910s. Adriënne Solser, Musidora, and Nell Shipman epitomize the creative and artistic contributions of actresses to the well-liked characters they brought to the screen. These contributions were far more influential than the phrasing “directed by” has suggested in retrospect. This may explain why even acclaimed actresses were so casual in asserting the direction credit for themselves: claiming the direction was not a signature of discursive control for them, but rather an appreciation of the collaboration of actress, cinematographer, and director. Actresses knew exactly how they co-created, in interaction with the camera, the appealing screen roles accredited to “their” directors. The inclusion of film direction and production in the careers of these actresses, then, ought not just be considered a legitimate means to capitalize on their accomplishments and fame; it can also be seen as a sign of shifts in acting styles at the end of the 1910s by consequence of impending requirements such as photogénie and diegetic acting. Like other actresses of the era, Solser, Musidora, and Shipman consolidated their grips on the roles and styles they preferred through establishing their own film production companies and co-directing the films in which they were featured.

A second communal aspect is the versatility, adaptability, and competences required by the range of métiers available to women in the booming popular stage and cinema of the first decades of the twentieth century. They switched from popular stage acting to screen acting, and ventured into scenar-
io writing, production and direction. They selected established stage genres and excelled in them after transferring them to the screen. Musidora and Shipman also astutely attuned their self-promotion and public personas to such requirements; through fictional and non-fictional statements, they engaged in the public discourse that shaped the field even long after their careers in the film business had ended. In the films that the three wrote and directed, they adorned the generic figures with individual traits and concerns, attempting to make them relevant to a new audience and to make them, to a tasteful extent, self-referential. One of my particular pleasures has been to detect the self-irony about stardom on the popular stage and in the cinema, and about popular genres and formulas that each exhibited in her comic roles and films: they provide delights of female wit and professional self-knowledge.

In the capacity of film producer and director, these women took great entrepreneurial and professional risks to realize their ambitions. They did not work under the umbrella of an established studio or film production company, but operated on a self-supporting basis. Solser and Musidora invested large amounts of private money, while Shipman had to find and to satisfy backers. It was essential to secure the collaboration of competent and loyal crew members. If the chemistry worked, they were idolized, but when things worked out differently than envisioned, their reputation and creditworthiness was at risk. For each film anew, Musidora and Shipman needed to find a distribution company that would care to make the most of it, while Solser held the distribution in her own hands through making her live performance an indispensable component of it. I found it particularly wry to observe the impact of sheer bad luck on their endeavors. Yet, in the same vein, they can be seen as the precursors of the independent women filmmakers of the 1970s and after.

Adrienne Solser, Musidora, and Shipman each carved out a niche for herself in the mass entertainment of the early twentieth century and left an imprint on it as competent and clever craftswomen. It is this imprint that I have detected and that I wish to cheer and to share.
Winking moon. Animated image from BET NAAR DE OLIMPIADE, EYE Filmmuseum.