2020

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Recommended Citation

Nevin, B. (2020). Framing “l’âme des personnages”: Performance and affect in jacques feyder's pension mimosas (1935). *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 57(2), 217-232. doi: 10.3828/AJFS.2020.20

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Framing “l’Âme des personnages”: Performance and Affect in Jacques Feyder’s *Pension Mimosas* (1935)

BARRY NEVIN

Abstract

Although Jacques Feyder’s authorial control over his productions and his direction of actors constituted two of the most widely appreciated aspects of his approach to filmmaking during his own lifetime, the impact of each on his *mise en scène* has received little critical attention. This article aims to remedy this oversight by linking both aspects in three stages: first, drawing on contemporary periodicals, recollections of Feyder’s performers and his own writings, it illustrates Feyder’s preoccupation with the creation of in-depth psychological portraits through his actors; second, focusing on *Pension Mimosas* (1935), it demonstrates that Feyder’s technical style, although aligned closely with empirically conventional visual stylistics such as filmed theatre, subjugates narrative norms to a treatise on the subversive ideological force of performativity; third, it argues that the film’s central female characters provocatively transgress misogynistic tropes designed to restrict and homogenize female bodies in French cinema during the 1930s. This study ultimately aims to plot new points of departure towards a fuller understanding of Feyder’s directorial style and how its apparently conventional components contested constricting patriarchal constructions of gendered relations in interwar France.

Feyder and film-acting

By the end of Jacques Feyder’s *Pension Mimosas* (1935), the hallucinating and fatally poisoned Pierre Brabant (Paul Bernard) confuses his adoptive mother, Louise Noblet (Françoise Rosay), with his exploitative girlfriend, Nelly (Lise Delamare), and beseeches her to kiss him. If one were to make a case for this film being a major event in Feyder’s career or in French cinema of the 1930s, the controversial kiss that Louise accordingly plants on his lips (fig. 1) arguably constitutes the ideal place with which to begin: Noël Burch and Geneviève Sellier praise Feyder for directing “family films that approached issues of sexual roles from a critical standpoint”, and Colin Crisp, considering some twenty films portraying quasi-incestuous maternal sentiments out of approximately one thousand films produced over the course of the decade, singles out *Pension Mimosas* for its “astonishingly explicit [...] representation of an older

Figure 1

woman's passion for a younger man who is legally her son".¹ Yet however much the film's final scene evokes Feyder's history of challenging gender paradigms, this incendiary moment is arguably the only one that fully lives up to Crisp's observation, and it does not give us the key to Feyder's directorial style.

An alternative case could be made for an earlier scene in which Louise discusses Pierre's future with Nelly. The sequence in question, which unfolds approximately seventy minutes into the film, encapsulates the deceptively understated style of the film and much of Feyder's work in general. The characters communicate with one another in a discreet and nuanced fashion, and the visual style of each shot is sparing and largely unobtrusive. For the first time in the film, Louise discusses Pierre's future with Nelly, who is now living with Pierre in the boarding-house managed by Louise and her husband, Gaston (Henri Alerme), in Menton. This article draws on this deceptively minor sequence to focus on the place of subtle verbal and physical expression in Feyder's direction and proceeds in three key stages: first, it considers the link between authorship and performance in Feyder's work in general; second, it performs a close analysis of this scene by paying particular attention to how Feyder's style productively reconfigures contemporaneous narrative conventions including a theatrical performance style within the diegesis; third, considering how this theatricality transforms Louise into an ideologically disruptive force, it illustrates how Feyder's comparatively overlooked portrayal of feminine performativity challenges patriarchal constructions that sought to contain and homogenize female bodies in contemporary French cinema.

¹ Noël Burch and Geneviève Sellier, *The Battle of the Sexes in French Cinema, 1930–1956* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), p. 55; Colin Crisp, *French Cinema: A Critical Filmography*, vol. 1 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), p. 118.

Generating avenues of enquiry in relation to Feyder's narrative style is critical because he occupies a relatively neglected place within evolving auteurist discourses despite his widely acknowledged importance as a leading director in the French film industry during the interwar period.² On the one hand, Feyder generally exercised a high degree of control over his projects, as noted by Feyder himself during the silent era: "Je suis exigeant. Je veux pouvoir recommencer une scène aussi souvent que je le jugerai nécessaire et faire reconstruire trois fois le même décor s'il ne me convient pas."³ Such was Feyder's reputation as an autocrat that, prefiguring *Cahiers du cinéma*'s later reevaluations of Jean Renoir's and Max Ophüls's bodies of work, reviews of his Hollywood output tended to revolve around perceived similarities with his French films of the 1920s.⁴ On the other hand, Feyder's work tends to elude critics aiming to seek evidence of formal or thematic continuity.

Indeed, when Feyder was attacked by François Truffaut as an exemplar of the *tradition de qualité* in the pages of *Cahiers* during the 1950s, he was an easy target: he pursued one genre after the other throughout his career, proceeding from the epic scope of *L'Atlantide* (1921) to the intimate urban drama of *Crainquebille* (1922); from the dark naturalism of *Thérèse Raquin* (1928) to the romantic political satire of *Les Nouveaux Messieurs* (1929); and, during the 1930s, from the atmospheric melodrama of *Pension Mimosas* to the lavish historical fresco of *La Kermesse héroïque* (1935).⁵ Furthermore, he reaped major commercial success in poetic realist cinema (*Le Grand Jeu*, 1934) and costume-drama (*La Kermesse héroïque*), which were both roundly attacked by *Cahiers* critics. Since Feyder's critical decline, the most valuable steps towards discerning recurring tropes across his films have arguably emerged not from the commemorative volume or either of the chiefly biographical monographs devoted to his career,⁶ but from Sue Harris's and Sarah Street's respective auteurist analyses of the evocative sets designed by Lazare Meerson for a number of Feyder's 1930s

² For two cursory examples, see André Bazin, "Quinze ans de cinéma français" (1957), in Jean Narboni, *Le Cinéma français de la Libération à la Nouvelle Vague* (Paris: Cahiers du Cinéma, 1998), pp. 23–41 (p. 24); Jean-Pierre Jeancolas, *Le Cinéma des Français: 15 ans d'années trente (1929–1944)* (Paris: Éditions Nouveau Monde, 2005), pp. 153–156.

³ Cited in Georges Chaperot, "Souvenirs sur Jacques Feyder", *La Revue du cinéma*, 12 (1 January 1930), 29–40 (p. 30).

⁴ See Barry Nevin, "*Le(s) Visage(s) de Garbo*: Negotiating Discourses of Authorship and Stardom in Jacques Feyder's *The Kiss* (1929)", *Nottingham French Studies*, 59: 1 (2020), 97–116 (p. 103).

⁵ See Truffaut's attack on *Kermesse* as "le film le plus haïssable" in Robert Lachenay, "Abel Gance, désordre et génie", *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 5: 47 (1955), 44–46 (p. 46). Truffaut employed Lachenay as his pseudonym in a number of articles early in his career as a critic.

⁶ Anon. (ed.), *Jacques Feyder ou le cinéma concret* (Brussels: Comité national Jacques Feyder, 1949); Victor Bachy, *Jacques Feyder, artisan du cinéma* (Louvain: Librairie universitaire, 1968); Charles Ford, *Jacques Feyder* (Paris: Seghers, 1973).

films including *Le Grand Jeu*, *La Kermesse héroïque* and *Knight Without Armour* (1937).⁷ As a result, the matter of Feyder's directorial style remains elusive.

Feyder's direction of actors constitutes a potentially insightful point of departure towards a deeper understanding of his style in general for two reasons. First, Feyder himself pursued a career in acting after abandoning the military career that his father desired for him. The young Feyder performed in theatres in Paris and Lyon from 1908 onward and turned to cinema in 1912.⁸ Thereafter, he acted for Georges Méliès (*Le Troisième Larron*, 1915), Louis Feuillade (*Les Vampires*, 1915), Victorin-Hippolyte Jasset (*Protéa*, 1913), Charles Burguet (*Le Troisième Larron*, 1915) and his master, Gaston Ravel (*Autour d'une bague*, 1915), who granted Feyder his first opportunity to direct.⁹ Second, the high-calibre performances featuring in Feyder's films collectively constitute one of the few aspects of his films that have been praised with a relatively high degree of consistency. Dudley Andrew appreciatively maintains that Feyder, although lacking a unifying vision, was "primarily a director of actors",¹⁰ and Andrew's view is supported by contemporary reviews of Feyder's films, testimonies from his actors and eyewitness accounts of his method of rehearsing. Indeed, contemporary critics frequently praised Feyder's films for their finely nuanced performances and their in-depth psychological realism. An ecstatic review of *L'Atlantide* praised Feyder for presenting "non plus des acteurs épris de grands gestes, mais des artistes vivant leur rôle".¹¹ After viewing *Visages d'enfants* (1925), one critic praised Feyder for directing "une profonde étude psychologique qui a fouillé jusqu'en ses moindres replis le cerveau et le cœur d'un jeune enfant extrêmement sensible".¹² Similarly, his next film, *Gribiche* (1926), was praised for its "étude de mentalité enfantine".¹³

Feyder's attention to his performers was recalled by many actors who collaborated with him over the course of the 1920s and 1930s. About the making of *Les Nouveaux Messieurs*, Albert Préjean writes, "Jamais plus, au cours de ma longue

⁷ See Sarah Street, "Sets of the Imagination: Lazare Meerson, Set Design and Performance in *Knight Without Armour* (1937)", *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 2: 1 (2005), 18–35; Tim Bergfelder, Sue Harris and Sarah Street, *Film Architecture and the Transnational Imagination: Set Design in 1930s European Cinema* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007), pp. 62–80, 169–223.

⁸ Chronology provided by René Micha, "Les Dates principales de la vie et de l'œuvre de Jacques Feyder", in anon., *Jacques Feyder ou le cinéma concret*, pp. 93–96 (p. 93).

⁹ Michel Warren and Nicolas Tixier with Catherine Aventin, "Filmographie commentée", in Jean A. Gili and Michel Marie (eds), "Jacques Feyder", special issue of 1895: *Revue de l'Association française de recherche sur l'histoire du cinéma* (October 1998), 189–250 (p. 190). On Feyder's debut as a director, see Ford, *Jacques Feyder*, p. 13.

¹⁰ Dudley Andrew, *Mists of Regret: Culture and Sensibility in Classic French Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 249.

¹¹ Lucien Doublon, "Les Films que l'on verra prochainement", *Ciné-Magazine*, 22 (1921), p. 26.

¹² Anon., "Les Films de la semaine", *Ciné-Magazine*, 14 (1925), 31.

¹³ Lucien Farnay, "Gribiche", *Ciné-Magazine*, 46 (1925), 339–340 (p. 339).

carrière, je n'ai rencontré un pareil guide."¹⁴ Charles Vanel (*Le Grand Jeu*; *La Loi du nord*, 1942) even suggests that Feyder developed a profound understanding of each of his films' characters before shooting: "Avant d'arriver au studio, Feyder [...] avait vécu chaque rôle, il avait ri, souffert, pleuré pour chacun d'eux et tout ça avec son petit air absent, sceptique et désabusé."¹⁵ Furthermore, eyewitness accounts suggest that Feyder devoted the majority of production-time to rehearsals. Writing in 1926, journalist Jean Arroy remarked that Feyder often spent forty-five minutes of every hour's work rehearsing with his actors.¹⁶ Recollecting the shooting of *La Kermesse héroïque*, cameraman Louis Page wrote that Feyder allowed actors to rehearse in the set and initially refrained from explicitly directing them or deciding on camera-angles during this stage of production in order to extract "ce qu'il appelait: *l'apport des comédiens*".¹⁷ Like Page, Marcel Carné, who served as assistant director to Feyder on *Pension Mimosas* as well as *Les Nouveaux Messieurs*, *Le Grand Jeu* and *La Kermesse héroïque*, even suggests that Feyder "voulait ignorer ce qu'on appelle à tort la technique et qui, en réalité, est le *style*. Une seule chose l'intéressait: le jeu des acteurs, tirer d'eux un maximum d'humanité."¹⁸

Supporting the views expressed by his own critics and co-workers, Feyder wrote in 1934 that "[l]'essence même du cinéma se décèle dans le mouvement intérieur de l'âme des personnages".¹⁹ He correspondingly devotes sixteen of the sixty-one pages that constitute his contribution to his own autobiography, *Le Cinéma, notre métier* (co-written with Rosay, his wife from 1917 until his death in 1948), to performers including Raquel Meller (*Carmen*, 1926), Greta Garbo (*The Kiss*, 1929) and Marlene Dietrich (*Knight Without Armour*)²⁰ and hints that his focus on the direction of actors was the result of a conscientious effort to compensate for "des prises de vue très fragmentées, des enregistrements courts, qui souvent ne dépassent pas l'étendue de cinq mots de texte".²¹ Furthermore, Feyder generally refrained from formulating ambitious technical statements throughout his career and, looking back on the evolution of cinema in his 1944 autobiography, observed that "[i]l est encore tout empêtré dans la technique. *Il lui arrive de prendre ses progrès matériels pour la*

¹⁴ Cited in Ford, p. 178.

¹⁵ Charles Vanel, "Jacques Feyder, maître à jouer", in anon., *Jacques Feyder ou le cinéma concret*, pp. 53–54 (p. 54).

¹⁶ Cited in Ford, p. 152.

¹⁷ Louis Page, "Les Méthodes de travail du metteur en scène", in anon., *Jacques Feyder ou le cinéma concret*, pp. 59–64 (p. 60), his italics.

¹⁸ Marcel Carné, *Ma vie à belles dents: mémoires* (Paris: L'Archipel, 1996), p. 60, his italics.

¹⁹ Roger Régent, "Les Difficultés du cinéma français selon Jacques Feyder" (5 July 1934), n. p. Accessed in "Recueil factice d'articles de presse sur Jacques Feyder, vol. 2: 1928–1938" (ref.: 8-RK-403[2]), Bibliothèque nationale de France.

²⁰ Jacques Feyder and Françoise Rosay, *Le Cinéma, notre métier* (Geneva: Skira, 1944), pp. 48–63.

²¹ Feyder and Rosay, pp. 48–49.

découverte d'un style!"²² Rather, he is content to repeat Tristan Bernard's maxim that "[l]'art dramatique est une science exacte, mais dont personne ne connaît les lois".²³

These first-hand accounts of Feyder's methods validate Andrew's view and suggest a well-trained classicism that relies on skilful performances to the exclusion of any discernible continuity in visual style across his work. The following analysis reassesses the complexity of Feyder's approach to composition and editing within a broader, empirically informed context of French narrative conventions by illustrating how the actors' movements and dialogue invoke concepts of performance both within and beyond the world of film in ways that challenge tendencies in gender representation within French cinema of the 1930s. As this analysis of Louise's conversation with Nelly in the eponymous *pension* will demonstrate, the actors remain the primary focus of Feyder's frame, but his deceptively understated style lends scope to interlinked elements of performativity and psychology that lie at the heart of the characters' interaction.

Performance, countenance and counterpoint in *Pension Mimosas*

The sequence in question lasts just under three minutes and its structure is broken down in the following table:

<i>Shot</i>	<i>Time</i>	<i>Set-up</i>	<i>Style</i>	<i>Frame</i>	<i>Charactors</i>
1	1.10	A	Mobile	Medium Long Shot	Gaston, Nelly, Louise, guest 1, guest 2
2	0.08	B	Stationary	Medium Shot	Nelly
3	0.04	C	Stationary	Medium Shot	Louise
4	0.02	B	Stationary	Medium Shot	Nelly
5	0.02	C	Stationary	Medium Shot	Louise
6	0.03	B	Stationary	Medium Shot	Nelly
7	0.03	C	Stationary	Medium Shot	Louise
8	0.25	D	Mobile	Medium Long Shot	Louise and Nelly
9	0.03	E	Stationary	Medium Close-Up	Nelly
10	0.53	D	Mobile	Medium Shot	Louise, Nelly, delivery-boy

Based on this table, the sequence conforms to two recognizable stylistic norms, the first concerning maternal melodrama (an underrepresented genre in 1930s France),²⁴ the second, contemporary French cinema. Aligning with Mary Ann

²² Feyder and Rosay, p. 9. Feyder's italics.

²³ Cited in Feyder and Rosay, p. 19.

²⁴ Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Films of the 1940s* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. 30. Doane's case-studies focus primarily on American cinema

Doane's description of the "zero-degree style" exemplified by the "woman's film", this sequence is formally unelaborate: it is structured through ten shots derived from five camera set-ups (three stationary and two mobile). It is true that the average shot length of this sequence (17.3 seconds) is noticeably greater than the contemporaneous national norm identified by Barry Salt in the period 1934–1939, which was 12.6 seconds. However, this sequence (like the film more broadly) does not align with André Bazin's ontological understanding of cinematographic realism as consistently as those of Jean Renoir (*Le Crime de monsieur Lange*, 1936), Orson Welles (*The Magnificent Ambersons*, 1942) or Kenji Mizoguchi (*Sansho the Bailiff*, 1954) and, when measured against their respective styles, Feyder's own extended takes and mobile camera seem modest adornments. Moreover, within the context of French national cinema, this sequence's use of long takes and lateral camera mobility is by no means exceptional: two films in Salt's analysis have an ASL of seventeen seconds and twelve films from his corpus of sixty-five exceed this measurement.²⁵ Furthermore, as Ginette Vincendeau observes, long takes and lateral camera mobility were common in French cinema of the 1930s, and highly regarded directors like Julien Duvivier (*La Tête d'un homme*, 1933) and Pierre Chenal (*Crime et châtiment*, 1935) as well as lesser figures such as Pierre Colombier (*La Chanson d'une nuit*, 1933) all exploited multiple reframings and complex negotiations of cinematic space and décor during the decade.²⁶

The second trend exemplified by this sequence concerns French cinema's relationship with filmed theatre. Without citing Feyder's work, Vincendeau convincingly argues that performance tended to determine cinematography in French cinema of the 1930s, which resulted in the importance of a slower rhythm of editing, wider shots and longer takes that displayed performers interacting with one another and "incorporated the essence of live performance into the film experience".²⁷ These characteristics are salient in the selected scene, whose medium shots of the individual characters are relatively brief (3.6 seconds on average) and whose mobile takes are chiefly motivated by the movements of the two female characters on whom the scene centres. Vincendeau further posits that this symbiosis between framing, editing

of the 1940s but also include films directed by émigrés, including Max Ophüls. In "Who is Without Sin? The Maternal Melodrama in American Film, 1930–39", trans. Dolores Burdick, in Christine Gledhill (ed.), *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (London: BFI, 1992), pp. 83–99 (p. 83), Christian Viviani observes that with the exception of *Pension Mimosas*, French cinema was "always lukewarm and somewhat soberly elegant (and a touch boring) in its treatment of melodrama".

²⁵ Barry Salt, *Film Style and Technology: History and Analysis*, 3rd ed. (London: Starword, [1983] 2009), p. 237.

²⁶ Ginette Vincendeau, "The Art of Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Classical French Cinema", in Michael Temple and Michael Witt (eds), *The French Cinema Book* (London: BFI Palgrave, 2018), pp. 101–111 (p. 107).

²⁷ Vincendeau, "The Art of Spectacle", pp. 109, 105.

and performance led to the prevalence of “filmed theatre” during this period, a tendency whose key attributes also characterize *Pension Mimosas*. For example, the importance of a word-driven screenplay to this aesthetic is confirmed by Feyder and Spaak’s script, and the text is derived from theatrical source material in the form of a thinly-veiled transposition of Racine’s *Phèdre*. Furthermore, the film features Rosay and Delamare who, like many performers of the era (for example, Raimu, Harry Baur and Arletty, who also featured in a minor role as a parachutist in the film), had a parallel career in the theatre.²⁸ Unsurprisingly, perhaps, in a discussion of *Pension Mimosas* in their *Histoire du cinéma*, Maurice Bardèche and Robert Brasillach suggest that, “[d]ans l’ensemble, il reste un peu trop fait pour le grand public, et emprunte excessivement à la technique théâtrale du boulevard”.²⁹

Aligning himself with Vincendeau’s observations on tendencies in French film style and with Andrew’s and Carné’s views of Feyder’s methods, Feyder suggested before the film’s release that the narrative eschewed elaborate formal compositions in favour of a focus on characters: “*Pension Mimosas* ne renferme aucun ‘clou’ de mise en scène, aucun tableau à très grande figuration. Le drame, tout intime, se concentre sur trois ou quatre personnages dont je me suis efforcé de ‘fouiller’ les réactions le plus possible.”³⁰ More specifically—and more important to the premise of the present analysis—Feyder suggested in the same interview that he had developed an approach to directing his actors which involved a carefully coordinated counterpoint between spoken words on the one hand and, on the other, gestures or expressions that belied the film’s elements of dialogue:

Pension Mimosas est comme on dit couramment “très parlant”. Toutefois, dans mon esprit, la plupart des dialogues ne sont là que comme indication, comme “fond sonore” si je puis dire. C’est ainsi que ce que disent les différents personnages a infiniment moins d’importance que ce qu’ils font ou que ce qu’expriment leur mimique ou leurs gestes. Il arrive même à plusieurs reprises que ceux-ci soient en contradiction avec les paroles que prononcent les acteurs. C’est, si vous le voulez, l’illustration de ce qu’on appelle “parler l’esprit ailleurs”.³¹

Feyder implies that the film’s unobtrusive, relatively conventional style invites close scrutiny of the place of theatricality, not merely in Rosay and Delamare’s acting, but in the behaviour and interaction of both Nelly and Louise.

Russell Jackson has described how films taking the theatre as a point of reference not only communicate an “excess” in behaviour but also use “the theatre’s

²⁸ Vincendeau, “The Art of Spectacle”, pp. 104–105.

²⁹ Maurice Bardèche and Robert Brasillach, *Histoire du cinéma* (Paris: André Martel, 1948), p. 399.

³⁰ Jean Valdois, “Avant *Pension Mimosas*: quelques minutes avec Jacques Feyder”, *Ciné-magazine* (27 December 1934), 6.

³¹ Valdois, p. 6.

status and conditions as an extension of their own project in simultaneously offering to reproduce what is real and exposing what lies beneath or beyond it”.³² Interestingly, the selected scene from *Pension Mimosas* approaches this aspect of theatricality from two interleaving perspectives: first, Louise and Nelly self-consciously perform etiquette for one another and remain acutely aware of the misalignment of each other’s words and private sentiments; second, Louise sports a more flattering outfit and hairstyle than those worn in the scenes set in 1924 and certain other scenes that unfold prior to Pierre’s return to Menton in 1934, thereby lending her a more youthful aura and putting her, as Jean A. Gili observes, “dans la disposition d’esprit de pouvoir tomber amoureuse”.³³ This section addresses the first of these, placing particular emphasis on the interplay between gesture and dialogue, whilst the next section analyzes the second perspective and how it positioned spectators in 1930s France.

Recalling Feyder’s desire for his characters “[de] ‘parler l’esprit ailleurs’”, the two characters behave in ways that evoke a stark contrast between their private thoughts and the words they choose to communicate their emotions whilst adhering to social etiquette. This duality is particularly apparent during the second shot, after Louise has suggested to Nelly that Pierre and she may one day inherit the *pension*: Nelly is responding to an English-language letter on Gaston’s behalf, a gesture that recalls Pierre Bourdieu’s observation that class crystallizes in objectified states including education and, by extension, exposes her and Louise’s societal misalignment.³⁴ The camera cuts to Nelly, who declares, “Je ne sais pas comment le remercier”, as she stares away from Louise towards off-screen space, stops writing and discreetly taps one hand on the other. Nelly’s delayed, unenthusiastic response clearly implies that her gratitude is purely superficial. This dismissiveness and its relationship to what Nelly perceives as a lack of cultural capital is confirmed when she drops the pen, turns to Louise and declares, “Franchement, je ne me sens pas très douée. Ces histoires de notes en retard, de serviettes, de lavabos bouchés.”

The matter of performative behaviour is evoked more explicitly on Louise’s part when Nelly, after declaring her intention to act in cinema, states, “Ah, être indépendant, ne devoir rien à personne, c’est ça que je veux.” As she does so, Louise looks at Nelly from top to bottom before responding, “Oui, c’est évidemment l’idéal.” In this instance, the counterpoint between Louise’s speech and expression transforms the axis of the conversation from class to her own proto-incestuous love

³² Russell Jackson, *Theatres on Film: How the Cinema Imagines the Stage* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), p. 269.

³³ Jean A. Gili, “*Pension Mimosas*, ou l’absence de hasard dans le jeu des passions”, in Gili and Marie, 157–166 (p. 164).

³⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital” (1983), trans. Richard Nice, in John G. Richardson (ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1986), pp. 243–248.

Figure 2

for Pierre: Louise's statement concedes to the potential practicality of Nelly's goals, but her facial expression articulates her own contempt (and desire) for the youth and beauty that permit Nelly to secure money through morally reprehensible means and could potentially enable Louise herself to contend with Nelly for Pierre's hand. Both Louise's envy and the theme of performance are manifest when Louise informs Nelly that "moi, j'ai fait du chant, de l'opéra-comique", and moves to stand beside a photograph of her younger self which was taken when she was performing in *La Traviata*. Louise holds her smile, as though to beg comparison non-verbally with her image (fig. 2). A counter-shot (shot 5) of Nelly smiling follows as she states, "Ah, je n'vous aurais pas reconnue. Vous étiez charmante." Nelly's smile is, like Louise's, a performance. Mirroring her comment on Louise's changed appearance, Nelly's facial expression thinly veils her mockery of the impact of time on Louise's aspirations, career and youth.

These moments clearly demonstrate that the film does not shy away from elements of theatricality that simultaneously enthused mainstream audiences and frustrated critics of the period.³⁵ In fact, its character-motivated technical style, evident in both the mobile medium shots and the stationary takes in which Louise's and Nelly's respective reactions are juxtaposed with one another (shots 2–7), embraces French cinema's conventional aesthetics of spectacle.

However, the narrative lends a high degree of reflexivity to this sequence in two particular ways. First, the film's *mise en scène* transcends contemporary norms by juxtaposing the theatrical qualities of their exchange in tension with the fluctuating world beyond the office. More specifically, Meerson's vitreous set-design invokes a tension not only between the foreground and background of the image but

³⁵ On these responses, see Vincendeau, "The Art of Spectacle", p. 105.

Figure 3

also between on-screen and off-screen space, thereby pitting the stifling theatricality of the two women’s interaction in the foreground of the image with the vestibule beyond, which remains visible in most shots during this sequence and leaves the frame open to the arrival of other characters. In the first extended take (shot 1), two guests pass through the vestibule at different moments, signalling the simultaneity of events taking place beyond the office. This contrapuntal effect is accentuated in the final shot of this sequence when a delivery-boy passes behind them (fig. 3) and then knocks on door to the office, interrupting Louise and Nelly’s tense exchange. The second of the two elements that transcend the theatrical tropes informing the narrative is the direct challenge that Louise’s subliminal performance of sexually branded desire for her adopted son poses to patriarchal constructions of femininity. How her proto-incestuous affection opens debates regarding the role of the female body as a site (and sight) of subversion within the context of Feyder’s narrative style is the final question posed by this analysis.

Interrogating the French “master narrative”

Whilst the film’s incendiary closing scene clearly provokes spectators by foregrounding the incestuous implications of Louise and Pierre’s embrace, the sequence currently under analysis focuses on the real possibilities allotted by Louise’s performance and portrays her body as capable of resisting assimilation into the reductive patriarchal categories of representation that informed French cinema. Most notable among these is the Oedipal “master narrative” identified by Vincendeau, in which French middle-aged men won young women from younger, conventionally more attractive male rivals, whereas female desire was perceived as transgressive and mothers

Figure 4

were “generally absent: out of sight, ineffectual, mad, or dead”.³⁶ The prevalence of this model in some 300 films over the course of the decade meant that female bodies were frequently incapable of inscribing their own meanings in cinema or of escaping zones of legible meaning inscribed by patriarchal values.³⁷ This semiotic restriction is even apparent in so audacious a film as *Pension Mimosas*, in which Louise’s rebellion against the conservative trajectory set by contemporary narrative norms forces her to assume the moral burden of her actions: Louise must refrain from verbalizing her desire for her son, and her enclosure within window-frames metaphorizes her struggle with the constrictive ideological frame enforced both by French society and by narrative conventions that simultaneously configure and limit her body’s expressive faculties (fig. 4).³⁸ Yet Burch and Sellier imply that one must approach apparent conformity in Feyder’s portrayal of gender relations with caution. In their analysis of *Le Grand Jeu*, a pessimistic exemplar of *cinéma colonial*, they suggest that Feyder “calls sexual roles into question” by discreetly but distinctly interrogating gendered tropes including virility and prostitution, which were central to popular cinema of the decade.³⁹

Pension Mimosas is equally provocative for similar reasons: the prevailing notion of forbidden maternal desire and the theme of proto-incestuous desire, both of

³⁶ Ginette Vincendeau, “Daddy’s Girls (Oedipal Narratives in 1930s French Films)”, *Iris*, 8 (1988), 70–81 (pp. 72–73, 75).

³⁷ Whereas Vincendeau identifies two-hundred films (“Daddy’s Girls”, p. 73), Burch and Sellier’s later study identifies approximately 300 (pp. 18–19).

³⁸ Barry Nevin, “‘Elle t’aime trop et moi, pas assez’: Jacques Feyder’s Melodramatic *Mise en scène* of Female Desire in *Pension Mimosas* (1935)”, *French Studies*, 73: 2 (2019), 198–216 (pp. 203–208).

³⁹ Burch and Sellier, p. 60.

which informed the French "master narrative", are crucial to the film. However, each of these tropes is profoundly reconfigured in an emphatically theatrical embodiment of characters that challenges dominant representations of each in French cinema of the 1930s. Key to this dialectic is the affective force of Louise's performance in this sequence. For Elena Del Rio, active performances such as Louise's operate as an expression of "unassimilable affect (unassimilable to language, binary structures, and ideological functions)".⁴⁰ As a result, rather than merely functioning as a reproduction of reiterative practices enforced by patriarchal order in line with Judith Butler's conceptualization of gender, performance potentially operates as "an *active* and aesthetically enabling production" whose effect enables characters "to pass from one bodily state to another".⁴¹ Therefore, the affective expression instigated by performance potentially provides solutions to otherwise intolerable situations by "multiply[ing] connections with the real" in a dynamic and transformative fashion.⁴²

The questions raised by Del Rio are particularly relevant to Louise's evolution within the film because Louise was once Pierre's legal guardian but is not his biological mother, and she therefore embodies an ambiguous site of indeterminate relations between romantic love and maternal solicitude. This oscillation between social roles is expressed through the photo of Pierre as a child, which is placed (presumably by Louise herself) on the table beside the photo of her younger self.⁴³ Crucially, Louise's pre-existing affinity with theatre opens her to the possibility of fostering a productively precarious identity. Interestingly, the narrative suggests that Louise's embodiment of multiple potential roles has remained an integral part of her character since her retirement from professional opera. This aspect of her personality is indicated during the opening sequence set in 1924 when Louise, whilst walking from one room to the next to request rent from her guests, casually sings to herself. Although her singing may appear unimportant on initial viewings, it evokes a capacity for assuming alternative roles that is stoked by Nelly's arrival in the *pension*. From this perspective, Louise's attire and hairstyle emphasize the impermanence of her identity and the unfixed relationship between an acquired social role (in her case, that of adoptive mother) and the range of other roles (Pierre's lover and rival for his affections) from which French society and its cinema generally sought to isolate it. As a result, Feyder's staging of Louise's conversation with Nelly not only invites the spectator's interrogation of the relationship between gesture and dialogue, but also sets the scene quite literally for Louise's blurring of roles, which aligning with Del Rio's theorization of affective-performative events, invokes "a certain wreckage

⁴⁰ Elena Del Rio, *Deleuze and the Cinemas of Performance: Powers of Affection* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), p. 4.

⁴¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Del Rio, pp. 36, 10, Del Rio's italics.

⁴² Del Rio, p. 36.

⁴³ As suggested in Nevin, "Elle t'aime trop, et moi, pas assez", p. 212.

Figure 5

of ideological stability [...], as former corporealities and their relations appear profoundly altered or dislocated”.⁴⁴

The ideological challenge engendered through Louise’s performance is underscored by Nelly’s failure to mobilize performance in a productive fashion. When Nelly predictably spurns Louise’s suggestion that she contribute to the management of the *pension*, she also voices her desire to act for a living. However, Nelly’s self-described “vocation artistique” is clearly motivated by financial avarice rather than any truly artistic inclination: when Louise warns her that work in the theatre pays poorly, Nelly responds, “Ah, le cinéma paie bien, et c’est ça qui m’intéresse.” Nelly’s fundamentally materialistic concerns are confirmed by her cap, trousers and low-cut top, whose androgynous and stylish quality firmly entrench her within emerging conceptions of the “modern woman” that developed during the 1930s (fig. 5) and informed roles played by major stars such as Michèle Morgan (*Gribouille*, 1937, dir. Marc Allégret) and Danielle Darrieux (*Abus de confiance*, 1937, dir. Henri Decoin).⁴⁵ Her association with superficial preoccupations is reinforced in the final shot of this sequence when the delivery-boy hands Nelly a new hat that she has purchased on credit for 550 francs, which she asks Louise to pay on her behalf.

Clearly, whereas Louise’s performance in this scene invokes a decay of ideological boundaries that was rarely permitted by French cinema of the 1930s, Nelly’s merely reinforces her role as an antagonistic foil contained by contemporary stereotypes. The real cultural impact of Louise’s deviation and the contrast it draws

⁴⁴ Del Rio, p. 16.

⁴⁵ Adam Stanley, “Hearth, Home, and Steering Wheel: Gender and Modernity in France after the Great War”, *The Historian*, 66: 2 (2004), 233–253 (p. 234). See also Ginette Vincendeau, “Melodramatic Realism: On Some French Women’s Films of the 1930s”, *Screen*, 30: 3 (1989), 51–65 (p. 53).

become clearer if we compare the two women's characters within the context of French national cinema: whereas Nelly's exercise in dissimulation aligns her with the *garce* stereotype, which was most famously perpetuated by Viviane Romance (e.g. Duvivier's *La Belle équipe* [1936]),⁴⁶ Louise's ambiguous characterization challenges the reliance of contemporary French cinema and society on clearly codified social roles and homogenized, stable subjectivities. As a result, Rosay the actress is no longer a slave to representation; rather, both she and Louise are laudable exemplars of the ethical and creative capacity of the female body within the context of oppressive social structures and their resulting cultural constructs.

Performance and/as authorship

By giving due consideration to the importance of theatricality to *Pension Mimosas* on a thematic level and illustrating how Feyder's portrayal of performativity positions the spectator within the context of France's notoriously gendered social divisions, this analysis has sought to illustrate the richness of Feyder's characters within the broader context of his actor-centred narrative style. From the preceding study, we can draw two sets of conclusions, both of which concern the place of actors within Feyder's approach to filmmaking. First of all, whilst *Pension Mimosas* exemplifies conventional aesthetics of melodrama and the French "cinema of spectacle", it is also clear that his apparently unambitious technical style serves two goals: first, to foreground (literally and metaphorically) the performativity of the two female characters; second, to contrast the slow and calculated pace of the two characters' exchange with the fluctuating world beyond the office. This interplay between the camera, actors and set testifies to a certain subtlety on Feyder's part and presupposes an attentive spectator rather than one in need of explicit guidance. The second set of conclusions concerns Louise's relationship to gendered tropes in contemporary French cinema. Louise's ambiguous embodiment of maternal and proto-incestuous longing resists assimilation within accepted frames of reference that characterized French society and structured conventions in French cinema of the 1930s. By situating the progressively indistinct image of a mother in an ideological conflict with the *garce* archetype embodied by Nelly, Feyder's deceptively understated cinema of affect exploits contemporary filmgoers' enthusiasm for theatrical models of cinema by providing a productively ambiguous point of audience-identification that generally eluded spectators.

Given Feyder's propensity for challenging gender norms in his films, the place of affective performance in his cinema merits further analysis, as does a stronger critical appreciation of the intensity and complexity of acting in Feyder's films and their relationship to our understanding of concepts of authorship. In a series of observations on auteur theory, Peter Wollen writes that two schools of

⁴⁶ Burch and Sellier, pp. 48–49.

auteur critics emerged in the wake of the *politique des auteurs*, one focusing on meanings, style and thematic motifs, the other centring on performance in the sense of inserting a pre-existing text into cinematic codes.⁴⁷ Within the context of authorship, we could interpret performance more literally as a contribution to Feyder's largely uncategorized body of work. Interestingly, Bazin, who galvanized Renoir's status as the quintessential auteur in the pages of *Cahiers du cinéma* by focusing on the director's mobilization of deep space and lateral camera mobility, suggests in a ground-breaking essay on Italian neorealism that it is Feyder's approach to characterization—rather than elements of visual or aural composition—that constitutes a lynchpin of his authorial signature. Bazin mentions in passing that the manifest love that Roberto Rossellini (*Paisà*, 1946), Vittorio De Sica (*Bicycle Thieves*, 1948) and Feyder display towards their characters from one film to the next constitutes a unifying attribute of their respective *œuvres*. The theorist further argues that, from such a perspective, “[l]a tentation est grande [...] de ne voir que du métier là où l'on cherche un style, la généreuse humilité d'un technicien habile devant les exigences du sujet au lieu de l'empreinte créatrice d'un véritable auteur”.⁴⁸ Such a vantage point on any director's work markedly departs from the appreciation of formal continuities that sustained Bazin's landmark reassessment of Renoir's work. Nonetheless, having demonstrated the importance of both nuanced acting and theatricality as a cultural point of reference in *Pension Mimosas*, it may become clearer that the thematic concerns, complex performances and technical style of one of the *tradition's* most notable victims had more in common with *Cahiers's* most lionized French auteur than the journal's critics cared to consider.

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⁴⁷ Peter Wollen, “The Auteur Theory”, in *Signs and Meanings in the Cinema* (London: BFI, 2013), pp. 58–96 (p. 62).

⁴⁸ André Bazin, “De Sica, metteur en scène”, in *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2008), pp. 311–330 (p. 313).

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