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## ‘ELLE T’AIME TROP, ET MOI, PAS ASSEZ’: JACQUES FEYDER’S MELODRAMATIC *MISE EN SCÈNE* OF FEMALE DESIRE IN *PENSION MIMOSAS* (1935)

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*Melodrama ‘à la française’: Feyder and French cinema of the 1930s*

By the end of 1934, Jacques Feyder had led a distinguished career in French silent cinema, had directed a critically acclaimed adaptation of Émile Zola’s *Thérèse Raquin* (1928) in Berlin, had returned from a three-year contract in Hollywood, had brought *Le Grand Jeu* to the screen (the greatest box-office success of the 1933–34 season), and appeared to be virtually unstoppable as he proceeded to direct his next film, *Pension Mimosas*. The film was described by one critic as ‘sans aucun doute l’une des œuvres les plus attendues de la saison prochaine’ and would rank as the season’s seventh-highest box-office success.<sup>1</sup> Popular enthusiasm for *Pension Mimosas*, ostensibly a maternal melodrama, was doubtless sparked by its incendiary portrayal of female quasi-incestuous desire. The narrative centres on Louise (Françoise Rosay) and Gaston Noblet (Henri Alerme), co-owners of a boarding house located in a town identified by Jean A. Gili as Menton.<sup>2</sup> Louise and Gaston have been raising a young boy, Pierre (Bernard Optal), whose biological father (Eddy Debray) returns in 1924 to claim him upon completing a prison sentence. Between 1924 and 1934, Louise continues to receive letters from Pierre, now based in Paris and nicknamed Baccara (played by Paul Bernard), repeatedly requesting money which he is using to settle his own gambling debts and to satisfy the demands of his exploitative girlfriend, Nelly (Lise Delamare). When Pierre informs Louise in 1934 that he is sick in an effort to secure more money, Louise travels to Paris and delivers Pierre an ultimatum: return to live in the boarding house or renounce all financial assistance. Louise eventually grants the melancholy Pierre permission to invite Nelly to move in also. During the remainder of the film, Louise refashions her own appearance, simultaneously expressing her own

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<sup>1</sup> Anon., ‘Ce que sera *Pension Mimosas*, le prochain film de Jacques Feyder’, *Bordeaux ciné*, 302 (24 August 1934), p. 19. Box-office details provided by Colin Crisp, *Genre, Myth, and Convention in the French Cinema, 1929–1939* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), p. 317.

<sup>2</sup> Jean A. Gili, ‘*Pension Mimosas*, ou l’absence de hasard dans le jeu des passions’, in Jacques Feyder, ed. by Jean A. Gili and Michel Marie (= special issue of *1895: revue de l’Association française de recherche sur l’histoire du cinéma* (1998)), pp. 157–66.

efforts to recapture her adopted son's transient innocence and her growing romantic affection for him.

Despite the film's initial critical and commercial success, its challenging gendered discourse — like Feyder's reputation — has since been relegated to the footnotes of film history in favour of Lazare Meerson's set designs (which structure no fewer than seven of Feyder's films, including *Pension Mimosas*) and films directed by other luminaries of the 1930s such as Jean Renoir, René Clair, Julien Duvivier, and Feyder's four-time assistant director, Marcel Carné.<sup>3</sup> There are two primary reasons for this. First of all, Feyder, who frequently adapted popular novels (including Frédéric Boutet's *Gribiche* (1926) and Zola's *Thérèse Raquin*) and whose work incorporated a diverse range of genres including political satire (*Les Nouveaux Messieurs* (1929)), the colonial epic (*L'Atlantide* (1921)), and the adventure film (*La Loi du nord* (1939)), was reduced by certain critics of *Cahiers du cinéma* to an exemplar of 'le cinéma de qualité', whose ranks were considered to lack the striking thematic and formal directorial signature evidenced by auteurs such as Renoir, John Ford, and Nicholas Ray.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, Feyder himself lends *Pension Mimosas* relatively short shrift within his autobiography, *Le Cinéma, notre métier*, which he co-wrote with Rosay (his wife from 1917 until his death in 1948): he refers to the film on only one occasion, merely remarking that he directed *La Kermesse héroïque* (1935) because '[a]près *Pension Mimosas*, j'ai eu l'ambition de me divertir un peu des sujets durs et de me détendre dans l'amusement d'une farce'.<sup>5</sup> Dudley Andrew remedies both Truffaut's and Feyder's respective oversights to some extent by restoring the film's importance as a precursor to the major poetic realist works directed by Carné; however, Andrew overlooks the narrative's provocative portrayal of gendered relations.<sup>6</sup> The aim of this article is therefore twofold: first, it performs a close analysis of Feyder's subjectivization of Louise's sexually ambivalent concern for her son's welfare through elements of *mise en scène* including interior architecture, costume design, and framing; second, locating Feyder's film within its aesthetic and socio-political contexts, this analysis determines the ways in which this neglected film's melodramatic *mise en scène* of female desire challenges recognizable tendencies in gender representation in French cinema of the 1930s, creating a provocative textual space within which gender politics in contemporary France can be critically addressed by spectators.

*Pension Mimosas* constitutes a particularly noteworthy case study for two reasons. First of all, its melodramatic portrayal of the female protagonist's sexual desire for

<sup>3</sup> For views of Meerson as auteur of Feyder's films, see Sarah Street, 'Sets of the Imagination: Lazare Meerson, Set Design and Performance in *Knights without Armour* (1937)', *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 2 (2005), 18–35; and 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.

<sup>4</sup> See François Truffaut's notoriously vindictive criticism of *La Kermesse héroïque* (1935) in Robert Lachenay, 'Abel Gance, désordre et génie', *Cahiers du cinéma*, 47 (May 1955), pp. 44–46 (p. 45). Note that Truffaut frequently wrote under the pseudonym Lachenay.

<sup>5</sup> Jacques Feyder and Françoise Rosay, *Le Cinéma, notre métier* (Geneva: Albert Skira, 1946), p. 40.

<sup>6</sup> See Dudley Andrew, 'Poetic Realism', in *Rediscovering French Film*, ed. by Mary Lea Bandy (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1983), pp. 115–19 (p. 116), and Dudley Andrew, *Mists of Regret: Culture and Sensibility in Classic French Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 243–44.

her adopted son problematizes any attempt to subsume the film within discernible tendencies in contemporary French cinema. During the 1930s, the maternal melodrama developed most prolifically in Hollywood, where contracted studio stalwarts and individualistic auteurs alike, including Edmund Goulding (*The Old Maid*, 1939), King Vidor (*Stella Dallas*, 1937), John M. Stahl (*Back Street*, 1932), and Josef von Sternberg (*Blonde Venus*, 1932), signed their names to this sub-genre. Conversely, Christian Viviani remarks that, with the exception of ‘Jacques Feyder’s French masterpiece of the genre, the near-perfect *Pension Mimosas*’, French cinema was ‘always lukewarm and somewhat soberly elegant (and a touch boring) in its treatment of melodrama’.<sup>7</sup> Indirectly building on Viviani’s remark, Ginette Vincendeau observes that French cinema of the 1930s, unlike Hollywood, never produced a category of films incorporating ‘a melodramatic woman-centred narrative, set in the classic areas of “woman’s experience” (the domestic, emotions, romance), and attempting to tell a story from a woman’s point of view or, more ambitiously, to portray a woman’s subjectivity and desire’.<sup>8</sup> On the contrary, Vincendeau asserts that Oedipal father–daughter relationships in which middle-aged ‘powerful male figures [...] often won young women from young (and conventionally more attractive) rivals’ continually recurred across French films of the decade.<sup>9</sup> Within this framework, women generally function ‘to facilitate relationships between male characters’ and their own desires are always perceived as transgressive. Furthermore, mothers are, in Vincendeau’s analysis, ‘generally absent: out of sight, ineffectual, mad, or dead’.<sup>10</sup> Colin Crisp has since identified approximately twenty films — a surprisingly high figure — portraying an older woman’s implicitly Freudian passion for a younger man (likened by Crisp to a ‘son’ figure) in his recent survey of French cinema of the 1930s. Nonetheless, he singles out *Pension Mimosas* for its ‘astonishingly explicit [...] representation of an older woman’s passion for a younger man who is legally her son’, lending credence to Noël Burch and Geneviève Sellier’s observation that Feyder was ‘used to making family films that approached issues of sexual roles from a critical standpoint’.<sup>11</sup>

Situating *Pension Mimosas* within its socio-political and aesthetic contexts is doubly important because, as Burch and Sellier observe, the Oedipal master

<sup>7</sup> Christian Viviani, ‘Who Is without Sin? The Maternal Melodrama in American Film, 1930–39’, trans. by Dolores Burdick, in *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman’s Film*, ed. by Christine Gledhill (London: BFI, 1992), pp. 83–99 (p. 83).

<sup>8</sup> Ginette Vincendeau, ‘Melodramatic Realism: On Some French Women’s Films in the 1930s’, *Screen*, 30 (1989), 51–65 (p. 51). Vincendeau’s assertion requires some tempering: Marie Epstein (*La Maternelle*, 1933) was a pioneer in this regard. For an analysis of Epstein’s career, see Sandy Flitterman-Lewis, ‘Epstein in Context: French Film Production in the Thirties’, in *To Desire Differently: Feminism and the French Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), pp. 169–87.

<sup>9</sup> Ginette Vincendeau, ‘Daddy’s Girls (Oedipal Narratives in 1930s French Films)’, *Iris*, 8 (1988), 70–81 (p. 75). Burch and Sellier expand the relevance of Vincendeau’s films to some three hundred films produced during the 1930s within a broader study of approximately one thousand films; Noël Burch and Geneviève Sellier, *The Battle of the Sexes in French Cinema, 1930–1956* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> Vincendeau, ‘Daddy’s Girl’, p. 79.

<sup>11</sup> Colin Crisp, *French Cinema: A Critical Filmography*, II: 1929–1939 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), p. 118; Burch and Sellier, *The Battle of the Sexes*, p. 55.

narrative detected by Vincendeau reflects 'a whole psychosocial paradigm in real life that extended well beyond arranged marriages between older men and young women'.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, even in the 1930s, women were not allowed to vote, had limited access to capital, and the Front populaire did little to introduce women to spheres of political decision-making despite fundamentally improving workers' social conditions. Furthermore, until 1938, the Code civil stipulated that married women could not run a business, own property, or hold a passport without their husband's permission. Crucially, Christine Gledhill argues that the female protagonist in melodrama contests constricting gender divisions by operating as 'a generator of female discourses drawn from the social realities of women's lives — discourse[s] which negotiate a space within and sometimes resist patriarchal domination'.<sup>13</sup> In doing so, Gledhill emphasizes the potentially empowering function of Feyder's maternal narrative within the marginalized socio-political sphere occupied by women in contemporary France.

Familial relations and domestic space occupy privileged positions within theorizations of literary, dramatic, and film melodrama. The term, which literally refers to narrative forms that combine music (the Greek *melos*) with drama, is understood by Peter Brooks as a universally legible mode of address which originated in stage and literary melodrama and aimed to express psychological conditions and moral sensibility in an era when industrial capitalism threatened domestic stability.<sup>14</sup> Drawing primarily on American cinema of the 1950s, particularly the melodramas of Vincente Minnelli (*Some Came Running*, 1958) and Douglas Sirk (*Imitation of Life*, 1959), film scholars have elaborated on how this morally and psychologically legible mode of address interacts with narrative, iconographic, and stylistic patterns produced by combinations of social, cultural, and economic determinants. Occupying central stage, according to Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, is each character's determination to locate 'a place within the system [...] in which they can simultaneously enter, without contradiction, the symbolic order and bourgeois society' while preserving both the family unit and a coherent individual identity, a dual condition of the drama that necessarily levies heavy sacrifices.<sup>15</sup> For Thomas Elsaesser, such dynamic 'clashes and ruptures' are illustrated through social iconography, sophisticated architectural values, and pictorial effects such as decor, gesture, and composition.<sup>16</sup> Chief among these are costume design, which Laura Mulvey and Linda Williams interpret as a frequent source of identification, and the melodramatic home, described by Conn Holohan as a 'spatial fiction' whose regulatory function is challenged from within by thresholds such as doors,

<sup>12</sup> Burch and Sellier, *The Battle of the Sexes*, p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> Christine Gledhill, 'The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation', in *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, ed. by Gledhill, pp. 5–39 (p. 37).

<sup>14</sup> Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 15.

<sup>15</sup> Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, 'Minnelli and Melodrama', in *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, ed. by Gledhill, pp. 70–74 (p. 73).

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, 'Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama', in *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, ed. by Gledhill, pp. 43–69 (pp. 59–60).

windows, and corridors.<sup>17</sup> All of these elements are core components of *Pension Mimosas* and of maternal melodramas in general, which, according to Marcia Landy, portray ‘the nature and constraints of mothering within patriarchal society’ whilst also revealing ‘the underlying disruptiveness and threat of the maternal figure’.<sup>18</sup>

Feyder and co-writer Charles Spaak’s portrayal of a mother’s quasi-incestuous desire for her adopted son clearly problematizes the film’s relationship with the broader socio-cultural patterns in contemporary French cinema rather than typifying them. It is important to note, however, that the film’s screenplay derives from a number of literary predecessors whose dialogue with *Pension Mimosas* will be examined over the course of this article. The first notable example is Euripides’s ancient Greek tragedy, *Hippolytus* (428 BCE), later adapted by Seneca as *Phaedra* (c. 54 CE). Each play portrays the adoptive mother’s development and fatal admission of romantic inclinations towards her adopted son, Hippolytus, in the wake of her husband’s apparent death. Jean Racine’s *Phèdre* (1677) adopts Seneca’s overt emphasis on the female viewpoint and adds Aricie, the son’s object of affection. Zola, determined to transpose ‘le sujet de la Phèdre antique accommodé à nos mœurs’, later penned *La Curée*, a merciless indictment of France under Napoleon III, whose moral corruption is embodied by the Phèdre-esque Renée Saccard and her complicit step-son, Maxime.<sup>19</sup> Feyder and Spaak draw on the Racinian model of the Phaedra myth, not only foregrounding the perspective of the female protagonist’s desire from a sympathetic perspective, but also introducing a love interest for Pierre, albeit one who is a good deal less virtuous than Racine’s Aricie. Early reviews of the film recognized the obvious similarities between Phèdre and Louise, but Rosay unconvincingly maintained in her memoirs that ‘je n’étais pas amoureuse, j’essayais simplement de défendre le jeune homme contre son entourage et contre l’envoûtement néfaste de la femme entretenue’.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, Michel Mayoux, Georges Sadoul, and Jean-Pierre Jeancolas all recognize the film’s close proximity to the Phaedra myth, the latter referring to Louise Noblet as ‘Phèdre incertaine et plébéienne’.<sup>21</sup>

Informed by an understanding of melodrama as a socially and culturally conditioned mode of address, the remaining analysis provides a close reading of Feyder’s *mise en scène* of socially prohibited female desire in *Pension Mimosas*. This

<sup>17</sup> Laura Mulvey, ‘Notes on Sirk and Melodrama’, in *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, ed. by Gledhill, pp. 75–79 (pp. 77–78); Linda Williams, ‘“Something Else besides a Mother”: *Stella Dallas* and the Maternal Melodrama’, in *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, ed. by Gledhill, pp. 299–325 (pp. 309–14); Conn Holohan, ‘All That Is Solid: Producing the Home-Space in John Stahl’s *Imitation of Life*’, in *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 35 (2018), 246–71 (pp. 254 and 263).

<sup>18</sup> Marcia Landy, ‘Psychoanalysis, Gender, and Race’, in *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film and Television Melodrama*, ed. by Landy (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), pp. 263–67 (p. 265).

<sup>19</sup> Émile Zola, cited by Susan Harrow, *Émile Zola: La Curée* (Glasgow: University of Glasgow French and German Publications, 1998), p. 27.

<sup>20</sup> Françoise Rosay, *La Traversée d’une vie* (Paris: Laffont, 1974), p. 197.

<sup>21</sup> Jean-Pierre Jeancolas, *Le Cinéma des Français: 15 ans d’années trente (1929–1944)* (Paris: Nouveau Monde, 2005), p. 155. See also Michel Mayoux, ‘Feyder vivant: *Pension Mimosas*’, *Cahiers du cinéma*, 5 (September 1951), pp. 56–58 (p. 58), and Georges Sadoul, ‘*Pension Mimosas*’, in *Dictionnaire des films*, 4th edn, ed. by Émile Breton (Paris: Microcosme/Seuil, 1990), p. 256.

study proceeds in three key stages which respectively correspond with three core aspects of film melodrama discussed in the introduction, specifically the framing of domestic space, the Oedipal trajectory of the central characters who inhabit it, and expressive costume design: first of all, this analysis focuses on the *pension* as a locus where tensions between conventional public protocol and Louise's private sexual desire are played out; secondly, it argues that the interior architecture and decor of the boarding house express Louise's search for a lost symbolic home by holding Louise's romantic desire for Pierre in tension with her nostalgia for the innocence that Pierre embodied as a young child; thirdly, this analysis proposes that Louise's outfits express her own ambivalence regarding her progressive appropriation of her son as an illicit object of desire. Through these three avenues of enquiry, this article ultimately aims to determine the ways in which the film's sympathetic portrayal of quasi-incestuous female yearning interrogated gendered discourse in contemporary France.

*'Faire évoluer les personnages en profondeur': framing surveillance and sexuality in domestic space*

The majority of Louise's drama unfolds in the Noblets' boarding house, firmly supporting Holohan, Nowell-Smith, and Viviani's shared emphasis on the centrality of the home as an expressive nerve-centre of the social and psychological tensions embedded in the family-focused melodrama.<sup>22</sup> The remarkable set, described by Sadoul as 'l'un des héros du drame',<sup>23</sup> was constructed by Meerson, a trained architect who endeavoured to blend authenticity with poetry through materials such as iron, glass, cement, and oil paints and, most importantly, remained conscious of the interplay between the camera, performer, and set. As historian and set-designer Léon Barsacq perceptively observes, 'quelle que soit la position de la caméra, Meerson s'arrange toujours pour qu'il se passe "quelque chose" au fond du décor' and permits directors 'de faire évoluer les personnages en profondeur, ce qui offre beaucoup plus de possibilités à la mise en scène'.<sup>24</sup> Such an approach was essential to Feyder, who wrote before filming *Pension Mimosas* that '[l']essence même du cinéma se décèle dans le mouvement intérieur de l'âme des personnages',<sup>25</sup> and who continually charts emotional tensions between the Noblets and Nelly by framing these characters in relation to various architectural elements that signal the problematized interior space of the boarding house.

The film draws on prominent architectural components including windows and staircases — both recurring elements in American melodrama of the 1930s<sup>26</sup> —

<sup>22</sup> Holohan, 'All That Is Solid'; Nowell-Smith, 'Minnelli and Melodrama', p. 71; Viviani, 'Who Is without Sin?', pp. 87–88.

<sup>23</sup> Georges Sadoul, *Le Cinéma français, 1890–1962* (Paris: Flammarion, 1962), p. 69.

<sup>24</sup> Léon Barsacq, *Le Décor de film: 1895–1969* (Paris: Veyrier, 1985), p. 63; Léon Barsacq, 'Les Décors de Lazare Meerson', in *Jacques Feyder ou le cinéma concret* (Brussels: Comité national Jacques Feyder, 1949), pp. 47–52 (p. 49).

<sup>25</sup> Feyder, quoted by 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', II: '1928–1938', Bibliothèque nationale de France, 8-RK-403 (2).

<sup>26</sup> Holohan, 'All That Is Solid', p. 271.

in ways that foreshadow the poetic realist films of Carné, who served as assistant director on *Pension Mimosas*. For Ben McCann, the careful foregrounding of such architectural details in poetic realist cinema engenders ‘action spaces’ that embody ‘sites of conflict, both narrative and emotional’; the composition of these spaces forges a vivid person–environment nexus and imbues poetic realist films with an expressive design that ‘allow[s] emotions to be immediately evoked’.<sup>27</sup> Although McCann’s analysis draws primarily on Carné, Clair, and Renoir, his concept may be productively mapped onto Feyder’s portrayal of Louise’s evolving relationship with Meerson’s set. The *pension* constitutes a complex socialized action space, primarily because it simultaneously operates as the Noblets’ private home and as a public space open to paying customers. The breached boundary between each is underscored by frequent long shots incorporating windows, doors, and corridors, which juxtapose the private space of the Noblets’ office or rooms hosting family events with the public sphere in which their customers circulate during scenes unfolding both in 1924 and 1934, capturing what Gili describes as ‘les va-et-vients qui ne peuvent jamais être dissimulés, les rencontres et les ruptures, le tout dans l’atmosphère tendue’.<sup>28</sup> Such moments illustrate David Sibley’s understanding of thresholds such as doors and hallways as ‘ambiguous zone[s] where the private/public boundary is unclear’, and recall Holohan’s assertion that the doubling of family homes in melodrama as a ‘profane site of commerce’ forebodingly undermines the sanctity and stability of the singular domestic space.<sup>29</sup> This is undoubtedly the case of the *pension*, but Feyder’s action spaces also form part of a complex dialectic of surveillance in which Louise’s nascent sexual desire for her son is played out.

During the scenes that unfold in 1924, these windows are exclusively instrumentalized by Louise to ensure order within the boarding house. This is made clear in an elaborate mobile shot that frames Louise as she walks through a corridor on the uppermost floor of the building. The sequence in question begins with Louise standing in front of a full-length window that looks onto a balcony. In an extended take, Louise walks from the far end of the corridor towards the opposite end, located in the foreground. As she walks, the camera pans to the left, revealing another full-length window looking onto yet another balcony (possibly the private balcony of a rented room), visible in the background. As Louise continues to walk, the camera pans further left and subsequently recedes, revealing the glass-house structure of the boarding house’s upper floor and parasols in the garden outside, thus configuring the co-ordinates of Meerson’s glass edifice in relation to the spatial arrangement of the entire boarding house. Underscoring the importance of surveillance to Louise’s enterprise, she taps the transparent wall to

<sup>27</sup> Ben McCann, ‘“A Discreet Character?” Action Spaces and Architectural Specificity in French Poetic Realist Cinema’, *Screen*, 45 (2004), 375–82 (pp. 376–77). See also Ben McCann, ‘Micro-Design Action Spaces and Objects’, in *Ripping Open the Set: French Film Design, 1930–1939* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2013), pp. 173–91.

<sup>28</sup> Gili, ‘*Pension Mimosas*’, p. 158.

<sup>29</sup> David Sibley, *Geographies of Exclusion: Society and Difference in the West* (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 33–34; Holohan, ‘All That Is Solid’, p. 248.





**Figure 1** Louise surveys the upper floor of the boarding house. Image courtesy of TFI International.



**Figure 2** Framing Louise's increased susceptibility to the public's moralizing gaze. Image courtesy of TFI International.

confirm that her maid, who is standing on a ladder outside, has fed the birds (see Figure 1). A similar mobilization of deep space structures the framing of the Noblets' office, where we frequently view residents walking in the background whilst members of the Noblet family discuss domestic affairs in the foreground.

The potential surveillance permitted by Louise's relationship with the windows and corridors that structure the *pension* emphasizes Louise's position of control by evoking Michel Foucault's theorization of a budding panoptical seventeenth-century society in which 'le regard partout est en éveil'.<sup>30</sup> Foucault asserts that the panoptical *dispositif* engendered through the architectural design of Jeremy Bentham's model prison 'aménagement des unités spatiales qui permettent de voir sans arrêt et de reconnaître aussitôt', and which may therefore be mobilized '[c]haque fois qu'on aura affaire à une multiplicité d'individus auxquels il faudra imposer une tâche ou une conduite' (ibid., pp. 233 and 240).

These windows alter Louise's relationship with the boarding house's public and private spaces during the scenes set in 1934 as she simultaneously develops feelings towards Pierre and becomes increasingly susceptible to the public's gaze. The framing of Meerson's set in these scenes evokes André Bazin's landmark analysis of windows in *Le Jour se lève* (Carné, 1939), in which he suggests that glass generally operates as '[une] matière transparente et réfléchissante, à la fois loyale, puisqu'elle laisse voir au travers [...], et dramatique puisque l'ignorer la brise et promet au malheur'.<sup>31</sup> After Pierre returns home upon Louise's insistence, both the transparent panes of glass and the window-frames that encase them become essential to the film's spatialization of the emotional tensions invoked by Louise's sexually ambivalent concern for her son: the rigid right angles of the window-frames located throughout the boarding house lend architectural form to the rigorous social propriety that Louise must uphold by repressing her romantic desires, recalling what Elsaesser describes as melodrama's 'incessant acts of inner violation, its mechanisms of frustration and over-compensation' within a world characterized by '[a]n acute sense of claustrophobia in decor', whilst the glass windows evoke the fragility of these conventions (see Figure 2).<sup>32</sup> Most interestingly, whereas the windows are initially exploited by Louise to ensure order, they progressively operate as a Foucauldian reminder of the impact of social protocol on Louise's expression of her sexual desire for her son in a publicly visible social setting which, as she is well aware, prohibits such desire.

Corresponding with Elsaesser's emphasis on the emotional excesses embedded in the *mise en scène* of domestic melodrama, the threat that Nelly poses to Louise's relationship with Pierre in both its strictly maternal and romantic aspects constitutes a key axis of Feyder's framing of the boarding house. The narrative most

<sup>30</sup> Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir: naissance de la prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), p. 229.

<sup>31</sup> André Bazin, 'Le Jour se lève', in *Le Cinéma français de la Libération à la Nouvelle Vague*, ed. by Jean Narboni (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 1998), pp. 76–102 (p. 91) (first published as 'Le Décor est un acteur', Ciné-club, 1 (December 1949), pp. 4–5).

<sup>32</sup> Elsaesser, 'Tales of Sound and Fury', pp. 65 and 52–53.



**Figure 3** Pierre, Nelly, and Louise ascend the staircase of the boarding house. Image courtesy of TF1 International.



**Figure 4** Louise shows Nelly a photo of Pierre as a boy. Image courtesy of TF1 International.

notably maps this tension between each woman's desire for Pierre onto the *pension's* staircase, an element of interior architecture which, according to McCann's study of action spaces, functions as 'the symbolic spine of a house' and 'signal[s] a passage into an entirely private and prohibited realm'.<sup>33</sup> As Pierre and Louise ascend the stairs to show Nelly to her room for the first time, the camera cuts from the lower floor of the boarding house to a view from the upper floor. Feyder's narrative sequence thus abruptly eschews right angles in favour of emphasizing the oblique lines provided by the balustrade, window-frames, and roof of the lower level within a stationary Dutch tilt (see Figure 3). The staircase, first framed as we view Louise inspecting the upper floor of the *pension*, now provides the film's most explicit action space, evoking Susan Hayward's description of objects in poetic realism that are endowed with "symbolism" to quite a degree [...] and resonate throughout the film, measuring the state of degeneration as the protagonist responds to their recurrence within the film'.<sup>34</sup> The symbolic disorientation of domestic space represented by this three-point arrangement of the characters on the staircase explicitly illustrates the incompatibility of Pierre's love for Nelly with Louise's sexually ambivalent feelings towards her son. The framing of discordant, oblique lines behind and in front of the characters as they advance towards Pierre and Nelly's room emphasizes that the latter's arrival, far from fulfilling the melodramatic home's role of 'imaginatively exclud[ing] the flux of public life from the reassuring stability of familial relations',<sup>35</sup> precludes the restoration of social order to the Noblets' compromised domestic space.

*Love objects and dead fathers: searching for the symbolic home*

Evoking Landy's understanding of maternal melodrama, Feyder's framing of interior decor illustrates permutations of the mother–son relationship, explicitly revealing that Louise's resentment of Nelly's arrival is a product not only of Louise's sexual desire, but also of her maternal protectiveness, which motivates her vain endeavour to re-establish a coherent symbolic home. The latter aspect of Louise's dual set of anxieties is inscribed in the pictures of the young Pierre that adorn the boarding house. One key example features in the Noblets' office after Louise has tested Nelly's loyalty by informing her that she may eventually inherit the boarding house. When Nelly declines Louise's offer with transparently contemptuous ingratitude, Louise beckons her to view two photographs placed on a desk in the office including one of Pierre as a child (see Figure 4). Anne Higonnet writes that the practice of accumulating snapshots of childhood performs

a serial function, one by one warding off the inevitability of loss. [...] We fend off death's terrors, snapshot by snapshot, pretending to save the moment, halt time, preserve childhood intact. We never succeed, of course, so we have to keep on trying.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>33</sup> McCann, Ripping *Open the Set*, p. 179.

<sup>34</sup> Susan Hayward, *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 185.

<sup>35</sup> Holohan, 'All That Is Solid', p. 254.

<sup>36</sup> Anne Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1998), p. 95.



**Figure 5** Feyder's *mise en scène* foreshadows Pierre's increasingly tense presence as a disputed object of Nelly and Louise's desire. Image courtesy of TFi International.



**Figure 6** The dying Pierre, as beheld by Louise. Image courtesy of TFi International.

Louise's practice also corresponds with Elsaesser's description of stories in American melodrama as 'the characteristic attempt of the bourgeois household to make time stand still, immobilise life and fix forever domestic property relations as [...] a bulwark against the more disturbing sides in human nature'.<sup>37</sup> Louise's photograph, aligning with the views expressed by Higonnet and Elsaesser, preserves an illusion of the restored symbolic family by illustrating the innocent state that she associates with her son and delusively effacing her memory of the young Pierre's own poor academic performance and growing interest in gambling, each of which is already obvious during the scenes set in 1924. Paradoxically, this photograph simultaneously indicates the hopeless elusiveness of her lost symbolic home. By extension, Louise's positioning — between Nelly, now off-screen, and the photograph — registers Louise's protectiveness and the women's mutual understanding that they share the same object of affection. Interestingly, Feyder's *mise en scène* mirrors an earlier shot of Louise talking to Pierre during a breakfast in his apartment in Paris. Over his shoulder, a photograph of Nelly faces Louise and foreshadows Pierre's increasingly tense presence as a disputed object of each woman's desire (see Figure 5).

The film's final scene, in which the suicidal Pierre lies fatally poisoned on his bed, confirms that he exists as an image — a composite of his own decadent state and his mother's nostalgic projections — and, by extension, that Louise's maternal relationship with her son constantly inflects her romantic desires. The shots of Louise looking at Pierre before he requests a kiss from Nelly are intercut with two close-ups of his tranquil profile. These close-ups are illuminated by a controlled, low-key light that lends Pierre an ethereal quality, far removed from the degradation that progressively consumes him over the course of the narrative (see Figure 6). Thus, even as Louise beholds him in the film's closing moments, it is apparent that her sexual desire for him is still tempered by her maternally protective endeavour to expel Nelly and to preserve his imagined innocence.

The factors underlying Louise's complex relationship with Pierre are illuminated by Landy's description of maternal melodramas as narratives that 'thrive on the dramatization of the female's attachment to an inappropriate love object, as in the frequent instance of the son who replaces the dead father as the object of desire'.<sup>38</sup> Both Landy and *Pension Mimosas* indicate the role of husbands in the emotional development of the female protagonist and the potential emergence of her illicit desire for her son. Louise's relationship with the adult Pierre is, on the one hand, a product of her desexualized relationship with Gaston. On the other hand, it is also a consequence of Gaston's failure to establish patriarchal order within the boarding house in a manner that could inspire Pierre to enter symbolic order. Crucially, Freud asserts that a boy suffers trauma upon discovering the mother's castration and must eliminate the 'feminine' in himself — precisely

<sup>37</sup> Elsaesser, 'Tales of Sound and Fury', pp. 61–62.

<sup>38</sup> Landy, 'Psychoanalysis, Gender, and Race', in *Imitations of Life*, p. 265.

because it implies castration — and identify with his father. In the absence of a figure capable of operating as a husband and father, Louise is obliged to compensate for a radical Oedipal fissure that she cannot legitimately fill, and which prohibits Pierre's entry into the phallogocentric symbolic order.

The narrative clearly demonstrates that Gaston's shortcomings as an adoptive father problematize Pierre's Oedipal trajectory and consequently reinforce Louise's maternal protectiveness. Gaston, who trains croupiers and monitors proceedings in a nearby casino for a living, leaves Louise the responsibility of disciplining Pierre when necessary. As both a child and an adult, Pierre absorbs his adoptive father's experience of gambling, but fails to direct it towards a secure living. Gaston's failure to ensure Pierre's passage to male adulthood is clear when, following Pierre's return to the boarding house, he and Gaston share one of their few lengthy conversations. Attempting to exhibit an authoritative attitude, Gaston states that 'un accord entre nous est essentiel à mes yeux'. However, Gaston's attempt to project a serious demeanour is undermined by his frustrated gestures and expressions, and by his naïve susceptibility to Pierre's flattery. Pierre pretends to agree with Gaston's assertion, stating that he feels he needs to learn from 'l'expérience d'un homme aux idées larges', citing concerns including children and women. Of the latter, Pierre remarks, 'tu devrais les connaître!' Pierre is merely flattering Gaston with a view to masking the disingenuousness of his request for advice. Evidently charmed by Pierre's apparent respect, Gaston assures him: 'Tu sais, si tu as besoin d'un conseil, eh même d'un . . . eh même d'un . . . d'un petit service . . . Mais pas devant marraine! Entr'hommes!' In this single exchange, the deluded Gaston has not only accepted caricatures of both himself and the faltering male relationship that binds them, but has also undermined Louise's efforts to secure Pierre's future as a self-sufficient member of patriarchal society. Pierre's unwillingness to identify with Gaston is evidenced by his lingering grief for his biological father, who claims his son in 1924, announcing that he and Pierre will be going to Belgium to live with his brother. Pierre never discloses how they fared in the company of his uncle, nor does he clarify his biological father's murky fate. The adult Pierre inadvertently emphasizes his personal dislocation by offering Brabant (also the name of a province in Belgium) as his surname when later selling a car in Nice, whose proceeds he fraudulently gambles away before his untimely death.

Gaston's unconvincing remarks also underscore his own desexualized relationship with Louise and his role in catalysing her forbidden desire for Pierre. After all, the stocky, bumbling Gaston sleeps in a separate bed and does not conform to the image of patriarchal control enforced by the broader corpus of French cinema of the 1930s. Although Gaston, unlike Landy's vision of the 'dead father' in maternal melodrama, is physically alive, he appears utterly oblivious to Louise's rejuvenated appearance within their desexualized albeit mutually respectful relationship, and foreshadows the father figure of 1950s American melodrama who, in David N. Rodowick's analysis, 'functioned solely to throw the system into turmoil by his absences [. . .], his weaknesses, his neglects', by existing as 'an empty centre

where the authority of the law fails'.<sup>39</sup> In doing so, Gaston remains partly responsible for the emergence of Louise's sexual desire for Pierre, and his short-sightedness justifies the far-reaching implications of Nelly's succinct complaint to Pierre regarding his relationship with Louise: 'Elle me déteste, ta marraine, parce qu'elle t'aime. Elle est amoureuse de toi . . . ce qu'un homme peut être aveugle quand-même . . .'.

*'Elle t'aime trop et moi, pas assez': performing and sublimating female sexual desire*

The triangular relationship between Louise, the set, and framing clearly illustrates the factors conditioning Louise's repressed yearning in ways that align with major theorizations of melodrama. Yet it is impossible to interpret Louise's own perspective on the quasi-incestuous aspect of her *amour protecteur* without addressing the ways in which she expresses her sexually ambivalent desire through symbolically rich costumes, an element of *mise en scène* which, according to Mulvey and Williams, operates as a complex point of orientation for spectators of melodrama.<sup>40</sup> During the aforementioned conversation between Louise and Nelly, Louise informs Nelly that she was once a professional opera-singer and shows her a publicity photo taken during her performance in a production of *La traviata*. This information underscores the importance of calculated performance to Louise's expression of her feelings towards Pierre in a sublimated form within the space of the boarding house. The dress that Louise wears in this scene may seem conventional and of little importance to the narrative, especially since she has already worn the same outfit in the first scene from 1934, when we see her arranging designs for the boarding house, and she is far more lavishly dressed in the photograph taken during her performance in *La traviata*. Interestingly, however, as Louise stands in front of Pierre's picture, it becomes evident that the outfit she is currently wearing and the clothes worn by the young Pierre share a maritime style. This commonality emphasizes that Louise is unable to assume an autonomous identity and to suppress her sense of maternal duty, which has endured her son's ten-year absence from *Les Mimosas* and his inevitable (albeit problematized) transition to adulthood. Thus, Louise's most conventional clothes operate as an expression of the oppressive confines of her world, recalling Elsaesser's assertion that characters navigating the stifling worlds that structure melodramas are isolated from any liberating *deus ex machina* and therefore 'constantly look inwards, at each other and themselves. The characters are, so to speak, each other's sole referent, there is no world outside to be acted on, no reality that could be defined or assumed unambiguously.'<sup>41</sup> This aspect of Louise's character is accentuated by a contrasting swimsuit worn by Nelly at the pool adjoining the boarding house, which bears Nelly's name and emphasizes her comparatively strong sense of individuality.

<sup>39</sup> David N. Rodowick, 'Madness, Authority and Ideology: The Domestic Melodrama of the 1950s', in *Home Is Where the Heart Is*, ed. by Gledhill, pp. 268–80 (p. 278).

<sup>40</sup> Mulvey, 'Notes on Sirk and Melodrama', pp. 77–78; Williams, 'Something Else besides a Mother', pp. 309–14.

<sup>41</sup> Elsaesser, 'Tales of Sound and Fury', p. 56.



Although neither of these two examples of Louise's attire illustrates her sexual desire for Pierre, they both valuably emphasize her close attention to details of her personal appearance and are therefore key to our understanding of how such elements illustrate the one-time professional performer's ambivalent expression of her sexual desire for her son. The self-consciously performative aspect of Louise's behaviour is particularly evident in the scenes bookended by Pierre's return to the boarding house and his eventual departure to join Nelly once more. Shortly after Pierre's arrival, Louise returns from a trip to town, where she has acquired a new dress and a new hairstyle, each of which belongs to a series of ambiguous but highly suggestive costume-changes. When Louise meets Pierre for tea in the following scene, she has already reverted to wearing her old dress, and wears a matronly outfit when Pierre later escorts Nelly to the boarding house for the first time. Later, in the moments prior to Pierre's final departure from the boarding house, Louise poignantly wears her most revealing costume, which incorporates a low-cut sleeveless blouse and youthful head-dress, the latter clearly inspired by one worn by a young parachutist (Arletty) whom she encounters in Paris during her first effort to locate her grown son in Paris.

Louise's *rajeunissement* permits her to express her romantic desire for her adopted son non-verbally while placing her, as Gili suggests, 'dans la disposition d'esprit de pouvoir tomber amoureuse';<sup>42</sup> it equally supports Nelly's own indignant declaration to Pierre that 'elle t'aime trop et moi, pas assez'. Louise's alternation between conservative and liberal outfits also confirms that she is still reluctant to display erotically codified clothing to Pierre and Nelly, even though she desires to demonstrate her attractiveness in Pierre's presence. The narrative offers three interlinked reasons for Louise's ambivalent behaviour: first, her private realization of the questionable morality of her feelings for Pierre; second, her internal conflict between these amorous inclinations and her sense of maternal protectiveness; and third, her awareness of the potential for others to observe her socially prohibited desire within the publicly visible domestic space of the boarding house. Thus, her clothes reflect tensions and oscillations rather than any clear transition from one outlook to another, as she struggles to discern and express her own subjectivity within the compromised domestic space of the *pension*.

The ambivalence expressed by Louise's costumes is enhanced by their interplay with decor and characterization in the film's final scene, after Louise finds the gravely ill Pierre in his room and beckons Gaston to leave and call a doctor. The camera frames Louise approaching the bedridden Pierre as her coat falls from her shoulders to the ground. The ailing Pierre, hallucinating, confuses Louise with Nelly, and asks her to kiss him. Louise, pretending to be Nelly, places a kiss on Pierre's lips before he dies. On the one hand, through the expulsion of the father figure and the provocative removal of the mother figure's outermost clothes, this sequence crystallizes the symbolic signification underlying the suggestive costume design that features throughout the narrative. On the

<sup>42</sup> Gili, 'Pension Mimosas', p. 164.

other hand, Louise never explicitly declares her love to Pierre, and the specific nature of her emotions remains elusive in this scene despite the saliently codified removal of her coat prior to their embrace. It is likely this ambiguity that prompted Roger Leenhardt to declare:

[Feyder] devient embarrassé, inhabile à rassembler, à conclure. Ou, plus exactement encore [...] l'auteur dès qu'il cesse de peindre pour créer, semble ne plus pouvoir se traduire, comme si son effort de synthèse avait du même coup épuisé ses qualités d'analyste.<sup>43</sup>

As no scene in the film simplifies or conclusively discerns Louise's true feelings, Leenhardt's frustration is understandable. Yet the narrative's refusal to reduce the factors motivating Louise's act to a single concern constitutes the precise richness of the entire narrative (and of this particular scene) because it provocatively confronts the protagonist with a dramatic interrogation of the ethics of maternal duty: Louise's kiss may, to some degree, satisfy her own romantic desire for Pierre; conversely, their embrace may also be viewed as a performative act that responds, albeit problematically, to the sense of maternal solicitude that has provoked her antipathy towards Nelly in the previous scenes, just as it has encouraged Louise to support Pierre financially during his decade-long absence from *Les Mimosas*.

*'Ce qu'un homme peut être aveugle quand-même. . .': contexts and intertexts*

It is important to emphasize that, although *Pension Mimosas* foregrounds the unviability of Louise's attempts to recrystallize her visions of Pierre as a child, the film refrains from attacking her legitimacy as a woman, a wife, or a mother. Nor does the narrative proffer a socio-ethical interdiction of Louise's amorous sentiments, even if audiences — like Louise herself — would be unwilling to condone the realization of her romantic desire. The film's consistently sympathetic viewpoint on Louise's complex relationship with her son is bolstered by the narrative's appropriation of two sources of cultural representation. The first of these is the challenging moral shading provided by the melodramatic mode of address which, as Brooks reminds us, problematizes monolithic categorizations of heroes and villains, thus lending full scope to struggles and transgressions invoked by 'desires, fears, values and identities which lie beneath the surface of the publicly acknowledged world'.<sup>44</sup> The second source in question is the range of literary and theatrical texts with which the film's characters and *mise en scène* implicitly invite comparison. Feyder's sympathy for Louise aligns closely with Racine's version of the Phaedra myth: neither glorifying Louise's choices nor effacing her morally questionable desires, the film focuses, in the best tradition of Racine, on a heroine '[qui] n'est ni tout à fait coupable, ni tout à fait innocente',<sup>45</sup> contrasting with Seneca's manipulative Phaedra, whom Albert Gérard describes a 'thoroughly evil woman' who 'yields to her illicit desires despite her better

<sup>43</sup> Roger Leenhardt, 'Pension Mimosas', *Esprit*, 3 (March 1935), pp. 981–83 (p. 982).

<sup>44</sup> Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, p. 33.

<sup>45</sup> Jean Racine, 'Préface', in *Phèdre* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), pp. 7–11 (p. 7).

knowledge'.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, whereas Racine grafted the character of Aricie onto the traditional cast in order to provide 'an image of innocent love as a foil to Phèdre' (ibid., p. 92), Nelly's malice provides a decidedly immoral counterpoint to Louise's repressed sexuality and maternal protectiveness.

The narrative's sympathetic characterization of Louise is further reinforced by the set design's implicit allusion to Zola's *La Curée*. The glass structure of the *pension*'s upper floor provides an additional intertextual point of reference, evoking the *serre chaude* where Renée and Maxime consummate their relationship and, by extension, sympathetically positioning Louise's plight in contrast with Renée's ignoble self-degradation.<sup>47</sup> Louise's status as a victim is further underscored by her very name, which recalls Zola's Louise de Mareuil, whose 'laideur vicieuse et charmante' and 'mémoire déjà pleine d'une vie sale' are the product of her now-deceased mother's indulgence in carnal vice, but are overlooked by Maxime in favour of her substantial dowry and the inevitability of her untimely death.<sup>48</sup> Bazin may well have had *Pension Mimosas* in mind when, writing on what he perceived as Roberto Rossellini and Vittorio de Sica's manifest love for their characters, he wrote '[q]uoique à partir d'une sensibilité très différente, et avec un souci formel très visible, un Jacques Feyder en France appartenait aussi à cette famille de réalisateurs dont la seule méthode paraît être de servir honnêtement leur sujet'.<sup>49</sup>

Although such intertextual references enrich our interpretation of *Pension Mimosas*, they do not explain the reasons underlying Feyder's audacious mobilization of a sub-genre and gendered perspective that were both under-represented in French cinema of the 1930s. The creation of stories that portrayed contemporary France was a priority for both Feyder and Spaak who, according to Spaak himself, shared a common interest in illustrating 'les hommes et les femmes de notre temps, aux prises avec des conflits qui nous sont quotidiens, dans des décors qui nous sont familiers, en leur faisant tenir un langage copié sur celui dont nous usons tous les jours'.<sup>50</sup> To this end, Feyder and Spaak used to open a map in order to consider the various stories and destinies that could emerge from particular locales. As Spaak recollected: 'Ce jeu nous amusait et, partis de Besançon, nous avons parcouru la France dans tous les sens pour terminer le voyage à Menton. C'est de cette dernière étape qu'est née *Pension Mimosa* [sic]' (ibid.). Given Feyder and Spaak's shared concern for everyday life, it is important to contextualize the film's sympathetic perspective on Louise's sexual desire within contemporary representations of gender in French cinema and the socio-economic gender divides

<sup>46</sup> Albert S. Gérard, *The Phaedra Syndrome: Of Shame and Guilt in Drama* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993), p. 124.

<sup>47</sup> For an analysis of the greenhouse as an intertextual motif in the films of Carné, Feyder, and Renoir, see Barry Nevin, 'Dans la serre: Framing the Greenhouse in *Le Jour se lève* (1939) and *La Règle du jeu* (1939)', *French Cultural Studies*, 29 (2018), 138–54.

<sup>48</sup> Émile Zola, *La Curée* (Paris: Gallimard, 2014), p. 154.

<sup>49</sup> André Bazin, 'De Sica, metteur en scène', in *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* (Paris: Cerf, 2008), pp. 311–29 (p. 313).

<sup>50</sup> Charles Spaak, 'Le Scénario', in *Le Cinéma par ceux qui le font*, ed. by Denis Marion (Paris: Arthème Fayard, 1949), pp. 100–15 (p. 108).

that produced them. Situated in relation to the patterns of gendered relations elucidated by Vincendeau, Burch, and Sellier, their portrayal of socially transgressive love within claustrophobic confines stands out from French cinema of the 1930s as a refreshing exploration of female desire: Feyder courageously rejects a narrative paradigm that provided the existing French patriarchal social order with a crucial axis of subject construction. Instead, he challenges female oppression in 1930s France through the melodrama's subversive system of representation and through Louise who, by expressing her illicit romantic desire for Pierre, corresponds with Gledhill's description of the woman in melodrama as a subversive agent of female counter-discourses.<sup>51</sup> Interestingly, this was the second of four sexually branded roles played by Rosay during the 1930s, including her tarot-reading bar-owner in Feyder's previous film, *Le Grand Jeu*, the brothel-owner and ageing lover of a younger gentleman besotted with her own daughter in Carné's first feature-length film, *Jenny* (1936), and as the older object of affection of her daughter's suitor in *Le Fauteuil 47* (dir. by Fernand Rivers, 1937). Of them all, *Pension Mimosas* arguably remains the most audacious, not merely because it portrays dysfunctional patriarchal structures, but because its intricate *mise en scène* and nuanced, female-centred script confronted male viewers with an emphatically maternal perspective on quasi-incestuous desire which generally eluded spectators of French cinema during the 1930s.

This article has sought to illustrate three ways in which social, cultural, and aesthetic elements of *Pension Mimosas* challenge tendencies in gender representation that contemporary viewers had learned to expect from French films. First of all, theorizations of narrative, stylistic, and iconographic elements featuring in American melodrama, most notably those advanced by Elsaesser, Landy, and Holohan, encourage us to consider the ways in which elements of decor, costume design, and framing contribute to our understanding of evolutions in Louise's relationship with the breached boundary between public and private space inside the symbolic home. Secondly, Louise's quasi-incestuous desire for her son is partly the result of the pre-existing absence of a stabilizing patriarchal figure within the Noblet family unit. And thirdly, sympathy for Louise's predicament is reinforced by the narrative's intertextual dialogue with other appropriations of the Phaedra myth, most notably those by Racine and Zola. The analysis supporting each of these core proposals demonstrates that *Pension Mimosas* inscribes patterns of domesticity, maternity, and femininity which counteract the limited traditional paradigms that served patriarchal order, mapping a space that the golden age of French cinema had largely sealed off.

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<sup>51</sup> Gledhill, 'The Melodramatic Field', p. 37.