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In 1900 film was a nascent medium. The academic scholarship that would, some fifty years later, validate the distinction between film and the other arts (particularly film and the theater) was clearly not yet part of how film was imagined, publicized, and exhibited. Indeed, the idea that film offered a vision of a transparent and natural world, that it was a self-sustaining and independent art form, and that it (among all the arts) was uniquely “popular” had therefore yet to be circulated and promoted as accepted fact. What I think an investigation of film in 1900 can accordingly reveal are the possibilities the medium once suggested and the challenges it once enabled. Instead of going back to find proof of film’s early ability to relay narrative or to shock us with its capacity to move and have things move, I therefore want to explore the ways in which film was an integrative technology that projected different ways of looking at and thinking about the world. To do this I will turn to Sarah Bernhardt, a figure usually sidelined as “too theatrical” in film history, and her short film Hamlet made for Paul Decauville’s “Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre” at the Paris Exposition of 1900.

As just one film presented in a program that featured other stage stars in famous roles—Coquelin the Elder in Cyrano de Bergerac and Felicity Mallet in L’Enfant prodigue, for example—Hamlet is not a film that has been addressed in any depth by film scholars. It is the “Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre” itself that has received some attention and which is today understood to be an early yet failed effort to join recorded sound to film. What I want to return to in this essay, however, is the idea that these short films were experimental in nature, presenting known stage stars in new and challenging contexts. My aim is not to argue that Bernhardt’s Hamlet has
It was glorious because of the official recognition that it brought to the role of the Lumière brothers and their invention; because of the individual spectacles, new and varied, that appeared there; and because of the vast and varied public that it attracted. Nevertheless, at the same time, it was marginal. After the event had run its course, the palace and pavilions were, for the most part, destroyed and the center of a momentarily transfigured Paris was returned to its previous state.3

Returning to Bernhardt’s Hamlet and the Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre, it can be suggested that this is Toute’s parenthesis in microcosm; that this was an episode without immediate consequence, yet an episode that was both glorious and marginal. It was glorious because it formed part of the first major “publicization” of a nascent art form that would, in its later development, join sound with action, performance with technology, and the star with an international audience. It was marginal because it was a program appendage that did not boast huge crowds and that would later be characterized as a failed experiment in recorded and synchronized sound.4

The Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre’s slippage between terms—marginality and centrality, the past and the future, a local and an international audience—is linked also to the fact that it was Clément Maurice, the projectionist of the first public Lumière showings at the Grand Café in 1896, who served as projectionist for the program. As an individual who is famously associated with film “proper,” yet who was nevertheless involved in a project that drew upon the renown of the stage star, Maurice makes explicit the early and productive exchange between theater and film. It is in the spirit of this exchange that Hamlet represents an interval—a break or intermission—that joins the image of the past (the legitimate stage of the nineteenth century) to the conjecture of what it might become (the cinema). The cinema that Hamlet anticipates is, I would argue, a cinema that celebrates performance and derives obvious pleasure from the blurring of disciplinary boundaries.

This emphasis on the blurring of boundaries was implicit in the posters used to advertise the Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre. In these, a woman stands facing forward, her right hand pointing a cane diagonally downward and her left hand holding aloft an unfurled banner that lists the featured attractions. In one poster (reproduced on the cover of David Robinson’s Music of the Shadows: The Use of Musical Accompaniment with Silent Films and in Toute’s article), the woman leans on a cinématographe and the cane points down to a phonograph that rests besides her feet. Bernhardt
is the opening attraction, followed by the likes of M. COQUELIN Aîné, M. Victor MAUREL de l'Opéra Comique, Mme. REICHENBERG de la Comédie Française, M. Louis MUREL de la Scala, and Mme RÉJANE. As the names and titles suggest, this program not only joined the stage star to the reproductive media of film and phonograph but also drew on the range of theater available to a contemporary audience (the boulevard theater, the classical theater, the variety theater, and opera). In another poster, reproduced in Georges Sadoul's *Histoire générale du cinéma*, the phonograph and cinématographe are absent and the woman leans against a wooden sideboard. Again, she points, cane in hand, to a list of feature attractions. Bernhardt is here listed in bold, providing a final climax to FOOTIT et CHOCOLAT, COSSIRA, Melle. Félicia MALLET, LITTLE TICH, POL-LIN and COQUELIN Aîné. In both posters, the woman, costume, and cane remain identical.

While these advertisements foreground Bernhardt's participation in the Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre, it is the woman depicted on the poster who best illustrates Bernhardt's importance to the program. The image of this woman, with her pointed black shoes, yellow dress, rounded feathered hat, and diagonally held cane is almost identical to François Flameng's *Portrait of Sarah Bernhardt as Tosca*. Reproduced in Sotheby's 1995 *Arcade Auction Catalogue of Old Master and 19th Century European Painting, Drawing and Sculpture*, Flameng's image has been dated 1908. Whether this has been wrongly dated or is a later reproduction that capitalizes on an earlier image is unclear. What is certain, however, is that contemporary audiences, familiar with the visual cues of Bernhardt's Tosca, would have identified the actress and the role. As Gerda Taranow explains in *Sarah Bernhardt: The Art within the Legend*, Tosca was the first role in which Bernhardt used a cane. This prop was, accordingly, foregrounded in sketches and paintings of the actress. Bernhardt's pointed shoes and dress in the advertisement similarly coincide with descriptions of her appearance in Tosca: "From her head to her toes, it is a century that, on the stage, walks before us. There is no detail that is indifferent and the shoes are as important as the costume. . . . Everything, from the pointed Empire shoes in green satin embroidered by palm leaves to the mix of black Peking satin and yellow is impeccably authentic."

That it was specifically Bernhardt who was used to publicize the "talking cinema" at the Exposition reveals the way in which she was seen as a mediator between the old and the new, the past and the present, and the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As an actress in a role that had very recently been brought by Puccini to the operatic stage (Puccini's Tosca debuted in January 1900), Bernhardt also highlights an exchange between the performative arts. What is significant here is the fact that, from any number of roles, Bernhardt is depicted as Florida Tosca. Tosca, an Italian opera singer, was a figure created by playwright Georges Sardou in a work expressly written for Bernhardt and first performed in November 1887. With her identity associated with an art form (the opera) that encouraged spectacular display and that enabled Sardou to indulge his penchant for dramatic action, his Tosca is an excessive woman whose identity is inseparable from that of performance. This emphasis on spectacle suggests that the films, like Bernhardt's Tosca beforehand, would appeal and be legible to a broad and international audience. Sliding between categories—Tosca was Italian but performed by a French actress, an opera diva characterized in terms of dramatic gesture, and a figure from the eighteenth century
introduced to the nineteenth century—Tosca brings her mediation of the phonograph, cinematograph, and live performance to other terms and categories. As a play whose climax is the moment in which Tosca watches her lover die, unwittingly believing that his death is being staged, Tosca similarly indicates the possibility of an exchange between the real and the represented, the event and the performance. This, in turn, suggests that the films presented by the Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre might be equivalent (if not more spectacular) to the theatrical productions of the plays themselves.

This slippage between terms and emphasis on the spectacular and performative nature of film is highlighted, quite obviously, by the fact that the poster presents Bernhardt as an Italian diva introducing herself cross-dressed as Hamlet, the Danish Prince. This was not Lorenzozio, the Florentine Hamlet of Alfred de Musset, where Bernhardt initiated the new acting category of the premier travesti rôle. Nor, too, was it l'Aiglon, the "white Hamlet" of Edmond Rostand, which was enjoying enormous success after its debut on March 15, 1900. Instead, it was the "black Hamlet" of William Shakespeare. Opening at the Théâtre Sarah Bernhardt on May 20, 1899, and commissioned by Bernhardt herself, this play demonstrates the control Bernhardt held as manager, producer, and actress in her own theater. As Tarasow relays:

In her capacity as producer, Bernhardt requested Marcel Schwob and Eugène Morand to prepare a new translation of the play. When she performed the Schwob-Morand text, she was the first in the French theatre ever to have offered the public a translation rather than an adaptation of Shakespeare's tragedy... Gone were the rhyming alexandrine couplets used in the stage adaptations that preceded the Bernhardt Hamlet, and gone were the alterations in plot that had characterized theatrical adaptations of Hamlet since 1879. In place of previous adaptations was a prose translation based upon scholarly sources in English, French, and German, and presented with so few excisions that the performed text was fuller than any of those used by then contemporary English Hamlets.

It is interesting to note that the Ghost, the gravediggers, the players, and the fencing match had appeared in French versions of Hamlet only within the preceding fifty years, and that it was not until 1886 that Hamlet would first die on the French stage. What must be taken into consideration, therefore, is the very originality of Bernhardt's commission. Not dictated by questions of decorum and sensibility (which had seen the exclusion of these scenes), and based on an unadapted English text, Bernhardt's Hamlet is best conceived of as an intervention, if not a challenge, to French classical drama. Evidently, while Bernhardt as Tosca was endorsing a spectacular and performative cinema, she was conscious of the polemical and political nature of spectacle and performance.

Although the phonographic cylinders for the Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre's Hamlet are no longer extant (and while they apparently only consisted of the clashing of swords), it is significant that Decauville's program challenged the sounding of film in much the same manner that Bernhardt's staged Hamlet challenged the "sounding" of the stage. A dual challenge might therefore be heard: on the one hand, there was a disavowal of the silence of silent film, on the other, a refusal of the traditional form of the dodecasyllabic couplet. It is therefore fitting that it is Bernhardt as Tosca, an excessive and expressive opera singer, who introduces herself as Hamlet in the Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre's program, since this was a forum in which sound did indeed begin to challenge the traditional limits of a text.

In his introduction to Hamlet, Schwob would explain that his aim was to capture the flavor and imagery of Shakespeare's language and that his removal of the rhyming alexandrine couplets was based on linguistic criteria and textual analysis alone. Schwob's discussion contained, however, evidence of another theatrical challenge: surveying the pre-Shakespearian accounts of the play, he argued that Shakespeare used a 1570 French translation by Françoise de Belleforest of a thirteenth-century Saxo Grammaticus chronicle as inspiration for his Hamlet. As Romy Heylen notes in Translation, Poetics, and the Stage: Six French Hamlets, this positing of Old French literary models and practices as antecedents to Shakespeare's text was an attempt to reclaim Hamlet not only philologically but culturally as well. In an effort to preserve meaning and form, Schwob and Morand also translated Hamlet into the language of the period corresponding to the source text—they provided, in effect, a historical French equivalent of Elizabethan English. They inserted into this allusions to late fifteenth and sixteenth, and early seventeenth-century French literature and thus "seemed to be attempting to reappropriate (at least in part) La Tragique Histoire d'Hamlet back into the native, oral tradition whence they believed it came... Although they 'historicized' the linguistic and textual/narrative material of the source text, they decided to 'naturalize' all space and culture-bound elements in Shakespeare's dramatic text, thus striking a blow for French literary imperialism."

It is within the context of these claims that the reception of Bernhardt's Hamlet abroad might be situated. While advance tickets of the production
would sell so rapidly in London that the number of performances jumped
from eight to sixteen, and while the prices at the Adelphi Theatre (and later
in New York) would—and could—be unusually high, criticisms were nev-
ertheless directed at the French prose. Exemplary of these is a review in the
London Times which, while recognizing that Schwob and Morand had
provided Bernhardt with an "entirely new version of the play," noted that
"Of course their prose sounds bade after the magic phrasing and the mu-
sic of Shakespeare's lines. There is even a touch of the ludicrous to the
English ears in such a matter-of-fact rendering." An instance of this
"touch of the ludicrous" is the Wormwood/Absinthe translation. As The
Times would again note: "It has a very curious effect... to find Hamlet's
exclamation in the play scene ("Wormwood! Absinthe!") turned into
"Absinthe! Absinthe!") with its inevitable suggestion of the cafe." John
Hansen, writing in the American National Magazine, would levy the same
criticism:

To an English ear accustomed to the flow of Shakespeare's verse the prose ver-
sion sounds rough, unadorned and insufficient, not to say ridiculous, in spots
where the rendering is particularly matter-of-fact, as, for example, "The funeral
baked meats did solidly furnish forth the marriage tables," converted into "Le
roti des funerailles a ete servi froid aux tables de noces." But the expression,
bordering upon farce comedy, is born where Hamlet exclaims in the play scene:
"Wormwood! Wormwood!" which the Frenchman turned into a cry of "Abs-
inthe! Absinthe!"

Schwob and Morand were not ignorant of this question of cultural
context. Predicting such a response, they explained that:

We translated old mole by vieille tasse and wormwood by absinthe. To the English
imagination, these words conjure up the Boulevard, its cafes, and its passers-by.
But in French literature, thank God, a mole remains a mole and absinthe a bitter
herb. ... In a few years when apéritifs will no longer be fashionable and when
our argot will have changed, even in England, tasse and absinthe will accurately
convey what they are supposed to represent sub specie aberrationis.

Such fidelity to the original text resulted, clearly, in an extremely long play.
Indeed, the French premiere was to last for over five hours. While 885 lines
and three tableaux were cut for the London production, reviewers would
still relay how "the wag in the gallery who whistled 'We won't go home
till morning' during the last entracte was felt to have neatly expressed the
feeling of the house." This length would enable the inclusion of scenes
never before seen on the French stage (i.e., the dumb show) while it also
attested to the time it took to arrange the elaborate scenography. Such a
production, best characterized in terms of operatic opulence, "required
more shifts of scenery than any of the elaborately designed spectacles that
Sardou had written for Sarah Bernhardt."

The length of Bernhardt's production and, of course, evidence of most of
this elaborate scenography, is absent from the Phono-Cinema-Theatre's
Hamlet. In this context, Bernhardt's film is indeed a veritable interval: at
once part of a series of short films, it is also section to its larger, staged
"whole." Perhaps more importantly, the film presents—in compressed
form—visible evidence of the challenge Bernhardt's Hamlet levied at the
traditional performance of the play. Relevant here is the fact that Bern-
hardt's film not only staged Hamlet's death but provided document to
Bernhardt's introduction of the standing death. This death, itself vignette
to that which had been elaborated on the Boulevard stage, was later fea-
tured in Bernhardt's longer running narrative films La Dame aux Camelias
(1911) and Queen Elizabeth. Here the Phono-Cinema-Theatre was again
poised between past and future: allusion to a projected cinema, it was also
witness to that which Bernhardt had already performed on the popular
stage.

It is within this context of Hamlet providing introduction to a spec-
tacularly conceived narrative cinema that the filming of the duel scene
might be considered. This scene, it should be remembered, contains both
the sword fight and Hamlet's death. Taranow contextualizes:

[Bernhardt] approached Hamlet from a background of two traditions—class-
cicism and the Boulevard—and undoubtedly recognized that although Shakes-
peare's dramaturgy had points of contact with both, it had greater affini-
ties with the popular tradition of the Boulevard. While the soliloquies of the Prince
of Denmark could satisfy any classicist who savoured the tirades of Corneille
and Racine, the Ghost, the mad scene, the grave yard scene, the fencing match,
and the death scene must have seemed like indigenous fare to audiences at the
Theater Historique where the Dumas-Meurice Hamlet was performed in 1847
and to those at the Port Saint-Martin where the Cressonnois-Samson Hamlet
was performed in 1886.

Like her standing death, Bernhardt's performance of this "indigenous
fare” stood in contrast to the customs of the legitimate stage. Struck by
the venom on Laetitia’s sword, Bernhardt relays the physical effect of her
wound with her back to the camera/audience. Bernhardt’s turn from clas-
sical tradition (where performers were traditionally told to face the audi-
cence) is thus given a visible inscription.23 This “turn” from tradition is evi-
dent, also, in Bernhardt’s eschewal of Hamlet’s traditional hat and plume.
While in the stage production Bernhardt was still costumed in a hat and
a blonde Fechterian wig, it is the continued absence of the black plume that
warrants attention. As Taranow, again describing the stage production,
explains:

The most significant aspect of the hat was that it lacked, intentionally, that
signature of Hamletism which was inextricably associated with the graveyard scene:
the black plume. Sarah Bernhardt’s entire production can be regarded as a repu-
tidation of the hamletic Prince of Delacroix, Manet, Baudelaire, Laforgue, Mal-
larmé, and Mounet-Sully, the absence of the black plume represented a literary
and theatrical statement. The unadorned hat announced boldly that this Hamlet
was liberated from the delicacy, pallor, pessimism, and irresolution which character-
ized the young Prince of Hamletism.26

Here it can be suggested that the absence of the plumed hat in the film
represents a negation of the romantic Hamlet’s possible presence. In other
words, Bernhardt’s Hamlet is unable even to carry the plume; his turn from
tradition is resolute, final.

This liberation of Hamlet from his traditional characterization as an
irresolute, melancholy prince saw the physicalization of that which was
contained in the Schwob-Morand text; Bernhardt’s performance was trans-
lative, it challenged what had been traditionally presented on the stage,
and its difference was ascribed national characteristics. For some, this rep-
resented a change for the better. Clement Scott, drama critic for the Daily
Telegraph, would therefore describe Bernhardt’s Hamlet as one of the “best”
(with the Briton, Charles Fletcher) since he displayed “that dominant note
of comedy, that rare vein of humour, that eccentric capriciousness which are in
the very veins of Hamlet.” Scott continued: “I begin to think, on the
whole, that the French temperament is better for the play of Hamlet as
acted by an audience than the philosophical German, the passionate Italian,
the alert American, or the phlegmatic Englishman.”27 The French An-
nales du Théâtre would similarly speak of Bernhardt’s performance in terms
of a “tour de force.”28 In England, however, Bernhardt’s Hamlet would be
regarded as “little less than an invasion of national property,” a “gain for
the French stage—not English,” and it was suggested that “the ardent, am-
bitious, and marvellous artist may be conigrated on her energy and her
pluck, and upon the financial result of an experiment in trading upon
English sheepliness and ignorance of and contempt for art.”29 John Hansen
would contextualize:

As Paris differs from London so does Madame Bernhardt’s Hamlet differ from
Shakespeare’s as it is understood by the English mind . . . The chief point of at-
tack in Madam Bernhardt’s performance, judged by British standards, is a lack of
proper philosophical melancholy, the critic forgetting that whereas the north-
man would say “To be or not to be” with tears in his voice, the southerner utters
the same sentiment with the same wondering heartache, but with a smile on his
lips. Few outside France understand the French smile or French philosophy; and
certainly one could hardly expect a Londoner to comprehend a Hamlet brood-
ing over the why and wherefore of creation unless he punctuated his reflections
with lugubrious tears and sighs. Therefore, the British critics while admitting
Bernhardt’s poetic, forceful, magnetic impersonation accuse her of frivolity in
her conception of the part, of creating “a pleasant, humorous, very gay prince,
who in happier circumstances would have been the life and soul of the court,”
to quote one high dramatic authority present at that important first night in
London.30

Like Schwob and Morand before her, Bernhardt would find it neces-
sary to defend and rationalize the changes she introduced to the produc-
tion. In a letter to the editor of the Daily Telegraph on June 16, 1899, she
would respond

I am reproached for being too lively . . . I know that Hamlet is a scholar . . . I am
reproached for not being stunned and frightened enough when I see the ghost;
but Hamlet went expressly to see the ghost, he went looking for it . . . I am
reproached for not being courteous enough to Polonius; but Shakespeare makes
Hamlet say all sorts of stupidities to Polonius . . . I am reproached for getting
too close to the king in the chapel scene; but if Hamlet wishes to kill the king, it
would be necessary for him to get close to him.31

Anglo-Saxon critics, castigating Bernhardt for her lack of restraint, tied
this to her “southern origins.” They also suggested that Bernhardt, as the
star performer, was unable to relay properly the subtlety of Hamlet’s char-
acter. Referring to the attention Bernhardt drew upon herself as Hamlet,
Hansen would note that "Ophelia flits in and out of Hamlet's life a pathetic shadow—no more; in fact all the other people are reduced to subsidiary themes woven about the grand motive of a star part." Somewhat more vitriolically, the Athenæum would comment, "it is a French euphemism, which we have to a certain extent localized, to speak of an actor as 'creating' a role. A juster or apter term would be manufacturing." As would be done by those critics who later dismissed Queen Elizabeth as "filmed theatre," Bernhardt's perforative excess here is cast as a foreign (and female) intrusion into the bounds of an established art form. Implicit in the criticism of this excess is the idea that the actress, in her encroaching age and narcissistic infirmity, was unable to appreciate what was appropriate to the stage and screen. That this excess was an interpretative tool used by Bernhardt to render dramatic character and to justify narrative development is therefore overlooked. That Bernhardt (as the producer, principal director, and performer of Hamlet) was also representative of a nascent twentieth-century feminism that would go on to claim the right to self-representation and the right to interpret things "differently" is similarly overlooked. Hence, just as Bernhardt has been largely excluded from film history, so too has performative excess been denied its productive meanings.

Bernhardt's decision to stage and film a play, which, evidently, boasted a long and productive history, indicates the extent to which she was prepared to take on the role of female antagonist. Even her choice of theatrical role (she chose, for instance, to perform Hamlet and not Ophelia) demonstrates Bernhardt's awareness that she was at once producer, director, and actor, and so very much involved in the interpretation and presentation of a spectacle. As Silvia Bigliazzi explains, "Hamlet is both actor and director, he is the first stage presence with an acute awareness of what it means to be staged." This awareness was articulated in the scene Bernhardt chose to record on film. Hamlet's fight with Laertes is, after all, a staged and performed fight, one that differs from Shakespeare's other duels—Edgar and Edmund in King Lear, Roderigo and Cassio in Othello, and Macduff and Macbeth in Macbeth. The bout is therefore introduced in the following manner: "His Majesty . . . sends to know if your pleasure hold to play with Laertes"; "the queen desires you to use some gentle courtesy to Laertes before you fall to a play"; "I . . . will this brother's wager frankly play." Even when the duel threatens to become "real" (i.e. Hamlet realizes the sword is poisoned), the tragedy is still contained within reference to its spectacular and dramatic nature: "give order that these bodies / High on a stage be placed to the view." "Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage." As Lisa Hopkins explains, "One of the primary effects of this insistent emphasis is to link this exhibition of fencing skills less with the anger-driven fights of the other tragedies than with the play-within-the-play of Hamlet itself . . . the staged rather than impromptu quality of the duel underscores a motif already very markedly present in the play: of the fragility of the line separating illusion from reality." This interconnection between illusion and reality is also implicit in the film's status as excerpt to a longer play and document to a live performance. As a film that features a fencing duel, Hamlet similarly oscillates between narrative performance and sporting display. Hopkins, addressing the status of the fencing duel on the stage, notes it is "specifically conceived of as a largely academic exercise of skill, designed to test the combatants and, incidentally, to provide a show of spectacular entertainment suitable for the amusement of the courtly audience (and, by implication, for the real one too)." Since the film does not include any other scenes and the Queen and King (Hamlet's attendant audience) are absent from view, Hamlet's duel presumes the engagement of a watching public. This focus on the fencing match, particularly in the context of a female protagonist, indicates the extent to which Bernhardt engaged in (and predicted) contemporary social trends.

By the mid-1880s in Paris, the display of fencing skills was a fashionable undertaking. Or, rather, fencing was fashionable for those "belles mondanées" with the money and leisure to pursue it. An article in La Vie Parisienne in 1884 that detailed the sport's burgeoning popularity explained that fencing reduced weight while it also provided a form of emancipation from traditional "feminine" pursuits:

The practice of different sports each day becomes more of a female Parisian custom. Their physique and their self-esteem are equally accounted for; the habit of exercise, especially masculine exercise, helps to put them in "good form," to make them more seductive. It is, at the same time, for them a sort of emancipation.

Of all the sports, the most favoured by our belle mondanées after horse riding is fencing. Nothing, in effect, is more efficient in combating this modern sickness of neurosis that they all more or less suffer, for accentuating the elegance of a slender waist, or for reducing the exaggerated opulence of the bodice. And then there is the vest, this provocative vest, a delicious cross-dress which is a thousand times more varied in cut and more becoming that the abominable "tank tops"
of the beach, its tightness allowing the pretty woman to effortlessly appear in all her serpentine grace while she fences with agility.39

What is interesting to note here is the attention being paid the female figure. Hence, while Bernhardt’s thinness had earlier prompted caustic comment (an 1880 publication was titled, for example, "Too Thin; or Skeleton Sara"40), by 1900 it was harbinger to a movement that would see increased attention paid to the smallness and suppleness of the female body. That Bernhardt would wear a mid-thigh length tunic in the film—and Pierre Magnier, as Laertes, a knee-length coat—is illustrative of this shift in the conception of the female figure. At a time when female costumes were, however, still often ankle-length, the exposure of Bernhardt’s legs was hardly innocent. As Taranow remarks: “Bernhardt’s costume appears to have remained the same throughout the play, with the length of her tunic extending only to mid-thigh so that her figure would seem elongated by the exposure of her legs.”41

What is also interesting is that the article in La Vie Parisienne finds “serpentine grace” desirable and travesti dress “delicious.” Again, this indicates changes in the approach to the female form. It also positions the actress as an anticipator of female trends. Explaining that fencing was first introduced via the actress on the stage, the actress becomes representative of a fashionable avant-garde.42 That Bernhardt was clearly part of this avant-garde—she was famous for her thinness, posed on the stage and in photographs with her body twisted into the tendrillic curves of the art nouveau, and had long fenced on the stage—is often overlooked. Particularly in film history, where she is characterized as a theatrical anachronism, Bernhardt’s challenge to the nineteenth century remains absent from discussion.

By the turn of the century (and thus in conjunction with Hamlet’s appearance), popular women’s presses would be detailing the availability of fencing classes in Paris. Fencing was also available, by this point, to working-class women. This fact parallels the idea that the staging of Hamlet’s duel and subsequent death was “indigenous fare.” The popular French journal Femina discussed the joining of fencing classes with the dance and music classes offered at “Mimi Pinson’s School” in Paris:

Everyone now knows the Charity of Mimi Pinson. Founded in 1900 thanks to the initiative and tenacity of M. Gustave Charpentier, the famous composer of music, this initially proposed to offer theater seats to the female workers of

Paris thanks to some particular donations and to the graciousness of the theater directors. But since this, the aim has been enlarged, and M. Charpentier has founded for the young female workers of our great Paris popular classes in music and dance to which, two months ago, was added fencing lessons…. He had first dreamt of gymnastics, but the delicate body of the female does not generally accommodate its brusque and uncoordinated movements well. These violent and strong exercises tend not only to deform women’s slender proportions, but also provoke all sorts of physical disorders, dizziness, flutters of the heart, etc.43

This practice of female fencing—and its accompanying rhetoric—was not unique to Paris. As an article in Harper’s Bazaar would explain:

Time was when this most graceful and healthful of exercises was confined entirely to the sterner sex. Now all this has changed. The fashionable woman of today is quite as expert with foils as is her brother or husband . . . A man is usually satisfied to do one thing well: not so a woman. She must have various accomplishments. Its main value is in charm of person and grace of motion . . . Fencing gives a natural poise and grace to the body . . . It makes the body supple and sinuous . . . So important is good judgment that fencing by experts has often been claimed to be more the work of the head than of the hands.44

While stressing the body’s sinuous charm, the notion that fencing is as much an activity of the mind as it is of the body provides echo to Bernhardt’s characterization of Hamlet as an active yet reflective youth.

Crossing the boundaries between the play and female “play” would not, however, be received favorably in the press. In criticism of Bernhardt’s apparent inability to sustain her performance of masculinity on the stage, the North American Review would state: “There is not a moment in the drama when the spectator is not fully and calmly conscious that the hero is a woman masquerading, or is jarréd into sharp realization of the fact by her doing something that is very like a man. It is a case where every approach to success is merely another insistence on failure.”45 Almost but not quite: Max Beerbohm—the drama critic of the Saturday Review—would accordingly entitle his review of the play “Hamlet: Princess of Denmark,” while The Athenæum would explain that “It is a full-blown truism to say that where everything is necessarily wrong nothing can possibly be right. Madame Bernhardt’s Hamlet has not even the negative advantage of showing us what to avoid . . . The suggestion of Punch—offered, of course, as
badinage—that Sir Henry Irving shall play Ophelia to the new Hamlet, seems, beside the present experiment, not wholly outrageous. 

What such reviews clearly ignore is the idea that Bernhardt might have actually sought to keep her gender visible to the watching public. What they also elide is the fact that, in emphasizing the performativity of gender, Bernhardt was also associating herself with a long and productive history of the theatrical stage. From the ancient Greek theater and the public theater of the English Renaissance through to the roles essayed by such women as Charlotte Cushman in the mid-nineteenth century, cross-dressing was an integral part of the theatrical stage. The very visibility of this custom—the fact that gender, as a social and cultural norm, was unsettled in so public and open a manner—highlights the challenge that the theater brought to its audience. Although entertaining and providing popular relief from quotidian life, the theater also undercut and disrupted the categories that structured normative reality. The theater's status as an art form that dealt with the problem of representation and reenactment was therefore joined to a critique of the constructed and artificial nature of reality. Bernhardt's "failed" Hamlet, introduced by a loud and self-publicizing Tosca, works to unsettle the natural transparency of social and cultural categories.

The criticisms of Bernhardt's performance of masculinity were carried into her performance of youth. John Hansen reviewed Hamlet in The National Magazine in 1899:

Physically Bernhardt's unusual lines of figure proved of assistance in rendering her impersonation sexless if not altogether masculine. Even now, with a contour rounded out considerably since the days when the supreme dramatic genius of our times was better known to the American public, Bernhardt, costumed in the traditional sables of the Dane, does not belie the part by strong suggestion of femininity except facially; there she comes up against a stumbling block—that elderly unique face, haunting at any time, becomes a nightmare, a specter in opposition to her faithful simulation of a youth's body.

The insistence with which criticism was levied at Bernhardt's Hamlet was met by her own ongoing explanations of why and how she essayed the role. In an article published in Harper's Bazaar titled "Men's Roles as Played by Women," Bernhardt would contend that male roles were more difficult to perform than female roles and that it was this challenge which prompted her to perform L'Aiglon and Hamlet. Going on to argue that performativ-

ity is not a specifically female prerogative, she reminded her public of the constructed nature of both genders:

Much of the success of the usual woman's role lies in the feminine charm and magnetism with which the actress is capable of investing the part. It is contended that in assuming a man's role she is obliged to part with her strongest weapons, and that therefore more skill is required to achieve success. This is only partially true. Skill is undoubtedly demanded, but it is the skill which can assume and depict the masculine charm and magnetism which exists just as surely as does the feminine. It is not sufficient to look the man, to move like a man, and to speak like a man. The actress must think and feel like a man, to receive impressions as a man, and to exert that innate something which, for want of a better word, we call magnetism, just as a man unconsciously exerts it.

As Bernhardt's demand for intellectual challenge makes clear, her performance of Hamlet levied a broad critique at the roles that were available for women to play on the stage. In stating "Most women's parts are mere play. The characters are required to look pretty, to move gracefully, and to portray emotions natural to the average woman," Bernhardt makes clear the changes and challenges she was introducing to the stage. That these changes and challenges would, after the turn of the century, be incorporated into the demands of an emergent feminism, reveals the importance a performer such as Bernhardt played in the development and formation of twenty-first-century feminist thought. As Susan A. Glenn explains,

As a figure of transition between traditional and modern values, Bernhardt constitutes . . . a perfect starting point for understanding how the theatre helped Americans explore and redefine femininity in the years between 1880 and 1910. At a time when actresses and female performers exhibited the unorthodox and increasingly fashionable qualities that would come to be associated with women's revolt against tradition, Bernhardt proved to be a highly elastic symbol of female irreverence. Because of that, she became a touchstone for a number of ambitious American women in as well as outside the theatre: from female comics in vaudeville to activists in the woman suffrage movement.

While Glenn restricts her comments to the stage and an American public, it is evident that the effects of Bernhardt's transgressions were felt across the arts and before a broad and international audience. What needs to be
emphasized, therefore, is that Bernhardt’s *Hamlet* was part of the Exposition of 1900. An international event that suggested some of the possible futures for film, it was also a forum that enabled and encouraged experimentation. Film, yet to make a claim to its uniqueness and separation from other media and art forms, was still very much a new technology, which incorporated and projected different ways of looking at and thinking about the world. The legitimate theater, directly involved in the marketing and production of film, was still to be separated out as an art form whose established traditions retarded or at least suspended the “natural” development of the medium. The phonograph, only just beginning to be sold for use as a leisure pursuit, was not yet part of the history of private entertainment. In other words, Bernhardt’s vision of a challenging and spectacularly conceived cinema had not yet been marginalized as a theatrical and mistaken intrusion into the development of film history. My task as a feminist film historian is not only, therefore, to recover and recapture Bernhardt’s contribution to film history: it is to ask whether we are still able to locate and appreciate the liberties that the cinema once offered.

**Notes**

2. Ibid., 26.
3. Ibid., 33.
9. See, for example, the steel engraving of Bernhardt as Tosca—the cane “centering” her body and gesture—by Florian (after a picture by Jan Van Beers) reproduced in *Revue Illustre*, National Portrait Gallery, n.d., Negative number 31594.
12. Ibid., xvii–xviii.
13. Ibid., 4–5.
14. On Schwob’s introduction and the staging and history of *Hamlet* as discussed in this paragraph, see Ronny Heylen, *Translation, Portico, and the Stage: Six French Hamlets* (London: Routledge, 1993), 63, 54, 64. The quote with which the paragraph ends is from pages 75–76.
17. Ibid., 12.
20. “Madame Bernhardt’s Hamlet.”
22. Ibid., 48.
23. See Tarawon’s comment in relation to this: “It is a matter of no small significance that Bernhardt’s Hamlet was the first Prince of Denmark to die standing. Writing of the Hamlet tradition and referring to the production in which he was directed by Guthrie McClintic, John Gielgud mentions that McClintic ‘invented’ for him the device of a standing death . . . John Gielgud’s success with the use of the standing death is now well-known. What is not known is that the innovation actually took place thirty seven years prior to the performance of the great English actor.” *Bernhardt Hamlet*, 186.
24. Ibid., 70.
25. See Bernhardt’s *Ma Double Vie: Memoires de Sarah Bernhardt* (trans.) (London: Arrow Books, 1984), 139–140, in which she explains, for example, how her performances at the Odéon theater in the early 1870s would upset the older members of the audience habituated to a more traditional and classical style of performance.
29. The comment about the production being “little less than an invasion” appears in Tarawon, *Bernhardt Hamlet* (109), although she does not specify her source. The comments on the production being a gain for the French rather than the English stage, and about the “ignorance” of the English audience are from “The Week: Adelphi Performance of Madame Bernhardt’s Hamlet, in innumerable Acts,” *The Athenæum* 3738, June 17, 1899, 764.
31. The criticism about Bernhardt’s Hamlet and the ghost went as follows: “He
Vision and Visibility

Women Filmmakers, Contemporary Authorship, and Feminist Film Studies

In her exploration of two Kathryn Bigelow films, Near Dark (1987) and Blue Steel (1990), Anna Powell observes in passing that auteurism “has a particular resonance within feminism.” While I agree absolutely that women filmmakers matter for a feminist cultural politics, it can be difficult to establish precisely why, not least since authorship is often regarded as a methodology that film studies has in many ways moved beyond. At worst reductive, at best naïve, auteurism privileges the authored text over the complexities of context. At the same time, the work of feminist film historians in documenting the contribution of women to the film industry represents not only an important attempt to write women’s history but a rejection of the claims made by, or more typically on behalf of, one person—the male director—to have priority over the text. Although women have only recently been working as directors in the U.S. film industry in any numbers, writers and researchers, including Lizzie Francke, Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, and Ally Acker, have worked to foreground the contribution that women have made to the cinema across a range of other roles.

And yet the figure of the filmmaker (typically, but not exclusively, the director) has rarely been so central to popular film culture as it is today. Moreover, at the start of the twenty-first century, women are now working in the American film industry as directors, producers, and even cinematographers, as well as in the more established female roles of screenwriter and performer, on an unprecedented scale. Even so, the position of women filmmakers is typically both marginal and precarious. Clearly, this stems in part from the structure and character of the film industry itself. I’d also like to suggest here that, given the significance of the figure of the filmmaker