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The European Actress, the Liberty Style, and the Diva
on the Silent Screen

Victoria Dukett

Typing in tandem
It is difficult to find examples of co-operative scholarship, particularly in feminist film studies. By this I mean that it is difficult to find scholars writing together, proactively. There are plenty of collections of essays, certainly, but these seem to come together in retrospect and are offered as a sort of reflection upon the dynamics of feminist change. In this sense, it is as though we really do need an editor to tie us together and say yes, we have all been tugging at the same thread, even if we have not known of each others existence and have yet to actually see the films, articles, photographs and so on each of us describe. That seventies moment which Laura Mulvey speaks of in her introduction to Visual and Other Pleasures—that moment when women wrote together collaboratively, anonymously, politically, differently, and optimistically—now seems a long time ago and tied in to a project very different from our own.  

At its most basic level, it attests to a group dynamic we can no longer boast. Practicalities of space and time—or perhaps, actually, of career and of the need to write and research in the first person singular—have stopped us from organizing feminist ‘events’ in the traditional sense of the term. We are now researching and writing the history of women in film, and come together at annual festivals and forums such as the Women and the Silent Screen conferences. It is in the effort to demonstrate that collaborative work can still be productive and that a shared political vision can still shape the tasks we choose to undertake that our articles (my own and that of my colleague, Elena Mosconi) are offered. Although they have been written independently, they have been typed in tandem. It is hoped that they will be read and understood in this way.

Seeing Stockholm: an anecdote about living
Feminism is not, obviously, only about writing for a common good. We need to describe what it is we are doing and where it is we think we are going. We will begin, therefore, with an anecdote Marc Bloch repeats in The Historian’s Craft. He states:

There is an anecdote which I have already recounted elsewhere: I had gone with Henri Pirenne to Stockholm; we had scarcely arrived, when he said to me: “what shall we go to see first? It seems that there is a new city hall here.”

Let’s start there.” Then, as if to ward off my surprise, he added: “If I were an antiquarian, I would have eyes only for old stuff, but I am a historian. Therefore, I love life.” This faculty of understanding the living is, in very truth, the master quality of the historian.

We want to begin our feminism here: in Stockholm with its civic spaces and avant-garde public arts. Because it is our contention that there is a style of film—a style that, for purposes of clarity and simplicity, we will call the ‘Liberty Style’ of cinema—which was popular up until the end of the First World War and that this style of film had less to do with antiquarian history than it did with a new form of public engagement in the world. In following Bloch and Pirenne we are therefore asking that the avant-garde potential of public art be acknowledged just as we are signalling a methodological choice. In other words, our explanation of what the Liberty Style might be is tied into specific microhistorical case studies drawn from continental Europe—Sarah Bernhardt and Lydia Borelli—and the detailed examination of particular films. Our aim is to demonstrate not just that the European theatrical film can be recuperated from its status as filmed theatre, but that the theatrical actress (particularly the actress from the legitimate theatre and the Continental stage) was able to engage with film in a new, productive, and challenging way.

Our case studies are not random. While Bernhardt and Borelli are very different individuals, they enable France and Italy to come together under the one stylistic model and to be examined within the same time frame. Moreover, they provide a way out of the dead end of diva and/or star studies (or the introversion of cultural studies more generally). Indeed, our work is largely a response to the tendency to discuss the theatrical star in terms of biography and to cast her (it is always a ‘her’) as some kind of disciplinary intruder, as though it was only in theatrical pose or through exaggerated theatrical action that she marked a material presence on film. What we are challenging, therefore, is not just the image of the diva as a reckless and ignorant artist but the idea that the very control and authority she wielded on stage was lost on film. More important than questions we are posing in terms of authorship, however, are those that we are asking about our relationship to film history. Are we able to think beyond the cinema of attractions and narrative cinema as our conceptual models of early film? Can we see the ‘theatrical’ film as a new art or style of expression rather than as an inevitable expression of a retroactive and anachronistic Europe? Because unless and until we recognize that there was not one cinema moving inevitably towards classical American cinema, the theatrical European actress will remain an anachronism, a kind of nineteenth century leftover, the flip side to film and modernist progress. As we suggested above, we are historians and so our task is to contextualize and understand ‘the living.’


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The disciplinary debate
Our engagement with questions of theatricality, anachronism, and stardom come (obviously) on the heels of other works. We do not need to repeat the criticisms which theatre historian David Mayer has directed at Nicholas Vardac’s *Stage to Screen* (1949), Roberta Pearson’s *Eloquent Gestures* (1992) or Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs’s *Theatre to Cinema* (1997). Nor too do we want to redress the very selective way in which Charles Musser has more recently recuperated the theatre in his article “Towards a history of theatrical culture: imagining an integrated history of stage and screen.” We will instead position our project within the context of Christine Gledhill’s recuperation of ‘theatricality’ in her book *Reframing British Culture: 1918–1928. Between Restraint and Passion*. Here, in a thoughtful reflection upon what it means to recuperate a criticised genre or style of film, Gledhill states that she wants:

...to evaluate films for what they do rather than what they fail to do. Such an approach questions the relegation of this cinema as ‘old fashioned’, rethinking its relation to the practices and values of its surrounding and preceding cultures, which to a critical intelligentsia appear all too easily as regression from the modernism promised by film.

Gledhill’s focus is British film in the decade 1918–1928. She engages with the very ‘stagnation’ of British film, arguing that the shared perceptual frames of British theatre and cinema provide evidence of a specific cultural practice or imaginary. Hers, then, is a move to recuperate British film from the signs of its theatrical regression. Tying British film in to a model adapted from other historians of British culture (particularly in to David Peters Corbett, writing about post war British painting) she explains that even if English painting between the wars turned from Vorticism and Futurism, it was nevertheless “a response to modernity, rather than a failure of modernist imagination defined by Continental examples.”

We are turning, then, to this ‘Continental example’ and arguing that even here an ‘old fashioned’ theatrical cinema can be isolated and recognized. Rather than determining a modernist margin, however, this cinema addressed questions which went to the core of contemporary concerns. What was film? Where did it stand in relation to the theatre? Was it a new art? A craft? Mere reproduction? A popular art? A high art? A quotient object? The works of Bernhardt and Birelli answer these questions in specific and concrete ways. The question, as Gledhill reminds us, is about visible presence and concrete facts. It is about what films do.

Beginning with Bernhardt
Sarah Bernhardt is famous for her two narrative films *La Dame aux Camélias* (1911) and *Queen Elizabeth* (1912). As Richard Abel recounts in *The Cité Goes to Town: French Cinema 1896–1914, La Dame aux Camélias* is a two reel condensed version of her famous five act play. It is “perhaps the most regressive of all surviving Film d’Art productions” because of its focus upon studio decor, narrative intertitles and the long take tableaux. *Queen Elizabeth*—described in similar terms—is renowned for the fact that it proved an enormous box office hit, gaining for Zukor the profits that would finance his Famous Players series.

It is here that discussion about Bernhardt stops. While I have, on other occasions, made some effort to contextualise the costume, tableaux and narratives used in these historical films, today I want to address Bernhardt’s next film, *Sarah Bernhardt à Belle Isle* (Sarah Bernhardt at Home, Film d’Art, 1912). Not only does this provide us with a fresh and interesting look at the actress, but it is a film which forces us to ask new questions about the actress and her engagement with the medium. Indeed, the most obvious questions begin with the genre of film itself: if Bernhardt was indeed merely reproducing her theatre on film, why would she bother to make a film which had little or nothing to do with the theatre? Why not take any one of her ‘other’ famous theatrical roles—*Phedre, Cleopatra, Theodora, Jeannette d’Arc*—and bring them to film? And if she was, alternately, only using film as a way to publicize herself, why not take us back stage or introduce us to her cast, give us a glimpse of her famous wardrobes and jewellery or a tour of her atelier in Paris? Why bring us to Belle Isle, her holiday retreat, and show herself walking around windy coastlines collecting flowers? Since this was the first home movie made by a star for film, why not focus a little more on the home? Why all this outside movement, this roaming from place to place, particularly since she obviously found it difficult to walk (her leg would be amputated three years later)? And so on. These are the questions which can be asked of this film. Rather than directing discussion towards the star and publicity, I want to ask what it is we are seeing. Because it is quite obvious that Bernhardt was famous and that a popular audience watched film. It is not so obvious, however, for us today to appreciate what it was she was trying to achieve with film.

315 Ibid.
An island landing

I will open my analysis with the film’s establishing opening shot. It shows Bernhardt being rowed to shore from the steamship, L’Émílie Solacroup. This ship was a famous passenger ship which took people from mainland France to Belle Isle en Mer, an island in Brittany. Reproduced on postcards at the time, the ship pointed to both a growing trade in tourism (and hence also the postcard) and to the expanding reach of steam and rail travel. Indeed, given that the ship was actually named after Solacroup, the famous nineteenth century director of the Paris–Orléans railway, it also points to changes in public mobilization and conceptions of speed and distance. This focus upon newness and novelty was linked, too, to the fact that Victor Laloux had, in 1900 (on the eve of the Exposition Universelle and in a record two years), completed the Gare d’Orsay. As the first electrified railway terminal in the world, it was also considered a masterpiece of industrial architecture. As the implicit starting point of Bernhardt’s journey, we are returned to an image of a modern Paris which she had, in her own turn, helped to define.

Bernhardt arrives by steam (train and boat) to Belle Isle but is then rowed ashore. This is not a landing at the Port de Palais, the ‘actual’ port of Belle Isle where Bernhardt would later be photographed, amid large crowds of people. Nor, too, does this image duplicate the images which circulated on postcards of Bernhardt’s arrival at this same beach (the more remote ‘Plage de Poulains’) since we no longer have an anonymous, waiting crowd watching her disembark from the row boat. Instead, ours is a solitary regard held on an otherwise empty beach. This suggestion of privacy, of a secluded and privileged spectatorship, helps to confirm the idea that this is an intimate and revealing document of a famous actress returning ‘home’.

In this same opening scene we can see a small boat to the far left. This is a fishing boat, identifiable through its distinct sails, which recalls the paintings which Maxime Maufra had completed a few years earlier from this same beach. Establishing the presence of a local community and suggesting its hardy, resilient nature, we then move on to a shot in which we watch three small rowboats head to shore. Figures wave and although we cannot see precisely who these are, the introductory title has already told us that Bernhardt is travelling with her son, Maurice. We can assume, then, that we have been included in Bernhardt’s group of close intimate friends, that the actress is signalling her awareness of our presence, and that even if she can not really see us (just as we can not really see her, she is both too far away and, anyway, a film), there is a reciprocal acknowledgement of fictional presence.

317 See, for example, the image reproduced in Jean Dupont-Nivet, Sarah Bernhardt: Reine de théâtre et souveraine de Belle-Ile-en-Mer, (Rennes: Éditions Ouest-France, 1996), 40.
318 See, for example, Maufra, Rentrée des bateaux de pêche, Belle-Ile-en-Mer, oil on canvas, 26 x 32, 1910 (Galerie Durand-Ruel, Paris).

This is not an instance in which we imagine ourselves part of a thronging and invisible crowd (the beach is empty) but one in which we can enjoy the fiction of our own uniqueness, our undisturbed importance upon an unmanned beach. Moreover, this is also an instance in which everything we see—the steamship, the fisherman’s boat, the newsreel-type footage of Bernhardt’s arrival—is shot, grouped, and framed entirely for us. Hence in the second shot the steam stops pouring from the funnel just as the fisherman’s boat disappears from sight yet Bernhardt smoothly continues her approach towards us. In this way, we know that Bernhardt is labouring for us, that she is working to produce this public fiction of her private retreat.

In this first shot, as Bernhardt approaches shore in her rowboat, visual meanings change. On the one hand, we have a collage of respective boats (the steam shop, the rowboats, and the fishing boat returning us to Maufra). On the other, we also have Bernhardt’s own boat again returning us to impressionist painting, specifically to Édouard Manet’s Escape of Rochefort (1881), with its similar composition, indistinct grouping of people on a rowboat coming towards us, as well as its sense of expectant arrival. Yet whereas Manet was painting an event some 6 or 7 years after the fact and reconstructing an escape from an island (Henri Rochefort escaped from the Isle des Pins, Noumea, by stopping a ship whilst on an excursion in 1874, by 1880 he was newly in Paris), 319 Bernhardt’s trip depicts an event as it unfolds and is about an escape of an altogether different sort: Bernhardt escapes to an island, she is less a political than a public prisoner, and she seeks the very isolation that Rochefort obviously disliked.

Decoration and display

What, however, are the terms of Bernhardt’s film as a new art? Aren’t we merely seeing a renegotiation of impressionist painting? (Here Maufra and Manet, later I will speak about Claude Monet, John Peter Russell, and Gustave Courbet). In a sense, yes, we are indeed seeing a renegotiation of impressionist painting since film is—of necessity—an art produced en plein air; it is representing an ordinary excursion, it marks the passage of time, and focuses upon the description of physical movement. But in Sarah Bernhardt à Belle-Isle we are also dealing with film as a decorative art, meaning the photographic image as a reconstructed art object and not just a material document telling us of a given event. Hence, in the next shot Bernhardt’s greyhound rushes forwards to meet her boat. This is the dog in Georges Clairin’s famous portrait of the artist (Portrait de Sarah Bernhardt, 1876) given its ‘liberty’; this is his curving tendril tail which ended the curves of her own sinuous body finally freed into actual movement. In other words,

with film we have a movement from inside to outside, a shift from a line that describes movement through dress and pose to the depiction of the movement itself. Thus, on film, the dog rushes to join its mistress just as she waves to her watching audience. Gone is the opulent décor frozen into a formal image of dog and owner; gone, in other words, is the idea that the female artist was best correlated with a seductive interior and the related presumption that woman signals a return to touch and texture alone. Still dressed in white and still the fundamental anchor in the image, Bernhardt’s portrait is brought, through film, quite literally out into the world.

It is important that we keep focused on this renegotiation of women’s role as decorative object and as decorative artist. For in this same image—and later in others—we have Bernhardt carried to the shore, we have her boxes carried uphill for her, we have her being cared for and looked after in a manner very different from traditional images of woman in a rural setting and very different from earlier portraits of women ‘at home’. Indeed, we need only realize the extent to which gendered roles are being essentially reversed (or at least significantly revised) in order to appreciate the extent to which Bernhardt is authoring her own image on film. For example, there is a shot just after her landing on shore where we see men carrying her luggage. This is composititionally and thematically very similar to Jean-Francois Millet’s Peasant women with brushwood (1858). Like the painting, which famously depicts two anonymous women carrying heavy loads of wood on their backs, the film shows men leaning forward, their caps covering their face as they strain against the boxes on their shoulders. Rocks and shrubs line the path they are walking on; we can see the curved points of their heavy clogs as they walk diagonally up, across the screen. Here, as elsewhere, Bernhardt authorizes her own image by this shift in iconographical reference. Men, it is therefore suggested, anonymously labour for Bernhardt in this rural retreat. Bernhardt is the star, carried off the boat and given flowers, she is the queen arriving at her castle (her house is the fort we see in one of the images). As if to reiterate her point of self-representation and female authorship, Bernhardt has a young female companion rush ahead to take a quick photograph of Bernhardt as they approach her house. Later, in her atelier, Bernhardt sculpts. Surrounded by busts, she busily moulds a portrait of Edmond Rostand, the playwright whose L’Aliglon she had made famous on the stage a decade earlier. Joined by a female secretary who busies herself with a book, Bernhardt is a professional artist capable now not only of bringing Rostand’s verse to the stage but of materializing his physical form. Later, Bernhardt is shown writing thoughtfully in her study, again attended to by a female maid. And even later, there is the local festivities in which a ‘Breton dance’ is shown. In each instance, it is Bernhardt who is both a patron and a participant: that gendered division between artist and subject is actively refused.

It is not just the agency given to the female artist which is important here, but the fact that the arts are no longer celebrated in their isolation. This had occurred earlier, in the 1870s, 1880s and 1890s, when Bernhardt exhibited sculpture in Paris, London, and New York and gained much press and attention through this. Photographs of the period, particularly those by Melandri in 1871, famously show her cross-dressed in a white satin suit as she sculpted or painted in her atelier. This was, clearly, suggestive of both gendered and artistic transgression. By 1901, however, it was explained how “one of the phenomena of the present day is the number of female artists now practising sculpture and the allied arts, practising them steadily”; in 1903 the popular journal Femina would feature images of female artists in their respective studios. By 1912, therefore, Bernhardt was not proving her literary and/or artistic talents but combining these within the one work, within the one film. Hence it was actually film which—unique amongst the arts—facilitated a plurality of vision and a permeability of artistic borders. Bernhardt’s male companions—those men who follow her along the coast or who join her for lunch or who salute her and/or carry her bags—are the physical bodies who bring a very different sense to the idea of artistic ‘work’.

Painting and presence
To turn, now, to painting and to argue that even if we do not have any actual images of Bernhardt painting in the film, the visual composition of each scene drew upon works which were familiar to her contemporary audience. I suggested, at the beginning of this paper, that Bernhardt consciously engaged with impressionist painting in the opening shots of the film. And I think that Bernhardt went on to do this throughout the work, choosing to recontextualize familiar images and styles rather than have herself shown ‘actually’ painting. The most obvious instance of this is when Bernhardt inserts herself as protagonist into a shot of the seaside on Belle Isle. Here, she is shown gesturing to a sea in which waves move against the rocks and in which an untouched nature is defined by an uninhabited, windswept coastline. Like Gustave Courbet in the 1870s, presenting a wave in terms of its sensorial impact or, more recently, like Claude Monet or John Russell (both in 1890) painting the effect of water hitting rock on Belle Isle, Bernhardt is defining nature in a way that has many parallels to the shock and sensation we otherwise relate to modern, urban space. Where Bernhardt departs from these earlier paintings, however, is in the insertion of herself: she and her companions are actually part of this rugged nature, it is they who intrude upon it and introduce us to it. In this way, Bernhardt demonstrates a subjec-

311 See, for example, Monet’s Storm at Belle Isle and the compositional similarities between this and the shot in which Bernhardt sits on a rock and waves expensively out to sea.
tive engagement in the world: she might return woman to a wild and bountiful nature, but she is very clearly changing its representational meaning.

The same might be said of Bernhardt's re-working of the landscape: Monet and Vincent Van Gogh present us with fields of poppies only occasionally populated by people. Hence, Monet's wife and son stroll indistinctly through his 1873 canvas, Poppy Field near Argenteuil; these two—and there are another two figures behind them again—might be any mother and son. Bernhardt, however, is instead at the front of the screen in her 'field of poppies' presented in the film. Identifiable, and clearly directing the activity of the women who surround her, she again mediates visual meaning. The poppies are therefore replaced by roses and camellias, women pick the flowers and collect huge bundles which they then pile onto a cart. Rather than blend in to the background of the image, women define and determine a physical presence.

Even the picnic Bernhardt depicts in the film represents less a lazy luncheon-time meal than a conscious reworking of familiar visual motifs. The camera therefore pans left across a group of men who—in terms of pose and setting—recall Édouard Manet's famous Le déjeuner sur l'herbe (1863)—and then onto a table that is compositionally and thematically reminiscent of Pierre-Auguste Renoir's Luncheon of the Boating Party (1881). What we are missing, of course, is both Manet's nude models and Renoir's sense of relaxed engagement. Instead, a woman (Bernhardt) is there to direct our gaze and to define visual meaning: the camera stops on the lunch table where Bernhardt sits, organizing and choreographing surrounding activity.

This sense of visual transformation—whereby one image slips into another, one history extends and develops another—is best illustrated in the scene just before the film's conclusion. At this point Bernhardt is finally placed within a 'public' (the local Breton community) and celebrated as a patron. After speeches, a 'Breton dance' is performed for her by the locals. Bernhardt is in the distance, signing autographs, and it is unclear whether she is even watching the performance. In the foreground, a group of men and women dance around playing musicians. The obvious source for this image is Paul Gauguin's Breton Girls Dancing (1888), where three girls have flowers pinned to their chest and hold hands, their figures describing a circular movement. Behind them is a village, with a church spire and buildings. In Bernhardt's film the Breton dance has changed in meaning and motivation: a spontaneous act is now a gesture of recognition and an isolated few have become an entire community.

The fiction of the painter's anonymous presence—or, at least, his capacity to capture the primitive remains of the modern world—has also been denied. Not only do we again have Bernhardt at the centre of the image (if not literally, at least symbolically, for this celebration is for her) but we have activity clearly choreographed for the camera. There is no pretense, as there was with Gauguin, that the Breton community was a spiritually pure peasant community and Brittany an isolated retreat free from the corruption of the modern world. Instead, Belle Isle and its peasant community is documented and brought forth as a vibrant part of the modern world, dependent upon outside patronage for its sustenance and new technology for its visibility. Indeed, Bernhardt was very public in her support of local activities and initiatives and actively promoted them. The 'Danse Bretonne' performed in her honour as benefactor of a local co-operative bakery was not only featured on her film but was publicized on the cover of the journal Excelsior in August 1912. In 1911 Bernhardt also famously responded to the storms which destroyed the island's fishing fleet by staging a 'Matinée de Gala'. This was a benefit performance of the play Pain d'herve des pécheurs de Belle-Ile-en-Mer which also saw the publication of a programme illustrated by Georges Clairin. The change from the image of an untouched utopian retreat to one in which the local community actually celebrated the presence of a female outsider (Bernhardt) indicates the extent to which the notion of an original primitive innocence was being eroded.

Here we must remember that we are on Belle Isle, that is, on an island traditionally celebrated for its cultural and geographic isolation and regarded as a frontier against the Dutch and English. This is where Alexandre Dumas set his novel The Man in the Iron Mask (1850) and where his King explains that he wants the fortifications to remain intact upon the Island, but that it is not these which draws him to the place. He accordingly states: "You would not guess what I want to see at Belle-Isle, Monsieur Fouquet; it is the pretty peasants and women of the lands on the sea-shore, who dance so well, and are so seducing with their scarlet petticoats!" It was also here, on Belle Isle, that Dumas had Porthos, one of his characters in the Three Musketeers', die. In an equally famous work (which marks the beginning of his historic dramas) Dumas’s play Mademoiselle de Belle Isle (1839) similarly focused upon Gabrielle, an attractive youth from Belle Isle. This is a role which Bernhardt played in November 1872 on her return to the Comédie Française and which was one of the few works by Dumas to remain in the repertory of the Théâtre Français into the twentieth century.

**Conclusion: the woman at the window**

When Bernhardt brought Belle Isle to screen in 1912, however, she was 'playing' no one but herself and she represented the island a little differently from Dumas's description of musketeers, knights, fishermen, and the Court. It was, certainly, a place in which solitude and silence could be enjoyed. It offered 'savagery, fisherman, sea, and sky'. But it was also what she called 'little and immense', in that it was a small landmass that expanded forever.

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322 See the reproduction of these images in Dupont-Nivet, op. cit., 200.
outwards, meaning that it moved out to the sea, and out, finally, to America. This is a very different tale, then, of the wranglings between capital and province, Paris and Brittany, described by Dumas. As Bernhardt explained in *Femina*, in an article written in 1904, "Yes, it is small, Belle Isle; but it is savage and it is immense, because Belle Isle is one of the points of the old world, the point where Europe plunges into the Ocean, and this Ocean, with its black rocks and transparent green waves, hurls itself infinitely ahead, where I imagine America, and still more worlds."

The film concludes with a portrait of Bernhardt. She is indoors, alone with three dogs, seated comfortably as she turns and looks out a window. This is the closest we have to her; it is an intimate image exposing a quiet moment alone. That it is only at this moment, and through this image, that we finally have Bernhardt

fixed calmly, decoratively, within her home is telling. At this point, when she gestures out the window, we might say that she is old, that the camera is still, and that she represents an image of Europe’s anachronistic (and theatrical) collapse. But we might, alternatively, compare this image to that painted by Clairin some forty years earlier and, following Gledhill, ask that we evaluate the film for what it does. *Sarah Bernhardt at home* shows Bernhardt arriving by train, by steamship, and by rowboat. It shows her sculpting, writing, and transforming the visual and narrative meaning of the pictorial and literary arts. Finally, it shows her at home looking out onto the sea and through this, onto America. America was the ‘New World’, a modernity of which Bernhardt certainly imagined herself a part. In other words, this film is not about the decorative arts constructing a sanctuary of a safe and feminine home. It is about a window opening outwards. It is, as Bloch might say, an anecdote about living.

This paper was originally accompanied by illustrations. You can see them on: www.italiansilencetinet.org/cine/proc/2008/duckett

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**Lyda Borelli as a Liberty Icon**

**Elena Mosconi**

**The Lady of the Painting**

The relationship between the great French actress, Bernhardt, and the Italian Diva, Borelli, is shown in a photograph taken in 1911 in Cesare Tallone’s atelier by the photographer Emilio Sommavilla. It is a photograph which depicts an artist painting an actress. Tallone (the painter) is completing an enormous portrait of Lyda Borelli. Borelli, one of the most important actresses in the Italian theatre in the teens, entered film just two years after the completion of this image. She is shown wearing Salomé’s costume, which was a role she famously played on the stage. As we know, this role was written by Oscar Wilde for Sarah Bernhardt but she could not—for reasons of censorship—bring it to the stage. This photograph demonstrates Borelli’s popularity in the 1910s. It also gives evidence of the relationship between Italian theatre and contemporary (that is, modern) European culture.

We do not need to again demonstrate Borelli’s importance to Italian society of the teens. Nor must we reiterate the fact that her fame increased when she left the theatre for cinema in 1918 when she married. As most people know, during these years in Italy a new term—“Borellism”—was invented in order to explain the public notoriety of Borelli’s gestures. Moreover, many historians such as Gian Piero Brunetta, Cristina Jandelli and Angela Dalle Vacche have given exhaustive interpretations of her art and work. In the same vein, we do not need to discuss Borelli’s status as an erotic icon. As it is commonly known, it was Antonio Gramsci, writing in 1917, who reduced her to this, stating that:

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223 Cesare Tallone (1853–1919) was an Italian painter known for portraits and scenes of landscapes. He taught in Milan to a generation of famous painters such as Carlo Carrà, Antonio Sant’Elia, Armando Bonfigli and Giuseppe Pellizza da Volpedo. Emilio Sommavilla (1883–1956) was a photographer who lived in Milan, too. His work was devoted to landscape and city pictures, to the photographic reproduction of paintings and portraits, mainly of actresses and artists. His photographs (45000 negatives on glass plates and 2700 original prints) are now in the Biblioteca Nazionale Braidense of Milan. See: Giovanna Ginesi, Ed., Divine. Emilio Sommavilla fotografo. Opere scelte 1910–1930 (Busto Arsizio, Varese: Nonos, 2004).
