This is the published version


Available from Deakin Research Online

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30063246

Every reasonable effort has been made to ensure that permission has been obtained for items included in Deakin Research Online. If you believe that your rights have been infringed by this repository, please contact drosupport@deakin.edu.au

Copyright: 2006, Cineteca, Bologna
The past decade has seen a resurgent interest in Sarah Bernhardt. Books, articles, exhibitions and film have all addressed who she was and what she achieved during her lifetime. We have learnt that she brought far more to the theatre than her mythic 'golden voice': she was an actress who actively engaged in and sponsored the other arts, she was at the vanguard of symbolism and art nouveau, she was a feminist precursor to the 'new woman' of the early twentieth century, she was a media savvy business woman adept at self promotion, and she was a French Jewess who successfully negotiated and combated anti-Semitism.

The reasons for this resurgent interest in Bernhardt hinge, I would argue, on the fact that she provides a historical reference point in which we might happily find ourselves reflected. Indeed, the current celebration of interdisciplinarity, of popular culture, of feminism, performance, multiculturalism, stardom, spectacularity and new media finds an easy footnote in the actress and her activities. What is more, our apparent concern for micro history, for tangible and concrete detail, is met by a figure who returns us to a historical period in which our research interests can be validated and who can be reconstructed through a wealth of archival remains.

Film clearly forms part of these remains. Indeed, as an actress who first entered film via Hamlet in Paul Deauville’s ‘Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre’ at the Paris Exposition of 1900 and who then went on to make nine narrative films and one documentary film between 1908 and 1923 (the year of her death), film is certainly a media which can be used to illustrate Bernhardt’s capacity for self promotion and her ongoing interest in new media and changing forms of theatrical expression. A brief listing of these films might indicate, through title and date alone, the scope and longevity of her engagement with the film industry: La Tosca (1908, Film d’Art, André Calmettes), La Dame aux Camélias (Film d’Art, André Calmettes and Henri Pouctal, 1911-1912), La Reine Élisabeth (Queen Elizabeth, Histrionic Film, Louis Mercanton, 1912), Adrienne Lecouvreur (An Actress’s Romance, Urban Trading Co., Henri Desfontaines and Louis Mercanton, 1913), Jeanne Doré (Éclipse-Transatlantic, Louis Mercanton, 1916), Mères françaises (Mothers of France, Éclipse, Louis Mercanton and René Hervil, 1917), It Happened in Paris (Tyrad Pictures, 1919), Daniel (Pathé Gazette, 1921), and La Voyante (The Fortune Teller, Films Abdoré, Leon Abrams, 1923). There is also her documentary film, Sarah Bernhardt à Belle Isle (Film d’Art, 1912) which featured the actress and friends at her holiday retreat in Brittany, as well as her inclusion in the numerous short news services which companies such as Pathé and Gaumont provided before their longer narrative screenings. Of these shorts, I have located and seen Sarah Bernhardt, Famous French Actress Returns to France (Folkstone, Pathé’s Animated Gazette, 1913), Sarah Bernhardt and Georges Feydeau at the Marriage of Sacha Guitry and Yvonne Printemps (Gaumont, 1919), and Funeral of Sarah Bernhardt (Gaumont, 1923).

What we find in the recent celebrations of the actress, however, is a general silence surrounding her involvement in film. Film is included on a video monitor in an exhibition, it is referenced briefly in a catalogue, it is presented via a patchwork of badly cited and uncontextualized quotations in a recently published book. In each instance, it is presumed that Bernhardt’s films can be explained by celebrityhood alone: the actress was brought to film because she was famous and film provides us with a visible record of her stage performance. What concerns me about this is the reductive ease with which silent film is recuperated. Indeed, it is the loose interdisciplinarity of star discourse, where film is but one text jostling amongst others in the effort to illustrate the reach and magnitude of the actress’s fame, which I think is a little misleading. What we must remember is that silent film’s newfound visibility has not necessarily brought with it a collapse of disciplinary divides or a marked change in interpretative strategies. At least in the instance of Bernhardt, I would argue that we have a kind of pastiche of art nouveau inclusivity, whereby objects are
joined together without any serious attempt to address what they actually represent. It is therefore hardly surprising that her films, outside of this forum, are still considered too theatrical and anachronistic to properly 'belong' to film history and too jerky and silent to properly form part of theatre history.

This deflection of film history into theatre history (and vice versa) indicates that dialogue has yet to be properly initiated between the two disciplines. As theatre historian David Mayer argues, film historians are routinely incapable of seeing the range of theatrical action on screen, misconstrue fluid action for static pose, and are ignorant of the circumstances surrounding theatrical performance. As he also argues, film historians have again joined theatre historians in presuming that the emergence of film (and the development of the theatre) involved an inevitable march towards realism. What he underscores is a point I want to take up: even today there is very little discussion about how and why film and theatre might overlap and very little appreciation for what he calls "the Victorian's preference for action (in the Aristotelian sense of enactment or the doing) and how this doing becomes a source of pleasure." Indeed, it would appear that it is only the cinema of attraction — that small catchment area of spectacular pre-1906 film — which ensures that the theatre becomes a visible point of reference in and for film history. Even here, however, film historians Lea Jacobs and Ben Brewster have seen the identification of this period as (triumphant) evidence of the theatre's diminished relevance to film studies, since so many other influences and art forms might be traced into this period. Moreover, Tom Gunning suggests that the enactment or doing which audiences actually celebrated was one which was largely technological, in that audiences went to more marvel at machinery than they did to admire physical performance. In any case, the spectatorial and visibility which he identifies is apparently superseded (or at least driven underground or accommodated by genre) by the time we reach narrative film in the early teens.

While I would like to retroactively attach Bernhardt's theatrical film to this category of cinema and to join Mayer in speaking about the pleasure which was (and is) derived from watching physical action on screen, I am constantly reminded that Bernhardt's films were anachronistic and do not "fit" developments otherwise occurring in film history. Richard Abel, discussing Camille in his book The Ciné Goes To Town, French Film 1896-1914, thereby describes the film as "perhaps the most regressive of all surviving Film d'Art production", and suggests that this use of the medium was largely driven by the desire to preserve a famous theatrical performance. Like Eileen Bowser explaining that Bernhardt "didn't understand what was appropriate to the new medium", there is the presumption that spectacular theatricality was somehow foreign to film. This presumption can be explained by the movement of narrative into film. As Gunning explains, "The period from 1907 to about 1913 represents the true narrativization of the cinema, culminating in the appearance of feature films which radically revised the variety format. Film clearly took the legitimate theatre as its model, producing famous players in famous plays." As he concludes, it is only recently, via the "the Spielberg-Lucas Coppola cinema of effects", that mainstream film is beginning to break free from this structure of narrative self enclosure.

Clearly, the major difficulty I face in incorporating Bernhardt's films into film history relates to the fact that theatrical action should, by the early teens, be eclipsed by narrative enclosure. What I want to instead suggest is that the theatrical film developed alongside and at times overlapped with the narrative film. I also want to suggest that this category of spectacle has a long and productive history which can not be deflected into theatre history nor siphoned off into a star discourse which never addresses the more 'serious' questions of periodisation or genealogy. I would go on to argue that Bernhardt is an early and important precursor to this spectacular cinema and that — notwithstanding all the attention paid her legitimizing function in film studies — she was enormously popular precisely because she brought a protocamp aesthetic to film via her emphasis upon physical action. Indeed, even a cursory glance at her two best known films — La Dame aux Camélias and La Reine Élisabeth — reveals that there is far more going on than the simple recording of a stage performance.

To begin, therefore, with La Dame aux Camélias, the film which launched Bernhardt's entrance into the film industry. Based upon a play which was familiar to an international audience, this was no longer the live work which shocked an English-speaking world with its licentiousness, nor the truncated excerpt later presented on the vaudeville stage. It was instead a work
whose length lay somewhere between these two very different
theatres and which made Bernhardt’s performance newly visible
to an international audience. As the “Ciné-Journal” would state in
its discussion of the work:

You think perhaps of the ‘Golden Voice’, of the tirades of great scenes,
and you say to me: What is there that remains on the screen?
There remains this: that Madame Sarah Bernhardt carries the value of
her role so well that its expression does not suffer by the silence. I have
understood better than ever, seeing her leave the scene after the fare-
well letter written to Armand, the poignant emotion of her act and the
depth of her love sacrificed for her lover. There is in her tender arms, in
her kiss thrown to him in his absence, in her hurried flight, hesitant,
held back, a minute of high tragedy which indicates better than words
the dreadful torment of a feminine heart11.

This focus on the visible legibility of performance was related
to the idea that gesture, even without speech, could impart emo-
tional affect. What was noted were not only the emotions which
were elicited by the ‘moving’ pictures but the changed gestural
tempo which Bernhardt brought to film. Indeed, what reference
to ‘a hurried flight’ and ‘a minute of high tragedy’ indicate is that
the moving pictures also literally moved. In other words, a new
temporal order was directing and accelerating Bernhardt’s theatric-
al action. “The Moving Picture World” would therefore speak of
how Camille was rehearsed a few times with the watch in order to
get it timed right12. Another review, invoking the wireless as
model and metaphor in its discussion of Camille, would state that
“The story is revealed as plain as print. Camille was never more
pitifully eloquent than in this dumb record […]. Someone has said
that the pictures fairly crackle with life and send wireless mes-
gages to the spectators”13. In contrast to this emphasis upon speed
and the possible articulation of dramatic action stands the slow-
ness with which Bernhardt’s gestures unwound on the theatrical
stage. As a review in the “New York Times” in December 1905
indicates, a live performance of in La Dame aux Camélias was a
contemplative event:

Her Mme. Gauthier stands revealed as a portrait, painted for the
most part in pastel shades, its subdued tints only now and then relieved
by a flare of brilliant coloring […]. In the varying passages of the five
long acts her magnificent accomplishments are in evidence with a
steady progression […]. To the reviewer, hurried and hastening – for the
performance lasted until well on to midnight and typists and forms
waited for no man – there come memories of scene after scene of the most
proficient employment of the means of dramatic expression and execu-
tion that can be imagined. Time is lacking for their description even we-
re a description possible14.

At the same time that a new temporal order established itself
on film via the acceleration of physical action, so too did a new
temporal order assert itself via the elimination of narrative con-
tent. Beginning in the third act of the play, the film cut the first
act (in which Armand and Marguerite meet at a supper party and
which establishes the frivolous world of the demi-mondaine), and
the second act (in which Armand convinces Marguerite of the sin-
cerity of his love for her). This meant that La Dame aux Camélias
was condensed into the concluding three acts and began at the
point at which Marguerite and Armand’s idyllic life in a cottage
outside Paris is interrupted by the request Armand’s father makes
to Marguerite for their separation. The film then shifts to the sce-
ne in which Armand sees Marguerite with the Count of Vavarville at
an evening party at Olympe’s house and, misunderstanding her
motives for leaving him, throws the money he has won at cards at
her. It moves on to the brief scene in which the Count and
Armand prepare to settle their differences via a duel and conclu-
des with Armand (at his father’s prompting) reconciled with
Marguerite as she dies of consumption in his arms.

Clearly, beginning Camille in the third act of the play signalled,
at the film’s very outset, that film did not mechanically reproduce
the action once presented on the legitimate stage. And clearly, the
acceleration of theatrical gesture can be seen as a visual effect in
itself, one that might be aligned with the notion of the attraction,
in that audiences derived pleasure from watching a familiar ac-
tress present herself in a changed and novel way. The stillness of
the camera and long take tableaux further emphasized this point.
So too did the artifice of costume and mise en scene: what was
being presented was not the anachronism of the late nineteenth
century theatre, but its new and spectacular mediation. Indeed,
just as Bernhardt’s spiralling action and thin tendrillike body once
physicalised the lines and curves of a nascent art nouveau, her
appearance on film helped to express the changed dynamism and
physical excesses of the modern world. Like those other materials put to new use and claiming a new visibility, Bernhardt and her theatre was re-presented to the public.

*La Reine Elisabeth*, made just one year after *Camille*, also illustrates the way in which Bernhardt used film to articulate a project of theatrical renewal. Drawing again on a famous and familiar story (the Ciné-journal would state, for example that “Everyone knows the tragic history of Queen Elizabeth of England and about her relationship with the valiant Earl of Essex [...]”) she also again drew upon a work which was visually familiar to a popular audience. Indeed, Bernhardt explicitly acknowledged the visual currency of this subject when she recreated, in the final death scene, Paul Delaroche’s opulent and spectacular 1828 painting, *Death of Queen Elizabeth, Queen of England, in 1603*. As one of the most widely known and acclaimed painters in the Western world in the nineteenth century, this nod to Delaroche ensured that the visible changes and challenges which Bernhardt brought to film would be seen and understood by a watching public.

The most obvious change which Bernhardt brought to the Queen was the focus she gave Elizabeth’s relationship with the Earl of Essex. Rather than depict the Queen alone in regal austerity or dying slowly (as Delaroche does) in her old age, Bernhardt bases her film upon the amorous relationship between the Queen and her young subject. Again, we are here returned to the emotional affect noted in reviews of *Camille*. As Bush would comment in “The Moving Picture World”, this focus upon the emotive life—or the passions—of the Queen was new to audiences. It represented a changed way of engaging with the Tudor Queen, eliciting audience empathy with a historical character who had previously been imagined only in terms of her capacity for cold calculation. As Bush states:

> This great artist had her own conception of the character of Elizabeth. It was not the traditional Elizabeth, crafty, calculating and not at all emotional.

So superb is the art of Sarah Bernhardt that she made her conception, which is that of a passionate woman, dominated wholly by her affections, seem not impossible. No student of history could pay a greater tribute to her art than to say that she successfully defied a well-known historical fact. Throughout the play, which consists of three reels, she exhibited her best powers and won from her audience such keen sympathy and compassion as the real Elizabeth could never have expected.

It is the last scene, where Bernhardt famously flops face forward to die on a pile of cushions before her, which best illustrates the way in which this notion of the “moving” picture was reinscribed through the acceleration of physical action. Where Delaroche depicts the Queen writhing in opulent splendour on an ermine cloak which is spread across a pile of the cushions, Bernhardt re-enacts her death quickly. She stands, therefore, before a pile of cushions and calls for a goblet from which she drinks and then holds a mirror to her face. Discarding the mirror she refuses the support of her court. Pulling herself straight, as though driven by a final burst of energy, she calls for the Admiral who enters. After naming her successor she raises both arms upwards and, palms outstretched, she falls forward onto the cushions. Hence, the moment of the Queen’s death arrives before Bernhardt falls to the floor from her throne. As May Agate, a former student of the actress, would explain:

[Bernhardt’s] performance was one of a soul-scared woman who still loves the man she has put to death. She was regal, immensely dignified, terrible, and as a picture of remorse I can think of nothing more haunting. What is more, you felt here was a woman capable of putting people to death, for she was hard, inexorable, terrifying. Even in her last throes of suffering she made no appeal to pity. There was no truck with the pendants; she died standing up, falling forward on to a mass of cushions, not writhing, serene amongst them as is recorded historically.

This reference to the historic image of Queen Elizabeth writhing serene amongst the cushions invokes not only Delaroche’s painting of the Queen but also David Hume’s *History of England* (published in 1800). In this, Hume explains that for “Ten days and nights she lay upon the carpet, leaning on cushions which her maids brought her; and the physicians could not persuade her to allow herself to be put to bed, much less to make trial of any remedies they prescribed to her”. In returning to depict this famous account of Queen Elizabeth’s death, Delaroche seems to anticipate what Roland Barthes would call the “intense immobility” of the photographic image. That is, although his work was novel in that it (like the later instant photograph) rendered a mo-
ment of the Queen's slow death which would not normally be available to us for contemplation (the Queen writhes, about to name her successor and die), this did not transform the image or change its ascribed meaning. As Barthes states:

[...] the reading of the punctum (of the pricked photograph, so to speak) is at once brief and active. A trick of vocabulary. We say "to develop a photograph"; but what the chemical action develops is undevelopable, an essence (of a wound), what cannot be transformed but only repeated under the instances of insistence (of the insistent gaze). This brings the Photograph (certain photographs) close to the Haiku. For the notation of a haiku, too, is undevelopable: everything is given, without provoking the desire for or even the possibility of a rhetorical expansion. In both cases we might (we must) speak of an intense immobility linked to a detail (to a detonator), an explosion makes a little star on the pane of the text or of the photograph: neither the Haiku nor the Photograph makes us "dream".

Hence, although the androgyny of Delaroche's Queen might provide me with the punctum of the image (the profile of her masculine face emerges from a bed of female opulence), Delaroche's painting is nevertheless prescriptive: the Queen will name her successor after ten days of writhing on the cushions and die a slow death. Viewed in this context, Bernhardt's return to Delaroche (and via him, Hume) takes an added significance. In re-enacting Delaroche's painting, she does not only reference a famous painting and then accelerate action, she also actively changes the character and meaning of history. By this I mean that a circumscribed event was figuratively and rhetorically freed from what Barthes would call its 'intense immobility'.

These movements are, however, lost within the film's habitual description. As film historians remind us, when *La Reine Élisabeth* opened at the Lyceum Theatre in Chicago on 12 July 1912 it helped to inaugurate the longer playing narrative film in America. In this way, it helped to introduce a new category of spectacle to the cinema. Indeed, Adolph Zukor was so enthusiastic about the film that he initiated a partnership with producer Daniel Frohman for the 'Famous Players in Famous Plays' series. This earned him the money which would see the foundation of Paramount Studios. In this way, a play which was the biggest failure of Bernhardt's theatrical career (it played for only 12 performances at her Theatre Sarah Bernhardt) transformed itself to become a popular film whose box office receipts helped to promote the acceptance of the feature film whilst also helping to found one of the major Hollywood studios.

This focus upon the temporal duration of *La Reine Élisabeth* suggests, of course, that the theatrical film was more encumbered than those shorter films 'drawn from life'. It also suggests that the theatrical film was long precisely because it provided a record of theatrical action. Again, this does not take into account the rapidity with which action unfolded on screen or the way in which the theatrical film was less about recording theatrical history than it was about our changing relationship to history. Indeed, I would argue that part of Bernhardt's project of theatrical renewal involved freeing history from its status a grand narrative which barely touched upon the lives of popular audiences. I would go on to argue that part of this freeing of history involved a protocamp humour which drew obvious delight at film's visible and very public re-enactments. Indeed, there is something comical about the focus upon a Queen's passions and the artificial and theatrical manner in which they are relayed. There is also something comical about the way in which Bernhardt represents herself to us, bowing at the beginning and end of the film, as though we did indeed need to be reminded of material artifice. There is also a chuckle to be shared over the very style of her film, with its elaborate costumes and painted sets. In other words, part of the freedom which Bernhardt celebrated on film was not only the possibility to change the tempo and significance of theatrical action, but the related possibility to transform the affective resonance of her own image.

That this freedom and the humour it elicits has yet to be recognized as anything but a retroactive reading practice articulated in Susan Sontag's *Notes on Camp* is evidence, I would argue, of our ongoing (and paradoxical) inability to demythologize star discourse. Indeed, even the recent acknowledgement of Bernhardt's lesbian camp led less to a reconsideration of her appearance on film than to a celebration of the engaged and avant garde way in which she had herself replicated through the mass media. Again, this concentration upon the actress's heterogeneous materiality does little more than mime the very structure (the star, the fan) apparently under critique. In terms of theatre and film studies, an
inability to celebrate camp humour can be related to the fact that disciplinary stakes remain high. With the probable exception of Mayer, theatre historians are not about to suggest that we laugh at a figure who helps to ensure the visibility of theatre history to international audiences today. They are also not about to ask that we explore the issue of camp film when we might instead explore the theatre’s relevance to twentieth century culture in so many other, more legitimating, ways. And film history, for all its focus upon spectatorial engagement, is hardly about to concede that high culture was in fact popular or that the performing body was as important as technology in the development of the language of film. It is also hardly about to concede ground to a theatrical avant garde or to acknowledge that this avant garde might not necessarily need to be recuperated through technologies of special effect. In other words, it would appear that it is film history – and not Bernhardt – which (to paraphrase Barthes) forces me to speak of an intense immobility, of a star on the pane of the text.

Notes


2 See (respectively) Sarah Bernhardt: The Art of High Drama, cit.; Menefee, D. W., op. cit.


4 Ibidem., pp. 119-120.

5 See Brewster and Jacobs, op. cit., p. 5: “Professional film historians today [...] have largely ceased to speak of a theatrically dominated early cinema. This is probably one of the many transformations in our understanding of early film history that was brought about by the Conference of the Federation of Film Archives [...] Attention among scholars has shifted to a reconsideration of the notion of the ‘primitivity’ of the cinema before about 1907, no longer considered negatively as an absence, a vacuum filled by inappropriate theatrical devices, but as a differentia specifica of early films which demands positive characterization. As for the cinema after 1907, the predominance of accounts of classical cinema centering on devices of narration has directed attention to the importance of literary narratives, particularly short stories, as influences on its formation. Theatre is probably less considered, whether as a positive or as a negative influence on the cinema, by film historians today than at any other time”.


9 Ibidem, pp. 233-234.

10 Remember that La Tosca, made three years earlier, was not released until after this film (See G. F. Blaisdell, Bernhardt in La Tosca, “Moving Picture World”, Oct. 19, 1912).


13 “MPW”, March 9, 1912.


William S. Hart, Two-Gun Man

Diane Koszarski

Bill Hart was a stage actor turned filmmaker at 49. He had a knack for his new craft and was fortunate to work for one of the growing industry's ablest young producers, Tom Ince. From 1914 until the mid-twenties, he starred in a series of widely popular two-reel and feature-length Westerns. American and European audiences found Hart's 'two-gun man' a serious characterization, a powerful embodiment of the current vision of values linked to the frontier: hardness, honor, rugged individualism. The United States in the period preceding the Great War hungered for moral passion; Hart delivered it on screen. His work, especially in the teens, strengthened the dramatic scope of the Western as a film genre, and his stardom, at its zenith, was equal to that of Chaplin, Pickford or Fairbanks. His distinctive Western persona is justly celebrated in the July 2006 retrospective organized by Il Cinema Ritrovato, giving us the opportunity to appreciate Hart as an author, for such he was.

As the 19th century closed, the journalism of Theodore Roosevelt, Frederick Remington and Owen Wister contributed to a new interpretation of the open frontier, just as it was closing in a practical sense. The vanishing West in their work became the touchstone for an idealized American civilization, properly created by many Anglo-Saxons, rural, egalitarian and individualistic. This represented a significant freshening of the Western myth as a key to national experience. Ned Buntline's dime novels and Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West show had stirred the popular imagination with flamboyant adventure. Broncho Billy Anderson had limned the outline of a cowboy hero in early film. The dramatic potential of Western tales had been touched on by Ince and Griffith. In 1914 another interpreter of Western roles traveled to...