



INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS

OFFICE OF SCHOLARLY PUBLISHING

First Encounters: French Literature and the Cinematograph

Author(s): Roland-François Lack

Source: *Film History*, Vol. 20, No. 2, Moving Picture Fiction (2008), pp. 133-143

Published by: [Indiana University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25165468>

Accessed: 08/08/2013 06:16

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Indiana University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Film History*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

First encounters: French literature and the cinematograph

Roland-François Lack

I defy my contemporaries to give the date of their first encounter with the cinema
(Jean-Paul Sartre)

Drawing on roughly forty years of French writing for examples, from the invention of the cinematograph to the publication of the first history of cinema in France, my aim in this essay is to consider how literature represented going to the cinema while this was still a new experience, how the raw material of this experience was processed into art. An alternative title would be 'The Cinema Scene as Motif in French Literary Fiction'. Important work on this topic for the first part of my period has already been done by Stephen Bottomore in an invaluable essay to which I am much indebted.¹

I have taken as a starting point Bottomore's remark to the effect that few famous authors contributed to the genre of fictions about cinema in the early period. It is certainly true that few French contributions match the quality of Kipling's 'Mrs Bathurst', the best if not the first in the genre. Bottomore discusses fine art-stories by Apollinaire ('Un beau film', 1907) and Giraudoux ('Au cinéma', 1908), but that these are the best French literature has to offer is disappointing, especially given how many of France's literary artists of the period up to 1914 acknowledged the existence of the cinematograph; they drew on it for similes, or commented on it discursively, but declined to tell stories about it.²

We might have expected more, for example, from Jules Verne (who died in 1905) than a brief reference to the kinetograph in 1895; after all, H.G. Wells would soon, in *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1899), demonstrate how central the cinematographic apparatus could be to visions of the future.³ Or from

Colette, who wrote film criticism and film scripts but, beyond describing a character's face in 1903 as having 'a cinematographic mobility', rarely mentioned the cinema in her several modern-day fictions of the period up to 1914.⁴ The period initiated the vogue for *romans-fleuve*, vast novel-cycles of contemporary life, so it is a further disappointment that no one in Rolland's *Jean-Christophe* (1904–1912) or Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1913–1927) finds the time to go to the movies. This did eventually happen in *La belle saison*, an early volume of Martin du Gard's cycle *Les Thibault* (1922–1937), where a full programme of *actualités*, Helen Holmes-style adventures and documentary images of 'Unknown Africa' provides a backdrop to erotic fumbings in the audience.⁵

The principal characters of these lengthy narratives are males who reach adulthood before the invention of cinema, and their authors seem to consider that their heroes have left behind such childish things. Historians may find evidence of this early assumption that cinema was only for children and women in the source of my epigraph, Sartre's autobiographical *Les mots*, published 1964 but a *locus classicus* of literature's first encounters with film. The relevant pages are rich in detail for the film historian to footnote, such as the specific dates of films mentioned (*Zigomar*, 1911; *Fantômas*, 1913; *Les Mystères de New York*, 1914; *Les Exploits de Maciste*

Roland-François Lack is a Senior Lecturer at University College London, where he teaches French literature and film. He is currently writing a book on Cinema and Place.

Correspondence to uclfrol@ucl.ac.uk

Fig. 1.
Jean-Paul Sartre,
Les mots (Paris:
Gallimard-Folio,
1983 [1964]).



– i.e. *Cabiria*, 1913), and the specific cinemas visited (the Panthéon, the Kinérama, the Gaumont Palace). This historian may also discuss issues around dating, through a peculiar figure of belatedness that marks the passage. Sartre, famously, reads the age of the cinema against his own:

We had the same mental age. I was seven years old and I could read. He, the cinema, was twelve, and couldn't speak. People said he was just starting out, that he had progress to make; I thought would we would grow up together.⁶

Since he was born in 1905, we calculate that Sartre dates the birth of the cinema as 1900, at least five years after the event.

The problem is not historical accuracy: it suits Sartre's literary purpose to make cinema a child of the twentieth century, and in film history we have become used to the rhetoric of false memory, especially when the past thing remembered is 'l'enfance de l'art'. In the first *Histoire du Cinéma*, from 1935, the novelist Robert Brasillach and literary critic

Maurice Bardèche evoke the origins of cinema through parallels with literature:

Everyone probably knows, nevertheless, that the origins of the film lie much further back, and that movies date from the era of President Faure and President Cleveland and of Bourget's first novels. They date, in fact, from a time when the boy Proust used to admire Mme Swann in the Bois de Boulogne, and woo Gilberte in the Champs Elysées. A Jewish army captain was arrested and tried then, but nobody foresaw that a year or two later the name of Dreyfus would convulse the whole French nation. The bicycle was still a velocipede. The automobile had just appeared, but older people insisted that it would never be as much use as the horse. Boldini was the fashionable painter. It was at such a moment that the film appeared.⁷

In fact, in the year cinema was born, Paul Bourget was onto his twelfth novel, and 'l'enfant Proust' was a grown man who had already published his first texts, but these literary associations help Brasillach and Bardèche present this story of origin as a kind of Proustian cinema, a succession of images laid out before the eyes of memory.

Brasillach, born 1909, devoted a large section of *Comme le temps passe* to the origins of cinema, depicting the activities of a film-production company in the early 1900s, evidently informed by Brasillach's work as a film historian:

Matricante went to see Méliès with René, and even visited the hangar in Montreuil where the master illusionist prepared most of his *trucs*. He came back filled with enthusiasm, for he had seen nothing at Charles Pathé's, where he had been taken by his compatriot Zecca, to match the ingeniousness, the acrobatic skill of this inspired, laughing, proud little man, who spent his days in his workshop, as inventive with his fingers as with his wit, and who took as much pleasure in organising *féeries* for children as he did large-scale comedies, staged *actualités* and little melodramas. In front of the astonished René he opened trap doors, suspended himself in the air, spat out fire, waggled his wizard's beard, produced a dozen women in white swimsuits from a giant rose, and had singing on the screen, thanks to

a phonograph, the grey silhouette of Paulus. René went home entirely won over by Matri-cante's plans, and ready to swear that the cinematograph would conquer the world.⁸

An habitué in the 1920s of art-house cinemas like the Studio des Ursulines and the Vieux Colombier (as related in his memoir *Notre avant-guerre*), Brasillach's historical knowledge was founded on his cinephilia, which fed directly into the cinema scenes he included in other novels.

His literary contemporaries narrated cinema-going as a generic experience, often tedious, sometimes sordid: 'the cinema was never any help to her: in that semi-darkness boredom overcame her irresistibly' (Mauriac); 'the film would be stupid, their neighbour would smoke and spit between his knees or else Lucien would be disagreeable' (Sartre); 'the cinema is the sewer of the twentieth century: whenever there's something base going on between two people, they end up in a movie theatre' (Montherlant).⁹ In a volume of his 'Real World' tetralogy, even Aragon, a genuine cinema enthusiast, succumbs to this fashion:

Aurélien had to get to his feet to let someone else past. The new arrival was an over-perfumed woman, who sat down beside him. He realised immediately what the game was. When he left the cinema, thoroughly disgusted with himself, he was overwhelmed by despair, mingled with a vague sense of guilt. The whole thing was senseless, quite pointless. He loathed the animal in himself.¹⁰

He then goes to get blind drunk in a bar. This is the second cinema Aurélien visits in the episode: in the first, one of the films he sees seems to be Tod Browning's *Drifting* (1923), a trace of Aragon's cinephilia, if not Aurélien's ('he doesn't know anything about films').¹¹

For Brasillach's characters cinema-going is never tedious or sordid. His cinema scenes are always marked by enthusiasm and by precision in the details. In *Le Marchand d'oiseaux* (1936) his heroine, who is traumatised by the German language, children playing marbles and avant-garde cinema, attends a screening of one of Richter's *Filmstudie*: 'The day one of her friends dragged her to the Vieux Colombier where a German director was presenting a film of pure cinema consisting simply of rolling crystal balls, she fainted in ten seconds, having rec-

ognised her three mortal enemies, in league against her on the magic screen'.¹²

Where other novelists in the thirties deign to name or evoke specific films, the details are not so likely to be derived from historiographic or cinephilic competence. In *Mort à crédit* (1936), Céline feeds on childhood memories of afternoons at Méliès's Théâtre Robert-Houdin:

My dog went with us everywhere, even to the Cinema, at the Robert Houdin, for the Thursday matinée. Grandmother paid for that too. We'd stay for three shows in a row. It was the same price, all seats a franc, a hundred per cent silence, no speech, no music, no titles, just the whirring of the mill. It'll come back, we tire of everything except sleeping and day-dreaming. The *Voyage to the Moon* will be back ... I still know it by heart.¹³

Céline was eight when he could first have seen Méliès's *Voyage dans la lune*.

Drieu la Rochelle has the hero in *Rêveuse bourgeoisie* (1937) see an early Lumière programme:

Nearby, in front of the Grand Café, difficult explanations were required regarding the cinematograph, on show there for the first time. He was drawn to it though at first disappointed by the banal scenes on that trembling screen, such as a train entering a station, which he had had to contemplate for too long, one evening in the depths of the café.¹⁴

Though the details of the locale on the boulevard des Capucines are more likely to have come from Brasillach and Bardèche's book than from Drieu's childhood memories (he was only three in 1896), this and the passage from Céline have, like Sartre's reminiscences, the authority of witness. But the child in front of a Lumière or Méliès *vue* is not yet the writer who will transform film into fiction.

The initial premise of my research was to discover the first writer to encounter the cinematograph and make fiction from it. My earnest, if chauvinist, hope was that the meeting occurred between Frenchmen, but that hope had soon to be abandoned. 'Revenge', the story Gorky published in 1896 after seeing a Lumière programme in Nizhny Novgorod, is the first great encounter of the cinema and literature. It is, from a socio-historical point of view, the equal of the cinema scene in Frank Norris's

1899 novel *McTeague*, no less a 'contemporaneous account of the reception of the cinematic image' containing 'rich material for understanding the horizon of expectations in which films originally appeared'.¹⁵ And from a literary point of view, Gorky's story performs the kind of reflexive figurations that make literature's reference to cinema worth our attention in the first place. 'Revenge' does not quite have the sophistication of Kipling's 'Mrs Bathurst', but it is an excellent beginning.¹⁶

Particularly remarkable is the speed with which Gorky transformed his experience of the cinematograph into art. Between his witnessing the Lumière show and publishing his story, just two weeks passed. By contrast, in May 1897 Paul Morand witnessed a major moment in the cinematograph's public history, the Bazar de la Charité fire, in which more than a hundred of France's finest aristocrats died in horrific and shameful circumstances. Morand would produce from this a fine art-story with the cinematograph at its centre, not merely as the attributed cause of the blaze but also, through the identification of the principal film on the programme, as the source of an intertextual figuration, a trope through which the story signals its own artistry. The film identified is Méliès's *L'Escamotage d'une Dame au Théâtre Robert Houdin*; briefly, the story concerns the complications arising from the temporary disappearance ('escamotage') of a 'dame' who, rather than dying as presumed in the blaze, had spent that afternoon with her lover.

One contrast I wish to establish with Gorky is that Morand's story was written almost fifty years after the witnessed event.¹⁷ Yes, as he points out in a footnote, Morand was only a child in 1897 (he was nine), but his note is there to insist, à la Sartre, on a link between his infancy and that of the cinema as art. Morand and the cinema would indeed grow up together: his writing would provide the cinema with stories – see Jean Epstein's *La Glace à trois faces* (1927) and Daniel Schmid's *Hécate* (1982) – and the cinema would reciprocate.

A stronger contrast between Gorky's 'Revenge' and Morand's 'Bazar' is the matter of historical accuracy: the immediacy of the 1896 story allows it to identify correctly elements of the Lumière programme that its characters could have seen (in particular the *Déjeuner de bébé*), even if the responses then recounted are fictional elaborations. Morand, on the other hand, writing in the 1940s, finds the title of Méliès's film not, à la Céline, in his childhood memo-

ries but in the intervening historiography of Brasillach and Bardèche. As I have said, the aptness of the film's title serves the story's artistry, but in passing does a disservice to any historiographical claim we might make for the story: there is no contemporary evidence concerning the presence of Méliès's *Escamotage d'une dame* on the programme at the Bazar cinematograph, and no film historians have suggested as much since. The operator at the Bazar specifies that he had put together for the occasion a film, in colour, called 'La Mi-Carême à Paris'.¹⁸ Morand make no use of this evidence: he may on other occasions be a historian, in his book *1900* notably, but in his story 'Le Bazar de la Charité' he is only an artist, arranging his materials for effect.

While I would not in every instance contest the historiographical value of literature's cinema scenes, in the French context the privileging of artistic effect over accurate documentation does seem to be a national characteristic. It needn't have been so: I have already manifested my unhappiness that a Russian preempted the French. The cinematograph, being French, should have entered French literature like a train steaming into a station. Naturalism, an art based on documentation and still, in 1895, a dominant literary mode, should have been an ideal receptor for such newness entering the world, but neither Zola nor his French *épigones* rushed to present the phenomenon in their fictions. Zola is the biggest disappointment, having still five vast novels to publish between 1896 and his death in 1902, in at least two of which scenes at the cinema might feasibly have figured: *Paris* (1898), a contemporary social fresco, and *Travail* (1901), a future-set vision of post-industrialism. We can assume Zola knew of the cinema, be it through cinematographic representations of his involvement in the Dreyfus Affair,¹⁹ or simply through his photographic practice, as a reader of the specialist photography journals in which the cinematograph was discussed, and as a regular purchaser of the Lumière company's photographic plates. (He expresses, in his notes, enthusiasm for their new 'yellow label' plates.²⁰)

Rather like that of Lumière's famous locomotive, now thought to have arrived at La Ciotat two years later than scheduled – it was after all an outdated model relegated from the inter-city express lines to serve on slower local services – the arrival of the cinema in French literature was belated.²¹ Preempted in Russia by Gorky and in the US by Norris (both Naturalist authors, and both of whose

cinema scenes figure in literary terms the impact of this new and competing mode of Naturalist representation), the Zola-school of French literature finally goes to the cinema in 1900, in Octave Mirbeau's *Le Journal d'une femme de chambre*:

After dinner we strolled for a while on the boulevards, then he took me to a cinematograph show. I was a bit weak after drinking too much Saumur wine. In the dark of the hall, as on the luminous screen the French army paraded to the applause of the crowd, he grabbed me by the waist and planted a kiss on my neck which almost undid my hair.

'You're fantastic', he whispered. 'God, you smell good!'

He walked me to my hotel [...] . As soon as we were in my room, and I had bolted the door, he came at me and threw me, skirts in the air, onto the bed.

When all's said, we can be pretty sordid at times. Poor us!

This episode ends with the scandalous Naturalism of brute sex, after its beginning had supplied the missing link between Naturalist and cinematographic representation that I have been seeking. There is rich sociological matter in the details of the scene: the conditions of viewing, the programme, the responses to it. Of course, as art, the scene is not 'evidence' for the sociologist, unless it is confirmed by better evidence (in which case the better evidence suffices), but at least we can ask the sociological context to illustrate the art. What kind of cinema show is Mirbeau describing? When and where might it have taken place?

With these questions answered, we might establish that Mirbeau's text is of its time. But its time is also a function of art, is a thing represented, and Mirbeau scholars know that the chronology of this novel is askew. The problem is, briefly, whether the chambermaid's diary begins in September 1897 and finishes in July 1898, or in September '98 and July '99. In either case, there are contradictory references to dated events: 'in conclusion', says a recent editor, 'the time of the novel is fictive'.²² This conclusion is all the more necessary in considering the cinema scene. The narrator describes this encounter as following immediately an event that, as she writes, occurred on 6 October, five years before. Given the possible time frames, then, the visit to the cinematograph takes place either in 1892 or 1893, two or

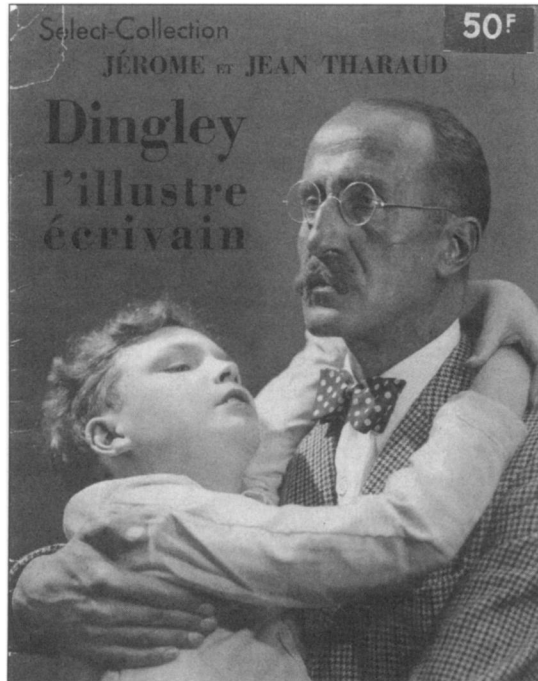
three years at least before attendance at such a show was possible.

A simple solution is to blame the chambermaid's memory for the solecism, but her insistence on precise commemoration makes that unlikely. More satisfying is to treat the scene as part of an aesthetic construct, where the vis-à-vis of what happens on screen and what happens in the auditorium serves as *mise-en-abîme* of motifs out of which the novel is composed. The cinema is presented as a mirror that fails to reflect reality, figuring not sordid sex but the army as symbol and idea. On the screen 'the French army paraded', as visualisation of a motif whose last expression is the name of the café that the heroine ends up running with her virulently anti-Dreyfusard husband: 'A l'Armée française'.

A historian of the French cinema scene could give substantial context to the sex-motif in Mirbeau. I have already mentioned the sexually charged atmosphere of the scene in Martin du Gard's *La belle saison* (1923). That atmosphere intensifies in the thirties and forties, reaching a climax of sorts in a cinema scene from Morand's *Hécate et ses chiens* (1954), a cocktail flavoured with Africanist exoticism and troubled sexuality, ending with the female protagonist's vocalised orgasm in front of a film showing children at play. This is the only description of public orgasm at the cinema I have yet found in French literature: the norm is a more private affair, as in the first pages of Roger Nimier's *Les Epées* (1948), one of the most striking opening scenes in twentieth-century fiction, where an adolescent boy admires then masturbates over a magazine picture of Marlene Dietrich.

The counterpart to sex in the Mirbeau scene is the military motif.²³ In Maurice Le Normand's 'Devant le cinématographe' (1900) and François de Nion's 'Le cinématographe' (1903), Stephen Bottomore has identified and discussed in detail two contemporary stories with cinema scenes where soldiers are deployed on the screen, soliciting an animated response from the audience. Both cinema scenes represent the Boer War, sharing with Mirbeau's novel – which for all its chronological ambiguity is determined historically by the still-ongoing Dreyfus affair – an intensity derived from contemporary events. Nion was the less obscure of the two authors (producing artistic fiction and theatre for a further twenty years, including *Jacqueline et Colette* (1919), a novel with two substantial cinema scenes), but neither has occupied much space in the history of French litera-

Fig. 2. Jean and Jérôme Tharaud, *Dingley l'illustre écrivain* (Paris: Flammarion, 1942), a revision of the 1906 edition.



ture. Nonetheless, both stories achieve a degree of artistic reflexivity through the deployment of the cinema-recognition motif.²⁴ They develop this against a social background familiar in Paris cinemas of the time, the French public's collective opposition to British imperialism in South Africa. In his literary column from the year 1900, the novelist Jean Lorrain documents this attitude more precisely: 'Half past nine, to the Folies Bergères, to hiss at Queen Victoria reviewing her troops on the Transvaal and applaud the parading Boers on the cinematograph'.²⁵

Fiction made many contributions to this prevailing mood, but none was so powerful as the Tharaud brothers' *Dingley l'illustre écrivain* (1902), a novella critical of British imperialism generally, and in particular of British policy in South Africa. The eponymous protagonist is a barely disguised portrait of Kipling. Briefly, the famous writer plans a novel depicting a useless low-life transformed into a hero by the exigencies of war. To research his novel Dingley embarks on a troopship sailing for South Africa, where circumstances find him captured by a Boer leader, Du Toit, who treats him well and releases him. Dingley returns to England disillusioned and unable to finish his novel. The story ends with the great novelist asking his Indian nanny to tell him fairy tales, as escape from the political realities of the present.

Cinema does not feature in this narrative, though the new medium's onomastic icon is present. On the ship over, Dingley is in conversation with a French photographer for *L'Illustration*, who complains, when it is suggested that the war might soon be over, that he'll be left with 'fifty dozen unused Lumière plates'.²⁶

The interest, for our purposes, lies in the Tharauds' 1906 transformation of their seventy-page novella into the full-scale novel with which they won that year's Prix Goncourt. The expanded version follows the plot of the first, more or less, with additions (and some subtractions: the reference to the Lumière plates is removed). But the denouement is entirely different. Dingley is in London, disillusioned, and suffering from *ennui*. Around four o'clock on a Sunday afternoon, he goes to a music hall:

The show was coming to a close. On a cinematograph screen stretched across the front of the stage, like a huge trap to catch images, paraded the portraits of generals commanding in the South. All, whether victors or vanquished, were greeted by the crowd with the same fervour, because all were equally respectable representatives of British Strength – a banal spectacle that he had seen a hundred times.

Suddenly, a tent appeared on the screen; beneath this tent a moving shadow. Dingley recognised Lucas du Toit.

The Boer was holding in his closed hand the pipe that he, Dingley, had seen alit; the same mud was on his boots and, over his shoulders, the coat in which he had for so long watched him sleep. This trembling ghost was replaced* by the young man, just as he had seen him one night, by the light of a lantern, in the dynamited farm that had been his. And, for a few minutes, the novelist was living so intensely on the starry Veld that he was blinded by the brightness of the screen, where everything had suddenly disappeared, like a man who awakes with a start and sees, through his window, the full moon.

Once more the screen was populated. A nondescript region dotted with a dune grass-like vegetation; in the distance, the Drackenber

* That is, in Dingley's consciousness the screen image was replaced by his memory of Du Toit.

mountains; du Toit and his driver Cornélis leaning against a sand embankment in front of a squad of soldiers... The same silence in this desert as in this expectant room, where no sound was heard save the whirring of the projector and where no light shone save the rays of the magic lantern.

Suddenly, the simulacrum of a salvo of gunfire snapped in the wings; the two men fell on their faces; the room blazed with lights; frenetic hurrahs and jingo refrains filled the music hall and in the fracas the orchestra unleashed in fury the famous tune:

Forward, soldiers of the Queen
For England and for the Empire
We shall be masters of the world

The novelist realised that, by its enthusiasm, the crowd was manifesting approval for his own patriotic ingratitude towards the rebellious Afrikaner.

The novelist is confirmed in his faith that instinctively British popular patriotism is right, and assured that he will be able to harness it in his writing:

He would inspire in these people the simple, strong, brutal emotion they had just felt on seeing shot, on that screen, a kind of hero: but with another power, because the life of a cinematograph is precarious and poor, and for a long time yet a well-constructed tale will reign over this mechanical toy, with all the old accumulated energy of words.²⁷

This is as striking a *mise-en-scène* of cinema as the kinetoscope, cinematograph and kinetograph episodes in Norris, Mirbeau and Kipling. It is particularly forceful as *mise-en-abîme*, setting image against text, the immediate impression that cinema makes against the permanence of writing. The description of the film itself foregrounds literature's greater sensitivity to the ghostly demarcations of cinema. The crowd simply cheers at the death of the enemy, but Dingley is watching also the death of a ghost – he already knows from the newspapers that De Toit is dead – but also the coming to ghostly life of the past, through memory: 'déjà fantôme ...'.

The addition of a cinema scene radically alters the narrative. Dingley is moved to finish his novel of Imperialism, and the 1906 text ends on a note of bitter affirmation: 'never had the illustrious writer exalted

with a greater sense of pride the egotism of his country'.

The portrait of Kipling in both versions is damning and even cruel, given the pivotal role played in the narrative by the death of Dingley's son. But the valorisation of text over image, of the 'well-constructed tale' over the 'mechanical toy', is not simply irony at Kipling's expense. As the closing scene in a sustained relativisation of writing throughout the text, the cinema episode qualifies but does not resolve the issue. The opposition is first developed in the on-ship discussion with the photo-journalist, who praises a fellow photographer, killed in action, 'a real hero of Journalism and the Image'. Dingley comments sarcastically on the heroism of this photographer, less worthy a hero for being a mulatto. The criticism of Dingley's imperialist prejudices and the fact that the photographer debating with Dingley is French serve to valorise the image as expressive vocation. Where the writer has been struggling to find the means to make sense of his own, fictional hero, and must embark on a ship for South Africa to do so, the photographer's work has immediate meaning and impact, even if it may cost him his life.²⁸ This scene complements the cinema scene, with immediacy of inception and reception set against studied expression and enduring effect. In both cases the attitude of Dingley mediates how we weigh the values distributed in each.

The cinema scene in the Tharaud's novel is an aid to how we read the ironies of literature. In passing, it appears to offer evidence of film's reception, materials towards a sociology of early cinema. We might learn several things from it: how the silent image was given dramatic force through sound effects (the snap from the wings when the condemned man is shot); how an audience might take a screen image as a cue for a performance of its own; how the intellectual classes saw popular entertainments as a cure for ennui. In fact none of this can be known from the evidence of the text; none of it need be observed detail, a fair representation of the English cinema-going public circa 1902. Every element could be pure invention, legitimised by the distance of setting and readership (London and Paris), and by the distance built into ironising fiction.

What we do have evidence of, possibly, is the horizon of expectation in which cinema-fiction appeared and was received by other fictionalisers – that is if we may conjecture that the Tharauds' 1906 revision of the 1902 novella through the addition of a

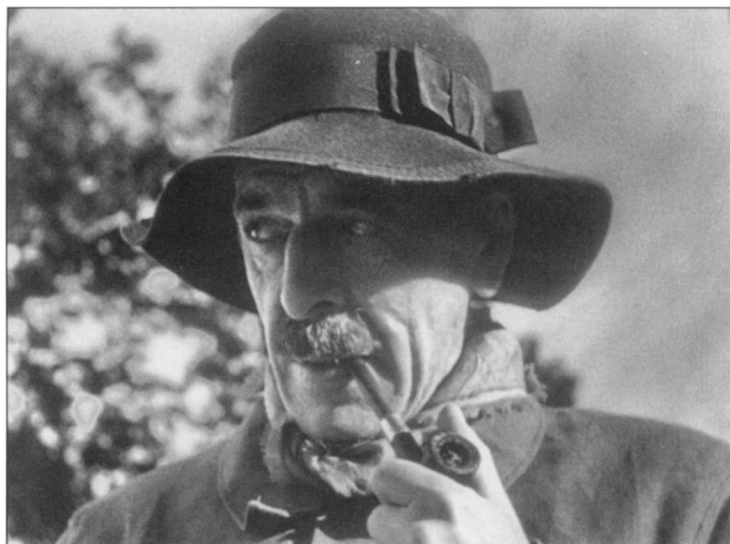


Fig. 3.
Charles-Ferdinand
Ramuz as an
extra in *Rapt*,
Dimitri
Kirsanoff's 1933
adaptation of his
novel *La
séparation des
races*.

cinema scene was prompted by a reading of the cinema scenes in 'Mrs Bathurst', published 1904. The reversal of affect, having Kipling suffer through recognition on the screen as his character Vickery did, is redoubled in irony by the apotheosis of self-confidence that the novelist's cinema-going brings him to. This may only be a reader effect: there is no external evidence that the Tharauds knew Kipling's story, and all we have for sure is two sophisticated literary works joined by a common motif.

The intertextual complexity produced by the vis-à-vis of 'Mrs Bathurst' and *Dingley* is chiefly a literary affair; the cinema in both is positioned, through a *mise-en-abîme*, as naïvely realist, as no match for the artifice of fiction. If there had been a cinema scene in Zola, the cinema would no doubt have been positioned the same way. Nor would it have been any different at the other end of the spectrum, with Proust, who knew of the cinematograph from reading about it in Bergson but who probably never saw a film. If Proust's narrator had walked into a cinema, he would probably have come out of it like Dingley, bemoaning the poverty and precariousness of the cinematograph, and affirming the 'old accumulated energy of words'. In the last volume of *A la recherche*, his narrator rejects the cinema as a model for literature on entering the real space of intertextual *mise-en-abîme*, a library.²⁹

As Proust was writing his extraordinary fiction and ignoring the cinema, the cinema was already claiming a place in the ordinary world of ordinary novelists, not least through the place it had claimed in the lives of soldiers in the Great War. Many refer-

ences to the cinema in post-war French fiction are associated with reference to the war (see novels by Henri Barbusse, Roland Dorgelès and René Benjamin, as well as the aforementioned war-set novel by Nion, *Jacqueline et Colette*).

Concurrently, cinephilic artists in prose were beginning to bring their characters to the cinema for reasons other than that it was a part of the real world around them. Aragon's *Anicet* (1920), though composed at the Front, carefully avoids any reference to its military context, but it does have a very complex scene at the cinema (and 'Pol', a character based on Charlie Chaplin).³⁰ Sitting in front of the screen, the protagonist Baptiste presents an enthusiastic defence of Pearl White, the ideal modern spectacle, anti-psychological and invigorating. His friend counters with contempt – 'Don't talk to me about the cinema, it has nothing to offer us' – and the cinema enthusiast is then fully deflated by what he sees on the screen, as he witnesses the wedding of the woman he loves. This parody of the cinema-recognition motif is not a realism – the figures on the screen genuinely do smile at and gesture towards the spectators in the cinema – but a specular affirmation of cinema's power. The cinema image makes this spectator psychologically confused – 'he didn't know if he was in front of a screen or a mirror' – and reduces him to a literary stereotype. What the cinema offers, we deduce, is a rich intertextuality.

In similar vein, Jules Supervielle has the protagonists of his *L'Homme de la pampa* (1923) firstly confuse what they see at a railway station with cinematic fiction, mistaking one official for a Red Indian and another for a Mexican revolutionary, then at the cinema that evening see on the screen the next episode in the story. A posse of Americans are chasing the Mexicans, but rather than follow them off screen they burst into the auditorium, horses and all, crushing seats and spectators and rushing out onto the boulevard. They reappear on the screen via a secret door, to the great pleasure of the protagonists, who stay in the cinema till midnight listening to the pianola.³¹

Whether or not they represent the cinema, in their composition these works by Aragon and Supervielle can be seen as cinematic, by which is understood fragmentary and anti-psychological.³² In 1924 the Swiss author C.-F. Ramuz published an overtly psychological novel that represents the cinema and is, in its composition, overtly cinematic. *L'amour du monde*, described in the film magazine *Cinéa* as 'un

roman sur le cinéma', is the story of a first encounter, describing the coming to a small Swiss town of the cinematograph and the transformation it effects in the lives of all. Complex figurations identify the cinema with sexual awakening, with the discovery of the world, and with the second coming of Christ. Constructed around cinema-scenes, cinema-derived fantasies and, at one point, the narration of events through poetic mimicry of a film script ('shot 147: close-up. The kiss. The darkness, from the edges of the screen, slowly reaches the centre'),³³ it is hard to do justice here to this most beautiful of cinema fictions:

They crossed the rapids on rope bridges, carrying parcels of tied up rubber on their heads.

There were school-type wooden benches where we sat; – the world came flooding towards us in the night, as when, in the depths of an underground mine, you break open a pocket of water with a pick axe.

A barrier gave way; the separation that that there had been between the world and you ceased to exist.

The entire space came through the hole: we didn't need to move and go towards it, because it was the space that came towards you. And, through this same hole came times past, things that had passed became present; so that time, like space, was denied.

We saw all the races of animals; we saw flat flowers on ponds, as big as the tables on a café terrace.

We saw the crocodile, lying in profile on the sand by river, holding his mouth wide open and a little bird go in.

It was taken from in front of you, – then you saw Babylon which is a city that disappeared two, three thousand years ago, with its towers, its gates, its temples, its gods, its kings, its priests, its soldiers, its courtesans; disappeared, become sand in the sand, flattened in the plain, more deserted than the desert; – well there, once again, soldiers are on guard up on the walls that have begun to throw a shadow far before them, like a chain of mountains.

And the week before Christmas, the poster announced the Life of Jesus; and so, now, it

was the stable; it was here and, at the same time, it was the stable; it's where we are, without us having to move; and it's the stable, the manger, the straw, real straw, with a real cow and a real donkey; while between them is He who is born, who is born this evening once more, for us.

We no longer dared to look.

And even less so, no?, when we saw Him carrying the cross, when we saw him forced by the whip to carry that terrible weight up the path to Calvary.

Mme Reymondin tried to keep looking; He was being whipped, she could no longer look; – but try as we might, the image stayed in your head, the light still shone, above eyes that we kept shut.

They left the hall; they carried on seeing.³⁴

In an otherwise fine historical work on the coming of the cinema to Geneva, this passage is used to illustrate what the experience of discovering the cinema might have been like.³⁵ This is surely wrong: the raw material of the cinema experience is so artfully processed by Ramuz, throughout the novel, that nothing of what remains can legitimately be drawn on by the historian.

A sign of Ramuz's artfulness is the novel's atemporality. Aragon's *Anicet* had rejected its historical moment by not relating its experiences to the just finished war, but there is almost nothing in *L'Amour du monde* to situate it anywhere in time. The only specific markers of period are, indeed, the films that the townspeople discover, though these films are generally generic: exotic romance, Christ story, Wild West adventure, travelogue, nature film, record of aviation feats. Only the clear reference to the Babylon episode of *Intolerance* gives us a date, 1916, though they could of course be watching the film any time thereafter.³⁶

Chronology in Ramuz is often imprecise: it is a part of what makes his art cinematic, as an art of the present. Griffith's history-bound *Intolerance* is then a wonderfully ironic intertext for a novel about coming to love the world expansively, in space rather than in time. And *Intolerance* works as an intertext whether or not it ever really played in the kinds of space Ramuz describes.

The first encounter with cinema that Ramuz represents is, like every other instance I have dis-

cussed here, one more assimilation by literature of the world around it. Such assimilation is not in itself cinematic, of course, and that cinema also assimilates the world around it doesn't make cinema literary, because it does that by entirely cinematic

means. This essay has been a discussion of a *literary* process. Its complement would be a discussion of literature as a motif in French cinema, but that might take more than just an essay.

Notes

1. Stephen Bottomore, "'Devant le Cinématographe': the Cinema in French Fiction 1896–1914", *KINtop*, 13 (2005), 92–110. I am also indebted to Jérôme Prieur's anthology *Le Spectateur nocturne: les écrivains au cinéma* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 1993), F.-J. Albersmeier's study *Die Herausforderung des films an die französische Literatur* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1985) and Richard Abel's essay 'American Film and the French Literary Avant-Garde (1914–1924)', *Contemporary Literature*, 17:1 (1976), 84–109.
2. The list of literary writers who, pre-1914, acknowledge in writing the existence of the cinema is quite extensive: Paul Adam (*Stéphanie*), Guillaume Apollinaire ('Un beau film'), Maurice Barrès (*Mes Cahiers*), René Bazin (*Gingolphe l'abandonné*), Emile Bergerat (*Les Contes de Caliban*), Tristan Bernard (*Les Phares Soubigou*), Henri Bernstein (*Samson*), Léon Bloy (*Journal*), Henri Bordeaux (*La vie au théâtre*), Paul Bourget (*Pages de critique et de doctrine*), Jules Clarétie (*La Vie à Paris*), Colette (*Claudine s'en va, La Vagabonde*), Georges Courteline (*Les Linottes*), Maurice Donnay (*Les Eclaireuses*), Georges Feydeau (*Le Circuit*), Anatole France (*Sur la Pierre blanche, Barbebleue, Monsieur Bergerat*), Jean Giraudoux ('Au cinéma'), Remy de Gourmont (*Le Livre des Masques, Epilogues*), Louis Hémon (*Maria Chapdelaine*), Alfred Jarry (*Le Surréalisme*), Henri Lavedan (*La vie courante*), Paul Léautaud (*Journal*), Daniel Lesueur (*L'Honneur d'une femme*), Jean Lorrain (*Poussières de Paris, Fards et poisons*), Stéphane Mallarmé ('Réponse à une enquête sur le roman illustré par la photographie'), Roger Martin du Gard (*Jean Barois*), Octave Mirbeau (*Le Journal d'une femme de chambre, L'Epidémie, La 628E8*), Marcel Prévost (*Frédérique, Lettres à Françoise*), Marcel Proust (*A l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*), Jules Renard (*Journal*), Jehan Rictus ('Conseils'), Romain Rolland (*Les Amies*), Jules Romains ('La foule au cinématographe'), Raymond Roussel (*Impressions d'Afrique*), les Tharaud (*Dingley l'illustre écrivain*), André Theuriot (*Mon oncle Flo*), Marcelle Tinayre (*Notes d'une voyageuse en Turquie*), Pierre-Jean Toulet (*Les tendres menages, Mon amie Nane*), E.-M. Vogüé (*Les Morts qui parlent*) ... This list is not complete.
3. Jules Verne, *L'île à hélices* (Paris: Hachette, 1916; first published 1895), 57. Verne is referring to Edison's apparatus for recording movement, but also discusses image transmission by the 'téléphone', an anticipation of television that is mentioned also in Camille Flammarion's science-fiction *La Fin du monde* (Paris: Flammarion, 1894). See also Octave Uzanne's future-vision 'La Fin des livres', from the *Contes pour un bibliophile* (Paris: Quantin, 1894), discussing the kinetograph and the projection of images into private homes.
4. Colette, *Claudine s'en va* [1903], in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Le Fleuron, 1949), 294.
5. Roger Martin du Gard, *La belle saison* (1923), in *Les Thibault*, 1 (Paris: Le Livre de poche, 1962), 447–457.
6. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Les mots* (Paris: Gallimard-Folio, 1983; first published 1964), 104. My translation: all translations from the French hereinafter are mine, unless otherwise specified.
7. Maurice Bardèche and Robert Brasillach, *The History of Motion Pictures*, translated by Iris Barry (New York: W.W. Norton and The Museum of Modern Art, 1938), 3.
8. Robert Brasillach, *Comme le temps passe* (Paris: Le Livre de poche, 1969; first published 1937), 116. The details here echo those given in the *Histoire du cinéma*.
9. François Mauriac, *La Fin de la nuit* (Paris: Grasset, 1935), 13; Jean-Paul Sartre, *La Nausée* (Paris: Gallimard, 1938), 72; Henri de Montherlant, *Pitié pour les femmes* (Paris: Grasset, 1936), 44.
10. Louis Aragon, *Aurélien*, translated by Eithne Wilkins (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1947; first published in French 1944), 381.
11. Aragon, *Aurélien*, 237.
12. Robert Brasillach, *Le Marchand d'oiseaux* (Paris: Le Livre de poche, 1974; first published 1936), 29–30. In *Les Sept Couleurs* (1939), Patrice excitedly recommends Cavalcanti's *En rade*, Du Pont's *Variété*, Von Stroheim's *Greed* and Sjöström's *Phantom Carriage* in the same terms Brasillach would use to express his own enthusiasm for these films, in both *Notre avant guerre* and the *Histoire du cinéma*. He does, however, distinguish his character's views from his own where Patrice praises James Cruze's *Beggar on Horseback* (1925), a film Brasillach thought 'puerile'.
13. L.-F. Céline, *Mort à crédit* (Paris: Le Livre de poche, 1964; first published 1936), 54.

14. Pierre Drieu la Rochelle, *Rêveuse bourgeoise* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960; first published 1937), 111.
15. Tom Gunning's characterisation of the cinema scene in *McTeague*. See "'Primitive Cinema' – A Frame up or The Trick's on Us", *Cinema Journal* 28:2 (1989), 3.
16. To my knowledge no English translation of Gorky's story exists, but it is cited and discussed in Yuri Tsivian's *Early Cinema in Russia and its Cultural Reception* (London: Routledge, 1994), 36–37. A French translation is in Maxim Gorky, 'Vengé', in *Contes et nouvelles (1895–1896)* (Paris: Editeurs Français Réunis [1949–1979], [1896]).
17. Paul Morand, 'Le Bazar de la Charité' [1944], in *A la fleur d'oranger* (Vevey: les Clés d'or, 1946). There is a superb contemporary text on the fire by a great cinematograph-enthusiast, Remy de Gourmont's 'Le bûcher' [June 1897], but he only mentions the cinematograph in passing, and with black irony: 'the most welcome invention of the century, as the prospectuses say and as none now can doubt' [i.e. after the holocaust of aristocrats]. See *Epilogues 1895–1898* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1922), 125.
18. Jules Huret, *La catastrophe du Bazar de la Charité* (Paris: F. Juven 1897), 155.
19. At least two contemporary films represent Zola himself, both produced by the British Mutoscope and Biograph company: *The Zola-Rochefort Duel* (1898) and *Amann the Great Impersonator* (1899).
20. Emile Zola, 'Notes sur la photographie', présentée par Alain Buisson, *Les Cahiers Naturalistes*, 66 (1992), 328.
21. Martin Loiperdinger argues that of the three Lumière films showing a train entering La Ciotat station, the one universally referred to as *L'arrivée d'un train*, catalogue no. 653, was not shot until the summer of 1897. See 'Lumière's Arrival of a Train: Cinema's Founding Myth', *The Moving Image*, 4:1 (2004), 103. For the identification of the locomotive in this film I am indebted to Roland Arzul and Jean-Louis Marquis.
22. Noël Arnaud, introduction to *Le Journal d'une femme de chambre* (Paris: Folio, 1984), 23.
23. It is there also in the Martin du Gard episode, since one specified item on the programme is newsreel of the the French President Fallières observing military manoeuvres and meeting the aviator Latham. This serves as a period marker, dating the scene around 1910. *Les Thibault*, 452.
24. Nion's story has a woman recognise on the screen her brother being executed among other Boer prisoners by a firing squad under the command of her own husband, who is sitting beside her in the cinema. Nion returns to this situation, less sensationally, in the First World War-set *Jacqueline et Colette*, when a woman recognises on the screen a French officer as he passes in front of the camera that has been filming German prisoners of war. She faints, which informs those around her that she loves this man: *Jacqueline et Colette* (Paris: Flammarion, 1919), 143.
25. Jean Lorrain, *Poussières de Paris* (Paris: P. Ollendorf, 1902), 210.
26. Jérôme et Jean Tharaud, *Dingley l'illustre écrivain* (Paris: Editions des Cahiers, 1902), 32.
27. Jérôme et Jean Tharaud, *Dingley l'illustre écrivain* (Paris: Editions d'art Edouard Pellatan, 1906), 150–51.
28. In Nion's 'Le Cinématographe' the Hero of the Image is the film camera-man.
29. Marcel Proust, *Le Temps retrouvé*, in *A la recherche du temps perdu*, 20 (Paris: Gallimard, 1960; first published 1927), 883.
30. Louis Aragon, *Anicet ou le panorama* (Paris: Le Livre de poche, 1969; first published 1920), 117–125.
31. Jules Supervielle, *L'Homme de la Pampa* (Paris: NRF, 1923), 153–155.
32. Richard Abel discusses the use of cinematic form in *Anicet* in his essay 'American Film and the French Literary Avant-Garde', 91.
33. Charles-Ferdinand Ramuz, *L'Amour du monde*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, 10 (Lausanne: Editions Rencontre), 338.
34. *L'Amour du monde*, 277–278.
35. Consuelo Frauenfelder, *Le Temps du mouvement: le cinéma des attractions à Genève (1896–1917)* (Geneva: Presses d'Histoire Suisse, 2005), xi.
36. Working from notes by Ramuz that mention Pearl White with enthusiasm, the editor of the recent Pléiade edition of his novels suggests that the inspiration for one of the character's fantasies might be a Pearl White film from 1921 called *A Virgin Paradise* (an earlier title for the novel was 'Paradise Lost'). See Doris Jakubec (ed.), Ramuz, *Romans*, 2 (Paris: NRF-Pléiade, 2005), 1569.

Abstract: First encounters: French literature and the cinematograph, by Roland-François Lack

This paper discusses early French fiction about the cinematograph, prior to the publication of the first history of cinema in French, specifically examining the figurative force of reference to the new medium in literature.