

## The Pleasures and Punishments of Roman Error: Emperor Elagabalus at the Court of Early Cinema

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On Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> November 1911, the high-society newspaper *Le Gaulois* drew to the attention of its Parisian readers an exciting package of films showing at 2:30pm that afternoon at the Gaumont Palace in Place de Clichy. The variety programme would include: “‘Elagabalus,’ a grand Roman spectacle; Gaumont’s talking films; for the first time, ‘A sensational chase in an aeroplane with Legagneux piloting and Martinet at the gun’; ‘A catastrophe in Pennsylvania’; ‘A town destroyed by a flood.’”<sup>1</sup> The following week a periodical of the French film industry, *Ciné-Journal*, carried a full-page spread provided by the Gaumont company that further advertised the first of these films as a “grand drama in color” of 200 meters (that is, one reel of about eight minutes duration). Beneath the alternative title *The Roman Orgy* (*L’Orgie Romaine*), a production still displayed the garlanded and bejeweled emperor surrounded by his Praetorian Guard. Elagabalus cowers on his couch before the soldiers’ commander who, with sword menacingly unsheathed in his right hand, points accusingly at him with his left.<sup>2</sup> The grand Roman drama was being

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<sup>1</sup> *Le Gaulois* (5 November 1911, p. 3): “‘*Héliogabale*,’ grande scène romaine; les films-parlants Gaumont; pour la première fois, ‘*Une Chasse sensationnelle en aéroplane avec Legagneux au Volant et Martinet au fusil*’; ‘*Une Catastrophe en Pensylvanie*’; ‘*Une Ville détruite par une inondation*.’” Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own. For convenience, I shall call the emperor by his customary Latin name “Elagabalus” although the film draws on its Greek version to identify him as “Héliogabale.”

<sup>2</sup> *Ciné-Journal* (11 November 1911, 4.168, p. 379). Elsewhere in the same edition (p. 411) and in that for the week after (18 November 1911, 4.169, p. 489), the film is advertised as

projected in an equally grand neo-Roman edifice, for the recently inaugurated Gaumont-Palace cinema had once been a Hippodrome, whose giant arena had accommodated equestrian exhibitions and circus shows, including the chariot races of the historical spectacular “Vercingétorix.”<sup>3</sup>

Cinema deserves a place in this volume’s discussions of Roman error and the perceived errors of Rome’s reception. Early cinema immersed its spectators back into ancient Rome with an unsettling immediacy and, at the same time, brought previous receptions of ancient Rome into the modern world. At the beginning of the twentieth century, cinema was introducing into modern culture a radically new way of seeing that would profoundly alter ideas of time, space, materiality, and art (Elsaesser 1990, 1). Visual, kinetic, ephemeral, and urban, cinema encapsulated the attributes of modernity (Charney and Schwartz 1995, 1-12). Yet cinema was not just innovative and modern: it was also intermedial. It emerged out of, and in competition with, the art forms and optical devices of the previous century. In the ancient world of the nineteenth-century historical novel, painting, sculpture, dance, theatre, and opera, cinema repeatedly sought not only familiar and exciting content but also cultural legitimization and supposed moral uplift (Michelakis and Wyke 2013, 5-7). Thus the Roman world brought to life on the screen should be understood against and casts light on other modalities of ancient Rome’s reception.

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part of a different variety package that includes two dramas, one romance, four comedies and a documentary.

<sup>3</sup> An article in *Ciné-Journal* for 7<sup>th</sup> October 1911 (pp. 9, 11) declares that the glorious debut of the Hippodrome, when it hosted grand spectacles such as “Vercingétorix” and “Jules César,” has not been forgotten now that the building has been turned into a veritable people’s temple of cinema.

This chapter explores early cinema, and the short French film *The Roman Orgy*, as an intricate and enticing point of entry into Roman error. The emperor Elagabalus incarnated extreme transgressions of gender, religion and imperial power in ancient historiographic narratives of Roman degeneracy and decline. *The Roman Orgy* re-envisioned a selection of his errors partly in order to counter charges made against the early French film industry of commercial mistakes and moral failings. Yet, while the film evoked contemporary discourses of national decline and aspiration to regeneration in its concluding punishment of the emperor, it first lingered pleasurably over the display of his imperial decadence. Using a Roman emperor as its convenient and lucrative instrument, early cinema could both overcome and wallow in its own sins.

#### *The virtues and vices of French cinema*

*The Roman Orgy* was shown at the Gaumont Palace about a month after the building was inaugurated as the principal cinema of France and the largest in the world. The genre painter Louis Abel-Truchet captured impressionistically the new street scenes afforded by this event (figure 1). The ladies and gentlemen of Paris, dressed in fashionable attire, crowd towards the cinema's majestic entrance which is brilliantly illuminated in the night. Their eagerness would have been met by a wealth of luxuries within: Pompeian-style decoration; vibrant sky-blue hues; foyers and galleries for promenading; a vast hall capable of seating 3,400 spectators; a program of varied genres and emotions; and a large ensemble of musicians and singers to accompany it.<sup>4</sup> The painting also makes manifest the strategy of gentrification on which the French film industry had recently embarked. A Hippodrome is

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<sup>4</sup> On the pleasures of the Gaumont Palace, see Meusy 1996, esp. 285-91; Abel 1998, 31-32; Moine 2009, 201. On Abel-Truchet's painting of it, see Blom 2008, 308.

redesigned as a “temple of cinema;”<sup>5</sup> a palace of electric lights is rendered in oils; popular culture is transmuted into high art.<sup>6</sup>

From the outset, filmmakers were all too aware of the contempt in which their purportedly vulgar moving images could be held and they sometimes responded with mischievous self-reflection. By 1905, for example, the temptation of Saint Antony had become a recurring theme in the film programs exhibited at urban café-concerts and the country fairs that travelled across France. In a version released that year by Pathé-Frères, the saint at prayer is suddenly accosted by the devil (resplendent in his horned hat).<sup>7</sup> The devil directs Antony to look at a series of images that are now projected, by means of superimposition, onto a painted backdrop to the left of the film frame. Seated on a stool, the saint refuses to take in what the film’s spectators are free to gaze upon with pleasure—a sequence of girls rotating their naked breasts towards and away from the camera as they move diagonally up screen as if in flight. The film ends, and the devil and his erotic temptations disappear, once Antony brandishes his crucifix at them. Such films literalized and subjected to ridicule the charge that cinema was the invention of the devil.<sup>8</sup> The French

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<sup>5</sup> See n.3 above for the contemporary description of the Gaumont Palace as a “*temple populaire de la cinématographie*.”

<sup>6</sup> As Blom 2008, 308 observes.

<sup>7</sup> The version of the film I have seen survives in the Cineteca Sperimentale di Cinematografia, Rome and is listed as *La tentazione di Sant’ Antonio*, directed by Vincent-Lorant Heilbronn.

<sup>8</sup> Cosandey, Gaudreault, and Gunning acknowledge this charge in the title of their edited collection on early cinema, *Une Invention du Diable? Cinéma des Premiers Temps et Religion* (1992), but none of the essays directly consider the reflection on such charges evident in the films about the temptations inflicted upon St Antony.

film studios, however, gradually developed a more serious and systematic response to accusations of immorality. Permanent cinemas were established in which to host mixed programs that would contain at least one featured attraction capable of laying claim to cultural prestige and the edification of the middle-class audiences now being sought. To secure cultural cachet, to attract the higher social classes, to increase ticket prices and sales, Pathé-Frères boasted of inspiration from the stage and Gaumont from both theatre and painting (hence, in mid-November 1911, the company's selection of *The Roman Orgy* from out of that week's film program to advertise as "a grand drama in color").<sup>9</sup>

The *film d'art* movement which began around 1907, and which Pathé-Frères came quickly to support, encouraged the preparation of scenarios for featured attractions that were based on recent theatrical successes (especially historical dramas), the utilization of sumptuous décor and costumes that attended closely to period detail, and the performance on screen of reputed actors from the Comédie Française. In the sardonic words of two film historians writing in the 1930s (Bardèche and Brasillach 1938, 43), with these strategies for improvement "cinema was bidding farewell to tents and circuses in order to woo a buskined Muse."<sup>10</sup> In the years that followed, Gaumont developed a similar policy, publishing a manifesto in July 1909 for a series of films that would deliver for cinema "a theatrical

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<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Christie 2013, 113 notes that in February 1912 a London cinema gave top billing to a "coloured drama" about the Roman tribune Licinius in a programme that also comprised four comedies, a documentary on science, a western and another drama.

<sup>10</sup> On Pathé-Frères and the film d'art movement, see Abel 1996, 118-119 and 199-202; D'Hautcourt 2006, 112 and 117-118; Salmon 2014, esp. 256-65.

evolution towards Life and towards Truth.”<sup>11</sup> The manifesto for “*théâtre-film*” was soon replaced in May 1910 by one for “*film esthétique*,” written by Louis Feuillade (who was to direct *The Roman Orgy* for Gaumont the following year). Gaumont’s next films, he promised, would be fittingly pictorial rather than theatrical because it is in the nature of the cinematograph to address itself to our eyes; they would realize “Beauty of Thought, Beauty of Form.”<sup>12</sup> Thus Feuillade would fasten on the emperor Elagabalus (among other historical subjects) as an opportunity for the cinematograph to set foot on the legitimizing path of Truth and Beauty, and to correct its earlier ethical and aesthetic deviancy.<sup>13</sup> Yet, I would argue, Elagabalus was a suitable subject for the Gaumont director to film not only because the emperor had been frequently depicted in the narratives and the illustrations of novels, on the stage, and in paintings of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but also because his representation provided an opportunity playfully to preserve some of the sins of cinema—to carry on the devil’s work.

### *The truths and falsehoods of Roman historiography*

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<sup>11</sup> “L’évolution Théâtrale Vers la Vie et Vers la Vérité.” The manifesto for “*Le Théâtre-Film*” appeared in *Ciné-Journal* n. 46, 4-10 July 1909 pp. 5-6, on which see Bastide 2008, 306-308.

<sup>12</sup> “Beauté de l’idée, Beauté de la Form.” The manifesto for “*Le Film Esthétique*” appeared in *Ciné-Journal* n. 92, 28 May 1910, p. 19, on which see Abel 1988, 20; Lacassin 1995, 104-113; D’Hautcourt 2006, 107-108, 112-113, 118; Bastide 2008, 315-317.

<sup>13</sup> Akin 2000 offers a survey of the c. 30 films set in antiquity that Feuillade made between 1908 and 1913 and reproduces as an appendix the original scenario for *Héliogabale – L’orgie Romaine*.

The aspiration to “Truth” and “Beauty” to which early French cinema laid claim was based on its exploitation of themes and forms from the high arts. When Louis Feuillade turned to the production of his grand drama in color about the orgies of Elagabalus, he had at his disposal a curiously dense clustering of receptions of the Roman emperor that had taken shape in France between 1888 and 1911. Sustained interest in this fabulous yet paradoxically inconsequential figure of Roman history was expressed in, for example: the historical novels *L’Agonie* (1888) by Jean Lombard, *La Dernière Nuit de Héliogabale* (1889) by Louis Jourdan and *L’Élagabal* (1910) by Henry Mirande; a novel with a contemporary setting by the pseudonymous Jean Lorraine, *Le Vice Errant* (1902); a collection of ancient sources by Georges Duviquet entitled *Héliogabale Raconté par les Historiens Grecs et Latins* (1903); a spectacular lyric opera *Héliogabale* in three acts inspired by Lombard’s novel (with libretto written by Émile Sicard and music composed by Déodat de Séverac) which was performed in Béziers in 1910 and in Paris the year after; and even another film *Héliogabale* (1910) directed by André Calmettes for the rival company Film d’Art.<sup>14</sup>

Such works, in turn, had at their disposal ancient accounts of a Roman emperor like no other. According to the histories of Cassius Dio and Herodian, and the biography questionably ascribed to Aelius Lampridius (the *Vita Heliogabali*), every act of Elagabalus was evil and base; he was more monstrous even than Caligula, Nero, or Commodus; he was the worst of Rome’s emperors. A recent, detailed (if rather idiosyncratic), analysis of the classical sources by Leonardo de Arrizabalaga y Prado, *The Emperor Elagabalus: Fact or Fiction?* (2010), opens with a vivid catalogue of the kind of accusations that the ancient texts assemble and which this modern work proposes to dismantle:

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<sup>14</sup> For an explosion of interest in Elagabalus in France during this period, see Oswald 1949; de Palacio 2001, 117-118; David 2001, 217-223; David-de Palacio 2005, 183-229; D’Hautcourt 2006, 114-116; Icks 2011, 148-179; Dumenil 2012, 284-285.

Breaches of protocol and precedent; importing a solar cult to Rome, seeking to impose it as an exclusive monotheism; murdering prominent men and comely boys; throwing human genitals to beasts; polymorphous sexual perversity, active and passive, mutual and collective, with males and females; refusal to wage war; dancing; driving a chariot; wearing make-up and silk; wedding the sun god, whose high priest he was, to the moon goddess; building palaces to use but once and destroy; holding dinners for ten bald, fat, or ruptured men; holding conventions for prostitutes of either gender; collecting tons of spider webs, or jarsful of flies; appointing officers of state on the basis of phallic size; selling state appointments; spending more than any previous emperor on banquets and shows for the populace; serving his toadies with glass replicas of food, and, when bored with his guests, smothering them beneath an avalanche of flowers.<sup>15</sup>

Classical scholarship, as Charles Martindale has observed (2013, 171), is itself a category of reception that engages with the ancient world and has the capacity to change that world and its inhabitants. Studies like that of de Arrizabalaga y Prado and Martijn Icks, *The Crimes of Elagabalus: The Life and Legacy of Rome's Decadent Boy Emperor* (2011), work to peel away antiquity's own falsehoods and to demonstrate that many of the errors of Elagabalus are themselves erroneous. An effective *damnatio memoriae* ordered by Elagabalus' successor has left us with few sources, among which the literary accounts are hostile in the extreme.

Modern scholarship assesses the fabulous narratives woven around the emperor against the surviving papyri, coins, inscriptions, sculpture, monuments and topography and strips them

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<sup>15</sup> De Arrizabalaga y Prado 2010, 1. On the peculiarities and inconsistencies of his investigation into the historical Elagabalus, see e.g. the review by Noreña 2012.



down to reveal the “real” Elagabalus—or what we now think we can know about him and the events of his reign. The colorful “creature of fiction” is transformed into a somewhat paler “character of fact.”<sup>16</sup>

The core of historical truth that emerges from this process is small and soft (because still pliable), yet it is nonetheless extraordinary.<sup>17</sup> The emperor who reigned at Rome for four years during the early third century CE most probably was born Varius Avitus Bassianus. He originated from an elite family in the Syrian town of Emesa where as a child he was dedicated to serve as the priest of the local sun god Elagabal.<sup>18</sup> In May 218 CE, he was acclaimed emperor by mutinous soldiers of the Roman legion III Gallica who were garrisoned nearby. On the pretense of being an illegitimate son of the earlier emperor Caracalla, and as index of his rightful membership of the Antonine dynasty, he took the official title Marcus Aurelius Antoninus. Emerging victorious from the ensuing civil war against the incumbent emperor Macrinus, he gained imperial power when he was fourteen years old. On arrival at Rome, he instituted the worship of Elagabal and acted as the god’s chief priest. Thus an *aureus* minted at Rome somewhere between 220 and 222 CE represents on its obverse the emperor’s youthful bust facing right, draped, cuirassed, and laureate, and

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<sup>16</sup> The distinction is that made by de Arrizabalaga y Prado throughout his study, which also utilizes a disturbingly categorical opposition between the supposed fictions of historiography and the truths of artefacts (see the concerns of Noreña 2012). Yet artefacts can also lie. Icks 2011 and Mader 2005 are less dismissive of the literary sources’ historical value.

<sup>17</sup> The following account relies mainly on Icks 2011, 9-43.

<sup>18</sup> Icks 2011, 59 explains that Varius was known only much later by either the Latin (Elagabalus) or the Greek (Heliogabale) form of the name of his Semitic god.

carries a legend designating him as *PIUS* or dutiful (figure 2).<sup>19</sup> The reverse demonstrates how deserving that epithet is—the Semitic god (who is represented not by an anthropomorphic statue but by a conical stone) sits behind a spread-winged eagle and is borne triumphant on a cart drawn by four horses pacing left. The star visible high above the parading horses may mark the event as a sacred ritual initiated by the emperor for the divinity who is thus designated *CONSERVATOR AVG* (or “protector of the august [emperor]”).<sup>20</sup> Elagabalus brought his sun god to Rome, built him a vast temple on the Palatine, bestowed upon him Jupiter’s role as supreme deity of the Roman pantheon, and became officially his “highest priest-emperor” (Icks 2011, 26). Four years later, in March 222 CE, he was assassinated by soldiers of his imperial guard. His cousin, the new emperor Severus Alexander, ordered an extravagant *damnatio memoriae*: the erasure of the name Marcus Aurelius Antoninus from inscriptions and documents, the destruction of the boy’s images, and the reversal of his religious reforms. The conical stone was returned to Syria.

Over the centuries, that historical core remained wrapped in ancient accretions of fantasy that became the truth about Rome.<sup>21</sup> From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment, from Machiavelli to Gibbon, Elagabalus was portrayed with conviction as the ultimate tyrant (Icks 2011, 123-47). At the start of the twentieth century, when historians were comparing classical historiography with artefactual sources and subjecting the former to some critical scrutiny (Icks 2011, 148), the first modern work on the emperor—a collection of literary and non-literary sources published in Paris in 1903—contains no assessment of the evidence by

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<sup>19</sup> The *aureus* is registered in the British Museum’s catalogue as no. 1864, 1128.288. See also Mattingly 1975, 560 (= RE5 197, p. 560) and Mattingly et al. 1986, 32 (= RIC4, 61, p. 32).

<sup>20</sup> See de Arrizabalaga y Prado 2010, 59-105 for detailed discussion and illustrations of the coinage of Elagabalus, esp. fig. 36 and pp. 76-77. Cf. Icks 2011, 17 and 78.

<sup>21</sup> I am most grateful to Basil Dufallo for this way of formulating my point.

its editor Georges Duviquet. Its title, however, *Héliogabale Raconté par les Historiens Grecs et Latins, dix-huit Gravures d'après les Monuments Originaux*, may contain within it the suggestion that the emperor is little more than an accumulation of stories (“*Héliogabale raconté*” or “Elagabalus narrated”). In the preface, the celebrated writer and critic Remy de Gourmont pronounces a judgment milder, but no less fanciful, than that of the classical texts he is introducing. The emperor was not despotic, murderous, cruel, greedy, or intolerant, but he was a corrupted Syrian, a debauched priest and an adolescent able to draw on limitless wealth. Desiccated by the heat of the Orient, kicking against the control of his female family members, he was a child trying to amuse himself. Not a mediocre figure, he was *the* emperor of extravagance.<sup>22</sup>

The fantastical quality of both the ancient sources on Elagabalus and his consequent *Nachleben* is not grounds for the dismissal of either. Their joint exploration, as Martijn Icks argues (2011, 4-5), sheds light on the strategies by which ancient Rome has been imagined and reimagined, and their purposes. The errors of the emperors have been vital components in the writing of Imperial Rome. Both Greek and Roman historiography established moral taxonomies to differentiate legitimate from illegitimate power. The illegitimate ruler was patched together through the use of standard literary *topoi*, such as usurpation, violation of Roman senatorial traditions, cruelty and favoritism, effeminacy, sexual perversity, and a prodigious appetite for luxury and pleasure. In the case of Elagabalus, it was possible to interweave the conventional narrative of deviancy with the dependency and capriciousness of a child, the shocking despotism, adornment, cosmetics and habits of an Oriental, a fanatical devotion to an alien religious cult and the offensive practice of its bizarre rituals—thus fabricating so extreme and pornographic a portrait as to guarantee that readers would judge

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<sup>22</sup> “*Un enfant qui s’amuse*” (11); “l’empereur de l’extravagance” (9). On de Gourmont’s preface, see David de-Palacio 2005, 222-224 and Icks 2011 182.

him a false Antonine.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, the fourth-century *Historia Augusta*, of which the *Vita Heliogabali* forms a part, establishes across its series of imperial biographies a teleological narrative heading towards degeneracy, decline and renewal. As one *malus princeps* replaces another, their emblematic vices become progressively more refined and extreme until Elagabalus is reached as the dazzlingly outlandish climax. He is condemned as *Antoninorum ultimus in summa impuritate uixisse memoratur* (“the last of the Antonines, who is said to have lived in the lowest depths of foulness,” *Vita Macrini*).<sup>24</sup> In contrast to his virtuous and benign successor Severus Alexander, Elagabalus is (as put expressively by Gottfried Mader) “the grand satrap of pleasure, the cross-dressing, gender-bending, convention-defying showman who turns the Principate on its head and into an amusement park, an endless skein of absurdity in which symbolics takes over from reality” (2005, 151). He is also, in historiographic terms, “an exercise in amplification, a *topos* run amok” (Mader 2005, 151).<sup>25</sup>

### *Cinematic punishments & French nationalism*

Now that the fabulous emperor of the *Vita Heliogabali* is better understood as the rhetorical climax of a classical narrative which emplots the political and moral decline of the Roman Empire, his ideological utility for French cinema in 1911 becomes correspondingly

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<sup>23</sup> On the literary *topoi* utilized in classical texts to depict Elagabalus as an extreme version of an illegitimate ruler, see Barrow 2001, 134; Mader 2005, 136 and 139-142; D’Hautcourt 2006, 110; Pasetti 2006; de Arrizabalaga y Prado 2010, 27-46; Icks 2011, 92-122.

<sup>24</sup> All translations from the *Historia Augusta* are by David Magie, from *The Scriptores Historiae Augustae Vol. II* (1924, The Loeb Classical Library).

<sup>25</sup> On the *Vita Heliogabali*, see in addition to Mader 2005; Pasetti 2006; Icks 2011, 6-7 and 108-115.

more intelligible. *The Roman Orgy* is not obviously identifiable as a condensation into a single reel of a specific French novel, play, or opera about Elagabalus.<sup>26</sup> Instead, it juxtaposes some scenes of the emperor's excesses whose features can be traced back ultimately to episodes in the *Vita*. Those film scenes could never have captured the exceptional libidinousness of the Roman "creature of fiction," given that film companies like Gaumont were vigilantly regulating the moral and sexual content of their products: there were to be no signs on screen of the triumph of vice, adultery, or prostitution; no murdered or bleeding human bodies; no kissing, even behind the ear (as Lacassin 1995, 93; Bastide 2008, 306). Yet they had the capacity to emplot Roman perversities, a lethal orgy, and their concluding punishment in a manner that might resonate with current French discourses of national decline and the need for renewal.

The opening intertitle of *The Roman Orgy* declares: "Rome year 218. The debauched emperor presides over the debates of a Senate of women charged with deliberating about fashion and the duties of courtesans."<sup>27</sup> The *Vita Heliogabali* consistently presents Elagabalus as an emperor who demonstrates utter contempt for the Roman senate, not least

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<sup>26</sup> Although see below for its interaction with aspects of the novel by Jean Lombard, *L'Agonie* (1888).

<sup>27</sup> "Rome, l'an 218. L'empereur débauché preside aux débats du Sénat de femmes chargé de délibérer de la mode et des devoirs des courtisanes." I am drawing on the version of the film presented as a special feature on a DVD containing Louis Feuillade's better-known crime serial *Les Vampires*. The DVD was released in the UK by Artificial Eye. I have also seen a version of the film held by EYE (Film Institute Netherlands) that goes by the title *Die Löwen des Tyrannen* ("The Lions of the Tyrant") and contains intertitles in German which differ in interesting ways from the French. I do not engage here in discussion of the variants and the adaption of the film for national audiences other than the French.

when he establishes a *senaculum* or “little senate” of women whose responsibility it is to decree matters of feminine style and protocol (*Heliog.* 4.3-4).<sup>28</sup> The film’s intertitles express the emperor’s trivialization of power through the immediacy of the present tense and through a clash between feminine agency and terms for government. The ensuing scene presents the emperor (played by Jean Ayme) and his court of festive women engaged in gestures of mutual admiration over the elaborate and beautifully colorized costumes they are all wearing—his more exotic than theirs. When the “senators” then gather round in adoration of their emperor, their movement renders more noticeable a soldier who is pacing back and forth on guard beyond the pillars, outside the imperial palace. Proper military masculinity is performed only in the background as, in stark contrast, femininity and effeminacy are celebrated front screen.<sup>29</sup>

The camera has moved in closer in the second scene in order to showcase the emperor’s effeminate and Orientalized appearance, his fastidious concern with its maintenance, and his capricious and cruel exercise of power. Lying on a couch, Elagabalus caresses the young manicurist painting his fingernails but condemns to death the young pedicurist who accidentally nicks his toes (figure 3). The intertitles augment the drama by breaking out on two occasions into dialogue: “You scratched me, you deserve to die!”... “To the lions!”<sup>30</sup> In the third connected scene, the camera captures a disconcerting shot that unfolds on two levels: from the balcony of his private arena, the emperor and his court of women look down with eager anticipation at the lions beneath; after the poor boy is thrust

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<sup>28</sup> On the establishment of the feminine *senaculum*, and the emperor’s scorn for the masculine traditions of the Roman senate, see Mader 2005, 137; Pasetti 2006; Icks 2011, 18-19 and 110-111.

<sup>29</sup> For discussion of this sequence, see also D’Hautcourt 2006, 109.

<sup>30</sup> “*Tu m’as égratigné, tu mérites la mort!*”... “*Aux lions!*”

into the arena, they react variously to his off-screen mauling (the emperor with exceptional delight).<sup>31</sup> Likewise in the *Vita*, women act in the masculine sphere of government, while Elagabalus is looked upon in the feminine sphere of his toilette: he wears garments laden with jewelry or threaded luxuriously with gold or purple; even his shoes are adorned with etched gems; he loves diadems because he considers that they set off the feminine beauty of his face (*Heliog.* 5.4-5).<sup>32</sup>

The next couple of film scenes merge together two separate anecdotes from the *Vita Heliogabali* concerning the vicious tricks the emperor used to play on his dinner guests: “In a banqueting-room with a reversible ceiling he once overwhelmed his parasites with violets and other flowers, so that some of them were actually smothered to death, being unable to crawl out to the top” (*Heliog.* 21.5); “Among his pets he had lions and leopards, which had been rendered harmless and trained by tamers, and these he would suddenly order during the dessert and the after-dessert to get up on the couches, thereby causing an amusing panic, for none knew that the beasts were harmless” (*Heliog.* 21.1). The *Vita* deprives the emperor’s banquets of any political or ritual purpose and, instead, presents them as a site for theatrical expressions of Elagabalus’ contempt for the social orders and his pursuit of a spectacular degeneracy (Mader 200, 137-138 and 152-610). Gaumont’s director, Louis Feuillade, reverses the sequence and the effects described in the classical text, so that first rose petals fall and then the lions kill. He also exceeds the conventions of theatrical space by staging his banquet scene in height and depth. In a large hall, the emperor’s guests are arranged in the foreground carousing around some small tables on which dancers soon pirouette gracefully. Above and in the right background of the frame, the emperor and his favourites preside over

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<sup>31</sup> D’Hautcourt 2006, 109 discusses these two scenes.

<sup>32</sup> Mader 2005, 137 and Icks 2011, 50 and 111 discuss the interest in bodily adornment exhibited by the Elagabalus of the classical sources.

the party, watching intently as rose petals begin to fall from above in ever increasing quantities until they almost mask the shot. When lions are suddenly released down the grand stairs positioned at the back of the three-dimensional set, the terrified guests rush out of the frame in every direction (figure 4) and reappear in the adjacent scene being chased back and forth en masse through an empty vestibule by the emperor's ménagerie.<sup>33</sup>

In the finale of *The Roman Orgy*, in fitting contrast, Elagabalus is left cowering in his boudoir after his terrified courtesans have turned against him. The Praetorian Guard breaks in for the kill and the emperor is beheaded off screen at their commander's order. The ending of the film follows the *Vita Heliogabali* in establishing a "causal connection between imperial depravity and military disaffection" (Mader 2005, 143), even if it does not reproduce the same location or detail for the assassination.<sup>34</sup> The film, therefore, also adopts the moralizing drive of the *Vita*, offering an episodic chronicle of debauchery that appears destined for the punishment meted out at the close.<sup>35</sup> Moral order is revived and foregrounded: the singularly

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<sup>33</sup> On the scene, see also D'Hautcourt 2006, 109-10. And for the deep-space aesthetic of early French cinema, see Brewster 1990.

<sup>34</sup> The *Vita Heliogabali* sets the unique squalor of the emperor's death and disposal (discovered and killed in a palace latrine, his corpse dragged through the streets and thrust unsuccessfully into a sewer before being weighed down and tossed into the Tiber, 17.1-3) against his aspiration to a beautiful suicide (such as leaping from a specially constructed tower onto jeweled and gilded boards beneath, 33.6). For which see Mader 2005, 164-165; Pasetti 2006; Icks 2011, 37-43.

<sup>35</sup> The previous film about the emperor, *Héliogabale* (1910, dir. André Calmettes), is equally moralizing but presents a tighter plot structure concerning the emperor's attraction to, abduction of, and attempt to molest a Vestal Virgin. His assassination is presented as a direct consequence of this attempt at sexual assault and sticks closer to the ancient accounts of his



cruel and cowardly effeminate is overcome by a collective, virile masculinity, marked on screen by the shining breastplates, plumed helmets, and plunging spears of the soldiers.<sup>36</sup>

In the persistence of its debt to the *Vita Heliogabali*, Feuillade's grand drama stakes a claim to high art, moral purpose, and contemporary political relevance. Across the nineteenth century, French commentators had turned to imperial Rome and its emperors as instruments through which to express and assess perceived national failure. The concept of "decadence" or "decline" (the preferred term for historians) operated within larger cyclical theories of history (Morley 2005, 573). Civilizations grow, mature, decline, die, and are reborn. Turning to the past (most often the past of ancient Rome) exposes the disease, its symptoms, and its prognosis—identified as either complete darkness or a new dawn (Morley 2005, 578-579). When confronted by a volatile succession of monarchies, republics and empires, and military defeats like Waterloo in 1815 and Sedan in 1870, French critics diagnosed the nation as suffering from its own imperial decay, and identified Paris as the heart of its Roman degeneracy.<sup>37</sup> Elagabalus too had a part to play in representations of Roman history that were designed allegorically as a warning for France (Icks 2011, 131; David 2001, 217-223). In the novel *L'Agonie* (1888), written by the socialist and political activist Jean Lombard, Elagabalus is painted, ornamented, tiaraed, androgynous, authoritarian, and Asiatic. He arrives in Rome to pollute and persecute the city with his tyrannical power and his phallic

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death (while remaining less squalid): the people break into the imperial palace to rescue the Vestal, they chase the emperor through the streets, and throw him into the Tiber after the Vestal refuses him mercy. On the film, see Abel 1994, 255-256.

<sup>36</sup> On the concluding scene of *The Roman Orgy* and its relation to the *Vita*, see also D'Hautcourt 2006, 109-111.

<sup>37</sup> See, for discussion of the place of imperial Rome in French discourses of national decline, Stephan 1974, 17-33; David 2001; David-de Palacio 2005, 332-333; Vance 1999, 110-111.

cult of the Black Stone. The suffering Christians beg God to release them from such agony and on their insubordinate community falls the potential for rebirth from apocalyptic disintegration. The novel incarnates the disorders of end-of-century France in a figure who (disturbingly conjoining Woman and Man, East and West, Christianity and polytheism) is leading Rome to the abyss.<sup>38</sup>

In contrast to the complex, communitarian trajectory of Lombard's novel, Feuillade's historical film appears to invite a reading in straightforwardly conservative terms as a call for the suppression of the feminine, the eradication of the foreign, and the regeneration of France as a combative Western power. Yet in his monumental study *The Ciné Goes to Town: French Cinema 1896-1914* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 1998, 183), Richard Abel argues that the pre-feature, single-reel historical film genre of the period 1907 to 1911 "constituted a crucial site of contestation, not only between the interests of spectacle attraction and narrative continuity, but also among the antagonistic social representations vying for ideological dominance in Third Republic France".<sup>39</sup>

### *Cinematic pleasures & French decadence*

The emperor Elagabalus invites equivocation. Literary critics note that when Jean Lombard writes his condemnation of decadence in *L'Agonie*, he revels paradoxically in the use of a decadent style of writing (David-de Palacio 2005, 210-211). Chapter 8 of Book 1 is devoted to a description of the triumph in which the emperor parades his barbaric Asiatic cult

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<sup>38</sup> Discussions of the allegorical qualities of Lombard's novel include Birkett 1986 15-18; David-de Palacio 2005, 183-229; Icks 2011: 164-169.

<sup>39</sup> I am very grateful indeed to Richard Abel for taking the time to read through this chapter and offer some helpful comments.

through the center of Rome to the astonishment of a people already habituated to imperial excess:

Everyone could see him, a face vermillioned, eyebrows painted like those of an idol, a tall yellow tiara on fire with opals, amethysts, and chrysolites, a dress of trailing silk hatched with violent designs, the first that had ever been seen, the sleeves of which hung down heavy, leading in the hieratic manner of a god a float led by sixteen white horses where on an altar of precious stones rested, like a phallus, the Cone of black stone, round at its summit.<sup>40</sup>

A pull-out color illustration by Auguste Leroux from the 38<sup>th</sup> edition of *L'Agonie* (published by Ollendorff in 1902)<sup>41</sup> does better, visual, justice to the spectacular exuberance of Lombard's depiction than the brief sample in literal English offered above (figure 5), and both operate in marked contrast to the images impressed on Elagabalus' own Roman coinage (figure 2). The novel and this illustration of it deploy a clash between ordered and disordered styles—literary and graphic—to present Elagabalus' triumphal procession to readers as the victory of a voluptuous and frenzied Orient over the martial and monumental traditions of

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<sup>40</sup> “*Chacun le revoyait, la face vermillonnée, les sourcils peints comme ceux d’une idole, une haute tiara jaune incendiée d’opales, d’améthystes et de chrysolithes, une robe de soie traînante, tramée de dessins violents, la première qu’on eût vue, dont les manches lourdes pendaient, conduisant en l’attitude hiératique d’un dieu un char à seize chevaux blancs où sur un autel de pierreries reposait, tel qu’un phallus, le Cône de pierre noire, rond à son sommet.*” Text from the 38th edition of 1902, published by P. Ollendorff, Paris, p. 54.

<sup>41</sup> The edition and its illustrations by Auguste Leroux are accessible from the Internet Archive [<https://archive.org/details/lagoniel00lomb>].

Rome. The chapter goes on at some length to catalogue the emperor's bizarrely assorted cortege. Those following behind include: naked Syrian dancers and priests of the Sun; a pell-mell of senators and consuls on foot singing hymns to the Principle of Life; elephants, leopards, and lions in chains; matrons exposing themselves obscenely; priests of Cybele and Pan; musicians and instruments of all kinds; a noisy unnamable multitude speaking every language. Those leading in front (and exposing the procession's contradictions) include: trumpeters, sacrificial animals, captives, lictors, and the entire Roman army. A parodic triumph then, not of courage and Roman *imperium* but of strangers and deviancy (David-de Palacio 2005, 363-368). This is decay at its most aesthetic.<sup>42</sup>

The eruption between 1888 and 1911 of French literature concerning Elagabalus has been attributed to the tastes of the Decadent movement—the exploration of style over sin, the substitution of the degenerate for the conventional, the cultivation of artifice above all else. While political theorists as far back as Montesquieu had warned that the decadence of Rome had been a facet of its imperial collapse, novelists of the late nineteenth century celebrated it as that empire's greatest achievement and Elagabalus as its most sophisticated proponent.<sup>43</sup> The *Vita Heliogabali* was now mined for the features of Rome's finest, rather than its worst, emperor: the *princeps* who preferred aesthetics to the simple satisfaction of desire (Mader 2005, 151), who engaged in studied extravagance and theatrical debauchery, who incarnated “the archetypal aesthete and performer with a flawless sense of spectacle and inverted

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<sup>42</sup> On this and other aspects of Lombard's novel, see also Birkett 1986, 15-18; David-de Palacio 2005, 186-187, 208-214, and 363-368; Icks 2011, 164-169.

<sup>43</sup> For the interest of the Decadents in imperial Rome and Elagabalus in particular, see Stephan 1974, 17-33; Vance 1999, 113; Palacio 2001, 117-118; David 2001, 7-12, 217-223 and 259-270; David-de Palacio 2005, 183-229; de Pasetti 2006; Icks 2011, 148-179; Dumenil 2012, 284-285.

decorum” (Mader 2005, 163). The Decadents actively reconstructed Elagabalus as a mirror in which to admire themselves.<sup>44</sup> The French poet and novelist Baron Jacques d’Adelswärd-Fersen even behaved as, as well as wrote about, the emperor. In his novel *Black Masses. Lord Lyllian* (*Messes noires. Lord Lyllian*, 1905) he described the depravity of its English hero as like that of a modern Elagabalus, while the incitement of minors to debauchery with which the author was charged two years earlier was said to have included the performance in his Parisian home of homoerotic masquerades set at the court of that emperor or of Nero (de Palacio 2001, 117-118).

Gaumont’s director Louis Feuillade appears to have been familiar with the end-of-empire historical novels composed by Jean Lombard (a later historical drama Feuillade released in 1913, *L’Agonie du Byzance*, dealt with failures of the Byzantine empire as had Lombard’s novel *Byzance* published in 1890). He might also have had the opportunity to watch *Héliogabale*, the spectacular lyric tragedy whose libretto (written by Émile Sicard) had been based on Lombard’s novel and which was staged in Paris seven months before the release of *The Roman Orgy*. The musical themes composed by Déodat de Séverac comprised trumpet fanfare for the might of Rome, the Oriental scale for its collapse into insanity, and solemn Gregorian chants and uplifting hymns for Christianity’s dawn (Waters 2008; Icks 2011, 132). Yet *The Roman Orgy* does not contain the charge of Christian persecution that had attached to Elagabalus in some of the moralizing narratives of the late nineteenth century. It does not even display the conical stone and the cult introduced to Rome of Syria’s sun god. The film appears to owe less to the narrative drive of Lombard’s novel than to the aesthetic exuberance of its depictions of imperial excess and to their colorful illustration in the novel’s

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<sup>44</sup> The immersion of the Decadents into the perspective of a debauched Elagabalus is discussed by Oswald 1949; Nugent 2008, 171; Icks 2011, 157-164.

multiple editions. The emperor remains an amoral artist who, on screen, takes on the features of early cinema's showmen.

In fulfillment of the Gaumont manifesto for "*film esthétique*" published by Feuillade in 1910, 1911's *The Roman Orgy* exhibits a calculated address to the eye. Its pictorial ambition—Gaumont's attempt to realize "Beauty of Form"—is especially marked during the banquet scene where the emperor's guests are smothered by falling rose petals (figure 4 above). Theme, composition, colorization and species of flower all evoke a classical-subject painting by the Victorian academician Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *The Roses of Heliogabalus*, which had been exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1888 and made famous through its wide distribution as etchings (D'Hautcourt 2006, 118-120). In the painting, any critique of empire that might be expressed through the emperor's murderous diversion seems, ironically, to be overwhelmed by the celebration of its decadent splendor. A youthful Elagabalus resplendent in cloth of silk and gold, jewels and a diadem, reclining in his luxurious palace of dazzling surfaces (silver and mother of pearl, variegated marble, pink rose petals) seeks, like the characters of Decadent fiction, to overcome his boredom through an extreme yet beautiful distraction.<sup>45</sup> In the film shot, elaborate stencil coloring creates a set of painterly effects: the bright jewel palette of the shimmering costumes (pale gold, dark pink, and pastel blue); the pointillism of the light pink petals (cf. D'Hautcourt 2006, 110). Furthermore, the film breaks the stasis of painting by dwelling on the movement of the petals as they fall and of the guests

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<sup>45</sup> For this reading of *The Roses of Heliogabalus*, I am indebted to the work of Barrow (1997-1998). Prettejohn 2002 offers a different interpretation of the ironies in Alma-Tadema's classical-subject painting. A further evocation of history painting may be made in the final intertitle of the film, which identifies Elagabalus as the Sardanapalus of Rome—the Assyrian tyrant whose love of luxury and exotic death had been painted by Delacroix circa 1827.

as they seek to escape the invading lions (D'Hautcourt 2006, 119). In this respect, the film lays claim to a specifically cinematic aesthetics of decadence.

### *Cinema's Roman errors*

*The Roman Orgy* further complicates any patriotic or educative reading of its representations of gender, Orientalism, and empire through the focus it places on how you *look* at Roman error. In the course of the film's eight short minutes, emphasis is persistently placed on spectacle and the act of looking upon perversity with pleasure. The emperor admires a senate of fashionable women, his feminized body parts, a boy's fatal mauling, a dance and a cascade of flowers disrupted by a pack of marauding lions, and the ensuing terror of his fleeing guests. Court favorites are embedded into the film as yet more spectators, complicitly expressing enjoyment in their emperor's entertainments. The triumph of visual fascination over moral indignation occurs in the film's concluding moments just when, significantly, the historical drama simultaneously breaks away from its dependency on the *Vita Heliogabali* (D'Hautcourt 2006, 110-111) and breaches the rules of self-censorship laid down by the Gaumont film company. After Elagabalus is caught in his boudoir by the Praetorians, after he is murdered and decapitated outside the film's frame, for a fleeting moment his severed head appears on screen attached to the end of a spear (figure 6). The spectacular momentum of *The Roman Orgy* invites the cinema audience at this point to look upon that forbidden dismemberment with the eyes of a sadistic Elagabalus and, unlike the emperor, to escape punishment for it.

Feuillade's Roman emperor exhibits attractions (including his dismembered self) to his on-screen and off-screen audiences and directly solicits visual curiosity. He performs like the showmen who exhibited films in French fairgrounds and café-concerts in the earliest

years of moving images, when filmmakers were less concerned with telling stories than showing a series of views (Gunning 1990). His lion acts are deprived of the solemnities of Christian martyrdom and its promise of spiritual renewal and thus resemble the vulgar amusements of the circus which lay at cinema's origins and which historical dramas such as this were supposed to transcend. The emperor-showman embraces the highbrow and the lowbrow, historical fiction and circus shows, narrative continuity and spectacle attraction, moral uplift and profitable entertainment. At a time when French writers were debating "whether the cinema acts as a significant force of moral reform or as an immoral temptation" (Abel 1988, 11), he presses on the limits of what bourgeois cinemagoers might tolerate. Like Saint Antony, Elagabalus is an ingenious device for cinematic *mise en abyme*.

Classical reception studies has pursued with vigor Charles Martindale's query whether meaning "is always realized at the point of reception" (1993, 3). As a consequence of this investigation of Emperor Elagabalus in early French cinema, I would argue that meaning is not realized at a point but at an intersection—between current understandings of the historical record, the history of receptions, and the differentiation between them.

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