Paris, Female Stardom, and 1930s French Cinema

DISSERTATION

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By

Jennifer Branlat, M.A.

Graduate Program in French and Italian

The Ohio State University

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Dissertation Committee:

Prof. Judith Mayne, Advisor

Prof. Jean-François Fourny

Prof. Jennifer Willging
ABSTRACT

This study investigates Parisian femininity in 1930s French cinema in order to show how representations of women draw from city spaces, real or imagined, and the extent to which these images are made visible by the French star system as it reorganizes with the advent of sound. I claim that the three stars of this study, Annabella, Arletty, and Danielle Darrieux, develop distinctly Parisian star images that draw from both a past cultural tradition that eroticizes the urban lower-class woman and modern ideals concerning her independence and mobility through the urban environment. My analysis of representations of women in the films Quatorze juillet (René Clair, 1933), Hôtel du Nord (Marcel Carné, 1938), Abus de confiance and Retour à l’aube (Henri Decoin, 1937, 1938) reveals that, while archetypal figures like the midinette (shopgirl) and the prostitute are anchored in idealized images of the popular neighborhood life of the past, the appearance of a modern woman in the second half of the decade is concurrent with looking to new city spaces and experiences to tell stories about women. Solitary walking, driving, shopping, and going to the cinema, for example, are depicted as privileged moments of reflection or leisure offered to women in the public sphere. In order to account for these new possibilities for female mobility and vision, I develop a theoretical framework that engages in the critical debate on female flânerie (solitary strolling), initially developed to describe the male urban subject. Finally, these insights concerning 1930s female stardom are crucial to an understanding of post-war films in which female mobility is addressed as an integral part of public life for women.
To my parents, and to Matthieu, Quentin and Chloé
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VITA

November 10, 1977 ...................... Born in Columbus, Ohio (USA)

2000 ......................................... B.A., French, Miami University (Oxford, OH)

2003 ......................................... D.E.S.S., Library Science, Ecole nationale supérieure des sciences de l’information et des bibliothèques (Lyon, France)

2007 ......................................... M.A. French, The Ohio State University

2006 – 2012 .............................. Graduate Teaching Associate, Department of French and Italian, The Ohio State University

Fields of Study

Major Field: French and Italian

Specialization in French Film Studies

Minor Field: Twentieth-Century French Literature

Minor Field: French Culture
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INTRODUCTION

For many people, French cinema of the 1930s calls to mind images of the city of Paris. Many 1930s films locate their narratives in or around the city, skillfully weaving the culture of neighborhood life into the stories they tell: Jean (Jean Dasté) docks his barge L’Atalante at La Villette in the industrial northeast of Paris, Boudu (Michel Simon) draws a crowd to the banks of the Seine near the historic Pont des Arts, and Madame Raymonde (Arletty) and Edmond (Louis Jouvet) gain mythic status with their verbal exchange on the footbridge of the Canal Saint-Martin. French films of the 1930s have been accurately characterized by film scholars as obsessed with representations of Paris—of its cultural establishments, popular neighborhood life, street spectacles, and inhabitants. As a result, during the first decade of sound cinema (1930-39), Paris was one of the most represented cities on the screen, and these representations came to play an important role in spectator pleasure.

In the context of this Paris-centered cinema, my aim is to explore how representations of women in city films are involved with the question of space and place and how such representations are orchestrated and negotiated through the French star system of the 1930s. One of the most striking aspects of the decade’s film discourse is the ways in which female stars are persistently defined in terms of their connection to Parisian culture and topography. Here are three examples from popular biographies. Arletty is the paradoxical “impératrice du faubourg,” a nobility that has its roots in the working class decor of her childhood (Ariotti and de Comès 4-7). As a native of
Montmartre and having been born on Bastille Day, Annabella is able to transpose to the screen the most authentic, lively and evocative images of popular Paris (Moran 6). Finally, Danielle Darrieux was hailed as the modern young Parisian, avid for freedom and movement. Other examples of the privileged connection between city and star abound: the upper-class charm of Gaby Morlay or Jacqueline Delubac, the mondaine, who was known for her walks along the Champs-Elysées on the arm of Sacha Guitry, a prolific playwright and actor of the 1930s.

More recent films attest to an on-going fascination with 1930s French femininity and the city of Paris: the teenage prostitute, Violette Nozière (Isabelle Huppert), in Claude Chabrol’s 1978 film by the same title; the working girl Amélie (Audrey Tautou) of *Le fabuleux destin d’Amélie Poulain* (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 2001) set in Montmartre; the street singer Edith Piaf (Marion Cotillard) of *La vie en rose* (Olivier Dahan, 2007); and Douce (Nora Arnezeder), the music-hall performer of *Faubourg 36* (Christophe Barratier, 2008). These films invite us as spectators to dig deeper into the Paris of the 1930s and explore its mysterious underworld, neighborhood figures and performance venues. They may even send us back to the films that inspired them with a renewed interest.

The presence of women in the cinematic city is a fascinating topic for scholars because it leads us to consider how women set their own itineraries in city spaces, in what spaces this undertaking is possible, as well as how they negotiate their presence and identity. Central to my claim that access to mobility and vision were at stake in city narratives featuring female protagonists is a body of scholarship on flânerie as a spatial and visual practice. The works of Janet Wolff, Elizabeth Wilson and Susan Buck-Morss have all contributed to the lively debate on the origin of the male flâneur and the possibility for a female flâneuse. I am most indebted to Anne Friedberg’s compelling
cultural history of the gaze, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern*, and the importance of looking, which spans the nineteenth century to modern day. Her concept of the “mobilized gaze” is crucial to my analysis of Danielle Darrieux and the visual and mobile pleasures available to the modern woman in the city.

At a more general level, in the context of 1930s French cinema, this dissertation has two objectives. First, it examines representations of women during a decade that has traditionally been seen as one dominated by male directors, actors, and scriptwriters. An interdisciplinary study of city narratives, female stardom, and Parisian cultural history, this project opens up a place for women in the early classical period of French cinema by tracing stories that fall outside of traditional auteurist-based film history.

Second, in spite of research conducted over the past 20 years on the classic French cinema, there still exists a discrepancy between the critical importance attributed to canonized classics and audience favorites (Vincendeau, *Popular Cinema* 74). Mainstream film histories and textbooks continue to depict “poetic realism” as the central aesthetic preoccupation in a decade of incredible cinematic diversity. Box-office statistics of the mid- to late thirties confirm that the films which have come to distill the essence of 1930s French cinema in the minds of film scholars were not necessarily those preferred by French audiences of the time. The films and stars that comprise this study reflect an attempt to bring popular films and film culture of the 1930s into better focus, to make some of the decade’s popular films more accessible, and to present some canonical favorites in a new light. With this in mind, I have chosen to concentrate on films by the celebrated directors René Clair and Marcel Carné, as well as some lesser-known filmmakers such as Henri Decoin. His film *Abus de confiance* (1937), for example,
has not been widely circulated outside of France but was a box-office success of the 1937-1938 season.

One of the primary difficulties in analyzing a nation’s stars and its star system is the fact that critical concepts like ‘star’ and ‘stardom’ were originally developed in relation to the Hollywood film industry. Some scholars have questioned whether the terms ‘star’ or ‘star system’ can be transposed to the French system. My use of these terms in the context of 1930s cinema draws from Ginette Vincendeau’s seminal work *Stars and Stardom in French Cinema* (2000), which identifies the specificities of the French star system from its very beginnings to the current day. Of primary importance for Vincendeau during the first decade of sound cinema was the centralization of the entertainment industry in Paris, making it possible for actors to switch easily between screen and stage (*Stars* 2-10). A classic example is Louis Jouvet, an icon of the Parisian stage and screen. In 1937, a reporter for *Ciné-Miroir* interviewed Louis Jouvet in a taxi as he rushed from film studio to theater. Indeed, it was not uncommon for actors of the thirties to oscillate between live-performance venues (music-hall, boulevard theater, and more rarely, the classic theater) and film studios. Building on Edgar Morin’s concept of the star as an amalgam of the ordinary and the mythical (16), Vincendeau also stresses the tendency of French stars to combine “the allure of a glamorous life with the intimate details of domesticity… Danielle Darrieux hoovering, Paulette Dubost at the sewing machine, Raimu making a fish stew” (15).

Richard Dyer’s founding work, *Stars*, which served to establish star studies as a field of inquiry in its own right, is concerned with the analysis of American stars and the Hollywood star system. He sets forth a framework for the theoretical analysis of stars based on two concerns: “the sociological and the semiotic” (1). According to Dyer:
The former centres on the stars as a remarkable, and probably influential or symptomatic, social phenomenon, as well as being part of an aspect of film’s ‘industrial’ nature. In this perspective, films are only of significance in so far as they have stars in them. The semiotic concern reverses this. Here, stars are only of significance because they are in films and therefore are part of the way films signify. (1)

Even though Dyer’s work traces the trajectories and signification of Hollywood stars, the methodology he advances can be applied to European stars provided that one is mindful of the very different industry contexts (Vincendeau, Jean Gabin 100). Following the framework established by Dyer, this study attempts to take into account both the sociological and the semiotic dimensions of each star individually. Each chapter provides the social context for reading a star’s image in the context of 1930s France and is followed by a detailed reading of a particular film or films.

My reading of the star images of Danielle Darrieux, Arletty and Annabella also borrows heavily from the concept of ‘social type,’ and the ways in which it manifests itself on screen. The question of social type is an important consideration for the study of stars in France during the Interwar period because their on- and off-screen images were highly coded in terms of stereotypes pertaining to social class.

The previously mentioned female social stereotypes that populate French cinema of the 1930s (the midinette, the prostitute, the independent woman) are considered by Jacques Siclier to impede French female stars from obtaining a mythic dimension because they are too anchored in representations of the everyday. Dyer, however, diverges from Siclier’s approach to female stars in his belief that “the star both fulfils/incarnates the type and, by virtue of her/his idiosyncrasies, individuates it” (Dyer 47). It is the star image itself, the off-screen contribution, which can serve to undermine the limits imposed by typecasting.
This dissertation seeks to incorporate historical specificity into theories of female representation. It is informed by 1970s feminist film theories, but more specifically engages with recent revisions to these theories that take into consideration the combination of “textual analysis and the study of various contexts shaping the production of meaning of individual films, genres, and the work of specific directors at specific moments in history” (Conway 11). Mayne’s *Cinema and Spectatorship* sets forth the questions that feminist film scholars need to take into account when examining historical models. Questions regarding the significance of film going for audiences at different moments in history, as well as how cinema and specific films are situated in the culture that produced them are of particular relevance (Mayne, *Cinema* 63). Finally, all inquiries guided by feminist film studies engage with the founding work of Laura Mulvey who demonstrated how sexual difference structures ways of looking. That women would serve as objects of the male gaze during a decade of male-authored cinema cannot be contested. Yet we find in 1930s French cinema moments where women adopt practices that subvert their position as objects. This subversion comes from both the actresses themselves and from certain French films that appear as internally self-critical of the ways in which women are depicted as objects of the male gaze. For example, Marcel Carné’s focus on performance and identity and his inclusion of performances staged in films (a technique adopted by Dorothy Arzner in the Hollywood system) open up a space to criticize traditional ways of looking (Mayne, *Dorothy Arzner* 140).

In chapter one, I introduce the critical lens through which I consider female stars and city narratives. I give an account of the different city spaces represented in 1930s French cinema and discuss how these spaces are connected to certain female social
stereotypes. I also examine the history of the urban subject to open the way for a later chapter on female flânerie and urban mobility. Lastly, chapter one aims to provide an overview of the social context that defined what it meant to grow up as a woman in 1930s France.

In chapter two, I discuss Annabella’s star image during the years 1929 to 1937, the year of her departure for Hollywood. Although she was typecast in many films throughout the decade as a waif-like, lower-class young woman (sometimes a shopgirl or midinette that recalls Amélie Poulain), she was also cast in more modern roles such as a female aviator.

I finish chapter two with an analysis of the film, *Quatorze juillet* (René Clair, 1933), in which the city streets provide the setting for a picturesque back-street romance between Anna, a flower peddler, and Jean, a taxi driver. In addition to the romantic undertones, the film also explores Anna’s struggle as an orphaned young woman in Paris as she moves from job to job before a fortuitous event leads her to professional and romantic fulfillment. Rather than staging the heroine as an intrusion in male-dominated city streets, Anna is at home in the streets as an itinerant vendor. In his fourth sound film, René Clair is less concerned about reading the urban environment in a critical way than he is with creating a timeless neighborhood in which tensions are smoothed over by the controlled aesthetics of studio décor. What is it about Anna that makes her essential to Clair’s vision of common people’s Paris? How do Anna’s social class and profession give her access to the metropolis? Is romance compatible with urban mobility? My analysis of Annabella’s star image also considers the following films: *Le Million* (René Clair, 1931), *Un soir de rafle* (Carmine Gallone, 1931), *Paris-Méditerranée* (Joe May, 1932), and *Hôtel du Nord* (Marcel Carné, 1938).
Chapter three discusses Arletty’s star image in terms of her early career, on both stage and screen, and in terms of her later box-office successes. Arletty is characterized as an emblem of working-class Paris because of her cheeky Parisian slang (often referred to as *la gouaille parisienne*) and gestures. She attracts audiences in a way that is different and ambiguous in terms of gender. This ambiguity and trans-gender performance saturate her star persona with a “femino-masculine eroticism” (Hayward, *French National Cinema*) 9) that has sent film scholars back to her 1930s films with a renewed interest.

In the film *Hôtel du Nord*, Raymonde, a prostitute, and Edmond, her pimp, plan to leave their cramped quarters at the Hôtel du Nord to go fishing at La Varenne. Halfway across the bridge a conjugal spat breaks out, and Edmond, who has fallen in love with a younger woman, confesses that Raymonde is the “atmosphere” in which he is suffocating and that he needs more than a change of scenery to lighten his mood. The turning bridge over the Canal Saint-Martin then becomes the stage for Raymonde’s outburst as she firmly puts Edmond in his place. A mastery of the insider language of the lower class (*l’argot* or street slang) allows Raymonde to demonstrate that she surpasses Edmond in terms of her underworld authenticity. In following with the nineteenth-century literary tradition, the film presents immobility as the urban working-class woman’s fate. How does Arletty’s star image of bold working-class femininity work against the immobility imposed on her by the archetypal role of the prostitute? What does it mean to be a more authentic member of the public sphere than her male counterpart?

In chapter four, I will look at Danielle Darrieux’s image of urban mobility and youthfulness in the following films: *Un mauvais garçon* (Jean Boyer, 1936), *Club de femmes*
(Jacques Deval, 1936), Retour à l’aube (Henri Decoin, 1938), and Abus de confiance. My analysis of Darrieux’s star persona will take into account the different stages of her stardom, with particular emphasis on her sustained collaboration with Henri Decoin during the 1930s. Darrieux is of particular interest to this study because she inhabits the city in a more mobile fashion than other female stars, both in the characters she plays (student, orphan, lawyer) and in their relation to city spaces.

In the film Abus de confiance, Lydia is a law student at the Sorbonne, orphaned after the death of her last living relative. Increasingly debt-ridden and prey to male advances, the young woman follows the advice of her best friend and attempts a “breach of trust” as the title indicates, passing herself off as the lost daughter of the writer and historian Jacques Ferney. Haunted by memories and a guilty conscience, Lydia decides to embark on a nocturnal journey down the Boulevard des Italiens (home to the grandiose movie palaces like the Cinéphone, the Marivaux and the Aubert Palace making it an exciting hub for film-goers of the 1930s). The film also follows a lower middle-class woman’s social ascent through the metropolis from the Latin Quarter to Versailles, the home of the patriarch. Walking and taking trains, Lydia’s experience of the public sphere is one of solitary mobility as she negotiates her existence in the public and private spheres. Can Lydia be considered a flâneuse? Does the city represent an escape from or an extension of patriarchal authority? What is the relation between class and mobility in the film?

To sum up, this study aims to expand the study of the woman’s film to new ground—1930s French city films featuring female stars—in order to show how films coded as urban (or Parisian) explored themes related to womanhood, but not necessarily domestic themes in domestic spaces as did the Hollywood woman’s film.
CHAPTER 1

WOMEN AND THE CITY IN 1930S PARIS

One particular approach to studying the city is from the point of view of gender studies, which attempts to examine how men and women live in the city, and how the city presents itself to its inhabitants as divided along the lines of gender. I begin by discussing how Paris was imagined by directors and set designers as a setting for 1930s films. Then, I provide a general history of women in Paris from the nineteenth century to the Interwar period in order to familiarize the reader with the female urban types commonly encountered in 1930s cinema, and to look at the ways in which women could occupy (or not) the position of urban subject rather than object.

1.1. The 1930s Imagined City

With rare exceptions, the 1930s cinematic city was an imagined city. Because cameras and camera mounts (dollies and tracks) were not easily taken out into the city streets, studio settings were preferred to location shooting. The best-remembered representations of the city were created by the emigré set designers, Lazare Meerson and Alexander Trauner, who collaborated with the most popular directors of the 1930s. Meerson was the favored set designer of René Clair for his city films of the early thirties. Paris was also elaborately reconstructed in studio by Trauner for three of Carné’s films later on in the decade: the Canal Saint-Martin for Hôtel du Nord, the industrial suburb for
Le jour se lève, and the Boulevard du Temple for Les Enfants du Paradis. Staging city space in “monumental sets” had the advantage of accommodating more actors (for example, the crowd scenes in Les Enfants du Paradis) and more complex story lines (Bergfelder, Harris and Street 220).

Staged representations of urban working-class environments were an important part of the aesthetic trend of the 1930s called Poetic Realism. Today, this label is used to describe films of the classic French cinema that focus more on milieu than plot, and which are characterized by an atmosphere of despair reminiscent of the working-class milieus of nineteenth-century French realism novels and crime serials (Andrew 196). As Williams points out in Republic of Images: A History of French Filmmaking, there is little agreement on whether poetic realism should be defined in broad terms as an attribute of 1930s French cinema or in more specific terms as the aesthetic agenda of particular filmmakers (Marcel Carné, Jean Grémillion, Julien Duvivier, Pierre Chenal and Jacques Feyder). For Williams, the term can be used to designate the set of aesthetic practices of roughly five directors (Marcel Carné, Jean Grémillion, Julien Duvivier, Pierre Chenal and Jacques Feyder) who made films characterized by “demoralizing themes and atmosphere” before the outbreak of the World War II (Williams 233). Vincendeau goes further to characterize Poetic Realist films as “pessimistic urban dramas, usually set in Paris (although there were colonial examples) in working-class settings, with doomed romantic narratives often tinged with criminality” (Vincendeau, Encyclopedia 336).

Skilled set designers were an important part of the filmmaking process during the 1930s. They were credited (sometimes more so that the director) with giving poetic realism films their dark, atmospheric feel. Trauner preferred to build his studio sets outdoors on an inclined floor in order to create what he called a “forced perspective”
that incorporated actual buildings from the skyline into the background (Carné, *Ma vie* 102). As its name suggests, ‘poetic realism,’ as an artistic movement, collapses both realism and a poeticizing of reality into one aesthetic imperative. Crisp notes that set designers found themselves at odds with the dual task of representing a recognizable locale in Paris and stylizing it just enough to bring out the important “poetic” details, thereby enhancing the film’s atmosphere (Crisp, *Classic* 372-372). To a large extent, the set designers of the 1930s depended on the audience’s capacity to recognize specific places or types of neighborhoods based on the details enhanced in the decor. For example, in *Quatorze juillet*, spectators would recognize the long, steep staircase that forms the backdrop as belonging to a neighborhood outside the city center such as Ménilmontant or Montmartre. Trauner himself states that his objective as a set designer was to “awaken memories inscribed in the spectator’s subconscious” (quoted in Crisp, *Classic* 373), and in order to feed his artistic imagination, he accompanied Brassaï and Prévert on nocturnal outings, “exploring the dark side-streets redolent of Paris’ literary past” (Andrew and Ungar 291).

The representation of Paris in 1930s city narratives is generally limited to specific areas of the Right and Left Banks. The Left Bank—with a focus on Montparnasse and the Latin Quarter—is used as a setting to depict the vibrancy of student and artistic life as well as the libertine atmosphere of jazz clubs. Overall, representations of Left Bank Paris were less common in the thirties except for generic views of the Eiffel Tower to establish the location of a film’s narrative as Paris. There were few exceptions, and these concern the Latin Quarter and Montparnasse. The Faculté de droit at the Sorbonne was filmed on-location in the films *Un mauvais garçon* and *Abus de confiance* that depict youth culture
and student life, while Montparnasse was featured as the setting for the detective film *La tête d’un homme* (Julien Duvivier 1933).

The most prominently featured areas of the city are the working-class districts of the north and northeast, at the periphery of Paris. These fringe neighborhoods are made up of the former villages called *faubourgs*, annexed to the city in 1860 (Combeau 33): Belleville, Ménilmontant, Montmartre and La Villette. Belleville and Ménilmontant were formerly rural areas in the process of urbanization with *ruelles*, paved streets and artisan workshops, while Montmartre was known as the epicenter of artistic activity and pleasure venues. La Villette, the northeastern industrial quarter, has retained to this day a certain industrial austerity with its massive complexes and wide-open spaces.

The sets for René Clair’s films *Le Million* and *Quatorze juillet*, as well as for those poetic realism films are set in an urban environment, have many elements that suggest a Paris of the past: narrow streets with paving stones, the depiction of small tight-knit communities, small neighborhood shops and cafés, and the systematic absence of automobile traffic can all be traced back to pre-1930s Paris. For Marcel Carné, it was the director’s duty to go out into the streets and seize the type of desolate atmosphere that one could find in the photographs of André Kertész, Man Ray, Brassaï, and Germaine Krull: “the multi-faceted, captivating and perpetually renewed life of each neighborhood, house and street corner...” (Carné, *Quand le cinéma* 2). ²

Cinematic representations of the backstreets and underworld stage a Paris of the past in which class conflict is depicted from the point of view of the bourgeoisie. City films of the thirties depict a city in which barriers between social classes are firmly in place. Susan Hayward notes that from 1930-1939, many films stage the confinement of social classes to certain areas of the city:
This is not a Paris that threatens to break out of its boundaries—or at least not one where the labour classes, the unruly mob of the working classes and the *apaches* will break into the safely contained west side of Paris. If, in a particular film, the imagined city is that of the working class, that class will remain within its sets and décors, the *apaches* in their own domain—and we will be privy to their activities, mostly represented as the working class at play. (*City as Narrative* 69)

Representations of the “working-class at play” seem distant from the social climate of 1930s France, of 1936 in particular, when over one million workers went on strike. Rather, presenting spectators with a Paris in which class conflict is smoothed over provided a safe way for moviegoers to explore the parts of the city that were perceived as off limits to the bourgeoisie. Forbidden places of the underworld like the working-class café, the music-hall, or farther outside the city at the site of the fortifications intoxicated the popular imagination because such sites promised the excitement and adventure of mixing with hoodlums and sexually promiscuous women.

When social classes did mix in films it was done with humor (and sometimes song) to diffuse the tension. The on-screen mixing of classes was presented in a comic guise and provided the storyline for popular comedies that stage the bourgeoisie’s encounters—often accidental—with the underworld. Stereotypic characters such as the *femme légère* (woman of easy virtue) played by Arletty, who had an exceptional gift for street slang, serve to exaggerate linguistic and cultural differences between the social classes in the films *Fric-Frac* (Claude Autant-Lara, 1939) and *Circonstances atténuantes* (Jean Boyer, 1939). The French word *s’encanailler* describes this act of slumming or of rubbing shoulders with the riffraff (*la canaille* in French) from the point of view of the upper classes and films of the 1930s offered such pleasures.
1.2. The Question of Gender and City Spaces

A widely circulated notion about Paris that developed as a consequence of the industrial revolution was that the city could be neatly divided in terms of public and private spheres, the former being “masculine” and the latter “feminine.” Unaccompanied women had no legitimate reason to walk the streets and were easily taken for streetwalkers or women for sale. As Susan Buck-Morss puts it boldly,

Prostitution was indeed the female version of flânerie yet sexual difference makes visible the privileged position of males within public space. I mean this: the flâneur was simply the name of a man who loitered; but all women who loitered risked being seen as whores, as the term “street-walker,” or “tramp” applied to women makes clear. (119)

Griselda Pollock states that pleasure seeking was also off limits to women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries since the presence of bourgeois women in entertainment venues like the café-concert was “reported as a fact to regret and a symptom of modern decline” (258).

From the mid-nineteenth century on, men were granted more extensive access to the city while women were limited to accompanied excursions in the city or else confined to the home. As Elizabeth Wilson notes: “This male/female dichotomy translated itself into a conception of city culture as pertaining to men” (9). One exception to confinement to the home was shopping. Shopping offered women a socially acceptable reason to circulate in the public sphere, but this experience was not without its own set of challenges. First, if the act of shopping or window shopping gave women access to looking and making choices, it was simultaneously set up to target women through commercial strategies as consumers. Wilson argues that “shopping was for many women—perhaps the majority—a form of work rather than pleasure” (Wilson,
Invisible Flâneur 101). Shopping for more than just the bare minimum also functioned as an exterior sign of a woman’s husband’s wealth and status (101). In this light, shopping could not be considered as an activity that transformed women into urban subjects.

It is important to note how confinement to the domestic sphere was a function of woman’s social class. The focus on the middle-class woman’s urban experience of the nineteenth century as shopper, mother, or bourgeois wife clouds that of the working-class woman. It would be impossible to speak of confinement to the domestic sphere for single working girls or for women prostitutes because they rarely possessed a private space of their own to which they could be confined (Wilson, Sphinx 59). Modest store clerks like Denise Baudu of Zola’s *Au bonheur des dames* (1883), a novel about the rise of the department store and its effects on the social mobility of women, lived in dormitories or rented small rooms in the city, and often preferred the distractions of the city streets to their unexceptional dwellings. Wolff confirms during the second half of the nineteenth century the real situation of women was “more complex than one of straightforward confinement to the home,” but rather varied according to social class and region (13).

Even when women were engaged in ‘respectable’ activities in the city, their womanhood was under threat. During the Interwar period, when Paris came to represent the epicenter of post-war decadence, the city (outside the home) continued to be perceived as a danger to the moral character of young women, particularly those young women of bourgeois upbringing. Victor Marguerite’s novel *La garçonnerie* (1922) localizes the debauched adventures of the main character, Monique Lerbier, to the Parisian nightlife scene where alcohol and drugs (opium, heroine, morphine, and cocaine) were readily available (Bard, *Les femmes* 123). And the threat of urban moral
corruption was growing. According to the census of 1931, the urban “threat” was a topical issue since the urban population attained a record level for the time of 50% of the population (123).

Another commonly held belief is that the city of Paris can be likened to a woman, or that certain aspects of the city are ‘feminine’ as opposed to ‘masculine.’ The aspects of city life linked to the feminine were those that threatened to disrupt the order, stability and rationalization introduced into the city by the urban planner. Elizabeth Wilson describes the gendered structuring of the city in terms of male and female “principles”:

True, on the one hand [the city] makes necessary routinised rituals of transportation and clock watching, factory discipline and timetables, but despite its bureaucratic conformity, at every turn the city dweller is also offered the opposite – pleasure, deviation, disruption. In this sense it would be possible to say that the male and female ‘principles’ war with each other at the very heart of city life. The city is ‘masculine’ in its triumphal scale, its towers and vistas and arid industrial regions; it is ‘feminine’ in its enclosing embrace, in its indeterminacy and labyrinthine uncenteredness. (Wilson, Sphinx 7)

The “indeterminacy” that Wilson links to the feminine realm of the city was not only at the heart of many anxieties about city life but was directed at women in particular. The rise of mass culture opened the way for the mixing of social classes and genders, and as a result, individuals became less knowable to others because they no longer appeared as recognizable social types. The city invited inhabitants to participate in “[urban spectacle entertainments of all kinds]—along with city parks, railway stations, and public transport—[which] seemed to break down or blur class as well as gender distinctions” (Abel 113). Women’s fashion also joined the ranks of mass culture in the post-war period (Roberts 67). Specifically in the 1920s and 30s, trends in women’s fashion broke down both social and class distinctions: the democratization of women’s fashion (Chanel’s prêt-à-porter) made it more difficult to determine a woman’s social
class from her clothing, and the *garçonne* style of the 1920s strove to minimize the female form visually. Mary Louise Roberts reports how such transformations impacted the way womanhood was viewed: “In reading fashion as a visual erasure of sexual difference, post-war critics referred to the new female body and even ‘womanhood’ itself as lacking clear definition or intelligibility” (Roberts 71).

The 1930s in particular marked the beginning of an aesthetics of the woman’s body. Breaking with traditions that required women’s bodies to conform to styles imposed on them by restrictive clothing, 1930s fashion continued to use certain elements of the *garçonne* tradition that took the emphasis away from “secondary sex characteristics, especially of bust and buttocks, betray[ing] a fixation on youth and a symbolic rejection of the maternal as the most oppressive element in traditional gender roles” (von Ankum 196). The increasing number of women’s fashion magazines began to focus their discourse on how to maintain a slim figure through the use of diet and aids like creams and massage. The tan sporty body also came into vogue as women began to practice sports and wear more revealing bathing attire on beaches.

There were many fears concerning the place of women in post-war society. One of these fears was related to the ways in which urban pleasures threatened to lure women away from the home, which began as part of the homefront/battlefront dichotomization that occurred during World War I thanks to “trench journals” that depicted women as living extravagantly in Paris, far away from the battlefields (Roberts 22-23). During the Interwar period, one has the sense of a continued crisis in femininity based on the idea that “postwar women, intent on their own work and pleasure, [were] determined to ‘live their life’ rather than ‘give life.’” (Maza 38). Françoise Ducout views the lack of stable mother figures as a characteristic feature of late 1930s French cinema.
She cites the example of the actress Line Noro whose mother roles were consistently negative and varied unpredictably:

Ainsi Line Noro (Une femme sans importance, Jean Choix, 1937, Ramuntcho, René Barberis, 1938...) sera-t-elle tour à tour mère crucifiée, mère jetée à l’opprobre publique, mère effacée jusqu’au sacrifice suprême, et, cela eût manqué au tableau, fille-mère que le doigt de la morale désigne au banc des accusées...” (Ducout 84).

The tension between living life and giving life is also clearly depicted in the film Jenny (Marcel Carné, 1936) whose protagonist played by Françoise Rosay is trapped between her desire to be a good mother and her desire to lead an independent life outside the home as manager of a Parisian night club that proposes gambling and gives male clients access to upscale prostitutes.

As we will see in subsequent chapters, French city films of the 1930s often staged young female protagonists as motherless. The orphan narrative is a recurring motif in the French literature dating back to the seventeenth century and is exemplified in the works of Sade and in the character Cosette in Victor Hugo’s Les misérables (1862). The prevalence of orphans reflects France’s obsession with identity and the importance in French culture of knowing one’s origins and social status. If mother figures weren’t missing altogether, they were “caricatural” or “comic,” which undermined their importance in the film narrative and left them subject to male authority (Vincendeau, Daddy’s Girls 76). It would be difficult to mention every film that features an orphaned female character, but here are some representative examples that concern women of the working-class, the most common type: in La petite Lise (Jean Grémillon, 1930), Lise is a young stenographer whose father is in prison in Guyanne for killing her mother in a fit of jealousy. Lise is afraid that when her father returns he will learn that she has been prostituting herself to earn enough money to support her lover, André. The interior
scenes of the film were shot in a hotel room near the Gare du Nord, in a *quartier de la gare*, which like other “station neighborhoods... was heavily populated with railway employees, many of them single young men...”. (Maza 16) Another example is Nelly (Michèle Morgan) who plays the female protagonist in *Quai des brumes* (Marcel Carné, 1939). Orphaned as a small child, Nelly is being raised by her godfather, Zabel, who becomes so jealous that he murders one of Nelly’s suitors. In film narratives, the absence of the mother is often concurrent with the young woman losing her bearings and falling into moral decline in urban space.

With the absent mother figure as a recurrent motif, idealized portrayals of family life are scarce among the decade’s films. Narratives are often driven forward by circumstances created by the absence of a protective mother figure, which sets the stage for a breakdown of moral values based on the daughter’s vulnerability. Ginette Vincendeau states that portrayals of the nuclear family in general are almost entirely absent from 1930s cinema. Rather, the decade favors father/daughter scenarios in which the mother was relegated to a minor role. Regarding the absence of mother figures and the visibility of the father/daughter relationship (biological or symbolic), Vincendeau gives reasons that relate to industry constraints as well as to the social structures of Third Republic France, which in the context of an aging population and low birthrate, favored marriages between older men and younger women (*Daddy’s Girls* 76).
1. Parisian Working-Class Femininity: the Midinette and the Prostitute

Urban figures such as the prostitute (and other variations of the *femme légère* with connections to underworld pleasures), the midinette, the gamine, and the orphan all figure prominently in 1930s French films, even if they are overshadowed by the more prevalent male-centered narratives and male heroes (Vincendeau *Melodramatic Realism* 51). The use of female stereotypes in 1930s French cinema has been denounced for the way it creates stereotypic, one-dimensional female characters. As Kelley Conway notes, representations of women in 1930s French cinema tend to be based on the “*ingénue/garce*” dichotomy, asking spectators “to either desire or despise female characters” (Conway 1). Jacques Siclier points to the fact that French actresses were essentially bound by 1930s French cinema’s obsession with realism and that typecasting based on either theater “*emplois*” or social stereotypes kept French actresses from attaining the mythic dimension of Hollywood stars (9-11). I would argue that these familiar urban stereotypes allow directors to draw from tradition and play with the signification of time-tested narratives and imagery of the city, which were highly appealing to audiences. But rather than validating such stereotypes of women, these
films reveal through close readings some of their inherent “symptoms” and “inherent lacks” while trying to represent these stereotypes as flawless and harmonious images of womanhood (Comolli and Narboni 27, quoted in Thornham) of the Interwar period when French womanhood was perceived as lacking clear contours.

Among the many eye-catching statues in Paris, the unassuming “La Grisette de 1830” is certainly among the least conspicuous. The statue is not mentioned in guidebooks and is likely only known to local inhabitants. Situated at the intersection of la Rue du Faubourg du Temple and the Quai de Valmy in the Square Jules Ferry, at the point where the Canal Saint-Martin goes underground, the Grisette was created as a symbol of the nineteenth-century working-class woman (Mairie de Paris). Originally, the term grisette referred to the modest female workers of sewing shops and fashion houses who dressed themselves in undyed coarse gray cloth (étoffe grise grossière). The term also designates the general class of cheaply paid female workers who worked in Paris during the nineteenth century. At the entrance of a somewhat secluded flower garden, the marble statue of the Grisette stands with a bundle of roses wrapped up in her apron. The history of the grisette is specific to proletarian neighborhoods of Paris where women like her would have worked as itinerant vendors or in the factories that sprang up along the industrial Canal Saint-Martin.

The Parisian working girl (the grisette, midinette, and petites mains were different names for the same social stereotype) was one of the most prevalent female social stereotypes of 1930s French cinema. Often an orphan, her femininity is based on an image of simplicity, passivity, and naïveté. Because she was poor and underpaid, she was easily led into prostitution to make ends meet. Annabella, the most popular female star of the mid-thirties, played a passive working girl in many of her early films. Dita
Parlo, another star who embodied a passive femininity, played in Julien Duvivier’s 1930s remake of Zola’s novel, *Au bonheur des dames*, which stages the social ascent of the hard-working and virtuous Denise Baudu. Duvivier’s adaptation of a nineteenth-century text reflects the tendency of French films of the decade to look to the past to define women.

The working girl became a figure of fascination in the nineteenth-century naturalist literary tradition through Maupassant’s short stories and Emile Zola’s portrayal of female workers in his novels *L’Assommoir* (1877) and *Au bonheur des dames*. In Zola’s novels, the female worker appears in two different guises: Denise Baudu, the young store clerk, and Gervaise, the female laundress who becomes prey to moral corruption. The women have in common a passive nature, and both are represented as the objects of masculine desire. Working girls in general were considered to be easy targets for young men of the bourgeoisie who desired to take them as mistresses before a proper marriage within their social class. One of the most telling examples is the narrator of the novel *Camille Frison, ouvrière de la couture* (André Vernières, 1908). The narrator is a young man of the bourgeoisie with a well-paid civil servant job and whose obsession with a seamstress named Camille leads him to different working-class establishments in the city: lunchtime cafés that cater to unaccompanied young women, sewing shops, proletarian neighborhoods. In a significant passage, the young man speaks with Camille’s supervisor about the character of the Parisian working girl:

Of course she has her faults, but they are inevitable. We are bound to take her as she is. The working girl of Paris is unrivalled in the world. With a mere chiffon, a mere rag or two, she can often make a work of elegance, perhaps even create a chef-d’œuvre. When at work she is capricious, talkative, easily distraite. To begin with, she is badly fed. Her health is delicate and she is often inclined to be consumptive. She is pale and anemic, and the sedentary life of the atelier is bad for her. When she arrives in the morning she is already tired, for she goes to bed late, often
working for herself in her own room till late at night, or, perhaps, going out to amuse herself. And nevertheless, because of the very exquisite work which comes from her hands, she must be very feminine and very much of a ‘Parisienne.’ (quoted in Pratz 215)

The supervisor praises the handiwork of the Parisian working girl while also calling attention to her unhealthy lifestyle and propensity to spend her wages on entertainment. Hardly earning enough to feed herself properly, she must take on extra work to do at night, but then she spends her money on entertainment.

The working girl’s access to the city was structured by the demands of her work schedule and was limited to her commute to work, eating in a café for lunch, and possibly an evening outing. Describing the rare moment of leisure for the working girl in Paris, Kracauer writes that free-time was limited to one day during the weekend: Sunday was the day that the “workers, laughing grisettes, soldiers, the petty bourgeoisie, who have few opportunities for strolling and gazing at shop windows during the week… all took the opportunity of gazing their fill on Sundays” (Kracauer quoted in Wilson, Invisible Flâneur 95). The prostitute, on the other hand, was at home in the city streets, her sexuality exhibited in plain view. Both figures have the potential to observe urban life since they work in and walked around the city streets, but they are attributed object positions rather than subject positions. Wilson’s analysis of women’s place in the city highlights the limited positions available to the prostitute and working girl: “Woman is present in cities as temptress, as whore, as fallen woman, as lesbian, but also as virtuous womanhood in danger, as heroic womanhood who triumphs over temptation and tribulation” (Wilson, Sphinx 7). Because both figures embodied the promise of sexual adventure, they were objects of fascination for the male urban subject. Interestingly, Wilson also suggests that the main reason for prostitution, which was
widespread, was poverty; many young women, and particularly those on their own without a family, were starving (49).

During the 1930s, the fate of the working girl was not as grim as it was in the nineteenth century. Thanks to upper primary school training, which prepared students for office or retail work, more working-class families were able to guarantee that their children would ascend to higher social positions, thereby creating a situation in which children occupied different cultural spheres than their parents (Maza 29). Sarah Maza has shown in her biography of Violette Nozière how “[t]here are plenty of instances, even at the turn of the century, of working-class families saving up and encouraging a single daughter to rise above them socially, for instance by studying to becomes a schoolteacher” (32). This was also the case for “downwardly mobile upper-middle-class, with social and cultural aspirations well beyond the family’s financial means” like that of Simone Beauvoir whose parents were able to send their daughter to attain pursue higher education and prepare her to enter the workforce (Moi 39).

Following World War I, the deteriorating economic climate and sharp decrease in the male population led more and more bourgeois families to prepare their daughters for the workforce, often in clerical jobs (39). Drawing from numerous primary sources, Maza describes how this post-war climate reduced the social gap between young women of the bourgeoisie and those of the working-class (39). One difference remained, however, in the way that bourgeois families strove to keep their daughters’ sexuality under constant surveillance, whereas among the working-class, premarital sex was so widespread that between the wars “one in five brides was pregnant and 12 percent already had a child” (Maza 46).
The scandal that emerged in 1933 around the figure of Violette Nozière reinforced some of the most tenacious stereotypes concerning the relaxed morals of the working-class. Nozière was in her late teens when she started to seek out nighttime pleasures in the city. She was first introduced to the middle-class students at the Sorbonne while skipping school since the school she attended, the Lycée Fénelon, was also located in the Latin Quarter. Then she began to frequent the jazz clubs of Montparnasse and Montmartre (Wiser 60). In order to pay for her costly lifestyle, she prostituted herself to the men she met during her evening excursions. After serving her parents their evening dose of barbital, she would leave the family’s apartment and wander the city. To a certain degree, Violette Nozière’s nocturnal pleasure-seeking was made possible by the walkable nature of the city of Paris. Without paying for transportation she was able to walk to and from the twelfth arrondissement where she lived to Montparnasse, the Latin Quarter and Montmartre in a single night. Maza makes salient the comparison between the restricted space of the Nozière family’s tiny apartment and the freedom that Violette felt upon leaving her family every evening. Violette Nozière became a fascinating figure to the French public during the highly publicized trial in 1933.

1.4. The Flâneur, the Flâneuse, Flânerie

In order to examine the possibility for representations of female mobility in 1930s cinema, it is necessary to turn back to the nineteenth century, to the figure of the flâneur. When Walter Benjamin claimed that Paris was the capital of the nineteenth century, he was essentially referring to the ways in which movement and vision or strolling and looking had become central to the urban experience. During the nineteenth century,
numerous architectural transformations, including the widening of avenues and increased air flow to congested areas, contributed to the establishment of Paris as a walkable city. This possibility for increased mobility gave city dwellers access to the city’s visual delights: Haussmann’s spectacular vistas, commodities presented in glass window displays, the spectacle of the *expositions universelles*, and visual entertainment (including diorama and other precursors to cinema) (Benjamin 4).

The privilege of vision and mobility are exemplified in the figure of the flâneur, the male idle stroller, who during the second half of the nineteenth century becomes synonymous with the urban subject. The term was first used during the nineteenth century to describe the male subject of modernity for whom the activity of strolling was accompanied by an appropriation of the gaze. The most famous descriptions of the flâneur can be found in the writing of the nineteenth-century poet, Charles Baudelaire:

> For Baudelaire, there is no doubt that the poet is the ‘man’ (and Baudelaire was quite explicit about the gender identity of the poet; much, if not indeed all, of Baudelaire’s work presupposes a masculine narrator or observer) who can reap aesthetic meaning and an individual kind of existential security from the spectacle of the teeming crowds – the visible public – of the metropolitan environment of the city of Paris. (Tester 2)

The word flâneur also refers to a social type who became known under the pen of Baudelaire. He occupies an ambivalent position in urban space, walking among the crowd yet remaining detached enough to record his observations of Paris, the modern city. Janet Wolff defines the flâneur as “the modern hero... his experience... is that of a freedom to move about in the city, observing and being observed, but never interacting with others” (40). Feminist critics such as Janet Wolff, Elizabeth Wilson, Griselda Pollock, and Anne Friedberg, writing about gender and the city of Paris, unanimously agree that the flâneur was characterized by his gender and class, and that the social
structures of nineteenth-century France did not allow for women to occupy such a position. Or, as Janet Wolff has shown, in the case of the shopper, such a position was a relatively “invisible” one (Wolff 18).

If feminist critics agree on a definition of the flâneur, they differ in their views on whether there exists or ever existed such a thing as the flâneuse. Wilson and Friedberg have opened up the possibility for female flânerie by claiming that the concept of flânerie can be disengaged from the flâneur, which is essentially a figure specific to a particular place and time. Parson also suggests that the term flâneur or flâneuse should be used as a “cultural, critical phenomenon”, a conceptual term (5) rather than a historical one. Friedberg distills vision and mobility as the most important characteristics of the flâneur, and she looks to other urban experiences that offer the same ways of looking and being, particularly those that emerged as a consequence of late nineteenth-century capitalism. Window-shopping and cinema spectatorship (which came later), she argues, are activities that locate women as legitimate observers and subjects (Friedberg 37). Orpen argues that these new urban subject positions made available to women by shopping and moviegoing made it possible for women to stroll the city during daytime hours. Yet as Orpen notes, “this mode of flânerie remained exclusively diurnal, as opposed to the far more masculine and risqué nocturnal variety” (59) like that practiced by Violette Nozière.

In French cinema of the 1930s, the male director can be likened to the figure of the flâneur who takes to the city streets and records his experience through the movie camera. The idea of a flâneur-filmmaker is presented in Marcel Carné’s 1933 article encouraging French directors to seek out and record the hidden, poetic elements of the backstreets (Carné, Quand le cinéma 1). From this point of view, one could say that once
again it is the male perspective that structures representations of the city. But what happens when a film makes use of a female perspective or female protagonist to tell its story? The next three chapters aim to answer this question by looking at how women are observers and strollers in Paris.

1 The first truly portable movie cameras came into use in 1959 during the French New Wave. Hand-held 35 mm and 16 mm cameras such as the Caméflex gave filmmakers more freedom from transporting heavy cameras and camera mounts (see Neupert, Richard. *A History of the French New Wave Cinema*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press: 2007, p. 40)

2 He goes on to say in the article that the constraints of sound technology made it impossible to go wandering the streets with a portable camera as did Dimitri Kirsanoff in the film *Ménilmontant* (1926) or Georges Lacombe in his documentary *La zone* (1928).

3 In *Dans le Paris de la Belle Epoque, les “Apaches,” premières bandes de jeunes*, Michelle Perrot reports that “apache” was first used in 1902 to describe urban gangs of young men in Belleville with an anti-authoritarian spirit and war-like attitude. Others were quick to imitate these young men in dress and attitude. Perrot claims that they acted in defiance of the discipline required by industrialized labor (“les jeunes qui ne veulent pas travailler”) (71).

4 The statue of the unnamed female worker, interestingly, stands just across the path from the statue of a much more visible figure in the history of Paris, the renowned actor of the Parisian stage, Frédérick Lemaître, who was one of the central characters in the film *Les Enfants du Paradis*. For a more in-depth description of the grisette and the lorette, see the blog *Invisible Paris*, Tuesday, 17 February 2009, entry entitled “Grisettes and Lorettes.”

5 The only exception was George Sand who dressed as a man in order to become a flâneur (Orpen 59).
CHAPTER 2

CANAL DIVA: ARLETTY AND MILIEU IN THE FILM
HÔTEL DU NORD

In the film *Hôtel du Nord*, Raymonde (Arletty) takes the spotlight from Renée (Annabella) in one of the most famous scenes of classic French cinema. Raymonde and Edmond plan to leave their claustrophobic room at the hotel in order to go fishing at La Varenne, undoubtedly planning to take one of the Sunday *trains de plaisir* that led Parisians of all social classes to the banks of the Marne River. The banks of the Marne were a reputed site of recreation outside of city limits where people could consume food and cheap untaxed wine in establishments called *guinguettes*. Fishing pole and bait box in hand, Edmond and Raymonde travel no farther than the footbridge in front of the hotel. Halfway across the bridge a conjugal spat breaks out, and Edmond confesses that he needs more than a change of scenery to lighten his mood (Figure 2):

*Raymonde*: Pourquoi on ne part pas pour Toulon? Tu t’incrustes, tu t’incrustes. Ca finira par faire du villain!

*Edmond*: Et après?

Figure 2 - Arletty and Jouvet halfway across the footbridge in the film *Hôtel du Nord*. 
R: Oh, t’as pas toujours été fatalitaire.
E: Fataliste.
R: Si tu veux, le résultat est le même... Pourquoi que tu as la caille ? On n’est pas heureux tous les deux ?
E: Non.
R: T’en es sûr ?
E: Oui.
R: T’aimes pas notre vie ?
E: Tu l’aimes toi notre vie ?
R: Faut bien, je m’y suis habituée. Coquard mis à part t’es plutôt beau mec. Par terre on se dispute, mais au lit on s’explique. Et sur l’oreiller on se comprend. Alors ?
E: Alors rien. J’en ai assez, tu sais ? Je m’asphyxie. Tu sais, je m’asphyxie.
R: A Toulon y a de l’air puisqu’il y a la mer, tu respiras mieux !
E: Partout où on ira ça sentira le pourri.
R: Allons à l’étranger, aux colonies.
E: Avec toi ?
R: C’tidée !
E: Alors ça sera partout pareil. J’ai besoin de changer d’atmosphère et mon atmosphère c’est toi.
R: C’est la première fois qu’on me traite d’atmosphère. Si je suis une atmosphère t’es un drôle de bled ! Ah là là, des types qui sont du milieu sans en être et qui cranent à cause de ce qu’ils ont été, on devrait les vider ! Atmosphère, atmosphère, est-ce que j’ai une gueule d’atmosphère ? Puisque c’est ça vas-y tout seul à La Varenne ! Bonne pêche et bonne atmosphère !

Raymonde’s fast-tongued verbal assault functions on two levels. At the level of the film narrative, Raymonde is denouncing Edmond as a has-been, whose current reputation as a crook is founded on his former exploits rather than his current situation. Secondly, her insult touches on a point of pride among all residents of the Hôtel du Nord—that of being “du quartier” (of the neighborhood). Each of Hôtel du Nord’s secondary characters, a star cast of known performers, has a profession that guarantees his or her place in the social order: hôtel owner, prostitute, lock keeper, truck driver, confisier, maid and pimp. By mastering the insider language of the lower class (“l’argot”) Raymonde demonstrates that she surpasses Edmond (Arletty could
undoubtedly have made the claim vis-à-vis Jouvet) in terms of her underworld authenticity.

2.1. An Unconventional Star

Today Arletty is best known to film scholars for her collaboration with Marcel Carné in a handful of films of the late 1930s and 40s: Hôtel du Nord, Le jour se lève (1939), Les visiteurs du soir (1942) and Les enfants du paradis (1945). The film Hôtel du Nord, in particular, served as a star vehicle for Arletty, enabling her to go from well-known actress to movie star. In the film she plays Madame Raymonde, a sassy prostitute who nearly always has the last word. The film was initially meant to highlight the younger and more famous Annabella, but Arletty emerged as the film’s star thanks to her bold performance of Jeanson’s script. Her natural gift for argot, her nasal working-class Parisian accent, and her unconventional beauty made her an obvious casting choice for Carné’s dark social universe. But, if Arletty’s association with the social despair of poetic realism makes salient certain aspects of her star persona such as her on and off-screen connection to working-class Paris, it also obscures important parts of her early career that help us understand the pleasure that spectators felt when watching Arletty on the screen. Arletty, for example, began as a comic music-hall performer and only became a film star at age forty, after twenty years of working on the Parisian stage.

Film scholars now have access to many rich details concerning Arletty’s life, which spanned nearly the entire 20th century, thanks to her autobiography, La défense, published in 1971, and numerous biographies. Philippe Ariotti’s comprehensive account of Arletty’s performances on both screen and stage, annotated with critical reception and Arletty’s own comments, is particularly noteworthy for its coverage of her
stage career, which is less accessible to scholars than her films. Because Arletty actively participated in the bustling social and artistic life of Interwar Paris, references to Arletty also appear in memoirs written by some of the period’s well-known celebrities: Sacha Guitry, Marcel Carné, Jean Cocteau and Henri Jeanson.

Her performances in films, primarily those made with Carné, have also been the object of more recent critical attention. In the introduction to her book Chanteuse in the City, Kelley Conway notes that “Arletty exudes appealing independence and complexity,” making her one of the notable exceptions to the ingénue/garce dichotomy that dominates 1930s filmic representations of women (2). Noël Burch and Genviève Sellier, in their analysis of Le jour se lève, show how Clara “incarne ici une femme « réelle », qui travaille et éprouve des sentiments” (69-70). For Burch and Sellier, it is Arletty’s natural, real-world character and desire for independence that set her apart from her co-star and younger object of desire, Jacqueline Laurent.

Arletty played in fifty-four feature length films during her lifetime, but she always referred modestly to her cinema career as a means to earn her “pocket money,” serving to remind her public that she is a typical, working parisienne. In 1951 as Arletty’s career started to take off again after a period of inactivity following the war, she tells readers of Cinémonde that she enjoys strolling through the city, taking the métro and, like many of her fellow Parisians, is in search of an apartment—preferably in the 8th arrondissement, a somewhat surprising departure from the neighborhoods she frequented during her youth. The “Arletty” of luxury hotels seems remote indeed from her 1930s on-screen persona, a cinematic flâneuse who inhabited the proletariat east side of Paris: the Canal Saint-Martin, Barbès, the Boulevard du Crime and Ménilmontant.
This chapter primarily deals with Arletty’s performance in the film *Hôtel du Nord*, but I also discuss briefly a handful of films of the 1930s that led to the formation of her distinctly Parisian star persona. Arletty’s working-class femininity took different forms. Most of the characters that she plays during the decade are inspired by the Parisian music-hall of the 1920s and 30s where the real Arletty debuted, while others are more historical (Madame Sans-Gêne) or inspired from literary tradition like the Parisian prostitute, Raymonde. Whatever the inspiration, Arletty imbues the characters with both masculine and feminine characteristics.

Keith Reader examines the issue of gender ambiguity in Arletty’s star persona, noting how “Arletty partakes of some of the most tenacious archetypes of modern femininity—the whore-with-a-heart-of-gold in *Hôtel du Nord*; the incestuous mother-figure in Roger Richebé’s *Gibier de potence* (1951)—androgynously inflecting and subverting, rather than overcoming or escaping, them” (Reader 65). Androgyny is one aspect of Arletty’s on and off-screen persona that allows her to avoid falling into stereotypical representations of women. As we will see with *Hôtel du Nord*, there are other dimensions to her performance style that undermine these “tenacious archetypes”: Arletty’s free-speaking *gouaille*, or “cheeky humor” that makes her a fitting interlocutor for strong male leads like Jean Gabin, Michel Simon and Louis Jouvet, her dress and her signature body language and gestures.

In this chapter, I will first examine Arletty’s place in the 1930s French star system, tracing her early career from theater and music-hall performer to cinema star in order to demonstrate how her star persona is more complex than previously thought. Even though her performance style in films of the thirties was essentially influenced by the comic Parisian music-hall tradition, the roles she plays in films are characterized by a
singular depth, uncommon for women characters of the classic period, because they combine selective aspects of urban mythology of the 19th and 20th centuries with the figure of the modern woman. This historical background will give way to an in-depth analysis of the film *Hôtel du Nord* to illustrate how the fundamental components of Arletty’s persona contributed to her ascension to stardom. I will then look at how this *femme du peuple* persona was skillfully reversed in the later Carné films *Le jour se lève*, *Visiteurs du soir* and *Les enfants du paradis* which led to the creation of a mythical Arletty, who is most like Garance, the freedom-loving flâneuse of the Boulevard du Crime.

Garance of *Les enfants du paradis*, in contrast to Madame Raymonde, is a mysterious figure who embodies contradictory feminine ideals. She is simultaneously a down-to-earth, natural beauty and a mysterious figure that is ultimately unattainable because she chooses freedom above all else. Although Arletty biographies constitute a strong body of facts and anecdotes regarding her life, I only consider biographical elements in my analysis to the extent that they inform her star persona. Of particular biographical interest will be the way in which Arletty talks about her own life to her public, her childhood in Courbevoie, the *argot* that she uses to do so, the details that she emphasizes in interviews and the way the off-screen Arletty was written about in fan magazines.

I argue in this chapter that Arletty went from minor star to international star thanks to the success of *Hôtel du Nord*, but I would also argue that Arletty was much less of a star during the 1930s than one would imagine. She has, however, benefited from a great deal of retrospective stardom, a phenomenon that can be explained in part by the critical focus on “poetic realism” as a genre. In the context of the Popular Front years, Arletty emerges next to Jean Gabin as a film icon of 1930s populist cinema; poetic realism was preoccupied with representations of working-class Paris and made use of
genuine working-class actors to do so. With historical hindsight, one is tempted to linger on Poetic Realist films as incarnating the despair of the end of an era. For the cultural historian Steven Ungar, Arletty’s famous “atmosphère” is a significant word that has the power to relocate meaning from within the filmic text to real life: “Raymonde’s final explosion of anger illustrates the extent to which politics—or, at least, the displacement of certain kinds of politics—always emerges within the symbolic engagement that links the Carné film to France in late 1938” (393).

A number of authors writing about Arletty make the assumption that she was one of the most popular stars of the 1930s. Arletty’s importance today does seem disproportionate when compared to the little attention she received in film magazines of the 1930s. Arletty was not talked about in film magazines of the 30s as much as one would expect. Until the 1960s, popular film magazines targeted a female readership and featured articles dealing with stars, their fashion taste, beauty secrets and cooking preferences (Vincendeau, Stars and Stardom 16). French film magazines, which generally promoted Hollywood models of stardom, devoted more attention to the young romantic female stars who modeled themselves after Hollywood. For example, the ingénues (Annabella and Danielle Darrieux) and the vamps (Viviane Romance and Mireille Balin) received the most attention. These actresses consistently ranked highest in reader polls. Arletty, on the other hand, was forty years old at the peak of her stardom and went on to make her best-known and internationally acclaimed film, Les enfants du paradis, at age forty-five. Due to her age and her unconventional femininity, she did not easily fit in with the younger generation of female stars, nor was she typecast in the traditional feminine roles of the vamp or femme fatale.
One could argue that in spite of her uneasy fit among young female stars, Arletty is nonetheless an emblem of a certain type of French cinema. Her star persona distills two of the most celebrated aspects of Carné’s studio spectaculars of the 1930s and 40s: atmosphere and dialogue. The characters she plays are profoundly connected to the different neighborhoods or atmospheres meticulously represented in studio by Alexandre Trauner, and she has some of the punchiest lines of French classic cinema. One need only examine the 2008 MK2 release of Hôtel du Nord to see that the film, originally created for the more popular 1930s star Annabella, has become definitively an ‘Arletty’ film. She is featured on the cover with Louis Jouvet, and two of the six bonus features are dedicated to Arletty. The same tendency can also be seen in print. Gallimard’s book entitled Gueules d’atmosphère, dedicated to French actors of 1929-1959, takes its title from Arletty’s lines in the film and gives a spotlight position to the Arletty/Jouvet couple, alongside Jean Gabin and Michèle Morgan, as symbols of the classical French cinema. To this day, the atmosphere scene, with Arletty’s particularly indignant and over-the-top pronunciation of the lines, remains the most often quoted passage from the decade.

2.2. Early Stage Career in the Parisian Music-Hall

Arletty’s career provides one example of the extent to which the Paris-based star system, due to industry and audience imperatives, took on actors from the boulevard theater and performers from the music-hall, infusing the decade’s cinematic production with a focus on performance, or as Vincendeau puts it, “the privileging of spectacle over narrative” (Vincendeau, French Cinema 130). Arletty’s debut on stage at the Théâtre Capucines, a “théâtre de genre,” as a “petite femme de revue” (Souvais 59) and her
subsequent passage to the cinema provides one example of the way in which French cinema of the 1930s readily absorbed various performance repertoires of the Parisian entertainment industry. With the advent of sound, the cinema industry recruited all types of personnel from two types of live performance, the “comic, singing and more proletarian on the one hand, and serious and culturally respectable on the other” (Vincendeau, Stars and Stardom 5). Coming from the more popular music-hall, performers like Arletty and Jean Gabin with their working-class accents and gestures, brought a French cultural specificity to French sound films. Their performance style was widely recognized by audiences as belonging to the world of the music-hall.

If performance repertoires can be easily divided into two broad categories, those coming from the boulevard theater and those coming from the music-hall, it is also important to consider that many performers like Arletty performed in different types of venues and were associated with multiple genres. For the music-hall genre alone, there were an estimated two hundred café-concerts and music-halls open in Paris during the period 1848-1914 (Chauveau and Sallée 14). This figure does not include theaters, which served as venues for different types of entertainment from music-hall to cinéma. Even within the music-hall itself, there were different sub-genres. It is important to make the difference, as does Kelley Conway, between the music-hall de variétés and the music-hall à grande revue, which can be differentiated by the relationship between performer and audience (56). In the large-scale music-hall revue with its spectacular décor and costumes, performers were distant from their audience. The variety show, on the other hand, was a form of entertainment in which the audience maintained an intimate relationship with performers. Yves Mirande recalls the intimate relationship that existed between performer and audience in such small theaters: “les artistes et les spectateurs
échangeaient continuellement des sourires ; des petits signes d’intelligence, quelquefois des mots piquants et des plaisanteries à haute voix” (93). The humor of these performances hinged upon the audience interacting with the performer, in some cases, engaging in witty verbal exchanges during the performance.

The music-hall variety show reached peak popularity before the early 1920s and eventually gave way to the spectacular mise-en-scène of the grande revue. In the 1920s, Arletty performed in small venues classified as théâtres de genre that provided the same type of show as the music-hall de variété. A brief look at several descriptions of the type of entertainment provided to audiences in the music-hall theater can help us understand how Arletty began as a comic actress whose personal style led her to interact closely with her audience. In the variety theaters, “On y donnait des spectacles légers, des pièces un peu lestes, opérettes ou vaudevilles à couplets, que ces demoiselles chantaient faux, à la grande joie de l’assistance” (Barrot and Chirat 75). Between 1920 and 1943, Arletty performed as an actress-singer in musical comedies, revues, operettas and fées written by some of the most famous names in live entertainment: Rip, Tristan Bernard, Yves Mirande, Marcel Achard, Sacha Guitry and Edouard Bourdet.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Arletty was a permanent figure of the Parisian revue spectacles, but she quickly became associated with the king ‘revuiste’, Rip, known for his comic insolence. The female performers in Rip’s variety of revue visually and verbally seduced their audience, parading around the stage in designer clothing. Paul Poiret, Cheruit, Pérugia and Lucien Lelong, who made popular the figure of the “élégante en tenue de ville” (Garnier 6), all designed costumes at one time or another for Rip’s shows. Biting social satire and wit were Rip’s specialty. Women performers in Rip’s shows also showcased their quick delivery of witty language. English and
American critics praised the Parisian revues of the 1920s, Rip’s in particular, for their witty, satirical and intellectual character as compared to the gratuitous use of female flesh in New York or London (Crane and Wheeler 303):

Whereas the Anglo-American tradition has “something razzling and dazzling, of legs and tom-foolery, of non-descript entertainments which aim at making a cheerful noise, of productions which introduce plenty of light and color and pretty dresses whose object is not primarily to conceal the beauties of the human form… [the Parisian revue] presupposes in its audiences an alert and intelligent interest in current affairs. Its methods are allusive and critical… it can only flourish where the theater keeps closely in touch with the things which are discussed at dinner-tables, in smoking rooms, or over the tea-cups. (303)

Equipped with years of training in the music-hall, Arletty was particularly well-suited to play the role of performance artist once she began in cinema; these roles serve to make the spectator aware of the actor behind the performance. The most formative moments in her early career, as in the careers of Gaby Morlay and Yvonne Printemps, were roles in typically Parisian, humorous spectacles that combined music, singing (chansons parigotes) and comedy. These were the types of revues and musical comedies that had amazed the young Marcel Carné in his youth (Turk 142). Arletty was particularly remarkable for “delivering comic dialogue and torch songs with a broad parigot accent” (142).

The singing parts were performed in verse and in a comical fashion. French critics describe Arletty’s voice as “oseille” or “aigre,” suggesting a sour, untrained quality. Although this register produced comic relief in the theater, many filmmakers were doubtful of how her squawky voice would be rendered in sound cinema. Carné and Feyder reportedly had great reservations about recording Arletty’s voice on film, which ironically, became her greatest and most original asset. “It was Arletty’s voice that brought her to the attention of moviemakers during the early years of sound film. If the
personality of the star depends as much on the “photogenic ‘grain of the voice’ as on the ‘photogenic configuration of body and face,’ Arletty had extraordinary ‘photogeneity’” notes a film critic (Affron quoted in Turk 142).

It was her critical success in the opretta “Yes” that gave her more visibility and led to her first role in the cinema. Unabashedly singing slightly off-key became part of Arletty’s natural style in films like Circonstances atténuantes (Jean Boyer, 1939). In the film, a medium shot captures Marie Qu’a-d’ça (Arletty) singing to an uncomfortable Michel Simon who plays a respectable bourgeois stranded among elements of the underworld. Arletty smiles and swings her elbow in a mechanical fashion and with unmistakable theatricality.

2.3. Cinema and the Femme Légère

Arletty first appeared on the screen in the comedy La douceur d’aimer (Hervil, 1930) with a small role as a typist, but the first film in which she had the lead role was the comedy Un chien qui rapporte (Jean Choux, 1931). In the film she plays a character with the evocative name of Josyane Plaisir, a “parigote” cabaret singer who agrees to participate in a scheme to catch a rich husband. With the help of a small dog specially trained to ‘get lost’ in the Bois de Boulogne by jumping into the backs of a cars driven by single men, Josyane hopes to ensnare an unsuspecting gentleman who is nice enough to return the dog to her. In the film, Arletty also performs the popular song “Cœur de parisienne” about a Parisian woman with a funny yet beautiful and troubling accent who hopes to find true love. Most of the film takes place in Josyane’s garçonnière apartment where she lounges around in lingerie, coiffed like a flapper with slicked down short hair, rebelliously smoking cigarettes. Although the film as a whole was only moderately
successful among critics, it marked Arletty’s first appearance in a film as a music-hall artist. Critics praised her natural acting style (Ariotti 72-73), which they felt was reminiscent of the comic style of the théâtre de variétés. Finally, Un chien qui rapporte is significant for the way in which it lays down a connection between the liberated young woman and the city of Paris, a connection that would be further cultivated through her collaboration with Carné.

When Arletty was cast as a music-hall performer, she didn’t simply play the woman as spectacle or woman as object of the male gaze. As Clara in Le jour se lève, she plays the assistant during Valentin’s performing dog act. First, the beautiful Clara attracts the audience’s attention as a female spectacle. Rather than remain a passive spectacle, she disrupts the show by not responding to Valentin’s cue, thereby leaving him looking ridiculous and drawing laughter from the crowd. This scene shows how she easily adopts subject positions reserved for male characters. In fact, the reversal in male and female roles was a recurrent motif in her career, and she became known for her gender ambiguity. The capacity of Arletty to play androgynous characters can be seen most distinctly in the role of Dominique (both a man and woman’s name) of Les visiteurs du soir. In the film La garçonne, based on the scandalous novel by Victor Marguerite, Arletty plays Niquette, a debauched music-hall diva who supports the young protagonist Monique Gerbier (Marie Bell) as a kept woman. Monique, the main character, becomes an outcast from her family for choosing independence and a career in the city over the conventional bourgeois path to marriage. Niquette initiates Monique to the world of Parisian pleasure at the Casino de Paris where she is well-connected. “Je connais tout le monde à Paris. Seulement il faut suivre mes conseils,” she tells Monique with almost paternalistic authority. Under the wing of Niquette, Monique comes in contact
with drinking, gambling and homosexuality during her experience with Parisian nightlife. In the end, Monique decides to leave Niquette, reasoning that if she has come to the city “ce n’est pas pour être une fille entretenue, c’est pour être une femme libre, sans contraintes, sans hypocrisie.”

Another film in which Arletty plays an androgynous, liberated woman is *La chaleur du sein* (Jean Boyer, 1938). The role itself was quite atypical in the sense that Arletty plays a mother figure, a rare figure in 1930s French cinema and a rare role for Arletty. She was certainly of the age to play a mother figure, but in all of her previous films she is childless and unmarried. In the film, Arletty plays Bernadette, one of Gilbert’s three stepmothers, his real mother having passed away at birth. His neglectful father, played by Michel Simon, has since remarried three times and each step-mother figure represents a different mother type. Bernadette is the youngest and least conventional of the three mothers. She is fashionable, sleek, and dynamic. She smokes cigarettes and wears pants *à la garçonne*. The story is an interesting reversal on the more common older father-younger daughter Oedipal drama of the 1930s. The comic narrative of *La chaleur du sein* is driven forward by the missing father, an eccentric Egyptologist, who is off chasing relics rather than raising his son. In the absence of parental guidance, the wayward Gilbert attempts suicide and is comforted by his three stepmothers, one after the other. The most appealing of the three mothers is certainly the erotic Arletty/Bernadette, who doubles as Gilbert’s object of desire.

Arletty remains a stranger to narratives of conjugal bliss or even traditional romantic love stories: Raymonde finds companionship but not passionate love in Prosper the lockkeeper after being discarded by Edmond; François prefers the younger Françoise, “la femme rêvée,” to Clara who represents a down-to-earth, mature “femme
réelle” (Burch and Sellier 69); Dominique of Les visiteurs du soir is given the mission of disuniting Anne and Renaud; and Garance is the enigmatic untouchable beauty destined to frustrate her four suitors. Arletty herself points out with respect to Les enfants du paradis: “c’est le seul film où un homme m’ait pressée dans ses bras et m’ait embrassée. C’est curieux… Mes amants cinématographiques ne me touchaient jamais et il n’y a eu que Barrault pour me donner un tout petit baiser” (Douin 29). These examples all confirm that Arletty does not easily fit into what Vincendeau call the decade’s Oedipal stories (Daddy’s Girls 73) or what Burch and Sellier go a step further in labeling “incestuous” (14).

Another way of considering Arletty’s androgyny is through the lens of the monstre sacré. A monstre sacré is a character actor with a characteristic body-type and strong personality that leads to typecasting and to film narratives being organized (or re-organized) around their imposing figure (Crisp, Classic 360). Arletty is considered by Crisp to be one of the very few women to have the status of monstre sacré in the 1930s: “her exaltation to that rank is primarily due to her raucous voice and hard-edged cynicism, which give the characters she embodies a competence and vitality in the face of adversity that make her an honorary man” (361). Character actors in 1930s French cinema were a carry-over from the theater where the categories of character or “emplois” were strongly established and codified (360). Crisp’s term “monstre sacré” and “honorary man” align Arletty with the traditional of male stars and suggest a likeness to Jean Gabin, the decade’s quintessential movie star and fellow monster sacré. There are many striking similarities between the Arletty myth and the Gabin myth; from a shared debut in the café-concert or music-hall to the way in which both emerged as character actors representing working-class Frenchness. Arletty is also a “phenomène
populaire” because she appeared in genres that appealed to the general public and were popular at the box office during the 1930s. But unlike the Gabin “myth,” the Arletty myth is based on a much smaller number of films and did not experience the same longevity (Vincendeau and Gauteur 96).

In other films of the late 1930s and 40s, Arletty essentially played different types of working-class characters. The most popular among audiences were the two variations of the femme légère: the performance artist with strong ties to the world of Parisian live entertainment and the femme du milieu who associates with petty criminals and is often wiser than her male associates. Arletty’s diegetic performances as a music-hall performer set off her characters’ uneasiness in serving as object of the male gaze and as autonomous agent of control. In Le jour se lève, Clara slyly and comically wrests control from Valentin as she lets his hat drop to the floor. In L’amant de Bornéo (1942), as master of the show, she plunges swords into a box containing one of her fans to the delight of the audience.

The femme du milieu character was extremely popular among audiences at the end of the 1930s as reflected by the box-office figures for the films of the 1938-1939 film season. Hôtel du Nord, Fric-Frac (1939) and Circonstances atténuantes (1939) all feature Arletty as a comic, slang-speaking, feisty woman of the Parisian underworld. Fric-Frac and Circonstances, in particular, were comedies that drew their power from “l’art de la réplique” or fast-paced witty banter and use of argot to set the underworld characters apart from the respectable and stuffy bourgeois characters.

The cabaret performer and the fille du milieu deeply resonated as distinctly Parisian phenomena and were given authenticity, despite the exaggerated nature of the characters, by the way in which Arletty spoke of her childhood in Courbevoie and her
early adulthood in Paris. Arletty’s childhood was marked by images of marginal working class city spaces. Her mother and father, Marie Bathiat and Michel Bathiat, were both of working-class origin and, until after the First World War, the family resided in the western industrial quarters that were served by the boat traffic on the Seine. Arletty was born Léonie Bathiat in Courbevoie in 1898 at a time when this small village across the Seine was the “patrie des blanchisseuses-repasseuses” and housed 58 laundries, constituting an industrial sector (Arletty 13). Her own mother was a laundress (lingère) whose family came from the Auvergne region. Arletty speaks of her mother’s working-class origins through references to Degas’ washerwomen which, according to Conway, connote “sexual availability, unruliness, and physical strength... Historically, the laundress had the reputation of a street-smart, straight-talking woman prone to brawling and launching strikes” (126). Unruliness and straight-talking were both dimensions of the Arletty persona, and she was fittingly cast as the laundress in the costume drama Madame Sans-Gêne (1941) and a former laundress in Les enfants du paradis who leaves her former profession to become a performer on the Boulevard du Crime. The idea of a vulgar past (laundress) given up for a nobler endeavor (performance) resonates with the transformation of Arletty’s star persona under Carné from a vulgar prostitute (Raymonde) to a regal actress (Garance).

In Télérama’s 1992 homage to Arletty, Jean-Luc Douin uses the term “gavroche au féminin” to describe Arletty: “Royale et galopine. Gavroche au féminin. Arletty doit l’essentiel de sa notoriété à ce tempérament d’insurgée qu’elle exprimait d’une adorable façon, ni coquine, ni narquoise. La voix du peuple, le gazouillis moqueur de l’oiseau du faubourg” (5). Douin likens her free-speaking cheekiness to the urban figure of the gavroche. Other critics have described her as titi, “a childish word used in the nineteenth
century to describe a young worker, usually dressed in a cap, scarf and smoking a pipe” or as a “femme du milieu” (Hussey xix). In French, the terms gavroche, titi and du milieu are traditionally used with a masculine connotation to describe urban young men, thereby revealing how the Arletty persona is also invested with androgyny.

The working-class woman, as emblematized by Arletty, therefore displays masculine and feminine attributes grounded in Parisian urban mythology. Her traditionally masculine attributes imbue her characters with a freedom or fluidity in urban space. Her characters are at ease in the café, which in 1930s cinema was a privileged site of male bonding, as well as on the boulevard. In the beginning of Le jour se lève, Clara moves next to François at the bar and strikes up a conversation with total ease, and in Fric-Frac and Circonstances atténuantes the café is her regular hangout.

On the other hand, being a woman of the milieu also suggests a moral dimension and class immobility suggestive of Zola’s characters Gervaise and Nana who never escape the social class into which they are born. But the quick-tongued and unruly Arletty cleverly uses her social class to her advantage, and her class-markers become elements of empowerment. In Fric-Frac, Daisy’s mastery of argot allows her to communicate secretly with her friends unbeknownst to Marcel (Fernandel). Her slang also enables her to direct verbal barbs at male co-stars Michel Simon and Louis Jouvet. Through Arletty, social class becomes a way to show-off her cleverness and resolve because she never lets anyone or anything get the best of her.

2. 4. Hôtel du Nord and the Desire for Mobility

In mainstream film histories, Hôtel du Nord and Le jour se lève are considered to be part of the moment in French film history termed Poetic Realism. Hôtel du Nord’s release
date, its extravagantly realistic set design, Prévert’s dialogue and Carné’s signature certainly confirm such a classification, but a closer look at the film’s narrative and its stars’ performances will reveal that this label obscures certain elements that set the film apart from other poetic realism films. These differences suggest that Hôtel du Nord may be better understood as a mixed-genre film or a film that doesn’t easily fit into the genre system. To a certain extent, the concept of ‘genre’ should be applied with caution in the context of 1930s French cinema because, as Crisp has shown, in France the genre system was neither well-developed nor a feature that served to promote films in the popular press⁶. In this light, I would like to bracket off considerations of genre for a moment and consider how Hôtel du Nord may represent a challenge to, rather than an ideal example of, “poetic realism” and that suggest the film is characteristic of the diversity of the cinematic production of France during the 1930s.

Firstly and most importantly, Hôtel du Nord tells the story of a doomed male protagonist, but he is one of four main characters. Monsieur Edmond does deliver himself to Nazarède at the end of the film, but he is not the unique narrative focus. The narrative focus is a female character, Renée, played by Annabella, and the film tells the story of her near-death and subsequent rebirth into society. At the end of the film, Annabella leaves the Hôtel du Nord planning to get married to Pierre in a typical happy ending.

The other factor that sets the film apart from Carné’s other late 1930s films is that Prévert, his usual scriptwriter, was unavailable for the project. In Prévert’s absence, Jean Aurenche and Henri Jeanson worked together on the adaptation, and Jeanson wrote the dialogue, which gives the film a theatricality missing from films scripted by Prévert⁷ (Quai des brumes, Le jour se lève and Les enfants du paradis). Critics often cite the trade-off
that Jeanson’s dialogue introduces into a film’s narrative: the crowd-pleasing, quick and witty dialogue is often foregrounded at the expense of narrative and character depth. Many different accounts of the film’s genesis confirm that Jeanson preferred writing for the older couple Jouvet and Arletty since both were veterans of the Parisian stage and thus familiar to Jeanson (Turk 130). The staginess of Jeanson’s dialogue performed by two experienced theater performers supports Vincendeau’s classification of the film as “theatrical realism” (Vincendeau, Hôtel du Nord 42). The concept of theatrical realism acknowledges the way Hôtel du Nord on one hand draws from the boulevard theater’s comic dialogue and on the other from the darker realism of the pessimistic Carné/Trauner social universe, in this case the Canal Saint-Martin.

The witty dialogue written for Arletty was one of the reasons that the film was such a success upon its initial release. The film critic Serge Veber describes how “la création qu’elle a faite d’un rôle sans doute prévu pour Viviane Romance... Il me suffira de vous dire que la première quinze répliques dites par Arletty furent coupées d’applaudissements. Et, à l’écran, c’est chose rare.” This quote brings up two interesting points. First, the reference to Viviane Romance suggests the difficulty Arletty may have had making a place for herself in the cinema, or that before Hôtel du Nord she was a star of secondary importance. Most importantly, however, it confirms the continuity in the relationship that Arletty had initially established with a theatrical audience in the 1920s and 30s that carried over to the cinema. Her earlier music-hall/theater performances had primed spectators to identify with her off-screen persona, an identification that added depth to her film performance in the case of Hôtel du Nord.

Hôtel du Nord relates an episode in the lives of the boarders of the Hotel du Nord (Figure 3), a real hotel located on the Quai de Jemmapes in the working-class 10th
arrondissement of Paris. The film tells the story of two couples: the younger couple Renée (Annabella) and Pierre (Jean-Pierre Aumont) who are plagued by romantic doom and an older couple Raymonde (Arletty) and Edmond (Louis Jouvet), a prostitute and a pimp, associated with the Parisian underworld of petty criminals. As the hotel’s residents are gathered around the table in celebration of a First Communion, Pierre and Renée check into the hotel hoping to accomplish a double suicide that will provide them with an escape from their unhappy existence. When Pierre fires a gun at Renée, Edmond, who is developing photos in his neighboring room, hears the shots and breaks into the room surprising Pierre with the gun in his hand. With the shame of the failed suicide attempt behind him, Pierre escapes into the night, carelessly disposing of his gun along the Canal Saint-Martin. Renée is taken to the hospital while Pierre turns himself in to the police.

Upon her release from the hospital, Renée is ‘reborn’ (elle “renaît,” - a characteristic Jeanson word-play) when the owners of the Hôtel du Nord offer her employment as a server-housecleaner to the dismay of Raymonde who has become suspicious of Edmond’s feelings for Renée. When Raymonde informs Edmond that Nazarene, his former associate, is in Paris looking for him, Edmond offers to take Raymonde to the south. Edmond has a change of heart and declares his love for Renée after telling Raymonde that she is the “atmosphere” in which he is suffocating. With
Renée, he hopes to escape to Port Saïd to start a new life. In Edmond’s absence Raymonde is left behind at the hotel and continues life as usual, taking up residence with the lock keeper, Prosper. Ultimately, Renée leaves Edmond on the ship and returns to Paris ready to forgive Pierre and make a new start. In the end, Edmond abandons his dream of escape and also returns to Paris after having been denounced by Raymonde to his former cronies. In one of the final scenes, Edmond hands Pierre’s gun to Nazarene and lets himself be killed. The end of the film comes full-circle with Edmond’s successful suicide echoing the failed suicide of the beginning followed by a scene with Pierre and Renée sitting on the same bench as in the beginning of the film.

The film’s financing was dependent on the internationally popular French star, Annabella, who, after a brief period in England, had been living in Hollywood since late 1937 under contract with 20th-Century Fox. She came to Hollywood at a time when exotic European femininity was in great demand. The popularity of charismatic stars like Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo established a precedent of European exoticism “that permitted all that Hollywood did not dare... an aura of romanticism and mystery behavior” that American actresses lacked due to the constraints imposed by the Production Code of 1934 (Viviani 95). Annabella’s monetary value to Fox in 1937 was an estimated 75,000 dollars per film, making her a considerable asset to the company (Allen). Her contract with Fox did, however, allow for her to return to France to make one film per year and she did so in August of 1938, a convenient moment to flee intrusive publicity about her relationship with Tyrone Power, her co-star in the film Suez (Allen Dwan, 1938). As soon as she returned she initiated divorce proceedings against her husband, Jean Murat and then began shooting Hôtel du Nord. Joseph Lucachevitch, the producer, had collaborated with Annabella on numerous occasions and wanted the
film to be a “Quai des brumes moral” consistent with Annabella’s star persona as the upstanding, simple and elegant young parisienne (Jeanson 273). In order for the film to be financially viable, it was necessary to maintain Annabella’s image of purity.

Returning to France from Hollywood, Annabella had come to represent to her fans an amalgam of Hollywood and French stardom. In Hôtel du Nord, the scenario portrays Annabella as a Hollywood star while at the same time drawing from Annabella’s characters in the René Clair films Quatorze juillet and Le Million. There are numerous references in Hôtel du Nord to the simple, hardworking, romantic hero of Quatorze juillet, particularly through Jaubert’s popular music score and the Bastille Day celebration. Vincendeau writes of how Hôtel du Nord’s mise-en-scène privileges Annabella as “pure image” staging her as “a French view of Hollywood stardom” (Hôtel du Nord 41). She is taken in close-up more frequently than any of the other actors, and the bright lighting and camera lens render her face fuzzy and dreamlike, she wears shiny lipstick, has an impeccably groomed appearance, and is clothed in designer dresses. Outside the film in the popular press, Annabella is also treated to the luxuries and comforts associated with Hollywood stars. In October 1938, Pour vous gave readers an update from the Billancourt studios stating that “pour la première fois, la loge roulante fait son apparition sur un plateau français: Annabella est, pour Hôtel du Nord, titulaire d’une ravissante « remorque » automobile équipée avec tout le confort moderne : eau courante, électricité, couchettes pourvues de matelas pneumatiques, jusqu’à une « kitchinette » très pratique (“Hôtel du Nord”). This special star treatment which, in its emphasis on image, seems to be mocked by Jeanson, the scriptwriter, who preferred writing for experienced theater actors like Jouvet and Arletty.
From the beginning, Pierre and Renée stand out from the other characters. When they arrive at the hotel, they have no place in the social ritual. Unlike the other boarders, who are heavily codified and defined in terms of their métier (prostitute, lock-keeper, policeman, confectioner, truck driver, manicurist, pimp), Renée and Pierre are orphans, socially adrift, who have survived by doing small jobs. Pierre is a failed draftsman, and Renée is an underpaid apprentice-baker who occasionally poses for painters to make ends meet. Their clothing and speech reveal that they are not part of the neighborhood, but are rather de passage. They speak standard French with no accent, and their dialogue is blander and less colorful than the banter exchanged at the table during the First Communion celebration. Finally, their clothing also signifies their detachment. Renée wears a simple trench coat and beret, the 1930s French cinema vestiary symbol of the lost woman. This ensemble, first worn by Danielle Darrieux in Abus de confiance, then by Michele Morgan in Quai des brumes in 1938 and finally by Annabella in Hôtel du Nord, is suggestive of the urban female flâneuse who wanders the city streets, attempting to establish a place for herself in society. The raincoat and beret in this particular case gives credibility to Renée’s story of being raised in an orphanage and being forced to make her own way in Paris.

Renée and Raymonde offer two contrasting models of femininity. As mentioned above, Renée is a romantic and sentimental young woman whose star treatment in the film was based on Hollywood conventions. Raymonde’s character, I would argue, resonates more deeply with the proletariat neighborhood in which the film is supposed to take place. The prostitute and the working-class woman, of which Raymonde is a fusion, is inspired from urban mythology and is present in French literature from the Middle Ages onward. In his cultural history of Paris, Andrew Hussey recalls that it was
perhaps François Villon’s La Grosse Margot, “the tender-hearted whore,” who can be identified as the ancestor of such female figures of 1930s French cinema as Arletty, Fréhel and the realist singer Edith Piaf (xx). According to Hussey: “By the nineteenth century, the working-class Parisienne was also termed parigote – and usually described as a harridan who did not hesitate to hurl insults or invective at any respectable bourgeois who crossed her path (xx)”. Raymonde’s exaggerated character, the prostitute-with-a-heart-of-gold, therefore brings to the screen several stereotypes concerning gender and class. Her verbal insolence, accent, gestures and clothing give away the fact that she belongs to a lower social class, and they also serve to anchor her character in the film décor, which realistically represents a slice of neighborhood like the Canal Saint-Martin.

The Hôtel du Nord and its immediate surroundings, including the canal, footbridge and locks, were re-created in the empty lot outside the Billancourt studios in Paris. The extravagant budget of the set design was counterbalanced by the fact that it was also to serve the film’s publicity campaign (Trauner 42). Joseph Lucachevitch, the film’s producer, invited the press and celebrities to a soirée held amid the fully lit set design. Outside the film, Paris was therefore literally treated as one of the “stars” of the film. The canal and its surroundings have a primary role in the film and are according to Carné and Jeanson, the only part of Eugène Dabit’s novel that was retained for the film. The novelty of the Billancourt canal was extolled in cinema magazines and newspapers: it had to be constructed outside due to its grandiose height of seventy meters, a feat made possible thanks to relaxed zoning laws that applied to the Billancourt. No expense was spared. The management of the flow of the canal water even required the collaboration of a team of engineers.
Carné was fond of such desolate working-class urban spaces for their potential for the use of contrasted lighting. The streetlights outside the hotel provide a poetic view for the suicidal lovers and an intimate setting for Edmond’s declaration to Renée. In more ways than one, the canal provides an ideal setting for the kind of stifling atmosphere found in 1930s films like *Le jour se lève* and *Pépé le Moko* (Julien Duvivier, 1937) where the atmosphere is deeply connected to the psychological state of the male protagonist, Jean Gabin. In *Le jour se lève*, his nervous breakdown is staged in his modest room while in *Pépé le Moko* (Julien Duvivier, 1937) he never manages to leave the Casbah. With the exception of Edmond and Renée’s brief excursion to Marseille, all the action happens in a very dense and restricted studio reconstruction of the neighborhood. The failed suicide takes place in one of the anonymous rooms of the *Hôtel du Nord* that offers a picturesque view of the canal. This room is across the hall from Edmond and Raymond’s shared living quarters where, during the third scene, they argue over the place of things. Downstairs is the Hotel’s café-bar and across the street along the canal is the lock-keeper’s house, the footbridge of the opening sequence and the bench where Renee and Pierre sit huddled together. Characters perform daily tasks and interact socially in a limited space reinforcing both the idea of conviviality (everyone knows each other, the Hôtel du Nord is a family) and the idea of oppression (with the exception of Annabella, no one escapes the milieu because they simply change rooms or die).

Carné’s urban spaces, specifically localized and recognizable parts of Parisian geography, also draw their representational power from urban mythology. The Canal Saint-Martin was inaugurated in 1825 and was initially designed to make inland water shipping more expedient by creating a shortcut alternative to the winding Seine. It opens up a direct passageway from the Villette basin of the north to the Seine just south
of the Bastille, crossing through the working-class neighborhoods of the east side of Paris and separating them from the beaux quartiers of the center and west side (Babey 21). With its dual function of connecting and segregating, the canal thus became a symbol of marginalized Paris, a barrier between the Parisian proletariat and the bourgeoisie.

As spectators of Hôtel du Nord, we have a visually restricted view of the canal but the footbridge and the façade of the Hôtel du Nord serves as architectural markers that allow us to situate the narrative in the 10th arrondissement of Paris. The footbridge that we see in the opening scene, only half of which was re-created by Trauner to allow the camera to pass underneath, becomes emblematic as a sign of Paris (or a Parisian quartier), a role that is habitually reserved for the larger and more imposing Eiffel Tower, symbol of modernity and signifier of Paris in 1930s French cinema. Like the community it represents, the footbridge is a more modest architectural object and provides a vista of the everyday life of the canal whose opening and closing locks structure the daily routines of characters and signal the passing of time in the story. The frequency with which we see the footbridge endows it with a narrative significance: “elle embraye le récit, le clôt et le structure en parties” (Marie 8).

The sequence of images and extra-diegetic music score of the introductory credit sequence serves to direct the spectator’s attention to the central importance of the canal in the narrative. For approximately two minutes we see a series of 5-10 second vignette images of canal water, two shots from different angles of the Hôtel du Nord’s façade, an image of water spilling over the canal lock and two different images of barges passing under a bridge. In the foreground, the credits appear in bold white letters that ephemerally ripple away like the water of the canal. Once the young couple appears
walking down the footbridge, the camera serves as an exploratory instrument that moves freely through the space of the set.

The importance of atmosphere is also emphasized in Jaubert’s film score which, used in conjunction with the symbolism invested in the different spaces of the hotel and canal, strongly suggests that the canal and its surrounding area are contradictory spaces of celebration and despair, of working-class daily routine, leisure (café, bal) and manual labor. The episodes of the film take place both inside the hotel, in the common space of the café-bar or in the private rooms, and immediately outside on the street or along the canal. The music score features an upbeat celebratory sequence followed by a slower sequence played in a solemn register. The slower melody to which Renée and Pierre go up and down the footbridge and that plays extra-diegetically over the inserted still shots of the grittier reality of the canal was initially created for another 1930s film about life on the canal, Jean Vigo’s 1934 film L’Atalante. This recycled music score invites the spectator to consider the parallels between these two “romance[s] of the waterways” dear to 1930s French cinema (Crisp, Genre 95). Apart from the music, the high-angle shots of barges passing under the footbridge also provide a commonality between the two films.

Written accounts of life on the canal suggest that the film Hôtel du Nord draws from the way many Parisians saw the canal as a dichotomous space of work and celebration. In her very interesting chronicle of life on the canal, Marie Babey, photographer and historian, recalls the laborious steps involved in crossing Paris via the Canal Saint-Martin. First, horses were forbidden on the banks of the canal and as a consequence, barges had to be pulled down the waterway by men called “haleurs” in French, most often the neighborhood’s dispossessed, marginalized drifters who made their living from such back-breaking work (21). The haleurs were a common sight on the
canal during the first half of the 20th century. The 4.5 kilometers of the canal housed nine locks and two swing bridges that had to be operated manually. The twenty minutes required to pass through was enough time for friendships to be established between the lock-keepers and bargemen who celebrated together in the local bistro: “L’ambiance était chaleureuse, on connaissait les mariniers, on les tutoyait, on allait boire un verre en face, à la Chope des Singes ou à l’Ancre de marine” (quoted in Babey 25). The bargemen were also known to leave tokens of appreciation at each lock: wine, salt, coal etc.

The canal was also a place of mystery in the collective Parisian imagination because it was the site of extraordinary fait divers stories. It was not uncommon to hear of drownings, suicides or murders, making it an ideal setting for crime novels like Léo Malet’s roman noir M’as-tu vu en cadavre? (1956) or Georges Simenon’s Inspector Maigret novel Maigret et le corps sans tête (1955). Part of the canal’s mystery came from the fact that near Place de la République it becomes covered by a vaulted archway lit and aerated thanks to holes in the ceiling. Travel under the city is reminiscent of the secret activities that take place in the Parisian sewers. The mysterious nature of the canal is reinforced in the popular imagination by locals’ accounts of what they would find at the bottom of the canal when it was drained for repairs. With its 1.5 feet of slime, the canal bottom was able to absorb all that was rejected or unwanted by society from guns to cars to human bodies to German soldiers’ helmets shed during the liberation of Paris in August of 1944 (74). Pierre Josse remembers how the bodies of assassinated Algerians were found floating near Louis-Blanc during the Algerian War (quoted in Babey 73).

In the film Hôtel du Nord, the studio canal retains the mystery of the real canal and serves an important role in the narrative. Pierre discards the gun that reminds him of his cowardly act in the room with Renée on the bank of the canal. The same gun is
found later by a child playing, and it is bought from the child by Monsieur Edmond who hands it to his former associate who uses it to kill him at the end of the film. The story of the tragic lovers Renée and Pierre was supposed to tap into the fait divers stories associated with the canal. Carné and Jeanson got the idea for the suicidal couple from a fait divers in Paris-Soir that happened near Les Gobelins (not at all near the Hôtel du Nord) that they hoped to incorporate into the film.

All the characters’ desires are somehow connected to what the canal represents. For Pierre and Renée, the Hôtel du Nord is the ideal setting for their suicide. The anonymity of Room Number 16 and the dark poetic images of the canal as Renée looks out the window make suicide seem the only outlet. Before taking action, Renée and Pierre gaze out the window and linger on the nocturnal beauty of the canal waters that promise to symbolically wash away their worries.

Once the suicide fails, Pierre walks anonymously along the canal hoping to hide his shameful act by discarding the gun. When Renée is saved and returns to the hotel, the warmth and kindness of the Lecouvreurs make her rebirth possible. Her social and emotional resurrection happens in the convivial atmosphere of the hotel café, an atmosphere that reaches its peak with the Bastille Day celebration along the canal and which marks the moment when she is ready to leave the hotel. Finally, the canal is the place where confidences are shared. Renée walks along the canal, chatting intimately with the acquaintances she makes at the hotel. She must refuse an advance by Kenel who tries to seduce her, and then she is able to talk intimately with Adrien who tells her that he approves of her attitude toward Pierre and admits that he had done the same with his “friend” who was arrested for stealing a bicycle. As for the film’s only homosexual, the bank of the canal provides the intimacy necessary for Adrien to speak
of his experience. While he is talking with Renée, he even meets up with his current lover and excuses himself.

The most famous scene of the film also takes place on the canal. The scene that features Edmond and Raymonde’s famous conjugal spat records more than just a privileged moment in French cinema history. It recalls with unknowing nostalgia the days when it was possible to walk across the locks, which was permitted until the 1950s. Edmond and Raymonde do not take the scenic and romantic footbridge. They stand on Trauner’s re-creation of the *Ecluse de l’Hôtel du Nord* where the camera could capture them frontally.

There are other city spaces that have social importance in the film. Cafés, in particular, were part of the daily ritual of “class-marked Frenchness” for many Parisians (Vincendeau, *Bal populaire* 55). The hotel with its ground floor café serves to set up narrative expectations in the film: it is “the site of almost any activity, from meals to courtship…” (54). In *Hôtel du Nord*, the café serves as the celebratory space of the First Communion, the site of the arrest of Raymonde for her insolence vis-à-vis the police officer, the space of Renée’s rebirth through work and the place where gangsters come to inquire about Edmond, foreshadowing the film’s tragic ending. The narrative is driven forth by the café’s capacity to reunite people in one space. The hotel with, on one hand, its gloomy rooms, and, on the other, its café, provides an ideal context for the “dramatic contrast between public celebration and private despair” (Crisp, *Genre* xix).

In a sense, the image of the quai and its surroundings may seem already familiar to us because the representation of the city in the 1930s was not limited to the cinema. It was also an important aesthetic imperative for the populist novel and photography which were two important intertexts in 1930s French films. The film *Hôtel du Nord*, for
example, brings into view these two important intertexts. First, the film was based on the populist novel by Eugène Dabit by the same title, which won the *Prix du roman populiste* in 1931. As Andrew has shown, there is an interlude of four shots halfway through the film that “tap visually into the grittier realism that Dabit had portrayed nine years earlier in his novel” (Andrew 286). The photographic sequence is uncannily similar to two photographs of the Canal Saint-Martin included in the album *Paris vu par André Kertész* (1934) (Andrew 288).

Intertextuality is one element among many that forms a virtual community: “the spectators are drawn into the filmic communities both ‘internally,’ through identification with the characters (by means of narrative, camerawork and editing), and ‘externally’ through the visual and thematic appeal to a real community which may be a profession, a block of houses, a neighborhood or the whole nation” (Vincendeau, *Bal populaire* 60).” From this point of view, *Hôtel du Nord* presents the spectator with several points of identification from the métiers of the different characters, the recognizable building façade of the quai de Jemappes, the working-class neighborhood of the Canal-Martin and finally through the characters in the film.

Now that the significance of the spaces of the film (hotel rooms, café and canal) has been established, let us return to examine the way Madame Raymonde is connected to the film’s atmosphere. Film scholars like Crisp and Vincendeau have shown how the mise-en-scène of stars differed in Hollywood and in France during the classic period. Arletty, in the manner of a typical French star, is taken less often in close-up (see Table 1 for a more detailed breakdown of character solo shots in the film).
Table 1. Solo and couple shots in the film *Hôtel du Nord*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Close-up</th>
<th>Medium close-up</th>
<th>Medium shot</th>
<th>Long shot</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Annabella</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arletty</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J.-P. Aumont</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Louis Jouvet</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Arletty/Jouvet</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annabella/Aumont</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
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Her performance in *Hôtel du Nord*, in fact, draws more power from the medium shot and long shot than the close-up because it allows her body to be read in a spatial context. In *Hôtel du Nord* as with other films of the 1930s, Arletty’s silhouette and body language become recognizable attributes that make salient more than just her facial features. One of her rare close-ups (Figure 4) in *Hôtel du Nord* captures Raymonde’s reaction (“*La vache!*” she hisses) when she figures out that Edmond is leaving her for Renée, foreshadowing her deliverance of Edmond into the hands of Nazarède. Much more common, however, are the long shots and medium long shots that capture Raymonde in her natural surroundings, seated at the community table in the café, drinking at the bar counter, preparing for work or standing over the canal. The choice of the long shot also sets off Arletty’s defining features for spectators of both film and theater, her silhouette and her signature walk when she leaves in a huff. Arletty’s tall, slight body type, sometimes described as “boyish,” was more appropriate for the *garçonne* vogue of the 1920s initiated by Coco Chanel than to the 1930s classic revival of longer skirts. A proper *garçonne* of the 1920s...
had boyish sleek hair, a flat chest and slender figure set off by Chanel’s fashionable drop-waist dresses. Socially, the garçonne was a rebel, not afraid to smoke in public and show off her legs, and who took full advantages of the possibilities offered by the fervent Parisian night-life.

The scene that introduces Madame Raymonde is remarkable for the way it establishes a strong connection between performer and décor. The setting for the scene is the small, stifling room shared by Edmond and Raymonde. During the scene, we are introduced to Raymonde who, in a medium close-up, appears on screen by playfully peeking out from beneath a towel exclaiming “Bonsoir mon p’tit!” (Figure 5). We later learn that she has been using an inhalator to help her sore throat, but even a sore throat does not keep her from sassily talking back to Edmond. In the scene that lasts just under three minutes, Raymonde is in constant movement, purposefully pacing as she goes about her daily routine, calling attention to the restricted space of the bedroom. She crosses the room several times, moving back and forth and turning to maintain a three-quarter profile when speaking to Edmond. All the while she and Edmond perform a number of mundane gestures involving what James Naremore calls “expressive objects”⁹. There are the objects that signify Edmond’s feeling of claustrophobia and need of change: the camera that promises to deliver him of his financial dependence on Raymonde and allow him to make an honest living, the First Communion cake that he significantly

Figure 5 - First view of Madame Raymonde in Hôtel du Nord.
discards after only having a bite, and the numerous ordinary objects that he claims are out of place on the table. The objects handled by Arletty are make-up, a curling iron and clothing, all making reference to Raymonde the prostitute who presumably prepares for work by applying make-up and putting on a dress but also to Arletty the performer.

What could be a gloomy ending is saved by the comic manner in which Arletty, at the end of the film, rants about the noise of the Bastille Day celebration:

**Raymonde:** Moi, c’est simple. S’il n’arrête pas son zinzin, je déménage. J’en ai assez de cet hôtel ou les boniches vous prennent vos amants et où les patrons vous barbotent votre sommeil à coups de pick-up.

**Prosper:** Calme-toi ma petite Reine. Le 14 juillet, c’est le 14 juillet.

**Raymonde:** Je m’en souviendrai de la prise de la Bastille ! Ils ont pris la Bastille, et puis après ? Qu’est-ce que ça change ! Il y a quand même des paniers à salade !

The script calls for Prosper to carry Raymonde’s suitcases down the stairs as Raymonde states: “Y a pas qu’un garno à Paris. Quand on paye 60 francs par semaine, on a tout de même droit à cinquante balles de sommeil… Alors tu te grouilles oui…” This scene, in which Raymonde was supposed to leave the hotel, does not appear in the 2008 re-release of the film.

The earlier part of the scene, however, that takes place in Raymonde’s room during the celebration as well as the “atmosphère” scene depict the kind of comic burst of anger that made Arletty famous. During such outbursts she holds forth indignantly, employing slang expressions that add color to her tirades. In the Bastille Day scene, she prefers the word “boniche” over the standard “bonne” to refer to Renée who has stolen Edmond away from her, and she refers to the police truck as a “panier à salade” in a comical tirade on social injustice. For Raymonde, the storming of the Bastille hasn’t
changed anything for the lower-classes—prostitutes are still unjustly carted off in police trucks and required to spend four days in prison for not having their papers in order.

Raymonde’s experience of being hauled off to prison brings us to another dimension of Arlettys’s persona, the way in which her characters often find themselves in a position to challenge patriarchal authority verbally and through the use of body language. When the police commissioner interrogates Edmond about Renée’s death, Raymonde cautions him against answering the commissioner’s baited questions. Raymonde’s cheeky behavior prompts the commissioner to verify that her papers are in order. When he finds out that they are not, he announces “allez, hop, embarquée!” The episode finishes with Madame Raymonde being taken away, but not without her usual show of effrontery, forcefully withdrawing her elbow and insisting on going to get her fur before being loaded into the police truck. The scene ends with Raymonde shaking her head in disbelief from within the police van surrounded on both sides by policemen. As spectators, we know that Raymonde is being unjustly accused, but we welcome the opportunity to see her unruliness toward the police. She returns four days later, without complaining, but sarcastically noting that everyone is surprised to see her back “so soon.” Similarly, in Les enfants du paradis, Garance is accused by the police on two different occasions that bring her in contact with the authorities. The first time, she is wrongfully accused of stealing a pocket watch from a man on the Boulevard du Crime as she watches Baptiste’s performance. On the second occasion, Garance is believed to be implicated in a murder committed by Lacenaire, but she skillfully uses the Count’s card and influence to get herself out of the situation, showing resourcefulness in face of adversity. Demonpion notes that Arlettys’s arrest for collaboration during the épuration gave the on-screen scapegoat an added layer of authenticity a posteriori because the
insolence of Raymonde, Clara and Garance eerily foreshadows the real Arletty’s encounter with officials after the war when she declared that “mon coeur est français mais mon cul est international!” in a line that could have been scripted by Prevert.

Arletty’s working-class and sometimes vulgar characters of the 1930s give way, under the auspices of Carné, to the composed and androgynous sensuality of Clara, Dominique (Les visiteurs du soir, 1942) and Garance. Edward Turk, speaking of Arletty’s transformation under Carné, writes how “the composed sensuality Arletty projects in the later films is a deliberate reversal of her prior persona” (142). This prior persona of which Turk speaks is the comic and vulgar Raymonde of Hôtel du Nord. After the film, Carné seems to have identified Arletty’s capacity for a more timeless, ideal and distant femininity. Clara represents the beginning of Carné’s exploration of Arletty’s wider potential in that she incorporates the comic and the tragic into her character. Clara is less the libertine, lingerie-wearing, comic performer of the early Arletty years. We do see Clara in her music-hall costume but we also become attached to the everyday woman she represents. The subversive scene of Arletty/Clara in the shower, the first woman star to appear nude in a film during the 1930s, is not simply the display of Clara as pure object. Partly due to her age, she emerges as the embodiment of mature sexuality that develops throughout the film in contrast to the sweet femme fleur represented by Jaqueline Laurent.

As previously mentioned, one of the aspects that sets Annabella apart from other female characters in Hôtel du Nord is her numerous changes of clothing that give her a fresh new look with each narrative segment. Arletty, ironically, didn’t require changes of clothing to be a star. Madame Raymonde is nonetheless a constructed image and part of her mise-en-scène allows for her to wear designer clothing: “Luxieusement chausée
par Perugia, modèle exclusif, représentant au moins 80 passes de Madame Raymonde.

Robe zip… un sac de Schiap, et une mini-fourrure,” Arletty notes with irony (134). Raymonde’s clothing sets off, albeit on a more vulgar level, some of the quirky accoutrements of 1930s fashion. The two dresses that she wears in the film have shoulder pads and the zipper dress is notable for its quirky, diagonal zipper, a feature introduced in the 1930s by Elsa Schiaparelli. In Hôtel du Nord, Arletty wears only three different outfits compared with Annabella’s six: 1) a dressing robe and lingerie that she wears in her room 2) a zipper dress with shoulder pads and 3) a two-piece plaid ensemble that accentuates her shoulders. She fittingly wears this dress when she storms out and leaves Edmond with his fishing pole. In her autobiography, Arletty recalls the eccentric Schiaparelli purse carried by Madame Raymonde. The purse seems to be an insignificant detail of mise-en-scène, but Arletty’s particular way of handling the purse as she is about to make an indignant exit endows it with a significance for Arletty’s star performance. Outside the film, Schiaparelli, who was synonymous with fashion as an ‘art’ with her original and artistic designs, represents the type of clothing that both the on-screen and off-screen Arletty wore. Arletty had previously worn one of Schiaparelli’s most daring shoulder treatments in the film Je te confie ma femme (Blum 59). Schiaparelli clothed many famous actresses of the period; Arletty, Annabella and Danielle Darrieux were known to be regular clients. Arletty, in particular, recalls how she modeled Schiaparelli clothing during evenings spent on the town. A Schiaparelli ensemble would be delivered to her residence and would be taken away the next day.

The whimsicality of Arletty’s characters in the 1930s (Je te confie ma femme, Hôtel du Nord), which coincided with Schiaparelli’s vision of fashion, invites a deep contrast with the clothing worn by Garance in Les enfants du paradis. Jeanne Lanvin designed the
tunic dress worn by Garance in the film. Lanvin was also a well-known fashion designer in Paris, but unlike Schiaparelli, was more known for her revival of an elegant, classical style. In the film, Arletty’s clothing contributes to her distance and untouchability. Her clothing suggests a goddess-like quality with its long skirts and numerous folds, and when she returns to the theater to see Baptiste, her face is covered with a black lace veil.

In 1992 Paris Match featured a lengthy biographical tribute to Arletty. The magazine invited readers to participate in a Minitel survey by answering the following question: “Was Arletty the first free woman of the [20th] century?” The question posed by Paris-Match is significant because it makes salient the way in which the on-screen and off-screen Arletty came to represent a femininity free of constraints, a natural femininity “du peuple” that also had its contradictory nobility. Arletty the star was also free in the sense that she did not adhere to social conventions concerning women during the 1930s. The characters played by Arletty, their speech, clothing and unconventional nature, all made Arletty into a symbol of a working-class femininity rooted in a spirit of rebellion which is confirmed by the fact that she doesn’t easily fit into the common father/daughter scenarios of the 1930s.

Arletty’s career was also atypical of French female stars for two reasons, one due to political circumstances and the other due to industry norms. Her ascent to stardom, or passage from vedette to star in 1938, coincided with the outbreak of the Drôle de guerre and of the ceasing of all industry activity prior to the major restructuring that the French film industry underwent during the war. Because of the war, and because of her alleged collaborationist activities, Arletty’s peak years were 1938-1945, a period during which she starred in eleven films before receiving an Interdiction de travail. After the war, in 1949, she returned to the stage to play in Tennesee Williams’ Un tramway nommé désir.
adapted by Jean Cocteau and then went on to star in *Huis Clos* (Jacqueline Audrey, 1954).

An unconventional star of the 1930s, Arletty is now recognized as a star that projects a complex femininity based on her androgynous nature and free-spiritedness, both characteristic of the modern woman. Arletty’s Parisianness is not the generic Parisianness emblematized by the Eiffel Tower but by more modest city monuments like the Canal Saint-Martin or the Hôtel du Nord, which became a national historical monument because of the film’s success. The films that she made under the direction of Marcel Carné showcase Arletty’s capacity to convey different ideals of working-class womanhood. The film *Hôtel du Nord* was an unintentional star vehicle for Arletty and, as a result of her mastery of Parisian street slang, she emerges as a more authentic part of the milieu than her male co-star. Her voice, accent and body language—all vestiges of her earlier music-hall career—allow Arletty to be at home among elements of the underworld, but they also limit her to the traditional fate of the working woman. In *Hôtel du Nord*, Raymonde’s desire to escape the neighborhood is ultimately frustrated, and the only change that she can effect on her existence is a change of room and partner. The social and physical immobility of the Zola-inspired Raymonde is balanced by Arletty’s off-screen persona, which was much more akin to the character of Garence, the freedom-loving, solitary stroller of the Boulevard du Crime.

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2 The article “Les secrets de mon intimité” appeared in Cinémonde (vol. 897) on October 13, 1951. The full quote reads: “Et quand je dis « chez moi », c’est encore une façon de s’exprimer, parce que depuis 1946, je suis dans le cas de beaucoup de Parisiens : je vis à l’hôtel et je suis à la recherche d’un appartement : « Cherche chambre, salon, salle de bains, confort, 8° arrondissement ou environ Étoile. Pour toute offre, s’adresser à Cinémonde, qui transmettra ». Merci d’avance à celui qui pourrait me dépanner !”
3 The term “théâtre du boulevard” is a general term that essentially refers to popular theater as opposed to avant-garde theater or the long-established theater of the Comédie française.

4 The Parisian stage is difficult to classify. Vincendeau calls it a café-concert, which according to historians scarcely existed, or survived in modified form into the 1920s (Vincendeau 2000: 5). Barrot and Chirat claim that Arletty thrived in the small boulevard theater revues, a claim supported by Ariotti and de Comes.

5 For most of her theatrical career she performed in Paris. Ariotti writes of how she toured in Province for the first time in 1951, after thirty years on stage.

6 Crisp states that Ciné-Miroir and Cinémagazine mention genres more frequently in the early thirties following the Hollywood model than in the later part of the decade. In the later part of the decade, once it had been established that French audiences globally preferred French films and that the genre system would not attain the level of importance it did in Hollywood, the popular press ceases to mention genre as often.

7 Prevert was one of the few scriptwriters of 1930s cinema not to have previously worked in theater.

8 Carné and Jeanson claimed that there was no story to adapt in Dabit’s novel. The novel reads as brief episodes rather than as a plot driven narrative.

9 James Naremore borrows the term from Pudovkin but uses it in a much more narrow sense in his book Acting in the Cinema.
CHAPTER 3

IDEALIZING THE FAUBOURG: ANNABELLA AND QUATORZE JUILLET

The city streets provide the setting for a picturesque back-street romance between Anna (Annabella), a flower peddler, and a taxi driver Jean (George Rigaud) in the film *Quatorze juillet* (René Clair, 1933). The film is a melodrama that tells the story of Anna’s struggle as a young woman in Paris as she moves from job to job before finding professional and romantic fulfillment with Jean at the end of the film.

In one of her most stunning close-ups, Anna appears at the window of her apartment, gazing into the night and remembering the happiness she experienced at the Bastille Day bal populaire in the neighborhood square where she danced with Jean. As the night breeze stirs the light fabric of her dress, we hear the resolution of the film’s theme song, *A Paris dans chaque faubourg*. The song lyrics and popular melody clearly connect the budding romance between Anna and Jean to the intimacy of the Parisian faubourg. As Anna looks out the window and the chorus gains in intensity, she takes on a divine appearance, an idyllic portrait of social class and youthful sentimentality that make her the heroine of the film.

Figure 6 - *Quatorze juillet* (René Clair, 1933): Anna remembers the Bastille Day festivities.
Before the success of *Quatorze juillet*, two films early in her career helped establish Annabella’s star persona as distinctly Parisian: in *Le million* (René Clair, 1931) she plays Béatrice, a Parisian ballet dancer, and in *Paris-Méditérannée* (Joe May, 1932) she is cast as a modest store clerk (*une petite vendeuse*) who works in the department store *Printemps*. In *Quatorze juillet*, which will be the focus of the third part of this chapter, Annabella plays a shy yet determined working-class youth who is forced to earn a living since her mother has fallen ill. In the beginning of the film she works selling flowers to the clients of an upscale dance-hall, she moves on to be employed as *serveuse* (waitress) in a café, and finally stumbles upon good fortune and becomes a proper *vendeuse ambulante* (street peddler).

With the box-office success of the Clair films, Annabella became one of the most popular female stars of the 1930s, best known for her youthfulness, bright face and sentimentality, traits which were crucial to her representation of Parisian street vitality. During the period 1931-1936, she averaged two box-office successes per year. She was also one of two French actresses to appear among the *Cinémonde*’s “Best in World” of 1933 (Crisp, *Genre* 268). Later in the decade, she figured in the top three of the referendum conducted by *La Cinématographe francaise* on the most popular French female film star of 1936 and 1937 (269).

In this chapter, I will explore the ways in which Annabella’s image as a *parisienne* was based on a model of passive femininity that was characteristic of the working-class *midinette*. Then, during Annabella’s career in Hollywood, her Parisian persona was transformed into a generic Frenchness in the context of the American film industry. Most of her Hollywood films fall out of the range of this study, but they will be referenced in the section on Annabella’s journey to America in 1937. The only
biographical works available today are two short romanticized accounts published in the 1930s and marketed to Annabella’s fans. Nonetheless, these accounts provide valuable still photographs taken from films that are no longer available, as well as insights into the major landmarks of Annabella’s early French career. The documentation concerning Annabella’s career in Hollywood is currently annexed to the numerous biographies and websites dedicated to her American husband, Tyrone Power. I will first provide an overview of her career in France and Hollywood and then discuss how Annabella’s passive character and association with the sentimental drama led her to fall into disfavor in the post-war period. Such sentimental dramas never attracted critical attention, nor did the films she made with non-French directors abroad. I will also discuss her treatment by the Fox Studios after her marriage to Power and, finally, her return to France to make Marcel Carné’s Hôtel du Nord.

After playing in only a handful of secondary roles at the end of the 1920s, Annabella became one of the most popular French female stars of the early to middle 1930s, starring in box-office successes such as Le million (René Clair, 1931), Quatorze juillet, L’équipage (Anatole Litvak, 1935), Veille d’armes (Marcel L’Herbier, 1935) for which she won the Venice film festival award for best actress in 1936, and Hôtel du Nord. Annabella had a highly successful career in France where she made both mainstream and auteurist films with some of France’s most celebrated directors, René Clair, Julien Duvivier, Anatole Litvak, Marcel L’Herbier and Marcel Carné, and her success in France quickly led to opportunities abroad. At age twenty-four she left for Berlin to make the French language version of Autour d’une enquête (Robert Siodmak/Henri Chomette 1931) produced by the German production company Universum Film AG (UFA). Roual Ploquin, head of French production at UFA, was well-known for producing high-quality
French language versions of German films and attracted the best directors, actors and technicians from France⁴ (Crisp, Classic 177-78). In 1932, Annabella travelled to Hungary to make Tavaszi zápor/ Marie, une légende hongroise/ Spring Shower⁵ with the celebrated director Pál Fejős. She also made films in Austria (Sonnenstrahl/ Ray of Sunshine, Pal Fejos 1933) and England. She was also one of the first French actresses to build a career in Hollywood before she retired from both stage and screen in the 1950s.

3. 1. The Midinette

In her early years of stardom, Annabella’s star image of child-like innocence was due to her young age. Suzanne Charpentier, re-baptized “Annabella” after Edgar Allen Poe’s tragic figure “Annabelle,” first appeared on the screen during the silent era at age sixteen, and she reached peak stardom in her early to mid-twenties. In her first film Napoléon (Abel Gance, 1925), she plays Violine, the first of her many roles as a romantic gamine. Violine falls in love with Napoleon and remains a faithful but passive admirer throughout the film. The passivity of her actions is counterbalanced by the way in which Gance’s camera captures the expressiveness of her face in close-ups at moments of heightened emotion, suggesting repressed desires. Violine⁶, the introverted girl-next-door, is also a figure of determination who is deeply committed to Napoleon. The solo close-ups of Violine, withdrawn and resigned to suffer unrequited love, foreground the innocence of youth and also introduce a deep contrast with grim battle scenes of collective slaughter.

Annabella’s father, who worked as a magazine publisher in Paris, had connections in the film industry and arranged for his daughter to participate in a screen test that led to her first film. Five years lapsed between her first screen appearance in
Napoléon and her first major role in a René Clair film in 1930 that firmly launched her stardom. Between 1925 and 1931, Annabella’s career stagnated, and she accepted small roles in a handful of films. Her collaboration with Gance led to a small role in Maldone (Jean Grémillion, 1927) followed by a period of inactivity during which Annabella took drama classes from Dullin at the Conservatory in Paris.

Like many other young actresses of this period who were not recruited from the live entertainment industry, Annabella did not have prior stage experience or formal dramatic training. She claims to have grown up with a passion for the cinema, going to the cinema as often as possible and obsessing over her favorite actors and actresses: “I always talked about movies. When I was twelve, I wrote ‘Studio’ on the chicken-shed in the back garden and acted scenes from the movies I had seen. I was the director, cameraman, everything. I used to sell my books to buy film magazines!” (Brownlow).

The film magazines of this period glamorized both French and American stars, but Vincendeau suggests that it was the Hollywood stars who provided the model for actresses of Annabella’s generation: “the new female stars (Danielle Darrieux, Michèle Morgan) had, to start with anyway, no theatrical experience and they modeled their performance on Hollywood rather than the boulevards” (Vincendeau, Daddy's Girls 77).

It was these new younger actresses who served as the “object[s] of erotic attention” since mature female actresses of the 1930s generally played “caricatured mother roles” or “comic parts” or both (76).

The years 1925-1931 are highly romanticized in fan magazines, creating the illusion that Annabella’s difficult ascent from cinema fan to celebrated actress was within the reach of a generation of young women, provided that they could display the same level of resolve. Dyer refers to this phenomenon as the “success myth”:
Particularly as developed in the star system, the success myth tries to orchestrate several contradictory elements: that ordinariness is the hallmark of the star; that the system rewards talent and ‘specialness’; that luck, ‘break,’ which may happen to anyone typify the career of the star; and that hard work and professionalism are necessary for stardom. (42)

The “success myth” was particularly cultivated in the images of young inexperienced stars like Annabella, Michèle Morgan, and Danielle Darrieux whose biographies sometimes ran multiple pages in fan magazines.

Annabella’s unsuccessful passage through the Conservatory was also used to show her commitment to the cinema as a distinct art form. According to a 1930s film critic, Annabella viewed the theatrical training she was receiving at the Conservatory to be at odds with the type of acting required by the cinema: “mais, très vite elle abandonne un enseignement qu’elle trouve en contradiction absolue avec les nécessités du cinéma. Au cinéma, il ne faut pas jouer, et moins encore dire” (Caligarou 24). The dramatic courses at the Conservatory, with their emphasis on an over-stated performance style, did not permit Annabella to further develop a cinematic performance style.

The period of professional inactivity that Annabella experienced also coincided with the deep crisis that affected the French film industry with the transition to sound. Movie theaters and studios had to make costly investments in the new technology required for sound films. The star system underwent readjustments as performance styles (voice, gestures) changed to accommodate recorded voice. Some actresses fell into disfavor with their public, but Annabella had not been typed as a silent film actress and easily adapted to the changes ushered in with sound films. She had a smooth, pleasant voice (sometimes described as “low” and “fragile”), and her youth made her a suitable casting choice for the decade’s numerous older man/younger girl scenarios. One critic
comments favorably on her voice and clearly views it as one of her strongest features:
“Sa voix timide, claires intonations légères et vibrantes, nous émeut profondément…”
(Moran 22).

With the possibility to make sound films emerged a new generation of young women. Annabella is typical of what Crisp calls the new generation of *benjamines* or young women who came to the cinema industry during the production of the first sound films in France, roughly between the years 1930-1932 (*Genre* 247). Crisp notes that these youth are highly visible in the popular cinema press and that they “dominate the pages of *Pour Vous*, in particular” (247). In the popular press, the youthful *ingénues* of Annabella’s generation were praised for two sides to their star personae. They were dynamic images of interwar French youth, bright-eyed and innocent, while at the same time serious and determined (Crisp, *Genre* 247). The seriousness of these young gamines counterbalanced the erotic attention they were given on the screen. Like Simone Bourdet, Josseline Gaël, Danielle Darrieux (to name only a few), Annabella is promoted as youthful and charming but mindful of professional objectives.

The period 1929-1931 was significant for several opportunities that gave new momentum to Annabella’s career: *Bacarolle d’amour* (Carl Frolich, 1929), filmed in Berlin, *Maison de la flèche* (Henri Fescourt, 1930), filmed in London, *Romance à l’inconnu* (René Barberis, 1931) and *Deux fois vingt ans* (Charles-Félix Tavano, 1931). None of these films was a huge success but Annabella was praised for her solid performance in all of them. Moran does note, however, that the role of vamp in the Fescourt film was ill-suited to Annabella’s character (14). He prefers the role of Mado in the subsequent film, *Romance à l’inconnu*, the orphan secretly in love with her benefactor, which he found more in line with Annabella’s performance style. The next film, *Deux fois vingt ans*, filmed on location
in Hossegorn and Arcachon, featured a sporty Annabella in the role of Poldi. The film required her to learn horseback riding, dye her hair brown and drive a race car (15-16). These active pleasures (riding, driving) associated with the modern woman come out again in the films *L’équipage* and *Anne-Marie* and show how Annabella’s image was the site of tension between the passive, working-class midinette type and the active modern woman.

The year 1931 was important for the release of *Le million*, Annabella’s first major success with the well-known director, René Clair, whose mise-en-scène firmly placed her in the spotlight as a “petite parisienne” thereby creating a strong link between the actress and popular Parisian city spaces: “le monde imaginaire de ses petites gens, ses ballets d’épicier, et de crémières, ses escaliers où jouent les enfants, toute sa grise et douce fine transposition des spectacles de la ville unique” (quoted in Barrot 37). To critics and fans of the 1930s, Annabella’s embodiment of popular faubourg life would remain the defining feature of her star persona, on and off-screen, for years to come. *Le million* was a unanimous success at the box-office and among critics who recognized Annabella’s “grâce aérienne” et “sourire d’ange” as the ballet dancer, Béatrice (Caligarou). Annabella’s face also dramatically registers the internalization of romantic disappointment and the melancholy of the girl-next-door who risks losing Michel, her neighbor, to a more glamorous woman who is after his money. Finally, Béatrice fits well into the film’s unrelenting rhythm; her figure is modestly offered to spectators as an object of erotic desire and a figure of movement in Clair’s cinematic ballet.

After her first film with Clair, Annabella was increasingly solicited by producers who were attracted to her timid romantic appeal. Before the beginning of her three-film contract with *Films Osso*, Annabella traveled quickly to Berlin to make the French
language version of *Autour d’une enquête* for UFA. When she returned, she began immediately as female lead in *Un soir de rafle* with Albert Préjean, directed by Carmine Gallone. The scriptwriters, Henri Decoin and Henri-Georges Clouzot, both went on to become major figures of cinema during the 1930s and 40s. In the film, Annabell plays a “tender and serious” café-concert singer in “un monde confus de rêves, de sentiments, de douleurs jamais exprimées” (Moran 17). But, as Kelley Conway notes, when compared to the earthy streetwise realist singer, Annabella is not a compelling figure of female strength because of her passive girlishness. Whereas the realist singer faces her audience and sings of her troubles, the characters played by Annabella prefer to retreat and withdraw:

Dressed in a black velvet sheath exactly like those worn by Damia, she sings ‘Ce n’est pas drôle’ (It’s Not Funny), a song about the tough lives of prostitutes. The waiflike, girlish Annabella, however, fails to convey the physical strength and aura of world-weariness of a realist singer like Damia. Moreover, Annabella is overshadowed by her co-star, Albert Préjean, who had played the lead in *Sous les toits de Paris* (René Clair, 1930). It is Préjean’s singing performances in *Un soir de rafle* that move and unite the diegetic working-class audiences. (117)

The favorable critical reception focuses on the couple formed by Annabella and Préjean who were well-suited for the story of working-class romance, and it is the romantic dimension of her star persona that probably won her the role. A two-page spread in *Ciné-Miroir* from 1931 displays several photos of the romance between Mariette, the singer, and Georget, the boxer. The photographs depict both characters as clearly nostalgic images of popular Paris: Mariette as a café-concert performer and Georget with an accordion slung over his shoulder. Interestingly, the back cover of the same issue shows off a studio glamour shot of the “real” Annabella as a beacon of elegance with strong lighting that calls attention to her light hair and luminous satin
blouse. Unlike the realist singer whose personal life deeply resonated with her songs, Annabella’s star image was an amalgam of her on-screen simplicity and her off-screen elegance.

It was while making her next film Paris-Méditerranée (Joe May, 1932) that Annabella first made the acquaintance of Jean Murat, her future husband. The shooting lasted three months, and when the film was released in February of 1932, critics hailed Annabella as “cette artiste si française de ton et d’allure” (19). In the film she plays a “petite vendeuse” or storeclerk who works in the Parisian department store, Printemps.

The personal feature for which Annabella received unanimous praise among critics was her Parisian-ness, which was rooted in two iconic urban character types: the gamine and the midinette (Parisian shop girl). Vincendeau notes that Annabella is known for playing “shy and sentimental heroines, epitomizing – especially in the Clair films – a romantic type close to the operatic midinette” (Vincendeau, Encyclopedia 19). As we saw in chapter one, the term “midinette” in Parisian popular culture refers to a courageous and underpaid little clerk (Rifkin 108), a young woman of the working class who works in a factory as many young women did in nineteenth century France, or as a stenographer, which was common in the Interwar period. In stories, the midinette is attributed very little agency, partly due to her social class and partly due to her being a young woman in the masculine world of work. The Oxford English dictionary gives examples of different usages of the word midinette in British accounts, which confirm the very ordinary and unremarkable nature of such a figure: “Average cloche-hatted midinette” or “the Boulevards abound with Midinettes who are dazzled with admiration for him” (Oxford English Dictionary). Apart from being a common boulevard dweller, the midinette in urban mythology is also an avid reader of dime-
store romances and is described as living in a dream world of romantic ideals and city pleasures (shopping, theater) to the extent that her modest budget allowed. In French literature, the midinette also appears in a sentimental guise: “tomber amoureuse comme une midinette d’une vedette de cinéma” (Gracq 126) or “une midinette sentimentale dont le cœur ne s’arrête pas de battre à chaque nouveau fascicule des interminables romans d’amour à quatre sous” (Cendrars 382). Annabella’s on-screen persona drew most from the ordinary and the sentimental character of the midinette and less from the young woman as consumer (mostly because of the faubourg setting, which is outside the commercial city center). Anna (Quatorze juillet), Mariette (Un soir de rafle) and Renée (Hotel du Nord) are the best cinematic examples of the quaintly destitute midinette with gamine charm.

Surprisingly for audiences today, it is modesty and simplicity that are most connected to the type of Paris that Annabella was able to evoke in her film performances. In the Clair films in particular, the accent is on a vignette-like representation of popular Paris, the depiction of moments rather than all-encompassing panoramas (Moran 6). For the most part, the camera stays in the area circumscribed by the neighborhood boundaries – the square and the staircase – to depict the daily activities of the inhabitants. Critics unanimously attribute Annabella’s talent for evoking the enchantment of the city streets to her distinctly “French” lack of pretension that mirrors faubourg life (Siclier 17, Moran 7) from which emerges a modest portrait of daily life rituals of Paris. Moran’s exaltation of the way Annabella presents the spectator with a particular vision of Paris is worth quoting at length:

Certes, aucun de ses films n’a eu l’ambition de vous présenter un Paris intégral et symbolique, réduit au rôle de quelque prétentieux Métropolis. Mais plusieurs de ses films… vous présentent des aspects de Paris, si justes, si vivants, si évocateurs, qu’ils font songer à telle phrase de Carco,
à tel bois d’Auguste Lepère, à telle eau-forte de Steinlen. Le retour de la petite chanteuse dans sa chambre, où elle mène, en compagnie d’un chat, une vie si sage; le passage dans les rues parisiennes de la jeune vendeuse du Printemps, alerte et gracieuse; la scène exquis de Quatorze juillet où la jeune fille qui vient d’éprouver sa première déception sentimentale rudoie un petit garçon, puis, honteuse d’elle-même, revient un peu et le console; de tels tableaux disent mieux Paris que d’ennuyeuses fresques. De Paris, ils disent l’art de faire de la grâce avec presque rien; ils disent la pudeur souriante et l’ironie sans dureté; ils disent le sens de la nuance, délicat comme un ciel parisien… (Moran 6)

The “midinette” also resonated with Annabella’s physical traits and character. Early in her career critics thought Annabella’s face to be one of her strongest physical features for the way it seemed to reveal a deeper melancholy, particularly in the film Maldone. Later on, critics recurrently make reference to Annabella’s face as her most captivating physical feature (her body movements are also extolled as “graceful” and like those of a dancer but this feature is secondary to her facial expressions): Caligarou notes “le petit visage secret et buté d’Annabella crée à lui seul la mystérieuse atmosphère de la maison du crime” (Caligarou 9) with respect to her performance in the film Maison de la flèche, whereas an American critic writing in 1937 writes “Among screen types she is like a fresh breeze among too many orchidaceous blooms. Her eyes are frank, her forehead high and her mouth childishly quizzical” (quoted in Pace). Facial close-ups are used to register her sudden changes in emotion from joy to disappointment or sadness (Napoléon, Un soir de rafle, Marie, la légende hongroise), to suggest dreaming/pensiveness (Quatorze juillet, Hôtel du Nord) or shyness (Le million) that facilitate spectator identification with Annabella as the romantic or melodramatic heroine.

Annabella’s face is also highly visible on film posters and in the popular press where she had numerous cover close-ups. The magazines tend to represent Annabella as both woman (sophistication, elegance) and child (inhibited sexuality, bashfulness). Early
in the decade, the close-ups accentuate her girlishness while mid-decade magazines shift their focus to her coming of age as the young heroine of *Citadelle du silence* (Marcel L’Herbier, 1937) or the exotic and mysterious Aicha of *La Bandera* (Julien Duvisvier, 1935). A typical example of the young gamine is the cover of the 1934 *Ciné-Miroir* almanac, which features an ethereal close-up of Annabella. The photograph has been accentuated with color tinting to highlight her child-like qualities. Her face is framed in three-quarter profile, chin tucked in toward her neck attesting to her shyness, and her eyes gaze playfully up at the camera, hinting at a *fausse naïveté*. The oval contour of her face has been rendered fuzzy, her cheeks and lips and chin have been retouched in pinkish hues that contrast with her white hair, and her large eyes have been contoured with a baby blue aura.

The following year’s films required the actress to travel abroad to Budapest for another film with Préjean, *Un fils d’Amérique*, directed by Carmine Gallone, and then to Hungary for the location shooting of *Marie, une légende hongroise*. Annabella is cast in the role of Mária, a maid who is thrown out on the street when her employer finds out that she has become pregnant. She is taken in by the women of a local brothel who give her friendship and a good home. The village authorities find out about Mária’s situation and take the child away to an orphanage, which causes Mária to lose her mind. She thinks of the child while she wanders the streets, eventually dying in front of a statue of the Virgin Mary. Time passes and one day Mária looks down from heaven and sees her daughter with a young man who attempts to seduce her. To spare her daughter from ending up in the same situation, Mária brings on a divine rain shower that saves her daughter from the young man. John Cunningham notes that the film was unusual in the Hungarian film-making industry at the time: “a film directed by a Hungarian with
Hollywood experience, produced by a French company with a French star and shot by one of the most outstanding cinematographers of the day (34)".

A survey of Annabella’s filmography reveals that she was the protagonist of numerous films during her years of peak stardom and often obtained top billing over male co-stars (both relatively rare occurrences for women during the 1930s) despite the passivity of her performances. She was also cast alongside the young male leads Albert Préjean (*Un soir de rafle, Un fils d’Amérique*), René Lefèvre (*Le million*), Jean-Pierre Aumont (*L’équipage, Hôtel du Nord*) and Jean Gabin (*La Bandera*, 1935) more often than with mature patriarchs Charles Vanel (*L’équipage*), Victor Francen (*Veille d’armes*) in romantic scenarios. The on-screen Annabella was defined by being in love with men her age, but this image was mediated by her off-screen marriage to co-star Jean Murat on October 4, 1934. At the time of their marriage, Jean Murat was more than twenty years older than Annabella; he was one of the decade’s sporty, uniform-wearing mature male patriarchs with whom she starred in the films *Paris-Méditerranée* and *Mademoiselle Josette, ma femme* (André Berthomieu, 1933). The couple received much media attention for being an “ideal cinematic romance”. One fan magazine published a double interview with numerous photos entitled “*Pourquoi j’aime Annabella – Pourquoi j’aime Jean Murat*”. This French ideal of the cinematic couple formed between a young woman and older man can similarly be seen in the union of the younger Darrieux to the much older Decoin.
3.2. *L’équipage* and the modern woman

A popular film of 1935, *L’équipage* featured Annabella against type as the film’s *femme fatale*. The film capitalizes on a different sort of Parisian-ness, this time not of the *faubourg* but of the elegance and sophistication of the city center. The film tells the story of two pilots, one older, Lieutenant Maury (Charles Vanel), and one younger, the amateur pilot Jean Héribillon (played by the *jeune premier* Jean-Pierre Aumont), who together form a two-man aviation team during World War I. The film places great emphasis on the sacred nature of male bonding and the way it serves to establish the necessary mutual trust among pilots for air combat missions. The plot centers on the love triangle formed by Lieutenant Maury, Jean and Denise/Hélène (Annabella). Denise meets Jean while he is on leave in Paris. When Jean gives his regiment number to Denise on the train platform as he leaves for the Front, she realizes that he has been assigned to the same regiment as her husband, Lieutenant Maury. When Maury asks Jean to deliver a letter to his wife, Jean learns that Denise and Hélène are the same person, and he abruptly cuts off contact with Denise. His psychological torment also causes him to distance himself from Maury. But Denise travels to the Front determined to find Jean and is eventually discovered by her husband who remains silent and internalizes his humiliation as a cuckolded man. Jean ultimately dies a hero’s death in combat with Maury and, in the end, Maury silently pardons his grieving wife, informing Hélène that 

![Film poster for *L’équipage* (Anatole Litvak, 1935).](image)

Figure 7 - Film poster for *L’équipage* (Anatole Litvak, 1935).
Jean’s last words were for a woman named “Denise.” Maury’s final act is unselfish in the sense that he sacrifices personal vindication for Hélène’s well-being. He gives her room to grieve for her lost lover, but his gesture also preserves the couple and restore order (Lagny, Ropars and Sorlin 211).

*L’équipage* is interesting for the way it stages (and then challenges) the polarized gender spaces of the masculine battlefront and the feminized civilian life in Paris, represented by Hélène. Hélène’s betrayal of her husband comes to symbolize what Mary Louise Roberts calls the “French woman as newly independent femme moderne [who] became the privileged symbol of the war’s most destructive effects, which she reproduced through her own sexual transgressions” (36). While her husband risks his life for the patrie, Hélène is in Paris where her life seems unchanged. Her elegantly tailored suits and hats, for example, hardly reflect the self-sacrifice that women were supposed to embody during the war. The film poster for *L’équipage* (Figure 7) takes this idea to an extreme by transforming the aircraft lights into dazzling ornaments that form a halo around Annabella’s blond hair.

Hélène is not, however, wholly diabolized as the “bad woman.” The film poses the love triangle as a moral dilemma of true love versus bourgeois convention. Charles Vanel in the role of Maury makes salient his character’s lack of seduction, particularly given Vanel’s “prédilection pour le rôle de mari trompé” (Lagny, Ropars and Sorlin 208). In the mess hall among other officers, Maury stands out for his lack of participation in group rituals, preferring to retire to his room rather than take part in male bonding. His refusal to confront Hélène also makes him a passive figure of masculinity. It is his wife, Hélène, who takes the active role in the narrative, seeking out Jean at the battlefront, thus transforming the military space into a space of melodramatic struggle.
As suggested by Lagny, Maury is responsible for the restoration of order, but this bourgeois order goes against the transcendent “true love” that exists between Jean and Denise.

Even though Litvak cast Annabella against type as a mature married woman, romantic intrigue still remains at the center of her character’s dilemma. As in previous romantic scenarios, Annabella plays the female protagonist in a melodramatic scenario that requires her character to resolve an internal conflict with a moral dimension. This situation demands her character to make the “right” decision. In L’équipage the “right” decision is the pursuit of true love at the risk of disrupting the marital bond. The double silhouette of Annabella on the film poster for her 1936 film Anne-Marie (Raymond Bernard, 1936) (Figure 8) provides a good example of the way in which her characters often find themselves divided by matters of the heart. One Annabella gazes upward toward her male co-star while the other Annabella wearing an aviator suit gazes toward the unknown.

The mise-en-scène of L’équipage calls attention to Denise’s fashionable clothing and neatly coiffed hair, both significant departures from Annabella’s habitual on-screen embodiment of a down-to-earth ideal of 1930s female youth. Unlike actresses such as Mireille Balin who embody a bejeweled, fur-laden aloof Parisian-ness of the beaux-quartiers, Annabella is “simply elegant” and never over-stated. Her image was associated in French fan magazines with the 1930s ideal of combining simplicity and mobility with feminine lines. In an article entitled “Je dois représenter la parisienne d’aujourd’hui,” Annabella enthusiastically praises a more practical approach to women’s
fashion, which enhances mobility and renders actresses closer to their public. The ideal young woman, according to Annabella, is “simple to perfection, coquettish, but not a slave to her clothing, very modern, sporty but not excessively so, tidy and cheerful, doesn’t wear silver fox fur at 9 o’clock in the morning nor a river of diamonds to go canoeing… period. In other words, a *parisienne*” (Annabella, *Pour vous*). This quote suggests that Parisian femininity, as represented by Annabella, was both practical and adaptable to different social occasions. The modern city woman’s lifestyle, which now included a wide range of activities, required a chic yet comfortable ensemble for walking in the city, an elegant dress for evening outings and a sporty outfit for recreation.

Annabella came into the public eye at a time when the boxy *garçonne* style of the 1920s was giving way to a “reassertion of the feminine” following the initiative of designers Jean Patou and Elsa Shiaparelli, who sought to introduce a more feminine version of 1920s mobility (Roberts 86). “After sack dresses, dropped waists and short boyish haircuts, 1928 brought a new emphasis on the female form. Unrestricted, tanned and fit, the body would henceforth dictate the shape of the garment rather than the garment the shape of the body” (Baudot 7). The 1930s emphasis on the female shape can also be seen through the prominence of the youthful, sporty body, which is reaffirmed in numerous films of the 1930s that feature young women in bathing suits (*Wings of the Morning*), equestrian attire, ballet (*Le million*), circus (*Variétés*) and music-hall costumes (*Trois jeunes filles nues*). René Hubert, Annabella’s costume designer in numerous films, was responsible for giving 1930s standards of feminine mobility a material appearance on the screen, particularly in the film *Quatorze juillet*.
3.3. *A parisienne in Hollywood*

Articles published during the same period regarding Annabella’s travel abroad to the United Kingdom and then to Hollywood confirm that Annabella’s Parisian-ness was highly exportable. Her French accent and elegance in manner and dress were appealing to foreign audiences. Cinema fans following Annabella’s international ascent to stardom could read that “Annabella est devenue, en quelques mois, la ‘sweetheart’ du public anglais” (*Pour vous*, Sept. 16, 1937) or that in Hollywood, “Elle plut par sa grace décente, dépourvue de snobisme, par sa tenue de fille bien élevée. Elle représente, en effet, avec bonheur, le type de la femme d’aujourd’hui…” (Escoubé, 1938). Popular French film magazines, which chronicled Annabella’s journeys abroad, repeatedly assure fans that Annabella would remain French, stressing differentiation over assimilation with respect to non-French models of femininity. Expatriate actors and actresses of France are depicted as belonging to a “*colonie française*” of Hollywood (*Pour vous*, Aug. 5, 1938). Annabella assures fans that she is part of the French community of Hollywood whose members gather whenever possible and that she had made friends with Danielle Darrieux and Simone Simon before they returned to France. Accounts in the French and American press suggest that Annabella was also cognizant of her role as ambassador of Parisian fashion and culture. By showing-off her French savoir-vivre and her Parisian “simple elegance,” she hoped to create a unique place for herself in Hollywood where fashion, like everything else, tended to be expressed in “superlatives.”

Annabella’s monetary value to 20th Century Fox in 1937, after the success of the three 1936 films she made for New World Pictures in Great Britain, was an estimated 75,000 dollars per film, making her a considerable asset to the company (Allen). In 1937,
under contract with 20th Century Fox, Annabella left for Hollywood to make two films, *The Baroness and the Butler* (Walter Lang, 1938) and *Suez* (Allen Dwan, 1938). Annabella arrived in Hollywood at a time when exotic European femininity was in great demand. The popularity of charismatic stars like Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo established a precedent of European exoticism “that permitted all that Hollywood did not dare… an aura of romanticism and mystery behavior” that American actresses lacked due to the constraints imposed by the Production Code of 1934 (Viviani 95). Although Annabella’s star image was not that of the mysterious *femme fatale* image projected by Dietrich or Garbo, she nonetheless came to symbolize a distinctly Parisian femininity to American audiences, which as I have already shown, was related to her perceived Parisian elegance and savoir-vivre. An interview with the American director, Allen Dwan, shows that Annabella was also sought by the Fox studios for her French “sexiness”. Dwan, who found himself at odds on numerous occasions with Danyl Zanuck, recalls in an interview how Annabella was chosen for the role in *Suez* for her girlish sexiness, which ended up getting the studio in trouble with the “Hays people” (the enforcers of the Motion Picture Production Code) when, during one scene, a wet t-shirt revealed Annabella’s “prominent erect nipples” (Morris). Dwan expressed no remorse, claiming that the scene had nothing unnatural about it and should not be censored, but the final decision not to reshoot the scene was likely due to budgetary concerns since it would have meant rebuilding the entire set (Morris).

August 1938 was a convenient time for Annabella to leave Hollywood for personal and professional reasons. She had just finished the shooting of *Suez* and intended to return to France to make her one French film of the year, Marcel Carné’s *Hotel du Nord*, which also permitted her to leave behind the lukewarm success of her
Hollywood films. On a personal level, Annabella was also fleeing intrusive publicity about her relationship with Tyrone Power, her co-star in *Suez*. As expected, she returned to France to initiate divorce proceedings against her French husband, Jean Murat.

*Hôtel du Nord*’s financing was dependent on Annabella, who was an internationally popular French star. Joseph Lucachevitch, the film’s producer, had collaborated with Annabella on other films and wanted the film to be a “*Quai des brumes moral*” in order to capitalize on the increasingly popular atmospheric dramas featuring working-class characters (Jeanson 266). The film had to be “moral” because, in order for the film to be financially viable, it was necessary to maintain Annabella’s image of purity vis-à-vis her Eastern European public for whom Annabella’s image hinged on moral righteousness following the success of *Marie, une légende hongroise* (268). In *Hôtel du Nord*, however, Annabella and her co-star Jean-Pierre Aumont are out-performed by the older couple formed by Arletty and Jouvet whose performances resonate better with the social universe of the film.

Annabella’s star image also seems to be at odds with poetic realism’s emphasis on morally-flawed, socially-alienated characters (as in the later *film noir* genre⁹). Her romantic nature doesn’t mesh with the dark fatalistic universe of *Quai des brumes* that Lucachevitch hoped to recreate in *Hôtel du Nord*. The disconnect between Annabella and the mysterious atmosphere of the Canal Martin is further reinforced by the French release in August 1938 of Annabella’s British film, *Dinner at the Ritz*, a light romantic mystery. To help further explain why Annabella seems to have fallen into disfavor with French movie audiences at the end of the decade, Crisp notes a shift in spectator taste from sentimental dramas to darker atmospheric films around this time in France. The critical reception of Annabella’s performance in *Hôtel du Nord* reflects this shifting in
feminine ideals that culminated in the success of “sensual, somber, and potentially dangerous women, who had initially been termed vamps,’ but are soon refashioned as ‘femme fatales’” (Crisp, Genre 262). The peak of the discourse of “sensuality,” Crisp’s study reveals, was between 1937 and 1938 (262). Annabella’s image as the romantic gamine was falling out of fashion perhaps for being less morally ambiguous than Michèle Morgan’s mysterious femininity or Arletty’s enigmatic beauty. In Hôtel du Nord, Renée is, at first, alienated from the community, but she makes a full recovery and reinserts herself back into the community. The film tells the story of Renée’s determined redemption rather than her demise. The moral goodness of Annabella’s star image also led her characters to display a strong connection to (rather than alienation from) the community, particularly in Quatorze juillet where Anna functions as a symbol of popular vitality.

The decisive waning of Annabella’s Hollywood career, unlike her career in France, can be attributed to a combination of a clash of cultural identities, as was the case for Darrieux, Morgan and Presle, and to her marriage to one of Hollywood’s most coveted bachelors, Tyrone Power, which went expressly against the wishes of Fox studio’s vice-president, Darryl Zanuck (annabella-power.com). In order for Tyrone power to remain a viable financial asset for Fox, it was necessary for the studio to cultivate his reputation as a Hollywood playboy. Zanuck was afraid the marriage would hurt both Power’s and Annabella’s reputation and disturb the skillfully-crafted star image that the studio had created around Power (and to a lesser extent, Annabella). In an attempt to separate her from Power, Fox offered her a contract for a multi-film package with foreign shooting but Annabella declined and married Power in 1939 (Allen).
What began as a story of defiant lovers and crazed young women boycotting Power’s films was transformed into a model of international marriage by the American cinema magazine, *True Romances*. From 1939-1941, the press covered anecdotes of the Powers’ bi-cultural home life, chronicling humorous stories about Annabella giving Tyrone French lessons and “l’affaire lait” – the search for a cow that could provide Power with his daily ration of milk while the couple visited France (Kerr). In Hollywood, after the studio panic settled down, Annabella and Power began to be viewed as an ideal cinematic couple. According to the fan magazines, was exotic and different from Hollywood beauties, “worldly and simple, both cheerful and serious” not “too pretty or too glamorous” (Kerr). She was also portrayed as having valuable life experience: “Annabella, however, though not so much older than he, had lived more completely. She had known marriage, the death of a loved one, divorce and motherhood. These things gave her wisdom and compassion, and her French heritage gave her an understanding of men and the sweet wiles of allure” (Kerr). In spite of this positive publicity regarding the Power’s domestic life, her marriage to Power, and the Fox Studios’ subsequent interference with Annabella’s professional situation, created numerous obstacles to overcome.

In addition to her troubling experience with the Fox Studios, Annabella’s French cultural identity was challenged by the films she made with American directors. Rather than using her Frenchness to her advantage, these films capture the superficial aspects of Annabella’s foreignness and fail to capture certain aspects of her star persona like its class dimension that were developed in the French industry. It’s surprising to note the number of films in which Annabella is cast as a non-French foreigner or an aristocrat, which contrasted with her earlier working-class Parisian star image: in *Wings of the*
Morning, Annabella plays a gipsy; in The Baroness and the Butler a Hungarian aristocrat; and finally a Russian doctor in Bomber’s Moon. Suez is one of two Hollywood films that featured Annabella as French. Considering the clichéd and stereotyped foreignness of the characters in these films, it’s easy to see how French audiences became disillusioned with the star during her collaboration with 20th Century Fox from 1937-1947.

3. 4. The Popular Heroine of Quatorze juillet

Quatorze juillet is a film that chronicles the Bastille Day festivities in one of Paris’s working-class neighborhoods. The French national holiday provides the background for a working-class romance between Anna, a flower peddler, and Jean, a taxi driver, who live in neighboring apartment buildings. The couple arranges to meet at the bal populaire, and as the celebration stretches into the night, they encounter some of Paris’s more eccentric personalities. When the bal is finally interrupted by a rainstorm, Anna and Jean seek shelter in the doorway of Jean’s apartment building. A period of tragedy and misunderstanding momentarily separates the couple. The untimely death of Anna’s mother leaves the young heroine to seek employment as a server at the neighboring café-bar, Chez Léon. Meanwhile, Anna dreams of gaining independence from the patriarchal café owner and of being reunited with Jean. Jean, on the other hand, has given up his taxi to become involved in a ring of petty thieves who are planning to rob the café where Anna works. Jean realizes that Anna risks becoming the victim of the robbery, so he intervenes to save her and then escapes into the night. The café owner, who enters the scene after the attempted robbery, sees Anna’s open window and believes that she has been entertaining a man in her room. Anna once again finds herself on the streets. In the end, a fortuitous event allows Anna to realize her dream of

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returning to the city streets as the owner of a colossal flower cart, thereby gaining independence. A second chance event reunites her with Jean at the end of the film.

*Quatorze juillet* is the third film in what is often referred to as René Clair’s Parisian trilogy that began with *Sous les toits de Paris* in 1930 and was followed by *Le million* in 1931. These three films were also part of the first generation of sound films to be produced in France by the French branch of the German company Tobis Klangfilm. Clair, as a surrealist and as one of the foremost participants in the debate on how sound would shape the future of cinema as an art form, welcomed the opportunity to use Tobis’s new technology to experiment with sound in narrative film. But after the low box-office turnout for *A nous la liberté/Give Us Liberty* (1931), a social satire of factory life, Clair returned to the less political sentimental *faubourg* atmosphere of *Sous les toits de Paris* for his third film *Quatorze juillet* (Williams 170).

The film is set in one of the Parisian *faubourgs*, the small villages that were annexed to Paris in 1860. Even though the *faubourgs* were officially part of Paris proper starting in the nineteenth century and many were eradicated with Baron Haussmann’s modernization of Paris, neighborhoods like Belleville, Montmartre, Ménilmontant, and La Villette (to name the best-known) were left intact. In 1930s cinema, these neighborhoods are depicted as pockets where a highly idealized working-class community life persisted. The contrast between the *faubourgs* and the city center is essentially one of class; the *faubourgs* belonged to the little people while the city center, which had been extensively modified over the course of 60 years to suit the consumer and leisure needs of the bourgeoisie, was more of an upper-middle-class space. In the center, avenues were widened to better suit strollers and streamline transportation to and from railway stations, trees were planted along main thoroughfares and city parks
were created within city walls. By 1920 construction was also nearing completion on the first 10 lines of the Paris metro, which made travel *intra muros* convenient and more expedient.

Meerson’s set for *Quatorze juillet* aims to distill the essence of village-like neighborhoods outside the city center as Jean Mitry notes:

> On glane les éléments qui illustrent de la façon la plus commune l’idée qu’on se fait de ces quartiers populaires : l’escalier qui monte de l’une à l’autre impasse, l’hôtel borgne, les maisons lézardées, la ruelle mal pavée, le ruisseau, la fille qui attend sous un bec de gaz, sans omettre le bal musette et les bistrots. Mais ce qui, dans la réalité se trouve dispersé à droite et à gauche, est ramassé dans un même espace. (46-47)

The staircase connecting one impasse to another was used for the setting of another *faubourg* melodrama, *Ménilmontant* (Dimitri Kirsanoff, 1925), and remains today a characteristic feature of some east side working class districts of Paris (Figure 9).

Whereas *Ménilmontant*’s title allows us to locate the narrative in Parisian topography, the set of *Quatorze juillet* is not anchored to a specific place. The concentration of the familiar noted by Mitry is a non-existent space. As spectators, we might draw from our personal experience in Paris to situate the neighborhood at the foot of one Paris’s elevated neighborhoods – perhaps the aforementioned Montmartre, Belleville or Ménilmontant. In a sense, locating the narrative is unimportant. What matters is the representation of an idealized working-class space: familiar but not claustrophobic (the staircase marks the possibility...
Meerson’s set recreates a genuine vie de quartier where characters know each other and children play in the streets. With only the necessary café-bar and florist, many consumer activities are absent.

The relation of the quartier to Paris as a whole city is not depicted in the same manner as in Sous les toits de Paris and Le million where the establishing shot situates the neighborhood as a snapshot of a greater Parisian whole. The establishing shot of Quatorze juillet exchanges the panoramic rooftops for the minutia of everyday life, casting the faubourg as its own world distinct from the city center. An out-of-focus close-up of a lampion or paper lamp momentarily obstructs our vision and then leads the camera to the window of an apartment where inhabitants decorate their windows, with more or less enthusiasm, for the celebration. Next, a 180-degree pan announces that the film’s pleasure will be that of intimately observing the social rituals of the working-class people as they prepare for the Bastille Day celebration, the French national holiday associated with the liberation of the people. The opening sequence also establishes Anna’s belonging to this community of working-class Frenchness. The 180-degree pan begins with different apartment tenants preparing for Bastille Day by hanging paper decorations on the building façade and ends with a medium shot of Anna coming to the window brushing her teeth. The film set displays none of the emblematic monuments of the city center such as the Eiffel Tower or the grand boulevards but rather asks the spectator to explore a modest neighborhood, to find poetry in everyday life on the cobbled streets.

The film’s references to an alternative way of life to that of the faubourg can be seen in the restaurant-bal and the shop window of the women’s clothing store. Located side-by-side, these locales are bourgeois spaces and carry a negative connotation in the
film. The restaurant and the bal, however, are the two other filmic spaces that best illustrate the contrast between interior (restriction, narrative disruption) and exterior (liberation, fulfillment). The city streets are where children play, where the celebration occurs, where taxi drivers banter in Parisian gouaille and where chance occurrences ultimately lead to happiness. Interior spaces such as the restaurant require restrictions in language and behavior and are associated with tragic occurrences (the death of Anna’s mother) or are the site of comic catastrophes when Imaque brings a revolver to the restaurant and drunkenly waves it in the faces of the bourgeois clients. The city streets provide stimulation and the possibility for chance encounters, which were so cherished by René Clair and other surrealists.

Furthermore, the space of the city streets is guided by rhythms (music) or by a recurring inanimate object like a hat. There is one particular hat that is traded and exchanged as the lottery ticket of Le million. The general motif of hats serves to visually link shots. In the final sequence, a Magritte-inspired surrealist vignette with two men in bowler hats fighting over an umbrella end up chasing each other down the road in a dramatic conclusion. Interior spaces, on the other hand, drive forward the film’s melodramatic plot. Anna discovers the existence of Pola from an observation point on the staircase, and Anna and Jean separate after a discussion in the entranceway of the apartment building. As the use of framing devices suggests (doors and windows), Anna is in complete harmony in the neighborhood space. Once she finally gains her independence, she can return to the streets where she and Jean will live happily ever after.

Anna as the working-class woman becomes a national ideal with the Bastille Day festivities that provide the temporal setting for the narrative. Anna and Jean are actually
both ideals of the working-class but in different ways: Jean as the taxi driver who belongs to the city’s expedient new boulevards while Anna represents the individual vendor against the department store (Figure 10). As part of the city’s circulatory system, the taxi driver is a figure of the modern Paris that emerges with increased vehicle traffic, while Anna goes against the consumerist order of modern Paris symbolized by the department store.

By the time René Clair began shooting Quatorze juillet in 1932, Annabella was on her way to becoming one of the decade’s leading female stars with two solid box-office successes behind her. Quatorze juillet capitalizes on Annabella’s previous successes, recycling rather than challenging the image that she had developed by 1932 as the ideal 1930s parisienne. This ideal image projected by Annabella is both physical (blond hair, girlish curvy figure) and related to her gestures and facial expressions. Anna has the child-like innocence of Violane (Napoléon), the elegance and grace of Béatrice (Le million), and the working-girl simplicity of Solange (Paris-Méditerranée) and Mariette (Un soir de rafle). Quatorze juillet also plays up the personal trait that Crisp identifies in discourse on 1930s young women: determination and self-respect. Film scholars such as Kelley Conway have referred to Annabella as one of the decade’s passive ingénues (1), which was certainly one aspect of her star persona, yet in Quatorze juillet, Anna is both short-fused and fast-talking, recognizable traits of working-class parisiennes, and introverted and sentimental. In the restaurant, she firmly refuses Mr. Imaque’s drunken advances, and she harshly dismisses Jean when she learns about Pola. One of the scenes

Figure 10 - Working-class itinerant vendor, Anna, stands in front of the department store window.
commented on favorably by several critics is the one where Anna, hurt after a quarrel with Jean, steps into the street and impulsively pushes away a child. Seeing the child fall to the ground, Anna immediately turns around, sits down and comforts him in her arms.

The idea that Annabella’s star image relies on two contradictory dimensions – passivity and determination, for example – is not surprising. We know from studies by Hayward, Leahy and Vincendeau that the notion of contradiction, particularly concerning gender, is at the heart of many stars’ performances. In the early 1930s, when Annabella emerged as a young romantic female lead, the female equivalent of the “jeune premier”, there existed contradictions concerning female and male leads. If, as Powrie claims, the male jeune premier of the late 1920s and early 1930s emerges as a figure of “youthfulness and feminine grace”, “key in the transition from the ephebic and melancholy jeune premier to the athletic jeune premier” (28-30), then it is not surprising that the young female lead would partake of some traditionally masculine attributes. Anna, for example, is assertive, determined and professionally-minded, and the film’s double happy ending encapsulates Anna’s concurrent desires: first, to have her own flower cart which will allow her to remain where she is happiest — in the city streets — and second, to be reunited with Jean.

It has been argued that the major focus of Quatorze juillet is formal innovation rather than plot and characters. In a sense, the film continues Clair’s experimentations with filmic rhythm: the invigorating cadence of the popular music score and the actors’ bodies in movement as they dance in the square both testify to the unifying power of popular entertainment. The comic gags that disrupt the celebration’s momentum serve to heighten our perception of music’s capacity to draw us into the narrative. In a
memorable scene at the bal musette, the live music comes to a halt over and over as musicians are offered free glasses of beer, causing frustration among the dancers and interrupting what should be a blissful moment between Jean and Anna. Sound also comes to be associated with contrasting social spaces, the city streets and the bourgeois interior. In the restaurant, indolent saxophone music seems to imitate the dissimulated yawns of the patrons. The music almost completely replaces dialogue to characterize the tediousness of bourgeois social conventions in the restaurant.

Quatorze juillet is unquestionably a film that continues Clair’s experiments with narrative cinema, but the film is also remarkable for its departure from Clair’s traditional distanced narration and for its more conventional use of stars, which introduces a tension in the dichotomous aesthetic form versus narrative debate. McGerr notes that the film contains more close-ups than any Clair film and that he “uses his biggest close-ups, faces filling the frame, at the most emotional moments in the film,” drawing us into the narrative rather than keeping us at bay (115). In a sense, Quatorze juillet is a departure from Clair’s previous films and depends on devices of character identification rather than distanciation. As protagonist of the film, Anna is the character with the most close-ups. In order to

Figure 11 - Anna framed within the frame during the opening sequence, after the dance.
highlight her importance in the narrative, Clair makes frequent use of a frame-within-
the-frame device, capturing her at moments of heightened sentiment in windows and
doorways (Figure 11) where the spectator’s attention is drawn to Anna’s dress in an
obvious way to suggest Annabella’s on and off-screen simple elegance. Simplicity is
signaled by Anna’s modest dress in the film: the cheerful dress that she wears in the
beginning to the bal, the plain dress that she wears as serveuse in the café, which marks
the destitute period after the loss of her mother and the dress of the closing sequence. In
Figure 11, Anna adopts a pensive posture with her arm up and hips slightly off to the
right accentuating the curve of her silhouette. The harmonious lines of her body are
echoed and set off by the ornamental frills of the window draperies. In the subsequent
shot we see Anna framed in the window as the wind catches the light fabric of the back
yoke of the dress, making it seem as if she has wings. But most importantly, Clair not
only chose Annabella, who was one of the most popular actresses, but he uses her real
name to call attention to his use of the actress. Considered in this light, Quatorze juillet
emerges less as an exercise in formal innovation than a classic plot-driven story with
recognizable actors in the roles of the protagonist couple (Annabella was much better
known to cinema audiences than George Rigaud by 1933). The film’s comic undertones,
gags and formal innovations are relegated to the background, a world of highly-stylized,
eccentric characters. Jean’s fellow cabby (Raymond Cordy) who plays the archetypal
loudmouth Parisian taxi driver is significantly never named in the film but is an
essential element of the film’s urban space. Mr. Imaque, the tuxedoed drunk, the
ridiculously proper bourgeois family, the nosy concierges and the underworld thugs are
all humorously stereotyped and also fit into the timeless aura of the backstreets of Paris.
Components of Anna’s character, her innocence, determination and working-class simplicity, but above all her Frenchness, are set off by the dark-haired femme fatale, Pola, with her foreign accent. Medium close-ups of Pola’s feet and legs call attention to her role as seductress and narrative obstacle. She is also superficial, preferring jewels to true love. Her intrusion into Jean’s life leads to the misunderstanding between Anna and Jean, and because of Pola, Jean quits his job as a taxi driver to become part of the criminal underworld. While the mise-en-scène of Quatorze juillet stages Anna’s subjectivity as a young woman in love, it represents Pola as a fragmented being, objectified by the camera as pure physicality.

So how does Annabella as a star, with the discourses on 1930s femininity that she brings to the film, fit in with René Clair’s personal vision of working-class Paris? In order to answer this question, it will be necessary to look at how the film deals with the tension between, on the one hand, actor and narrative, and on the other, formal aesthetic concerns. Film scholars unanimously agree that Clair, with his use of simple narratives belonging to the melodramatic tradition, uses the mechanisms of “fate, coincidence, circularity and nostalgia” (Vincendeau, Melodramatic Realism 52). In an interesting article on Clair’s particular use of melodrama in Quatorze juillet, a film that clearly functions as a precursor to the later poetic realism films with their focus on what Vincendeau calls “male melodrama,” Butler argues that “[t]he focus on the female character Anna allows for a certain level of intrigue to enter into this comedy without its being subsumed by tragedy or fatality. Anna’s struggle to make ends meet and to be virtuous displaces the plight of the working class onto the working-class female, and makes her concerns private rather than public” (122). Butler goes on to note that Clair’s reputed commitment to aesthetic imperatives, to form over plot11, allows him to circumvent the “excessively
emotional, feminine, a-historical” nature of melodrama (122). Clair uses melodramatic genre rather to “hold off the real social hardships of the time and place of his story” (125).

I would argue, however, that Anna’s professional ambitions do remain public since they are localized in the streets. Just before the end of the film, Anna walks with her suitcase and pauses outside the café. During another scene we see her pick flowers that don’t belong to her and try to sell them to a passing couple. Much of Clair’s mise-en-scène is concerned with staging Anna as unhappy in the private sphere doing traditional woman’s work like cleaning and serving in the café.

This second collaboration between René Clair and Annabella also attests to her importance in Clair’s personal filmic universe. As Vincendeau says of Juliette Binoche, a contemporary romantic heroine of French cinema: “She functions both as beautiful female ‘object’ within a long iconic tradition, and as a ‘subject’ who focalizes the auteur’s philosophical and aesthetic preoccupations” (Stars 244). This statement also holds true in the context of 1930s French cinema where certain directors used female stars as an effective means to represent the different social milieux of Paris. Marcel Carné, for example, used Arletty for her Parisian gouaille in two films, and Julien Duvivier and Jean Grémillon both used Mireille Balin to signify upscale Parisian chic in their films. In Quatorze juillet, Anna’s picturesque working-class beauty and introversion echo the outmoded charm of the ruelles of Paris explored in the film. Her character’s name “Anna” reinforces the connection between Annabella’s star persona as a Parisian and Anna, the faubourg heroine. Annabella’s star treatment is uncommon in Clair’s canon since he is not normally known for his conventional use of stars. The only other actor
with whom he regularly collaborated was Raymond Cordy who also embodies proletarian Paris.

Anna’s character in Quatorze juillet, the ambulant marchande de fleurs, or flower peddler, inhabits an enchanting Paris that, as many scholars have noted, is not a wholly realistic representation of 1930s Paris. Clair’s Paris seems rather to hark back nostalgically to an earlier Paris as do many films of the 1930s. Vincendeau notes that “The evocation of French films of the 1930s of warm, unified, communities entertaining themselves in cafés, bals, and guingettes, undoubtedly had a basis in the social reality of the time, as confirmed by other documents (photographs, autobiographies, oral history)” but that a staging of such spaces as “ideal” is also rooted in a nostalgia for a folk entertainment that belonged to the past and that was yielding to cosmopolitan, commercial forms of entertainment such as the cinema and music-hall (Bal populaire, 60).

The “unified” community of which Vincendeau speaks is present in the outdoor bal populaire of Quatorze juillet, which is a space that brings together all characters from the meddlesome concierges to Mr. Imaque, the tuxedo drunk who is liberated by the animation of the festivities. Mr. Imaque brings out the contrast between the liberating live performance of the city streets and the impersonal jazz music in the restaurant where he makes the acquaintance of Anna. Anna’s role in the nostalgic community is different than that of Clair’s male working-class ideal, Albert Préjean. In the earlier Sous les toits de Paris, it is Préjean who unites the people through his singing. Anna is the solitary working soul of the community.

During the 1930s, the Bastille Day street entertainment depicted in Quatorze juillet and also in Hotel du Nord is very concerned with representing the cohesiveness of the French (read Parisian) social body, attempting to cinematically “reaffirm the
community” through the use of high angle long shot (Vincendeau, *Bal populaire* 58). The staging of the community as a whole in *Quatorze juillet* is balanced by explorations of the female protagonist’s place within that imagined community represented by the outdoor festivities. The film’s plot follows Anna’s distancing from the community when her mother’s sickness and untimely death during the following evening’s Bastille Day celebration keep her inside. Her mother’s death also leaves Anna alienated and without support. The modest storefront advertising “*Fleurs naturelles*” is closed and boarded up causing Anna to be taken in by Léon, the neighborhood’s café owner. Her work inside the café is not fulfilling, and Anna often stares melancholically out the window at the city streets where she was previously happy. In the beginning of the film, before she is separated from the community, her link with the community is reinforced through the way she plays with children in the street.

In a predictably whimsical René Clair ending, Anna, who has heroically disarmed the drunken Imaque in the *bal-restaurant*, sells her modest bouquet of flowers to Imaque for the generous sum of two million francs. Imaque leaves in a taxi revealing Anna in long shot standing in front of a woman’s clothing store (*Jenny’s*) hat displays elegant evening gowns. The camera zooms in to a medium shot of Anna gazing down at the two one-thousand franc bills in her hands. A close-up of the two bills slowly fades into an enormous flower arrangement that a pull-back discovery shot reveals to belong to Anna, who is now selling flowers to a customer on the street. The slow transition from Anna’s hands in close-up to the frame entirely filled with flowers suggests that the narrative has advanced temporally and spatially. It is only with the pull-back discovery shot that we understand to what end Anna has used Imaque’s money. She uses the money to advance socially but does not leave the neighborhood where she began. The
new flower cart has visibly created new opportunities for Anna and freed her from the oppressive patriarchal atmosphere of the café Chez Léon. The flower cart and Anna’s presumed independence will allow Anna to stay in the city streets where she is most happy. A subsequent high-angle shot follows her diagonally across the cobblestones as she shows off her newly gained physical and social mobility, proudly nodding to the bourgeois family.

When Clair cast Annabella as the heroine in *Quatorze juillet*, he drew on her particular embodiment of the *midinette*, the youthful, working-class romantic feminine ideal of early 1930s cinema. Anna’s character and the film’s melodramatic plot draw heavily from Annabella’s star image explored in the first part of this chapter, staging Annabella in a more serious guise against Parisian popular culture representations of the *midinette* as a superficial figure. The film’s numerous close-ups of Annabella and the narrative structure focusses on her character as a picturesque figure of working-class struggle. The film’s ending also suggests that the representation of Paris *populaire* may not have
been limited to masculine figures like Jean Gabin or Albert Préjean since in order for the
narrative to be resolved, Anna must return to cobblestones of the faubourg where she
embodies the working-class values of vitality and determination.

Popular discourse on Annabella shows that she is crucial to Clair’s depiction of a
sentimental people’s Paris because of her previous roles as romantic heroine. If part of
Annabella’s star image is tied up in fashion discourse on the modern woman and in the
new aesthetics of the tanned, fit body, her roles are also exemplary of the decade’s
nostalgic representations of women. Annabella began her career as one of the decade’s
young women who inaugurated the sound cinema and contributed to the cinema
freeing itself from other forms of entertainment like theater and music-hall, but as the
modern women gained a foothold in the 1930s, filmmakers like René Clair and Marcel
Carné continued to look backwards, staging nostalgic representations (as a flower
peddler, Anna belongs to the corps of métiers ambulants or ambulatory professions that
were being elbowed out by the 1930s if they hadn’t been earlier). Postcard archives at
the Bibliothèque nationale de France confirm that ambulatory figures like the marchande de
fleurs, marchand d’habits (used clothing peddler), and chiffonier (ragpicker) were much
more common at the turn of the century than they were during the 1930s.

During the 1930s, Annabella projected a romanticized, flawless image of the
working girl, who was in complete harmony with Clair’s rose-colored faubourg. Clair’s
emphasis on film as a choreographed performance (primarily in Le Million) also
encourages the spectator to see Anna critically as both a fetishized and stereotyped
image of the past. The faubourg is depicted in the film Quatorze juillet as a closed space,
impermeable to many of the transformations that effected urban dwellers of the 1930s.
Although Annabella’s off-screen image was that of the sporty, fashionable modern
woman, she rarely played the modern woman on-screen. Her romantic midinette legacy lives on today in actresses like Juliette Binoche (see Vincendeau’s chapter entitled “Juliette Binoche: the face of neo-romanticism”) and Audrey Tautou who plays the wide-eyed bashful waitress in Le fabuleux destin d’Amélie Poulain (Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 2001), both part of a push in contemporary films to reconnect with the childish charm of the romantic hero.

1 The song A Paris dans chaque faubourg was written by Maurice Jaubert and recorded by the realist singer Lys Gauty in the 1930s. This song, which evokes the popular Paris of 1930s cinema, was more recently recorded and performed by Patrick Bruel and Danielle Darrieux, Georges Brassens and Yves Montand.

2 In the 1930-31 film season Annabella starred in two of seven of the most popular films at the box-office, the operetta Le million and the drama Un soir de rafle. Autour d’une enquete ranks among the top 25 for the same film season. The 1931-32 two box-office successes featuring Annabella were Paris-Mediterranée (romantic comedy) and Un fils d’amérique. For the 1932-33 season Annabella starred in Quatorze juillet and Mademoiselle Josette ma femme. Annabella had three box-office successes for the 1935-36 season: La bandera, l’équipage, Veille d’armes.

3 Annabella went to Hollywood for the first time in 1934 to make the French language version of Caravane (Erik Charell, 1934) making her one of the first actresses of her generation to travel to Hollywood.

4 In The Classic French Cinema: 1930-1960, Crisp gives a rather detailed list of the major French stars who were under contract with UFA in the mid-thirties (177-78), and the number is astounding. Almost every major star in 1930s French cinema made at least one film in Berlin.

5 In his book entitled Hungarian cinema: from coffee house to multiplex, John Cunningham points out that Tavaszi zápor was one of only two Hungarian films to make it into the revered 360 Film Classics, a booklet published in the June 1998 issue of Sight and Sound Magazine. Although the film was not a critical or box-office success at the time, it is now considered to be one of the best Hungarian films ever made.

6 Annabella was supposed to play Napoleon’s sister but Gance supposedly invented the character of Violine for Annabella whom he thought better suited for the role of the girl next door (Caligarou).

7 For an interesting discussion of melodrama in 1930s cinema see Vincendeau’s Melodramatic Realism: On Some French Women’s Films in the 1930s.

8 The two major French film unions, the Chambre Syndicale Cinématographique Française and the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT) issued an informal recommendation stipulating that French actors and actresses owed one film a year to France in order to protect the French film industry. This article is cited by Sellier (Drôle de guerre 203) and refers to a statement made by Henri Decoin to the French press on May 6, 1938: “Nous sommes en parfait accord avec la Chambre Syndicale Cinématographique Française et la C.G.T. qui estiment que les acteurs tournant à l’étranger doivent au moins un film par an à leur propre pays. Ceci pour protéger l’industrie françaiue”.

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9 For more information on the relationship between film noir and 1930s French cinema, see Ginette Vincendeau’s *Pépé le Moko*, BFI Film Classics, 1998.

10 Sarah Maza estimates that approximately “one-half of all working-class couples in Paris met at a dance” during the Interwar period (45).

11 According to Butler, Clair preferred simple narratives and stock characters to elaborate plots.
CHAPTER 4

DANIELLE DARRIEUX AND FEMALE FLANERIE

As we saw in chapters two and three, figures like the flower peddler played by Annabella (*Quatorze juillet*) and the prostitute played by Arletty (*Hôtel du Nord*) embodied outdated ideals of femininity that drew from the closed spaces of the faubourg and the milieu. Danielle Darrieux’s 1930s star image, however, conveyed a femininity connected to the mobility of the modern young woman. Some of Darrieux’s most celebrated films of the 1930s deal with the theme of female independence and look to the dynamic city center to tell stories about young women who are depicted as socially mobile, both physically and professionally. In these city narratives, scenes of solitary walking, driving, taking trains, and going to the cinema—at the time, distinctly modern activities associated with urban mobile perception (Friedberg 3)—are depicted as moments of reflection or pleasure offered to the modern young woman outside the home. Darrieux’s star image of the 1930s, like that of other French female stars, therefore has a privileged connection to the city of Paris. Darrieux occupies a unique place in the 1930s French star system on several counts: first, the roles she played raise questions about the 1930s modern woman’s relationship to mobility and her access to the public sphere; second, she is the only female star of the decade whose popularity rivaled that of male stars like Jean Gabin or Fernandel (in terms of length of career, she has surpassed both—her most recent film *Pièce montée*, directed by Denys Granier-Deferre, was
released in 2010); and third, during the second half of the decade, Darrieux’s assertive on-screen presence led her to star in popular female-centered narratives.

4. 1. Physical and Social Mobility: Re-examining Darrieux’s 1930s Star Image

Darrieux’s youth and energetic presence were fundamental in her ascent to stardom. She debuted on screen at age fourteen as a precocious enfant terrible in Wilhelm Thiele’s 1931 film, Le bal/The Bal. Chosen for the part mainly for her age, she was subsequently praised by critics for her natural style and simplicity, aligning her with young film stars like Annabella and Michèle Morgan who had no dramatic training or prior experience in the theater: “Mademoiselle D.D., une fillette au cœur tendre a dans ses naïvetés, charmantes d’ailleurs, beaucoup plus le sens du cinéma que ses célèbres partenaires (”Le bal”). Darrieux’s vocal training and dancing ability also made her a highly marketable star given the popularity of the operetta, musical comedy and various forms of spectacle recorded in films during the 1930s (Vincendeau, Social Text 182). In films such as La crise est finie (Robert Siodmak, 1934), Mademoiselle Mozart (Yvan Noé, 1936), Un mauvais garçon (Jean Boyer and Raoul Ploquin, 1936), Retour à l’aube (Henri Decoin, 1938) and Premier rendez-vous (Henri Decoin, 1942), she gave memorable vocal performances.

Halfway through the decade, Darrieux began to branch out from earlier typecasting and take on more “serious” roles. In her autobiography, she contends that the light comedies of her early career kept her from developing as an actress. It wasn’t until the production of Anatole Litvak’s international dramatic tragedy, Mayerling (1936) that she began to consider acting as a serious career: “Auparavant, je jouais dans une
espèce d’inconscience... je ne prenais pas mon métier au sérieux. Les rôles qu’on m’attribuait—toujours des ingénues plus ou moins énervées et poussant la chansonnette—me permettaient d’ailleurs pas de le faire” (Darrieux and Ferrière 33). Mayerling gave Darrieux the opportunity to work with an internationally known director and a top-billed male lead, Charles Boyer, with whom she would later co-star in Max Ophuls’s film Madame de; the film also marked a turning point in her career. From that point, Darrieux was praised for her ability to play psychologically complex protagonists rather than “ingénues plus ou moins énervées,” as she calls them (33). Darrieux’s maturation as an actress also coincided with her marriage to director Henri Decoin in 1935. She recounts in her autobiography the extent to which Decoin was the driving force behind her stardom (31), claiming that he gave her confidence and knew how to showcase her abilities as a star.

In spite of several opportunities to make films in Hollywood, Darrieux has remained throughout her career a resolutely ‘French’ star. In January 1937, she signed a five-year contract with Universal Studios² and moved to Hollywood where she and Decoin lived from October 1937–May 1938. While Darrieux made The Rage of Paris (1938) with director Henry Koster, Decoin acted as her manager and spokesman, purportedly rejecting the screenplay five times before giving his stamp of approval (Sellier, French Identity 203). Later in 1939, while the couple was involved in a lawsuit with Universal Studios for Darrieux’s failure to respect her contract, she openly described her experience in Hollywood in negative terms, claiming that she resented the way Hollywood wanted to change her image (204). On more than one occasion, Decoin spoke on behalf of the couple, pledging his support for the French national film industry (it was common for French stars under contract with Hollywood studios to return to
France once a year to make a French film and “reassured the public as to Darrieux’s Frenchness” (203). Stardom brought with it many opportunities, but Darrieux’s major performances are associated with French directors Henri Decoin and Claude Autant-Lara and the German-born Max Ophüls, who spent most of his professional career making films in France.

With the general rise in popularity of dramatic stars after 1935 (Vincendeau, Stars 25) Darrieux began to favor dramas over comedies. A study by Grandmaire suggests that her star status increased as a result. A survey of the cover photographs of Pour vous, one of the most popular cinema magazines of the decade, confirms that Darrieux’s popularity rose during the latter half of the decade starting with the release of Mauvaise graine and the international success of Mayerling. As Grandmaire has shown, Darrieux’s twenty-four cover photographs in Pour vous fall between August 1934 and September 1939, with a spike occurring during the production of the two dramas Katia (Maurice Tourneur, 1938) (five covers) and Retour à l’aube (two covers) between October 1938 and February 1939.

With Darrieux’s maturation into a young woman, she came to star in coming-of-age stories and began to play young heroines searching for happiness (most often romantic) and/or a legitimate position in society. An overview of her output of the 1930s reveals that social mobility is one of the most common features of Darrieux’s films, giving them fairytale-like undertones. In particular, the films directed by Henri Decoin between 1937 and 1940, Abus de confiance, Retour à l’aube and Battement de cœur, have been described as modern re-workings of the classic Cinderella rags-to-riches story. Considered more broadly in the context of 1930s French cinema, such Cinderella tales diverge from the more pessimistic poetic realism films, which depict women and men as
powerless against destiny. Poetic realism’s cast of working-class characters are ultimately unable to escape their milieu while, on the contrary, characters played by Darrieux often aspire to achieve something better, transcending their modest origins in search of pleasure (Retour à l’aube) or romantic and professional fulfillment (Abus de confiance). Grandmaire views Darrieux’s ability to have a positive impact on her existence as a defining feature of the Darrieux-Decoin scenarios of the 1930s.

In the ten films for which Darrieux’s image served as a central vehicle, she plays a young woman who rises in social class five times. In four of these films she plays an orphan. As we see in Abus de confiance, Lydia is forced to use deception in order to triumph over oppressive circumstances. In the comedy, Battement de cœur, Arlette escapes from a boarding house for young women, tries unsuccessfully to become a pickpocket, eschews a marriage of convenience, and finishes by finding true love and moving up in the social ranks when she marries a diplomat.

The following films in particular showcase the rebellious young woman who refuses the duties associated with traditional female roles: those of daughter in Le bal and Un mauvais garçon and those of wife in Retour à l’aube. This rejection of traditional values and searching for an alternative path — for a place in society (Abus de confiance, Un mauvais garçon), for her origins (Le domino vert) or for true love (Battement de cœur, Premier rendez-vous) — is what fills Darrieux’s characters with both the strong desire to assert their presence and an existential emptiness that comes with rejecting the prescribed destiny of a young woman.

Between 1931-1941, Darrieux played in twenty-nine films, none of which belong to the poetic realism canon, but which are rather part of the decade’s lesser known tradition of “cinéma populaire,” which includes both drama and comedy (Sellier 62). In
Darrieux’s most memorable comedies, those in which she excelled as a troublemaker, the comic register allows issues concerning the modern woman’s struggle for independence with respect to patriarchal values to be addressed at a safe distance: for example, the compatibility of marriage and professional life in Un mauvais garçon, extramarital pregnancy in Club de femmes (Jacques Deval, 1936) and expectations concerning marriage in Mademoiselle ma mère (Henri Decoin, 1937). But as Sellier is careful to point out, Darrieux was never typecast solely as a comic actress. Rather, throughout her acting career, perhaps the longest in the history of cinema, she consistently worked with different directors and embraced the multiple genres (and sub-genres) that constituted a particular decade’s popular cinema: operetta, musical comedy, romantic comedy, melodrama, historical drama and film noir.

Film critics agree that, in the 1930s, Darrieux presents spectators with an image of the 1930s modern young woman. But it is the two contradictory sides to her star persona that gave her an inimitable quality that goes beyond a simple character type: “the innocent naïve woman, astonished with the ways of the world (…), and the sassy, spunky firebrand who stands up for herself and in the process finds a mate who is a more appropriate partner for her” (Mayne, Danielle Darrieux 171). In France, the ‘jeune femme moderne’ (‘modern young woman’) is a cultural concept that emerged in response to changing ideas concerning gender identity following World War I. During the 1920s, the modern woman was synonymous with the independent and sexually liberated garçonne. But the worldwide financial crisis of 1929, which hit France slightly later in 1931, presented new challenges to the feminist wave of the 1920s. As unemployment rose, so did resentment towards women’s continued demands for the right to work outside the home, spurring a campaign that aimed to return women to the
domestic sphere. The campaign, designed to provide a temporary solution to male unemployment, gained momentum and peaked between 1931 and 1935 (Bard, *Les filles de Marianne* 313).

As research by Vincendeau and Burch and Sellier has shown, the prevalent father-daughter scenarios of the 1930s reflect the reaffirmation of conservative values that occurred at the beginning of the decade. Father-daughter films deal with the relationship between a beautiful — and in Darrieux’s case rebellious — young woman and a controlling father figure. Focusing on the social and historical context for the production of such scenarios, Christine Bard refers to the 1930s as “la revanche des patriarches” or “the return of the patriarchs” (*Les femmes* 127) following the tumultuous 1920s. With the attempted reaffirmation of the patriarch’s authority, film scenarios of true love and marriage become a means by which the modern young woman, inspired by the feminist culture of the 1920s, can be dissuaded from professional aspirations and from desiring happiness based on something other than male love and support. Incest between the father (or father figure) and daughter (or substitute daughter) is ultimately averted, thereby restoring narrative order, when the father is forced to renounce his desire or marries off the daughter to a weaker father substitute, a young man less charismatic than the father but who is nonetheless capable of maintaining control over the young woman (Vincendeau, *Daddy’s Girls* 72).

Burch and Sellier have demonstrated how the 1930s father-daughter narratives reflect fears pertaining specifically to the freedoms of the ‘modern woman.’ Thus, young women who wish to lead an independent life, with access to university education and a professional existence outside the home, are dismissed as unruly youth who can be brought back to their senses by marriage and paternal guidance. The father then plays a
key role in the daughter’s coming-of-age, imparting traditional values such as the importance of marriage rather than fostering her life outside the home.

Sellier and Verdier have both published critical studies of Darrieux’s stardom, arguing that the tension between traditional and modern notions of womanhood are at the heart of Darrieux’s pre-war image: “elle propose au milieu des années trente une figure ambivalente, à la fois moderne et traditionnelle, qui permet de concilier les idées opposées d’autonomie et de dépendance féminines” (Verdier 177). The ambivalence of the modern woman was undoubtedly an engaging topic to both male and female film audiences since the press, popular novels and theater were increasingly focused on the figure of the ‘modern woman,’ some to promote her independent spirit, others to satirize and ridicule her. For Verdier, who builds on the framework developed by Burch and Sellier in *La drôle de guerre des sexes du cinéma français*, the roles that Darrieux played during the thirties challenge traditional patriarchal values, but do so in a way that ultimately leaves these values intact:

Désir d’autonomie et jeunesse se confondent, se soutiennent suivant des configurations différentes mais toujours acceptables… Sa vitalité certes perturbante pour la communauté qui l’entoure est avant tout une forme d’énergie enfantine sans conséquence réelle et ses rebellions sont donc sans gravité. (189)

Central to Verdier’s analysis are three films: *Un mauvais garçon*, *Abus de confiance* and *Katia*, which allow for a discussion of Darrieux’s star image across three different sub-genres (musical comedy, melodrama and costume drama). Sellier and Verdier claim that Darrieux’s moments of rebellion are weakened by childish regressions, undermining any serious threat to the decade’s father figures.

The thirties were a transitional period in French cinema’s acclimation to modern definitions of femininity, and nothing illustrates this point better than the Darrieux-
Decoin cinematic couple. They met in Berlin in 1934 during the filming of the French language version of the film *L’Or dans la rue* (Kurt Bernhardt, 1934) (Grandmire 1). Between 1935 and 1940, Darrieux’s off-screen image affirmed the viability of relationships between young women and older men (Decoin was twenty-seven years her senior). Popular film magazines circulated photographs of the couple together, stressing that they were an ideal couple. Darrieux tended to talk about her stardom in terms of her relationship with Decoin and built up a success myth based on her husband’s instrumental role in her career. She rarely spoke about her own private existence outside that of the couple. Articles in *Pour vous* that speak of Darrieux alone maintain a distance and report on superficial aspects of her stardom: her repertoire of facial expressions (Salemson), make-up, star wardrobe as an envoy of Parisian fashion during her stay in Hollywood (Biezville) or pets. It is tempting to see Darrieux’s off-screen image as the docile, naive young woman whose career was more effectively managed by an older man than by herself, but even after the couple’s separation, Darrieux was reticent to speak about her private life or her existence outside the cinema (“Danielle Darrieux, une vie de cinéma”). In rare interviews, she deflects attention away from herself, making it difficult for spectators to know the “real” Danielle Darrieux.

Nearly all the films that Darrieux made with Decoin (and with other directors as well) affirm that narrative closure requires marriage between the heroine and her true love, but often this conjugal conclusion has a picturesque, unreal, almost fleeting quality rendered with no dialogue and taking no more than seconds of screen time. Marriage seems to appear more out of the necessity to conform to generic codes than to draw any profound conclusions on marriage as destiny for women. As Judith Mayne suggests, it is not the Darrieux-as-bride scenes that have had the most lasting effect on spectators, but
rather the “sheer joy and intensity her characters exude as they embody passion and argue for their places in the world” (Danielle Darrieux 171). A critical focus on the power ascribed to the father figure has overshadowed an analysis of such scenes or entire films that feature Darrieux acting as an autonomous subject, opening the possibility for woman-centered films at a time when men retained aesthetic and industry control.

There is also a melancholy and pensive side to Darrieux’s socially mobile, exuberant young woman that can be glimpsed in her most admired close-ups and publicity photos. Popular cinema magazines tapped into this aspect of Darrieux’s star image by circulating close-up still photographs of her most characteristic facial expression: an immobile, wide-eyed, searching expression. Or as Marc Lalanne notes of her acting style: “Son jeu ne se départit jamais d’un certain détachement, une sorte d’underplaying très moderne qui minore tous les affects, nuance la tristesse de sérénité et la joie de mélancolie” (62-63). The melancholy to which Lalanne refers is inseparable from Darrieux’s characters’ maturation—a joie de vivre that co-exists with a cognizance of the responsibilities of adult life.

Darrieux’s post-war association with the ‘woman’s film,’ which reaches its height with the films of Max Ophuls (Madame de, 1953) and Douglas Sirk in the late forties and fifties (Haskell 186-7), leads us back to the 1930s Darrieux films, particularly those that feature female-centered identity-searching narratives, with a renewed interest. In Madame de, Darrieux plays a countess who has rejected the traditional destiny of the married woman in order to pursue true love of which she ends up being the victim. Although staged among upper-class of turn-of-the-century Vienna, we can see that the countess is a vehicle for Ophuls to pursue questions pertaining to class, identity and destiny, questions that also underlie earlier films like Le domino vert (Henri Decoin,
1935), *Abus de confiance*, and particularly *Retour à l’aube*. The conflict between society’s expectations and women’s desire to live outside these limitations that informs some of Darrieux’s most noteworthy roles of the thirties causes us to reconsider the idea that there were perhaps more women’s films produced in France than formerly thought.

The term ‘woman’s film’ is most commonly associated with Hollywood melodramas produced between 1930 and 1950 that target a specifically female audience. Such films explore themes like domesticity, motherhood and romance—themes defined as “feminine”—through the eyes of a female protagonist. Feminist film critics, however, have been skeptical of how cinema as an institution could possibly transform its basic assumptions about male and female ways of seeing and of appropriating the gaze. In particular, Mary Ann Doane foregrounds the existence of roadblocks at the narrative level, that is, of “formal resistances to the elaboration of female subjectivity [that] produce perturbations and contradictions within the narrative economy” (13). As Judith Mayne puts it, there are “contradictions that erupt when a form made to the measure of male desire and male subjectivity attempts to engage with other desires and other subjectivities” (Mayne, *Keyhole* 3). The woman’s film in France (see chapter 1), however, appeared in a very different context. With no highly developed studio or genre system, the emergence of the woman’s film in France (if such a type of film existed) must be considered in a pluralistic context of director, star, and literary/theatrical intertexts, which all carry influence over the final product.

In the 1930s, the French film industry was in a different position than that of Hollywood (see Crisp’s *The Classic French Cinema, 1930-1960* for industry constraints and Vincendeau’s *Daddy’s Girls: Oedipal narratives in 1930s French Films* for an account of theater’s influence on cinema). The theater intertext and its associated casting practices
that were brought to the cinema created favorable conditions for the dominance of (older) male-centered narratives. In the French cinema of the 1930s, the figure of the mother, the subject of many of Hollywood’s women’s films, has either little narrative importance or is absent altogether. Considered in this light, the number of orphan narratives in the classical French cinema is not surprising. Of the twenty-five films produced in France during the 1930s that explicitly deal with motherhood, most depict caricatured, excessive images of motherhood (Vincendeau, *Daddy’s Girls* 73). Mothers represented as excessive to the point of being ridiculous are common in the previously mentioned father-daughter centered narratives in which mature male leads provide support and protection to vulnerable young women (71). To illustrate this point, it is useful to cite two Darrieux films that feature a mother figure of diminished importance. In *Un mauvais garçon*, the over-encouraging and overexcited nature of Jacqueline’s mother are put on display as a spectacle to set off the paternal authority of Mr. Serval. In *Abus de confiance*, Lydia’s mother is deceased (she is an orphan) as is the mother (Jacques Ferney’s wife) of the young woman she is pretending to be. In narrative terms, the maternal absence in *Abus de confiance* makes Lydia’s search for identity all the more prominent since she lacks maternal guidance.

4. 2. *Un mauvais garçon* and the Pleasure of the Automobile

A significant feature of Darrieux’s star persona comes to the fore with the release of *Un mauvais garçon*. With an unsurpassed level of energy, Darrieux possessed an unusual physicality for young female stars of the 1930s (Laurent). Jonathan Driskell, speaking in particular of Michèle Morgan, has described how the waif-like,
“metaphysical” female bodies of poetic realism have an otherworldly dimension that draws attention away from their physical presence on-screen:

... in addition to her alignment with the historically grounded and kinetic modern woman, Morgan also, simultaneously, embodied another seemingly ahistorical type of femininity; she was an ethereal woman who, due to an elevated status, appeared to exist in a realm beyond the material, making her, to some extent, negate the concreteness of her physicality. (62)

Darrieux, by contrast, presents spectators with a dynamic body, constantly in motion. She plays a lively music-hall performer in La crise est finie, she tap dances, swims and performs acrobatics in Club de femmes, she bursts into tantrums in The Rage of Paris and catapults herself off a bed in Battement de cœur. Not surprisingly, Darrieux’s physical mobility is most effectively set off by moments of hesitation (in close-up) such as the one at the end of Un mauvais garçon when Jacqueline realizes that she has been tricked into marrying by her father. Darrieux’s physically active body and vitality also find an important outlet in the city of Paris, where she had lived and studied music from a young age. In a two-minute scene from the same film, Jacqueline is shown in a medium close-up shot/reverse shot sequence, slaloming her car through the streets of Paris while she sings along with the radio.

The pleasures associated with movement were also a part of Darrieux’s off-screen image. A Gaumont newsreel of March 1939 features Darrieux proudly driving her brand new 1939 Rosengart Supertraction cabriolet in front of an audience in the Bois de Boulogne. The announcer states that “La charmante star ne limite pas son souci d’élégance au choix de ses parures. Au Bois de Boulogne, elle présente avec fierté à ses amis le nouveau cabriolet Supertraction qu’elle vient d’acquérir.” In this way, through her on-screen antics and off-screen love of the automobile (“I’ve always been fond of
cars,” she recalls in an interview), Darrieux’s stardom carries a vitality and movement characteristic of the city itself. In an article celebrating her 75 years of cinema, Le Nouvel Observateur sums up Darrieux’s life: “Elle conduit sa voiture, va au cinéma, a beaucoup aimé” (Darrieux and Mérigeau 64). She was not a star to be simply looked at and admired for her physical beauty. As spectators we appreciate Darrieux in movement, climbing the social ladders or taking cars or trains. This mobility also detracts from her, easily serving as the object of the gaze, and aligns her with the city’s dynamic circulation system. Throughout the 1930s, the most popular female stars also enjoyed privileged connections to the city of Paris: Annabella as a picturesque symbol of the disappearing faubourg charm in René Clair’s Quatorze juillet, Arletty as an emblem of the underworld’s stagnation and immobility in Hôtel du Nord and Mireille Balin as the femme fatale of upper-class west side of Paris. But no female star embodied to the extent of Darrieux the modern woman’s desire for and appreciation of the freedom of movement.

Un mauvais garçon is a comedy that tells the story of the recently graduated law student, Jacqueline Serval, whose ambitious career plans are thwarted by her father’s desire to marry her off to a rich suitor. Jacqueline refuses to marry. Realizing that he is no match for his daughter’s stubbornness, Mr. Serval agrees to provide Jacqueline with the necessary conditions to lead an independent professional life for eighteen months. If at the end of eighteen months Jacqueline has not successfully pleaded a case, then she must agree to marry. One month before the eighteen months have lapsed, Jacqueline is called upon to defend Pierre Meynard, a bad-boy, petty criminal who ends up being released on a mistrial thanks to Jacqueline’s overzealous legal inquiry. Pierre and Jacqueline fall in love, and Jacqueline is able to enjoy her last days of freedom with Pierre and his gang: playing cards, learning argot, smoking, and trading in her tailored
suits for a checkered cap. Unbeknownst to Jacqueline, however, her father has arranged everything in advance. Pierre is really the son of her father’s friend who arrives just in time from the colonies to reveal Pierre’s true identity.

As a musical comedy with bourgeois family life as its focus, *Un mauvais garçon* draws heavily from the boulevard tradition. Its emphasis is on the actors who, at times, adopt an exaggerated performance style for comic effect. This is particularly the case of Jacqueline’s parents played by André Alerme and Marguerite Templey. André Alerme was first known to the Parisian public as an actor of the boulevard theater before coming to the cinema. He is above all remembered for his comical ill temperedness and excessive reactions in films like *La dame de chez Maxime’s* (Alexander Korda, 1933), based on a play by Georges Feydeau and *La kermesse héroïque* (Jacques Feyder, 1935). The younger couple played by Danielle Darrieux and Henri Garat, by contrast, maintains a more sober acting style throughout the film, even if Darrieux’s role does require her to play numerous different roles throughout the film: impertinent daughter, professional lawyer, boss (she oversees the housekeeper/typist and later Pierre as the butler) and romantic heroine.

By giving actors the opportunity to showcase their dramatic skills, the film continuously foregrounds its own theatricality and establishes the importance of role-playing within the narrative. While waiting for a job to come along, Jacqueline pleads imaginary cases to Marie, the housekeeper, who serves as her audience. At another moment, Jacqueline’s mother draws an audience at the scene of a car accident as she rants about her daughter’s expertise in legal matters, handing out business cards to drivers and by-standers. Although as spectators we don’t realize it until the end, Pierre
has also been playing a role, that of a lower-class thief when he is actually a well-to-do middle-class son.

The role that we never have the opportunity to see Jacqueline play is the one suggested by the film’s closing scene—that of wife. Throughout the film, Jacqueline, seconded by her mother in spite of her subordinate position vis-à-vis her husband, is an ardent defender of “la liberté de la femme.” Jacqueline remains unyielding in her negative view of what marriage has to offer and has no illusions about the type of young man her father will choose for her. The original film poster captures Jacqueline’s reticence to marry: Pierre and Jacqueline are featured in a cheek-to-cheek embrace, but while Pierre stares at Jacqueline, she remains elusive, staring into empty space and choosing not to reciprocate Pierre’s loving gaze. Early in the film while reading aloud a letter from the old friend to whose son he hopes to marry off Jacqueline, he can hardly conceal his delight at the family’s wealth and capitalist ambitions. During the final sequence, our point of view is aligned with Jacqueline’s when we learn that no fewer than four emblematic figures of order (Mr. Serval, Mr. Feutrier, the president of the bar and the judge), as well as Pierre, have been mobilized to conspire against her. The genuineness of the feelings she experienced during her last month of freedom as she lived alongside Pierre and his friends is abruptly called into question. We will never know to which role Pierre will end up being the most faithful—to that of the seductive bad boy or to that of his father’s son—since we are never shown any sort of verbal reconciliation between the couple. Nor does Pierre provide an explanation for his behavior. During their last verbal exchange Pierre asks:

Garat/Pierre: Are you angry with me, Jacqueline?
Darrieux/Jacqueline: So, all along it was a… No! Leave me alone!
Pierre leaves the apartment in pursuit of Jacqueline, and in the penultimate scene, which takes place in an elevator, a series of humorous vignettes disrupts the sense of closure created by the revelation of Pierre’s true identity and reinforces the idea that what we are seeing is cinema. The spectator is reminded of the different roles that Darrieux and Garat have been playing throughout the film. First, we are shown their present roles (Jacqueline pouts while Pierre smugly plays the part of winner) then follows a series of short encounters: 1) Jacqueline in her sleek garçonne-inspired professional attire/Pierre as chauffeur 2) Jacqueline dancing while Pierre, as butler, plays the feather duster as a musical instrument 3) Jacqueline as maître Serval/ Pierre as the car thief. Directly inspired from the film, the vignettes introduce a distance with respect to the filmic narrative by foregrounding the actors’ double task: to act as though they are acting.

The vignette sequence is followed by two final (silent) images of Pierre and Jacqueline’s marriage. Since it immediately follows the vignette sequence, Jacqueline’s wedding dress appears as yet another change of clothing—a role that will require an additional performance, all the more so since we assume that Jacqueline has not entered the marriage without reservations, but as she confides to Pierre: “I owe this sacrifice to my father.” These words show that Jacqueline has planned to follow through with the agreement concluded with her father earlier in the film, and it is unlikely that her professional consciousness as a lawyer would allow her to break her word. It is the father who resorts to scheming in order to remain in control of his daughter and of the other women (Mrs. Serval and Marie, the housekeeper) since they were also ignorant of his intention to trick Jacqueline. The series of shot/reverse-angle shots shifts attention away from the older men and aims to capture an intimate visual exchange between
Jacqueline and Pierre. Jacqueline’s expression, rather than showing happiness that her father approves of Pierre, depicts incredulity and emptiness at having been duped.

A father’s desire to maintain control over his daughter is a recurring theme in Darrieux’s films of the 1930s and resonates with anxieties inspired by the ‘independent woman’ (see section 1.1) of the 1920s and 30s. Un mauvais garçon shows how such anxieties were compounded in the city of Paris where access to professional opportunities outside the home increasingly brought women into the public sphere. As Burch and Sellier put it:

> Ce qui est en jeu dans l’imaginaire patriarcal, à travers cette figure de “Jeune fille moderne,” c’est le contrôle, ressenti comme de plus en plus urgent, de la “femme nouvelle,” celle qui travaille au dehors et qui risque ainsi d’échapper aux hommes (30).

In Un mauvais garçon, Jacqueline’s most intense moments of pleasure occur outside the home away from the watchful eye of the father (Jacqueline’s parents frequently visit her apartment unannounced): in front of the Faculté de droit, she learns that she has successfully obtained her law degree, an event that marks her entry into professional life; later in the film, on the way to her first professional appointment, Jaqueline enjoys a few minutes of solitary pleasure behind the wheel of her car; and finally, her excursions to Belleville with Pierre and his gang allow her to escape the restrictions of bourgeois family life.

The scene in which Jacqueline experiences the pleasure of driving alone in her car through the streets of Paris merits closer analysis for the way in which the experience of driving is depicted as “a new subjectivity (whose circumference, unlike that of domestic subjectivity, is nowhere and everywhere)...” (Ross 22). What Ross refers to as a “new subjectivity” is more closely aligned with post-War France consumerism and the
1950s than it is with the 1930s when economic and social conditions prohibited most middle-class French from owning a car. Jacqueline receives a telephone call from the judge informing her that she has been assigned to defend Pierre. She is aware that establishing herself as a reputable lawyer may take a long time (“you need twenty years to make a name for yourself”) and that this assignment may turn out to be the impetus she needs to jump-start her career. Jacqueline’s attire and make-up all reflect an impeccable balance of masculine and feminine: the necktie and hat give a sleek, androgynous touch to her tailored suit while her thin eyebrows and lipstick add a touch of glamour.

During the two-minute scene, a series of reverse-angle shots alternates between Jacqueline in medium close-up with her hands on the wheel to a point-of-view shot of what she sees through the windshield of her car: she proudly speeds through the city streets, skillfully dodging cars and pedestrians. Jacqueline’s joy builds as the scene progresses. After forty-five seconds of driving (the orchestral film score reinforces the excitement), we see a close-up of Jacqueline’s gloved hand turning the radio dial to the “poste parisien.” A masculine voice is transmitted through the speakers singing one of the film’s theme songs “Je n’donnerais pas ma place.” She listens to the song then responds as if the male voice were singing directly to her: “Are you kidding? I wouldn’t give it up for anything!”

The scene is filmed entirely in Jacqueline’s car, a private enclosed space that allows spectators to share in this moment of bliss with her. As she starts to sing along with the radio, we see that her song serves as an outlet for her joie de vivre and satisfaction with being part of the city’s flow of traffic. Thanks to the point of view shots,
we are able to share the sensations of speed and fluidity from Jacqueline’s privileged viewpoint.

The mise-en-scène uses modern objects like the car and the radio to align Jacqueline (and Darrieux as a star) with the practices and perspectives introduced by modern technology. Jacqueline’s car, later ridiculed by Pierre, is a symbol of her freedom and mobile femininity. It lets her pass unrestricted through urban space, taking part in the public sphere of work and urban life. The perspective from the driver’s seat, gazing through the windshield, gives Jacqueline access to what Anne Friedberg calls the “mobilized gaze” of the flâneur, a traditionally male figure. Friedberg recalls that, “Although flânerie began as a predominantly male perceptual mode it was, by mid-nineteenth century, available to women—first as shoppers, then, as tourists and cinema-goers” (184). The position of women as drivers extends the “ambulatory gaze” a step further because it opens up new possibilities for looking associated with speed and fluidity.

4. 3. From the Latin Quarter to the Boulevard: Female Flânerie in Abus de confiance

In our analysis of Un mauvais garçon, we saw that journeys through urban space, thanks to the speed and fluid sensations of the automobile, provide women a distinctly modern access to the pleasure of the “mobilized gaze,” first used to describe the “one-way looking” privileges of the flâneur, and then later to describe women’s experience as consumers and cinema spectators (184). This section will take a step back from the speed of the automobile to examine women’s relation to the act of flânerie itself, the act of aimless strolling by foot through urban space.
The film tells the story of a young student, Lydia, who is struggling to make ends meet in the city after the death of her last living relative. Unable to continue studying law at the Sorbonne, she is faced with two options: sell herself out of necessity or resort to deception. Her friend Alice suggests the latter and presents her with a diary found among some old books in her parents’ antique shop. Lydia uses the diary to pass herself off as the biological daughter of Jacques Ferney, a wealthy writer and historian. Like many Darrieux films of the 1930s, *Abus de confiance* is a tale of social mobility and identity searching. Lydia starts off as a poor, orphaned student, and by the end of the film, she has attained social prestige as a lawyer who defends delinquent children. In one of the final scenes, Lydia dramatically pleads the case of young woman who has committed the same misdeed as Lydia. The film ends with Lydia marrying Jacques Ferney’s assistant, Pierre, and in spite of her offense, being accepted as a part of the family by Ferney’s wife, who insists that the “*abus de confiance*” will remain their secret.

*Abus de confiance* was announced in *La Cinématographie française* in February 1937 as one of the most important films of the year, mainly due to the prestige of its star cast led by Danielle Darrieux, and that of its producer (Joseph Bercholz), director (Henri Decoin), and scriptwriter (Pierre Wolff). The film was a popular and critical success during the 1937-1939 season (Crisp, *Genre* 324), and on November 20, 1937, it received a *grand prix avec félicitations du jury* at the Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne.

Darrieux was particularly suited to play the young woman adrift after her leading role in *Mauvaise graine*. In this film, Darrieux plays Jeanette, a young woman associated with a gang of car thieves, whose role is to distract rich automobilists while her associates carry out thefts. One of the gang members, Henri, is the son of a doctor.
and from a higher social class, but his fascination with the underworld leads him to join the gang. In the end, after the death of one of their closest friends, Jeanette and Henri decide to make a fresh start and board a ship destined for Casablanca. Even though the film was labeled a comedy, it is truly a hybrid film that deals with the serious theme of youth culture and urban delinquency. The main characters’ desire for escape, to start over and make a new life in the colonies, also gives the film poetic realism undertones. Darrieux speaks of the “audacity” of the film in her autobiography, recalling how the film’s theme and location shooting anticipate the New Wave (Darrieux and Ferrière 21).

In terms of the social context of the film’s production, Abus de confiance was inspired by the journalistic investigations of Alexis Denan, who was among the first journalists to denounce the lack of legal protection for minors in France (Chirat, Henri Decoin 244). Often referred to in the press as “l’enfance malheureuse” in reference to the treatment they received in controversial children’s prisons, these delinquent children were chronicled by Denan in the Parisian daily, Paris-Soir, from 1934-36. His most famous article was an open letter to the French nation on May 31, 1936 in Paris-Soir in which he demands a legal framework to protect criminal minors: “Nous demandons qu’il en soit de l’Enfance malheureuse dans ce pays et de l’Enfance tout court, comme il en est des jardins et des monuments des villes qui sont placés sous la protection du public.” The opening night gala for the release of Abus de confiance took place on November 29, 1937, at the Madeleine-Cinéma under the auspices of Paris-Soir to raise money for Denan’s cause (“Une grande soirée parisienne: le gala d’Abus de Confiance”). Darrieux announced to the press that she was delighted with the film’s focus on class, stating that “For the first time, I’ll be able to play a poor young woman.”
Thirties youth culture was a topic of great interest to Henri Decoin. From his debut in the film industry in the late twenties as a scriptwriter through the end of the decade, Decoin aimed to incorporate contemporary issues concerning 1930s youth culture into his scenarios. After having spent his youth in Paris working to support his family, then as a record-setting swimmer and member of the French Olympic water polo team, he was mobilized in 1914. It was during the war that he began to write short stories that he submitted to the Parisian dailies (Chirat, Henri Decoin 228). After the war, he returned to his passion for youth culture and sports and began writing scripts for a handful of films about cycling, soccer and boxing.

In 1932, Decoin was working as scriptwriter on the film Hôtel des étudiants (Viktor Tourjansky, 1932) when he was praised for his skillfully crafted sentimental story that resonated with the times (234), in particular with the marginalized and disadvantaged youth of the 1930s. Decoin directed two dramas (Abus de confiance, Retour à l’aube) that, at times, recall poetic realism’s use of dark atmospheres and doomed protagonists. During his collaboration with Darrieux, Decoin aimed to explore aspects of youth culture from a female perspective: “… dans les films de son mari, Danielle Darrieux incarne, à cette époque, la vitalité de la jeunesse combative et optimiste face à une société sclérosée” (Grandmaire). He does this by creating new cinematic roles for young women.

In Abus de confiance, he places Darrieux in the role of a female student who courageously faces society’s unwillingness to accept young women as anything other than sexual objects. By 1937 in France, young women did have access to university education, but the gender balance still fell strongly in favor of male students. According to Lécuyer’s study of the emergence of the female student during the Third Republic,
female enrollment in the university nearly quadrupled between 1910 and 1935 (3). In 1910, the total number of female students made up 12% (2,121 female students) of the total student population, whereas in 1935 they represented 28% (9,200 female students) (3). These statistics suggest that the figure of the female student emerged and gained importance during Third Republic France. Lydia’s particular situation in the narrative as a female law student pushes this new role even further. Women obtained the right to pass the bar in 1899, but legal power and education were still considered to be the prerogative of male intellectuals and philosophers (Sarde 620). Alice’s conversation with her male colleagues in front of the Faculté de droit affirms that they see Lydia as an attractive potential mate rather than a fellow scholar. They complain that Lydia is not interested in going out with young men, and for this reason, they protest, “female lawyers should be against the law.”

In many ways, *Abus de confiance* aims to capture the spirit of 1930s Paris with its location shooting in the fifth and ninth districts and its narrative focus on the real-world problems of a young woman. The fifth district, dominated by the Sorbonne, was historically the center of religious and intellectual life, but in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the Latin Quarter became associated with both intellectual freedom and political unrest as epicenter of the Paris Commune and of the student riots of May 1968. The ninth district, particularly the area encompassing the boulevards around the Opéra Garnier, is an important site in the history of cinema. The first film projection in front of a paying audience took place at Le Salon Indien, 14, Boulevard des Capucines. The Boulevard des Italiens, where Lydia’s nighttime walk takes place, allows Decoin to pay homage to what many film critics see as the two underlying aesthetic tendencies in French cinema: the documentary-inspired cinema of the Lumière brothers and the
fantasy cinema of Georges Méliès. The Théâtre Robert Houdin, where Georges Méliès
was a stage magician and director, was housed on the boulevard but was destroyed
during the final phase of Haussmann’s renovation of Paris, and the impressive Electric
Palace (renamed Le Cinéac) showed exclusively “les actualités filmées” or news on film
(Lemonier 162). The Boulevard des Italiens was also home to other grandiose movie
palaces like the Cinéphone, the Marivaux and the Aubert Palace, making it an exciting
hub for film-goers of the 1930s.

According to Midinette, a popular women’s magazine, Darrieux and Decoin
prepared extensively for the film by taking to the city streets, immersing themselves in
the student atmosphere of the Latin Quarter:

Elle garda à la ville le béret et les misérables vêtements de celle qu’elle
faisait revivre à l’écran. Enfin, victime du devoir professionnel, Henri
Decoin emmena même un soir la pauvre Danielle, coucher rue des Ecoles,
dans une chambre misérable, humide et sans feu. Presque chaque soir, du
reste, pendant les prises de vue, on les vit dîner dans les restaurants
modestes du Quartier latin que la Lydia du film devait fréquenter.
(“Notre couverture: Danielle Darrieux”)

Throughout Abus de confiance, Lydia’s quest is closely connected with her
physical mobility through Parisian topography. Her trajectory throughout the film is
easy to follow thanks to recognizable landmarks and can, for the most part, be traced on
a map. The film opens in the Père Lachaise cemetery of the working-class twentieth
arrondissement. Our very first view of Lydia is a medium close-up of her black
stockings and shoes as she follows her grandmother’s funeral procession down the
cobblestone alley of the cemetery. Lydia is represented by her walking feet, suggesting
that itinerancy will play an important role in the narrative. But as spectators, we are
immediately attuned to the dangers that lie ahead for Lydia as a young woman in the
city. The camera pans left and then up to a male bystander who is watching the funeral
procession from a distance. The camera traces his line of sight to Lydia, reinforcing her vulnerability as the object of his gaze.

In the first half of the film, Lydia’s emotional and physical resilience are put to the test as she battles the destructive effects of male desire. The camerawork adds force to the unequal power relations between Lydia and her landlord and between Lydia and the potential employer. Rather than using a shot/reverse-angle shot to depict these interactions, Decoin uses the two-shot to emphasize Lydia’s humiliation and subordinate position. Instead of being constructed by the looks of men, Lydia is threatened by them. When Lydia returns to her modest room at the Hôtel des étudiants, her landlord comes up to her room and tries to force Lydia into selling herself to pay a portion of the money she owes. In this case, a low angle shot of the landlord makes him into a formidable yet grotesque figure of male desire. Lydia finds herself in a similar situation vis-à-vis an older man who is looking for a secretary who can “work nights.”

At the height of her disillusionment with life (“tout est sale, écœurant” she tells her friend Alice in a café), Lydia decides to take a walk.

As we saw in chapter one, feminist critics have reoriented the debate around the controversial figure of the flâneur, to argue for the possibility of a female flâneuse. But unlike the male subject for whom idle walking and observing secured a place as the subject of modernity, the female urban subject carries more ambiguity. The act of streetwalking when practiced by women is associated with the prostitute, a female figure not traditionally granted the status of viewing subject.11

In the film Abus de confiance, Lydia’s solitary wandering through the city of Paris by night takes up more than eight minutes of screen time and marks a halfway point in the narrative. The sequence stands out as the most remarkable sequence in the film, both
in terms of its cinematography and its subject matter—unique in the context of 1930s cinema—of a young woman walking in the city. Juliette of Jean Vigo’s 1934 film *L’Atalante* is perhaps the only precedent for Lydia’s character in the 1930s. As Valerie Orpen has shown, random urban walks practiced by women characters are most often associated with the malaise of post-WWII society (Orpen 60). She notes that “These women are not just walking off some sort of personal crisis, but they are also quite literally ‘adrift’ in modern society, detached from their environment” (60).

What is at stake in *Abus de confiance* during the flânerie scene is not just the desire to avert a personal crisis, but rather Lydia’s desire for mobility and spatial relocation which comes in reaction to the victimization she experiences in the first part of the film. It is certainly no coincidence that Lydia’s walk takes place halfway through the film, after three episodes that happen behind closed doors: the sexual encounters with the landlord and employer and the first trip to Versailles to visit Jacques Ferney. The interior spaces function as traps for Lydia, either as the victim of male predators or as the victim of her own scheming (using the pages of the young woman’s diary) while the exterior spaces of her walk fulfill a cathartic function.

If interior spaces seem to trap Lydia, it is because they are associated with male figures and male power. Jacques Ferney’s patriarchal authority, like that of the landlord and potential employer, rests on Forney’s ability to deploy it in the security of interior spaces. Ferney’s study with its dusty historical volumes on the *Ancien régime* functions as a patriarchal retreat, enabling him to lose himself in history rather than face “modern” times. The city streets, by contrast, don’t necessarily appear as masculine spaces but rather as a space where Lydia has time to reflect.
If we break the sequence down into three episodes, we see that each episode is characterized by a significant event for Lydia: 1) Lydia walks from the Latin Quarter to the Boulevard des Italiens, 2) Lydia has a chance encounter with a male colleague from the Sorbonne, who takes her to a fairground and then attempts to seduce her, and finally, 3) Lydia escapes from Paul and continues walking while a subjective montage of images from Lydia’s recent past reveals her inner anguish to spectators.

The first and second episodes reveal how Lydia’s anxious state of mind is exteriorized in urban space. First, a lateral tracking shot depicts Lydia walking through the Latin Quarter, past the restaurant where she was previously refused service (she avoids being seen by the owner). She walks farther and pauses to gaze into the window display of the antique store. Then the orchestral score reaches a climax as a cut to a long-shot high-angle view of the Boulevard des Italiens at night signals the excitement of Lydia’s arrival and lure of the boulevards. Cars crowd the wide avenue while streetlights and brightly illuminated signs advertise cafés and movie theaters. A rapid sequence of two oblique angle shots, the first advertising “Cinéphone,” the second “Cinéac” suggest Lydia’s potential position as a spectator (a viewing subject) in this particular scene rather than the more conventional female object.

But this initial excitement fades as a subsequent lateral tracking shot captures Lydia in medium close-up passing in front of a wall lined with advertisements and posters. One particular poster seems to call out directly to Lydia (and to spectators since

Figure 13 - Nocturnal view of the Boulevard des Italiens, Lydia’s final destination.
it bears the same title as the film): “Abus de confiance, citoyens on vous trompe.” Colin Crisp describes the exteriorization of Lydia’s state of mind as represented in a “distinctly Godardian manner in cinema billboards and posters” (Crisp, Genre 188) since the city seizes upon Lydia’s anxieties. Rather than blending in with the crowd and passing incognito as she does in the Latin Quarter thanks to her unassuming raincoat and beret, Lydia is now walking against the flow of traffic, bumping shoulders with other pedestrians who stop to look at her.

During this part of the scene, Lydia is very much adrift, physically and psychologically. Her inability to blend in with the crowd is symptomatic of her alienation from society. Verdier, whose reading of Abus de confiance provides valuable insights concerning the film’s moral focus, maintains that Lydia is the archetype of the “pure” young woman without resources, “qui doit assurer elle-même sa survie économique et la sauvegarde de son intégrité morale et sexuelle. Non seulement elle est menacée mais elle n’a pas de rôle social défini, ce qui représente aussi un menace pour la société” (183). To a certain extent, Lydia’s walking then affirms Elizabeth Wilson’s analysis of the way women are considered to occupy urban space as disrupters of the social order:

... at the ’commonsense’ level of our deepest philosophical and emotional assumptions, the unconscious bedrock of Western culture, it is the male-female dichotomy that has so damagingly translated itself into a conception of city culture as pertaining to men. Consequently, women have become an irruption in the city, a symptom of disorder, and a problem: the Sphinx in the city. (9)
During the flânerie sequence, Lydia struggles with how her solitary walking is viewed by others. The fact that she is an unaccompanied young woman leads Paul to treat her like a prostitute, first buying her dinner then leading her to a hotel. The spectacle of the nude woman at the fair (“la beauté féminine sans aucune parure,” the announcer states) actually foreshadows the crudeness of Paul’s seduction, and serves as a warning to Lydia as to what she may become. But Lydia resumes her walk. A lateral tracking shot again follows Lydia down the street, but this time a montage of images from the past is superimposed on the tracking shot of Lydia walking. The montage renders her increasingly anxious state: several oblique shots of the neon hotel sign (“chambres à louer – à la journée, à l’heure”), an image of the photo album, a photograph of Jacques Ferney’s real daughter, the train to Versailles, the Versailles station, Lydia and Alice in a café, the job interview, the hotel, Jacques Ferney, Jacques Ferney looking at the album, Ferney’s wife, the Père Lachaise cemetery, and the landlord. The images come with increasing frequency until Lydia passes out at the bottom of a staircase.

4.4. Cinderella Derailed: Retour à l’aube and the Urban Fairy Tale

On August 9, two months after the Decoin couple’s return from Hollywood, they traveled to Budapest to begin filming Retour à l’aube. The film script called for twenty days of location shooting in the small town of Buldog and in Budapest with a cast of familiar French actors and actresses. The cast then returned to the French studios in

Figure 14 - Refusing to sell herself to Paul, Lydia resumes her walk.
Joinville to begin filming the interior scenes (Coutisson 1938). Based on a short story by the Austrian-born writer Vicki Baum, the film recounts a twenty-four hour urban adventure in the life of Anita, a naïve peasant girl. The choice of Baum’s text was fitting given that her works of the thirties and forties are identified with depictions of modern femininity in an urban setting (Soares 324), a familiar focus for Decoin-Darrieux collaborations. Although the film was set in Budapest, the city environment functioned as a stand-in for Paris in order to capitalize on the Darrieux-in-Paris narrative that was used in Abus de confiance.

The film confirmed Darrieux’s abilities as a dramatic actress while pushing her to adapt to the requirements of a psychologically complex and morally ambiguous role. A journalist for Cinémonde who was present for most of the filming recalls how the scene in the police station during which Darrieux was supposed to scream like a “bête égorgée” and roll around on the floor was particularly difficult and required numerous takes. The beginning of the film depicts Anita’s boredom with small-town life, leading her to fantasize about what it would be like to take the express train to Budapest and experience city life. The headline in Cinémonde neatly sums up the plot: “One day, one night… and then the return at dawn.” During the day and night in the city, Anita spends her inheritance on a dazzling, blue ball gown that transforms her into an imaginary countess. Her transformed appearance enables Anita to gain access to the luxury spaces of the casino and Grand Hôtel where high society mixes with the underworld. Thanks to Darrieux’s particularly glamorous star treatment (make-up, hair accessories and refined costume), the connection between Anita and Cinderella is loosely maintained, inviting the spectator to make comparisons between the “ideal”
storybook Cinderella and Anita who sinks lower and lower into vice as the night goes on and is therefore increasingly menaced by the 6 a.m. return to Thaya.

Anita’s return to the village at the end of the film is thought-provoking and leaves the spectator room to reflect on the extent to which Anita will really be able to return to her previous life with Karl after her adventure in Budapest. Retour à l’aube is also unique for the way in which it deconstructs the traditional Cinderella narrative, presenting the story à rebours and introducing a dark atmosphere characteristic of film noir. The film begins with a fairy tale happy ending that calls to mind many Darrieux films of the 1930s: a picturesque small-town wedding in rural Hungary. But the marriage, instead of giving closure, marks the beginning of Anita’s sense of confinement in the village. After the wedding, Anita doubts that she has found true love in the rather dull and unromantic stationmaster, who functions as a figure of order in the narrative with his impeccable uniform and routine-driven work schedule. The wedding establishes a state of order that seems to be characteristic of village life itself, an order that is challenged first by the arrival of the express train, which puts villagers in contact with the city, then by Anita’s personal transformation.

The contrast between the opening credit sequence and the wedding scene that follows shows the extent to which the express train disrupts peaceful village life in Thaya. To give a sense of the unbridled speed of the express train, Decoin and his team mounted a camera on the front of a locomotive and filmed the perspective of a train as it tears down the tracks at night. The quick-paced editing and repeated change of perspective depict both confusion and exhilaration. Suddenly, the point of view is reversed and the train advances quickly toward the camera. A cut to Anita and Karl’s
wedding procession makes salient the different rhythms of the modern train and the
slow-paced matrimonial rituals of the village.

The village first perceives the high-speed train as an exciting novelty, and Karl is
eager to take on more responsibility at the train station. With each stop in Thaya, adults,
children and livestock flock to the platform to gawk at the train passengers in transit to
the capital. Anita has been given the particularly humiliating task of selling
refreshments and magazines, none of which meet the high standards of the
sophisticated capital dwellers (“Je me demande pourquoi le train s’arrête dans cette
affreuse gare,” remarks a woman when she realizes that Anita is selling outdated
fashion magazines and spoiled fruit). These brief encounters with the city open a breach
in Anita’s provincial existence: between the simplicity that reigns in Thaya (represented
by Karl) and the figures of city refinement that she perceives with each passage of the
express. The contrast between the village and city is later maintained through cross-cuts
between Budapest and Thaya.

As the film’s title Retour à l’aube (the English title is She Returned at Dawn)
suggests, Anita transgresses rather than conforms to the traditional image of Cinderella
in the film, which causes the narrative to become disjointed and fall apart. Whereas the
fairy tale heroine is cautious to respect the conditions imposed by the fairy godmother,
leaving the ball at midnight, Anita’s first lapse (missing the 6 p.m. train) leads to a
twenty-four hour bout of reckless behavior that compromises her social position as
stationmaster’s wife. Rather than passively waiting for the prince to return the lost glass
slipper, Anita actively seeks pleasure walking through the city. In the novelization of the
film, the flânerie sequenced is described in the following way: “[r]assasiée, elle reprit sa
marche et cette fois ce fut le long des boutiques qu’elle se mit à flâner. Jamais elle n’avait
imaginé qu’il pût y avoir tant de belles choses assemblées derrière des vitrines et ses stations se prolongeaient” (Varinot 33). As Anita experiences the city, different subject positions become available to her: first, as a passenger she experiences the speed and physical displacement of train travel; second, as a flâneuse, she becomes a window shopper and consumer; and third, as a cinema spectator.12

The capacity of the city to transform Anita’s perception of the world is reflected in the following passage:

Elle continuait à marcher, heureuse d’être dans la ville, habituée maintenant au bruit, au mouvement, à l’espèce d’affolement qui semblait posséder tous les individus qu’elle croisait. Elle avait oublié Thaya, l’héritage, et ne vivait que la minute présente, si nouvelle, si curieuse. (33)

This description of city life emphasizes the thrill of living in the present moment and the experience of urban life as fleeting impressions and anonymous encounters.

In this sense, Anita’s experience recalls nineteenth and early twentieth century accounts of the “modern” city from the point of view of the male flâneur in the writings of Baudelaire (and later Walter Benjamin) but, whereas the flâneur made the city streets his home, Anita remains adrift in urban space and easily passes through masculine and feminine spaces, frequenting the streets, department store, hotel, casino and finally, the police station. In her work, Streetwalking on a Ruined Map, Giuliana Bruno discusses how women’s experience of urban space can be described in terms of “spatial desire” and that “the overlapping terrains of urban and spectatorial modes that provide pleasure for the female subject” are inseparable from their association with city geography. The spaces frequented by Anita (the train car, hotel and casino) are precisely the “deterritorialized spaces” of which Bruno speaks:

As deterritorialized spaces, trains, cinemas, and, we may add, arcades traverse and break up the formerly closed notion of the milieu. In these
settings of pervasive eroticism “consumed” by the collectivity, individuals from different backgrounds, classes, venues, and genders are transgressively put in close touch, share intimacy in fleeting encounters. (52)

The brief encounter that has the most dramatic effect on Anita is when she meets Keith, an upscale jewel thief, who takes advantage of Anita’s naïveté but at the same time represents “true love” as Anita imagines it. Keith makes a strong impression on her because he has everything that Karl lacks. He is romantic (Karl never courted Anita, but rather “chose” her), seductive and suave. The lyrics to the film’s theme song “Dans mon cœur” that Anita sings solo in the casino illustrate how Anita accepts that her city adventure and relationship with Keith will be all the more intense because they are ephemeral: 

Mais tout passe et tout doit finir / Tout s’efface, même un souvenir/ Et la flamme va bientôt mourir/ Dans nos cœurs trop lourds.

The film’s psychological ending affirms that Anita is irrevocably changed by her contact with the city (notably her romance with Keith) since she is no longer able to conform to Karl’s ideals. On the train back to Thaya, Anita unwraps the package containing her old clothes in an effort to transform herself back into the “old” Anita, but when she exits the train, she does so in a trance-like state that betrays her reluctance. When Anita tells Karl the truth, he refuses to listen. The film ends with Karl whimpering the words “je n’aurais pas dû te laisser partir toute seule.”

During the latter half of the 1930s, Danielle Darrieux starred in three female-centered narratives that depict urban space as significant in telling women’s stories. Access to the city provides characters like Jacqueline, Lydia and Anita with a momentary or more far-reaching access to pleasure and escape from patriarchal authority, even if such moments of escape are not without their own dangers in Abus de confiance. Although traditional film histories restrict Darrieux’s image to that of a
“modern ingénue” or “modern woman,” recent scholarship has shown that Darrieux’s star image was much more complex. This analysis of *Un mauvais garçon, Abus de confiance* and *Retour à l’aube* focuses on break-through moments of flânerie to show that Darrieux was the first physically mobile French movie star. Because she is often depicted on-the-move, taking trains, cars, walking and searching for her place in the world, Darrieux challenges the ways in which female stars invite contemplation as object of the male gaze.

1 Madame Darrieux gave singing lessons at the Paris Conservatory. In addition to her daughter, Simone Simon was also one of her pupils.

2 For a more detailed account of the legal problems brought on by the contract with Universal Studios, see “Danielle Darrieux devant les prud’hommes” (*Cinématographie française*, 2 December 1938), “Gala judiciare Danielle Darrieux” (*Cinématographie française*, 10 June 1939).

3 The one French film a year rule was part of recommendations issued by the major French film unions, the Chambre Syndicale and CGT (Sellier 2002: 203).

4 Each weekly issue of *Pour vous* featured a well-known actor or actress, most often in the context of an upcoming film release, on the front and back covers of the magazine. In his study of Darrieux’s coverage in *Pour vous*, Gilles Grandmaire points out that Darrieux is the only star to be featured on the front and back cover of the same issue (see “Daniele Darrieux dans le magazine *Pour vous*”).

5 Darrieux was featured twenty-four times on the cover of *Pour vous* during the 1930s, more than any other female star. Annabella falls in second place with twenty-one covers. See Gilles Grandmaire’s article “Daniele Darrieux dans le magazine *Pour vous*.”

6 In a subsequent article that examines father-daughter scenarios from the 1920s to *La Belle Noiseuse* (Jacques Rivette, 1991), Vincendeau writes of how the father-daughter relationship constitutes “a master-narrative which French cinema has repeatedly returned to, challenged or reworked” (156). See “Fathers and daughters in French cinema: from the 20s to ‘La Belle Noiseuse’ in *Women and Film: A Sight and Sound Reader*, 1993.

7 The ‘modern young woman’ here refers to young women who aspire to have a career outside of the home and for whom marriage is not the ultimate goal in life. For Christine Bard, the “modern young woman” was essentially an urban phenomenon (1998: 45).

8 For an historical discussion of the anxieties associated with the “femme seule” or “single woman” in the 1920s, see Mary Louise Robert’s chapter entitled “Something Else in Life Besides Love” in her book *Civilization Without Sexes*. She claims that the large number of single women after the war led feminists to consider the advantages of celibacy for women. Many women chose to adopt the term “jeune fille moderne” or “modern young woman” rather than the outdated “vieille fille” or “spinster” (157).

9 Christine Bard states in *Les garçonnes* that the movement for women’s independence was essentially an urban phenomenon.
Many poetic realism films of the decade explore similar themes. Decoin, however, never attained the auteur status of poetic realism’s most iconic directors (Marcel Carné, Julien Duvivier and Jean Renoir) because he experimented with different genres, producing both dramas and American-influenced light comedies during the 1930s.

The New Wave film *Cléo de 5 à 7* (Agnès Varda, 1962) notoriously explores the ambiguity of the female stroller as both object of the male gaze (as a famous singer, Cléo lives to be desired and looked at) and as desiring subject.

The reference to cinema is a playful, self-reflexive moment characteristic of many Decoin films. During these references to cinema, Decoin, ironically, liked to place Darrieux in the role of cinema spectator rather than that of movie star. In *Retour à l’aube*, this brief encounter shows how Decoin viewed “youth” as the true subject of cinema (quoted in Chirat, 1973). The man who approaches Anita states: “Vous êtes beaucoup trop jeune pour avoir des bijoux, Mademoiselle, les diamants c’est bon pour les vieilles femmes. Moi, si vous voulez, je vous offre le cinéma” (Varinot 33).
CONCLUSION

The city of Paris provided the setting for an astounding number of films produced in France during the 1930s. Localizing their narratives to the capital city, these films ask spectators to identify specific landmarks, neighborhoods, and urban types, and also to engage with different temporal representations of the city. Since location shooting was not a common practice, many filmmakers relied on set designers to model the city in studios. Although the studio sets created by Trauner and Meerson were highly realistic in the way they captured the atmosphere of certain neighborhoods (the canal in Hôtel du Nord), they did not depict the activities of the city center.

The 1930s was also a decisive period in the development of the French female star system. The three female stars of this study, Annabella, Arletty, and Danielle Darrieux, ascended to stardom during a decade when male stars dominated the French film industry, but the city film (although not an established genre in the Hollywood sense) became a vehicle to explore femininity and to open up a space for more complex representations of women.

Representations of women in 1930s French cinema reflect the continued diversification of femininity in the post-war period. Tensions concerning gender relations in post-World War I society tended to focus on the figures of the ‘garçonne’ and the ‘modern woman,’ terms that were widely circulated in the press of the decade and which referred to liberated women who sought an independent life outside the home. The thirties brought further economic hardship and low birth rates that shored up
efforts to contain and impede the progress of the modern woman in the public sphere.
This social context is useful to understand why the French film industry looked to the
past, to nineteenth-century figures like the prostitute or working girl, to give shape and
definition to an Interwar femininity that was perceived as untethered from the
traditional values of motherhood. The absent mother therefore becomes a trope in 1930s
French cinema.

Annabella occupies an ambivalent position in René Clair’s films of the early
1930s. In the films, she is typecast as a lower-class working girl, a social figure
traditionally characterized by passivity and repressed desires, but Annabella’s star
image as a sporty, determined ‘modern woman’ casts the figure in a new light. In
Quatorze juillet, she plays an aesthetic role in Clair’s lighthearted and self-aware
depictions of life in the faubourg, and Clair uses framing devices to invite the spectator
to contemplate Anna as an object of desire. The experimental and sometimes ironic
nature of Clair’s films during the first decade of sound cinema, however, also invites us
as spectators to step back and view such representations in a critical manner as
nostalgic. In Quatorze juillet Anna ultimately resists the role of passive beauty by
becoming an ambulant vendor, a position that gives her access to the city streets.

With many years of experience in the Parisian music-hall, Arletty developed a
performance style that consisted of comic insolence and working-class speech. Her
stardom was deeply rooted in the imagery of the east side of Paris in neighborhoods
such as Belleville, Ménilmontant and the Canal Saint-Martin. Arletty’s on- and off-screen
images were quite similar in that both project an independence and love of freedom that
were rare among female stars. In Hôtel du Nord, her sassy character allows her to recover
independence against the grain in her role as prostitute. As a prostitute, Raymonde is
supposed to sell herself, but there is little mention in the film of her professional activities. Her charisma and ability to use language against her male co-stars causes her to become the center of attention, even in typically masculine city spaces like the café. She comes to occupy the central position in the films she made with Marcel Carné, sometimes unintentionally, because as a mature figure her life experience renders her philosophical and contemplative. Arletty’s charisma also fit well with Marcel Carné’s critical use of performance scenes in films (Le jour se lève in particular) to make spectators aware of how they appropriate women as object of the gaze.

Danielle Darrieux stands out from other female stars of the 1930s because of her unusual background, being one of the youngest stars, and for not having been trained in the theater like Annabella. Her sophisticated speech and distinctly Parisian glamour caused her to be noticed by Hollywood (like many French stars of the 1930s when making films in the United States and Germany), but Darrieux’s precipitous return to France shows that she was not at ease in the Hollywood system.

A closer examination of Danielle Darrieux’s 1930s films shows that she was never associated with what has been referred to as the “populist cinema” of the 1930s with its nostalgic representations of working-class Paris (René Clair) or Poetic Realist dramas with their characteristic focus on male working-class camaraderie. In this sense, Darrieux, like Simone Signoret, does not depend on a “social community” for the construction of her identity (Hayward, Simone Signoret 238). Abus de confiance offers spectators a self-searching narrative in which Lydia discovers the hardships of adulthood on her own.

In Darrieux’s films of the 1930s, she embodies a dynamic, questing femininity that is uncomfortable with life being dictated by the typical bourgeois trajectory for
women. Because she often plays an orphan figure, identity-searching and lack of a maternal role model become central to film narratives. Although some of Darrieux’s celebrated films are characterized by happy endings in the form of marriage, the lengthy flânerie sequences of *Abus de confiance* as well as that of *Retour à l’aube* show that her characters are not content in traditional female roles. In *Abus de confiance*, Lydia rejects giving up her studies to work in a demeaning clerical job while Anita in *Retour à l’aube* leaves her small-town existence to discover the city. For Darrieux’s characters, solitary walking is a spatial practice that allows them to regain possession of themselves. As mobile subjects, they observe and seek out viewing positions in the city (cinema, shopper, driver). In terms of distance covered, Darrieux’s urban mobility recalls that of Cléo from the film *Cléo de 5 à 7* (Agnès Varda, 1962). Whereas Anna and Raymonde do not manage to journey outside the quartier, Lydia crosses from Left Bank to Right Bank, and Jacqueline is perhaps the first French cinematic woman behind the wheel of a car, enjoying the pleasure of driving.

Darrieux’s most frequent collaborations were with her husband of the time, Henri Decoin. Decoin’s interest in youth culture of the Interwar period aligns him with certain themes addressed by directors of the French New Wave at the end of the 1950s. He was also an innovative director in the 1930s for his explorations of femininity and alternative city spaces like the Latin Quarter where he filmed on-location to capture the vibrancy of student life.

Over the past ten years, a fascination with 1930s Paris has stimulated the public’s interest in films that deal with Interwar French femininity. Some of these films have a biographical focus while others invent heroines based on social types of the past. When contemporary films adopt these figures, they re-engage with ideas concerning the
visibility of women in a decade overshadowed by an historical focus on pre-World War II politics. They also invite us to consider how the 1930s has influenced later ideals of urban femininity, particularly that of the working-girl, prostitute, flâneuse and cinema spectator that we see converge in the figure of Nana in Jean-Luc Godard’s *Vivre sa vie* (1962). In the films I’ve examined here, the city is not just a place where the feminine is on display or for sale. It is a place where women attempt to create their public selves and itineraries.

Overall, this study aims to provide insights into the traditions and ruptures involved in representing women in 1930s French cinema. It also provides a lens through which post-WWII representations of women can be considered, particularly during the New Wave in the late 1950s. The New Wave was concerned essentially with breaking from the traditions and conventions that governed the classic mode of film production. My research on the 1930s female star system shows that the directors of the New Wave actually transposed many familiar female figures from the interwar period into the cinema of the late 1950s and early 1960s.
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