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VIEWING THINGS DIFFERENTLY: SPECULARIZED DESIRE AND THE AVANT-GARDE BODY

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation offers an analysis of visual and literary representations of the body in the avant-garde works of French homosexual filmmakers and writers from 1918 to 1939. I consider erotically-charged corporal imagery in various works by Jean Cocteau, René Crevel, Colette, Germaine Dulac and Jean Epstein. A principal focus of this investigation, which constitutes its significance, is the acknowledged but unexplored issue of the homosexuality of the majority of the French avant-garde during this period. Each chapter examines the visual and narrative techniques employed by these artists and authors to figure the sexualized body, while devoting significant attention to the literary, cultural and historical context in which these works were produced. Consequently, my methodology depends on close literary and cinematic readings supported by cultural research gleaned from popular journals, press and fashion magazines of the time. Literature, film and popular
discourses (including fashion and advertising) of the period are preoccupied with the display of the human body. I examine this preoccupation through what I call "specularized" desire which favors celebrating the disguised, fragmented, staged and overtly sexual body. I argue that images of bodies, created at the intersection of gay and lesbian sexuality and the avant-garde, must be understood as productive forms of resistance to medical and scientific discourses, as well as to heterocentric objectification.
For Philippe
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INTRODUCTION

In general terms, the subject of this dissertation involves an analysis of homosexual representations of the sexualized body in French literature and film between the wars. The impetus for this project emerges from the realization that even a cursory consideration of French literature and film of the early part of this century attests to the diverse representations of the human body and sexuality. Certainly the invention of photography in 1839 played no small part in the accumulation of images of sexualized bodies in both the visual and the literary arts. The photograph allowed for the possibility of fixing the body, its image and its surroundings, in a relatively permanent state. Naked or semi-naked, the body's image was more readily available in its rawest and most realistic form. Important examples of the proliferation of images of the body include Eadweard Muybridge's stop-action photographic studies: Animal Locomotion (1887) and The Human Figure in Motion.
(1901). Of the over 800 plates contained in Muybridge's earlier study some 520 of them are of the human figure performing various tasks (sitting, bathing, exercising and so forth) in partial or total states of nudity (Ewing 20). Although seemingly conceived and designed as scientific studies of the human form, the stop-action photographs of Muybridge and others like Thomas Eakins reveal a modest attention to artistic and narrative considerations. In many cases, the stop-action photographs tell a story. Plate 408 of *Animal Locomotion* depicts a woman approaching and then dousing another woman with a bucket of bath water. These images accurately convey the surprise and frustration felt by the victim. It seems obvious that Muybridge was attempting to capture more than the physical displacement of the human form. He draws our interest to the emotion and the sensation of human movement as well. As painters took notice of the technological advances in photography and freely purchased daguerreotypes of naked models for their work, clandestine demand for erotic photographs soared (Ewing 22).

Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase #2* of 1912 may certainly be read in the light of stop-action photography. His
morcelized and disarticulated image of the body undeniably echoes the more intact and more scientific rendering of Muybridge's nudes.

Egon Schiele's *Squatting Woman* of 1914 (printed in 1919) represents another example of the rapport between representations of the body in photography and in painting. The lines composing the woman's body in Schiele's print hint at the previous states and positions of her movement downward, and call to mind Thomas Eakin's *History of a Jump* (1884-85). In addition to the role it played in the visual arts, the photographic image served to anchor the body's accessibility to other forms of analysis, while reflecting rising interests in social sciences such as ethnography. Consider for example that in the field of ethnography there were, as early as 1860, established guidelines for photographing the naked body in such a manner so as to avoid claims of pornography (Ewing 18).

Nevertheless, if a consideration of the advent of photography speaks to the multiplicity and increasing accessibility of representations of the sexualized body throughout the Belle Époque and up to the First World War, it does not fully explain the new forms that images of the body took after the war. The impact of
WW1 on the body and its representation was profound. The enormous death and suffering of the war underscored the body’s vulnerability and potential. France lost some 1,300,000 men, most of whom were born between 1870 and 1899. French women’s participation in the labor force rose moderately during the war (many sources estimate six percent). Fields relatively closed to women in France before the war, such as education, administration and commerce were suddenly opened. Post war growth brought freedom to work more in general, and for women a greater possibility of earning a living independently from a man. Along with new socio-economic opportunities came a certain freedom of the body as well. The female body in particular, rigidly confined (in paralyzing undergarments) and extensively covered (dresses below the ankles) throughout the turn-of-the-century, rapidly needed clothing permitting its participation in the work force and thereby emancipating its position within the changing capitalist system after the war. French women of the twenties, especially those with a little wealth, saw the death of the corset and advent of freer moving fabrics such as Chanel’s “jersey.”¹ Beginning in the twenties, images

¹ The socio-economic and historical forces operating in Europe
of hearty bodies pictured in realistic settings began to appear in abundance in mass-circulated magazines throughout Europe. Seen playing sports, or modeling the newest fashions for the masses, the body’s presence became increasingly noticeable. No longer restricted to the bedroom and its occupant’s gaze, the body—in part through the agent of photography and more fully as a reflection of the changing historical, social and economic climate after the war—became more easily transferable, transmittable and transformable than it had ever been before.

The photographed body influenced literature as well. For their part, early twentieth-century writers in France chose to highlight certain aspects of the human body and sexuality in their works, while downplaying others. They chose for example, to represent the body in nature or at home, alone or with others, partially or fully clothed, etc. The language and discourses they employed for their body representations ranged from the medical and the scientific, to throughout the early twentieth century are complex and varied greatly from year to year. It would be almost impossible to avoid generalization or oversimplification. Some of the most detailed and complete studies of post WW1 Europe and especially France in terms of economic and social trends include: Mandel (1987), Becker (1990) and Duby (1991).
the imaginary and the erotic. Nevertheless, amidst all the variety, some apparent and specific differences begin to emerge. As a way to consider the nature and the importance of the changes in sexualized body representations after WWI it may be helpful to posit two common discursive, artistic and critical procedures for contemplating the body and sex that still have currency today. On the one hand, descriptions and images of the body may borrow heavily from medical and scientific discourse. The urgency of the AIDS epidemic, the literature and art this disease has produced, and its effect on the artistic world in particular, have only heightened our so-called newfound recognition that the human body remains dependent on the sciences which strive to understand it. Yet the medicalization of the body is by no means a phenomenon, having its beginning in the early 1980s. As Michel Foucault wrote in *The History of Sexuality*:

> The society that emerged in the nineteenth century—bourgeois, capitalist, or industrial society—put into operation an entire machinery for producing true discourses concerning it. Not only did it speak of sex and compel everyone to do so; it also set out to formulate the uniform truth of sex... As if it was essential that sex be inscribed not only in an economy of pleasure but in an ordered system of knowledge. (69)
The invention and influence of sexology, a sister science of the burgeoning field of psychology, like the invention of such terms as "homosexual" during the Belle Époque, underscore the progressive intervention of science into the realm of human bodies and their sexual endeavors. The literature of the period too, cannot seem to escape medical and scientific language and imagery when it turns to the body and sex.

It is certainly revealing for example, that the imaginary yet extremely knowledgeable discursive partner of André Gide's Corydon is a doctor. Similarly, it is hardly by mere coincidence that Gide draws heavily from the sexual behaviors of the animal kingdom to explain away same-sex love. Proust's eloquent use of flower and bee imagery to describe the seduction scene of Charlus and Jupien in the prologue of Sodome and Gomorrhe I unfurls similarly as desire is foreground and described in scientific terms. The insect to be studied (the bee) and the real object of observation (Charlus) become nearly interchangeable as the narrator (who defines his own position as first "géologue," and then "botaniste") ponders: "si l'insecte improbable viendrait, par un hasard providentiel, visiter le pistil
offert et délaissé” (4). These brief yet revealing examples from Gide’s and Proust’s text, once read in the light of Foucault’s notion of *Scientia Sexualis* epitomize the assembly and mobilization of persuasive and determinant discursive practices that slowly concretized the body and sex as objects of study over the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Furthermore, many would argue (again mostly reacting in some way to Foucauldian theory) that similar powerful praxes continue to circumscribe the body and sex today. The extent to which such claims are still relevant or not however, does little to dissuade evidence of the long lasting scientific and medical community’s privileged position from which to study and analyze the body.

In the most basic terms, if the goal of Science is the attainment of *Truth*, then when speaking of the medicalized body the goal would be to reach some truths about the human body and concurrently about its behaviors. On the one hand and more than often, the study of human sexuality, whether it be discussed in scientific journals or popular literature, follows a descriptive approach searching for some type of verity. Medical and scientific considerations of the body
strive to explain and demystify its functions and habits, just as the natural sciences strive to uncover the reasons and underlying causes of specific natural phenomena. By extension, the employment in literature and art of scientific and medical discourses to describe and figure the body seek to inform and reveal certain hidden truths about the body and sex—and to make understandable (or for example in the case of homosexuality, palatable)—its functions, codes and desires.

Yet the point of arguing for the influence and existence of the medicalized body model goes beyond reductive classification or allegation in so far as it permits a consideration of a contrasting and equally persuasive yet more oftentimes ignored model: the specularized body. Unlike the medicalized gaze of the body and sex, the specularized gaze seeks not to explain but to represent. Showing-off the body, putting it on display and re-presenting its forms, fashions and desires are all the concerns of a specularized body discourse. Questions of truth and normality, matters of empirical evidence and rationality are most often absent, if not
summarily dismissed with dispatch in specularized views of the body and sex.

In the case of the homosexual writer and artist the distinction between the medicalized and the specularized view of the body and desire become more pronounced. To return to our previous example, much of Gide’s work deals explicitly with the questions: what is true and what is natural? In fact, critics like Roman Wald-Lasowski read Gide’s texts such as Les Faux-Monnayeurs and Corydon as primarily concerned with the issues of truth and nature and their relationship with homosexuality. Proust’s A la recherche du temps perdu can be analyzed from a similar perspective. Yet Gide and Proust, in spite of their almost monolithic presence in the French literary cannon, and Gay and Lesbian studies cannons as well, were only two of many homosexual writers working in the early 1900s. Thus, it seems reckless to gloss over the vast production of other gay and lesbian writers and artists, or works dealing with same-sex desire of the period. Equally rash, although not uncommon in some scholarship, would be an assumption that the lives and production of “other” gay and lesbian artists and writers, or works exploring homosexuality,
were understandable as a reaction to, or a reflection of, scientific and medical discourses of the period. Usually the latter unfolds in biographical readings of these artists where the analysis aims to uncover some productive yet deeply problematic inner sexual or gender-related conflict which served as a "genesis" for their work. I would like to approach the relationship between textuality and sexuality from a different angle.

It was and continues to be common knowledge that the majority of French avant-garde authors, artists, playwrights and filmmakers were gay and lesbian. Scholars have generally considered the importance of homosexuality in literary and cinematic production in three ways: 1) avoidance of the topic completely; 2) consideration of homosexual desire as a provocative and transgressive expression against bourgeois norms; 3) psychoanalysis and explanation of it, oftentimes in biographical terms. In contrast to these approaches that seek to hide or excuse the sexuality of major avant-garde authors and filmmakers, this study considers the role of same-sex desire in aesthetic creation differently. I argue that desire of the "same" must be understood as a productive desire which seeks
and uncovers pleasure that it then employs to resist many literary, artistic, political and social forms of repression. This resistance, I maintain, is manifested at the level of the body and its representation. For authors and filmmakers like René Crevel, Jean Cocteau, Colette, Jean Epstein and Germaine Dulac, the body does not hide sexuality and desire, nor does it conform to, or respect heterocratic codes of nature and science, but rather it focuses and displays same-sex desire in the name of pleasure. Another reason for delineating the difference between scientific body models on the one hand, and spectacular and specular considerations of the body on the other—which lies beyond reductive categorization or a repositioning of the works of lesser studied authors and artists—involves an examination of how the avant-garde body processes and celebrates same-sex desire in the works of these authors.

Rather than propose a comparative analysis between medicalized and specularized views of the body and sex, I will bracket the argument for the former view as a valid and generally accepted one. Foucault's writing, and the work of recent critics such as Jennifer Terry trace the progressive and invasive nature of
medical, scientific and technological discourses in regards to the body. The matter of desiring another body—the spectacular and the specular body, hence the term: specularized desire—foregrounds this study. Questions which will guide my analysis include: What are the roles and effects of performance, visual representation, and memory in representations of the body during the 1910s, 1920s and 1930s? How does the homosexual author or cinematographer frame and compose the body in visual and textual terms? How is same-sex desire represented and acted-out on the body during this period? What possibilities exist for the avant-garde body both within and without the realm of the literary and cinematic world? Are the theoretical implications and processes operating in such representations? And finally, what do these specularized representations of the body reveal about the period, and the intersections of the avant-garde and gay and lesbian sexuality?

My analysis will draw principally from four theoretical frameworks. Rather than embrace any one theoretical stance exclusively or extensively, which more often than not tends to reduce a text or a film to a limited meaning or interpretation, I have
chosen to borrow from various literary and cinematic approaches in order to widen and multiply interpretive possibilities. As is the case with many modest interdisciplinary approaches, I have few illusions of reinventing the theoretical wheel.

The work of Foucault, to whom I have already alluded, subtends the inquiry on many levels. In general terms for example, Foucault’s works foreground the role and representation of the body as a legitimate and revealing cultural and historical phenomena. The multiplication of discourses surrounding the body and sex since the nineteenth century alone, underlines the thematic relevance of considering its place in literature and film. Furthermore, as Foucault’s prolific writings demonstrate, the periphery or marginal position offers a particularly revealing view from which to understand culture and history. Just as analysis of the treatment of the insane, or observation of the criminal speaks volumes about those who seek to reform and treat them (and especially the power relationship between the two), so does the marginalized perspective of the homosexual writer and artist reveal much about the society in which he or she lives. These broad references to Foucauldian
thought although present throughout my project, are buttressed by more specific applications of Foucault's conceptions of the body and power, especially in my analysis of René Crevel and the Surrealist body.

A theoretical influence related to Foucault comes from the revolutionary work of Deleuze and Guattari. Notions of desire proposed in the *Anti-Oedipus* speak specifically to how the body is desired in society. A Deleuzo-Guattarian reading of the bourgeois-capitalist structuring power over desire calls for a liberation of desire and pleasure of the body, echoing in some respects Foucault's take on the body and pleasure. Another crucial contribution drawn from the anti-oedipal conception of desire informing my analysis concerns the belief that desire is a process and not a structure. By speaking of desiring processes and desiring production, the notions of sexuality, sex and gender are opened-up and freed from heterocratic structures and patterns which impose predetermined oedipal pathways for desire. With the emphasis being on the process and not the product of desire, the body participates actively in desiring, no longer bound to be an object of study or psychoanalysis. Schizo desire, a seminal
notion in the *Anti-Oedipus*, roams and seeks connections universally and does so through a liberated, pleasure-seeking (and perhaps purely imaginary) body. Such an approach to desire and bodies more adequately informs the disarticulated and fragmented desiring-body model so prevalent in literature and film after WW1.

The notion of the avant-garde composes the third theoretical construct relevant to this project. The term: avant-garde seems especially appropriate to characterize the new form representations of the body took in the early part of this century. As I intend to show, representations of the body in the works of Cocteau, Crevel, Colette, Epstein and Dulac shun reliance on the scientific and medical body model. Instead, by co-opting the language of fashion, art, and society these artists and writers put forth images of a *corps sexué*—one that is revolutionary and innovative—and one that seeks to question both society and the entire language of representing the body itself. Certainly, the notion of the avant-garde has seen some heated debate and although that controversy lies outside the focus of
my dissertation project, it may be appropriate here to contextualize my use of the term.²

I will consider the avant-garde in its historical context (that is to say, a notion which took all its force in the beginning of the century), in its experimental sense, and also in the sense that the avant-garde must constantly confront the society and culture from which it emerges. First, in regards to its historical context, the term avant-garde has had currency in the French language since the middle ages when it referred to the part of the army that marched out in front of the rest of the troops. It was not until the late 19th and early 20th century that the term was extended to the realm of politics, culture, society and the arts. It seems most appropriate to choose this term to speak of the emerging form of the body in modern French culture and literature since the term itself (at least the extension of its meaning outside the realm of the military) takes

² Two of the most provocative models of the avant-garde are found in Renato Poggioli’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1968) and Peter Bürger’s book of the same title (1974). In a sense, the latter is a critique as well as a response to the former. Jochen Schulte-Sasse’s forward to the English translation of Bürger’s book offers a substantial comparative reading of the two works and the debates
its full force during the same period. Second, essential ingredients of the definition of the avant-garde appropriate to this project include the idea of rupture—especially rupture with a tradition. The avant-garde oftentimes represents a total refusal of the past and what the past represents as it seeks to break oppressive codes of expression and representation. As Jean-François Fourny points out in “La deuxième vague: Tel Quel et le Surréalisme,” in most cases avant-garde artists benefit at some point from more recognized and officially accepted realms (237). In other words, Cocteau or Colette were not suddenly born avant-garde artists. On the contrary, they went through rather conventional and sanctioned artistic periods before their more experimental work emerged. Crevel, for example, may not have ever reached the unique artistic achievement that he did had he not been associated with Breton and the Surrealists. And third, the avant-garde is a local phenomena and often times specific

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3 Bürger contests situting the notion of the avant-garde as a purely early twentieth-century phenomena. Regardless of this debate, the term clearly applies to the authors and filmmakers in this study.
and practiced in discreet areas at particular times in history. The kernels of an avant-garde movement of the twenties and thirties such as Dada can not be disassociated from the specific locales of its inception (Zurich, New York and Paris). In this light, this project will seek to understand various representations of the avant-garde body in view of cultural and historical phenomena and as they appear in such formats as popular magazines and reviews (Vogue and Fémina), as well as through various societal trends in hygiene (sun-tanning, attention to make-up) and leisure (vacationing, sports).

First, to take just one example, consider the relationship between fashion in the time period and authors which interest us here. Colette wrote essays on woman’s fashion and her fictional writing incorporates detailed passages on women’s attire. Cocteau too, who benefited greatly from his friendship with Coco Chanel, and was almost obsessive with costumes and clothing in his cinematic and fictional work, also occasionally contributed articles to Vogue in the twenties. Secondly, fashion represents a rich intersection between the body and society. Clothed or un-clothed, dressed for sex

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4 Ironically, Crevel’s association with the Surrealists most likely contributed to his suicide.
or for sport, the body's accouterments project its function outwardly to the gaze of the other. Fashion may be read as a discourse of the avant-garde body to the extent that fashion hides, focuses, guides and misleads (sometimes concurrently) the image of the body and the body itself. As Renato Poggioli notes, the movement of fashion is "avant-gardiste" by definition: "fashion too passes through the phase of novelty and strangeness, surprise and scandal before abandoning the new forms when they become cliché, kitsch, stereotype" (82).

The March 1934 issue of Fémina provides an example of the intersections of the avant-garde, fashion, socio-historical phenomena (such as increased attention to hygiene and sport) and the body. An article about hands argues that women must take better care of their hands:

A présent, tandis que les sports, les exercices en plein air, l'auto, ont fait des mains féminines, des mains tant soit peu viriles, on a trouvé le moyen de transformer, de soigner afin de les rendre méconnaissables, les mains abîmées de la femme . . . . Une main doit, avant tout, être souple, entretenue par les exercices de culture physique, répétés quotidiennement et spécialement prescrits. (31)
The article is accompanied by a two page spread of Man Ray's photographs of severed mannequins' hands floating eerily on a black background.\textsuperscript{5}

Finally, the fourth theoretical influence that informs this study, spectatorship, comes from the field of film studies. Theories of film spectatorship center on the role of the subject in the viewing process and especially the subject's role in the meaning-making process. Issues of identification, positioning and ideological systems and the ways they are structured in films (for example through cinematic devices and editing) lie at the core of theories of spectatorship. Judith Mayne's \textit{Cinema and Spectatorship} provides a comprehensive (although equally critical) study of the theories of spectatorship. According to Mayne, interest in spectatorship theory evolved primarily in the early to mid 1970s and clearly in relationship to discussions in textual analysis around the issues of narrative codes, the constitution of subjects, and the importance of ideological and discourse analysis. In film studies, theorists such as Christian Metz

\textsuperscript{5} Many articles in \textit{Féminia} of the thirties address the importance of sport and exercise for women. The review also sponsored regular sporting competitions for women ranging from bridge to skiing.
and Laura Mulvey, drawing from psychoanalysis, began to investigate the ways in which cinema operates on the subject—especially the way it structures and conditions the viewers' participation in aspects of dominant ideologies such as fantasy structures, dreams and pleasure (Mayne 13-30). Rather than trace the history and definitions of spectatorship here, for now it is more important to acknowledge my debt to the theoretical models of spectatorship and their implications especially to the work of Laura Mulvey and Judith Mayne. In many cases, my textual and cinematic readings depend upon the negotiation and constitution of the viewing subject, their perspective on the sexualized body, and the role of pleasure and desire in that relationship.

The names and works of the authors and filmmakers that constitute the corpus of this project range from well-known and prolific to lesser-known and modest. Jean Cocteau, one of the most diverse figures of his time, dabbled in many arts. He wrote and directed ballets, plays and films; authored poetry, novels and essays; found time to draw and paint. Colette, in her own way, broke many stereotypes commonly associated with women, but also with other
authors by writing novels, essays, short stories, articles, plays, theater and film reviews, criticism and memoirs for over 50 of her 80 years. René Crevel’s work, in contrast to Colette’s and Cocteau’s, has received little critical attention since his suicide in 1935. Although he is generally mentioned in anthologies dealing with Surrealism, he is oftentimes quickly labeled as the “only homosexual” in the group, and later forgotten. And finally, much like Crevel and perhaps to a greater extent, considerations of the impressionist and avant-garde films of Jean Epstein and Germaine Dulac seem somewhat underrepresented in the area of film studies. The reasons for their relative obscurity (especially in the case of Dulac) may in fact be due to the lack of information available on their work and their lives. Nevertheless, in the end, some selections must be made and for this project I have chosen to concentrate on a limited number of texts and works by each author and artist in order to more closely focus on the text or the image, rather than on purely thematic considerations. By limiting the analysis to texts and films which specifically display and foreground the body—its movements, representations, configurations and desires—and by relying on close
textual and cinematic analysis as opposed to thematic readings, I hope to uncover strategies and praxes of visual and narrative corporal desire applicable to other texts and images by the same author or filmmaker and to others as well.

Chapter 1, "René Crevel’s Body Algebra," offers a close reading of his most well-known work: *Mon Corps et moi* (1925). I trace Crevel’s opposing yet non-exclusionary approach to heterosexual desire. The focus of this chapter is to show how Crevel’s images of bodies-in-resistance call for a plenitude and a variability of desires, beyond the constraints of the binary opposition heterosexual/homosexual. In Chapter 2, "Jean Cocteau and His Men," I consider Cocteau’s difficult relationship with the Surrealists, while underlining the significance of spectacle and spectatorship in avant-garde corporal representation. By examining his body imagery, I show the Surrealists’ problem with Cocteau has more to do with his sexuality, than with the nature or form of his work. The third chapter, "Staging Colette: Writing and Performing the Body," explores the importance of the bohemian and theatrical periods of her life and widens the discussion of the avant-garde body to consider the
position and the evolution of the female spectator in Colette’s texts. In Chapter 4, “Germaine Dulac’s Pure Cinema as Specularized Desire,” I study two of her films: *La Souriante Mme Beudet* (1923) and *La Coquille et le clergyman* (1927) in relationship to her theories on the cinema and especially her notion of pure cinema. I read these films and her writings about the elements of pure cinema as rich examples of specularized desire. The fifth chapter, “Ultra Drama in Jean Epstein’s *La Chute de la Maison Usher,*” deals with Epstein’s *La Chute de la Maison Usher* (1928) and his writing on film. I follow Epstein’s cinematic and theoretical preoccupation with the body’s surface, and in particular the dramatic potential of the skin and the extreme close-up shot to unleash desire and sexuality. Like Dulac’s films, I see Epstein’s version of Edgar Allan Poe’s tale as a clear illustration of specularized desire of the avant-garde body.
In his preface to Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus*, Michel Foucault characterizes the France of the 1920s and 1930s as dreamy and utopian. Certainly these two terms apply to the Surrealists. In 1924, Breton himself locates “sur-reality” at the intersection of dreams and reality—an absolute and pure state of reality—a point for Foucault at which Freud and Marx meet. Breton’s reading of Freud saw great possibilities for desire and the unconscious as a revolutionary mechanism (Breton 24). To unveil unconscious thoughts and desires and perhaps even to act them out was for Breton the ultimate Surrealist act. René Crevel, a Surrealist writer, at first intimately associated with Breton’s group, also saw the potential

1 From *Articulations of Difference*, edited by Lawrence R. Schehr and Dominique Fisher, forthcoming from Stanford University Press. Used with the permission of the publishers. No part of this chapter may
of desire, both for himself and for his writing. Crevel's form of desire, however, distinguished him from his Surrealist contemporaries. Although credited with introducing the Surrealists both to hypnosis and especially automatic writing, René Crevel is often cited in anthologies yet is quickly dismissed and almost always categorized as the openly homosexual member of the group. His oeuvre has suffered an even worse fate since it remains largely unknown and even more rarely studied.

Given the recent critical attention paid to the role and figure of the human body in literature and culture, along with an ever growing interest in gender studies, the oversight of Crevel's work seems curious (Beizer; Brooks; Fuss 205-288; Rivers). This is especially true in the case of Mon Corps et moi of 1925, which unequivocally engages the questions of desire and the body. More importantly, Mon Corps et moi develops a philosophical explanation of desire anchoring the role of the body in the process. Crevel's writing attempts to liberate his own desire, rejecting the ideological bivalent categories of heterosexuality and homosexuality, while striving for a novel expression of his unique longing for corporal
pleasure. The focus of this chapter will be twofold. First, my aim is to evaluate the possibilities for desire suggested in Mon Corps et moi through an investigation of the figure of the body—its representations and its manipulations—as the site of desire. Second, I consider Crevel’s textual strategies for representing desire in Mon Corps et moi as emblematic of an avant-garde way of seeing the body. In this light, his text offers a fitting introduction to my project.

In the most basic terms, Mon Corps et moi may be considered as a collection of memories. Seeking solitude, the narrator retreats to a room in the mountains to reflect upon his life's experiences. Like many of Crevel's texts, Mon Corps et moi reveals much about his life and vice-versa. Crevel sought solitude and rest at a mountain clinic as he suffered from the effects of tuberculosis. While referring to another novel: Détours which was written shortly before Mon Corps et moi, Crevel wrote to Paul Eluard:

Ce manuscrit de Détours qui n'est guère enjolivé d'étoiles de corrections, fut pourtant très long à être écrit, car s'il m'a suffi de quelques semaines pour rédiger ce premier roman, je dois avouer que j'ai passé bien des années non à le vivre mais à le penser. Ajouterai-je que je le

For more on Crevel’s homosexuality vis-à-vis the rather questionable yet strongly professed heterosexuality of the other Surrealists, see Schehr Alcibiades 23-67.
Crevel's tortured prose reflects a less than ideal existence accentuated by disappointment and solitude. Throughout most of his memories however, the body plays a repeated and central role. It is possible to distinguish the various representations of the body in *Mon Corps et moi* into three groups: the body re-membered, the reflected body, and the body in nature. I do not wish to consider these categories as exclusive, but rather my goal is to clarify the various forms the body takes in Crevel's text so as to flesh out the relationship between the body and desire. By examining the different textual manipulations of the Crevelian body I hope to draw some larger conclusions as to what may be Crevel's philosophy of desire.

As an integrated unit, the body makes few appearances in the text. In fact, the male body is almost always partial, fragmented and/or cut-up. Crevel's body-cutting differs from the familiar mutilation and degradation of women's lips, eyelids, and hands found in many other Surrealist's texts, in that he dis-members and then re-
members male bodies. The first body reference in *Mon Corps et moi* is to the skin. He writes: "mais chaque fois, ma peau de fin d'après-midi, avant de s'étonner d'une douceur végétale, avait des réminiscences d'œillet" (21-22). From the very beginning, the skin's importance to the body is foregrounded in two curious ways. Firstly, the skin enjoys an immediate association with nature in its comparison to a plant, and secondly the skin remembers. Yet the latter is less surprising given that memory is as partial as the body. For Crevel, memory is suspicious. "Dès lors, comment ne pas souhaiter la minute où, libre de toute pensée il me serait possible de me débarrasser du souvenir même" (31). The mere thought of some "complete" memory, just like some "complete body," is absurd for Crevel. Coherent and total memory in *Mon Corps et moi* belong to the dubious realm of representation, that Crevel disdains, preferring partial dream-like recall, where all parts of the dream deny closure and synthesis. At issue also from the very beginning in *Mon Corps et moi*, lies the metaphysical duality of the body versus the mind. Crevel's narrator distinguishes between two types of bodies: "minds wearing bodies" and "bodies wearing minds." He wonders whether the body wears the mind, like it wears a suit or a dress for example, or does the mind wear the body? (23). The difference is important
since only "minds-wearing-bodies" experience desire directly on the surface of the body. Such immediate body pleasure distinguishes the "je" from the "autre" at the very onset of the text when the narrator proclaims himself a "mind wearing a body" distinct from all others who will allow the cognitive filter of the mind to rob them of their pleasure. Crevel vows to "ne pas renoncer au bonheur mais vivre, agir, jouir avec des pensées" (23). In order to combat the other's pretension of wearing the mind, Crevel's writing isolates the body of the other by dissection—singling out and valorizing their body parts—while ignoring their minds. For example, on one occasion the narrator seeks the company of a particularly well-made man, Pepo, to whom he refers as "l'homme le mieux fait du monde."

And yet, as handsome and pretty as the most well-built man in the world may be, he cannot remain whole. Pepo's tanned thighs, torso, abdomen, and varnished skin are enough to make the scopophilic narrator nervous:

Je m'inquiète: curieux de jersey, drôle de pâte. Je ne comprends rien à ce torse, à ce ventre laqués. ... J'aime la couleur d'une peau bien cuite, la parure des bains de soleil, mais tous ces étalages de graisses brunes, rouges sur un corps . . . (78)
In memory, even the most well-made man is as easily un-made as he is undressed. Pepo's problem is that he wears his mind instead of his body. Specifically, Pepo too is hypocritical in pleasuring his clingy older female friend, while secretly eyeing male cyclists' posteriors and thighs. The visitor to the lodge looses interest when he discovers Pepo's vain insecurity and theatrics. "L'homme le mieux fait du monde" is just not true to himself.

Men as easily dis-membered as Pepo will not suffice Crevel's desire. An evening at the boxing ring, where he can watch some true men-on-men contact might offer a more pleasurable memory. The memory quest for "real" men, however, falls short as the narrator recalls a pseudo dandy/artiste dressed in butch military gear named Jojo, squaring off with Zo, an amazonian he-man. Like the promise at the lodge, body parts suffice to titillate the narration, but not the narrator: "cou lourd, des doigts trop gros, et pour qu'on oublie le cou et les doigts, des jambes" (87). But the desired brawl between "real" men becomes just another silly spectacle. "Quoi, encore de la coquetterie, de l'art comme chez la danseuse de l'homme le mieux fait du monde, moi qui espérais des garçons vrais jusqu'au sang?" (87). A show will not suffice. The sight of thick appendages and manly chests in this boxing ring fade to art and artifice. Zo, however,
is more desirable in his raw and natural appearance. As the narrator describes him: “Végétal ou minéral. Pas animal. Ses muscles habitent un peau insensible. Protégé de la douleur, il ne doit rien connaître de la volupté” (88). Nevertheless, Zo has a skin problem. It is beautiful to look at, but too hard to touch: “Quant au corps il semble d’un bois précieux et verni. Il est très beau et pourtant je n’ai pas envie de le toucher” (88). What the narrator really wants to see and feel is the real thing—a struggle to the death—or a spectacle devoid of fiction.

Re-membering bodies for Crevel involves violence, whether that violence be directed towards the self as he ponders: “aurai-je la force de tenter encore quelques essais si je n’entrevoyais dans le geste définitif, ultime, la solution? (102), or towards someone else: “J’aimerais, avec la pointe d’un couteau, combiner des dessins sur tout son corps” (88). Even as a child, the narrator fantasized over the plight of an infamous murdereress most notable for her neck. He lovingly called her “la dame au cou nu,” or the lady with the naked neck. Like Pepo and the boxers, she too falls prey to the cutting edge of his memory and her identity has been reduced to her most precious body part. Besides the intrigue she provokes as someone who killed her own husband and mother, desire for “la dame au cou
nu" works differently than desire for men. First, the recalled fantasy is only possible through the intermediary of Rémy, an older local boy who supplies his younger friends with magazines depicting the plight of the infamous tueuse. The exotic "dame au cou nu" is desired for no other reason than her naked neck. "La dame au cou nu est la dame au cou nu" (26). In his memory however, her unique symmetry quickly unravels: "Ainsi, elle que j'ai crue l'unique, elle dont j'espérais qu'elle demeurait la toujours identique à soi-même, dans mon souvenir déjà, n'est plus comme l'œuf dans sa coquille" (28). At the very least the choice of the disjunctive pronoun soi instead of elle seems curious. The "dame au cou nu" surpasses and transgresses her own identity since in his memory she becomes equal to the neutered and impersonal subject. Moreover, her ambiguous re-flexive identity mimics the narrator's cry to be sufficient on to himself: "Or ce soir, mon souhait enfin réalisé, je me trouve disponible à moi-même" (21). For him a desire to be alone to seek self-availability, for her involves risking both complete disengagement and loss of gender.

Being available to oneself involves another representation of the Crevelian body—the body in the mirror. For example, most striking in the narrator's recollection of his sexual experience as a
soldier, is the role of the mirror. Unsuccessful in reaching orgasm with a gloved lady, the soldier throws her off to finish "the business" himself. The glance in her mirror recalls childhood masturbation in front of his family's mirrors in the hallway. In front of her, he becomes self-available through his own recollected reflection. Certainly for Crevel, autoeroticism in front of a mirror has advantages over sex with a woman. Looking back at himself, as a soldier or as a young boy, most closely resembles a state where the body is equal to itself. In the mirror, the desperate woman's body disappears while the reflected self appears along with another self and the soldier seems to finally enjoy his "esprit habillé d'un corps." The reflected image allows the loss of the self: "Et puis, devant un miroir, mes yeux ne sauraient apprendre à connaître ce corps auquel ils appartiennent" (129). A vision of the same produces another. If autoeroticism offers one definition of self-availability, then masturbation in front of a mirror offers a greater pleasure that risks self-effacement. Unrecognizable and yet the same, the reflected body disallows knowledge, forcing the mind inside the skin while focusing pleasure on the body. As a boy in a hall of mirrors, the pleasure process increases, as do the bodies:
At the age of 12, he has already become a **bricoleur**, tinkering with his body, processing desire, without making products. For Crevel, desire—whether reflected or re-membered—is always a process. In the mirror, desire as process centers on one's own body, while recalled desire targets the other's body. Both processes transgress the body's unity, either through multiplication or division, although neither process allows the body's autonomy from the mind. Inevitably the soldier, like the voyeur at ringside, finds little satisfaction in his sexual adventures. For the narrator, watching sex or being watched having sex by another is as amusing as rearranging books on a library shelf (127).

It would seem that the problem with desire reflected and desire re-membered lies in the fact that both processes are ultimately subordinate to the conscious mind. In a hierarchical fashion, reason, guilt, and conscience disallow the pleasure of one's own body and especially one's own skin. Crevel’s narrator turns to nature, seeking a novel desiring adventure in the mountains where
all pleasure centers on the skin. "Toute peau à cette altitude doit être bien cuite et offrir à respirer d'un peu près, une surprise plus affamante que celle du pain chaud" (117). The skin's baked surface, the hoped-for locus of ultimate pleasure, connects with nature and desires nature unlike any other surface. Nudity is critical to a natural body adventure. The body and the body's surface must be free of clothing in order to permit maximum connections between skin and nature.

J'ouvrirai ma chemise jusqu'à la ceinture. Autour de mon torse la brise essaiera un drôle de jeu. Chaque caresse s'imprimera en cercles de douceur. Des joies parallèles s'additionneront pour me donner la méprisante vivacité du zèbre et, mon épiderme devenu robe de bonheur, ma poitrine s'élargira et se tendront mille petits muscles élastiques et jamais soupçonnés. (117-8)

In a frenzy of half-sheathed bodily pleasure en nature, the body threatens to open itself—to offer itself up like a flower: "ma poitrine va-t-elle s'ouvrir, ruche enfin soumise aux abeilles du bonheur?" (118). Here the body waits calmly passive and ready to be stung by nature. Each body part wants to cede and become free:

Il faut être docile. Dans les villes mes pieds prisonniers du cuir s'obstinaient à quelque vengeance. Toute ma peau exilée, s'exaspérait jusqu'à ne plus savoir, après l'attente des jours, utiliser pour le plus grand bonheur nocturne quelque autre peau dont la recherche avait compliqué les
heures. Mais aujourd'hui la chair est libre, mes pieds ne se rappellent plus les chaussettes, les chaussures. (118)

Memory and knowledge become temporarily impossible as the body willingly succumbs to nature. The flesh too, finds a freedom it could not enjoy in the city. With every surface, every fold of the skin exposed and open, and every trace of the flesh set free, the body becomes curious processing pleasure directly while bypassing the intermediary of the mind. “Quel miel allez-vous donc m'apporter, désirs, dont j'ai laissé se disperser l'essaim? Je suis curieux de toutes les fleurs” (119). Even more liberating than reciprocal nature/body contact and curiosity, is the potential for nature to make man more than himself. Whereas in the city, man is belittled, pushed aside and alone, in nature lost in naked bliss he becomes Man. “J'étais un homme perdu. Je me suis retrouvé. Enfin je suis l'Homme. Je crois en ma grandeur parce que j'ai marché nu dans le soleil” (119). Only now, and through striking Rousseauist imagery, can Crevel explore the possibilities of what he considers Man's full desire [plein désir] (119).³

³The return of Rousseauism is especially evident in the ninth chapter of Mon Corps et moi. Rochester indicates that after his death many pages of Crevel's reading notes on Rousseau's Confessions were found in a suitcase (157).
The natural setting of the mountain proves the most pleasurable for the Crevelian body. Not only does a single desperate man become something greater than himself, perhaps even a symbol for all humanity (je suis l'Homme) but he becomes lost, found, and forgotten all in the same day. Later, Man becomes Earth as his body changes into a pleasure giving terrain. "Mes doigts à peine tangents, les laisse aller et, par le sommet de leurs petits monts sensibles, apprendre à connaître les vibrations d'une créature qu'on force à l'amour, au bonheur. Et puis comment ne point vouloir se perdre au sein des pays qu'offre un atlas voluptueux" (120). On the skin-map surface, the neck becomes an isthmus, while the shoulders turn to plateaus. This image of the skin as a sensual exploring envelope seems to anticipate Didier Anzieu's metaphor of the Skin Ego as the body's surface functions as the boundary, interface and site of inscription for nature heightening the process of unfettered desire (Anzieu 40).

And although at the beginning of the experience, the narrator believes himself a "sensual" rather than a "sentimental" individual, the mountain adventure reveals neither category to be wholly appropriate. In fact, from now on, the body and the pleasure it seeks and produces are only classifiable in their multiplicity: "Il faut tant
d'adjectifs pour me qualifier que je puis me vanter—ou m'accuser—d'appartenir à aucune catégorie mais à toutes" (122). Plural and universal, everywhere and nowhere, the body and the self get lost. The mountain adventure disperses and decodes the body and the self leaving it neither categorical nor recognizable. "D'une minute à l'autre je ne me reconnais plus. Je ne me reconnais plus dans mon corps" (122).

On the mountain and caressed in nature, the Crevelian body has broken free from traditional desiring relationships. Triangular and structured desire—described by Freudian psychoanalysis and venerated by men such as Breton—remains insufficient to describe Crevel's body experience.4 A more useful model of understanding desire in nature comes from Deleuze and Guattari's notion of desiring-production. In the Anti-Oedipus, Deleuze and Guattari propose that the schizophrenic out on a stroll is a better model of desiring-production than a neurotic lying on the analyst's couch. For them, schizophrenic desiring-production involves an immediate connection to nature. Such a connection allows multiple and endless contact will all life. The polarity between man and nature fades
away, and eventually becomes false and untenable. The same holds true for Crevel on the mountain where oppositions such as body/nature, self/other, outside/inside and the like, lose all meaning.

Nevertheless, Crevel's desire in nature can not last. Ultimately memory, prohibitive and oedipalized, reminds and consequently robs the body of its place in the process of pleasure. Memory also reminds the narrator of his loneliness. Even the skin in nature, touching and connecting with the grass, opening before a flower, finally succumbs to the mind that will lead the way off the mountain. The reader and the writer come to learn by the very end of the shared limitlessness of the skin, with the body and the mind acting independently. A tortured tone marks the realization that after all, the body and the mind are not so separate:

A la vérité, le mystère demeure. La peau ne m'a rien révélé. J'ai enfin appris que les contours charnels ne marquent point de frontières, et que les corps auront beau se prêter, l'apaisement ne sera point chose de l'esprit. (137)

For a moment, there seems to be no hope for the body or the mind to desire in peace. Alone, the subject is sad and condemned to suffer

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4 Crevel's interest in Freud's work was somewhat cautious. See for example: "Freud. De l'alchimiste à l'hygiéniste" also in Mon Corps et moi.
the body/mind conflict. With another, the subject will only be disappointed by false representations and ersatz eroticism. On the mountain, the body's solitary pleasure is interrupted by the mind that needs to participate. Far from abandoning hope in his search for pleasure, the narrator adapts the concrete mountain body experience to the abstract effectively involving the mind in the desiring process. However promising such a transformation may be, it remains unattainable with real bodies. Crevel hopes that an algebraic equation may offer solutions to his form of desire.

Proposing that "tout se fait algèbre" (138), Crevel seeks to manipulate bodies as variables and objects in his very own equation of desire. At first, the central equation seems rather simple:

\[
\frac{JE + X}{Y} = \text{jolie partouse}
\]

or, in longer terms: "I" plus a variable "X," on top of variable "Y" equal a nice orgy. We may be tempted to interpret the equation as a clever declaration of the author's preference for groups of three: himself, "la danseuse," and "l'homme le mieux fait du monde," or
himself and his male and female friends at the train station, or the
two boxers and himself at the boxing match. Such an interpretation
underestimates the primordial task that preoccupies Crevel from the
very start which is nothing short of figuring his own unique desire—
rejecting any individual or societal categorization of his sexuality—
and participating in a desiring-process that is universal and multiple.
In other words, Crevel's final algebraic equation not only combines,
but also goes beyond all previous manifestations of body desire in
the text.

Shortly before introducing the equation, Crevel ponders what
would happen if his project of reducing the other (body and mind) to
an object were successful:

Sans doute le malheur vint-il de ce que j'acceptai de
croire que tout se trouverait simplifié si, de ceux qui
m'attiraient, je parvenais à faire des objets. Ainsi fut
obstinément, et en vain d'ailleurs, tentée une
transsubstantiation, dont au reste, si elle avait été
parfaite, je n'eusse été capable de me contenter. (137)

Algebra offers Crevel the possibility of thinking beyond mind and
body, to play and manipulate the two at once, tinkering [bricoler]
with their different possibilities. “Alors, tout se fait algèbre, même
pour mes sens. Equation de peau sur les divans, lettres chiffres
humains se joignent, changement de place, cherchent des notion
d'égalité, sans d'ailleurs paraître beaucoup s'amuser” (138). Bodies
as objects may be manipulated, joined and equated algebraically.
Instead of just talking about love and desire, instead of just writing
and representing it, the author now needs to figure it out and
investigate its possibilities. Moreover, in abstract mathematical
terms desire achieves, at the same time, what individual encounters
and actions could not: the combination of self-reflexivity, and
multiplicity.

At the textual level, Crevel's writing of desire offers three
axioms concerning desire: desire is multiple and varied; desire
becomes enhanced through re-flexion or when it focuses on one's
own body; and finally, in order to be fulfilling, desire must directly
engage the body first and the mind second. Examining Crevel's
equation from a purely mathematical perspective and borrowing
from group and field theory in mathematics, we discover that
“je+x/y=jolie partouse” defines a group. According to group theory,
and in the most basic terms, a group is a set with an operation
subject to three axioms. 1) The operation is associative, in other

5 I am grateful to Renée J. Miller for her help and suggestions
regarding group and field theory.
words, order does not matter; 2) the operation has an identity element, for example: 1 is an identity element under the operation of multiplication because every number multiplied by 1 equals itself, and 3) each member of the set has an inverse element (a and \(~a\), or 4 and 1/4). All three axioms must be met in order to define a group. In many ways, the writing of desire in Mon Corps et moi demonstrates all three axioms necessary to define a group.

The case of the “dame au cou nu,” for example, who is desirable as long as she is equal to herself, demonstrates the identity axiom. If we had to identify a symbolic identity element in the text, it would be the body, or the body of the moi, as the site of self-reflexive desire. Just like the recurrent request to be alone (“tout seul”), or to be available to one-self (“disponible à moi-même”), the body of the self willingly and uniquely serves as the locus of desire. The desire of the soldier who can only find pleasure in his own hand, and in his own-self reflection pivots on his body, bringing back the other to itself. Yet also necessary to the self-reflexive pleasure of the body is the inverse image created by the mirror. As we have seen, the mirror image of the self produces the same body, one that is not fully recognizable to the self. The mirror fools only the body, and it is the
mind that desires and recognizes the image as the inverse, or as the "not" body. "Et cependant, ce n'était pas mon corps mais mon esprit qui demandait un miroir" (143). By asking for the mirror, the mind corrects, or perhaps punishes the body, denying true self-sufficiency, or solitude.

It seems that for Crevel, sexuality and desire are as variable as the elements in his equation. *Mon Corps et moi* barracks us with various combinations of desire and preference: bestiality (116;129), transvestitism (62), homosexuality (59), and heterosexuality (123-24). Although any variables work in Crevel's equation, just as desire has value as a process rather than as a reproduction, homosexual desire is preferred over heterosexual sex. For example, Crevel considers the act of human reproduction more as a form of photographic duplication than as some expression of love. "Et dire que cette passante pourrait me donner ma photographie: un fils. J'ai peur. Deux sous dans la fente. Et dans neuf mois, mon portrait en résumé" (80). Process supersedes product. He considers however, that friendship between people of the same sex expresses "le plus haut point de l'amour même" (135). The final equation, in light of his text and philosophy of desire, breaks sexuality and preference free from categorization. Desire is liberated, free to pursue and focus on
anything and everything. Here too, the anti-Oedipal and the Crevelian conception of desire share many commonalties: "Au reste, qui porte en soi l'universel désir, indifférent aux détails et aux petits profits, songe moins à satisfaire ce désir qu'à vouloir que rien ne triomphera de la soif qu'il a de tout" (149). Calls for such non-territorialized desire, ready at all times to move on and re-connect to something else, only foreshadow what Crevel prophetically terms a "premier rêve d'arc-en-ciel" (149), an image that today symbolizes diversity for many people. Crevel's dream of an unquenchable and universal thirst, anchored in the relationship between the body and desire rebukes any form of structuring or categorization. Interest and profit have no role in Crevelian body desire since for him sex and sexuality must remain variable: solely seeking pleasure. As a Surrealist Crevel believed in resistance. His writings like his sexuality resisted traditional conventions. Most unique however is that he envisioned resistance at the level of the body and for that reason Crevel's body algebra foreshadows an appeal developed by Foucault in The History of Sexuality:

It is the agency of sex that we must break away from, if we aim—through a tactical reversal of the various mechanisms of sexuality—to counter the grips of power with the claims of bodies, pleasures and knowledges, in their multiplicity and their possibility of resistance. The rallying point for the
counterattack against the deployment of sexuality ought not to
be sex-desire, but bodies and pleasures. (157)

For Crevel, Foucault, and Deleuze and Guattari, bodies and pleasures
(in the plural), are the terms of resistance. Crevel writes: "Mais
quelle multiplication depuis le catéchisme de mes dix ans! Ce n'est
pas deux ni trois, mais une multitude que je sens en moi. Duquel
s'agit-il de triompher? Il y a trop d'ennemis pour que je sois
victorieux d'aucun" (157). To resist the social constructions of
sexuality and desire would be less preferable since both are invested
in our bodies from without. Resistance is in multiplicity: in rejecting
such singular and pigeon-holed categories as homosexual, or
heterosexual, and adopting the pursuit of pleasures and bodies, and
bodies in pleasure. Likewise, with all four authors, resistance to
power begins and proceeds at the level of the body since pleasures,
and the pleasures of the body/bodies, belong to us. Our pleasures
are what allow us to resist the mechanisms of power that otherwise
dominate our bodies. As in Crevel's dream of a rainbow, Foucault
concludes The History of Sexuality dreaming of a "someday" or of a
"one day" when our bodies and our pleasures will no longer be
subjugated to sex and its powerful grip (159). As long as our bodies
continue to both contribute and yield to the discursive powers of sex,
and until our bodies are no longer the subjects to everyone and everything except our own pleasures, then both author's "somedays" remain a future, perhaps not impossible, yet difficult to imagine.
CHAPTER 2

JEAN COCTEAU AND HIS MEN

In 1951 the journal *L'Age du cinéma* issued a special volume on Surrealism edited by Kyrou and containing articles by Breton, Péret, Man Ray, Ferry and others. The issue wastes no time in declaring which filmmakers should be “seen” and which should not be “seen”. There on the inside front cover, under the heading “VOYEZ” the name of Méliès leads the pack followed by, among others: Buñuel, Vigo, Poudovkine, Eisenstein, Richter, Renoir, Dickinson, Prévert and Visconti. First, under the heading of “NE VOYEZ PAS” are the names of Lumière, Disney, Delluc and Capra, followed by Gance, Carol Reed, Kirsanoff, Bresson, Pagnol and more. Given the Surrealist penchant, and especially Breton’s own particular papal bent for deciding who’s “in” and who’s “not”, it is hardly surprising that Cocteau did not make the Surrealist cut. His name
figures on the fringes of “NE VOYEZ PAS,” number 24 out of 34
names. And although Cocteau’s name is sometimes associated with
the Surrealist movement, he could hardly be considered “a
Surrealist”—let alone as being part of the Surrealist group.\(^1\) Despite
his association with Antonin Artaud as early as 1922, the Surrealists
wanted little to do with Jean Cocteau.\(^2\) Nowhere however, could
Cocteau’s name be more problematically associated with the
Surrealists and Surrealism than in his film making. The first article
in the \textit{L’Age du cinéma} issue mentioned earlier written by Kyrou
directs us in part to the problem that Cocteau represented to the
Surrealists.

The point of Kyrou’s article is to laud Buñuel’s \textit{L’âge d’Or} as
Surrealism’s most powerful and most rightful expression through

\(^1\) Cocteau’s name is consistently associated with Dada and surrealism.
It was not until surrealism was founded that he was marginalized by
Breton. In a short article accompanying photographs of the interior
of Cocteau’s home near Paris, Julie V. Iovine writes: “Cocteau was a
surrealist who defied classification precisely because he excelled at
everything: plays, ballets, films, poetry, painting” (69).

\(^2\) For background on the intellectual and literary climate and
different personalities during Cocteau’s life, see Ashton 47-81;
Anderson and Saltrus.
de l'homme, a trouvé dans le cinéma son arme la plus fulgurante. La meilleure preuve en est L'âge d'Or, que personne n'a le droit d'ignorer" (4). For Jean Cocteau however, the most important thing about L'âge d'Or was knowing who created it. On several occasions, and in the most detail in Les Entretiens sur le cinématographe, Cocteau relates that people oftentimes confuse Buñuel's work with his own.

On appelle Le Sang d'un poète film Surréaliste, alors qu'il s'opposait aux films de ce mouvement (encore à peine nommé) et Buñuel me disait avant-hier, qu'à l'étranger, il arrive qu'on lui attribue Le Sang d'un poète et qu'on m'attribue Le Chien andalou, bref, que nos styles si opposés à l'époque se mélangent avec le recul au point d'être confondus. (26)

For him, it seems almost normal since both projects were originally discussed and funded at the same time by the vicomte de Noailles. Cocteau believed that his film shares elements of Buñuel's film out of some similar intellectual aura of circumstance rather than out of imitation. In fact Cocteau continues, and he makes this point in several places as well, he never saw L'âge d'Or until well after he had completed Le Sang d'un poète. (Entretiens 26) According to the Surrealists however, Cocteau's film is nothing but an imitation of the
Buñuel and Dali masterpiece. Whether or not Cocteau saw L'âge d'Or before or after making Le Sang d'un poète can be, and has been debated. Similarly, it is possible to see Cocteau's film as an "unauthorized" or "unblessed" expression of Surrealism given that it incorporates many elements common to other Surrealist films such as Un Chien andalou including: a suicide; several isolated extreme close-up shots of hands and other body parts separated from the body and seemingly edited in a haphazard order; a near obsession with partial and fragmented objects; a dream-like atmosphere, and so forth. These Surrealist marks in Cocteau's film notwithstanding, the matter of his place in Surrealism may at first glance seem fruitless to the extent that for the most part the Surrealists themselves considered him to be persona non grata. Cocteau too wanted little to do with the Surrealists. In fact, he considered his film an anti-Surrealist act of what he called the politics of arts and letters, which unlike Surrealist politics, had no political attachments. "Le Sang d'un poète était pour moi un acte de cette politique et s'opposait à la politique Surréaliste, alors toute-puissante parce qu'à peine déclarée comme telle" (Entretiens 42). And yet, why would
viewers (ranging from Cocteau's own contemporaries to film scholars such as Rudolf E. Kuenzli) so readily classify the film as an example of Surrealist cinema on the one hand, while others (such as the filmmaker himself and Breton) so hotly deny it?

In the form of a partial answer I believe that there are at least two significant and related possible reasons. The first and most obvious reason is Cocteau's homosexuality and what that represented to André Breton and the Surrealists. \(^3\) The second reason and the one that I will shape in the beginning of this study deals less with the specific elements of his film per se, but rather the manner in which Cocteau views, displays and employs those elements throughout the film. In short, the Surrealists' problem with Cocteau, the reason he doesn't make their cut, seems to boil down to a matter of taste, of style, and a way of seeing things. More specifically, it is Cocteau's particular uses of fashion and the gaze of the spectator—both

\(^3\) As I argued in my chapter on René Crevel and his role in the surrealist group, it seems rather simplistic to consider surrealism as a movement and the surrealists themselves as patently homophobic.
elements introduced in the two opening shots of the film—that set him apart from his Surrealist counterparts.4

Fashion, theatrical costumes and glamorous accoutrements virtually litter Cocteau’s film. In the first shot, statuesque, immobile, face and hair powdered white, Cocteau stands with an extended arm. His arm is loosely draped with cloth in order to conceal that he is grasping a plaster arm which makes his arm appear two times its normal length. Studio lamps litter the background. Besides concealing the visual arm trick, the cloth and the powdered face of the filmmaker foreshadow much more than the obvious central role of the statue in this film. Cocteau’s ominous figure, loosely draped like a Hellenistic statue, signals in addition the proceeding series of guises, cover-ups and wardrobes that will pass among the characters in the film highlighting their relationship and their similarity. For

4 Of course it is not always easy to generalize about or categorize the members of the surrealist group. Nevertheless, Breton’s Puritanism reigned over the group and held them in check on certain issues. Without a doubt, officially the group had certain stances on various issues and homosexuality was one issue the surrealists were “officially” against. This does not mean that independent people could not occupy marginal positions within the group. The American Man Ray is a good example of someone who was relatively
example, the statuary garb resembling a loose fitting sheet advances from the film’s creator (Cocteau) in the opening shot, to Lee Miller who plays the part of the statue in the poet’s room, and then to the poet played by Enrique Rivero. Although the statue costume might change slightly in its various reincarnations, the white draping cloth—both the sign and the threat of becoming a statue—consistently function to conceal or reveal the body in various ways. In the case of the statuesque Cocteau, the cloth hides the illusion of a hyper-extended arm. When it covers Lee Miller (a noted artist and photographer herself) the draped cloth creates the illusion of a living statue. Her arms appear to be cut-off when in fact the cloth covers Miller’s own arms which are folded beneath. Finally, the poet appears draped in the cloth (in a similar manner as Cocteau in the beginning of the film) with a laurel wreath about his head; immediately after he shoots himself in the head in the “hôtel des Folies-Dramatiques.” In its final version on the poet, the seemingly simplest of costumes, however, accentuates in a dramatic fashion both the threat of his becoming a statue and the spectacle of his independent from the group. Man Ray too, like Cocteau was influential in the world of fashion.
naked body. Loud drum beats herald the cloth's sudden appearance as it drapes the poet's bare shoulders. An important difference exists, however, between the cloth on the poet and the cloth on its previous models. Whereas in the case of the filmmaker and the female statue the cloth covered and created an illusion, in fact blocking and confusing the viewer's sense of anatomy, when it mysteriously and dramatically appears on the poet's bare chest, it is immediately resisted and thrown to the ground by the poet. The spectator is quickly treated to a view of the poet's sculpted and slim physique no longer laden by anachronistic costuming.

A simple cloth that drapes an artist's body (in all its various fittings) is only one example of the diverse uses of costumes and fashion in *Le Sang d'un poète*. Early in the film, in a sparsely

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5The April 1930 issue of *Vogue* saluted the preponderance of Greek statue inspired designs in French fashion. A Patou dress modeled by The Duchess of Gramont in 1931, and a "Robe Maggy Rouff" are good examples of the trend that continued well into the 1940s. These dresses share floor-length hems, folding and draping, white, lightweight cloth and they cover most of the body except—interestingly enough—the model's arms. In the "Point de Vue" section of the issue we read: "Modelées sur de vrais corps, des draperies légères mais voulues sauront reprendre et distribuer l'ampleur. Celle-ci paraîtra généreuse sans gravité. Abondante et maintenue, nous la verrons"
furnished room, the poet wears tight fitting cyclist shorts rolled-up to his knees, a white glove and a Louis XV wig. A low angle long shot from behind an easel frames the poet as he sits drawing. The white tableau on which he draws blocks any view of his upper body and face, but cleverly frames his bare thighs and bent knees. When the poet leans to the right of the easel his wig strikes an odd contrast not only to the rest of the mise-en-scène but it also highlights the exposed area of his body from his head to his waist—his naked chest. The visual parallel between the canvas that substitutes for the upper-body atop human legs in the low angle long shot, is only strengthened by the anachronistic wig that caps his body. A brief visit from a friend played by Jean Desbordes, elaborately attired in a Louis XV costume with matching wig, draws our attention even further to the fact that the poet is half naked.

Besides the poet’s friend in the Louis XV motif, Cocteau treats us to a Mexican man in elaborate traditional costume with a sombrero and a poncho, and even a wall-bound little girl in a leather bell harness. Both of these ‘fashionable’ figures, appearing behind

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intervenir en belles chutes verticales dans la plupart des robes élégantes...” (qtd. in Rachline 48).
closed doors in the “hôtel des Folies-Dramatiques” beyond the mirror. Similarly contrast with the corresponding reverse long shots that center on the poet’s bare back as he struggles up and down the hallway, effectively underscoring his vulnerable and unclothed state. Cocteau’s clever use of both contrasting and off-setting fashion continually draw our gaze to the naked male figure. If in the first part of the film, the fashions of the secondary characters highlight the poet’s naked physique much in the same way as his Louis XV wig, then in the second part of the film, after the poet returns from the mirror, fashion draws our attention to the theatricality of the film. Here, Cocteau dresses his actors in a series of elegant evening attire including full-length gowns, diamond tiaras, tuxedos, eye patches, capes, full-length black gloves and masks.

There is of course a close interplay between early cinema and the theater. Theatricality, vaudeville, spectacle and even magic are common elements in many films—both commercial and non-commercial—made before and after the first World War. Good examples of the role and importance of melodrama, slapstick and theater in early French cinema may be found in the following well-
known and easily available films: *Le Voyage dans la lune* (George Méliès, 1902); *Arroseur et Arrosé* (Lumière, 1896), and *La Petite Marchande d'allumettes* (Renoir, 1928/30). Cocteau certainly draws on aspects of the films of Méliès and Lumière. Victoria Steinberg’s “The Primitive Mirror and the Films of Jean Cocteau,” traces the important influence of primitive cinema in many of Cocteau’s films. She reads *Le Sang d’un poète* “as a treatise on cinematic expression, especially its source . . . an exploration of the blood of cinema, of its life-blood as well as the poet’s” (10). I would like to concentrate on one aspect of the link between Cocteau’s film and primitive cinema, namely, his allusions to the theater and to spectatorship in the film as they play out on the body. Viewers of *Le Sang d’un poète* are constantly reminded of their position as spectators. The second shot of the film, which follows the Cocteau-as-statue shot discussed earlier, is a medium close-up of a door handle and key hole. Cocteau’s shot of the scopophilic poet contorting his body to peer through the keyhole has become a classic film image of voyeurism. But the superb shot, as well as several others of the bare-chested poet peering through the key-holes of the “hôtel des Folies-
Dramatiques" serve to continually ground the position of the spectator. Cocteau identifies the spectatorial position in many ways. The film viewer like the poet on the screen are both watching. We as viewers are implied in the voyeuristic enterprise of the actor to the extent that we are watching him watch something or someone else. Whereas his gaze is framed by the key hole and his body hidden by the closed door, our perspective remains anonymous in the dark public sphere of the movie theater and is framed by Cocteau's lens. To use Laura Mulvey's terms, what this scene demonstrates is an instance of pleasure in looking. In simple terms, pleasure derived in looking, or what Freud called scopophilia, involves looking at others as objets and subjecting them to our gaze. The voyeur derives pleasure through his objectifying gaze of the other. Certainly, many films allow us, among other things, to participate in the process of scopophilic pleasure. By directly representing the voyeuristic activity in his film, Cocteau undeniably and indiscreetly identifies the viewer's position in the process. In fact, even without Cocteau's shot of the voyeur, cinema already recreates and solicits the scopophilic
fantasy. In Visual and Other Pleasures, Mulvey writes that cinema portrays:

... a hermetically sealed world which unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense of separation and playing on their voyeuristic fantasy. Moreover the extreme contrast between the darkness in the auditorium (which also isolates the spectators from one another) and the brilliance of the shifting patterns of light and shade on the screen helps to promote the illusion of voyeuristic separation. Although the film is really being shown, is there to be seen, conditions of screening and narrative conventions give the spectator an illusion of looking in on a private world. Among other things, the position of the spectators in the cinema is blatantly one of repression of their exhibitionism and projection of the repressed desire onto the performer. (17)

More than a simple voyeuristic journey through the hallway of doors, the images of the scopophilic poet establish a singular male viewing position of the poet/artist that lays the foundation for the ensuing plural omniscient spectatorial position. In other words, Cocteau's repeated use of the voyeur image sets-up the snow ball fight sequence that follows, begging the viewer to regard the whole scene as a mini-drama. In this scene, the poet—now a snow statue himself—mirrors and anchors the viewers' spectatorial position within the frame. The peeping poet at the key hole who serves as a
screen surrogate for the spectator has been transformed and transfigured into a statue. Form his perspective we observe the opening frolic of the school boys, the arrival of Dargelos and the death of the youth. The ocular mise-en-abîme of one singular voyeuristic subject perspective preparing a larger and more public omniscient view of the drama culminates when the school court yard of the snowball fight becomes a stage itself complete with balconies and well-dressed spectators. From the opening shot onward, it would seem that Cocteau has been slowly preparing the viewer to take a seat in the balcony lodges in the final sequences of the film. The magnificent attire of theater spectators within the film only heightens the theatrical affect and further anchors our own spectatorial viewing position. Even the actors on the school yard stage (Rivero and Miller), both former statues themselves, are wearing a spectacular evening attire. As if the role of fashion in highlighting the interplay between viewing subject and viewing object was still not clear, Cocteau brilliantly pauses the camera, and thus our gaze, first on Lee Miller as she abandons a card game to powder her nose and then on an elegant theater patron who exactly
mimics Miller's compact artistry. In Cocteau's spectacles, not only do the actor's costumes pass to the spectators, but even the actor's spectacular gestures circulate between actors and spectators.

In effect, the sequences in Cocteau's film tend to train the viewer to follow the spectacle in a certain way. In addition to asking us to see a series of images from a certain perspective (voyeuristic, omniscient, or spectatorial), in a particular order, Cocteau's filmic decisions and *mise-en-scène* ingeniously direct the viewer to focus on certain parts of the male body. The isolation of the poet's torso through circulating and contrasting wardrobes offers only one example. In the snowball fight scene, Cocteau's images move our focus to the young boys knees. Dressed in school uniform knickers with high socks and wool capes the boys frolic in the snow. Their dark capes end neatly on level with their knickers, only inches from their kneecaps on one side, while their dark socks frame them on the other side. The camera pauses languidly on Dargelos as he sits on the stairs with his still perfectly framed yet certainly more mature knees prominently on display. Once the younger boy has been struck down by Dargelos' deadly snow ball, the boys gather in unison forming a
semi-circle around his fallen body. The low angle camera shot frames not only the dying lad, but the approaching kneecaps of his schoolmates as well, as they approach to get a closer look. Here again, just as he did with the poet's torso, Cocteau is isolating and focusing the viewers' attention to a specific male body part through a processes of masking, framing and contrasting. In both cases, the role of male spectatorship is crucial to the process. The school boys, like the poet, must crouch low and get close to see the spectacle while at the same time, the spectacle itself (whether a dying boy or a Mexican dying by a firing squad) serves to highlight and show-off the naked male body. The pleasurable process of watching boys entails, among other things, the pleasure of boys watching. Put another way, every body who participates in the show also enjoys watching it at the same time. Pleasure in looking, as Mulvey points out, may involve "circumstances in which looking itself is a source of pleasure, just as, in the reverse formation, there is pleasure in being looked at" (16). In Cocteau's film, the acts of looking and seeing circulate; they are as easily transferred and reversible as they are obvious.
One way to conceive of this process of reciprocal valorization of the body-as-spectacle or body-on-stage and the consequent effect on the viewer would be to describe it as a form of desire. That is to say that the subject within the film struggles to see what will only put him more on display. The visual act itself becomes a sexually charged display of the body. This type of gaze, that Cocteau continually employs throughout the film, typifies what may be considered a form of specularized desire. I believe that there are some important distinctions to be made between Cocteau’s economy of desire and spectacle and what may be said about the male gaze in film in general. First, what is usually considered the active/passive dichotomy between the male subject and the female object does not apply. According to Laura Mulvey:

In a world order by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. Women displayed as sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle... she holds the look, and plays to and signifies male desire. (19)

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In Cocteau's snow fight scene there are no women. It is possible to see the dying boy as a substitute for the passive women (or in this case passive object of desire) but to do so would be to ignore the meticulous effort devoted to costuming, editing and framing in this sequence. In the school yard, as in theater, everyone is active in the spectacle. The gaze and the desire it carries circulate between those who are looked-at and those who do the looking. In Cocteau's film, when the pleasure of looking roams between spectators of the same sex, everyone becomes subject and object. As a consequence, the active/passive distinction dissolves. Moreover, bodies in *Le Sang d'un poète* continually resist passivity through their staging and their display. A specularized gaze of the body enjoys displaying and representing the body, its fashions, its sexuality, and its sex. Pleasure is at the heart of this desiring process. In Cocteau's film, the pleasure of the voyeur, like the grandeur of the theater, heightens the dynamic display of the naked male torso, back and knees. Staging the male body, telescoping its naked spectacle through costumes and drama are at the heart of Cocteau's film. The role of
the specularized gaze in *Le Sang d'un poète* is particularly relevant to
a discussion of this film's relation to Surrealism.

Cocteau's skill at training the spectator and at creating a visual
praxis that operates on the male body contradicts one of the core
tenets of Surrealist film. According to Rudolf E. Kuenzli, Surrealist
films, in contrast to popular films, depend on a certain passivity of
the spectator. Basing his assertion Breton's writings on the cinema
and the film viewing habits of men like Breton and Man Ray, Kuenzli
writes:

> In reading Breton's, Desnos's and Buñuel's writings on film, we realize that the Surrealists had two quite
different notions regarding film and the activities of the
Surrealist spectator: popular films demanded an active
viewer, whereas truly Surrealist films posited a passive
spectator. (8)

André Breton, for example, found great value in dropping in at
random to a theater. Without consulting the start time or the title of
a film, he would rather just arrive and leave at will, completely
wanting to avoid being bored with the film's plot or diegetic
elements. Man Ray made special prism glasses to distort the images
on the screen. Similar to Breton, he would choose a film based on the
comfort of the seats. On some occasions, the Surrealists would leave in the middle of one film in a particular theater and rush to another across town. In this way, Breton believed, "one came out charged for a few days" (qtd. in Kuenzli, 8). Their goal in viewing films in this way was to avoid participation and complicity in the symbolic order of any single film's plot. These men wanted to free their unconscious minds by barraging themselves with juxtaposing images and inharmonious narratives. The Surrealists valued passivity in film viewing because they hoped it would permit the unpredictable and violent drives of the unconscious to break free to the surface. Thus a primary goal of Surrealist film involves barraging the spectator with non-narrative juxtaposing images that in effect make the spectator's mind passive and open to unconscious wandering. The point was to disorient the spectator's mind to the point where sur-reality can issue forth—liberating the unconscious in the process (Kuenzli 9).

*Le Sang d'un poète*, in contrast to a classic Surrealist film such as *Un Chien andalou*, incorporates just enough coherence to disallow complete spectatorial passivity in most viewers. In fact, Cocteau uses cinematic techniques such as visually opposing unrelated images (i.e.
the Mexican in front of the firing squad followed by the shot of human forms in the shadows preparing to consume opium) in combination with cinematic aesthetic elements such as costumes, props and lighting, to draw the spectator’s attention and gaze specifically to the male body.

There is another important way in which Cocteau’s film contrasts with Surrealist film. Consider for example the visceral images of death and body mutilation in both *Un Chien andalou* and *Le Sang d’un poète*. The razor on the eye in *Un Chien andalou* and the suicide of the poet in *Le Sang d’un poète* are by far the most memorable scenes. The primary difference between the way these two relatively disturbing events are portrayed lies precisely in the theatricality and cinematic apparatus the two films employ. In Buñuel’s film, the razor on the eye comes almost without warning. The images are cut in rapid succession. In *Le Sang d’un poète* on the other hand, the suicide becomes a mini-drama within a drama. Like the slow motion wind-up of Dargelos’ arm as he releases the deadly snowball, the poet’s suicide is dramatically and painstakingly prepared. First, the revolver is produced from outside the frame
while a voice narrates the proper use of the weapon. Second, in a
grandiose gesture the poet places the revolver to his head and pulls
the trigger. The appearance of the white cloth and laurel wreath
only heighten the effect. In general, Surrealist films do not use slow-
motion. According to Kuenzli, Surrealist films would tend to avoid
the slow motion because it would upset the sense of what is familiar
in the film to the viewer. The familiar in a Surrealist film is
necessary in order to effectively disrupt the spectators reality and
open their mind to a hidden unconscious (Kuenzli 10). In a so-called
Surrealist film, there are no rehearsals, no preparations, no slowing
down the fatal blow, or the fatal cut. Cocteau, however, seems to
relish the moment, to cherish it so much that in some cases he
repeats the gesture as he does in the case of Dargelos winding-up to
release the snow ball, or the Mexican revolutionary falling in front of
the firing squad. The repetition, the lengthening and the mirroring
of all these scenes build their spectactularity and signal the viewer to
pay attention, or push them to wonder at what they are about to see.
All of these effects keep the viewer active and aware of their
spectatorial position vis-à-vis the images.
In the end, however, the Surrealist dislike for Cocteau's film most likely went beyond the matter of a non-passive spectator, or the repeated cinematic techniques and signals that draw the viewer's attention to the spectacle. In fact, by placing Cocteau's name on the side of filmmakers that should not be seen, the Surrealists of the 1950s were mimicking an exclusionary gesture typical of the first generation Surrealists of the 1920s. Just as there were filmmakers that should not be seen, for men like Breton and Unik there were certain subjects that should not be discussed. The topic of homosexuality in particular evoked a distinct disgust in most Surrealists. Of course, Aragon, André Masson and René Crevel had more moderate views on the subject. There are other factors besides sexuality that certainly contributed to Cocteau's exclusion. For example, artists need patrons and they courted the same people (Chanel, the de Noailles, etc.). Cocteau's talent and success at obtaining funding from these patrons could have exaggerated the Surrealists' animosity towards him. Such a situation could be read in Girardian terms as a form of homosexual rivalry (in Breton's case repressed) (Things Hidden 335). Nevertheless, Breton's hatred for
pederasts was well known and has been well documented. George Bauer writes of Breton’s position on homosexuality:

In his life his authority was one of edicts and interdictions. Not a few of them dealt with homosexuals and they were ferociously expressed in fist and pen. Cocteau was anathema, his accursed rival. ‘son semblable, son frère’ the butt of hypo-critical readings, symbolic beating, of objectionable popped cartoon balloons by cardinal friends in moments of sur-real frenzy. (1)

Other critics such as Lawrence R. Schehr have examined the problematic relationship between homosexuality and Surrealism (Alcibiades 23-67). By the first showing of Cocteau’s film, the Surrealists—and especially André Breton—had already tried, convicted and condemned homosexual desire. For Breton, heterosexual desire was not a matter of representation, but rather, a hidden unconscious expression that needed to be liberated. Only Surrealism and Surrealist art were truly capable of freeing the unconscious according to the Surrealists. Of course. In Breton’s heterocratic model, desire must remain spontaneous, and most certainly unrehearsed. Surrealist desire, in Breton’s version, was heterosexual male desire for the other, not the same. The role of the woman in such a system is paramount to the extent that she remains
the "other"; the mysterious; the dangerous, the object. As Schehr points out:

Her desire, the desire of the other does not need representation as a vehicle for its free expression. Meaningless in herself except as the reflection of the liberation of desire for the heterosexual man, the woman also conveniently ensures the perpetuation of the system that Breton does not wish to challenge. . . . The homosexual is dangerous because he enters into a game of mimetic behavior and heterogeneous representation. The homosexual implies that there is a desire at the locus of the other, separate and apart from the reflection of the liberty of the desiring Surrealist subject (Alcibiades 35-36).

For Schehr as well as Bauer, the all important difference in Breton's formulation of desire between a woman occupying the object position and a homosexual, lies in Breton's militant homophobia.

In Alcibiades at the Door, Schehr draws out the ambiguity of Breton's homophobia. In fact, Schehr claims that Breton may have even entertained the possibility of his own bisexuality. By interpreting some of Breton's texts and metaphors, contextualizing the testimonies of his friends and contemporaries and analyzing the Surrealist discussion of homosexuality gathered in "Recherches sur la sexualité" of 1928, Schehr offers a convincing reading of
homoeroticism in Breton and Surrealism. Nevertheless, Schehr concludes that homoerotic elements in Breton are scarce and that they soon become repressed and replaced by heterosexual images of desire:

The early references to homoeroticism are replaced, as it were, by a translation into an acceptable vocabulary of heterosexual desire as Breton creates the image of the Surrealist woman, the object of desire that is herself never self-reflective and that reflects only male, phallic, heterosexual desire. . . . Breton's version of the woman's desire is, crudely put, that she wants to be fucked her desire is not hers, but a reflection of, or a complement to, the desire of a man. (35)

In Breton's form of Surrealist desire the woman is pure object, pure reflection and eventual receptacle of active male drives. She has no desire herself, no meaning and no purpose other than to liberate him.

In light of Schehr's reading of Breton's stance on homosexual representation, the Surrealist dislike of Cocteau's Le Sang d'un poète, becomes more clear since desire in the film is not only the product of representation, but it is the vehicle driving the representation itself. Cinematic devices heighten the awareness of the representation of desire, or the spectacle in Cocteau's work. It is easy to see how the Surrealists were (re)expressing some heterocratic and Surrealist
male fear and disgust of the "same" occupying the place of the "other." In other words the Surrealist problem with homosexuality seems particularly relevant in a discussion of a film that not only foregrounds but unabashedly celebrates and exploits the notions of desire and representation. Beyond the question of how the film draws us in to a spectatorial position, it appears that the Surrealists were also reacting to what Cocteau's film was drawing us to: the male body on display.

Cocteau's talent at displaying the specularized male body was certainly not limited to this film, or to his work in film in general. Same-sex specularized desire figures predominantly in his prose writing as well. For example, the matter of seeing same-sex desire foregrounds the opening of one of Cocteau's earlier prose works: *Le Livre blanc*. Like the signature stars that punctuate the opening color illustration of the 1930 re-edition, or the star that draws our attention to the bare back of the poet in *Le Sang d'un poète*, there is little hesitation to engage the spectacle of the male body. Here in the most white of Cocteau's books, the author wastes no time to dirty
things up a bit. The story to be told concerns the strong sex, the beautiful sex. It is a rare tale indeed and the only thing criminal about it may be society’s reaction, or its dominant will to reform the desire of the individual author.

J’ai toujours aimé le sexe fort que je trouve légitime d’appeler le beau sexe. Mes malheurs sont venus d’une société qui condamne le rare comme un crime et nous oblige à réformer nos penchants. (15)

In _Le Livre blanc_, desire for the male body enjoys a long spectacular history. For Cocteau, three decisive incidents recall his homosexual becoming or genesis. It may be rash to interpret the three all important memories as a justification or an explanation of the author’s particular type of desire. Rather, to the contrary, these moments are structuring spectacular episodes in Cocteau’s life and ones which anticipate his filmic praxis of desiring the male body. More than the why or saying: “I like the “strong” sex because X, Y and Z occurred to me,” Cocteau’s _Le Livre blanc_ opens to show us

6 Like the issue of homosexuality, the issue of authorship immediately surfaces in _Le Livre blanc_. Nevertheless, there can be no doubt of the author’s identity in spite of the shabbily veiled postscript in which he refuses and then in fact concedes to sign the work.
both visually and narratively, the way he desires men.\textsuperscript{7} In order to understand better his unique narrative body-desiring strategy, and to see how it compares to the strategy Cocteau employs in \textit{Le Sang d'un poète}, in addition to \textit{Le Livre blanc}, I will focus on Cocteau's essay \textit{Le Numéro Barbette}. Although neither work enjoys the same critical and popular attention as some of Cocteau's more famous plays, films and novels, both texts clearly reveal desiring strategies and processes present throughout most of his work.

To begin, in \textit{Le Livre blanc}, the specularization of the three moments are mediated through the author's memory, and his memory is specific in that above anything else, it remembers the male body. While pretending to be a great hunter on his father's property, the author discovers a naked young farm hand bathing with his horse:

\begin{quote}
... je vis de ma cachette un jeune garçon de ferme conduire à la baignade un cheval de labour. Afin d'entrer dans l'eau et sachant qu'au bout du parc ne s'aventurait
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{7} I have chosen to consider the author and narrator of \textit{Le Livre blanc} as the same person. Although Cocteau never really signs the book, its autobiographical nature is blatant and there is no doubt that he wrote the work. For more about the (un)questionable authorship of \textit{Le Livre blanc}, see Milorad Cahiers 109-42.
jamais personne, il chevauchait tout nu et faisait s'ébrouer le cheval à quelques mètres de moi. (18)

It is important to note how this sexual memory occurs in the heart of nature, with a horse and water providing a serene, almost pure background. The boy playing hunter spies yet another boy playing at something else and their roles are quickly reversed. The spectacle of the farm boy's white neck, arms, feet and most notably the enigma that emanates from the center of the body, cause the spectator to pass out for four hours. Just as the queasy boy explains away his absence by relating that a hare scared him, so too does the hunter become the victim. The show of one boy's body strength literally zaps the consciousness of the other. What so intrigues the youth in the rugged boy of his gaze are the dark spots on his body: his sunburned face, neck and arms and most of all the dark patch of his pubic region. The memory of the farm boy's body is a memory of body parts and regions, all dark and shaded—perhaps even disguised if not accentuated—and all contrasting his milky white beautiful skin, and the purity of nature. Cocteau's careful portrait of the intriguing boy continues:
Le hâle sur sa figure, son cou, ses bras, ses pieds, contrastant avec la peau blanche, me rappelait les marrons d’Inde qui jaillissent de leurs cosses, mais ces taches sombres n’étaient pas seules. Une autre attirait mes regards au milieu de laquelle une énigme se détachait dans ses moindres détails. (18)

Here the natural and the exotic merge (marrons d’Inde) without losing any of its erotic charge ("jaillissent, une énigme se détachait").

This passage also establishes Cocteau’s play of contrasting light on the body. Like the dark costumes that accentuate the pale schoolboy’s knees in Le Sang d’un poète, enigmatic shadows naturally make the mysterious, dark parts of his body even more enticing and desirable.

The second memory-spectacle occurs in approximately the same place. Surrounded by nature, the author stumbles upon two young naked bohemians climbing a tree, and again what he remembers are their dark decorative stains which accentuate and accessorize their nudity:

Vivrais-je cent ans, grâce à ce cri et à cette course, je crèverai toujours une roulotte, une femme qui berce un nouveau-né, un feu qui fume, un cheval blanc qui mange de l’herbe, et, grimpant aux arbres, deux corps de bronze trois fois tachés de noir. (19)
Strikingly, the image of two naked male bodies evokes the same reaction as the image of new born in the arms of a woman. Beyond exposing the narrator’s sensitive nature, the comparison evidences a type of visual contrast in which a traditionally innocuous image (mother with child, white horse) immediately precedes a potentially sexually charged image. The effect of this contrast heightens the unusual nature, in this case of the latter image, compared to the former.

Unlike the first two body-memories, the third involves an adult. Gustave, a domestic, has a body which excites in the author the memory of the two previous spectacles. Just being around Gustave incites the young boy to scheme a way to touch the dark mysterious spots that he’s only seen before. Although the touch is embarrassingly brushed-off and perhaps misinterpreted by Gustave, the memory the event holds is not so easily forgotten: “A force de tourner et retourner dans ma tête les souvenirs du garçon de ferme et des bohémiens, j’en arriverai à souhaiter vivement que ma main touchait ce que mon œil avait vu” (20). Although if at first touching
may seem preferable to seeing, in retrospect Cocteau prefers the beauty of the spectacle.

I have spent some time detailing these childhood memories in the opening pages of Cocteau's *Le Livre blanc* since they point towards a visual and narrative pattern whereby he establishes a praxis of seeing and remembering the body—a textual form of specularized desire that will come across even stronger in his film two years later. In this short auto-biographical narrative, each body-memory is related to the previous one and each recalls the primary scene that caused the viewer's body to collapse. One naked body with enigmatic dark regions and tan skin recalls another and each conflates into another. The practice of male bodies recalling other male bodies becomes even more apparent as the *Le Livre blanc* continues.

For example, there is the figure of Rose's pimp, Alfred, who pretends to be her brother: Cocteau writes: "Ce frère ressemblait au garçon de ferme et à Gustave de mon enfance" (38). Alfred, the author reminisces, may have even been called Alfredo but, in the
end, his name is not what mattered—it was something else that stood out in his memory—an entirely different point on his body:

Le corps d'Alfred était pour moi davantage le corps pris par mes rêves que le jeune corps puissamment armé d'un adolescent quelconque. Corps parfait, grêé de muscles comme un navire de cordages et dont les membres paraissent s'épanouir en étoile autour d'une toison où se soulève, alors que la femme est construite pour feindre, la seule chose qui ne sache pas mentir chez l'homme. (39)

We may recall that it was Alfred, or perhaps Alfredo, who shows the author his ropes, "le droit chemin"(39), or the real pathway of his desires. Here again, theatricality predominates as Rose, Alfred and the author all opt to play their perspective roles of prostitutes or lovers. Alfred/o, "grisé par le romanesque du cinématographe," even dyes his hair and chases his lover in the street with a gun for dramatic effect (43). And here, at least for the moment, everyone seems happy, since the best part of the play is in watching the others play their role well. Nevertheless, as the author soon learns, all good shows must come to an end just as the final memory of Alfred/o's that Cocteau might have filmed as a reverse tracking medium long-

8 See René Galand's interesting analysis of the relationship between desire and death in Cocteau (Stambolian and Marks 279-94).
shot of a beautiful yet hopeless wanna-be gangster with a bad hair-dye and two tears running down his cheek. Or as Cocteau writes:

Et maintenant encore il me suffit de fermer les yeux dans un taximètre pour que se forme la petite silhouette d'Alfred en larmes sous sa chevelure d'assassin. (45)

Leaving Alfred behind, the author returns to the "charmante Sodome" (45) of the port city of Toulon. Although far enough from the spectacle of Paris, the trade of Toulon offers the same type of show. Here, even the butchest of men may don a flowery dress.9

The possibilities for artifice and illusion in Toulon are as endless as they are plentiful. But unfortunately so are the chances for disappointment. In Toulon, the author spies "PAS DE CHANCE" the young tough sailor whom he eventually leaves in the same manner in which he left Alfred/o. And again, the parting scene hinges on the visual and the voyeuristic:

Je ne résistai pas à mettre mon œil au trou de serrure. Il encadrait baroquement une petite tête rasée.

PAS DE CHANCE, la figure dans mes gants, pleurait à chaudes larmes. (51)

9 "Un sel nocturne transforme le bagnard le plus brutal, le Breton le plus fruste, le Corse le plus farouche en ces grandes filles décolletées, déhanchées, fleuries, qui aiment la danse et conduisent leur danseur, sans la moindre gêne, dans les hôtels borgnes du port" (46).
For the author, sentimentality—especially in the figure of a masculine beauty—is not a pretty thing. What is it then that draws the author to these men? The answer, it would seem, lies in the author's body memories as a boy, and more specifically in the figure of Dargelos.

Most readers of Cocteau are familiar with the Lycée Condorcet. Here, amidst the smell of chalk and sperm (24), the author obsesses over one classmate whose masculinity and virility dominate and entertain the school-yard.

Un des élèves, nommé Dargelos, jouissait d'un grand prestige à cause d'une virilité très au-dessus de son âge. Il s’exhibait avec cynisme et faisait commerce d'un spectacle qu’il donnait même à des élèves d’une autre classe en échange de timbres rares ou de tabac. (24-25)

The body of Dargelos is the epitome of the male body as spectacle. The way Cocteau films the bully in the school yard in Le Sang d’un poète (close-up of the face, a curly lock of hair hanging down from beneath his cap and especially his tongue sticking out of his pursed lips as if here were preparing to seduce some unexpecting lad) leaves little doubt that he was evoking Dargelos. His body has all the requisite qualities the author admires: tan skin, tight muscles, great
legs, and so forth as well as the predictable overwhelming effects on
the author.

A ses culottes très courtes et à ses chaussettes retombant sur ses chevilles, on le devinait fier de ses jambes. Nous portions tous des culottes courtes, mais à cause de ses jambes d’homme, seul Dargelos avait les jambes nues. Sa chemise ouverte dégageait un cou large. Une boucle puissante se tordait sur son front. Sa figure aux lèvres un peu grosses, aux yeux un peu bridés, au nez un peu camus, présentait les moindres caractéristiques du type qui devait me devenir néfaste. . . . La seule chose dont j’étais sûr, c’est qu’il ne ressemblait d’aucune sorte à celui de mes camarades. (24-25)

In retrospect, the claim that Dargelos resembles no other friend is both problematic and revealing. For in fact, every male body explicitly desired or narratively staged from the early show and tell scene at the Lycée Condorcet onward invariably recalls the figure of Dargelos. PAS DE CHANCE is at first mistaken for “le spectre de Dargelos” and then, with all illusion aside as “Dargelos en marin” (46). Later, after a series of misadventures with less masculine love interests all mediated through women and apparently less interesting to the scopophilic authorial memory, the author returns to religion and commits himself to an abbey. Not surprisingly, the monk—in a habit (or simply a religious costume, as we may be
tempted to call it) succeeds in covering his body, but not his face or his voice which reminds the author of every male figure specularized to this point.

Il baissa son capuchon. Son profil se découpaït sur le mur. C'était celui d'Alfred, de H., de Rose, de Jeanne, de Dargelos, de PAS DE CHANCE, de Gustave et du valet du ferme. (83)

It should be clear by now that by 1928, Cocteau had clearly established both a specific scopophilic strategy, and a taste for the interchangeability and circulation of costumes and desirable men (or parts of men), well before he made Le Sang d'un poète. In both works for example, the complex flow of body imagery at work serves to heighten the spectacle as well as underline the nakedness of the human body. For Cocteau, the spectacle of male body presents a wealth of narrative and/or visual possibilities. The Coctelian male body—as it is drawn and represented in Le Livre blanc, and as it filmed in Le Sang d'un poète—functions as a lens for the spectator's, reader's, and the author's gaze. Cocteau's men are always on stage, and their actions and behaviors become roles they adapt. Moreover, Cocteau's representation and re-representation of the spectacular
male body in his writing, drawings and illustrations, cinematic and casting choices, etc. construct a figure of an "homme-type" or a male type. Different from a typical male, Cocteau's "homme type" is an actor, an illusionist, and a master of disguises all in one. Thus, the Coctelian man offers, at the same time, a conglomerate of several men and a variation on a theme. Given the number of times Dargelos re-appears in Cocteau's texts (as himself in Les Enfants terribles (1929), and as Stopwell in Le Grand écart (1923) it seems accurate to conclude that he represents the base from which all other men are re-figured. If this is true, it may be fruitful to return to Cocteau's claim that Dargelos was unique from his other boy-friends. In fact, Dargelos is different from the other boyhood memories to the extent that he is dressed. Nevertheless, his clothed parts only serve to highlight his unclothed parts. Just like the dark spots accentuating the young bohemians bodies, so do the right shirts, socks and shorts heighten the spectacular male body. Or, once again the Coctelian male body is divided and shaded by light and shadow, the seen and the un-seen.
Given Cocteau's taste for depicting men on stage, it is revealing to consider briefly Cocteau's essay on a professional actor who made a living on stage. Apparently different from the homme-type that is "staged" or presented as a pleasurable visual spectacle, the hero, or heroine of Le Numéro Barbette offers another type of man. Le Numéro Barbette, published in 1926, describes the popular aerial act of an American transvestite trapeze artist, Vander Clyde, whose Parisian performances became unforgettable. According to Cocteau, the act consisted of a short vaudevillian strip-tease followed by a skillful artistic and athletic aerial performance. Barbette's skill at transforming himself into a woman was of particular note to Cocteau, who admired his craftsmanship. Cocteau compares the labor of the transformation to the artistic labor involved in the playwright's work:

On a honte de savoir si mal son métier en face de certains spécialistes, et je n'ai cru pouvoir me permettre d'écrire une pièce (Orphée) qu'après sept ans d'études, sous prétexte de pantomimes et d'adaptation. Je me faisais la main. C'est vous dire ma reconnaissance au numéro Barbette, une extraordinaire leçon de métier théâtral. (257)

Critics have noted Cocteau's penchant and respect for the beauty of artifice, illusion and lies which were already well established themes
by this point in his career. Barbette epitomizes this Coctelian trope in that his performance in drag, or his transformation into a woman is almost flawless. High in the air, Barbette’s masculinity cannot remain hidden. “Et entrant et là, au-dessus des têtes, et lorsqu’il retombe à terre, même lorsqu’il sautille, il aura l’air peu féminin” (261). For Cocteau, Barbette’s performance seems to problematize gender, but not sexuality. In Le Numéro Barbette, Cocteau draws up a new gender when he admits that his fascination with Barbette lies in his ability to go beyond the categories of masculine and feminine. “Car il [Barbette] plaît à ceux qui voient en lui la femme, à ceux qui devinent en lui l’homme, et à d’autres dont l’âme est émue par le sexe surnaturel de la beauté” (261). Some critics have read the surnatural sex of beauty as Cocteau’s admiration for the androgynous (Ritter 173-93). Such a reading, however, seems to impose the medical and scientific discourses of the early 1900s on Cocteau’s vision. Certainly Barbette’s ambiguity intrigues Cocteau. Wearing a wig and the right shoes, Barbette plays a better woman than a

10 For example, Hugo Marsan writes: “On dit couramment que Jean Cocteau est un magicien. Il faut donner au mot son plein sens.
woman; while flying through the air his brute strength and athletic
talent challenges even the manliest of men. Nevertheless, the
category of the androgynous figure falls short when reading Cocteau
and forces an easy, comfortable dismissal of the question of
sexuality. For if androgyny represents a type of compromise
whereby both the masculine and feminine co-exist in some
ambiguous manner, then Cocteau's male figures defy the limitations
of the androgynous, since they necessarily evoke a response in at
least three spectators: the male, the female and the lovers of beauty.
The third category, the category in which we must assume Cocteau
situates himself, remains distinct. Supernatural beauty, like the male
and the female, is gendered, and one needs to avoid conflating
sexuality and gender to understand its unique position. As Cocteau
draws it, "le sexe surnaturel de la beauté" reaches the epitome of its
representation in the male body. "L'homme type" therefore, defined
and shaped by his spectator invariably possesses supernatural

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Cocteau transfigure le réel mais cette mutation accepte l'insolite, le
particulier" (59).
beauty. The end of the snowball fight in Les Enfants terribles provides another example:

Un coup le frappe en pleine poitrine. Un coup sombre. Un coup de poing de marbre. Un coup de poing de statue. Sa tête se vide. Il devine Dargelos sur une espèce d’estrade, le bras retombé, stupide, dans un éclairage surnaturel. (111)

In this passage, the statue and Dargelos become one impressive surnatural image of a man. In conclusion, in Cocteau’s oeuvre, hair color, tuxedos, dresses, make-up, a nice tan, gloves, and even wigs all complement the male figure in different ways—but the figure remains uniquely male, and uniquely beautiful. The Coctelian male body represents a break from his contemporary’s representations of the body. Coctelian male figures are types: heroic-types, marine types, drag-queen types, boyish types, foreign types, etc.

Nevertheless, like mass produced fashion, and Duchamp’s Ready-Mades, Cocteau’s male bodies are multiple and interchangeable provided they possess surnatural beauty. Dargelos remains the

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11Cocteau’s choice of the word : surnaturel, is by no means naive. Like in the case of the surrealist’s “objet” and Breton’s Nadja, beauty is a personal thing, it lies in the eye of the beholder.
prototype, and although the parts—both seen and unseen, or clothed and unclothed—which form him (the neck, the legs and the chest, just to name a few members) re-appear throughout the Coctelian oeuvre in different forms and combinations, their net effect will always remain the same: beautifully and spectacularly male. And therein lies the Surrealist problem with Cocteau. His figuring of desire for the “same” represents a form of resistance to the Surrealist norm. When it comes to sexuality, Cocteau appears more subversive than his heterocratic Surrealist counterparts. It is little wonder then, that they wanted him and his work to remain un-seen.
CHAPTER 3

STAGING COLETTE: WRITING AND PERFORMING THE BODY

Of the French female authors working and writing during the 1920s and 1930s in Paris, none became nearly as well-known as Colette. Her professional writing career, starting at the turn of the century, spanned forty years. She was the first woman to be elected into the Académie Goncourt (1944). Although mostly known for her fiction, Colette also wrote criticism and had a lengthy and profitable career as a journalist. Burdened by severe arthritis in her later years, she continued writing into her early eighties. Given her Herculean and varied literary production and her undoubtedly colorful life, it is hardly surprising to find volumes and volumes of criticism and manuscripts on Colette. The challenge arises therefore to choose some point of departure for reading Colette. Titles of a handful of critical studies on Colette reveal, if only superficially, the
various approaches brought to bear on her work: Colette Amoureuse (Dormann), Colette, libre et entravée (Sarde), L’approfondissement de la sensualité dans l’œuvre romanesque de Colette (Harris) or L’homme objet chez Colette (Biolley-Godino). And yet among the countless critical approaches taken to read Colette, few have considered to any serious extent the role of theatricality, and especially the process of spectatorship in her writing. Certainly, many critics readily acknowledge that several of Colette’s essays, short stories and novels treat subjects related to the theater and the music hall. But questions such as how these milieus and their codes resurface in unexpected places, or in what ways they seem to inform and even propel the text are rarely raised. This chapter will investigate spectatorial relationships (such as voyeurism) in her texts and the effect they have on her writing—especially as they are expressed through the figure of the body. Some necessary distinctions need to be made here when we speak the role of theatricality in Colette. First, Colette’s work on stage (critical reviews of her performances or her screen plays for example) lies beyond the scope of this chapter. Second, I am considering the terms: theater
and stage in their broadest sense. That is to say, I will be drawing on various elements of theatricality, from the role of pantomime and Colette’s study of that art, to her own intense and unique fascination with theatrical elements such as: make-up, costuming and fashion. Colette’s ability and success as an performer will only play a part here to the extent that they brought her notoriety, helped her earn a living, and in a sense demonstrate her own keen understanding of the profession.

Without a doubt, the year 1906 marks a critical turning point in Colette’s life. Separated from her husband of twelve years, Henry Gauthier-Villars, she no longer was able to receive royalties for the books she wrote and published under his pen name Willy. Colette, fascinated by the popular music-halls of the time, began studying pantomime. Her success at this art was remarkable and her performances provoked considerable attention. Her first appearance on stage was playing the role of a faun in a mini-drama entitled: Le désir, l’amour et la chimère. Several other performances followed and Colette would oftentimes appear on stage covered only in a veil, or animal skins. By January 1907, Colette’s ability to draw
significant although scandalous attention to her performances had reached a high point as she appeared in a pantomime entitled: Rêve d’Égypte at the Moulin Rouge. In this incident, her appearance on stage in lightly veiled clothing was only part of the scandal. The real core of the drama lied in her co-star: the Marquise de Belboeuf, the daughter of the Duke of Morny (the great-granddaughter of the Empress Josephine and thus the niece of Napoleon III), whom Colette affectionately called Missy. Colette’s intimate relationship with Missy began in May of the previous year and lasted six years. Their liaison was hardly a secret among the literary and artistic world of the Belle-Époque. Colette wrote of their relationship in both Les Vrilles de la vigne (1908) and Le pur et l’impur (1932).

Willy, always with an eye on profit, exploited the two women by encouraging Missy to play a role with Colette. Le Rêve d’Égypte opened on January 3, 1907. More provocative than the notoriety of the actors however, was the association of the event—in rather overt ways—with the Morny family name. The poster advertising the show included the Morny coat of arms and a thinly veiled anagram for the co-star: Yssim. Willy enticed the owner of the Moulin-Rouge with the
potential great public interest in the event. According to Marcel Boulestin, "there was not a seat to be had at any price . . . . I suppose it is true to say that there had never been such a scandal in Paris theatre" (Richardson 38). Nevertheless, the spectator's curiosity quickly turned to indignation as "Yssim" and Colette embraced on stage. The police intervened and in the very next performance Missy was replaced by George Wague, one of Colette's close friends.

I have taken time to concentrate on this event in order to ground the proceeding discussion of Colette's writing firmly within the world of the theatrical. The years of 1906 and 1907 began with as much theatrical success as scandal for Colette but she was far from discouraged. For years after Le Rêve d'Égypte, Colette along with Wague and Christine Kerf toured France, Belgium and Switzerland in a wildly successful mime entitled: La Chair.

Colette's stage experience dating from 1906 became more than passing grist for her first widely known work after the Claudine series: La Vagabonde (1910). This book revolves around the theater, performance and the stage. La Vagabonde relates the story of a music hall performer Renée Néré. Suffering the humiliation of a
cheating husband, Renée finally gathers the strength to divorce the man she deeply loved. She makes her living as a pantomime performer, dancer, and comedian. Her life takes a new but complicated twist only once Renée truly discovers and enjoys the pleasurable freedom and liberty of her nomadic day-to-day existence. Maxime Dufferein-Chautel, a dashing young and wealthy man pursues her tirelessly begging her to succumb to the static nature of a relationship—a position she had fought so hard to flee. His eventual success, or her consent which at first is guarded and then eventually impetuous, unravels at the end as Renée tours “une dernière fois” with her trusted companion and mentor Brague.

Whether read as a struggle for independence or a lamentation of a lost although imperfect love, La Vagabonde vividly portrays the inner-world of the music hall performer. It is in this light that we consider Colette’s early text here, if only briefly, both as a window on the stage and as an expression of stage performers’ life. Moreover, in La Vagabonde Colette lays a foundation for a way of seeing the human body and its performance that she refines and develops later.
Renée Néré's body for example is most comfortable, most assured and most abandoned when it is on stage and performing. A clear opposition is established early in the text between the pensive and cerebral moments of the narrator's pre-performance machinations in the dark hallways and loges, and the on-stage performance where "everything is good":

Dès les premières mesures de notre ouverture, je me sens soulagée, engrenée, devenu légère et irresponsable. Accoudée au balcon de toile, je considère d'un œil serein la couche poudreuse ... qui couvre le parquet où se traîneront tout à l'heure mes genoux nus, et je respire un rouge géranium artificiel. Dès cette minute, je ne m'appartiens plus, tout va bien! (8-9)

Regardless of her previous experiences that day, or the public's unpredictable reaction, the stage promises Renée an ethereal comfort zone, where the body experiences a rhythm and a cohesive beauty impossible to find off-stage. "Je sais que je ne tomberai pas en dansant, que mon talon n'accrochera pas l'ourlet de ma jupe ... . La brutale lumière me porte, la musique régit mes gestes, une discipline mystérieuse m'asservit et me protège... Tout va bien" (9).
In stark contrast, once she is no longer performing in front of an audience and alone in her apartment, Renée sees her body as tired and gloomy, likening herself to a fox or a rat:

C'est pourtant vrai que je ressemble à un renard! Mais un joli renard fin, ce n'est pas laid n'est-ce pas?... Brague dit que j'ai l'air d'un rat, quand je mets ma bouche en pointe, en clignant des paupières pour y voir mieux... Il n'y a pas de quoi me fâcher.

Ah! que je n'aime pas me voir cette bouche découragée et ces épaules veules, et tout ce corps morne qui se repose de travers, sur une seule jambe!... (13-14)

The opposition between the body on-stage and off-stage, firmly established in the opening of this short novel, is important for two reasons. First, the off-stage/on-stage dichotomy echoes many other opposing body appearances throughout the text: fully dressed (180-81)/undressed (225), in daylight (75)/at night (14), without make-up (134)/with make-up (23; 136-7), fettered (166)/free (14;226). These contrasting representations of the body generally function along similar lines. On the one hand, the uncomfortable, sad and graceless body opposes the rejuvenated, self-assured and disciplined body. Make-up, for example, has a powerful effect on the body in La Vagabonde. Without it, Renée feels vulnerable and unprepared. Fully made-up she can hide the pain of her life. Applying make-up
becomes a time to mask and screen the age and pain, as well as a
counseling session where Renée can maintain self-respect and sanity:

Revenue à ma loge, je lave mes mains teintes d'un sang
groseille, devant la glace où nous mesurons, la conseillère
maquillée et moi, graves, en adversaires dignes l'une de
l'autre.

Souffrir... regretter... prolonger, par l'insomnie par
la divagation solitaire, les heures les plus profondes de la
nuit: je n'y échapperai point... Deux habitudes m'ont
donné le pouvoir de retenir mes pleurs: celle de cacher
ma pensée, et celle de noircir mes cils au mascara... (sic)
(22-23)

Alone in her lodge, she finds comfort in the reflection of her made-
up face. Of course, Renée's career on the stage requires her to wear
make-up. She feels however, that her face has simply lost the habit
of being seen in the light of day, and that she is not really herself
without the proper make-up (130). To the same extent, and in the
same way that Renée feels comfortable with her body once it is
made-up, she finds solace in being in various states of undress,
notably during the evening hours. In short, her life is something of a
night performance on stage. Her awareness of her own role—a role
that she plays and lives—remains strong. Renée's sense of self-
awareness, so evident in her make-up philosophy, points toward a
second critical aspect of the on-stage/off-stage opposition which speaks to the very nature of the opposition itself.

Some of the most striking moments in *La Vagabonde* occur when the narrator begins to question her own future. In other words, precisely when she contemplates whether to pursue her life on stage, or settle down with her lover Max. At the conclusion of a long passage in which Renée recounts her recent divorce and the beginning of her life anew (a passage which in effect summarizes a stage in the author's own life) she emphasizes her will towards isolation. The men and women around her fill her with disdain and with fear. Although some of those around her might claim that: “Elle est en acier,” Renée prefers to consider: “Elle est ‘en femme’ tout simplement” (36). Moreover, it is only when she is on stage that she truly becomes woman. “Et cette bizarrerie encore, qui me vint très vite, de ne me sentir isolée, défendue de mes semblables, que sur la scène,—la barrière de feu me gardant contre tous...” (36). Within a few lines, Renée has literally changed the way she sees herself. On the one hand, perhaps we can understand the use of the third person “elle” in the “Elle est ‘en femme’” passage as a reference to divorced
women everywhere trying to make a living on their own. The narrator has Renée seeing herself through the eyes of her audience. Then Renée reclaims her own perspective and sees herself alone and against all the others. Both viewing positions are sympathetic to Renée, but one originates in the audience while the other comes from the stage. This double viewing position foreshadows a move that Colette makes much more explicitly later in the text.

For example, at one point Renée is describing a particular dance performance. The majority of the passage however describes what she sees in the audience. Instead of simply detailing Renée’s gestures and performance, the narrator focuses on her role as a spectator viewing the audience all the while she herself is the spectacle. On this particular evening several of her ex-husband’s lovers are in attendance. In fact, one is seated in the front row:

Elle est là, au premier rang. On a utilisé tout l’espace disponible, et sa chaise est si près de l’estrade que je pourrais, d’une caresse ironique, effleurer ses cheveux, qu’elle teint en blond parce qu’ils blanchissent. (52)

The narration continues detailing the apparel, perceptions and reactions, imagined or otherwise, of several other women seated throughout the audience. As a dancer on stage, Renée has the best
position in the house, seeing more than the spectators themselves.

Renée even questions the reality of her privileged spectatorial position as a performer when she convinces herself to concentrate on her own performance:

Non non, il n'y a rien de réel que la danse, la lumière, la liberté, la musique... Il n'y a de réel que rythmer sa pensée, la traduire en beaux gestes. Un seul renversement de mes reins, ignorants de l'entrave, ne suffit-il pas à insulter ces corps réduits par le long corset, appauvris par une mode qui les exige maigres? (53-54)

It is in the reality of the performance where all the power lies. On stage, the performer's body has the authority to insult others, with even the slightest of contortions, all the while retaining its position as object. The true strength of this position is underscored by the consideration that it would normally be the cheated wife who would feel the humility of the mistress. The stage offers both the site and the sight to exercise this reversal. But humility is not enough of a satisfaction. Renée wants to seduce them with her performance:

Il y a mieux à faire qu'à les humilier; je veux, pour un instant seulement, les séduire! Un peu d'effort encore: déjà les nuques, chargées de bijoux et de cheveux, me suivent d'un vague balancement obéissant... (54)
This performance clearly has a twofold effect. First the goal is to humiliate and second to seduce the spectator. The process hinges on the body's performance as well as its ability to observe the spectator with precision thereby undermining the expected subject/object viewing position. While Renée's ability to manipulate her viewing position is striking, it is not a one time performance.

In a later passage in *La Vagabonde*, Renée observes her body walking:

> Et je marche, je marche, pressant le pas chaque fois que la glace d'une glace d'une vitrine me renvoie mon image, parce que je trouve à ma figure une expression un peu trop théâtrale de volonté soucieuse, avec des yeux pas assez convaincus sous des sourcils froncés... Je la connais, cette figure-là! Elle se masque d'austérité, de renoncement, pour mieux attendre le petit miracle, le signe de mon maître le hasard, le mot phosphorescent qu'il écrira sur le mur noir, quand j'aurai, cette nuit, éteint ma lampe... (133)

This passage is notable at many levels as it relates to viewing the body. First there is the reflection of the image of the self. An image that provokes criticism in that it is a bit too theatrical. Throughout *La Vagabonde* we find Renée seated in front of her mirror, contemplating her face, her make-up and her life. In fact, just before this scene Renée worries that her make-up may not be sufficient to
keep her young lover focused on her eyes and on her mouth, or what she calls “les trois lumières, les trois aimants de mon visage” (130). And what may be a considered a critique of her esthetic overcompensation is quickly dismissed with a recognition of “cette figure-là.” It seems curious, at the very least, that Renée is able to see such detail in her own hurried reflection, in a store front window, at dusk. The details on her eyelashes seem to come from a different perspective, omniscient or perhaps authorial, but certainly one that sees much more than expected. In that passing deliberate glance, Renée’s perspective on herself mimics that of the audience viewer in the music hall. She sees herself become “another” just as the walking “je” becomes the reflected “elle.” Dana Strand has pointed out Colette’s ability to manipulate viewing perspectives especially in her shorter fiction. Strand considers some of Colette’s narrators as “quick-change artists” and focuses particularly on how changing and shifting referentiality in Colette’s writing subverts the reader’s process of establishing meaning (81). While Renée’s shifting spectatorial perspectives certainly have this effect in La Vagabonde, it is important to note that they mostly hinge on both corporeal and
theatrical elements. In La Vagabonde, the staged body becomes both the site and the vehicle for calling into question the relative subject/object viewing positions. Furthermore, in La Vagabonde and as we shall see throughout much of her work, viewing the body on stage is associated with pleasure. The term voyeurism accurately informs a discussion of Colette's staged bodies. Of course, the word voyeurism is generally attributed to the field of psychoanalysis. Voyeurism refers to sexual fulfillment derived from observing, from a secret position, the genitalia or the sexual acts of others. In the first of his Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality (1905), Freud discusses the relationship between pleasure and seeing in sexuality:

For there are certain intermediate relations to the sexual object, such as touching and looking at it, which lie on the road towards copulation and are recognized as being preliminary sexual aims. On the one hand these activities are themselves accompanied by pleasure, and on the other they intensify the excitation, which should persist until the final sexual aim is attained. . . Perversions are sexual activities which either (a) extend, in an anatomical sense, beyond the regions of the body that are designed for sexual union, or (b) linger over the intermediate relations to the sexual object which should normally be traversed rapidly on the path towards the final sexual aim. (149-50).
In the same essay, Freud also discusses lingering over intermediate sexual activities which may be caused by factors such as danger or impotence. Lingering, however, is not a perversion if it continues towards copulation (or what he calls the “normal sexual aim”). Freud directly addresses what it means to linger over seeing when he writes: “visual impressions remain the most frequent pathway along which libidinal excitation is aroused . . . when it encourages the development of beauty in the sexual object” (156). To sum up Freud’s take on pleasure in seeing, the pleasure of seeing is only a perversion if the sexual gratification stops there. Setting the question of perversion aside (and the moral baggage the term may imply), it is undeniable that seeing and pleasure are regularly at work in Colette’s text. My intent here is not to introduce a discussion of perversion or even less Freudian psychoanalysis, but rather to contextualize and clarify my use of the term voyeurism and a related term scopophilia as they describe a pleasure and/in seeing.

Pleasurable viewing pathways are continually at play in La Vagabonde and in Colette’s later novels and it is worthwhile to detail their beginnings in her earlier novel for many reasons. First, the
theatrical and voyeuristic viewing strategies Colette develops in La Vagabonde reflect the profound influence of her own experience as a stage performer in her writing. Many of Colette’s texts—from her fiction to her non-fiction—incorporate her own unique perspective as a successful performer, author and artistic celebrity of the Parisian scene. Second, as I have argued above, it is possible and fruitful to trace how her explicit staging of the human form in this key novel shapes the writing process. Put another way, the staged body in La Vagabonde produces and in some cases calls into question meaning and interpretation of the text. The remainder of this study will focus on some developments and evolution of Colette’s body writing strategies specifically in two of her most well-known novels Chéri (1929) and Le pur et l’impur (1932).

Although Chéri was published as a complete novel in July of 1920, the first installment was printed in La Vie Parisienne in early January of the same year. At the time, Colette was spending the majority of her energy writing and editing at Le Matin (Richardson 73). It is possible to summarize the intrigue of Chéri as essentially a love story between an aging but attractive courtesan named Léa de
Lonval and a much younger and impressionable wealthy man: Fred Peloux called "Chéri," by everyone except his own fiancée Edmée. Peloux is the illegitimate son of Charlotte Peloux and he finds great comfort in the indulgent and pampering affection of the seductive and motherly Léa. Suddenly however, after a five year relationship, Chéri weds another women in a marriage arranged by his mother. Léa, who is devastated, leaves Paris and everything behind for six months. Chéri's marriage quickly fails. For a time he decides to hide-out and play the bachelor with a longtime friend named Desmond, but soon returns home to seek out his lost but decidedly aged former lover. As Léa prepares for them to flee Parisian life, Chéri realizes that his love is misplaced and confused and Léa gently dismisses him.

In Chéri it is possible to distinguish Colette's body writing in three ways. First, the body is constantly changing. Second, the body's femininity is always valorized over its masculinity. And third, the body relishes its own display and its own staging. One way to consider how bodies change in Chéri is in terms of their attire. As in La Vagabonde, the human form is often described in terms of its
fashion. Léa, for example, is quite simply obsessed with what she and others are wearing. For her, a loosened tie or an incorrect fold of a dress may incite not only criticism, but even horror. Any state of attire between being meticulously and completely dressed and utterly naked seems unimaginable and undignified:

A cause de la chaleur qui augmentait, Mme Peloux releva jusqu'aux genoux sa jupe étroite, montra ses petits mollets de matelot, et Chéri arracha rageusement sa cravate. . . . Ces abandons de l'après-midi l'écœuraient. Jamais son jeune amant ne l'avait surprise défaite, ni le corsage ouvert, ni en pantoufles dans le jour. 'Nue, si on veut, disait-elle, mais pas dépouitrailée.' (730-31)

On the other hand, Léa values and relishes the lengthy process between various states of nudity and impeccable dress. Her morning toilet ritual begins with a call for her bath to be drawn followed with clear orders for what clothes are to be laid out. Once when extremely rushed, we discover that “en moins d'une heure, elle fut baignée, frottée d'alcool parfumé au santal, coiffée, chaussée” (725). The narrator also reminds us that on this rare occasion, the time is well past one thirty in the afternoon. Fashion and primping quite simply mean everything to Léa.¹ She even considers Chéri’s physical

¹Colette, like her protagonist Léa, was extremely interested in fashion as well and chronicled her observations in seven articles
development her own personal affair. Léa finds Chéri's skin too white and his muscles too thin. Although she imagines that her young lover has the body of a Chinese or an African man, his body is simply not up to the part (744). On one summer excursion Léa decides to recruit the assistance of a professional boxer to become Chéri's personal trainer. Her goal, albeit subtle, is to encourage the transformation of his adolescent body of into her exotic and oriental image. She also thoroughly enjoys the view of their work-outs:

Léa souriait et goûtait le plaisir d'avoir chaud, de demeurer immobile et d'assister aux jeux des deux hommes nus, jeunes, qu'elle comparait en silence: 'Est-il beau ce Patron! Il est beau comme un immeuble. Le petit se fait joliment. Des genoux comme les siens, ça ne court pas les rues, et je m'y connais. (741)

In addition to the spectacle of their boxing workout, Léa is drawn to their beauty—a beauty heavily coded and valorized in feminine terms. Patron, for example, has the voice "d'une jeune fille, aux longs gathered in Belles Saisons II which appeared in 1955. Unlike Belles Saisons I, a collection of essays all touching on the passage of time and the change of seasons, the second volume more directly addresses women readers and fashion. The subjects treated in Belles Saisons II range from hair styles, to women's figures, to the lives of fashion models. Rarely considered one of her important works, the collection nevertheless reflects her keen talent as a chronicler of her time. Nevertheless, I will not fully explore these essays here. in
Chéri is described as a “vielle coquette” (720); he orders a meal that a “modiste émancipée” (779) might enjoy and has an obvious penchant for wearing women’s accessories—especially pearl necklaces.

Léa’s female friends share a similar gender-bending fate. For them however, the exaggeration of their masculine physiognomy and mannerisms devalorizes them:

Mme Aldonza, une très vielle danseuse, aux jambes emmaillotées . . . portait de travers sa perruque d’un noir laqué. En face d’elle et la dominante d’une tête et demie, la baronne de la Berche carrait d’inflexibles épaules de curé paysan, un grand visage que la vieillesse virilisait à faire peur. Elle n’était que poils dans les oreilles, buissons dans le nez et sur la lèvre, phalanges velues . . . (754-55)

With hair in their ears and hair pieces on their heads, these women suffer the mocking gaze of Léa. Beauty in Léa’s eyes demurs in the svelte and frail, in the graceful and innocent demeanor of an awkward effeminate young man. But Léa is not the only one to see the feminine charms of Chéri. His bachelor friend, another young gigolo, also fixates on Chéri in a most particular way. Desmond, awoken one morning by Chéri, “s’assit et arrêta sur son ami le regard

favor of more formally concentrating on Colette’s fictional strategies
... de ses yeux couleur d'eau trouble. Il feignit l'abrutissement pour prolonger un examen attentif de Chéri, Chéri vêtu de bleu, pathétique et superbe, pâle sous un velours de poudre habilement essuyé. ..." (787). Desmond takes pleasure in the view of his handsome friend, lingering languidly on his eyelids. Desmond ends his voyeuristic contemplation on Chéri's lips with a striking image:

Il regardait les cils de Chéri, lustrés et vigoureux, et l'ombre qu'ils versaient à la sombre prunelle et au blanc bleu de l'œil. Desmond remarqua aussi que la dédaigneuse bouche arquée s'ouvrait, ce matin-là, humide, ravivée, un peu haletante, comme après une volupté hâtive. (787)

In the end, Desmond's fanciful projection of Chéri's nocturnal activities, are purely speculative. In fact, Chéri has finally decided to return home to Neuilly, to his fiancée and most importantly to Léa. And although his mother Charlotte believes that he has been sowing his last wild oats, in truth Chéri spent most of his vacation sharing a room and a meal with Desmond. The scenario Charlotte creates for her son's absence and tells all her friends, underscores the theatrical moments in Colette's text. Not only does Charlotte rehearse her explanation for her friends, she prepares Edmée for her part as the...

... of corporal representation especially from the 1920s to the 1930s. 115
dutiful and understanding wife (797-800). Chéri, for his part, knows exactly what is expected of him during his impetuous hiatus even though he lacks the will to return or to stay away. Unable to decide, he chooses not to choose because at least then, he will be following his mother’s script. Appearances and timing are everything in Chéri and Colette draws the reader’s attention to this theatrical economy in many ways. During her first few days back after a self-imposed exile in the country, Léa obsesses over the possibility of running into Chéri. Especially fearful of being seen in inappropriate attire, or the improper light, Léa panics when she perceives any male silhouette in the street. Joanna Richardson reads Léa’s anxiety as an example of Colette’s ability to evoke the emotional impact of a character and her situation through suggestion rather than direct description of that emotion. Richardson argues that Colette “does not waste emotion on descriptions of the sexual act”; rather, Colette’s poignant authenticity centers in her ability to record “Léa’s desperate longing, her anxiety to dress well in case she should meet him” (78). While Richardson certainly has a point, Colette’s skill goes beyond that of a chronicler. Colette’s narratives supersede the recording of emotional states, they
accentuate and create those states through an exaggeration of such theatrical elements as timing, costume, repetition, and finely sequenced dialogue worthy of any fine script. In a way, the centrality of the stage performer’s perspective in La Vagabonde has been diffused into the dramatic actions, gestures and decisions of the characters in Chéri.

Both Chéri and Léa share a passion for staging and for looking. They imagine themselves in particular situations, at specific times and places saying certain lines. For either character, the staging process always requires a spectator—be they imagined, real or both. Desmond, for one, is entirely enchanted as Chéri slowly dresses for his return to Neuilly. Nevertheless, Chéri conjures up another more threatening spectator while lost in his own erotic musings:

Il considéra l’image de Chéri dans la glace, nota la blancheur des narines dilatées, la mobilité errante du regard, et risqua la plus discrète des questions:
‘Tu rentres déjeuner?... Hep, Chéri, je te cause. Nous déjeunons ensemble?’
Chéri fit ‘non’ de la tête. Il sifflotait en carrant son reflet dans le miroir oblong, juste à sa taille comme celui de la chambre de Léa, entre les deux fenêtres. Tout à l’heure, dans l’autre miroir, un cadre d’or lourd sertirait, sur un fond rose ensoleillé, son image nue ou drapée d’une soierie lâche, sa fastueuse image de beau jeune homme aimé, heureux, choyé qui joue avec les colliers et les bagues de sa maîtresse... ‘Elle y est peut-être déjà
dans le miroir de Léa, l'image du jeune homme”...’ Cette pensée traversa son exaltation avec une telle virulence qu’il crut, hébété, l’avoir entendue.

‘Tu dis” demanda-t-il à Desmond.’

— Je ne dis rien, répondit le docile ami gourmé.

Besides the impression of Desmond as a moronic codependent lover wondering if he will see his companion again, Colette’s writing underscores the importance of possible scenarios. Will Chéri be able to wear Léa’s pearl necklace? Will another man be there in my place? The theatrical codes of this passage are reinforced by the overt references to visual language (glace, miroir, regard, cadre, and so forth). Moreover, Colette allows his very thoughts to create an additional spectator; someone to watch him get dressed and play dress-up. Chéri’s imagination gets more than the best of him, it creates and in effect supplements the men in the audience for his performance.

Léa’s taste for drama and the stage, although just as strong as his, is not developed in such homosocial terms. Simply put, Léa’s world revolves around being presentable and ready for both the public and the private eye. She frets mostly about her clothes and
her age. She wonders how an outfit might compliment her figure, how her accessories might reflect light on her skin. She is especially concerned with her neck. For example, she refuses to wear her precious pearls to bed out of fear that they might pull on her skin and cause wrinkles. At a critical moment in the novel when she is contemplating her life without Chéri, Léa studies her features and decides to mask her neck, as if with a stage curtain:

Mais son teint, ambré, fouetté par le soleil et la mer, fleurissait comme celui d'une belle fermière et eût pu se passer de fard. Encore fallait-il draper prudemment, sinon cacher tout à fait le cou flétri, cerclé de grands plis où le hâle n'avait pu pénétrer. (791)

The visual play between re-presentation, theatricality and her aging body in this self-critique are only reinforced by the torn photographs strewn about her room and a repeated reference to a hole in the curtain in her dressing room (791). Later, in an all important confrontational scene with Chéri, Léa “se leva à son tour pour le dominer mieux. Les battements de son coeur calmé la laissaient respirer à l’aise et elle voulait jouer sans faute” (809). It is important to notice how the proper blocking and choreography will support her performance. Léa knows the art of staging. At night she
looks back on her day more of as a performance than a daily reality. While losing her struggle to win Chéri back for good, fearful that she is playing her part badly, she criticizes her own delivery: “Que c’est mal dit... C’est dit en mauvais théâtre...” (821). Léa even wonders if she can take the whole argument scene from the top and in effect rewrite the script. Unfortunately, for Léa, this is not a dress rehearsal. Chéri walks out of her life and her apartment in a manner strangely evoking the closing shots of many films where a protagonist trots off into the horizon of newly found liberty. And although there are no direct cinematic references in the closing paragraphs of Chéri. The ultimate passage reads much like a screen play with Colette’s familiar visual and representational codes (e.g., miroir; cacher; rideau, and voir). Léa is reduced to a mere figure on stage, repeating her gestures in front of a reflected imagined audience:

Une vieille femme haletante répéta, dans le miroir oblong, son geste, et Léa se demanda ce qu’elle pouvait avoir de commun avec cette folle.
Chéri reprit son chemin vers la rue, ouvrit la grille et sortit. Sur le trottoir il boutonna son pardessus pour cacher son linge de la veille. Léa laissa retomber le rideau. Mais elle eut encore le temps de voir que Chéri levait la tête vers le ciel printanier et les marronniers chargés de fleurs, et qu’en marchant il gonflait d’air sa poitrine, comme un évadé. (828)
What is striking in this passage is how Léa sees her own reflection. In a sense she is on stage watching and being watched at the same time. Chéri's departure signals a definitive textual separation between Léa as performer and Léa as spectator. The old woman has become the spectacle—shunned by her lover, wrinkled and alone—while Léa has a different perspective entirely. Léa has the chance to see both her fleeting lover and her own performance. Once again, Colette's mastery of the stage and its elements combine with her meticulous skill and style of observation to produce a most intriguing performance. Chéri clearly marks an evolution in Colette's writing of the body. Whereas in La Vagabonde, the staged body is explicitly and autobiographically anchored, described and manipulated, in Chéri it performs in more fictional and representational terms—depending on exaggeration, changes in physical appearance and costume, staging techniques such as blocking, timing and entrances and dramatic dialogue. While at first look Chéri seems less concerned with what I have been calling the specularized views of the body, it is in fact even more dependent than La Vagabonde in its subtle language and oftentimes refracted theatrical preoccupation.
A brief analysis of *Le pur et l’impur* will allow our consideration of the staged body in Colette to come full circle. Begun in 1931, *Le pur et l’impur* (published until 1941 under the title: *Ces désirs*) was written almost 30 years after the author’s career in the music hall. The book was published by 1932 although it left Colette exhausted and frustrated with her writing and her financial affairs. Colette promptly decided to abandon writing and open a boutique selling and designing make-up. *Le pur et l’impur* therefore, marks a curious point in her career as a short-lived retirement from her life as making-up bodies with a pen and making-up bodies with a mascara brush. Opened in March of 1932, the boutique was successful in part due to her reputation as an author. The stress of working on her feet five days a week (she had suffered a damaging leg injury in 1931), combined with the impossibility of longed for anonymity, convinced her to return to writing by early 1933.

*Le pur et l’impur* remains distinct among Colette’s works on many levels. First, it considers the issues of aging, old friendships and long term relationships with an authorial voice clearly resonating a more mature and nostalgic Colette. Second, *Le pur et
L'impur differs from many of Colette’s other texts to the extent that it directly and unabashedly engages the subject of same-sex desire. And third, the novel’s quality is rather uneven. The essays vary from poignant and personal reflections on life and happiness to gossipy portraits of a declining demimonde. Joanna Richardson dismisses Le pur et l’impur as “an incoherent collection of essays, and not all of them are new” (147). While such a stern judgment certainly holds an element of truth, it seems nonetheless rash. Richardson’s critique begs the question: are coherence and originality necessarily markers of literary achievement? On the contrary, I believe that in this case it is exactly the opposite, since the text’s originality seems to come precisely from its lack of coherence; its re-staging of people, bodies and events. In other words, in light of Colette’s body staging praxis and her genuinely original representation of older and borrowed texts and characters composed in the marginal space of same-sex desire, Le pur et l’impur surpasses many of her other texts.

Colette wastes little time in engaging issues of spectatorship in Le pur et l’impur. The novel opens on a scene of voyeuristic
pleasure. The scopophilic narrator, writing in the first person, enters an opium den to observe. The incipit’s autobiographical and theatrical grounding are quite clear:

Sans surprise, je serai la main tendue d’un confrère journaliste et romancier, et j’échangeai des signes de tête avec des amphitryons étrangers qui me parurent. Dieu merci, aussi peu liants que moi-même. (7)

People come to this studio to watch, listen and intoxicate themselves. Wanting to shun the advances of an admirer, the narrator claims to be there on a professional assignment. She resolutely abstains from opium. Her true intoxication seems to comes from the visual, audible and olfactory spectacle before her—a freedom to simply watch and enjoy the pleasure as a curious spectator rather than as a participant: “Et je le détestai davantage, pour ce qu’il me croyait incapable—moi qui l’étais en effet—de goûter ce luxe: un plaisir tranquille, un peu bas, un plaisir inspiré seulement par un certain snobisme, l’esprit bravade, une curiosité plus affectée que réelle...” (8). Here body parts hang from lofts, lie one on top of another; couples of all configurations mix in various states of undress and arousal. Rather
than being ashamed of her voyeuristic position the narrator revels in her discreet although entirely consumed participation:

J’étais dans une fumerie et non dans une de ces assemblées où le spectateur puise généralement une assez durable répugnance de ce qu’il voit et de sa propre complaisance. Je m’en réjouis, et je commençai à espérer que nulle danseuse, nul danseur nus ne troubleraient la veillée, qu’un aucun danger d’Américains, frétés d'alcool, ne nous menaçait et que le Columbia lui-même se tairait...

(10)

Her sensory meditation however is quickly interrupted by the voice of Charlotte, whom many people are there to see.

The figure of Charlotte quickly consumes the narrator. Many readers of Colette would soon identify the character of Charlotte as a younger version of Léa in Chéri. For example Charlotte shares Léa’s penchant for young effeminized men. Charlotte however, holds a central place in Le pur et l’impur in a way Léa never could. Charlotte becomes an object of study, a curious person to whom the narrator is attracted on many levels. For example, in a striking reversal of gender and perspective, the narrator feigns sleep in order to better observe Charlotte leave the studio. The same scene occurs at the end of Chéri, only Chéri is the one watching Léa make final preparations
for their elopement. In *Le pur et l’impur*, however, Colette sees things from a different viewpoint:

> Je m’embarque, quand je pense à Charlotte, sur un voguant souvenir de nuits que ni le sommeil, ni la certitude n’ont couronnées. La figure voilée d’une femme fine, désabusée, savante en tromperie, en délicatesse, convient au seuil de ce livre qui tristement parlera du plaisir. (31)

It seems significant that where our view of the story of Léa and Chéri ends, Charlotte and the narrator’s spectacular tale begins.

The narrator paints Charlotte as both real and imagined; as a memory and as an invention. She refuses to look for Charlotte all the while she creates a detailed image of her whereabouts: “J’imagine qu’autour d’un guéridon hexagone, couronnée de gâteaux secs, sa présence m’eût semblé toute naturelle” (20). When Charlotte appears at the narrator’s book signing, the latter’s reaction is mixed. On the one hand, seeing Charlotte again will lessen the mystery she represents. On the other hand, how else will she be able to meet her again? Although Charlotte is elusive, it seems significant to note that the sight of Charlotte again occurs precisely in a space of literary production and consumption—a place where the narrator is selling books. In a sense, in this place of texts, Charlotte becomes object of
study and insistent spectator at the same time. Or in other words, the hunter and the prey:

Et je questionnai maladroitement:
— Vous êtes seule?
— Je ne sors guère seule, répondit Charlotte. On ne vous a pas revue là-bas...
Elle me dit à mi-voix, en feuilletant le volume qu'elle venait d'acheter:
— Ils y sont toujours le dimanche soir ...
J'acceptai cette invitation indirecte, pour le plaisir de retrouver Charlotte, plaisir qui fut plus grand que je ne l'avais espéré car elle était seule . . . . (20)

Back in the opium den on Sunday night, the narrator finds Charlotte entirely alone, without a man in sight. She draws particular attention to Charlotte's body and its garb: "sa robe noire . . . ses bras potelés, la bourgeoise et muette dextérité de chacun de ses gestes (21), or what we may consider her ability as an actress. Charlotte's ability to publicly fake orgasm with a man intrigues and arouses the narrator: "Là glissait sans doute le secret, le mélodieux et miséricordieux mensonge de Charlotte." Her performance is excellent, and she is a master of the "mensonge déférent, duperie entretenue avec flamme. . . ." (23). Charlotte captivates her audience—from her young male lover to the narrator, and the faceless opium addicts in between—with a performance that masters the body.
Colette, in turn, captivates her readers by staging that body; by viewing it and writing it with the keen insight of a stage performer. If indeed Charlotte is another Léa, then the term re-presentation is a more precise way to characterize Colette’s textual body figuring strategies as she stages Charlotte to an even greater extent.

Another example of Colette’s body staging prowess occurs in a discussion with a close friend she calls “X.” X is a figure in two ways. First he is a literal figure of the alphabet, “X” a symbol of someone we assume to be famous, but whose true identity the narrator can not reveal. Second, the narrator sees him as a Don Juan figure. Like her attraction to Charlotte, she delights in his exaggerated feats of sexual performance. The attention he draws predictably spills over to his wardrobe:

Il s'en allait, et c'est à son dos balancé, à son grand pas dont il exagère la foulée, à son chapeau que je m'adressais mentalement;—à son chapeau surtout, son chapeau significatif, délateur, inconstant et perplexe, qu'il pose trop de côté, quand il affecte la gaminerie; trop en arrière : c'est le bohème, trop en avant : attention, nous sommes susceptible, et méchant garçon, qu'on ne nous marche pas sur le pied... Un chapeau, enfin, qui ne veut pas vieillir... (42-43)
In this parting glance, even X's hat has a line to deliver, and a character to project. Later, one of Colette's closet friends makes a cameo appearance in the text. Like other bodies in Colette's texts, the description of Moreno belies an implicit dependence on the theatrical. The references to the stage are direct and unmistakable. Given that Moreno was an actress, this in itself may not be surprising. But what is intriguing is Colette's choice of describing the actress falling asleep in the midst of a conversation—a state where the body physically refuses to play along or to act awake and interested:

Mais Marguerite Moreno dormait, son nez de conquistador tourné vers l'aventure. Son repos profond rendait à sa bouche, petite et ferme, l'expression plaintive, l'acquiescement que lui refuse toujours une veille en armes.

Avec précaution, j'atteignis une couverture légère, et je couvris Chimène et le Cid, étroitement unis dans le sommeil d'un seul corps. Puis j'allai reprendre mon poste au bord d'une table-bureau, d'où mes yeux de femme suivirent, sur le vélin turquoise, un courte et dure main de jardinier, qui écrivait. (72)

Here, like we saw with Charlotte at the book sale, the staged body and the writing activity combine. Even asleep, Moreno never leaves the stage. In a sense she even betters her acting talent in that she
can play the lead male and the female role at the same time. How could the narrator resist writing about, let alone lingering over, such an masterly yet docile performance?

The Ladies of Llangollen present an even more intriguing spectacle for the narrator. She has heard about them, read the diary of the older partner, and contemplated at length the bliss and sorrow of their secluded existence. Regrettably for her however, she only has a mediocre picture of the well-known lesbian couple. The older one, “face au spectateur,” the narrator notes, “est engoncée dans un vêtement noir de lourde étouffe, à spencer étriqué, à jupe abondante et dont la coupe sent le tailleur de village” (125). And while the image of the older Lady Eleanor captures the narrator’s gaze, it does not spark her imagination nearly to the extent of the younger Miss Sarah Ponsonby. Her writing about the couple, based on Lady Eleanor’s memoir, focuses on the silences of Sarah. Colette’s narrator can only speculate on Sarah’s voice and only through Eleanor’s prose. But this will not suffice. The narrator needs to go into their world. In a way, she walks in on their life to get Sarah’s point of view, as if Eleanor’s script was incomplete. Her entrance is difficult to miss:
Entrons, émus, dans l’atmosphère fantastique, brisons l’idéale barrière, foulons la prairie, élastique comme une nuée, verte comme ce qui est vert dans nos songes, effleurée par un rais ‘silver and purple’ venu on ne sait d’où, laminé entre deux montages… (129)

In a flurry of rather uncharacteristic poetic language, Colette’s invitation seems benign enough at first. But we might proceed with caution, as she wonders about their bedroom, and what cannot be said about the activities therein. Colette’s voyeuristic narrator who invites us with such poetic enthusiasm to watch and wonder soon relinquishes the adventure in order to script her own version. She imagines for example a scene of nocturnal anguish or a near fear of what one might consider eighteenth-century gay bashing: “La plus faible noue ses bras au cou de l’aînée, respire la chevelure drue, serre les dents, ne consent ni à sangloter, ni à gémir: ‘Que nous sommes loin! ... Que nous sommes seules!...’” (139). The older and more sure of herself Eleanor replies, her fist clenched: “Si on osait entrer ici pour me la prendre, je ...” (139). Thus, when drama wanes in Eleanor’s prudish prose, Colette’s narrator rallies her theatrical skill to compensate and draw in the reader.
In the end, Colette’s representation of the Ladies of Llangollen follows her own script. She has taken a unique perspective on the couple, a privileged place, or as a friend points out to her: “une place de spectateur, une de ces places de choix d’où le spectateur, s’il s’enivre a le droit de s’élancer pour rejoindre, dûment titubant, la figuration active” (72-73). Few metaphors, in this or for that matter in many other of Colette’s texts, so succinctly capture her perspective on the body. Near enough to the stage to jump in and participate, and yet just far enough removed to keenly observe every detail, Colette writes at the inside edge of marginality. Staging the body through the written word, framing it within the realms of the theater and literary production, Colette’s creates bodies at the meeting point of oftentimes opposed spheres: imaginary/real, female/male, homosexual/heterosexual. The author too, in her own way, lived and struggled in a similar circumstances: the stage/the writing desk; selling make-up/dressing in masculine attire, married to Willy/devoted to Missy. But more importantly than surviving, she thrived here—in between the stage and the audience, or on both sides of the voyeur’s door. In the most direct terms, it is too simplistic to
deduce from these binarisms that her life imitated her texts, or vice-versa. Nor is it particularly fruitful to deconstruct them in the quest for some elusive meaning. Colette's staging of the body, her figuring and manipulating its gestures, costume and desires, must be understood in productive terms. The body becomes the locus and the impetus for Colette's journey from the audience to the stage. Her view always lingers on the staged body. Colette not only writes about the space between the spectator and the specularized body, but she continually creates in that space—resisting being held in either sphere, she moves back and forth, sly as a fox.
CHAPTER 4

GERMAINE DULAC’S PURE CINEMA AS SPECULARIZED DESIRE

Photographie et réalisation des plus hardies, interprétation excellente, adaptation scrupuleuse, tout contribuera à assurer le succès à La Souriante Mme Beudet, à Mme Germaine Dulac et à M. Louis Aubert, qui a eu l'heureuse idée de s'assurer l'édition de ce film.

-Jean de Mirbel 1923

Si les épisodes bouleversantes qui ont donné naissance au scénario d'Antonin Artaud ont probablement un caractère onirique, je ne pense pas qu'il ait voulu donner au film l'apparence qu'un cauchemar... Pour qu'Antonin Artaud fasse un grand film, il faut qu'il soit son propre metteur en scène.

-L.C. 1927

Such were the reviews of the two most well known films made by Germaine Dulac in the 1920s. While Mirbel praises virtually
every aspect of *La Souriante Mme Beudet* (1923), the reviewer L.C. wishes that Dulac had never touched Artaud's scenario for *La Coquille et le Clergyman* (1927).¹ These two films inspiring two radically opposing critical receptions are stunning examples of what most critics consider the cinema of the first avant-garde in France. With the possible exception of Jean Epstein, few filmmakers who were also film theorists played a more central and influential role in the development of film theory, avant-garde cinema and the creation of an audience for the relatively young "septième art", than Germaine Dulac. Charles Ford recognized Dulac's importance early on writing:

Sans elle, il n'y aurait pas eu d'avant-garde. C'est elle, qui a galvanisé les tenants de ce mouvement dont l'importance prépondérante dans la création d'un cinéma artistique ne saurait être niée. (48)

Without Ford's early praise and appreciation of Dulac as a filmmaker, and as a theorist, film scholars today would most likely know very little of her life, her theories or her art.

¹ Mirbel's review of *La Souriante Mme Beudet* appeared in an edition of *Cinémagazine* dated 9/11/23 while the review of Dulac's adaptation of Artaud's *La Coquille et le clergyman* was only signed with the reviewer's initials and appeared in *L'ami du peuple* 16.5. Unfortunately, the review by L.C. is a transcript of the actual review which I have been unable to locate.
Germaine Charlotte Elizabeth Saisset-Schneider was born in Amiens, France on November 17, 1882. The daughter of a captain in the cavalry, she moved from place to place throughout her childhood. She eventually settled with a grandmother living in Paris. Dulac loved the cultural and artistic opportunities available to her in Paris. She wholehearted pursued the study of art and music, especially Wagner's operas. In 1905 she married an engineer named Louis Albert Dulac who went on to co-produce several of her films. Four years later, Dulac pursued her interest in journalism and edited and contributed to two important feminist journals La Française (where she authored biographical portraits and interviews of famous women) and La Fronde. Soon Dulac took over as drama critic at La Française where her passion and interest for photography and cinema grew. In 1914, Dulac took the opportunity to travel to Rome with a well-known actress and soon to be personal friend Stacia de Napierkowska. The actress invited Dulac to assist and accompany her on location. This trip marked Dulac's first actual experience in a film studio and the beginning of a new career. Wasting little time, Dulac along with her husband and a novelist Irène Hillel-Erlanger
started the D-H film company in 1915. Two years later, Dulac directed a film produced and released in separate episodes entitled: *Ames de Fous*. The casting of Eve Francis, a popular and highly skilled actress of the period proved to be an excellent decision. As it turned out, Francis’ companion was Louis Delluc, one of the key figures of the early avant-garde cinema. Dulac and Delluc went on to collaborate on a key film of the early French avant-garde: *La Fête espagnole* (1919). This was the single project they worked on together for in spite of their great individual talents, they also had unique and oftentimes opposing temperaments (Ford 29). From 1917 to 1933 Dulac made some 26 films. Although financial reasons obliged her to make many of her films of the 1920s appeal to a large general public (films such as *Gossette* (1922) and others made at the studio Ciné-Romans), her real passion lied in films that rigorously challenged her on artistic, poetic and technical levels (*La Souriante Madame Beudet, L’Invitation au Voyage* (1927) and *La Coquille et le clergymen*). One of Dulac’s last major films, that gathered wide public admiration was *La Princesse Mandane* of 1928. Nevertheless, she ended her directing career with three non-narrative and non-
commercial visual studies of rhythm and music. In 1930 she began working on weekly newsreel films eventually becoming the head of France-Actualités Gaumont. Throughout her entire studio career, Dulac also wrote and lectured extensively on film theory and eventually became the President of the French Fédération des Ciné Clubs, an organization that she developed significantly over her career. After being forced to end her work at Gaumont in 1940 with the occupation of the Propagandastaffel, Dulac’s delicate health worsened. She died in Paris in July of 1942.2

This brief biographical sketch serves to underline the incredible range, experience and influence Dulac had on the filmmaking industry—in spite of the fact that some of her work manifestly opposed traditional filmmaking practices of the time. It is nevertheless important to point out a duality in Dulac’s career. Dulac had a twofold aim in making and promoting film, even though her two goals were at times difficult to coincide. On the one hand she favored creating “cinéma pur” or a cinema that relied on form over

2 Wendy Dozoretz provides the most complete source of biographical information on Germaine Dulac, and perhaps the most thorough consideration of Dulac in general.
content. Pure cinema celebrates cinematic techniques and the visual elements they entail such as rhythm, movement and plays of light. It emphasizes poetics, evocation and abstraction over logic and narrative. On the other hand, Dulac firmly believed that the development of an audience for cinema of any kind would be the only way to assure the continuation of the art form. Dulac felt that it was more important to keep people coming to the cinema, even to watch commercial narrative and serial films, in the hopes that someday a different audience would develop. Hopefully, she figured, that new audience would appreciate film art to its fullest extent:

"L'art cinégraphique, tel qu'on le conçoit actuallement, a pourtant bien peu de traits communs avec celui qui séduira un jour les foules plus éclairées, avec celui de demain, avec celui qui doit être"

(Hillairet 60). Dulac's strong belief in a different kind of cinema with different possibilities drove her throughout her professional career. The great majority of her essays and conferences speak directly to this point. Recently many of Germaine Dulac's writings on the cinema have been gathered and edited by Prosper Hillairet in *Ecrits sur le cinéma*. This is certainly fortunate since very few of her films
exist in their entirety today. Regrettably however, only two films, which will constitute the focus of this study, remain readily available in the United States today. Biographical information about Dulac is equally scarce except for the few details I have outlined above. Nevertheless two of her films: La Souriante Mme Beudet and La Coquille et le clergymen, along with the Hillairet’s recently published collection of Dulac’s conferences and essays on the cinema speak volumes to the profundity of a brilliant career.

I would like to situate this chapter in the context of the duality to which I alluded above. That is to say, within the tension between cinematic form and content—a tension driven by the search for a pure cinema—and one so constant in Dulac’s theoretical writings and films. Dulac must also be considered in terms of resistance. As an outspoken and successful woman filmmaker working in the male dominated film industry, Dulac knew of resistance first hand. Her films and her theories reveal a preoccupation with resisting norms

3 In Vampires and Violets, Andrea Weiss seems to settle the matter and the importance of Dulac’s sexuality rather directly labeling her first “a lesbian director” (20); second “a pioneer of French avant garde film” (20); and third “a pioneer of lesbian and gay filmmaking in the margins of cinema” (23).
and expectations as well. Specifically, I will proceed with a close cinematic reading of *La Souriante Mme Beudet* and *La Coquille et Clergyman*. My primary goal will be to show how it is possible to read Dulac's theory of pure cinema (as it develops in these two films and in her theoretical writings) as an expression of specularized desire. In other words, I see Dulac's cinematic practice in light of her theory as dependent on representing the body, and the body's relationship to the mind, in specific and original ways. Images of bodies in either film remain overtly inscribed in the theatrical. Dulac's camera literally stages the human form and its desires in spectacular ways. I would like to focus on three crucial yet interrelated aspects of Dulac's specularized representations of the human body that have undergone uneven analysis in most discussions of her work and films: 1) the theatrical; 2) the mind/body interaction, and 3) the staging of desire as a consequence of the mind/body interaction.\(^4\)

\(^4\) The two most recent major critical investigations of Dulac and her work (Dozoretz and Flitterman-Lewis) approach Dulac from a feminist perspective.
In many ways, Germaine Dulac saw the theatrical and the cinematic as conflicting types of artistic expression. Speaking to the merits of cinema as a narrative art at a conference given at the Colisée on December 7, 1924 Dulac pronounced:

Quand, dans nos films, l'un de nous veut, l'espace d'un court passage, échapper aux affabulations théâtrales qui sont contraires à l'esprit du cinéma, et tenter d'émouvoir par la sensation seule, par la sensibilité, par le mouvement des choses vues en elles-mêmes, de l'aider, de le comprendre, car en luttant contre l'intrusion littéraire ou dramatique dans son domaine artistique, peut-être est-il dans la vérité. (qtd. in Ford 33)

For Dulac then, the cinema must combat and oppose the facile infiltration of narrative in favor of expressing movement and emotions. Despite her repeated and convincing appeal to do away with, or at least re-define cinematic narration (Hillairet 32, 54, 57), it remains nevertheless curious that one of her most intriguing explorations of fantasy and emotion was a film adaptation of a play.\(^5\)

The choice of directing a film based on a piece of theater is even more remarkable given that Dulac found the cinema to be a truly

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\(^5\) In order to distinguish between Germaine Dulac's theoretical writings on the cinema edited and collected by Prosper Hillairet under the title *Ecrits sur le cinéma* and the film theory of Jean
richer medium of artistic expression than the theater: "J'ai compris ce qu'était le cinéma, art de la vie intérieure et de la sensation étranger au théâtre et à la littérature, expression nouvelle. . . (Hillairet 28).

The play upon which Dulac based Beudet was originally written by Denys Amiel and André Obey. Dulac had Obey adapt it some two years later for her film. Charles Ford tells us that whereas the play relied on long dramatic silences to evoke the psychological trauma that Madame Beudet endures at the repressive and controlling hand of her husband, Dulac saw its cinem atic adaptation as a means to represent what is not said—what can only be thought or imagined between the two protagonists (34). For her part, in a 1923 interview with Paul Desclaux, Dulac nuances her position by stating that she was not strictly against adaptations. but that she felt that they slowed the artistic progress and potential of the cinema (Hillairet 28). And although the film certainly achieves the goal Ford claims Dulac intended: that is the representation of inner-thoughts, it builds that representation through the tension between the world of the theater,

Epstein gathered under the same title, I will reference to Dulac's writings under the name of Hillairet.
and the world of perception and sensation, clearly sustained throughout the film. 6

To begin for example, one of the critical moments of conflict between the two protagonists occurs over an invitation to see an operatic production of Faust. Both imagine the event in entirely differently ways, yet the fact remains that the theatrical or its signifier (the invitation) inspire the inner-perceptions of each character. We might also note the opposing imagery of each character’s inner-thoughts. On the one hand, Monsieur Beudet imagines Faust’s opera in two ways: 1) clearly in the realm of social (the singers are depicted happily singing in a group, going out with friends, etc.); 2) from a “petit bourgeois” and provincial perspective of dressing-up for a night out on the town (he imagines himself in a tuxedo). On the other hand, Madame Beudet envisions a stifling and oppressive operatic world (the bullying male denying the helpless female) and one she attempts to avoid by musing over her magazine

6 Allan Williams would seem to disagree with my reading of the importance of the theatrical. In Republic of Images, he writes: Dulac adapted Madame Beudet from a contemporary avant-garde play, but its most striking resonances are traditional and literary” (147). One has to wonder what he means by “traditional” resonances.
full of escapist images of urban commercial life (an advertisement for a sporty automobile and a young bourgeois man dressed in the latest tennis fashions). In other words, while his text (the invitation) prompts him to imagine a fancy evening on the town, her text (the magazine) conjures private and intimate images of escape and leisure between no more than two people.\(^7\) One of the most striking and perhaps cliché citations of the theatrical occurs in the closing scenes in which the couple reconcile while two marionettes appear in the frame of a painting above their heads. In these shots, Dulac’s montage between moments of narrative importance and the fantasies they incite seem to establish a dialogue between the realm of what the mind imagines (for example, unresolved psychological conflict), and what may be represented (banal and almost certainly temporary reconciliation).

\(^7\) In 1920 a typical issue of *Vogue* had one full page advertisement for a hygiene product (tooth paste, powder, soap) on the inside front cover of the review with only 2 to 4 pages of advertisements at the end (usually half or quarter page drawings). By 1925 advertising in the same magazine had increased dramatically. The early November 1925 edition of *Vogue* had 42 pages of full to 1/8 page advertisements (photographs and drawings) for products ranging from cologne to automobiles, to radios, to brassieres.
In addition to these direct references to the world of theater throughout the film, Dulac’s depiction of Monsieur Beudet’s attempts to feign suicide are heavily coded with theatrical elements. Beudet’s make-up is clearly exaggerated. The camera often distorts his face in extreme close-ups especially while threatening to kill himself out of exasperation with his wife’s behavior. The distorted and out-of-focus shots exaggerate the grotesque features of his face like his huge lips and sunken eyes. The distance of the lens to the subject it depicts was critical in Dulac’s conception of these shots. In a 1924 conference entitled: “Les Procédés expressifs du cinématographe,” which appeared in Cinémagazine one month later, Dulac stated:

Qu’une vue soit lointaine ou proche, le plan change de valeur, qu’il isole ou qu’il réunisse, son degré d’intensité n’est pas semblable, sa signification change. Un haussement d’épaules de Mme Beudet, pris en plan lointain, n’aurait pas la même signification qu’un haussement d’épaules pris en plan rapproché. (Hillairet 37)

The actor playing Monsieur Beudet (Arquillière) has an ideally expressive face for Dulac’s use of the extreme close-up. When speaking of a grotesque shot of his face Dulac claims : “Quand M. Beudet rit, d’un rire qui grince sur les nerfs de sa femme, il faut que
ce rire remplissait tout l'écran, toute la salle, et que les sectateurs éprouvent vis-à-vis de ce mari vulgaire la même antipathie que Mme Beudet" (37). The following intertitle which precedes one of his suicidal rehearsals demonstrates Dulac's clever but sparse use of intertitles to underline subtle emotional realities of an image while retaining a primitive narrative coherence.

La plaisanterie fatale
et souvent répétée : chère Monsieur Beudet:
parodie du suicide

The very form of the text reads more like a passage taken from a director's script as the final words: "parodie du suicide" imply and reinforce the repeated nature of the act. In a sense, the intertitle establishes a textual referent, or a signifier "parodie du suicide" to the signified imago of a sick joke. In this brief and repeated gesture the theatrical elements build the sensational and emotive effect of the image. Beudet's face is not the only one to be distorted by the camera, yet it is fragmented and exaggerated beyond all others. The shot that refers to the title of the film, has Madame Beudet leaning her head over backwards enjoying a phantasmagorical laugh. It is cinematically produced in the same fashion (extreme close-up.

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lighting from below and tight framing) but the effect differs greatly from the shots of her husband. The shot of her face from above, a glazed look of what might best be called ecstasy, provokes sympathy rather than fear, contrasting the crooked toothed, sinister laughing smile and dark-set eyes of Beudet’s face. Yet the ground work for this type of emotional identification with the protagonists occurs much earlier than these key shots.

For example, Dulac employs an iris to open and close several shots of the Beudets’ and other characters’ heads, hands and various body parts throughout the film. The iris tends to emphasize not only a particular part of the body, but also a particular framing of that body part—a framing, or more precisely an opening and a closing that seems to be gender based. One of the first iris shots captures the entire body of Madame Beudet. The shot establishes her body as a whole human figure surrounded by domestic elements such as a chair, books, lamps, and a piano). The following iris on Madame Beudet encloses her hands in the act of reading—a textual and fantastic escape from her domestically imprisoning existence. The first iris shot of Monsieur Beudet also includes a textual reference
although he has no head. This iris opens on his hands and the text completely blocking any hint of a thinking, reading person. For a man who so often draws attention to the self-inflicted loss of his own head, Dulac's camera technique threatens his decapitation sufficiently without his theatrics. In contrast to iris shots of Monsieur Beudet, those that frame his wife seem to isolate sympathetically her head, not in a violent or disfiguring way, but rather in order to valorize the psychological and fantasy life active beneath her forehead. One of the most sustained iris shots in the film is of Madame Beudet and begins with her head and shoulders as she considers the physical and mental extent of her suffocating existence. A shot of a face of a clock, and then a bell—two round shapes mirroring the camera's iris interrupt this shot signaling both the routine habitual nature of her life, and the stifling atmosphere of its slow progression. The iris then closes in even more on her forehead as if to underline that the previous images, although physical representations of time, were truly and at the same time, mental interpretations and expressions of her anguish. Then she approaches the mirror that reflects a rounded frame of her image before the iris closes. A revealing intertitle
follows, "C'est toujours les mêmes horizons," reinforcing not only the physical constraints of her existence, but also indirectly commenting on the visual technique of that representation itself: the iris. Just as the iris remains present and fixed on her head throughout this sequence, so does the feeling that her mind, her fantasies, and her mental visions will offer her only escape. Her hands, as opposed to her head, offer little comfort. Although she can hold a magazine, play the piano or toss her wedding ring in her hands, these props cannot provide her access to her desire—her longing to escape through fantasy.

In addition to the iris effect on human bodies, Dulac's framing techniques fragment and disfigure the human body in two distinct ways. On the one hand, and in a similar way to the gender specificity of the iris shots, Dulac's framing operates more often in violent ways on male bodies than female bodies. Monsieur Beudet's body rarely appears in its entirety in any shot throughout the film. His body is split either by the camera's frame, or various objects within the frame. The disorienting extreme close-ups of his face, equally off-center, capture one side of his face or the other, but rarely both at
the same time, and when the latter occurs his face seems to be stretched-wide like putty thanks to Dulac’s distorting lens technique. Not surprisingly the same effect holds true for male bodies at the work place as well. While at Beudet’s place of business, men’s bodies are seen from waist down (when on the ladder getting bolts of cloth) or from waist up. It is not surprising that Beudet’s business partner’s wife, Madame Lebas, suffers the same type of disfigurement (the extreme close-up of her ear as she eavesdrops on the Beudet’s dinner conversation) to the extent that she is continually equated with masculinity and not femininity. Some examples of her masculinization include: 1) taking the phone from her wimpy husband to make the decision to go to the opera and thereby effectively usurping his role as business partner with Monsieur Beudet; 2) her mimicking the shrugging shoulder gestures of Monsieur Beudet on two shot-reverse-shot sequences between the two; 3) her striking resemblance to Beudet himself (wide, grotesque face, sunken eyes, hideous laugh and smile and so forth). Dulac’s camera treats Madame Lebas as belonging to the realm of the grotesque, exaggerated, fragmented and discontinuous body. Even
the name Lebas foreshadows the way camera will disfigure and disfavor her head over her incomplete body. And just like Monsieur Beudet’s provincial tuxedo fantasy, for Germaine Dulac the extreme close-up of Madame Lebas’ ear represents the archetypical provincial mentality: “Ainsi, dans Mme Beudet, le gros premier plan de l’oreille de Mme Lebas, c’est toute la province, tous les cançans, l’esprit étroit, à l’affût des disputes, des discordes” (Hillairet 37). One striking effect of the masculinization of Madame Lebas is the opposition it creates between her and Madame Beudet. In contrast to the manly Lebas, Madame Beudet seems even more unique. In other words, the masculinization of Lebas has the effect of bolstering the feminization of Beudet. Although it may be problematic to consider the disfiguring framing of male bodies as necessarily violent, that is to say intending to cause harm, there is nevertheless a continual negation of both men’s heads and the continuity of the male head to the male body. In this way, here Dulac’s cinematic technique concurrently devalorizes men’s heads while valorizing the fragmentability of their bodies. In Beudet, men quite simply do not think, they act. Their ability to fantasize and to express desire
remains limited and confined to the superficial realm of theater attire and gratuitous dreams of performers’ ankles. Not only does Monsieur Beudet act violently (crushing a doll’s head), but he has little use for his brain at all. In addition, both Madame Beudet’s dreams and actions draw our attention to his dispensable head. Besides dreaming of his suicide parody, for example, she envisions him at work with an oversized account ledger dwarfing the sight of his head. The shot from behind where she tightens his neck tie around his neck before he leaves for the opera operates along the same lines.

As I mentioned above, there seems to be a technical attention towards highlighting aspects of Madame Beudet’s body over other characters’ bodies in the film. In contrast to the decapitated male bodies, Madame Beudet’s body receives different attention from Dulac’s camera. Madame Beudet’s body is also fragmented and even visually separated from her head, but in very different ways. One of the opening images of Madame Beudet is of her hands playing piano. The image is a split, with her husband’s hands nervously tossing coin-like objects on the other side. While her hands create art, his
appear to be creating capital. For Dulac, this shot of fragmented body parts summarizes all the oppositions between the two dreams even before the characters themselves are presented. Dulac writes "deux mains jouant du piano et deux mains différents soupesant une poignée d'argent. Deux caractères. Un idéal opposé... des rêves différents, nous le savons déjà; et cela sans aucun personnage" (Hillairet 36). The next shot, from behind the piano isolates her head and is followed by an image of her writing her name on a musical score by Debussy. Two intertitles interrupt this sequence of images establishing a more complex definition of the female body. The split image is preceded by the intertitle:

Derrière la façade des maisons tranquilles des âmes.... passions...

while the shot immediately following the split shot of the hands playing piano (and immediately preceding the shot from behind the piano) announces the main character: Madame Beudet (joué par Germaine Dermoz). After Madame Dulac seemingly confirms her identity by writing her name on the page of music, there is a medium shot of her playing the piano cut by an unidentifiable image
of shimmering light. This sequence seems to suggest that her body—her hands and her head are related and work together in the name of music. The shimmering image of light seems to heighten the emotive and dream-like quality of her distraction found in music. Another sequence that follows, showing her hands turning the page of the book followed by a medium shot of her reading with one hand placed on her head strengthens the connection between her hands and her head. Put another way, although her body may be fragmented by the camera, the two will work together to seek escape through such activities as playing music or reading poetry. Not only do art and escape lie at the intersection of the body and the mind, but they are created at that point as well. In Beudet, this intersection nevertheless tends to lie mostly in one woman's body. It is her body and her mind working separately and together that desire and fantasize; dramatically providing her imaginary flights from a repressive reality.

In the four years between Beudet and Seashell, Dulac directed five other films. Gossette for example was a six episode film that capitalized on Dulac's success with Beudet but was intended to
broaden her reputation among a larger audience. By directing at first at the Ciné-Romans studio, Dulac found ways to combine, extend and integrate her technical abilities at capturing the psyche/body intersection ("le plan psychologique", or the "symphonie visuelle", and so forth) with the more popular and certainly more funded genre of romance and melodramatic cinema. She also honed her theories and tastes for integrating musical imagery into her work in such films as La Folie des Vaillants (1925) (Ford 34-37).

Nevertheless, it would seem that Dulac hardly abandoned her interest in filming the body and its expressions. This is certainly the case in Seashell which also deals with issues of desire and escape.

Imagined escapes, fragmented bodies and the power of the mind to imagine and envision desire are all issues clearly at the heart of Seashell. And yet in some respects Seashell represents a significant break from Beudet. For example, in Seashell there are no intertitles, as well as a much heavier reliance on objects, plays of light and cinematic trucage. Moreover, and certainly more controversially, there is the dream-like quality of the film and the implied clear lack of a coherent and obvious narrative plot. This
issue belies the entire debate and quarrels surrounding the film: namely the collaboration and cooperation (and lack thereof) between Dulac and Artaud, the film’s scenarist. Such readings of the film have solicited much attention from critics of Dulac’s work. (Dozoretz 1979; Flitterman-Lewis 1992; Kyrou 1953) In her book To Desire Differently: Feminism and the French Cinema, Sandy Flitterman-Lewis devotes a chapter to questions such as: whether the film represents a dream (i.e. evokes the feeling of a dream), or whether it is a representation of a dream (i.e. a cinematic dream itself); the role of the writer of the film’s scenario and his alleged initial dislike and eventual acceptance of the film, as well as the reaction of other Surrealists (118-30). In addition, Flitterman-Lewis assesses Artaud’s relationship to Dulac, his contribution to the film and his thoughts on cinema in general. She also makes a case for reading the continuity between Beudet and Seashell:

At the heart of both films is an interest in the psychical mechanisms of the unconscious, an exploration of the subjective reality which—whether determined by the specific confines of fictional characterization or liberated by the unmediated play of the logic of dreams—is capable of revealing not only productive insights into our deepest longings, but the structure and function of “femininity” in its social, psychic, and cinematic contexts, as well. (100)
In this passage Flitterman-Lewis clearly calls us to read Dulac's films as being especially significant in their ability to call into question the means of cinematic representation, but also in her reformulation and redirection of the emerging art form along the lines of sexual difference (137). As we saw earlier, Dulac clearly intended producing a cinema reflecting the multiplicity of the inner-life, of human sensations and emotions. Dulac wanted to offer cinematic access to what she called "pure impressions":

Quoi de plus mouvementé que la vie psychologique, avec ses réactions, ses multiples impressions, ses ressauts, ses rêves, ses souvenirs. Le cinéma est merveilleusement outillé pour exprimer ces manifestations de notre pensée, de notre cœur, de notre mémoire. (Hillairet 37)

On the basis of our understanding of the body in Beudet, it might be fruitful to approach Seashell specifically from the angle of the body's role in the desiring process. My aim is to more fully explore the pathways of sexuality and desire present in the film—especially as they are represented in the body—and their potential for unlocking the provocative notion of pure cinema.

It is important to note that on the surface, Seashell tends to resist analysis at a purely narrative level to the extent that there
exists little narrative logic to the film. Instead, the film is a series of images and sequences that form a dream-like montage of representations of desire. Specifically the film centers on the possibilities and processes of visualizing and pursuing desire in both corporal and psychic terms. The role of spectatorship within the process is of course fundamental since the spectator inevitably both creates and actively participates in the meaning-production process. In fact, Seashell, may be read as an attempt to represent the unconscious itself. The relative lack of narrative codes in the film only contribute to the imperative of the spectator participating in the process. Seashell therefore, seen either as a dream or as a representation of a dream, engages our unconscious in part by

8 To speak of a meaning-production process is to evoke the field of psychoanalytic film theory and its founding theoretician Christian Metz. See for example his book: The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema. For Metz, film is an ideal medium for engaging the unconscious processes since a film's meaning-production occurs in its viewing. In other words, the film (its images and sounds) are a construction of the viewer and that work is mostly unconscious.

9 We may also recall the active/passive distinction between Surrealist film and classical narrative film we outlined in our discussion of Cocteau's Le Sang d'un poète (Kuenzli 9).
begging for interpretation all the while its narrative organizational structure resists such interpretation. As Flitterman-Lewis writes:

It can be successfully argued that *Seashell*, undeniably acknowledged as the first example of Surrealist cinema (both chronologically and aesthetically), represents the earliest attempt to cinematically render these unconscious forces in a way that engages the viewer in a process of identification with the film-text itself, rather than with any specific fictional construct. Once liberated from the constraints of both character and plot, these forces are thus free to circulate on the screen with all the energy of unconscious drives themselves. (117)

In other words, since our unconscious and our dreams resist narrative organization, then a film attempting to represent these inner-worlds must equally forego internal narrative structuring and identification with any one character. In this way, the meaning-production process lies in the spectator and not within character and plot identification. And Flitterman-Lewis remains rather clear on this point insisting "for the film consists of a series of moments connected associatively without any regard for narrative logic or causality" (118). Such an assertion, however, is quite simply not true. *Seashell* does follow a "narrative logic." Moreover, if the film engages the viewer to participate in the meaning-production process, to seek and produce meaning precisely where interpretation is most
resistant, then it would follow that such a process is possible and available in the film. Perhaps the process might be an individual experience for each viewer, yet narrative codes are evident in the film. These codes, these signposts to fashioning the body, reading desire and producing meaning, emerge in the film when we contemplate the intersection of desire, the mind and what I have been considering the avant-garde body. Furthermore, as in *Beudet* they are generated through Dulac's camera techniques, and her framing.

Even to talk about *Seashell* implies a certain organization of its sequences. That is to say, even if there were no internal logic to the film, or perhaps to dreaming, then any discussion of more than one image could imply its own logic. For example to say that one shot or sequence follows another would assume that there was a direction to the sequence if not some intention (either directorial or spectatorial) to create a passage from one shot to another. It is in this context then, that I believe the film includes a basic narrative thread which may best be described as the pursuit of desire. Both the clergyman and the general pursue the woman in the film, just as the two men
pursue each other. In this light, I will concentrate on certain sequences for analysis, without claiming that these grouping of sequences and shots are in anyway the only way to read the film. On the contrary, my intent is to question and reveal what these sequences might tell us about the role of the body and mind in the production and pursuit of desire and broaden our discussion of pure cinema as an expression of specularized desire.

As I mentioned before, the notions of pursuit and escape are consistent narrative structures in *Seashell*. The opening of the film shows a seated clergym an (Alex Allin) filling glassware with a black liquid held in a seashell as a general (Lucien Bataille) approaches him from behind.\(^{10}\) The initial pursuit occurs as the clergym an chases him through the city streets until he encounters the general with a woman (Génica Athanasiou). In subsequent pursuits and escapes the general and the woman flee the clergym an in a horse-drawn buggy, through a church, and in the countryside. Yet no matter where the

\(^{10}\) As Flitterman-Lewis points out, many versions of the film available in the United States have a major mistake. Somehow the three reels were spliced together with the third reel before the second. My reading follows the order of the scenario and the correct
chase takes place, all three figures are elaborately costumed and seem somewhat out-of-place in their surroundings. The clergymen's dark attire strongly contrasts with the white pavement of the streets upon which he crawls. The general's elaborate garb and flashing sword heighten both his social position and his exaggerated masculinity certainly contrasting the meager stature of the clergymen. The woman, a striking and beautiful person who was incidentally Artaud's lover at the time, wears an eighteenth-century gown. She changes appearances most often in the film portraying a bride, a member of the royalty, and a governess. The camera sights specific and detailed elements of their costumes including the general's sword, the clergymen's coat tails and the bodice of her dress. The emphasis on costumes and on their constituting elements suggest both a preoccupation with the metonmical and the body's possibility for expression. By fragmenting the costume and thereby the body or body part that lies underneath, Dulac's technique valorizes theatrical exhibition of the body.

version of the film. According to Flitterman-Lewis, the sequences within each reel have not been altered (139).
An excellent example of this technique occurs about halfway through the film when the clergymen rips the woman's bodice from her chest to reveal her naked breasts. The build-up of this display is slow and occurs in layers. First the camera foregrounds the importance of the act of looking through a slow sequence of six isolation shots of the actors' heads. These close-ups exaggerate the head's features while capturing the eye's movement as the head rotates. Images of the human heads looking or being looked at hardly surprise the viewer as the film includes at least 40 close-up shots of the human head similar to this sequence. Next we see the clergymen childishly plotting and scheming as he prepares to confront the woman. When he does rise to face her, he removes first her bodice and then a seashell carapace to reveal her naked breasts. The close-up of the woman's breast framed on either side by the rest of her dress suggest a stage complete with curtains. Her unique costume (with a ready-made removable bodice) frames and heightens the shocking display of her uncovered breasts. The following shots are of a ballroom full of dancers. The camera spins wildly capturing frenzied and fragmented bodies and embraces
pausing on a man gratuitously stealing a glance at his partner’s chest.

The pace of this shot accelerates evoking the acceleration of desire suggested in the previous theatrical display of the woman’s breasts.

Dulac mostly used the accelerated shot or its opposite the slow-motion shot to evoke both the intensity and the urgency of an inner emotion she was attempting to represent:

Une obsession intérieure . . . Là encore, c’est le mouvement qui rythme les sentiments . . . . Le ralenti intensifie les tics, les accélère, intensifie le bruit. Un état d’âme décrit par la vitesse. (Hillairet 50)

For Dulac, the rhythm of the shots always spoke more than any number of words or dialogue. Interrupting the display of her breasts, the dizzying ballroom scene offers the reappearance of the woman and the general and in effect a re-staging of the pursuit.

Another sequence involving pursuit, isolated framing of the body and the staging of desire occurs later. However, this sequence underscores same-sex desire. The sequence opens as the clergyman spies the general standing alone on what appears to be a pier. Thick ropes lying on the dock make-up the minimal scenery. The general leans seductively against a wharf poll as the camera focuses on the
men's longing gaze established through a reverse shots. This brief encounter in suggestive yet minimal nautical scenery strikingly foreshadows scenes from Fassbinder's *Querelle*. A surimposition follows of the woman's head kissing the general. The editing of this sequence clearly identifies the subject position with the clergyman. The sequence recalls a similar surimposition in *Beudet* when Madame Beudet imagines her maid receiving a kiss from her lover. René Girard's models of mimetic desire comes to mind as apparent rivals desire an object of the opposite sex. As Girard writes in *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*: “the more desire seeks what is different, the more it stumbles upon the same” (338).\textsuperscript{11} The clergyman's visualization of someone else embracing the object of his pursuit (desire) fades to a surimposition shot of his hands strangling the neck of the woman and then some provocative images of flight including a ship sailing to an isolated castle. The series of flight-images seem linked to the inner-fantasies of the clergyman as the camera frames a small portion of his forehead in one corner of the

\textsuperscript{11}In fact, many of Girard's theories on mimetic and triangular desire could be brought to bear on Dulac's work, especially *La Coquille et le clergyman*. (Girard 1978: III 3, 4; 1961: 11-57)
screen and the concocted images of the woman’s death and his escape from (or perhaps with) the general, appearing on the rest of the screen. A fade to black and a shot of maids furiously cleaning a spacious room, just like an accelerated shot of hands banging on the table underscore the erotic charge to this series of images.

The possibilities for desire centered on the dramatically coded body evident in these two sequences alone support an argument for a broad definition of desire in Dulac. Rather than a divergence from or a convergence with Beudet, Seashell offers a glimpse at a cinematic evolution of the filmmakers’ representations of desire as they are conveyed technically through the lens of “cinéma pur.” As much as the two films share (technique, fragmented bodies, an emphasis on the theatrical) they differ in their considerations of desire. In Beudet desire emerges in the continuity of the female body and mind. In Seashell desire becomes emblematized in the figure of pursuit and escape—a figure dramatically coded and divergent—and incredibly free moving. Here desire operates more subtlety offering rare visions of same-sex desire, by co-opting a
heterocratic Surrealist scenario. Desire for the same presses against the loose although not absent heterosexual plot.

Germaine Dulac’s films La Souriante Mme Beudet and La Coquille et le clergymen resist classification. A reading of their specificity as resistance—defined in the broadest terms—reveals in turn their preoccupation with the body. As a filmmaker Germaine Dulac resisted norms. She was a woman successfully working in a male-dominated industry. The fact that she was a lesbian neither explains away, nor does it aggrandize the role of same-sex desire in her films. But to analyze her films and not to consider sexuality tends to narrow, rather than expand her contribution to the avant-garde. As mentioned earlier, Dulac’s outspoken stance vis-à-vis theater and literature and especially their relationship to the cinema remained ambiguous. For as much as she claimed that cinema must resist the formulas of other art forms, and for as much as she believed in a “cinéma pur,” Dulac could not escape evoking and co-opting the other arts in her works. Cinematic adaptation was necessary in order for the cinema to survive since without a public, the cinema would die: “Mais sans le public, nous ne pouvons rien”
(Hillairet 54; 55-56). Just as she needed the public for her art she could not help but to encourage them to improve their taste for non-narrative films.

Je reproche donc au public de décourager pour son plaisir l'effort de ceux qui veulent rendre le cinéma à lui-même, à sa vraie pensée, et je reproche à tous les autres arts de vouloir emprisonner le cinéma dans leur formule, l'empêchant de vivre librement loin de leur secours (56).

Dulac certainly knew the value of inclusion all the while she strove to re-define cinematic viewing. She firmly believed that the potential for a radically new art was already there, it just needed to be uncovered and explored. "Pourquoi persister dans une erreur néfaste et ne pas changer le sens du cinéma actuel pour découvrir celui qu'il porte en lui et que nous méconnaissons? (Hillairet 54) In her own cinematic practice, the same idea of potential exists. In conclusion, Dulac’s pure cinema depends as much on representing the body in theatrical and spectacular terms, as it does on resistance. Dulac’s co-option of the norms she was resisting—including heterosexuality and classical narrative plot structures—allowed her to depict different views of fantasy and desire played-out both inside and outside the human body.
CHAPTER 5

ULTRA DRAMA IN JEAN EPSTEIN’S LA CHUTE DE LA MAISON USHER

On ne se raconte plus, on indique. Cela laisse le plaisir d’une découverte et d’une construction. Plus personnellement et sans entraves, l’image s’organise. - Jean Epstein (1921).

Although mostly recognized as a film director, like many of the first French avant-garde, Jean Epstein was also a writer. In addition to several articles on the cinema and film theory, most of which are gathered in Ecrits sur le cinéma (1974), Epstein wrote six works specifically addressing the cinema: Bonjour Cinéma (1921); La Lyrosophie (1923); Le Cinéma vu de l’Etna (1925); Intelligence d’une machine (1946); Le Cinéma du Diable; and Esprit de Cinéma (published posthumously in 1955). He also wrote two novels chiefly inspired by his love of the region of Bretagne and the ocean: L’or des
mers (1932) and Les recteurs et la sirène (1934). Nevertheless, the majority of Epstein's artistic production was in film.

Jean Epstein was born of a French father and a Polish mother in Poland in 1897. He completed his early education in Switzerland before taking up the study of medicine in Lyon where he met Auguste Lumière. His primary passion, however, was modern literature and the emerging seventh art form: cinema. Epstein had his first concrete although brief working experience in film between 1920 and 1922 as an assistant to Louis Delluc on the film: Le Tonnerre. From there Jean Epstein went on to make some 44 films between 1922 and 1948. Epstein died in Paris from a cerebral hemorrhage on 5 April, 1953.

Without a doubt, Epstein's most well-known film is La Chute de la Maison Usher made in 1928. In this chapter we will mostly concentrate on La Chute de la Maison Usher for many reasons. First, although unfortunate, it is one of the few Epstein films readily available in the United States today. What remains of his other films are difficult to access even in France. Second, the film is an adaptation of Edgar Allan Poe's short story of the same title and as such directly engages matters of representation. In other words, La Chute reveals not only Epstein's fascination with Poe's texts, but his
desire to capture Poe’s propelling taste for the dramatic, the mysterious and the unexplainable on film. And third, *La Chute de la Maison Usher*, along with Epstein’s comments on the film, present a compelling case for the critical role of the body at the intersection of avant-garde representation, spectatorship and sexuality. I will structure my analysis of Epstein’s film and his writing on cinema and spectatorship in three parts. In the first part of this chapter, we will concentrate on Epstein’s debt to Poe in two interdependent ways. The first way deals with Epstein’s borrowings and re-configurations of Poe’s tales on a narrative level. The second influence concerns Epstein’s interpretation, reassignment and representation of what we might consider the dramatic and mysterious elements in Poe’s texts. Next, we will turn to a close cinematic reading of *La Chute de la Maison Usher* concentrating on the ways in which Epstein foregrounds two critical senses of spectatorship: the visual and the audible. Lastly, I will conclude in a discussion of how Epstein skillfully combines dramatic and spectatorial elements to offer a veiled although poignant representation of homosexual desire.

As mentioned above, at first glance it seems obvious that Jean Epstein's *La Chute de la Maison Usher* is a cinematic adaptation of Edgar Allan Poe’s famous short story of the same name. And yet,
what seems so easy to see at first, becomes as the film progresses increasingly less straightforward. Epstein's *La Chute de la Maison Usher* is more precisely the combination of Poe's *Fall of the House of Usher* (1839) and another short tale: *Life in Death*, or *The Oval Portrait* (1842). Borrowing from both Poe tales, Epstein weaves his own mysterious and melodramatic tale of a man loving a woman, that woman dying, and her coming to life again. But then again, Epstein's version becomes more than what it appears to be when a close look reveals the title of Roderick's portrait of his wife to be: "Ligeia - Lady Usher - 1717," indicating yet a third reference to one of Poe's tales: *Ligeia* of 1838. In the end, only a diligent Poe scholar could unearth all the possible rapports to Epstein's film, however the point remains that what at first appears to be one tale, is really many more. One reference becomes two, then becomes three, and so forth.

We can, however, be more certain of Epstein's high regard for Poe's work. Thoroughly disappointed with the available French translation of Poe, Epstein laments:

Dans l'estime où l'on tient Poe, il y a souvent un contresens. Ce clair poète, aimant et juvénile, on le tient pour un fantaisiste macabre ou policier. La traduction sèche, incomplète du cœur, infidèle à la musique, mauvaise, que Baudelaire fit de cette œuvre, est une cause permanente de ce malentendu. (*Écrits* 187)
In an effort to bring to life Baudelaire's dry Poe, Epstein engaged a young scene decorator who truly understood Poe. In a review of the film written in June 1928, Epstein said:

Je me suis pour cela...adressé à un jeune qui a lu et relu tout Poe, qui s'en est imprégné, qui, maintenant, le comprend admirablement—dans la mesure où cet écrivain peut être compris, naturellement—et qui a su l'interpréter dans tous ses décors. (L'Avant-scène 78)

Given Epstein's apparent desire to faithfully portray Poe's work, it seems fruitful to unearth the extent of Epstein's borrowings. What elements did Epstein retain in his version, and what elements did he alter? Although by no means exhaustive, a comparative analysis of the film and written texts will address what these changes signal and how they effect the way we understand various elements of the film. As a beginning to a response to the question raised above, let me suggest that the deviations and changes to Poe's text consistently underline Poe's and Epstein's own taste for the mysterious. In other words, if nothing else, Poe's taste for the unseen, or unheard, is unabashedly celebrated in Epstein's film.

As we have noted, Epstein's La Chute de la Maison Usher is at least the combination of three Poe texts. Without a doubt, Poe's Fall of the House of Usher provides the majority of the plot to Epstein's
film. In both versions, and in the most basic terms, the plot similarities may be summarized in the following manner: 1) a man invites a close male friend to his mysterious castle; 2) the host's closest female relation is deathly ill; 3) the two male friends occupy their time by reading, playing music or painting; 4) the deceased female comes back to life and the house of Usher literally falls apart.

To the basic narrative structure borrowed from Poe's Fall, Epstein adds and expands upon the artistic talent of the protagonist Roderick by incorporating elements from The Oval Portrait. More specifically, Epstein dons Roderick with the prestigious yet ghastly ability to paint his subject's portrait with such lifelike detail, that indeed he paints the life right out of her. Or, as Poe writes: "And he would not see that the tints which he spread upon the canvas were drawn from the cheeks of her who sat beside him."1 Moreover, borrowing presumably from Life in Death, Epstein alters the relationship between Roderick and Madeline from brother/sister to husband/wife. The third reference to the Poe tale Ligeia, remains the most difficult to discern in Epstein's film, especially on the

1 Edgar Allan Poe, Life in Death [The Oval Portrait], 738. All further citations to Poe's works are taken from The Unabridged Edgar Allan Poe and will be noted in the body of my text by their initials followed by a page number. FHU = The Fall of the House of Usher, LID = Life in Death [The Oval Portrait], and L = Ligeia.
narrative level. That is to say, with the exception of the revivification of a woman, no other obvious narrative similarities exist with Epstein's film.2

On the other hand, what *Ligeia* fails to contribute on a narrative level is compensated for on a scenic and thematic level. It is probable, for example, that the long flowing curtains that appear several times in Epstein's film come directly from *Ligeia*:

The lofty walls—gigantic in height—even unproportionably so—were hung from summit to foot, in vast folds with a heavy and massy-looking tapestry—tapestry of a material which was found alike as a carpet on the floor, as a covering for the ottomans and the ebony bed, as a canopy for the bed, and as the gorgeous volutes of the curtains which partially shaded the window. (L 487)

The theme of the mysterious sickly woman is equally a part of Poe's *Ligeia*, *Life in Death*, and *The Fall of the House of Usher*. In *Ligeia* in particular, the woman is as much a source of fear as a source of mystery. Ligeia's power—both intellectual and esthetic—leave her husband quaking: “Without Ligeia I was but a child groping benighted. Her presence, her readings alone, rendered vividly

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2 What is intriguing in the tale of *Ligeia*, and will have more relevance to this analysis later, is that when Ligeia dies, her husband remarries Rowena, a seemingly inferior substitute, who in turn dies. Later, when Rowena's corpse comes back to life an important change occurs for she is someone different. She is now the husband's first
luminous the many mysteries of the transcendentalism in which we were immersed’ (L 483). In *Ligeia* then, as in *The Fall of the House of Usher*, Poe offers to the reader, and we can safely assume the filmmaker, a representation of the dying woman leaving the impish man lost, troubled and helpless.  

Of course, all the differences between Poe's texts and Epstein's film are too numerous to detail. Yet one of the most notable differences lies in a gender switch where the immediate malady of the man shifts to the woman. Indeed, ultimately, in all four texts, the woman is ill and dies. But in Poe's texts with the exception of *Life in Death*, men are equally ill. Poe's tales seem more concerned with the man's sickness than with his wife's or his sister's malady. In Poe's tales the woman's poor health and her sickly presence make her mysterious, and eventually bring the man to his downfall. For example, in Poe's *Fall of the House of Usher*, Roderick calls upon his dearest and only friend to come to his side precisely because he (Roderick) is so ill at the sight of his sister's decline:

> The writer [Roderick] spoke of acute bodily illness—of a pitiably mental idiosyncrasy which oppressed him—and of wife Ligeia.

3 Although strikingly beautiful, the artist's wife in *Life in Death*, represents a lesser threat since the artist true wife and his true love are painting.
an earnest desire to see me, as his best, and indeed his only personal friend, with a view of attempting by the cheerfulness of my society, some alleviation of his malady. (FHU 533)

Similarly, Ligeia's lingering sickly memory drives her husband to opium: “I had become a bounded slave in the trammels of opium, and my labors and orders had taken a colouring from my dreams. But these absurdities I must not pause to detail” (L 486). In Poe's work, the woman, especially the sick woman, is a cause of great concern. She haunts, upsets, and terrorizes her mate to the point of insanity. In contrast to Poe's tales, Epstein de-emphasizes Roderick's sickness in favor of Lady Madeline's baffling illness. Whereas Poe goes to much effort to detail Roderick's hypochondria, Epstein emphasizes Madeline's frailty through such devices as the presence of the doctor, her inability to join Allan and Roderick for dinner, and her generally sickly appearance throughout the film. Certainly Madeline's failing health worries Roderick in Epstein's film, but like the artist in Life in Death, his major concern focuses first on his art, and secondly on his visitor friend Allan. The gender malady shift from the sick man to the sick woman echoes another shift based in gender operating

4 It seems hardly a coincidence that Epstein gives the visitor the name Allan, as in Poe's middle name.
between Epstein’s adaptation and Poe’s text and within Poe’s texts as well.

In *Ligeia* Poe describes at length the strange beauty of the deadly/dying woman:

Yet although I say that the features of Ligeia were not of classic regularity, although I perceived that her loveliness was indeed ‘exquisite,’ and felt that there was much of ‘strangeness’ pervading it, yet I have tried in vain to detect the irregularity and to trace home my own perception of the strange.

The skin rivaling the purest ivory, the commanding breadth and repose, the gentle prominence of the regions above the temples . . . I looked at the delicate outlines of the nose—and nowhere but in the graceful medallions of the Hebrews had I beheld a similar perfection (L 480).

In *The Fall of the House of Usher* a somewhat similar yet different description appears:

... lips somewhat thin and very pallid, but of a surpassingly beautiful curve; a nose of a delicate Hebrew model, but with a breadth of nostril unusual in similar formation. . . . these features, with an inordinate expansion above the regions of the temple, made up altogether a countenance not easily to be forgotten. (FHU 536)

In many ways, we could be reading about the same Hebrew beauty. The latter however, is not a description of Madeline, as one would expect, but rather of Roderick. In fact, in Poe’s text Madeline’s physical description economically reads: “Her figure, her air, her
features—all, in their very minutest development were those—were identically (I can use no other sufficient term) were identically those of the Roderick Usher who sat beside me.” (FHU 537) Unique words escape Poe's narrator here, and the only resource left is to describe "her" with "his" terms. Within Poe's texts alone, physical descriptions seem to circulate from Ligeia to Roderick to Madeline. In Epstein's version too, the very least one can say is that Roderick's physical appearance and facial features are astonishingly similar to Madeline's, and now by extension to Ligeia. To name only one example of the way Epstein draws our attention to Roderick's, and as if by default to Madeline's "beauty," consider the repeated close-up's of Roderick's forehead, eyes and lips. We will return later to discuss in more detail the camera's biased treatment of Roderick. In both Poe and Epstein then, beauty both strange and intriguing can switch easily from man to woman while their portraits become virtually interchangeable. What then can both of these gendered malady and beauty shifts indicate and how are they played-out in cinematic terms?

In attempting to answer the questions above, for clarity's sake, I will set aside a discussion of Poe in favor of a more in-depth analysis of the film. Epstein's emphasis on Lady Madeline's malady
takes many forms. Consider the presence of the doctor who, in the film, is there to cure Madeline while in Poe's text is there to cure Roderick. Of the minimal story boards Epstein uses in the film, one takes on more importance given the shots surrounding it: "La maladie de Lady Madeline, femme de Roderick Usher, bafouait la science de son médecin." After we get our first look at the portrait of Madeline (but before we find out Madeline is such a strange case), Roderick introduces Allan to the doctor, who merits his own story board reading in large characters: "Le médecin." After Epstein makes sure we know there is a doctor in the house, the next two shots frame the three men together. Once Madeline’s peculiar malady is announced, there are four shot reverse shots in which the men—in particular Allan and the doctor—seem to be dumbfounded by something other than Madeline's illness. What so intrigues the doctor and Allan, rather, is Madeline. Her lifelike depiction (which is as true to life as life itself since Epstein has placed Marguerite Gance literally within the painting’s frame) causes the two men to approach in awe, one with his hands in lifted in astonishment. The mere presence of the doctor, which is almost constant throughout the film, underscores the importance of Madeline's illness. In other words, her medical case, just like her very presence, astounds men.
But Madeline's presence goes beyond simple astonishment since her very nearness affects men in a more direct way. Ridding themselves of the doctor, Allan and Roderick find some time alone to talk over dinner. Allan seems hungry until Roderick collapses on the table after taking a fleeting glance at the portrait. Even the slightest look, in this case established by a shot of Roderick looking away to the left, followed by a medium shot of the portrait, causes Roderick to fall apart. Allan, a concerned and intimate friend, lunges to grab Roderick's hands from across the table in an effort to console him. Once Roderick has gained his composure, and after Allan has held Roderick's hand for quite some time, Roderick looks again to the left, this time to a shot of the hallway stairs. But now it is Allan who seems to fall apart more physically than emotionally. Allan leans forward into the camera—towards Roderick who is off camera—and puts his hand around his ear because he can't hear. Roderick's fleeting glance to the portrait, and then to the hallway, both signal the eerie and mysterious presence of Madeline—a presence that directly affects Allan's senses. Allan will lose his hearing again on several other occasions always in the presence (literal, impending or suggested) of Madeline. For the following ten shots, Allan has trouble hearing as Roderick continues to look around himself
uneasily. The camera returns on five occasions to a close up of Allan not being able to hear, reinforcing the impression that Lady Madeline has a disrupting auditory effect on Allan. Even if Roderick is not looking at Madeline, he seems to be hearing her move about, or tracking her presence. He looks several times off camera, and we see the wind blowing some leaves. Something is out there, and it is most likely a scary woman.\textsuperscript{5} This short sequence where Madeline's presence or even the spirit of her presence impedes men's senses is only a beginning. Everywhere she comes up, she reduces men's ability to hear. Consider just these two examples: 1) Roderick's inability to hear Allan ringing the bell, (it even takes the servant a long time to respond) and 2) Allan's recurring deafness right before Madeline comes back to life.

Madeline's strange effect on men's ability to hear is even more intriguing when viewed in the light of Epstein's masterful effort to draw the spectator's attention to his or her own sensory lack. From the opening images of the film, we as spectators are barraged with images marked by visual imperceptiveness. The opening shot of Allan approaching the coach house is striking to the extent that

\textsuperscript{5} Another scary woman meriting a closer look is the woman at the coach house whose face we see in the window.
Allan's head is cut off from the frame. Epstein's framing dismembers and disallows the viewer to see just who is going where. The pursuant mise-en-scène emphasizes the mysterious visitor to the coach house. Allan's face is hidden from view well into the epilogue. Either he is bent over with his back to us, or his face is bundled up in scarves. The medium close-ups of the men inside the coach house straining their necks to see the visitor contribute to the tension of the viewer not being able to see. Epstein exaggerates our visual imperceptiveness more through a close up of Allan looking through his large magnifying glass at a letter that we can only see partially. I believe that there is little coincidence in the fact that the only words the viewer can make out through the magnifying glass are the words: "Madeline" and "inquiet." What we do see precisely is a worrying Madeline, or a Madeline that makes someone (if not everyone) worry. Furthermore, if the viewer is not sufficiently worried about the mysterious Madeline suggested by the letter, the shots of another woman in the epilogue drive the nail home. First we see the coach house woman worrying from a distance with her head in her hands. Not surprisingly, in the next shot Allan pulls out his ear horn as if her distant presence may cause him to lose his hearing. And finally, in what is perhaps a foreshadowing of the other threatening
woman in a frame (Madeline), Epstein follows with a medium shot of the two windows of the coach house from the exterior in which we can see the woman again. An extreme close up of the woman follows the medium shot. Her face is plastered against the window, mouth half open and her nostrils flaring. This particular shot is quite simply disturbing. From this shot on, the viewer is set up to expect a tale of horror and fright, a tale where what is unheard and unseen is no less comforting than the scary woman signaling it all. In short, in *La Chute de la Maison Usher*, sick and disturbing women not only bring about the fall of men and houses, they also threaten men's senses. Like these men, the viewers' ocular impairment is only further problematized by another visual double-take: the striking resemblance between Roderick and Madeline.

Without a doubt Roderick and Madeline could pass for twins rather than just brother and sister, or husband and wife. Their noses, lips, eyes, and eyebrows are remarkably similar. In the text, we have already seen how Poe brings this resemblance to bear, and even switches the female ideal to the male body. Epstein's camera technique permits and underscores the male/female switch.

On the one hand, Epstein repeatedly uses the close-up or extreme close-up on Roderick. The camera often times pulls in close
on his worried eyes, vast forehead, and flared nostrils. On other occasions, Epstein frames Roderick's hand in an extreme close-up as if to emphasize not only Roderick's artistic talent, but also, perhaps, to draw attention to his delicate and sensitive hands. The effect of these close-ups is one of intimacy. In contrast, Madeline is mostly shot in a medium shot or long shot. The viewer either sees Madeline framed within the frame of her portrait, or framed between men. Otherwise we see Madeline very little—we know that she is there, and like Roderick we sense her lurking about, but we do not always see her.

On the other hand, and characteristically throughout the film and in regards to all characters, Epstein's constantly alters between extreme long shots and close-ups. In regards to Roderick and Madeline, this translates into a majority of close-ups and extreme close-ups of Roderick and long shots, or extreme long shots of Madeline. The viewer is asked not only to see Roderick more than Madeline, but to see Roderick better and more intimately than Madeline. Epstein uses the term “grossissement” to describe his preference:

Jamais je ne pourrais dire combien j’aime les gros plans américains. Nets, brusquement l’écran étale un visage et le drame, en tête à tête, me tutoie et s’enfle à des intensités imprévues. Hypnose. Maintenant la Tragédie
The varying camera distance, heightened by Epstein's taste for "grossissement" affects the viewer in two ways. On the one hand, the viewer is unable to see one thing very well and another not so well. On the other hand, the "grossissement" biases the view of Roderick. Epstein would seem to want to hypnotize us with Roderick's beauty rather than Madeline's.\(^6\) For Epstein, the extreme close-up is an incredibly intimate act. One where the spectator penetrates the image. As early as 1921, and in his very first book: *La Poésie d'aujourd'hui: un novel état d'intelligence*, Epstein defines a growing esthetic of proximity:

La succession des détails qui remplace le développement chez les auteurs modernes et les gros premiers plans dus à Griffith relève de cette esthétique de proximité.

Entre le spectacle et le spectateur, aucune rampe. On ne regarde pas la vie, on la pénètre. Cette pénétration permet toutes les intimités. Un visage, sous la loupe, fait la roue, étale sa géographie fervente.

Des cataractes électriques ruissellent dans les failles de ce relief qui m'arrive recuit aux 3000 degrés de l'arc. C'est le miracle de la présence réelle, la vie manifeste.

\(^6\) It could be argued that the two visions of "beauty" are identical since their descriptions are such, but Madeline is defined in Roderick's terms, this in combination with the camera's "gross" bias, refutes such a claim.
ouverte comme une belle grenade,
pelée de son écorce,
assimilable,
barbare.

Théâtre de la peau.
Aucun tressaillement ne m’échappe.
Un déplacement de plans désole mon équilibre.
Projété sur l’écran j’atterris dans l’interligne des lèvres,
Quelle vallée de larmes, et muette!
Sa double aile s’énerve et tremble, chancelle,
décolle, se dérobe et fuit:
Splendide alerte d’une bouche qui s’ouvre.
Auprès d’un drame ainsi suivi à la jumelle de muscle en muscle, quel théâtre de parole n’est point misérable! (171-72)

In light of Epstein’s esthetic of proximity, we may no longer consider the spectatorial preoccupation with Roderick’s body, carried out through the camera’s tight framing, as purely innocent or coincidental. In fact, when Madeline comes back to life, it is possible, although difficult to prove, that Madeline is indeed played by Roderick. The overdone masculine features of Madeline notwithstanding, the bride/groom late to his/her wedding is only shot in such a manner as to exclude either a clear view of Roderick or a clear view of Madeline. We either see Madeline’s face or Roderick’s but never both together in spite of the fact the camera tracks in front of them. Much like Madeline’s portrait going up in flames, so does our perception of Madeline that is only mediated through our ability
to see Roderick. Given the textual precedent of the Rowena/Ligeia switch in Poe’s tale, the Madeleine/Roderick(in drag) switch seems more plausible. In any case, what we are unable to see contributes to what we are unable to know.

The slow motion shot, another favorite technical device of Epstein, heightens our sense of the unknown. The “ralenti” is often used in La Chute in shots of objects rather than people. Nonetheless, its effect is similar to the altering between close and long shots and intimate “grossissement” preference used in shots of Roderick. The “ralenti” is especially effective when it captures the falling books or the falling statue, since it serves to draw the viewer's attention to the fact that no tangible person could cause those things to fall. Rather, what does jump out at the viewer is the feeling that he or she is unable to see who caused these strange things to happen. What we cannot see heightens the drama of the shot. In 1928, Epstein wrote:

J'ai négligé volontairement au cours de La Chute de la Maison Usher tous les effets plastiques que pouvait permettre l'ultra-cinématographie. Je n'ai cherché si j'ose m'exprimer aussi prétentieusement—que l'ultra-drame. À aucun moment du film, le spectateur ne pourra reconnaître: Ceci est du ralenti. Mais je pense que, comme moi à la première projection, il s'étonnera d'un dramaturgie aussi minutieuse. Car, c'est la dramaturgie, l'âme elle-même du film, que ce procédé intéresse. Nous voici, aussi subtilement qu'en littérature, près de retrouver les temps perdus. (Écrits 191)
Ultra-drama reaches perfection then in slow motion, because slow motion struggles to get at something difficult to uncover—something mysterious and as unseen as the soul. Given that the unknown and unseen soul is at stake, we can now better read the close-ups of Roderick's body over Madeline's since the ultimate “ralenti” for Epstein is that of the face: “Je ne connais rien de plus absolument émouvant qu'au ralenti un visage se délivrant d'une expression. Toute une préparation d'abord, une lente fièvre, dont on ne sait s'il faut la comparer à une incubation morbide, à une maturité progressive, ou plus grossièrement, à une grossesse” (191). Again in light of the proximity of the camera to Roderick, it would seem that the only true soul-searching carried out is on the male soul. What Epstein tells us, in so many words, is that his technique uncovers and unmasks that which is difficult to see and even harder to represent. The mysterious decor, the mysterious loss of hearing and the mysterious similarity between Roderick and Madeline sharpen even further the search for the intangible.

I would like to suggest, however, another way to read all the mystery, all the unheard and all the unseen. Such a reading would center on the relationship between Allan and Roderick, which in many ways is uncharacteristic of many representations of male-male
friendship. When the two men meet after the film's epilogue, Roderick embraces his friend Allan. The embrace in itself seems straight enough except for the fact it is repeated within two shots, and that the first time, Roderick's salutary force is so strong that he picks Allan right off the ground. Then there is the extended hand holding at the table, which comes as no surprise given that Roderick has a less than bashful ability to touch every man in sight as much as possible. Throughout the first shots of the doctor, Roderick, Allan trio, Roderick has his hands or arms around another man virtually throughout the sequence. We might wonder too at Roderick's excessive worry over Allan getting cold, since he runs down the stairs, wraps his friend's ears and hugs him just one more time before Allan goes for a walk. Then for the first time, and in the absence of Allan, Roderick touches his wife, but with much less enthusiasm and concern than he demonstrates for Allan. There is much other evidence of the mystery surrounding Roderick and Allan's relationship yet one particular sequence of shots is very revealing. In a series of shot reverse shots, Allan, from off camera, watches Roderick advance towards him. Roderick, as if going through withdrawal, stumbles right past the empty portrait of Madeline, in the direction of Allan. The story board tellingly reads:
"Roderick n'ose plus répéter cette folle persuasion qui l'étouffe ... Madeline." If Madeline is the wild persuasion, then why does he go right past her portrait? There is a strong suggestion that Roderick's persuasion could be more directly related toward Allan and not toward Madeline. To a point, all this male loving and touching might be innocent enough, but evidence only mounts (i.e. Allan clinging to Roderick like a protective lover at the discovery of the latter wife's death) until another suspicious mounting occurs—namely the toad sequence.

By the toad sequence, I am referring to Madeline's burial. As Roderick and Allan are slowly backing out of the crypt to the right, Allan clings to Roderick as if to impede him from looking back, while the doctor and servant begin to nail the coffin closed. The pursuing series of cross-cutting shots evokes some interesting images. To begin, there is a shot of the doctor and servant mechanically hammering the coffin shut. Next, a shot of Allan supporting and helping Roderick climb the stairs. Then, as if from nowhere, the medium shot of the two men mounting stairs is cross-cut with a shot of two toads beginning to mount each other. The action of the frogs, in turn, is mimicked with an extreme close up of the doctor, pounding away; his head moving up and down in a mechanical
fashion. This pounding/nodding shot of the doctor and the servant is cut back to the frogs now humping one another, and finally back to a medium shot of Allan, this time mounting Roderick as they climb the stairs. It might be no surprise that the whole sequence, according to the screen play, is shot in slow motion. Furthermore, the cross-cutting between doctor/servant, Allan/Roderick, toad/toad, is punctuated by two camera techniques. First, Epstein closes in on the toads, moving his camera closer and closer as if to uncover the soul of a toad, and ensure that we wonder at the sight. Second, there are two other shots later mixed into the previous sequence which are rather mysterious. According to the screen play one is of an owl and the second is described only as an “objet mystérieux” (L’Avant-scène 67). What does it matter what these two mysterious shots depict, as long as they draw the viewer’s attention to the fact that something else—something much less obvious—is going on? The mystery, in the form of that which we can only barely understand or see, is in no manner invisible. The mysterious must be present or felt in order to threaten and intrigue us. According to Jean Kolb, Epstein reportedly turned to is actors during a shoot and yelled without a smile: “Soyons mystérieux, mes enfants!” (L’Avant-scène 78). What we cannot see
for sure, is precisely what Epstein urges us to contemplate and perhaps to look for but never truly understand or fully reveal.

If imitation, or in Epstein's case, adaptation, is the highest form of complement, then Epstein's high regard for Poe's work seems to be tied to Poe's mastery of the mysterious. On more than one occasion in Epstein's writing on the cinema, he cites a famous passage from Poe's *Fall of the House of Usher*. The passage comes at the point in Poe's tale when the traveler is contemplating the mystery he senses when he first sees the House of Usher.

> What was it—I paused to think—what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher? It was a mystery all insoluble; nor could I grapple with the shadowy fancies that crowded upon me as I pondered. I was forced to fall back upon the unsatisfactory conclusion, that while, beyond a doubt, there are combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of thus affecting us, still the reason, and the analysis of this power lies among considerations beyond our depth. (533)

As I have attempted to demonstrate, Epstein's take on Poe gives the meaning of mysterious a new twist. On one level the mysterious may be summarily represented in the woman. But such a definition is unsatisfactory. A definition of the mysterious based in gender falls flat in Usher's house since it only cites and sights that which is within our grasp or within our vision. That is to say, the
presence/absence tension embodied in Madeline is too easily identified and necessarily less of a mystery. In Epstein's film, the mysterious, itself a transgression of nature, looks to another “transgression”—the transgression of sexuality. Male-male desire, and all the secrets that surround it, explicitly contribute to Epstein's notion of mysterious. He plays out these secrets on the surface of the body, slowly and tightly framing it in the most intimate ways. In the end though, we might wonder why Epstein chose a rather harmless, natural image of two toads mating—a sight that would disturb few of us if they were to stumble upon it in the woods—to suggest male-male love. But then again, some of us would not wonder at all.
CONCLUSION

To use expressions like specularized desire and avant-garde body is to take a certain amount of liberty with language. In a way, the move is both deliberate and appropriate. Any avant-garde expression involves transgression. Yet transgression does not occur in a vacuum. There has to be some norm or tradition to be challenged in the first place. Avant-garde transgression also supposes a goal, however unattainable. Generally the aim of an avant-garde movement is one associated with progress towards a new way of creating, writing, living, or thinking but most importantly a way of doing things differently. In this dissertation, we have examined how René Crevel, Jean Cocteau, Colette, Germaine Dulac and Jean Epstein create by drawing on sources from such diverse fields as mathematics, advertising, haute couture, mystery literature and theater. Yet regardless of the discourse of their inspiration, and without exception, the authors and filmmakers
considered here confronted the world around them by fashioning something new and something different through sexually charged corporal representation, or what I have been calling the avant-garde body. The term "specularized," that combines the visual and the dramatic uniquely describes the relationship between the desired object and desiring subject. Sexuality plays a role in all of this as well. The avant-garde body—as an expression of the morcelized and disarticulated body of modern art—desired, drawn, written and filmed through the filter of same-sex love—transgresses objectivity in search of subjectivity. It calls into question its position as passive object. By capitalizing on pleasurable and spectacular environments and scenarios, the avant-garde body often seeks to celebrate and valorize same-sex desire over heterosexual desire. Representations of the avant-garde body subvert an objectifying gaze through their fragmented, magnified and reflected image. If homosexual desire, like the avant-garde involves transgression, then the avant-garde body too is transgressed through its staging, fragmentation, magnification and reflection. The avant-garde body and the desire that produces it refuse scientific and medical objectification and seek
pleasure—above anything else—from the spotlight of the stage to the lens of the camera. Viewing things differently for the French avant-garde of the 1920s and 1930s involves engaging ocular praxes of pleasure and spectacle in the name of figuring a homosexualized avant-garde body.
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