

Communicating vessels: The influence of Luis Buñuel's early films on the Belgian avant-garde cinema

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RESUMEN: *La perla* y *Monsieur Fantômas*, obras tempranas del cine de ficción en Bélgica, son dos ejemplos poco estudiados dentro del cine de vanguardia del primer tercio del siglo XX. Obras singulares, en primer lugar, dado que fueron los únicos filmes realizados por sus autores, Henri d'Ursel y Ernst Moerman, respectivamente, pero también por su adhesión a los principios discursivos y a la estética del cine surrealista desarrollado en las décadas de los 20 y 30 del pasado siglo. El presente artículo las contextualiza dentro del cine de vanguardia y del cine nacional belga, ahonda en su relación con la cultura de dicho país y, por último, también examina la huella en ellas de la obra de notables representantes del movimiento artístico como René Magritte o Luis Buñuel.

Palabras clave: *La perla*, *Monsieur Fantômas*, cine belga, vanguardia cinematográfica, surrealismo, Luis Buñuel, René Magritte.

ABSTRACT: *La perle* and *Monsieur Fantômas* are early examples of the fiction film features in Belgium and both have not been studied much among the avant-garde school of films spread in the first third of XXth century. They are both quite unique, first of all as they were the only feature films shoot by their directors, Henri d'Ursel and Ernst Moerman respectively. But also because of their early adoption of the discursive principles and visual aesthetics of Surrealist cinema of the 1920's and 30's. The present article put them in context not only among the contemporary avant-garde cinema but also among Belgian film history. It explores too the cultural background related to Belgian cultural heritage and finally it studies their connections with the works of reputed surrealist artists like René Magritte and Luis Buñuel.

Keywords: *La perle*, *Monsieur Fantômas*, Belgian film, Avant-garde cinema, surrealism, Luis Buñuel, René Magritte.

RÉSUMÉ: *La Perle* et *Monsieur Fantômas*, œuvres précoces du cinéma de fiction belge, sont deux exemples peu étudiés du cinéma d'avant-garde du premier tiers du XXe siècle. Ce sont des œuvres singulières, d'abord parce qu'elles sont les seuls films réalisés par leurs auteurs, respectivement

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Henri d'Ursel et Ernst Moerman, mais aussi parce qu'elles adhèrent aux principes discursifs et à l'esthétique du cinéma surréaliste développé dans les années 1920 et 1930. Cet article les replace dans le contexte du cinéma d'avant-garde et du cinéma national belge, explore leur relation avec la culture belge et, enfin, examine également l'empreinte qu'ils portent sur l'œuvre de représentants notables du mouvement artistique tels que René Magritte et Luis Buñuel.

Mots-clés: *La perle*, *Monsieur Fantômas*, cinéma de Belgique, cinéma d'avant-garde, surréalisme, Luis Buñuel, René Magritte.

“Movies are as delicate as babies”² wrote François Truffaut in his movie-going memoir *Les films de ma vie*. Dealing with the works of certain French underground auteurs of the ‘post-*Nouvelle Vague*’ generation, including, amongst others, Philippe Garrel, Jean Eustache, Maurice Pialat and Jacques Doillon, Truffaut championed some films which were badly distributed in France and then, having been unable to reach an audience, simply abandoned. In trying to avoid this cinematic limbo, several such films passed from the artisanal conditions of their production “to the heaven of the Cinémathèque”,³ specialist cinemas being the solution to the ‘invisibility’ associated with the scarcity of their resources. Truffaut’s line of argument is, of course, particularly pertinent to underground and/or experimental film, and was precisely the case with two fine and remarkable examples of Belgian avant-garde cinema: Henri d’Ursel’s *La Perle* (1929) and Ernst Moerman’s *Monsieur Fantômas* (Flemish title: *M. Fantômas*, 1937). Having been rarely screened, both were ‘rescued’ by the Belgian Royal Film Archive (Cinémathèque Royale de Belgique), under the direction of Jacques Ledoux (the Belgian equivalent of France’s Henri Langlois), which bought the original prints of the films some decades ago. More recently, they were released in a DVD special edition,⁴ also including some early avant-garde films by the prestigious Henri Storck and Charles Dekeukeleire.

Less known internationally than the French, German, or Russian experimental film, the Belgian avant-garde cinema of the 1920’s and 1930’s was deeply rooted in the tradition of Surrealist films such as Luis Buñuel’s early works *Un Chien andalou* (1929) and *L’Age d’or* (1930) —in fact, as I will propose later, Buñuel was a major influence behind both films. “Belgian experimental cinema 1927-1937 was (...) a

2 TRUFFAUT, F., *Les films de ma vie*, Paris, Flammarion, 1975, p.146.

3 *Ibidem*.

4 *Avant-Garde 1927-1937* (2-DVD Set) (2006), Brussels, Les Filmarchief de la Cinémathèque.

short-lived adventure. It was also an affair with a very limited number of players”.⁵ Aside from d’Ursel and Moerman,⁶ other Belgian surrealist filmmakers included Pierre Charbonnier, director of *Ce soir à huit heures* (1930), and Marcel Mariën, who directed a short film titled *L’imitation du cinéma* (1959). Mariën was one of the most intriguing and elusive members of the Belgian wing of the Surrealist movement. He was not only a bookseller, poet, essayist, journalist, photographer, artist (collagist and object maker) and filmmaker, but an early chronicler and historian of Belgian Surrealism —his classic book *L’Activité surréaliste en Belgique* was published in 1979. Moreover, Mariën published prolifically as editor of a great number of surrealist magazines like *L’Aiguille aimantée*, *La Terre n’est pas une vallée de larmes*, *Le Ciel bleu*, *Le Miroir infidèle*, *Le Feuille chargée* (the last two co-edited with his close friend René Magritte) and *Les Lèvres nues*.

All along the early decades of its development “short features and documentary films were the most interesting part of film production in Belgium”,⁷ as internationally well-reputed Belgian filmmakers such as Jacques Feyder —his work includes *Visages d’enfants* (1925), *Anna Christie* (1930) and *La kermesse héroïque* (1935), would rather work in most important film industries like Hollywood, France, or Germany. Aside of E. G. de Meyst, forefather and patron of the Belgian national cinema, seminal Belgian films of the period came from key figures connected with experimental film. The work of well-known documentary filmmakers Henri Storck and Charles Dekeukelaire also began within the avant-garde. Storck, who worked in various capacities on *Zero for Conduct* (*Zéro de conduite*, 1933), Jean Vigo’s subversive depiction of the life in an authoritarian boarding school, and who co-directed with Joris Ivens the powerful documentary *Misère au Borinage* (1933), was very keen on avant-garde filmmaking during his early years as director. Some of his works of the period 1929-1933 were ‘montage films’ influenced by Dziga Vertov’s ‘Cine-Eye’: *Images d’Ostende* (1929), *Sur les bords de la caméra* (1932) and *Le soldat inconnu* (1932). At the same time, Storck also developed a fine example of ‘pure cinema’ with Abstracte films getekend op pellicule (1930) and an openly surrealist statement, *Pour vos beaux yeux* (1929), shot one year after Buñuel’s *Un Chien andalou*. In parallel, Dekeukeleire’s first films, such as *Combat de boxe* (1927),

5 MARTENS, E., “Le temps des expérimentations”, in *Avant-Garde 1927-1937*, op. cit., p. 74.

6 The reader can find some more biographical information about both d’Ursel and Moerman in CANONNE, Xavier, “Les écrans perlés”, in *Avant-Garde 1927-1937*, op. cit., pp. 54-57, which is probably the most extended source of biographical information on them.

7 JEANNE, R. y FORD, C., *Historia ilustrada del cine Vol. 3: el cine de hoy (1945-1965)*, Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1974, p. 286.

Impatience (1928) and *Histoire de détective* (1929), are experiments based on movement (and rhythmic editing) and visual distortion —using the usual mixture of lap dissolves, superimpositions, and other photographic techniques quite common at the time.

Both Henri Storck and Charles Dekeukelaire were lifelong friends of the aristocratic Henri d'Ursel. He was born in Brussels in 1900, full name Henri Charles Francis Joseph Marie d'Ursel, the 8th Duke of Hoboken (but the dukedom is better known under the name Duke d'Ursel), a Belgian title of nobility of ancient origin, and Count of Saint-Empire. The Count's personality was most attractive. He lived in Paris during the 20's and he was a regular amongst surrealist circles. One of his closest acquaintances at the time was the versatile poet Georges Hugnet, who wrote the script and played the lead in d'Ursel's only film, *La Perle*. As d'Ursel later confessed, they made the film, shot in France, in the flush of inexperience. Perhaps this was the reason he used the pseudonym Henri d'Arche. Some years later, d'Ursel settled back in his own country and, in 1937, founded with Louis Camu the Prix de l'image, anticipating the work of experimental film festivals such as Knokke-le-Zoute. In the aftermath of World War II, the Count founded with Luc Haesaerts the Séminaire des Arts, one of the most prestigious cine-clubs in Belgium for the next two decades. Highly appreciated in Belgian *cinéphile* circles, d'Ursel was appointed Vice-President of the Royal Film Archive, a position that he held for 25 years until his death in 1974.

The rather obscure figure of Ernst Moerman is, if possible, even more eccentric. He is described by his friend, writer Robert Goffin as “an extraordinary person, with poetry expressing itself in every gesture of his life”. Moerman, who was born in 1897, died at age 46 in 1944. a passionate surrealist, his life was not only short but quite uneven —he ended his days living in a caravan. Like d'Ursel, he too was close to the Parisian surrealist group in the 1920's, and there he became a close friend of the poet Paul Eluard. In fact, Eluard's *Capitale de la douleur* (1926) —heavily quoted in Jean-Luc Godard's noirish sci-fi film *Alphaville* (*Alphaville, un étrange aventure de Lemmy Caution*, 1965)— is visually quoted in Moerman's one and only film: *Monsieur Fantômas*. Moerman was a very talented young man not only interested in film but also in poetry and jazz as well as in theatre —his stage productions included a surrealistic version of the legend of Tristan and Iseult and a *Vie imaginaire de Jésus-Christ* (*An Imaginary Life of Jesus Christ*). In recent years, his poetry book *Fantômas 1933*, a private printing of 375 numbered copies, dedicated to Jean Cocteau, has become a valuable collector's item. However, his poem 'Louis

Armstrong', dedicated to the popular American jazzman, is still his best-known piece of writing in English speaking countries thanks to Samuel Beckett's translation for Nancy Cunard's book *Negro: An Anthology* (1934). A script titled "Fantômas 37 (Film surréaliste)", dated April 1937, is available at the Royal Film Archive. This nine-page document details 98 shots and 35 intertitles and is apparently an early draft of the screenplay of *Monsieur Fantômas*, although its *découpage* differs slightly with the final 'montage' of the film.

Both *La Perle* and *Monsieur Fantômas*, surrealist films *avant la lettre*, share a characteristic amateur film look as they were shot very much in the home movie mold so common to the independent cinema of the time. In fact, they were made for incredibly low budgets and neither ARC nor Films Hagen-Tronje, the production companies behind them, would develop any further film projects. *Monsieur Fantômas*' small crew included cinematographers Norbert and Roger Van Peperstraete and art director E. Van Tonderen, while its cast was composed of non-professional actors. An exception was Jean Michel (Léon-Michel Smet, father of French singer/actor Johnny Hallyday), who plays the title role. D'Ursel's *La Perle* relies visually on strong cinematography by veteran cameraman Marc Bujard, whose superb visual skills had been definitively proven in Abel Gance's *I Accuse (J'accuse!)*, 1919) and *The Wheel (La Roue)*, 1923), and in Raymond Bernard's *The Chess Player (Le joueur d'échecs)*, 1927). But, as with *Monsieur Fantômas*, its cast boasts just one professional actor: Marcel L'Herbier's stock company member Kissa Kouprine.

D'Ursel and Moerman were both ardent fans of Pierre Souvestre and Marcel Allain's character Fantômas, 'the Master of Crime', and, of course, of the five films dedicated to him by Louis Feuillade between 1913 and 1914.⁸

In the case of Moerman, who dubbed Fantômas 'the demoralizing gentleman', he left us a testimony of his penchant for Souvestre and Allain's character:

"Of the time when I read the 35 volumes of Fantômas, I keep the obsessive and hazy memory of what we consider, perhaps, a dream, an epic poem, more unreal than absurd, set in a world in which nothing is impossible and where a miracle is the shortest way to our bent for mystery. Working on the script of M. Fantômas, I've tried precisely to create a communication with that world, in which a fantastic reality rules, making each object, every visible thing shine with its own true and inner light".⁹

8 *Fantômas, à l'ombre de la guillotine* (1913), *Juve contre Fantômas* (1913), *Le mort qui tue* (1913), *Fantômas contre Fantômas* (1914) and *Le faux magistrat* (1914).

9 MOERMAN, E., "Un film belge : Mr. Fantômas", *Le Rouge et le Noir*, Brussels, 29/09/1937.

The exploits of Fantômas were an immediate success among the surrealists, who felt much attracted by the criminal milieu so brilliantly described in Feuillade films (and not only in the *Fantômas* films but also in other serials such as *Les Vampires* [1915], *Judex* [1916] or *Tih Minh* [1918]). Many poets and writers connected in one way or another to the avant-garde, such as Guillaume Apollinaire, Antonin Artaud, Blaise Cendrars, André Breton, Louis Aragon, Paul Eluard, Robert Desnos, Jean Cocteau, Francis Ponge, Max Jacob, Francis Carco and Raymond Queneau, acknowledged *Fantômas* as a very powerful source of inspiration. It's not surprising, then, that film historian Georges Sadoul mentioned how "Luis Buñuel was very harsh towards the French avant-garde films. He angrily rejected the fashionable technical acrobatics which prevailed at that time. His model was Fantômas or Les Vampires, a direct translation, without affected mannerisms, of an unusual reality".¹⁰ This widespread enthusiasm also reached Belgium, as seen for example in the early paintings of René Magritte.

In 1928, the Belgian artist painted a canvas titled *Le Barbare* (*The Barbarian*, 1928), destroyed in a bombing around 1940, depicting a portrait of Fantômas (as painted by illustrator Gino Starace on the cover of the first Souvestre and Allain adventure) fading in and out of a brick wall. But his sinister influence can also be traced in other paintings by the artist such as *L'Assassin menace* (*The Threatening Murderer*, 1926), *La Traversée difficile* (*Difficult Crossing*, 1926) and *Le Musée d'une nuit* (*One Night's Museum*, 1927), among others. In his book on Magritte's paintings,¹¹ art historian Patrick Waldberg has probed this influence further by comparing some of the titles of the artist's early canvases —*The Threatening Murderer*, *The False Mirror*, *The Phantom's Wife*, *The Prisoner*, *The Empty Mask*, etc.— with the titles of the chapters of the first two *Fantômas* adventures —*The Master of Crime*, *Tragic Dawn*, *Night Escape*, *Under the Floor Tiles of the Morgue*... The affinity is self-evident, even when most of these Magritte paintings are not related to their very evocative titles. The main function of these titles, as Uwe M. Schneede has pointed out, is an allusive one, providing the viewers with some "allusions that, with their wide range of possible associations, promise important events".¹² Some Magritte scholars have dubbed these early works by the Belgian artist as 'Detective Themed Paintings'. I will later propose their influence on the aesthetic of Moerman's *Monsieur Fantômas*.

10 Quoted in ZAGURY, F., «"The Public is My Master": Louis Feuillade and Les vampires», text included in the DVD edition of *Les vampires* (Paris, Image Entertainment, 1998).

11 See WALDBERG, P. (1965), *René Magritte*, Brussels, André De Rache Editeur, 1965.

12 SCHNEEDE, U., *René Magritte*, Barcelona, Editorial Labor, S.A., 1978, p. 10.



René Magritte not only as a seminal aesthetics influence in *Monsieur Fantômas*, but also as a diegetic presence in the film, painting his iconic canvas *Le viol* (c. 1934).

Moerman's film was shown for the first time by the Cercle du Cinéma, a left-wing film society in Brussels, at the Palais des Beaux-Arts on October 12th, 1937. *Monsieur Fantômas* was screened on the same programme as Buñuel's *Un Chien andalou*, which seems a good choice as both films have elements in common. First, they are both consciously immoral acts of savagery, partly sadistic, partly intellectual satires, with religion and love as their two main objects of attack. It is self-evident that both can be described as furiously anticlerical— Buñuel and Moerman were well-known for their virulent, lifelong anti-clericalism. But whereas *Monsieur Fantômas* proves to be a satirical indictment of the church in the style of a parody, Buñuel's critique goes way beyond that, emerging as something considerably more merciless. In the case of Moerman's film, Raymond Borde¹³ asserts that its anticlericalism comes

13 BORDE, R., "Mr. Fantômas", *Midi/Minuit Fantastique* (France) n° 24, winter 1970-71, p. 69.

from an ancient tradition in Belgian culture, from the famous medieval Carnival at Binche to the works of James Ensor. In the opening sequence, a nun finds a priest in women's underwear putting on make-up. Throughout the film, one can see masked nuns and perfidious priests almost everywhere, reminding us of both works of the Marquis de Sade,¹⁴ one of the Surrealist's forerunners ("Sade wanted to restore to civilized man the power of his primitive instincts",¹⁵ wrote André Breton in his *Anthology of Black Humour*), and the blasphemous and lurid paintings of Clovis Trouille. Another example of this farcical attitude towards the church is the scene in which Fantômas is judged and later sentenced to death for his evil crimes and immoral outrages. The court is composed of a cruel and blood-thirsty Archbishop assisted by a General and an executioner, key representatives of the established socio-political powers of society: religion, authority, and violence. Finally, at the end of the film, a lively group of nuns and priests perform a frenzied dance on the deserted beach, celebrating the death of the master criminal.

It is easy to establish connections not only between *Monsieur Fantômas* and *Un Chien andalou*, but also with Buñuel's next film, *L'Age d'or* (1930), aside from their anticlericalism. The three of them use the surrealist concept of *amour fou*, as a negation of the traditional bourgeois notion of love, to challenge the established order of things. As proper surrealist films, they represent a subversive revolt against social and moral bourgeois principles. As with their anticlericalism, the main difference between them is their degree of intensity. If both Buñuel films were conceived as a sort of means of agitation, planned to clash with the norms and values of a middle-class audience, *Monsieur Fantômas* took its rebellious ideals less seriously. In opposition to the phenomenal fury and the delirium of the absurd that throws Buñuel's characters into blasphemous and iconoclastic anger in *Un Chien andalou* and *L'Age d'or*, Moerman's film is more recreational and somewhat less effective. Nevertheless, the battlefield chosen by the two filmmakers to fight for that liberation is a common one, that of desire. "Fantômas travels the world searching for the woman he loves", says one of the intertitles (despite being shot in 1937, the film is silent). The well-known criminal (played by Jean Michel) wanders, lonely, across dunes on a beach, empty fields, and wastelands in search of love. And he finally finds it in the person of the beautiful Elvire (Trudi Van Tonderen), whom

14 For an in depth analysis of the connections between Sade and the Belgian Surrealists see FUESSLE, S., "The Belgian Surrealists and Sade: A Criminal Affinity", *Image [&] Narrative* n° 13, November 2005 <<http://www.imageandnarrative.be/inarchive/surrealism/fussle.htm>>.

15 BRETON, A., *Antología del humor negro*, Madrid, Círculo de Lectores, 2005, p. 36.

he meets floating in a river in an image that seems to be inspired by the painting *Ophelia* (1852) by John Everett Millais. Theirs is a love at first sight, a sort of *amour fou*. However, despite Fantômas's most solemn oath —“Elvire, I will love you for the rest of my life”— their union will prove to be impossible. Moerman's approach has nothing to do with love as a sort of liberation, as it is in *L'Age d'or*, for example, in which the lovers, by facing all the social taboos about love and sex, manage to be “reborn one to the other in a sparkling sublimation of erotic ecstasy”.¹⁶ Instead, his love-death vision naturally suggests myth (of course, mythological thought has animated the avant-garde from its beginnings, from Jean Cocteau's *Le Sang d'un poète* (1930) to Maya Deren's film trilogy). Unlike Buñuel's liberating vision of love, the irresistible impulse which draws Fantômas and Elvire to each other against all odds is destined to fail. For ‘the genius of crime’ seems to be invariably destined to kill the woman he loves. “Will Fantômas ever be able to love?” questions one of the intertitles.

I have previously discussed the connection of this film with the works of René Magritte. In fact, a young Magritte himself appears in front of the camera, pretending to be painting his iconic canvas *Le Viol* (*The Rape*, c. 1934). His presence could be somewhat expected as *Monsieur Fantômas* is heavily influenced by his paintings— something especially evident in the sequences located by the solitary seaside. Many of them seem to refer to paintings by the Belgian artist such as *L'Homme du mer* (*The Man of the Sea*, 1926), *La Condition humaine* (*The Human Condition*, 1935) and the different versions of *La Belle captive* (*The Beautiful Captive*, from 1931 to 1967). It is as if Moerman —with the help of his art director Van Tonderen, who captures Magritte's sense of astonishment by using a few design elements (the door, the gigantic key, etc.) juxtaposed with a beach landscape— would have liked to animate those paintings,¹⁷ bringing them to life. Furthermore, this ‘animation’ also uses many iconic images taken from the previously mentioned ‘Detective Themed Paintings’ such as the bowler hats and long coats used by their mysterious figures (represented by Inspector Juve and his men in the film). Of course, Magritte was a champion of the binary nature of incompatible readings. In his paintings, diverse significations not only fail to merge, but they simply clash. Magritte's work consists of fragmentation and juxtaposition, and therefore, as Silvano Levy put

16 BUACHE, F., *Luis Buñuel*, Madrid, Editorial Labor, 1976, p. 16.

17 Of course, Alain Robbe-Grillet would do pretty much the same in his film *La Belle Captive* (1983), inspired directly by one of Magritte's paintings of the same title.

it, “space is destabilized, and unitary components are dismantled”.¹⁸ Moerman’s sense of space is equally disrupted. For example, in the scene in which Fantômas and Elvire arrive at their bizarre ‘home’ in the middle of the dunes, represented by some incongruous fragments of interior decor. Nothing but the door distinguishes these two spaces, inside from outside, which are in fact the same beach setting. By practicing the surrealist principle of combinatorial art, both Magritte and Moerman combine two opposite environments. The result of this paradoxical exercise is a very personal, eye-catching, and unusual quality, which they share.



“Fantastic reality rules making each object, every visible thing shine with its own true and inner light” (Moerman). The strong visual and poetic influence of Magritte’s symbols and iconography on *Monsieur Fantôme*.

18 LEVY, S., “Magritte at the Edges of Codes”, *Image [&] Narrative* n° 13, November 2005 <<http://www.imageandnarrative.be/inarchive/surrealism/levy.htm>>.

As with Buñuel's films, *Monsieur Fantômas* is very rich in terms of surrealist images —e.g. three mysterious masked men cycling across the beach in slow motion, Inspector Juve's assistants breaking down a door in the middle of the sand with the help of a gigantic key used as a battering ram, the two lovers' romantic and rather gripping walk along the seaside (he is masked, while she is wearing a nun's wimple and a swimming suit) hand in hand... But one image stands out from all the rest: the sequence in which Fantômas is surrounded by police. The contagious and enjoyable sense of humour¹⁹ running throughout the film suddenly comes to the surface. Given the surrealists well-known taste for slapstick humour, this is not surprising. As if in an old Mack Sennett or Ben Turpin film, the master criminal turns into a double bass to escape the police. Logic and reason ("The absolute rationalism which is still the fashion does not permit consideration of any facts but those strictly relevant to our experience",²⁰ reads the Surrealist Manifesto) are now gone, if ever they once ruled, and the time has come for pure fantasy and delirium. In fact, this penchant for farcical elements is one of the most remarkable qualities of the film. On many occasions, surrealists refer to the 'immediate absurdity' of their output, the peculiar quality of that absurdity being a yielding to whatever is most admissible and legitimate in the world: divulcation of a given number of facts and properties overall not less objectionable than others. Undoubtedly, *Monsieur Fantômas* represents the quintessence of that particular taste for absurdity.

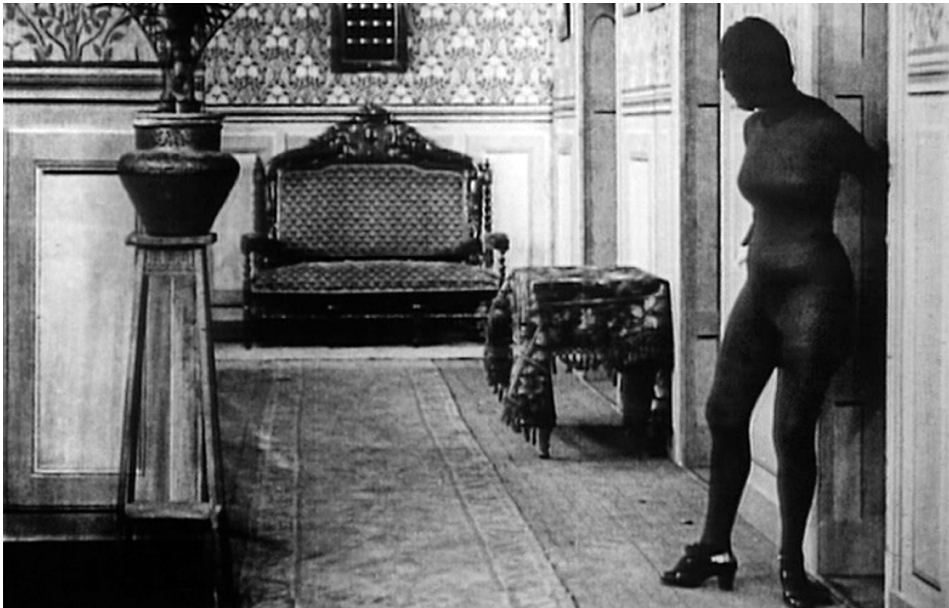
Moerman, evoking the screening of his film on October 12th, 1937, at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, described the opening night as deeply marked by "silent film nostalgia".²¹ While teaching at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts in La Cambre, Henri d'Ursel usually expressed to his students the very same nostalgic thoughts of the cinematic past. For him, silent films were "the only ones whose horizons were dreams".²² It is easy to trace the influence of early silent era film narrative principles in both *Monsieur Fantômas* and *La Perle*. For instance, the principles of a 1914 film by Louis Feuillade, with its series of static long duration wide shots, frontal framings, editing that just knits together scenes, etc. As in the case of Moerman's film, *La Perle* seems to be inspired by such Feuillade films as the five *Fantômas* features and *Les Vampires* (1915). Moreover, the film seems to stem directly from the Irma Vep character (played so enthusiastically by Musidora) in the latter.

19 Belgian avant-garde scholar Francis Bolen praised the 'farcical intention' of the film in his classical essay "À propos de «Monsieur Fantômas»", *Midi/Minuit Fantastique* (France), n° 24, winter 1970-71, p. 71.

20 BRETON, A., *Manifestos del surrealismo*, Buenos Aires, Editorial Argonauta, 2001, p. 68.

21 CANONNE, X., *op. cit.*, p. 54

22 *Ibidem*.



Looking alike: the iconic Musidora of Feuillade's *Les vampires* (1915), muse and model for the thief character (Kissa Kouprine) in *La perle*.

The surrealist poet Robert Desnos surrendered to the charms of Musidora in a film review for *Le Soir*: “Musidora, how beautiful you were in *Les Vampires*! Do you know we dreamed about you? And that you, when night fell, dressed in your black body stocking, came in silently to our bedroom? And that the next morning we searched for the trace of the trembling hotel thief who has visited us?”.²³ This brief extract gives us a perfect idea of the plot of d’Ursel’s film. The search for a pearl which constantly disappears in a string of bizarre encounters allows a young man (played by Georges Hugnet) to meet the most fantastic women —a hotel sneakthief dressed up as Irma Vep (Kissa Kouprine) and a somnambulist walking the roof-tops (Renée Savoye). In fact, in *La Perle* everything refers us to the realms of dream. Almost all of its characters —the young man, Lulu (Mary Stutz), his fiancé, the thief, the somnambulist— sleep in before our eyes. The film’s logic is that of a dream in which reality has been dismantled. The French poet Gérard de Nerval, a major influence on the surrealists, dubbed the dream a second life, inseparable from daily existence. It is precisely that continuing alternation between reality and dreamed fantasies, intermingling, inseparable, that gives the film its haunting and dream-like look. For the surrealists, heavily influenced by Freud’s theories, dreams were one of the most crucial weapons to fight against social repression: “No other realm can be, in fact, as rich as that of dreams, where no curb inhibits the individual, and in which images are the symbols of his subterranean instinct’s life”.²⁴ In the film, the young man, a waking dreamer, releases all his amorous fantasies thanks to his erotic dreams of love, monopolized by the disturbing presence of the thief, played by the fascinating Russian actress Kissa Kouprine.

However, the *amour fou* that springs up between them is, as in the case of that between Fantômas and Elvire in *Monsieur Fantômas*, an impossible one. I have already pointed out the mythological side of the love-death theme so cherished by members of the avant-garde. For example, it is not difficult to connect both tragic love stories with a classic myth such as the Orpheus myth. “Thanks to Moerman, Fantômas becomes a tragic hero, a sort of modern-day Orpheus searching for absolute love, thus justifying his misdemeanours”.²⁵ In both films, the lovers are condemned to live alone and to finally lose their love. One of the most powerful erotic images in d’Ursel’s film is the thief’s death scene. As the girl suddenly dies, the young man

23 Desnos quoted in LACASSIN, F., *Louis Feuillade. Maîtres des lions et des vampires*, Paris : Pierre Bordas et fils, 1995, p. 218.

24 DUPLESSIS, Y., *Le Surréalisme*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1972, p. 96.

25 CANONNE, X., *op. cit.*, p. 82.

removes the pearl (once more lost) from her blood-stained mouth. Immediately, her black body stocking turns into her ordinary clothes. Although men are not free to keep the women they love, Hugnet and d'Ursel bear witness to one of the key surrealist convictions: the absolute power of desire. One of the aspects most praised by the film's reviewers is the 'unending eroticism' reflected in its images. Of course, this eroticism serves, as in *L'Age d'Or*, for example, as an incitement to transgression, and its power is a liberating one, because, as surrealist poet Benjamin Péret wrote, "the expression of supreme love is only conceivable in a society that has been liberated from all its blockages".²⁶ This is where Buñuel's films and *La Perle* connect. Their aim is very much the same: to liberate man by liberating all his primitive instincts, no matter how deeply buried they might be.



²⁶ CANONNE, X., *op. cit.*, p. 82.



The erotic Love-Death logic of Henri Ursel's *La perle* as shown in two frames of the film.

Writing about the instant and crucial influence of Buñuel's *Un Chien andalou* on subsequent avant-garde filmmaking, Jacques B. Brunius describes the Spanish filmmaker as a figure that “haunts the years to come”.²⁷ Furthermore, he points out how films like *La Perle* and *Le Sang d'un poète* are undoubtedly indebted to Buñuel's early films. In the case of d'Ursel's film, it is crystal clear that both thematically (*amour fou* as a sort of liberation, eroticism, a particular sense of humour coming from the absurd...) and aesthetically (the dream-like quality of the images, the poetic search based on a series of iconic elements — death, sex, crime, etc.), the film is heavily Buñuelian. Indeed, the uproarious premiere of *L'Age d'or*, at the Parisian Studio 28 on November 28th, 1930, was a milestone for avant-garde

27 BRUNIOUS, J. B., *En marge du cinéma français*, Paris, Arcanes, 1954, p. 139.

filmmaking. At the same time, these early films by the Spanish filmmaker also brought about a slight decay of abstract (or 'pure') cinema, with its firm belief in the lens of the camera, photographic tricks and those 'technical acrobatics' which Buñuel was so opposed to. The revelations of *Un Chien andalou* and *L'Age d'or* meant an obvious revolution in terms of filmic calligraphy, but, furthermore, as Brunius states, they also signified an exemplary, ambitious moral example for the rest of the avant-garde filmmakers. Unconnected with the abstraction of works by the likes of Hans Richter, Oskar Fischinger, Viking Eggeling and so on, *La Perle* and *Monsieur Fantômas* mark a middle ground between a more self-consciously poetic filmmaking —that of Cocteau's *Le Sang d'un poète* or Herman G. Weinberg's *Autumn Fire* (1930), for example— and, due to their nonconformist attitudes, the moral avant-garde tendency represented by Buñuel.

Finally, both films were quite warmly received by the surrealists, if not by the audience, as they had quite a short-lived exhibition run. Although *La Perle* was shown for three weeks at the Studio des Ursulines in Paris without the scandal caused by Buñuel's films, it was immediately appreciated by the surrealists. In fact, it earned Georges Hugnet entry into Breton's group, in which he played a major role until the early 1940's. In the case of *Monsieur Fantômas*, it was highly praised by Paul Eluard, who considered it a masterpiece equal to Buñuel's early films— no matter if it does not have the same powerful tragic beauty and violence, and shows a naivety and innocence completely alien to the works of the Spanish cineaste. "Everything is light-hearted and lovely in this film, with intertitles few in number but nevertheless worthy of Tzara or Breton",²⁸ wrote Dominique Païni. And the truth is that the poetry, the power of imagination and free-form fantasy, and the certain sort of freshness coming from the somewhat amateurish filmmaking of these two unique efforts can only lead us us to guess what other unpredictable films d'Ursel and Moerman might have been dreaming of.

28 PAÏNI, D., "Monsieur Fantômas", in *Une encyclopédie des cinémas de Belgique*, Paris, Musée d'art Moderne/ Yellow Now, 1990, p. 210.