

## Conclusion

### *Difference and Diversity: The Expanding Horizons of Transnational Film*

Bernhardt, Réjane, and Mistinguett emerged from the margins of Paris to blaze divergent yet connected pathways into English and American renown in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These leading French actresses used commercial and creative skills to connect with popular transnational audiences, who did not necessarily understand spoken French and who did not share their cultural and social backgrounds. Adapting themselves to the changing media landscape of the early twentieth century—most significantly, in terms of this study, to the changing transnational landscape of silent film—they bridged cultures, centuries, art forms, social classes, and even theatrical genres and styles, bringing a heady spectacle of French tragedy, comedy, drama, dance, and athleticism to Anglo-American audiences. From the emotional tragedy of Bernhardt to the sexualized comedy (and later, somber nationalism) of Réjane and on to the athletic charge of Mistinguett's proudly Paris-based films, these French actresses offer a generational and pioneering view of female achievements in the early film industry.

The involvement of the legitimate stage actress in the silent film industry was traditionally criticized for merely providing a record of live stage performance. Scholarship implied that the European actress was an anachronism on film: stylistically detached from the technical and creative developments that made film a young, fresh, and twentieth-century art form (the close-up, the mobile camera, and so on), the actress allegedly represented the high-class stage practices of elite European theatrical tradition.<sup>1</sup> As we saw in my introduction, recent scholarship focusing on Asta Nielsen and her reception abroad provides a fine example of an attempt to redress such reductive thinking. My study develops this work further, arguing that the French stage actress was a generational force who impacted the global development of film. This impact was not only attached to the actress's

individuated ability to uniquely and skillfully perform recognizable roles in new ways. It also was linked to her marketing, management, and business initiatives—all astutely changed and adapted for local reception contexts. Furthermore, my work demonstrates that if we take the French transnational actress as merely an “exception”—that is, an idiosyncratic celebrity who achieves unusual intercultural renown—we might also look generationally and culturally at other actresses and so-called exceptions emerging from the French theater. From this perspective, the French actress helps to locally and transnationally define theatrical achievement during the Belle Époque. She evidences the range and vitality of French theater, literature, art, innovation, and technology (“culture”) to audiences in Paris and to transnational audiences in the years leading up to and into the Great War. With the onset of war, the French actress became the face of military propaganda; she newly promoted a changed, more urgent, image of France to Allied audiences abroad.

#### SHIFTING BORDERS, CHANGING ARGUMENT: NOTES ON LINGUISTIC AND GEOGRAPHIC LIMITS

The triangulated exchange between France, England, and America (largely circumscribed by Paris, London, and New York) defines the geographic and cultural reach of this study. My reasoning for this is pragmatic: English and French are two languages I have available to me. Another reason is cultural: France dominated the global film industries in the prewar period, and the century that was to follow was largely defined by American film production. There is a logic, therefore, in asking if we might see continuity and overlap (rather than rupture and separation) between the Old and the New, the Past and the Present, a prewar period of female leadership and an interwar period of male directors and Hollywood succession. But there remain questions that I do not pursue. These questions ask for work from scholars who can access and read materials from other countries and continents that I do not explore: Did the French actress enjoy the same impact in non-English-speaking countries as she did in England and America? What do we learn when we take into account her reception in non-Western cities, countries, and continents? A culturally and geographically complex regard might let us know whether the late-nineteenth-century French actress was indeed a global phenomenon or whether she was, instead, the product of a historically determined transnational exchange, filtered selectively through the creative industries of English-speaking nations.

Within the context of English-speaking countries themselves, we can nuance the discussion of transnational reception contexts if we focus regionally or, conversely, geographically further afield. I have discussed, for instance, Bernhard's films being screened in Penzance Pavilions, Cornwall. We might broaden discussion and identify and differentiate English regional reception or explore the significance of French film in relation to known theatrical hubs, such as Manchester.

A transnational bedding into regional difference can deepen our knowledge of local cinemas, enriching our knowledge about cultural exchange, cinemagoing, and “intrafemale” (that is, between actress and audience) contributions to early film. Moreover, if we explore transnational reception contexts further afield—if we move, for example, into a consideration of Australia—we might better understand the transnational spread and reach of the French actresses’ renown, particularly in its articulation through film.<sup>2</sup> An Australian reception context can also reveal the legacy and imposition of European (and not only British) culture in these important years of Federation. Julie K. Allen, in an article focusing on Asta Nielsen and Francesca Bertini’s reception in Australia in the 1910s, has begun some of this work. Allen argues that film gave these actresses “both opportunities for serious, meaningful engagement in the process of film creation and powerful role models for female emancipation and agency.”<sup>3</sup> Can the French actress be added to this transnational discussion of Danish and Italian celebrity? Did the performance cultures of Paris also help to unite audiences across the geographic and linguistic distances in colonial Australia? Implicit in the questions I am posing is also a desire to unpack the coincidence between global first-wave feminism and the “Age of the Actress.” I look forward to scholarship that might explore overlaps between entertainment and politics and, significantly, transnational film and feminist activism.

#### TRANSNATIONAL FILM AND FESTIVAL PROGRAMMING TODAY

The film festival poses important questions for film history. It is the space where scholars, students, collectors, archivists, programmers, and musicians come together to celebrate important restorations. Because of this (often time-consuming and slow) process of restoration, these festivals function as a space for “practice as research.” That is, the film festival allows us to reassess and reconsider the narratives, biases, and materials that constitute our shared history through the very act of restoring, projecting, and discussing silent film. Introduced by program notes written by global leaders in film archiving and film history, silent films emerge as works that might have been “authored” by a given film director but whose significance is also alive and vital thanks to the collaborative work that went into choosing, restoring, and presenting a film anew to festival audiences today. At festivals, we are also afforded the unique experience of watching a projected film accompanied by live music. Musicians such as Neil Brand, John Sweeney, Gabriel Thibaudreau, and Maud Nelissen—professionals who are not only familiar with silent film but who appreciate the fundamental importance of music to the viewing and theatrical experience of film—have opened my eyes to the nuance of the theatrical gesture on the silent screen.<sup>4</sup> In this forum, film history is an emergent practice and narrative, driven equally by postscreening discussion and debate. What will our second, planned Mistinguett program at *Le Giornate del Cinema*

*Muto* reveal to us? What further insights will we learn about Réjane when her films are screened together for the first time? My discussion of each case study is, I acknowledge, partly provisional. I look forward to seeing the study of the actress amplified and accorded further festival resources so that we might better appreciate the importance of women to the global spread of film.

The vital work of feminist programmers, scholars, and archivists has begun, in this dynamic context, to offer alternate narratives of film history and what professional success within this history might look like. Scholars/archivists/activists such as Heide Schlüpmann, Karola Gramann, Annette Förster, and Mariann Lewinsky have demonstrated that women drove change in the early industry and that they did this through transnational films. Laura Horak and Maggie Hennefeld's "Nasty Women" programs at Pordenone (2017–) are recent examples of this hands-on, practice-driven archival outreach through a reconsideration of performance on film. Working with Elif Rongen-Kaynakçi, and circulating their work on Blu-ray and DVD, these scholars also ensure that new audiences are introduced to the spectacle of women's slapstick and trick films through viewing platforms that can be brought into the classroom or home. Similarly, this year Pam Hutchinson reintroduced British Film Institute audiences to the Danish actress Asta Nielsen with her curated program, *The ABC of Asta Nielsen*. Hutchinson's program confirms the place of the theatrical actress in our reconsideration of transnational film. It also indicates that the foundational work of Schlüpmann and Gramann continues, in other countries and before new audiences, to drive inquiry into the where, why, and how of transnational reception contexts.

#### DISCUSSING DATA

As a scholar who was trained in America in the 1990s—and who vividly recalls the limits placed on photocopies, as well as the difficulty of searching microfiche—I am grateful for the affordances research collections give us today. My database of smartphone images, collected over a period of seven years for this project, numbers in the thousands. The information I gained from residencies at the Harry Ransom Center (University of Texas at Austin), the Bill Douglas Museum (University of Exeter), the Cini Foundation (Venice), the Performing Arts collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum and the British Library (London), and the Bibliothèque nationale de Paris gave me the data I needed to turn into evidence and write. This database, recorded quickly on-site but studied at leisure once home, allowed me to describe transnational tours, film programs, and the influential networks that the French actress was able to build in cities that were not her own. These materials augmented the vast range of resources I accessed online. The Internet Archive, the Bibliothèque nationale de France's Gallica, the Media History Digital Archive, the newly expanded contents of the British Newspaper Archive, and materials available on YouTube (and, often, eBay) were fundamental to my research.

When I could not find materials, librarians and archivists came to my aid and were extraordinarily generous in their willingness to share materials online.

I have previously argued that microhistory is a historiographic tool that can allow us to question received narratives in film history.<sup>5</sup> A recent article by Frank Kessler and Sabine Lenk has confirmed this view, explaining that microhistory usefully champions more than a film-centered approach to film history.<sup>6</sup> As Kessler and Lenk explain, the “new cinema history” (that is, the new history in film studies that focuses on the history of moviegoing as opposed to film as an aesthetic object) can use microhistory to embrace the study of “when, where and how” film was seen. As they observe, this joining of textual film history with the issues of distribution, exhibition, and reception emerges because of “the rapidly growing accessibility of paratextual source material, other data, and films themselves, as a result of the massive digitisation efforts around the world in the past decade.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, access to new and searchable materials and data sets has opened possibilities for comparative and collaborative research. While Kessler and Lenk use my own analysis of a corpus of Bernhardt’s films (in *Seeing Sarah Bernhardt*) to help illustrate the changing relationship between film and cinema history, especially reception contexts, in this study it is the French actress, not her body of films, that I explore as a new corpus for film historical study. I could not have undertaken this study without the digital tools and searchable online resources that made film history newly available to me.

A 2015 talk by Carlo Ginzburg is useful because it self-reflexively highlights that the materials we find on the internet are important to the process of undertaking microhistory. Explaining that a global perspective is nothing new—globalization is a process “begun centuries ago”—Ginzburg notes that the internet has placed us in a series of cultural exchanges and networks that are new to us. He concludes his discussion with a focus on these networks: “We are submerged by data and the problem is how to deal with this enormous mass of data. How can we use the web, in order to exploit its potentialities? I’ve been confronted with this question myself, and I tried to teach my students to navigate in order to find something which, besides answering our questions, raises the possibility of asking new questions on the basis of unexpected findings. The web can be used as a tool for research; and research means looking for the unknown and finding the unknown.”<sup>8</sup>

A case-study-driven history that draws extensively on online data has allowed me to find answers to questions but also to pose some more of my own. One of these—the question of critical language, particularly of the ways we frame and talk about transnational renown—has come to the fore. We employ terms like *cinema pioneer* and *megastar* in our scholarship to convey female achievement on the screen. As my case studies reveal, however, philological anachronism can blind us to differences in cultural reception contexts. The French actress in London was not who she was in New York, and vice versa. Similarly, the French actress on film was not necessarily the same onscreen that she was onstage, and vice versa. By

refusing a superficial framing of the “French actress” on early transnational film, I have shown that English and American reception contexts need to be differentiated. Actresses need not only reveal the tired and ironic fact of their own gendered absence from film history. They can equally expose our ongoing need to remain mindful of the localized and contextual nature of “transnational” film.