Researching Women in Silent Cinema

New Findings and Perspectives

edited by Monica Dall'Asta, Victoria Duckett, Lucia Tralli

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 # 1

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This publication has been edited through a blind peer review process. Papers from the Sixth Women and the Silent Screen Conference (University of Bologna, 2010), a biennial event sponsored by Women and Film History International, were read by the editors and then submitted to at least one anonymous reviewer. When the opinion of the first reader was entirely negative or asked for substantial revision, the essay was submitted to a second anonymous reviewer. In case of a second negative opinion the essay was rejected. When further changes were deemed necessary for publication, the editors worked extensively with the authors to meet the requests advanced by the reviewers.

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The "Voix d'Or" on Silent Film: The Case of Sarah Bernhardt

ABSTRACT: Sarah Bernhardt is a paradigmatic case study for the joining of voice and silent film. This is because she was famous for her "voix d'or" on the theatrical stage and because she was highly visible in the nascent period of the cinema's development. Traditionally considered an example of an actress in the early cinema who was "silenced" by film, she has also been considered an anachronistic and ineffective on-screen performer. I argue instead that Bernhardt's films were not mute records of her live stage action but works that further promoted and developed her polymorphous body at the opening of the twentieth century.

Recent scholarship has addressed the misunderstandings, problems and paradoxes that the term "silent film" raises, detailing the rich and changing ways that sound accompanied early film and was, in fact, central to its emergence, exhibition and reception (See e.g. Altman; J. Brown and Davison; Marks). Theater historian David Mayer, sensitive to the centrality of music and sound in theatrical performance, has long argued that actors never performed in silence, even when they were rehearsing or performing for "silent" film. It seems reductive, therefore, to speak today of silent film or to suggest that the cinema can be historically reduced to a capacity to animate the visual image. The idea that film recorded a theatrical performance that was destined to mechanically repeat itself is similarly reductive. Certainly, silent film presents the indelible image of a single live performance, but from a pragmatic point of view, the public apparatus of film confirms that the cinema was performative in rich and changing ways. In other words, film did not merely record performed gesture, but was an expressive and co-extensive media that engaged other medias and modes of expression.

It is from this dual perspective that I explore Sarah Bernhardt's engagement in early film. She is a paradigmatic case study, not just because she was famous for her "voix d'or" on the theatrical stage, but because she was highly visible in the nascent period of the cinema's development. Traditionally considered an example of an actress in the early cinema who was "silenced" by film, she has also been considered an anachronistic and ineffective on-screen performer. I argue instead that Bernhardt's films were not mute records of her live stage action but works that further promoted and developed her polymorphous body at the opening of the twentieth century. Before she entered film, Bernhardt was not just famous for her voice, but had already been reproduced on the phonograph and extensively reproduced by many of the nineteenth century's most famous photographers—by Nadar (Gaspard-Félix Tournachon), his son Paul Nadar, Melandri, and W & D. Downey. Film carried with it this history of Bernhardt's diffusion through reproductive media. It also drew upon her status as an internationally famous actress, one who was renowned for her vocal skills and pantomimic mastery. In this context, Bernhardt's body on film traversed and incorporated the theater as

well as new media and technology.

Polyphony and Performance

When Bernhardt entered film in 1900 she did so with *Hamlet* (*Le duel d'Hamlet,* Clément Maurice), a film that formed part of Paul Decauville's program for the Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre at the Paris Exposition. Her film was accompanied by a phonograph (Henri Lioret's Idéal phonograph) playing the clashing of swords (Sadoul 100–102; Manoni). It was shown alongside other stars drawn from the opera, comic, and variety stages in Paris. *Hamlet* was therefore part of the promotion of film as a multi-media technology that was broadly eclectic. As Laurent Manoni has detailed in the 2012 catalogue for *Le Giornate del cinema muto*:

> Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre is an attraction which mingles several different genres: sound films synchronized with the phonograph (songs, monologues, extracts from plays), but also dances and pantomimes which were simply accompanied by a pianist or orchestra. There is also a sound effects man and possibly a *bonimenteur* (narrator). (26)

Sarah Bernhardt in *Hamlet* (*Le duel d'Hamlet,* Clément Maurice, 1900).

The publicity for the event advertised the association of film with sound in a two-page poster that featured, on one page, an array of international flags. Across each flag a phrase (translated into its respective language) read: "Celebrated artists to be seen and heard."

This capacity to be seen *and* heard on film was integral to Bernhardt's engagement with the narrative film industry roughly a decade later when she made *Camille* (*La Dame aux Camélias*, André Calmettes and Henri Pouctal, 1911) and *Queen Elizabeth* (*Les Amours de la Reine Elisabeth,* Henri Desfontaines and Louis Mercanton, 1912).[1] Each role that Bernhardt brought to film was not only accompanied by sound but was already familiar to audiences through photographs, phonographs, paintings, books, articles and so on. In this way, her films were polyvalent works that presumed that an international public was capable of expanding (rather than reducing) the horizons of film.

A Brief Background: Establishing Vocal Fame

Born in 1844, Bernhardt was accepted into the elite school of acting, the French Conservatoire, in 1860, at the age of fifteen. The Conservatoire was the leading school of dramatic declamation, established in France in 1786. In August 1862 she made her debut, to little success, at the Comédie Française in the customary performance of three roles. As theater historian Gerda Taranow relays (and she is referencing Bernhardt's autobiography, *My Double Life*), "So unexceptional was her performance in the first two roles that by the time of her third *début*, [theater critic Francisque] Sarcey had forgotten the role of the first" (182).

Bernhardt left the Comédie Française in 1863 and by 1866 had joined the Odéon theater. This was a theater that was second only to the Comédie Française in Paris. It was here that her acting began to be noticed and applauded by audiences. According to Bernhardt it was in the *travesti* role of Zacharie in Racine's *Athalie* (1691) that she was first "rewarded by three rounds of applause" by an audience "charmed with the sweetness of [her] voice" (*My Double Life* 127). In this work—which used Felix Mendelssohn's incidental music composed for the play in 1845—she was given the unusual task of saying all of the spoken choruses alone. Two years later, in 1868, she famously revived the role of Anna Danby in Dumas père's *Kean* (1836). While *Le Temps* spoke of her "charming" voice that presented in "a most touching and lovely way one of those most interminable dialogues in which old Dumas took pleasure," it was the students and young workers in the audience who began to actively cheer and support Bernhardt's performances in the theater (Bernhardt, *My Double Life* 131).[2]

[1] I realize that Bernhardt also made *La Tosca* in 1908. *La Tosca* (André Calmettes, Charles le Bargy) is a difficult case as we have lost the film and it was released after *Camille.* (see Blaisdell; "Madame Sarah Bernhardt Pour La Première Fois Au Cinématographe [Mrs. Sarah Bernhardt for the first time at the cinematograph]"; "Bernhardt Conquers New World").

[2] Sarcey ("Chronique Théâtrale" [theatrical review], Feb. 24 1869 2) also confirms Bernhardt's enthusiastic reception. Note that Bernhardt's success in this role was such that over two decades later, in 1891, reviewers of the play would hold her performance as something of a benchmark, stating that her "hit" as Anna Danby marked the "greatest revival of the play" (F.K. n. pag.).

It was not until the following year, however, that Bernhardt enjoyed major popular success. Playing another *travesti* role, that of Zanetto (the wandering Florentine minstrel) in François Coppée's play, *Le passant* (1869), alongside Agar (the actress Marie Léonid Charvin), she captivated a Parisian public. The work was a verse poem between the two characters that lasted roughly twenty minutes. It was not just vocally melodious but actually incorporated song: Coppée's directions specifically introduce Zanetto arriving, singing a verse. We know that this opening verse was put to music by Jules Massenet in a short piece of 1869, called *Sérénade du passant* [serenade of the passer-by]. While Massenet dedicated this piece to the then famous soprano opera singer, Miolan Carvalho, the play's success was ascribed to Bernhardt's vocal skill. As Francisque Sarcey explained in his review of her performance: "With what delicate and tender charm has she said this delicious verse! . . . . She was celebrated, given curtain calls, cheered by a delighted public" ("Chronique Théâtrale" [theatrical review], Jan. 18, 1869 1).

Suze Rueff, Bernhardt's biographer, reiterates that it was Bernhardt's unique voice that in these early years founded her theatrical success. It drew a new audience composed of students, workers, and young women to the legitimate theaters of Paris. This audience would soon be known as the "Saradoteurs." Rueff states:

> *Le passant* counts as one of the most important landmarks in the career of Bernhardt, for it revealed for the first time to the general public her incomparable gift for the speaking of French verse, never rivaled before nor since. It drew to the Odéon the students, the midinettes and the artisans of the *rive gauche* . . . [who were] attracted by the strange music of that voice. (Rueff 48–49)[3]

When Sarcey reviewed Bernhardt's performance as Doña Maria in Victor Hugo's *Ruy Blas* (1838) in 1874, he stressed the play's musical qualities. Calling Hugo a "composer" and a "librettist" in order to underline the use made of music and voice in the performance of this work, he states:

> [Bernhardt's] voice is yearning and tender and well arranged, her diction is of such perfect clarity that not one syllable is lost, even when words flow like a caress from her lips...Never has delicious poetry been so deliciously spoken. ("Chronique Théâtrale" [theatrical review], Feb. 26, 1872 2)

Bernhardt consciously developed this use of melody in the pronunciation of verse on the live stage. Reynaldo Hahn, Bernhardt's friend and contemporary who was a student of Massenet and a noted conductor and composer of operas and operetta's, explained in his book *La grande Sarah. Souvenirs* that Bernhardt appeared to be obsessed with "spoken opera"

[3] See also Bernhardt's comments about the "Saradoteurs" in *Ma Double Vie: Mémoires de Sarah Bernhardt* [my double life: Sarah Bernhardt memoirs] (290).

and wanted to play *Orphée* in this style (158). While Hahn does not elaborate what Bernhardt meant by spoken opera, he does suggest that Bernhardt's voice was very important to her stage performance. Esmé Percy (who studied in Paris with the actress) reiterates this point, describing what it was like to attend a live performance:

> Well, it was astounding . . . I felt that her voice was the only voice. I felt that something extraordinary had happened, that I had been taken out of myself completely. A fascination came over me . . . . This was justly called "la voix d'or": golden. And on the assumption that colour has its immediate counterpart in sound, I imagine that the deaf might see the colour of her voice. It was the gold of sunset, the silver of the harvest moon . . . . She brought something to the language which had never been there before. She made it (if possible) more beautiful, more musical, more illuminating. (*The Legend of Sarah Bernhardt*)[4]

There is evidence that Bernhardt was not alone in realizing the musical potential of her voice on the live stage. As Louis Calvert explains in his book, *Problems of the Actor*, Henry Irving also developed the melody of his voice on stage. Recounting a rehearsal for Lord Byron's *Werner* (1823) where Henry Irving asked to give a speech to music, Calvert recounts how Irving gradually omitted the accompanying instruments that were providing the incidental music for the play (the flute, cornet, trombone and finally the violin were silenced). As he states:

> Loudly did the orchestra leader expostulate with Irving, pointing out, with many flourishes of his bow, that if the violin were cut out there was nothing left of the music, since the melody was gone. But Irving turned a deaf ear to his lamentations. And Irving knew what he was about. He knew that the secret of writing music to accompany the voice is that the voice takes the place of the melody. It was a bit of a blow to the musician in this case, for he had grown attached to his little melody, but it had been out of place. If it had been used it would have fought Irving's voice for first place, and thus would have defeated the end for which it was composed. (Calvert 222-223)[5]

Moving Abroad: Vocal Fame and Pantomimic Mastery

In 1879 Bernhardt toured with the Comédie Française to London. Here she was first celebrated (or, rather, was "followed, mobbed, and applauded wherever she appeared") by the English public (see "Visit of the Comédie Française: A Recollection of Sarah Bernhardt in London" 8). Her acting, given more attention than the rest of the French cast at the Gaiety theater, was lauded for both its physical legibility and its range of vocal expression. As a review in *The Observer* explained, in the role of Doña Sol (in Victor Hugo's *Hernani* [1830])

[4] No date is give for this performance. I would like to thank David Robinson for bringing this recording to my attention.

[5] I would like to thank David Mayer for this reference.

Bernhardt displayed "picturesque gesture and statuesque attitude" in the opening scenes. Finally, about the last scene, the critic wrote:

> Rarely has there been heard on the stage any utterance more charged with varied emotion than Mdlle. Bernhardt's delivery of Doña Sol's appeal to Ruy Gomez for Hernani's life. More rarely still is there seen any picture so touching as her sudden expression of triumphant content, when, having drunk the poison, she nestles her head against her husband's shoulder . . . . To do justice to Mdlle. Sarah Bernhardt's rendering of such a passage as this, in which the whole gamut of love, despair, and resignation is touched, might well baffle us . . . we must be content to note that its effect upon its audience exceeded all that had been anticipated for it, even by those whose recollections of Mdlle. Mars enabled them to anticipate the probable course of the representation. ("At the Play" 3)

When Bernhardt left the Comédie Française in 1880, spurred on by such praise, she began a series of tours that took her to Europe, America and Australia. She toured nine times to North America between 1880 and 1917 and it is especially here, on long and demanding tours where she performed in a variety of venues before popular audiences, that she developed a performance style that was visually pantomimic. Taranow explains that Parisian audiences, when they welcomed Bernhardt back to Paris, were therefore thrilled to see "the pantomimic mastery of an *ex-societaire* [of the Comédie Française]" (38). As Sarcey stated in his review of Bernhardt's *La Tosca* in 1887, the play was made not for Parisian audiences but for audiences (mainly "les Yankees") abroad; it was "above and before all, a good commodity for export" ("Chronique Théâtrale" [theatrical review], Nov. 25,1887 1). This was because Bernhardt no longer expressed psychological developments in her theatrical play through long conversation and vocal monologue but instead relayed facts that are "blindingly obvious." Moreover, she played "furious pantomime" in scenes that were visually spectacular. There was no longer, in his opinion, even "a shadow of poetry" since after her tours "her golden voice is now a brassy one" (Sarcey, "Chronique Théâtrale" [theatrical review], Nov. 25 1887 2).

Critic Jules Lemaître would go so far as to say that Bernhardt's acting unwound "solely through gestures, wringing hands, disheveled hair, knees dragged along the ground, or even by nothing, by the immobile silence of Niobe" (qtd. in Taranow 88-89). Although Bernhardt refuted this criticism,[6] they indicate that roughly a quarter of a century before Bernhardt entered narrative film her acting was regarded in terms of an international language that required no knowledge of French or even prior knowledge of a play to be understood.

[6] See the retort in "Sarah Bernhardt et La Tosca" (18): "Des historiens sévères ont imagine de la classer dans la categorie des pieces de pantomime. C'est une malice plaisante, autant que la qualification de pieces d'exportation. N'est-il pas preferable de prendre l'oeuvre nouvelle de M. Sardou pour ce qu'elle est, pour ce que l'éminent écrivain a voulu qu'elle soit, sans dépasser son imagination et sans chercher surtout à imposer de cruels remords à sa conscience d'académicien?" [some severe historians imagined to rank it under the pantomime category. it is an amusing malice, as well as the qualification of the export plays. it is not better to take the new work of Mr. Sardou for what it is, for what the eminent writer wanted it to be, without exceeding his imagination and without trying to impose cruel remorses to his academic conscience?].

While Bernhardt might have developed a physical style of acting before international audiences, her voice nevertheless remained part of her ongoing renown. This was developed and sustained through her engagement in the nascent phonograph industry. Indeed, during her first tour to North America in 1880, Bernhardt was recorded on Edison's tin foil phonograph. In 1896 she made two cylinders for Gianni Bettini in New York. This was followed, in 1902, with five Pathé cylinders. In 1903 she made records with the Gramophone and Typewriter Company as well as the American Zonophone Company. She continued to record her voice until 1918 (see Menefee, *Sarah Bernhardt: Her Films, Her Recordings* 130–133). Caruso's first needle-cut recordings were made for these same American companies in 1903. Significantly, the same dynamic that was described above in terms of her acting developing before American audiences and then being returned to a French public occurred with her recorded voice. Indeed, Bernhardt heads the list of famous vocal talents cited in the Zonophone's French advertisements of 1903. Returned to the French public through these "New American Speaking Machines," she endorses the brand with the statement that "This is the first time that I have heard the perfect reproduction of my voice. Thank you Zonophone."[7] Hence, while Bernhardt's pantomimic acting on the stage was important to her international fame, this was just one aspect of her expanding fame.

What do we hear, however, in these recordings? From those that are available online or collected in the CD entitled *Sarah Bernhardt in Performance,* we hear short excerpts (generally between three and four minutes long) of Bernhardt in roles which were never brought to film, but which nevertheless contributed to the development of her theatrical career: Phedre, La Samaritaine, Izail. Each excerpt is drawn from a thrilling theatrical moment, one that also displays the range and extent of Bernhardt's vocal skill. In the 1910 Edison recording of *Phèdre* (Jean Racine, 1677) (*Sarah Bernhardt in Performance*), for example, we hear Bernhardt admit her illicit love for her stepson Hippolyte (played by Lou Tellegen). Her voice is plaintive but then passionate, song-like in the way it changes tone. It is also unusual in the way it rises and falls in order to accentuate and develop the emotional charge of her words. Irrespective of the fact that individual words are often hard to distinguish, the tracks give evidence of the passions that are present within each scene. Within a phrase, sometimes even within the rhythmic pronunciation of a single word, there are intonations and cadences that reveal

[7] With an advertisement featuring Bernhardt stating that it was the first time that she has heard "the perfect reproduction of her voice." Under the heading "Enfin! C'est la Perfection!! INNOVATION GÉNIAL—ZONOPHONE est une Nouvelle Machine parlante américane, extraordinaire, incomparable! En VOICI des TÉMOIGNAGES tout chauds, signés d'hier" [finally! this is perfection! brilliant innovation—zonophone is a new American talking machine, extraordinary, incomparable! here some hot testimonials from yesterday], Bernhardt's "C'est la première fois que j'entends la reproduction parfaite de ma voix. Merci donc au Zonophone" [it is the first time that I hear the perfect reproduction of my voice. so thank you to the Zonophone] appears. All the other endorsements follow Bernhardt and are from people associated with "l'Opéra" (this is a fact spelt out by this reference following their names). See Marty 110.

SARAH BERNHARDT MAKING A PHONOGRAPH RECORD.

Sarah Bernhardt recording her voice with a phonograph.

Bernhardt's expressive and singular use of her voice. There are no other sounds on these recordings apart from the noise of the record itself. Unlike on the live stage, there is no music to develop the emotional depth and meaning of a given scene. It is Bernhardt we hear, isolated as a murmuring, speaking, sometimes even a shouting voice. As an advertisement for the Edison Phonograph Company explained in 1910, the phonograph gives Bernhardt "the widest possible latitude for the display of her God-given talent" (qtd. in Musser 159).

The phonograph did not only allow Bernhardt to display her vocal skills before audiences who might only hear her in a single play, it also allowed her to enter the middle class home as a portable and audible object. No longer was Bernhardt only a reproduced photograph, a theatrical program, or even a remembered performance, but someone who could be heard in the comfort of a living room. As the Gramophone's publicity of 1903 stated (expressly listing Bernhardt as it's first "star" in featured attractions): "Going to the theater entails catching the last train. On the Gramophone you can hear in your own garden Sarah Bernhardt's sympathetic and dramatic voice" (see the advertisement reproduced in R. Brown and Anthony 237). Furthermore, the phonograph was marketed as a record of physical attendance at an otherwise fleeting theatrical performance. As the Edison Phonograph Company boasted, "Everyone who saw Bernhardt would buy her Records, if only as a souvenir of her farewell tour" (Musser 161).

Charles Musser has recently argued that this expanding fragmentation of Bernhardt's self through reproductive technology correlates with early twentieth century modernity. It resonates with the development of cubism in painting just as it mobilizes interrelationships in cultural forms that (as he states) "had certainly existed, but not in that way or to that degree" (166–168, quote on 168). In other words, Bernhardt's theatrical performances were just one part of her growing renown. Already adapted, changed, fractured and mediated before an international audience well before her entrance into narrative film, her polymorphy disavows the possibility of constructing a simple teleological history of theatrical transfer between the nineteenth-century stage and the twentieth-century screen. Performing before foreign audiences in a variety of venues at the same time that she recorded her voice on the phonograph, Bernhardt was a multi-media actress *par excellence* whose body was continually adapted, reconfigured, and reproduced as a shifting and above all mobile cultural construct.

The Divine Sarah

Known as "the divine," Bernhardt was accorded a title in the late nineteenth century that had earlier been applied only to singers (Nectoux 5).[8] Not only was she a performer with a remarkable voice, she was also a star whose interpretation of a role gave substance to a theatrical text. In this way, Bernhardt can be considered akin to the *prima donna* in the Italian

[8] See also, e.g., "SARAH BERNHARDT": "The elite of Paris have applauded the splendid projections of the Divine Sarah in her greatest role" (27).

bel canto, where individual vocal agility determined theatrical success.

Many of the roles that Bernhardt went on to play on the theatrical stage indicate that her performance could literally be associated with the *bel canto* tradition. Her Doña Sol in Victor Hugo's *Hernani* (played at the Comédie Française to much success in 1877) and Lucrèce in Hugo's *Lucrèce Borgia* (1911), as well as Andromaque in Racine's *Andromaque* (1903) had already appeared on the nineteenth century stage as (respectively) Giuseppe Verdi's *Ernani* (1844), Gaetano Donizetti's *Lucrezia Borgia* (1833), and Gioacchino Rossini's *Ermione* (1819). Further, the roles Bernhardt brought to silent film—*La Tosca, La Dame aux Camélias*, *Queen Elizabeth* and *Adrienne Lecouvreur* (Henri Desfontaines, Louis Mercanton, 1913)—also came largely out of the *bel canto* tradition of Gioachino Rossini and Gaetano Donizetti.

Why did Bernhardt choose to bring these roles to film? In the first place, opera allowed her films to be promoted as middle class entertainments, thereby expanding her possible audience. Opera also allowed her films to be associated the traditional arts and so capitalized on her established renown. Bernhardt's "operatic" film was also a clever response to the medium's silence. It ensured that vocal absence did not suggest a linguistic or instrumental failure. Instead, film was a new artistic hybrid, which was uniquely able to join vision, sound, industry, and art. It is precisely because she was already established as a significant "singer," a diva with a famous voice, that she was able to have her works reconstituted as silent screen performances and brought before audiences she would never actually see. Further, film enabled Bernhardt to expand her public, particularly at a point in which her live voice was beginning to be described as "broken" and "bruised" (see Taranow 46 citing theater critics Adolphe Brisson and Henri Bordeaux in 1912 and 1913 respectively). And, finally, opera indicated that a media which had, until this point, been viewed as a popular entertainment might instead be seen as a modern manifestation of music (which was itself considered the newest of the traditional arts).

As Martin Marks argues in *Music and the Silent Film*, the opera film was appealing to audiences precisely because it guaranteed the quality of the cinematographic product. Even without synchronized sound, it was a cultural coup for the nascent industry. It was also one that implicitly ensured opera a growing mass audience. Marks states:

> A silent film of an opera seems an oxymoron. The mute medium robs such a work of its dramatic essence; and even if the accompanying score were to include vocal as well as instrumental parts (which does not often seem to be the case), the original theatrical balance has been lost. In the minds of film producers and audiences, however, these problems of adaptation probably counted for less than the fact that operas were popular works possessing glamour and prestige—qualities that most silent films of the period lacked. (72)

While Marks cites Sadoul's discussion of Georges Mèliès's reproduced arias for *Faust and Marguerite* (*Faust et Marguerite,* 1904) and *The Barber of Seville* (*Le barbier de Séville,* 1904) as

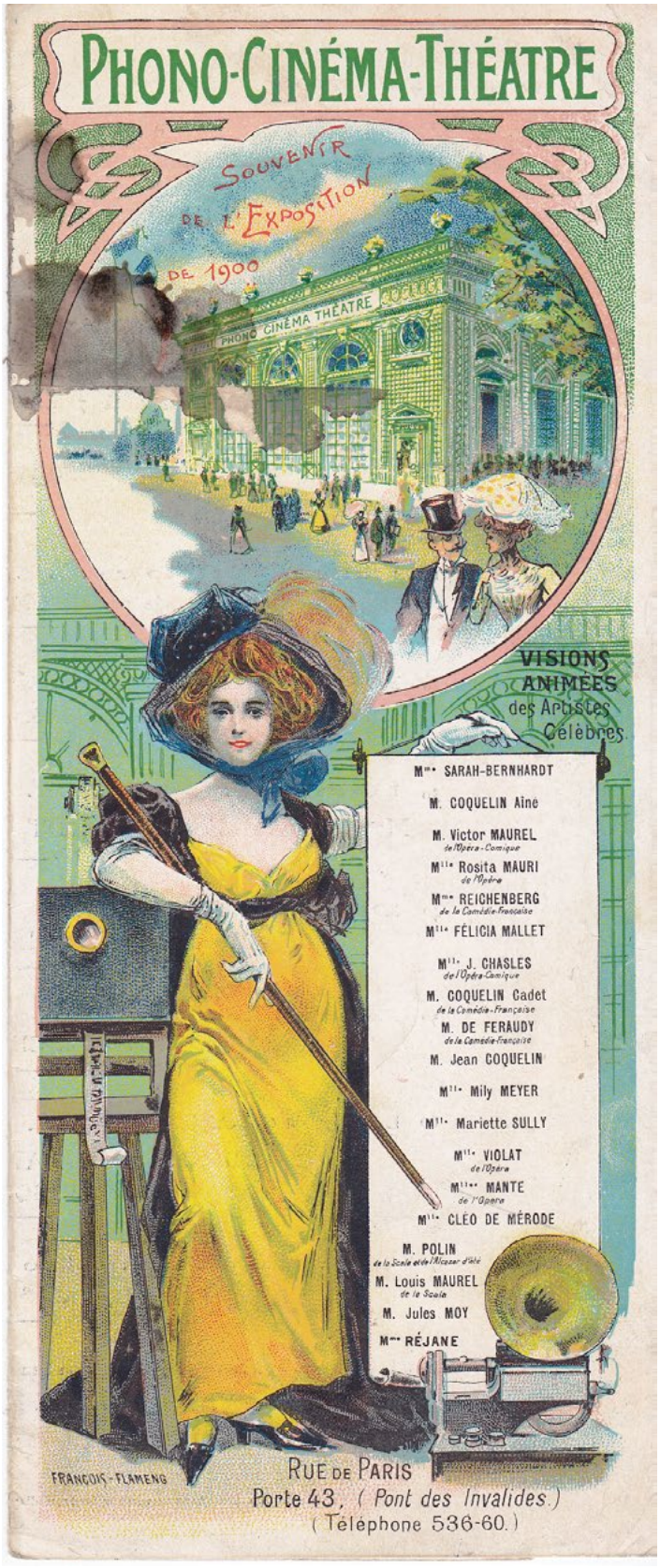
examples of these "opera films," Bernhardt's films could very well be discussed here. In the first place, they were marketed as unique works of art, which were accessible to all. As a 1912 double-page spread in *Ciné-journal* would explain, Bernhardt was "the most celebrated artist" interpreting "the most celebrated drama" in the Film d'Art's *La dame aux Camélias* (*Camille*) (*Cinéma-journal*, Jan. 6, 1912 30). In America, the film was at once "a merit of the highest class" and also "an entertainment for all classes" ("Sarah Bernhardt in *Camille*." Advertisement 596). Bernhardt was publicized as a *prima donna* of the stage; her "actual" silence on silent film in no way mitigated the quality of the product on offer. Indeed, in an advertisement for the Canadian paper *The Saint John Globe*, reproduced in David W. Menefee's *The First Female Stars: Women of the Silent Era,* Bernhardt's *Camille* is sold as "A GLORIOUS RECORD OF GENIUS" screened in the "OPERA HOUSE" (32).

This focus on film as a "record" was quite an effective way to promote the fame of Bernhardt, one that recalls the strategy employed by Edison to promote the phonograph through the trace of Bernhardt's voice, by presenting it as a souvenir of the actress, a record of an otherwise fleeting and ephemeral performance. With film, however, "a glorious record of genius" is a shared public event, something that is realized only when a public comes together to watch Bernhardt in the Opera House. In my view, our difficulty today in appreciating Bernhardt's skill on screen is related to our incapacity to see her films in this expanded context, as one inter-related development of her developing publicity and performance.

Back to Beginnings

In Paul Decauville's programme Bernhardt was prioritized among the performers who could "sound." In the posters publicizing the event, she either heads the programme before the other actors and singers (who are culled from such prestigious theaters as the Comédie Française, Opéra, Opéra-Comique, and La Scala) or she is the last attraction, featured in the biggest and boldest print.[9] What is important about these posters is not only that Bernhardt headlined a bill that included famous singers, but that it is her dressed in the yellow gown of *La Tosca* who introduces the "Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre" programme (see Duckett, "Investigating an interval" for a discussion on this). Evidently, film was not silent, but an expressive multi-media venture. It included and referenced the voice and the record, just as it included and referenced the live stage. While there is a great difference between the Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre and the narrative film industry that Bernhardt entered some years later, we would do well to remember that spectators did not go to watch silent film but to see a performative event. Bernhardt's films, in this sense, do not record a vocal absence. They are paradigmatic examples of early cinema itself.

[9] See the cover of Robinson. See also the poster reproduced in Sadoul 101 and in *Image & Magie Du Cinema Francais: 100 Ans de Patrimoine* [image&magic of French cinema: 100 years of heritage] 153.



Phono-Cinéma-Théâtre - Souvenir de l'exposition de 1900 - Visions animées des artistes célèbres.
[Souvenir of the 1900's exposition - animated visions of famous artists].

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---. *Kean*. By Alexandre Dumas, père. Théâtre de l'Odéon, Paris. 1868. Performance.

---. *Le passant*. By François Coppée. Théâtre de l'Odéon, Paris. 1869. Performance.

---. *Hernani*. By Victor Hugo. Comédie-Française, Paris. 21 Nov. 1877. Gaiety Theatre, London. 1879. Performance.

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