

The Case of the Phantom Fetish: Louis Feuillade's *Les Vampires*

Elizabeth Ezra

School of Languages, Cultures and Religions  
University of Stirling  
Stirling FK9 4LA

Email: [e.r.ezra@stir.ac.uk](mailto:e.r.ezra@stir.ac.uk)

Author bio:

Elizabeth Ezra teaches in the School of Languages, Cultures and Religions at the University of Stirling. Her most recent book (co-edited with Terry Rowden) is *Transnational Cinema: The Film Reader* (Routledge, 2005). She is the author of *The Colonial Unconscious: Race and Culture in Interwar France* (Cornell University Press, 2000); *Georges Méliès: the Birth of the Auteur* (Manchester University Press, 2000); and *Jean-Pierre Jeunet* (forthcoming in 2007 from the University of Illinois Press). She is also the editor of *European Cinema* (Oxford University Press, 2004), and co-editor (with Sue Harris) of *France in Focus: Film and National Identity* (Berg, 2000).

## The Case of the Phantom Fetish: Louis Feuillade's *Les Vampires*

On the cover of Laura Mulvey's collection of essays entitled *Fetishism and Curiosity*, there is a well-known illustration of Musidora in the role of Irma Vep from Louis Feuillade's ten-episode film serial *Les Vampires*.<sup>1</sup> This image of a head floating in space, surrounded by a question mark, was apparently, and aptly, chosen to suggest the 'curiosity' of the book's title. However, it also evokes the 'fetishism' of the title, as it provides a substitute for an absence within the book, which contains no mention of *Les Vampires*, Musidora, or Irma Vep. This familiar fetish-image of Irma Vep's head, taken from a contemporary publicity poster, perfectly embodies one of the serial's central motifs. This article examines the recurring image of the severed head in *Les Vampires* in relation to its various metonymic functions. In particular, I argue for a reconsideration of its emblematic status as a symbol of castration, and suggest how the image of the severed head in Feuillade's serial can be linked to the anxieties and traumas engendered by the First World War.

*Les Vampires* follows the exploits of a gang of criminals, masters of disguise, who terrorise the Parisian bourgeoisie while being pursued by investigative journalist Philippe Guérande (played by Edouard Mathé) and his sidekick, a reformed vampire and some-time mortician named Mazamette (played by celebrated character actor Marcel Levesque). Shot between the summer of 1915 and the spring of 1916, the serial makes no explicit mention of the war that was slaughtering millions. This apparent omission could perhaps be explained by the fact that audiences were looking for diversions to distract

them from the horrors going on around them. Feuillade himself knew exactly what he was distracting viewers from, having seen these horrors first-hand while serving as a sergeant earlier in the war, before being released from duty because of a heart condition in July of 1915. In its refusal to show the physical violence of the war explicitly, *Les Vampires* mirrors French newsreels of the period, which '[hid] neither the destruction nor the suffering of the soldiers but never reveal[ed] a corpse, a mutilated body or a wounded man'.<sup>2</sup> This omission was even more marked in feature films, according to Pierre Sorlin, who notes '[t]he silence of French cinema' on the subject of the war.<sup>3</sup> However, it is not quite accurate to say, as one commentator did when the serial was shown at the Cinémathèque française in 1972, that 'the war is completely forgotten in the ten episodes of *Les Vampires*'.<sup>4</sup> Richard Abel has speculated about the symbolic presence of the war in *Les Vampires*, wondering 'if, in their conjunction of the real and the unreal, the banal and the unexpectedly terrifying, the films also convey, through displacement, the French experience of the war—the absurd proximity of normal life to the ghastly horrors of trench warfare'.<sup>5</sup> Abel's suspicion can indeed be borne out by close analysis of the films.

Feuillade's serial predates the birth of the vampire film genre that viewers today would recognise, which began with Murnau's 1921 *Nosferatu*, based on Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Though both kinds of film reflect similar anxieties about infiltration and physical violation, Feuillade's serial is more concerned with urban crime than with rustic folklore. Anton Kaes has argued that crime films made during the Great War or in the inter-war period (such as Fritz Lang's 1931 *M*) reflected a sense of paranoia that can be traced to the enemy's hidden but pervasive presence in wartime trenches. Invoking Ernst Jünger's theory of 'Total Mobilization', Kaes contends that the war mentality had pervaded civilian life to the extent that enemies—in the form of criminals—were thought to be lurking in

the shadows of the great metropolises.<sup>6</sup> From this argument, it can be inferred that the sleuthing necessary to track down criminals, so prevalent in *Les Vampires*, is linked to the preoccupation with code-breaking during the war.

The Great War's presence is in fact encrypted in Feuillade's serial, which invites its own decoding in a series of clues offered to viewers. The first clue to the enigma involves the very depiction of codes within the films, surely not insignificant at a time when Feuillade was unable to film on location in urban centres because people worried that movie cameras might be instruments of German espionage.<sup>7</sup> The serial abounds in veiled semiotic systems such as cryptograms, as in the third episode, entitled 'Le Cryptogramme rouge'; numerical codes (episode 9), invisible ink (episode 8), and anagrams (as when the letters in the name 'Irma Vep' dance around on a marquis to form the word 'Vampire', in the third episode). The repeated emphasis on deciphering scrambled messages evokes the practice of codebreaking used in wartime espionage. The French were the most effective cryptanalysts of the First World War, possessing 'the strongest team of codebreakers in Europe', which they had developed as a defensive measure after their defeat in the Franco-Prussian War.<sup>8</sup>

Other clues to the war's hidden presence include the use, in episode 5, of a poisonous gas with which the vampire gang immobilizes a roomful of party guests in order to rob them (Francis Lacassin describes this scene in terms that seem unconsciously to evoke the war, as the transformation of 'a ballroom in to a gigantic mass grave'<sup>9</sup>). Later, in the ninth episode, Irma wears a gas mask taken from a chemical laboratory where she has been helping the new vampire leader conduct experiments; and the vampires again attempt to use poisoned gas on their enemies in the tenth episode. These aspects of the plot would have evoked the first use of poison gas as a weapon of war by the Germans in the spring of 1915, just a few months prior to the filming of these episodes. Similarly, the

oversize cannon that the villain Satanás uses to blow up a Parisian cabaret would certainly conjure up the 'Big Bertha' used in battle for the first time in World War I. And finally, the exploding ship from which Irma narrowly escapes death (for which Feuillade appears to have used actual newsreel footage) would have reminded audiences of the sinking of the *Lusitania*, the British passenger ship bombed by the Germans, also in the spring of 1915, which killed some 1400 civilians, making headlines around the world.

But the serial's most pointed allusion to the Great War occurs in its almost obsessive allusions to fathers, either actual *pères-de-famille*, or men who could potentially father children with the hundreds of thousands of women left partnerless as a result of the war, contributing to the much-discussed fear of declining birthrates in France at the time. We learn in the first moments of the first episode, and are reminded several times thereafter, that one of the central characters, Mazamette, is a single father of three small boys. (Of course, Mazamette's single status raises the question of the absent mother, presumably dead, but it is Mazamette's status as a father that is repeatedly emphasized in the films.) Mazamette's lapse, and later relapse, from respectability and righteousness into a life of crime, is motivated by his need to provide for his young sons, as he reminds Philippe by brandishing a photograph of himself with his progeny at several opportune moments throughout the serial. Then too, the serial's morally upright hero, the investigative journalist Philippe Guérande, lives at home with his widowed mother, while identifying with his deceased father through his paternalistic treatment of Mazamette, which includes boxing his ears when he disapproves of his behaviour; showing him a moralistic passage from La Fontaine's fables when Mazamette threatens to return to his criminal ways; and bestowing his blessing upon him when he wishes to marry. And finally, Irma Vep, a foundling, appears to be seeking a father figure in her

liaisons with the succession of Grand Vampires, gang leaders with whom she invariably falls in love. The persistence of these images points to a cultural preoccupation with fathers at a time when many more of them were going off to the front than were coming back—in the first four months of the war alone, France had lost about 850,000 men, who were either dead, wounded, missing in action, or taken prisoner.<sup>10</sup>

Absent fathers are figured throughout the films by means of a recurring image, that of the severed head, which appears in several guises. Indeed, the serial is capped by the title of the first episode, 'La tête coupée' [The Severed Head]. In this episode, the connection between the image of the severed head and fatherhood is established metonymically, as the film's first mention of the missing head of a man decapitated by the vampire gang is sandwiched between two scenes that allude to absent fathers. The mention of the severed head is preceded by a scene in which Mazamette shows Philippe a photograph of himself with his three small sons, along with his wet-nurse bill; and it is followed by Philippe's return home to bid farewell to his widowed mother before embarking upon the investigation.

The image of the severed head also appears in the metonymic form of a hat. Mazamette spends a brief period as a mortician, in an effort to reform his errant ways. As proof of his newfound trustworthiness, he shows Philippe a note (episode 3) that reads 'Municipal funeral home certificate. We certify that M. Oscar-Cloud Mazamette has proved to be a devoted and punctual employee, about whom our clients have never made the slightest complaint'.<sup>11</sup> Of course, the joke here is that the beneficiaries of Mazamette's services would not be able to complain even if they wanted to, given their posthumous state. In the sixth episode, 'Les Yeux qui fascinent' ['The Mesmerizing Eyes'], the top hat is displayed in a glass case on Mazamette's mantel, a constant reminder of his

decision to follow the path of moral rectitude in becoming an honest working man, but also a symbolic reminder of the dead the film cannot mention explicitly (this silencing aptly evoked in the name of one of the vampires, 'le Père Silence' ['Father Silence']).

The missing member implicitly rears its ugly head again in the eighth episode of the serial, titled 'Le Maître de la foudre' ['The Master of Lightning']. The episode begins when Philippe and Mazamette inform Irma that Moréno, the lover whom she has described as a father figure, has been executed: Mazamette makes a slitting motion across his throat to indicate that he has been beheaded. Then, the new Grand Vampire, Satanas, disguised as a priest and addressed as 'mon père', blows up the ship that Vep is travelling on by firing a cannon out the window of his hotel room. Mazamette, having been newly reunited with one of his sons, played by the well-known child actor Bout d'Zan, goes off in search of the culprit, and discovers a hatbox which, instead of a top hat, contains a projectile bomb. The shot of the shell in the hatbox recalls the shot of the severed head in 'La Tête coupée', creating a chain of signifiers linking the severed head in its box in the first episode to the mortician's hat and then to the bomb in the hatbox in the eighth episode. When Satanas, referred to as 'le chef'—literally, 'the head'—of the vampire gang, plants a bomb in his own top hat later in the episode, the link is reinforced. The fantasy underlying the war was that the missing head would be recovered (as in 'La tête coupée') and restored to the body familial. But as the war progressed, the missing head in Feuillade's serial was replaced in its box first by a mortician's hat, and then by a bomb: first, by a representative of death, and then by the agent of its own destruction.

The image of the severed head was not an innovation of the First World War era. At the end of the nineteenth century, there were severed heads everywhere. Jean-Louis Leutrat points out that '[c]inema was born when Salome

was carrying around the head of John the Baptist. Heads were falling a lot in this period, in literature, in painting, the theatre, and even in public squares'.<sup>12</sup>

Alluding to the widespread (if temporary) perception by early film audiences that close-ups showed dismembered bodies, Leutrat continues: 'There were links in the public imagination between the guillotine's blade, the camera, and close-ups'.<sup>13</sup> The severed head appears perhaps most insistently in the work of the film pioneer Méliès, whose better-known titles in this genre include *Un homme de têtes* [*The Four Troublesome Heads*, 1898]; *Une bonne farce avec ma tête* [*Tit for Tat*, 1903]; *Le mélomane* [*The Melomaniac*, 1903]; *L'homme à la tête de caoutchouc* [*The Man with the Rubber Head*, 1901]; and *Le bourreau turc* [*The Terrible Turkish Executioner*, 1904], as well as his stage show, *Le décapité récalcitrant*.

Ever since Freud's pointed equation between decapitation and castration in his essay 'The Medusa's Head', it has become somewhat automatic to read these images as symbols of castration. Charles Bernheimer has argued that the castration fantasy is a product of the decadent imagination in European culture at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>14</sup> It is thus possible to interpret the function of the severed head as a continuation of its function in earlier decades. But unlike earlier depictions of headlessness, images of the severed head in *Les Vampires* had a significance beyond that of castration: that of the father separated from his family, through absence or death. For all its (phantasmatic) phallic significance, the severed head was more closely associated with absent fathers at this moment in history. The castration fantasy (the reading of the presence of female genitalia as the 'absence' of male genitalia) constructs the loss, through a phantasmatic wounding, of something that never existed except as a narcissistic projection (giving a phallus with one hand and taking it away with the other). On the contrary, the loss of fathers and sons in the war was the result of very real wounding, the very real slaughter underlying these images of severed heads.



The fear of castration actually covers over, obscures a deeper fear. Freud wrote his Medusa essay in 1922, when contemplation of the rather hypothetical prospect of castration could detract from all-too-real encounters in the course of daily life with any of the 3.2 million Austrian war wounded.

The castration complex is thus itself is a fetish, a substitute that both disavows an absence (the absence of men slaughtered at war), and acts as a memorial to that absence. A fetish erects a phantom limb where there was none in the first place, a memorial reminding us of nothing. This is precisely the function of the castration fantasy. As Freud observed that sometimes a cigar is just a cigar, I am arguing that, on one level, a severed head is ‘just’ a severed head—or a severed arm or leg—and nothing less. It is thus my contention that what Kaja Silverman calls ‘the phallic legacy’<sup>15</sup> is undermined in Feuillade’s serial not because its acephalic imagery symbolizes castration, but because castration is merely a decoy for another loss that cannot be acknowledged overtly.

The status of castration as a fetish is reinforced by the logic of substitution that drives the serial’s narrative, and that also points directly to the war. This logic of substitution manifests itself in two ways. When Feuillade began shooting *Les Vampires* in the summer of 1915, he was severely limited in his choice of actors and technicians because the majority of male personnel had been mobilized. Those who had not yet fought would soon be called away: several characters thus met untimely demises when the actors playing them (such as, for example, Louis Leubas, who played the vampire leader Satanás) had to return to battle.<sup>16</sup> Immune from conscription were Edouard Mathé, an Australian citizen; Jean Ayme, who was Swiss (but whose character was killed off anyway when the actor demanded a pay rise), and of course Musidora, whose gender made her a safe bet (though only relatively so: she was actually Feuillade’s second choice for

the role of Irma Vep, and was only called in when the first actress hired to play the part got pregnant).<sup>17</sup>

For very pragmatic reasons, then, the logic of substitution underwrites the prevalence of impersonation in the serial. If these vampires do not suck blood and have no use for fangs, coffins, graveyards, castles, or even immortality, they do display a predilection for inhabiting other characters' bodies. For example, we learn at the end of the first episode that the Grand Vampire has killed an old friend of our hero's father and taken over his body, helpfully providing an explanatory note: 'The real Dr. Nox, whose personality I have taken over, is dead, assassinated by me'.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, the Grand Vampire has already been using an alias to impersonate the Comte de Noirmoutier, so his impersonation of Doctor Nox is already a double impersonation. Between them, the various members of the vampire gang, and, less frequently, the good guys Philippe and Mazamette, impersonate some twenty different people, sometimes more than one at a time. And in episode 6, Irma Vep herself is impersonated by a servant working for a couple of American thieves who are in turn impersonating other Americans. The rash of substitutions effected at the level of the diegesis thus mirrors the substitutions among the actors necessitated by the war. It is perhaps no wonder that, immediately after the war, psychiatrists identified a new class of paranoid delusion, 'l'illusion des sosies' or Capgras' syndrome, in which patients traumatised by the loss of loved ones imagined that even survivors had been killed or spirited away and replaced by imposters who inhabited their bodies.<sup>19</sup>

The episode that contains the most instances of impersonation is the sixth, 'Les Yeux qui fascinent'. This episode, with its proliferation of substitutions, provides a particularly apt illustration of the process whereby the loss of life is transformed filmically into the fetishization of castration. Near the beginning of the episode, we learn that the fascinating eyes of the title belong to the vampires'

rival in crime, Moréno, who has the power to hypnotise people simply by staring at them. But this episode also suggests that there is another kind of eye with a similar capacity to objectify those on whom it fixes its gaze: that of the movie camera. Immediately after the scene in which Moréno hypnotises his housekeeper, we see Philippe and Mazamette seated in a cinema. They are watching a newsreel entitled 'L'Assassinat du Notaire, L'Enquête dans la Forêt de Fontainebleau' ['The Murder of the Notary, and Investigation in the Fontainebleau Forest']. The illusion of a film is created by means of live actors on a stage before the cinema audience, surrounded by a rectangular frame, meant to be the screen. In a *mise-en-abîme* effect, in which we see an audience watching people who are themselves engaged in looking at something, the audience sees a small group of people, including Irma Vep in male drag, intently examining the ground beneath them. We learn that the vampire gang, returning to the scene of their most recent crime to remove any incriminating evidence, has been caught on camera by a roving news reporter. A movie camera then makes a second appearance at the end of the episode, brandished by one of the journalists who are interviewing Mazamette in his home after he has been given a big reward for solving a crime. Mazamette shows the reporters his mortician's top hat displayed in a glass case on his mantelpiece, announcing: 'In front of this modest headpiece that I once wore, I proclaim that although vice may not always be punished, Virtue is always rewarded'.<sup>20</sup>

Between these two references to filmmaking, this episode of *Les Vampires* displays all the hallmarks of the voyeuristic process of 'ascertaining guilt (immediately associated with castration), asserting control, and subjecting the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness'.<sup>21</sup> In addition to the 'moral' involving punishment and reward that Mazamette trots out for the benefit of the reporters to whom he tells his life story, we are also presented with another

morality tale. While Irma Vep is sent to search the hotel rooms of an American couple suspected of harboring a treasure map, attention shifts to her accomplice, the Grand Vampire posing as the Comte de Kerlor (whose son Irma poses as before slipping back into her body-hugging vampire suit). The Grand Vampire distracts the hotel guests with a story about his great-grandfather in Napoleon's army in Spain which he reads from an account he has written entitled 'Les Aventures de Gloire et d'Amour du Capitaine de Kerlor, racontée par le Colonel Comte de Kerlor son arrière petit-fils' ['The Glorious and Romantic Adventures of Captain Kerlor, as told by Colonel Count Kerlor, his great grandson']. We then see footage shot on location of a soldier ordering a Spanish woman to feed and water his horse. The woman, whose husband and brother have been killed by the French, unleashes a bull on the soldier. The bull chases the Frenchman, who does battle with the animal, finally stabbing it with his sword. The bull dies, but, an intertitle informs us, 'the Kerlors are not the kind of people who would take revenge on a woman'.<sup>22</sup>

The incongruity of this interlude, apparently inserted because Feuillade had already shot the Spanish footage for another aborted film, had a surrealist appeal (literally—it was fondly remembered by several of the young poets and artists who would later become Surrealists, and in whose work bullfighting was a recurring theme). Film analysts have commented on the apparent arbitrariness of this sequence, citing it as an example of Feuillade's 'automatic filmmaking', a precursor to the Surrealists' automatic writing.<sup>23</sup> Ado Kyrrou credits Feuillade with the creation of 'collage cinématographique', prefiguring the pictorial collages of Max Ernst.<sup>24</sup> Another explanation for the illogical nature of the sequence, however, can be found in the very structure of trauma, in which, according to E. Ann Kaplan, '[i]mages are repeated but without meaning: they do not have a clear beginning, middle and end. Rather they erupt into cinematic

space, unheralded in the story as in an individual's consciousness'.<sup>25</sup> When read as a symptom of trauma, the bullfighting scene enables the Napoleonic War to stand in for the war taking place at the time the serial was made; it also displays a certain coherence that is in keeping with the logic of the episode and, ultimately, of the whole serial.

The sequence's narrative drive is provided by a woman's act of betrayal towards a man, which provokes a desire for punishment. This scenario prefigures the American woman's betrayal of her husband to the police, who arrest him and give the substantial reward for locating the criminal to Mazamette, which prompts the barrage of reporters who film his moralistic account of the events leading up to the arrest. Earlier in the episode, we see the American man on horseback arguing with his wife, who is standing beside him, and whose look of petulance provides the first sign of the rebellion that will result in her 'betrayal' of him. The bull sequence begins with a nearly identically staged shot of the Spanish woman standing beside the horse-riding French officer, with a look of defiance on her face.

The desire for revenge, provoked by these apparent acts of feminine betrayal, are always gallantly suppressed, as in the examples cited above, as well as in the last episode of the serial, in which Irma is finally killed off—but *by a woman*, thus fulfilling a male revenge fantasy, without actually incurring masculine guilt. Indeed, the justification for these acts of revenge often falters upon even cursory examination. For example, the American woman's act of 'betrayal' consists in opening the door when the police knock—but the role she plays in her husband's arrest is questionable, when we consider that her husband, named Raphael Norton but posing as a man named Horatio Werner, has already raised suspicion about his identity by neglecting to remove his large insignia ring engraved prominently with the initials 'R.N.' Nonetheless, this man

is shown making a strangling motion directed at his wife when he is finally arrested, implying that she is entirely to blame for his fate. Similarly, although it is implied that the Spanish woman's act of loosing the bull on the fictional Comte de Kerlor's grandfather ought really to be a punishable offense (were the Kerlors not such a noble and gentlemanly breed), we in fact learn that the woman is doing no more than avenging the deaths of her father and brother at the hands of the French. Irma Vep, too, undergoes a similar transformation from victim to perpetrator in this episode. In the penultimate scene, after the American thieves have been arrested but before Mazamette is visited by journalists, we see Irma spending a little quality time with her new lover, Moréno, the arch rival of the vampire gang. No longer in male drag, but instead wearing a woman's suit inspired by men's fashions complete with fitted blazer and necktie, she writes, under Moréno's hypnotic influence, a confession of all her crimes. In the original script for this episode, however, the letter that Irma writes is the following: 'I am a foundling. I was named Irma Vep because this name is an anagram of Vampire. The man who raised me taught me to steal and kill. He used to exercise an overwhelming influence on me, but I'm no longer afraid of him'.<sup>26</sup> In the trajectory from script to screen, Irma's account of victimization is transformed into a confession of crime. Moréno seems satisfied by Irma's confession, and reinforces his domination of her by ordering her to murder her former lover, the Grand Vampire, which she does, and for which she receives an embrace.

Musidora herself referred to her character's behaviour in a mocking tone that underscored Irma's exaggerated culpability: 'I confess. . .; these are my crimes. This morning, I shot and killed my former lover, the Great Vampire, played by the elegant actor Jean Ayme, in order to spend my life with a more attractive bandit'.<sup>27</sup> The guilt projected on to this female character is the guilt of survivors, of men who did not fight in the war, or those who did fight and lived

to tell about it. Irma Vep narrowly escapes death in several episodes of *Les Vampires* so that viewers might have the continued pleasure of watching her undergo yet another near miss. Here is Musidora again describing a typical day's work: 'Yesterday, a 52-coach train went over my body at great speed, with infernal clattering of wheels and great gusts of wind. I'm not in any hurry to repeat *that* performance'.<sup>28</sup> The 'crime' of which most women were implicitly deemed guilty in wartime was not that of castration, but rather that of not having had to risk their lives in combat.

In film, both crime and punishment are often displaced on to the female body. These scenarios of feminine misbehaviour and masculine desire for punishment rehearse the voyeuristic process of assigning blame to women for sexual difference: of imagining, in other words, that they are former men who have brought about their own fall from grace. This phantasmatic vision of women as modified men is part and parcel of the castration fantasy, and is figured in the image of Irma Vep in male drag. This instance of feminine cross-dressing is a disavowal of her difference, covering over an absence with a surface sheen as distracting as that created by the same character's sleek, shiny body stocking, or the glass case in which Mazamette keeps his mortician's hat. The hat itself is a metonymy of death contained safely on Mazamette's mantelpiece, just as the castration fantasy itself covers over, with a dazzling theoretical gloss, the reality of death on the battlefields. (It is almost as though she is aware of the links between the image of the severed head and the objectification of women in film when, in the fourth episode, in response to an invitation from an elderly man to accompany him to the movies, Irma stabs him in the head with a hatpin. On the cinema bill: 'Le Grand Couronné—Documentaire d'actualités' ['The Great Crowned Head—Newsreel'].)

The cut-up, or episodic, nature of the serial form itself reinforces the fetishistic emphasis on fragmentation in the titles of the two episodes on which I have been focusing so far, 'La tête coupée' and 'Les Yeux qui fascinent'. In addition to evoking the recently developed film technique of the close-up, the bodily part-objects that pervade the serial suggest the carnage being created on not-so-distant battlefields, from which so many fathers (and sons and brothers) would not be returning. But one instance of dismemberment, or near-dismemberment, which occurs during the reunion between Mazamette and his son Eustache in the eighth episode, attempts to resist the disintegration of the nuclear family alluded to throughout the rest of the serial. When the rambunctious little boy is expelled from school for bad behaviour, his father initially greets him with stern disapproval, but this soon dissolves into paternal affection. Mazamette immediately includes the boy in his crime-fighting capers, and the two set out in matching outfits, ready for adventure. After helping his father locate the hideout of the Grand Vampire and narrowly avoiding the exploding hat-bomb, Eustache poses as a street urchin begging for money door-to-door. The boy takes out a gun and aims at the vampire, but misses, and ends up shooting his father in the nose. Despite their mishaps, Eustache and Mazamette have nevertheless managed to get the Grand Vampire arrested, and, overjoyed, Mazamette leans down to kiss his son, but his injured nose gets in the way. The boy looks straight at the camera and laughs (this rupture of the diegesis evoking the child actor Bout d'Zan's background in vaudeville), clasping his hands together in a triumphant gesture. The important thing, though, about this exchange between father and son, is that it does not end here. Later in the episode, Mazamette assumes the paternal role toward his son that Philippe has until now taken with him. Showing Eustache a newspaper article declaring the demise of the vampire gang and warning him, '[t]hat's what



happens to people who don't behave in school',<sup>29</sup> Mazamette leans over to kiss his son again, repeating his earlier failed attempt, and once again hurting his nose and provoking uproarious laughter from the boy. But now Mazamette makes one more attempt, this time succeeding in kissing the boy, who finally responds with affection. Mazamette's shooting by his son, though a near-patricide, does not, ultimately, support an Oedipal interpretation, and does not, finally, prevent Mazamette from asserting his parental role.

In addition to Mazamette's reunion with his son, the serial's final episodes also attempt to reaffirm the integrity of the nuclear family, with Philippe's marriage, the announcement of Mazamette's engagement to a widowed housekeeper, and the marriage of Irma Vep. The reinstatement of the nuclear family, headed by a man, staves off the acephalic threat, pushing back the nagging suspicion (according to Silverman) of a 'lack at the heart of all subjectivity'<sup>30</sup>—or, at the very least, of the lack of order and legitimacy in a world devastated by the senselessness of war. The final episode's title, 'Les noces sanglantes' ['The bloody nuptials'], while referring explicitly to the excesses of Irma's bohemian wedding celebration and its culmination in her death, can also be read in relation to the traditional marriage convention's demand for a bloody sheet, as a confirmation of paternity, in which the bride's virginity is affirmed at the very moment of its dissolution.

But even these insistent images of familial cohesion cannot entirely obscure the spectre haunting the serial, the very present absence buried deep within it. As 'in mechanized warfare, machine-gun operators kill without seeing any corpses'<sup>31</sup>, so it is possible to do another kind of shooting—of film—without showing these corpses. When Feuillade's serial was made, the term 'vampirisme' referred to 'a perverse attraction for corpses'.<sup>32</sup> A serial about vampires provided a home for these cadavres, a way of mourning them, without

having to refer to them explicitly, as Mazamette's career as a mortician evokes the mourning that cannot otherwise be performed in the film. The serial thus incorporates the dead, in both the usual and the psychoanalytic senses of the term, encrypting them with the code of castration, the better to bury them in glass cases, hatboxes or safes. Abraham and Torok describe the fetish as '*the symbol of what cannot be symbolized*'<sup>33</sup>. Indeed, castration here both signals and obscures the death that dare not speak its name.

---

<sup>1</sup> Laura Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity* (London: BFI, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Pierre Sorlin, 'Cinema and Memory of the Great War', in *The First World War and Popular Cinema*, ed. Michael Paris (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> Pierre Sorlin, 'France: the silent memory', in Michael Paris, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

<sup>4</sup> ['la guerre, elle est totalement oubliée dans les dix épisodes des Vampires'], Colette Godard, *Le Monde*, 7-9-72.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Abel, *French Cinema: The First Wave* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 76.

<sup>6</sup> Anton Kaes, 'The Cold Gaze: Notes on Mobilization and Modernity', *New German Critique*, vol. 59, Spring/Summer 1993, pp. 105-17.

<sup>7</sup> Claude-Marie Trémois, *Télérama* no. 1926 (1986).

<sup>8</sup> Simon Singh, *The Code Book* (London: Fourth Estate, 1999), p. 104.

<sup>9</sup> ['une salle de bal en vaste fosse commune'], Francis Lacassin, *Pour une contre-histoire du cinéma* ([?]: Institut Lumière/Actes Sud, 1994), p. 177.

<sup>10</sup> Alfred Cobban, *A History of Modern France*, vol. 3 (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 111).

<sup>11</sup> ['Pompes Funèbres municipales. Certificat. Nous certifions que M. Mazamette Oscar-Cloud s'est toujours montré un employé dévoué et ponctuel au sujet duquel nos usagers n'ont jamais formulé la moindre plainte']

<sup>12</sup> ['Le cinéma apparaît alors que Salomé porte la tête du Baptiste ici et là: les têtes tombent beaucoup à cette époque, en littérature, en peinture, au théâtre, et

---

même sur les places publiques. Un lien unit dans l’imaginaire la lunette de la guillotine, l’appareil photographique et les gros plans’], Jean-Louis Leutrat, *Vie des Fantômes: Le Fantastique au cinéma* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma), p. 39.

<sup>13</sup> [‘Un lien unit dans l’imaginaire la lunette de la guillotine, l’appareil photographique et les gros plans’ ], Leutrat, op. cit., p. 39.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Bernheimer, ‘Fetishism and Decadence: Salome’s Severed Heads’, in *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, eds. Emily Apter and William Pietz (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993).

<sup>15</sup> Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 65.

<sup>16</sup> Francis Lacassin, *Maître des lions et des vampires: Louis Feuillade* (Paris: Pierre Bordas et fils, 1995), p. 215.

<sup>17</sup> For details about the making of the serial, see Jacques Champreux, ‘Les Films à épisodes de Louis Feuillade’, in *Louis Feuillade*, eds. Jacques Champreux and Alain Carou, special issue of *1895*, October 2000, especially pp. 133-42.

<sup>18</sup> [‘Le véritable Docteur Nox dont j’ai pris la personnalité est mort, assassiné par moi’]

<sup>19</sup> Hillel Schwartz, *The Culture of the Copy: Striking Likenesses, Unreasonable Facsimiles* (New York: Zone Books, 1996), pp. 73-6.

<sup>20</sup> [‘Devant cette modeste coiffure que je portais naguère, je proclame que si le vice tarde parfois à être puni, la Vertu est toujours récompensée’]

<sup>21</sup> Laura Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity* (London: BFI Publishing, 1996), p. 205.

<sup>22</sup> [‘Mais les Kerlor ne sont pas de ceux qui tirent vengeance d’une femme’]

---

<sup>23</sup> Francis Lacassin, *Pour une Contre-histoire du cinéma* ([?]: Institut Lumière/Actes Sud], pp. 174-5.

<sup>24</sup> Ado Kyrrou, *Le Surréalisme au cinéma* (Paris: Editions Ramsay, 1985), p. 55.

<sup>25</sup> E. Ann Kaplan, 'Melodrama, cinema and trauma', *Screen* 42:2 (Summer 2001), Special Debate: Trauma and Screen Studies, p. 204.

<sup>26</sup> ['Je suis une enfant trouvée. On m'a appelée Irma Vep parce que ce nom est l'anagramme de Vampire. L'homme qui m'a élevée m'a appris à voler et à tuer. Naguère, il exerçait sur moi un ascendant irresistible. Maintenant, je n'ai plus peur de lui' ], *Les Vampires* scenario (FEU), Bibliothèque du Film, Paris. The version of *Les Vampires* on which this essay is based was restored by Jacques Champreux, Feuillade's grandson, who reconstructed the intertitles after consultation with Musidora and others directly involved in the making of the film. See Régis Bastide et al., *Louis Feuillade* (Perpignan: Cahiers de la Cinémathèque, 1987).

<sup>27</sup> ['Je m'accuse. . .voici mes forfaits. . .Ce matin, j'ai tué d'un coup de revolver à bout portant mon dernier amant, le grand Vampire, l'élégant acteur Jean Ayme—pour vivre ma vie avec un bandit de plus d'envergure'], Musidora, *Souvenirs sur Pierre Louÿs* ([?]: Muizon/Editions A l'Ecart', 1984), p. 18.

<sup>28</sup> ['Ainsi, hier un train a passé sur mon corps avec 52 wagons. . . et le bruit infernal des roues, les tourbillons de vent et la vitesse accélérée font que je ne recommencerai certainement pas cette performance' ], *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>29</sup> ['C'est comme ça qu'on finit quand on travaille mal à l'école' ]

<sup>30</sup> Kaja Silverman, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>31</sup> Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, Trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 131.

<sup>32</sup> This usage dates from 1891 and is cited in Hervé Joubert-Laurencin, 'Quand le dessin animé vampirise le cinéma', in *Les Vampires, Colloque de Cerisy* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1993), p. 283.

<sup>33</sup> Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel*, vol. 1, trans. Nicholas T. Rand (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 153; original emphasis.