

# No Price Above Pearls: The Avant-Garde Economy of Georges Hugnet's and Henri d'Ursel's La Perle

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# No Price Above Pearls: The Avant-Garde Economy of Georges Hugnet's and Henri d'Ursel's *La Perle*

Hervé Picherit

I was a nervous wreck. . . . Before the show, I'd put some stones in my pocket to throw at the audience in case of disaster, remembering that a short time before, the surrealists had hissed Germaine Dulac's *La Coquille et le clergyman*, based on a script by Antonin Artaud, which I'd rather liked. . . . After the film ended, I listened to the prolonged applause and dropped my projectiles discreetly, one by one, on the floor behind the screen.

— Buñuel (106)

In Luis Buñuel's description of *Un Chien andalou's* première, we find a concise expression of the tenuous relationship between the surrealist and the cinematic avant-gardes. In this scene taken from the experimental filmmaker's memoirs, we find Buñuel ready to assault the very surrealists who, by the end of the première, literally disarm the bellicose director with their applause. Buñuel's remarkable account distills the ambivalent connection between the surrealist movement and the cinematic medium, a relationship characterized most notably by the speed with which it shifted between antagonism and alliance. Despite the auspicious convergence in the 1920s of the "*cinéma pur*" movement with André Breton's desire to elaborate surrealism into a "new mode of pure expression" (*Manifestoes* 24), the phrase "surrealist filmmaking" would only ever evoke an unachieved, if not impossible, project.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Much has been written on the tenuous relationship between surrealism and *cinéma pur*, beginning with the clear division established by René Clair in 1925: "If surrealism has its own technique, cinema also has its own" (Clair 90). Those who follow Clair are equally categorical. See for example Beaujour 58; Blot 263; Sadoul 21; Virmaux, "Une Promesse mal tenue"; and Virmaux, *Les Surréalistes et le cinéma* 80. Except where noted below in "Works Cited," all translations are mine.

United in a common quest for purity of expression, then, the surrealists and the *cinéma pur* directors remained starkly divided concerning the means of achieving this goal. For the experimental filmmakers of the 1920s in particular, this attractive and repulsive tension between the cinematic and the surrealist avant-gardes made them servants of two masters. As in the case of *La Coquille et le clergyman* cited by Buñuel, to serve one avant-garde too well was to provoke the ire of the second. When Germaine Dulac, experimental filmmaker and pioneering movie critic, adapted Antonin Artaud's script for this film, her adherence to the ideals of *cinéma pur* proved incompatible with surrealist doctrine.<sup>2</sup> Alternately, the films lauded by the surrealists were those that could at least claim to be rooted, not in particularities unique to the cinematic medium, but in the irrational truths sought out by the "human explorer" aiming to "carry his investigations much further" (Breton, *Manifestoes* 10). Despite the shared commitment to "purity" and the prospect of alliance, then, the challenge of creating "surrealist cinema" proved to be a polarizing trial that led filmmakers and artists to rally under the banner of one or the other avant-garde.

It is in this context of veiled discord that *La Perle* premiered, a film that, because it navigated between Scylla and Charybdis perhaps too deftly, went largely unnoticed by its contemporaries. Written by the French poet and visual artist Georges Hugnet and directed by the Belgian duke Henri d'Ursel, *La Perle* opened in 1929 at the Studio des Ursulines, the site of *La Coquille et le clergyman's* debacle and *Un Chien andalou's* triumph, where it met the fate of neither film.<sup>3</sup> Instead, *La Perle* provoked a critical silence that had less to do with the film's own merits than with the difficulty of placing it within the binary opposing the cinema and the surrealism of the late 1920s. Neither the scriptwriter nor the director had formally adhered to any group by 1929, leaving the film's status open to interpretation. Affiliated with neither current of the avant-garde then, *La Perle* functioned as an Rorschach test of sorts, inasmuch as many surrealists and *cinéma pur* filmmakers were each able to identify elements of their own brand of "purity" in the movie. In large part because of this particularity, the film's conciliation of the cinematic and surrealist avant-gardes at the height of their division went unnoticed. The original viewers tended to interpret *La Perle* through the lens of Hugnet's and d'Ursel's inexperience as scriptwriter and filmmaker. Rather than seeing a conscious artistic decision in the film's resistance to the binary opposing surrealism and *cinéma pur*, viewers attributed *La Perle's* eccentricity to the "naïve"

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<sup>2</sup> We should add that Dulac's work was equally incompatible with the surrealists' primarily masculine – if not misogynistic – vision of the experimental artist. On this aspect of her film's reception, see Alain and Odette Virmaux's *Artaud/Dulac La Coquille et le clergyman: Essai d'élucidation d'une querelle mythique*.

<sup>3</sup> On *La Perle's* lackluster reception, Canonne notes that the surrealists in particular "neither legitimated, nor disavowed" the film (36).

filmmaking of these cinematic neophytes.<sup>4</sup> Contemporary readings of the film continue these trends to this day by defining *La Perle* retroactively according to the career of one or the other of its creators. Those critics who cite Henri d'Ursel's subsequent work in film during the 1930s and the 1940s – his establishment of the *Prix de l'image* and his founding of the future *Musée du cinéma de Bruxelles* – tend to present *La Perle* as a primarily cinematic endeavor.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, those critics who privilege Georges Hugnet's scripting of the film point to his close, albeit stormy, relationship with surrealism after 1929 in order to underscore those elements of *La Perle* that conform to surrealist doctrine, thus inscribing the film within André Breton's movement.<sup>6</sup> The nationality of each contributor only serves to deepen further this critical divide, making *La Perle* either into a wholly Belgian and wholly cinematic film, or a French, and thus surrealist, script.<sup>7</sup> Finally, the release of this silent art movie in the midst of cinema's transition to sound film also conspired to make the avant-garde tenor of Hugnet's and d'Ursel's work seem antiquated – a sentiment perhaps best expressed by the American composer Virgil Thomson, who said that *La Perle* “was sweetly poetical and lived for a season. Then it became an antique, like all films without sound tracks” (149).

Because readings of *La Perle*, both past and contemporary, reprise the 1920s' divisions of the avant-garde, they remain fundamentally sectarian interpretations of a film whose defining characteristic, I would argue, is its position beyond the tensions otherwise characterizing the cinematic-surrealist relationship. Neither a synthesis of, nor a choice made between *cinéma pur* and surrealism, *La Perle* stands out, on the contrary, for its capacity to situate its interrogation of the avant-garde beyond these divisions.<sup>8</sup> It is in this light that we can recognize in *La Perle*'s

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<sup>4</sup> Livio Belloi describes the perception of Hugnet's and d'Ursel's use of narrative in the context of avant-garde film as an “outdated” practice (95). Similarly, Steven Kovács characterizes *La Perle* as an “unsuccessful attempt to create a Surrealist film” (18-19). Finally, d'Ursel's own self-deprecating description of making *La Perle* stresses his inexperience (d'Ursel).

<sup>5</sup> Though Belloi is equitable in his presentation of Hugnet's and d'Ursel's collaboration, he nonetheless identifies the latter as *La Perle*'s primary creator and, thus, he stresses the film's cinematic aspects.

<sup>6</sup> Alain and Odette Virmaux, for example, conclude from Hugnet's involvement in the film's scripting, as well as his influence on its staging, that “to everyone's eyes, it was a film by Georges Hugnet” (58).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, James Phillips's appraisal of *La Perle* that entirely omits the name of the film's director (67-69).

<sup>8</sup> It would seem at least that such was Hugnet's intention, since in his script he specifies both that *La Perle* will “refuse the description of poetic” and that “no image is self-sufficient.” On the contrary, Hugnet aimed to “situate poetry of cinema” and to show that cinematic movement “reacts against art film” (17).

shortcomings *as* an avant-garde film precisely those elements that make it a successful film *about* the avant-garde. At least, this is what Henri Langlois suggests when he proclaims this film, along with René Clair's *Entr'acte* and Alfred Sandy's *Prétexte*, to be "the only direct expressions of avant-garde art in French film" (qtd. in Païni 83).<sup>9</sup> Indeed, it is because Hugnet and d'Ursel go beyond the doctrine of one group or the particularities of one medium that we can read *La Perle* as a commentary on all avant-garde activity.<sup>10</sup> In other words, it is by claiming a position above the artistic divisions of the 1920s that this film attempts to stage the avant-garde as a unified discourse, at once visual and poetic.<sup>11</sup> For Hugnet and d'Ursel then, the question of avant-garde "purity" has less to do with respecting the particularities of one movement or medium, than it does, quite more ambitiously, with defining avant-garde activity as a coherent and independent symbolic system.

Thus the importance of *La Perle's* eponymous object, the pearl, most notably as it appears in the film's prologue. The oneiric quality of Hugnet's and d'Ursel's film suggests that this McGuffin, justifying all that happens onscreen, also operates as an "umbilicus" from which *La Perle's* fabric of symbols and affects emerges, "like a mushroom out of its mycelium" (Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* 525). It is an artistic function borne out by the pearl's position at the heart of the film's presentation of the avant-garde as a unique symbolic system. Using this prop, *La Perle* stages an evolution by which a visual and poetic practice rooted in universal equivalence is replaced by a symbolic practice rooted in universal difference. Or, in rhetorical terms, metaphor is replaced by diaphora; the visual conceit of the icon gives way to that of the idol. The evolution staged by the film leads away from a stable relationship between the constituent halves of the sign towards a game of shifting equivalences between signifier and signified. It is in this light that Hugnet and d'Ursel present avant-garde practice, whether poetic or cinematic, as a symbolic act in which each manifestation of a sign or image produces a unique and distinct meaning. Such is the disruption of symbolic equivalence in this diaphoristic system that it replaces the Saussurean function of the sign with the affective mechanism of the fetish. Hugnet's and d'Ursel's vision of the avant-garde, then, is one in which a signifier comes to designate a succession of entirely personal, if not entirely asocial, meanings.

At least, such is the aesthetic scenario outlined by the film's juxtaposition of two distinct systems of economic exchange: purchase and theft. While purchase

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<sup>9</sup> Païni cites here an unpublished passage from Langlois' notebooks.

<sup>10</sup> We should note that though Hugnet would later adhere for a time to the surrealist movement, d'Ursel claims the poet in fact "hated" the surrealists – a sentiment that speaks to *La Perle's* resistance to the "purity" Breton demanded of his followers (d'Ursel).

<sup>11</sup> It is worth noting that in his description of *La Perle*, d'Ursel uses neither the term "surrealist" nor the expression "*cinéma pur*," but instead the more general descriptor "avant-garde."

reflects the workings of a symbolic and affective economy based on the universal equivalence of the gold standard, theft stages the mechanism of an alternative, avant-garde economy of meaning and affect. It is in this light that we should interpret *La Perle's* portrayal of the pearl's evolution from mere commodity to standard of all value. Bought in the beginning of the film, the pearl acquires a value inexpressible in monetary terms once it is stolen by the film's "vamp." It is theft that would have the film's titular object cease to be a pearl and become instead The Pearl announced by the title – in other words, a unique form of value inexpressible in any other terms. Thus removed from the realm of monetary exchange, the stolen pearl becomes the heart of a parallel economic system whose standard of value is no longer the universal equivalence of gold, but the unique and untranslatable value of a singular, indivisible, and irreplaceable object. In this diaphoristic system, then, economic circulation is guaranteed, not by the exchange of equivalent values, but by successive thefts that attribute to the same object a succession of distinct meanings.

Theft thus becomes an alternative, not only to the monetary structures of bourgeois society, but more generally to the symbolic and affective economies this society adopts to organize the circulation of signs and desires. In much the same way, then, as Marcel Mauss theorizes gift exchange as the basis for a unique web of social and economic bonds, *La Perle* posits theft as the founding act of a distinct form of individuality and society. It is in this light that we should note how *La Perle's* choice of titular prop as standard of value identifies avant-garde activity not merely as a break with the bourgeois sensibility, but as belonging to a tradition in its own right. The film's presentation of itself as an "irregular pearl" – as a *barroco* – inscribes avant-garde practice within a model of selfhood that predates the bourgeois one, that of the baroque sensibility.

## The Pearl

Far more than a mere prop, the object of the pearl stands out in *La Perle* for its central importance to the film's thematic, narrative, and visual structures. Indeed, the eponymy of the pearl would have one and the same term function as a title to evoke the higher-order truth of *La Perle's* status as a cinematic artifact, as well as a common noun designating the lower-order truth of *la perle's* function as a prop within the film's narrative. It is this double meaning that delineates the film as a whole, since Hugnet and d'Ursel isolate the pearl as a stable point in a movie otherwise defined by visual and narrative indeterminacy. Though nothing can bring complete coherence to *La Perle's* images or story, it is the pearl that offers the promise of revealing the most complete vision of the film, inasmuch as this object represents the only common point of reference shared by the movie's oneiric, diegetic, and extra-diegetic structures.

Never is this unifying function more clear than in *La Perle's* prefatory montage, which stages the pearl's central position between the opposing trends of *cinéma*

*pur* and surrealism. With no other explanation besides the film's title and opening credits, *La Perle* opens with the following succession of shots: a diver fishing for pearls, a close-up of an oyster, a close-up of a hand smoothing a pearl with an awl, an unknown figure dissolving yet another pearl in acid, a close up of a single pearl, and, finally, a shot of pearls weighed in a jeweler's balance scale. More important than the contents of these images is their double function, since this montage evokes simultaneously the essential traits of *cinéma pur* and of surrealism, while respecting the particularities of each movement.

In their film, Hugnet and d'Ursel begin constructing the evolution of the pearl's visual value around the images they recycled from existent educational movies.<sup>12</sup> The choice of pedagogical film is not insignificant, since it evokes the nascent tradition of *cinéma pur* as Germaine Dulac defined it in her 1925 essay "L'Essence du cinéma: l'idée visuelle." Here, Dulac relies primarily on the example of pedagogical film to illustrate how and why the cinematic medium represents a unique mode of expression: "One of its primary characteristics is its instructive and educative force; documentary films show it to us like a form of microscope with which we can perceive in the domain of the real that which we cannot perceive without it. In a documentary, in a scientific film, life appears to us in its thousand details, its evolution, everything that the eye cannot usually perceive" (62). Dulac continues by citing the example of scientific time-lapse photography to show that, much in the same way film can reveal the lifecycle of a flower in a few seconds, cinema is capable of showing more human "movements as suffering and joy . . . in the plenitude of their existence." Such is the uniqueness of cinematic perception for Dulac that she sees in film a medium that represents "an eye wide open on life, an eye more powerful than our own and that sees what we cannot." As for *La Perle*, Hugnet's and d'Ursel's own use of pedagogical film effectively incorporates into their movie Dulac's key example illustrative of the traits unique to *cinéma pur*. It is a choice that, at least apparently, defines *La Perle* according to this visual tradition: the film's prefatory montage seems to situate this movie's aesthetic stakes in cinema's capacity to reveal those objective truths that remain hidden to the unaided human eye.

Yet it is in parallel with its evocation of *cinéma pur* that *La Perle's* preface also evokes the surrealist search for subjective truths mined in the unconscious. While the source of these images might evoke Dulac's ideal of the "educative and instructive force of cinema," their montage produces a fragmentation more

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<sup>12</sup> Livio Belloi sees in this borrowing *La Perle's* staging of "the exhibitionist modality of the cinematic image" (102). What's more, d'Ursel states in his account of making *La Perle* that it is Hugnet who suggested, after filming was complete, that they add the preface from found footage "apt to surprise the viewers." The filmmaker goes on to specify they collected this footage from an office in the Palais-Royal arcades that sold "all that one could wish for in the way of pieces of documentary films," in order "to create amusing montages from all these debris of silent films."

evocative of the surrealists' unique brand of cinematic reception. Just as important as the pedagogical tenor of *Les Perle's* opening images, then, is the fact that these shots function as *spolia*, as elements recycled in the construction of a new work. And it is as the object of surrealist *détournement* that the opening montage calls upon the perceptive spontaneity of the viewer's unconscious as much as, if not more than, the objectivity of cinematic perception. The unruly juxtaposition of images in the film's preface invites the viewer to defer to the unconscious's capacity for free association.

It is an invitation that finds its roots in surrealism's particular relationship with cinema, given that *La Perle's* disordered assemblage of images recalls André Breton's eccentric form of cinematic viewership, when he and Jacques Vaché circulated, at random, from screen to screen in Nantes movie theaters. Famously leaving a projection "at the first signs of boredom [or] satisfaction" (Breton, "Comme dans un bois" 903), Breton and Vaché practiced what we might call a form of "do it yourself" editing that strung together scenes from films that happened to be playing at the same time, and whose very titles these odd audience members ignored. As for *La Perle*, its creators edited the opening of their film in a way that effectively simulates the visual effect of Breton's and Vaché's technique. Reproducing a semblance of *hasard objectif*, Hugnet and d'Ursel string together images from unknown films in a way that opens to the viewer a vast network of possible poetic associations. To cite only a few examples, the images from *La Perle's* preface evokes Georges Bizet's opera *Les pêcheurs de perles*, Paul Verlaine's poem "Les coquillages," if not Pliny the Elder's account of Cleopatra dissolving a precious pearl in vinegar to drink it. Each one of these associations opens on a different reading of the film as a whole, and thus reveals the way in which *La Perle's* preface appeals to the viewer's capacity to make unconscious connections. Seen in this light, the prefatory montage seems to align Hugnet's and d'Ursel's film with the subjective processes that so fascinated the surrealists.

Such is the unique audacity of a film that appeals both to *cinéma pur's* cinematic perception of objective truth and surrealism's spontaneous perception of subjective truth. However, we should be clear on this point: the association of these avant-gardes in *La Perle* represents neither a compromise between, nor a synthesis of these forms of artistic experimentation. On the contrary, *La Perle's* originality consists in the way in which the film is able to adopt both surrealist and *cinéma pur* techniques, all the while respecting the particularities of these otherwise contrary movements.<sup>13</sup> And it is the pearl's placement at the heart of this confluence of avant-garde currents that designates this prop as a common measure of both the

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<sup>13</sup> We should also take to heart Claude Maillard-Chary's observation that would have *La Perle* belong to a "maritime triptych" that also includes Man Ray's *L'étoile de mer* (1928) and Dulac's *La Coquille et le clergyman* (160). More important yet, however, is the fact that *La Perle's* place in such a triptych implies this film's capacity to bridge Man Ray's surrealist experimentation with Dulac's particular vision of *cinéma pur*.



visual values of *cinéma pur* and of the poetic values of surrealism. Effectively transcending the divisions that opposed Dulac and Breton, *La Perle* presents its eponymous object as representative of a value shared by all avant-garde activity. In other words, Hugnet and d'Ursel present the pearl as a kind of "common currency" unifying the symbolic practices unique to artistic experimentation.

It is *La Perle's* reconciliation – if only imagined – of surrealist and *cinéma pur* doctrines that attributes a particular significance to the final image from the film's preface, a shot showing pearls being weighed in a jeweler's balance scale. Associating the aesthetic stakes of *La Perle* (cinematic artifact) with the economic stakes of *la perle* (prop), this scene ostensibly portrays these scales as establishing the value of the jewels being weighed. Yet, the pearl's place at the heart of *La Perle's* attempt to harmonize competing experimental movements invites us to consider an alternative economic scenario, namely, the seemingly unnatural situation where it is the pearl that functions as the standard against which all other commodities are measured. Indeed, the comparative function of the balance scale recalls the interchangeability of all commodities. To reprise Marx's famous examples, the value of linen can be measured in corn, just as this grain's worth can be expressed as a function of iron (162). Even the most apparently objective and absolute measure of value, gold, is subject to this interchangeability. As such, the balance scale serves as a reminder that this metal can confront "other commodities as money only because [gold] previously confronted them as a commodity." In other words, gold's advantageous position as universal equivalent, as an expression of the "objective fixedness and general social validity" of monetary value, is an arbitrary and historically conquered position.

According to *La Perle*, it is also a reversible one, since the balance scale's function can be flipped, making the pearl the measure of value rather than the commodity measured. However, the pearl does not merely represent an alternative to gold in an existent economy. Much more radically, the portrayal of the pearl as an unstable and untranslatable value throughout the rest of the film puts it at the heart of a parallel economy that *La Perle* presents as an alternative to the system of exchange founded on gold's universal equivalence. In short, if *La Perle* works to reconcile the surrealist and the *cinéma pur* currents of experimental film, it is to form a more clear contrast between what we might call a unified "avant-garde economy" and the workings of a bourgeois one. More importantly yet, when we recall the overlap between the economic themes of the film and the aesthetic stakes of *La Perle*, these competing economies reveal themselves as opposed systems of symbolic and affective values.

We can trace the film's juxtaposition of these antagonistic economies to the pearl's own ambivalent symbolic tradition, one whose ambivalence *La Perle* further deepens with the visual and lexical fields in which this film inscribes its eponymous prop. Here, we might begin with the most immediate associations that identify the pearl as an emblem of purity and virginity. For the Greeks, the pearl was a symbol of love and marriage – of institutional and reproductive coupling

("Pearl" in Chevalier and Gheerbrant). It is presumably this domestic and filial meaning that the Christian tradition reclaims for itself when, in turn, it identifies the pearl as a representation of Christ and, more specifically, of the Immaculate Conception. This last association in particular accomplishes the unlikely synthesis of maternal fertility with sexual purity, a combination that designates the pearl as an embodiment of angelic perfection. By extension, these associations reveal the pearl as an emblem of the transmutations by which the material becomes spiritual. The physical process by which the oyster creates the pearl evokes those spiritual gestations by which the mire of the world can be transformed to express the illuminating whiteness unique to the realm of ideas. If we recognize in this biological transformation an emblem for the act of symbolization, the pearl comes to embody the fantasy of a sign ruled entirely by the signified, of a meaning that entirely transforms the signifier used to convey it, since the Christian tradition also uses this jewel to define symbols as "pearls of speech concealed within the shell of words" ("Pearl" in Chevalier and Gheerbrant). To return to the image from *La Perle's* preface, this virtuous and spiritual pearl belongs to the scenario by which the balance scale establishes this jewel's value against an absolute and abstract measure.

However, if only by irreverent antiphrasis,<sup>14</sup> the whiteness of the pearl also conveys a set of darker meanings. Behind the guise of feminine and angelic purity, this jewel also evokes a concupiscent and violent form of sexuality. We have only to recall the pagan myth of Aphrodite's birth, in which the "foam" from Uranus's castrated genitals begot the goddess in a scallop shell, to surmise the seminal tenor of the pearl, a meaning reprised in the French slang term *perle* for "sperm" ("Perle" in Lebouc). More specifically, the pearl equally evokes female eroticism, with the word also serving to designate the clitoris ("Perle" in Guiraud and Rey). These erotic meanings only become deeper when we take into account the wider visual and lexical networks *La Perle* builds around the pearl. Indeed, the strings of pearls featured throughout the film are *des perles enfilées*, a significant detail since the verb "enfiler" evokes the sexual act ("Enfiler" in Guiraud and Rey).<sup>15</sup> It is an erotic scenario the film plays out in many forms, albeit through a code of visual and

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<sup>14</sup> One need not appeal to antiphrasis to explain the double nature of the pearl, since this dual nature has roots in the Christian interpretation of this symbol. Saint John Chrysostom in particular composed a parable that presents the human condition as the possession of two pearls, one "vile" and one infinitely precious. He goes on to describe the danger of confusing the worthless pearl, representative of earthly pleasures, with the valuable one, representative of the spiritual plane ("Perle" in Fontaine). In the context of *La Perle's* own blending of the economic and the aesthetic, it is interesting to note Chrysostom's use of the pearl to juxtapose two economies, each of which is in turn representative of a distinct way of being in the world.

<sup>15</sup> More evocative yet is Alfred Delvau's definition of *enfiler*: "Enfiler une femme. –comme une perle, avec un bout de pine au lieu d'un bout de fil" 'Enfiler a woman. –like a pearl, with a penis in place of the string' (151).

verbal puns, beginning with the shot of a scantily clad woman suggestively stringing pearls together on a thread. More explicit is the scene portraying two female burglars together in a bathtub – itself reminiscent of Aphrodite’s shell – as they gamble for pearls in a game of dice, *un jeu de dés*. Along with the metonymic and metaphoric associations that connect the ivory dice with the already eroticized white pearls, it is the French term *dé*, slang for female genitals, that recasts the game in a decidedly lubricious light (“Dé” in Guiraud and Rey). Leaving nothing to chance, the film further stresses this implied lesbian encounter by portraying these burglars in the silk bodysuit of the *souris d’hôtel* (“hotel thief” and, literally, “hotel mouse”), with the term *souris* once again representing a term for “vagina” (“Souris” in Guiraud and Rey).

*La Perle* contrasts the more orthodox, if not explicitly theological, significance of the pearl with the connotative meanings circulated by popular parlance. This second phenomenon is the mechanism by which the film strings together a succession of erotic meanings that, together, effectively tarnish the familial and spiritual tradition in the pearl’s symbolism. Just as important as the erotic imagery itself, however, are the very pointed double entendres of visual and verbal puns by which *La Perle* eroticizes its titular prop. The playful mechanisms of this kind of connotative meaning forms a stark contrast with the Christian workings of “the pearl of language” by which the sign serves to reveal a pure signified. It is in juxtaposition with this spiritual understanding of symbolization that the erotic pearl embodies a different kind of sign whose symbolic value resides in the material, if not fetishistic, nature of the signifier. It is this version of the pearl that reverses the scenario of the balance scale, and that would have the dark pearl serve as the standard against which all other values are measured.

The pearl juxtaposes these two symbolic economies, which the film in turn translates into its own visual structures. Indeed, the film carries out its contrast of the erotic pearl and of the pure pearl in its own use of cinematic images, such that *La Perle* is also made up of two opposing visual economies. At least, this is the case when we take into account the film’s organization around two entirely different stars of early cinema: the French vamp Musidora and the angelic American serial star Pearl White.

Donning the dark, skintight bodysuit of a *souris d’hôtel*, the character *La Perle* simply identifies as *la voleuse* is an unmistakable reference made to Irma Vep, the infamous femme fatale played by Musidora in Louis Feuillade’s serial masterpiece *Les Vampires* (1915-1916). This reference is all the more meaningful for *La Perle* given that Feuillade’s universe already identifies Irma Vep herself as a pearl. Indeed, in Georges Meirs’s novelization of *Les Vampires*, we discover that, when Vep enters into the hero’s employ disguised as a Breton maid, his mother describes her as “une véritable perle” (Feuillade and Meirs 152), as a ‘true pearl.’ When, rather predictably, Vep tries to poison and rob her employers, it becomes clear that this “true pearl” is neither virginal nor spiritual. On the contrary, she is a dark pearl whose beauty – noted by the hero when he first meets the false maid – is

entirely eroticized. Given this, *La Perle's* own resurrection of Feuillade's famous vamp evokes not only Irma Vep herself, but the complex of sexual, aesthetic, and political revolutions she came to embody. As Vicki Callahan argues about *Les Vampires*, Irma Vep's erotic criminality struck wartime viewers as an assault against the mores of *Belle Époque* France – an attitude that drew the ire of wartime censors, and that Feuillade himself sought to attenuate in later episodes of the serial (Callahan 73-116).

It is this same revolutionary tenor that, along with Vep's revealing outfit, fueled André Breton's and Louis Aragon's famous infatuation with the vamp. For these future surrealists, Vep embodied an invitation to interpret *Les Vampires's* more risqué images against the grain of its moralizing narrative. Breton in particular adopted a mode of reception that effectively freed the erotic image of the vamp from the story that would serve to condemn her. For him, this "pearl" has value not because it accurately depicts anything real. On the contrary, the vamp's calling card is her ability to take on widely different appearances, none of which reveal her "true nature." As such, it is Vep's very embodiment of the "treachery of images" – her production of artifice without regard for faithful representation – that gives her image an alternative value to the surrealists' eyes. For Hugnet and d'Ursel to resurrect Vep, then, is also to reprise this avant-garde conception of the cinematic image. In particular, it is by laying claim to the incidental – if not accidental – features of *Les Vampires* that Hugnet and d'Ursel make explicit what Feuillade only suggests: when the vamp is on screen, the film ceases to organize its images into a coherent narrative meaning. To return again to the prefatory image of the balance scale, when the dark pearl becomes the measure of the film, *La Perle's* visual structures cease to signify anything other than the pleasure its isolated images can procure the viewer.

Though it is *La Perle's* reference to Irma Vep that has garnered most critical attention,<sup>16</sup> the significance of this allusion remains incomplete without taking into account the complementary half of this film's intertextual network. Both visually and morally, *La Perle's* angelically blonde character, simply identified as *la fiancée*, evokes Musidora's contemporary and rival, the wholesome and flaxen Pearl White.<sup>17</sup> *La Perle's* visual reference invites the viewer to engage in an onomastic

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<sup>16</sup> See Callahan's analysis of *La Perle's* borrowings from *Les Vampires* (145-146), as well as Belloï's (107) and Kovács's (18-19) appraisals of Musidora's significance to Hugnet's and d'Ursel's film.

<sup>17</sup> For the influence Pearl White exercised directly on *La Perle*, cf. Christina Petersen's "'The Most Assassinated Woman in the World': Pearl White and the First Avant-Garde." For an overview of the surrealists' take on Pearl White, see Alain and Odette Virmaux's *Les Surréalistes et le cinéma* (126-31).

game that reveals in Pearl White a white pearl.<sup>18</sup> At least, such is the meaning *La Perle's* visual and verbal tricks attribute to *la fiancée* when we recall White's starring role in *The Perils of Pauline*. Released in Europe in 1916, *The Perils of Pauline* ran in French movie theaters at the same time as *Les Vampires*. Unlike Feuillade's film, however, the American serial featured its female lead as a virtuous damsel in distress, beset by agents of disorder. And it is one narrative conceit in particular that neatly summarizes the values White embodied in this series. With Pauline destined to inherit a fortune only after marriage, the various "perils" she faces all add up to the film's one and only true danger: denial of entry into the institutional, reproductive and, as it were, financial union of matrimony. This narrative arch effectively places its "white pearl" at the heart of the symbolic, monetary, and institutional mechanisms of a bourgeois economy. More important yet is the way in which this bourgeois sensibility translates into White's function within this serial's visual economy. Inscribed within the story arch of inheritance and marriage, the image of the actress exists only as a function of plot. In the terms of *La Perle's* preface, the white pearl is weighed against the rest of the film in which it appears. The heroine's moral and economic worth can only come to term, as an objectively fixed and socially valid value, if she completes the matrimonial narrative laid out before her.<sup>19</sup>

## Purchase and Theft

Given the self-referential nature of *La Perle's* title, the diegetic events of the pearl's purchase and theft have extra-diegetic consequences for our interpretation of the film. It is this self-reference that lends significance to the contrasting economic contexts in which the pearl appears. Beginning as an object of purchase to serve as a gage between a young man and his fiancée, the pearl soon falls into the realm of theft where the same jewel enables erotic exchanges. This displacement of *la perle* (prop) between two economic modes outlines another parallel movement that has the viewer displace *La Perle* (film) from one aesthetic framework to another, namely, from the institutional norms of the bourgeois sensibility to the revolutionary values of avant-garde practice. If the narrative recounted in *La Perle* is the story of the film itself then, this self-referentiality serves more generally to convey the tale of two competing systems of symbolic and affective exchange. Aligning the economic with the aesthetic, *La Perle* cites purchase's foundation of

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<sup>18</sup> See Hugnet's description of this character in his script as "this sort of blonde damsel [who] illustrates the prettiness and graciousness of the classical fiancée from conformist novels" (Hugnet, 18).

<sup>19</sup> The onomastic meaning of Pearl White's name along with the virtue of the characters the actress played seems to designate her as an answer to a question posed, at least in the common French translation of the passage, in Proverbs: "La femme vaillante, qui la trouvera? / Son prix surpasse de loin celui des perles" 'Who will find the woman of worth? / Her price is above pearls' (*La Bible* Prov. 31.10).

bourgeois society in order to defend and illustrate better theft's own ability to underpin an alternative, avant-garde economy of meaning and affect.

It is the scenes immediately following *La Perle's* prologue that reveal purchase's role in founding the objective fixedness and general social validity of the bourgeois sensibility. This sequence of scenes begins with the blonde and white-clad fiancée who, shown in an idyllic garden, looks off into the distance. Here, a sudden cut to a shot of the male lead, to *le jeune homme* played by Hugnet himself, suggests that the film matches *la fiancée's* sightline as she watches her betrothed move across forests, rivers, suburbs, and finally into a city where he ends up in a jewelry shop. Editing the scene at the jeweler's in parallel with shots of the blonde woman, *La Perle* offers the possibility of understanding these images according to a ready-made scenario: *le jeune homme* plans to buy a necklace of pearls for his wife-to-be. In addition, while the intercutting of shots of these two only implies their engagement, the appellation of *la fiancée* creates a character that can have meaning only when we understand her through the institution of marriage.

Such is the backdrop against which *La Perle* carefully spells out the modalities of the economic exchange that serves to seal this marriage contract. First of all, the object bought by *le jeune homme* is a string of pearls, namely a collection of equal and interchangeable jewels that stand in stark contrast with *La Perle* – with the singular and irreplaceable pearl announced by the film's title. The film further stresses this theme of equivalence by showing *le jeune homme* choosing, rather arbitrarily, a string of pearls from the collection of other, indistinguishable necklaces offered to him. One item drawn from a mass of entirely equivalent commodities, his string of pearls has nothing to differentiate it from the rest. Given its seemingly perfect equivalence with the other necklaces, the one chosen by *le jeune homme* expresses a general and abstract value rather than a concrete and particular one. It is an attribute the film further stresses by spending a generous amount of time showing *le jeune homme* counting out bank notes to pay for the gift destined for his fiancée, thus rooting this token's meaning in the abstract and socially validated value of monetary exchange.

Taken together, these details suggest that purchase of the necklace serves to further the circulation not of affects, not of desire, but of institutionalized obligations. On a cinematic level, it is this scenario of bourgeois marriage that allows the viewer to impose narrative and spatial continuity onto what is in fact a loosely woven succession of images. The rudimentary story of engagement effectively quiets a series of disquieting visual details: the mismatch of the left-to-right direction of *le jeune homme's* movement across with screen with the leftward glance of his fiancée's sightline, the reprisal of the same left-to-right movement for both *le jeune homme's* departure and return, and, most confounding, the juxtaposition of *le jeune homme's* entry into the jeweler's from a busy Parisian street with his exit into a quietly rural setting. It is in face of all this that the assumption of the characters' engagement permits what we might call a "bourgeois mode of

reception" that allows the viewer to gloss over visual inconsistencies that might otherwise plunge the film into the indeterminacy of avant-garde experimentation.

Yet, these very inconsistencies soon gain the upper hand when *La Perle* disrupts the monetary exchange portrayed in the jeweler's shop. Recrossing the film's distorted space, one can only assume, to deliver the necklace to his fiancée, the young man counts its pearls to discover that one is missing. Beyond the personal injury caused *le jeune homme* by his shortchanging, this inequitable transaction represents a threat to the economic mode of abstract value and perfect equivalence. The necklace *le jeune homme* assumed to be a distinct expression of value turns out instead to be the expression of a distinct value. At least, *La Perle* would have us understand as much when the young man's attempt to rectify the situation, to exchange his defective necklace for a full string of pearls, only draws him more deeply into the realm of unique value. Rather than succeeding in claiming his due, *le jeune homme* becomes fascinated with yet another expression of incomparable value: a string of pearls hidden in the stocking of a saleswoman we later discover to be *la voleuse*.

Much more than the defectiveness of the first necklace, it is *le jeune homme's* choice of this second, stolen one that lures him, if not the entire film, into a distinct economy of signs and affects. His decision introduces him to an alternative system whose nature we do not have to look far to understand. Reprising one of Freud's iconic examples from his 1927 essay "Fetishism," *La Perle* effectively short-circuits the symbolic mechanism of equivalence founding monetary exchange. No longer expressive of abstract value, the fetishized pearls become a sign whose asocial meaning is inscribed on the very material of the signifier. The stolen string of pearls can have no equivalent, even in a necklace of identical monetary value, since only it was pressed against the saleswoman's thigh. Only these particular pearls participate in the metonymic association with the vamp's body and stocking. This is in stark contrast with the metaphoric function of the necklace as a gage for the institutional bond of marriage. As an object of monetary exchange, then, the pearl expresses its virginal and matrimonial meanings. Freed from this role, however, the pearl reveals its erotic associations, since metonymy connects this object with what the film suggests is *la voleuse's* unbridled sexuality: no sooner is her larceny detected, than she makes off with a strange man before leaving him for *le jeune homme*.<sup>20</sup> In other words, it is as an object of theft that the pearls cease to function as a gage for objective fixedness and general social validity, enabling instead the circulation of unregulated affects and desires.

Echoing the Maussian model of exchange in which a counter-gift must answer a gift,<sup>21</sup> *le jeune homme* meets theft with his own act of thievery, with a "counter-

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<sup>20</sup> On the fetishistic nature of the pearl and the chain of tropes that connect the pearl to *la voleuse*, see Belloï (96-99).

<sup>21</sup> Cf. in particular the chapter "The Three Obligations: Giving, Receiving, Repaying" in Mauss's *The Gift* (37-40).



theft" that fully consummates his entry into *la voleuse's* economy. It is a scenario outlined in the scene at the crux of the film's narrative indeterminacy: pursuing the vamp who robbed him, *le jeune homme* strangles *la voleuse* and, after she dies, removes a pearl (presumably *the* pearl) from her bloodied lips. By stealing what the narrative presented as rightfully his, by taking with force what he had previously paid for, *le jeune homme* chooses to pursue, not the abstract and monetary worth of the pearl, but instead the variety of asocial values this prop represents within theft's alternative economy of meanings and desires. This scene in particular underscores how theft and the avant-garde can, together, organize affective and symbolic values. We should take note that the possible murder of the vamp and the counter-theft of the pearl from her lips offer an alternative to Freud's phallic and castratory explanation of sexual fetish, a model in which displaced desires derive from the perception of an absent phallus ("Fetishism"). In place of this version, the visual language of the counter-theft scene accounts for the symbolic mechanisms of fetish with a clitoral and excisionist scenario. Stealing the pearl, *le jeune homme* accedes to a sensibility in which the clitoris, and not the phallus, is the object and measure of all desire. According to *La Perle*, then, to engage in theft is to break with a Freudian model of sexuality that would have phallic desire serve as the standard for all affects. To engage in theft is to accept *la perle* and, by way of this term's erotic connotations, the "clitoral desire" it represents as an alternative measure of meaning and affect.<sup>22</sup> To engage in thievery is, finally, to enter into an affective economy that allows emotions and impulses not possible in a social structure regulated by the phallus, the gold standard and the sign.<sup>23</sup>

The radical nature of this shift from purchase to theft is reprised and deepened by *La Perle's* visual structures. When *le jeune homme* confronts *la voleuse* in the jeweler's, the film's telescoping of time and space suggests a relationship of cause and effect between the young man's search for a single pearl stolen from the necklace he bought and his discovery of an entire stolen necklace in *la voleuse's* stocking. That is to say that the film's editing leads the viewer to consider an entirely implausible eventuality, namely that the string of pearls hidden in the vamp's stocking somehow is the single pearl missing from *le jeune homme's* necklace. With the irrational equation that would have one pearl be equal to a

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<sup>22</sup> That the scenario of *La Perle* replaces phallic desire with clitoral desire seems to be confirmed in a scene scripted by Hugnet, but not filmed by d'Ursel. In his version of the film, Hugnet imagined a shot where *le jeune homme*, having succumbed to *la voleuse's* charms, slowly posed his lips on the "shady fold of her armpit" after which the camera zoomed in until reaching a state of "total confusion" (24). Given the concentration of tropes *La Perle* uses to portray *la voleuse's* body, the metaphors and metonymies of this description leave little doubt as to the scene of cunnilingus implied in this encounter. More importantly, however, is its stress of the clitoral, rather than phallic, nature of the relationship allowed by theft.

<sup>23</sup> For the connection between phallic desire, the gold standard, and language see Goux.



string of pearls, *La Perle* sets out the modalities of theft as a distinct economy whose mechanism is the distortion of purchase's abstract and equivalent values. When the film suggests visually that a single stolen pearl is "worth" an entire necklace, it reveals theft's operation outside the objective and socialized values of monetary exchange. The very irrationality of this implied equivalence testifies to the subjective and personal, if not entirely arbitrary and hermetic, values created by theft. How else can the viewer explain the scenario by which one pearl amounts to an entire necklace, except to say that this equation is an entirely personal one – whether on the part of *le jeune homme*, of *la voleuse*, or of the filmmakers themselves?

Far from avoiding the logical scandal by which one becomes the same as many, acknowledging the subjective nature of this equation isolates the mechanism by which theft facilitates the production and circulation of values. According to *La Perle*, theft eliminates the objective worth of what is stolen. More generally, it removes commodities from a system of exchange united by abstract value. Revealing instead the fundamental inequality of commodities, even those of the same type, theft operates a radical individualization of these representations of worth. In other words, theft brings to light those subjective and sentimental values that can make what has been stolen from us irreplaceable by any apparent equivalent. Or rather, theft creates these values, since the pearl stolen from *le jeune homme*'s necklace has no subjective value to him until he discovers its larceny. Only then does this object reveal its capacity to express a veritable luxuriance of unique values as each new theft recasts this commodity's worth in a new subjective light.

As with all key points of this film, the economic shift that pushes *la perle* from the realm of purchase to that of theft also influences *La Perle*. Just as the scenario in which one pearl can be the same as a string of pearls is inconceivable in terms of monetary exchange, it is equally unimaginable in terms of narrative and mimetic cinema. In this case, it is an aesthetic equation that only becomes interpretable when we consider the act of theft as the economic expression of the visual and poetic structures that dominate the second half of the film. Beginning with the pearl's larceny, the film's elementary narrative – one that associates purchase with marriage – gives way to an iterative structure where the movie seems to replay itself as distinct variations on a theme. The images are arranged so that we cannot easily distinguish between the film's higher and lower orders of truth – between, for example, dream and diegesis. As such, it is the ambiguous relationship between its iterative episodes that gives rise to much of *La Perle*'s indeterminacy. Given the film's paralleling of its economic and aesthetic structures, then, the same shift that would have *le jeune homme* abandon the necklace's abstract value would also have the film's viewers reconsider their own understanding of *La Perle* as an "emplotted" reflection of the world. And it is theft that reveals the visual and poetic mechanisms that replace mimesis and emplotment as the film's central structure. Namely, theft situates the visual conceit

of the idol and the trope of diaphora at the heart of *La Perle's* vision of the avant-garde as a unified and unique discourse.

It is first of all *La Perle's* images that should be understood according to the intertextual network by which the film compares Pearl White the icon with Irma Vep the idol. Indeed, the distinction between icon and idol – between “εἰκῶν” and “εἰδῶλον” – offers us insight into the visual structures juxtaposed throughout *La Perle*. As long as mimesis and emplotment organize the film's images, *La Perle* remains subject to the reign of the icon – to a type of likeness that takes the form of a “personal description” and, metaphorically, of a “living image” (“Εἰκῶν” in Liddell). The function of the icon appears most directly in the visual conceit showing a photograph of *la fiancée* come to life under the hero's gaze. Associated with the narrative of marital fidelity, this resurrected Pearl White also comes to embody the image's absolute fidelity to the subject it represents. It is this current of *La Perle* that offers a cinematic update to the εἰκῶν, to the term Plato chose in *The Sophist* to express the idea of the “faithful reproduction, which strictly preserves the proportions and the colors of the original” (Simon 245). As such, the iconic white pearl designates a type of image whose value is weighed against the subject it depicts.

This is in starkest contrast with the idol, with a type of image that, beginning with the film's slide into narrative indeterminacy, shows “what we see as if it were the thing itself, but which is in fact a double,” “what is displayed in a mirror, which is not really there” (245). In *La Perle*, the clearest expression of the idol appears in the oneiric hotel that presents us with endless visual copies of *la voleuse*, all dressed in Irma Vep's famous bodysuit. Each successive duplicate of Feuillade's vamp only testifies more strongly to the treachery of cinematic images that can place “someone absent before our eyes” (245). Yet more radical is the idol's ability to make present that which is not and never was, since these copies of Vep, these images of what was already an image, are in fact duplicates of an “original” that never existed in reality. Inscribed with the erotic tenor of cinema's first vamp, then, *La Perle's* own luxuriance of idols reveals the image's capacity to produce pleasure regardless of faithful depiction. In other words, it is as “the bearer of visual illusion” that the idolatrous dark pearl embodies a kind of image able to take the place of what it represents and, as such, whose affective and symbolic value emerges independently of what it portrays. More generally, it is by reversing the icon's hierarchy, its placement of the depicted above depiction, that the idol conveys a revolutionary scenario in which it is the artificial image that must become the standard against which we measure reality.

The film deepens its visual shift from icon to idol with a parallel, poetic transition from metaphor to diaphora. As we have seen, *La Perle's* elementary plot relies on the narrative of engagement and marriage, a scenario itself rooted in the pearl's capacity to serve as a metaphor for these socialized and objectivized meanings. In other words, *La Perle's* narrative dimension relies on the theological and philosophical tradition informing the viewer's interpretation of the film's

eponymous emblem. This social meaning is further supported by the apparently objective connection of similarity that would have us identify the pure white pearl with the purity of the film's own Pearl White. Given *La Perle's* assimilation of its economic and aesthetic codes, its portrayal of metaphor constitutes a broader statement on the act of symbolization in general. If the metaphoric symbol is "the pearl of language," it is because this trope manifests the possibility of a sign united by a necessary and objective link connecting its signifier to its signified. In *La Perle*, then, metaphor becomes a rhetorical and poetic expression of the fantasy that would have language, like the iconic image and like the gold standard, function as a perfect reflection of what it represents.

Yet the pearl's metaphoric function breaks down along with the film's plot. Once removed from the story of engagement and marriage, once displaced from the film's narrative and mimetic structures – in short, once stolen – the pearl ceases to function as a stable emblem, producing instead a veritable luxuriance of shifting meanings. The strange economic equation that would have a single purloined pearl amount to an entire necklace corresponds to a vision of symbolic practice that, as opposed to metaphor, operates as a function of difference rather than equality. After its theft, then, the pearl becomes subject to an essentially diaphoristic process in which each appearance of this prop assigns it a new meaning. As for the nature of these novel meanings, it is revealed in the oneiric tenor of *La Perle*. The possibility that all that happens on screen is "but a dream" suggests that the diaphoristic meanings assigned to the pearl are the product of the unconscious's subjective and asocial dreamwork. As metaphor did in the first half of the film, diaphora serves in turn as the rhetorical and poetic expression of a fantasy about language. Like the idolatrous image and like the stolen pearl, diaphora is the mechanism for a kind of pure creation that, freeing the sign from the requirements of objective and socialized representation, gives rise to entirely original meanings and affects. Diaphora is theft's aesthetic counterpart in an avant-garde economy of radically original signs and desires.

This is certainly the case when we take into account *La Perle's* final shot, which consummates the breakdown of the film's mimetic and metaphorical structures. Having chased down *la voleuse*, who falls unconscious, if not dead, on the ground, *le jeune homme* recovers the missing pearl. The film ends with a medium close shot of the young man transfixed by this jewel before he breaks down into tears and *La Perle* fades to black. In this sudden, even stark, ending, we do not find a key that might help us resolve the film's indeterminacy. In place of such a cypher, *La Perle* once again points to the pearl. At the very moment when we might expect a statement about what the movie signifies, then, it points to a prop that serves as an avatar for the film itself. As such, the movie's ending reiterates its unwillingness to enter into a symbolic economy rooted in mimesis and metaphor. Instead of stabilizing its shifting meanings, the film concludes on what we might characterize as a visual diaphora, since the final shot once again insists: "*Cette perle est La Perle*" 'This pearl (prop) is *The Pearl* (movie).' As a consequence, the aesthetic

economy in which the film wishes to inscribe itself mirrors the theft-based economy it portrays. What's more, however, *le jeune homme's* solitude with the film's titular prop suggests that this final shot is a vision, not only of an alternative symbolic and monetary economy, but also of an alternative form of selfhood.

## The Avant-Garde Self

It is by way of the film's prologue that we might conclude our analysis of *La Perle*. The visual and economic codes running throughout this film can help us to understand the importance of one of its more inscrutable prefatory images: the close-up of a hand smoothing a pearl with an awl. We might see here a statement about the film in general, a suggestion that *La Perle* is itself a misshapen, rather than a perfect, pearl, and such a reading would certainly account for this movie's amateur imperfections. Yet behind this cue resides a deeper play on words. A game of visual and linguistic associations would have the playful viewer recognize, first of all, the object from this scene as a *barroco* – as an “irregular pearl” – before, in turn, identifying this Portuguese word as the etymological source for the term “baroque” (“Baroque” in Rey). However tenuous this association of words and images might seem, it can nonetheless help elucidate the filmmakers' curious preference for the pearl as a replacement for gold in their alternative economy. If only unconsciously, Hugnet's and d'Ursel's choice of *La Perle's* titular prop – of the *barroco* – identifies avant-garde activity, not merely as a break with the norms of bourgeois society, but as belonging to an expansive tradition in its own right. At stake in defining the avant-garde beyond the currents of surrealism, of *cinéma pur*, or of any single movement, then, is the unification and historicization of what the film identifies as an independent symbolic system. Namely, *La Perle's* elegant, albeit oblique, reference to the *barroco* serves to inscribe avant-garde practice within a tradition that predates the bourgeois one, that of the baroque sensibility.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> We should note that the film echoes the baroque sensibility intertextually, as well as linguistically. Indeed, the scene after the first murder of *la voleuse* showing *le jeune homme* unable to wash his hands of her blood echoes Lady Macbeth's infamously guilty ablutions (Act V, scene I), just as *La Perle's* portrayal of an enigmatic sleepwalker reprises Shakespeare's culpable somnambulist in *Macbeth*. More importantly for the film's engagement with avant-garde expression, however, is the way in which these allusions also represent an indirect reference to Alfred Jarry's infamous play, *Ubu roi* (1896), itself a parody of Shakespeare's Scottish play. In this light, Hugnet and d'Ursel inscribe *La Perle* in an avant-garde tradition that, if only according to their own film, extends its roots from the turn of the twentieth century to the beginning of the baroque period (on *Macbeth* as baroque, cf. Brooke 34 as well as Dubois 162). Finally, we should note that this conception of an extensive avant-garde tradition would come to extend into the future as well, since Jean-Pierre Melville's

It is in this light that *La Perle's* visual and linguistic play opens on an intriguing proposition about the avant-garde's capacity to organize meaning and affect: modernist experimentation can serve as the foundation for a new collective and individual "way of being in the world." Placed under the banner of the *barroco*, the aesthetic experiments of the avant-garde reveal their capacity to form the basis for an alternative to the social and psychological structures afforded by the bourgeois sensibility. In particular, the baroque reveals in the avant-garde a form of selfhood that equates being with seeming.<sup>25</sup> The baroque and, along with it, the avant-garde thus represent mentalities at the antithesis of the *être bourgeois*: a way of being in the world that conceives of itself as a stable identity over time, and in which the self "accumulates reputation and identity as one would manage one's wealth" (Apostolidès 19).

*La Perle's* reprisal of Feuillade's vamp offers us an insight into the baroque's contribution to what we might call the "avant-garde self." Unlike *Les Vampires* where all deceptions are solved and all disguises are lifted, *La Perle* makes no effort to separate being from seeming. On the contrary, the film's indeterminacy leaves these states intertwined, so that the question of who *la voleuse* "really" is remains permanently embroiled with what she *seems*. Not organized in higher and lower orders of truth, *La Perle's* iterative structure confronts us with the implausible hypothesis that *la voleuse* is as much the saleswoman murdered by *le jeune homme* as she is the ever-elusive *souris d'hôtel*. The multiplicity and mutability of self permitted by the baroque allows us to see that *la voleuse* is both, just as *La Perle's* alignment with the *barroco* should allow us to see in the "avant-garde self" an alternative to the fixity and singularity of bourgeois identity. In short, Hugnet's and d'Urse's baroque pearl reveals that what is at stake in avant-garde experimentation is the prospect of an alternative selfhood, of a permanently provisional "I" ceaselessly reinvented by the mechanisms of dream, deceit and disguise.

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adaptation of Jean Cocteau's novel *Les Enfants Terribles* (1950) not only borrows from the same Shakespearean and Ubuesque sources, but also reprises key shots from *La Perle*.

<sup>25</sup> "The baroque self is an entity for whom *being* and *seeming* merge. One is what one seems" (Beaussant 3).

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