

The Filmic Front

Transnational Cinema and World War I

World War I brought tremendous change to the careers of Mistinguett, Réjane, and Bernhardt. When Germany declared war on August 3, 1914, cinematic production shut down entirely in France until the end of the year.¹ The Triple Entente of France, Russia, and Britain established prior to the war (formalized with the signing of the Pact of London on September 5, 1914) meant that my Parisian actresses were involved in the war—to different degrees and in varying capacities—from its outset until its conclusion (on November 11, 1918).² What is of interest to my discussion about this engagement is not so much that World War I marks the period in which American cinema replaced French cinema as the leading global producer and distributor of films.³ Rather, Mistinguett, Réjane, and Bernhardt remained involved in filmmaking, often standing at the forefront of the national effort to ensure French cultural and military visibility across the globe. Although each actress reached audiences in Britain and America differently, they collectively evidenced the important (and often overlooked) voice that the transnational actress brought to film in the fight for Allied allegiance and support. As Marcelline Block and Barry Nevin remind us, in a different context, but to the same effect, the role of film as a crucial intermediary medium during the war was significant since the stories movies told were not only behaviorally instructional but also “stimulated the cinema’s development from a mere amusement to an essential connection with the distant battle, dismantling the contemporary notion that films ‘were not meant to communicate serious information.’”⁴

A reconsideration of the role of the transnational actress and her changing relationship with film during the war also sheds light on the work that Mistinguett, Réjane, and Bernhardt undertook on the stage. Some of this work included charity fundraising events for war efforts, as well as the performance of patriotic plays. For example, Mistinguett adapted her music-hall work in Paris to showcase support

for the Allied cause. A 1916 cover of the British tabloid *The Bystander* featured Mistinguett performing in “The Lilies of France” at the Folies-Bergère. The magazine proposed that employing English girls in the chorus line as “lilies” made for what was “surely the prettiest presentment yet of the Ente [*sic*] that has become an Alliance.”⁵ The cover-page photograph was telling: Mistinguett prances before a field of female heads leaning on the exposed flesh of their folded elbows and upper arms, stark against a dark background. Visibly incarnating the French fleur-de-lis as a shared symbol of allied heraldry, the English chorus smiles in spirited solidarity with both Mistinguett and France.

During the war period, Réjane similarly chose patriotic plays that could engage foreign audiences. Below, I discuss the way in which she brought Gaston Leroux and Lucien Camille’s patriotic play *Alsace* to her Théâtre Réjane in 1913, eventually touring the play to Britain in 1915 and then adapting it as one of the first propaganda films. Notably, Réjane’s theater in Paris was also used for charity events during the war. There is a report in *The New York Times*, for example, that she hosted the Christmas fête for the Comité de Noël des Enfants Réfugiés Français et Belges (the Christmas Committee for French and Belgian Refugee Children) during Christmas, 1916. As American readers were told, the gifts distributed to needy children at the Théâtre Réjane included “dolls wearing the bodice and apron and great black headdress of Alsace, or proud little Marianne’s complete with pointed cap and red tricolor.”⁶

Bernhardt was similarly implicated in nationalistic efforts to shape and influence the “theater of war.” In 1915, for example, Bernhardt famously staged Eugène Morand’s poem *Les Cathédrales* (with music by Gabriel Pierné, replete with a 150-person chorus and orchestra) at her theater in Paris. She also provided a benefit performance for the French military.⁷ In January 1916, Bernhardt again performed this patriotic play at the Coliseum in London for a short season of two weeks. *Les Cathédrales* introduced an injured French soldier dreaming of seven, conversing iconic French cathedrals (including Notre Dame de Paris, and the cathedral at Rheims). In this largely female cast, Bernhardt symbolically embodied the Strasbourg Cathedral. Like Réjane, therefore, Bernhardt returned audiences to Alsace, a French territory annexed under German control during the Franco-Prussian war in 1870–71.⁸ Significantly, Bernhardt’s role also communicated across cultures: as the London Coliseum program explained, Bernhardt’s verse concluded with her speaking “of that brave Englishwoman cruelly murdered by a German Officer even while she proudly faced the enemy’s rifles.”⁹

Further patriotic plays—most famously, Bernhardt’s own *Du théâtre au champ d’honneur* (*From the Theater to the Field of Honor*)—were performed for British audiences in the London Coliseum’s January 1916 season.¹⁰ *Du théâtre au champ d’honneur* was a play describing the final moments of a young French soldier. Injured on a battlefield, the anonymous *poilu* is found by an English officer and is

supported, in his final moments, by a Red Cross dog and two British nurses. The play invokes the Germans (“Huns”) as a common enemy for British audiences. Concluding with the French soldier crying “Vive L’Angleterre! Vive la France!” (Long live England! Long live France!), the play reminded spectators of the strong military, cultural, and emotional bonds between their two nations.¹¹

The US Congress declared war on Germany on April 6, 1917. This was well after Mistinguett, Réjane, and Bernhardt had begun to exhort allied audiences to embrace the sacrifices of war. By this time, the conflict had atrophied France’s once-dominant cinematic production capacities and global distribution networks. As Abel succinctly summarizes in *The Ciné Goes to Town*, “Pathé Frères could no longer play the same leadership role as [it had] before [the Great War]. For the rest of the decade and through the 1920s, the French would fight a valiant battle to resist becoming what Henri Diamant Berger accurately called “an American film colony.”¹² Although the American cinema began to claim economic and cultural supremacy, the French transnational actress weaponized her cinematic clout, sending proud, patriotic material to allied audiences abroad.

MISTINGUETT: THE SHOW MUST GO ON

A program touting Mistinguett as its star attraction in the annual *revue* show presented at the Théâtre des Variétés in Paris 1916 concluded with an act entitled “Vive Paris” (Long live Paris). In this final act, Mistinguett—listed in large, bold font—characteristically played “the Parisian.” Beneath this concluding act, “MISTINGUETT” was loudly printed above a commentary by “Roberto de Phlers” (the comic pseudonym for the playwright Robert de Flers). De Flers explained how important Mistinguett was to the morale of men fighting on the war front for France. In his view, her celebrated capacity to invoke laughter positioned her as a symbol of “the heart, the goodness, the gaiety, and the health of Paris.” Moreover, de Flers explained that Mistinguett was the most renowned comic artist across the nation’s concerts, cinemas, and theaters. French soldiers often talked about her, just as they frequently named their bayonets and cannons “Mistinguett.”¹³ Still associated (as she was before the war) with cheerful physical play, Mistinguett’s light humor now also represented national patriotism and defiance.

When Mistinguett returned to perform in the Casino de Paris in 1918, now with a young Maurice Chevalier as her partner, her renown was also reaching audiences abroad. As the fashionable English paper *The Tatler* reported (using a large, full-page photograph of Mistinguett in an extraordinary, high-couture dress): “Mlle. Mistinguett out-Gabys Gaby [Deslys, the internationally famous singer and dancer], and is at present playing at the Casino de Paris. She dances, plays and sings in her own inimitable style, and has the well-earned reputation of wearing the most beautiful stage clothes of any actress of the musical-comedy and revue world” (fig. 23).¹⁴ Clearly, Mistinguett’s reputation had risen by World War I



FIGURE 23. “Out Gaby-ing Gaby,” *The Tatler*, Feb. 5, 1919. © Illustrated London News / Mary Evans Picture Library.

to be reported to English audiences who might not attend her live shows in France. She was, as *The Tatler* suggested, one of the charismatic leaders of her profession. Moreover, the luxury of her dress indicated that she had the financial and cultural capital to invest in shows in a manner similar to her respected contemporaries, Bernhardt and Réjane. Mistinguett’s performance, now also reviewed within Paris by a respected theater critic such as Adolphe Brisson, writing in *Le Temps*, was said to reflect and incarnate her modest, outsider origins. Elegant yet gleefully working class, she became an insouciant model of wartime resilience. In Brisson’s words, Mistinguett symbolized “in her feeble person all the fugitive joys and miseries of the suburbs.”¹⁵

The narrative films that Mistinguett made during this period reinforce de Flers’s image of her as a cheerful yet fiercely patriotic Parisian actress. The first of these films, the four-reel *La Double Blessure* (*The Temptations of Life*, Milano Films, 1915), was produced in Italy. In this film, Mistinguett played a tomboy schoolgirl who escapes the confined atmosphere of a prim seminary for young ladies to find the excitement she desires at the announcement of war.¹⁶ Disguising herself as a Boy Scout, she “climbs high walls, escapes from the hold of a ship by means of a ventilator, plunges into the sea, and does all manner of intrepid and dangerous things.”¹⁷ Released in Britain in late 1915 (and playing in theaters until early 1916), the film was advertised in relation to the themes of “Army Mobilisation, Active Service, Espionage, Hotel and Domestic Life with a Romantic

Theme.”¹⁸ British audiences were thereby reassured that war did not diminish the possibility of seeing Mistinguett perform in a cheerful and sprightly manner. Released as a “Milano Melodrama,” the film presented “a thoroughly characteristic performance, full of dainty grace, quick sympathy and vivid expressiveness that have made her [Mistinguett] so popular.”¹⁹ Interestingly, the *Temptations of Life* was sometimes programmed in Britain alongside or immediately prior to Bernhardt’s still-circulating *Camille*.²⁰ In this way, a dichotomy of “temptations” would have been apparent to audiences. On the one hand, Bernhardt returned to the role of the nineteenth-century courtesan, her white nightdress wrapping around her as she pivots in a full-body fall to her death. On the other hand, Mistinguett heralded temptations of a new kind. She was spurred to adventure and followed intrigue precisely because modern women could now define their place through physical action in the world.

Mistinguett’s association with female espionage, physical agility, and romance was again evident in her following film, *Chignon dor*. In this first of four films Mistinguett made with André Hugon between 1916 and 1917, Mistinguett visibly transforms herself across a range of characters as she successfully pursues Parisian gangsters. Self-reflexively performing the role of a music-hall idol in Paris, she subsequently adopts the role of a *gigolette* (streetwalker) and then a *parigote* (a Parisian street kid), selling the Parisian boulevard newspaper *Le Journal* in local streets. What is interesting is not only Mistinguett’s music-hall versatility but also the shots of wartime Paris. We see Mistinguett spurring action across urban rooftops and streets that stand in for a city and culture that foreign audiences could no longer travel to or enjoy. Later, when Mistinguett performs the *parigote*, we also see the enduring warmth and humor of Parisians captured on film as they go about their business on the city streets.²¹

Chignon dor is fascinating because it also self-reflexively returns audiences to Mistinguett’s prewar films. It stages, for example, an Apache dance in the Lapin Blanc (White Rabbit) café, and it echoes *L’Épouvante* in showing the actress foil another theft of her jewelry while resting one night at home. In Mistinguett’s next film, *Fleur de Paris*, similar themes reappear: shot on location in and around Paris, scenes (as Abel has noted) look like French actualité footage.²² Mistinguett also self-reflexively performs herself as a popular stage actress and as a young, urban, working-class woman (she appears as a dressmaker and a flower-seller). Chasing romance, the film concludes with two contrasting scenes of romantic fulfillment: Mistinguett (as Margot the flower-seller) manages to ensnare the hand of an attentive, wealthy Frenchman, while Mistinguett (the music-hall celebrity) partners with a visiting American entrepreneur who will develop her fame tour abroad. The doubling of Mistinguett’s role within the film exposes her own rags-to-riches story and is also “fascinating in the context of the Great War as well as of her alleged work as a double agent [conducting espionage for the Germans while spying for the French].”²³

Mistinguett made two other films with Hugon during the war—*Mistinguett détective I* and *Mistinguett détective II*. While there is no evidence that these films circulated in Britain during the war, Mistinguett's work remained focused on espionage, the fight against foreign spies, and (in *Mistinguett détective I*, where she discovers a secret submarine base), the topical effort to vanquish enemy submarine attacks. In the single mention that I found in British papers about these two films, a short note explained that the "Mistinguett Detective" series was to be launched with a film entitled "The Submarine Base."²⁴

A PARISIAN IN AMERICA: THE CIRCULATION OF PREWAR MISTINGUETT

The war in Europe remained central to discussion about the circulation of French film in America and the reception of American film in France. When Joseph Monat (of Monatfilms), "one of the most important figures in French cinematographic circles," traveled to New York in November 1916 to buy American film and to sell French films, the war explained his arrival. Introduced to American readers as a man who had served on the front in the French army, suffered from shell shock and trench sickness, and had been "over the top" half a dozen times, Monat brought with him nine French film programs. Heading his sales list was a "Series Mistinguette [*sic*]," comprising *Chignon d'or* (Golden Hair) and *Fleur de Paris* (Flower of Paris), both five reels and both produced by André Hugon. There was also a "Series Musidora," similarly produced by Hugon, and a series entitled "Patriotic Film."²⁵ Mistinguett's work on film—and, particularly, her work with Hugon—was considered significant enough to justify her own series of films. When Monat was later interviewed in *Moving Picture World*, he made clear that it was a changed France that films were circulating within and emerging from.²⁶ On the one hand, Monat's message was that "our great France just now is a poor country, and affords only small opportunity for American film." Surprised at the sums asked for American pictures, he argued that Americans did not understand the impoverished conditions of wartime France. On the other hand, Monat was patriotically selling a program of French films to American audiences. As he stated, French productions "have never been so good as they are today." Most of the films he offered for sale were identified by the names of their directors and production companies. We read, for example, that Monat offered *The Anguish* (six reels, Hugon) and *Shackles* (seven reels, Hugon). In contrast, Mistinguett was given her own series.²⁷ The effort that Monat made to sell French film in America and to testify to the changed wartime conditions of France was not heeded. As Hugon lamented, it was cheaper for him to buy American films through third parties in London than to purchase American film from companies in New York.

These fraught market conditions help to explain why the films Mistinguett made during the war were not released in America. Mistinguett's prewar films,

however, continued to circulate throughout the war. When *The Siren* was promoted in Montana in October 1914, it was presented as the “Well Known Problem Play” with “an all-star cast” that had caused a sensation in New York.²⁸ A theater in Alaska, screening *The Siren* in March 1916, touted Mistinguett as Theda Bara’s “only rival.”²⁹ There is record, too, of *Les Misérables* circulating throughout the war. Mae Tinée, the nom de plume of the well-known writer Frances Peck, wrote an enthusiastic review of *Les Misérables* for the *Chicago Daily Tribune* in 1917. Explaining that *Les Misérables*, “made fully four years ago,” demonstrates that “the old things are best,” she pronounced the film “a delight” and the foreign actors “marvellous.”³⁰ In 1917, *Les Misérables* was also promoted in Georgia as a forthcoming attraction. In this instance, Mistinguett was listed second after Kraus in the film’s “splendid cast”; *The Siren* was also cited as a film she had starred in “two and a half or three years ago.”³¹ With the exception of a brief discussion of Mistinguett’s successful effort to free Maurice Chevalier from German prison in 1917, Mistinguett remained circulating in America as a prewar cinematic celebrity. She remained, in this way, mobile testimony to the cultural capital and gay allure that France had once enjoyed.³²

PERFORMANCE FROM THE PROVINCES:
RÉJANE IN ALSACE

While Mistinguett’s plucky physicality was defiantly placed, during the Great War, into a rollicking military escapade and subsequently into Hugon’s series of urban gangster and espionage films, Réjane’s work on film was very different. Famous in the prewar period for legitimate class comedy, she became active in the making and promotion of a single, somber film: *Alsace*, directed by Henri Pouctal at the Film d’Art in 1915. Prior to the outbreak of the war, in 1913, Réjane had brought Gaston Leroux and Lucien Camille’s play *Alsace* to her own Théâtre Réjane. Performing the role of an Alsatian mother, Jeanne Orbray, who is exiled with her husband from Alsace to France for leading the patriotic singing of the Marseillaise with a band of equally nationalistic friends, the play revolves around the conflicts that transpire when her son (Jacques) falls in love with and marries Marguerite Schwartz, a German neighbor. Jeanne returns home after the death of her husband; when Jacques is eventually called up for military service with his German troupe, he is torn between his love of country (France) and love for his wife (Germany). Eventually resolving this conflict by patriotically supporting France, he dies on his provincial street after proudly shouting “Vive la France!” At the film’s conclusion, Jeanne grieves at the tombstone of her son, now remembered as a French patriot.

When Réjane inaugurated the play in Paris, *Alsace* was considered a patriotic work that endorsed the legitimate need to fight for French provincial independence

and liberty from Germany. In this way, *Alsace* was a lightning rod to displays of discontent about the German annexation of Alsace (Alsace became part of the German Empire after French defeat in the 1870–71 Franco-German War). The emotional impact of the play was compared to the quiet reflection motivated by the work of writers such as Maurice Barrès, René Bazin, André Lichtenberger, and journalist Paul Acker. Each of these authors differently espoused provincial—and often, Alsatian—patriotism in their novels. As Adolphe Brisson explained in *Le Temps*, reflecting on the emotive reception of the play, “the country [Alsace] where the action takes place in this new work [in the theater] no longer belongs to History; we have a part and a responsibility in its miseries; we cannot contemplate it with serenity.”³³

Alsace was licensed in England by the English Examiner of Plays on April 1, 1915. As the examiner’s report explains, the play was newly relevant to the First World War, particularly to the August 1914 Battle of Mulhouse (known also as the Battle of Alsace), an attack by the French Army against Germany at the start of World War I.³⁴ In this battle, the French recovered but then conceded the province of Alsace to the opposing Germans, because the second offensive launched by the French failed to gain the province with an army corps newly named the French Army of Alsace. While the Parisian reception of the play at the Théâtre Réjane highlighted the nationalist emotion that Alsace elicited in Parisian spectators, its reception in England was quite different. Considered a good example of the contrast of ideas and manners between the French and Germans, the focus in Britain became the conflict between Jacques’ German wife and his proud Alsatian mother. This conflict was not, however, considered particularly engaging.

Réjane’s performance as a mother fighting for the honor and patriotism of her son was applauded, but she remained a celebrity actress whose most famous and preferred role was the spirited, if now also aged, *boulevardier* washerwoman of *Madame Sans-Gêne*. Hence, when Réjane took *Alsace* from its debut at the Court Theatre in London to the Theatre Royal in Birmingham, it was “regretted” that she did not debut in *Madame Sans-Gêne*, since it “has long found favour in the sight of English audiences.” Describing *Alsace* as “a play of feeble and desultory execution,” this might have been a problem of national context since “we have no English theme of such national and patriotic significance.” As readers in Britain were reminded, *Alsace* was produced originally in Paris in early 1913, in an hour of popular enthusiasm: “at that time it would have been difficult for the English playgoer to conceive in his imagination the inveterate hatred of the French Alsatian for the arrogance of German oppression.”³⁵ Despite the subdued reception of Réjane’s performance of *Alsace* in England, she remained a bridging figure between the two countries during a time of war. In the Royal Court Theatre publicity for *Alsace*, it was therefore explained that there were “no frontiers” between France and England. As Réjane stated: “to come to England is not to quit France.”³⁶

ADAPTING ALSACE TO FILM

The film of *Alsace* debuted in Paris on Christmas Eve 1915 in the Théâtre Réjane. At the film's launch, Réjane addressed the audience, stating that the brothers and sons of France were claiming, by right of popular conquest, the land of Alsace and Lorraine. She was happy to give her theater over to the film because it showed "her beloved play that, thanks to the magic wand of cinema, has become a great novel of living pictures."³⁷ Applauded by cinematographic entrepreneurs (including the famous filmmaker and producer Jean Benoît-Lévy, the exhibitor and trade association leader Léon Brézillon, and inventor and film producer Léon Gaumont), *Alsace* was regarded as a profound study of the antagonism between the French and German people. Where the Germans proudly saw Alsace as an annexed part of empire, the French hoped that Alsace would return to the motherland. Réjane's noble work in bringing the role of a great maternal heroine to the screen was particularly noted. "What a beautiful maternal role Réjane was able to film!" *Ciné-Journal* exclaimed. If a young actress was instead employed, "she would, by dint of being too pretty, appear banal."³⁸

Alsace was released to six theaters in Paris a few weeks later, on January 16, 1916. As double-page advertisements announced, this was "The First Edition" of a "Great Patriotic Film."³⁹ The French tricolors, attached as inserted leaflets in *Ciné-Journal*, announced that the work was "the most moving of all patriotic films."⁴⁰ With only "Réjane" and *Alsace* listed on the inserts, Réjane seemed to be the author. This point was reiterated in an earlier issue of *Ciné-Journal*, where ALSACE! and REJANE! were the only two words featured on the journal's cover.⁴¹ On another cover of *Ciné-Journal* (Oct. 30, 1915), Réjane was featured in the distinctive clothing of an Alsatian woman, with "Mme REJANE DANS ALSACE" below and the playwrights' names in much smaller print. As posters for the film also attested (fig. 24), it was Réjane who was publicized as a celebrity French actress who was able to incarnate the motherland and the plight of Alsace.

ALSACE AND THE ENGLISH ALLIES:
A PICTURE THAT PLEASURES THE PUBLIC

When *Alsace* was released in England, the film was interpreted in relation to developments in the current war (that is, in relation to the German occupation in Belgium), not to the historic German-French Alsace conflict. As *The Bioscope* reported, "The German occupation of Belgium gives additional point to the strong patriotic feeling which permeates the play, which depicts with great power and conviction, and also with admirable restraint, the bitter indignities suffered by a conquered people even when not subjected to actual violence."⁴²

As we know, England entered the First World War when Germany invaded neutral Belgium, bound by the Treaty of London of 1839 (which protected Belgium



FIGURE 24. Poster for *Alsace* featuring Réjane. <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btvib10109080b>.

in the event of war). Recontextualized in relation to the beginning of the war and Britain's involvement, the film, concluded *The Bioscope*, was "calculated to stir the finest feelings of patriotism, and as an incentive to recruiting should prove of the highest value."⁴³

In much the same way as *Madame Sans-Gêne* was earlier distributed in England by Jury's Pictures, so, too, was *Alsace* released to exhibitors as a prestige Jury's picture that would "please the public."⁴⁴ Reports show that, unlike the theatrical play, *Alsace* found popular favor. Publicized in early February 1916, it was described as a "great war picture" and "one of the finest patriotic films that has been inspired by the war." Exhibited by Tom Bogue (the manager of the Majestic Picture House in Hull) in March 1916, it was screened for a week and was considered "quite a topical interest, especially now that that part of France is so prominent in the public mind."⁴⁵ As late as 1918, there were reports in English papers of *Alsace's* circulation on film, particularly in relation to its ability to engage London youth in the war. Hence, in June 1918, "hundreds of schoolboys formed an audience at the Pavilion, Marble Arch, on Monday last, when, under the auspices of the 'French Official War films,' 'Alsace Awaiting' was exhibited. The acting of Madame Rejane excited intense enthusiasm, and quite a hostile demonstration occurred when the German schoolmaster appeared on the screen."⁴⁶ The fact that the film had been screened in the relatively new and "quality" theater the Marble Arch Pavilion and renamed *Alsace Awaiting* indicates the respect a London population still held for Réjane. Now a maternal French figure giving a national address that touched on qualities

that were very different from her role in *Madame Sans-Gêne*, she was again an actress who pushed boundaries, explored opportunities, and advocated for cultural and political change.

THE “EUROPEAN WAR”: ALSACE IN AMERICA

In America, where Réjane had not toured for more than a decade—and where audiences had never been introduced to *Alsace* on the stage—circumstances were different. Released in April 1916, the film was first mentioned in *Motion Picture News* in the “Film News from Foreign Parts” column by G. Kaczka in November 1915. Interviewed by Kaczka for the journal in Paris, Réjane made it clear that she previously made one other film (*Madame Sans-Gêne*) and that, while encouraged to make films, she had patriotically chosen to make this single title. Making no mention of the 1913 stage production of *Alsace* in Paris (nor her performance of the role in London in 1915), she asked: “Could I possibly refuse to play the interesting part of Madame Orbey in the marvellous patriotic scene? I could not resist such an invitation, and for the second time, I am facing the camera, this time in the costume of our dear and beloved ‘Alsace.’”⁴⁷ Featured on the page, Réjane is shown in an Alsatian costume, offering readers “the very first photograph of Réjane in ‘Alsace.’”⁴⁸

This focus on Réjane’s mediation through photograph and film in 1915 was replaced a couple of months later by a second “Film News from Foreign Parts” column recounting the opening of *Alsace* at the Théâtre Réjane. Noting that the cinema now performs “an official function,” the article underscored the fact that official government ministers and community leaders attended Réjane’s film and that *Alsace* was first introduced by a large orchestra playing the Marseillaise, followed by an introduction to the film by the actress on the theatrical stage. Translating Réjane’s introduction to the film from its original transcription in *Ciné-Journal*, *Motion Picture News* stated:

When first produced in 1913, I did not think the authors would prove such good prophets. Looking at the beautiful scenery representing the charming town Thann in our beloved Alsace, I never dreamed that only two years later Thann would be French again. Oh dear Alsace! O dear Lorraine! We never forget you. . . . I am very happy that this great film is shown to you for the first time, at my theatre, and what is more, the scenes you are going to see on the screen, are actually played just now by our Poilus, who are at Thann and who will soon lead us to victory.⁴⁹

Offered to exhibitors as a film in five parts by the Authors Film Company, *Alsace* was first screened on April 12, 1916, in a specially promoted “Trade View” event in the company’s dedicated projection room at 67 Madison Avenue, New York. As an advertisement flagged, trade screenings were scheduled in Philadelphia, Washington, Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Buffalo, Chicago, Minneapolis, and Montreal.

Using bold red borders and text, the Authors Film Company publicity was unusual because it also featured a full-length photograph of Réjane as an Alsatian mother, looking solemn and majestic as she clasped a religious cross on an open cemetery gate. Associated with a provincial but important region of France (and remember that *La Marseillaise* was composed in Strasbourg by Rouget de Lisle in 1792 and known as *Marching Song for the Army of the Rhine*), Réjane heralds both life and death, battle and victory. Described as a “star of supreme achievement” who offered “the intensely inspiring, patriotic drama ALSACE,” Réjane represented global celebrity, religious piety, and patriotic courage.⁵⁰

This trade publicity highlighted the film’s changed reception in America. Rather than being patriotically screened in a nation’s capital city in an established theater with dignitaries and the actress on hand, *Alsace* was promoted as a trade screening to states-rights buyers who could ensure the exhibition and distribution of the film. In this context, exhibitors were given the opportunity to “judge for themselves” the impact that the film would have on box-office receipts.⁵¹ A subsequent advertisement for *Alsace*’s trade show screening declared: “Do you sit down quietly at a private showing and see the pictures yourself, booking only those that measure up best to the standard set by your patrons? The safe way is the ‘OPEN MARKET’ way.”⁵² The trade press therefore presented America as a nation fostering free enterprise and giving validation to the decisions made by exhibitors, who, with “first-hand knowledge,” built national theater programs. By this point, Réjane was being marketed (for the first time, with an accent aigu) in America as a French and not a Parisian national export: she is a “world-renowned dramatic artiste” presenting *Alsace*, the “master drama by Gaston Leroux and Lucien Camille.”⁵³ In another full-page advertisement, Réjane was also acclaimed within Europe, setting “all of France and England talking. Replacing live theater with film, and the class comedy of *Madame Sans-Gêne* with the patriotism of *Alsace*, Réjane’s performance of an Alsatian patriot and mother became “the crowning triumph of her career.”⁵⁴

When *Alsace* was reviewed by Peter Milne in *Motion Picture News* in April 1916, America had not yet entered the war. America was therefore officially and politically neutral. Mention was consequently made of the fact that “it is not a picture that we in America would call neutral; that is, judging it from the standards of neutrality laid down by our government.” Citing the success *Alsace* was enjoying in France and England, Milne called it an “unusually strong drama,” set against the backdrop of the “European war” and “the bitter hatred of the Alsations toward their Teutonic conquerors of 1871.”⁵⁵ Making an effort to avoid discussing politics, Milne reiterated Réjane’s relevance to contemporary events, stating that she presented a “vital topic” that had not yet been dramatized on film.⁵⁶

Alsace was released in America at a point at which popular sentiment had begun to support the French and British in their fight against the Germans. Germany’s 1914 attack on Belgium, its destruction of European art, as well as the unprovoked sinking of the liner RMS *Lusitania* on May 7, 1915 (in which 123 Americans died),

had shifted public opinion. An editorial in the inaugural issue of the *Scientific American*, in May 1915, reflected on the liner's sinking: "Has this ceased to be a war of army against army and degenerated into a war against civilians and women and children, no matter of what nationality? This is the first instance in the history of mankind where a regular transatlantic liner, filled with civilians of many nationalities, has been deliberately sunk on the high seas, and this act was committed, not after allowing innocent women and children to escape in lifeboats, but wantonly and wickedly without allowing the victims of the weapon of destruction any chance for their lives."⁵⁷

A film that focused on German cultural coercion in Alsace and highlighted the grief of a French mother for a son who died because he spontaneously shouted "Vive la France" in a German-occupied town was unusually topical. It was also groundbreaking in terms of film production and distribution: there existed no other French feature-length film set against the backdrop of the current crisis that was designed to promote patriotism and allied support for military action. Moreover, there was no other celebrity taking to the global stage and advocating for a revision of what both the French actress and Alsace stood for. No longer embodying spicy boulevard entertainments or the cultural supremacy of Paris, Réjane now incarnated the historical, social, political, and military aims of regional France. No longer performing the comedy of a washerwoman who hailed from Alsace, Réjane represented the intergenerational aspirations of a region associated with the founding of the French First Republic. When we elide discussions of the relationship between the late nineteenth-century theater and early film, we not only overlook important histories of defiant female comedy and physicality, but we elide and forget the many opportunities that Réjane generated in a period of enormous change.

THE FRENCH PROPAGANDA FILM: BERNHARDT ENTERS THE GREAT WAR

While Réjane significantly changed the terms of her renown in both Britain and America during the war, Bernhardt capitalized on her established celebrity as a French *porte-parole* to promote American engagement in the war. Although Bernhardt also made the social-problem film *Jeanne Doré* (1915) during this period, American audiences appeared more interested in the ability of the film to eliminate "evidences of the actress' lameness" (Bernhardt's right leg had been amputated earlier in the year) than in the narrative meaning of the work. *Mothers of France* (1917) was Bernhardt's second and final film made during the war and, unlike *Jeanne Doré*, its message proved unequivocal. As the famous poet, novelist, dramatist, and academician Jean Richepin explained when he introduced the film to the Union des arts in France in 1917, *Mothers of France* was filmed to make French propaganda palatable and legible across geographic distances, culture, and language.⁵⁸

Richepin's address to the Union des arts—an organization in France whose aim was the spread of French art and design through modern industry—was particularly appropriate in its focus on the capacity of the French actress to be militarily instrumentalized through transnational film. *Mothers of France* also illustrated Bernhardt's fervent patriotism and the significance of film to the ongoing relationship between France and America in 1917. Conceived as a work for American consumption, the film capitalized on the existing relationship between France and America. This included not only the established history between the two countries but also the national tours Bernhardt had undertaken on the stage, as well as the success of her previous appearances on film in America. As we know, *Camille*, *Queen Elizabeth*, and the documentary *Sarah Bernhardt at Home (Bernhardt à Belle Isle*, Hecla, 1915) had been released in the teens to national acclaim.⁵⁹

Significantly, the narrative of *Mothers of France* focused on the experience of womanhood and motherhood in regional France. At its center was a portrait of female endurance: the death of family members in war (in this case, a father and husband) and the impact that chemical warfare had on the health of community members (a schoolteacher returns to regional France blinded by his experiences in the trenches). The themes of grief and loss are explored, as is the dangerous work women undertake in their capacity as nurses and caretakers for wounded soldiers on the front, as well as the leadership they adopt in their local neighborhoods and towns. A film that examined personal pain, but that also projected fierce nationalism and optimistic fortitude (and that presumed the compassion and empathy of female audiences), *Mothers of France* was one of the earliest (and certainly the most successful) propaganda films commissioned by the French government during the war. Produced by Eclipse under the direction of the French Ministry of War working with the Service cinématographique de l'armée (the SCA), it involved not only Richepin as screenwriter but Louis Mercanton and René Hervil as directors.⁶⁰ In this sense, Bernhardt headlined a rousing propaganda film that combined government sponsorship, a leading French film production house, and renowned creative practitioners.

At the film's debut in Paris, Richepin argued not only that its message was transparent but also that *Mothers of France* would engage Americans in the realities and aspirations of the French government and people: "When they [the American public] will see what the horrors of the war are, even a war which is just and fair as the one which we are undertaking, then they will understand the symbols which it evokes; why we have undertaken it, why we have been obliged to undertake it, not only with the aim to defend ourselves . . . but to defend the ideas that are dear to us, that are sacred, that are the health of France and at the same time of Europe itself."⁶¹

How did Bernhardt perform for a work that was destined for foreign audiences during the war? The largeness of her earlier gestures on film—her spectacular falling deaths in *Queen Elizabeth* and *Camille*, for example—were replaced by smaller and more intimate physical movements. Often reaching to touch, caress,

or embrace another person (her son, another local mother, a wounded soldier), she was shown as being both physically and emotionally connected to her family, community, and the French military. Often clutching a white handkerchief, she wipes her brow, her cheeks, her eyes. When she beseeches the statue of Jeanne d'Arc, her patron saint, outside a sandbagged Reims cathedral one evening, she does not raise her arms; instead, she stands stationary, in profile, swathed in the long billowing habit of a medical nurse. Holding onto the rails that surround the statue with one hand, and with her other hand to her throat, she speaks quietly as she looks upward. Later, at the front line, she is filmed from above while she stands at the foreground of an uneven line of soldiers. She reaches her right arm onto the top of the trench as she ducks her head under enemy fire, then gesturing forward, she talks with a soldier. We do not, of course, see Bernhardt take a step or move through the trenches; she is always standing, seated, or traveling in a car. Her immobilization and these brief records of conversation and physical touch remind us that Bernhardt's right leg was amputated and that she was unable (as were many wounded soldiers) to walk or perform in the ways that she once enjoyed.

Richepin's belief that Bernhardt's film would reveal the war to foreign audiences as it was experienced in France, and that they would be moved by Bernhardt's performance, was borne out by the fervor that met screenings of *Mothers of France* in America. Released to great fanfare in New York, the film premiered at the Rialto Theater on March 11, 1917, and the World Film Corporation quickly secured American distribution rights (fig. 25). The corporation's first official announcement about this deal proclaimed that "against the determined competition of leading special feature producers, spurred by the knowledge that this was and is the most powerful and distinguished feature ever filmed, we have bought 'Mothers of France.'"⁶² The film was a popular success, circulating in America throughout 1917. It was programmed at benefit screenings for war causes and became a rallying cry for American participation and support for the war.

At the time of the film's release in March 1917, the US had not yet joined the war. Congress declared war on Germany on April 6, roughly a month later. While the film was not responsible for the nation's entry into the war, it helped to give impetus to public support for military engagement. As I noted above, this support had already been sought by Réjane, who had released *Alsace* in 1916. Focusing on the geographic region that launched the First World War in France, Réjane capitalized on her fame as a Parisian actress to international audiences. Bernhardt, though, nationalized her address; on film, she was not a mother in Alsace but a representative of all mothers in France. Accompanying her film with a tour across America, Bernhardt was a political spokeswoman both onscreen and off.⁶³ *Motography* reported that when the film was screened in Philadelphia in April 1917, Bernhardt appeared in person at the screening.⁶⁴ The impact that Bernhardt's film had on audiences in America is evident in a review that stated it "fans the fire of patriotism in a white heat. It is a call to duty that will not be denied."⁶⁵

2941 THE MOVING PICTURE WORLD March 31, 1917

The Triumph of the Year
World Film Corporation
Scores Sensational Success

Bought
 for Franchise
 Holders of
 World Pictures
 Brady-Made

**SARAH
 BERNHARDT**
in her Greatest Triumph
"Mothers of France"

Announcement

Against the determined competition of leading special feature producers, spurred by the knowledge that this was and is the most powerful and distinguished feature ever filmed, we have bought "Mothers of France." This extremely important transaction was closed so late that we have not been able to prepare an announcement of the details of distribution.

WORLD FILM CORPORATION 130 West 46th Street, N. Y. City

FIGURE 25. Advertisement for *Mothers of France*. *Moving Picture World*, March 31, 1917.

The American reception of Bernhardt's celebrity was quite different from Bernhardt's reception in England. Indeed, in England *Mothers of France* was less a justification for war than evidence of what audiences already knew. As English advertisements stated, *Mothers of France* revealed "the heroic women of our glorious Gallic Ally," as well as "the debt we owe our womankind." Moreover, Bernhardt's film was marketed with no mention of Richepin as scriptwriter or of the film's director, Louis Mercanton. Rather, it was a demonstration of the power Bernhardt "still possesses to grip the attention and thrill the emotions of those to whom she plays."⁶⁶

Today, it is hard to understand the familiarity with which English audiences greeted Bernhardt as a suffering mother onscreen and the impact that *Mothers of France* enjoyed in America. Appearing old and theatrical on black-and-white footage, Bernhardt does not seem to represent the heroism of women on the front line, nor does she appear convincing enough to incite American women to send their loved ones into war (and possible death) in distant Europe. Yet her character's suffering, through the loss of a husband and the wounding of a son, likely reminded audiences of the star's own aging, suffering body.⁶⁷ We know that months after *Mothers of France* had completed its theatrical run, it was still circulating in benefit screenings, raising money and gaining supporters for the Allied cause. In this context, we can appreciate the celebrity that Bernhardt still enjoyed, as well as the importance of film as a transnational bridge to new audiences.

During the First World War, the rallying cries of Bernhardt and Réjane on film circulated alongside the cheerful defiance of Mistinguett's more lighthearted films. Together, the three actresses demonstrate a shrewd and effective understanding of the value of this new medium. French patriots in war time, they were versatile actresses who collectively placed Paris as an expanding horizon of female theatrical and military achievement. The transformative nature of these achievements is evidenced in the actresses' continued relevance during the war. Bernhardt, Réjane, and Mistinguett (if indirectly) helped to drive the allied call to military action. As my conclusion argues, the extent, range, and impact of Mistinguett, Réjane, and Bernhardt's transnational film histories are far from complete. Online data offers its own contemporary call to action. It multiplies our tools, materials, and access to historical content and suggests that the threads I have collected in my study might, one day, be expanded exponentially.