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Political Importance of Female Authorship in *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange*

The political reading of *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* (1936) by Jean Renoir has been so firmly established in the existing scholarship that it cannot be ignored when a new interpretation of the film is proposed.¹ Critics agree that the murder committed by Lange is a reflection of political mood spreading among the partisans of the Front Populaire in France in the mid and late 1930s.² In the film, a popular justice jury decides not to turn the criminal in since his deed was committed for the greater good of the oppressed working class. Lange has been generally proclaimed a central character of the story, while Valentine has been disregarded, and, if mentioned at all, is presented only as Lange's companion who reports his story to the jury. This trivialization of the presence of the strongest female character in the film is the reason why a detailed analysis of her performance and its relation to the production of meaning in the film is very much needed. The presence of Valentine as an emancipated woman and a full participant of the public sphere, who overcame a dark past and started a thriving business, significantly challenges the centrality of politics in the film, or at least remarkably alters its the political message.

If the killing of Batala is the central event of the story and should be read as fighting against oppressive capitalism, I would like to factor in the fact that the narrative of the murder is not recounted by the person most affected by it, namely Lange. It is Valentine who weaves

¹ Jean Renoir, *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* (Films Obéron, 1936).

² Front Populaire was an alliance of left-wing political parties in the interwar France, including le Partie Communiste Français, la Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière and le Parti Radical.

the narrative of what happened in the convention of multiple distinct genres, such as Western, crime story and finally her desired romance, while at the same time the central character, a professional storyteller whose fate is very uncertain, is not even present in the room. Except for the central event of murder, there is no guarantee that the sequence of circumstances presented by Valentine is real, which I will demonstrate hereafter. Along these lines one can allow a possibility that the female protagonist is manipulating her male audience by negotiating the significance of Lange's crime in order to get her happy ending. The objective of this project is to analyze how this acknowledgement of the importance of Valentine's role affects the established reading of the film. If its call for gender equality has been missed, it is because the film makes its case through narration or, more precisely, the way it frames Valentine as a narrator.

André Bazin was the first one to remark that the making of *Le Crime* coincides with a political turmoil in France at the time, which can be easily discerned as mirrored in the film's scenario. According to him, the election of the Front Populaire in 1935 is reflected through establishing the cooperative which is to replace the hegemony of Bata: "In this sense *The Crime of M. Lange* can be seen as a *film à thèse* against evil bosses and capitalist exploiters, and for the workers, solidarity, and collectivism."³ As such, the movie seems to excuse and even glorify Lange's deed, as it was committed for the greater good. Dudley Andrew takes this theory a step further and claims that the film suggests the path to be taken by the newly chosen coalition. According to him, the political events might have provided a prototypical sketch of events for the script, but the further its plot unfolds, "everyday life is mythologized through fiction until fiction provides the model for politics."⁴ Thus, the Groupe Octobre, whose

³ André Bazin, *Jean Renoir*, trans. W.W. Halsey and William H. Simon (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), 41.

⁴ Andrew Dudley and Steven Ungar, *Popular Front Paris and the Poetics of Culture* (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 209.

collaboration under the leadership of Renoir and Prévert resulted in creating *Le Crime*, can be seen as much more politically engaged than just taking a stance by commenting upon the political events.⁵

The existing scholarship confirms that at least some political importance should be attributed to the message conveyed in the film. Only Christopher Faulkner's interpretation seems to veer significantly in a different direction, even though it was not always the case. In 1986, when he wrote *The Social Cinema of Jean Renoir*, he was very much in agreement with his fellow critics:

Renoir does embrace a political framework to support his practice. Given his achievement to this point, one is not surprised that the French Left should have supported his work and sought out his allegiance. This affiliation now seems right and inevitable (although critics have been ignoring it for years).⁶

Interestingly, fourteen years later his reading of the political militancy of *Le Crime* has evolved. He no longer sees the validity of the argument supporting the political engagement of the film in the cause of the *Partie Communiste Française*. In his article "Paris, Arizona; or the redemption of difference," he substantiates his new statement by pinpointing various thematic nuances taken up by the filmmakers, which do not fit in the *Front Populaire's* ideology:

Notwithstanding received opinion, *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange*, which was released in January 1936, has little to do with the ideas and ideology of the Popular Front coalition that came to power in May and June on a vote of confidence in social, cultural and economic change. The film extends no hand to

⁵ Groupe Octobre was a group established in the early thirties by politically active culture workers and filmmakers with the leadership of Jacques Prévert. The political activity can be described as anticlerical, antimilitarist and anticapitalist. For more information on Groupe Octobre and its connections with French film see Colin Crisp, *The Classic French Cinema 1930-1960* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

⁶ Christopher Faulkner, *The Social Cinema of Jean Renoir* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 56.

clergy, takes a position for women and against colonialism and racism, embraces popular culture, has an idea of the nation (or community) that would suit no political party of the time and proposes its own solution to the abuses of capital.⁷

In the above passage, Faulkner concentrates on the time of the film's release rather than its production in order to show that the revolutionary atmosphere engendered by the radical political change, which took place a few months earlier, has subsided. This, in turn, allows a less streamlined interpretation of the message sent by the Groupe Octobre.

Faulkner is the only scholar who does not trivialize the role of Valentine in *Le Crime*. He does not grant her the central position in the story, but he does not treat her primarily as mere *Lange's lover* either, as she is referred to by other scholars. He is the first one to state that the heroine does not simply give the account of events preceding the murder committed by Lange, but she takes on much more responsibility by replacing him when his life as a free man is hanging by a thread. While Valentine elaborates on her version of the crime of Mr. Lange, he is sleeping in the other room. Even though Lange is not present at his own trial, Valentine represents him and acts as a mediator between him and the popular justice jury. According to Faulkner, Valentine's account is in fact Lange's dreamed up version of his deed. Even though Lange is still the author of the version of events presented to the public, it is Valentine who controls its delivery.

Before granting Valentine with the authorship of the murder story, I will give a closer look at why the story should be considered fiction in the first place. Allowing this possibility is important in order to establish a framework, within which Valentine can be considered as a narrator. It is impossible to deny that the actual killing of Batala by one Amédée Lange really occurred, since the men assembled in the tavern find out about it from a newspaper. As far as

⁷ Christopher Faulkner, "Paris, Arizona; or the Redemption of Difference: Jean Renoir's *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* (1935)," in *French Film: Texts and Contexts*, ed. Susan Hayward and Ginette Vincendeau (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 27.

the other facts brought up by Valentine are concerned, there is no immediate proof to substantiate them, only Valentine's word. Thus begins the strategic planning of how to present the sequence of events leading up to the climactic crime in a way which will make the jury composed of working class men change their minds about turning the criminal in to the police. Faulkner notices that *Le Crime* as a film can be seen as "a mirror held up to measure of desire circa 1936."⁸ The same can be said of Valentine's story delivered for to her male audience at the tavern, which is not necessarily a reflection of real life events but of desires of those who listen to it. This mirror reveals narrative modes deeply rooted in popular culture of the time, which are intelligible to the listeners. Faulkner lists at least five different genres embedded in the reported fantasy: "comedy, *policier*, Western, melodrama, romance."⁹

The way in which the scene in the tavern is constructed only enforces Valentine's presentation as an authorial figure. She steps into the static *mise-en-scène* in the central point of the frame. As she approaches the camera, her initially blurred features come into focus. Valentine assumes a central position at the table surrounded by men whose gaze is fixed on her. She starts introducing herself glancing to the right and to the left at each member of her audience. She also receives almost spotlight lighting as if she was on a stage. A lyrical violin soundtrack starts shortly after she begins to speak. She is thus established as central figure who is in control of her performance (see fig. 1).

Subsequently, Valentine starts to play with popular culture genres in order to weave the crime story. David Pettersen points out a purpose in presenting Lange's story to the public by means of juggling multiple modes of narration, which is "to control the film's genre."¹⁰ Maintaining the control over how the tale is presented allows to eventually determine how it

⁸ Ibid, 28.

⁹ Ibid, 34.

¹⁰ David Pettersen, "The Politics of Popular Genres in Jean Renoir's *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange*," *Studies in French Cinema* 12, no. 2 (May 8, 2012): 119.

will be judged. It is therefore crucial to turn the odious felony into a noble act to achieve freedom. Pettersen claims that this negotiation is realized mainly through juxtaposing “the epic Western and the crime, or faits divers, story.”¹¹ Indeed the manipulation of these two styles seems to be at work from the beginning. Interestingly, they work as leitmotifs always appearing along with the two main characters, Lange and Batala.

Already in the first scene we are able to see Lange at his desk writing his masterpiece-to-be, *Arizona Jim*. The faits divers mode, in turn, is introduced with Batala entering his publishing house, where his employees work on his crime story press. The first time these two worlds clash is when Lange, encouraged by Valentine, tries to convince Batala to publish *Arizona Jim*. Initially not convinced, Batala agrees to publish the Western story, keeping to himself the fact that his decision is motivated solely by the prospect of his personal gain. Batala ruses Lange into giving up the copyrights. As a consequence, the crook is able to insert in Lange’s writing completely irrelevant passages containing a somehow blatant advertisement. Thus, the tension between the genres is set up; the creator of a noble Western hero is symbolically denigrated and belittled by a morally dubious criminal. Subsequently, working under the oppressive rule of his boss, Lange reveals to a friend the plot of one of *Arizona Jim*’s upcoming episodes: it will be a story of gangsters stealing workers’ pay. It is Arizona Jim who gets them in the end. This way Lange, associated with the Western side of the story, is able to win the sympathy of the inn’s public composed of working men.

¹¹ Ibid, 108. Western is a film genre, which usually portrays a lone protagonist operating within a society organized around a code of honor, and personal justice opposed to flawed general law. For more information about the genre see Jim Kitses, *Horizons West. Directing the Western from John Ford to Clint Eastwood* (London: BFI Publishing, 2004). Faits divers is a journalistic genre encompassing short anecdotes non-classifiable as regular news articles. They usually concern tragic events including crimes, accidents and petty larceny and they all contain an element of the inexplicable. An exemplary fait divers is the story of the murder committed by Violette Nozière. For more information see Sarah Maza, *Violette Nozière, a Story of Murder in 1930s Paris* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2012).

The situation changes when the ambience of faits divers disappears along with the flight of Batala chased by his creditors. When his oppressed employees find out about his alleged death, initially disoriented by the excess of freedom, they organize themselves and create a cooperative which carries on issuing *Arizona Jim* as their main publication. The elimination of their tyrannical boss allows them to bring down his crime story publication, *Javert*, by the symbolic tearing down of its poster, and thus get rid of the faits divers undertones of the story. Nevertheless, Batala is not dead. Having survived a train collision, he dresses up as a priest in order to return to the city. He does so only to discover the demise of his empire. When he asks a newsagent about the current trends in popular stories, he finds out that his faits divers publications are no longer in print and copies of *Arizona Jim* are selling like hot cakes. The despot goes back to the cooperative headquarters and the crime aura follows him. When Lange discovers that his oppressor is back, he has no choice but to succumb to the temptation of committing the murder. The whole narrative leads up to this particular moment in order to enable the audience to see the murder not as another faits divers but as an act of emulation of noble Arizona Jim who sacrifices himself for the greater good.

The gravity of Lange's crime is attenuated in Valentine's version of the story on multiple levels. First, as demonstrated above, the protagonist's motives are directly associated to the esthetics of Westerns and juxtaposed with shady faits divers, both of which can be easily decoded by the assembly members gathered in the tavern as a struggle between the good and the evil. Secondly, the actual shooting of Batala is merely a finalization of what has long been predetermined or even what has already happened. Karla Oeler sees it as a double death of the tyrant: "the plot cues as to sympathize with Lange's motives by killing Batala twice, first, only apparently, by train wreck, and then, for real, by murder."¹² The shooting in one of the final

¹² Karla Oeler, *A Grammar of Murder: Violent Scenes and Film Form* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009), 112.

scenes of the film, can be, however, read not as killing Batala for the second time, but simply putting the final touch on his death, which occurred during the train accident. After the collision, Batala's workers moved on and created a new reality in which there was no room for him, therefore it was only natural that his anomalous presence be ceased.

Finally, the fact that the story is delivered via female voice has been read as a call for empathy. Martin O'Shaughnessy finds Valentine's mediation meaningful in a way that she, as a woman, should be seen as a delegate of the repressed:

She also plays a key role in the film's narration, framing the main story with her plea for Lange. Significantly, when we are asked to move beyond a simple factual determination of guilt, a woman's viewpoint is introduced, suggesting that a more passionate and compassionate vision of justice necessitates the return of the repressed "female" voice.¹³

As O'Shaughnessy suggests, this introduction of a strong and important female voice marks a radical break with a misogynistic representation of women in the French cinema of the period. Thus, Valentine being a revolutionary figure takes on a double meaning, not only is her inclusion significant in the manipulation of the plot of the film but also within the unfolding of the history of cinema.

I wanted to argue, however, that as Lange's appearances in the movie are accompanied by motives of Western, Batala's by the aura of *faits divers*, Valentine introduces the atmosphere of romance. Her narration is followed by hints at a love story from the beginning. The first thing she says, having introduced herself to the men at the inn, is that she loves and is loved. Then she presents the object of her desire, who also happens to be the wanted murderer. Once the love theme is established, Valentine bonds with her audience by admitting that she belongs to

¹³ Martin O'Shaughnessy, *Jean Renoir* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 109.

a working class and she knows what it means to be poor. When the film transitions to what allegedly are Valentine's flashbacks, as I mentioned, we become acquainted with Lange and his ways as a writer. The first time we can see Lange and Valentine together is when she delivers his laundry. Lange takes this opportunity to explain to her who Arizona Jim is, but Valentine states she only likes love stories. She also takes initiative and invests in the development of their relationship even if Lange seems indifferent to her at the beginning. Eventually, she is the one to ask Lange out for dinner.

When Valentine and Lange officially start seeing each other, she openly announces that she is in love. She repeats: "Je suis amoureuse, amoureuse!" with such enthusiasm that she ends up being mocked by Batala. As the relationship of the two develops and Valentine takes time to read her lover's fiction, she notices there is a woman in *Arizona Jim*, and she wants to know who she is. Lange dismisses her question since apparently the female character has no real importance to him or to the plot. The fact that Valentine discovers her and singles her out builds up her significance. Up to this moment women, in real life as well as in writing were not on Lange's radar. It is Valentine who makes him notice the female character he created and by extension herself, since she becomes more and more important to Lange too. When the couple finds out about the train crash and Batala's passing, confronted with the reality of death Valentine asks her companion if he finds her alive. This moment is emblematic of coming to life and converging of her romance and Lange's Western all the while the crime atmosphere is dissolving. The love story is then transposed onto the cooperative which also constitutes a set up for a parallel love affair, the one of Estelle and Charles, who are referred to as its children. Finally, when Batala comes back to take over the cooperative, Lange does not shoot him at first, even though he has a good opportunity to do so. It is only after he sees Batala harassing Valentine in the courtyard that he leaps down the stairs and instantly finalizes the execution of

the aggressor. Therefore, Lange committing the crime out of love is not an implausible reading of the scene.

Other than constant reminders about Valentine's penchant for melodrama, the cinematographic reconstruction of her purported memories fits quite well into the frame of norms for what was considered women's cinema at the time.¹⁴ Ginette Vincendeau emphasizes the motive of inscription of the feminine space within, or even its submission to the masculine structures of power, as symbolic of the emergent distinctive female presence: "[h]owever, stories about women working (which tended to be written by women) ambiguously emphasized pleasure in competence and newly gained independence, while carefully placing the heroine in positions still separate and slightly subservient to the man."¹⁵ Valentine is a very accurate embodiment of this statement. She is independent and claims agency in everything she undertakes, but at the same time her social position is clearly inferior to the men's. She is also ready to abandon the life she has built for herself and set off in pursuit of love. Still, although Valentine's happiness depends on men, she demonstrates a strong capability of making her own decisions. This incorporation of female agency in the movie may be read as a gesture of the Groupe Octobre made towards the new Front Populaire on the cusp of political change. Even though, as the years to come have shown, this plea for reforms regarding social inequalities was

¹⁴ To state, however, that Valentine's narrative can be seen as one produced unambiguously for female spectators would be wrong, since, as Vincendeau asserts, a clear cut category of women's cinema never crystalized in France in the 1930s. Vincendeau lists, however, some common features of Hollywood's film for women, which can be easily identifies in Valentine's story, who remains the one who controls Lange's portrayal by filtering it through her own desire: French cinema never produces a category of films that can be called 'women's film' as Hollywood did in the 1930s and 1940s. Though that category (or sub-genre) itself is ill-defined and subject to controversies, it nevertheless designates films with common features: a melodramatic woman-centered narrative, set in the classic areas of 'women's experience' (the domestic, emotions, romance), and attempting to tell the story from a woman's point of view or, more ambitiously, to portray a woman's subjectivity and desire. Ginette Vincendeau, "Melodramatic Realism: On Some French Women's Films in the 1930s," *Screen* 30, no. 3 (September 1, 1989): 51.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 60.

not addressed by the coalition as expected, its incorporation in the film at the time of production and release was more than relevant: “In the 1930s women were legally more oppressed in France than in other advanced countries and even the Popular Front government of 1936-1938, which fundamentally improved workers’ social conditions, left women’s situation practically unchanged.”¹⁶.

What is more, Vincendeau draws our attention to the figure of chanteuse (réaliste or otherwise) in French films of the 1930s. She states that the embedding of such performance in movies “[offers] a spectacle both within and outside the narrative, directly addressing the spectator and referring to an older entertainment form.”¹⁷ *Le Crime* also inscribes itself in this trend and Valentine, played by Florelle who had initially been a singer, takes on a role of a chanteuse. Her performance has a double meaning. On one hand, she falls under the description of theatrical actress rather than chanteuse réaliste. If, however, one makes an effort to fit her performance into the mold of *chanson réaliste*, it may shift the whole dynamics for understanding of her role.

Colin Crisp firmly categorizes Florelle as a theatrical actress:

Some of these female singers, notably Josephine Baker and Florelle, are accorded affectionate roles in which they attract audience sympathy and identification. Florelle’s songs in *Faubourg Monmartre* and *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* are cases in point. For the most part, however, female singers are implicated in negative aspects of society, such as crime, sexual misdemeanors, and suicide.¹⁸

¹⁶ Ibid, 60.

¹⁷ Ibid, 57.

¹⁸ Colin Crisp, *Genre, Myth, and Convention in the French Cinema 1921-1939* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 171.

According to Crisp's classification, Florelle's performance in *Le Crime* is to be decoded as affirmation of her empathetic femininity, as opposed to chanteuses réalistes who are morally dubious figures. He does not imply, however, that theatrical actresses have impeccable reputation. To the contrary, "both participate in that well-known disposition of the female performers to be women of easy virtue, the actress has none of the singer's tendency toward the sleazy, the squalid, and the criminal."¹⁹ Whether Florelle/Valentine has no propensity towards unlawful deeds and shady behavior is unclear. When Lange and Valentine find themselves alone in the hallway while others celebrate the prospect of a cinematic adaptation of *Arizona Jim*, Lange asks his companion what she used to do before she started her laundry business. Avoiding eye contact, Valentine asks if he really wants to know. He decides that her past is not important and it is only the present that counts. Keith Reader states that Valentine's past life as a prostitute is also hinted at in the lyrics of the song: "[...] the song Valentine has [...] sung to Lange [...] suggests that she may once have had to resort to prostitution and closes on the line: 'C'est une triste vie'."²⁰ On one hand, then, the song is the last moment of suspense before Valentine's seduction of Lange is accomplished, an intimate expression of love meant only for her lover's ears. On the other hand, it is a revelation of Valentine immoral past, made in front of all the spectators of the film.

In her analysis of the song scene, Kelley Conway leans towards stating that Florelle's star identity was not one of a realist singer, but her performance in *Le Crime* should be classified as chanson réaliste due to its allusions to the darker side of the world in which women are oppressed. Conway compares and contrasts all three female figures in the film through their relationship with prostitution.²¹ She presents Edith, Batala's secretary, as the one who just

¹⁹ Ibid, 172.

²⁰ Keith Reader, "The Circular Ruins? Frontiers, Exile and the Nation in Renoir's *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange*," *French Studies* LIV, no. 3 (July 1, 2000): 292.

²¹ Kelley Conway, *Chanteuse in the City: The Realist Singer in French Film* (Berkeley: UC Press, 2004), 125.

having been abandoned by her boss, is escorted from the train station by a stranger leading her into her future as a prostitute. Estelle, who also is a victim of Batala's abuse, barely escapes prostitution thanks to Charles who takes her in under his wings thus saving her from her moral demise. Finally, Valentine is the only one who manages to escape the life of prostitution on her own, turning into a self-made woman, and therefore she is the one who sings the song. The song's lyrics make direct references to her past as a prostitute ("de vieilles poupées/ font encore le tapin"²²), still, Valentine's light-hearted performance, full of smiles and loving glances, reaches out into a promising future.

Conway explicitly emphasizes the import of this constructed show: "[Floreille's] performance of the realist song, along with the multifaceted star image she brings to *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* works to amplify other elements of female characterization in the film, creating a film that is rather startling in its progressive representation of femininity."²³ This progressive representation is further reinforced when Lange reveals his interest in Valentine's past, but after a second of hesitation he decides it does not matter, "c'est maintenant qui compte." This moment is crucial in the development for the story, because through the dismissal of the history, Valentine escapes objectification as a *chanteuse réaliste* who can never break free from her own past.

There are also significant differences in which the camera treats Valentine and the two other women. Whereas all of them are usually depicted in two-shot configurations, Estelle and Edith appear as passive and submissive. This is especially visible when they are coupled with the dominant Batala. When Estelle is left alone with Batala in his office, the spectators see her from a high-angle shot. Estelle's face is softly lit and its close-up is accompanied by dramatic sound effects. Batala, in turn, is presented from a low-angle, sharp focus point of view. This

²² Ibid, 124.

²³ Ibid, 119.

contrast establishes a hierarchy of power between the oppressive masculine presence and the weak femininity (see fig. 2). A similar divergence of representation is established in scenes where Batala is alone with his secretary. Right before he sends Edith off to entertain one of his business partner, we can see her in a static frame, sitting in an armchair, her face softly lit and looking up at her boss who is towering over her giving her orders (see fig. 3). Although the contrast is not as striking as in the case of Estelle, the established power structure is obvious. Whenever Valentine appears on the screen, however, she is represented as equal to the person she is speaking with. These scenes are composed of static medium shots, where both participants are in the center of the frame. Even if Valentine always receives soft focus high-key lighting, it only highlights her femininity and does not diminish her empowerment (see fig. 4).

As a self-made woman, Valentine makes her own way in the world and does what it takes to succeed. The above interpretation of Valentine's performance may help us understand that she would possibly not hesitate to take advantage of her knowledge and experience and help to carry out the escape of a murderer (which Lange is in the light of the law) by manipulating the people on whom the outcome of the whole plan depends. The authorship of the story of the crime committed by Lange that I am arguing to attribute to Valentine, manifests itself not only through her working in and juggling the three popular narrative genres, Western, *faits divers* and melodrama, but also via pure invention. First, the framing narrative of the film sets up a possibility of inserting a fictitious story in its middle. Following Reader's argument, Valentine's account of the sequence of events delivered in front of the popular justice jury, is not a report of what really happened but resembles more of a dream:

The framing narrative itself is extremely brief (only seven minutes out of the film's eighty-five, most of those at the beginning), so that when we return

abruptly to it just before the ending the effect may well resemble that of waking from a dream, back into a reality the dream-work had veiled from us [...].²⁴

The dream of the murder story is dreamed by two audiences: the group of men assembled at the tavern as well as the spectators of the film.

A mental image of the events produced in the collective imagination of the jury is transposed onto the screen as a cinematic image to be watched by the audience. Both are inspired by Valentine's narrative and both rely on her words. Daniel Serceau pinpoints a reason why the imaginary image of Valentine's account can be easily mistaken for reality. It is because mental reproduction of events performed by the jury is handed to the spectators in the form of an actual continuous sequence of images: "le récit de Valentine devient l'image cinématographique pour nous spectateurs comme il est image mentale pour les consommateurs du café. [...] En ceci, la fiction cinématographique de type classique devient la simulation d'une expérience, et nous fait bénéficier du point de vue exégétique qu'elle jette sur le monde."²⁵ Along these lines, the film spectatorship has access to a much clearer image of what Valentine says really happened than the primary audience of her narrative. It is also easier for the film viewers to discern little incongruities and hints of the story's fictionality.

There is also a difference between the ways in which the framing story and the cinematographic image corresponding to the mental image of the jury are constructed. The framing narrative, including the scene in which Valentine and Lange drive up to the inn in the beginning, as well as the final scene of crossing the border on the beach, is composed of numerous point of view shots, which are not to be easily found in the story of the killing. Even though Valentine claims to be reporting her version of events, none of the shots included in the image of her story is presented from her perspective. Even the scenes in which she engages in

²⁴ Reader, "The Circular Ruins?," 295.

²⁵ Daniel Serceau, *Jean Renoir, l'Insurgé* (Paris: Le Sycomore, 1981), 64-65.

conversation with other people are presented two-shots: “in addition to the film’s profound reflexivity, there are many desubjectivized shots. Indeed, the film features relatively few point-of-view shots, including shot-reverse-shot sequences. Most conversations take place with both interlocutors in the frame.”²⁶

The desubjectivization of shots encompassing interactions applies not only to Valentine communicating with others, but also to conversations of other people. Interestingly, Valentine provides a very detailed account of events she did not witness. She seems privy to intimate exchanges of which she could not have been a part. It is true that since she was always trying to keep abreast of all current happenings at the courtyard, she might have had some of the conversations reported to her: the ones between Estelle and Charles, Lange and Batala, and others. There are, however, encounters of which she had no way of knowing, like for example the exchange between Batala and the priest, when the former was on the run. Valentine’s strategy of dealing with events that were out of reach of her perception is actually revealed in Lange’s and Estelle’s rendez-vous scene. Estelle seems incredulous and intrigued when she finds out that Lange writes about Arizona and Mexico, even though he has never been to America. She asks: “Vous n’êtes jamais allé et vous racontez tout ça, mais vous écrivez de tout, comment faites-vous?” Lange’s response is very simple: “Je ne sais pas. J’invente.” There is a possibility that Valentine gives away her secret through the words she makes Lange utter in her own story, which she invents.

The above dialog is only one of many hints at the story’s fictionality scattered around in the film. Another important instance of the absence of a reliable figure who reports real events is another desubjectivized shot, the famous 270° pan of the courtyard directly preceding the firing of the gun. The pan has been analyzed and interpreted in various ways. Bazin saw it as “the pure spatial expression of the entire *mise en scène*,” which concludes the circular

²⁶ Oeler, *A Grammar of Murder*, 115.

framing of the story, a motive later picked up by Reader.²⁷ Other scholars, like Faulkner and Davis, read the scene as a political justification of the crime by sharing the responsibility for the deed with the whole cooperative. I would like to propose yet another reading by associating the pan with Kaja Silverman's theory of suture. "Suture" is the name given to the procedures by means of which cinematic texts confer subjectivity upon their viewers."²⁸ By applying appropriate strategies, a filmmaker directs ways in which a spectator aligns her or himself with the image on the screen. One of the procedures which allow spectators to situate themselves in relations to the cinematic image is the 180° rule, and the panning shot in question undeniably goes against it, thus making it impossible for the reader to assume a personal point of view on the scene.²⁹ The way in which the director decided to present the scene renders the image unrealistic and by extension the whole murder episode can be read as phony. It does not mean that the crime did not happen, but that its representation is highly manipulated.

Moreover, this particular scene, where the camera revolves seemingly without logic instead of following Lange's footsteps, falls under the description of what Kenneth Johnson calls wandering camera. According to him, wandering camera moves not only in time and space but also in discourse: "what we witness with wandering camera is a momentary shift in emphasis from the story as something understood to be already complete, to the story in the process of being created."³⁰ This instantaneous disruption of cinematic logic may thus suggest

²⁷ Bazin, *Jean Renoir*, 46.

²⁸ Kaja Silverman, *Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 195.

²⁹ Silverman describes the rule as follows: "[The 180° rule] dictates that the camera not cover more than 180° in a single shot. This stricture means that the camera always leaves unexplored the other 180° of an implicit circle – the half of the circle which it in fact occupies. The 180° rule is predicated on the assumption that a complete camera revolution would be 'unrealistic,' defining a space larger than the 'naked eye' would normally cover." *Ibid*, 201.

³⁰ Kenneth Johnson, "The Point of View of the Wandering Camera," *Cinema Journal* 32, no. 2 (1993): 50.

that Valentine does not recount events that took place and are accomplished but that she improvises her story.

In order to further substantiate my claim that Valentine's story is heavily laced with figments of her imagination rather than it being an honest account of what really happened, I will define her function as a narrator. In "Characters and Narrators," Seymour Chatman presents two different ways to situate a cinematic narrator. The narrator can be either identified with one of the characters or with an author of a film's plot. If the moment of the recounting of the story is distanced in time from when the actual events take place, then the audience is dealing with a narrator who operates on a somewhat separate level than the character which she or he represents:

A character can literally see (perceive, conceive, etc.) what is happening in a story because he/she is in the story. A narrator can only "see" it imaginatively, or in memory if he/she is homodiegetic, that is, participated in the events of the story "back then" when they occurred. Even if the same person narrates events which he/she saw "back then," we must recognize two separate narrative beings moving under the same name - one, the narrator, who previously inhabited discourse-time-and-space, and another, the character, who inhabits story-time-and-space.³¹

Le Crime maintains a perfect division of the time and space of the discourse (what is happening now in the tavern) and the one of the story (what has happened before in the city and in the courtyard). It seems reasonable to assume that Valentine is an exemplary model of the situation described above. She does report the events leading up to the murder, relying on her memory. I wanted to suggest, however, that Valentine-as-narrator does not have to act as Valentine-as-

³¹ Seymour Chatman, "Characters and Narrators: Filter, Center, Slant, and Interest-Focus," *Poetics Today* 7, no. 2 (1986): 194.

character but Valentine-as-author exactly because her narrative is a story (of crime) within a story (of escape). When we realize that she is an omniscient narrator (she has access to events she did not witness), we must conclude that her narrative is not based on what she saw. Chatman sees the relation between the omniscient narrator and the author as follows:

As a term, “omniscient,” for all its faults, offers a can with fewer worms. Genette is quite correct, of course, when he objects to calling the author “omniscient,” because “l'auteur n'a rien a ‘savoir,’ puisqu'il invente tout”. But the narrator, quite another being, may be endowed by the author with more or less knowledge. Knowledge is not the same thing as “sight.”³²

Thus, Valentine is at the same time the narrator, but also the author who doses the self-endowment with “knowledge” of the crime and relates it to the audience in the tavern. In other words, her role in the recount of the story is one of its author rather than a character who only participates in the events.

As I have demonstrated, the role of Valentine is much more significant than one of the protagonist’s lover. She holds real power over Lange’s fate. It is because of her instrumental contribution that the jury sets him free. Nevertheless, Lange’s cause is not the only one she fights for. Granting her such high level of control over the unfolding of the narrative is emblematic of promoting women’s rights, an enterprise promoted by Groupe Octobre, which was not, as it turned out, on the Front Populaire’s agenda.³³ In final scene of the movie where, again, Western and melodrama merge, we can see both lovers run off towards the horizon,

³² Ibid, 203.

³³ As the film includes strong female characters who have their role in the functioning of the cooperative, the Groupe Octobre also has female members who contribute to the creation of the motion picture. There is a parallel that can be drawn, which may seem far-fetched but interesting nonetheless. The editing of *Le Crime* is done by two women: Marthe Huguet and Marguerite Renoir. The two *monteuses* thus had remarkable influence of how the footage was presented to the spectators, just as Valentine was controlling the final shape of the story of the murder.

possibly into the brighter future (see fig. 5). Such an ending sends a radical message that was not widely promoted in France in the 1930s. Other popular titles of the interwar period, such as *Le Quai de brumes* (Marcel Carné, 1938), *Marius* (Alexander Korda, 1931) and *Zouzou* (Marc Allégret, 1934), do not include endings which imply that a woman and a man can share the same fate. If *Le Crime* was made with the intention of suggesting to the coalition what path they should take in their political activity, that path would be one of celebration of popular justice over capitalistic oppression but also of letting women into the public sphere in the name of equality.

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Figures



fig. 1



fig. 2



fig. 3



fig. 4



fig. 5