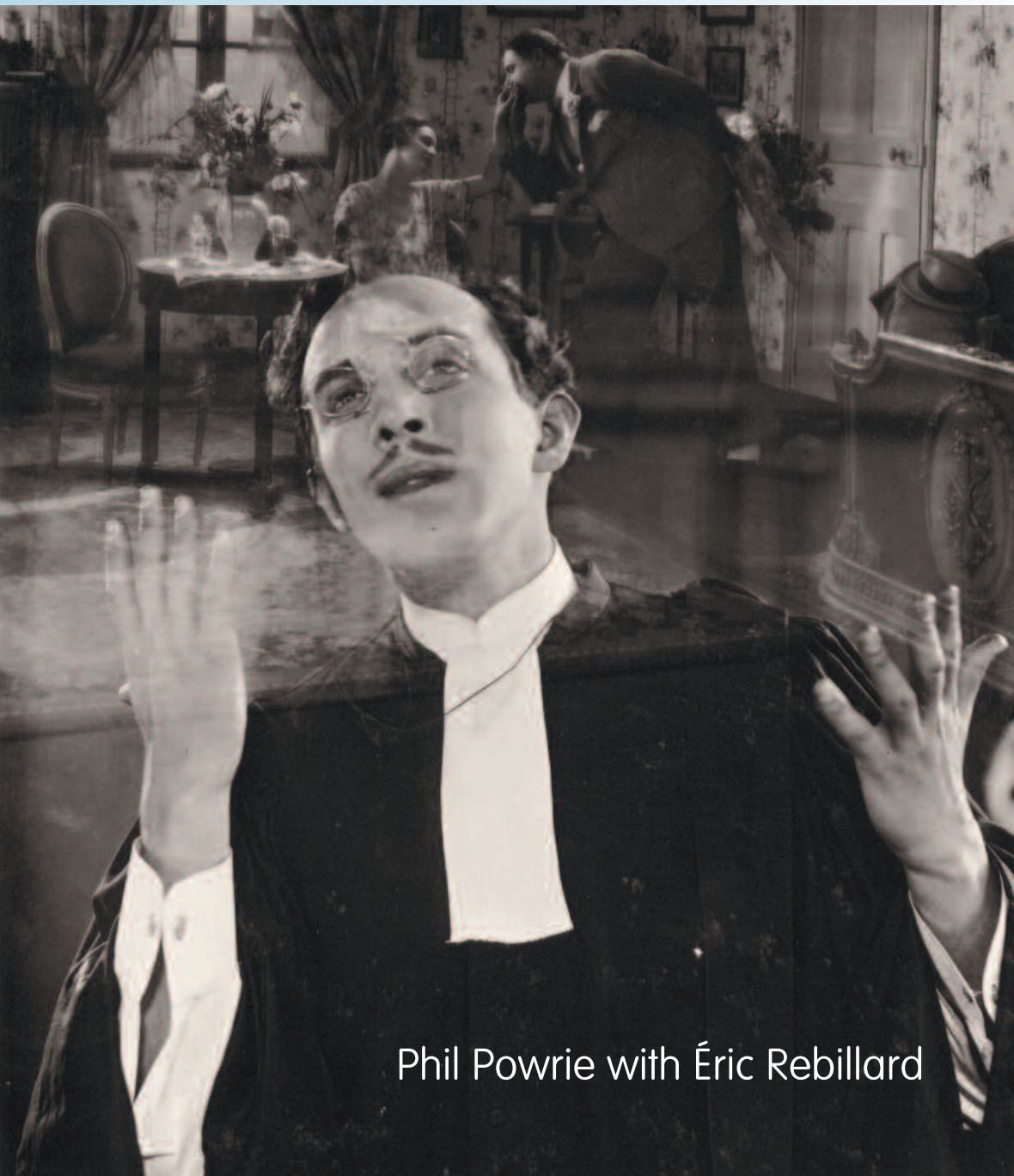


Pierre Batcheff

and Stardom in 1920s French Cinema



Phil Powrie with Éric Rebillard

Pierre Batcheff and Stardom in 1920s French Cinema

‘Focusing on a single major star, Pierre Batcheff, Phil Powrie’s new book offers a productive, alternative approach to writing the history of a crucial period of French cinema, that of the late 1920s and the transition to sound.

On the one hand, Batcheff often exemplified the *jeune premier* of commercial fiction films during the period (notably in *Le Joueur d’échecs*): handsome, seductive, well-bred, and charming. On the other, his characters’ “normality” just as often was undermined by an element of “foreignness” or uncanny “otherness” and by a behavior shaped by irony and/or self-parody.

Taking Batcheff as an iconic figure, Powrie and Rebillard’s book counters the long-held notion that such a persona differs radically from the iconic male figures of the American or German cinemas of the period, and thus challenges the all-too-common denigration or dismissal of French male stars in most histories and critical studies.’

Richard Abel, University of Michigan

*Pierre Batcheff and Stardom
in 1920s French Cinema*

Phil Powrie with Éric Rebillard

EDINBURGH UNIVERSITY PRESS

© Phil Powrie with Éric Rebillard, 2009

Edinburgh University Press Ltd
22 George Square, Edinburgh

Typeset in Garamond
by Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Stockport, Cheshire, and
printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Antony Rowe Ltd, Chippenham, Wilts

A CIP record for this book is
available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7486 2197 2 (hardback)

The right of Phil Powrie with Éric Rebillard
to be identified as authors of this work
has been asserted in accordance with
the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Contents

List of illustrations	ix
Preface	xiii
Sources	xvii
Acknowledgements	xvii
1. A short life	1
Origins and childhood (1907–22)	1
The rise of the star (1923–6)	3
From the mainstream to the avant-garde (1927–9)	8
The lacoudems (1930–2)	16
An early death (1932)	20
2. Stardom in the 1920s	27
Batcheff, the <i>jeune premier</i> , and the past	28
Batcheff and transitional masculinity	32
Batcheff and fan culture: the unwilling star	36
Batcheff, Valentino and ‘otherness’	39
Batcheff as pin-up	42
Batcheff as a surrealist star	43
3. Beginnings	51
<i>Claudine et le poussin, ou Le Temps d’aimer</i> (January 1924)	51
<i>Le Double Amour</i> (June 1925)	55
<i>Feu Mathias Pascal</i> (July 1925)	61
4. Historical reconstructions	73
<i>Destinée</i> (December 1925)	74
<i>Napoléon vu par Abel Gance</i> (April 1927)	77
<i>Le Joueur d’échecs</i> (July 1927)	84
<i>Monte-Cristo</i> (May 1929)	88

5. The lover	94
<i>Le Secret d'une mère</i> (July 1926)	94
<i>Éducation de prince</i> (June 1927)	95
<i>Le Bonheur du jour</i> (July 1927)	99
<i>La Sirène des tropiques</i> (December 1927)	101
<i>L'Île d'amour</i> (February 1928)	107
<i>Vivre</i> (July 1928)	111
<i>Le Perroquet vert</i> (October 1928)	112
6. Comedy: <i>Les Deux Timides</i> (December 1928)	115
Contemporary reception	115
Adaptation and structure	119
The trial	120
Courtship	123
The battle	128
7. Parody and the avant-garde: <i>Un Chien andalou</i> (June 1929)	135
Contemporary reception	135
Later academic commentary	140
Parody of previous films	144
Simonne Mareuil	147
8. <i>Un Chien andalou</i> : Parodying stardom	152
The slit eye	152
Dismemberment of the star: seeing behind the surface	153
Hysteria, ethnicity, costume	156
The gaze of the woman and masochism	160
Anamorphosis	162
9. Looking back	171
<i>Illusions</i> (January 1930)	172
<i>Le Roi de Paris</i> (August 1930)	174
<i>Les Amours de minuit</i> (January 1931)/ <i>Mitternachtsliebe</i> (September 1931)	175
<i>Le Rebelle</i> (August 1931)	177
<i>Baroud</i> (English version September 1932/French version November 1932)	181

10. Conclusion: uncanny bodies	191
The lost object	192
The automaton, the mannequin and the doll	195
‘Explosante-fixe’	196
Appendices	199
1. Summary biography	199
2. Interviews and star portraits	202
3. Filmscript from Knut Hamsun’s <i>Sult</i> (<i>Hunger</i> , 1890)	203
Filmography	211
Bibliography	237
Index	249

List of illustrations

Figure 1.1	Batcheff around 1925–6 (Courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris)	3
Figure 1.2	The first page of Batcheff's script for <i>Sult</i> (Collection Roche-Batcheff)	7
Figure 1.3	Denise Tual, Pierre Batcheff and the 35mm projector in their flat (Collection Roche-Batcheff)	12
Figure 1.4	Far from the studios (Photo: Élie Lotar, Collection Roche-Batcheff)	14
Figure 1.5	Denise Tual, Jacques Prévert and Pierre Batcheff at the Col de la Voza (Collection Roche-Batcheff)	18
Figure 1.6	Batcheff on the quays in Cherbourg (Collection Roche-Batcheff)	19
Figure 1.7	Batcheff on the beach during the shooting of <i>Baroud</i> (Collection Roche-Batcheff)	21
Figure 2.1	'Pierre Batcheff, who is one of the screen's best <i>jeunes premiers</i> ' (<i>Pour vous</i> , October 1929)	29
Figure 2.2	References to Batcheff in <i>Ciné-Miroir</i> 's 'On répond' column	37
Figure 2.3	Batcheff as pin-up in <i>L'Île d'amour</i> (1928)	41
Figure 2.4	'Leurs visages' (<i>Mon ciné</i> , December 1928)	45
Figure 3.1	<i>Claudine et le poussin</i> : Claude at his bedroom window (Collection Roche-Batcheff)	53
Figure 3.2	<i>Claudine et le poussin</i> : the phallic gun (Collection Roche-Batcheff)	54
Figure 3.3	<i>Claudine et le poussin</i> : the lovers by the river (Collection Roche-Batcheff)	55
Figure 3.4	<i>Autour d'un berceau</i> : Batcheff's 'ridiculous moustache' (Courtesy of the Bibliothèque du Film, Paris)	56
Figure 3.5	<i>Le Double Amour</i> : the family triangle	58
Figure 3.6	<i>Le Double Amour</i> : the inverted family triangle	58
Figure 3.7	<i>Le Double Amour</i> : Batcheff's character dominated (Courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris)	59

Figure 3.8	<i>Le Double Amour</i> : a characteristic stare into the distance (Courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris)	60
Figure 3.9	<i>Feu Mathias Pascal</i> : expressionist corridors (Courtesy of the Bibliothèque du Film, Paris)	65
Figure 3.10	<i>Feu Mathias Pascal</i> : the haunted look of Scipion the hysteric (Courtesy of the Bibliothèque du Film, Paris)	67
Figure 4.1	<i>Destinée</i> : Roland teaches Floria French (Collection Roche-Batcheff)	75
Figure 4.2	<i>Napoléon vu par Abel Gance</i> : the chess game (Courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris)	79
Figure 4.3	<i>Napoléon vu par Abel Gance</i> : the triangle on the steps of the Victims' Ball	81
Figure 4.4	<i>Napoléon vu par Abel Gance</i> : the triangle during the chess game	82
Figure 4.5	<i>Le Joueur d'échecs</i> : the confrontation. A film by Raymond Bernard (© Gaumont, 1926)	85
Figure 4.6	<i>Le Joueur d'échecs</i> : the isolated and ineffectual Serge (© Photoplay Productions)	88
Figure 4.7	<i>Monte-Cristo</i> : Albert and the pasha (Courtesy of the Bibliothèque du Film, Paris)	91
Figure 5.1	<i>Éducation de prince</i> : Cercleux takes Sacha in hand (Collection Roche-Batcheff)	96
Figure 5.2	<i>Éducation de prince</i> : Batcheff's silk shirt (Collection Roche-Batcheff)	98
Figure 5.3	<i>Éducation de prince</i> : the final whimsical shot (Collection Roche-Batcheff)	99
Figure 5.4	<i>Éducation de prince</i> : love versus duty (Collection Roche-Batcheff)	100
Figure 5.5	<i>Le Bonheur du jour</i> : Batcheff's 'simply expressed emotion' (Courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris)	101
Figure 5.6	Publicity still for <i>La Sirène des tropiques</i> (Courtesy of the Bibliothèque du Film, Paris)	103
Figure 5.7	<i>La Sirène des tropiques</i> : Papitou cares for the wounded André (Courtesy of the Bibliothèque du Film, Paris)	105
Figure 5.8	<i>La Sirène des tropiques</i> : Papitou stands over André (Courtesy of the Bibliothèque du Film, Paris)	106
Figure 5.9	<i>L'Île d'amour</i> : Bicchi learns sophistication (Collection Roche-Batcheff)	108
Figure 5.10	<i>L'Île d'amour</i> : Batcheff as pin-up (Collection Roche-Batcheff)	109

Figure 5.11	<i>L'Île d'amour</i> : Batcheff as object of the woman's gaze (Collection Roche-Batcheff)	111
Figure 6.1	<i>Les Deux Timides</i> : sequences in the film	119
Figure 6.2	<i>Les Deux Timides</i> : Frémassin evokes domestic bliss in the trial sequence (Courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris)	121
Figure 6.3	<i>Les Deux Timides</i> : Frémassin fumbles with his pince-nez (Courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris)	122
Figure 6.4	<i>Les Deux Timides</i> : Frémassin fiddles with the tassel (Courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris)	124
Figure 6.5	<i>Les Deux Timides</i> : Frémassin acts out his declaration to an empty chair (Courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris)	125
Figure 6.6	<i>Les Deux Timides</i> : Frémassin's despair that he has a rival (Courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris)	126
Figure 6.7	<i>Les Deux Timides</i> : Frémassin 'crosses the bridge' (Courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris)	127
Figure 6.8	<i>Les Deux Timides</i> : Frémassin imagines that he has conquered his rival (Courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris)	129
Figure 6.9	<i>Les Deux Timides</i> : the café sequence (Photo A. Masour, Collection Roche-Batcheff)	131
Figure 8.1	Batcheff as hysteric in <i>Un Chien andalou</i> (Courtesy of the Bibliothèque du Film, Paris)	163
Figure 9.1	<i>Les Amours de minuit</i> : strangers on a train (Collection Roche-Batcheff)	176
Figure 9.2	<i>Les Amours de minuit</i> : Pierre Batcheff and Danièle Parola (Collection Roche-Batcheff)	178
Figure 9.3	<i>Le Rebelle</i> : Pierre Batcheff as the self-absorbed scientist with a characteristic stoop, and Suzy Vernon (Collection Roche-Batcheff)	179
Figure 9.4	<i>Le Rebelle</i> : Batcheff as the effeminate hero (Collection Roche-Batcheff)	181
Figure 9.5	<i>Baroud</i> : Hamed draws his knife and prepares to kill André (Photo R. Tomatis, Collection Roche-Batcheff)	186
Figure 9.6	<i>Baroud</i> : Batcheff's look off (Collection Roche-Batcheff)	187
Figure 9.7	<i>Baroud</i> : the melancholic 'savage' (Collection Roche-Batcheff)	188

Preface

Pierre Batcheff is in all probability best known to those interested in cinema as the Man of the avant-garde classic, *Un Chien andalou* (1929), by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí. The paradoxical combination of dreamy beauty and surrealist-inspired frenzy in a provocatively nonsensical and often disturbing narrative is likely to be what most remember about him. What is much less well known is first that he played a major part in the making of the film, a fact conveniently forgotten by the film's many commentators, and, second, that he was a major star at the time of the film, while its makers were almost complete unknowns. The tables have been turned since 1929, however, and it is Batcheff who has sunk into obscurity, while the two Spaniards became in their different ways major icons of the twentieth century in film and in painting respectively.

Batcheff was one of a small group of prominent commercial stars in the 1920s. Unlike them, however, he was linked to intellectual circles, particularly the surrealists and groups surrounding poet and scriptwriter Jacques Prévert. His involvement with the avant-garde led to tensions in his film performances as he strove to balance the demands of the commercial cinema and his interest in the avant-garde film. Unlike most of his fellow stars of the 1920s, he had a strong social conscience and engaged in voluntary work, organising film projections in prisons and even in asylums. Like many intellectuals of the period (Antonin Artaud and Roger Gilbert-Lecomte amongst them), he became addicted to drugs. Striving to keep his addiction secret, he finally died of an overdose in mysterious circumstances in April 1932 – an apparent suicide – just as he was about to embark on a new career as director and scriptwriter. *Amour . . . Amour . . .* (September 1932) was directed by Robert Bibal after Batcheff's death, from a script by Jacques Prévert and Batcheff.

By the time of his death, he had made twenty-five films (including dual language versions), of varying quality, many of which he quite openly despised. Amongst them, however, there are a number of films by major silent cinema directors: Raymond Bernard, René Clair, Jean Epstein, Henri Fescourt, Abel Gance, Marcel L'Herbier. Although we shall explore all of his films, we have focused in this study on those that are now more readily available. *Un Chien*

andalou (1929), *Le Joueur d'échecs* (1927) and *La Sirène des tropiques* with Josephine Baker (1927) are currently available on DVD. In addition, a number of films have been screened in theatres or on television over the years, sometimes in a restored version: *Feu Mathias Pascal* (1925), *Napoléon vu par Abel Gance* (1927), *Les Deux Timides* (1928), *Monte-Cristo* (1929) and *Baroud* (1932). Seventeen are available for viewing in archives. That still leaves eight films which are not extant, at least to our knowledge (see the Filmography for details); to explore Batcheff's performance in context we have relied on documentary archive material for these (as well as for those that are extant, of course), as detailed below.

Considerable work has been done on French silent cinema in recent years, by Richard Abel in several ground-breaking volumes (Abel 1984, 1988, 1994), by younger researchers in the USA, and by members of the Association Française de Recherche sur le Cinéma; it is particularly useful to single out François Albera's extraordinary study of the Films Albatros, not least because Batcheff made several films with this studio (Albera 1995). This kind of work has generally been broad-sweep history, analysis of conditions of production/reception, analysis of genre and analysis of directors, rather than our focus for this study, the analysis of the stars of the period.

Star Studies is now a key component of current cinema studies. Introduced as an academic discipline by Richard Dyer at the end of the 1970s, it has since developed considerably, not least in French cinema studies when Ginette Vincendeau published a groundbreaking volume on Jean Gabin (Gauteur and Vincendeau 1993), followed by an equally important study of French stars (Vincendeau 2000); this was complemented by Guy Austin's study of French stars after 1945 (Austin 2003).¹ Susan Hayward has worked extensively on Simone Signoret (Hayward 2001, 2002, 2003; Hayward and Leahy 2000), Sarah Leahy has worked on Bardot and Signoret (Leahy 2002, 2003, 2004; Hayward and Leahy 2000), and there has been a recent collection devoted to one of the other iconic female stars, Catherine Deneuve (Downing and Harris 2007). But apart from the books by Vincendeau and Austin, neither of which focuses exclusively on male stars, and occasional journal articles (O'Shaughnessy 1994 on Belmondo; Hayes 2004 on Delon), there is as yet no major work on a male star, still less a star in the silent period.

Our study therefore sits squarely within a major direction taken by French cinema studies in the last decade; but its focus on a silent cinema star, and to some extent its focus on a male star, is novel. Vincendeau's 2000 book only covers one silent star, the comic Max Linder, to whom one of ten chapters is devoted; Austin's book is on post-1945 French stars; the 2003 Popular European Cinema Conference's focus on stars was more generally European, and did not have a single paper on a French silent cinema star. A study of

Batcheff will allow us to understand how stardom worked in the 1920s in France for a genre-crossing star. Unlike Max Linder, for example, who specialised in comedies, Batcheff worked in mainstream cinema, usually as the lover in escapist fantasies or spectacular historical reconstructions. However, he also acted in one of René Clair's comedies, *Les Deux Timides*, and in Buñuel and Dalí's *Un Chien andalou*. Batcheff's ubiquity makes him a more profitable figure to study than some of the other male leads of the period – such as André Roanne (1896–1959) or Albert Préjean (1893–1979) – with whom the film press of the time tended to compare him. He is an exemplary figure of the avant-garde, but, fascinatingly, a major star; indeed, he is one of the key male 'pin-ups' of the 1920s, with many parallels between him and Anglophone matinee idols such as Valentino and Novarro in the USA, and Novello in the UK. We shall refer to some of the work that has been done in this area, particularly with regard to Valentino, with whom Batcheff has frequently been compared (see Hansen 1986 and 1991, and Studlar 1996 for Valentino; Williams 2003 for Novello). Unlike the American stars, however, Batcheff was intimately involved in the intellectual avant-garde of his time, leading to a tension between the star as commodity, his persona moulded by the demands of the market, and the star as auteur pursuing a personal agenda. This study will tease out the tensions he exemplifies between the 'popular' and the 'intellectual' during the 1920s and early 1930s, while engaging in a star analysis whose focus is on star performance.

We begin in Chapter 1 with Batcheff's biography, where we encounter the gap between his activities as a commercial star and his gradual engagement with a variety of intellectuals in the period, most revolving around the surrealist group. This led to a sharper sense in Batcheff of what he really wanted to do: drop acting, particularly in commercial films, and move towards directing. Chapter 2 places this basic tension in the context of the film industry, and in particular the role of the *jeune premier* in French cinema in the 1920s. We chart the rapid rise but equally rapid mutation of the *jeune premier*, and suggest that Batcheff represents a particularly interesting variant of this feature of the French film industry, gesturing towards a transitional masculinity. After these two opening chapters, we treat Batcheff's films mostly in chronological order, most chapters dealing with a group of films. Chapter 3 looks at Batcheff's first three films, which set up a complex persona combining the innocence of the ephebic youth, a longstanding motif in French pictorial culture, with darker streaks of duplicity, the uncanny and hysteria, which we link to the concerns of the surrealists in the 1920s. Chapter 4 groups together Batcheff's historical reconstructions, spread over several years (1925–9). We have changed our adherence to chronology partly because he did not have a lead role in the four films in question, and partly because they

illuminate particular aspects of his image which are elaborated in his other films from this period. One aspect is his static performance, which combines with roles where he is either passive to start with, or made passive by the narrative, to elaborate a masochistic form of masculinity. Chapter 5 turns to the other films from this period where he plays the Lover. In these films, a trope that was already in evidence in previous films comes to the fore: Batcheff is 'other' or alien in a number of ways, either by his presumed nationality, or by virtue of narratives where an oppressive family situation causes him to escape. Interestingly, the last film of this group, *Le Perroquet vert*, suggests that Batcheff wished to change his image of the apparently innocent but corrupted and almost catatonic alien.

His next two films, both comic and violent in different ways, mark a significant shift not just in his star persona, but also in French cinema more generally. For that reason, we have devoted a whole chapter to *Les Deux Timides*, one of René Clair's great silent comedies, and two chapters to the film that many will remember Batcheff by, *Un Chien andalou*. These two films reprise and foreground the darker sides of Batcheff's image, characterised by the detached and troubled alien. This is more obviously the case in *Un Chien andalou*; in the two chapters devoted to this film, we review both contemporary and later views of the film, in whose creation Batcheff himself played a significant part, before considering fracture and disarticulation in the film as a function of Batcheff's star body. We pick up themes covered in earlier chapters, such as madness and masochism, and focus in on a key image little analysed previously, that of the death's-head moth, to show how anamorphosis, a preoccupation of Dalí's at the time of the film, can be profitably used to explore Batcheff's function. Batcheff's final films are a disappointment, but in terms of our study are illuminating; they show how difficult it was for him to extricate himself from the stereotypes established in his previous short career. They try to engage with some new elements for his image, but in the end, the abiding sense of Batcheff's final couple of years is, as we call it, melancholic destitution.

Our conclusion returns to surrealism, using the Freudian notion of the uncanny to tie together the various aspects of Batcheff's image that we have identified: apparent innocence underlain by brooding menace and troubled identity; an innocence bordering on a masochistic helplessness, apt to break out suddenly in spurts of activity tinged with violence; or, as we attempt to characterise it, the young lover uneasily and convulsively combined with the rebel-criminal. We finish with André Breton's notion of convulsive beauty as the most apt expression of this extraordinary star, who shot to fame in less than four years, and burnt bright at the end of one period, the silent period, in two heady years 1928 and 1929, before burning out just at the time when the industry was turning to sound.

Sources

Much of our archive work is based on the popular film press of the period, available in particular in the Département des Arts et Spectacles at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. Sources include the following: *Cinéa-Ciné pour tous*, *Cinémagazine*, *Ciné-Miroir*, *Cinémonde*, *Mon ciné*, *Mon film* and *Pour vous*. This material has been augmented by documentation from an extensive private archive held by the only surviving relative of Batcheff: his niece, Madame Claude Roche. The biography of Batcheff relies on the same sources, and on material from the family, mainly Claude Roche and Batcheff's wife, Denise Tual. We have indicated both in the biography outlined in Chapter 1 and in the summary biography in the Appendices the months when particular films were being shot. Sometimes it is apparent from details of location publicity exactly when and for what Batcheff was available. In most cases, however, we have had to piece together a broad time-frame for the shooting of films, and it is clear that Batcheff would not have been shooting throughout the whole of the period concerned.

Acknowledgements

Our study is the culmination of a project begun by the two authors in 1999 and which led to a British Academy-supported paper on Pierre Batcheff at the Buñuel conference held in London in 2000. This led to a publication (Powrie and Rebillard 2004), from which this book has grown, bringing together a longstanding interest in Batcheff on the part of both authors. Éric Rebillard acted as principal researcher of archive material, and conducted indispensable interviews with members of Batcheff's family (Denise Tual and Claude Roche). Phil Powrie is responsible for the architecture of the project and the drafting of the text, which both authors have then extensively revised.

The book contains brief extracts from previously published work by Powrie in the fields of surrealism, and cinema and gender studies:

- 'Masculinity in the Shadow of the Slashed Eye: Surrealist Film Criticism at the Crossroads', *Screen* 39:2 (Summer 1998), pp. 153–63 (critical accounts of *Un Chien andalou* from the 1940s to the 1980s).
- 'The God, the King, the Fool and ∅∅: The Oedipal Trajectory in the Films of Beineix', *Gender in the French Cinema*, edited by A. Hughes and J. Williams (Oxford: Berg, 2001), pp. 195–208 (theoretical considerations on anamorphosis).
- 'Of Suits and Men in the Films of Luc Besson', in *The Films of Luc Besson: Master of Spectacle*, edited by Susan Hayward and Phil Powrie (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 75–89 (theoretical considerations on the male suit).

Chapter 3 includes a reworked version of an article published by Phil Powrie with Éric Rebillard, ‘Marcel L’Herbier au carrefour des avant-gardes: *Feu Mathias Pascal* et le dédoublement’, in *Marcel L’Herbier: l’art du cinéma*, edited by Laurent Véray (Paris: Association Française de Recherche sur l’Histoire du Cinéma, 2008, 79–90). An extended version of the section on *La Sirène des tropiques* was given as a paper at two conferences in 2008: the eighth annual Studies in French Cinema conference at the Institut Français, London; and the fifth Women and the Silent Screen conference in Stockholm. Parts of Chapter 2 and the Conclusion were given as a plenary paper at the ninth European Cinema Research Forum in Dublin in 2008.

We would like to thank the following: the British Academy for financial support in archival research, leading to the Buñuel conference paper mentioned above; Claude Roche for her readiness to share her archives on Batcheff with us, and for her agreement that we could use many of the photographs from her collection to illustrate this book; Kevin Brownlow for material on *Destinée*, including the loan of an indispensable 17.5mm copy of the film, the only extant version as far as we know; Marie-Ange L’Herbier for access to her father’s archive; Sarah Leahy for her sympathetic reading of the final draft of the book; the Robinson Library, Newcastle University, for their help in obtaining a wide range of archival material; Éric Le Roy from the Centre National de la Cinématographie for material on Donatien; Robert Short for material on *Un Chien andalou*; the viewing services of the British Film Institute (London), the Centre National de la Cinématographie (Paris), the Cinémathèque Française (Paris), the Cinémathèque Royale de Belgique, the Forum des Images (Paris); and Sarah Edwards, our editor at Edinburgh University Press, who never lost faith in our ability to complete the project.

Particular thanks go to Richard Abel whose work on early French cinema is a constant source of inspiration, and to whom all of us who have an interest in early and silent French cinema are deeply indebted.

Phil Powrie and Éric Rebillard
January 2008

Note

1. We are referring here and below to academic work on stars rather than popular star biographies, of which there are many. These are often useful secondary material for basic historical data and for framing the reception of stars, but of little use in terms of the close analysis of star performance within the films themselves.

A short life

‘C’est ça, le cinéma.’
(Batcheff) me répondit très sèchement:
‘C’est votre cinéma, ce n’est pas le mien.’
(Buñuel 1982: 109; on *La Sirène des tropiques*)

‘Well, I guess that’s the movies,’ I remarked.
‘That’s *your* movie,’ (Batcheff) replied drily, ‘not mine.’
(Buñuel 1984: 90)

Pierre Batcheff was labelled the best French actor of the period 1925–9 by Georges Sadoul in 1975 (Sadoul 1975: 106). He was one of the foremost *jeunes premiers* of the 1920s, a term normally taken to refer to handsome young actors who played young lover roles. His biography is striking for his rapid rise to stardom and the fact that he was, unlike many of his peers, an unwilling star. He considered the majority of the films he acted in to be no more than hack work, and longed to become a director. This was no doubt partly because his wife-to-be, Denise Piazza (later Tual), introduced him to a number of intellectuals in the mid-1920s; but his desire to be more than just a commercial star increased following *Un Chien andalou*. He met Luis Buñuel on the set of a film he made with Josephine Baker in 1927, and collaborated closely with him for *Un Chien andalou*. Not long afterwards, he met Jacques Prévert and his entourage, with whom he planned screenplays for films that he might direct. In what follows, we will outline the major elements of his life as an unwilling star.

ORIGINS AND CHILDHOOD (1907–22)

Pierre Batcheff’s mother, Maria Renter, was from Estonia. A woman of great beauty, she had a very strong personality, and was involved in early protests against the Tsar. She was part of a large family, most of which would sadly disappear during the Stalin era. In 1905, she married a Russian businessman by the name of Mikhaïl Petrovitch Batcheff, much older than her and from Oranienbaum, near Saint Petersburg. The nature of his business is unclear,

except that it required frequent travelling. Denise Tual reports in her autobiography that he was Jewish (Tual 1987: 86).

Pierre Batcheff himself was born Benjamin Batcheff in Harbin, in Manchuria (where his father had gone on business for a couple of years) on either 22 or 23 June 1907.¹ He took the name Pierre from his father only later, when he started in the cinema. Batcheff had an elder sister, Sophie (called Sonia), born on 27 July 1905 in Saint Petersburg.

The family did not stay long in Harbin, moving to Riga and then back to Saint Petersburg. When war broke out in the summer of 1914, the mother and children were on their annual holiday in Switzerland, where they subsequently stayed – on the father's recommendation, as he assumed it was a safer place for them to be – first in Lausanne, and then in Geneva. The father kept travelling between Russia and Switzerland, but around 1917 he went bankrupt in the turmoil surrounding the Russian revolution, and the family found itself in reduced circumstances. They had to move to cheaper accommodation, and Batcheff's mother returned to her occupation as a nurse.

Batcheff himself took on bit parts in Georges Pitoëff's theatre company in Geneva. Later interviews tell us that he acted in *Hamlet* amongst other plays, but, as he ironically put it, 'je jouais les valets de chambre' ('I played valet roles'; Sannier 1930: 665). He went to school in the Collège Calvin in Geneva's old town from 1919 to 1921 (the same school as the film actor Michel Simon), where he did well (sixth out of thirty boys, according to the college archives and interviews with one of his classmates), leaving in mid-June before the 1921 end-of-year exams to go to Paris with his mother and sister.

It is not known why the family moved to Paris. The father did not follow them, and times were hard. They were soon joined by Batcheff's aunt, who had managed to escape from Russia. Batcheff found himself the only male surrounded by three females – his mother, his sister and his aunt – for whom Batcheff was their only support and the centre of all attention.

Batcheff began his acting career in Paris at the age of fifteen, playing Apollo in *La Nuit des muses* by Robert de Jarville, which opened on 22 December 1922 in the Théâtre de la Potinière on the occasion of the 112th anniversary of the birth of the Romantic playwright Alfred de Musset. He also played bit parts for a small local theatre near Pigalle, the Comédie Mondaine. His theatrical work was in all probability undertaken to pay for drama lessons.

From the very start he knew that he wanted to be in the cinema, and in 1922–3 he was moving around the studios, starting at a low level, helping on the sets as a stage-hand or painter, and then as an extra (Bernard-Derosne 1929: 16; Mital 1931: 6). But his looks were so exceptional that very quickly he was noticed by a director who was looking for someone very young for his next film.



Figure 1.1 Batcheff around 1925–6 (Courtesy of the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris)

THE RISE OF THE STAR (1923–6)

In the summer of 1923, Batcheff was shooting his first film, *Claudine et le poussin*, at the Château de Troissereux near Beauvais, in which he plays Claude de Puygiron, the inexperienced lover of a rather more experienced female

artiste. The film, described as a mixture of sadness and gaiety,² was premiered on 15 January 1924 at Le Select (8, avenue de Clichy), to considerable interest. More than fifty cinemas rented it for its general release in March (*Cinématographie française* 1924a), and it was later distributed in the USA under the title *Baby Boy*.³ Later that year, in May–June, he was shooting *Princesse Lulu* – in which he plays Prince Raoul, a young lover and foil to the villain played by the film’s director, Donatien – near Geneva, as well as in Montreux and Lausanne (Hennard 1924: 3–4), before returning to France in July for the remainder of the shoot.

Marcel L’Herbier was one of the major figures of French cinema during the 1920s, with a reputation for a highly aestheticised art cinema, thanks to *Eldorado* (1921) and *L’Inhumaine* (1924). It is unclear how Marcel L’Herbier came to hear of Batcheff for the small role he plays in *Feu Mathias Pascal*, made for Films Albatros, a studio run by Russian émigrés. L’Herbier may well have seen Batcheff’s first film, *Claudine et le poussin*; in addition, he knew Georges Pitoëff well,⁴ and it may be Pitoëff who alerted him to Batcheff’s emerging talent. Contemporaries remarked on the close resemblance between L’Herbier and Batcheff, and this may have been an additional and deeper motivating factor, particularly when we consider that L’Herbier and another prominent *jeune premier* in much the same mould as Batcheff, Jaque Catelain, worked closely together during the 1920s.⁵ Be that as it may, from that date, L’Herbier appears to have taken Batcheff under his wing to some extent, and helped him obtain a foothold in the cinema world.

Batcheff was a late addition to *Feu Mathias Pascal*. The first shooting script⁶ does not have his character, Scipion, the slightly deranged brother of the villain, and the various lists of actors in the film press do not mention him until a very late stage of the production.⁷ By that time, he had already been working on another film, *Autour d’un berceau*, signalled in the film press in late December 1924, and completed at about the same time that Batcheff seems to have been working on *Feu Mathias Pascal* with L’Herbier, in February 1925. In *Autour d’un berceau*, he plays Pierre de Sombierre, the suave gambling friend of the hero, who steals money and runs away, thus causing all sorts of problems for the hero. His aristocratic-sounding name recalls that of his first film, and to some extent set his persona as an elegant upper-class lover, often with a tragic flaw.

While Batcheff was working on these two films, another film with Albatros was announced in February, by the well-known filmmaker Jean Epstein: *Le Double Amour*. In this film, Batcheff plays Jacques Maresco, the gambler son of a mother played by Natalie Lissenko. The film was made in a very short space of time, between March and mid-April (Ploquin 1925: 12), and was premiered

a month before *Feu Mathias Pascal*, the reason for this being that L'Herbier had additional scenes to shoot as late as May (*Cinéa* 1925a: 16–17). As a result, Batcheff had his first magazine cover, as L'Herbier's Scipion, for *Mon ciné*, on 30 April 1925, but also with mention of Epstein's film. This placed Batcheff firmly in the public gaze, especially given the stature of Epstein and L'Herbier in the film industry.

Destinée, Batcheff's first historical reconstruction, was announced in that same month of April 1925, directed by another major figure, Henry Roussel. Batcheff played yet another aristocratic lover role, that of Roland de Reuffize, an officer in Napoleon's army. Shooting started in mid-May, the main exteriors being located in the South of France (Avignon, Arles, Nice and Marseille) in June and July; further exteriors were shot in various locations in Paris, such as Palais-Royal, the interiors being shot at the Éclair studios, in Épinay, between July and November.

Not surprisingly, given that much of the film was shot in the South of France, it was a French regional newspaper that ran the first major article on Batcheff at the end of June 1925 (see Appendices). It is significant that one of the few personal traits evoked in this article is one which will mark his persona in the years to come: melancholy. This film appears to be the first one to elicit the term *jeune premier* with regard to him, as well as epithets that were to remain with him throughout his career: elegant and charming (*Cinématographie française* 1925e: 26).

In January 1926, Batcheff was making *Le Secret d'une mère* in the studios at Saint-Laurent-du-Var, with exteriors in Rome; he played the role of a son abandoned by his mother, but who eventually forgives her after a painful moral tussle. This was followed by a film by another major filmmaker of the period, Raymond Bernard, whose *Le Joueur d'échecs* was being made in Joinville's Réservoirs studios. Batcheff was once again cast in the role of the aristocratic lover, this time Russian: Prince Serge Oblonoff. This film seems to be the one which made him a star; an interview piece from 1931 says that in this film, Batcheff 'sut donner à son personnage un tel relief, qu'il se détacha de l'ensemble' ('managed to create such a convincing character that he stood out from the rest'; Mital 1931: 6). The sudden celebrity occasioned by roles in films by three major filmmakers – L'Herbier, Epstein and Bernard – led to the beginning of fan mail.⁸

Meanwhile, Gance's epic *Napoléon* continued, shooting having started back in January 1925. Batcheff's role was that of General Hoche; one of his few scenes in this film was the 'Bal des victimes', which we analyse in Chapter 4. The film press tells us that shooting for this scene took place in the Billancourt studios in July 1926 (*Cinématographie française* 1926a: 23), even though Batcheff is not mentioned, and had not been mentioned previously as being engaged

for the film (the first mention of him in relation to this film is almost at the end of shooting, in the 2 September issue of *Mon ciné*).

The year 1926 was an important one for Batcheff's private life, as he met Denise Piazza, daughter of Henri Piazza, founding director of the well-known Éditions d'art, that specialised in deluxe editions (she later married Roland Tual, at the time a surrealist sympathiser and later a film producer, publishing her autobiography under that surname). She had first seen Batcheff in passing on a location shoot for *Le Joueur d'échecs* near Barbizon, where she lived, and it was love at first sight. She arranged a meeting subsequently on the set of a film,⁹ where Batcheff could not speak with her as arc lights had made his eyes stream with tears. They met three days later, and Tual's description of Batcheff is worth quoting extensively for the insights it gives us into his character:

(J'étais) stupéfaite et subjuguée à la fois par sa beauté qui venait de l'intérieur, sorte de magnétisme qui comptait plus encore que ses traits (. . .) Obsédé par l'idée de faire un jour de la mise en scène, il n'aimait pas le métier d'acteur, qu'il considérait comme une véritable prostitution. Il ne se reconnaissait pas de talent comme interprète, et se demandait pourquoi il avait tant de succès. Il haïssait l'idée de s'exhiber comme un portemanteau. Il écrivait des scénarios, mais autour de lui, personne à qui lire ses écrits. Acteur, il n'était pas pris au sérieux comme écrivain, et s'en désolait. Son âme slave le poussait au désespoir. À vingt et un ans – il avait débuté à quinze ans – il se trouvait très vieux, il n'avait pas le temps d'attendre, ayant derrière lui une carrière de films alimentaires qu'il détestait, avec des partenaires impossibles, vulgaires. En réalité il cherchait un scénario qui lui offrirait un rôle plus intéressant que ceux de jeune premier fade et prétentieux dans lesquels on l'enfermait. (Tual 1987: 88–9)

(I was astounded and enthralled by his beauty which came from the inside, a kind of magnetism which was even stronger than his good looks (. . .) Obsessed by the idea that he might one day direct films, he didn't like acting, which he considered to be tantamount to prostitution. He didn't think he had any talent, and couldn't understand why he had so much success. He hated the idea of exhibiting himself like a coat stand. He wrote screenplays, but he had no one around him who would read them. As an actor no one took his writing seriously, which filled him with chagrin. His Slav soul led him to despair. At the age of twenty-one – he had started acting at fifteen – he thought himself old, he didn't have the time to wait, with nothing but bread-and-butter films that he hated to his credit, with impossibly vulgar co-stars. What he was really looking for was a story that would give him a role somewhat more interesting than the insipid and pretentious *jeune premier* roles in which he felt imprisoned.)

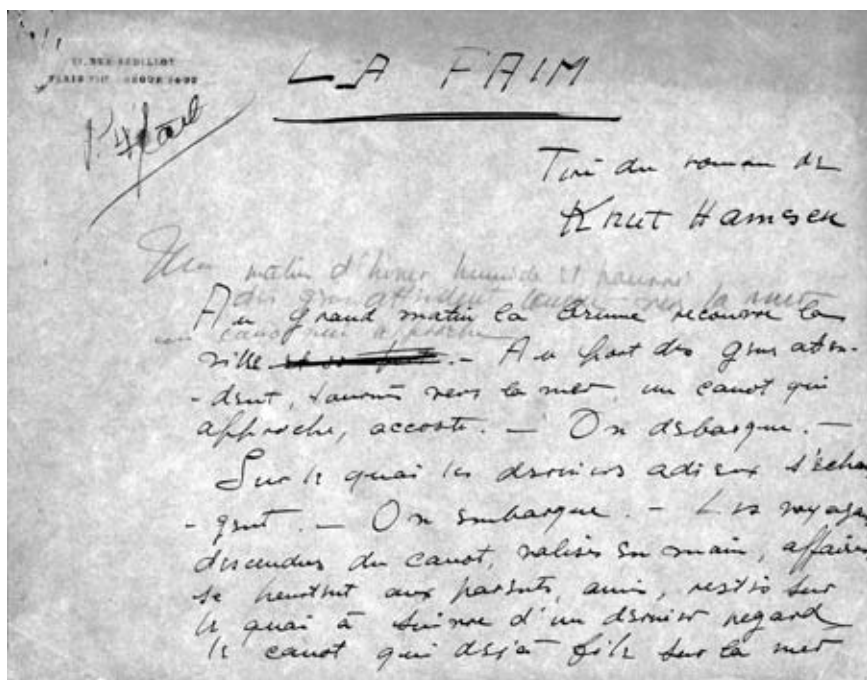


Figure 1.2 The first page of Batcheff's script for *Sult* (Collection Roche-Batcheff)

Tual at the time was already married, to Camoin, an antique dealer, and abruptly decided to leave her husband, gradually moving in with Batcheff.¹⁰ She was to have a key influence in his life as she introduced him to the avant-garde and the surrealists. For example, Batcheff met and became friend with poets Robert Desnos and Paul Éluard, and with composer Igor Markevitch. Tual explains how she talked to him about *Sult* (*Hunger*, 1890), a novel by Knut Hamsun (1859–1952) about alienation and the descent into madness. Batcheff subsequently read the novel and drafted a screenplay.

She and Batcheff were invited to visit Rex Ingram in Nice in 1926; Ingram was looking to launch another Latin lover after Rudolph Valentino and Ramon Novarro, and tried to persuade Batcheff to take on the role of a Berber. Batcheff laughed at the idea and decided against it in 1926, although he was to take it on five years later for his last film, *Baroud*, after his attempt at becoming a director failed.

Éducation de prince, directed by Henri Diamant-Berger, was announced in October, Batcheff's role as Sacha, the European prince who needs 'educating' and who falls for a Parisian dancer, not being announced until December. There is no doubt Batcheff was happy being cast with Edna Purviance,

Chaplin's leading actress, Chaplin being one of his idols. In November, he briefly substituted for Jaque Catelain who had fallen ill while making *Le Diable au cœur* (1928) for Marcel L'Herbier; Catelain appears to have recovered sufficiently quickly, as Batcheff is not credited for this film.

Meanwhile, he acted in a play at the Théâtre Montmartre, *La Comédie du bonheur*,¹¹ by the well-known Russian playwright Nicolas Evreinoff (1879–1953).¹² The play was staged by one of his co-actors in *Le Joueur d'échecs*, Charles Dullin. Dullin was a theatre director; he had grouped a small number of actors around him, known as 'l'Atelier' (workshop), amongst them Antonin Artaud. The play ran for 250 performances, from November 1926 to May 1927. In the play, Evreinoff used the device of a company of actors sent out into 'real life' to perform the parts chosen by their director; Batcheff played the part of the *jeune premier* of the company. He did not enjoy his part (interview with Denise Tual, 1994), getting mixed reviews. Some commented favourably: 'Il danse farouchement' ('He dances fiercely'; *Presse* 1926). But he was still too used to the silent screen, and many complained that he could not be heard: 'Il parlait bas, si bas, qu'à plusieurs reprises on dut lui crier "Plus haut, plus haut"' ('He was speaking low, so low, that several times people shouted "louder, louder"'); *Paris-midi* 1926).

FROM THE MAINSTREAM TO THE AVANT-GARDE (1927–9)

The year 1927 was tiring for Batcheff from the start. Before Christmas 1926, Diamant-Berger's company had gone on location to the old town of Pérouges near Lyon. The company was soon back in Paris, and the film press reported that Diamant-Berger had erected lights in such a way that he could shoot *Éducation de prince* night and day.¹³ The film was also the first to be made in Natan's new studios in rue Francœur, inaugurated by a visit from the Minister for War, Paul Painlevé, at the end of January, while the film was being made. No sooner was shooting for this film finished than Batcheff was back in the studios at Épinay for Gaston Ravel's *Le Bonheur du jour*, followed by location shooting in Nice during the course of April. In a story which recalled *Le Secret d'une mère*, Batcheff was the lead as Jean Plessiers de Chavignac, a son from an aristocratic family (as his name once more suggests) who thinks he is illegitimate.

In July, shooting started on two films in which Batcheff was again the male lead, although refreshingly not aristocratic: *La Sirène des tropiques*, as the engineer André Berval, the young lover playing opposite Josephine Baker; and *L'Île d'Amour* (called *Bicchì* until the end of shooting), where he plays a local Corsican boy who falls in love with an American heiress, who eventually makes him presentable in polite society. The latter film once again took him to Nice, and then beyond to Corsica.

Batcheff, in need of money, had decided to act opposite Josephine Baker in her first feature film since her success on stage in *La Revue Nègre* in 1925. Tual recounts the famous tantrums of the American star: ‘Insupportable, elle faisait des caprices, piétinait les colliers de verroterie qui lui servaient de cache-sexe, exigeant une cape de chinchilla sans laquelle elle refusait de tourner. Pierre assistait impassible à ses scènes, pendant qu’un jeune assistant stagiaire se précipitait pour ramasser les fausses perles’ (‘She was unbearably capricious, stamping on her glass necklace G-string, demanding a chinchilla cape without which she refused to act. Pierre watched impassively as a young assistant rushed to pick up the false pearls’; Tual 1987: 98–9). Baker was no doubt uppermost in Batcheff’s mind when he later commented dismissively on screen partners, emphasising the disjunction he felt with at least some of his co-stars: ‘Être acteur, c’est exprimer devant l’appareil de prise de vues toute la poésie latente que l’on sent en soi. Mais comment y parvenir si l’actrice, de son côté, a un jeu sans poésie, un jeu banal?’ (‘Being an actor is expressing for the camera all the latent poetry you feel inside yourself. But how can you do that if the actress on her side acts without poetry, in a banal way?’; Doré 1929a: 183).

It was while making this film that Batcheff met Buñuel, who was an assistant director, and began talking about a collaboration which was eventually to become *Un Chien andalou*, a radical departure from the kind of film they were both engaged in, the kind of film that Batcheff increasingly despised, as reported in the exchange between him and Buñuel in the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter. According to Tual, Batcheff accompanied Buñuel to meetings of the surrealist group (Tual 1987: 99).

In September, Batcheff was back in Natan’s studios, where both *La Sirène des tropiques* and *L’Île d’amour* were being made at the same time.¹⁴ Shooting for *L’Île d’amour* finished towards the end of October, *La Sirène des tropiques* in November, although it is likely that Batcheff was no longer involved by this time. The end of the year finished on a high note, with Batcheff featuring alongside Edna Purviance, his co-star in *Éducation de prince*, on the cover of the 23 December issue of *Ciné-Miroir*, although any pleasure he may have felt might well have been mitigated by the fact that Josephine Baker made the cover of both *Cinémagazine* and *Ciné-Miroir* two weeks later.

The year 1928 was significant for the release of Batcheff’s first comedy: one of his best films, René Clair’s *Les Deux Timides*. The year began under a cloud, however, with the suicide of Batcheff’s partner in the as yet unreleased *L’Île d’amour*, Claude France. Aged 33 and unhappy in love, she had gassed herself, according to the suicide note she left behind (Dupont 1928: 59–60). The film was as a result released without a press showing, apparently to capitalise on the publicity surrounding France’s death. The same month, Batcheff began shooting *Le Perroquet vert* at Natan’s studios, with exteriors the