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The Film *Madame A Des Envies* (Alice Guy 1906) Through the Prism of the Visual Culture of the Parisian Belle Époque: an Analytical Proposal

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Early cinema employed extensive use of fixed typologies of characters, as evidenced by the constant presence of highly clichéd roles. The construction of female subjects especially depended upon this mode of representation, attesting to a patriarchal vision within the then-nascent medium of film. The recurrent use of easily recognizable 'feminine' traits more often than not reinforced male dominant norms. However, gender typologies cannot always be seen in a systematically pejorative light, as being either simplifying or rigid. They are also a fundamental part of our cognitive structure, allowing us to grasp complex information coming from our environment. The critical study of typologies within early cinema makes it possible to understand the specificities of this cinematographic period, but also the creation and deconstruction of gender clichés of a given era by means of the Seventh Art whose rules were yet to be codified. What happens when the first female director, Alice Guy, tackles gender clichés? This presentation aims to focus on the development and dismantling of the belief at the beginning of the 20th century that pregnant women have cravings which they cannot resist by analyzing *Madame a des envies* (1906). The goal of this essay is to demonstrate how particular of a film *Madame* is in French cinema, because it shows the sexual desires of a pregnant woman, thus creating a new character within Early cinema. I will begin the analysis by illustrating the *cliché* in itself: the fact of having cravings during pregnancy, its history, and sociological issues in the French Belle Époque. Finally I will talk about how Alice Guy makes fun of the cliché by exaggerating all of its elements, while fixing this film in the heart of the fin-de-siècle visual environment.

Keywords: silent cinema, intermediality, Belle Époque, Alice Guy, pregnancy, sexuality

Alice Guy (1873-1968), who began her career as a secretary at the Établissements Gaumont in 1895, is one of the first female film director, producer, and studio manager in history (Lacassin; Slide; Bachy; McMahan). It is our hypothesis that she made her first fiction film, *La Fée aux Choux*, in 1896, as well as one of the first narrative films featuring only black actors, *A Fool and His Money*, in 1912. She participated in the creation of the Gaumont film style and made or directed about one hundred and fifty sound films with the chronophone, a sound synchronization tool. She pursued a career in the United States from 1910 to 1922, opening her own studios called the Solax Company, before being forced out of the film business following the closure of the studios. Despite the importance of these contributions, she has been forgotten by the public and most film historians. If fifty years after her death Alice Guy seems to be arousing new interest, as an ever-

increasing number of publications about her show (Simon; Gianati; Green; Catel; Gaines), her career leads to numerous questions mainly dealing with her French years (1895-1907). It is necessary today to review her films to understand their importance in film history, as Alice Guy made modern use of narrative continuity and had a satirical view of her time. With this article I aim to analyze one of the first films to cinematically depict a pregnant woman: *Madame a des envies* (Madame's Cravings) made by Alice Guy in 1906.¹ This film is unusual not only for its technical features, but also for its depiction of maternity, which is the antithesis of the Parisian fin-de-siècle image of pregnant women. I will highlight the technical and sociological particularities of the film, before focusing on the caricatural representation of motherhood and cravings seen through this medium in its cultural, artistic, and geo-political context.

***Madame A Des Envies* (1906), Cliché and Symbolic Significance**

Madame a des envies is a film whose story centers on the popular belief that pregnant women are incapable of resisting their cravings. The story is simple enough: a pregnant woman walking down the street cannot help stealing food or objects from people she meets: a little girl's lollipop, a glass of absinthe on a bistro table, a beggar's fish, and a peddler's pipe. After the thefts, she tastes the objects on camera in a series of medium-length shots in front of a wall, before giving birth in a cabbage patch. I will come back to this last aspect later, but it is already interesting to note that the cabbage field motif is a recurrent one in Alice Guy's work, which she uses at least three times (In *La Fée aux Choux*, 1900, *Sage-femme de première classe*, 1902, and *Madame a des envies*, 1906). Moreover, Madame is followed on her pilgrimage by her husband, who drags a cradle with their first-born as best as he can. At the end of the film, he is the one who picks up the newborn from a cabbage. How does the film *Madame a des envies* help reinvent the femininity of pregnancy? How does the character of Madame break with a certain tradition of representing pregnant women? While the film has already been analyzed in some previous research, particularly in relation to the female gaze (McMahan; Brey), the contextual social-cultural particularities and filmic characteristics have yet to be grasped. I will start by looking at the belief itself, namely the fact of having urges during pregnancy. Then, I will look at how Alice Guy mocks the cliché by exaggerating all of its elements, while inscribing this film at the heart of the fin-de-siècle visual environment.

¹ The film lasts four minutes 30 seconds (102 meters of film). We have no information about the actors or technical crew, which is typical of this early cinematic period. It can be viewed on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gOHQOJaHTXo>. We are well aware that the film has not been attributed to Alice Guy by the GP Archives since June 2024 (https://gparchives.com/index.php?urlaction=doc&id_doc=308323&rang=2, last access in July 2024). The film *Madame a des envies* is thus currently without a director ("unknown"). However, our own doctoral research leads us to attribute this film to Alice Guy, who was then the head of the cinematography department at Gaumont.

Let's start by defining and analyzing the prejudice that pregnant women can be troubled by strong cravings, especially for food (like strawberries, in the common imagination). This belief is not new, but it has undergone a strong evolution over the centuries. In fact, the first references are to be found in Aristotle, Pliny, and it was commonly accepted by physicians during the 17th century (Pancino 161). Two notions are important here. The first one is that pregnancy is said to cause mood disorders in women, responsible for an appetite for unusual things, such as coal or earth. The second is that the imagination of mothers-to-be has the power to mark the fetus' body. This notion explains the importance of satisfying the wishes of pregnant women so as not to risk altering the body of the unborn child (Coste 519-520). This belief then seems to spread orally during the Middle Ages, before being theorized again during the 14th and 15th centuries (Albertus Magnus, Matteo Palmieri). For the authors, refusing to respond to a pregnant woman's cravings could put her in mortal danger and cause her to lose the pregnancy (Magnus 63-64). Moreover, it was thought that if a craving was not satisfied, a permanent mark of the desired thing would appear on the child's body. This was known as "craving" (*envie*). It is interesting to note that this belief originated in scientific circles: it was philosophers, doctors and scientists who established that women could, by force of imagination, mark the fetus with a sign representing the thing desired during pregnancy. Little by little, this belief was rejected by medical circles (Coste 524), until it came to symbolize the ridiculous nonsense believed by the common people. Indeed, in the middle of the 19th century, Gustave Witkowski, in his *Histoire des accouchements chez tous les peuples*, speaks of influence of the imagination:

La grossesse peut réellement apporter dans les facultés affectives et intellectuelles de la femme des troubles plus ou moins sensibles ; il faut néanmoins reconnaître que ces perturbations psychiques sont beaucoup plus rares qu'on ne le croit communément. L'idée fort accréditée qu'il ne faut pas contrarier les désirs ou *envies* des femmes enceintes, contribue pour beaucoup à les faire naître. Mauvaise excuse pour toutes celles qui profitent de cette croyance populaire pour remonter leur garde-robe, satisfaire leurs goûts luxueux et même commettre des vols ou des crimes !² (187-188)

He adds that these prejudices are born in the brains of women, who are weaker than men:

Le terrain le plus propre au développement du préjugé est, sans contredit, le cerveau d'une femme : tendance au merveilleux, au mensonge même, ignorance, présomption, obstination, tout favorise en elle l'éclosion de cette plante tenace. Parasite aussi difficile à extirper de

² "Pregnancy can indeed bring about disturbances of varying degrees of sensitivity in a woman's emotional and intellectual faculties; it must be acknowledged, however, that these psychic disturbances are much rarer than is commonly believed. The widely-held belief that pregnant women's desires and desires should not be interfered with is a major contributory factor. It is a poor excuse for women to take advantage of this popular belief to improve their wardrobe, satisfy their luxurious tastes and even commit theft or crime!"

l'esprit féminin que le chiendent d'un champ ! [...] Dès lors, est-il utile d'ajouter que le nombre des préjugés relatifs à la grossesse et à l'accouchement est presque infini³ (171).

Witkowski thus accuses women of believing and spreading this belief in order to justify material desires and even crimes. This misogynist argument developed and culminated in the heart of the 19th century, accusing women of perpetuating the belief due to weakness of mind, but also out of materialistic self-interest⁴. In other words, we are witnessing a complete intellectual shift: as Claudia Pancino sums it up:

Ce sont en effet des auteurs du dix-huitième siècle qui répètent que les premières traces de cette croyance "*se perdent dans la nuit des temps*", que "*la croyance a toujours existé*" et que "*les femmes y ont toujours cru*". Pourtant, à un examen approfondi de l'histoire de la croyance, il résulte plutôt qu'elle n'apparaît pas avant le XV^e siècle et, fait encore plus important, qu'elle se présente à cette époque dans un milieu culturel savant⁵ (155).

Around 1870, science turned its back on maternal desires, which became a folkloric notion belonging to the lower classes. Yet this belief was born at the heart of medical knowledge, in an attempt to reduce the mysteries and complexities of pregnancy that eluded the male experience. Nineteenth-century scientists seem completely unaware that Montaigne or Hippocrates believed in the power of the maternal imagination. It is interesting to note, despite the complexity of the spread of this prejudice, the importance given to women's desires. As Claudia Pancino points out, the craving is not a real transgression because situated in a precise context of social behavior: the rituals of

³ "The best breeding ground for prejudice is, without a doubt, the female brain: a tendency to the marvellous, even to lies, ignorance, presumption, obstinacy, everything is conducive to the blossoming this tenacious plant. A parasite as difficult to extirpate from the female mind than couch grass in a field! [...] Is it worth adding that the number of prejudices relating to pregnancy and childbirth is almost infinite".

⁴ "Il est certain qu'il se trouve des femmes dont la grossesse a été tourmentée par les goûts les plus bizarres et les appétits les plus extravagants et qui donnent naissance à des enfants dont la peau n'offre pas une seule tache ; mais quand un nouveau-né apporte une marque où l'on prétend trouver de la ressemblance avec quelque objet, la mère, pour l'honneur du préjugé, bien qu'elle n'ait jamais éprouvé de désirs analogues, ni ressenti d'émotions, se rappelle sur-le-champ telle circonstance qui, pendant la grossesse, l'a vivement affectée, ou telle fantaisie qui n'a pas été satisfaite ; le mari de se plaindre et de gronder affectueusement sa femme, qu'il n'eût pas manqué de contenter coûte que coûte. Par ce petit manège, on dispose à l'avance un époux à accueillir favorablement la première demande qu'on lui fera, et à l'occasion de laquelle on feindra, s'il le faut, une grossesse, du moins pour le temps nécessaire au succès de cette petite manœuvre"; "It is true that there are women whose pregnancy has been tormented by the most bizarre tastes and extravagant appetites, and who give birth to children whose skin doesn't show a single blemish; but when a newborn displays a mark that is said to bear a resemblance to some object, the mother, in honor of the prejudice, even though she has never experienced similar desires, nor felt those emotions, immediately recalls some circumstance that, during pregnancy, affected her greatly, or some fantasy that was not satisfied; the husband complains and affectionately scolds his wife, whom he would not have failed to please at any cost. With this little manoeuvre, a husband is prepared in advance to accept favorably the first request made of him, and on the occasion of which, if necessary, a pregnancy is feigned, at least for the time necessary for the success of this little manoeuvre" (MLC*** 36).

⁵ "Eighteenth-century authors repeat that the first traces of this belief "*are lost in the mists of time*", that "*the belief has always existed*" and that "*women have always believed in it*". However, a closer look at the history of the belief shows that it didn't appear until the 15th century and, even more importantly, that it appeared at that time in a scholarly cultural milieu".

pregnancy (161). Not only are these envies accepted, but they are even expected. But what kind of cravings are we talking about? These desires are first and foremost dietary: the pregnant woman may crave fruit, vegetables, meats, bread etc., but not only that. Cravings can also include sexual desires: “Malgré l'autocensure des médecins du corpus sur le traitement des thèmes liés à la sexualité, une autocensure qui s'observe sur bien d'autres sujets que les 'envies', les auteurs reviennent avec insistance sur les 'envies' sexuelles de la femme enceinte”⁶ (Coste 527). Here, an example cited by Laurent Joubert in 1578:

On comte qu'une fame d'Auvergne, qui eut grand phantasie de manger de la chair d'un bouchier, qui monroit ses bras decouvers fort blancs et charnus, elle contrainte de ce fol appétit, le dit au bouchier, qui fut bien pitoyable, que sur le champ il taiha un loup in de chair de sa cuisse et le lui donna. [*En marge de la page* : Peut estre qu'il ne coupa rien, mais lui fit plaisir de la chair, qui pand entre les cuisses]. La fame bien joyeuse la mangea tout à l'instant ainsi crue, et la voylà fort contante⁷ (311-312).

These sexual urges then seem to disappear from the medical landscape, as a strong taboo falls over discussions of female sexuality. Later, as skepticism spread in medical circles, belief in *envie* took a much more playful turn in the popular imagination. By the time Alice Guy made this film in 1906, the prejudice was already well entrenched in popular culture, and that's why Monsieur does not stop Madame from eating (although he argues with her and has to suffer the consequences of his wife's actions) - because one cannot contradict a pregnant woman. A woman's desires, which would normally have no chance of being heard, become legitimate during pregnancy, and are even expected. But let's not forget that this belief was first born in the scientific field, as it served to reduce the mystery of pregnancy. So what can we say about the cinematic staging of cravings? And what happens when Alice Guy tackles this prejudice?

Madame A Des Envies: the Objects of the Cravings

The first thing to note about the film is that Madame's desire is a solitary pleasure, which directly excludes Monsieur. Madame's excessive body dominates the action, while Monsieur's body is diminished. The wife is taller and more imposing than her husband, who appears very awkward and clumsy at her side, even weak and clearly in a subordinate position.

⁶ “Despite the self-censorship of doctors in the corpus on the treatment of themes linked to sexuality, a self-censorship that can be observed on many other subjects than 'cravings', the authors insistently return to the sexual 'cravings' of the pregnant woman”.

⁷ “It is said that a woman from Auvergne, who had a great desire to eat the flesh of a butcher, who showed his arms to be very white and fleshy, was compelled by this mad appetite, and told the butcher, who was very pitiful, that on the spot he cut a wolf's worth of flesh from his thigh and gave it to her. [In the margin of the page: Maybe he didn't cut anything, but gave her the pleasure of the flesh between his thighs]. The woman, delighted, ate it immediately, raw, and was very happy”.



Fig. 1: *Madame a des envies* (Alice Guy, 1906). Still from the movie. 00:01:02.

While I will come back to the corporeal dimension of the film, I would first like to focus on the objects stolen by Madame, which are highly suggestive. The first is a lollipop stolen from a little girl, then sucked with relish in a medium shot. The second object is a glass of absinthe stolen from a consumer at a bistro table. This is not just a glass of alcohol, but absinthe, the consumption of which had particularly negative connotations for women, as it was considered provocative. First of all, let's note that the consumption of pure alcohol began to be harshly criticized after 1900. First there was the creation of various anti-alcohol movements, including the Société française de tempérance, the Croix bleue, the Ligue antialcoolique parisienne and the Union française antialcoolique, which all came together in October 1903 to form the powerful Ligue nationale contre l'alcoolisme. Their newspaper, *L'Étoile bleue*, began to grow in circulation, winning over the political world, which gradually rallied to their cause. The League adopted an interesting strategy: it tolerated wine to combat absinthe, considered the most formidable agent of alcoholism. This was a salutary challenge, but also an economic one: in 1914, nearly 5 million of the country's 40 million people were dependent on the wine and alcohol industry for their livelihood (Kalifa 73). Absinthe was finally banned in 1915. But what about female consumption during the Belle Époque? Far from being the prerogative of men alone, women also drank absinthe, but for them, this consumption was associated with emancipation: "Les femmes, peu portées sur les apéritifs, se mettent à l'absinthe. Facteur d'initiation, d'intégration à la vie sociale, la Fée verte est pour elles,

un signe de modernité et quelque part d'émancipation"⁸ (Delahaye, *Promenade autour de l'Absinthe d'hier à d'aujourd'hui*, 39).



Fig. 2: "L'heure verte", postcard, Coll. P. Jupin, Belle Époque.

As we can see from the postcard above, the young woman pictured is wearing a rather daring outfit for the time: a little camisole revealing her forearms and throat, striped pants,⁹ and is drinking absinthe and smoking... Absinthe, as we shall see, also became the symbol of feminists, caricatured in all their forms. But absinthe was not just a drink for modern women: cheaper than wine, absinthe was also enjoyed by the lower social classes. Seamstresses, milliners, and lingerie workers paced the boulevards of Paris, but they did not stop at café terraces to drink alone. They are accompanied, often in groups, and often drink absinthe. Women who were alone were seen as prostitutes and demi-mondaines. While absinthe was gaining ground in bourgeois circles, advertisements played up the drink's supposedly salutary virtues to win over sporty, modern women.

⁸ "Women, not very keen on aperitifs, started drinking absinthe. A factor of initiation and integration into social life, the Green Fairy is for them a sign of modernity and, in a way, emancipation".

⁹ It is worth remembering that to wear pants, women needed "cross-dressing permission" (until 2013!). However, women's costume was already undergoing significant changes at the turn of the century, with the influence of feminist ideas, concern for hygiene, the practice of sport and women's work. (Bard 217).

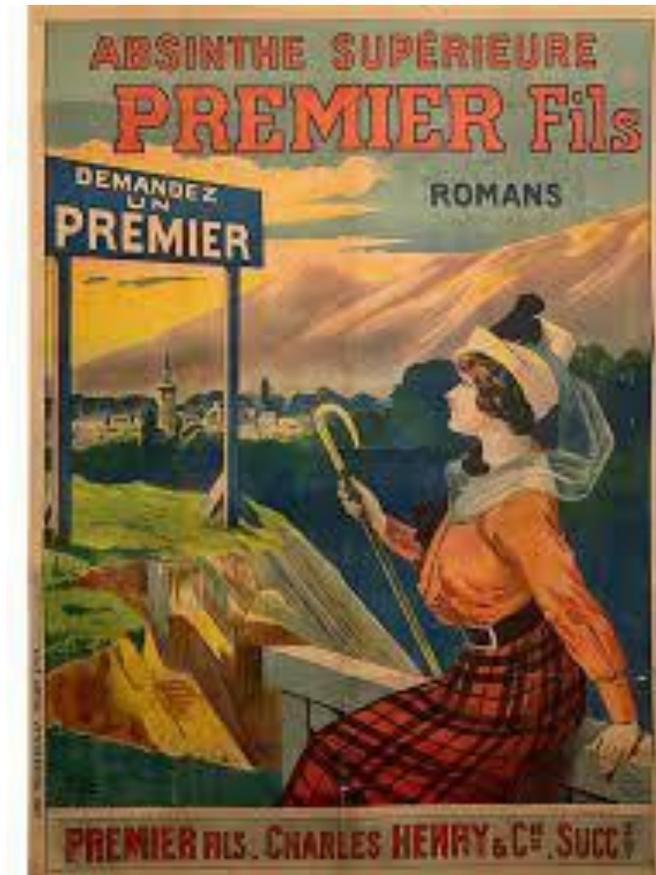


Fig. 3: "Absinthe Supérieure", poster by Lotil, 1902.

Absinthe producers had everything to gain by convincing women to drink it: by gradually reaching all social classes, the drink could be sold to the majority of French people, right up to the point of alcoholism (Lancereaux et al. 221). What's more, absinthe is personified by a female figure in advertisements: the green fairy, the green-eyed muse: "envoûtante par ses arômes de plantes, pernicieuse par l'eau que l'on y ajoute et qui en fait une boisson délicate que les femmes apprécieront, insidieuse par l'addiction à l'alcool qui en résulte, l'absinthe ne pouvait être représentée que sous les traits d'une femme"¹⁰ (Delahaye, *L'Absinthe au Féminin*, 10).

¹⁰ "Bewitching through its herbal aromas, pernicious through the water added to it, which makes it a delicate drink that women will appreciate, insidious through the resulting addiction to alcohol, absinthe could only be represented in the guise of a woman".



Fig. 4: "La Fée Verte", carnival outfit suggested by *Moniteur de la Mode*, 1903.

Absinthe was chic, modern and inexpensive. Finally, it is worth noting that in France, the recommendation that pregnant women avoid drinking alcohol only came after the First World War, so when this film was made, the situation was not as shocking as it appears today (Fillaut 15-20). Nevertheless, a woman who drank was very much frowned upon, as it went against the idea of a temperate feminine nature. What's more, at the time, absinthe was associated with abortifacient properties in addition to its digestive virtues.... "La grande absinthe a été utilisée jusqu'au milieu du XXe siècle comme abortif, d'où son nom d'herbe des vierges"¹¹ (Delahaye, *L'Absinthe, Son Histoire*, 12). In the movie, Madame is pregnant, but she is drinking a notorious abortifacient... Does she really want her unborn baby? It is not an insignificant question, since Madame does not have the slightest regard for her first-born, who is cared for by her husband alone... Finally, as we have seen, absinthe began to be frowned upon at the beginning of the century and was

¹¹ "Common wormwood was used until the mid-twentieth century as an abortifacient, hence its name virgin's herb".

the subject of petitions as early as 1906, before being definitively banned in 1915. The drink was condemned by the medical profession as early as 1903 (Lancereaux et al. 220-244), before being blamed for all manner of evils, such as "l'arrêt du développement des naissances, les maladies des organes digestifs et des centres nerveux, l'extension de la tuberculose, l'augmentation de la criminalité, l'envahissement des hôpitaux et des asiles d'aliénés. [...] Elle devint ainsi, et resta, le symbole de l'alcoolisme"¹² (Delahaye, *L'Absinthe, histoire de la fée verte*, 127). Women who drink are the victims of many prejudices, which revolve around a triptych: the woman victimized by her alcoholic husband, the exemplary woman who saves her family, the guilty woman who drinks (Delahaye 129). Women are assimilated to the idea of a temperate feminine nature, so alcohol

Aboli leur féminité. [...] Il n'y a pas de femmes alcooliques parce qu'en s'alcoolisant on abdique sa féminité. À ce titre, la lecture de la littérature médicale des années 1890-1930 est révélatrice, et donne à voir des femmes dénaturées dans leurs comportements sociaux comme dans leurs corps, mauvaises mères, mauvaises épouses, vicieuses enclines à d'autres comportements contre nature¹³ (Salle 36).

More important: "L'alcoolisme féminin est également considéré comme la conséquence d'un déficit de féminité initial, préexistant au comportement intempérant. Il est ainsi des femmes qui boivent parce [...] qu'elles sont sans enfants, infertiles, débauchées ou ménopausées"¹⁴ (Salle 37). Of course, women could drink absinthe, but not alone as we have seen, and social norms prevented single women from consuming alcohol. Consumers on café terraces would drink in groups. Here, Madame drinks alone and gulps her glass, as if it were a common, everyday practice, or because she needs to do it very quickly before she is stopped or caught. The viewer gets a multi-layered message from this scene: Madame is pregnant but drinks an abortifacient beverage, she is beautiful and feminine but does not repress her unnatural craving for absinthe.

The third stolen object is a phallic-shaped herring, stolen from a poor starving beggar. I will come back to this object, and above all to its victim, but it is worth pointing out that the beggar seems to be masturbating before Madame arrives to steal his herring, or at least he is suggestively touching his crotch¹⁵. Madame then eats the fish with relish. While the herring loses some of its phallic form when eaten by Madame, it is worth noting

¹² "The cessation of fetal development, diseases of the digestive organs and nervous centers, the spread of tuberculosis, the increase in criminality, the crowding of hospitals and insane asylums [...]. It thus became, and remained, the symbol of alcoholism".

¹³ "Abolishes their femininity. [...] There are no alcoholic women, because by drinking they abdicate their femininity. In this respect, medical literature of the 1890s-1930s is revealing, depicting women whose social behavior and bodies have been distorted, who are bad mothers, bad wives and vicious, prone to other unnatural behaviors".

¹⁴ "Female alcoholism is also considered to be the consequence of an initial deficit of femininity, pre-existing the intemperate behavior. Some women drink because [...] they are childless, infertile, debauched, or menopausal".

¹⁵ I would like to thank Michael Rosenfeld for pointing this out to me.

that this action seems to illustrate the erotic expression "Avaler le poisson sans sauce", meaning "être baisée par un homme qui ne jouit point, ou que l'on empêche de jouir"¹⁶ (Delvau 33). Finally, the last stolen object is a pipe stolen from a street vendor, which Madame smokes with relish to the point of suffocation. Noël Burch speaks of the animal pleasure "que dégage un film comme *Madame a des envies* (1906) où l'on voit une femme enceinte merveilleusement enjouée, se précipiter sur tout ce qui se mange, se boit où se suce, jusqu'au cigare d'un passant... qui la rend malade au point de lui faire dégorger son bébé au milieu d'une plantation de choux"¹⁷ (82-83). I would like to take a look at the pipe's underlying meanings. Let's start by recalling that the Second Industrial Revolution brought many changes to the Western world, and in particular to the culture of smoking behavior: the arrival of the cigarette, which overturned tobacco consumption patterns previously dominated by snuff and the pipe in particular (Ferland 37). This new object also creates a new category of consumer: women. It is interesting to note that the growing popularity of smoking among all Western social classes was gradually eroding the persistent taboo surrounding female tobacco consumption, a taboo that also seemed to exist in pre-Columbian societies (Gernet 70). The reasons for this taboo seem associated, at least in the West, with notions of orality, authority and speaking out: "Depuis l'époque moderne, fumer en public est l'une des manifestations sociales de la virilité masculine. Les hommes se retrouvent entre eux dans les cabarets et les tavernes, qui constituent à la fois des espaces sociaux et des forums d'expression publique strictement masculins, où ils discutent autour d'un verre d'alcool tout en fumant"¹⁸ (Ferland 40). For women, this behavior, although identical to that of men, had many other, much more negative meanings: "The activity of smoking or even just holding a pipe was suggestive of a variety of character traits, supplying machismo to the sailor or hunter, and sophistication to the gentleman. On the other hand, the woman who smoked was consistently labeled as sexually promiscuous or otherwise disreputable" (Wyckoff). Anything to do with the mouth was almost systematically taboo in the society of the time, if it applied to the female sphere. Jean-Pierre Corbeau also notes that "la levée des interdits buccaux (boissons, tabac) s'accompagne du droit de dire ce que l'on pense et ressent..."¹⁹ (262). In addition, women who smoked in public were compared to prostitutes, whose behaviors strayed furthest from social norms. Finally, a woman who smoked conveyed the image of a person who controlled her sensuality and,

¹⁶ "Swallowing the fish without sauce. To be fucked by a man who doesn't come, or who is prevented from coming".

¹⁷ "The animal pleasure of a film like *Madame a des envies* (1906), where we see a wonderfully playful pregnant woman rush to eat, drink or suck anything, right down to a passer-by's cigar... which makes her so sick she pukes up her baby in the middle of a cabbage patch".

¹⁸ "Since modern times, smoking in public has been one of the social manifestations of male virility. Men meet in cabarets and taverns, which are both social spaces and strictly male forums for public expression, where they chat over a glass of alcohol while smoking".

¹⁹ "The lifting of oral prohibitions (drinks, tobacco) was accompanied by the right to say what one thought and felt...".

therefore, her sexuality (Rudy 22). So, like absinthe, smoking became a sign of assertion and emancipation, but female smokers were associated with prostitutes or feminists. Thus, in France and in England, “in the Victorian era, only women living at the edge of respectability consumed tobacco, which included prostitutes as well as women freed from social norms, such as actresses or writers, who were thought to have an unbridled sexuality” (Rudy 41). The French language soon adopted the expression “tailler une pipe”, literally “to cut a pipe”, meaning to perform oral sex. This expression originated in prostitution circles in the first part of the 20th century, replacing “faire un pompier” (“to do a firefighter”), previously used:

Les fumeurs du peuple se roulaient leurs cigarettes [...]. Ils disaient alors qu'ils “s'en roulaient une” ou “se faisaient une pipe” [...]. De là, il est facile d'imaginer que les dames de petite vertu qui faisaient des pompiers à leurs clients comparaient leurs gestes à ceux que font les fumeurs d'abord méticuleusement avec leurs doigts et puis le long de la cigarette avec leur langue avant d'aboutir à une “pipe” prête à être fumée²⁰ (Planelles 849).

Let's recall that the word pipe was synonymous with cigarette at the beginning of the last century²¹ (Cellard and Rey 630-631), and that the word ‘cigarette’ had an extremely erotic connotation: “Cigarette. Le membre viril que les femmes savent si bien rouler dans leurs mains et porter à leur bouche, par le gros bout”²² (Delvau 105). Moreover, the popular expression, “avalier la fumée” (“to swallow smoke”), meant the ingestion of sperm following fellatio (Planelles 850). In the film, Madame swallows the smoke, causing her to cough until she gives birth... Finally, I would like to point out that another film from the same period featured a female magician with a cigarette in her hand. This was *Pipe Dream*, directed by Edison in 1905. In this film, a woman smokes a cigarette, before making a tiny man appear in her palm with her smoke. The man appears to propose, but she laughs in his face. She then crushes him between her palms, and the man disappears. The woman tries to make him reappear, but she cannot, and stares at her palm in astonishment.

²⁰ “Common smokers rolled their own cigarettes [...]. They would then say they were “rolling one” or “doing a pipe” [...]. From this, it is easy to imagine that the ladies of little virtue who “made firemen” of their customers compared their gestures to those made by smokers, first meticulously with their fingers and then along the cigarette with their tongue, before ending up with a “pipe” ready to be smoked”.

²¹ “Si la cigarette s'appelait aussi la *pipe* en argot, parmi d'autres appellations, ce serait parce que la quantité de tabac nécessaire pour fabriquer la cigarette était à peu près équivalente à celle utilisée pour une pipe” (Planelles 849). “If the cigarette was also called a *pipe* in slang, among other names, it would be because the quantity of tobacco needed to make a cigarette was roughly equivalent to that used for a pipe”.

²² “Cigarette. The virile member that women know so well how to roll in their hands and bring to their mouths, by the big end”.



Fig. 5: *A Pipe Dream*, Edison, 1905. Still from the movie.

For Lucy Fischer, the female character is an embodiment of the overpowering woman:

The Amazon, or the awesome, domineering Mother, as seen by a child-man. Thus, she is a figure of considerable terror. [...] The fact that the woman smokes a cigarette marks her, according to Victorian mores, as dangerously loose and 'masculine,' and thus invests her magician-status with a degree of perversity. Furthermore, it is significant that when she tries to repeat her trick, she fails, as though her magical powers were accidental, or beyond her control (32-33).

Here, too, the cigarette represents the powerful, transgressive, non-standard woman. Madame in Alice Guy's movie smokes a pipe and chokes on the smoke: we are clearly in a filmic metaphor for fellatio, all the more so if we also consider the scene where Madame sucks a lollipop with obvious pleasure. We can see, then, that the stolen objects were not chosen at random, but have political and ideological significance thanks to their subversive elements. They represent the excess of Madame's desires beyond food, her sexual desires. The objects were also considered typically masculine, such as the glass of absinthe and the pipe. Although Madame's femininity is never denied, we are almost confronted with a behavioral transvestism, a woman who transgresses taboos and prohibitions to satisfy her desires; a subject that remains controversial today. Finally, it is worth pointing out that these objects are sucked/eaten/drunk/smoked in very particular medium shots: Madame is isolated in front of a background that highlights the protagonist in action. The framing cuts the character just above her belly, making us forget for a moment her status as a pregnant woman and turn her into an almost little girl sucking a lollipop, an animal woman devouring a herring, an alcoholic absinthe consumer, and a masculine woman smoking a pipe. This scenic construction is clearly anti-natural, since the white background breaks up the scenes shot on location, but it serves the narrative by underlining the film's humorous particularities. The actress's face is visually enhanced, as are her grimaces of pleasure. On the one hand,

there is the fascination with movement typical of the cinema of attractions (1895-1907) (see Burch), but there are also early attempts at close-ups.



Fig. 6: Madame is smoking in front of the camera. Still from the movie. 00:03:44.

Madame A Des Envies: the Representation of Motherhood

I would now like to turn my attention to Madame's victims. Two of them struck me when I first saw the film: a little girl and a beggar. Defenseless, they arouse the viewer's pity. We see the little girl crying for her lollipop, and the poor, crippled beggar ready to eat an unappetizing fish that is his only source of sustenance before it is stolen from him. We then see the beggar running as best he can to retrieve his property, limping. Here, Madame's maternal instinct is deconstructed: Madame is a pregnant woman who doesn't care at all about her first-born; Monsieur takes care of him alone, while she doesn't give her baby a glance. She seems to have no compassion for either the little girl or the beggar, the former crying before her eyes and the latter limping to retrieve his property. On the one hand, Alice Guy plays on the cliché of the pregnant woman, showing an exaggerated, grotesque, protruding belly and the irresistible cravings to which pregnant women are subject. On the other hand, she pokes fun at a deep-rooted prejudice by exaggerating all the elements of desire towards which Madame's boundless, unquenchable sexual appetite pushes her. Madame's excesses make her a grotesque, parodic character. The term "grotesque" evokes a hidden, visceral dimension that is typically feminine:

The grotto-esque. [...] This view valorizes traditional images of the earth mother, the crone, the witch, and the vampire and posits a natural connection between the female body (itself naturalized) and the 'primal' elements, especially the earth (Russo 1).

The grotesque body is open, protruding, irregular, multiple and changing. The grotesque, here as a bodily category, emerges as a deviation from the norm. Grotesque female bodies abound in history's earliest films, a direct legacy of carnivalesque excess (Hennefeld). This aspect of the grotesque is also linked to parody, which offers a counterfeit imitation of the established prejudice. There are many taboos surrounding the female body, particularly the pregnant body, which appears irregular. Is Madame grotesque simply because she is pregnant? One might well think so, since she remains physically very beautiful by the standards of the time, so it is mainly in terms of the low profile of the pregnant woman in society that we can speak of the grotesque:

Bien présentes et visibles dans l'espace public, quels que soient les milieux sociaux, les femmes enceintes ne cherchent pas à mettre en valeur leur état. Au contraire, elles dissimulent autant que possible les signes de leur grossesse. Les tabous religieux et les normes de pudeur sont évidemment intégrés par les femmes enceintes, qui ne peuvent afficher trop ostensiblement un état qui révèle le fruit d'un rapport sexuel. [...] Jusqu'à l'invention récente de l'échographie, la femme ne sait pas avant l'accouchement si le fœtus qu'elle porte est bien conformé [...] La peur de donner naissance à un monstre ou à un enfant anormal terrifie les mères, qui y voient la conséquence d'un châtement ou d'une faute personnelle²³ (Berthiaud 68-71).

Pregnant women do not hide themselves, but propriety dictates that they conceal their pregnancies under loose-fitting clothing: "La grossesse n'incarne pas alors le plus haut degré de la féminité: le corps de la femme enceinte étant envisagé sous l'angle de la maladie, de l'inconfort et de l'enlaidissement, il ne vient pas à l'idée de le magnifier par l'habillement. Tout est donc fait pour dissimuler la grossesse et cacher le ventre"²⁴ (Berthiaud 74). Of course, this applies mainly to women from the middle to upper social classes, as poorer women could not afford to hide their situation. It is worth noting that the two characters in the film seem to belong to the middle class, as their clothes indicate. Here, Madame struts down the street showing off her enormous belly in defiance of fin-de-siècle decorum. We are a long way from the rigid image of maternal gentleness that pregnant women – and mothers in this case – should exemplify. However, *Madame a des envies* deals with "l'ambivalence maternelle d'une manière singulière,

²³ "Pregnant women are present and visible in the public sphere, whatever their social background, but they do not seek to highlight their condition. On the contrary, they conceal the signs of their pregnancy as much as possible. Religious taboos and standards of modesty are obviously taken on by pregnant women, who cannot display too conspicuously a condition that reveals the fruit of a sexual relationship. [...] Until the recent invention of ultrasound, a woman does not know whether the fetus she is carrying is well formed before giving birth [...]. The fear of giving birth to a monster or an abnormal child terrifies mothers, who see it as the consequence of a punishment or a personal fault".

²⁴ "Pregnancy does not embody the highest degree of femininity: the pregnant woman's body is seen in terms of illness, discomfort, and disfigurement, and it does not occur to us to magnify it through clothing. Everything is done to conceal the pregnancy and hide the belly".

qui mêle féerie et comique"²⁵ (Knibiehler and Sagaert 436). Is Madame a bad mother? What if maternal love was not innate? asked Austrian physician and psychoanalyst Margarethe Hilferding during her first paper presentation at the Psychoanalytic Society of Vienna in 1911, one of the first to question this long-held belief, pointing out that "loin d'être inné, ce lien est issu de la relation de la mère avec son enfant"²⁶ (Mons 114)²⁷. Madame is thus an atypical character, far removed from the idea of a woman full of kindness and the notion of maternal instinct, creating another model of the female character, modern and sexual, woman and mother at the same time. Madame's excesses and humor are justified by her belly: Madame is pregnant, so her excesses are authorized by society.

Madame, the comic object of ridicule, can devour the whole public sphere if she pleases: her extreme behavior is no doubt driven by her hyperactive womb movement. *Madame's Cravings* thereby literalizes the subjective instabilities of the comic through recourse to tropes of hysteria. The utromaniacal woman, goaded by her womb tilt, embodies the deeper terrors that motivate ambivalent laughter, and are further triggered by the libidinal upheavals endemic to modern industrial life (Hennefeld 80).

Physically, Madame is a very beautiful woman, entirely in keeping with the physical canons of her time. However, she is an undisciplined woman, with an anti-normative corporality, excessive, disruptive of feminine decorum, with carnal displays at odds with the codes of femininity, defying sexist conventions with parodic play. Moreover, let's recall that the word "hysteria" comes from the Greek word for "uterus", and was originally used to describe an ailment experienced by women when their genital organs had not been satisfied, or when their activity had been abnormally overexcited (Paicheler 134-135). Therefore it is particularly interesting to note the still strong link between pregnancy, the uterus and the woman who cannot control her body and her sexual desires. We thus can describe this as a caricature of a prejudice. By caricature, we mean a grotesque, exaggerated representation of reality. Indeed, in the first instance, the pregnant woman's sexual desires and the obvious pleasure she takes in sucking on various objects play a part in establishing a reinvention of the femininity of the pregnant woman and of motherhood in general. We see a feminized body in all its conceptual and maternal power, erotic and active in the narrative without adhering to the characteristics of the typologies of virgin, mother, and prostitute. Secondly, this is not a classic representation of motherhood and pregnancy. As we have shown, Madame ignores her eldest in the stroller, snatches a child's lollipop, has carnal desires, smokes, and drinks. The prejudice is deliberately placed in a different perspective, appearing cognitively distorted and

²⁵ "Maternal ambivalence in a singular way, blending comic enchantment".

²⁶ "Far from being innate, this bond stems from the mother's relationship with her child"

²⁷ Please note that the idea of maternal instinct was far from entrenched at the time of Margarethe Hilferding's speech. As Michael Rosenfeld points out, it is necessary to qualify the vision of maternity and, above all, the idealized model of pregnancy in late 19th-century France. Many women resorted to infertile practices, abortion or (sometimes forced) sterilization. (Rosenfeld 103-120).

ridiculous. If, normally, “le régime des attractions monstratives suppose [...] une certaine adhésion cognitive du spectateur, adhésion qui s'appuie sur un rapport de connivence entre fabricants et consommateurs de vues, au centre duquel se trouve la reconnaissance mutuelle de certaines figures conventionnelles et de certains schémas stéréotypaux”²⁸ (Chemartin and Dulac 153), here the anomalies produce strangeness for the viewers and differences from the established prejudice²⁹. It is precisely this balance of power between prejudice as perceived in society and dissonant elements that will create humor and elements of rupture. In *Madame*, therefore, we find not only prejudice as a narrative thread, but also various visual elements characteristic of this cinematic period. While Alice Guy's fictions are often inspired by humorous postcards, such as *La Fée aux choux*, which is certainly the best-known example (Loveday), *Madame* takes up a theme found in 19th-century caricatures. Indeed, the cartoons of that same century also mocked the delirious desires of pregnant women.



Fig. 7: Paul Gavarni, *L'envie d'une femme enceinte* (XIX^e).

²⁸ “The system of monstrative attractions presupposes [...] a certain cognitive adherence on the part of the viewer, an adherence based on a relationship of connivance between the makers and consumers of views, at the heart of which is the mutual recognition of certain conventional figures and stereotypical patterns”.

²⁹ Alice Guy often used irony and humor in her films to poke fun at established prejudices. See *La Fée aux Choux* (1900) or *Les Résultats du Féminisme* (1907).

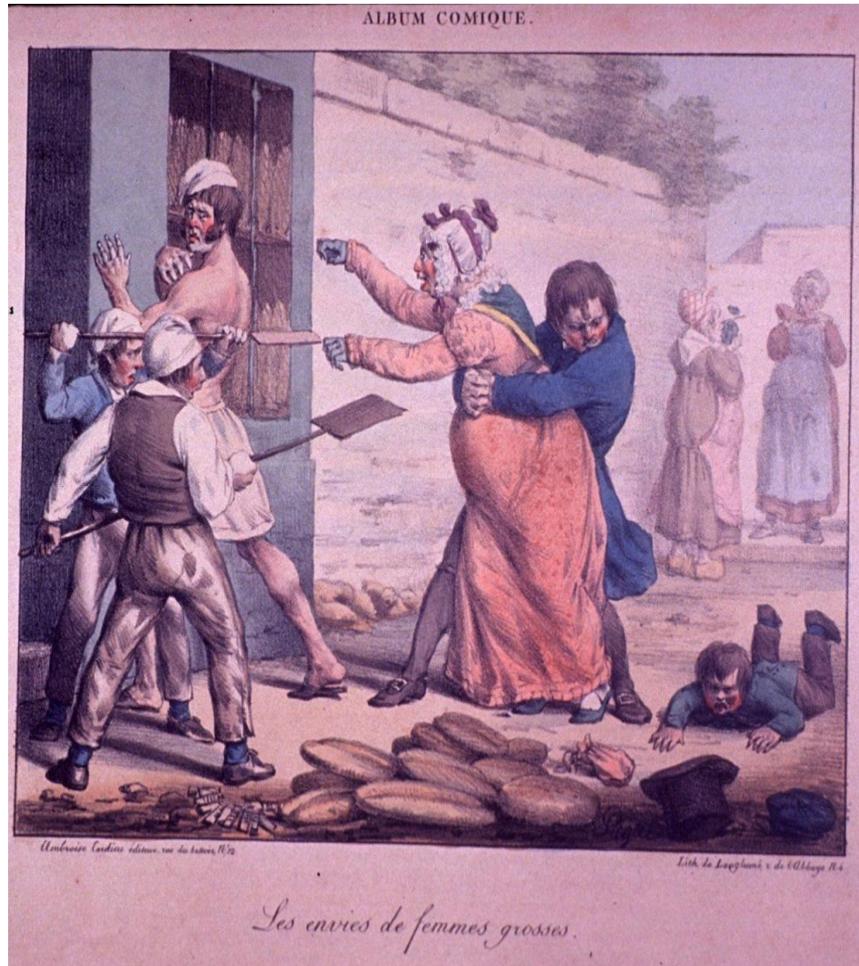


Fig. 8: Pigal, "Les envies de femmes grosses", in *Album comique de pathologie pittoresque*, Tardieu, Paris 1823.

These caricatures by Gavarni and Pigal, for example, suggest that women do not just want meat or bread, but fresh flesh. Under a humorous guise, these caricatures reveal men's anxieties about insatiable ogresses. The husband in the second image goes to great lengths to restrain his wife from devouring poor male passers-by. Here is a long description of the second illustration provided by Pigal:

Contemplez celle dont nous vous offrons l'image ; remarquez comme tous ses traits semblent avoir faim ! comme ses yeux dévorent la proie que ses dents ne tiennent pas encore ! La pauvre dame, se promenant avec son fils et son mari, a rencontré un boulanger vêtu à l'écossaise suivant les habitudes de son état. Ce mitron est d'une carnation superbe ; un léger nuage de farine répandu sur toute sa personne prête à sa peau une blancheur encore plus appétissante. La femme grosse s'élançe pour mordre cette épaule charnue. Le patronet, justement effrayé, se sauve aussi vite que lui permet l'imperfection de sa chaussure ; deux apprentis, afin de protéger sa retraite, croisent la baïonnette avec les ustensiles du fournil, dont ils sont armés. Le mari fait de violents efforts pour retenir sa moitié ; il paraît d'autant plus affecté de l'envie qu'elle témoigne, qu'il n'en ignore pas les conséquences funestes ; déjà son premier fils porte sur la joue une grappe de raison qu'un garde champêtre n'a pas permis

de cueillir ; lui-même a sur le front l'image trop fidèle d'un rat que dans le temps on n'a pu attraper pour en faire un civet à sa mère. Il semble craindre que les goûts anthropophages de sa femme ne finissent par retomber sur lui. Dans le fond du tableau, deux femmes enceintes, cédant aux inspirations d'un appétit plus modeste, se sont jetées sur des fruits et des viandes crues qu'elles mangent avec beaucoup d'avidité³⁰ (Pigal, not paginated).

The caricature of pregnant women in the grip of powerful, sexual desires was thus an integral part of the visual culture of Alice Guy's time and often perpetuated prejudices that were detrimental to women.

However, these women almost look like witches, whereas Alice Guy's Madame is more beautiful, feminine and playful. This reflection leads me to believe that the female filmmaker deliberately chose to use the beliefs for humorous and narrative purposes: the story in the caricatures is effectively brought to life on screen, using the film medium to its full potential in the context of its production, while playing on the expectations of the audience of the time. It is further instructive to compare Alice Guy's film with a work produced by Pathé Frères under the same name a year later, in 1907. This version is unfortunately considered lost. We do not know the name of the director, but there is a summary of the story available in the catalogs, as well as a poster. I am well aware that it is risky to make a comparison between the summary of a film and a film preserved in its entirety, but it still gives us some clues:

Madame, très doucement: "Je t'en prie, c'est très mau-vais de ne pas satisfaire ces envies-là, on dit même que les enfants s'en ressentent toute leur vie. Oh mais cela, c'est positif". Madame cite des preuves à l'appui... Monsieur, embêté mais convaincu, prend son chapeau et suit Madame. Chez la modiste, elle choisit cinq ou six chapeaux, en charge son mari et continue sa course. Elle est tentée quelques pas plus loin par un petit poisson rouge dans son bocal qu'elle dépose avec précaution entre les mains de son mari. Il n'a pas l'air content, Monsieur, oh ! Mais pas du tout ; il s'avance piteusement, chargé comme un âne. Bientôt, il sue à grosses gouttes sous un énorme boa de plumes, traînant en laisse un petit chien et portant comme un balai dans ses bras une longue plante grasse... il avait l'air d'un homme réclame. Madame, elle, marche délibérément. Elle s'excuse genti-ment: "Mon pauvre chéri,

³⁰ "Contemplate the one whose image we offer you; notice how all her features seem to be hungry! how her eyes devour the prey that her teeth are not yet holding! The poor lady, strolling with her son and husband, met a baker dressed in the tartan style of his profession. The baker's complexion was superb, and his skin was even more appetizingly white, with a light dusting of flour all over him. The pregnant woman lunges to bite this fleshy shoulder. The boss, justly frightened, flees as fast as the imperfection of his shoe will allow; two apprentices, to protect his retreat, cross their bayonets with the bakery utensils they are armed with. The husband makes violent efforts to restrain his wife; he seems all the more affected by the envy she shows, as he is not unaware of its fatal consequences; already his first son bears on his cheek a bunch of grapes that a country warden has not allowed to be picked; he himself has on his forehead the all-too-faithful image of a rat that in time could not be caught to make a stew for his mother. He seems to fear that his wife's anthropophagic tastes will eventually fall on him. In the background, two pregnant women, yielding to the inspirations of a more modest appetite, have thrown themselves on fruit and raw meat, which they eat with great avidity".

si ça n'était pas pour la santé de notre bébé, je ne te chargerais pas comme cela va!"³¹ (Bousquet 4).

If we read the summary, it is clear that the Pathé Frères version deliberately pokes fun at the woman who takes advantage of her condition to manipulate her husband. If we now look at the film's poster, we see that this element is even more obvious:



Fig. 9: Vincent Lorant-Heilbronn, *Madame à des envies*, 1907, Lithograph, Fondation Jérôme Seydoux Pathé.³²

Madame by Pathé Frères, unlike the Gaumont version, does not appear pregnant, and her cravings are more like whims. The Pathé version may have been inspired by the Gaumont version, as it was filmed after and it was common practice for directors to copy each other's subjects at that time (see Burch). We are clearly, with the Pathé version, in the filmic representation of a misogynist prejudice, which bears a strong resemblance to Witkowski's observations above: pregnancy here becomes an excuse to satisfy all her material desires. With Alice Guy, on the other hand, we see an exaggerated version of all the elements of the prejudice, with the aim of playfully criticizing social conventions and upsetting preconceived ideas through comic imitations.

³¹ "Madame, very gently: 'Please, it is very bad not to satisfy these desires, they even say that children suffer from them for the rest of their lives. Oh, but this is positive'. Monsieur, annoyed but convinced, grabs his hat and follows Madame. At the milliner's, she chooses five or six hats, loads them onto her husband and continues on her way. A few steps further on, she is tempted by a little goldfish in a jar, which she carefully places in her husband's hands. He does not look happy, Monsieur, oh, he does not look happy at all; he strides forward piteously, laden like a donkey. Soon he is sweating profusely under a huge feather boa, dragging a small dog on a leash and carrying a long, fat plant in his arms like a broom... he looked like a sandwich board man. Madame, on the other hand, walks deliberately. She apologizes kindly: 'My poor darling, if it was not for our baby's health, I would not be charging (burdening or loading you up) you like that is going!'".

³² To view a higher resolution image, click [here](#).

Caricature and laughter are often used for provocation, as they tread a path where insolence and even nastiness go hand in hand and do not detract from the viewer's pleasure. All these elements make it possible to understand how Alice Guy pokes fun at sexist prejudices and manages to show the sexual desires of a pregnant woman beyond the moral conventions of fin-de-siècle society. Madame does not want to control her sexuality and sensuality, and seeks to satisfy her desires by any means necessary. Her excesses are visual devices that allow us to take a humorous step back from the prejudice itself, to directly reach a level of post-judgment where we are not hindered by the pre-judgment we may have been capable of. I thus conclude along the same lines as Pierre Chemartin and Nicolas Dulac: as Gustave Flaubert wrote in 1880 in his book *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, the only way to get rid of prejudices is to expose them to the light of day, to make them raw material, even if this means pushing them to the point of absurdity (Chemartin, Dulac, 159), all the better to laugh at them.

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