

## Louis Feuillade, Héliogabale (1911)

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### ***The movie Héliogabale***

« Héliogabale » or « L'orgie romaine » is a short movie directed by Louis Feuillade, produced by Gaumont and released on November 24<sup>th</sup> 1911. Its length, eight minutes or a wheel of 167 meters, is usual for the time. Its actors are Jean Ayme, Louise Lagrange, Léonce Perret and Luitz Morat. Contrarily to most movies of the period and fortunately for us, a copy of the film has been preserved ; it has been recently restored by the Nederlands Filmmuseum (Amsterdam) and shown in different cinema festivals. I have not seen the movie yet.

Here is the summary available to me (on The Internet Movie Data Base) : « The dissolute Emperor Heliogabalus dresses as a woman, and looses lions among his guests ».

### Ancient sources

Readers of Helagabal's Life in the *Historia Augusta* and of Dio Cassius may easily recognise the inspiration for this movie for both of its themes. According to the *Historia Augusta* 21, 1, « among his pets, Helagabal had lions and leopards, which had been rendered harmless and trained by tamers, and these he would suddenly order during the dessert and the after-dessert to get up on the couches, thereby causing an amusing panic, for none knew that the beasts were harmless ». We are also told in 25, 1, that « when his friends became drunk, he would often shut them up, and suddenly during the night let in his lions and leopards and bears — all of them harmless — so that his friends on awakening at dawn, or worse, during the night, would find lions and leopards and bears in the room with themselves ; and some even died from this cause ».

The *Historia Augusta* and Dio Cassius make of Helagabal's crossdressing and gender identity a main point of his negative portrait, and the summary of the movie above does not

make possible to identify a specific passage as its inspiration. According to the *Historia Augusta*, the emperor played the role of Venus in a *fabula Paridis* in his palace (5, 4-5), and he appeared in front of female prostitutes dressed as a woman (26, 5). According to Dio Cassius, he acted as a female prostitute, both outside and inside the palace (80, 13, 2-4).

It was Gaumont's policy not to reveal scenario writers' identity; their names did not appear on the screen in the generic. For the moment, I do not know who wrote the scenario of "Héliogabale"; it is not impossible that Feuillade himself imagined the story; he was a prolific scenario writer for Gaumont, for movies he shot himself or for movies whose shooting he left to other directors.

Obviously, it is not possible for the moment to assess if the scenario is directly inspired by the ancient texts or if indirect influence was at work; intuitively, for the moment, I would rather favour the second option.

## 2 titles

Movies of the time frequently had two or more titles. In this case, it seems that the title used in America was « A Roman orgy ». The marketing department of Gaumont used to suggest for distribution a title that was different from the one used during shooting. Only archives in Gaumont could help to solve this question, if they survived.

## **Louis Feuillade**

### A Brief Presentation

Louis Feuillade (1873-1925) has been called « the saviour of French cinema after the first world war », and the « third way of French cinema » (the first two ones being represented respectively by the straight realism of the Lumière brothers and the fantasy of Méliès). Born in a very conservative middle-class family in the South of France, Feuillade came to Paris and tried his chance first as an accountant in a publishing company, then as a journalist in different rightwing and/or satirical newspapers. By chance, in 1905, he started writing scenarios for Gaumont Company, and soon he was asked to shoot movies. His productivity, his efficiency and his flexibility allowed him to shoot more than seven hundred movies, in all genres possible. His greatest successes, which brought him fortune and world-wide fame were the so-called serials : *Fantomas*, *Judex*, and *Les Vampires*.

With their combination of extravagant plots, humour, mysterious characters, dark aesthetics and with their fine images, the serials enjoyed tremendous success after the First World War, to be despised after Feuillade's premature death and rediscovered by the

surrealists. They enjoy now a second renaissance, critical and commercial, with their reissue in DVDs.

### Louis Feuillade and Classics

With such a career, it may be surprising to know that Louis Feuillade went through a good training in classics. As a young teenager, he went to the « Petit séminaire », the first step of a good catholic education, which could have led to the « Grand séminaire » and priesthood. Latin was an essential part of the curriculum. Obviously, Feuillade did not choose an ecclesiastical career. However he passed successfully in 1891 the « baccalauréat ès lettres classiques », i.e. Classics and French Literature. Though the level of this classical education degree at that time was very high, I doubt that the curriculum covered the *Historia Augusta*. Nevertheless, Louis Feuillade certainly heard about Helagabal's history and image during his school years.

Within Feuillade's abundant production, before the movies from the « Film esthétique » series, which I will discuss later, a few movies have classics themes. Here is a list of titles, according to their release year:

- 1908: La légende de la fileuse (about Arachne and Minerva); La légende de Narcisse; Prométhée (it seems that the movie was influenced by a famous picture by the symbolist French painter Gustave Moreau); L'Amour et Psyché
- 1909: L'aveugle de Jérusalem; Judith et Holopherne; Le voile des Nymphes; Idylle corinthienne
- 1910: La légende de Midas; La légende de Daphné; Le festin de Balthasar (or Les derniers jours de Babylone); Lysistrata; Esther et Assuérus

### ***Héliogabale and « Le film esthétique »***

In 1910, Gaumont Company started a new series of movies under a new label: “Le film esthétique”. Several causes underlie this creation. First, it was a reaction to a move by two rival companies. The independent company “Le Film d’Art” started in 1908 with an ambitious project by the directors Charles Le Bargy and André Calmettes: “L’assassinat du Duc de Guise”. Of course, this movie was a silent movie, but it was accompanied by a sound track specially commissioned to Camille Saint-Saëns. The same year, the big production company Pathé started, as a reaction to “Le film d’Art”, the “Société Cinématographique des Auteurs et Gens de Lettres”. Films made by both companies are characterised by a research

of intellectual and cultural prestige both through the use of famous works of literature as a basis for scenarios and through the hiring of famous theatre actors.

The same years, the president of Gaumont travelled extensively in the USA where he explored the market potential for French movies there. Despite their critical acclaim, movies like “L’assassinat du Duc de Guise” were not commercial successes both because their historical plot was too specialised for an American audience and because their bloody scenes offended some puritan sensibilities.

Because of the competition’s moves and of the wish to penetrate the American market, Gaumont and his artistic director, Louis Feuillade, created “Le film esthétique”, which would specialise in ambitious artistic movies whose themes would be centred on biblical, Greek and Roman stories. Movie theatre managers seem to have preferred the Christian part of the series. Attention was given to the quality of the images, and, according to the creators of the series, the beauty of the theme should match the quality of the image. This quest for artistic respectability and prestige was expensive; the experience was short-lived and stopped after two years.

In all, 21 films were produced under the label “Film esthétique”; Feuillade shot most of them, which seems to be a sign of deep involvement in the series and its themes. It should be noted that the series also gave Feuillade the occasion to make a point in method of acting. Feuillade was strongly opposed to the use of theatre actors and techniques for movies in opposition to directors like Calmettes and to the rival prestigious labels mentioned above. He favored a more natural and modern method of acting.

Here is a list of all “Film esthétique” movies:

- 1910: Le Pater; Amphitryon (shot by Etienne Arnaud); Petits poèmes antiques; L’Exode; La Nativité. This last movie was influenced by a painting by Luc-Olivier Meerson (1846-1920): “Le repos en Egypte” (1880). Some years later, this painter considered that he had been plagiarised, and he went to court against Gaumont. After a long trial, the charge was eventually dismissed in 1921, after the painter’s death.
- 1911: Thaïs; La prêtresse de Carthage; Locuste; Le Tyran de Syracuse; La fils de la Sunamite; Flore et Zéphyr; La vierge d’Argos; La fiancée d’Eole; Héliogabale (ou L’orgie romaine); Aux lions les Chrétiens; La Nativité (new release for Christmas)
- 1912: Androclès; Tyrtée; Poèmes antiques (new release)
- 1913: La mort de Lucrèce: L’Agonie de Byzance (a 50 minutes super production, which was given a special prestigious opening with a soundtrack commissioned for the occasion and played with a large choir and organ); Le Festin de Balthasar (new release); La

destruction de Carthage (released only in 1915, during the war, when new films were scarce); L'esclave de Phidias (shot by Léonce Perret, and released in 1917 in the same circumstances than the previous movie)

Only a detailed examination of all movies in the series "Le film esthétique" would allow assessing the negative and positive aspects attached to the "pagan" movies in opposition to the Christian ones. However, if I am not mistaken, Helagabal is only in the company of Nero as representatives of the Roman Emperors, which seems to indicate that the proselytising mission of the series did not stop at the Christian movies. The show of bad emperors could only, through comparison, underline the virtues of biblical or Christian figures. It is worth here reminding that these short movies were never shown individually. They were part of a program combining several short movies, usually belonging to different genres. The (weekly generally) selection was made by Feuillade at the Gaumont company, but it could be modified by individual movie theatre managers.

### ***Héliogabale's Lions***

It would be wrong to consider the story of cinema only from an auteuristic and artistic point of view. The mixture of commerce and art, of money and sensibility make movies what they are, maybe even more at the beginnings of this form of art than in our time. Louis Gaumont seems to have been an efficient businessman who closely checked expenditures and revenues. His legendary stinginess explains why the series « Le Film esthétique » did not last long and why it was replaced by another series called « La vie telle qu'elle est », whose base realism was cheaper than biblical and classical decors.

Glamorous decors were necessary to show Greece, Italy or the biblical lands. Animals were part of the atmosphere : for instance, elephants, vultures or other exotic animals were regularly hired to appear in the « Film esthétique » movies. As an investment at the beginning of the series, Gaumont Company bought several lions and some other felines. Because these animals had to be cheap, they happened to be animals deemed too vicious or lazy to be kept by zoos or circuses. It did not go without problems at Gaumont, where a menagerie was built along the studios. Several incidents saw the beasts escape from the set where they were supposed to be filmed and spread the terror one could imagine in Gaumont's offices.

It seems very probable that these adventures helped in writing the scenario of Héliogabale, furthermore because we know about "La maison des lions", another movie shot by Feuillade in 1912 whose plot is very similar to « L'orgie romaine » : a rich lady is

offended because her lover broke with her ; in revenge, she looses lions against him during a trendy party. Except for costumes, it is very similar in action and effect to Héliogabale.

Lions were used in other movies from the series « Le film esthétique », obviously in « Aux lions les Chrétiens », but also, for instance, in Androclès (the hero once helped a lion who was suffering from a thorn in its paw ; in the arena, the lion recognises its benefactor among the victims offered to the beasts).

These dangerous lions, prone to accidents and expensive to keep, have known a sad destiny. They eventually were killed. Their death could not be lost for the movies, and they were shot in both senses of the term, by a gun and a camera, during different short movies where valiant men saved women and children from the dangerous animals.

Movies could be very stressful for actors and technicians on the set, and every incident was exploited by imaginative scenario writers who had to come each week with new ideas. The movie Héliogabale is also borne in the momentous circumstances of this era of cinema history.

### ***Feuillade and Calmettes***

As we have already seen above, this period of movie history is also a period of fierce competition among producers and directors. We know of another movie called Héliogabale, in 1909, directed by André Calmettes and produced by the Film d'Art. I do not have yet other details about this movie.

We have already seen the name Calmettes in the previous pages. As I said, he is famous as one of the directors of « L'assassinat du Duc de Guise » (1908), a very prestigious movie whose music was written especially for the occasion by Saint-Saëns. He is also the author of a.o. Œdipe Roi (1908) ; Britannicus (1908) ; Le Roi de Rome (1909) ; Le retour d'Ulysse (1909), Le baiser de Judas (1910), La résurrection (1910) and Jésus de Nazareth (1911). His movies are very often based on famous literary works, for instance « Macbeth » or “La Dame aux Camélias”, with the famous actress Sarah Bernhardt as Camille (she was not happy with the result, it seems).

Louis Feuillade explicitly took issue with Calmettes' theatrical and static way of shooting movies. More research needs to be done about Calmettes and about the relation between the two Héliogabales. For chronological reasons and because of Calmette's connection with theatre actors and music composers of his time, more research should also be done about the relation between both short movies and Déodat de Séverac's opera.

### ***A very brief Conclusion***

In search both of respectability and good stories, the young movie industry was attracted by Greek and roman history and by the contrast between pagan and Christian figures. However, the noble thematic and aesthetic ideals of the people involved in movies had to adapt to economic and practical circumstances. In these pages, I tried to show how both considerations fashioned the short movie *Héliogabale* by Feuillade.

More research needs to be done to understand how Feuillade's movie fitted in the artistic production of its time, and more consideration needs to be given to the image of Helagabal in the movie, particularly the image of his sexual identity. This may be achieved only after visioning the film, something I will hopefully do soon. I am very interested to read comments from people who attend the conference.

To know more about Feuillade:

F. LACASSIN, *Louis Feuillade. Maître des lions et des vampires* (1995) (richly illustrated)

V. CALLAHAN, *Zones of Anxiety: Movement, Musidora, and the Crime Serials of Louis Feuillade* (2005) (a feminist analysis of the crime serials) (*non vidi*)

Several articles in a special issue of the journal *1895* (October 2000), devoted to Feuillade, deal with the series "Le film esthétique" (*non vidi*)

Images:

NB: All the images presented here were found on Internet; I do not know their copyright situation. Please, contact me if any problem arises

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**A still image from “Héliogabale” (1911)**



Found on [http://perso.wanadoo.fr/erca/pierre\\_philippe/unesoireeaugaumontpalace.html](http://perso.wanadoo.fr/erca/pierre_philippe/unesoireeaugaumontpalace.html)



**A poster for “Prométhée” (1908)**



Found on <http://www.apgrd.ox.ac.uk/events/lectures03-04.htm>

**A still image from “La Nativité” (1911)**

Found on [http://www.louis-feuillade.com/lunelart/cine/feuillade/feu\\_autres.htm](http://www.louis-feuillade.com/lunelart/cine/feuillade/feu_autres.htm)  
A picture of Meerson's painting is visible on <http://www.musee-beaux-arts-nice.org/francais/collections/merson.html>

**A still image from “Aux lions les Chrétiens” (1911)**



Found on [http://www.louis-feuillade.com/lunelart/cine/feuillade/feu\\_autres.htm](http://www.louis-feuillade.com/lunelart/cine/feuillade/feu_autres.htm)

**A still image from “L’agonie de Byzance” (1913)**



Found on [http://www.louis-feuillade.com/lunelart/cine/feuillade/feu\\_autres.htm](http://www.louis-feuillade.com/lunelart/cine/feuillade/feu_autres.htm)