



# The miseries of the needle of the cooperative **Cinéma du Peuple**: a feminist movie in the early cinema

*As misérias da agulha do  
Cinema do Povo: um filme  
feminista no primeiro  
cinema<sup>1</sup>*



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<sup>1</sup> This article was presented in a reduced preliminary version in English, in the annals of the *11th Seminar on the Origins and History of Cinema – Presences and Representations of Women in the Early Years of Cinema 1895 – 1920*, held in Girona, Spain, in May 2017.

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**Abstract:** this article aims to analyze the first film produced by *Cinéma du Peuple* in France, in January 1914, entitled *Les misères de l'aiguille* (Miseries of the Needle). The film was frankly oriented to show the problems of the urban women in French working-class. The film analysis revealed us not only a whole different way of showing women with a feminist motivation, but also a new representation of the female, even by the working-class movement in the early 20th century in France, as we can see by comparing caricatures, draws and pictures produced by militant press and artists.

**Keywords:** early cinema; *cinéma du peuple*; feminism.

**Resumo:** o artigo pretende analisar o primeiro filme produzido pelo Cinema do Povo na França, em janeiro de 1914, intitulado *Les misères de l'aiguille* (As misérias da agulha). O filme foi francamente orientado para mostrar os problemas das mulheres urbanas na classe trabalhadora francesa. A análise fílmica nos revelou não apenas um modo totalmente diferente de mostrar as mulheres, com motivação feminista, mas também, uma nova representação da mulher, mesmo pelo movimento operário do início do século XX na França, como podemos ver comparando caricaturas, desenhos e imagens produzidos pela imprensa e artistas militantes.

**Palavras-chave:** primeiro cinema; cinema do povo; feminismo.

The *Cinéma du Peuple* (Cinema of the People) cooperative emerged from French militants' frank approximation with cinema, which had begun in 1909, when the industrialization of French film production was already well underway. The cooperative's lifespan was relatively short, from October 1913 to July 1914. Echoing beyond 1914, the Cinema of the People experience was the first organized attempt by the working class of taking ownership of cinema. It laid the foundations for a new form of cultural intervention, in opposition to commercial cinema's unbridled hegemony<sup>3</sup>. By means of an analysis based on workers' movement standards of artistic representation, this article proposes an interpretation of the cooperative's filmic constitution. To this end, the theme of militant art, circumscribed by the history of the workers' movement and the construction of its images since the advent of the Third Republic, served as the foundation for comparisons between Cinema of the People and illustrations published in the militant press.

To date, the following films of the cooperative have been found: *Les misères de l'aiguille* (*Miseries of the needle*, 1914), by Raphaël Clamour, their first; *Le vieux docker* (*The old docker*, 1914), by Armand Guerra, and *La Commune* (*The Commune*, 1914), also by Armand Guerra, the last and better known of the three<sup>4</sup>. The main sources for this article are the first film<sup>5</sup>, *Miseries of the needle* (from now on, simply *Miseries*), and the drawings of the artists Maximilien Luce, Delannoy, Bernard Naudin, and Georges Bradberry. The drawings were produced for the *Les Temps Nouveaux* newspaper, edited by the anarchist Jean Grave. The choice of *Les Temps Nouveaux* is justified by the fact that, in addition to bringing together artists who played a major role in the contemporary discussion on painting, and who also contributed their illustrations to other libertarian newspapers, *Les Temps* illustrations were closest, thematically and aesthetically, to the Cinema of the People mode of filmic representation.

These drawings, together with other forms of illustration (series of litographs, albums, brochures, books, posters, and postcards) were published across three

<sup>3</sup> The research that gave rise to this article sought to demonstrate, by means of the Cinema of the People experience, that the public is not a natural and irrevocable prisoner of commercial films and the interests of distributors. The Cinema of the People was the first comprehensive militant cinema organization, since it integrated the techniques of the cinematographic tripod: production, distribution and exhibition, all in a noncommercial circuit geared towards revolutionary militancy (MUNDIM, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> As for the films that have never been found, they are the following: *Les obsèques du citoyen Francis de Pressensé* (*The funeral of citizen Francis de Pressensé*, 1914); *Victime des exploités* (*Victim of exploitation*, 1914); and *L'hiver! Plaisirs des riches! Souffrances des pauvres!* (*Winter, Pleasures for the Rich, Sufferings for the Poor!*, 1914). See: *La bataille syndicaliste*. (*Le Cinéma du Peuple*), February 23, 1914.

<sup>5</sup> The film can be found online: <http://bit.ly/2V9c3f9>.

hundred different editions of the newspaper, an iconographic collection with no equal among the anarchist press (DARDEL, 1980, p. 2). While analyzing *Miseries*, our focus is the advent of a new representation of women by the workers' movement of the early 20th century, as we will see when comparing filmic sequences and scenes with caricatures, drawings and images published in the *Les Temps Nouveaux* weekly. The film was likely one of the first in the world explicitly geared towards representing the themes of militant feminism.

The Cinema of the People cooperative idealized and produced *Miseries* in approximately two months, despite the difficulties inherent in the enterprise and the group's frail reputation in the eyes of other organizations. A police report from January 19th, 1914 provides some details on the film's launch party, which had taken place the day before<sup>6</sup>. The report describes the event's schedule, which had a sequence of attractions including singing, speeches, and film projections. Interestingly, the projection of *Miseries* appears as only one among a number of attractions, and not as a Cinema of the People exhibition.

The Cinema of the People party was tributary to the popular party tradition, a format that had been reinvented in the previous twenty years, as a response to the Republic. It was held in the *société savant* from 9:30 pm to 12:30 am. Attendance was approximately 500 people. The price of entry was 1 franc, a little above the average ticket in the neighborhood cinemas of the time, which were fairly common. In Paris, the cinema ticket could cost between 0.50 fr. (for a regular place in the gallery) and 6 fr. (for a special reservation in the *loge* of a *Cinéma-Palace* such as the Gaumont-Palace)<sup>7</sup>.

According to the police report, the first half of the party was comprised of presentations of songs with popular and militant themes, by the composers Pierre Alin, Broka, Anne Broka, Xavier Privas, and Francine Lorée Privas. The singers took turns between film exhibitions. The films had been borrowed from Lux, a film producer.

Afterwards, Lucien Descaves made a speech on the "Usefulness of the Cinema of the People." Until recently, we had access to only a fragment of this

<sup>6</sup> See: *Archives Nationales de France*, series AN F713347. January 19, 1914 report. Cinema of the People activities were closely monitored, either by police officers during parties or by agents infiltrating the meetings.

<sup>7</sup> Considering the reference of one kilo of bread— the main workers' food both in the countryside and in the city (a family with two children consumed an average of 2 kg a day)—priced at 0.40 francs in 1913, the cinema ticket would be a considerable, although modest, additional expense. This lends credence to the idea of genuine interest in the spectacle, which is not regarded as a cheap distraction (*Annuaire statistique*, Paris, 1901-1952). For cinema ticket prices, see Meusy, Jean-Jacques, 2002, p. 288. Regarding the importance of bread in the period, see Prost, 2014, p. 31-34.

speech, thanks to the police report and a comment published in January 24, 1914 in the *Le Libertaire* newspaper. The comment was written by a spectator, bothered by technical difficulties in the projection. However, Jean-Paul Morel was able to find the text of the Descaves speech, and published it in full in 2011, in the *1895* magazine. The document contains the film's full information sheet:

**Miseries of the Needle<sup>8</sup>**

Film information sheet

Directed by: Raphaël CLAMOUR

Photography: Armand GUERRA

Production: La Coopérative «Le Cinéma du Peuple»

Launch: Première, Great Salle des Sociétés savantes,  
 8, rue Danton, Paris Ve, January 19, 1914.

Cast:

Louise	Mlle MUSIDORA, des Bouffes parisiens
Laure	Mme Lina CLAMOUR, du Moulin-Rouge
The militant's wife	Mlle Marion DESCLOS
Georges	M. Raphaël CLAMOUR, de l'Odéon
The employer	M. MICHELET (Fred), du Châtelet
The militant	M. GAGET, du Châtelet
The foreman	M. GUERRA, du Grand Théâtre de Barcelone
The little Pierre	Maurice G ... (2 years old)
The militant's son	Marcel B ... (6 years old)

Raphaël Clamour (1885-1943), a well-known theater artist who was part of the militant milieu, was responsible for writing the script and producing the movie. Clamour invited the actress Jeanne Roques (1889-1957) to participate in the film, since he was used to working with her. Jeanne Roques was already fairly successful in the theater scene and in cabarets such as *des Bouffes Parisiens*, under the artistic name of Musidora<sup>9</sup>. She got the main role: a character named Louise, the Parisian clothing shop seamstress.

<sup>8</sup> The document is described as follows: *Brochure de 4 pages. Imprimée pour le « Cinéma du Peuple » par « L'Émancipatrice, Imprimerie communiste, 3, rue de Pondichéry, Paris (XVe) » Dessin de couverture de Henri Sastre.* Archives de l'Institut International d'Histoire Sociale (I.I.H.S.), Amsterdam. See Morel (2011).

<sup>9</sup> On the trajectory one of this most celebrated silent film actress, who gained notoriety as Irma Vep in the serial *Les Vampires* (by Louis Feuillade), see Lacassin (1970) and Cazals (1978).

After Descaves' speech and a five-minute intermission, which closed the first half of the party, the *Miseries* exhibition began. At this point in the report, the police officer informs us that a piece of paper with the film's history was also sold during the party<sup>10</sup>. It was likely a brief text, also written by Lucien Descaves and made available in Morel's publication:

**Miseries of the Needle**

*A great social drama, edited by Cinema of the People*

In its debut, "*Cinema of the People*" aimed to present the public with a social drama interesting to women.

No matter what is said, women in contemporary society find themselves in a situation of great inferiority, as compared to men. It is rightly said that women are exploited twice: as producers and, often, also in their homes.

In Paris, more than 300,000 women are forced to sell their [productive capacities] at degrading prices. Each morning, thousands of "Louises" reach Paris' large stations, coming from the suburbs. They spill themselves over the capital's stores and ateliers.

Our aim was to use cinema to shine a light on all of modern women's misères; those women who suffer everywhere, in exchange of hunger wages.

The "Home Angel," so celebrated by the poets, is no longer! Only the unhappiest of sufferers remain, mistreated by fate. Our feminism consists mostly of elevating women, putting them in their true place in society, to make them equal to men in all social actions.

Above all, we want women to be interested in social issues, so one day the material and moral conditions of all the oppressed may be transformed.

If all the "Louises" choose to reflect on their unfortunate fate, they shall leave their mortal isolation; they shall join each other in social defense organizations. If every militant who wants to free women decides to help us, the cause of women's emancipation shall take a great step forward, and *Cinema of the People* shall not regret its efforts in editing *Miseries of the Needle* (Morel, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> Archives Nationales de France, series AN F713347. January 19, 1914 report.

Lucien Descaves had been the vice-president of the *Ligue française pour le droit des femmes* (French League for women's rights)<sup>11</sup>. The choice of the character of the seamstress Louise Michel for opening the cooperative's series of films, among various other possible professional categories, also merits attention. This was to pay homage to the historic Louise Michel, the Paris Commune heroin. Cinema of the People had an openly feminist agenda. This went side by side with their other themes, such as labor categories and the tribute to martyrs. Not so well-addressed in the documentation, the presence of two women in the group—Henriette Tilly, the chairman of the *Comité Féminin*<sup>12</sup>, and Jeanne Morand, an individualist anarchist—contributed to determining women's struggles as the subject of the films.

Only one copy of *Miseries* survived, stored in the French Cinematheque. The copy is highly deteriorated and perhaps incomplete, judging by some sequences in which scenes appear to be missing. Yet, this 225-meter surviving copy runs for a total of 13 minutes. This appears to be the movie's original timespan. When we first watched it, it gave us an impression of technical precariousness in comparison to the commercial films of the period. We gather this was due to the limited material possibilities of the cooperative. However, going beyond the impression caused by this first contact, we wondered: how did the director conceive of the execution of the scenes and sequences? How do feminist ideas permeate the film? Moreover, what are the film's references to the workers' movement mode of artistic representation, as these are not readily apparent? We will perform a brief analytical incursion into the film, so as to answer those questions<sup>13</sup>.

The initial sequence takes place in the store Louise will later be working at. It opens with an external mid shot (the camera will assume a fixed position throughout the film). The sequence shows Louise strolling through the streets, accompanied by an older woman. Her companion points to something, and they stop in front of a clothing store; its front window exhibits a job opening poster. The scene is cut to an American

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<sup>11</sup> The organization was founded in 1870 by Maria Deraismes and Léon Richer, and made Victor Hugo its honorific president when it was re-founded in 1882, after a disagreement between Derasimes and Richer regarding the struggle for universal suffrage. Richer had resisted the agenda because he considered women's right to vote a risk to republican and democratic ideals, since it could supposedly lead French Catholicism to dominate the elections. The case of the French League is emblematic in the denunciation of men's attempt to captain the organized feminist movement in the nineteenth century. In a 1921 artwork in commemoration of the League's 50 years, Leon Richer is the one who is honored. See Viviani (1921).

<sup>12</sup> The group emerged in 1912, and had not been created exactly as a feminist organization. Its approximation with feminism became much more forceful in the second half of 1913, when the "Emma Couriau affair" took on great proportions in the CGT, as we shall see later. See, for example, *Les Archives Nationales* (AN) F713054. November 5, 1913 police report.

<sup>13</sup> For the methodological basis of filmic analysis see, for example: Goliot-Lété; Vanoye (2012); and Jullier; Marie (2009).

shot, and we are able to read the job posting's text: "*Hiring apprentice, immediate compensation.*" It also says that the work can only be performed by a woman, and does not require previous experience. Louise is somewhat reluctant to go into the store to find out more about the opening, but her companion convinces her. In the store, the owner assists a bourgeois couple. She uses an employee as a mannequin to present a dress to the potential customer. The scene denounces the frivolity of this type of trade. The sequence is closed with the costumers leaving and Louise and her friend arriving. The friend convinces the store owner to take in the heroin as a seamstress apprentice.

This first sequence is enough to present the aesthetical option for a more direct approach to the subject, which avoids formal symbolism. This strategy should not be discredited, but rather understood as a representation of Cinema of the People's militant struggle. It is also worth noting that women are not only the theme, but also the film's central figures of representation.

### Initial scenes from *Miseries of the Needle*



Figure 1: The friend (probably the character Laure) alongside Louise in front of the store.



Figure 2: Louise appears to resist the idea of applying for the job.



Figure 3: Within the store, the owner shows a dress to bourgeois customers.



Figure 4: Louise is then accepted as an apprentice

Source: *Les misères de l'aiguille* (Miseries of the Needle, 1914)

Even though women are traditionally present in the labor struggles of the first half of the 19th century, they were only taken in as nurses or cooks. In order to carry weapons, they had to dress as men. Thus, early-20<sup>th</sup> century artistic representations of women rarely place them in a leadership position. At the classical republican iconography, leading protests or parades, they are frozen as symbols, in *Marianne*, the last means of transforming woman in object, a representation of “people” itself. In workers’ movement representations, however, women are almost never alone, always participating in the family’s misery and labor. They appear, above all, as family mothers, carrying babies in their arms, with children that they have to feed often around them. Thus, women feed and soothe their children, and play games with them. This image of working-class women is rather conventional. If not for the representation of the interiors of their houses as modest, austere places, they could easily be mistaken for women of any other class<sup>14</sup>.

### Women’s representations in the *Les Temps Nouveaux* newspaper



Figure 5: Tell them not to kill the fathers who are striking. Georges Bradberry.

Source: *Les Temps Nouveaux – Supplément littéraire*, May 5, 1906



Figure 6: Untitled (a mother and two children). Charles Angrand.

Source: *Les Temps Nouveaux*, June 27, 1914

<sup>14</sup> For these aspects of female representation in the arts, see: Dardel, 1980, p. 133; Agulhon, 1976; Chenut, 2012, p. 437-452; Riot-Sarcey, 2005, p. 362-378.

The drawing “Tell them not to kill the fathers who are striking,” by Georges Bradberry (Figure 5) is among the most representative of this perspective. Published in 1906 in *Les Temps Nouveaux*, it contains almost every element of this tradition, defined by the segregation of women to the domestic and maternal space, the rearguard of the struggle. While the children play innocently with their lead soldiers, the violence experienced by French workers in 1905-1907 is evoked. The army is guilty of taking capitalism’s side against the striking workers. The role of the working woman is to stay at home, taking care of the children, worried about her man’s return. The husband, meanwhile, is the one who takes part in the strike.

Another interesting *Les Temps Nouveaux* drawing was authored in 1914 by the neo-impressionist artist Charles Angrand (Figure 6), a disciple of Seurat. It too exemplifies the traditional representation of women in the militant milieu of early-20<sup>th</sup> century France. The drawing, contemporary to the Cinema of the People film, was used as the edition’s cover. It shows a working woman with a baby and a child. Her expression carries sadness and sorrow, most likely in an effort to convey the feeling caused by the impeding departure of men to fight in the war. This is a recurrent theme: the working woman’s burden of responsibility for home and family, in the face of a man’s absence. Thus, the drama consistently revolves around the man’s absence, whether caused by the latter’s commitment to militant struggle or his death in the hands of the warring state. To women represented as such, all that remains is faith in the struggling man’s ability and luck. They have little or nothing to do but join the children in a cheerleading effort.

*Miseries* appears to take a stance that differentiates it from this tradition. The initial scene, of course, indicates working women’s conformity to family life. However, there is always some kind of differentiating remark that points clearly towards feminism. Despite the absence of intertitles, which were probably part of the original film, we are led to assume that Louise’s job in the store was able to secure her some kind of stable income for her modest, yet comfortable household. She arrives there with her child, carrying some shopping items. Among her acquisitions there is a small toy horse. She gives it to her child, who starts playing with it. This is the traditional representation of women, in which they are solely responsible for their children. However, the father soon arrives and, as enthusiastically as the mother, takes part in the child’s play. This is not seen in the analyzed drawings, and is rare in commercial cinematic portrayals of family life. Could this be pointing to women’s emancipation even within the household?

### Family scenes from *Miseries of the Needle*



Figure 7: Louise plays with her son. At first, this appears to be a traditional workers' movement representation.



Figure 8: The father arrives and plays effusively with the child.

Source: *Les misères de l'aiguille* (Miseries of the Needle, 1914)

The film continues, and with more details being presented, a different, non-traditional representation appears. In the subsequent scene, Louise refuses to physically submit to her employer, as we will see. She enters the employer's office, likely called upon. When he starts harassing her, trying to kiss her neck, she reacts by slapping him.

A brief report on the precarious working conditions to which women were subjected highlights the prevalence of work in commerce and in the domestic space, with constant abuse by employers. The 1906 census accounted for 7.69 million economically active women. Although it may have failed to account for many informal domestic workers, they were approximately 10% of the total (MARUANI; MERON, 2012)<sup>15</sup>. This issue was approached in 1907 by a Delannoy illustration, published in *Les Temps Nouveaux* (Figure 9). It can be compared to the scene in which Louise reacts to the employer's harassment.

<sup>15</sup> For more on this issue and others related to the world of women's labor in the early twentieth century, as well as women's militancy, refer also to the classic studies of Marie-Hélène Zylberberg-Hocquard: *Féminisme et syndicalisme en France* (1978) and *Femmes et féminisme dans le mouvement ouvrier français* (1981).

## Urban working women and their employers

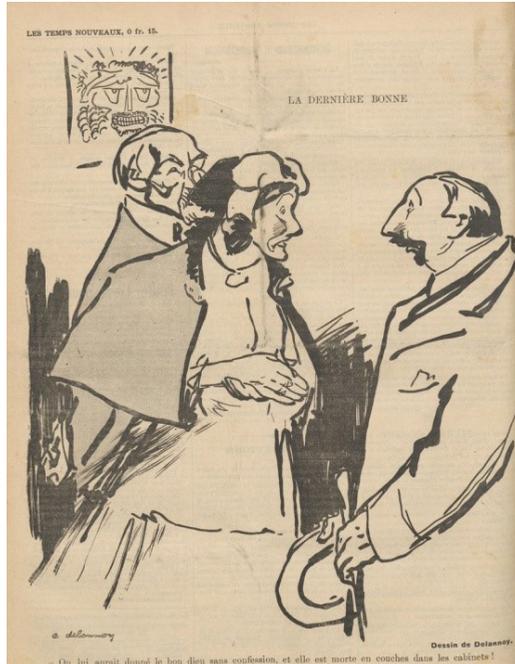


Figure 9: “She was a saint and we had no reason to distrust her; she died giving birth at the office!” Delannoy. *La Demiere Bonne* (The last maid).

Source: *Les Temps Nouveaux*, May 11, 1907



Figure 10: Louise reacts to the employer’s harassment by slapping him in the face. The scene, like others in the film, shows women actively at odds with oppression, a rare representation even within the militant milieu.

Source: *Les misères de l’aiguille* (*Miseries of the Needle*, 1914)

The maid (Figure 9) is not actually present, since “she died giving birth at the office.” The employers provide us with this information. They are the target of the author’s criticism, the bearers of the hypocrisy common to all bourgeois: their concealment of exploitation and abuse, and their false moral standards. At the time, the “*bonne à tout faire*,” a polyvalent household maid—very similar to her Brazilian counterpart, even in the early 21st century—was escaping from the provinces, migrating to the country’s capital in the hope of obtaining sufficient income. The long working hours, the low wages and loneliness often led to diseases and prostitution. Louise’s reaction to the employer’s abuse is actually a significant fact, a departure from traditional representations. However, it could hardly go unanswered. Vexed, the employer expels her from the office. This will have consequences for her home.

The husband, a secondary figure in the plot, also suffers from labor’s misères. Centered on the classical logic of exploitation at the factory, the next sequence takes place in a lithographic production line, where the husband works. The foreman enters the scene from the background. The workers are seated in front of the machine, typing. While still in the background, the foreman delivers a piece of paper to one of the workers, not without threatening gestures. Now in the foreground, he speaks to a second worker and allots him the task, leaving no doubt regarding his supervising role<sup>16</sup>.

The same logic of movement across the frame is repeated during the next scene. A mid shot shows the hall with the typographic machines forming a line towards the background. A young and seemingly inexperienced worker crouches to catch something in the corridor’s floor, between the machines. The foreman again joins the scene, coming from the background, and harshly reprehends the worker, punching and kicking him.

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<sup>16</sup> The foreman was one of the main targets of workers’ revolt, because in addition to a watchful gaze and regulation of the pace of work, he invariably practiced all kinds of abuse against women. See, for example, Perrot (1988, p. 70).

## The foreman, the militant and the strike-breaker in the lithography factory

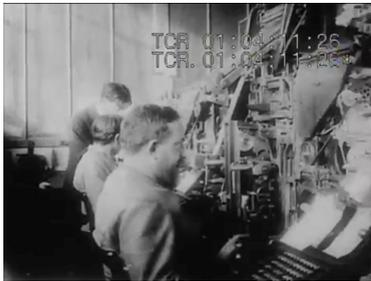


Figure 11: In the background, the foreman energetically gives instructions to a worker.

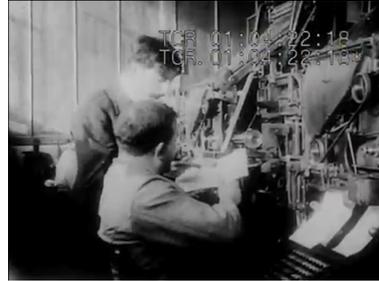


Figure 12: He walks towards the foreground, and gives instructions to a second employee.



Figure 13: The foreman reprehends the young employee. In a white coat, the militant confronts the foreman.



Figure 14: After the fight, the room is emptied by the workers, in solidarity for the militant comrade. The foreman returns to find only George, Louise's husband, still in the factory. He has refused to stop working.

Source: *Les misères de l'aiguille* (The Miseries of the Needle, 1914)

Another worker, certainly the “militant” character, intercedes and threatens to attack the foreman, who calls management. All the other workers follow the militant in protest, and only one remains in the shop floor, working normally. It is likely Louise's husband. The husband, a *jaune* (strike breaker, in working-class lingo), nonchalant about his colleagues' solidarity, will one day suffer the consequences of his alienation from the collective struggle.

Armand Guerra's acting as the foreman stands out. The character's movements are theatrical, although plastically consistent with the cinematic frame. The character favors the scene's overall composition, as is visually emphasized as needed. To the spectator's eyes, the foreman thus becomes unavoidable, his role as an oppressor imposing itself over the worker.

This scene has the highest degree of aesthetic and formal elaboration, standing out among the remainder of the film's scenes. Even though the setting looks simple, lithography was an important reference for the French workers' turn towards feminism. In 1913, this change was precipitating itself considerably. The immediate reference for this feminist agitation was the so-called Emma Couriau affair.

According to Guillaume Davranche, the federation of book unions was the most reformist and centralist among CGT trade unions. Together with unions from the lithographic factories, it was also the most "macho." Although a minority of trade unions had a pro-women stance, rank-and-file workers were mostly hostile to female employment and unionization. Even after a tight vote in favor of women's unionization during a 1910 congress, the federation's leadership eventually allowed affiliated unions to act as they saw fit. In April 1913, Emma Couriau, a typographer, wife of Louis Couriau, also a typographer and union member in Lyon, demanded union membership after seventeen years of professional work. In addition to denying Couriau's membership, the union penalized her husband for allowing his wife to work as a typographer (DAVRANCHE, 2014, p. 328-329).

The case ended up gaining notoriety within the CGT—and even among bourgeois feminists—after the involvement of the *Fédération féministe du Sud-Est*. Led by Marie Guillot, this organization sued the federation of book unions, while mobilizing the most important militant newspapers. There were considerable public outcries from notorious militants like Émile Pouget and Pierre Monatte, who repudiated the refusal and demanded practical measures from the union in Lyon. Nevertheless, the federation did not give in and, given the impasse imposed by the autonomism and local limitations of the federations and their unions, the solution was to allow women to join at a confederation level, by means of a hybrid organism in the form of a female trade union league. The climax of the affair was reached when a large conference involving more than a thousand people was held in December 1913, organized by bourgeois feminist and working women's associations. The conference decided to tackle the organization of female workers separately from male unions. According to the documentation compiled by Davranche, this discussion was not new, with precedents in the 1910 Congress of the Federation of Garment Unions. At that time, a decision was made to keep unions mixed, with the possibility of creating separate female sections, as suggested after the Emma Couriau case (DAVRANCHE, 2014, p. 331-332).

The typographic environment was more than yet another space for capitalist exploitation. In the experience of the French labor movement, it had a peculiar character as place of confrontation between divergent positions and tendencies, and not only feminist ones, but rather those of an entire universe of social movements. Given the circumstances of militants at the time, the typographic factory in *Miseries* is intended as a representation of a male-dominated environment. Within it, vileness is not limited to the oppression of the foreman over the workers; rather, it exists as a general form of oppression lived by female workers and militant French women.

This vile environment was complemented by another, the greatest source of tragedy in the life of female Parisian workers—the domestic environment. Thus, in the next sequence we see Louise performing her domestic work. She acquires the necessary fabrics in the street, goes home and begins sewing. The house now seems smaller, more modest. It has a mansard roof. The environment where she sews is also where the child and the husband sleep. The husband is sick and seemingly unemployed. Louise, tired, falls asleep. From the montage, one is led to assume she is dreaming, but we believe this was actually an attempt at parallel narrative. In one half of the picture, we see a scene with Louise's employer and a woman. Both are living the good life, wandering across the city in a carriage and eating in good restaurants. They come across a beggar, who asks for help. The attempt at expressing social contradiction is performed in a technically precarious way, overlapping the transverse half of the screen with the parallel narrative's scenes.

The highlight of the scene is the representation of the domestic work performed by Louise. The informal character of this professional category made it difficult to fully conceive of domestic work's implications over the exploitation of women. Perrot, referring to the proletarianization of urban women in the face of domestic work, emphasizes the role of the sewing machine:

The female worker's condition will only be rehabilitated at the beginning of the twentieth century, in opposition to the abuses of the *sweating system* (work at home within the context of the textile industry), linked in large part to the rhythms imposed by the sewing machine. This is also a story of subverted dreams. Initially a women's object of desire, who saw in it the means to reconcile their tasks and perhaps save time—a Singer is many a beating heart—the sewing machine became an instrument of bondage: the factory at home (PERROT, 1988, p. 198-199, own translation).

The domain of domestic sewing work had similarities to the paternalist environment of textile labor during the nineteenth century. This was a key sector for early industrialization. The autonomy of workers in the family environment, in which productive obligations are transferred to the sphere of parent-children relationships, helped dissimulate exploitation in the textile industry. After an ephemeral upsurge in the French Luddite movement—the textile workers’ revolt against the machines installed in rural industries during the first half of the twentieth century—smaller machines and looms, for domestic use, began to be employed as a way of appeasing these workers’ revolt and their contempt for the factory environment (PERROT, 1988, p. 25-34).

In a 1914 *Les Temps Nouveaux* drawing by Bernard Naudin, the reality of nineteenth-century domestic textile workers is portrayed. The drawing was meant to publicize a play called *Les tisserands*, by Gerhart Hauptmann. It was a drama about the misery of the 1840s, staged for the first time in Paris in May 1893, at the *Théâtre Libre*. It was reenacted in the same week the drawing was published (DARDEL, 1980, p. 289). In the drawing, the father rests over the loom, visibly fatigued, flanked by the mother and the child, both in suffering. This closely resembles the *Miseries* scene in which Louise is working with the sewing machine and ends up lying on it, overcome by fatigue.

At the end of the sequence, the husband is unable to resist his disease and dies. Desperate, Louise grabs the rope from the clothesline above her son’s cradle, takes the child in her arms, and goes out into the street. There is a cut to an external full shot, with the camera positioned over a stone beach. We see the river and, in the background, a bridge. Louise appears in the background, stunned but resolute to go on. Alternately, we see the departure of workers from an apparent meeting at the job exchange or the *Maison du Peuple*, near the riverbank towards which Louise is heading. Among the people leaving, with some difficulty (due to the deterioration of the film) we are able to see the militant coming towards the camera, holding hands with a child. While crossing the beach, they see Louise, tied to her son and about to throw herself into the river. They prevent her from committing suicide, and take her to the lingerie cooperative “L’Entraide.” This is the end of the movie, at least in the presently known copy.

## Domestic textile work: 19th century family, women and the sewing machine at the beginning of the 20th century



Figure 15: “Drawing by Bernard NAUDIN, for the programme of our Tisserands presentations.”

Source: *Les Temps Nouveaux*, March 14, 1914



Figure 16: In her pauperized home, Louise falls on the sewing machine, exhausted. In the background, her sick husband and son are also sleep.

Source: *Les misères de l'aiguille* (Miseries of the Needle), 1914

The sequence is a confirmation of what the programme for the first day of exhibition stated about the film’s goals: “If all the ‘Louises’ choose to reflect on their unfortunate fate, they shall leave their mortal isolation; they shall join each other in social defense organizations.” (MOREL, 2011).

Isabelle Marinone (2009), in her thesis on anarchism in French filmmaking—published as a book exclusively in Brazilian Portuguese—devotes a whole chapter to Cinema of the People. According to the author, the group was heterogeneous in terms of its political orientation towards the debates and struggles of the French labor movement. This heterogeneity was established by the cooperative’s founding statute itself, in its rules of adherence. This very point was frequently reasserted in the various publications which disseminated the cooperative’s activities in the militant press. However, the political will underlying a project is not always able to overcome material limits. In this case, these limits were not related only to gender, but also to the fact that *Fédération Communiste-Anarchiste* (FCA) militants were a majority within the group. The FCA was the main collectivist dissenting organization of parliamentary socialism in France<sup>17</sup>. Feminism was a good fit to the anarchist-communist ideal, more prevalent as a trend than Jeanne Morand’s individualistic anarchism<sup>18</sup>. The film’s ending indeed suggests that, extrapolating mutual support among women, the struggle for female emancipation would be an issue of class, not gender.

From a formal standpoint, *Miseries*, like other Cinema of the People films, mirrored the preexisting narrative tradition of commercial cinema, at that time already going through a process of discourse dramatization. The group’s militants composed their films based on a form of cinematic narrative that preceded the classic analytic montage, as perceived by them in films by Gaumont and Pathé. Nevertheless, in their practical cinematographic experience, they were able to build their own repertoires of representations and solutions for issues of filmic

<sup>17</sup> The Cinema of the People was led by the anarchist-communist syndicalist Yves Bidamant. In addition to Bidamant, the most active members of the group, such as Henri Sirolle, Robert Guérard (originally screenwriter for *Miseries*), Émile Rousset and Henriette Tilly, were all members of the FCA, as were the most prominent supporters such as Sébastien Faure, Pierre Martin, and Jean Grave. As for the socialists, the only active member was the singer Montéhus, likely a police infiltrator. For these data and details of the influence of the FCA on the Cinema of the People and on French social movements, see our thesis, chapters 1 and 2 (MUNDIM, 2016).

<sup>18</sup> The term anarchist-communist identifies a historical tendency of the anarchist movement, defined by its opposition to individualistic anarchism. Individual anarchists were supporters of emancipation by way of morals, could be adept at factual propaganda, and usually opposed syndicalism, the main pathway for anarchist-communist activism. The term was created by anarchists themselves in the 1880s. See: Mundim (2016, p. 94-102).

discourse. What presented itself as potential in *Miseries*, was gradually made concrete in *The old docker* and above *The Commune*.

By centering the narrative on the content's message, Cinema of the People filmmakers sought out original film editing and staging forms. Such an exercise could indeed have created a new style, changing "the course and methods of French production," as stated in the 1930s by Armand Guerra, *Miseries'* aforementioned actor and photographer. Guerra was also the director of *The Commune*<sup>19</sup>. A significant sign of this artistic freedom experienced by the Cinema of the People group—which, as we should remember, was the first cooperative cinematic production experience independent from the commercial medium—is the creation of *Miseries* in and of itself. Given the brief analysis presented here, *Miseries* can be considered the first openly feminist film, released eight years before *La Souriante Madame Beudet* (The Smiling Madame Beudet, Colisée Films, 1922), by Germaine Dulac, which is still generally regarded as the first feminist film in the history of cinema.

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<sup>19</sup> "The beginning of the war signaled the end of the *Le Cinéma du Peuple* cooperative, which had seemed destined to change the direction and methods of French cinematic production. From that point forward ... I have traveled throughout most of Europe, part of Asia Minor and Africa, working in many countries. But I have never again found the opportunity to organize a cooperative similar to the Parisian one." (GUERRA, 1935).

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