

Pantelis MICHELAKIS

**‘The comic - sentimental and grotesque’:
Louis Feuillade’s *Lysistrata* (1910)**

The aim of this paper is two-fold. On the one hand it will argue for the significance of Feuillade’s *Lysistrata* as one of the earliest adaptations of Greek drama in the history of cinema. On the other hand it will demonstrate that the film invites reflection on Aristophanes’ play after which it is named and more generally on the nature and potentialities of Aristophanes’ comedy. Feuillade’s *Lysistrata* is not a faithful translation of the play to the screen but an attempt to recast Aristophanes’ comedy for a different era and a new medium.

Lysistrata or *Kiss Strike* (*Lysistrata ou La Grève des Baisers*), is a 10-minute film which was produced by the French company Gaumont in 1910. Like many other films of the period, *Lysistrata* has been totally ignored by film historians, theatre historians, and classicists for almost a whole century. And, like many other films of this period, it can quickly be dismissed not only as inaccessible but also as crude, technically inadequate or naive. This paper brings two contexts into play which attempt to explain the film’s reinvention of Aristophanes’ play: theatrical and feminist versions of the play just before and in the era of silent cinema and debates on what constitutes comedy – crafted ‘sentimental’ plots and characters versus slap-stick and ‘grotesque’ jokes.

The film’s domestication of the foreign and its foreignization of the familiar, and its combination of the fantastic and the banal, challenge us to rethink our assumptions about the comic art of Aristophanes and the histories and theories of its interpretation. We may take for granted today that *Lysistrata* is one of the greatest feminist and anti-war utopias in the history of Western theatre. However, the film, produced only four years before the outbreak of the First World War, shows a distinct lack of interest in the realities and horrors of war. Moreover, the celebration of marital bliss with follows the display of female solidarity and self-consciousness seems to suggest that the women who have the power to control the filmic narrative should also display their ability to willingly submit themselves to a utopian vision of bourgeois and patriarchal order.

Like other comic films of the time, the film ‘mocks, without subverting or erasing, the hierarchies of class and gender’ (Abel 1994). And with an irreverent style mixes high comic plots and low buffoonery. Through a series of twists and reversals, narrative continuities and digressions, the film holds the promise of a symbolic resolution to some of the real tensions in the world inhabited by its early spectators. How seriously to take the balance it puts forward between the theatre and the circus, female emancipation and patriarchal values, working-class strikes and bourgeois utopias is an important question about comedy as an art form that the film leaves tantalizingly open.