



# RESEARCHING WOMEN IN SILENT CINEMA

NEW FINDINGS AND PERSPECTIVES

EDITED BY MONICA DALL'ASTA, VICTORIA DUCKETT, LUCIA TRALLI

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ALMA MATER STUDIORUM  
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## **Women and Screen Cultures**

**Series editors: Monica Dall'Asta, Victoria Duckett**

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Women and Screen Cultures is a series of experimental digital books aimed to promote research and knowledge on the contribution of women to the cultural history of screen media. Published by the Department of the Arts at the University of Bologna, it is issued under the conditions of both open publishing and blind peer review. It will host collections, monographs, translations of open source archive materials, illustrated volumes, transcripts of conferences, and more. Proposals are welcomed for both disciplinary and multi-disciplinary contributions in the fields of film history and theory, television and media studies, visual studies, photography and new media.



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# 1

### **Researching Women in Silent Cinema: New Findings and Perspectives**

**Edited by: Monica Dall'Asta, Victoria Duckett, Lucia Tralli**

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# Researching Women in Silent Cinema: New Findings and Perspectives

## Peer Review Statement

This publication has been edited through a blind peer review process. Papers from the Sixth Women and the Silent Screen Conference (University of Bologna, 2010), a biennial event sponsored by Women and Film History International, were read by the editors and then submitted to at least one anonymous reviewer. When the opinion of the first reader was entirely negative or asked for substantial revision, the essay was submitted to a second anonymous reviewer. In case of a second negative opinion the essay was rejected. When further changes were deemed necessary for publication, the editors worked extensively with the authors to meet the requests advanced by the reviewers.

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Mark Garrett Cooper

## Archive, Theater, Ship: The Phelps Sisters Film the World

ABSTRACT: Examines the archival survival of the amateur travelog films made by Eleanor and Claudia Lea Phelps from 1923 to 1930. Argues that early twenty-first century interest in these materials testifies to archives' heterotopian properties, as described by Michel Foucault in his 1967 essay "Of Other Spaces." It follows that the aim of archival work should not be to preserve or recover the past, but to transform present day institutions and their relationships. Scholars of "women and the silent screen" are engaged in precisely this kind of activity.

This story, like all archival stories, begins twice. It begins, first, with the 1922–1923 cruise of the *Laconia*. Organized by American Express with the aim of broadening access to luxury travel, this round-the-world by steamship package tour was extensively documented by Claudia Lea and Eleanor Sheffield Phelps. Thanks to these sisters and their heirs the *Laconia*'s story also begins with the rediscovery of a stack of films, photographs, and papers in the University of South Carolina's archives where I work. The Phelps Sisters films comprise more than fifty reels on diverse subjects. Most of the footage records travel to various parts of the world between 1923 and 1930. In addition, there are domestic scenes from their winter home in Aiken, South Carolina. And there are copious records of dog breeding activities. (Claudia Lea Phelps played a key role in introducing the West Highland Terrier to North America). In addition to home movies, the University Libraries care for photographs and scrapbook diaries documenting the Phelps sisters' lives and travels. Of all this archival material, the footage of the *Laconia* trip is of particular interest not only because of the novelty of the voyage itself, but also because it seems to be the first footage Claudia Lea and her sister Eleanor shot with their *Filmo 70*, which was introduced by Bell & Howell in 1923 as the first 16mm camera marketed to amateurs. From the two beginnings of event and archive, then, the Phelps films are poised to illuminate an array of histories concerning tourism and travel, Aiken's "winter colony" of well-to-do (mostly northern U.S.) families, amateur filmmaking, and the Phelps family's own shifting fortunes—not to mention dog breeding.

The Phelps Sisters collection also provides evidence of the women's participation in the history of film production and exhibition, which may make it worthy of attention by scholars concerned with women and the silent screen. Here too one encounters a temporal doubling. Jane Gaines observes that scholarly recovery of the many women who helped create film industries around the world poses the questions of "why *we* forgot them" in the first place. She suggests that, in part, feminist film scholars "forgot" the women behind the camera because they were preoccupied with the women in front of the screen. "The existence of so many women attempting to form companies in the international film industry requires

us to revisit ‘production,’ just as the emphasis on female spectators, beginning in the 1980s, reformulated ‘reception’” (Gaines 113). Patricia Zimmermann makes a similar point in advocating attention to amateur filmmakers. She envisions that home movies will enable and provoke film history “from below,” both making visible a broad popular engagement with screen culture and throwing the methodological biases of industry-centered historiography into relief (3). To insert the Phelps Sisters into twenty-first century conversations about women and amateur filmmakers gives them a mission they did not know they had and peers around the world with whom they are unlikely to have compared themselves. In so doing, it gives us the opportunity to reflect on the productivity, and the limitations, of our scholarship and of the institutions that sustain it.

The Phelps films stand ready to provide evidence for such a range of histories thanks to the recontextualization that occurred when they moved from the Phelps’s home into the institutional space of the archive. They also provide an occasion to examine the kind of institutional space an archive is, and particularly to investigate the remarkable assumption that accumulation there will change practice elsewhere—the premise, shared by funders, curators, and researchers alike, that preservation and access will make a difference we can feel good about. More specifically, the case of amateur filmmakers who happen to be women presents the opportunity to examine the proposition that archival accumulation might alter gendered practice outside the archive, might help make gender matter less in where we go and what we do. By the same token, the fact that the filmmaking sisters happen to be white American women from a prominent family requires us to acknowledge the distribution of interests and powers that condition archival accumulation from the get-go. As I am hardly the first to note, the archive promises egalitarian change even as it ossifies inequities (see, e.g., Harris). To understand the archival promise as more than wishful thinking it is necessary to consider the archive’s relationships with other institutions.

Archives, like cinemas and cruise ships, encourage, segregate, and shelter alternatives to what we might call “normal life.” This is the suggestion of Michel Foucault’s 1967 essay “Of Other Spaces,” which lists ships, cinemas, and archives among its exemplary heterotopias, spaces distinguishable from utopias in that they actually exist and exist in functional relation to the network of sites comprising modern social space. According to Foucault, heterotopias are “most often linked to slices in time.” Museums and libraries provide an indicatively modern example in their ambition, Foucault says, to “enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes,” thereby manifesting “the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages” (26). He’s partly right about this. The archives do inspire a sense of temporal immediacy, but no one who has done time in them could fail to recognize this as a fantasy. To work in the archives, as Foucault surely knows, and as Jacques Derrida, Carol Steedman, and Phillip Rosen have explained in different ways, involves a desire for the past to speak as well as a realization that it will not do so absent supplementary feats of imagination in the present. The spatializing metaphor of

the heterotopian “slice” acknowledges while occulting the irreversibility of temporal process and the duration of archival work.

It does so in a manner Foucault identifies with cinema, which appears to him as a heterotopia “capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several . . . sites that are in themselves incompatible,” such as the rows of seats in the theater and the ever shifting worlds on its screen (25). This principle has as its corollary the observation that heterotopias are set apart by procedures that limit admission and conceal knowledge of what exactly goes on within them. Thus they are also spaces of deviance. Foucault’s examples include psychiatric hospitals, prisons, and retirement homes—hints that he imagines deviance not only in the sense of the deviant individual who is isolated in order to be “corrected,” but also in terms of governmental norms for defining healthy, secure, and productive populations, as emphasized by his later work on biopolitics. In any event, Foucault is clear that heterotopias are not anti-normative. They do not defy normalization, but rather enclose deviance in a manner that confirms a norm. This delimits their “function in relation to all the space that remains” (27).

The ship marks the limit of what Foucault is able to tell us about this functional relationship. It concludes the essay as “the heterotopia *par excellence*. In civilizations without boats,” Foucault laments, “dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates.” The ship is also a “great instrument of economic development,” although Foucault allows in a parenthetical remark that “I have not been speaking about that today” (27). And indeed, to speak about it would require elaboration of his taxonomy along the lines the ship suggests. Instead of locating heterotopias in a static distribution of sites and functions, as is Foucault’s general procedure in “Of Other Spaces,” the ship requires us to think about process as change. In juxtaposing spaces, it collects and deposits persons, things, and information, moving cargo from one place and time to the next. This is how it provides an instrument of economic development and a focal point for dreams of pirate adventure.

As if to demonstrate this point, the cruise ship *Laconia* set out from New York in November of 1922 to circumnavigate the globe with 450 passengers on board, including the Phelps (“Many to Sail Today on a World Cruise”). The ship was notably “wet,” allowing alcoholic consumption prohibited on the mainland. Shipboard activities included topical lectures, themed dinner parties, games and contests, and an equator-crossing ritual, in which Father Neptune’s victims wear what one could perhaps call pirate outfits. At each of the twenty-two ports of call, American Express agents arranged tours of notable sites, visits to prominent locals, and, of course, shopping trips. In the month before departure, American Express advertised berths at costs comparing “favorably with the average expense of Wintering at Home . . . \$650 a month and up” (“Wonder Cruise Around the World.” Display Ad). This was a trip for people who “wintered” rather than worked, but it was also pitched to those on a budget. It exemplified American Express’s aim to grow the market for leisure travel by designing experiences accessible to a segment of the middle class. Passengers

would be encouraged to transform a voyage of entertainment and education into memories made durable by commitment to paper and celluloid. Doubtless an instrument of economic development for American Express and the Cunard line, likely an engine of dreams for its well-healed passengers, the ship offers a powerful reminder that regulating access to heterotopian space confers privilege as well as sheltering deviance, that unlike certain utopias, heterotopias cannot be imagined innocent of or radically alter to the relations of privilege in which they are enmeshed.

The Laconia reel's screening at the 2010 Orphan Film Symposium in New York brought this ship into the heterotopian space of the cinema, in whose darkness anyone might be sheltered for a modest ticket price. So far as I know, this was the first screening outside the Phelps household. The film appeared as part of a program devoted to amateur women filmmakers who travel. This programming choice counted on audiences to be interested in films shot by amateurs, by women, and by women who got away from "home," with all that term connotes. Yet if all of these attributes might be expected to suggest rare and even exotic offerings, programmer Dan Streible announced from the podium that he had no shortage of possibilities for inclusion in the session. Which means: the Laconia reel can be described either as a rarity or as a commonplace. Because we know that its makers were women who travelled, the film can be presented as an exception that confirms our understanding of historical filmmaking and viewing norms. Or, it might equally be thought of as requiring us to revise our understanding of those norms. Either unusual women occasionally resisted masculinist screen culture, or else women were everywhere part of making an emerging screen culture. In posing these interpretative alternatives, if in little else, the Phelps sisters have something in common with their professional counterparts. The transposition of screening venue from the parlor of the Phelps' winter estate to New York University's School of the Visual Arts cinema demands this kind of reflection.

Because they are poised between home and elsewhere, Devin Orgeron finds in family travel films from much later in the century a "preservational awareness of a personal and global world in transition" (77). Such an awareness is certainly evident in the [Laconia reel](#). To pick just one example, an early sequence begins with the title card "The 'Savage Headhunters' of Formosa, when requested to look ferocious and animated, responded in this manner." Cut to a woman and child in what appears to be traditional costume staring blankly into the camera. Other observers circle the stone-faced pair: two photographers, perhaps professionals, manipulate their cameras and exit frame right; a man in a smart suit and tie enters behind the woman and child to stare out at the movie camera (and, presumably, a Phelps sister) but does not raise his camera to photograph them; the stare of the man in the suit echoes the looks of the workmen centered in the background who gaze out at us across the entire shifting scene. If the savages of colonialist imagination existed, this little sequence suggests in its irony, modernity has tidily swept them up. Gender is part of this process, we may see, by observing that neither woman nor child fits the stereotype of headhunter.

Gender is in play, furthermore, in the difference between the woman who looks through the camera, the one who looks at it, and the crowd of men who observe the entire scene. Discovery of difference within the category “women” is a motif of the Phelps diaries as well as the film. One page of Eleanor’s diary, for examples, pastes under the heading “In Seool” a picture of presumably Korean women in headscarves and white dresses labeled “Typical Women” next to a picture of two white women in hats and fur coats labeled “‘Harry’ Pratt and CLP [e.g., Claudia Lea Phelps].” It is a bit difficult to tell from the photo, but it seems that “Harry” may be wearing a pantsuit under her fur coat, while Claudia Lea wears a jacket and skirt. The sense of gender difference is redoubled, it seems to me, in the relationship between contemporary viewers and the screen. Because both kinds of outfits now look like historical costumes, they indicate ways of being women that differ from present options almost as much as they do from each other. In any event, the cinema strikes me as most heteropian in this juxtaposition of chronotopically distinct women, in its blatant reminder that “women” does not contain a unity.

The slices of space-time containing these different women found their way to New York’s screen because our archive in South Carolina saved and selected them. It hardly saved everything. One searches in vain for example, for any information about the woman and child asked to pose as native Formosans. This comes as no surprise, given that the *Laconia* existed not to mobilize their dreams but to accumulate their traces. The Phelps Collection also withholds details about the sisters’ filmmaking practice, and in the process opens up a fertile ground for speculation. Importantly, most of what can be known about the process of making the *Laconia* reel must be inferred from the film itself. Although both sisters left diaries, neither records when the *Filmo 70* came into their possession or mentions filming with it. Since the footage probably begins with New Year’s Day in Kyoto, it is possible that the camera was acquired in Japan. Overall the collection provides evidence of vigorous habits of editing, titling, and reediting. Perhaps half of the reels duplicate material from others. There is evidence of material being recontextualized—effectively used as stock footage. For example, a shot identified by a title in another film as representing Mrs. Sheffield Phelps on the Adriatic in June of 1922, shows up at the beginning of the *Laconia* reel as a representation of their departure from New York in November of that year. It is possible, then, that some of the footage in the *Laconia* reel was not shot by Phelps sisters, but rather acquired, compiled, and edited by them later.

Silence on key questions of how, when, and exactly why the films were made encourages a particular kind of interpretation. We might relate the sister’s filmmaking habits to the conventions of amateur photography and scrapbook and diary making in which they were well versed. We might note that their framing and subject matter choices are informed by established iconographies of the foreign—footage of the Ghats at Benares and the Sphinx and pyramids at Giza seem especially familiar. In editing and particularly in titling practices, we might claim the inspiration of newsreels and travelogs. The lack of any clear statement



Detail from Eleanor Phelps Wilds, *Around the World by the S.S. Laconia Book I*.  
Phelps Sisters Collection. University of South Carolina.

about what the sisters thought they were doing with their movie camera frees us to tell many stories about their work, stories that situate their practice in relation to norms of the time. If we were expecting amateur film to be more readily interpretable because somehow more personal, the Phelps Collection defies that expectation. Here, as always, the archive's accumulated "slices" of the past require a dynamic process of interpretation in the present, a process of interpretation that supplies them with a necessary context. This process requires films and their interpreters to leave the archival heterotopia and return to normal space.

The context of early-twentieth-century film culture that could be spoken about in normal space looked different in the bad old days, before a lot of archival work established that we would find interesting women filmmakers pretty much anyplace we looked. A biographical impulse informed much of that archival work, and here too, and finally, the Phelps Collection provides an opportunity to reflect on what we want biography to do. Thanks to the efforts of

Claudia Lea Phelps's grandnieces Stephanie and Ellen Wilds and to the socio-economic status their family enjoyed at the turn of the last century, stupendous amounts of information about the family are available, much of it online. A few basic details. Claudia Lea was born in 1894 followed by her sister Eleanor in 1895. They had a brother. They were born in Teaneck, New Jersey to Mr. and Mrs. Sheffield Phelps, the Mrs. being previously known as Claudia Wright Lea. Both the Phelps and the Leas were wealthy and politically prominent families. Around the turn of the last century, Sheffield Phelps, a journalist and aspiring politician, purchased an estate, Rose Hill, in Aiken, South Carolina and became part of the "Winter Colony" there. Shortly afterward, in 1902, he died of typhoid fever, before securing an independent fortune for his family. At the time of the Laconia cruise in 1923, the fatherless sisters would have been in their late twenties. Eleanor married in September of 1923. Claudia Lea never did. She was known to her nieces Stephanie and Ellen as "Aunt Bill." According to Stephanie the sobriquet comes from Claudia Lea's youth, when she adopted William the Conqueror as a role model. Anticipating what may be your desire to assign Aunt Bill a sexuality, Stephanie describes her as "nothing." The piles of photographs and papers, which Stephanie has lived with longer and examined more closely than I, provide evidence of close friendships with women when Claudia Lea was younger and of male horse and hound buddies when she was older, but no evidence of sexual entanglements. Modern sexuality being what it is, the archival silence on this point is more likely to incite than to limit speculation. What seems not to be in doubt, however, is Aunt Bill's deviance with respect to gender norms. By all accounts, she was an unusual woman. This discovery makes her interesting. More interesting even than her sister Eleanor, who married against her mother's wishes!

Aunt Bill is at home in the heterotopian space of the archives. She is a deviant among deviants, useless accumulators of details, twitchy transcribers of barely catalogued piles of paper, obsessive seekers after films doomed to rot or believed to have long since rotted, time wasters who want to know everything about pasts that may prove irrelevant. To be sure, Claudia Lea Phelps does not belong to the same category of deviant as the historians who study her. Rather, her archival persona is like ours because in departing from the norm she helps us recognize what the archive is there to do: not to "save" the past, but to pervert the present.

The archive's ability to do this, like the ship's and the cinema's, depends on its difference from and connection to the normal space outside it. Archival accumulation depends on entire fields of institutionalized practices, from the tourist industry, to film and camera equipment manufacture, to university training in film and media studies and moving image archiving. Similarly, if the archive provides safe harbor for piratical fantasies of data plunder, this is because its procedures miraculously release would-be thieves back into the world as law-abiding researchers. The archive's ability to launder its contents ranks high among its virtues. That said, the Laconia trip, in its cinematic and archival extensions, clarifies that heterotopias are as insufficient as they are necessary. The Laconia reminds us of a profusion

of heterotopias, of countless voyages, of multifarious cinemas, and of the world's many archives. It also reminds us that if heterotopias transform existing distributions of power they do so without radically undoing them. The point, then, of seeing the archive as heterotopian, is not only to praise its ability to produce deviations within normative practice, but also to clarify the way institutionalizing those deviations reorganizes, without revolutionizing, normal space.

Historiography provides a means by which it can do so. But only if we appreciate that history is a kind of archival work that requires writing, rather than a kind of writing that occults archival work. I take the former to be Steedman's position and the latter to be that of Jacques Rancière. In *The Names of History* Rancière credits Michelet with inventing for "the history of the age of the masses" "the art of making the poor speak by keeping them silent" (42, 45). On this account, Michelet directs the reader's attention to a massive pile of archival paper in order to explain that the many voices that speak there constitute a singularity—"the people of France"—that cannot speak for itself. Michelet rhetorically excludes the dissenting multitude under the name of France, Rancière contends, in the very process of establishing "the people" as the agent of revolutionary change. This narrative invites readers to forget the rhetorical feat of exclusion that established that agent as a unity in the first place. Modern historiography thus requires two exclusions: the name of the people excludes the speech of the multitude presumed to constitute it; the people as revolutionary agent covers-up this rhetorical slight of hand. In this way, historiography provides Rancière a symptom of the promise and the sickness of modern democracy: promise, in its acknowledgment of dissenting multiplicities, whose voices may ring in the archive, but are silenced within the imperative to name them as a unity; sickness, in creating the mistaken impression that history provides a scientific account of the people's role as agent. Because history requires a rhetorical myth-making activity that it must "forget," Rancière avers, those hopeful for the future would do better to read philosophy, which properly identifies and can explain its structures of inclusion and exclusion.

Steedman's Michelet, in contrast, allows us to see historiography's silences and inventions not as poor philosophy but as engines of inspiration. This is so precisely because she understands the archive as particular kind of workspace, and not as merely "an excess of words" (Rancière 43). Cold, detached, insalubrious, Steedman's archive harbors anthrax spores in the leather bindings of its dusty books, a contagion that—it seems plausible!—inspires Michelet's fevered encounters with the dead people of France. In place of Rancière's devious master rhetor, Steedman imagines an obsessive deranged by workplace contaminants. Her point is not, as she says with tongue firmly in cheek, to substitute a real archive fever for Derrida's metaphorical one. Rather, she aims to highlight the interpretative work the archive encourages in piling up papers for future generations. When the Trades Union Congress opened its file on "Dust—Rag Flock" it wanted to document the health hazards of the tanning trades. It could not have anticipated that it would help Steedman to establish an

alternative etiology for modern historiography. Yet it did, reminding us that the “excess of words” required the industry of leather workers—one among many reminders made possible by the juxtaposition of two space-times in one place. A heterotopian workplace, the archive can allow us to redescribe and begin to alter relations among a wide variety of institutions. Philosophy may be incapable of enjoying its perverse operations, which defy all utopian plans.

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