



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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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

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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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Coloring the Figures. Women's Labor in the Early Italian Film Industry

ABSTRACT: The essay deals with the problem of women workers employed as hand colorists in Italy between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. It explores general issues such as the relation between the modern development of industrial coloring processes and the professions involved, the continuity between the coloring techniques in the film industry and those employed in other production fields (e.g. photography). The text subsequently investigates the situation of women workers and the gendered forms of labor division in the Roman laboratories of Cines between 1905 and 1910.

Before introducing the subject of this contribution, I wish to begin by closely examining the cover illustrations of an Italian magazine, *Il Progresso fotografico* [the photographic progress], published between 1899 and 1909. These covers exploit an interesting association between the representation of female figures and the modern photographic technologies emerging at the turn of the twentieth century. From 1899 to 1902, the cover illustration produced a sophisticated *mise en abyme* effect: it showed a woman with her hair tied up, working at a desk and surrounded by technical equipment, while she reads what the viewer can surmise is a “how to do” article on the first page of the same magazine. [fig. 1]. The purely material dimension of the developing and printing process is transformed into an ordered system of signs, symbolizing the different phases of the photographer's work.

Over the next few years, the leitmotif of the female photographer was profoundly transformed. From 1903 to 1904, the cover girl turned into an elegant reader of *Il Progresso fotografico* [fig. 2]. While the *mise en abyme* trope was maintained as a constant stylistic feature, the emphasis shifted from the production of images to their reception. Evidently, an idealized figure of a woman in a long dress with her hair down was more attractive than a woman at work with her hair tied back; the technical instruments, while still present, were now relegated to the background of the illustration. In 1908, after several years without displaying any cover illustration, a new emblematic image appeared on the magazine to reinforce this transformation: two female figures in an *art nouveau* setting were portrayed while leafing through a photo album and dispersing light through a prism [fig. 3]. This Newtonian theme of light refraction was taken up again in the 1909 cover. On the left, in the foreground, a woman is sitting with a prism raised in her hand. On the right, a Cupid stands in the background, playing with a photo-camera mounted on a tripod [fig. 4]. No material trace of the photographic process is left; the covers convey a series of symbolic references meant to promote the aesthetic dimension of the photographic medium. The female figure, therefore, is idealized as the modern Muse of the new photographic art, whose foundation myth is inscribed in the birth of the Newtonian science of light.



1. Cover illustration of *Il Progresso Fotografico* [the photographic progress], 1899-1902.
2. Cover illustration of *Il Progresso Fotografico* [the photographic progress], 1903-1904.

The cultural tendency to idealize the female figures as Muses of technology appears in paradoxical contrast with the very real experience of so many women who were materially working within the industries that produced this same technology.¹ In what follows I will deal with this veritable “dark side” of film history, the hidden history of female labor in Italian early cinema. By looking for and analyzing the few remaining traces left by these women workers, I will focus in particular on the specific activity of hand-coloring.² What concerns me in the first place is the structure of female labor in the Roman laboratories of Cines at the end of the first decade of the twentieth century.

¹ On the role of women in the material production of visual culture, see Higonnet.

² For an overview of the practices of hand coloring prior to film, see Crompton, Henry, and Herbert; Brunetta and Zotti Minici; Pierotti (27–29).



3. Cover illustration of *Il Progresso Fotografico* [the photographic progress], 1908.

4. Cover illustration of *Il Progresso Fotografico* [the photographic progress], 1909.

Female Labor and Hand-Coloring at the Turn of the Century

Miss. Gladys E. Hartley in *The Queen* magazine advises women who, after studying drawing or painting, struggle to make a living coloring miniatures or doing similar underpaid jobs, to look for a better source of income in photography.³ (“In giro per il mondo. La fotografia quale professione per la donna” [all around the world. photography as women’s profession] 2561)

This brief remark, published in the pages of an Italian photography journal, hinted at the emancipation of women in the more advanced countries of Northern Europe, where female personalities such as Miss. Gladys E. Hartley were presented as already so well acquainted

³ “Miss. Gladys E. Hartley nella rivista *The Queen* suggerisce alle donne che dopo aver studiato disegno o pittura trascivano una vita stentata colorando miniature od in simili lavori poco retribuiti, di cercar una miglior fonte di guadagno nella fotografia.” (All the quoted texts in this paper are translated by the author).

with the new technology that they could be asked their opinion as expert advisers. The quote also reveals that the practice of coloring small images was culturally attached to women's work.⁴ Indeed, hand-coloring required skills, such as precision and patience, that aligned themselves closely to the female vocational training. Besides learning pattern cutting, sewing and embroidery the female professional schools of the time educated the girls to practice activities such as drawing, painting, artificial flower making, and coloring small objects and images (Giulio Benso). There is evidence that coloring practices were encouraged as a pastime in the pages of women's magazines too.⁵

Beyond their recreational aspect, these activities—and the women who performed them—were becoming a resource for certain branches of industry. Hand-coloring may, in fact, be compared to other jobs held by women, such as assembling artificial flowers, decorating wallpaper, porcelain glazing and doll manufacturing. All of these jobs demanded manual dexterity and involved lengthy timeframes for their execution.

The need for these skills arose especially in productive sectors based on low-profile technology and labor-intensive work. Essentially, employers in these fields limited their costs so as to keep their activity as lucrative as possible. Since female labor was considerably cheaper than that of men, it was by far the preferred choice for employers. Equally, some of the new professions that emerged in the fields of photography and film also employed low-cost female labor. In photography, women were frequently hired in photographers' laboratories with the task of retouching the negatives and coloring the prints, and in film factories in jobs such as preparing plates and emulsions. Their presence occasionally emerges as a visual clue in the photographs taken within the laboratories and other establishments and used to illustrate articles in the trade press [fig. 5]. Otherwise, the presence of women is indicated in dramatic news reports of accidents caused by the toxic or explosive materials in use in these precarious workplaces (“Il processo per lo scoppio nello stabilimento Ganzini” [the trial for Ganzini establishment's blast]. The article concerns the death of two women working in the Ganzini establishment, following a blast).

The work of the film colorists should be thought of as a part of the broader phenomenon of technological innovation. In particular, the hand-coloring process performed in the motion picture industry evokes the techniques of retouching and coloring in photography. However, the descriptions given by sources from these two separate fields differ in some significant way. While photographic magazines and handbooks usually presented retouching and coloring as implicitly male activities (or, at least, not typically female), their cinematographic equivalents, on the other hand, always specified that these tasks were regularly assigned to women.

⁴ This at least with regard to the purely executive fields of application, excluded from artistic recognition. For an introduction to the problem of women's work in Italy between the nineteenth and twentieth century, see Pescarolo. On the issue of women's access to artistic professions, see Trasforini.

⁵ For instance, two articles in *La Donna e la famiglia* [the woman and the family] taught women how to color real flowers with aniline dyes: “Pittura delle rose” [roses' painting] and “Colorazione artificiale dei fiori” [flowers' artificial coloring].



5. Women preparing photographic plates in the laboratories of “La luminosa” (Serravalle Scrivia, Alessandria) (*Nel campo dell’industria. Una visita allo stabilimento della “Luminosa”* [in the field of industry. a visit to the “Luminosa” plant] n. pag.).

This disparity in the consideration of the role of women’s work reflected a different approach towards coloring in the two respective media. In photography, colorists worked on individual images, which were usually painted in full.⁶ In motion picture films, on the other hand, the work was repeated on a series of very small frames; only the main parts of the image were colored, while the flesh tones were left gray. Finally, according to the basic principle of the division of labor, each woman was called to apply a single color.⁷ Women were more frequently employed as colorists in those fields where the job was more repetitive, as in the motion picture industry. Conversely, when it came to producing an effect of uniqueness, as in photography, the attribution of gender tended to disappear. Moreover, the idea of repetition highlights the material and conceptual proximity of coloring to the technique of editing. As a matter of fact—as we will see—editing would soon be considered as another occupation suitable for women. Perhaps, for women who had first been hired as colorists, editing might have become a new, extremely promising, field of employment.

⁶ See Cocanari. This short handbook taught how to paint hair, eyebrows, eyes, mouth, skin tone, cheeks, clothes and background colors.

⁷ On the technological aspects and the organization of the work in hand- (and pochoir) coloring, see Murette; Dana, “Couleurs au pochoir”; Malthête; Brown; Yumibe.

Clearly, the use of women as colorists was determined by both economic and cultural factors. Although the phenomenon, due to the paucity of documentation, appears difficult to research, looking at single case studies can help us make some significant inroads. For instance, analyzing the case of an important Italian cinematographic firm of the early period, the Cines film company, can test some of the previous assumptions. Based in Rome, Cines originated from the very first Italian film company, Alberini & Santoni, created in 1906. The coloring process within this and other small-scale companies and operations was relatively close to the Pathé industrial model.⁸

Between 1906 and 1907, four articles were published that described the Alberini & Santoni (then Cines) establishment located in Vicolo delle Tre Madonne. The reader was informed that

The [company's] main building has three floors. One is underground and it lodges the darkrooms where more than fifty female workers—a number that will soon be doubled thanks to a rapidly increasing demand—carry out the preparation and the coloring of the films.⁹ (“Alberini & Santoni. Il primo stabilimento italiano di manifattura cinematografica” [Alberini & Santoni. the first Italian film production establishment] 4–6)

Further evidence emerges from a 1906 article on Cines by Giustino Ferri. The processing of positives carried out in underground rooms is described by the author in rather suggestive words. He reports seeing “male shadows wandering through the shadow” and “uncertain female shapes bent over mysterious looms and narrow desks for coloring”¹⁰ (796).

The employment of women at Cines is additionally confirmed by a demographic survey of the Testaccio popular neighborhood in Rome: of the almost four hundred under-age working women who were covered in the study, three were employed at Cines as film colorists, reportedly one in 1907 and two in 1910 (Orano).¹¹ If three under-age women living at the Testaccio were working during this time as colorists, it would be rational to think that more women from different working-class Roman neighborhoods were also employed in the same field. From 1907 to 1910, the study reports, an Italian hand-colorer working at Cines in Rome was earning from a minimum of one and a half liras to a maximum of three liras per

⁸ On the history of the Cines company, see Redi.

⁹ “Il fabbricato principale è a tre piani di cui uno sotto terra per le camere oscure, in esso oltre 50 operaie procedono alla preparazione e colorazione dei Films, e questo numero verrà quanto prima raddoppiato per le ognor crescenti richieste.” The article was published in both Italian and French; the Italian version also appeared in *Bollettino della Società Fotografica Italiana* [bulletin of the Italian photographic society] (38–39).

¹⁰ “La cortesia dell’ingegnere Pouchain e del signor Alberini mi fece presto passare alle siberiane temperature dei sotterranei per gli sviluppi e lavaggi, dove al barlume rosso d’infernali lampade elettriche s’intravedono ombre maschili aggirantisi nell’ombra, forme incerte femminili curve sopra misteriosi telai e stretti banchi per la colorazione.” The other two articles mentioning the area dedicated to the coloring process at Cines are “I cinematografi” [the cinematographs] and “La Società Anonima Cines” [Cines joint stock company].

¹¹ I wish to thank Luca Mazzei for providing this precious reference.

day. For an apprentice, this amount was reduced to one lira. The working day lasted ten hours (Orano 618–619). During this time a worker was able to color up to four or five meters of positive (Mariani 193–194). Compared to the other female jobs listed in the survey, coloring was in the middle of the salary scale, commanding daily pays from fifty cents to four lira. However, it is interesting to observe that one of the highest paying jobs in the list of female professions was that of the photographic negative retoucher, which confirms that this activity must have been deemed to be a more skilled one (Orano 616–617).¹²

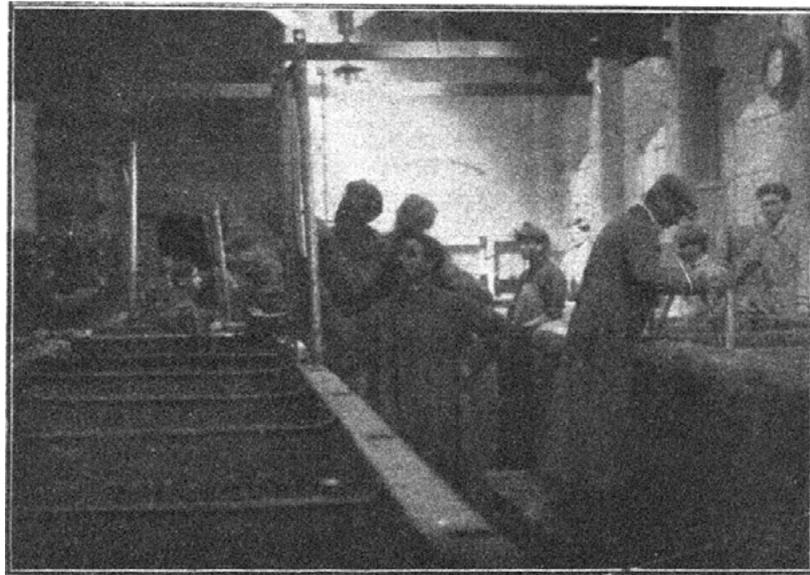
While several sources agree on the presence of women workers in the first phase of the company's management (under the direction of Adolfo Pouchain), for the next phase, beginning in the summer of 1910 with the nomination of Alberto Fassini as Cines' new president, information becomes more complex. When Fassini came to the head, the situation concerning film coloring at Cines was changed. That year in August, Fassini declared in his report on the company's industrial situation of Cines that "the issue of coloring was an utmost priority" and "had to be confronted and resolved" (Fassini [typewritten on letterhead]). Fassini also asserted that "by 1911 we must enable ourselves to color our own films" (Fassini), thereby revealing that, for some reason, the company had no longer been able to do so for a while. A possible implication is that Cines was no longer able to do so in a cost-effective manner. Yet Fassini advises against "trying something new" in the field of coloring, stating that the company would better "stick with what others had found that worked" and indicating Pathé and Gaumont as models to follow (Fassini)¹³. These two French companies had been using stenciling techniques for several years (in the case of Pathé since as early as 1906). Fassini was then probably suggesting that Cines should adopt this specific technology too.

As far as coloring was concerned, then, Cines was no longer in a favorable position. Had the color division been closed? Had the activity of hand-coloring been rejected as obsolete? By supposition, we may assume that the problem pointed out by Fassini was resolved (at least temporarily) thanks to the tinting and toning technology. This is confirmed by a letter written to Fassini by the laboratory supervisor, Carlo Moretti. In this correspondence the engineer informed Fassini about the installation of "a small *coloring* laboratory, limited, for now, to obtaining combined effects of panoramic scenes with tinting and toning techniques" (Moretti [typewritten, highlight in the original])¹⁴.

¹² For the retoucher, the daily pay ranged from a minimum of two and a half liras to a maximum of four liras (for a ten hour working). Compared to the average wages of male workers (Orano 577–599), women's wages were significantly reduced. Orano himself highlights that "women work much more than men; women are tied to their profession for many many hours of the day, while earning much less" (613). ["La donna lavora molto di più dell'uomo, è legata, cioè, al suo mestiere per molte e molte ore della giornata mentre guadagna molto di meno."]

¹³ "Fra questi problemi, quello che si presenta più degli altri impellente, è quello della 'colorazione', che bisogna subito affrontare e risolvere, come hanno già fatto le Case più importanti, Pathé e Gaumont. Anche per questo bisognerà non avventurarsi in tentativi nuovi, ma usare dei sistemi già sperimentati favorevolmente da altri." I wish to thank Fabio Del Giudice and Flavia Magnolfi for their kind contribution on this point.

¹⁴ "... impiantai un piccolo laboratorio di Coloritura limitandola per ora ad ottenere degli effetti combinati con le tinte ed i viraggi nelle scene panoramiche."



"CINES" — Sala per il lavaggio.

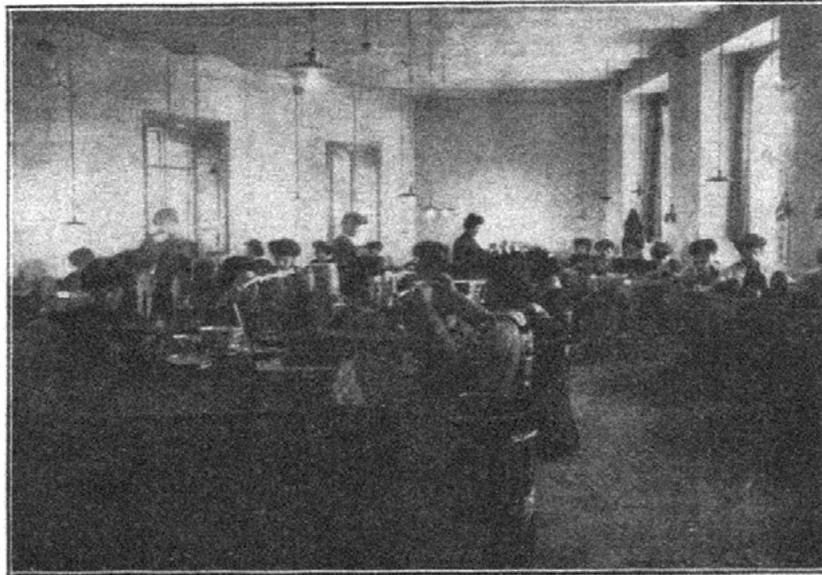
6. The Cines washing room (*Gli stabilimenti della società italiana "Cines"*
[Cines company facilities] 36).

These documents show that by 1910-11 hand-coloring was no longer taken into consideration at Cines. It belonged to a season that had flourished under the previous management. Tinting and toning were easily the preferred choice at this time, while stenciling remained a project in Fassini's mind. The 1910 and 1911 reports show that Cines wanted to bridge the technical gap with its French rivals—Pathé and Gaumont—which meant adopting stenciling coloring processes. However, not being in a position for immediate change (because of costs, time restrictions, and other obstacles) Cines finally settled on tinting and toning.¹⁵

The abandonment of hand-coloring in favor of the faster and cheaper technology of tinting and toning reflects the changes that were then sweeping the global motion picture industry. Such technological applications call into question the material problem of labor division at the Cines plant. Indeed, unlike hand-coloring, tinting and toning were tasks reserved to male workers, since they required an apprenticeship in the field of chemistry, an area from which women were excluded. In any event, monochrome coloring was ultimately a simpler and quicker operation than hand-coloring.

So what happened to the women colorists? Were they still working at Cines when the company shifted to tinting and toning as its standard coloring technique? In the attempt to

¹⁵ Cines would continue to focus on tinting and toning, using this technique (especially toning) as a distinguishing factor on the international market. See, for example, the contract with George Kleine, signed in December 1911 (Harrison and Mazzanti).



" CINES " — Un angolo del montaggio.

7. The Cines editing room (*Gli stabilimenti della società italiana "Cines"* [Cines company facilities] 36).

venture an informed guess, we can look at an advertisement published in Cines's official bulletin, *La Cinematografia artistica* [artistic cinematography], in October 1912. The text explains:

From the printing department, the film is transmitted to *Development* and *Drying*, then, if needs be, to *Toning* and *Tinting* and, finally, to the *Draining rooms*. From here, the positives become ready for *Editing*, yet they reach this department only after a careful *Revision*, and for some positives, if necessary, after *Coloring*.¹⁶ ("Gli stabilimenti della Società Italiana 'Cines'" [Cines company facilities; highlights in the original])

Therefore, the department devoted to the processing of positives was segmented into several working processes, all of which showed the same kind of gendered differentiation between the two types of work already described by Giustino Ferri. On the one hand, there were activities such as the development, washing, toning, tinting and drying of the positives, which apparently were all performed by men. On the other, there were the editing, the revision and the coloring processes, which constituted mostly a female realm. Unfortunately, the photos attached to the 1912 Cines advertisement do not document all of the women's activities in the plant. No image of the color laboratories is included; neither is there one for tinting, toning or coloring. Nevertheless, the existence of a rigid division of labor based on

¹⁶ "Dalla stampa la pellicola è trasmessa ai reparti di Sviluppo e di Lavaggio, poi eventualmente, a quei [sic] di Viraggio e Tintura, e, infine, nelle sale di Prosciugazione. Da qui i positivi escono pronti per il Montaggio, ma giungono a questo reparto dopo un'accurata Revisione e alcuni, se del caso, dopo la Coloritura."

gender can be clearly identified thanks to the photographs of the washing room—which is occupied only by men [fig. 6]—and the editing room—which portrays numerous women at work [fig. 7].

This kind of labor division based on gender is further confirmed by the author of an interesting handbook appeared in 1916, Vittorio Mariani. The volume includes several photographs from the already mentioned 1912 Cines advertisement [fig. 8], which are used to illustrate different chapters. In the part devoted to “coloring, editing and positive arrangement,” the author affirms the necessity to combine the rooms where these tasks were carried out, and to physically separate them from the areas dedicated to development, fixing and tinting and toning. Mariani states:

[Coloring] can be performed both before and after editing, and it is done only for a few special films whose manufacture will have to not impede the progress of ordinary production. This means that coloring will take place away from the developing, fixing and tinting and toning equipment, in separate rooms that may also be used for editing and the arrangement of positives.¹⁷ (Mariani 193)

Mariani also observes that both coloring and editing were usually assigned to female workers. From his description we can grasp that such physical separation reflected a sheer conceptual separation between men’s and women’s activities.

Furthermore, Mariani’s description of the work encourages the supposition that a certain crossover must have usual between the coloring, editing, and the so-called arrangement of positives, processes. Therefore, once hand-coloring had become obsolete, a colorist could perhaps be re-employed as an editor. Indeed, as Giuliana Bruno points out in *Streetwalking on a ruined map*, editing required skills similar to those involved in other traditionally female jobs, such as sewing, and her remark may be easily extended to the practice of hand-coloring (105–121).¹⁸ This kind of transition is actually documented in the case of Germaine Berger at Pathé laboratories at the end of the 1920s (Dana, “Couleurs au pochoir”). Might this have also been the case of colorers at Cines at the beginning of the 1910s? The photos of women editing at Cines certainly encourage this hypothesis.

In the case of the Alberini & Santoni company, laboratory operations—from the development of positives to the packing of the final copies—were separated according to genders. Men attended to tasks requiring higher levels of technological know-how and less manual skill. For them, we may consider the single reel of stock as the basic unit of their work. Conversely, women were assigned tasks where only a low level of technological knowledge was required and where, at the same time, other types of skills, such as manual dexterity, precision

¹⁷ “[La coloritura] può essere eseguita prima e dopo il montaggio, ed ha luogo soltanto per alcuni films speciali, la cui fabbricazione non deve ostacolare l’andamento della produzione ordinaria. Ciò significa che la coloritura dovrà aver luogo in locali separati dagli impianti di sviluppo, fissaggio, viraggio e tintura, e più propriamente in sale abbinabili con quelle di montaggio e sistemazione dei positivi.”

¹⁸ On editing as a specifically female profession, see also De Miro d’Ayeta.



Fig. 98. — Sala di montaggio (Cines - Roma).

8. The Cines editing room (Mariani, *Guida pratica della cinematografia*
[a practical guide to cinematography] 216)

and patience, were needed. Coloring and editing were precisely this type of job, as they were considered to require purely manual and non-artistic work.¹⁹ Both jobs were deemed suitable for female hands and were actually assigned to women.

Curiously, both coloring and editing deal with films at the level of the single frame. I would argue that for the female workers in the motion picture industry, their basic unit was the more laborious, time-consuming single frame. In this sense, while they appear to have been denied access to technologically intensive jobs, nonetheless they engaged with industrial manufacturing in a more intimate, familiar, and (perhaps) more “female” way.

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¹⁹ For almost the entire silent period, editing, like coloring, was sometimes performed on positive prints. Both activities were much more repetitive and less creative than one might think today. On the technological aspects of editing in the silent era, see Read (11–12).

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