



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
UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA



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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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Researching Women in Silent Cinema: New Findings and Perspectives

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

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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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Martin F. Norden

**Alice Guy Blaché, Rose Pastor Stokes,
and the Birth Control Film That Never Was**

ABSTRACT: The worldwide popularity of Lois Weber's pro-birth control, anti-abortion film *Where Are My Children?* (1916) prompted many in the movie industry to develop films with similar themes. Prominent among these filmmakers was Alice Guy Blaché, who approached renowned birth-control activist Rose Pastor Stokes about collaborating on such a project. The two women eventually developed a script for a film on birth control tentatively titled *Shall the Parents Decide?* They hoped to finish their film in time for a key event due to occur in the fall of 1916: Margaret Sanger's opening of the first birth-control clinic in America. *Shall the Parents Decide?* was never made, however, and this chapter explores the reasons for its failure. The research materials include Pastor Stokes' unfinished autobiography, Guy Blaché's memoirs, and correspondence between the women and Guy Blaché's representative, Bert Adler. The most important document by far is the unpublished script itself. A fifty-page typewritten affair prepared by Guy Blaché and supplemented by Pastor Stokes' numerous hand-written emendations, the script offers a fascinating glimpse into the women's collaborative process. It gives a clear and detailed account of the film that Guy Blaché had hoped would be, in her words, her "crowning cinema achievement."

As is widely known, the Universal Film Manufacturing Company's biggest hit of 1916 was Lois Weber's pro-birth control, anti-abortion film *Where Are My Children?* It reeled in three million dollars at the box office but cost only about ten thousand dollars to make, and its enormous worldwide popularity prompted many others in the movie industry to develop films with similar themes. Prominent among these film practitioners was writer-director-producer Alice Guy Blaché, then marking her twentieth year in the film business. Like any successful filmmaker, she had learned to bend with the times. When it became clear that the topic of birth control, which had been tentatively explored in such films as *The Miracle of Life* (1915) and *Race Suicide* (1916), had reached exceptionally lucrative proportions in the form of *Where Are My Children?* during the spring and summer of 1916, Guy Blaché decided to enter the fray with her own take on the subject: a proposed film with the working title *Shall the Parents Decide?*

Due to a variety of circumstances, however, the film was never made, and this paper will explore the reasons for its collapse. In the belief that failed film projects—particularly ones associated with high-profile filmmakers—can be just as informative as successful ones, this study examines the various factors that contributed to the project's development and eventual failure: Guy Blaché's collaboration with birth control activist Rose Pastor Stokes, the themes explored in their fifty-page unpublished screenplay, and pressures within the film industry that hastened the project's demise. Fortunately, a wealth of printed materials survives: principally, the script itself and pieces of key correspondence, all of which are available at New York University's Tamiment Library. My hope is that this essay will not only

provide additional insight into the career of one of the most prominent women filmmakers of the time but also shed further light on the film business and its practices during the volatile years of the mid-1910s.

In July 1916, just as the agitation for legalizing birth control information was heading toward a climax in New York City and elsewhere, Alice Guy Blaché and husband Herbert Blaché were contemplating a major change in their business operations. The Blachés' film production company—Solax, based in Fort Lee, New Jersey—had been absorbed into a concern called Popular Plays & Players in late 1914, and though Guy Blaché as PP&P's principal director was able to provide a steady stream of films to such companies as Metro, Pathé, and World for distribution (Tinée; Guy Blaché, *Memoirs* 79), the Blachés soon became unhappy with the new company's distribution agreements. Within a month, the Blachés decided to reduce their involvement with PP&P and return to independent film production under the banner of a company they had formed several years earlier but through which they had not yet produced any films: the U. S. Amusement Corp. (McMahan 186). Their plan now was to develop projects on a film-by-film basis that would meet the needs of their long-time distribution partners—Pathé, Metro, etc.—and any new ones with the understanding that these concerns would provide production funding upfront to the Blachés. Under this new business arrangement, Guy Blaché doubtless believed that she would have little difficulty attracting takers for a proposed film based on a topic then taking the country by storm: birth control.

She realized, however, that she needed a collaborator for such a sensitive and controversial subject. She was uncertain to whom she could turn until a scholarly acquaintance made a suggestion. As Guy Blaché remembered, “One of the Columbia University professors with whom I had kept up friendly relations advised me to visit [Rose Pastor Stokes] of whom people told scandalous tales. Why? . . . ‘Go see her’ [said the professor] ‘she’s an advocate of birth control’” (Guy Blaché, *Memoirs* 88).

Pastor Stokes was an auspicious recommendation, to say the least. Characterized by her biographers Arthur Zipser and Pearl Zipser as a “literary propagandist” (141), she had penned numerous socially minded plays such as *Squaring the Triangle*, *In April*, *A Man of Peace*, *The Saving of Martin Greer*, *Love and Marry*, and *The Woman Who Wouldn't*. She was also a socialist who, with no small irony, happened to be married to a millionaire, James Graham Phelps Stokes. Associated with a number of leftist causes, she quickly gained her greatest renown as a birth control agitator.

Pastor Stokes was keenly aware of her unusual and highly contradictory social standing in New York City, and she used it to her advantage. Knowing that well-to-do women had ready access to birth control information but impoverished women did not, she made it one of her missions to reveal to lower-class women the same birth-control information that their wealthy sisters already possessed. “Whether birth control is practiced upon Fifth Avenue or upon Hester Street makes no difference,” she said. “What is good for the uptown

gander is certainly good for the downtown goose” (qtd. in “Told Birth Control Secrets at Dinner to Emma Goldman” 6). She uttered these words on April 20, 1916, during a New York City meeting in support of Emma Goldman shortly before the latter’s trial for having given a speech on birth control. In violation of the law, Pastor Stokes then walked up to each attendee, whispered birth control secrets in her ear, and gave her a slip of paper with additional information. “I am not bidding for arrest,” she said.

I want to do what Emma Goldman did. My being married and now having social standing makes a difference in a way. I want to give out to some women in this, a public audience, the



Rose Pastor Stokes, well-to-do socialist and “literary propagandist” who agreed to work with Alice Guy Blaché on a feature film. Her highly publicized experiences as a birth-control advocate served as the basis for the women’s collaboratively written screenplay.

information I possess. I am not the only one. There are many other women who do that very thing. The courts found it best to quash the indictment against Margaret Sanger and, perhaps, they will find it best to quash the indictment against Emma Goldman. At any rate, we know the courts will have a bigger fight than they ever had before. (qtd. in “Rose Pastor Stokes Is Getting Gay Again” 1)

Rose Pastor Stokes, well-to-do socialist and “literary propagandist” who agreed to work with Alice Guy Blaché on a feature film. Her highly publicized experiences as a birth-control advocate served as the basis for the women’s collaboratively written screenplay.

Pastor Stokes’ provocation only increased. On the evening of May 5, 1916, she spoke at a meeting in Carnegie Hall to welcome back Goldman, who had just been released from the Queens county jail for having given a birth control speech. Pastor Stokes was the very embodiment of defiance. “For the good of the cause, be the penalty what it may, I here frankly offer to give out slips with the forbidden information about birth control,” she proclaimed. “I have been breaking the law right along. I have given this information to whomsoever has written to me for it” (qtd. in “Mrs. Stokes ‘Mobbed’” 2). As a reporter for the International News Service breathlessly noted, Pastor Stokes’ comments and actions caused a near-riot:

Mrs. Rose Pastor Stokes was literally mobbed by an eager crowd in Carnegie Hall tonight when she offered, in defiance of the police, to distribute printed slips bearing a formula for birth control. The audience seemed to rise at her en masse. Those nearest the platform invaded it, and surrounded the speaker. Others tried to approach. Everybody shouted for the slips. In its excitement, the crowd overwhelmed Mrs. Stokes. ... Her hair was pulled and her shirtwaist almost torn off. With great difficulty Mrs. Stokes was finally rescued from her friendly besiegers, and maneuvered through a side door, whence she and her husband gained the street, and boarded a street car. (“Mrs. Stokes ‘Mobbed’” 2)

Such inflammatory events hardly went unnoticed in the film industry. Given the timing of certain situations—the April 16 opening of *Where Are My Children?* at New York City’s Globe Theatre and its immediate and phenomenal box-office success, Pastor Stokes’ comments on April 20, the pandemonium that she caused on May 5—it is hardly surprising that she would become a magnet for moviemakers interested in capitalizing on the hot topic of birth control.

Instantly intrigued by this woman who not only was at the epicenter of the birth control controversy but also had considerable experience as a playwright, Guy Blaché authorized one of her company’s top employees, Bert Adler, to find a way of getting in touch with her. Adler, a one-time theater manager who in June 1916 had been hired as an assistant to her husband Herbert (“Bert Adler with Blache”; “With the Film Men”), was the perfect go-to person for Guy Blaché’s request; he had cultivated an extensive web of business contacts while serving as publicity director for the New Rochelle, New York-based Thanhouser Film

Corp. from 1909 to 1914 and as manager of Universal's studio in Coytesville, New Jersey, starting in June 1915.¹ He knew that Pastor Stokes was among the two hundred-odd people who agreed to examine films on behalf of the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures, and he contacted Wilton Barrett, the person in charge of coordinating the reviewers, about setting up an introduction with her. Barrett, who had known Adler for years and valued his long and cooperative relationship with the board, agreed to help. In a letter to Pastor Stokes dated July 16, 1916, he wrote that Adler was "anxious to get in touch with you with regard to consulting you about a sociological picture which the company is planning to produce" and that "Madame Blaché who superintends the selection of scenarios and their production for this Company suggested to Mr. Adler that some arrangement might be made for her to meet you and to discuss the possibilities of such a film. Madame Blaché, I understand, is much interested in social phenomena as affording themes for motion pictures and believes that some good propaganda work can be done in this matter" (Barrett).

Her interest piqued, Pastor Stokes quickly agreed to meet with Guy Blaché, who was quite willing to journey from her Fort Lee studio to Stamford, Connecticut, the site of one of Pastor Stokes' homes. Guy Blaché vividly recalled their initial encounter:

Madame Rose Pastor [Stokes] lived in New England in a tiny bungalow.² Dressed in an overall and sandals, her hair loose to the wind, she was working in her garden. "In fact," she told me "I encourage birth control. I have taken work in a factory in order to mingle with women workers. I try to gain their confidence. Have you seen some of the hovels in Brooklyn where many families live in a single room? Where the woman who is always pregnant may lose courage and ask help of an abortionist, who may leave her mutilated for life, if not dying? What I advocate is that a loving couple not fear to unite, taking precautions, so that they may have children when they desire them, and can care for them, and rear them to be healthy. I have discussed this with priests who have encouraged me" (Guy Blaché, *Memoirs* 88).

The two women hit it off and agreed to collaborate, with Adler acting as an intermediary with regard to correspondence. Pastor Stokes shared some birth control literature with Guy Blaché, who, according to their plan, was to complete a scenario draft and then send it to Pastor Stokes soon thereafter. Adler reported to Pastor Stokes in an August 1 letter that Guy Blaché had started working on the scenario that day, and their ensuing correspondence revealed a deep desire on the part of Guy Blaché and Adler to get the script written and the film produced as quickly as possible. They wanted to take advantage of a key event that was due to occur that September: the opening of the first birth control clinic in the United States. Margaret Sanger's plan to establish such a clinic in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn was

¹ Adler's career as publicity director for the Thanouser, Princess, Majestic, and Apollo Mutual film brands is observed in Grau 326–27; "Film Flashes"; "In the Busy World of the Movies."

² Guy Blaché was being facetious in her description of the Stokes home; the place was a mansion set on a private island.

the country's biggest open secret at the time, and Guy Blaché and Adler were convinced that their company's film would greatly benefit from the huge publicity that was certain to accompany that event.

Adler was nervous about word getting out about the proposed project. "Undoubtedly if it got forth that this concern was contemplating such a film, by Madame and yourself, other [motion picture] concerns would 'beat us to it!'" he wrote to Pastor Stokes in a letter dated August 1, 1916. "Would also ask that inasmuch as this scenario is by Madame *and you*, that you would not endorse any similar *film* plays – if any *were* launched. That might take away from this effort of your's and Madame's. But I do not look for any similar film plays if we all of us hold the work preparation 'quiet'" [emphasis in original text]. He also emphasized speed. In a follow-up letter dated August 3, he pushed Pastor Stokes to set aside her other work (she was then correcting the proofs for her first published play, *The Woman Who Wouldn't*)³ and devote all her energies to the scenario "since it *does* seem best to have the photoplay ready by September," he wrote.

Despite the best intentions of all concerned, however, the birth control project was delayed. Illness along with the press of other film projects forced Guy Blaché to diminish her progress on the script, and in the interim Pastor Stokes began developing her own scenario. Guy Blaché would then meet with Pastor Stokes again as soon as her health and schedule allowed to compare their drafts.

In late September 1916, Pastor Stokes proudly announced her debut as a screenwriter. "I have just completed for a [New Jersey] company a scenario, which deals with social reform," said she. Asked by a wire-service reporter to elaborate on her scenario's birth-control subject, she was blunt: "We have failed to think as much of the breeding of the human race as we do of cattle; therefore, the human race is a failure" (qtd. in "Use Movie Shows to Aid Campaign for Birth Control" n. pag.).

Pastor Stokes, Guy Blaché, and Adler were relieved when Margaret Sanger had to delay the opening of her long-planned birth control clinic until sometime in October. That gave them a few extra weeks, but the self-imposed pressure of completing their film and getting it into movie theaters as soon as possible was still on. In a letter dated October 6, 1916—only days before Sanger opened her birth control clinic in Brooklyn—Adler wrote to Pastor Stokes that Guy Blaché, who was still ill, "realizes the value of quick work—both scenario and production—so [that] the final picture [can] be ready when B-C is agitating this Fall"—in other words, when Sanger opened her clinic.

More delays ensued, with Guy Blaché's illness extending well into October. Finally up and about later that month, she was still plugging away at a script. In a letter to Pastor Stokes dated October 27, 1916—eleven days after Sanger opened her clinic and only a day or so

³ Pastor Stokes' book was published in November 1916. A reviewer for the Pittsburgh-based *Jewish Criterion* praised *The Woman Who Wouldn't*, calling it "a tense, terse little play, with motherhood rights and social and industrial limitations for its basis." See "Two Notable Women Write Brilliant Tales."



Alice Guy Blaché, longtime New Jersey-based writer, director, and producer who late in her career sought to create a birth-control film with Rose Pastor Stokes.

after police shut it down and arrested her—Guy Blaché wrote that “I am working now and hope to be able to see you next week with my version” of the script. She also returned Pastor Stokes’ press clippings and claimed to have found some inspiration in them. “I have read every one and find many interesting things that I am going to use in my scenario,” she wrote. To put it another way, the script was still far from completed.

The two women finally finished a script, presumably sometime in November 1916. In perhaps an acknowledgment of *Where Are My Children?* and its question-posing title, Guy Blaché initially titled the script *Shall the Mother Decide?* On the recommendation of Pastor Stokes, who did not view birth control as exclusively a woman’s concern, they changed the title to *Shall the Parents Decide?* At the last minute, the women agreed to change the name yet again; wishing to make their project as censor-proof as possible, they finally settled on a title that they believed no one could possibly object to: *Sacred Motherhood*.

The script that emerged from the women’s collaborative efforts and is on file at New York University’s Tamiment Library reveals the women’s uncertainties about the title. It is labeled *Shall the Mother Decide?* but the word “Mother” is marked out and replaced with “Parents”—a change made by Pastor Stokes. Overlaying the script is a handwritten page laden with hyperbole presumably penned by Guy Blaché after the script had been finished: “Mme. Alice Blaché Presents Her Crowning Cinema Achievement ‘Sacred Motherhood’ With the World’s Best Loved Rich-Woman Rose Pastor Stokes.”⁴

The vagaries surrounding the title are actually emblematic of the entire script—at least, the version of the script that survives. It is principally a typewritten affair, but it is overflowing with handwritten emendations. The emendations are in Pastor Stokes’ hand, which may lead us to the conclusion that the typewritten portion was largely Guy Blaché’s doing (though much of it appears to have been developed from newspaper accounts of Pastor Stokes’ activities). Adding to the script’s uncertainties is its rather odd structure; it begins with a nine-page scene that reconstructs the first meeting of its two writers and their eventual agreement to work together.

Since the script is not readily available for perusal as of this writing, I hereby offer the following summary:

The main narrative begins in the modest Midwestern home of the Hope family, where a wedding is taking place. The screenplay describes the mother of the bride as looking quite a bit older than her husband. She is, to use the language of the script, an “invalid.” The mother speaks to her seventeen-year-old daughter Helen, one of five siblings who attend the wedding of their sister Claire. The mother says that someday Helen, too, will find the right man and get married, to which her daughter replies “Never.” She continues: “Mother, I’m afraid of a life like yours, an ever increasing family, health declining, and bringing children

⁴ Pastor Stokes remembered that statement and used it in her unfinished autobiography to poke a bit of fun at herself: “A Madam B. wrote a scenario—‘The Least-Loved Rich Woman in the World’ in ‘Sacred Motherhood’ etc., etc.” See Pastor Stokes, *I Belong to the Working Class* (147).

into the world like our poor little Jane.” Helen pats the head of Jane, who the script describes as a “little crippled girl, age 4,” and goes on to say: “You cannot really wish me such a life as this, mother dear.”

Four years later, Helen works as a stenographer for a box manufacturing company. One day she passes a tenement where much hubbub is occurring. A spectator tells her that a woman, whose husband is nearly dead from consumption, tried to commit suicide and kill her children. Helen learns from another onlooker that a second woman has been arrested for causing the death of a woman who had sought an abortion. That night, after falling asleep, Helen dreams of numerous women reaching out to her for help.

A few days later, Helen and an unnamed “very prominent woman”—a composite figure based largely on Margaret Sanger and Emma Goldman—start a birth control league. The Sanger/Goldmanesque chairperson asks Helen to visit the Matron of a so-termed “Institute for the Feeble-Minded” to pick up a statistics sheet. While there, Helen spies Maude Miller, a former co-worker and friend who is having a child institutionalized. Helen also recognizes the man with Maude: her boss, Simon Sulphur, who is also a local judge. Helen takes out a small camera and snaps their picture without their knowledge.

After Maude and Simon depart, Helen introduces herself to the Matron and the two go to the latter’s office. The Sulphur-Miller child—a girl named Alice (a name pointedly shared with Guy Blaché)—is still there. While the Matron goes out of the office to find the statistics sheet, Helen snaps the child’s picture.

Two weeks later, Simon propositions Helen on the job. She rejects his advances and returns home highly upset. There’s a knock at the door; it’s a newsboy with the evening paper. She reads the paper and then tells her mother that the chairperson of the birth control league has been arrested for giving out information. She tells her mother that she is going to volunteer to hand out birth control information and be arrested, too, if necessary.

Helen’s proclamation finds its way into the press; Simon reads in the newspaper that she plans to give out printed slips of information at a public meeting. He decides to quash the meeting and, at the office the next day, dictates a letter to the Police Chief about it. Helen ironically is the stenographer taking the letter.

Helen later witnesses Simon’s firing of Mrs. Jones, a co-worker who has been routinely late for work at the box factory. Her excuses are related to the extensive amount of time that she needs to care for her big family. Helen hectors Simon for his actions and then rallies her fellow factory workers to support Mrs. Jones by refusing to work until Simon reinstates her. Helen’s agitation among her co-workers only adds to Simon’s resolve to get rid of her.

Several intercut scenes follow: Helen at home with her mother at lunch, making plans for the mass meeting that evening; Simon at the Police Chief’s office, swearing out an arrest warrant for Helen. Later that afternoon, Simon visits Maude, the mother of their developmentally disabled child, Alice. Maude berates him, whereupon he breaks off their relationship, throws a thousand-dollar check at her, and departs.

Meanwhile, a police officer with an arrest warrant arrives at Helen's home, but her mother distracts him while the young woman escapes down a fire escape. Helen soon arrives at the mass meeting, hands out slips of paper containing birth control information, and is arrested. That evening, Maude reads a newspaper story about Helen's arrest. Touched by her erstwhile co-worker's selfless actions, Maude uses Simon's thousand-dollar check to post Helen's bail.

A week later, Helen stands trial and acts as her own attorney. Simon is one of the three presiding judges. In an echo of Pastor Stokes' own statements, Helen says she "was only trying to insist that the poor possess the knowledge that the rich have and use." Simon argues for her conviction but the other two judges are impressed with her speech. She then produces the photograph she took of Alice and says, "I snapped it the day you brought your child to the institute. We advocate the prevention of the conception of such and other unfortunate children." Even Simon is touched by that remark, and the film concludes with the dismissal of the charges against her.

Though the story hinges on a number of unlikely coincidences (most notably, that Helen's boss at the factory is also one of the judges who hear her case), it should be clear from the foregoing summary that several of its key moments—namely, Helen's distribution of slips of paper containing birth control information, and her speech at the end—are based on Pastor Stokes' immediate experiences. In addition, it is worth noting that some scenes in the factory may also have been drawn from Pastor Stokes' personal history; as a young woman, she had worked in a cigar factory in Cleveland for more than ten years. Even the nine-page prologue is based on an actual event: Pastor Stokes and Guy Blaché's first meeting, though someone—Guy Blaché, presumably—changed the venue from Pastor Stokes' main home in Stamford to her second home at 88 Grove St. in New York City. By including such references to people and events of the very recent past, Guy Blaché and Pastor Stokes hoped they had made their script as timely and relevant as possible.

While the collaborative script was shaping up, Guy Blaché and Adler began approaching potential partners to finance the project. With the proposed film to be released under the U.S. Amusement Corp. banner, Guy Blaché and Adler needed to secure production funding up front from a distribution company that would eventually handle the film's release. As Guy Blaché put it to Pastor Stokes in late October 1916, she hoped "that the financials will decide to help us." It was at this juncture that they ran into the difficulty that would sink the project; to their surprise and dismay, they could find no takers. Guy Blaché's past contractual partners—Pathé, Metro, Alco, World—expressed no interest. She then thought that her best bet would be Lewis J. Selznick, former general manager of the World Film Corp. and current president of the Clara Kimball Young Film Corp., which he formed around May 1916. Guy Blaché knew Selznick fairly well; a number of her *Popular Plays & Players* films had been released through World, which like the Blachés' various film production enterprises was based in Fort Lee. She was aware that Selznick was on the lookout not only for properties that would showcase his resident star but also for other performers whom he could add to

his roster (“Selznick Increases Operations”). Though Selznick was impressed with the actorly talents of Pastor Stokes—she claimed that he made a screen test of her, proclaimed her “a Sarah Bernhardt,” and offered her a contract (Pastor Stokes, *I Belong to the Working Class* 147)—he was not interested in pursuing a birth control project.⁵ Selznick was known for being blunt and direct in his business dealings, and his immediate reaction to Guy Blaché’s proposed film with Pastor Stokes was not promising. As Guy Blaché remembered it: “I suggested to Selznick about making a propaganda film with her. He laughed in my face” (Guy Blaché, *Memoirs* 89).

It is possible that Selznick himself had another birth control film under development. More likely, he knew of a similar project underway at another studio: a film written by and starring Margaret Sanger, who was then under contract to the B. S. Moss Motion Picture Production Co. According to Bert Adler, who also approached Selznick, the latter was just not comfortable with the idea of producing such a film. In a letter to Pastor Stokes dated November 24, Adler wrote that “Mr. Selznick can give no definite information about the similar picture. It is my own belief that he was simply afraid to produce this subject.”

Adler and Guy Blaché were not about to give up, but their options were fading fast. Casting about for another company to which he could pitch the project, Adler hit on the idea of approaching the Universal Film Manufacturing Co. His arguments for so doing, he thought, were sound; not only had Universal distributed earlier Guy Blaché productions, but Adler himself had been a mid-level manager at Universal and maintained his network of business contacts there. He also reasoned that Universal was the studio that had produced *Where Are My Children?* earlier that spring and that hugely successful film “may serve as a precedent for its acceptance,” as he wrote to Pastor Stokes on November 24.

Adler was understandably bitter when his former employer turned him down flat a few days later. In a letter to Pastor Stokes dated December 6, 1916, Adler grumbled that “I did not write you promptly because I have had some discouraging news again. A craven spirit seems to dominate the producers; they will take a ‘sex play’ if it is sufficiently sugar-coated, but not if it is red-blooded and points a *real* lesson.” Of the studio in particular he wrote: “Universal accepted and produced ‘Where Are My Children?’ with its half lesson but return ‘Shall the Mother Decide’ with its *whole* lesson. So there we are” [emphasis in original text].⁶

Unbeknownst to Guy Blaché, Adler, and Pastor Stokes, Universal had other reasons for turning down their project. Movie companies back then were quite secretive in their dealings, just as they are now; there would be nothing to be gained by tipping their hand about their ongoing projects (except, perhaps, to build “buzz”). In the case of Universal, the company was not about to make another birth-control film without its star director-writer, Lois Weber, at the helm. In the wake of Margaret Sanger’s opening and shut-down of a birth control

⁵ Pastor Stokes also asserted that Guy Blaché’s company offered her the film’s leading role, though I have not found any other sources that corroborate that point.

⁶ For reasons unknown, Adler had reverted to the project’s working title.

clinic in Brooklyn and her multiple arrests (all occurring in October and November of 1916), Weber had started developing a film that would be based more explicitly on the Sanger story than *Where Are My Children?* had been. By the time Adler approached Universal, the studio had already committed to the new Weber birth control film, tentatively titled *Is a Woman a Person?* and which would be released in May 1917 as *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle*. Though Adler promised Pastor Stokes that he would continue searching for a partnering company, his efforts went for naught. By the time he had taken a new job as the New York manager of the Educational Films Corporation of America in January 1917 (“News of the Film World”), the project, to cite a Guy Blaché expression, had “died in the egg” (Guy Blaché, *Memoirs* 69).

The script developed by Alice Guy Blaché and Rose Pastor Stokes was unusual for its time in a number of respects, and these factors may have played a role in its rejection by potential distributors. Firstly, it has a heavily self-referential quality; it indicates that both Guy Blaché and Pastor Stokes would appear as themselves at the beginning of the film to discuss the need for exploring birth control in a popular entertainment such as a film. Indeed, the first nine pages of the fifty-page document—about a fifth of the script—is taken up with a scene depicting the initial encounter of the two women. It is very expository and information-heavy, with Guy Blaché coming across as ingenuousness personified; she states that she does not even know which topic she wants to explore. After she has been enlightened, she says: “Mrs. Stokes, I have come to ask you if you will not collaborate with me in writing a moving picture scenario that would interest the people in this subject of birth control.” Pastor Stokes says, “I should like to try, and I would call the play ‘SHALL THE MOTHER DECIDE?’” The two women shake hands and Guy Blaché departs, an action that finally allows the script’s main narrative to begin.

Unusual, too, was the fact that its headstrong twenty-one-year-old heroine required no direct assistance from a male to accomplish her goals (except for the judges clearing the charges against her, of course) nor did she find herself enmeshed in any romantic subplots. For some distributors interested in catering to mainstream audience tastes, such factors would doubtless have constituted glaring oversights.

Ultimately, however, the film’s failure may have come down to a matter of timing; Guy Blaché and Pastor Stokes had simply missed their window of opportunity. Margaret Sanger’s birth control clinic and attendant publicity had come and gone, and they were not much farther along with their project than they had been before. A movie based on their script might have been a respectable short feature, but “the moment” for such a film had clearly passed. Now, with the United States hurtling toward direct military involvement in the Great War, the time for movies that advocated the limitation of birth—to say nothing of movies that featured feisty and rebellious women unencumbered by romantic relationships and male help of any sort—was rapidly coming to an end. A new conservatism was setting in, however briefly, and it was enough to derail the project that Guy Blaché had hoped would be, in her words, her “crowning cinema achievement.”

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