



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

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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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Christine Gledhill

**An Ephemeral History:
Women and British Cinema Culture in the Silent Era**

ABSTRACT: This essay examines select examples of British trade, fan and news press of the 1910s and 1920s in order to explore how the new visibility of women in cinema—both as audiences and in films—was registered. My focus is less how women themselves responded to cinema, than how these materials, in marking the relationship between women and cinema, reveal conflicts around shifting gender relations and identities. Starting by outlining some of the problems of using such material, I will highlight some key themes that emerged in British cultural discourses and imaginings across a range of print media circulating around cinema in this formative period. These include: women and cinema work; the English “girl” and “Americanitis”; sentimentality and “sob-stuff”; acting, “it” and sex-appeal; trans-valuation of the “true woman” in the new cinematic public sphere; femininity, class and representation; and gender contest.

Introduction: Some Preliminaries

My essay stems from a lengthy sojourn among materials of the British trade, news and fan press of the 1910s and 1920s, searching for what they reveal of the cultural and aesthetic history of that cinema. While not initially looking for women’s individual career histories, this presents a rich period through which to explore the shifting significances of gender in its interaction with cinema, highlighting its contribution to modernizing femininity. Returning to think about these materials in the context of *Women and the Silent Screen* foregrounds certain themes, which might prove signposts to future research. In particular it raises issues about how to approach such materials and what they can illuminate.

One problem haunting women’s film history is its duality: on the one hand a labor history of employment openings and closures and on the other, a history of films—representations, expressive and aesthetic achievements, spectatorial possibilities and audience responses. As feminist film historians, we would like to see the one impact on the other. But women’s filmmaking does not necessarily conform to today’s feminist expectations, nor do women filmmakers always want to be identified by gender. Feminist film theory has developed ways of bypassing this dualism through notions of discursive construction and women’s differential positioning in spectatorship, which is produced by both social gender and the unconscious operation of sexual difference. According to such perspectives, women must, almost by default, register a difference, whether they acknowledge their position as women or not. However, researching the cultural materials through which cinematic impact is registered suggests a different approach—one perhaps more attuned to the more complex conception of gender and femininity in our postmodern, postfeminist age. Notions of the intermittency, fluidity and discursivity of any social positioning might suggest that we move in and out

of such positions in different contexts and may, according to circumstance, imaginatively occupy positions not conventionally assigned to us.

Antonia Lant, introducing the diversity of writings of women across the decades, not only warns against monolithic constructions of audiences and textual spectatorship; she also notes that many of the concerns registered by women are shared by male writers too, and can be rooted in particular cultural currents of the time (Lant and Periz). Although much of the British material I have gathered is written by women, I have not deliberately targeted women's responses per se, nor attempted to separate what can be identified as feminist or progressive from what seems permeated by patriarchal ideology. Concepts of consciousness as formed by prevailing cultural imaginaries, perceptual horizons and fantasy formations take us beyond fixed ideological meanings as the goal of film analysis and fixed social identities as the focus of spectator response. This enables historical analysis to attend to processes of change, when thinking and feeling may be on the cusp of new perceptions (see Williams).

Ongoing thinking about film genre further supports this direction. The relationship of female authorship and traditions of genrified gender are central to the project of women's film history and I have found considerable help here in Bakhtin's generous conception of the speech act or utterance as generic: "Our speech—all our utterances—is filled with other's words, varying degrees of otherness and our-own-ness" (89). For Bakhtin all our utterances in whatever medium are grounded in previous generations' cultural uses of language forms. Yet we speak out of present circumstances, inflecting available communicative forms and practices through dialogue—external or internalized—with alterity: with the past meanings of others entrenched in the language forms at our disposal or anticipated in our internal negotiations with future users. As Raymond Williams argues, any historical period is intersected by emergent, residual and dominant frames of thinking and feeling. Equally helpful is the postmodernist, postfeminist conception of identity as partial, multiple, shifting. This, along with the notion of discursive calls on identity and constructive performativity, suggests that gender is not ever a consistent, enduring identity, but one that fluctuates, comes into being when circumstances demand we act in gender, but is frequently in abeyance while other identities are called up. Such concepts help bridge the gap between cinema's two histories, explaining how women may come to operate successfully in a world defined by men. On the one hand institutionalized practices and cultural shifts intersecting with discursive gender open up or foreclose career opportunities for women filmmakers or for more adventurous representations—as Mark Cooper has so perceptively analyzed at Universal in the 1910s and Sue Harper in the British context in the 1970s (Harper and Smith, Introduction and Part II 115–232). But in the movie theater, as Pam Cook persuasively argues, gender may work differently, as a series of imaginary identities, perspectives, feelings, styles, poses, open to male and female alike in diverse ways and with diverse effects.

In looking at the materials, then, in which British journalists, reviewers, essayists, fans, publicists, photographers, illustrators recorded their perceptions of the meeting of cinema

and gender, I wanted to explore what was at stake in the way cinema as emblem of the modern was associated with the shifting balance of gender relations towards twentieth-century modernity. Much of my analysis concurs with observations by Antonia Lant and others looking at similar materials culled from the America and European trade, news and fan press. But in my case historical-cultural situatedness gives a specific slant to the imbrication of (largely) English girlhood and manliness in reaching for, or in reaction against, powerful conceptions of the modern coming from Hollywood and in different ways from Europe. In an attempt to delineate intersecting cultural imaginaries axed on conceptions of gender I have sought to delay social or ideological evaluation. This is partly because what I have scanned for this essay is (in relation to the mass of material available) scanty, unsystematic, contingent. So this paper takes snapshots, pausing at points that seem particularly resonant in relation to themes that hold our imagination and thinking now. But more importantly, I want to pay attention to the doubleness of discourse suggested by Bakhtin: to attend to what holds writers and photographers to past meanings, even as they struggle to embrace new ideas and opportunities, examining how new perceptions impress upon them even as they defend their values against perceived threats.

Finally, there is the question of why particular pieces resonate so powerfully nearly a hundred years later. I would suggest here the value of hindsight. Many of these pieces re-activate perceptions we thought were our own, but, coming from earlier generations, register with renewed freshness and significance. Others reveal to us a struggle with entrenched meanings, constraining the imaginable, which we now have the terms to name; or they frankly give shape to fantasies and needs often derided for their old fashioned attachments and prematurely discarded, which now seem due for recovery in more contemporary terms—witness the current interest in affect, the sublime and aesthetics. In all such cases what the historical snapshot registers is not comprehensive explanation or fact but a way of engaging with the acculturated gender imaginaries of the past in order to repose our own questions. In this spirit I want to examine a number themes that represent nodal points in my trawl through a broad range of materials.

Women's Work

The cinema produced a range of new jobs—some of them arising from the call-up of men to the First World War—which led to a new public visibility for women and new gendered calls. For example, jobs discussed in the press include: film acting, film vetting for exhibitors, projectionist, producer, pay-box cashier, costume designer, scenario writer, orchestral musician, assistant director, editor, continuity girl, studio mother. Trade, fan and general interest press are curious about these jobs and the new male-female relationships involved. In the early 1910s much note is made of the physical skills required in filmmaking, most visible in the dangerous feats required of the screen actress—especially by the

American serial queens. In contrast to such female derring-do, articles by or about women on the production-exhibition side claim a more mature femininity, shifting conceptions of gender relations from female subservience to partnerships with men, even if these are perceived in traditional domestic terms. The call to labor draws on familiar female roles and experience: from mothering the workforce—providing expertise in domestic details, personal relationships, the decorative arts and fashion—to scripting or set and costume design, to a call on women’s supposed intuitive feeling for audiences in giving programming advice to exhibitors. In other words, skills and aptitudes learned in a gendered domestic arena are now, within the filmmaking partnership, put to professional use, without challenging public perception of male-dominated roles in the workplace.

Such challenges did occur, however, both in films—e.g. problem pieces about the impossibility of combining career and motherhood—and in the industry. Regarding the latter, the most notable challenger was Dinah Shurey who, forming a company in 1924 with the help of male backers and directorial expertise, not only increased her control over production but was bold enough to claim the roles of producer and director (Gledhill, “Reframing Women in 1920s British Cinema”). Her nemesis appeared in the form of another woman: the irreverent young journalist, Nerina Shute, of *The Film Weekly*, who under the heading, “Can Women Direct Films?” not only attacked Shurey for creating “several appalling pictures,” but used an interview with Mrs. Walter Forde, wife of a director of popular comedies, to prove her point. However, Mrs. Forde was also known as Adeline Culley—long-time participant in filmmaking, including working as film editor, assistant director and producer on her husband’s films.¹ While in Shute’s interview Mrs. Forde (aka Culley) does indeed suggest that women are incapable of the multi-tasking required of the male director, she also, in describing her own work in the film studio, clearly sees it as embedded in a different and collaborative mode of male-female partnership—something which film criticism has failed to find the language to explore (Shute, “Can Women Direct Films?”).

Elective Affinities: Trans-Valuing the Ideology of Separate Spheres

Women’s highly visible public presence in the cinema auditorium, and exhibitors’ frequent reference to the dominance of the female audience, whose tastes had to be considered, led to gendered conflicts over the nature of the new medium and its social impact. Before the arrival of Hollywood’s clearly established genres, there was some uncertainty whether cinema was a male or female medium. Because it depends on vision, writes one woman in 1920, it is necessarily action—and therefore male—oriented, while conversely female stories depend on talk (*Stoll’s Editorial News*, June 17, 1920 11). Contrariwise Grace Faulconer, writing in 1912 in one of Britain’s earliest general interest film papers, *The Film Censor*, argues that cinematic vision endows emotions with an intensity of impact undistracted by other calls on attention

¹ I am grateful to Bryony Dixon for making this connection.

(Faulconer, “Women and Cinematography: Its Influence on Our Emotions”). Since women are the emotional gender, this creates an affinity between cinema as a medium and women. This perceived affinity is taken in different directions in the succeeding decades, as gender definitions are reworked to suppress or open up new calls to male and female social being.

In one perspective, then, a romantic association of the female figure with beauty and fragile emotion is both projected as women’s special contribution to filmmaking—in their concern with decorative arts and their performance of charm and wistfulness—and analyzed as a particular quality of cinema as a visual medium. For many commentators, male and female, such a perception leads to what Ann Kaplan has argued was a trans-valuation of Victorian separate spheres ideology. John Ruskin in *Of Queen’s Gardens* had claimed that responsibility for the state of the world lies with women through their greater moral sensitivity and their power over men. Responding to cinema as a new arena of moral-emotional perception, Grace Faulconer in 1912, Michael Orm in 1925 in the trade paper, *Kinematograph Weekly*, and Iris Barry, as reported in the *Yorkshire Post* in 1926, all produce what is effectively a revision of Ruskin’s demand on women, who are now no longer confined to the home, but channeled into the new public sphere represented by cinema. “The cinema was made for women,” claims Iris Barry, “but they have made precious little use of it” (Iris Barry qtd. in Davey n. pag.). It is women’s task, these commentators suggest, to exercise their greater moral and aesthetic sensibility to ensure that cinema achieves its own best self, characterized variously as moral cleanliness, the creation of beauty for beauty loving eyes, winged imagination, spiritual fantasy, or the aesthetics of movement.

For a while in the early 1920s, the trade journal, *Kinematograph Weekly* provided an opening for female influence in columns headed “Through Women’s Eyes” or “The Woman Patron.” Thus Kathleen Mason, reviewing *The Broken Road* (René Plaissetty, 1921), a romantic adventure film of imperial India, critiqued in highly Ruskinian terms the implicit racism of the heroine, who, accepting an Indian lover in India, rejects him in England, so propelling him to join an uprising against the Raj: “Where peace and been hoped for and worked for, she brings only war as her contribution towards the building up of a great empire.” Such double standards, Mason argues, will be repudiated by a female audience who “realize that they have power for good and evil in the intelligent solution of these questions” (26). Michael Orm, on a somewhat different tack, but using a similar mix of convention and radicalism, slides into a female voice to speak outside his own gender:

The kinema is such a wonderful influence in the lives of women that I would implore *them* to keep it at its best . . . *I am weary* of these semi-nude vamps, whose marble bath-rooms vie with the swimming-pool orgies of their male companions . . . men who leer and women who lure grow very monotonous. (Orm 63)

This identification of women with guardianship of cultural and moral value could be reversed in an equally Ruskinian way. Lady Emmott, Acting Vice-President of the National

Council of Women in Great Britain, argues the bad influence of the female audience in a public address entitled “Do Women Cheapen Films?” While largely affirming that they do, she pleads the efficacy of citizenship: “Women who realize their responsibility to community . . . have no taste for artificial excitements . . . the quickest and surest way to abolish undesirable film is to arouse a deep and sincere interest in citizenship” (Lady Emmott).

Gender and Genre: Action Versus “Sob Stuff”

The widely perceived affinity between cinema and female emotion produced by the twenties a decided backlash in a gendered contest over what and whom cinema was for. The presumably male reviewer of the 1926 American remake of *The Better ‘Ole* (Charles Reisner), based on Bruce Fairbairns’s sardonic warfront cartoons, writes that given its success with an all-male cast he hopes “the women-and-children first principle of cinematography will be abandoned and that the mere man in a picture theater will no longer feel he has strayed to the lingerie counter” (*Daily Chronicle*, Oct. 29, 1926 n. pag). Recurrent complaints about “sickly sentimentality,” (a fifteen-year-old boy qtd. in Allen n. pag.) “moonfaced sentimentality appealing to romantic maidens” and “harmful ‘sob-stuff’” (Spenser n. pag.) suggest a gendering of genres and modes in contest between male and female viewers, with “sob-stuff” telling us just *how* women cheapen films.

But there were women writers willing to defend the apparently indefensible, sometimes pointing out that male dramatists and actors could be highly sentiment-prone. Edith Nepean, British studio correspondent for *Picture Show* throughout the 1920s, displayed an acute sensitivity to the emotional feel of screen images and audience responses. Noting that “betrayal of emotion” is currently considered an “expression of bad taste,” she declares: “it is extraordinary to watch the effect of “sob stuff” on audiences in the cinema,” and suggests it arises from recognition of one’s own “tragic possibilities.” Contrary to the derision that greeted women’s romantic fiction, “Love,” she argues, is “shown as a distinctly *disquieting* passion,” exemplified by her favorite exponent, Ivor Novello, as a “past master of ‘sob stuff’” (Nepean 9). Nepean’s empathy with popular responses was, however, up against a conundrum to which the intersection of class, national culture and emotion was central. In 1929 a doctor writes into *The Film Weekly* to decry “crude, degrading sentimentality” explaining that “it is bad for a nation to live on its emotions,” and that attachment to a “good cry” is related to hysteria (Jones 18).

“Americanitis”: Weeping Mothers and Sophisticated Flappers

The emotion-saturated nation that the doctor had in mind was America—where, as many had argued, pursuit of the dollar and therefore of a democratic mass rather than cultivated audience favored “the mushy ultra-sentimental story, sprinkled with erring children and

Film Booking Offices Ltd



The American Girl

The Great New West Serial
In Seventeen Two-Reel Episodes.
Marin Sais as the Intrepid Horsewoman.

THREE ADVANCE OPINIONS.

Marin Sais possesses a charming appearance, and performs feats which cause one to hold one's breath in amazement. . . . Seldom have we seen such a galaxy of adventure. A pretty love story runs through it. "The American Girl" should be popular.
The Bioscope.

Adventure, mystery, thrills enacted among scenery that breathes the very spirit of "do and dare"—a Kalem Serial that will more than hold its own, and with the certainty of the Sexton in the Ballad "gather them in"—the lovers of the serial of mystery untold episode by episode. The audience is never allowed to lose the grip of the main thread and it is wonderfully sustained — the complex mystery — right through the 17 episodes.
The Cinema.

Marin Sais is the heroine of this 34 reels of frills and thrills — a sensational serial full of horsemanship. It will be a popular soldiers' drama — there are comedy touches. If all American girls were as strenuous as this one, I should advise an Army at the front. It would not be all honey for the Huns.
Kinematograph Weekly.

Release Date



July 1st.

MANCHESTER: 4 CATEATON STREET.	SHEFFIELD: 174 NORFOLK STREET.	NEWCASTLE ON TYNE: BOLBEC HALL.	LIVERPOOL: 36 THE ARCADE, LORD ST.	22 SOHO SQUARE, LONDON, W. 1.
GLASGOW: 34 ST CLYDE STR.	BIRMINGHAM: 22 HILL STREET.	CARDIFF: 23 CHARLES STREET.	DUBLIN: 3 DAME STREET.	WIRES, ESSARUM, OX. LOND PHONE, REGENT, 277

"The American Girl." Advertisement. *Kinematograph and Lantern Weekly* 6 June 1918.

weeping mothers” (“What is a Good Film? Wynham Standing and Hugh Croise Debate” 38) and “a sentimentality that nauseates” (Agate 6). Such American “sob-stuff” in Britain, it was argued, appealed to the “unthinking classes” (“What is a Good Film? Wynham Standing and Hugh Croise Debate” 38)—to “the largest number of nursemaids, servant girls and errand boys” (Agate 6). However, it was the “girl” who offered a more inspiring imaginary alternative to the mature woman-as-citizen through whom to confront cheapening female sentimentality—a figure more compatible with American cinema’s modernizing, democratic appeals, capable of embodying changing conceptions of gender. As Sally Mitchell and Jon Burrows have shown, the “girl” was a pervasive and vital figure, emerging in late nineteenth-century girls’ fiction and magazines and in the chorus lines of musical theater, music hall and variety (Burrows; Mitchell). The Girl, as was said of Mary Pickford, stands on the threshold, a threshold between a Victorian past and twentieth-century modernity. In this respect, the Girl dramatizes the contrary gender-generic pulls of the cinematic, divided between the *action* of the American serial queens and the *affect* of an often ditzzy but wholly empathic femininity represented quintessentially by Mary Pickford (Gledhill, “Mary Pickford: Icon of Stardom”).

These twin calls from America put the Girl at the center of cultural imagination in which femininity was negotiated with the national, pulling in different class-performative directions. Aware of different audiences to be served, a kind of critical tongue-in-cheek jokiness greeted the exploits of Pearl White’s serial queen and later derring-do heroines, whether written by men or women (see, most recently, Dahlquist). This extended to a particular version of the Girl, *the Flapper*, understood as an American creation and, like the serial queens, fun, but not grown up enough to be taken seriously (see satirical piece “The Flapper and ‘It’”). More problematic, however, derring-do and the on-screen chorus girl had changed dress codes and the behavior that went with them. The result was an ever more public display of female sexuality that threatened the Victorian middle-class ideal of true womanhood, also blamed on America. James Agate, for example, speaking to the New Gallery First Nighter’s Club in 1923, declared that the American producer, “search[ing] for the eternal dollar,” pursued only one theme: “that chastity in a woman spelt idiocy” (Agate 6). In two ads juxtaposed in *Kinematograph Weekly* (June 6, 1918), “England’s Own Picture Girl” (40-41) is neatly pitted against “The American Girl” (39).

Nevertheless, the times were changing and trade critics were caught in a bind, keenly aware that “sex and punch” both paid *and* put the much-sought “better-class public” off. Central to this class-inflected antagonism and its solution was the value to English culture of “acting.” In a 1922 *Kinema Club* debate, the director, Hugh Croise, argued against America’s “sophisticated screen ‘flapper,’” declaring that “as an Englishman I believe [in] our own more natural women who, with their real knowledge, experience and stage technique, have not their superiors in the world” (“What is a Good Film? Wynham Standing and Hugh Croise Debate” 38). The contradiction here is acute, catching the English actress in a double-bind: required to be natural and display acting skill at the same time.

British
Studio
News

Are British Girls Wanted?

Pauline Johnson Loses her Part—Mabel
Poulton's Cockney Talkie—Lilian Hall-Davis
also to Speak—Roshier and the Art
of Film Beauty.

OH, let us be joyful! For I learn that British girls (despite their poker-faced acting and their sad reluctance in competing with foreigners for "undressed honours") are now the only desirables in the film world. They are to be given the chance of their lives.

Buy one and all the grey-beards in the British Studios, "English girls are stiff and reserved; it is difficult to make them emotional. We have always found that foreign women are a thousand times more



PAULINE JOHNSON

successful and easier to work with, but now that Talkies have come, foreigners are useless!"

Last week I bewailed the fact that Lya De Puyla is leaving us. But, after all, what lack of patriotism! Lya, and all those other unfortunate with defective tongues, must be shooed away from British films like dust before a broom. They must make way for British girls.

Amey Ogden is another sufferer, and I doubt not that Pola Negri will eventually follow suit, refusing, as she does, to make a Talkie. These people, no matter how

FILMA VOICE
PRODUCTION
STUDIOS

brilliant, are become practically useless as heroines. When the public understands that the words on their lips belong, not to them, but to mere doubles, there is bound to be revolt. One-time favourites will be condemned as "back numbers." Foreigners are only useful in occasional parts where broken accents are essential.

Without being impolite, I may say that Elstree has every reason to frown her brow with a large frown. The actresses she has on contract include Betty Balfour, who in the right kind of part should talk well, Estelle Brody, whose voice, fairly good in "Kitty," should improve, and Eugenie Prescott (alias Amami), as yet an unknown quantity. But are these enough? I think not.

The problem remains. How are they going to supply the demand for new artists? Are they going to select stage players—those ladies whose faces are marred by their wrinkles? Or are they going to scour England for unknown talent that is allied to the most important of all qualities, YOUTH?

Opinions

I talked to Norman Walker, the wise and respected director of "Tommy Atkins" and "Widcombe Fair." He should know what he is saying:

"Certainly English girls are in enormous demand. They are horribly reserved—both scenes and love scenes, turn them into shocked icicles—but their voices are wonderful. And voices are the only things that count nowadays. We shall have to get busy and find some really capable stars. Personally I believe that stage artists will have the monopoly of the parts. To my own way of thinking, youth doesn't matter so much. A beautiful voice is the main essential."

Much as I admire Norman Walker, I don't agree with him here. And nor, I am happy to say, does Graham Cutts, now directing the talking sequences for "The Return of the Rat."

Said he in a moment of confidence, "The voices of stage people are always a little affected. They roll their r's and play on their words in a way that annoys the sensitive microphone. The result is seldom so good as an untrained voice. And I think

by NERINA SHUTE
FILM WEEKLY
Studio Correspondent

camera angles, etc., before the picture starts. In "The Vagabond Queen," the film I've just finished with Betty Balfour, I arranged my camera in such a way as to make her face less round and wide. [That's Betty's failing, you know.] It was easily done, and they say it was very successful. Now I'm taking tests of a dozen applicants



LILIAN HALL-DAVIS

for the part of leading lady in Dupont's new picture, "Atlantic," originally called "The Beg."

One Foreigner Still with B.I.P.

Yes, in spite of everything, British



MONA GOYA, who has taken P. Johnson's part in "Goodwin's

that British films have no female And cultured voices will make the of all those dandies with sufficient to force an entry into British Studi

Mabel Poulton is Worried

Returning to Graham Cutts moment, he tells me that he intends a talking film of "The Wonderful his first production, you remember Hall-Davis will play her original leading lady and Lawson Butt is b sidered as the hero.

More important still, I learnt fr little Mabel Poulton the news of h programme.

"I'm rather frightened of Talk confessed, "they're so—so differs taking a step in the dark, and no of it better. For the present I mus myself with just synchronising m pictures. In that way one gains ex But in the future I am hoping to proper Talkie. Nothing is settled, of course, but if only it c I shall play the part of a Cockne

Eve Gray a "Passion Cam

I know of one very lovely th faced film actress, whose tongue is as her face, and who bids her t less anxiety than Mabel Poulton. Gray.

Here is an artist with consider rience in musical comedy, which confidence. But even so she is out of work, waiting and grumble many others, until the ground s erected and the British film indu a new lease of life.

Eve Gray should not be forgotten first place her wiseful beauty i fully belied by a very naughty

Nerina Shute, "Are British Girls Wanted?" *The Film Weekly* 17 June 1929.

English Actress, American Star

A debate that ran through the 1920s turned on the tension between acting and being, foregrounded by the rise of American film stardom and consequent arguments about why British cinema failed to match it. Since British acting was, and still is, considered by the British to be the best in the world, the problem was, contrariwise, laid at the door of the English girl. For while some critics and fans were allergic to "sob-stuff," it appeared that star performance required spontaneous expressivity. Thus in 1920, *Kinematograph Weekly* reported the claim of an—unnamed—leading producer that "English girls have not the necessary temperament

for screen work . . . (although a dash of Irish or Welsh blood makes all the difference). The English girl is too staid and unemotional.” The paper’s response is revealing: “What does he want them to do? Hula-hula dances in short grass skirts?” (qtd. in *Kinematograph Weekly*, April 8, 1920 84).

The debate that rumbled on through the 1920s highlights the way cinema refocused gender and class in their contribution to the aesthetic as well as social dimensions of a shifting cultural imaginary. For restraint, underplaying and understatement had become key British signifiers of a naturalism that divided male from female and middle from lower class.

The proponents of restraint claimed the greater power of implied rather than declaimed emotion, which remained the province of melodrama. However, restraint achieved its effect of power in combination with signifiers of middle or upper class authority. Melodramatic gesture, it was argued, belonged to female and working-class energies that refuse to submit.

Thus in diffusing the climactic oppositions of melodrama’s class confrontations, restraint put up protective barriers between protagonists differentiated by class and gender, thereby allowing a modern democratic extension of social contact while maintaining difference.

Restraint and the English Man

The aesthetic of restraint, however, worked well for masculinity, providing, it was claimed, “manliness” of a kind unavailable to Americans and Europeans. The actor, Miles Mander rejected his Italian, French and Swedish counterparts for their “unmanly gestures,” which, he claimed, were “not attractive to the English” (15). Apparently agreeing, Elaine Nicholson asked in *Motion Picture Studio*, “do female fans appreciate how much more manly the British hero is . . . a good-looking well-bred man of the . . . fascinating forties, who knows how to wear perfectly-cut clothes as if they belonged to him, and who reserves his smile for comparatively rare moments” (17). However, in comparison to the American star the restrained British film actress appeared simply “repressed.”

In 1926 playwright and theater critic, St John Ervine provoked a running debate in *The Morning Post* by claiming that English girls failed to become successful film actresses because of “the immobility of feature so fashionable among nicely-bred girls. Our young ladies betray so few of their feelings in their faces that one is tempted to believe they are wearing masks.” Nevertheless in replying to one of his correspondents Ervine reinstates class limits: “When we invite . . . [our young actresses] . . . to be vivacious in their manner, we are not asking them to behave like low-class barmaids” (Ervine n. pag.). Both social and aesthetic systems depended on a middle-class femininity to hold the line between private and public spheres, between performer and audience in order to maintain visible social differences. In this respect English femininity was exemplified by Alma Taylor, who *Pictures and the Picturegoer* had in 1917 proposed as the English Mary Pickford (“Is there an English Mary Pickford?”). Like “England’s Own Picture Girl,” the image is decorously contained and separated from



The illustration for May Edginton's "The 'IT-less' British Girl,"
The Film Weekly Dec. 17, 1928

the viewer. It was precisely this gap that the American star overcame. Writers in the trade and fan press frequently advised that the film industry should look beyond the legitimate stage to a different class of girl for star material. *The Bioscope* quoted Ervine himself saying, "it may be . . . that the English film-actress will come from the working class, where immobility of expression is not practiced" (Ervine qtd. in *The Bioscope*, July 8, 1926 49). The directors Sinclair Hill and Manning Haynes argued that the showgirls of variety and cabaret make good film performers because they can "get over" to an audience (Hill and Haynes 9-10).

English Girls, "It" and Sex Appeal

Along with the showgirl and cabaret dancer proliferating on English screens in American films, a new set of terms facilitated the crossing of such class-sexual boundaries: sex appeal and Elinor Glyn's electric term "It," coined in 1923, to define the personal magnetism connecting star and audience exemplified by the American star. In 1928 *Lady Eleanor Smith*—writer of romances featuring aristocrats and gypsies—complained of the English

actress's lack of "It" (Smith writing in *The Picturegoer* qtd. in Mannoek). May Edginton wrote from Hollywood on "The 'IT-less' British Girl": "English girls are considered in Hollywood to be at a discount because of their lack of emotion On the screen they are cool; they are chaste; there are no sirens . . . they photograph coldly" (9). Restraint, then, is now interpreted as sexual coldness. Thus Monty Banks wrote of the difficulties of getting English actresses to "unbend—to lose their coldness" (15). And Maurice Elvey was observed by Nerina Shute "in the gentle art of distributing sex appeal" as he urged his crowd of ball-room extras in the proto-feminist science fiction film, *High Treason* (Maurice Elvey, 1929): "Be more abandoned: Remember this is 1950 and you're not in Balham" ([*'High Treason'* review], *The Film Weekly*, June 3, 1929 5).

Representation, the Cultural Imaginary and Social Change

I want to end with a reflection on a final theme: the embrace of social change through shifting representations—a theme running throughout these materials that highlights the link between the imaginable, the aspirational, and changing cultural practices. Ibsen's *The Doll's House* functioned as a marker of growing awareness of the need to contest standard discursive calls on and representations of women, although arguably struggles with the "True Woman" began in nineteenth-century women's fiction from the moment of her inception. Thus in 1912 Grace Faulconer opened her column in the first issue of *The Film Censor*: "Let me plead the cause of my sex. In many films we are made to appear unimportant—a negligible quantity, mere dolls, the toys of men" ("Women and Cinematography: Her Position in the Photoplay" 4). Although, as I have suggested, Faulconer entered the fray within a nineteenth-century perspective that advocated the moral impact of women on the filmic public sphere, she saw Wilberforce's campaign to end slavery reduced by "the greater power of the cinema over the pen" in combating "the indignities and evils under which we suffer" ("Woman in Cinematography [sic]. Why We Like the Photoplay" 3).

In this respect, it was cinema's aesthetic and imaginary power that became the focus of gendered negotiation. The cinema's attention to real bodies in movement, its probing of personality and its display of female sexuality opened up a border which many women in Britain—especially the new generation who grew up with cinema—were eager to cross. As a threshold figure, the Girl had already been used in the theater by the Melville brothers to activate the moral boundary within an eroding Victorian moral framework. In the context of wartime, the Melvilles' play titles advertised under the heading "Pictures which will Make Money for You" (60) were frankly aimed at exhibitors now aware of a new audience of young women recently called to war work outside the home:

A World of Sin
The Shop-Soiled Girl
The Girl Who Took the Wrong Turning

By the early 1920s *Pictures and the Picturegoer* in “Bad Girls on the Screen” felt moral recuperation was no longer needed to justify pleasure: “Seven stars who specialize in screen viciousness . . . all gave this same reason: Because of the glorious acting opportunities such roles offer. So now you know” (J.L. 60). In 1928, *The Film Weekly* ran Margery Lawrence’s article, “I Love Wicked Heroines”:

To me, vitality—vividness, personality, the quality known as ‘pep’ in America . . . is worth all the negative colourless virtues in the world! . . . ‘Sin’ (so-classed) springs far more often than the virtuous will allow from sheer vivid, eager interest in life . . . I love and adore courage! Not merely brute male courage, but that finer courage of the woman that goes out to meet life, defiant of watching eyes, and insists on living it in the way that suits her best, regardless of either opinion or convention. (9)

Nerina Shute, under headings such as, “Are British Girls too Big for the Screen: Hints for the ‘IT’-less” or “Are British Girls Wanted?” campaigned for the sexualization of British actresses, writing scornfully of English actresses’ “poker-faced acting and their sad reluctance in competing with foreigners for ‘undress honors’” (“Are British Girls too Big for the Screen” 9). To “Flappers” convinced that sound cinema would require their English voices, she warned: “it remains for them to cultivate passionate tendencies . . . with a nice dose of ‘sex appeal’” (“Are British Girls Wanted?” 12). Turning the whole purpose of sex appeal to the advantage of the female audience, a reader writes in to *The Film Weekly*: “Sir, will you try and absorb the simple fact that we women, who form the vast majority of the film public, do not share your doll-worship. We want to see the men” ([reader’s letter], Jan. 21, 1929 12).

In Conclusion

In 1931 Alma Taylor, the putative English Mary Pickford of 1917, set out to answer, under the heading “How Films *have changed* Women” [original emphasis] the question: “Is the Modern Girl a product of the Screen?” (Taylor 9). Implicit in her question is the recognition of the passage through the imaginary that social change must travel. In tune with the tenor of the writings of the second half of the 1920s, she argues that if Mrs. Pankhurst won women’s political rights, the cinema had completed her work in “establishing the Modern Girl’s right to a good time, and to her capacity for enjoying one!” (Taylor 9). Most of the themes that I have highlighted converge in Taylor’s account of the symbiotic relation between women and cinema.

Central to her argument is a conviction—also expressed by others—that women, having so much more invested in the need for change, are less conservative than men. Their desires, she argues, drove cinema’s search for novelty so that “the screen became a mirror of all that was newest in life.” Stressing the democratic reach of the cinema to all classes of women, she acknowledges the value of the shocks experienced by many when confronted by “the

Bad Girls on the Screen



Jetta Gouman

Why Do Girls Go Wrong—in the Movies? Is it because they "would never dream of doing such a thing in real life?" Is it because it gives them "a chance to work off superfluous energy?" Or because they can thus "see what it's like" and then if they don't like it, leave it alone? No, Josephine, it is for none of these reasons. Fold back your ears and I will explain. Seven stars who specialise in screen viciousness, and one star who has had only one bite at it (Elsie Ferguson), all gave this same reason: Because of the glorious acting opportunities such roles offer. Now you know.

Daphne Wayne was serenely playing drug addicts and similar perverted specimens of femininity when she was barely in her teens. Daphne is a unique personality. Her tow coloured locks which won't keep tidy, her great blue eyes, and irregular but piquant features lend themselves admirably to delineating the emotions of good girls gone bad. And so in the beginning she gave us unforgettably depraved



Above: Marie Prevost and Kenneth Harlan trying to live up to the title of "The Beautiful and Damned." Circle: Anna O. Nilsson demonstrates in "What Women Will Do."



Stately Elsie Ferguson trying to look like a girl who took the wrong turning in "Outcast"

in her own Selznick productions she was about seventeen. She was allowed to choose her own stories, and she proceeded to pick out one "bad-hat" after another for her initial impersonations. Cabaret girls who'd seen the seamy side of things, tragic adventuresses, etc., etc., were the very breath of life to her. Norma doesn't shine in these roles, really. She's at her best as a modern girl in studies and problems of modern womanhood. She's not a good ramp; and she's too womanly and sweet to be a convincing adventuress. I think she knows it now. Not so Nazimova, who has never yet played a screen siren. Nazi is supremely endowed to create any of the great ancient or modern female "rotters." She did play *Salome*, but she converted her into a Byzantine flapper. If Nazimova ever stages a comeback into screenland let's hope it will be as a "girl who took the wrong turning."

The latest recruit to the army of screen sinners is none other than Mary Dickford, whose "Rosita" is (for her),

'goings-on' of Continental film sweethearts" and the "excessively broad humor of the early American screen comedians" (Taylor 8–9). However, anticipating by seventy years or so Patrice Petro's arguments about the aftershocks of the new, Taylor suggests that "being shocked is a process that becomes less painful as you grow used to it. It ends far more frequently by broadening one's mind and enlarging one's sense of humor than by undermining one's morals." And on this basis, while regretting as an English woman that her examples come from abroad, she argues the power of the serial queens, Pearl White, Ruth Roland and Grace Cunard, in "preparing the public mind to accept women in other roles than as wives and housekeepers" (Taylor 8–9). Contrary to the clamor over American cinema's "undress habit," she argues, "it was largely due to the "bathing beauties" of Max Sennett's creation that the unwholesome Mrs. Grundy has been banished for ever from our beaches and sports grounds," while films considered objectionable because they deal with sex, divorce, birth-control and illegitimacy have "exploded" the "indecent secrecy of Victorianism." "Against 'Americanitis,'" she graciously concedes that "the finest American women are not unworthy of being chosen as world examples" (Taylor 8–9). It is a soberly cautious, English-oriented, but generous assessment, which is aware that fantasy, laughter, as well as outrage and contest constitute the processes by which cultural imaginaries shift and are enlarged, without which no change can take place.

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