



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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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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Viktoria Paranyuk

Riding Horses, Writing Stories: Josephine Rector's Career at Western Essanay¹

ABSTRACT: Josephine Rector's fleeting career in cinema is inseparable from the Essanay Film Manufacturing Company, specifically its outfit in Northern California. This paper traces the contours of Rector's involvement with Essanay, in particular her contribution as a scenario writer to the western genre. As head of the scenario department from 1912 to 1914, she was responsible for both writing and selecting suitable material for two-reel adventure stories, most notably the Broncho Billy series, which inaugurated the first cowboy star played by Gilbert M. Anderson. Due to the loss of the majority of Essanay films and the absent writing credits in the extant ones, a listing of Rector's entire output is difficult if not impossible to compile. Building on the previous research about Western Essanay by the historian David Kiehn, this paper brings to light Rector's career as that of a young woman who seized the opportunity offered to women by the burgeoning film industry in 1910s United States.

Josephine Rector's career in cinema as scenario writer and actor was brief, amounting, given the evidence, to about four years, from 1911 to 1914. Due to this fact, as well as to the loss of the majority of the pictures she worked on and the absence of writing credits in the surviving work, assembling her professional profile proved elusive.

What follows is the result of my research, which draws on contemporary newspaper accounts, trade press, fan magazines in addition to several publications and archival material concerning the Essanay Film Manufacturing Company and the figures Rector was closely associated with. When one begins researching Essanay, it does not take long to realize that articles and books tend to be mostly about "Broncho Billy" Anderson, the "A" of Essanay and the legendary film cowboy. These materials are also, to a considerable extent, about Charlie Chaplin who spent less than one year, just about six months, making films under the company's lucrative contract. There is virtually nothing about Josephine Rector, whose presence at Essanay, although short-lived, coincided with the peak of the studio's success, its western outfit in particular.

As already implied, Rector's stint in the motion picture industry is inseparable from the Essanay Film Manufacturing Company. Essanay was founded in Chicago in 1907 by George K. Spoor, renter of films and distributor of screen equipment, and Gilbert M. Anderson, actor, director, and producer, who is best known for bringing to the screen the rugged western outlaw in the Broncho Billy series (Kiehn, *Broncho Billy and the Essanay Film Company* 1). Convinced that western adventure stories should be filmed in the real West, Anderson left Chicago, and with a small crew set off in the direction of the Rockies sometime in 1909 (Kiehn, *Broncho Billy and the Essanay Film Company* 10-11; Bell, *The Golden Gate and the Silver*

¹ A version of this article was originally written for the forthcoming *Women Film Pioneers Project*.

I would like to thank David Kiehn who has generously provided the images that illustrate this article.



Josephine Rector.
Courtesy of Niles Essanay Silent Film Museum.

Screen 41).

In April of 1912, Anderson and his production unit, after short sojourns in Colorado and several towns in California, settled in Niles, just east of San Francisco, building a film studio and bungalows to house the company's personnel (Smith 135).

Rector's first encounter with Essanay occurred before the company's move to Niles. In late 1910 or early 1911, when Anderson's crew was filming in Los Gatos, California, the young woman, vacationing nearby, was introduced to Jack O'Brien, actor and Anderson's secretary. In conversation, Rector mentioned some story ideas to him who then encouraged her to submit them to Essanay ("Daze of Studio Days Back in Niles" 14). Evidently O'Brien and Anderson were impressed by her stories, as shortly thereafter Rector was hired to write for the company for fifteen dollars a week and occasionally get in front of the camera for three (Strobel 8–9). Soon after this incident, however, Anderson and the crew moved south for the winter while Rector stayed behind in San Francisco where she lived with her two sons. Around this time, a personal tragedy struck: her oldest son died. When the company returned to northern California in the spring of 1911, they set up shop in San Rafael for seven months, and Rector was rehired. She began to commute to San Rafael to write as well as act. *Across the Plains* (Gilbert M. Anderson), her first film written for the western Essanay, was released in April 1911. It was advertised in the *Bioscope* as "a dramatic picture that will arouse your fighting blood" ("Popular Essanay Photoplays" suppl. xxii). The story concerns father and daughter driving a prairie wagon, being pursued by Indians, and eventually saved by a cowboy. *The Moving Picture World* claimed, "[a]n audience will be pleased with this picture" ("Comments on the Films" 842). One print of the film survives and is presently at the British Film Institute.

Rector's background seems to have prepared her well for acting in and writing for westerns. Josephine Pickel (her maiden name, 1885-1958) grew up on a ranch in Montana and was no stranger to riding on horseback and the rough-and-tumble, outdoorsy way of life. In the late 1890s she trailed her father, a miner, a long way over the Chilkoot Pass, to scramble for gold in the frigid waters of the Yukon (La Roche 85). In a May 1914 profile for the *Motion Picture Story Magazine*, Rector talked about realizing that she had wanted to learn how to "speak" those things she knew" by virtue of her adventurous background, a desire that prompted her move to San Francisco where she participated in amateur theater (La Roche 85).

This 1914 *Motion Picture* article, "A New Profession for Women," profiling women scenario writers, was advertised as "life stories, pictures, and the daily work of leading photoplay editors" (155). The author describes Rector as "the little lady who presides at the Essanay desk" and for whom "[h]alf the time a chair is too tame a saddle . . . and she is out in the open—riding, posing, climbing, 'bucking' her cheeks up to the color of Oregon apples. For Miss Rector is also one of G. M. Anderson's leads, and plays before the camera when she isn't writing or editing" (La Roche 85). The interviewee confessed that she had equally liked doing both, writing and acting. In a much later interview, only several months before her death,

the former scenario writer and actor reminisced about the scars she had acquired during her movie days, since “there were no doubles then,” she noted (Strobel 8-S). Rector could have very well been one of the women actors that Gertrude Price enthusiastically wrote about on the pages of many Midwestern newspapers in the early 1910s—“an athletic girl who runs, rides and rows with all the freedom and agility of a boy” (Abel, 143).

The *Motion Picture Story Magazine* profile evidently came out a month after Rector had already left Essanay, for in the same issue under the rubric “Greenroom Jottings,” it is announced that “Miss Josephine Rector has resigned from the Western Essanay Company and is now at Haywood (sic), Cal.” (La Roche 125). Although most recent histories suggest that she acted only occasionally, the contemporary press accounts unequivocally indicate that Rector was one of the leads often playing opposite G.M. Anderson. “Her acting,” says the already mentioned profile, “shines out from ‘most every Western Essanay release’” (La Roche 85). In a 1958 interview for the *Oakland Tribune*, Rector mentioned that as head of the company’s scenario department, she “either wrote or selected the scripts for more than 100 westerns” (Strobel 8-S). As an actor, she appeared in about sixty shorts between 1911 and 1914 (Wiersema 2).

The majority of the films produced by Essanay at Niles during Rector’s tenure were one- and two-reel western adventure stories with “Broncho Billy” Anderson at the helm, as well as comedies featuring such characters as Alkali Ike and Slippery Slim. It is certain that it was the former, western adventure reels, with their gripping narratives, strong heroes living by a code of moral values, and magnificent setting of the real West that particularly captured nickelodeon and theater audiences of the early 1910s across the United States and made G. M. Anderson a celebrity (Bell, “Making Films in the Old West” 4; Smith 133–153).

While, allegedly, Rector did not have, or need, a double in her onscreen exploits, Anderson had several because the horsemanship of the famous cowboy star left much to be desired. Gilbert M. Anderson is credited with establishing the prototype of the movie cowboy in the character of Broncho Billy, a rugged western outlaw with a heart of gold who almost always in the conclusion of the film returns to or rediscovers the integrity of middle-class values (Smith 142). Andrew Brodie Smith has pointed out that although cowboy characters “figured in cinema since the medium’s inception, Anderson’s ‘Broncho Billy’ was among the first film audiences could readily identify” (133).

The first reels of the Broncho Billy series appeared in 1910 with *Broncho Billy’s Redemption*, prior to Rector’s arrival on the scene. However, the years she worked at Essanay coincided with the enormous popular success garnered by these films. In March of 1913, *The Bisbee Daily Review* proclaimed: “It is safely said that more Broncho Billy pictures are used than any other production on the market and over 100 copies of this famous brand are sold each week in the United States alone” (“Prime Attraction Is This Card at Lowell” 5).

Many who worked with G. M. Anderson spoke of his difficult, autocratic personality on the set. In a candid interview in the *Hayward Daily Review*, Hal Angus, Essanay actor and

Rector's second husband, remarked that while "Anderson was a production genius," he was a difficult boss, who "drove his people just like he'd drive his automobile" (Wiersema 2; Bell, "Making Films in the Old West" 7). Rector's professional relationship with the screen outlaw was stormy at least on one occasion. In January of 1912 Anderson decided to move the company south, to Lakeside, seeking better weather conditions. When he asked Rector whether she would join the unit, she replied, "No, I've had enough of you" (Wiersema 2). However, when three months later Anderson and the group came back to the Bay Area, settling in Niles, Josephine went to work for Essanay once more.

Whatever difficulties their professional relationship endured, Anderson clearly valued the young woman's contribution, writing her from Lakeside: "Send all the stories you have and also let me know how your account stands I appreciate your work and realize you are a great help to us. Let me hear from you" (Kiehn, "Those Essanay People" 8). This time, upon rejoining Essanay at Niles, she was appointed chief of the scenario department—a one-person operation—for a salary of 25 dollars a week. Together with her son Jem, Rector moved to Niles (Kiehn, *Broncho Billy and the Essanay Film Company* 97).

During her tenure as head of the scenario department, from April 1912 until her departure in April 1914, Rector wrote original scenarios as well as selected and edited suitable material for them. Anderson shot quickly, at a rate of about one or two films a week—at times more—keeping the scenarist busy. Four decades later, in an *Oakland Tribune* interview, Rector—then Mrs. Hal Angus—confessed, "a good portion of our best scripts came from pulp magazines and the shelves of the Oakland Public Library" (Strobel 8-S). No scenario penned by her has been found as of yet and nothing seems to have survived in her family, but The Niles Essanay Silent Film Museum in the Bay Area has a collection of stories and scenarios by Amanda Buckham, who worked at the Chicago Essanay studio from 1911 to 1913 and freelanced afterward. Buckham's stories are generally about two pages. These scenarios consist of numbered scenes of up to forty-five and describe the set and action in a few sentences each (Kiehn, personal interview via email). My assumption is that Rector's scenarios were somewhat similar in format.

The *Oakland Tribune* interview refers to *The Dance at Eagle Pass* (Lloyd Ingraham, 1913) as Rector's crowning filmic achievement (Strobel 8-S). She both wrote and starred in it. Unfortunately, as a great majority of the Essanay films, it is not extant. The story is interesting for its use of forensic ballistics that in the end helps apprehend the real villain. Anderson did not much care for sophisticated plots, being more concerned with conveying immediate action—be it a fistfight or a chase on horseback—romanticized notions of the Old West, and the triumph of a valiant hero. Rector, however, seems to have injected more ingenious narrative lines when she was involved in the writing process as was the case with *The Dance at Eagle Pass* (Lundquist 41). It is worthwhile to point out that following Rector's departure, Anderson frequently recycled Essanay plots from the previous years in order to continue to turn out the Broncho Billy series (Bell, "Making Films in the Old West" 7).



The Dance at Eagle Pass (Lloyd Ingraham, 1913).
Courtesy of Niles Essanay Silent Film Museum.

Due to the reasons described in the beginning of this paper, a list of Rector's complete output is impossible to compile. The presence of her name in film books devoted to early American film is sporadic at best. One of the principal reference sources on silent cinema, Spehr's *American Film Personnel and Company Credits, 1908-1920*, has no mention of her. *A Guide to Silent Westerns* credits Rector for the following three films: as a scenario writer and cast member in *Broncho Billy's Reason* (Gilbert M. Anderson, 1913), actress in *The Dance at Silver Gulch* (Arthur Mackley, 1912) and *The Cast of the Die* (Jess Robbins, 1914) (Langman 57, 74, 102). *The Braff Silent Short Film Working Papers* lists her as an actress also in *The Cast of the Die* and *A Gambler's Way* (Lloyd Ingraham, 1914). Anthony Slide, in his book *Early American Cinema*, in the chapter titled "The Role of Women," acknowledges the significance of women in the early American film industry and profiles a group of forgotten characters involved with all aspects of cinema, including writing; unfortunately, Rector's contribution escapes these pages. Her involvement with cinema was fleeting, nonetheless her work played

a key role in the success of the western Essanay studio, as well as in championing the genre of American film that was to realize its full potential several decades later in Hollywood.

David Kiehn, film historian and author of the book *Broncho Billy and the Essanay Film Company*, extensively researched the company's history and people. He compiled Rector's filmography, which consists of twenty-two titles—where her credit has been decidedly established—accounting both for her writing and acting output. Five of these are extant. Through my research I was able to augment the filmography slightly.

During Rector's work at Essanay from 1911 to 1914 the studio produced just over 200 films in San Rafael and Niles. Knowing that she was in charge of the scenario department for the last two years, it is unequivocal that her contribution significantly exceeds the twenty-two or even fifty films during this period as either writer or editor of scripts.

From my research it is clear that she was at the height of her career when she left Essanay



Josephine Rector in her office at Essanay.
Courtesy of Niles Essanay Silent Film Museum.

in 1914 and very likely intended to move to Hollywood, as did several of her colleagues. As mentioned above, that year she was profiled in the *Motion Picture Story Magazine* as head of the scenario department and actor. The *Anaconda Standard* announced in March 1914, less than a month before Rector's departure, that assistant scenario writer had been hired due to Rector's growing ambition to become "a real motion picture actress," which seems to contradict her pronouncement in the *Motion Picture Story Magazine* profile of liking both writing and acting in equal measure ("The Stage. Theatrical Calendar" 8). Another newspaper account, under "Gossip of Film World," announced: "Miss Josephine Rector, who has been with the Essanay company for four years, has severed her connection and expects to join another company soon" (15).

Her move to Hollywood, however, never came to pass. A few months later she married a fellow actor Hal Angus, and together they attempted to start their own film outfit, the Pacific Motion Picture Company, which was short-lived, and as far as can be ascertained, it released no films. The Anguses ran a flower shop in Hayward, California, until 1926, and in the subsequent years it appears that Josephine Angus became a homemaker (Kiehn, "Those Essanay People" 9).

Notwithstanding the brevity of Rector's career, this research contributes, however infinitesimally, to filling the gap that has been steadily closing with recent scholarship on women's early contribution to the motion picture industry. It also places her alongside such important women figures as Frances Marion, Lois Weber, June Mathis, Jeanie Macpherson and others like them who dominated scenario departments in the 1910s. Rector entered the scene during the moment when the American film industry was undergoing profound transformations on a number of levels. As Shelley Stamp remarks in *Movie-Struck Girls*, "[c]inema's visual grammar, its narrative paradigms, its industrial structure, its social standing, and its audience base all solidified" between 1908 and 1915 (3). Embodying certain aspects of the "new woman" in the beginning of her professional adventures—a single mother living in the urban environment of San Francisco, striving for economic independence—Rector belongs to a generation that was testing the waters of a nascent industry, which at the time offered women a range of exciting opportunities, including creative self-expression and financial self-reliance.

Most challenging about this research project was the incompleteness and fragmentary character of found evidence coupled with the inevitable sense of discontent that often accompanies historical inquiry. To let go and realize that what I discovered might be all there is was a hard but important learning experience. Perhaps in the future additional bits and pieces will surface as more material enters the digital universe, but the "complete picture," in any case, can never be put together. While it is impossible to determine the exact quantity of Josephine Rector's contribution—and in the end it may not be that crucial—her role in the success of one of the most prominent motion picture companies at the time is unquestionable and must be acknowledged.

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