



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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1

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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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
Monica Dall'Asta, Victoria Duckett <i>Kaleidoscope: Women and Cinematic Change from the Silent Era to Now</i>	2
PROLOGUE TO PART I	12
Heide Schlüpmann <i>An Alliance Between History and Theory</i>	13
I. HISTORICAL IMAGES	27
Martin F. Norden <i>Alice Guy Blaché, Rose Pastor Stokes, and the Birth Control Film That Never Was</i>	28
Veronica Pravadelli <i>Lois Weber's Uneasy Progressive Politics: The Articulation of Class and Gender in Where Are My Children?</i>	42
Donna R. Casella <i>Women and Nationalism in Indigenous Irish Filmmaking of the Silent Period</i>	53
Dunja Dogo <i>The Image of a Revolutionist: Vera Figner in The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty</i>	81
Margaret Hennefeld <i>The Politics of Hyper-Visibility in Leni Riefenstahl's The Blue Light</i>	96
Federico Pierotti <i>Coloring the Figures. Women's Labor in the Early Italian Film Industry</i>	106
Mark Garrett Cooper <i>Archive, Theater, Ship: The Phelps Sisters Film the World</i>	120
PROLOGUE TO PART II	130
Christine Gledhill <i>An Ephemeral History: Women and British Cinema Culture in the Silent Era</i>	131
II. WOMEN AND THE CULTURAL DISCOURSE	149
Mary Desjardins <i>Fading Stars and the Ruined Commodity Form: Star Discourses of Loss in American Fan Magazines, 1914-1929</i>	150
Anne Morey <i>School of Scandal: Alice Duer Miller, Scandal, and the New Woman</i>	163
Mark Lynn Anderson <i>The Impossible Films of Vera, Countess of Cathcart</i>	176

Anke Brouwers	
<i>If it Worked for Mary. . . Mary Pickford's Daily Talks with the Fans</i>	197
Claus Tieber	
<i>Mary Pickford—as Written by Frances Marion</i>	220
Kristen Anderson Wagner	
<i>Silent Comediennes and “The Tragedy of Being Funny”</i>	231
Qin Xiqing	
<i>Pearl White and the New Female Image in Chinese Early Silent Cinema</i>	246
Ansje van Beusekom	
<i>Getting Forgotten. Film Critic Elisabeth de Roos and Dutch Culture Before World War II</i>	263
Luca Mazzei	
<i>The Passionate Eye of Angelina Buracci, Pedagogue</i>	273
PROLOGUE TO PART III	288
Jane M. Gaines	
<i>Wordlessness (to be Continued)</i>	289
III. GENDER ON STAGE	302
Annette Förster	
<i>A Pendulum of Performances: Asta Nielsen on Stage and Screen</i>	303
Victoria Duckett	
<i>The “Voix d’Or” on Silent Film: The Case of Sarah Bernhardt</i>	318
Elena Mosconi	
<i>Silent Singers. The Legacy of Opera and Female Stars in Early Italian Cinema</i>	334
Stella Dagna	
<i>A Tribute to Her Creativity: Maria Gasparini in The Stage</i>	353
Michele Leigh	
<i>Alexander Khanzhonkov and His Queens of the Screen</i>	362
Amy Sargeant	
<i>However Odd—Elsa Lanchester!</i>	374
Laraine Porter	
<i>A Lass and a Lack? Women in British Silent Comedy</i>	384
Johanna Schmertz	
<i>The Leatrice Joy Bob: The Clinging Vine and Gender’s Cutting Edge</i>	402
Viktoria Paranyuk	
<i>Riding Horses, Writing Stories: Josephine Rector’s Career at Western Essanay</i>	414
Luciana Corrêa de Araújo	
<i>Movie Prologues: Cinema, Theater and Female Types on Stage at Cinelândia, Rio de Janeiro</i>	424

Ansje van Beusekom

Getting Forgotten. Film Critic Elisabeth de Roos and Dutch Culture Before World War II

ABSTRACT: Elisabeth de Roos (1903-1981) was one of the most intelligent Dutch film critics of her time. From 1925 onwards, she published on French cinema and she contributed regularly to the *Filmliga* journal. *Franse filmkunst* [french cinema] was published in 1931. She lost her professional fascination with cinema with the coming of sound. In 1932 she married writer Eddy du Perron. “How could de Roos’s work be so entirely forgotten?” and “How exactly has this process of disappearance and oblivion taken place?” were the leading questions. Elisabeth’s life and reputation can be studied through the biographies and correspondence of her husband and his best friend Menno ter Braak. They were aware of their strategic positions, while de Roos did not care about her position in the literary landscape. Though, her personal relationship to cinema and literature and her search for authorship is very consistent, De Roos never felt the urge to anthologize or reflect on her own writings. She dedicated herself to du Perron’s work and to raising their son. Financial troubles forced her to write as much as she could for money. Not even those women who were so active in history are granted an ongoing renown.

Who Was Elisabeth de Roos? A Brief Background

Elisabeth de Roos, one of the most intelligent film critics of her time, was born in 1903 and studied at the Gemeentelijke Universiteit van Amsterdam (today Amsterdam University). She started writing on film in 1925. As a Ph.D. candidate in French literature she was interested in French cinema and in avant-garde French cinema in particular. She published in several Dutch literary magazines (*De Stem*, *Rhythme*, *De Vrije Bladen*) and from 1927 onwards she contributed regularly to the *Filmliga* journal. Although she was invited to join the *Filmliga* society, as head of the department in The Hague, she never accepted this post.

In 1931 de Roos published *Franse filmkunst* [french cinema] in the series “Monografieën van de filmkunst” [monographs on cinema], one of the first Dutch attempts to write the history of silent film as an art form. While she was writing this book in 1930, she was living in London and frequently attended the screenings of the Film Society. In 1931, she completed her thesis on *Het Essayistisch Werk van Jacques Rivière* [the essayistic work of Jacques Rivière]. After 1931, when it was clear that the talking pictures would dominate the field, she lost her professional fascination for cinema and wrote instead about modern literature.

In 1932 she married writer Eddy du Perron, a cosmopolitan intellectual, residing in Amsterdam, Bruxelles and Paris.

A Female Writer

During my research for my book, *Kunst en Amusement. Reacties op de film als een nieuw medium*



The book cover of *Fransche Filmkunst* [french cinema], published in the series “Monografieën van de filmkunst” [monographs on cinema] in 1931.

in Nederland, 1895-1940 [arts and entertainment. comments on film as a new medium in the Netherlands, 1895-1940], I gathered a modest collection of writings by Elisabeth de Roos on film from 1926 to 1931 that I studied at the time, but never actually highlighted. In the book I mention her mostly in connection with other critics who had been more actively and practically involved in the struggle for film as art. The Women Film Pioneers Project offered an opportunity for me to single Elisabeth de Roos out as the only Dutch female intellectual film critic of the silent period. Clearly, she merits closer study. It is my aim here to contextualize her work, bringing to the foreground a remarkable female presence in the predominantly male landscape of early Dutch film criticism.

In this paper I take a closer look at de Roos's writings on film. I ask if we can detect a female approach in her work, and explore what this means in the context of the "film as art" debate.



Elisabeth de Roos (1903-1981), ca. 1930.
(Foto: Studio Wagram Bruxelles).

“How Do You Proceed to Get to Know More About Her?”

“How do you proceed to get to know more about her?” was the question posed by a friend when I seriously started digging into Elisabeth de Roos’s life and work. When you look for Elisabeth (du Perron) de Roos, in environments such as academic libraries, newspaper databases, websites and so on, it is remarkable how little emerges. There is some correspondence at the Letterkundig Museum in The Hague, but it takes some effort and diplomacy to see this material. There is one article on her literary criticism (Snoek, “De kennis van het menselijk hart: Elisabeth de Roos als criticus” [knowledge of the human heart: Elisabeth de Roos as critic]) and one Master thesis that significantly defines her as a “writer in the shadow” (Mars). We also know from Snoek (*E. du Perron* 599) that she had an affair with the Dutch poet Hendrik Marsman around 1925, before she married Eddy du Perron seven years later. And that is all.

Film is still marginalized in literary historiography, so the lack of research on de Roos in this field might seem not so surprising. We need to remember, however, that Elisabeth de Roos wrote about a lot more than film: she also wrote about theater as well as French and English literature. The paucity of information makes researching her work and life difficult. This produces the emergence of new questions such as, “How could de Roos’s work be so entirely forgotten?” and “How exactly has this process of disappearance and oblivion taken place?” Careless as I am about my own career, this is by no means a comfortable enterprise.

There is a lot to learn indirectly about Elisabeth’s life and reputation from studying the biographies and correspondence of her husband and his best friend Menno ter Braak, also a major Dutch writer and a cinephile, who had co-founded the Filmliga society in 1927 and who was a good friend of de Roos too. We can peep into their lives and thoughts through their opulent writings and other documents from within their circles. With thousands of pages of published texts (the correspondence of ter Braak and du Perron between 1930 and 1940 alone amounts to over two thousand pages), these writings offer the most extensive resource about de Roos in Dutch literature, (ter Braak and du Perron, *Briefwisseling 1930-1940* [correspondence 1930-1940]). The correspondence of both authors was (tellingly) preserved, archived and published thanks to their widows, du Perron-de Roos herself and Ant ter Braak-Faber. Other published studies of their life and work are similarly extensive. In order to find out more about Elisabeth’s working and living conditions one consequently needs to explore sources such as Snoek’s *E. du Perron: het leven van een smalle mens* [E. du Perron: the life of an ordinary man], Hanssen’s *Sterven als een polemist* [die as a polemist: 1930-1940] and *Want alle verlies is winst: Menno ter Braak 1902-1940* [for every loss there is a gain: Menno ter Braak 1902-1940]. Recently a website on Menno ter Braak, *Menno ter Braak 1902-1940*, gave access to a few unpublished letters of Elisabeth du Perron-de Roos that are held in privately owned collections (“Menno ter Braak | Elisabeth du Perron-de Roos – 1927-1938”).

Initial Findings

The friendship between Menno ter Braak and Eddy du Perron began in 1930. After they met, ter Braak's life and career took a decisive turn. He changed from being a cool, distanced, and polemical (film) aesthete into a passionately engaged intellectual essayist. A truly cosmopolitan personality, du Perron had grown up in the Dutch Indies before moving to Paris, Bruxelles and The Netherlands, where he had become an active member of the Dutch literary circle of the so-called "young critical dogs." He had introduced himself into those circles through his polemic writings against aestheticism, and had found ter Braak at his side in this battle. Yet even more decisive than this collaborative friendship was du Perron's encounter with Elisabeth de Roos, during a dinner at ter Braak's place in Amsterdam in 1931. The two fell in love and they got married shortly after in 1932. Du Perron already knew of de Roos and had read her articles. In a letter to a friend he describes her in February 1931 as "the only lucky combination in Holland of brain and dress, of culture, both inside and outside." (Snoek, *E. du Perron* 595) While de Roos's intellectual work was important to du Perron, she gave up an eventual academic career in literature in order to live with him abroad. The couple moved to Paris in December 1932 and after a six week stay in the Netherlands, to the Dutch Indies, from October 1936 to 1939.

"Vorm of Vent": Form or Personality?

Despite their short lives, both ter Braak and du Perron are considered very important in Dutch culture. They represent the good side of intellectual life before World War II: by 1933 they had both criticised Hitler, national socialism, fascism and communism, emphasizing the cultural value of "good" thinking and the "good genre" (*le bon genre*) in the making of a good individual person. Neither form nor aesthetic style would mean anything, they believed, without a sense that they are also "good" or truthful at the same time, otherwise they may even be dangerous.

Their vision of life and art is labelled *Vorm of vent* [form or personality] and did, in many ways, set the agenda for Dutch intellectual life before, during and after the war. Unfortunately, ter Braak and du Perron did not live to see this happen: they both died at the age of forty, just at the onset of the war, apparently without being aware of each other's death, on May 14, 1940. Ter Braak committed suicide, while du Perron died of a heart attack.

Although the mountain of publications on the illustrious duo ter Braak-du Perron may suggest otherwise, their struggle to earn their keep through writing was hard. Ter Braak worked as a teacher, and later as a journalist, but the du Perrons had no job other than writing. The number of subscriptions to *Forum*, the journal founded by ter Braak and du Perron in 1931, amounted to about one thousand, and the print runs of their books were even smaller. How could they become so famous, when during their lives they could hardly

survive on what they wrote? Today they are celebrated as two of the most influential Dutch writers of the early 1930s, but this is indeed a retrospective consideration that does not take into account the real conditions under which they wrote. While struggling to make their living, the two men were nevertheless aware of their strategic positions in the Dutch literary landscape and manoeuvred accordingly. In short, they knew the rules of the game, in Bourdieu's term *les règles de l'art*, and were passionate players. Already in his adolescent years ter Braak had been on the editorial board of a students' magazine named *Propria Cures*. Later, he was the founder, editor and a major contributor of the *Filmliga* journal. Fighting for a new art was an ideal manner to gain entrance into the field of art and literary criticism, which happened shortly afterwards when ter Braak became the editor of the literature section of *Het Vaderland*, a national newspaper. All of these activities can be regarded as training for the "real thing": a career in the cultural world of the Netherlands, not only as a novelist, but also as a journal editor and a literary critic. Du Perron, in his turn, was the son of a rich planter's family, which had lost its wealth at the beginning of the economic crisis of the 1930s. He was a dedicated modernist, and later an engaged polemist and critic who referred to Multatuli (Eduard Douwes Dekker) as to his chosen cultural model.

Managing Differently: The Career of de Roos

Like du Perron and ter Braak, de Roos was also publicly recognized during her active years. In the second half of the 1920s she was known as the "Muse of the Free Press" (from the name of one of the literary journals in which she published, the *Vrije Bladen* [free pages]) and a woman who was able to combine elegance and intelligence. Regarded as a model of class, she was celebrated by many. These sentiments may have amused her, but she certainly did not mint them. She instead followed her own particular interests, and they were varied. De Roos began writing on theatre, flirted with film, and finally became serious about both French and English modern literature (exploring such authors as Louis Ferdinand Celine, Aldous Huxley, Emily Dickinson, Virginia Woolf).

De Roos's style was very different from that of "the boys": she did not fight or slander (as her husband did) and tried instead to maintain a balanced and sophisticated view of things. Her texts were usually short, but made of long and difficult sentences with a very accurate and precise use of language. She held firm opinions, and stood by them, but these were never uttered in strong language, and never meant to dominate those of other people. She gave her own opinion, but was no polemicist. To the contrary: she was quite self-confident and apparently did not feel like she needed to engage debate.

To keep within the *Vorm of vent* vocabulary, de Roos can indeed be considered an *avant-la-lettre* "personality." Her personal relationship with cinema and her search for authorship in the films she was critiquing is very consistent. Her ideal film directors were Pudovkin and Dulac, because in her eyes their films gave a personal vision of reality. On the opposite, she

considered Autant-Lara to be only a *schrunkten*, a limited personality. She found that Buñuel had a sick mind, and wrote against what she perceived as the rudeness and cruelty of *Un Chien andalou* (1929). She had great impact as a critic in the Filmliga. Where else in the world was *Mother* (*Mat*, Vsevolod Pudovkin, 1926) more admired than the *Battleship Potemkin* (*Bronenosets Potyomkin*, Sergei M. Eisenstein, 1925), and *The Seashell and the Clergyman* (*La Coquille et le clergymen*, Germaine Dulac, 1928) favoured over *Un Chien andalou*?

De Roos never felt the urge to anthologize or reflect on her own writings. She wrote for herself about what was interesting to her in a specific moment. This could be film, theater or literature, or even a mix of the three. Although her personal views were highly appreciated by her friends and colleagues, she did nothing to attract a readership. Her articles appeared scattered in too many different magazines.

According to Snoek, she published regularly; during her Parisian years (December 1932 through October 1936) she wrote some 120 articles as a foreign correspondent for several regional Dutch papers, but few of those texts appeared under her own name (Snoek, *E. du Perron* 653). Most of all, she did not focus on one single issue in her work. In other words, she did not have a strategic attitude with regard to her career. She wanted to have her say because she felt it had to be said and published, but she never emphasized her person in doing this. Also, she hardly engaged publicly with other writers. She responded to films, books and exhibitions but never purposefully opened a discussion. Those who cared could listen, those who did not could easily pass by. Unfortunately, this is exactly what historiography has done: passing by Elisabeth de Roos, acknowledging only the existence of Elisabeth du Perron-de Roos, the famous writer's dedicated widow.

Questions of Legacy

How to proceed then with this woman who did not care about her own intellectual legacy and even actively erased traces of her opinions from the published correspondence of her husband? In my view, de Roos' work on film is extremely interesting, just as is her dissertation on French essayist Jacques de Rivière. Maybe her writing was a little old fashioned in style, but it was often very specific and close to the point. Her writing is much clearer than that of many of her male contemporaries. However, from her letters to ter Braak we can detect that writing was a struggle for her. I found no signs of satisfaction with her own work. Although ter Braak was admittedly her fan, he recognized that what she wrote was too difficult even for her intelligent readers ("Menno ter Braak to Elisabeth De Roos. Rotterdam, November 15, 1931").

Young de Roos emerges as an independent woman, treated by her friends as "one of the guys." Unlike ter Braak, du Perron cannot be suspected to be responsible of inhibiting de Roos' writing on film due to his criticism. Indeed, she had already shifted to literature before they met, and she had been living abroad—in London, writing her dissertation—

even before their marriage. During her stay in London, she quitted writing regularly on film because she became more interested into other arts, probably also because the film avant-garde movement she had supported in the previous years was losing its momentum. After the marriage with du Perron, it was de Roos who insisted that they moved to Paris (where du Perron had a few prestigious friends, such as André Malraux, his wife Clara, and Pascal Pia). De Roos continued to write essays on Virginia Woolf, Aldous Huxley, D.H. Lawrence for *Forum*, *Groot Nederland* and *De Gids*, book reviews for *NRC*, plus her “Letters from Paris” as a correspondent (Snoek, *E. du Perron* 635). While du Perron was busy composing his masterpiece, *Country of Origin (Het land van herkomst, 1935)*, dedicated to Elisabeth, she maintained them both financially by writing relentlessly.

Why, one could ask, didn't she write her own masterpiece? The answer, or a hint to a possible answer, can be found in the above quoted du Perron's novel, where the character of Jane represents Elisabeth. In a conversation with the Malraux reported in the book, Jane explains what it means to live with such a personality as her husband for twenty-four hours a day in the following terms:

Sometimes a woman can feel as if she betrays her man by losing her personality. The stronger she chooses that of her husband, the more she feels attached to him and the more she gets from him, the more she loses her sense of self. . . . The worst moment arrives when she becomes aware that the woman whom she wants to be for him and the woman she is, no longer are the same. It is a sad thing. . . . Why isn't he jealous of the part of her that is lost? (du Perron, 454).¹

Of course one must not jump to conclusions here, but this quote suggests that it is very possible that de Roos did not care much about her own public voice. For example, in 1932 she wrote to ter Braak: “For quite a while I have had a feeling that interesting conversations, on art or other matters, are like an accompanying noise (counterpoint if you like!) of an actual conversation that takes place back and forth under one's breath!”² (“Elisabeth De Roos to Menno ter Braak. January 30, 1932”).

Having your own, soft, intelligent and convincing voice for those who care to listen, is clearly not enough for a woman to survive in historiography. After her marriage, however exciting it might have been in relation to her work, de Roos's own voice dimmed. She dedicated herself to du Perron and to raising their son (Alain, born in 1935). Moreover, financial troubles forced her to write as much as she could for money, and to accept every

¹ “Een vrouw, zegt Jane, kan soms voelen dat zij haar man verraadt door het verlies van haar eigen persoonlijkheid. Hoe sterker zij die van haar man kiest, hoe meer zij zich aan hem hecht, en hoe meer zij krijgt zelfs, hoe meer zij soms verliest wat haar in zichzelf interesseert. . . . maar het ergste moment komt als zij merkt dat de vrouw die zij geven wil en de vrouw die zij is, niet meer dezelfde zijn. . . . Waarom wordt hij niet jaloers om het deel van haar dat verloren is gegaan?” (translated by the author).

² “Bovendien heb ik al heel lang het gevoel dat de conversaties die de moeite van het houden waard zijn, over kunst of andere dingen toch vooral een begeleidend gedruisch zijn (contrapunt als je wilt!) van de eigenlijke conversatie die over en weer binnensmonds gaat!” (translated by the author).

possible job. Both had been raised in well-to-do families that had allowed them to follow their interests and talents, but after the death of their parents during the economic crisis of the 1930s, they had little to live on, aside from the freelance work provided by their friends. This hand-to-mouth existence was largely maintained by Elisabeth. The untimely death of du Perron at the onset of war in Holland in 1940, when their son was just five, made living conditions even harder for de Roos. She subsequently (and courageously) worked hard to publish her husband's late work: thousands of letters, critiques, essays, novels and stories were sampled and published in a "Collected Works" series, while her own writings (she kept on working as a literary critic and a translator, as usual to earn her living and that of her son) remained overlooked. What is most shocking about the historiographical oblivion of de Roos is that she appeared to have everything on her side not to be forgotten: she wrote extensively, she was acknowledged, praised and widely admired in her time. Clearly, not even those women who were so active in history are granted an ongoing renown.

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