



RESEARCHING WOMEN IN SILENT CINEMA

NEW FINDINGS AND PERSPECTIVES

EDITED BY MONICA DALL'ASTA, VICTORIA DUCKETT, LUCIA TRALLI

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ALMA MATER STUDIORUM
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Researching Women in Silent Cinema: New Findings and Perspectives

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

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Researching Women in Silent Cinema: New Findings and Perspectives

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This publication has been edited through a blind peer review process. Papers from the Sixth Women and the Silent Screen Conference (University of Bologna, 2010), a biennial event sponsored by Women and Film History International, were read by the editors and then submitted to at least one anonymous reviewer. When the opinion of the first reader was entirely negative or asked for substantial revision, the essay was submitted to a second anonymous reviewer. In case of a second negative opinion the essay was rejected. When further changes were deemed necessary for publication, the editors worked extensively with the authors to meet the requests advanced by the reviewers.

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Heide Schlüpmann

An Alliance Between History and Theory¹

ABSTRACT: The rediscovery of the early cinema in the 1980s brought about a change in film historiography that the women's movement had in essence already proposed in the 1970s. At the time, at issue here were not only women directors, forgotten by film historiography, but also the varied and primarily anonymous group of women working in the realms that classical film history did not register: those working in film laboratories, in film coloring, as film editors, on the screenplay and (not least) as actresses, something that is not identical with the function of stars, shaped by men. Using the figure of the actress (and Asta Nielsen in particular) and concentrating on the cinema of the *seconde époque*, this paper explores women's liberation from male domination. It argues that the actress places the reality of perceptual play in a public space. Thanks to her, a form of communal life that the women formed in and with the home is freed from the walls of the private.

How New is the New Film History?

The rediscovery of the early cinema in the 1980s brought about a change in film historiography that the women's movement had in essence already proposed in the 1970s. At the time, at issue here were not only women directors, forgotten by film historiography, but also the varied and primarily anonymous group of women working in the realms that classical film history did not register: those working in film laboratories, in film coloring, as film editors, on the screenplay and (not least) as actresses, something that is not identical with the function of stars, shaped by men. But most of all, this was about the audience: it was about film reception by a nameless mass of women in relationship to a production process where named men held the reins. The other film historiography proposed at the time today appears to find itself subsumed in the new film history, for it, too, expands the limited scope of film history beyond works and directors, stars and producers. All the same, it is clearly still necessary to hold sessions on "women and the silent screen."

An Alliance of Theory with History: Which Theory?

The new film history wants to do more than expand the former field of film history. The discovery of the early cinema has changed our notion of what film and what cinema is. In particular, it has led to an awareness of the link between theory and history and "historicizing" theory. This close link between theory and history, the alliance that developed in the course of new film history, is emphasized as one of its main characteristics by Gaudréault in his book *Cinéma et attraction: pour une nouvelle histoire du cinématographe* [cinema of

¹ English translation by Brian Currid.

attractions: a new history of cinema].

But the alliance with feminist theory plays no role here, nor is it to be found in Thomas Elsaesser's exploration of a new film history.

In contrast, both speak of how 1970s theories critical of Hollywood—such as those of Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean-Louis Baudry (“Ideological Effects of the Cinematic Apparatus”; “The Apparatus: Metapsychological Approaches”)—contributed decisively to the new focus on the otherness of the early cinema. In this account, it was with their support that the new film history began. In contrast, no mention is made of feminist theorists such as Laura Mulvey or Claire Johnston. Nor is mention made of the works of Judith Mayne or Miriam Hansen (*Babel and Babylon*) from the 1980s. Of course these women equally contributed to the discovery of and research on this early, other cinema.

Conversely, under the influence of historical discoveries, theory—including feminist theory—has also changed. The old psychoanalytic, semiotic, or apparatus paradigms of film studies were replaced by thinking about and conceptualizing film in historical dimensions. Here in particular, the new film history must respond to the question of which history is given attention.

Those who propose a view of the early cinema as a cinema of attractions almost always tended to limit this cinema to the cinema before 1907, seeing everything that follows as already part of the transition process to narrative Hollywood film. This view was also adopted by and large by feminist film research. However, it is problematic. This becomes clearer when Gaudréault in his recent book takes up a theoretical reconstitution of the early cinema's historiography. For here, a zone of transition is eliminated in favor of a dichotomy. This creates a division between a period of the cinematographic without cinema and a film history dominated by the institution of the cinema.

But the phase of transition is quite interesting from a feminist perspective. It was here that women increasingly found their way to film and the cinema, both as actresses and as a mass audience. In her introduction to *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema*, Jennifer Bean is far from puristic temporal demarcations or a dichotomizing film history, finding that the “early cinema,” when used as a feminist critical category and not just as a means of periodization, can open the door for research even beyond the 1910s. As she explains, early cinema becomes “more or less coextensive” (Bean 8)² with the silent cinema. And the transition, the multiple transitions, in a given period of time thus become the actual object of research for early cinema.

The Intermediate

In contrast to a dichotomous thinking about a theory of the early cinema, I would like to

² See also: “it is clear, that contemporary feminism has much to gain by troubling the period break between early cinema and cinematic classicism, by refusing to toe the 1917 line” (Bean 8).

take a position for the “intermediate,” a time between the “cinema of attractions” and the silent film of the 1920s. This allows us to ground the critical category of the early cinema once again in historical terms. Here, I am adopting Eric de Kuyper’s suggested periodization. He proposes alongside the *cinema du premier temps* [early cinema] a *cinema de la seconde époque* [a second era cinema] that encompasses the 1910s. This allows us to focus on a phase between the “cinema of attractions” and the narrative cinema, even that of the silent film. I would like to call it the *époque* of the “Spielfilmkino”—which is not “feature film cinema,” but the then used notion “photoplay” comes near to it—and present a few theoretical considerations about it. My thoughts developed—as you will see—in particular from my work on the films of Asta Nielsen. Abstracting from this research implies that Nielsen is only a mirror of the cinema of the 1910s, a special phenomenon in which its emanations are bundled and reflected.

Discoveries in film history and their theorization are—at least if they successfully establish themselves—always shaped by contemporary interests. The cinema of attractions corresponded to the popularity of the blockbuster spectacle and film studies’ interest in them. Gaudréault’s more recent distinction between a film before cinema and cinema film also finds an echo in the current trend that film is increasingly leaving the cinema, diversifying in terms of media and space. The interest in the “intermediate phase” of film history, in turn, the phase of the formation of cinema, corresponds to current efforts to preserve the cohesion of film with cinema and in so doing to emphasize its non-identity with the institution formed by economic and power interests.

Cinema Theory

For me—and not only for me—the discovery of the early cinema provided an impulse to move from the theory of film to a theory of the cinema. In so doing, feminism’s 1970s critique of the Hollywood cinema seemed a strong motivation. The more I concerned myself with the cinema of the 1910s in Wilhelminian Germany, in its films, and also in the beginnings or prior forms of film critique or theory, the more it became clear to me that women constitutively participated in the emergence of the cinema. As subjects. It was also clear that this participation found no echo in the press—or if it did, it was a negative one. The prehistory of film theory contains a repression. It manifested itself later as abstraction (of film) from the cinema and from the mass audience. Recalling the division between the audience and the public of the press demanded a revision of the history of theory in terms of a theory of the cinema. For cinema theorists, the cinema could no longer be subsumed under the theoretical concept of a public institution. From my own experience, and with an eye on the 1910s, it proved to be an intermediate factor, a mediation between publicity and intimacy. There is, I would like to argue, a movement of emancipation concealed here.

Paradigms and the Paradigm of the "Haus"

I picked up Gaudréault's *Pour une nouvelle histoire du cinématographe* with great interest, in the hope of finding theoretical approaches, reflections on a film and cinema historiography that take the special characteristics of early cinema as their starting point. On the one hand disappointed, it also inspired me to present my own view of the matter. One such inspiration was his reference to cultural paradigms and series. Gaudréault subsumes the early cinema in the paradigm of the stage spectacle, and accordingly places it in the series variety, circus, shadow play, pantomime, etc. For later film history, the paradigm of the *cinéma institutionnel* [institutional cinema] applies. It is apparent that here only public cultural phenomena are considered paradigmatic.

I would suggest considering the paradigm of a culture of the private and the intimate when looking at the cinema of the "second era." Adopting a concept that was then contemporary, it could be called the paradigm of the "Haus," the (bourgeois) home. In the early twentieth century, Georg Simmel was concerned with the question of female culture, inspired by the women's movement and the two emancipated women close to him. He recognized that women were indeed capable of all the cultural production that was developed by men and had been dominated by them up until that point. Furthermore, he posed the question of a specifically female culture. He considered two phenomena. The one was the *Haus*, understood as a creation of collective experience, a life sphere and an atmosphere, through which women could gain influence over their husbands (I prefer to use in the following "Haus," because "home" has a slightly different meaning). Simmel saw the other in the actress, something I will return to later.

It seems plausible to conceive of the cinema of the 1910s within the paradigm of the feminine culture of the *Haus*. The cinema buildings, "houses," that emerged at the time were not products of feudalism or the nation-state like the theater, they weren't "people's stages" and they set themselves decisively apart from the sphere of showmen. At issue were spaces run by private male individuals that nevertheless found public interest. These spaces required women to fill them with life, for their mere economic viability. Without a mass female audience, men would not have spent their time in the cinema, or (for many reasons) they would have spent much less time there. There is evidence of how frequently women encouraged men to attend the cinema, and how men were more interested in the female spectators than in the films themselves. In addition, the presence of (bourgeois) women guaranteed the respectability of the location. On the one hand, female cinemagoers were part of the basic arrangement. At the same time, the women on the screen provided the spectator with dreams and fantasies that corresponded to their most intimate desires. This inspired a psychophysical interest in film that did not rely on the spectacular, on attraction.

The significance of the actress for cinema's development in the 1910s characterizes this cinema as a cinema of the *Spielfilm/photoplay*. This can be seen alongside—and in temporal

terms between—both the cinema of attractions and the narrative cinema. For the *Spielfilm* is not just a film genre, but a cinema in which the art of the actress informs the appearance of the cinema itself. For this reason, I will now turn to the actress.

The Actress

The culture of the *Haus* and the art of the actress were closely linked even before the cinema combined them. For Simmel, they are both forms of female culture. The “essence of the art of acting,” he argues, coincides with the “form of the female being” which is the “unrestrained suffusion of the whole personality in artful appearance” (240). In this conception of the *Haus* and the actress, the philosopher of culture subverts the bourgeois subjection of women to the separation between private and public. In the one sphere, they were considered socially recognized women, but in the other—and this is entirely true of the actresses—they were basically considered prostitutes. The cinema continued in practice this theoretical subversion in the concept of a female culture comprising the home and stage, and abolished the separation between private and public. Elsewhere, I have explored this under the term “public intimacy” (Schlupmann, *Öffentliche Intimität* [public intimacy]).

Here I would like to draw attention to the fact that with the subversion of the distinction between private and public, Simmel’s separation between actress and housewife is also subverted. What they share is not a female essence, but rather the cultural and social figure of play. The actress does free herself from public display, she finds herself in the intimate play that she engages in before and with the camera, controlled by no director or author. The woman that goes to the cinema leaves aside the seriousness of the patriarchal, social function of her culture, what remains is also an ability to play. I will go into this capacity in more detail below. First of all, however, the statement that women are productively joined around the cultural and social figure of play is startling on its own accord. Seeing the innermost culture (or core) of the *Haus* in play corresponds neither to then contemporary views nor to more recent feminist research. Does that mean that my attempt at a historiography of the *Spielfilmkino* must in the end do without an alliance with theory?³

All the same, there is a theory in the cinema, a view of society and history that is created in the cinema alone. My exploration of the early cinema, my experience with its films and especially the actress Asta Nielsen bring me to the insight that in play we can find the capacity to create the privacy and intimacy of the *Haus*. Theoretically speaking, this view divorces the *Haus* from the attribution of female identity. The discursive emancipation is preceded by the emancipatory practice of the cinema, the liberation from male domination in that identification with play.

If a piece of history is revealed, if it is made transparent to me by the cinema, conversely a bit of film history is revealed in the context of this socio-historical phenomenon. Cinema

³ The link between “Hausfrau” and cinema is also subject in Klippel.

history and history cannot be separated from one another. In the field of tension between the history of the cinema of the 1910s and gender history, a movement of emancipation takes place. This movement consists not only in the entry of women into male society. It also contains within it the liberation of a context of living, the freeing of a life sphere from its implication in the bourgeois patriarchal household and thus ultimately in the order of capitalist society. The awareness of such emancipation within the women's movement was eroded by the antagonism between the conservatism of female culture and the progressive project of the freedom of female individuals.

In theory formation, the rediscovery of the cinema of the 1910s engendered the separation of feminist film theory and historiography from the concept of female identity and from the interrogation of this concept as well. But where could this next step lead us? Perhaps the reflection on play as a specifically historical phenomenon can take us further.

In the last part of my lecture, I want to explore the issue of play, but without discussing the theory of play to any great extent. Instead, I would like to sketch out the facets of play that found their way into the *Spielfilmkino* from the *Haus* and became visible there.

The Mode of Play

Feminist theory and critique focused on the psychoanalytic concept of scopophilia as well as that of narration. The theory of the cinema of attractions in turn underscored the role of exhibition and display in the "early cinema." All these concepts imply a dichotomous way of thinking. For there is always a separation conceived between the looker and the seen object, between the narrative and the listener or reader, between the showman, the artist, and the spectators, those hungry for sensation. With play, in contrast, a mediation, an intermediate zone seems to me possible that forms the space of the cinema in which film and the audience find their place and where separation, together with the hierarchy that is usually associated with it, has no decisive importance. In contrast, what takes place is an ensemble of play, a playing together, the space of the cinema as a space of play. Its origins, the bourgeois home; its technical prerequisite, film. Its historical realization, the entrance of the actress in film and the female audience into the cinema.

The mode of play with its origins in the home and its becoming public in the actress has several facets.

Child's Play

One of the rare theorists to introduce the term play into the aesthetic of film was Walter Benjamin. He tried to conceive of film not only using the traditional philosophical terms of appearance and perception, but rather with that of play. Miriam Hansen explored this attempt in the original version of the Artwork essay (Benjamin, "L'oeuvre d'art à l'époque de

sa reproduction mécanisée” [the work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility]) in her important article “Room for Play: Benjamins Gamble with Cinema.” In the later versions of the Benjamin essay, this aspect has disappeared—perhaps not least due to the influence of Theodor W. Adorno’s criticism. Benjamin’s sensibility for play as an element of the cinema should be seen alongside his interest in childhood—for example, in his *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*. And Adorno’s mistrust of all forms of regression in mass culture is well documented.

In his lecture “Der Dichter und das Phantasieren” [the poet and fantazising] Sigmund Freud spoke in 1907 about play as a basic human capacity that can only develop in childhood. He saw play as “adapting . . . imagined objects and relations” to the “tangible and visible things of the realm world” (Freud 171). With regret, he states that growing to adulthood no longer allows for this adaption. Imagination is banned to the realm of fantasy and daydreams. It is only in the form of the artwork, that is, divorced from the one who fantasizes as well as from external reality, that it is publicly allowed. But the poet Hugo von Hofmannsthal recognized in cinema the possibility to once more return to a relationship to the world surrounding us that we had as children, full of poetry, full of mystery—and for this reason treasured the then-new medium. The cinema rescues play into adult life.

But these writers do not associate the play element of film nor that of child’s play in itself with woman, neither with the actress nor with the housewife. Benjamin had Chaplin in mind, and early Lukács, who—here like Hofmannsthal—attributes a playful quality to film, simply dropping the actress who has just been honored in the pathos of high seriousness of the stage by the wayside when he begins to speak of film.

In so doing—in the experience of these men in particular—it is the bourgeois home, and thus women, that provide room for child’s play by allowing it to take on its specific form. This is possible because women, unlike men, are not equally subject to the censorship of adulthood. Perhaps they can play for their entire lives. On the one hand, they are not considered fully responsible subjects. On the other hand the bourgeois division of labor foresees not only that they provide children with room for play, but also that they form it with them: they occasionally even play together with them, something which the men have neither the time nor the inclination to do. Unlike aesthetically interested film theories, theories of mass culture often linked their object to childhood and femininity. All the same, this association was usually made with an air of superiority and denigration.

Asta Nielsen self-confidently brought the substructure of child’s play in film acting to display. Playing the role of a seventeen year old in *Engelien* (little angel, Urban Gad, 1913), not only did she get her children’s clothing from the attic for the rich uncle from America, but also for the endless desire of the audience, male and female. Nielsen recalls her own childhood behavior from the depths of her physical memory. Visible for us, she adapts the imagination of a living, childlike body to her actual body.



Asta Nielsen in *Englein* (Urban Gad, 1913).

Playing with the Male

The woman at home not only played with her children, she also played with her husband. Behind the Victorian *façade* of prudery, in the nineteenth century a differentiated realm of erotic play often thrived. That Nielsen carried out this play in public was scandalous. But it was also charming for the male spectators, who—as Béla Balázs formulated it in the early 1920s—thought she embodied the “great, complete lexicon of the gestures of sensual love” (139). Other actresses from the 1910s seduced in a more subtle fashion, fitting for the morals of the time.

The Victorian wife undertook play with and for her husband primarily in the furnishing of his home. It was her responsibility to create for her husband and his leisure an atmosphere of shared life that served the pleasure principle rather than the reality principle. Often this was no more than the creation of a surface, a suggestion of such a life. The early films show the dysfunctional spatial arrangements of the bourgeois home, the doilies and opulent curtains, the pictures on the walls, the floral arrangements, and not least the unavoidable divan, the sofa. The bourgeois interiors were in reality a product of the imagination of the woman of the house, and in film they once again become things to play with. This is also true of her clothing, her costume. All these playful aspects are presented in harsh visual contrast to an outer world that is rather sober, shaped by technology and industry. The 1916 scene of *Die Börsenkönigin* (the queen of the stock exchange, Edmund Edel) which shows Nielsen rushing through an industrial compound as “stock market queen” in her snow white, ample gown lined with ermine could be seen as almost emblematic of this.

With the form of child’s play and its extension to playing with the husband, the actress provided the cinema access to a male audience that, like Hofmannstahl or Benjamin, looked back with regret at a lost childhood. But there were also men like Béla Balázs, who saw both the domestic oasis and eroticism getting lost in the present of the twentieth century. It was especially for the male audience that a *Spielfilmkino* saved a disappearing world of the private and the intimate, an individual lifetime and a historical time. In the films of Franz Hofer, made during the First World War—*Weihnachtsglocken* (christmas bells, 1914) or *Kammermusik* (chambermusic, 1916)—this found its incomparable filmic reflection. For the female audience, in contrast, the cinema as a site and an experience signified emancipation or the hope of it. That is: the cinema was also the future, the possibility of other forms of social collectivity.

Play with Perception in Women’s Playing Together

Generally, the female audience is considered naïve in comparison to a male audience, which has a distanced and informed relationship to film. But early *Spielfilm* photoplays show just the opposite. The audience here is able to engage in play with perception that is initiated



Asta Nielsen in *Die Börsenkönigin* (Edmund Edel, 1916).

by the actress. The male spectator instead devotes himself in view of the star to a language of love that he thought lost: for him, the actress becomes the *Hobe Frau* [high lady]. This is like the minnesinger once addressed the lady of his heart, who was in fact a noblewoman. The imagination of the female spectators, in contrast, is coupled with sobriety.

For women—who had been limited for decades, if not centuries to the home—have developed in this confinement a capacity that corresponds to the possibilities of the cinema, the “Lichtspiel”: namely, the ability to play with perception. This capacity becomes a life necessity with the step into modern society and inclusion in the male world of professional and public life. If, seeing with their own eyes, they want to enter a world that was otherwise closed to them, to complete the transition, they initially only have access to playful perception. The social reality that women saw in an external, abstract, and above all only fragmentary way was therefore combined with their imagination in “play.” Their glimpses of the outer world reaffirmed the *Lichtspiel* of female perception.

In 1914–1915, at the start of the war, the film critic Malwine Rennert was surely under the impression of wartime enthusiasm when she spoke of cinemagoers as “Zaungäste des

Lebens,” [sideline guests of life]. In relationship to male society and life within it, the mass of women took a position as “sideline guests” already during peacetime at the start of the twentieth century (217 *passim*). They could only participate in social reality beyond the *Haus* through their husband or other male family members; alternatively, they could observe it from the window or during their limited forays outside. As a rule, they could not participate. In this way, they lacked perception from inside. This not only meant that the reality in which the men lived remained elusive, it also meant above all the separation of external perception from those sensations, feelings, and interests that only could form in living experience and with full awareness. What could the women do but to fantasize about the ultimately ungraspable perceptions of the male world?

Housewives, women of the *Haus*, developed an apparently childish play with their own perception of external reality. The women’s novels of the nineteenth century are considered trivial because they communicate such a playful perception. But in the twentieth century, film brings female readers similar views of the world, ones that are similar to their own views. They are similarly robbed of the sensual and intellectual possibilities of participation. However, the eye of the camera could register much more than was possible for these women with their limited horizons; it expanded their horizon of perception endlessly. This entailed a new challenge for a playful approach. The actress helps to fulfill this.

The actress becomes a mediator between camera takes and the audience’s capacity for play. She overlays documentary views of social surroundings and life within it with her imagination. Using photographic fragments, she thus creates a perception of reality. But she does not seduce the spectator to identify with this perspective. For she presents her way of dealing with an abstract and fragmented perception of the outer world. She knows that she herself is not being registered by the camera, for the camera can only capture the external. But the camera is receptive to the way she makes her playful perception accessible. It is thus possible this play with perception, which appears on screen, becomes something that a female audience, in particular, is able to relate to. Accustomed to abstract and fragmented vision, the female audience accepts the film shots and at the same time reacts to them, imposes their own imagination on to them. In the cinema, this audience forms a space for play. Here, the limitations that the patriarchal home had established between women fall by the wayside. The barrier between them and the outer world have, in turn, been absorbed by the technical abstraction of film shots. This alone would keep the women fixed in their “incomprehensive” gaze and at the same time in constant imaginary production.

But the actress broke this spell. The great significance that she had for the female spectator was that she could create in the midst of a playful appropriation of what is seen a real perception that encompasses all senses, feelings, sensations, and deepest desires: the perception of play on the screen. For the play in which the woman on screen engages is something that the women in the cinema are deeply familiar with: it is part of their actual world. This is suddenly realized in the perception of the female audience. The actress breaks

through the spell of spectatorship and places the reality of play in a public space. Thanks to her, a life sphere, a form of communal life, that the women formed in and with the home is freed from the walls of the private.

This is why the cinema was a site of emancipation. The perception of one of the sideline guests of society could endure here, outlasting their superficial integration in society. Furthermore, the capacity of play liberated itself, which means an approach to reality emerged in which imaginations free themselves from being banned to childhood. It—the capacity of play—becomes aware of its adulthood, and can stand up to male seriousness and the earnestness of capital.

In Conclusion: A Cinema of Transition

In conclusion, I would like to return to my interest in the feminist research on transitions, the time of transition. *Spielfilmkino* is, in many ways, a cinema of transition. But it is a cinema of transition not so much in the sense of an intermediate step between a cinema of attractions and narrative film. It is cinema not as an institution, but as a passage that has become form. Seen historically, it emerged and formed as a moment of women's attempt to step out of private domestic existence into a public, social one. In terms of personal life history, this transition repeated with each visit to the cinema, and once again renewed the perceptive subject that threatened to get lost in the course of social integration.

Within film, play develops an aesthetic of transition. It is not formal, but inseparable from the content. Play recalls the forces of childhood, a phase in human life. It equally forms the familiar, intimate atmosphere of the intermittent, temporary stay of the male. And it represents a perception in transition. That is, the passage from a gaze divided between abstraction and imagination, and real perception. Or vice-versa: play moves through perception to an outer reality that previously remained abstract.

Finally, a lost bourgeois world manifests itself in *Spielfilmkino*, a reality that passed, but at the same time reveals a possible, other social life.

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