

## Past Imperfect: Feminism and Social Histories of Silent Film

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Article abstract

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# Past Imperfect: Feminism and Social Histories of Silent Film

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## ABSTRACT

Picking up on recent feminist calls for an emphasis on social histories of cinema, the author argues for the importance of socio-historical contextualization in order to preserve feminist goals of critiquing epistemologies and power relations. Analyzing two early Edison films, she shows that the historical importance of each can be located in the ways they depict ideological confusion over female sexuality and mobility in changing urban spaces. Through socio-cultural contextualization, she further illuminates how *Laughing Gas* (Edison, 1907) depicts social tensions about the national rise of African American female domestics.

## RÉSUMÉ

Prenant en considération la récente mobilisation des féministes en faveur d'une histoire sociale du cinéma, l'auteure du présent article montre que la mise en contexte sociohistorique joue un rôle essentiel dans l'entreprise féministe visant à critiquer les approches épistémologiques et les relations de pouvoir. Une analyse de deux films d'Edison lui permet de montrer que leur importance historique réside en ceci qu'ils illustrent la confusion idéologique à propos de la sexualité féminine et de la mobilité des femmes dans un espace urbain en transformation. L'auteure met par ailleurs en lumière la façon dont *Laughing Gas* (Edison, 1907) dépeint les tensions sociales liées à l'émancipation des domestiques afro-américaines.

[T]here is still work to be done in feminist, as in other, social histories of the media, and excellent examples have been set... Key areas of feminist inquiry include the history of women's contribution to the making of films and the history of women's activities as consumers of films, and the scope for new research in these fields is clearly potentially international. As far as feminist-informed work in film and media studies worldwide is concerned, this, in my view, is where to seek the cutting edge today.

Kuhn 2004

Of late, leading film scholars like Annette Kuhn have been taking stock of feminism's contributions to film studies while simultaneously responding to premature declarations regarding feminism's demise. At least two books have appeared on this subject, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* devoted a 2004 issue to the topic, and film journals have featured individual articles on the subject.<sup>1</sup> We are at an interesting historical moment, in this regard, since so many feminists among the generation of film scholars writing in the 1970s and 1980s are currently active scholars who know the complete map of feminist film publication from the 1970s to the present. When a scholar like Kuhn addresses "the state of film and media feminism," she, like so many others writing on this topic, necessarily writes from a position that incorporates her own intellectual history from the 1970s onward. (I too have to include myself among those for whom the historicization of film feminism's past narrates my own participation in the profession of film scholarship.) Kuhn *concludes* that social histories of cinema are what count most for the future of feminist film studies in the 21st century.

But what defines these histories and makes them central to our intellectual future? I would argue that it is the incipient challenges they pose: what are the proper sources for knowl-

edge? Who should be the subjects of history? What are the myriad and complex ways that subjectivity and identity are formed with the consequences of power inequities? What are the examples by which conditions of social production and relations may be changed? These questions keep in sight the goals of political change and of change in power inequities that have always formed the basis for feminist inquiry. So, departing from Kuhn, I wish to begin to try to answer these questions by starting where her essay ends. I would like to outline the shape these social histories should assume.

New feminist film histories afford the opportunity to magnify the social aspects of perception, the role of the gaze as *consumerist* rather than solely centered on sexual desire, and the intimacy between women's consumerism and desire.<sup>2</sup> Within this domain, scholarship that attends to and synthesizes both the literal and symbolic spaces associated with cinema challenges the paradigm of distracted, highly individualized self-absorption in the movie screen. Let me offer a concrete example from my own work to clarify what I mean.

My favorite—simply because it is the most succinct—illustration is the early film often cited by feminist film critics, *What Happened on West Twenty-third Street, New York City* (Edison, 1901). The film is a one-minute display of an actual busy city street; a man and woman walk from the background into the foreground and over an air grate. The woman's dress is lifted by the updraft while male onlookers watch her pull her billowing skirt back around her. She briefly laughs and looks at the camera as she walks offscreen and men stare after her. In the late 1980s, Judith Mayne treated this film as fundamental to locating an earlier-than-imagined movie source for the argument that men "look" and women are the objects of their gaze.<sup>3</sup> According to Mayne, the film was a signal event for developing the roles of male desire and female sexuality: she interpreted from the film's representation a historical source for gender relations that would prevail in classical Hollywood cinema. The film also provoked Miriam Hansen (1993, p. 39) to consider whether or not the look that the woman shoots back at the camera is an act of "resistance," retrospectively interpreting in

early cinema not only the origins of the continuity of gender disparity but the possibility of fighting that disparity.

I share both scholars' investment in *looking for* gender disparities in the cinema. But I believe that for understanding the film as an historical artifact, one cannot merely offer a modern interpretation of the film's display. Social and cultural contextualization always influences audience understanding, and as we already know, the construction of gender and sexual identities is itself historically dynamic. So, for me, the process of interpreting the film's social historical function goes something like this: the film's title—generally overlooked by most film scholars focusing on the act of the woman's raised skirt as a universal sign of misogyny—had to mean something. If this was truly a film only about gaining visual access to a woman's ankles, the conventions of the time would have dictated it be called something like "From Promenade to Burlesque"—a title that would hint at the titillating content. One has to ask what naming an unforecast action as specifically on 23rd Street in New York City would have meant to audiences in 1901? It seems more than a naive demarcation of the actual location since this nationally distributed film easily could have been called "What Happened on a Street in New York City." Why 23rd Street? Learning about the spatial geography of New York City taught me that first, 23rd Street was among the thoroughfares where men gathered on corners and watched women's skirts lifted by high winds. Second, and probably more important, 23rd Street at this date was simply a notorious thoroughfare—one among several streets worked by prostitutes in the Tenderloin District—and known in this way not only to New Yorkers but billed as such in tourist guides for out-of-towners as well.

Could this woman serving as a linchpin for feminist scholars' trajectory of sexism in motion pictures actually have been portraying a prostitute and, if understood in this way by her contemporary audiences, does she function differently within any cultural discussion of sexual commodification? When I initially discussed this example, I compared the woman's attire with contemporary portrayals of prostitutes in the visual arts (many of them even specifying that the subjects were found on 23rd

Street or in the neighborhood), relying on historical sources to pinpoint a more probable historical understanding of the film as featuring a prostitute.<sup>4</sup> But, it was important not to quit my investigation of urban geography with this simple “factual” correction.

Timothy J. Gilfoyle’s (1992) book on sex work and the changing geography of New York City as well as my own investigations into the rapidly changing neighborhoods of downtown Chicago also taught me that shopping and restaurants had moved closer to the borders of the more notorious districts, making it increasingly difficult to tell simply by a woman’s appearance what her sexual status was now that both reputable and disreputable women occupied the same public spaces during certain times of the day. In other words, what was at stake in this film culturally was a new confusion over how to interpret female sexuality in public spaces, even while the film authorized some solutions, insofar as the raised skirt and revealed ankles reward spectators with the potential of viewing all women as sexual spectacle regardless of this particular woman’s ambiguous status as a sexual commodity.

My investigation shifts the terms of inquiry to historicizing the film within social determinants of meaning. So while I am in complete agreement with my feminist colleagues that this *is* a film about female sexual spectacle and that the interrogation of cinematic gendering is an important contemporary concern, work as *history* generalizes how silent cinema functioned within social processes and contributed to the powerful effect of intensifying the bond between female sexuality and commodification at the very historical moment when women in western industrialized societies appeared to be experiencing new freedoms.

Feminist social history of silent film may well have as its manifest content women’s lives, bodies, and subjectivities. But it is the ways in which we reflect upon, question, and theorize what should be and what counts as knowledge that matters for the shape of what is to come. In this regard, consideration of women’s biographies, writings, and authorship has provided several key issues that contribute to this future of feminist film history scholarship. For want of a better title, this scholarship is

often an enterprise of “lost and found.” Scholars research and rescue from oblivion those women artists, filmmakers, workers, pioneers who were “lost” either because of suppressed memories regarding women or because of historiographic ideologies—such as Giuliana Bruno’s (1993) demonstration in *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map* that Italian filmmaker Elvira Notari’s works were generally attributed to her husband because journalists either could not imagine a woman in charge or because they refused to accept it.

The radical potential of “lost and found” scholarship lies not in our mere corrections to a past record that sidestepped or swept away women’s contributions but in three ways that refashion film theory and historiography: 1) This new feminist history builds upon the very foundations of women’s history in the 1970s and 1980s that taught us the centrality of considering intimate, personal, sexual issues as well as the spheres of the everyday. These considerations perpetuate a historiography that embraces subjects who may have lesser status within their cultures. We can determine the subjects of historical inquiry and what shapes matters and events of importance.

2) This new feminist history has the potential to overthrow the paradigm of a U.S.-centrist cinema: women’s roles in silent film production in national cinemas around the globe are not the only thing that has been eclipsed or lost in international silent cinema—in fact, entire national cinemas have all too often been overlooked. Not only are narratives of silent as well as world cinema usually centered in Europe and the U.S., but cinemas outside those spheres are generally recognized only when they emerge on the world stage. The design of this world stage, and the privilege of recognizing a cinema as emergent must, of course, be attributed to a combination of the institutions of academe, film festivals, and film import and export practices over some hundred years, but it is not world film history. Of course, while film production has taken place around the world since the turn of the century, the international circulation of cinema has been dominated by the distribution and exhibition of Hollywood movies. By foregrounding women’s roles in many cinemas, we can also take back a world history

that assumes cinemas other than Hollywood exist even if they have not come into the view of the arbiters of the English-language world-stage. We may offer an approach that recognizes imperialism and hegemony but avoids the binarism of dividing the world between imperial and colonial or post-colonial, between a First World and everyone else.

3) This new feminist history has helped to redefine *auteurism*, a dominant epistemological force within the history of film studies. Excavation of women producers initially provoked a conundrum among feminists—we critique the tradition of romantic authorship that has preserved patriarchal authority at women’s expense at the same time that we are motivated by our desire to find women’s voices, unity of texts (the fiction of the author) that allows for women’s subjectivity to speak to us across a text.<sup>5</sup> In some cases, however, where a historian’s desire motivates and undergirds that unity—as in the case of Judith Mayne’s (1993) study of Dorothy Arzner—speaking her desire for models of lesbian and gay subjectivities is less a historiographic liability than itself a political act and important critique of epistemologies. In that same spirit, adaptations of *auteurism* that look for places of women’s creativity within cinema but that historicize economic and social conditions relative to specific women’s lives, especially for constraints and possibilities by which women can express themselves, have shaped a rich distinctively feminist history.

Authorship in this regard then is not merely a unity across the text but is established in relationship to human agency within industrial or artisanal networks and practices. Authorship as a practice is therefore contingent on securing a position and power within institutional frameworks and reception. In her consideration of filmmaker Alice Guy-Blaché, for example, Amelie Hastie (2002) comments perceptively on these conditions and takes it to the next level by reflecting on how Guy-Blaché’s memoir is itself a dynamic “last hurrah” at securing Guy-Blaché a position of prestige and power in film history. Written after her active years of filmmaking, her memoir filters fact and fiction through memory, personal investment in and self-justification of one’s own reputation, and hindsight that sets



the past in some kind of alignment with the present. For feminist film history, this exemplary treatment illustrates that women's authorship is intimately bound to more than questions of aesthetics, psyche, and creativity: it is about agency and power, the politics of collective memory, the issue of memory itself as a historiographical method, and the consequence of such memories as a challenge to conventional institutional repositories of memory (books, archives).

I would be remiss at this point if I did not point out that there are serious limitations in focusing only on gender in subject formation and on subordinating social theories, economics, and geo-politics in silent cinema's continuous operations as an industrial practice and commodity. I do not wish to create the impression that I have an overly-confident preoccupation with gendered subjectivity as eminently knowable. Any new feminist history must also ask what are the parameters and the limitations of the knowable subject, what can be known about interiority through performance, physical appearances and constructions, and what are the ways that public and private collide in discourse. That is, we need to reconcile our celebration of women's agency and creativity in silent film with our knowledge of the highly mediated ways that women's bodies were constructed through representation.

In this regard, let me to turn to another Edison film, one that has generally been overlooked in discussions of both women's and African American bodies despite it being a rare early film about an African American woman and available for rental from the Museum of Modern Art as well as on a newly-released DVD.<sup>6</sup> *Laughing Gas* (Edwin S. Porter, 1907) is an exceptional film: 1) it features an African American woman rather than a Caucasian woman in blackface or a man in blackface playing a Black woman; 2) it offers this woman, Mandy, as the *subject* of the narrative rather than as a mere caricature or type who figures in along the sidelines; 3) in the film's story about the effects of laughing gas on Mandy following a trip to the dentist, she instigates riotous laughter on the subway, clashes with two Italian street vendors, stops a fight between two drunken Irishmen, overturns the dignified atmospheres of a courtroom and a

church service, and then dumps her White employer's dinner on his head—all of which allows for pleasure in a politicized reading of disruption and resistance against authority.<sup>7</sup>

There are as well typical social limitations inscribed in the film: first, it *displays* the protagonist, by relying upon conventions that made women simultaneously the subject and object of early cinema's camera gaze; second, the display itself of medium-close up shots showing Mandy grimacing at the beginning and laughing at the end reinforces a racist stereotype of Blackness presented in numerous other early films, ethnographic displays, and other popular visual imagery.<sup>8</sup> The presentation of Black performance for White audiences always necessarily offers up something suspect about an entertaining exoticism conscripted in Otherness. On a superficial level, *Laughing Gas's* Mandy conforms to Donald Bogle's description of the "aunt jemima" as a mammy who wedges herself into the dominant White culture and is generally "sweet, jolly and good-tempered—a bit more polite than mammy and certainly never as headstrong" (Bogle 1990, p. 9).

But Mandy resists any easy stereotype. First, she is unlike other mammy figures in contemporary films since she is not represented conventionally as other mammies were—as a character played by a man in blackface.<sup>9</sup> Even in *Mixed Babies* (American Mutoscope & Biograph, 1908), a comedy contemporary to *Laughing Gas*, the Black mother whose baby gets switched with a White one while she shops at a New York City department store is still played by a White actress in blackface. She is only replaced by a Black actress for the final close-up of mother and baby.

Second, Mandy is the active agent of the film's proto-narrative as she moves easily back and forth between public and private spaces, White and Black cultures. We see her on city streets, riding in an integrated subway car, and on her way to work in a suburban neighborhood. We also see Mandy at an all-Black church service and being courted by a male suitor: she is neither completely assimilated nor so clearly a female "tom" character. Her mobility across the predominantly White spaces connects the shots of the film and suggests the agency of an independent

actor. In this regard, she functions similarly to the protagonist of *Mixed Babies* who shops with confidence in the largely White environment of the department store. These films suggest that the boundaries of White American public spaces could not only be transgressed by White but also by African American women.<sup>10</sup>

Mandy thus falls somewhere between a blatant racist caricature and the construction of a full character with individual psychological traits and motivation. The only way that I see to return to the feminist question of performative agency versus objectified representation here is again to try to take into account the disparity between present-day and past social determinants of meaning. In observing the identity markers of race and gender that preoccupy us today, critics often fail to notice a third stigmata that would have been paramount to audiences of 1907. Mandy is also marked by class or, more specifically, by occupation: she is a domestic. Of course, her employment as a servant is contingent on her race and gender. During the decade in which this film circulated, domestic service in the U.S. began to shift significantly from being largely done by Irish, German, and Scandinavian women to African American women. By 1910, White immigrants enjoyed expanded job opportunities in a growing industrial, retail, and office economy. African American women, part of a new migration from Southern tenant farms to Northern and Southern cities, were shut out from other occupations, and they increasingly assumed the immigrants' former positions in middle-class households.<sup>11</sup> By 1910, domestic service was the predominant occupation for urban African American women.<sup>12</sup>

While it is therefore ordinary that a period film depicting a household servant would portray her as African American, the selection of an African American domestic worker as the protagonist is not self-evidently necessary for the success of the film's plot. But by making Mandy the subject of the story, the film allows for an investigation of her body at just the moment when increased numbers of Black women entered White households as well as urban public spaces. Whereas previous generations of domestics knew little English, lived in the home, and worked

long hours for little pay and room and board, African American domestics were day laborers, wage earners, and had families and activities in the Black community that de-centered the place of their employers' homes in their lives. African American servants were often less tractable than their predecessors, who were isolated, unacculturated, or non-English speakers. Employers accepted the new terms because of the increasing shortage of live-in servants of northern European stock. But, for the first time, many White Northern American middle-class families encountered daily Black women on the street, on the streetcar, or in the intimate setting of their homes.

*Laughing Gas* does not solve the predictable problems resulting from this change. But the social tensions resulting from such new employment relationships can be seen to figure into the film's topical interest in regarding Mandy's laughing body. *Laughing Gas* was an ideological accommodation to a new "servant problem" for both White and Black middle classes. It provided a paradoxical representation of *both* display and agency: Mandy laughs uproariously, calls attention to herself, and commands a public deportment that opposed White and Black middle class efforts to teach "the apron and cap" crowd proper public—and especially public transportation—demeanor.<sup>13</sup> *Laughing Gas*' Mandy represents an ambivalent figure of urban female appearance when new numbers of African American domestics came to the attention of both the White and Black middle classes, who sought through newspaper columns, Black churches, the YWCA, and other urban charity organization to control working class public behavior and to get these women to conform more to middle class standards of feminine gentility.

Mandy claims her right to full subjectivity in public space and in White culture while the film also works to disavow that claim within the popular racist poses already in circulation. Rather than view her by today's standards as a racist or quasi-racist stereotype, we gain much by an historical contextualization wherein she is the focus of fascination, perplexity, and vacillating status. Both *What Happened on 23rd Street* and *Laughing Gas* exemplify their society's preoccupation with the

public urban self-presentation of women and minorities. Many early films articulate promises of new urban mobility for female and minority populations while simultaneously constraining these individuals.

Such historical claims can only be made when one embraces cultural histories external to the texts themselves. Silent cinema's meaning as social document requires an understanding of how cinema operates within larger spheres of cultural power. To summarize, then, what are new feminist social histories of silent cinema? 1) They forcefully extend the historical projects underlying feminist scholarship of the 1970s and 1980s. 2) They focus on the everyday. 3) They understand women's bodies as the bearers of meaning within the discursive production of subjectivity and social politics contemporary to the period. 4) They theorize the gaze not only as an organizational construct of heterosexual desire but as aligned to consumerist desire within modernity. 5) They approach women not as empty vessels for meaning but as active producers of meaning however much they are mediated by contemporary popular imagery.

We may appear to be united in our belief that silent cinema provides cultural artifacts that are complex texts, institutions, and machines, but we become a political force to be reckoned with once we self-reflexively situate silent cinema both within important historical contextual determinants as well as within our own subjective investments, which always originate in the present moment. Collectively, our job is to unmask the underlying politics of knowledge, and only then may we continue to be a constant challenge to the changing orthodoxies and power inequities of epistemology.

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#### NOTES

1. Petro 2002, Rich 1998, McHugh and Sobchack 2004; for example, Gaines 2004.

2. Of course, within the tradition of feminist film theory, the gaze does not always function to locate heterosexual desire and identification. The homoerotic dimension of the gaze is well-established. My purpose here is to define a set of looking relations less aligned with sexual desire than with commodity desire and fetishism.

3. Mayne 1990 (pp. 161-164). Tom Gunning qualifies Mayne's argument by noting that, while the film can be seen as a proto-narrative, it is still largely and categorically "display" since the woman's display neither instigates nor functions to reveal character traits. He contrasts this woman's display with that of Marilyn Monroe's similarly uplifted skirt in *The Seven Year Itch* since the latter film provides a moment of spectacle that functions narratively to create character traits that explain later plot actions (Gunning 1993, p. 9).

4. See Rabinovitz 1998 (pp. 38-46).

5. Most recently, Jane Gaines (2002) has elaborated further on auteurism and by implication the idea of the author in general as a romantic celebration of fathers, of the illusion of lone creativity in the face of the nature of industrial collaboration and of how this critical ideology consequently serves to diminish women's participation and their agency in a range of roles in the industrial process of filmmaking.

6. *Edison: The Invention of the Movies, 1891-1918* (Kino Video and Museum of Modern Art, 2005).

7. We do know that although *Laughing Gas* seems to present a complete enough episodic comedy toward this end, the extant print is missing a scene described in the company's original advertisement in which the protagonist named Mandy interrupts a group of German street revelers ("New Edison Films," New York Clipper, no. 1193, 1907). One can only speculate about the missing scene, one likely excised by an exhibitor, since exhibitor editing was a common practice, and perhaps removed because this particular exhibitor had an audience less likely to be amused by anti-German stereotypes or German men being the butt of Mandy's jokes. So, there are material variations and limitations to the reach of Mandy's resistance.

8. See, for example: *Laughing Ben* (American Mutoscope & Biograph, 1902). For a more detailed catalogue, see Stewart 2005 (pp. 181-187) and Sampson 1995.

9. The drag performance in early cinema was routinely reserved for mummies and spinsters as comic caricatures. For examples of mummies, see *What Happened in the Tunnel* (Edison, 1903), *A Mis-Directed Kiss* (American Mutoscope & Biograph, 1904), *A Kiss in the Dark* (American Mutoscope & Biograph, 1904), *Everybody Works But Father* (American Mutoscope & Biograph, 1905), and *Under the Old Apple Tree* (American Mutoscope & Biograph, 1907). Jacqueline Stewart (2005) has demonstrated that the logic of blackface, while not always consistent, generally adapted blackface practices from popular minstrel performance styles for the first story film comedies in order to produce Blackness.

10. Yet, Mandy's agency as an individual subject is mitigated by the fact that it is the laughing gas that she took at the dentist's that controls her and her body's mechanically convulsive movements of laughter. It is not through Mandy's desire that any of the disruptions occur: it is indeed because of her *lack of or loss of* control over her body. Indeed, such a depiction serves to reinforce racist stereotypes of Black women's inability to control themselves as sexual beings.

11. For example, in Philadelphia and New York City, the share of African American women in domestic service rose significantly in this period: from 30% to 40% of all female domestic workers in Philadelphia; from 10% to 15% in New York City. In some southern cities, like New Orleans, Black women comprised 80% of all female servants by 1910. In other cities like Chicago, where African Americans were still relatively few in the overall population, women were 10% of the servant work force by 1910, which was still a sharp increase over 1900 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, "Statistics of Occupations," *The Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900*, Washington, Government Printing Office, 1904 [pp. 520-521, 634-635, 640-641, 676-677]; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of the United States 1910*,

Vol. 4: *Population/Occupation Statistics*, Washington, Government Printing Office, 1916 [pp. 547, 571, 574, 590]).

12. African American historian John Hope Franklin says that because African American women had less difficulty finding employment as household servants than their male counterparts, a larger number of women than men migrated to the cities (Franklin and Moss 1988, p. 279). In sum, while the rate of their expansion and domination of the domestic labor force occurred unevenly, a major national shift was occurring, one that only accelerated with the Great Migration of World War One.

13. For more on the subject of campaigns to teach “the apron and cap” crowd of African American domestics, see Stewart 2003. For Stewart’s compatible discussion of *Laughing Gas*, see Stewart 2005 (pp. 44-48).

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