



# 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**

**Series editors: Monica Dall'Asta, Victoria Duckett**

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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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**# 1**

### **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

## 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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## The Editors

Monica Dall'Asta is Associate Professor of Film and Television Studies at the University of Bologna, Italy. She is the author of the award winning book *Trame spezzate. Archeologia del film seriale* (2008) She edited a new Italian translation of Alice Guy's Memoires (*Memorie di una pioniera del cinema*, 2008) and the first collection on women filmmaking in Italian silent cinema (*Non solo dive. Pioniere del cinema italiano*, 2008).

Victoria Duckett teaches film history in the Centre for Ideas, Victorian College of the Arts. She has held posts in the University of Manchester (Department of Drama) and the Università Cattolica, Milan (Department of Communication and Performing Arts). She has published broadly in early cinema, has programmed films for Cinema Ritrovato, Bologna, and been involved in Women and the Silent Screen since its founding in Utrecht, 1999. She is currently completing a book that explores Sarah Bernhardt and early film (*History Fed By Fiction: Sarah Bernhardt and Silent Film*, University of Illinois Press, forthcoming).

Lucia Tralli is a Ph.D. Candidate in Film and Media Studies at the University of Bologna. Her main research focus is the re-use of media images in audiovisual productions. She received her MA in 2009 with a thesis about the practice of found footage and the work of two contemporary women filmmakers, Alina Marazzi and Cécile Fontaine. She is now writing her thesis on contemporary forms of audiovisual remixes, focusing especially on fan vidding and gender related issues in remix practices.

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**Monica Dall'Asta and Victoria Duckett**

**Kaleidoscope: Women and Cinematic Change  
from the Silent Era to Now**

*A Collective Endeavor*

This volume is a partial account of the more than one hundred papers that were presented at the sixth Women and the Silent Screen conference, held in Bologna in 2010. Less than one third of the papers delivered on that occasion did find their way in this publication. This reduction is obviously due to the need to keep the editorial work within a manageable scale, as well as to the wish to offer, with the help of an efficient peer review selection process, some of the best samples of the recent international research in feminist film historiography. Yet these are not the only reasons. As with previous conferences, several more contributions that were first presented in Bologna are being developed by their authors into different publication projects. So in a way, what is missing from this publication is as significant of the richness and vitality of our present collective research as the papers we have collected.

We cannot speak of our community without acknowledging the hard work and effort that has helped to open a new research field, which is now approaching an unprecedented stage of maturity. Beginning with the work of Annette Förster and Eva Warth in Utrecht 1999, Women and the Silent Screen has brought feminist film historians together for fourteen years. The conference was hosted in 2001 by Shelley Stamp and Amelie Hastie at the the University of Santa Cruz; in 2004 by Rosanna Maule and Catherine Russell at the University of Montreal; in 2006 by Joanne Hershfield and Patricia Torres San Martín at the University of Guadalajara; and in 2008 by Astrid Söderbergh and Sofia Bull at the University of Stockholm. While we are working to finalize, with the invaluable help of Lucia Tralli, the editorial work on this collection from the 2010 conference, organized in Bologna by Monica Dall'Asta and Cristina Jandelli, a new WSS event is scheduled in Melbourne (October 2013), hosted by Victoria Duckett and Jeanette Hoorn.

*Researching Women in Silent Cinema: New Findings and Perspectives* emerges in dialogue not only with previous conferences but with their related publications as well.<sup>1</sup> That we can today issue this volume, supported by a board of referees who have willingly and generously given their time and expertise, is testimony to the collegiality and community that WSS has fostered. We might articulate quite different interests, methods, and projects, but we certainly stand up together in support of our shared endeavors. Our referees—Richard Abel, Kay Armatage, Janet Bergstrom, Giorgio Bertellini, Elaine Burrows, Vicki Callahan, Sumiko

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<sup>1</sup> These include Bull and Söderbergh; Hastie and Stamp; Maule; Maule and Russell; Bean and Negra.



Higashi, Sabine Lenk, Jill Matthews, David Mayer, Giuliana Muscio, Jacqueline Reich, Masha Salazkina, Matthew Solomon, Shelley Stamp, Virginia Wexman—deserve particular thanks for this.

In *Researching Women in Silent Cinema* you will find junior scholars writing alongside established Professors, people who transmit the excitement they discover in doing feminist film history, and those who reflect on it after decades of research. In this context, the three invited articles that punctuate the anthology—Heide Schlüpmann’s “An Alliance Between History and Theory,” Christine Gledhill’s “An Ephemeral History: Women and Film Culture in the Silent Years,” and Jane Gaines’ “Wordlessness (to be Continued)” —give a sense of what it means to write feminist film history from within the history of its development. Each of these scholars reflect not only on the wide variety of documentary materials involved in the historiographical research on film (the films themselves, the trade and fan press, different types of visual and paper archives, including the internet, and so on), but on the conceptual boundaries that still need to be deciphered, challenged and developed in women’s film history today.

Used as prefaces to the three sections that form the volume (“Historical Images,” “Women and the Cultural Discourse on Film,” “Gender on Stage”), each of these three articles reminds us of the need to join the history of women’s film to the process of its theoretical reflection. While the papers that follow each keynote are joined to in loose thematic terms, we wish to emphasize that these are not commissioned essays. Our organization of material was made *a posteriori*. It is not proposed as a fixed guide. This may be obvious for our readers; we wish to remind it only to reiterate the flexible nature of our shared endeavor.

### *Three Essays on Indeterminacy, Fluidity, and Difference*

All of our three keynote articles are especially focused on the 1910s, sometimes moving discussion into the 1920s. In Schlüpmann’s opening essay, we return to what (following Eric de Kuyper) she calls the cinema’s “second era.” Schlüpmann argues that in this transitional period, located between the cinema of attractions and narrative cinema proper, an important paradigm that deserves more attention is represented by the home (or, more precisely, by Simmel’s paradigm of the *Haus*). Rather than see this as a site of enclosure and entrapment for women, Schlüpmann suggests that the *Haus* is a fragmentary site of perceptual play, whose form and function meets its technical realization in film. In arguing for a perceptual overlap between the public and private, the institutional and the personal, film and perception, as well as the theater and the home, Schlüpmann frees us from the strictures of traditional models of history. The house, the female spectator, the cinema theater, and the film actress herself are together enmeshed in a historical and theoretical paradigm that takes playful perception as we recognize it as the route to a feminist emancipation we can all identify with and enjoy today.



In “An Ephemeral History: Women and British Cinema Culture in the Silent Era,” Christine Gledhill also returns to questions of perception, albeit in a different way. Gledhill uses the British trade, news and fan press of the 1910s and 1920s to challenge “fixed ideological meanings as the goal of film analysis and fixed social identities as the focus of spectator response.” It is indeterminacy, fluidity, and discursivity that drive analysis and that indicate her critical and conceptual overlaps with the observations of Schlüpmann. In a sense, she provides a historiographical model for the theory that Schlüpmann has put into place: Gledhill’s subtitles preface insightful vignettes that illustrate the “playful” and changing ways in which the British press allows us to rethink the relationships between gender, feminism, and the silent cinema. What Gledhill makes manifest in her essay is the importance of film as an intermediary in the path for social change.

Jane Gaines explores what she calls “wordless mimesis” in her article on physical expression in early film. Like Schlüpmann and Gledhill, her focus is on the “second era” of film history. Gaines focuses on that period of transition when Asta Nielsen (who is also Schlüpmann’s paradigmatic example of the actress) gained fame in narrative cinema. Nielsen achieved global notoriety because of the nuance and depth of her gestural expression; it was her body that conveyed even the slightest intonation. Using Marc Bloch as the impetus for this discussion of “wordless mimesis” in much the same way that Schlüpmann uses Simmel’s *Haus* to construct an alternate way to conceive of women’s contribution to early film, Gaines argues that the traditional centrality accorded to language (the word) in film studies has prevented a thorough understanding of both the female agency on screen and our own agency as spectators. Critiquing the cinema-as-language analogy, she contends that wordless mimesis is not “the antithesis of erudite and cultivated speech” but a conceptual tool that is necessary to our intelligence of film history today. Citing Schlüpmann (in *The Uncanny Gaze: The Drama of Early German Cinema*), Gaines claims that feminists must explore “the involuntary and graspable” (light, color, movement), that is the fluidity and indeterminacy, which represent the unique aspects of film expression.

The intersections and overlaps between these three essays is certainly tied to the temporal period they explore. Yet the authors also make reference (implicit or explicit) to each other’s work in theoretical terms. Moreover, each author has rethought women’s contribution to early film through the lens of a key male thinker: Simmel is invoked in Schlüpmann’s text, Raymond Williams and Bakhtin in Gledhill’s, and Bloch in Gaines’. Developing new feminist ideas, concepts, and paradigms that are not necessarily integral to these scholars’ original thought or aims, Schlüpmann, Gledhill and Gaines each demonstrate how we can use and develop ideas of a given period without denying the originality of our own. Gledhill puts this point succinctly when she states that “what the historical snapshot registers is not comprehensive explanation or fact but a way of engaging with the acculturated gender imaginaries of the past in order to repose our own questions.”



Unknown amateur camera operator.

## *Touring the World*

Schlüpmann, Gledhill and Gaines's research is both national and global: comprehensive critical paradigms are offered that are then discussed in terms of their national specificity. So, too, with the papers included in our three sections. Each confirm our expanding awareness of nationhood, pushing discussion into a number of regions and cinematic practices that Western film historiography has traditionally neglected. We read with interest the work of Qin Xiqing, "Pearl White and the New Female Image in Chinese Early Silent Cinema," who argues that Chinese culture not only absorbed the American serial queens of the 1910s and early 1920s, but produced its own films that took Pearl White as an inspiration and a model for a new female image on screen. In Donna Casella's "Women and Nationalism in Indigenous Irish Filmmaking of the Silent Period," we are instead reminded that national cinemas may provide us with false records: active in the struggle for self-determination in Ireland, women have been removed from the films celebrating the national history they helped to forge. Mark Garrett Cooper explores not just a marginalized genre of film (the amateur travelogs film), but a pair of sisters whose films were first shot on a 1922-23 round-the-world steamship package tour. In his article "Archive, Theater, Ship: The Phelps Sisters Film the World," Cooper cleverly raises questions about the archive, history, film and travel, positing these women as producers of a heterotopian archive that we can unpack today.

## *From National Cinemas to Comparative Histories*

National cinemas do not only expose women's global contribution to film, they also expose the composite nature of women's engagement with film. We read about national cinemas, yet in fact we learn about an array of other subjects. There is the birth control campaign in the United States (Martin F. Norden's "Alice Guy Blaché, Rose Pastor Stokes, and the Birth Control Film That Never Was" and Veronica Pravadelli's "Lois Weber's Uneasy Progressive Politics: The Articulation of Class and Gender in *Where Are My Children?*"), immigration control in America (Mark Lynn Anderson "Her Reputation Precedes Her, or the Impossible Films of Vera, Countess of Cathcart"), the feminist movement in Russia (Dunja Dogo, "The Image of a Revolutionist: Vera Figner in *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty*"), Third Reich propaganda in Germany (Margaret Hennefeld, "The Politics of Hyper-Visibility in Leni Riefenstahl's *The Blue Light*"), the condition of women workers in Italy (Federico Pierotti, "Coloring the Figures. Women's Labor in the Early Italian Film Industry"), the impact of the Great War on women in British comedy film (Laraine Porter, "A Lass and a Lack? Women in British Silent Comedy") and a discussion of the connections between cinema's history and urban development in Brazil (Luciana Corrêa de Araújo's "Movie Prologues: Cinema, Theater and Female Types on Stage at Cinelândia, Rio de Janeiro").

We tour the world and we tour women's changing relationship to film. It's an exciting journey that also provides us with insights in different comparative histories. These include



First Lady Helen Taft, behind the camera, with silent movie star May Allison, around 1910.  
Bain News Service, Public Domain, Wikimedia Commons.

the comparison between British actress Elsa Lanchester and Russian actress Alexandra Khokhlova in Amy Sargeant's "However Odd—Elsa Lanchester!" Other articles compare the history of cinema to national history (Casella), to media history (Mary Desjardins, "Fading Stars and the Ruined Commodity form: Star Discourses of Loss in Fan Magazines, 1914-29"), to the history of opera (Elena Mosconi, "Silent Singers: The Legacy of Opera and Female Stars in Early Italian Cinema"), and to the history of intermedial exchange (Victoria Duckett, "The 'Voix d'or' on Silent Film: The Case of Sarah Bernhardt"). In Annette Förster's "A Pendulum of Performances: Asta Nielsen on Stage and Screen," comparison instead gives way to exchange: we learn that Asta Nielsen's stage performances impacted her screen acting just as her screen acting later motivated her return to the live stage. Implicating two traditionally separate histories in each other's development, Förster suggests that by the late 1920s we can establish not just the impact that the theatrical actress had on the screen, but the influence that film acting had on gestures and live performances.

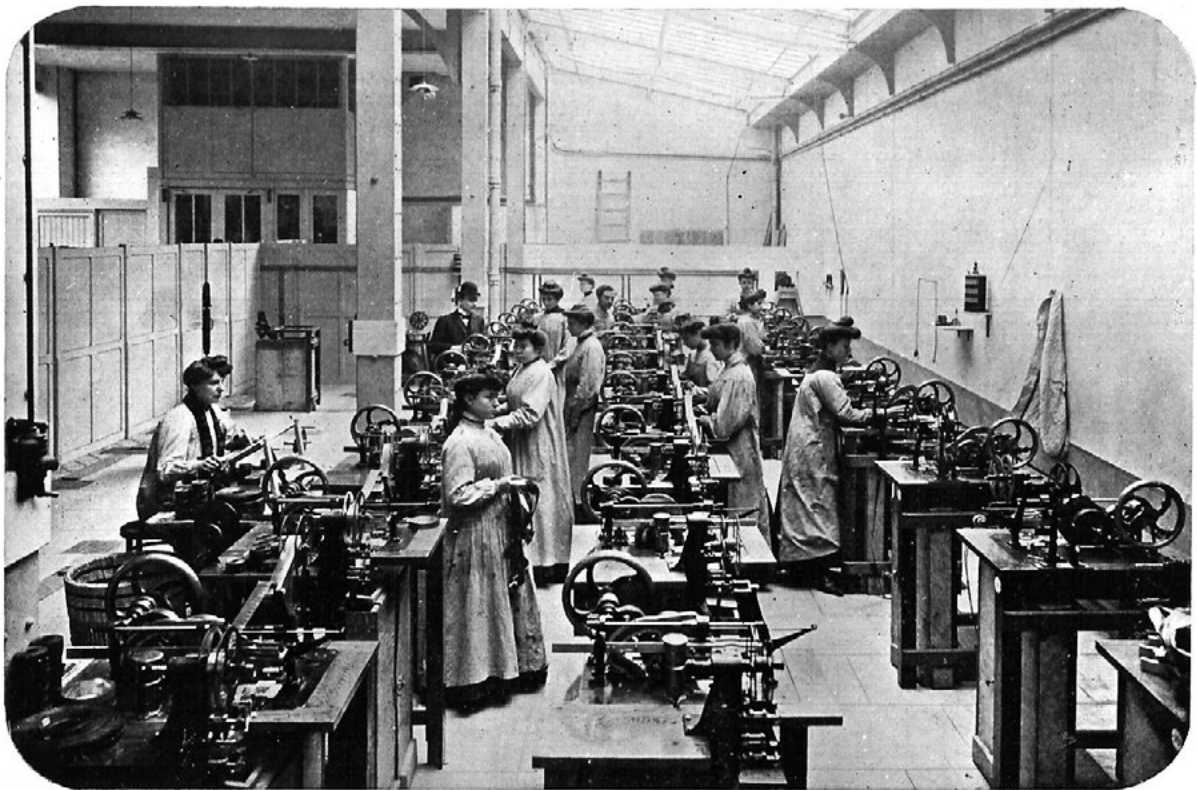


Just as the essays in this collection emerge from different national and comparative histories, so too do they make it clear that we are dealing, in one way or another, with the same sense of historical indeterminacy that weaves its way through the work of our three invited essays. For some scholars, it is the awareness of an indeterminate gap that motivates historical research itself. “How exactly has this process of disappearance and oblivion taken place?,” asks Ansje Beusekom, exploring the undocumented career of Dutch film critic Elisabeth de Roos (“Getting Forgotten: Film Critic Elisabeth de Roos and Dutch Culture before World War II”). Faced with the historic absence of de Roos, Beusekom begins to write her back into history, using in her task the biographies of de Roos’s better documented male companion (Eddy du Perron) and friends (Menno ter Braak). In a similar manner, Luca Mazzei investigates the absence of the female cinephile in models of early film spectatorship. Rediscovering the unrecognized, yet extremely brilliant work of Angelina Buracci, a young Italian feminist pedagogue, he writes the female cinephile back into early Italian film history. In Kristen Anderson Wagner’s paper, “Silent Comediennes and ‘The Tragedy of Being Funny,’” the awareness of film history’s indeterminate nature is illustrated through the figure of the comedienne. Challenging traditional definitions of femininity, Wagner exposes the contradictions and complexities that surround women’s performance of comedy in early silent film. In Anne Morey’s “School of Scandal: Alice Duer Miller, Scandal, and the New Woman,” we are introduced to a female author who used scandal as a liberatory and feminist tool. Morey demonstrates that women’s erotic freedom and self-knowledge can be unearthed through narratives that have indeterminacy written strategically into them. Finally, in Claus Tieber’s “Mary Pickford as written by Frances Marion” we are reminded that Pickford is “a composite of the multiple identities she assumed both on and off the screen.” It is the fluidity of her characters and identities on screen that confirm her indeterminacy and, through this, her “modernity.”

### *Mixing Materials*

The range of resources used to explore women’s film histories indicate another way in which we might speak of indeterminacy. Our articles harness a rich variety of materials in their analyses: we encounter home movies, letters, advertisements, early sound recordings, oral histories as well as digital files. For instance, Joanna Schmertz, in “The Leatrice Joy Bob: *The Clinging Vine* and Gender’s Cutting Edge,” examines the stage to screen transition of *The Clinging Vine* using archival research, interview transcripts and notes from Kevin Brownlow’s *Hollywood* television series, conversations with actress Leatrice Joy’s daughter, as well as resources from the Leatrice Joy Gilbert Fountain. In Victoria Paranyuk’s “Riding Horses, Writing Stories: Josephine Rector’s Career at Western Essanay” we learn about three years of Rector’s career in the motion picture industry as both a scenario writer and an

actress through contemporary newspaper accounts, trade press, fan magazines and other types of material related to the Essanay Film Manufacturing Company and the figures Rector was closely affiliated with. Finally, Anke Browsers's "If It Worked for Mary... Mary Pickford's 'Daily Talks' with the Fans" concentrates on just two years of Pickford's newspaper column. Browsers expands her argument to include nineteenth century discourses and rhetorical traditions, such as those represented by conduct books and sentimental Victorian literature. She indicates that the relationship between a film star and her fans was impacted by sources that we would not habitually associate with the emergence of film.



THE PATHÉ COLOUR MACHINE-PRINTING ROOM.

Women workers at Pathé Color printing room.

*Conclusion: Towards an Alliance Between History and Theory*

Schlüpmann's alliance between history and theory is at once modest and ambitious. On the one hand, she is focusing on German bourgeois society at the opening of the twentieth century, she is speaking to the films of Asta Nielsen, and she is discussing spaces and things we all presume to know: the home, the cinema theater, our own response as women to images on screen. On the other hand, and more poignantly, Schlüpmann is challenging perception itself. She is asking that we reconsider the way we see silent film, play with it, realize it, both as a history and (above all) as a way of being in the world. As she explains, the coincidence between the emergence of narrative cinema, the female actress on screen, and our own agency as women who negotiate public and private spaces, can not be taken for granted.

At the same time, the investigation into the second *époque* of film history that constitutes the subject of so many papers in this collection still provides powerful hints for us to interrogate our own place in "doing women's film history."<sup>2</sup> This point needs to be emphasized, since the transitional years of silent cinema have traditionally been seen as an undefined, or again, indeterminate period toward the development of cinema proper. However, this is also a time when women's agency appears more visible both on and off screen, as many papers published under "Historical Images" make especially clear. This is certainly the reason why in *Researching Women in Silent Cinema* this period emerges as such a rich ground of inquiry, which extends in each and every direction, and even as our crucial theoretical and historical resting point. As Jennifer Bean has already indicated, our research into these years, and our shared refusal "to toe the 1917 line" as the breaking point between early cinema and cinematic classicism, is causing some trouble into the established paradigms of silent film history (Bean 8).

However, there is another major reason why we all seem to recognize the 1910s as such an important moment for women's film historiography. This is the time that saw the rise of our collective emancipation, yet it contains within it our collective conservatism. Our challenge today is to join both histories in discussion and research. Can we do this? Authors have proposed tentative paths forward, indicating that the sources we read are implicated in this process of re-thinking history and our place in it. We would do well to remember this, particularly when we watch early film. It is the history of cinematic practice, and not only the discourse it devolved, that saw our emancipation. The indeterminacy that so many of us exhibit in our articles is (perhaps) evidence of this. That is, indeterminacy, fluidity, and contingency might just be other ways of expressing our historical emancipation.

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<sup>2</sup> To quote the title of a forthcoming publication edited by Christine Gledhill's and Julia Knight, offering papers presented at the *Doing Women's Film History* conference held at the University of Sunderland, UK, in 2011.



#### THE AUTHORS:

Monica Dall'Asta is Associate Professor of Film and Television Studies at the University of Bologna, Italy. She is the author of the award winning book *Trame spezzate. Archeologia del film seriale* [shattered plots. archeology of serial film] (2008) She edited a new Italian translation of Alice Guy's *Memoires (Memorie di una pioniera del cinema* [memoirs of a cinema pioneer], 2008) and the first collection on women filmmaking in Italian silent cinema (*Non solo dive. Pioniere del cinema italiano* [not just divas: Italian silent cinema pioneers], 2008).

Victoria Duckett teaches film history in the Centre for Ideas, Victorian College of the Arts. She has held posts in the University of Manchester (Department of Drama) and the Università Cattolica, Milan (Department of Communication and Performing Arts). She has published broadly in early cinema, has programmed films for *Cinema Ritrovato*, Bologna, and been involved in Women and the Silent Screen since its founding in Utrecht, 1999. Research interests include feminist historiography, film's relationship to the other arts, and performance on film. She is currently completing a book that explores Sarah Bernhardt and early film (*History Fed By Fiction: Sarah Bernhardt and Silent Film*, University of Illinois Press, forthcoming).

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