



Marie Epstein

Also Known As:

Marie-Antonine Epstein, Mademoiselle Marice

Lived:

August 14, 1899 - April 24, 1995

Worked as:

assistant director, co-screenwriter, director, editor, film actress, preservationist, screenwriter

Worked In:

France

by Astrid Burnod, Sandy Flitterman-Lewis

Born to a French Jewish father and a Polish Catholic mother in present-day Poland, Marie Epstein moved to Switzerland with her mother Hélène and her brother Jean after the death of her father Jules in January 1907. The Epsteins later established themselves in Lyon, France, where Jean was completing his studies, and then in Paris around 1922, just a few months before Jean directed his first two feature films, *L'Auberge Rouge* (1923) and *Coeur fidèle* (1923). It was also in the early 1920s that Marie became involved in the world of cinema. She started as an actress—in *L'Auberge rouge*, where she appeared as an extra in just a few early shots (Flitterman-Lewis 143), and in *Coeur fidèle*, two films that she co-wrote with Jean—but found it difficult to secure more roles. She then turned fully to screenwriting, which led her to work as an assistant director and editor (EPSTEIN184-B40). Through the intervention of French director and producer Jean Benoit-Lévy, Marie also became a director at a time when there were few women filmmakers in France. After she had been Benoit-Lévy's assistant on several silent film documentaries in the 1920s, she then co-directed, wrote, and edited eight sound fiction films with him in the late 1920s and 1930s. During that period, she also directed at least one short film on her own (EPSTEIN113-B26 3/3), possibly more. After World War II, and the death of her brother Jean in 1953, Marie was hired by Henri Langlois as a film preservationist at the Cinémathèque française, a job she held until her retirement in 1977.

Beyond this initial sketch, however, Marie's film career is not easy to reconstruct with great precision. During the silent era, Marie was often credited for her contributions to the films she made with Benoit-Lévy, yet not in a consistent fashion across publicity materials, film periodicals, and newspapers. Further challenges, which will no doubt sound familiar to scholars interested in other women filmmakers from the silent cinema, have to do with the collaborative nature of Marie's work and the scarcity of extant archival materials related to her contributions as a director, screenwriter, and editor. Although she worked relentlessly to preserve her brother Jean's legacy from the 1950s through the 1970s, and to constitute the Jean and Marie Epstein collection at the Cinémathèque française, she rarely discussed or even documented her own film career in great detail. Finally, certain difficulties concerning Benoit-Lévy's status as a Jewish filmmaker during World War II have emerged in recent years that further complicate one's understanding of Marie. Yet, despite these challenges, traces of Marie's work—and even perhaps her authorship—survive and call for our renewed attention.

What we do know—so far—is that Marie's acting career apparently began and ended with *Coeur fidèle*, which was not very successful at the time of its release in 1923. Although Marie was under contract with Pathé-Consortium as an actress (Daire 63-64), the naturalism and sincerity of her acting style as the young disabled neighbor might have set her too far apart from the popular stars of the time, including her co-stars Gina Manès, Léon Mathot, and Edmond Van Daële. In any case, Marie quickly dropped acting and became a screenwriter full time. In addition to *L'Auberge rouge* and *Coeur fidèle*, Marie wrote the screenplays of several important films in the 1920s, such as *L'Affiche* (1924), *Le Double Amour* (1925), and *Six et demi onze* (1927), all directed by Jean Epstein; and *Ames d'enfants* (1927) and *Maternité* (1929), directed by Marie Epstein with Jean Benoit-Lévy. She even won a prize for *Les Mains qui meurent* in 1923 (awarded by Pathé-Consortium)—even though the film was never made—and this led to the complimentary comparison with filmmaker and critic Louis Delluc (“France finally had Louis Delluc. It now has Marie Antonine Epstein” [Henry]). However, only two other texts were published about her during her career (Doringe; Fescourt 402-8).

Although the five films she co-wrote with her brother—*L'Auberge Rouge*, *Coeur Fidèle*, *L'Affiche*, *Le Double amour*, and *Six et demi onze*—predate Marie's work as a director, these films played a formative role in shaping her entire film aesthetic. Stylistic features such as the reiteration of figures, repetitions of haunting images from the past, the use of significant objects and recurring motifs, which later became characteristic of Jean's highly evocative cinema, all find their way into Marie's most accomplished work as a director, the sound film *La Maternelle* (1933). Furthermore, Marie's own films—like Jean's—often focused on the impact of an oppressive social milieu on a character's inner life. And, finally, Marie's role as a disabled woman who cradles the heroine's sick child at the end of *Coeur fidèle* foretells her preoccupation with the themes of childhood, womanhood, and motherhood that abound in the fiction films she co-directed with Benoit-Lévy, mainly *Ames d'enfants* (1927), *Peau de pêche* (1928), and *Maternité* (1929).

Marie began working with Benoit-Lévy almost by accident. Her brother, who was Benoit-Lévy's assistant, bequeathed his sister to the documentary director when he wanted to make films of his own. But perhaps because Marie willingly cast herself “in the shadows” of the men who surrounded her (Jean Epstein, Jean Benoit-Lévy, and, several years later, Henri Langlois), speculation about this origin story abounds. For example, in her book *Le*

Cinéma des femmes (1987), Paule Lejeune surmises that Marie decided to follow the path of Benoit-Lévy because she would have been intimidated by the cinematographic forefront where her brother was, or because she would have preferred to guarantee an economic income to support her brother (52). But these speculations deny Marie's artistic agency; her work with Benoit-Lévy, first as assistant on his documentary films, then as director on the fiction films, indicates a talent and a vision that we associate with significant *auteurs*.

What can be asserted (although this too is problematic) is that Jean Epstein's focus on experimentation was geared toward an avant-garde audience, while Marie's films with Benoit-Lévy, whose focus was on women, children, and the social challenges they faced, were accessible for all audiences. Benoit-Lévy's socially committed documentaries (three hundred of them) were geared toward his principles of education and learning, toward progressive social politics, and toward issues often deemed "secondary" as they concerned women's lives and social realities. The documentary form served his purpose well because he approached his material with the chronicling attention of a documentarist. But when he turned to fiction films, the sensitivity, insight, and artistic sensibility of his scenario-writing co-director gained a place of prominence. Marie brought a particular aesthetic from the silent films to the sound films of the thirties. Furthermore, she was instrumental in transposing Benoit-Lévy's documentary concerns with social issues, particularly as they related to women and children (poverty, public health, neglect, single motherhood, education, ethical and moral choices, social responsibility) to the form of the fiction film, with its emphasis on female characters, that comprised their output in the twenties and thirties.

World War II put an end to their creative collaboration for the duration of the conflict. After one year in relative safety in the countryside, the Benoit-Lévy family, being Jewish, was forced into exile in New York City, where the director had been invited by the Rockefeller Foundation. This explains the somewhat mournful tone of Benoit-Lévy's dedication in his book written in America: "When she reads these lines, I would like Marie Epstein to feel that all the professional joys and sorrows through which we have lived together are reflected in this essay on the art we both love. I am certain that, over there, in the country of tragic heroism, she, like myself, retains the hope that we shall soon be able to revive our old group..." (Benoit-Lévy 276). For her part, Marie, whose family had converted to Catholicism when she was young, was still seen by the authorities as a Jew. She was arrested by the Gestapo in 1944 but managed to avoid deportation and was released due to the intervention of friends in the French film industry and the Red Cross. The Benoit-Lévy family returned to France after the war, only to find their apartment, with its screening room and offices, vandalized. Nevertheless, Marie subsequently collaborated with Jean Benoit-Lévy on several documentary projects, including a film about the ballet, the first program broadcast on French television at its inception. This time, Marie worked with Benoit-Lévy as an assistant instead of a co-director (which was also the case for the last film they made before the war: *Feu de paille*, 1940). She also wrote scenarios for other filmmakers (e.g., *La Grande Espérance* [1953] by Léonide Azar, *Liberté surveillée* [1958] by Henri Aisner and Vladimir Vlcek) after Jean Benoit-Lévy quit filmmaking. She finally joined the Cinémathèque française to restore films, especially those made by her brother who died the year she was recruited to work at the organization run by Henri Langlois (Cauquy and Frappat).

At the time of her work with Benoit-Lévy, Marie Epstein was acknowledged in the film world by at least one prominent critic, Henri Fescourt, who said, "Marie Epstein, who stands in the shadows because she is too discrete, is one of the most complete *cinéastes*, as much for her ideas as a scenarist, as for her work as a director and editor. She was, for both her brother and for Jean Benoit-Lévy, a collaborator of the most inestimable efficacy" (Fescourt 311). Still, this did not prevent her from being totally unknown to English speaking audiences until Langlois's death in 1977, at which point American feminist Sandy Flitterman-Lewis was able to interview her and screen her films. This resulted in Marie Epstein's career being treated in *To Desire Differently: Feminism and the French Cinema* published in 1990, and in some of her films being shown at the Festival de films de femmes de Créteil in 1991, which led to Marie's increased and continuing visibility.

However, for reasons having to do with both the archives and the collaborative nature of Marie's work with Benoit-Lévy, it remains difficult to this day to research her film career. On the one hand, after 1940, Benoit-Lévy's documentary films saw their authorship transferred to non-Jewish filmmakers in the process of Aryanization adopted by the French government. The Benoit-Lévy family is still trying to have authorial designation returned to Benoit-Lévy; because of this, speculation about gender concerns in the fiction films that Benoit-Lévy and Marie directed together has the danger of falling into a conventional (and misleading) attribution. More fruitful, perhaps, is the way that Benoit-Lévy's chosen subjects (often involving powerful single women or childhood trauma brought on by poverty and neglect) were amplified by Marie's stylistic choices, including the use of experimental editing techniques reminiscent of her brother's silent films, such as rapid cutting, repetitions, and disparate images of memory or fantasy. Fiction films that preceded the attested directorial collaboration include *La Future Maman* (1925) and *Le Voile Sacré* (1926), but Marie's influence is clear even though these films do not list her as co-director, and they act as prelude to the fiction films of the thirties.

On the other hand, questions arise as to the division of labor in her collaboration with Benoit-Lévy. What part did she really have in her collaboration with him? In an interview, Marie stated that the collaboration with Benoit-Lévy was so close as to render each person's part indistinguishable from the other: "This answers all the questions of well-meaning people who always want to settle a collaboration and know: 'Who did this?' and 'Who did that?' There are two of us who did this and that, the good and the not so good" (Vincendeau, "Enthousiasmes" 80–83). Perhaps a bit modestly, she has asserted that, while Benoit-Lévy could have made the films without her, she could not have done so on her own. But it seems probable that this modesty is something of an exaggeration; her authorial signature is apparent everywhere in these films. On a more personal note, Marie was treated like a member of the Benoit-Lévy family, and professional life merged with private life, as some family pictures of costume parties and the like demonstrate. Although she never married or had children herself, she treated the Benoit-Lévy girls like daughters, and they in turn treated her like a beloved aunt.

Nevertheless, we can find some hints in Jean Epstein's interview with [Musidora](#) in 1946: "my sister who collaborated with Benoit Lévy, while she was mostly doing the artistic part of the film and he was doing the administrative part" (Epstein). But this might also create more problems than it solves, and bespeak of a prejudice retained by Jean Epstein from the early days of his working with Benoit-Lévy. The subjects for the films, at least for *La Maternelle, Hélène* (1936), and *Itto* (1934), all came from Benoit-Lévy himself, first from his devotion to and friendship with Léon Frapié, whose writing inspired *La Maternelle*, then from his admiration for Vicki Baum's novel, and finally out of a desire to critique Pierre Loti. While it may be true that the most experimental sequences in these films came from Marie's editing and poetic vision, Benoit-Lévy did far more than accounting. The question of the collaboration process persists, but the closeness of these two filmmakers goes without objection.

To conclude, Marie Epstein's story is a complex one that changed over the years as opinions shifted and new elements came to be considered. Although she has been more visible since the 1970s than she was during most of her film career, many questions remain unanswered, making it difficult—yet not impossible—to speculate about her work. What can be said with confidence, however, is that Marie Epstein wore many hats, from actress to screenwriter to director to editor and preservationist, and that her presence in many areas of French cinema and French film culture was not only long-lasting but also impactful. The full extent of her influence remains to be seen.

Bibliography

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Fonds Jean et Marie Epstein, EPSTEIN184-B40, EPSTEIN113-B26 3/3, EPSTEIN191-B42. [Cinémathèque française](#).

Filmography

A. Archival Filmography: Extant Film Titles:

1. Marie Epstein as Actress and Screenwriter

L'Auberge rouge. Dir.: Jean Epstein, sc.: Jean Epstein and Marie Epstein (Pathé consortium cinéma FR 1923) cas.: Léon Mathot, Gina Manès, Marcelle Schmitt, si, b&w. Archive: [Cinémathèque Française](#), [Filmoteca Española](#), [Fondazione Cineteca Italiana](#), [Harvard Film Archive](#), [Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée](#).

Coeur fidèle. Dir.: Jean Epstein, sc.: Jean Epstein and Marie Epstein, adap.: Jean Epstein (Pathé Consortium Cinéma FR 1923) cas.: Léon Mathot, Marie Epstein, si, b&w. Archive: [Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée](#), [Bulgarska Nacionalna Filmoteka](#), [Cinémathèque de Toulouse](#), [Cinémathèque Française](#), [Cinémathèque Royale de Belgique](#), [Filmoteka Narodowa](#), [Museum of Modern Art](#), [Národní Filmový Archiv](#), [Gosfilmofond](#),

[Cineteca Nazionale](#), [Arhiva Nationala de Filme – Cinemateca Romana](#), [Filmoteca UNAM](#), [George Eastman Museum](#), [Danske Filminstitut](#), [National Film and Sound Archive of Australia](#), [Jugoslovenska Kinoteka](#).

2. Marie Epstein as Screenwriter

L’Affiche. Dir.: Jean Epstein (Films Albatros FR 1924) cas.: Nathalie Lissenko, Camille Bardou, Génica Missirio, Sylviane de Castillo, Madame Lacroix, Georges Saillard, Roger Huguenet, Pierre Hot, François Viguier, S. Costantini, S. Dermoiz, si, b&w/color. Archive: [Cinémathèque Française](#), [Cinémathèque Royale de Belgique](#), [Národní Filmový Archiv](#), [Cineteca Nazionale](#), [Jugoslovenska Kinoteka](#), [Centre National du Cinéma et de l’Image Animée](#).

Le Double amour. Dir.: Jean Epstein (Films Albatros FR 1925) cas.: Nathalie Lissenko, Jean Angelo, Camille Bardou, Pierre Batcheff, Nino Constantini, René Donnio, Alexis Ghasne, Pierre Hot, Madame de La Croix, Jules de Spoly, si, b&w/color. Archive: [Centre National du Cinéma et de l’Image Animée](#), [Cinémathèque Française](#).

Six et Demi Onze. Dir.: Jean Epstein, sc.: Marie Epstein, ph.: Georges Périnal (Films Jean Epstein FR 1927) cas.: Suzy Pierson, Nino Constantini, si, b&w. Archive: [UC Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive](#), [Centre National du Cinéma et de l’Image Animée](#), [Cinémathèque Française](#).

3. Marie Epstein as Assistant Director

Le Travail du potier. Dir./prod.: Jean Benoit-Lévy (L’Edition française cinématographique FR 1920), si, b&w. Archive: [Centre National du Cinéma et de l’Image Animée](#).

La Sérériculture. Dir./prod.: Jean Benoit-Lévy (L’Edition française cinématographique FR 1924) si, b&w. Archive: [Centre National du Cinéma et de l’Image Animée](#).

Bizerte. Dir./prod.: Jean Benoit-Lévy (L’Edition française cinématographique FR 1925) si, b&w. Archive: [Centre National du Cinéma et de l’Image Animée](#).

La Récolte de la pomme de terre. Dir.: Albert Mourlan, prod.: Jean Benoit-Lévy (L’Edition française cinématographique FR 1925), si, b&w. Archive: [Centre National du Cinéma et de l’Image Animée](#).

L’Olivier. Dir./prod.: Jean Benoit-Lévy (L’Edition française cinématographique FR 1926) si, b&w. Archive: [Centre National du Cinéma et de l’Image Animée](#).

La Destruction des campagnols. Dir./prod.: Jean Benoit-Lévy (L’Edition française cinématographique FR 1926 [?]) si, b&w. Archive: [Centre National du Cinéma et de l’Image Animée](#).

Ecole de Cibeins. Dir./prod.: Jean Benoit-Lévy (L’Edition française cinématographique FR 1927) si, b&w. Archive: [Centre National du Cinéma et de l’Image Animée](#).

Nefta, la perle du Djerid. Dir./prod.: Jean Benoit-Lévy (L’Edition française cinématographique FR 1929, si, b&w. Archive: [Centre National du Cinéma et de l’Image Animée](#).

Arbres fruitiers en plein vent. Dir./prod.: Jean Benoit-Lévy (L’Edition française cinématographique FR 1930) si, b&w. Archive: [Centre National du Cinéma et de l’Image Animée](#).

Essai d’une locomotive au banc d’essai de Vitry. Dir./prod.: Jean Benoit-Lévy (L’Edition française cinématographique FR 1930) si, b&w. Archive: [Centre National du Cinéma et de l’Image Animée](#).

La Filature du coton. Dir./prod.: Jean Benoit-Lévy (L’Edition française cinématographique FR 1930) si, b&w. Archive: [Centre National du Cinéma et de l’Image Animée](#).

Le Fumier de la ferme. Dir./prod.: Jean Benoit-Lévy (L’Edition française cinématographique FR 1930) si, b&w. Archive: [Centre National du Cinéma et de l’Image Animée](#).

Maroc, terre de contrastes. Dir./prod.: Jean Benoit-Lévy (L’Edition française cinématographique FR 1930) si, b&w. Archive: [Centre National du Cinéma et de l’Image Animée](#).

Le Nid. Dir./prod.: Jean Benoit-Lévy (L’Edition française cinématographique FR 1930), si, b&w. Archive: [Centre National du Cinéma et de l’Image Animée](#).

Maternité. Dir./prod.: Jean Benoit-Lévy (L’Edition française cinématographique FR 1930), cas.: Rachel Devirys, Andrée Brabant, Jimmy, Alex Bernard, Madeleine Donyval, Pierre Hot, Georges Deneubourg, Georges Floquet, si, b&w. Archive: [Centre National du Cinéma et de l’Image Animée](#), [Cinémathèque de Toulouse](#), [Lobster Films](#), [Museo Nazionale del Cinema](#), [EYE Filmmuseum](#).

Des Métiers pour les jeunes filles. Dir./prod.: Jean Benoit-Lévy (L’Edition française cinématographique FR 1930) si, b&w. Archive: [Centre National du Cinéma et de l’Image Animée](#).

Petits doigts de fée. Dir./prod.: Jean Benoit-Lévy (L’Edition française cinématographique FR 1930) si, b&w. Archive: [Centre National du Cinéma et de l’Image Animée](#).

La Poésie du travail. Dir./prod.: Jean Benoit-Lévy (L'Édition française cinématographique FR 1930) si, b&w. Archive: [Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée](#).

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La Culture des orchidées. Dir./prod.: Jean Benoit-Lévy (L'Édition française cinématographique FR 1932) si, b&w. Archive: [Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée](#).

Standardisation des fruits, légumes, primeurs et emballages. Dir./prod.: Jean Benoit-Lévy (L'Édition française cinématographique FR 1932) si, b&w. Archive: [Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée](#).

Ecole nationale d'agriculture de Montpellier. Dir./prod.: Jean Benoit-Lévy (L'Édition française cinématographique FR 1933) si, b&w. Archive: [Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée](#).

Ecole nationale des eaux et forêts et les forêts françaises. Dir./prod.: Jean Benoit-Lévy, prod.: (L'Édition française cinématographique FR 1933) si, b&w. Archive: [Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée](#).

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L'Agronomie du Maroc. Dir.: Edmond Floury, prod.: Jean Benoit-Lévy (L'Édition française cinématographique FR 1934) si, b&w. Archive: [Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée](#).

La Soie. Dir./prod.: Jean Benoit-Lévy (L'Édition française cinématographique FR 1935) si, b&w. Archive: [Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée](#).

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L'Oasis. Dir.: Jean Benoit-Lévy (Eden Productions FR 1936) si, b&w. Archive: [Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée](#).

4. Marie Epstein as Co-Director and Co-Screenwriter

Ames d'enfants. Dir./sc.: Jean Benoit-Lévy and Marie Epstein, aut.: J.H. Rosny, prod.: Jean Benoit-Lévy (L'Édition Française Cinématographie France 1928) cas.: Robby Guichard, Monique Mélinand, Jacqueline Blanc, Danielle Vigneau, Henri Piaget, Beaume, Alberti, Hubert, Boundireff, Roger Tourez, Max Bonnet, si, b&w. Archives: [Cinémathèque de Toulouse](#), [Lobster Films](#), [Cinémathèque Française](#), [Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée](#).

5. Marie Epstein as Co-Director

Peau de pêche. Dir.: Jean Benoit-Lévy and Marie Epstein, sc.: Jean Benoit-Lévy, aut.: Gabriel Maurière (G.F.F.A. – Gaumont-Franco Film-Aubert France 1929) cas.: Maurice Touzé, Denise Lorys, Simone Mareuil, Jimmy, si, b&w. Archive: [Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée](#), [Cinémathèque de Toulouse](#), [Národní Filmový Archiv](#), [Forum des Images](#), [Cinémathèque Française](#), [Lobster Films](#).

Il était une fois trois amis. Dir.: Jean Benoit-Lévy and Marie Epstein, sc.: Louis Devraigne, prod. Jean Benoit-Lévy (l'Édition française cinématographique FR 1929) cas.: Camille Bert, Jo Raffels, Dornel, Cari, Mme Decori, M. Blochouse, si, b&w. Archive: [Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée](#), [Cinémathèque Royale de Belgique](#).

C. DVD Sources

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D. Streamed Media

[Le Double amour](#) (1925) via the Cinémathèque française (French with English subtitles)

Clip featuring Marie Epstein from *Cœur fidèle* (1923)

Credit Report

Marie Epstein's filmography was compiled mostly based on data from the Archives Françaises du film of the Centre national du cinéma et de l'image animée (CNC). It sometimes differs from the information available from the FIAF Film Archives online, especially regarding release dates and credits. For example, FIAF indicates that *La Maternité* (1930), for which Epstein served as Jean Benoit-Lévy's assistant director, according to the Archives Françaises du Film, was instead co-directed by Benoit-Lévy, Epstein, and Tonny Brouquière, and co-written by Benoit-Lévy and Epstein.

Furthermore, the Cinémathèque française holds different versions of Marie Epstein's résumé from the late 1950s and early 1960s, in which she claims having co-written only two of her brother's films, *L'Affiche* (1924) and *Le Double amour* (1925) (EPSTEIN191-B42). But as noted previously, Marie's unassuming personality, as well as the personal and collaborative nature of her work with Jean, make it difficult to treat any one document as a definitive authority.

Some sources indicate that Marie Epstein was involved in the extant *Pasteur* (Jean Benoit-Lévy and Jean Epstein, 1923) in some capacity, and a photograph from the collections of the Cinémathèque (Iconothèque, P665038, Cinémathèque française) places her on the set. However, because further research is required at this time, *Pasteur* is not included in Epstein's filmography.

Finally, Epstein's full filmography is longer than the one presented here. But because of the focus of the Women Film Pioneers Project on the silent era, the sound films she made with Jean Benoit-Lévy have been left out. (To be clear, the films from the 1930s listed in the filmography are silent. Whereas commercial filmmaking in France transitioned to sound starting around 1929, non-commercial films like the ones directed by Jean Benoit-Lévy and Marie Epstein remained silent well into the 1930s.) The film *La Grande Espérance* (1953), directed by Léonide Azar, is sometimes attributed to Marie Epstein who is described as the "author" on the contract preserved by Éclair. Yet the term "author" most likely meant "screenwriter" at the time.

Citation

Burnod, Astrid; Sandy Flitterman-Lewis. "Marie Epstein." In Jane Gaines, Radha Vatsal, and Monica Dall'Asta, eds. *Women Film Pioneers Project*. New York, NY: Columbia University Libraries, 2023.