

IDENTIFYING A FEMINIST ADDRESS IN EARLY CINEMA

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In the 70s and 80s, the difference between male and female (and later, queer and straight) artists was still hotly contested. We used to wonder whether it was empowering or essentialist to perceive and celebrate how women artists had different creative strategies from men. ... [Such] speculum gazing is out of fashion now Women directors are no longer restricted, as pioneer Dorothy Arzner was, to directing the kind of films that are loosely described as 'women's pictures' or, in the current argot, 'chick flicks' Perhaps we should re-open a space for thinking about how women might construct stories, frame shots and express ideas differently from men.

The above quotation is from a *Sight & Sound* editorial in an issue devoted to “chickflicks”. The analogy between “male and female” and “queer and straight” in the first sentence stands out: the implication is that gender coding and sexual preference are somehow connected. Also implied is the idea that the similarities and differences between them can be isolated within a filmic text. The idea of re-opening “a space for thinking about how women might construct stories, frame shots and express ideas differently from men” led me

When I first began to research early cinema in 1990, my goal as a filmmaker was to apply early cinema practices to the development of a contemporary feminist film aesthetic. In fact, what I came to realize, rather belatedly, perhaps, is that if we define a feminist aesthetic as a “normative theory of ... artistic form that can be derived from a feminist politics,” then, a feminist aesthetic is impossible, and our perpetual search for one, as literary critic Rita Felski has pointed out, “has tended to hinder any adequate assessment of both the value and limitations of contemporary feminist [art] by measuring it against an abstract conception of a “feminine” [artistic] practice.”

Though a feminist aesthetic is a chimera, feminist artistic practice, of course, is not. Feminist art is both a product of existing social conditions and a form of critical opposition to them. Feminist art is explicitly aimed at a class of people that is self-identified as

oppressed, and in the case of media, mis-represented. Feminist cinema, then, is often explicitly focused on “gender-specific concerns centered around the problem of female identity.” This can make an analysis of early feminist cinema problematic. First of all, how can we know if an early film was meant to be feminist? It can be very difficult to determine the social function of a particular film made before 1913, as information about reception is incredibly difficult to come by. A feminist film critic working in early cinema is often working with a minimum of historical information. If she’s lucky she will have access to the film itself. This was the problem that faced me as I did my research on Alice Guy Blaché, the first woman filmmaker. After ten years of research I had quite a bit of information on her personal life and on her business dealings . I had first hand reports from people who knew her that attested to her feminism. But I still had minimal information about how her films were received, and most of that information was in the form of one-line reviews in trade journals like *Moving Picture World*, hardly the ideal place to look for information on female audiences.

Linda Williams has suggested that films designed to engage their female audience do so by appealing to our multiple psychological and social roles in patriarchy - as wives, mothers, daughters, housekeepers, and caretakers . The female spectator is able, and expected to, “alternate between a number of conflicting points of view, none of which can be satisfactorily reconciled. Williams’ theory follows from Teresa de Lauretis’ theory of “Oedipus Interruptus”, which argues that films made by women can foreground woman’s double-desiring subjectivity, whose duplicity need never be resolved . De Lauretis further argued that the ‘female-gendered subject [is] one that is at once inside and outside the

ideology of gender'. The implication is that a feminist mode of address, if not a feminist aesthetic, can be identified in the sum of, and the contradictions between, the multiple layers of discourse of a film (or other text) in which it is present.

My paper will show that the connection between the diegetic and extra-diegetic discourses in Alice Guy's films is a feminist mode of address. I'll start by quoting Mieke Bal, who said:

Address, the ways in which a viewer is invited to participate in the representation, is perhaps the most relevant aspect of a semiotics of subjectivity. ... However much autonomy a particular viewer may have (or assume to have) in front of a painting, ... subjectivity is always produced at least by the interaction between the "I" of the work and the "you" this "I" addresses."

The "you" that the "I" of the painting addresses is a constructed you. Narratologists writing about the circuit of narrative communication refer to this constructed "you" as the "narratee," the person the story is being told to. So the mode of address of a painting or a film is inextricably bound up with the construction of the narratee, a mask that the viewer or spectator is forced to wear, or at least, has to negotiate with.

In other words, it isn't necessary to construct films for women in a completely new or different cinematic language in order to address women as spectators. It is enough to include a feminist mode of address at at least one level of narration. For example, the character gaze could be female, and that of the camera male. This occurs often, especially in

"women's films" though productive looking or reading against the grain is often required for feminist enjoyment.

The character gaze and the camera gaze could be female. This is quite difficult, since -- as Mulvey noted -- in our culture the image of the female itself connotes a male gazer. Some filmmakers have dealt with this by adding a female voice-over, as Marleen Gorliss did in *Antonia's Line*. Susan Seidelman's film *Smithereens* rocked the critics because the camera was placed in the woman's position instead of the man's, as did Amy Heckerling in *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*. What does the man see in a love scene? The woman's face. What does the woman see? The ceiling. Putting the camera in the woman's position, instead of in the more common male position, calls the viewer's attention to one way in which the camera gaze is subject to convention.

Others have created a female camera gaze and male character gaze. For example, *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982, dir. Amy Heckerling, based on the book by Cameron Crowe) and *Thelma and Louise* (1991, dir. Ridley Scott with a script by Callie Khouri) are both examples of female camera gazes and mixed character gaze. *Say Anything* (1989, written and directed by Cameron Crowe) has a male character and camera gaze, but there is a powerful sequence in the middle where the girl that the John Cusack character is trying to win watches him as other teens at a party make him the guardian of their car keys.

It is relevant to note that the most obvious contemporary examples of female character gaze occur in teen films. Perhaps it is easier to achieve a camera identification with a female among teens, where social hierarchy is still roughly level. Further possibilities of varying the socially constructed positions from which the camera's gaze

originates also exist, whether we define the constructed position in terms of gender, class, or race. This is another pointer to the importance of modes of address at each level of narration: the extra-diegetic (the advertising campaign, which constructs cinema viewers as live audience members – akin to the direct-address-to-the-audience of early cinema), the non-diegetic (such as uses of the fourth look which addresses the cinematic spectator directly), the diegetic, such as the examples of teen films just listed, which in turn can be subdivided into levels of external and internal focalization and which put mechanisms of character identification such as alignment and engagement into play.

In other words, at each level of narration the narratee is constructed differently. For many years critics have focused on the narration side of the narrative circuit, and in recent years much attention has been paid to reception, to how spectators and fans actually react, especially to film and television. Very little attention has been paid to how the spectator is constructed at the various levels of address in a given medium, which is a key step in the circle of communication between narration and reception. In this sense, cinema studies has much to gain from the discoveries of advertising theorists. In order to make my point clearer, let's look at a couple of films.

I'm going to show two comedies of cross-dressing produced and directed by Alice Guy Blaché at Solax in 1911 and 1912, the period when she had almost complete control, in other words, these are films for which we can clearly point to her as historical author.

The choice of films is dictated by the following criteria: 1) recognisable address to female spectators in the diegesis; 2) recognisable female address outside of the film's diegesis; and 3) a "dialogue" or "counterpoint discourse" between the film's discourses and

between the discourses of the film and cultural discourses outside of the film to which the film refers (insofar as these can be determined through historical research); 4) and finally, the accessibility of these discourses to present-day audiences.

What stands out in Guy's comedies of cross-dressing, unlike films featuring cross-dressing made by other filmmakers, is that they are addressed primarily to women and that all of them, beginning with her very first films, require "productive looking". In other words, her films require a constant and conscious reworking of the terms under which we look at objects that make up our visual landscape. Guy's films encourage this "productive look" through the use of transvestism, cross-dressing and even transbodiment and role-reversal.

CROSS DRESSING AND GENDER IDENTITY

Crossdressing was a staple of the cinema in Guy's day, although no other single film producer seems to have used it as consistently, and to such effect, as she did. A standard drama in literature as well as film was the young woman who dons a soldier's uniform and identity in order to a) rescue her lover b) be with her lover c) do a job her lover cannot do because of a wound or cowardice or d) all of the above. In these films (almost always dramas) for the woman to don a man's clothing and identity is seen as proof of great love: for a woman to behave in a masculine way is seen as a great sacrifice, performed temporarily under duress, and finished with as quickly as possible.

In *The House with the Closed Shutters* (Biograph 1910), D.W. Griffith carries this plot a little further, as the girl and her soldier brother trade places. The reviewer in *The Moving Picture World* commented on her action thus:

With noble self-forgetfulness, the spirit to bear up against misfortune and an almost superhuman power to dare, to achieve and to suffer, she dons her brother's uniform and rides forth to do his duty. She delivers the dispatches and becomes involved in a fierce battle. At times she falters, the scene is a horrible one, women do not love destruction, but she dashes in, the iron is in **her** blood, she attempts to save the flag and falls mortally wounded facing the enemy. Her brother's name is listed among the honored dead. Her brother really lives behind closed doors and shutters. A drunken decadent, he lives on and on through weary years. It is given out that he bravely died and his sister, with disordered mind, overturned by his supposed death, is behind those shutters. Year after year the faithful suitors leave their tributes of affection at the door of the old Southern house. The family honor is preserved, while somewhere in the unmarked trenches are the bones of the Southern rose.

In western culture identity is essentially gendered. Clothes embody gender-specific meanings, but they are as changeable as any semiotic convention. In other words, it's very easy to undress, and very easy for men and women to trade clothes with each other, to cross-dress. If the markers of our gender identity are so easily changeable, what does that say about identity itself? If males and females can trade clothes, then maybe what is male and what is female is not so unalterably fixed.

SHOW RESTAURANT CLIP WITH MASHER HERE

This pattern is evident in *Officer Henderson* (Solax 1911): Henderson and his partner, Williams, are police officers. They are told to dress like women so they can catch pickpockets who prey on lady shoppers. Henderson takes great pleasure in donning the disguise and showing that he "has it on Venus coming and going." We see Williams go shopping in a lace shop and promptly catch a pickpocket, but Henderson stops at a fancy bistro to eat lunch, where he is accosted by a masher. Henderson plays along from behind his veil while two real women (dainty ladies at lunch) watch with horror as Henderson invites the masher over to his table and flirts with him. This scene aptly illustrates Mary Anne Doane's statement:

At some level of the cultural ordering of the psychical, the horror or threat of that precariousness (of both sexuality and the visible) is attenuated by attributing it to the woman, over and against the purported stability and identity of the male. The veil is a mark of that precariousness.

However, in Guy's universe, it is a *man* who wears a veil and illustrates that precariousness, and another man who is willingly duped. All the while in the background we see two *real* women (no need of veils) whose reactions, shown in a point-of-view sequence, inform ours, the spectators'.

Henderson goes back to the police station where he re-enacts his exploits for his fellow officers (he tricked one of them into helping him cross a muddy street) and invites them all to the bistro the next day to watch him continue his flirtation with the masher.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Henderson, who has been visiting her mother, comes home early and finds Henderson's disguise hanging in the closet. She assumes he is having an affair and that the dress belongs to the other woman. She packs the whole thing up and runs back to Mother, who advises her to put on the dress, approach Henderson, "and when he embraces you don't be afraid to use your knuckles." Once dressed, Mrs. Henderson decides to stop in at the bistro; the masher sees her and, thinking she is Henderson, starts caressing her. She jumps up and whips him soundly with her purse, while Henderson's fellow officers watch through the window, laughing hysterically. Mrs. Henderson runs out to the street, where she sees her husband, in his policeman's uniform, telling his partner, who is in his dress/disguise, that his women's clothes have disappeared. Assuming Williams is the other woman, Mrs. Henderson starts beating him about the head with her purse, so Henderson, not recognizing her, hauls her off to the police station, where all is revealed and the couple is reconciled.

It is interesting to note the double disguise here: the identity of the fictional Other Woman travels from Henderson, to Mrs. Henderson, to Henderson's partner, illuminating the process of projection: each character projects his or her fears and fantasies on this Other Woman figure, who is contained somehow in the clothes, and with the clothes passes from one character to the next as if she were playing musical chairs. But in the end, everything is restored to order under the watchful eye of the Chief of Police.

Cupid and the Comet (Solax, 1911) has some stylistic similarities to *What*

Happened to Officer Henderson, which was made just a few months later. Together, the two films together clearly demonstrate the sophisticated nature of Guy's productive look.

SHOW CUPID CLIP HERE – SHE'S TRYING TO PULL CLOTHES FROM UNDER HIS PILLOW

The story starts with a father who has read about Haley's comet that is soon to appear and invites some of his friends over for a "comet party." When he finally gets his telescope focused through the window, he sees not the comet but his daughter in the arms of a "strange young man," as the plot summary describes him, sitting on a garden wall and silhouetted by moonlight. Father's reaction, after checking the telescope to see if its working, is to run out to the garden, grab the unfortunate young man, and literally toss him out with several well-aimed kicks to the derriere. Then he pulls his struggling daughter out of the garden by her hair and locks her in her room. However, her lover, undaunted, appears beneath her window and convinces her to elope. Dad catches her climbing out the window and kicks the suitor away again; this time he spansks his daughter before locking her up again, and to make doubly sure she cannot go anywhere this time, he takes her clothes. Since one can never be too sure about these things he tucks her clothes into bed with him. When her lover appears beneath her window a second time, she sneaks into her (now sleeping) father's room, but decides that pulling her clothes out of his bed is more than she can handle. So she takes his clothes and puts them on. She takes the added precaution of locking his closet and taking the key, which tells us that Father has a closet full of clothes, but she has only one set. Father wakes up and sees her climbing out the window, but this

time he's delayed by the fact that his clothes are gone and his closet is locked. So, there's nothing to do but to put on her clothes. Meanwhile, back at the preacher's place, the young couple find the very effeminate minister unwilling to marry two young men to each other, at least until the bride's true identity is revealed -- by the simple removal of her hat. The three of them, the "real" man, the woman dressed as a man, and the effeminate preacher, are watched closely by two "real women" reminiscent of the two women observers in *Officer Henderson*. Dad comes running in, dressed in his daughter's clothes, but it is too late, and he gets a lecture from the minister for both his anger and his odd habits of dress.

In *Cupid and the Comet*, Guy is deliberately using crossdressing as a source of comedy. In *Officer Henderson*, the way the narrative is resolved ultimately reinforces the fixity of sexual difference and the social/sexual hierarchies erected upon it. *Cupid and the Comet*, made earlier, is a little more daring. The young woman in this film adopts male clothes -- and with them, apparently, the gumption to climb out a second story window and run off with her lover -- in order to escape her father, who is not only domineering and abusive, but presumably incestuous as well. The final tableau presents us with a "visionary multiplicity" of gender, an androgynous subversion of gender fixity. And even though the plot has a traditional resolution, with the two young people tied in a heterosexual marriage knot, the fact that they are both dressed as men during the marriage ceremony, that the minister is so glaringly effeminate, and that the hulking and hirsute father arrives wearing his daughter's clothes undercuts even this narrative closure. What Guy's cross-dressing films focus on is not so much the conventions of femininity (which she problematized in her

films of female transvestite behavior such as *Algie the Miner* and *Burstop Holmes' Murder Case*) but on gender conventions, gender as social more, social law.

Judith Butler has pointed out that “Woman” can be taken as a category, as a signifier, as a site of new articulation. This is exactly what happens in Guy’s films of cross-dressing: Woman as a social construction is opened up as a site of political contest, by showing female characters cross-dressing as males in order to achieve the degree of agency to which they are entitled, but to which the way is blocked (usually by a patriarchal figure). The contestation also occurs in Guy’s films where male characters cross dress as females. In other words, whether men are cross dressing as women, or women as men, the cross dressing in these films points to a theme of resistance to the gender conventions as applied to Woman, and not to Man. This is achieved by having both sets of stories told from the perspective of a female character: by Winnie in *Cupid and the Comet* and by Mrs. Henderson in *Officer Henderson*. Even though Mrs. Henderson is introduced late in the film, the important duplicity of the disguise is the one worked on her; in her absence other female characters (the disapproving women at the restaurant where Henderson flirts with the masher) focalize in her place.

If we were to judge Guy by her cross-dressing films alone, it would be easy to say that she was a feminist in the modern sense of the term, as she avowed later in her life. What stands out in her films of crossdressing, as with almost all of her films, is the preoccupation with female agency, the connection between agency and gender construction, and the obstacles facing the development of female agency in a patriarchal society. She was highly aware of the suffrage movement (the tender wife who is trying to assertively reign in

her husband's gambling problem in *Burstop Holmes' Murder Case* is dressed in the white blouse, thin tie, and plain skirt of the suffragists) though she herself, as a French citizen, could not vote until after the end of the Second World War.. She was quite conscious of the fact that she herself had achieved an unprecedented degree of self-realization through her career of film producer and director; almost all of her films are addressed directly to women with the message "you too can do more – here's how". The "how" usually involved creative thinking, daring action, and a sense of humor: all three qualities required by the tomboyish girls, usually played by Vinnie Burns, that star in her action films and by cross-dressers.

It seems quite clear from all of Alice Guy's films, and especially her comedies of cross-dressing, that Guy was a feminist. However, her feminist filmmaking did not take the form of a cinematic language that was radically different from that of the other filmmakers that surrounded the Solax Studio at Fort Lee. Rather, her feminist aesthetic takes the form of multiple levels of address, all aimed primarily at female spectators. She accomplished this by telling her stories most often from the perspective of female characters; but even when this was not the case, a feminine narration (even if is not always feminist) is always in evidence. The address of these two levels is often reinforced or contradicted for humorous effect by the extra-diegetic narration, the details that call the spectator's attention from outside the story, such as indirect references to suffrage or communist revolution.

Finally, there is the complex figure of Alice Guy herself, the implied author who maintained a front of femininity and diffidence towards the press, either as a result of her French convent training, as a device for preserving her marriage, her business, or all three. At the same time she encouraged other women by public exhortation and through her films,

to follow her example, assert themselves in choice of marriage partner, in their relationships, and last but not least, in their choice of career.

Thank you.