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Historiographies of women in early cinema

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Historiographies of women in early cinema

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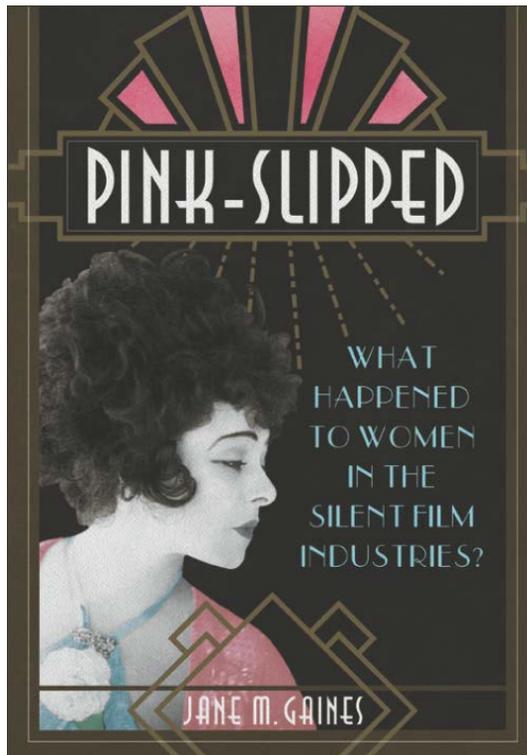
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In the recent decades, academic research on early cinema has grown remarkably. At the intersection of early cinema studies and feminist history, significant new research has revealed the hitherto overlooked presence of women, and the rich diversity of positions they held, in the first decades of film production.

Feminist film historiography has an ever-expanding scope. It ranges from the rediscovery of female film pioneers from across the world, of whom the Women Film Pioneers Project (Columbia University) have made an impressive inventory, to a reassessment of the role of female early film stars, producers, and writers in the development of film narration and transnational growth of local film industries. Another blossoming subfield investigates histories of women's labour in film and media production, whether in colour laboratories, cutting rooms, animation productions, service professions, or clerical and secretarial positions. A recent contribution in this vein that is important to mention here is Erin Hill's *Never Done: A History of Women's Work in Media Production*.

In this book, Hill looks at the forms taken on by women's work as it was shaped by both 'explicit, managerial motives for hiring women' in the media industry and the 'implicit, gender-based expectations'.^[1] Not limiting her approach to rediscovering or identifying women that worked in the industry, Hill attempts to reconstruct the nature of women's work from the perspectives opened up by such concepts as 'emotional labour' and 'gender performativity'. Importantly, as a historian, Hill acknowledges the performativity inherent to her own present recreation of past events – a self-reflective standpoint inspired by Jane M. Gaines' discussion of feminist historiography. In a 2004 article titled 'Film History and the Two Presents of Feminist Film Theory', Gaines drew attention to current practices of feminist film historiography and raised the issue of representation.^[2] By inviting scholars to

question the limits of revisionist feminist film history, Gaines sought to enrich understandings of *both* the past and present. In themselves, new discoveries of women’s activity in early cinema were never enough and they never spoke for themselves. Gaines suggested instead that practicing film historians should question how *they* revisit, represent, and rewrite these facts that have been rediscovered. ‘The difficulty is to know how to tell these women’s stories without telling them,’ she wrote.[3] Among her productive suggestions for new historical approaches, Gaines cited Barbara Klinger’s reference to historical writing as ‘a vigorously self-reflexive activity’.[4]



In her recently released book, *Pink-Slipped: What Happened to Women in the Silent Film Industries?* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press: 2018), Gaines takes her discussion a step further by questioning the limits of the empirical historical approach widespread in contemporary feminist historiography. As her point of departure, Gaines poses the following question: ‘How can a historian really know everything that has been happening?’ In asking this,

Gaines does not mean to suggest that there is ‘no knowing’, nor that the historian cannot claim to know or write about past events. Gaines is more interested in questions implicated in methodological assumptions than drawing conclusions about ‘what happened to women in the silent film industries’. Using theories of history to trouble scholarly assumptions entails scrutinising the historical method in detail and recognising its shortcomings. In striving ‘to explain academic feminism’s divergent accounts of women working in the silent-era national film industries in the 1895-1925 period’, the book gradually betrays Gaines’ disillusionment with the historiographic project (p. 3). Ironically, the book does not answer the question posed in its title. *Pink-Slipped* is a momentous contribution to the interdisciplinary field of feminist media history in its embrace of ‘unknowability’ as a critical stance. Disillusionment with the historiographic methodology is not taken as a limitation. Rather, it is a productive ground from which to ask further questions and illuminate ongoing assumptions at work across media history, from its research practices to the crucial role played by archives and museums. In each of the book’s eight chapters, Gaines picks up a case study, scrutinises the historiographical assumptions implicit in its study, and embraces the ‘unknowable’.

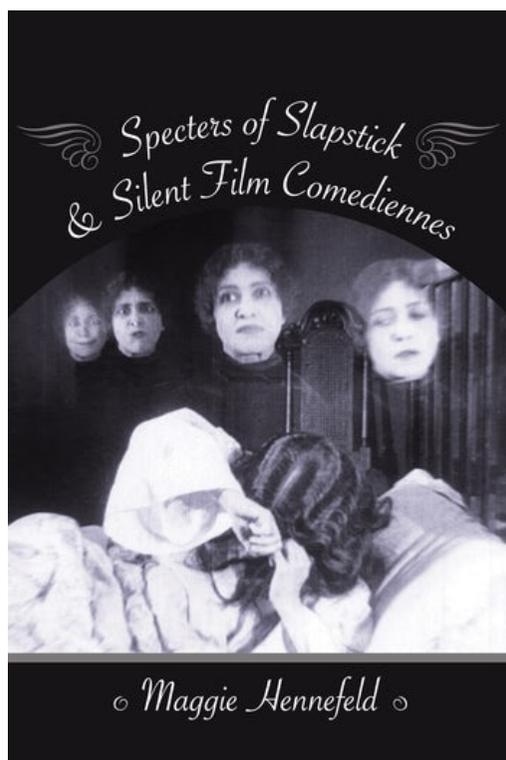
In chapter one, Gaines moves the emphasis of critical inquiry from seeking definitive answers to *the process of searching itself*. In so doing, she reterritorialises the ‘what happened?’ question, repurposing it as a rhetorical strategy that postpones a conclusive answer and a narrative closure, if you like. Chapter two tackles the present political implications of narrativising empirical evidence (artefacts from an unknowable or partially knowable past) by discussing the case of Antonia Dickson. The limits of our trust in historical artefacts is further undermined in the next chapter by examining conflicting accounts in Alice Guy-Blaché’s memoir.

The multiplicities inherent in any historical artefact are further dissected in chapter four, which explores the crucial decisions made in the recent digital restoration of Lois Weber’s film *Shoes* (1916). Here Gaines problematises how restoration aims to restore a condition that approximates as closely as possible ‘what it had been’, which she argues is really ‘what it never was’. Following this, the next chapter invokes conundrums in the philosophy of time as a way of probing the historian’s position in the present and narrative of the past, which always remains unreachable.

The historian’s inescapably limited vision in the present provides a point of departure for chapter six. Gaines provocatively asks ‘what if our current

historical work says more about *us* than it does about them?’ (p. 112). In approaching this question, she discusses the phenomenon of ‘tainting’, that is, the way in which present facts and perspectives are inflicted on the narration of past events. Chapter seven ponders over the possibility of a potential historiographic practice based on the unknowability of the ‘unnamed’. This anonymity-driven historiography would emphasise the precariousness and irregularity of labour over the historical agency of *nameable* persons, the subjects of a name-driven film history. The final chapter probes the gap between the historian’s present and the possibilities and aspirations – the once possible futures – of women film pioneers. Gaines concludes her study by expressing her urge to think about earlier ‘unthinkables’, positing historical research as a constant encounter with the strange and inscrutable. Her conclusion harks back to her initial question: ‘what happened to women in silent film industries?’ Here Gaines underlines how unanswerable ‘what happened’ questions are. By the end of the book, the reader is convinced of the futility of attempting definitive answers and the fertile possibilities opened up by constantly interrogating and troubling assumptions in the historiographic method.

With its strong emphasis on the instability of historical knowledge, *Pink-Slipped* opens up a wide range of possibilities for feminist practice in media historiography. While Gaines acknowledges the huge amount of empirical research proving that women were not only present but influential in the silent era, *Pink-Slipped* foregrounds the methodological limitations of such research, using theories of history from Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Hayden White, Ernst Bloch, and Joan W. Scott. In a way, Gaines’ book represents one step forward in her ongoing criticism of historiographic practices. But *Pink-Slipped* also marks a significant moment of transition in film histories inspired by second-wave feminist history and Foucauldian theory. Gaines quotes Foucault’s well-known phrase, ‘knowledge is not made for understanding; it is made for cutting’ (p. 160). This is what could be said of *Pink-Slipped*; it comes as a *cut* to disrupt the ongoing methodological assumptions for the sake of a restored historical narrative and to provide fruitful ground to further embrace the unknowable, the unthinkable, and the lost in the feminist media historiography practices.



Another noteworthy recent title in early cinema studies, *Spectres of Slapstick and Silent Film Comediennes* by Maggie Hennefeld (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), investigates tropes of female physical fluidity in slapstick in a manner comparable with Gaines' historiography of the unknown. Augmenting the already extremely rich scholarship on women's diverse presences in early cinema, Hennefeld's research hones in on slapstick representations of the female body and their relation to unfolding transformations in politics, society, and culture. In a way, Hennefeld's interest in closely analysing filmic content from a perspective informed by feminist film theory reinstates the worth of aesthetic film history, a method that has been relatively downplayed in the field, especially in the wake of data-driven digital methods. The book explores female bodies' rapidly shifting places in the public sphere, civic politics, and the industrial workforce as they are articulated in such widespread slapstick comedy tropes as women exploding out of chimneys, melting away, dismembered, beaten, or combusted. Focusing on the relationship between the history of early cinema and feminism through

a close analysis of female bodily performance, Hennefeld's book represents a significant contribution to the field in its refreshing methodological combination of cultural analysis and feminist historiography.

Over seven chapters, Hennefeld treads an uneasy path between feminism and comedy, analysing the cultural and political meanings of spectator laughter. The book revisits classic theories of laughter, such as Bakhtinian *carnivalesque* and Bergsonian laughter, from the perspective of feminist politics. The feminist carnivalesque, which celebrates images of female excess, such as grotesque corporeality, 'in order to defy sexist conventions and to assert women's entitlement to the exuberant pleasures of laughter and its liberating social potentials' (p. 11), provides insight into the political aesthetics of comic tropes of corporeal profusion in the slapstick genre. In her investigation, Hennefeld helpfully distinguishes between 'carnivalesque femininity' and 'female slapstick corporeality'. The former enacts a temporary insurrection against the cultural codes dictating female behaviour; the latter is characterised by a persistent inability to conform to physical and social laws. This distinction grounds a wider attempt to reconsider the political implications of what evokes laughter in slapstick, particularly its feminist political resonances in the sociocultural context of both the era of early cinema and today.

In her analysis, Hennefeld charts two main approaches to laughter, focalised through two figures: the killjoy and the unruly woman. For the killjoy approach, which is mostly associated with second-wave feminism's anti-laughter ethos, laughter perpetuates humor's misogynistic tendencies. The unruly woman, by contrast, 'wields laughter as a feminist weapon', reclaiming the power of the female grotesque and female laughter as means 'to challenge the social and symbolic systems that would keep women in their place' (p. 12). In adopting this perspective, *Spectres of Slapstick and Silent Film Comediennes* presents a valuable political analysis of feminist comedy, which resonates beyond the field of early cinema studies, speaking to feminist film theory at large.

Although *Spectres of Slapstick and Silent Film Comediennes* discusses a rich selection of slapstick titles made, roughly, between 1890 and 1910, in no way is it limited to inventorying or rediscovering historical titles. Hennefeld treats comedy tropes of corporeal transformation and spectrality as gateways through which we might retrace social and aesthetic possibilities both past and present. Like Gaines, Hennefeld treats unknowability as a productive ground for further historiographical and cultural analysis and exploration.

The visual record of female slapstick characters' bodily fluidity, for Hennefeld, allows us to reimagine the contingency and productive unknowability of the past as such. In this vein, female catastrophe comedies are regarded as fugitive spectres from an undead past. Their appearance, according to Hennefeld, reveals excluded notions of history and complex understandings of its temporal unfolding. Along this line, each chapter is dedicated to analysing relevant titles with a particular focus on how cinematic aesthetics function, both literally and figuratively, as symptoms of a wider sociocultural milieu.

In chapter one, 'Early Cinema and the Comedy of Female Catastrophe', Hennefeld focuses on 'female combustion', the recurrent slapstick comedy trope of women spontaneously combusting while doing housework. A detailed study of 'slapstick explosion' as an early genre category – the term is borrowed from Eileen Bowser – reveals how the trope can be used in an empowering way, whereby women frequently repurpose everyday technological or household objects as comic devices, for example, to ward off sexual aggressors. Following this, Hennefeld's attempt to archive destructive female metamorphosis concludes in chapter two, with a metaphorical observation about feminist historiographical practice. At this point, Hennefeld's treatment of corporeal combustion and metamorphosis as metaphors for archival artefacts resonates with Gaines' reference to Foucault's conception of knowledge producing a cut, instead of installing continuity: '[I]like the aftermath of a film trick that invites us not to see transformation in process, these comedienne spectres will return without warning, again to unleash their untimely destruction', writes Hennefeld (p. 82). These perspectives surely enhance widely accepted notions, not least that of the 'cinema of attractions'. They open up fertile avenues through which to explore the political implications, and sociocultural connotations, of aesthetic choices, rather than treating early cinema as only popular entertainment.

In the next chapter, 'Slapstick Comediennes in Transitional Cinema', Hennefeld investigates the ways in which gendered comic tropes, some of which could be compared with the cinema of attractions aesthetic style, were brought into conformity with transitional cinema's narrative grammar. Here, through a detailed survey of slapstick comediennes' key tropes in the transitional era, Hennefeld shows how a number of gendered trick films interweave spectacle and narrative. The fourth chapter compares the gendered slapstick aesthetics of American Vitagraph and French Pathé-Frères. Titled

‘The Geopolitics of Transitional Film Comedy’, it demonstrates how comedienne’s bodily performances played vital roles in negotiating industrial and geopolitical transitions in filmmaking. The new aesthetic horizons opened up by slapstick representations of female corporeality are further traced in D.W. Griffith’s narrative filmmaking in chapter five. The dialectic between the spiritual, fleshless woman and the voluptuous woman is presented as the basis of Griffith’s new film language, particularly in his ‘slapstick-inflected melodramas’, to use Hennefeld’s term.

The third part of the book, which is dedicated to feminist slapstick politics, starts with a chapter investigating early comedy aesthetics and suffragette social politics. Hennefeld explores a large body of slapstick comedy dealing with the demands and actions of feminist activists as well as their changing participation in the public sphere. The suffragettes were frequently taken as the subject of comedy, which ranged from carnivalesque exaggeration, through dreamy activists, to cross-dressing. When it comes to depicting suffragettes, this diversity of comic tropes is interpreted as the symptomatic traces of feminism’s fundamental contradictions, including its lack of unified goals and range of tactical objectives. Following on from this, chapter seven, ‘Radical Militancy and Slapstick Political Violence’ focuses on violent street protests and hunger strikes led by the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU) in Britain. Detained, incarcerated, and tortured, WSPU political prisoners were subjected to political violence enacted on their bodies. Filmmakers of the period represented this political violence in a wide variety of forms, such as the comic absurd and melodrama. Hennefeld focuses on how suffragette tactics of corporeal self-annihilation appropriate the repressive violence of the state apparatus, and concludes the chapter with the recording of Emily Wilding Davison’s ultimate act of self-annihilation as protest.

Investigating the political implications of female slapstick in the sociocultural context of early cinema, *Spectres of Slapstick* ends by celebrating female laughter as a political and historiographical tactic. For Hennefeld, the task of making visible forgotten histories of feminist social struggle and women’s formerly invisible cultural presences is inextricably linked with the struggle against the recurrence of such political obstruction and historical annihilation. Unconventionally, *Spectres of Slapstick* connects female laughter then and now through the cinematic aesthetics of corporeal excess. As Hennefeld remarks in the conclusion, ‘recognizing these cinematic spectres of the past, and allowing their difference to become sites of feminist haunting into the future, makes way for reimagining the social and aesthetic possibilities of the

present' (p. 237). This conceptual creativity and incisive cultural analysis makes *Spectres of Slapstick* a significant contribution, not only to early cinema studies and feminist media histories, but also to classic feminist literature on depictions of an excessive female body.

It is possible to see *Pink-Slipped* and *Spectres of Slapstick* as products of a visionary investigative potential that currently characterises feminist film historiography of early cinema. Throughout her scholarly career, Gaines' contributions to the methodology and practice of feminist film historiography, and her dedication to critically exploring their assumptions, have been extremely influential in this growing field. From this perspective, *Pink-Slipped* can be seen as a new addendum to her critical analysis, broadened to address diverse historiographical practices from restoration to preservation, historical research to narration. Consulting theories of history and historical time, Gaines sets almost all aspects of historiographical practice as in motion. This dynamic vision of historiography infuses Hennefeld's method of cultural analysis in *Spectres of Slapstick*. Creatively interweaving fields of film analysis, feminist politics, and historiography, Hennefeld's research enriches the understanding of *both* the past and the present.

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Notes

- [1] Hill 2016, p. 6.
- [2] Gaines 2004.
- [3] *Ibid.*, p. 117.
- [4] Cited in Gaines 2004, p. 119.