World Women: Still Circulating Silent Era Film Prints

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Feminists in film studies have been surprised to find evidence of so many women who worked as producers, directors, and writers during the first decades of the silent motion picture industry.¹ Few had imagined how many women worked in the United States, nor how many had pursued two-continent careers, crossing not only the Atlantic but the Pacific, nor how many crossed borders within continents in search of opportunity. Western feminism, however, has not automatically produced the right research questions, and if ever there was a case to be made for comparative national, world-inclusive feminist studies, this is that case.² A great triumph of feminism has been its critique of the limits that have historically been placed on women’s success in the working world, but feminism has not necessarily prepared us for so many striking exceptions to the rule. We did not expect, for instance, to find silent-era film producer Bahiga Hafez in Cairo, Egypt.³ Thus when we extrapolate from the first world to everywhere else, we risk underestimating whole worlds of women. A revised rule of thumb for research on women in the international silent film industries might then be this: in parts of the world we once thought women could not possibly have worked as producers, directors, or writers, they will be found.

Corollary to the rule that women might be found where we least expect is the rule that a woman producer might have worked in more than one national industry or even that she left one part of the world to start a motion picture venture in another. Stephanie Socha traveled from her native Poland, for instance, to start a film acting school in Lima, Peru, before directing and producing Los abismos de la vida (1929).⁴ Fern Andra, a circus performer from Watseka, Illinois, left her hometown and by 1915 had set up the Fern-Andra Film Studio in Berlin, Germany.⁵

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Figure 1. American Fern Andra started the German Fern-Andra Film Studio Deutsche Kinemathek, Berlin. WFP2-AND02.
With preliminary research uncovering so many multiple-nation careers, we may begin to ask how so many women dreamed and then facilitated the global reach the new industry promised, a question that might not have been asked with regard to men. The continental moves of celebrated male émigré directors has explained entire schools of exported and imported visual style. Certainly the female equivalent of a world style is the diva form developed by Danish actress Asta Nielsen in *The Abyss* (1911). We can trace the diva’s bodily attitude and downward-spiraling narrative from Denmark to Germany to Italy to Mexico. A distinction, however, needs to be made here between circulating motion picture prints and the transnational careers of motion picture personnel. For we are interested in asking about non-correlation as well as correlation. In the most perfect correlation, prints traveling ahead prepared the opportunity for a cross-continental career, as in the case of American Florence Turner, whose motion picture popularity in Britain made it possible for her to start Turner Films, Ltd., in London in 1913. There, with Larry Trimble, she produced and starred in the extant short *Daisy Doodad’s Dial* (1914), as well as later feature films. Turner, the former “Vitagraph Girl,” is only one example of an actress who could claim international star recognition and thus take advantage of the creative and economic opportunities that opened up in that first decade. Here let us not take for granted the practice, predominant in the West, of women taking women’s roles. If men had played women’s roles, as they did in Japanese silent cinema, actresses would not have been on the set to prove their indispensability and thus eventually to have been able to parlay box office success into investment capital.

![Figure 2. American Florence Turner in the British Daisy Doodad’s Dial (Turner Films, 1914). Frame enlargement. WFP-TURNE04.](image-url)
Women producers and writers (some of whom were effectively directors) are significant for what they tell us about economic mobility and job fluidity. The opportunities for women in the first decade constitute a case study in which neither class nor gender disqualified job seekers. In addition, in an industry so new it is remarkable to find the apparent ease with which some women moved between national industries, even given a language difference. Perhaps the “universal language” mythos of the silent motion picture industry encouraged the idea that language difference was not a barrier. The phenomenon we consider here goes beyond the way the U.S. silent industry welcomed others with European-sounding names, whether fake or authentic. And here we may note the way the industry was unwelcoming to other immigrants, as in the attempts of Chinese American, Japanese American, and Mexican American women to start their own independent production companies, or the sting of class difference as described in Russian Jewish immigrant Anzia Yezierska’s scathing criticism of the motion picture industry.

But my subject is the non-correlation as well as the correlation between international careers and circulating prints. Rather than starting with biographical narratives, I start from the curious existence of archival objects. I am interested in what conclusions we can draw about women’s silent-era work from the holdings of members of the Fédération Internationale des Archives du Film. What patterns are revealed when we compare archival holdings? In the following, I privilege Alice Guy Blaché and Gene Gauntier, treating them as paradigms representing the challenges of conducting research across national boundaries, and especially of following the trail of motion picture film prints, a trail that begins with worldwide shipping in the silent era.

One could argue that every print held today in a national archive provides the basis of a contemporary claim for that work as part of national exhibition history as well as production history. More difficult to answer, however, is the question as to whether the women who invented the motion picture industry would have thought of themselves as part of one national industry as opposed to another. To what national industry history did Florence Turner think she belonged—the American or the British? Within the field of motion picture history, the best-known example is Alice Guy Blaché, whose two-continent career is divided into the French Gaumont (1896–1907) and American company portions (1910–23). The first major exhibition of her extant work, which opened in January 2010 at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, called attention to the importance of her position as president of the Ft. Lee, New Jersey, Solax Company, where between 1910 and 1912 she produced, directed, and wrote numerous short films. For film scholars and archivists, this retrospective has had special behind-the-scenes significance as a curatorial coup achieved through the location of Alice Guy’s films in fourteen different archives located in six countries—France, the United States, Germany, Sweden, Spain, and Belgium. It marked the discovery in a seventh
country—Canada—of the first title produced at Solax, *Mixed Pets* (1910), a nitrate positive print of which was donated to the U.S. Library of Congress by the Provincial Archives of Alberta.\(^\text{15}\)

There it is another title, however, that dramatizes the complexities of the two-continent career and suggests the kinds of mysteries that surround

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Figure 3. Alice Guy Blaché, Gaumont Company producer-director-writer, 1907 (Cinémathèque Royale, Bruxelles). WFP-GUY16.
surviving silent-era film prints. A print of Alice Guy Blaché’s *Le Matelas Alcoolique* (Gaumont, 1906) survives in the National Film and Television Archive in London under the English-language title *The Drunken Mattress*. Another print survives as *Le Matelas Alcoolique* in the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York. Also titled *Le Matelas Epileptique* or *The Epileptic Mattress*, according to the Whitney Museum program notes, the comedy features a cross-dressing male maid who inadvertently sews a drunk into the mattress she is airing. In the London print’s last scene, an interior set of the bedroom of the sleepy couple to whose bed the “drunken mattress” is delivered exhibits the Solax Company logo on the wall. But is this a Solax or a Gaumont film? We can certainly see from the Old World European character of the streets as well as from the flavor of the bawdy chase that this is an early French film comedy. However, one could argue that if the final scene in the London archive print is effectively trademarked “Solax,” for distribution purposes this print is a peculiar Gaumont-Solax hybrid. Although certainly more Gaumont than Solax, the extant London print is important for what it tells us about world distribution. Before further research, we could make a hypothesis. We could hypothesize from the existence of this print that it was popular enough for Madame Blaché to remake by reshooting a single scene and to distribute as early as 1910 at the inception of the Solax Company. The extant print points to the continued close connection she and her husband, Herbert, had with Gaumont and to the calculation of profitability based on the expectation that Solax would benefit from the world distribution arrangements that Gaumont had secured.16

We already know some of the modes in which women traveled abroad in the earliest decades of the twentieth century. Of course, they transported
their luggage and their lives under significantly different social and economic conditions. While the less fortunate took passage as immigrants, the wealthy were tourists, and, in some cases, explorers, some of whom carted motion picture cameras along with them, like Osa and Martin Johnson. To these new options we add a fourth. In the emerging motion picture industry, women relocated in search of work opportunities or, once part of a company, crossed continents in the great quest for exotic locations. In the 1910s they looked for settings for short subjects (Gene Gauntier for the Kalem Company) and in the 1920s they sought backdrops for extravaganzas (June Mathis for the Metro Pictures Corporation production of *Ben-Hur*, 1924). They also followed men, and more often than not had a male business partner or husband-collaborator. Alice Guy’s immigration to the United States is explained by her marriage to Herbert Blaché, who was effectively transferred to Cleveland, Ohio, by the Gaumont Company. Here is one place where gender explains the special difficulties researchers encounter when they attempt to reconstruct these careers through archival searches. In contrast with men, women had more total names—pseudonyms, stage names, maiden names, married names, and acquired aristocratic titles. Valda Valkyrien, the Danish actress, was also Adele Frede, Baroness Dewitz, Mademoiselle Valkyrien, and Mrs. Adele Stuart Otto. Her career began with the Nordisk company in Copenhagen and continued in the United States, where she worked at the Thanhouser Company. Not uncharacteristically, Valkyrien, born in Reykjavik, Iceland, typifies the aristocratic and artistic personas many of these women arranged through marriage or invented for themselves in these early years.

While scholars of colonial expansion and comparative women’s social history might approach this topic by reading diaries, memoirs, and letters as well as consulting census reports and passenger shipboard records, motion picture historians have a specialized set of objects to study. We have the physical film prints deposited in the vaults of national members of the Fédération Internationale des Archives du Film (FIAF). In the years since the institution of the Treasures from the FIAF Archives online, film scholars have become increasingly fascinated with the records of deposit. While we know that stories about the survival as well as the destruction of motion picture prints is often apocryphal, we still want to know the circumstances under which films were acquired, deposited, and preserved and exhibited over the years in which the FIAF archives were established, beginning in 1938. Crucially, we want to know what the pattern of extant titles tells us, if anything, about the careers these women had in the first two decades of the battle for world film industry dominance waged among France, Italy, Germany, Britain, and the United States. Because world film distribution more than any other factor explains why silent-era 35 mm film prints end up in archives far from the country of their origin, we could begin there. But we would not want to stop there because in the intervening years since a film print was first deposited, it may have taken any number of detours.
inventoried or accessioned, any number of transactions, many between FIAF archives themselves, might have taken place.

Let us take, for example, the extant print of *The Red Lantern* (1919), adapted and with continuity written by June Mathis and starring Alla Nazimova, produced by Alla Nazimova Productions, and distributed by Metro
Pictures Corporation. Notably, the intricately elaborate sets were designed by Henri Menessier, who started with Alice Guy Blaché at the Solax Company, and we could speculate that Natacha Rambova designed Nazimova’s striking costumes. Although no print exists in any of the U.S. film archives, one 35 mm print is held in Gosfilmofond in Moscow, and a second is at the Cinémathèque Royale in Brussels. According to the title on the head of the film print, the Belgian archive restored the film in 1996. The Russian intertitles were replaced with the original English titles from the Metro records deposited at the University of Southern California. We can infer that Metro Pictures Corporation’s international distribution reached as far as Moscow when we also note that a print of *Eye for Eye* (Nazimova Productions, 1918) is also listed as held by Gosfilmofond. These two titles were part of the group of nine features Nazimova Productions had contracted with Metro to produce and distribute between 1917 and 1921. Of the nine titles, Metro may have