

Editor's Introduction

Betterment

One of the sad ironies of twentieth-century political life in the United States is how the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, which extended voting rights to all women citizens of the republic, effectively worked thereafter to mark almost every social, political, and cultural initiative mounted by women as only “special interest.” Prior to the amendment’s ratification in 1920, the suffrage movement had provided women of various ideological stripes and from diverse backgrounds a context for both complaint and action within a public sphere where their very disenfranchisement was increasingly grounds for both acknowledging and granting them a voice in cultural enterprises, regulatory and reform institutions, and even social policy formation, albeit stratified by those hierarchies of race, ethnicity, age, religion, and class that operated everywhere else in American society.

By the 1910s it was practically unthinkable to hold a hearing on a pressing social problem, form a commission addressing inequities or corruption, or found an institute dedicated to reform without seeking the valued testimony, perspectives, and participation of women *as women*. Yet by 1930, this expansive politics of inclusion was all but forgotten, replaced in historical memory by grotesque caricatures of matronly reformers, those meddling Mrs. Grundys who had been (and continued to be) perpetuated in the social imaginary by, for example, anti-censorship constituencies that, curiously enough, included significant numbers of women. Women citizens were now sufficiently anonymized through bureaucratic divisions of labor such that their work could never be construed as interest of any kind, and certainly not as gendered interest.

Scholarly film history has often simply assumed or confirmed this popular trope about women’s rather uncomplicated and uniform relation to uplift in the silent era. A recent monograph on the history of film censorship in America, for example, describes the composition of the National Board of Censorship after its creation by the People’s Institute in 1909 as “a group of committees—made up mostly of women—[who] did the reviewing based on

accepted Victorian sentiments. The disproportionate number of women affirmed the Victorian notion that they were morally superior by nature and best qualified to judge a movie's influence."¹ Here, of course, the historian doesn't subscribe to the spurious "Victorian notion" about women's natural moral superiority, but he effectively mobilizes that idea as socially operative in the era and wholly adequate to exhaustively describe these women reviewers' charge, their self-understanding, and the way their work was popularly received as a woman's prerogative.

Shelley Stamp has recently described and analyzed how several decades of extensive historical and historiographical work on women's relation to early cinema—research conducted by scores of international scholars—has been either virtually ignored or marginalized by contemporary English-language textbooks regularly adopted for college and university courses on film and media history.² The essays that compose this special issue of *Feminist Media Histories* on "betterment" are offered both as a critique of reigning and received ideas about women and reform in the silent era and as contributions to ongoing research on the social and cultural politics of the cinema in the early twentieth century, though without any illusions that these analyses will somehow significantly affect dominant film historical narratives about the development of cinema as a social force, since we obviously remain in a post-enfranchisement era where feminist perspectives remain of "special interest" only.

Interestingly, thirty years ago Robert Sklar pointed to emergent and innovative work on women's relation to early cinema by both social historians and cinema studies scholars as indicating a possible future of a materialist practice of film history for which questions of social class, political power, and institutional contradictions would be central.³ Citing essays by Miriam Hansen, Judith Mayne, and Elizabeth Ewen, Sklar proposed that the sort of expanded social history practiced in the early 1980s by historians such as Ewen, Kathy Peiss, and Roy Rosenzweig would go a long way toward answering, or at least complicating and enriching, some of the imminent questions about women's "place" in the cinema—questions about agency and about women's semiotic inscription that were being asked by cinema studies scholars such as Hansen and Mayne—in part by expanding both the archive and the social contexts through which we might investigate early cinema. "Those radical social historians who have so far written about early cinema have in general not made it the central focus of inquiry, but have considered it as part of immigrant and working-class lives, as one of many sites of leisure and communal activity," Sklar noted.⁴ By resituating the cinema within the larger social fabric of which it was a part, Sklar pointed the way toward a history of the cinema that might be freed from

the tyranny of the film text as the principal datum from which to derive an account of cinema's historical development. Instead, the institutional history of the cinema could more profitably be pursued through its multiple and contradictory relations with other institutions and with differently situated constituencies who struggled not only over the meanings of the films they saw but over the mission of the cinema itself.

While we might today observe that film history has indeed taken many lessons from materialist social history since the publication of Sklar's essay in 1988, with sundry accounts now in place about various historical modes of cinemagoing as well as an ever-growing interest in nontheatrical experiences of motion pictures, issues of social class and political struggle have in many cases remained as muted and underdeveloped as before. All the essays in this issue were originally presented at the Eighth International Women and the Silent Screen conference, held at the University of Pittsburgh in the summer of 2015.⁵ Holding this biennial conference in postindustrial Pittsburgh afforded an occasion for remembering how a practice of American social history that foregrounded issues of labor, leisure, and social class provided an important basis for expanding feminist film history and historiography during the 1980s and beyond; recalling that era today, we might profitably ask how that legacy continues to shape the questions we ask and the methods we adopt and innovate so as to arrive at new questions.

One of the most widely accepted and appreciated results of early efforts at uplift in relation to the cinema was precisely its presumed effects on the film text itself, that continuing refinement of narrative form and style that took place after the nickelodeon era, a project that often corresponded to and was propelled by genteel hopes in the social refinement of taste. Aesthetic education via the motion picture was routinely praised for its ability to cultivate citizenship through presenting an absorbing entertainment that might eschew a sustained contemplation of social realities in favor of, at best, self-improving edification, but wholesome diversion at the very least. As the industrial psychologist Hugo Münsterberg happily observed at the close of his famous 1916 monograph on film aesthetics, "Communities at first always prefer Sousa to Beethoven. The moving picture audience could only by slow steps be brought from the tasteless and vulgar eccentricities of the first period to the best plays of today, and the plays of today can be nothing but the beginning of the great upward movement which we hope for in the photoplay."⁶

Of course, this particular project of betterment was articulated at a moment immediately following the 1915 Mutual Decision, in which the US Supreme

Court defined motion pictures as “a business pure and simple” and therefore not protected by First Amendment guarantees of free expression. Historians such as Lee Grieveson have viewed this juridical and regulatory context as radically diminishing the motion picture’s ability to function as social discourse, thereby accelerating the film industry’s embrace of harmless entertainment.⁷ Münsterberg explicitly set his Kantian aesthetics against an emergent cinema of reform by posing aesthetic education itself as an efficient, constructive, and pacifying means of Americanization, and he advised scenarists to write stories that take the cinema audience away from their everyday practical concerns and instead immerse them in abstract human emotions by providing opportunities to appreciate universal ideals: “The men and women who carry out the action of the plot must not be people whom we may meet in the street tomorrow.”⁸ The psychologist’s contemporaneous prescriptions were aggressively pursued by the American film industry in the late 1910s, and would-be authors of motion-picture stories were often advised to study “the work of the leading companies” as well as to remember, in the words of Vitagraph scenarist Marguerite Bertsch, that the public is “the great army of those who have failed, yet who nevertheless cherish, sometimes hopefully more than despairingly, their belief in the ultimate reward for persistent effort,” and thus constitute an ever-exploitable market for happy endings.⁹

Yet both before and after a rapid consolidation in the late 1910s of a globalizing corporate studio system that increasingly sought to stifle reform efforts by ignoring them, lobbying against them, and attempting to absorb reformers’ regulatory demands as already effectively satisfied by judicious corporate oversight and trade cooperation, there remained individuals, groups, and organizations committed to diverse projects of betterment in which the cinema played a significant if not a central role.¹⁰ Women often conceived and carried out these projects—initiatives that also sometimes explicitly expressed the social and political interests of women. By attending to the specificity of these civic enterprises and practices, the essays of this special issue are offered as a means of questioning the place of women in film historical considerations of uplift and progressivism in the early cinema. Standard accounts of the era have often been deeply marked by the early public relations successes of the industry itself where women’s concerns were paternalistically entertained by, say, the Hays Office’s open-door policy of the 1920s, but also thereby reduced to presumably only one or two of several nagging special-interest constituencies with axes to grind. The politics of betterment in relation to international cinema during the 1910s and 1920s cannot of course be reduced to any single set of issues, positions, interests,

groups, or institutions. Instead, the essays gathered here ask us to form a more hesitant, a more considered, and a more complicated appreciation of women's participation in the early cinema as a means of social progress.

Constance Balides's essay "Sociological Film, Reform Publicity, and the Secular Spectator: Social Problems in the Transitional Era" describes a taxonomical condition of the film trade in the United States at the end of the transitional period, just prior to the full ascendancy of classical narration. The so-called "sociological film" was valued for the intrusion of recognizable social forces into the story in a manner dissonant with emergent conventions of realism but commensurate with nineteenth- and early twentieth-century practices of a didactic visual culture of reform. Unlike those sorts of pacifying aesthetic refinements of motion pictures that were to be advocated by Münsterberg and Bertsch, sociological films in Balides's account were educational and, by using visual strategies to encourage empathy with the plights of others, sought to engage the viewer's participation in the solving of social problems. The very difficulty of excavating the category of the sociological film as a form of knowledge helps to explain, in part, the formation and stylistic practices of a filmmaker like Lois Weber, as well as what might be called her growing unfashionableness at the end of the decade. This transformation was a result not only of a post-Progressive Era change of cinematic fashions, but also of a fundamental disarticulation of the very categories of visual culture through which Weber's reformist cinema was meaningful and valued. Balides's analysis allows us a glimpse into how the eventual containment of class issues with respect to depictions of the poor on-screen and elsewhere was deeply intertwined with diminishing the relevance of women's interests in social reform.

Jennifer Horne's reconsideration of the better films movement and the various contexts of women's community-building and organizing work associated with the directives of the National Board of Review challenges conventional accounts of the role women's organizations played in both early film educational initiatives and civic engagements with the film industry. Horne accomplishes this change of perspective by attending to the unstable political conditions through which women's organizations took up the cause of betterment both in the standards of film depictions and in the very terms through which their own perspectives might be accorded civic relevance and legibility. Horne's important historiographical intervention here is not to demand that we attend to particular statements or surviving documents in the archive to ascertain the cultural perspectives of the better films network of organizations, but instead to trace the assemblages of women involved in this work as indicative of civic

organizations' responsiveness to "the place of women" with respect to social authority as they sought to leverage that very place. The fact that cinema often provided these organizations such occasions becomes denaturalized here, and while cinema studies remains as skeptical of the empirical bases of social history as it was in the 1980s, Horne's work shows how a critical project that refuses the historical recovery of experience can nevertheless reveal the rich institutional and governmental contexts in which gendered labor struggled to make itself meaningful, and from which it shaped the media terrain of American society for decades to come.

The production history of the film *Once Upon a Time* (1922) provides Christina Lane with a rich case study for a critical reflection on the significance of women's organizations for local and regional cultural politics. It is also a biographical-historical inquiry into how such civic groups allowed Ruth Bryan Owen, a privileged woman of the elite political class and eventual US congresswoman from Florida, the opportunity to pursue filmmaking as a means of social engagement and community building that could resolve problems in both her personal life and her professional career. Lane reads the mounting of this Orientalist fantasy by Owen and by the members of the Housekeepers' Club of Coconut Grove as providing a progressive if somewhat fraught alternative vision of the local community, one that pushed against prevailing separations of classes, races, ethnicities, and genders. Lane's essay implicitly raises familiar questions about the prevalence of ethnic disguise then being promulgated by Hollywood and new consumer markets, but from the unusual perspective of a regional cultural politics less concerned with the commodity culture of self-fashioning than with resisting the patriarchal imposition of Jim Crow.

Luciana Corrêa de Araújo's research on the brief and ill-fated career of 1920s Brazilian movie star Eva Nil describes the necessity for this celebrated film actress to publicly downplay or elide her role in the construction of her star image as well as her creative agency in the motion pictures in which she appeared, particularly her work as a cinematographer. More importantly, Araújo also reveals how Nil's feminist attempt at refashioning her stardom was complicated by evolving betterment projects that sought to elevate the cultural status of Brazilian cinema along nationalist lines. Here, the fan magazines and emergent cinephile press in Brazil seemingly championed Nil as a particularly unique and important screen talent for raising the quality and standards of national production while simultaneously promoting evolving nationalist conventions of realism and cosmopolitanism that rapidly attenuated Nil's attempts at refiguring gender expectations and the generic conventions associated with screen

heroines. Nil's troubled stardom provides an opportunity to contemplate how progressive aesthetic projects within a particular national context not only worked against professional women's political interests but ultimately reaffirmed male privilege within a developing studio system and the culture at large.

While Sumiko Higashi's history of *Photoplay's* early years functions as an effective critique of the era's culture industry, it also provides an astute and measured account of the magazine's rapid evolution from a regional trade publication, to a fan magazine aimed at working-class women, to its eventual embrace of the trappings of a middlebrow culture that would expand its circulation to mass proportions. From its humble and uneven beginnings to its rise as a pre-eminent fan publication, *Photoplay* would perform the sort of transformational success that its depicted versions of Hollywood lifestyles promoted and that its many advertisers promised. In its pages, a proffered refinement of taste operated to expand and secure a market by a gendered address to consumers seeking a better way of life. Higashi's analysis cautions against the dangers of assuming that proletarian cultural forms indicate progressive expressions of working-class autonomy or resistance, since the massification of such forms was often accomplished through promises of uplift and refinement that exploited specific imaginary conditions of the working poor through consumerist fantasies of transformation and class mobility all the while leaving in place the conditions of an oppressively gendered labor market in which so many readers of magazines such as *Photoplay* toiled.

But lest we despair that workers and working-class cultures were effectively contained or absorbed by the burgeoning cinema with its aligned institutions and industries, we are advised otherwise by Annie Fee's fascinating excavation of the Parisian shopgirl-as-cinemagoer. With her uninformed consumption of cheap melodramas in post-World War I France, the widely disparaged *midinette* served as a plebeian foil against which an elite, mostly male cinephile culture not only constructed itself as the guardians of cinema's artistic achievements but likewise aided in establishing historiographical protocols that have to this day all but eliminated early French popular cinema and its audiences from standard film historical accounts. Neither a cipher of modernity nor an elusive historical spectator lost amid the ruined maps of early twentieth-century Paris, the *midinette* turns out to be a very nameable department store clerk, or, rather, any number of such young, working-class women and their housewife sisters, who wrote letters to serial stars, coordinated community events in their neighborhood theaters, participated in the left-wing political meetings often held in those cinemas, and even led revolts out of the cinemas and into the streets of Montmartre. Fee's research represents the very best of a militant film history that runs past and

survives the historical revisionism of the 1980s, the celebrated appeals of the 1990s to cinematic modernity as a history of the sensorium, and the empirical turn to mapping and big data of our present moment, in order to continue a radical film historical practice that questions the underlying assumptions of those standard film histories that we are continually being sold. This is history written on behalf of those in the past for whom we still care, written on behalf of those we love.

Finally, this issue of *Feminist Media Histories* concludes with the publication of Martin F. Norden's careful reconstruction of a speech delivered by Lois Weber, to the Los Angeles Woman's Club in July 1913, and titled "The Making of Picture Plays That Will Have an Influence for Good on the Public Mind." While public speaking was an important part of Weber's missionary and advocacy work, little remains of this aspect of her career, and hence this reconstruction is a particularly interesting glimpse into Weber's rhetorical zeal. Delivered while she was serving as mayor of Universal City, the speech unsurprisingly promotes the interests of the American film industry, with Universal singled out for its commitments to uplifting the tastes of its audiences, and with Weber herself serving as an instance of the studio's lofty aims. Commenting on issues such as censorship and the educational effectiveness of motion pictures as a universal language, Weber promotes here a history of film as one of an amusement emerging from the crudity and vulgarity of an earlier moment into a more socially responsible and relevant mass medium capable of solving social problems that are here rather vaguely defined and unspecified. Such a transformation of the cinema, she asserts, has come about because of the involvement of those better elements of society who sought to correct the deficiencies of a poor and working-class cinema of diversion.

In many ways, such a history is not all that different from the stories about the cinema and its audiences promoted by Münsterberg and Bertsch—stories that helped curtail the sort of reformist filmmaking to which Weber was so committed. It is evident where Weber's account differs from what would soon become the hegemonic commitment to quality entertainment by the way she worries in 1913 about the bifurcation of the cinema into two separate economies: with cheap one-reelers being seen in cheap houses by those with little money or leisure time; and with a quality cinema of feature-length historical spectacle and Kinemacolor actualities being viewed by the well-to-do in the bigger, more expensive houses. For Weber, this division in the market was creating conditions in which the critical opinions of "thinking people" were no longer in the service of improving the cinema for everyone. While such a fear can easily be

seen as an instance of class paternalism in which it was impossible for Weber to conceive of any self-organized projects of betterment arising among the working poor, she is equally revolted by the elitism, excess, and narcissism of the cinema of quality. Instead, Weber pleads with members of the Los Angeles Woman's Club not to abandon the working masses, but to envision a society in which we all exist in affective relation through a mass medium of social *engagement*, a medium through which we might better come to see, know, and understand one another anew. ■

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NOTES

1. William D. Romanowski, *Reforming Hollywood: How Protestants Fought for Freedom at the Movies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 19.

2. Shelley Stamp, "Forgetting Women and the Silent Screen," paper delivered at the Ninth International Women and the Silent Screen conference: "Histories, Her-stories, and Method," Shanghai, June 16–18, 2017.

3. Robert Sklar, "Oh! *Althusser!*: Historiography and the Rise of Cinema Studies," *Radical History Review* 41 (Spring 1988): 11–35.

4. *Ibid.*, 27.

5. The one exception is Sumiko's Higashi's essay on *Photoplay*, a companion essay to her keynote address at the Pittsburgh conference, "The Decline of Middlebrow Taste in Celebrity Culture: The First Fan Magazines," which dealt largely with the early history of *Motion Picture Story*.

6. Hugo Münsterberg, *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study and Other Writings*, ed. Allan Langdale (New York: Routledge, 2002), 158.

7. Lee Grieveson, "Not Harmless Entertainment: State Censorship and Cinema in the Transitional Era," in *American Cinema's Transitional Era: Audiences, Institutions, Practices*, ed. Charlie Keil and Shelley Stamp (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 265–84.

8. Münsterberg, *The Photoplay*, 137.

9. Marguerite Bertsch, *How to Write for Motion Pictures: A Manual of Instruction and Information* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1917), 24–25, 30.

10. While there are numerous examples of the industrial disarticulation of reform discourse at all levels of society, much of the organization of these efforts at the national level was provided by the trade organization the National Association of the Motion Picture Industry (NAMPI) from 1916 to 1921, and then by the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) after the Hollywood scandals of the early 1920s.