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DOI

[10.1525/fmh.2023.9.2.101](https://doi.org/10.1525/fmh.2023.9.2.101)

Publication date

2023

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Feminist Media Histories

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[Link to publication](https://doi.org/10.1525/fmh.2023.9.2.101)

Citation for published version (APA):

Saccone, K. (2023). Doing "Applied Film History": An Interview with Silent Film Curator Elif Rongen-Kaynakçi. *Feminist Media Histories*, 9(2), 101-130.
<https://doi.org/10.1525/fmh.2023.9.2.101>

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Doing “Applied Film History”

An Interview with Silent Film Curator Elif Rongen-Kaynakçi

ABSTRACT Kate Saccone interviews Elif Rongen-Kaynakçi, Eye Filmmuseum’s silent film curator. Rongen-Kaynakçi discusses various aspects of her career and daily work, from archival research and film restoration projects to curating film programs and working with scholars and digital research platforms. Central to this conversation is Rongen-Kaynakçi’s role within the archive in relation to feminist film history and challenging established (patriarchal) film histories. **KEYWORDS** Cinema’s First Nasty Women, Eye Filmmuseum, film exhibition, film restoration, historiography, Little Chrysa, silent cinema

“We can and should be changing the film history that was handed down to us,” Elif Rongen-Kaynakçi excitedly said to me one sunny September day in Amsterdam. This provocation is, of course, a familiar rallying cry for the community of feminist film historians, students, curators, and archivists within which the international biannual conference Women and the Silent Screen is embedded. But Elif’s point does not just reflect a challenge to established patriarchal early cinema histories; it also suggests the importance of a critical, anticanonical approach toward film heritage more broadly. As the silent film curator at Eye Filmmuseum in the Netherlands, Elif’s curatorial efforts engage with these overlapping practices: she researches, restores, and presents marginalized silent films made by women or featuring lesser known actresses; and she has dedicated her career to busting the canon, to centering what is often overlooked, and to rethinking notions of historical value in the archive. While she would likely be the first to say that Eye’s specific institutional history and policies—an emphasis on women filmmakers, a long-standing enthusiasm for the noncanonical and the fragmentary, for example—helped to shape her curatorial practice and thinking, it only takes a few minutes with her to recognize a genuine (and gleeful) personal passion for, and curiosity of, the unknown (see figure 1).

Elif began working at Eye in 1999 and now oversees the archive’s rich international silent film collection. She has been involved in numerous film

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FIGURE 1. Elif Rongen-Kaynakçi, silent film curator at Eye Filmmuseum. Courtesy of Rongen-Kaynakçi.

preservation, restoration, and presentation projects, including *Beyond the Rocks* (1922), *Shoes* (1916), *The Spanish Dancer* (1923), and *Filibus* (1915), and she regularly organizes film programs at archival film festivals like Le Giornate del Cinema Muto and Il Cinema Ritrovato. As an emerging feminist film scholar with an interest in silent cinema and curatorial theory and practice, I have been watching Elif's work over the years, both from afar and, since I moved to Amsterdam in 2020, in closer proximity. The chance to interview her was an opportunity to unpack the varied work she does (re)circulating and (re)contextualizing silent films while engaging with the actual material and physical conditions of the archive. I wanted to understand the (feminist) film historiographical potential of her specific public-facing and hands-on practical work, and I wanted to know how she considers her work in relation to larger cultural and historical questions around women's agency in past cinema industries and their legacies today. Thus, using her presentations at the June 2022 Women and the Silent Screen conference as a loose structuring guide, I asked her about the different (but, of course, overlapping) aspects of her curatorial activities: archival research, film restoration, film presentation, and scholarship.

Our conversation, which took place at Eye's Collection Center on September 2, 2022, reflects Elif's wide-ranging interests and deep knowledge of and commitment to silent cinema history and turn-of-the-century popular culture. Woven throughout are reflections on the evolution of her curatorial thinking and practice, her excitement for the potentials of the digital present, and her awareness of the iterative nature of contemporary archival recovery work, labor that she inspiringly calls "applied film history." The interview below has been condensed, edited, and slightly reorganized for clarity.

Kate Saccone: I want to start by discussing your research into the comic actress Little Chryisia, which is so inspiring in terms of how tirelessly you have been digging into this unknown woman's stage and film career.¹ It's really a reflection of how fragmentary and iterative feminist film (archival) research often is, as you are pulling together bits and pieces from various sources, both visual and print, to weave together a career. You have now identified fifty-two film credits, fifteen of which are extant, but you are still faced with a number of unknowns, such as what happened to Little Chryisia after 1915. Could you talk a little bit about this research project?

Elif Rongen-Kaynakçi: When I present this research project, I make sure to say this is, in a way, a very insignificant woman in film history, and that makes her dear to me because there are so many women just like her. By researching Little Chryisia, and recognizing and following the patterns of this fragmentary research, I have learned how to better understand other actresses who remain unknown—women that I hope others will pick up in their research (see figures 2 and 3)!

KS: I like this idea that the patterns of research can serve as models for the study of other relatively unknown women from the silent era. One thing I see regularly, and this is something you also covered in your conference presentation on Little Chryisia, is the fact that women's names often changed for various personal or professional reasons. For example, you discovered that Little Chryisia's character name was changed from Cunégonde to Arabella when her films were distributed in the United States, and that she herself may have been known as Miss Calcott in England prior to coming to France. These discoveries really highlight how it's important to consider the possibility of a multiplicity of names.

ERK: Yes, and I'm very glad and excited to say that I'm seeing these patterns of research being followed very widely now. For example, at the recent "Off-and On-Screen: The 'New Woman' in the Cinema of the



FIGURE 2. Little Chrysia in *Cunégonde femme cochère* (Cunégonde the Coachwoman, dir. unknown), 1913. Courtesy of the Eye Filmmuseum.

Russian Empire” conference, there were archivist presentations where almost everything that we thought we knew [about women from the Russian Empire] turned out to be wrong, like the date of death of Diana Karenne turns out to be twenty or thirty years later than what was assumed by many.² Why? Because her name changed, of course. This particular mindset for researching women in early cinema—i.e., being aware of the fact that maybe their name changed, maybe they migrated, maybe they married—is so essential, not only to correct previous mistakes but also to uncover careers of women we still know practically



FIGURE 3. Little Chrysia in *Cunégonde femme crampon* (Cunégonde the Nasty Woman, dir. unknown), 1912. Courtesy of the Eye Filmmuseum.

nothing about. I'm really excited to see this approach being applied to different sources and different language territories. And the amount of information that is coming out is stunning.

KS: Yes, we now have access to many different primary sources online. How has your research process changed in the last decade or so as various sources have become more available?

ERK: I understand now that it's important not to rely on one source, or one language even. For example, with Little Chrysia, we always thought she was French, so we were digging into French sources. It comes automatically, you don't think otherwise. But it was so helpful to cross-reference other language sources, like a German flyer or an English newspaper, in order to confirm some dubious discoveries. Actually, for Little Chrysia, every research breakthrough came from a different language source. What I was seeing ten years ago or so was so different. Lantern was available, but that was more homogeneous then—you were looking mostly at trade magazines in English (and a few years later some French publications were added that I used).³ Whereas now I am able to cross reference everything, not only in many different language sources but also in many different types of sources, from a news item to a promotional flyer, which might include photographs. This sort of

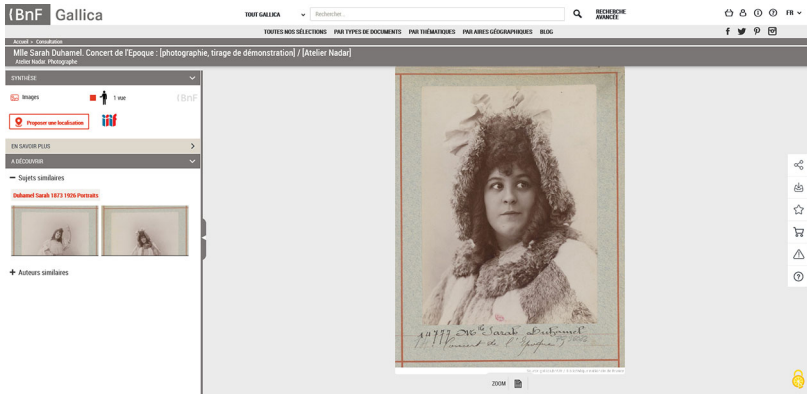


FIGURE 4. Screenshot, French actress Sarah Duhamel's portrait in the digital library Gallica (Bibliothèque nationale de France).

varied cross referencing is essential to fully understand women's film history, and it's now possible, which I find so exciting. Every day sources are being added—the challenge is to remember that you have to return to databases like Gallica or Lantern. Now when I talk about Little Chryisia, I have to always look again in these resources because new material is constantly being added, better linked, or better described (see figure 4).

KS: Listening to you talk now, it strikes me how your Little Chryisia research exemplifies both the expanding possibilities of doing feminist film historiography in the digital era and the fact that this work is, especially now, never quite done.

ERK: Exactly! Obviously, ten or fifteen years ago I was not able to find anything on Little Chryisia, and around five years ago it suddenly became more possible to start this continued digging and cross referencing. [And now] none of us can finish anything! That's a part of it, but we are also in very fruitful territory, and I think it is a big game changer. Thirty or forty years ago, people may not have known where documents were or where to start; whereas now we're aware that there are too many documents. Who is going to read them all? [*Laughs*] I am happy to say that with women and silent cinema, we have finally come to a place where, from now on, it will be difficult to say, "Oh we know nothing about this person." From now on, it will be, "We have not researched her yet."

KS: One thing that struck me while listening to you present on Little Chryisia was the cross-disciplinary nature of silent cinema scholarship and curatorial research. This is not a new idea, but it's worth reiterating

as part of this conversation: to understand Little Chrysis's career you're following the breadcrumbs not only to different film archives, based on her transnational screen career, but you're also looking beyond film during a fluid period between early cinema and other entertainment practices, like vaudeville and the circus. I'm reminded of something you said elsewhere about how feminist film historiography "requires an interdisciplinary approach."⁴

ERK: What struck me at this year's Women and the Silent Screen conference was how many people were talking about dancers. There's always a few names that are mentioned by everyone at each conference. A few years ago it was Lois Weber, for example, but this year it was Alla Nazimova and all these dancers, like Stacia Napierkowska and women I had never heard of before. I found that interesting. Talk about interdisciplinary! Also the people doing this research themselves don't necessarily come from a film background—although what is a strictly film background nowadays?—which is great. For this kind of researcher, it's nonsensical to think that this research isn't interdisciplinary. Their motivation to study a woman maybe comes from dance and then they look at her film career. To them, it's all connected, which I believe reflects the real woman's life and career. I'm now convinced that the fact that Anna Pavlova made one film [Lois Weber's 1916 *The Dumb Girl of Portici*] doesn't make her an actress, and I don't think she was thinking about herself in those terms either. It's like the opportunity came her way, she does it, and then she moves on to other things. We're all passionate about several things, your career is an amalgamation of all these interests and projects. Why would these women have one focus? No, they were like us; they pursued a couple of things at the same time, cinema being only one of them.

KS: This way of thinking allows for a fuller picture of these women as professionals but also as people.

ERK: It's hard though. I mean what if their hobby was cooking? It's difficult to write a biography of someone and talk about their cooking if they didn't write a cookbook. As a historian, you need to have some tangible traces to work with. On the other hand, I think it is possible to imagine these women as whole people, who had multiple interests, and not necessarily have to write about it. I think it is valuable to see these women as complete people, who cared about their children and cooked for their families, for example. They, like us, were not immune to real life struggles. Sometimes the scholarship and biographies, even the

autobiographies to some extent, leave out this “natural” domestic part, and I believe this has created the notion of the superhuman diva professional who didn’t do anything outside of her career. That’s a very selective way of looking, and I think we have been looking at these women’s lives too selectively. They become reduced to something, something that we wanted to see perhaps . . .

KS: Yes, I can see why, at one time, it was important to maybe ignore motherhood or the personal or domestic aspects of a life to highlight how a woman worked and her professional output. But maybe now we don’t have to reduce them to just “working women.”

ERK: It’s not a crime to say so if one woman decided to pause her career because she wanted to pay more attention to her children. If we heard this today from a contemporary actress in an interview or article, we understand. But as historians, sometimes you look back and you keep wondering why there is a five-year gap in this woman’s career. It seems really hard to understand, but maybe it’s not that hard to understand at all, and maybe it was very logical or a result of the circumstances.

To me, it’s fun trying to speculate, and I’m also very excited about all the speculative approaches that are becoming more central in women’s film history. Speculation is really helpful because I find myself doing the same thing over and over again. Let’s say there’s a four-year gap in a woman’s career. If that gap is between 1914 and 1918, we all jump to say, of course, World War I made work impossible. But you know, maybe, exactly during these years, this woman had an illness or a sick child. We cannot know, but we should realize that we cannot know. But we should not always say, “Oh, of course it’s explained by World War I,” or these bigger events that we all know about that fit nicely into the narrative. What if there is a similar gap between 1922 and 1926, then it’s suddenly unaccounted for? I’m all for thinking in these patterns; I am all for saying Little Chrysia probably moved out of France to Italy, or toward Italy, because of World War I, and even went back to England when Italy joined the war. To me that would make sense. But also, it could be completely wrong.

KS: Yes, as Allyson Nadia Field reminded us in her introduction to one of the recent *Feminist Media Histories* issues on speculative film historiography, if we keep asking “what if?” there is the potential for “alternative possibilities to emerge.”⁵

ERK: In speculative fashion, I want to say, because we still don’t know what happened to Little Chrysia after 1915, maybe she moved to the

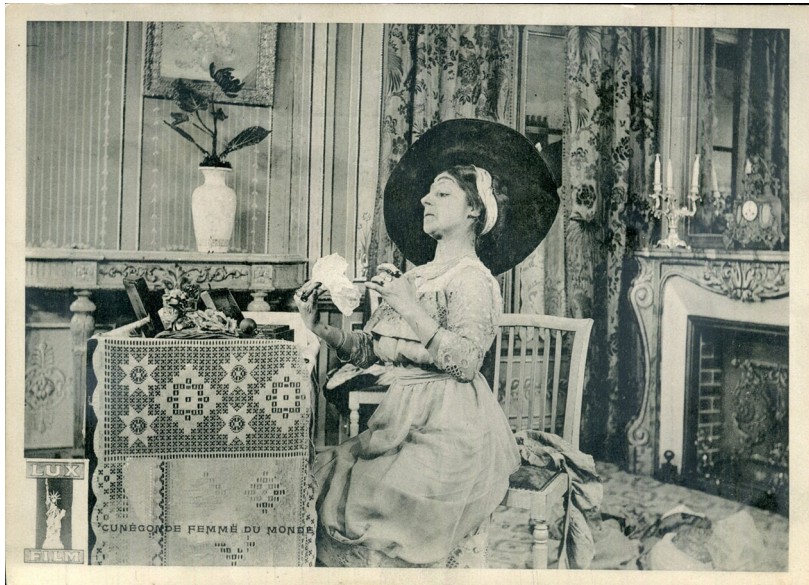


FIGURE 5. Little Chryisia in *Cunégonde femme du monde* (Cunégonde Woman of the World, dir. unknown), 1912. Courtesy of the Eye Filmmuseum.

United States, like so many others did around that time. She knew these people, like Marcel Fabre.⁶ He migrated to the United States from Italy around that time and they had worked together already in 1914 at Ambrosio. What if she was in touch with him and he told her his plans and then she realized that there might be better opportunities there? I think this sort of speculation is very fruitful and it makes you look in sources that you might not otherwise consider (see figure 5).

KS: You also presented Eye's new reconstruction of *Just Around the Corner* (1921), directed and written by Frances Marion, at the conference in June. It's a wonderful New York melodrama about a young woman and her family. Could you talk a little bit about what this particular restoration project entailed?

ERK: That film had a strange path. It arrived at Eye almost twenty years ago, in 2005, and we looked at it and we recognized and acknowledged its importance and we made a preservation print. Although it was kind of short, it did feel complete, although not entirely satisfactory. This is an important issue for me—when do I call a film complete? Because it can be anything: it can be a two-minute fragment; it can be something with a beginning, middle, and end; or it can be something without a beginning and an end that still makes sense. We actually now have



FIGURE 6. Sigrid Holmquist and Edward Phillips in *Just Around the Corner* (dir. Frances Marion), 1921. Courtesy of the Eye Filmmuseum.

a “complete enough” category in the Eye catalog that the curators invented. It might not be complete, but it’s enough for us to show to people. We don’t need to postpone showing it, in other words, because there are also those cases when we find a film but it’s missing something so essential that it would not make sense to present it. So we postpone the project until either we find more or another archive finds more material (see figures 6 and 7).

KS: So *Just Around the Corner* wasn’t “complete enough” then?

ERK: We could show it technically, but we were not showing it because it felt like something was missing. Then it turned out that the Library of Congress had an even shorter version of the film, which was also incomplete because it was missing the final eight minutes. I was able to compare the two versions and I was quite stunned. It turns out that Eye’s version doesn’t include the whole dance competition, which is so important to the timing of the film. It stretches the time—you are worrying if Essie will get out of the dance competition in time to go home to her sick mother. If you don’t have this part, then the whole climax of the film deflates in a way. I don’t understand why it was taken



FIGURE 7. Margaret Seddon and Lewis Sargent in *Just Around the Corner* (dir. Frances Marion), 1921. Courtesy of the Eye Filmmuseum.

out—I guess deliberately, but it’s hard to say. It’s possible that, because it’s so different from the rest of the film, a private collector before us thought these scenes were from a different film and cut them.

KS: Another thing about this reconstruction is how different the two prints were in terms of camera angles and takes. Eye’s version of the film is a foreign distribution print (with Dutch intertitles), while the Library of Congress’s version is a domestic release print. Could you talk a little bit about combining these very different language prints?

ERK: One thing I want to stress about this particular film is that we decided to call it a work-in-progress. We don’t want to call this a finalized restoration for a number of reasons. First of all, it’s literally not a restoration in that it does not restore the film to how it was originally since we were working from two very different sources, with different takes. We have created something that has never existed before. For the sake of reconstructing the story, we took parts from different negatives, which makes a Frankenstein entity. We’re not restoring the film to how it was seen by either the domestic audience or the foreign one.

The other reason is more technical; it’s a work-in-progress and not a restoration because we did not write it back to 35mm film because we

are not 100 percent sure that this is the complete film. Someone could contact me with previously unknown material after seeing the film at a festival. Since it is digital, we can add that. Sometimes, after we have locked films by writing them back to 35mm, which is very costly, there were new discoveries. One example is Lois Weber's *Shoes* (1916). We had locked everything and the restored film had been shown for many years, and then, in the process of making the DVD release, Dennis Doros and Amy Heller at Milestone Films actually found the original script. In our locked 35mm version, the intertitles were translations from Dutch to English, but suddenly we had the original wording, which we had to reintroduce digitally. So, if you asked me today what is the best version of *Shoes*, it's not our 35mm print. That was eye-opening for me, especially because many venues prefer to show things digitally nowadays. Of course, the restoration team always wants to have all the elements in place. They don't like this endless interfering; they want to lock the restoration and move on. But in this case, I'm too much of a film historian in that I care too much that the version you need to see is the version that uses the original English wording.

That's why I was so happy to see the original intertitles on the Library of Congress's *Just Around the Corner* print. But actually when we compared intertitles in the overlapping parts of the two prints, we saw that they overlapped in terms of content quite well, even in terms of the expressions. That was a nice discovery because it meant the Dutch intertitles were actually really close translations of what Frances Marion wrote. But it was so great to have the English intertitles, especially in the case of a film written by a writer like Marion who can be so playful with her words and who has her own way of expressing things. Otherwise, in translating the Dutch back to English, we would have had to guess, "How would Frances Marion say this?" But finding the majority of the titles in the English version intact, with beautiful illustrations and her exact wording, is very satisfying. For me, this, among other things, makes it worthwhile to put in the effort to bring together these two versions of *Just Around the Corner*.

KS: I see parallels between the potential to never be done with a restoration, or reconstruction, and what we were just talking about in terms of the iterative nature of feminist film historiographical research, especially now as more information becomes available and researchers and archives are better connected.

ERK: The work will never finish. It's not a pessimistic thing. We're evolving with time, and we're evolving with the technological

possibilities that we have. Working with the Jean Desmet Collection made me realize that we will have to go back and revisit that collection forever.⁷ When you have more than 900 films, by the time you are done with whatever you are doing—whether it’s updating the catalog or scanning in the highest standard available—you’ll have to go back. Eye did film-on-film preservations with the Desmet Collection before my time, and then digitized the films at a very low resolution. And now we are still scanning all the films at 2K resolution, and I’m fully aware that by the time we’re done with the 2K scanning, there will be a new standard and we’ll have to start again. This realization has made me aware that, technologically, we are running this impossible race. But the same goes for the knowledge, as we discussed earlier. I’m working on some German films right now that arrived at Eye thirty or forty years ago. They were registered at the best capacity at the time, but, at that point, it was impossible to identify a person or a film. Now thanks to all these online sources, we are able to identify more, and now I have the ability to take a picture with my phone and send it to a colleague in Germany via WhatsApp and get their opinion, or even post it on Facebook and get everyone’s opinion. All of this wasn’t available a few years ago, and so it pays off to go back to things that were done well, either in terms of technological standards or cataloged information. There is a lot to do and a lot to discover when you think and work in these circular terms.

KS: You’ve been involved in so many important film restorations over the years at Eye, many that bring renewed attention to long forgotten or overlooked women. Could you talk briefly about a few others? Which ones are you most proud of?

ERK: It depends. For example, with *Filibus* (1915), I am proud that we recently discovered, as part of making the DVD with Milestone, that *Filibus* was played by Valeria Creti and not Cristina Ruspoli as was previously thought. But I’m also proud that we found the right moment to reintroduce *Filibus*. It’s not like the curators before me had not known about the film. It was restored and preserved and offered to festivals in the 1990s. But it had a very selective reception and received marginal recognition. Italian film scholars, with some exceptions, were not talking about it. But now we have reintroduced the film to the world, starting around 2017, because I felt like the world really needed *Filibus* and we needed to do this all over again. And that paid off really incredibly. The film is on DVD; it’s been shown at festivals around the world, in Seoul, Madrid, Vilnius, Seattle, Toronto, Ankara, everywhere.

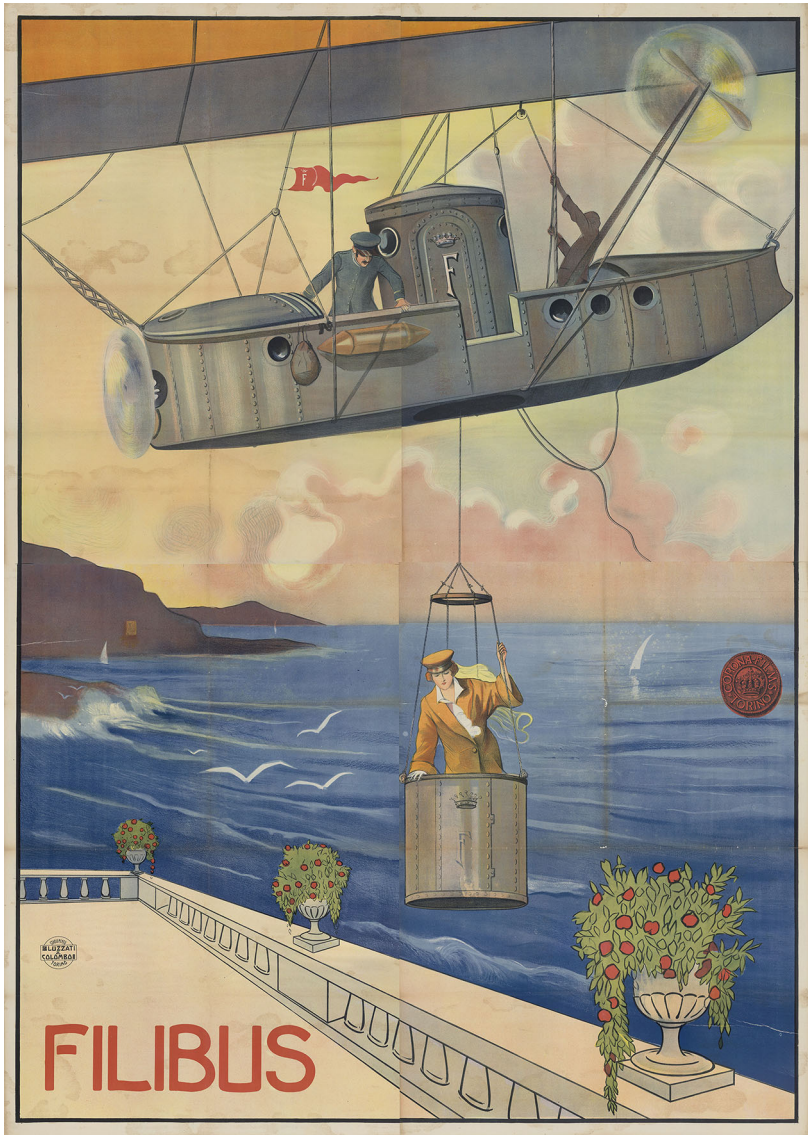


FIGURE 8. Poster for *Filibus* (dir. Mario Roncoroni), 1915. Courtesy of the Eye Filmmuseum.

That was something we had not achieved before. Maybe it was too early to show it in the 1990s—*Filibus* was ahead of her time. But now people are ready to discover *Filibus*, and that this reintroduction came with the discovery of Valeria Creti makes it even more meaningful (see figure 8).



FIGURE 9. Rosa Porten in *Neueste Stern vom Variété* (The Newest Star of Variety, dir. Rosa Porten and Franz Eckstein), 1917. Courtesy of the Eye Filmmuseum.

On the other hand, with Rosa Porten's films, maybe people in the future will say that trying to show her rediscovered and restored films around 2014 was ahead of its time. I'm confident, thanks to Annette Förster, that there is a small group of people who are aware of Porten's directorial and screenwriting work. In that sense, I am really proud of everything we've done around her films, even just that we have reversed attention from her more famous sister Henny Porten. I was working very closely with Annette while she was doing her research; we actually looked at some of Rosa's films together. Then we had the program of her films at Il Cinema Ritrovato in 2014, and then the Women Film Pioneers Project published Annette's profile on Rosa and, recently, Victoria Duckett's overview essay for the Women Film Pioneers Project on actresses includes a discussion of her.⁸ These are the building blocks and the interest and awareness will keep growing. So there are different reasons for me to be enthusiastic or proud of something (see figure 9).

KS: As you have alluded to, presentation is a necessary part of preservation and restoration work, and you have done extensive public programming around Eye's holdings, be it at specialized film festivals or



FIGURE 10. Sarah Duhamel in *Rosalie et son phonograph* (*Rosalie and Her Phonograph*, dir. Romeo Bosetti), 1911. This title is one of ninety-nine films featured in *Cinema's First Nasty Women*. Courtesy of the Eye Filmmuseum.

on more general platforms like the Eye Film Player. At the recent Women and the Silent Screen conference, you also spoke on a panel about Kino Lorber's *Cinema's First Nasty Women* DVD/Blu-ray release, of which you are a co-curator.⁹ The set really honors the selected films' pastness via ethical contextualization but also re-circulates the films via a particularly contemporary curatorial framework. Could you speak more about the curatorial selection process and criteria? What has it been like to bring these specific films, which gleefully and violently trouble the patriarchy, to the public (see figure 10)?

ERK: I think the Nasty Women idea was already within me and co-curators Maggie Hennefeld and Laura Horak, and a few other people, for a while. We have this instinct for singling out films with rebellious, anarchic, or subversive women. The fact that we are presenting these films to a larger audience now reflects, again, the fact that we feel that people are ready for them. Not everyone is ready, by the way.

KS: They should be!

ERK: Exactly! People should at least be made aware of these films, and then they can draw their own conclusions. For me, the selection process

was almost instinctive, as I was saying. It's about sharing our enthusiasm of seeing something unusual. I was stunned when I first saw films like *Cunégonde femme crampon* (Cunégonde the Nasty Woman, 1912); *Cunégonde femme cochère* (Cunégonde the Coachwoman, 1913); *Léontine s'envole* (Léontine Gets Carried Away, 1911); or *La fureur de Mme Plumette* (Madame Plumette's Fury, 1912). It's so refreshing to see a woman be anarchic and violent and react in unexpected ways in 1911 or 1913. It goes against all the clichés. I define myself as a film historian, and I just want to break every single cliché there is. The canon was really creating for us certain expectations about actresses, like they were just there because they were pretty. But seeing Sarah Duhamel being so naughty in *Patouillard a une femme jalouse* (Patouillard Has a Jealous Wife, 1912) or the kitchen maid throwing plates at her employer in *Victoire a ses nerfs* (Victoire Is on Her Last Nerve, 1907)—wow, that's an act of rebellion you don't expect. Basically they were disobeying everything you think they *should* be obeying. So *Cinema's First Nasty Women* is a great opportunity to make people aware of these films, to help them shed all their misconceptions and prejudices (see figures 11, 12, and 13).



FIGURE 11. *La fureur de Mme Plumette* (Madame Plumette's Fury, dir. unknown), 1912. Courtesy of the Eye Filmmuseum.



FIGURE 12. Sarah Duhamel in *Patouillard a une femme jalouse* (Patouillard Has a Jealous Wife, dir. Romeo Bosetti), 1912. Courtesy of the Eye Filmmuseum.



FIGURE 13. Sarah Duhamel in *Patouillard a une femme jalouse* (Patouillard Has a Jealous Wife, dir. Romeo Bosetti), 1912. Courtesy of the Eye Filmmuseum.

KS: It's about showing how varied cinema history really is.

ERK: I refuse to believe that there will ever be only one kind of cinematic output. There might be only one kind of output that survives in the film historical narrative. If everyone loves Charlie Chaplin, Chaplin survives. It doesn't mean that all these others that were forgotten and died never existed.

KS: *Cinema's First Nasty Women* is not only a great example of contemporary feminist film curating, it's also a chance for us to look back at the beginning of the twentieth century from a fresh perspective.

ERK: When I'm watching a film from 1905 or 1912, I'm not looking for artistic mastery. That's not interesting to me. I don't think that's what these films were about, to put it bluntly. But I am definitely looking for something, and in the case of the Nasty Women films, it's about seeing something that goes against what we think they should be about as well as seeing traces of popular culture at the time. I'm interested in cinema as popular entertainment; the fact that cinema is enjoyed by the masses is what makes me love it, and I want to understand what mass audiences were seeing. How was the culture of the time reflected in these films? That's why I'm interested in how suffragettes are caricatured in these Nasty Women films, for example. The fact that they were caricatured in, for instance, *Le ménage Dranem* (The Dranems, 1912) tells me something about how pervasive suffragettes were in popular culture. Yes, these are ugly caricatures, but at the same time they are valuable for us today. If someone took the time to make a film that mocked suffragettes, then they were really aware of the movement. I approach silent cinema, especially the pre-World War I period, from this perspective, thinking about what the people making the films were worrying about and what the people watching were seeing in them.

KS: You are a champion of thematic programming, which I like because it often draws our attention to lesser-known or marginalized titles in the archive and makes unexpected connections between films. Obviously, retrospective programming is important to draw attention to one woman's participation in cinema, but thematic programming is also exciting to me as potentially a counterintuitive feminist mode of curating since it puts who made the film on the back burner and opens up space for all sorts of films and curatorial interventions. It doesn't sequester women filmmakers or actresses into a special category but puts them on equal footing with any number of films, both by male artists and those we haven't yet identified.

ERK: I don't necessarily need to call it feminist, but it's definitely about going against the canon for me. My work in this regard is fed by my desire to go against the grain and challenge the canon. Retrospectives can be great, but retrospectives acknowledge the canon because you are paying tribute to someone who is *someone* already. That's exactly what I don't want. I want people who are *nobody* in our opinion to become somebody. So thematic programming has become my way to interfere with the canon. It didn't come out of nowhere; it was a solution that I found when I was working very intensely with the Desmet Collection around when it was inscribed in the UNESCO Memory of the World register in 2011. There was more demand for films from the collection, and it bothered me that we had created, by 2011, a Desmet Collection canon. It was always the same films on the festival circuit, and I had this urge to break this canon, and not have it consolidate further. To highlight the films in the collection that were never shown, I used thematic programming, which makes me dive into our Desmet holdings with a fresh perspective. I come out with films that I have never seen just because I am searching with a keyword, like "money," in mind. You make really great discoveries! And then when these programs are shown, at Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, for example, you are basically showing the audience something unexpected, like a Léontine film, under the guise of a theme.

KS: Yes, it's a way to connect people with films that they would not normally seek out on their own.

ERK: At Eye, we have so many films that people haven't heard of or that no programmer is asking about. It is my job to reverse that, and say, "You should consider this." In that regard, I find thematic programming a really good solution. It also allows you to engage with people who are not really knowledgeable about or interested in silent cinema. With a thematic program, you can say, "Here are ten films from a century ago about mothers-in-law." Then people have other reasons to watch the program other than being experts in silent cinema. So, thematic programming is good on many levels. I don't tire of it and it satisfies my desire to go against the canon.

KS: Switching gears now, as the silent film curator at Eye, which is an institution that really supports research and academic activities, and access, you often work closely with outside scholars. So many feminist film historians have benefited from your knowledge, archival expertise, and time, and your internal work has also been shaped by external

scholarly projects and initiatives. Could you talk a little more about your relationship to feminist film historiographical scholarship?

ERK: As a curator, I hear from people while they are researching and writing their books; it's often a back-and-forth partnership. I'm close to the object, the film itself. I can give feedback, like, "We just opened this can and saw this film," which is, I hope, helpful for scholars. And working with scholars really accelerates my work, otherwise I would have to wait for a book to be published, and then find the time to read it, before offering any feedback. Whereas if we are in direct contact from the beginning, and if I can immediately say, "I just saw a film and thought of you and your research," that creates momentum. If the scholar is writing a book on someone and I know we have a relevant film in the collection that's preserved but nobody has seen it, then you can start thinking this could culminate in a festival screening or something. Finally, the way I look at the films in the archive has also changed and improved over time, thanks to the scholarship that is out there and my direct contact with scholars like Jane Gaines, Annette Förster, Victoria Duckett, Maggie Henefeld, Laura Horak, and many others.

KS: It's a reciprocal relationship.

ERK: What I've inherited at Eye from former directors and curators Eric de Kuyper, Peter Delpout, and the current senior curator Mark-Paul Meyer is the importance of sharing the enthusiasm. Share the enthusiasm of having seen something by showing it to others. But, of course, over the years, I have realized there is too much to do—I don't have time to pursue everything, nobody has time to pursue everything. This made me realize that we need to share this too; it's not that we just have to share the results, we have to share the beginnings too, and try to get people to do research on certain films and filmmakers. Some people are discouraged to do research because they don't know how they will see the films or know whether they even exist. So, in the archive, I'm in this good position to encourage people and their research by saying, "Look the films are here," or "You should consider this actress." I can imagine, from the other side of the archive, you are not going to write a dissertation about Fern Andra, for example, if you don't even know if there's one film you can watch, or if you have to wait for a festival to show something. That is the reverse of how it should be done in my opinion.

KS: Something like the recent Ellen Richter research project run by Oliver Hanley and Philipp Stiasny in Babelsberg, Germany, is a good example of scholars influencing your work.¹⁰ Their research and

curatorial interest in this undervalued German actress and producer ignited work at the archive.

ERK: Yes, that sort of project is something I'm very enthusiastic about because you had scholars coming to check with all the archives to see what Richter films are extant. Although Richter's films were not really being shown, Oliver and Philipp were pulling films and coming to the archives to do research. At the same time, they were doing the festival pitch and the preservation pitch, which is ideal to build momentum. We discovered and restored her film *Aberglaube* (Superstition, 1919) as a result of this project and presented it at Le Giornate del Cinema Muto in 2021 as part of the Ellen Richter strand.¹¹ This is just the beginning; more Richter discoveries will come. Now some people have watched her films at Pordenone and discussed her and whether or not she was a good actress, for example. That doesn't really matter—the only thing that matters is that more people are aware of Ellen Richter and can maybe identify her moving forward (see figures 14 and 15).

KS: I can attest to this! I had the privilege of being there while you looked at an unidentified reel of nitrate at Eye in November 2021, after the Richter series in Pordenone, when you recognized her. It turned out to

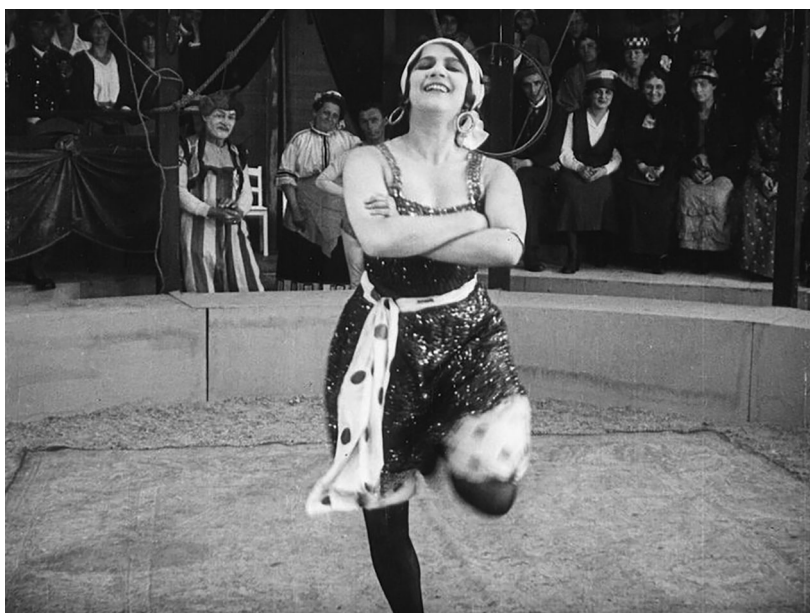


FIGURE 14. Ellen Richter in *Aberglaube* (Superstition, dir. Georg Jacoby), 1919. Courtesy of the Eye Filmmuseum.



FIGURE 15. Ellen Richter in *Aberglaube* (Superstition, dir. Georg Jacoby), 1919. Courtesy of the Eye Filmmuseum.

be one reel of the presumed-lost *Frauen, die sich opfern* (Women Who Sacrifice Themselves, 1916).

ERK: After being exposed to various Ellen Richter films on the big screen in Pordenone, it took me only a few seconds to recognize her. Now that I have a lot of experience as a curator, I can recognize this pattern of continued (re)discovery. And now there are scholars, Oliver and Philipp, or a festival like the Giornate, linked to Richter. These are people and places you can contact when you find a film or some material. That's so important. Sometimes I see an actress that I am enthusiastic about but I don't even know who to share the news with.

KS: You have also been spearheading work at Eye around the gender gap on Wikipedia in terms of women related to the archive's collection, by either adding information to existing entries or creating new ones. What inspired this work?

ERK: One big frustration for me was that we make all these discoveries here at Eye, but then how do we communicate those discoveries to the wider world? Take the correct identification of Valeria Creti as Filibus as an example. How do we expect people to access that knowledge? Should it only be from buying the DVD or seeing the film at a festival, which

obviously a lot of people won't do? In terms of my desire to change film history, I think Wikipedia is one way to really make a wide impact. It's read around the world and anyone can update it. When we identified Creti, there was nothing on Wikipedia about her, and so we made an entry for her. Now if someone somewhere has any information to share about Creti, they could update that Wikipedia page and it would eventually reach me. I've seen this before, with people like Mabel Normand or Tsuru Aoki. When I've gone back, years later after working on them and their films, and looked at their Wikipedia entries, I'm stunned by how much great, detailed information has been added. It's impressive! And I can open a film can today and discover another Creti film and add that immediately to her Wikipedia page. I wouldn't be able to update the filmography of a published book or essay, but Wikipedia has the advantage of being online and editable (see figure 16).

KS: Yes, it's important to have these online outlets and digital platforms, especially given the iterative nature of contemporary feminist film historiography that we discussed earlier.

ERK: And we do update our online Eye catalog with new information, but our database is in Dutch and not as readily accessible. But I see a platform like Wikipedia as a place to share information more widely. And I don't need to write an essay for it. Often, we don't have enough information to write an essay about a film. But we might have an interesting link to add, or a tiny piece of information to share. If I can do something very simple like go into an existing Wikipedia entry and create a hyperlink between a person and a film, for instance, I think that is incredible. For example, this week, I opened a can of film and identified it as *The Sacrifice of Kathleen* (1914), starring Norma Talmadge. I looked in our database and saw that the film was already there because we also hold related posters and stills in our collection. However, in the catalog (and in the paper materials) the actress was not specified. And so I only did a very minor thing: I added Norma Talmadge to the cast list in the catalog. But this means that sometime in the future, if someone asks for all the films Eye holds featuring Norma, this film will now pop up. Now, imagine doing something as small as that in Wikipedia, the impact could be huge! So that was our idea internally in trying to do more on Wikipedia—how can we share our knowledge from the archive with others?

KS: There's probably still hesitation in academia around Wikipedia as a scholarly resource, but I've found it to be really helpful in my work for



FIGURE 16. Poster for *Filibus* (dir. Mario Roncoroni), 1915. Courtesy of the Eye Filmmuseum.

the Women Film Pioneers Project, especially for confirming key details and following online sources that other people, all over the world, have tracked down.

ERK: One reason I'm an avid user of Wikipedia, in all languages by the way—you should read a page in all the languages that you can, if

possible, because they are different—is because of the constant correction of women’s dates of birth or death. For example, Wanda Treumann’s filmography stops in 1929, and so many people just assumed she died. It turns out she immigrated to Australia and lived there until 1968. Then someone discovered this and wrote a blog post about it. This was linked to on her Wikipedia page as a reference, and all the proof is there, such as an obituary in the newspaper. So one click from Wikipedia, and there is so much for me to discover (see figure 17).

KS: Throughout this conversation, we have talked a lot about your relationship to film history . . .

ERK: I consider myself a film historian; I have a background in film history. But I don’t write books. I call what I do “applied film history” because I work with film history every day. I look at the films, and this learning while looking is fundamental to women’s film history because of the lack of everything—the lack of understanding, the lack of books, the lack of films themselves. So my motivation is indeed to correct the mistakes and prejudices and to offer alternatives to the more canonical film histories.

KS: Yes, I see your hands-on archival work as a form of film historiography, and especially, given all the work you have done researching, restoring, and presenting women’s film history, an active form of feminist film historiography. You are helping us all to rethink archival value in terms of previous gaps, absences, and standard film historical accounts. When I was preparing for this interview, I reread your 2015 interview with Victoria Duckett for *Feminist Media Histories*, and one line really stayed with me. You said, “I think I got drawn into [the silent period] because . . . I really have suspicions about how well that period is described.”¹² I think this is a great rallying cry for the broader feminist film historiographical project; we all need to be suspicious of previous histories, speculate new ones, and be ready and willing to roll up our sleeves and dig through all types of sources in order to make new discoveries and connections. Where are your suspicions these days? How are you approaching or describing the period in new ways?

ERK: When I said that I was feeling like there were lots of omissions and black holes, and now I believe that we are beginning to get more of a grip on these black holes and omissions. This is in part because we have a better understanding of the patterns of research that we talked about earlier—that is, if he migrated, maybe she did too. Being able to piece



FIGURE 17. Wanda Treumann in *Die Sumpflume* (The Swamp Flower, dir. Viggo Larsen), 1913. Courtesy of the Eye Filmmuseum.

together immigration records and items in different language newspapers, for example, has given us a better sense of how things worked in the silent era, but also how things were different then. A lot of mistakes and assumptions were made in retrospect. I think a lot of people working on silent cinema in the 1970s or 1980s were, unconsciously, making assumptions based on how cinema was then or in

recent history, just because they didn't have enough evidence about the silent era. Because we can recognize the patterns we were talking about earlier—the fluidity between the stage or the circus and the screen in the silent era and the transnational careers, the moving around—our ideas are more nuanced now.

The directions that we are taking in *Women and the Silent Screen* now are really great and allowing us to do more interdisciplinary research and make more discoveries. I'm really enthusiastic about the turns that the research is taking, in terms of the methodologies. We are making new connections. And people are daring to do research about a person you can't even name, like Léontine. There are so many Léontines out there, other women that we don't even know what to call. But that's not discouraging people!

Recently, I was asked to write a short online introduction for a film screening in Turkey of two compilations of films by Georges Méliès and Segundo de Chomón. Although I was given limited space to talk about these two men, I felt that I needed to say something about their wives, Jehanne d'Alcy and Julienne Mathieu. So I spent a few lines on these women, saying that, in light of how we think about cinema history in recent years, when we are comparing the careers of these two men we also must mention their wives, not only as actresses in their films but also as people who were instrumental in their careers and career decisions. They were both working in the cinema already, and today there are assumptions that Julienne even introduced Segundo to Pathé, and that Jehanne maybe suggested to Georges that he could go to England to buy a camera if the French did not sell him one. But this urge to discuss the wives would not have been there a few years ago for me. It's not like I wasn't aware of them then, but I would have just followed the assignment. Now I really feel that I have to say something because it wouldn't be fair to the readers to continue to canonize these two men without really acknowledging all the people around them. I also noticed this when I presented *Man With a Movie Camera* (1929) in Istanbul a few years ago; it was this moment of realization that we have to mention Elizaveta Svilova. We can no longer not mention her when we present this film. The days are over when we're only talking about Dziga Vertov! ■

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ELIF RONGEN-KAYNAKÇI is the curator of silent film at Eye Filmmuseum. Since 1999, she has worked at Eye on the discovery, restoration, and presentation of many presumed lost films. These include *Beyond the Rocks* (starring Gloria Swanson, 1922), *The Floor Below* (starring Mabel Normand, 1918), and many more. She is also involved in archival festivals like Il Cinema Ritrovato and Le Giornate del Cinema Muto and is co-curator of the box-set *Cinema's First Nasty Women* (Kino Lorber, 2022). Elif has been involved in Women and the Silent Screen since 2007 and co-organized the Amsterdam edition in 2019 on Eye's behalf. She served two terms on the Women and Film History International Steering Committee (2017–2022).

NOTES

1. For more on Little Chrysia see, Elif Rongen-Kaynakçi, "Little Chrysia," *Cinema's First Nasty Women* Blu-ray booklet (Kino Lorber, 2022), 46–50. www.dropbox.com/s/ocwexqmo52bhhz/NastyWomen_Booklet_Integrated_v1.pdf.

2. The hybrid conference "Off-and On-Screen: The 'New Woman' in the Cinema of the Russian Empire" was held in person at the University of Basil from September 1 to 3, 2022. Elif watched the panels via Zoom. For the conference program, see: https://slavistik.philhist.unibas.ch/fileadmin/user_upload/slavistik/Forschung/Off_and_On-Screen/Off-On-Screen.NewWoman.Program.pdf.

3. Lantern is the search platform for the Media History Digital Library. <https://mediahist.org/#lantern-search>.

4. Eye Filmmuseum, "Meet the Archive," Episode 8. "Archiving the Legacy of Women in Film: Collaborations and Networks," December 16, 2021. <https://youtu.be/xgPc7LrLEIs>.

5. Allyson Nadia Field, "Editor's Introduction: Acts of Speculation," *Feminist Media Histories* vol. 8, no. 3 (Summer 2022): 1.

6. Marcel Fabre was a stage name of the Spanish-born actor and director Marcel Pérez, who worked in France and Italy before coming to the United States during World War I.

7. The Jean Desmet Collection is the film archive of Dutch distributor Jean Desmet (1875–1956). For more on Desmet's career and his collection, see Ivo Blom, *Jean Desmet and the Early Dutch Film Trade* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003); Eye Filmmuseum, "The Desmet File," www.eyefilm.nl/en/collection/collections/film/film-files/file-desmet.

8. "Dr. R. Portegg, I Presume? Comedies By and With Rosa Porten," *Il Cinema Ritrovato*, 2014. <https://festival.ilcinemaritrovato.it/en/sezione/il-dottor-portegg-suppongo-le-commedie-di-e-con-rosa-porten/>; Annette Förster, "Rosa Porten," in *Women Film Pioneers Project*, ed. Jane Gaines, Radha Vatsal, and Monica Dall'Asta (New York: Columbia University Libraries, 2016). <https://wfpp.columbia.edu/>

pioneer/rosa-porten/; Victoria Duckett, "Theater Actresses and the Transition to Silent Film," in *Women Film Pioneers Project*, ed. Jane Gaines, Radha Vatsal, and Monica Dall'Asta (New York: Columbia University Libraries, 2022). <https://wfpp.columbia.edu/essay/theater-actresses-and-the-transition-to-silent-film/>.

9. The project website: <https://wfpp.columbia.edu/cinemas-first-nasty-women/>.

10. The project website: <https://www.filmuniversitaet.de/en/research-transfer/research/projects/project-page/detail/workshop-die-grosse-unbekannte-ellen-richter-und-das-populaere-kino-in-deutschland-1913-1933>. See also, "Ellen Richter," *Le Giornate del Cinema Muto Catalogue* (Pordenone, Italy: Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, 2021), 55–93.

11. Philipp Stiasny, "Aberglaube," *Le Giornate del Cinema Muto Catalogue* (Pordenone, Italy: Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, 2021), 62–66. www.giornatedelcinemamuto.it/en/aberglaube/.

12. Victoria Duckett, "Interview with Elif Rongen-Kaynakçi, EYE Film Institute, Amsterdam, January 7, 2015," *Feminist Media Histories* vol. 2, no. 1 (Winter 2016): 190.