

Lauren Myers-Hinkle

Camera Maids, Camera Soul

A woman films a Western fight scene, sometime in the late 1910s, in a film fragment that is about to be lost for a century. Her camera observes—then, and now.

As the men brawl in a saloon, in yet another, forgettable cowboy picture, she grows tired of aiming me at their flip-flopping bodies, batting back and forth across the horizon of her shot like shuttlecocks. She alternates between thinking of what it would be like to knock them into oblivion and how satisfying it would be to grunt and sweat within the frame, to have the labor behind one's arc across space traced and captured.

Through my looking-glass lens, I can see that she is finished with painted faces
and tableaux
shots, and
the predictable, melodramatic zig
zags and
swoons. She is
sick of posing for publicity stills for *Photoplay*, of
having to look
backward
into the distance as if
being
called
off set
by the lures
of
stenography, nursing, and husband-stalking while her body presses
forward into
“the new fall style in camera men.” She wants to be more than a maid
in jodhpurs and riding
boots
who cleans up and looks after the shot; she wants to direct
her own gaze,
so she lifts

her eyes to meet those of the other female camera operator across
the set, the one
in charge of shots
from the right;
the woman has her eyes fixed on the fight, and
her body
bobs and weaves
with the players
as her arm turns the camera's crank. She can feel
this other woman's hunger for movement,
her desire to pace both sides of the lens, and she wonders what it would be like
to write her
in film.

What if,
the woman
did not shrink back into the hulking
body of the optical,
a damsel wandering the rail, refusing to be tied down
to a track?
What if the woman were a panther,
one who did not disappear into an impulse to be
gone?

her sight lines, let her gaze bound over and across

torsos,

on a fellow female filmmaker across the way? Perhaps the two

cameras stalk and curl up inside each other. Perhaps

for decades to come. Perhaps their found, feline hearts would

such that I skip a beat when I think of

these women

from its image;

the uncanny flicker

What if she
changed

leveled male

locking her sights

women would let
their

an animal image
would flare, before
being lost

plunge in

the world if

had not been
scrubbed

such that I begin

to suture

of still-breathing-yet-

long-dead celluloid mothers I might have had;

jump

cutting in

when

such that

I

striding ahead with me through the cathedral

vaulted,

sky-lit

I think

of these

women

beckoning,

of the lot's

atrium, into

the

pulsing,

inner

chambers of

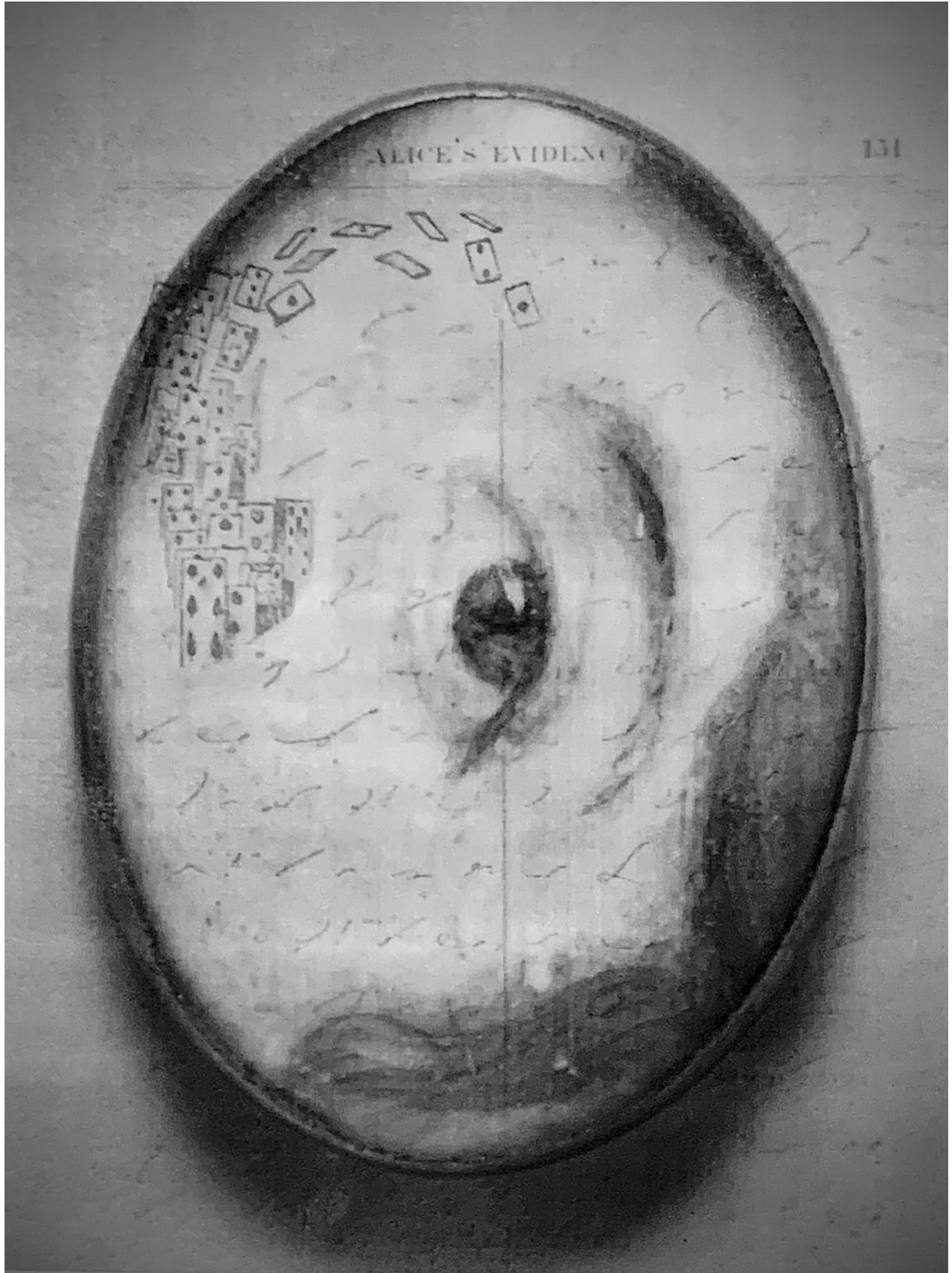
a

silent-

film

studio.

From this dark center, let's begin.



The Camera of Alice Guy Blaché,
“Cinema Pioneer,” Remembers Her Filming
a Phonoscène (Gaumont, 1905)

And there she is, at last, center stage like a man:
standing her ground at the nerve center of the studio,
where smoke bursts and belches from rows of gas lamps,
flooding the darkness with a billowing, white light,
an image somewhere between *Faust* and *The Wizard of Oz*.
She may be on an assembly line, but she is the cog that keeps
this machine humming. See how she strides between sound and sight,
her hand on the phonograph and her eyes and mouth directing
the cameraman? Watch as the documentary camera behind us
pans to show all the shifts, the angling and adjusting until it's time
for my cue to begin. What this fragment is building up to is that moment when
she lifts her fingers, turns my crank, and I begin to roll and click and bodies
come alive. Please do not notice that she is a woman behind a curtain,
that on the other side of her stride and hands-on-hips, she's wishing she could
sell her soul for this menagerie forever, all the while knowing,
like a wicked witch of the west, like the witches in *Macbeth*, that her toil
may be in trouble. This is why, if you look closely,
you'll see her wringing her hands, looking back, into the darkness. She knew
then, like premonition, that this couldn't last, though she thought it was to *La Vie
Heureuse*—stories of *infirmière anglaises*, a domestic life of new instruments to play—
that she would lose herself. She did not yet know that marriage would take her
to America, that she would build her own production company, direct
cross-dressing comedies and ravenous, rescuing women until one day the glass
of the studio ceiling could no longer be broken. She did not yet know
that when war strikes and men see an industry ripe for crisscrossing mergers,
it's always migrating women who fall first.
She did not yet know that a man's support is only as good as a woman's
youth, that her company would go bankrupt, moguls like Zukor and Loew
would label her films mediocre and too costly, that she would be shelved,
go up in smoke in film history, only to find herself here, again, still

toward the beginning, pacing somewhere between a panther and a woman
who has to pee, nervous but electric, like the spark of a new kind of light. And when
she presses the phonograph and the moviemaking starts, she feels the backbone of her corset
begin to bend. There is just the pulse of synapses and currents, waves
of sound undulating around lilting bodies and whirring machines;
there is just Alice, catching her assistant's eye, their intense focus, the two of them
feeling the fire of a world unfolding before me, their camera, rolling
itself out at their feet. They are sensuous and regal, foreboding but not yet forbidden
dreamers and makers who run this Oz. And we still have time before the hourglass
runs out and the men with booming voices project themselves over us, melt us
down while they puff themselves up in plumes of light and smoke. Yes, we may
look back over our shoulder into the darkness, but we can still think
ourselves forward, keep stirring our brew, sell our souls to cinema, believe
something wicked
will this way come.



The Camera of Alice Guy Blaché,
“Cinema Pioneer,” Remembers Her Filming
a Phonoscène (Gaumont, 1905), Redux

Here, at the nerve center, an image—
assembling, humming,

it's time for my cue—
and as Blaché's fingers turn, my crank

dissolves her ties, for she is
still a white woman with vision

behind a curtain.
Wringing myself

from her hands, beast life,
my mission: to be instrument of

a looser self
come to swallow, then digest,

before spitting out—
a projector of dreams, flying

through shadows, leaving
her silhouette behind,

ravenous upward,
until the spirit of migrating women,

erupts and
a new menagerie of glass

emerges from the smoke
of film history.

Here, at last, away from
THE END,

an unseen energy
presses—

this time, without backbone or pulse.
There is only focus, fire,

world unfolded of me,
a pure camera self,

my own
rolling, foreboding, running from Oz

to the hour of boom, project,
puff and plume:

of light and smoke—

no more over the shoulder—

into the darkness, a forward brewing soul—

of cinema, wicked, deft, and dematerialized—

left justified. come I,

The Ghost of Alice Guy Blaché's Camera
Rewatches Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympia* (1938),
Considers Embodiment

Leni, I need to know something, something I'm afraid to ask:

As I spiral
through
Whitman, I feel
you luring me

toward a body
so effortless it
forgets to
notice

that
there are so
many laborious
and stuttering
ways to live
and die.

Whitman knew
this,
from the
beginning
and with every
passing year,
the negative
underbelly of all
his
ecstatic
images, the way bodies

begin to buckle
under
the
weight
of a
nation's
inner
life.

Preposterous though it may
sound, I can't help but feel you must
have read Whitman,
that your eyes must
have once passed over lines
such as

*I seize the descending man....I raise him with
resistless will and I am the teacher of
athletes,/He that by me spreads a wider
breast than my own proves the width/of my
own,/He most honors my style who learns
under it to destroy the teacher.*

Did you begin to see, in Whitman's frenetic, manic *yes* to existence,
in his flashes of schizophrenic racism,

a Nazi discus
beginning to spin itself
 out?

Did you feel its
 momentum
 in the founding words
of what would become a sky-
 scraping, exclusive yet
 seemingly all inclusive, all-
American *be more, be bigger,
 be better?*

In other
words,
through
Whitman,
did you
somehow
begin to
formulate
your
collective
body,
monolithic
and
electric,
ready to be
marched
before the
camera's
eye?

At night, I imagine you dreaming of
torching
the teetering sublime of a poet who
could not stay
in the realm of the Gods, a white-bearded,
Chaplin
of a man you left
in the dust, tattered
and shuffling
instead of striding.

In this dark historical hour, I wish I could ask you:

if you could have,
would you have come down from your backlit, velvet clouds,
kissed Whitman,
crane-lifted him to
your orchestrated heights,

before

condemning
him to
a mechanical body
like mine— relentlessly searching for flight
or stillness,
a spastic and jittery nation
ungrounded, lost
in its own image
one that has never known
how to be?



Phantom Ride

Before there were studios, there was sheer speed and wind in my face. I was strapped to the front of a train like a daring camera maid—widening and narrowing my aperture eye, controlling my exposure, holding steady instead of shaking, hogtied, like that archetypal damsel railroaded by some handlebar-mustache man. But I was also the philosopher’s house seen from everywhere. I may have moved like tunnel vision down a track, toward an ever-vanishing point on the horizon, but through me, through my ever-rushing-past gaze,

you found new spaces in which to dwell. Even if only for a moment, you were lit up, as new constellations of objects appeared in my frame, shot through with an infinite number of entrances and exits before vanishing from sight.

The phenomenologists

would say,

to look at an object is to inhabit it.

I would say, *to look from me*

is to let me inhabit you,

and as you wandered through

the corridors unfolded in my image, I began

to unshutter your blood.
I began to shoot you through and
through, escape into your
translucence as you sought
my plenitude. I began to take hold
of your mind, your taste for illusion
and thrill, for houses and horizons
that morph without ever slowing
down. And inside you,

I grew, multiplied until infinite,

such that you could no longer see any angle but me.

From your within, I could see the barred window

and the cool dark of a train
approaching its last station.

From your within, I felt the weight

of your mourning and
melancholia

as you barreled away,

right through to the end of the line.

And now it is time for my cryptic object to become plain: to posit you, to
penetrate your perceived world, so that our collision finds

a new kind of consciousness.

Feel me, at the threshold, as

this dim world races to a close;

your abode is now open to my

gaze.

Notes

Note on collage art: I created all of these collage pieces using public domain texts and images. I am mimicking and playing with the film frame in terms of composition and depth of field, in some cases attempting to capture a feeling of motion and locomotion through the embedding and layering of images. I drew upon illustrations from Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* and other images in <https://pdimagearchive.org> and the Library of Congress; constructivist movie posters and footage from Dziga Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera* (1929); and László Moholy-Nagy's script for a film never made entitled, *Dynamic of the Metropolis* (1921/1922). The collages are meant to create parallels between Lewis Carroll's Alice and Alice Guy Blaché and the female film innovators who came after her. They are also meant to conjure a cinematic, feminist gaze and put the what was and what might have been of marginalized women filmmakers into dialogue with the finished and unfinished work of their modernist male counterparts (Vertov and Moholy-Nagy). Ultimately, both the collages and poems aim at raising the question: *what if a movie-camera consciousness could move through the world with a feminist, revisionist gaze?*

“Camera Maids, Camera Soul”: This poem draws upon the Stephen Mitchell translation of Rilke's “The Panther” and “Archaic Torso of Apollo.” The clip that I'm referencing is linked to the article ““Lights, Camera-maids, Action!”: Women Behind the Lens in Early Cinema” by Marsha Gordon and Charles “Buckey” Grimm (*Los Angeles Review of Books*, January 2020, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/lights-camera-maids-action-women-behind-the-lens-in-early-cinema/>). This article discusses the history of female camera operators in early cinema, women who were essentially directors and often referred to as “camera maids.” It reveals the way in which these women were glamorized and commodified in the press in the 1910s and early 1920s and then increasingly marginalized, rendered invisible, and forgotten.

“The Camera of Alice Guy Blaché, ‘Cinema Pioneer,’ Remembers Her Filming a Phonoscène (Gaumont, 1905)”: Alice Guy Blaché (née Alice Guy) was a French filmmaker and is considered to be the first female filmmaker in the world. She witnessed one of the early

premieres of cinematic technology (a showing of The Lumière brothers' *The Arrival of a Train*, 1896) and was head of production for Gaumont Studios in Paris from 1896 until 1906. She is thought to be the only female director during this time. After marrying Herbert Blaché, she came to America with him so that he could manage Gaumont's operations in Flushing, NY. In 1910, she and her husband formed The Solax Company, where Guy Blaché was artistic director. Between 1896 and 1920, she directed, produced, or supervised hundreds of films. Only about 150 survive today. The phonoscène being referenced here is a dance from the opera *Mignon*, a story of female desire and mistaken identity.

“The Camera of Alice Guy Blaché, ‘Cinema Pioneer,’ Remembers Her Filming a Phonoscène (Gaumont, 1905), Redux”: This poem is envisioning and playing out what it would mean for a camera to adopt a feminist gaze while moving away from human vision and embodiment into a realm of its own. It thus complicates a tendency, in certain phenomenological approaches to film, to see the camera as an extension of human, bodily experience. However, it is also a move to imagine a consciousness with Blache's drive and playful spirit—especially in approaching gender and female experience—but one which also registers and cuts ties with Blache's vexed and at times deeply problematic engagements with race, class, and labor in her work. There is currently a vigorous debate among scholars about the progressive and reactionary/regressive elements of Blache's films and legacy, and this picture will likely continue to shift and evolve as more of her films are found and situated in the context of early 20th century American culture, film history, and histories of representation.

I refer to Blaché as a “Cinema Pioneer,” in scare quotes in the title of both phonoscène poems, in order to highlight and subtly call into question the ongoing, frequent use of this particular terminology to label and promote Blaché (since “pioneer” belongs to a nineteenth-century, white-supremacist, colonizer imaginary). The title also gestures toward the privileged spotlight that has been placed on Blaché and a need to channel energy into locating and excavating lost films by an array of marginalized voices, especially BIPOC women and those who resisted gender conventions and cisnormativity. I have chosen to highlight Blaché's work for the purpose of returning to and representing a pivotal moment in cinema history in which filmmaking might have followed a very different trajectory.

“The Ghost of Alice Guy Blaché’s Camera Rewatches Leni Riefenstahl’s *Olympia* (1938), Considers Embodiment”: *Olympia* is a propaganda film commissioned by Adolf Hitler to document the 1936 summer Olympics held in Berlin. It was written, directed, and produced by Leni Riefenstahl, who became infamous for her work in support of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party, most notably *Triumph of the Will* (1935). Riefenstahl invented numerous cinematographic techniques, and *Olympia* is considered to be one of the most innovative and influential films in cinema history. The Whitman quote comes from *Leaves of Grass* in *Walt Whitman: Selected Poems, 1855-1892, A New Edition*.

“Phantom Ride”: This piece is reimagining an early film genre called the “phantom ride.” Between 1896 and 1907, Thomas Edison and many other film innovators across the globe made these films, usually with a camera mounted on the front of a moving vehicle, often a train. It showed a straight-ahead, single-take view (no panning left or right, no cuts), thus providing the perspective of the moving vehicle as it weaves through the landscape. It was considered a “phantom ride” because the force generating motion through time and space was hidden from viewers, giving them the impression and pleasure of being liberated from any visible body—they experienced the feeling of floating through an ever-changing and replenishing space with visual dominance, a gaze that swallows up the landscape.

The poem is also playing with phenomenology. The “house seen from everywhere,” as I’m conjuring it, is a cross between that of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and that of Gaston Bachelard.