

**Alice's Great Adventure**  
(November 2011 version)

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In an opening scene of *Miracolo a Milano* (1951) written and directed by the Italian Neorealists duo of Cesare Zavattini and Vittorio De Sica, an older woman discovers a baby lying in her garden under a cabbage patch after hearing his cries. Gathering the baby in her arms, she takes him into her home, where she lives alone. One day, she returns from shopping to find the toddler sitting on the floor in a stream of milk that has spilled over from a boiling pot on the stove. Rather than scold the child as a typical Roman mother would, she imagines the spilled milk is a road and stream and creates a picture by placing small objects alongside the flowing milk transforming the floor into a landscape seen from an aerial view. The old woman performs this creative work with much joy as a wide grin of amazement slowly spreads across her face and the young toddler ceases to cry. By transforming what would be considered a disaster, into a moment of “play” between mother and child, the old woman shifts the tone of the scene to one of fantasy and pleasure—a tone that will pervade throughout this film, in which a number of miracles take place.

My first thought after watching this scene<sup>1</sup> was did De Sica and Zavattini see Guy's cabbage inspired films, *La Fée aux chous* [The Cabbage Fairy] or *Sage-Femme de première Class* [First Class Mid-wife]? In addition to the cabbage birth of a young boy, which immediately shifted my attention momentarily away from *Miracolo a Milano* to thoughts of Guy, the main character of *Miracolo* appears to be a dumb, though not deaf,

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<sup>1</sup> Having seen the film in the past, I did not recall this cabbage patch scene.

aged, single-mother. After dying early in the film when the child is just an adolescent, she later reappears as an angel or fairy godmother, who has stolen a magic dove from heaven in order to help her orphaned son and a community of slum squatters find refuge after being displaced by businessmen developers. There was something magical about this “godmother” who not only brought to mind a character Alice Guy might create on-screen, this figure, who defies the gods with her “will of steel”<sup>2</sup> reminded me of Guy herself.

In *Wonderment, Seeing the World* through the eyes of Alice Guy, written for the Whitney Alice Guy Blachè exhibition catalog, I emphasized Guy’s particular way of seeing by stressing her strengths as a storyteller, in both her films, as well as in her autobiography. What I recall most from the latter is Guy’s descriptive power in passages in which she describes her childhood memories of traveling by boat across the Strait of Magellan to join her parents in Chile. Years later, as an adult and newly married bride, Alice Guy Blachè made another landmark voyage traveling with her husband Herbert by boat across the Atlantic to New York, leaving her native Paris and a successful and rewarding career at Gaumont as a director and producer behind. This new adventure would ultimately change the course of Alice Guy’s life and career, as a new name, a new identity, a new husband and a new country and culture shaped the woman who today we celebrate as world’s cinema’s first woman director. While we know this, have we considered how this journey across the ocean might suggest a useful starting point for reframing how we have theorized and historicized Alice Guy? I’d like to suggest that a transnational perspective may help us generate questions that could alter the framework of existing historiographical and critical approaches to Guy’s work. By refocusing attention to Guy’s social class background and her status as an immigrant, we might

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<sup>2</sup> Alan Williams describes Guy in this way.

reconsider how we historians have viewed and interpreted her possible feminist inclinations while underplaying the sometimes conservative and problematic representations of race, class, gender, and family in her work.

### **Finding Alice Guy – Was She Ever Lost in the first place?**

Alice Guy Blaché, *Lost Visionary of the Cinema* (2003) by Alison McMahan is, and remains the foremost scholarly work devoted to Guy and McMahan is still considered the expert on the subject. Being a filmmaker before a film scholar, McMahan explains that she undertook her investigation of Guy because she wanted to **find** a woman filmmaker working outside of the Hollywood system, “ who could serve as a role model for her own films, which would use a “feminist film language.”<sup>3</sup> “I had to invent Alice Guy before I could find her. ...“ I drew a profile of what this role model might be like.”

McMahan explains that she thought she was more likely to find her role model in Europe rather than in the U.S., “because that would put her at a further remove from what became Classical Hollywood narrative.” Inspired by 1980s feminist film theory and responding to Tom Gunning and Gaudreaut’s *cinema of attractions* theory, McMahan frames her study of Guy from her personal perspective as a filmmaker and the current scholarly theoretical and historical work of the period in which she was writing. I think we all agree that McMahan’s work is an invaluable contribution to the field ; she **created** Alice Guy for us and more importantly gave us **ACCESS** to her in ways that Anthony Slide and other male historians have not ; we have relied on her research as the starting point for our own research.

In her essay *Are They Us* Jane Gaines has made us aware that we often construct historical women, like Guy in our image. She questions whether or not we are actually

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<sup>3</sup> McMahan, p. xxv.

representing ourselves as much or more as these women in our own work : “we find what we would be but not what we would not be” when we claim them as historical figures. In this context, I find McMahan’s expressed desire to create Guy interesting in and of itself because Guy functions as a sort of fantasy that fulfills the requirements necessary for McMahan to reaffirm her own practice as a filmmaker.

Furthermore, McMahan shapes much of her discussion of Guy’s career and her argument for Guy’s unique contribution to the field within a feminist framework or perspective. Throughout her book, she somewhat hastily attributes to Guy a range of innovations, including aspects of narration and innovations, such as “first dramatic close-up” in order to argue that Guy was ahead of the men. At other times she holds back when discussing race and ethnicity in Guy’s Solax productions and does not address it in her Gaumont films. Interestingly, McMahan often attempts to correct the historical record by arguing on behalf of Guy in a manner similar to the director’s own writing in her autobiography.

Returning for a moment to McMahan’s fantasy to create a model of a women filmmaker, I think it might be useful, especially for contemporary feminist or women filmmakers and for us to consider what role fantasy plays in history. I suggest this because I recently saw Lynn Lestor Hershman’s film on the feminist movement *!Women Art Revolution—A Secret History* in which she chronicles the history of what she calls “the feminist art revolution.” Beginning in the 1960s Hershman interviews pertinent women artists, scholars, curators and academics and inserts her own interpretations and impressions as both an active participant and observer of the feminist movement. I’m bringing this up because in the film Hershman goes into detail about how important the

notion of “role playing” was for many feminists artists as well as herself. Performance was not only the art form specific to women—they created it because it was “the best way for them to act out.” I want to take a moment to think about this notion of performance for women’s artistic and creative work.

In many ways, Hershman’s film is a personal fantasy become reality, but it is also a fantasy for women spectators. Women are the real stars here ; they control everything—the images, the POV, the history and the narration. In fact, in the film, Hershman tells us that she took on another identity at one point in her life because her own was fractured, and that many women of her generation did the same because they were juggling identities. These women turned to making art or performance pieces in which they created new identities. Role playing, or “acting out” in performance pieces allowed them to express the ways in which their personal life was political, especially with reference to experiences of trauma, such as rape, boredom and daily routine (housewives), and issues of equality associated with gender, race, ethnicity, class, and labor. Hershman’s best example of role playing’s liberating and game changing effects for women is when she informs us that she funded the film with earnings from her artwork—unknown and unsellable for years until she wrote a positive critical review of it under a different name and became a success overnight. Not only is this fascinating, but it raises questions as to why such action was necessary in the 90’s and why it worked! It speaks much about women’s labor, be it creative or otherwise.

So, what does this have to do with Alice Guy and her time? In a series of interview sessions with Victor Bachy from November 1963 to June 1964, the, then ninety-year old Alice Guy, “silenced” for years in the historical arena used the

opportunity to “sound off” in her own words when answering Bachy’s question as to why she thought her work was overshadowed by her male colleagues :

“I can assure you that I am not the least bit vain about what I accomplished. I was there at the **right time**, I began my career then, and I had a fair amount of imagination. I was born with a fertile imagination. I wrote—that amused me—and I read a huge amount. I was the daughter of a bookshop owner and I could read whatever I chose, or rather almost everything. I loved it. As a child, I used to hide under the table to read. I thrived on it.”<sup>4</sup>

What is interesting in this passage is that while prior to this Guy initially restrained herself from directly answering Bachy by stating “Why, I cannot say. I have children,” she quickly retracts that statement in order to emphasize her natural intelligence and curiosity. Reminding Bachy and us of her privileged childhood in France where she was free to read and explore whatever book she wanted, whenever she wanted, Guy manages to emphasize both her bourgeois roots and intellectual background. Her vague suggestion that motherhood could have been responsible for her being “silenced” in history, may suggest unsettled feelings she had about the likely loss of freedom and independence that resulted from her marriage and decision to bear children. Her comment seems far from the playful and curious Alice Guy of earlier days when babies were picked from a cabbage patches or purchased from a mid-wife. Babies later became mixed up with a dog, (*Mixed Pets*, 1911) and left on doorsteps (the newly discovered *The Coming of Sunbeam*, 1913) as they remained a consist theme in Guy’s Solax films. Babies obviously were on Guy’s mind throughout her life and work ! Yet, it’s possible

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<sup>4</sup> Bachy, Conversations with Alice Guy.

that a fantasy to have children, once realized, may not have fulfilled Guy's dreams and desires as she may have hoped they would.

If we take into account that Herbert Blachè left Madame with two children for an actress, imagine the social implications (as well as the economic) for a woman of Guy's bourgeois background (single, divorced woman with children). After finalizing her divorce in 1922, she returns with her children to France hoping to find work in the film industry and fails. The loss of freedom, economic support, social status and professional stature Guy experienced after the demise of Solax is in striking contrast to the adventurous youth and excitement of the early years of her career.

Returning to Hershmann's film, and the word **Secretive** in its title and the reference to being "silenced" with regards to Guy and other women of her generation, there is an opportunity here to generate some questions as to why historically, women's creative work is silenced, hidden, lost, secretive, ignored or undervalued. If we are to reframe Cinema Past and Future we need to think about what questions are asked, and what aren't in determining women's histories. The notion of role playing, performance, and "acting out" that Hershmann's film charts in a more contemporary context, is perhaps not far from the notion of "play" that Heidi Schulpmann theorizes in *An Alliance between Film History and Film Theory*. Schulpman's notion that "play is a mediation, an intermediate zone possible in the space of the cinema in which film and the audience find their place and where the separation, together with the hierarchy associated with it has no decisive importance" offers us an opportunity to reconsider how we think about Guy and the context of the transnational transitional cinema in which she worked.

**The first Woman Film Director or the First Woman *Metteur-en-Scene***

When describing the early history of the French film industry, Alan Williams explains that in order to avoid a Great Men (and Women) theory of history, he will utilize a method of focusing on individual filmmakers and his/her industrial context in his somewhat old-fashioned format of dealing with multiple, creative biographies. Williams' method allows for him to address a "film community" and a "network of individuals" rather than individual *auteurs*. I find William's method appealing because firstly, he deals with the specific historical context of the French industry, as well as the social context of those working in it. Guy's first experience in the cinema is as a laborer in France and her social/historical context is "bourgeois" ; as Williams explains, Guy worked in a network and there was "a sympathy" *sympathia* between her and Leon Gaumont. That network consisted of, not only Gaumont, but other business associates, the inventors Demeny and the Lumieres, and also Guy's friend and secretary, Yvonne Mugnier-Serand, her sister Germaine, and those she trained and collaborated with, such as Feuillade, her cameraman Anatole Thiberville and Henri Menessieur, (who designed the sets for Guy's *Passion*), the later two having followed her to the U.S. With her "convent education and good royalists connections"<sup>5</sup> Guy was an asset to the Gaumont's business , not only in her efficiency and dedication, but socially:

"Guy's bourgeois background and her many travels must certainly have helped fit in with the firm and its generally wealthy sophisticated clientele. Her ambition to re-enter the bourgeoisie from which she had fallen would have endeared her to the enterprise's new owner. She and he both combined the drive and the flexibility of the *parvenue* (self-made upstart) with the cultural and intellectual values of the bourgeoisie."

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<sup>5</sup> Williams, p. 55.

My purpose here is to emphasize the bourgeois French context in which Guy grew up as a child, matured as a single, young woman and first experienced work as a laborer in the nascent film industry and cinema context in France. This context was quite different from what she experienced as a married woman, mother and film studio producer in the United States. McMahan notes that the Lumiere's and Gaumont had similar political and philosophical views, they were bourgeois and considered "right-wing" conservatives. Gaumont and Lumiere's held a paternalistic attitude toward their employees and their business model was bourgeois. While this business model functioned well in France, McMahan claims it was disastrous when each entered the United States, and only Pathe with its more aggressive approach survived. I would tend to disagree with this somewhat. Pathe eventually was pushed out of the United States, in part due to cultural objections to some of its product's content and to industry pressure and standards unacceptable to U.S. audiences (suicides, etc.). This, along with the advent of feature films and stricter imposed barriers to entry by the Motion Picture Patent Company's Trust which no longer found Pathe a useful member, contributed to Pathe's forced departure from the U.S. Gaumont, who focused on sound rather than distribution and exhibition failed in the U.S. for that reason as well as that fact that it lost its key position in the Trust when it was replaced by the Italian company Cines (McMahan even writes that the chronophone was Gaumont's entry into the states).<sup>6</sup> McMahan does not discuss Guy's business model for

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<sup>6</sup> McMahan p. 69. She also states that the MPPC had licensed the chronophone, although there was later opposition to it., especially after complaints from exhibitors "Can't you prevent Gaumont Pictures running under "talking picture?". P. 74. Gaumont promoted the machine until 1922, and first presented it in 1902. p. 74

Solax, or any possible class-related and industry issues associated with it. Rather, she accepts Solax, as an American Company, operating like the others.<sup>7</sup>

What is overlooked here is the fact that Guy's American production still adhered mostly to the French model of filmmaking, and not only in terms of production. While she had a network or troupe of artists and technicians who collaborated in a work environment similar to that at Gaumont, her American films also had a French sensibility in their humor and point-of-view. Solax films drew on French vaudeville, skits and comedy routines as did other French producers of the time. In both Italy in France, the term *metteur-en-scene* is used to describe those who oversaw or supervised the direction, coordination and details of each film production. Typically, the *metteur-en-scene* specialized in a genre or genres and most production companies had a number of *metteur-en-scene*. While during the early teens (1909-1913, in particular) its difficult to generalize from country to country and from firm to firm, we know that some early production involved not so much a strict division of labor, but loosely functioning collaborative teams in which the players and technicians could function in different roles.

McMahan relies primarily on models formulated by American historians, like Staiger, to claim that Guy passed over the cameraman system phase and began immediately with the director system ; why she does explains that two divergent modes of production, collaborative and hierarchical (*phonoscenes*) co-existed at the same time at Gaumont,<sup>8</sup> it is because the Gaumont *phonoscene* studio functioned more as a factory (division of labor) by 1905, if not earlier, that she can claim Guy as a pioneer of studio management. I agree with McMahan that Guy pioneered a form of studio management at

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<sup>7</sup> McMahan, p. 29.

<sup>8</sup> P.119

Solax, but she seems to have operated her company more closely to Gaumont and Lumiere's bourgeois paternal business model. Instead of the American director system, Guy, I argue, employed the European *metteur-en-scene* system and hired and trained a number of men to handle a diverse range of genres that distinguished Solax's house style. Whether directed by Guy or someone else, Solax films share similar themes, stylistic devices and narrative form. In the French tradition, Solax had a small, consistent, steady troupe of professional talent--actresses and actors, and children (many families) who remained committed to Guy and to Solax ; these people were willing to take a pay cut when Solax had financial troubles years later.

#### **Solax, A French-American Company**

Taking the above into consideration, I'd suggest that rather than being an American Company, Solax was a French-American house. There are many possible ways to explore this, but since space and time limits me here, I will touch on just a few. For example, Guy's films were sent to France to be developed and many of the intertitles were originally in French. While I hesitate to use the term *auteur* to describe what is specific to Guy's filmmaking, I would argue that looking across a body of work done both in France for Gaumont, and in the U.S. for Solax and for independent features, we can identify a specific film style to Guy. This style and form of narration seems consistent whether or not she was the *metteur-en-scene*, or wrote or produced a work that others directed.

Williams argues that, like Zecca at Pathe, Guy was a director and producer and in that capacity she did two things: one, she created the "Gaumont House Style" and she

trained the filmmakers, who “would be the best in the business.”<sup>9</sup> Comedy, a genre which Guy excelled in at Gaumont, became a Solax company specialty in the fall of 1911 after she and Herbert Blache had just returned from Europe where comedies were popular, particularly in France and Italy. Figures like Max Linder, Andre Deed and Marcel Fabre were featured in series as characters, Max, Cretinetti. and Robinet respectively.

Comedies were imported to the U.S. in the mid-teens to fill the demand for single-reel subjects ; they often accompanied Italian films of increased length and production values, what came to be defined as features a few years later, in order to meet quotas imposed by distributors like George Kleine.. Quick and cheap to make, comedies supplied nickelodeons, vaudeville houses and later motion picture palaces with a genre that could appeal to different classes, ages, and sexes.<sup>10</sup>

**Comedy and the notion of play. Humor is the single most subversive weapon we have.**

If we look at Solax and Gaumont comedies within the context of early French vaudeville and theatrical traditions, we may discover that much of the humor, at times vulgar or crude, and the contradictory representation of sex, gender, race, class and ethnicity in Guy’s films may be attributed to her class and cultural background. There is a particular French flavor to Guy’s Solax, and her later independently produced films, even if the subject draws from contemporary social issues and current events, as does many of her subjects. A somewhat repetitious pattern is revealed. Cross-dressing, generally for men (*Officer Henderson*) but also for children (*The Sewer*) and in some

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<sup>9</sup> Williams, p. 56. Williams says “they were standing on the shoulders of Alice Guy.”

<sup>10</sup> Williams says that film comedy dominated French cinema until 1914, by its sheer volume and extraordinary box office returns. P. 62.

cases grown women (*Burstop Holmes Murder Case*) is a dominant motif and form of play for characters. Additionally, young women dressing up (*When Marion was Little*), (*The Ocean Waif*) and the mixing of gender roles and age is also prevalent. In Guy's upside world an animal (a dog) can be confused with a baby (*Mixed Pets* and babies can be purchased in cabbage patches. But there is also the idea of disguise, performance and play operating in many of these comedies or dramas and disguises are not used solely to emphasize cross-dressing. Rather they function as a form of playful humor as well as a narrative device to motivate action.

In *Burstop Holmes Murder Case*, Mr. Jellybone wears a wig and his twentieth-century wife is dressed like a man in pants. Mr. Jellybone escapes out the bedroom window with the help of a friend in order to play cards with the boys. To fool his wife that he is at home, he takes his wig and places it on the head of a dummy he throws together with a crumpled sheet ; placing the dummy under the covers, it appears as if he is sleeping.

Mr. Jellybone accidentally cuts his finger when cutting his wig, and blood spills on the sheets, but he ignores it and escapes out the window. Meanwhile, downstairs in the parlor Mrs. Jellybone hears the racket and heads for the bedroom to investigate. Spotting the bloody sheet, she accidentally knocks the fake head off the dummy onto the floor. Shocked by the decapitated head, which she believes to be her husband's, she calls detective Burstop Holmes to investigate the crime. Holmes is in his office where he takes the call and then dresses up in a disguise of a detective outfit, long moustache, hat, and two pipes which he lights with a light bulb.

While the film tries to suggest that Mrs. Jellybone is a twentieth-century woman who wears the pants in the family, and that her husband is like a child and wears a wig, gender roles are only superficially at play in the film. By the end, the characters return to their traditional roles as husband and wife, as the wife forgives her husband's antics, and cries hysterically, relieved that he is indeed not headless or dead. The disguises used in the film work to reinforce the comic high points which support the silly story line and subject, the modern woman as sufferette, so that the film can end on a conventional note.

In *Canned Harmony*, Billy disguises himself in a wig, moustache, and tails so he can transform himself into a virtuoso in order to impress his sweetheart, Evelyn's, father. Billy outwits Evelyn's dad by faking he can play a violin assisted by a phonograph record secretly played by Evelyn while her father is not looking.

Similarly, in *His Double*, Jack tells his girl Grace that he will "change his face" to suit her father and rival Count Laking Koyen, who Grace's father has selected as her suitor, despite her tantrums and protests. Jack disguises himself to look exactly like the Count and plots to prevent him from marrying Grace, and thus outwits her father. In these films, a young woman's attempts to challenge and defy her father's selection of a marriage partner takes the form of play rather than dramatic action or defiance in the form of unacceptable behavior. The preferred male partners plan and scheme with the young women (and make fools of themselves) in order to do whatever the girls want in order to outwit their future father-in-laws, who wind up victims of the game, amused but outsmarted.

In the early comedy *Mixed Pets* (1911), a dog is confused with a baby as two couples from different classes reveal their contrasting social points of view. The

bourgeois Mrs. Newylwed wants a pet dog against her husband's wishes and manages to convince her uncle to come to her aid in order to surprise Mr. Newlywed, her husband. Meanwhile, the butler and the maid are secretly married and they must hide their baby in a kitchen cupboard unaware that the new dog has been hidden there as well. When Mr. Newlywed goes to the cupboard at his wife's suggestion and according to instructions she leaves him in a hand-written note, he finds a baby rather than the planned dog. He is shocked, but not as shocked as when the servants of the house disclose to the Newlyweds and the uncle that the child is theirs and that they are secretly married.

These films recall vaudeville skits in their quick intentions and gags to gain a laugh, as well as the literal puns in their titles, such as "canned harmony," his "double," and "mixed pets." As a form of play they actually camouflage more unsettling and serious underlying social and cultural beliefs in traditionally conservative values concerning marriage, birth, and class. Additionally, throughout these films and others, Guy uses a simple story line as a base for structuring a series of devices, be it shooting into mirrors and reflections (*His Double*), disguises as described above, or split screens, diegetic inserts (newspaper ads, letters) and athletic stunts (*His Double*) shown over a series of edited shots, or close-ups (clocks, photographs to denote the passage of time), awkward at times because the shots are held much longer than would be employed by a director like Griffith, to demonstrate the breadth of operations used to motivate the narration.

Vaudeville-like attractions such as the African-American woman who unveils herself to a shocked Billy Quirk in *Matrimony's Speed Limit*, and the African-American laborer in trousers who imitates an ape eating a banana after losing his money at playing

cards in *A Fool and His Money*, equally operate to motivate narration, but they also present disturbing and unsettling representations of race and class, hidden in many of Guy's films.

In Guy's films we get all but the kitchen sink, as she tries to jam in as many technical and artistic devices as possible in order to tell a story. Often these films are constructed in a less efficient and uneven manner in terms of narrative and style than say Griffith, who Guy clearly borrows from. But they are also interesting and fascinating in their clumsy attempts to tell a simple story in a complex visual manner ; they illustrate the many technical, social, and cultural changes of the transitional era in their mix of the European tradition of filmmaking with an emerging, American classical style.

Unfinished section

### **The Notion of Play in the Transitional Cinema or *Cinema des las seconde époque*?**

In her *An Alliance between Film History and Theory*, Heidi Schulpman suggests that the transition phase of cinema is interesting from a feminist perspective : women found there way to film and the cinema as actresses, as a mass audience. And she cites Jennifer comment that “early cinema” when used as a “feminist critical category” and not just as a means of periodization, can open up door for research beyond the 1910s –and that the transition, the multiple transitions become the actual object of early cinema. Arguing in favor or Erik de Kuyer's periodization, *cinema du premier temps a cinema des las seconde époque*, encompassing the 1910's, she posits the époque of the Spielfilmkino, which is not feature film, but the then used term for photoplay. She describe how the discovery of early cinema provided an impulse to move from a theory

of film to a theory of cinema and she came to the conclusion that women's participation in the emergence of cinema was significant constitutively. .Schulpmann suggest sthe paradigm of a culture of the private and intimate for the second era, it would be called the *Haus* or the bourgeois home.