“Tackling Universal Women as a Research Problem: What Historiographic Sources Do and Don’t Tell Us about ‘Gender’ in the Silent Motion Picture Studio.”

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By way of public introduction to *Alas and Alack* (Joseph De Grasse, US, 1915), the conference organizers asked me to explain in fifteen minutes or less “what historiographic sources do and don’t tell us about ‘gender’ in the silent motion picture studio.” This irresistible prompt offers several intriguing puzzles. Is it well worth considering, for example, how exactly information becomes an “historiographic source,” and the silent motion picture studio certainly merits renewed investigation. But one cannot speak of everything all at once. I take a clue from the inverted commas singling out “gender” and infer that this term is more vexed than the others, and therefore of greater interest. Without purporting to develop a major statement about “gender” in relatively few words, I illustrate through my own research two points I take to be axiomatic. First, what sources tell us about “gender” is a function not of the sources themselves but of our methods of interpretation. As every English speaker knows, whether “man” means “male person” or “everyone” depends on how you read it. Second, gender presumes a conceptual relation: when a source tells us about “gender,” it tells us that something or someone is “gendered” and also, if only by implication, that something or someone else is differently gendered. The list of possible something elses is very long, insofar as cultures use gender distinctions to classify and hierarchize not only persons and things but also places and practices. In illustrating these two axioms--that interpretive methods prepare us to detect gender and that gendered objects come in relational sets--I provide some concrete information about what I asked and learned about gender in the course of my research on the Universal Film Manufacturing Company in the 1910s.

To begin, then, with “gender.” I think it safe to say that the quotation marks testify to three closely related problems. They indicate, first, that “gender” remains a theoretically contested term, pointing to a legacy of argument about the culture-nature distinction, about systems of cultural differences and the relations among them, about the relationship between performing a gender and being assigned one, and so on. The inverted commas also mark “gender” as an historically contingent category, such that sources of information from the past might change our sense of what gender is or does in a particular time and place.
Finally, in acknowledging that “gender” is a contested and variable category, the punctuation around it addresses a community of interpreters for whom usage of the term continues to seem important despite, or perhaps because of, theoretical differences and differences of historical interpretation.\(^1\) To the theoretical and historiographical challenges inherent in the term, then, we may add the political matter of what we hope to gain from a history of gender in the silent motion picture studio. I think we might hope for an empowering understanding of institutions as historical actors capable of changing gendered practice.

The research on Universal reported in *Universal Women* did not find any major alternatives to a binary organization of gender into masculine and feminine terms.\(^2\) It did find a good deal of variation in what those terms might connote, in the intensity with which they were applied to persons and practices, and thus the degree to which they regulated who did what at the studio. Those variations in how gender norms regulated work, I show, were not mandated by particular individuals. Neither did they simply trickle down from “the culture” or “the industry.” Rather, they resulted from cascades of decisions made by differently empowered constituents of the studio as an institution. My book explains what decisions led the studio to employ a relatively large number of women as directors from its beginnings in 1912 through 1919, and then why it reversed that practice, such that new additions to its directors’ ranks would be men. Many of these decisions had nothing explicitly to do with the question of whether women should direct. Nonetheless they helped form practices that would end up defining directing as a job for men alone by decade’s end. The fact that individuals working within institutions can make decisions with unintended consequences hints at the kinds of actors institutions are. The frequency of such unintended consequences suggests a general rule: although we can change them, institutions do have minds of their own.

Women directed from four to twelve percent of Universal’s titles in the period depending on how, when, and what you count. By available historical measures, this was a high percentage range relative to US industrial averages. It certainly distinguished Universal from contemporary competitors like Vitagraph, a large producer which also employed women to direct, but in much smaller numbers.\(^3\) To tackle the research problem of why Universal first promoted and then demoted women required consideration of what made the firm different from its industrial peers. Why did interpretations of “man” or “woman” at first seem to matter less at Universal than at other large studios in determining who would
direct? How did those interpretations or the intensity of their application change? These questions encouraged me to examine sources that make no explicit mention of gender--such as financial statements and maps--as well as those that did--such as films and their promotional materials.

Briefly, the story those sources tell goes like this. Through 1917, Universal embraced an experimental approach to the performance of gendered roles. This approach was encouraged by a production model that distributed the risk of film production across the very large volume of short tiles that comprised Universal’s variety program. This production model valued efficiency, inventiveness, and experimentation over reputation, commanding authority, and generic formulae. The geography of Universal’s West Coast facility itself encouraged a certain amount of gender trouble. The company imagined Universal City, which opened on its current site in 1915, as a live-work-play space, a make-believe polity, with a woman police chief and major, where city boys from back East could join serial queens in playing cowboys and Indians (fig. 1). The decade’s close brought an end to playtime. The institution became increasingly confident that it could determine the difference between men and women and understand the needs and interests of each. It did so through a process of creating and marketing feature film genres and through attempts to reconcile the difference between studio space as imagined in 1915 and as inhabited by 1918. That year, Universal scaled back production and joined the rest of the industry in marketing a feature film program. For the first time, promotional materials began to treat the films of Lois Weber, Ida May Park, and Elsie Jane Wilson as having something in common because they were directed by women (fig. 2). In its fictions as on the lot, Universal increasingly segregated domestic space from work space. The studio developed a formulaic understanding of what would interest women in the audience. This allowed it to associate genres with genders--such that a “society drama” could be assumed to interest women more than a “western.” Although the details are interesting, this association of film genres or generic attributes with genders is familiar enough. And so will the accompanying assumption that women should direct films of special interest to women, while men could be expected to direct titles of interest to men as well as women. When it settled on these interpretations by 1919, Universal did not strip women directors of an authority they once had as women, but rather banished
women directors by constituting them as such, by imposing a unity on the category “woman” it had not theretofore possessed.

I can make this argument and my method more concrete by describing how I employed a central tool of film history: the filmography. Although we may be tempted to associate the filmography with mere data collection, this list making belies a powerfully coercive feat of interpretation. Filmography pries titles away from the multiple contexts that natively embrace them and recontextualizes them to suit the historian’s desire. Listing and sorting begins the process of turning a film into a historiographical source. In truth, the filmography’s titles organize an entire ensemble of sources through which we come to understand a film and its context: copyright descriptions, reviews, surviving prints, etc. The choices we make in constituting the filmography will profoundly affect what this ensemble of sources will or will not tell us about gender.

If I make a filmography of Ida May Park’s works, then the film you are about to see, *Alas and Alack*, might get listed under the heading “Park as screenwriter” and the subheading “1915.” It would appear alongside the nineteen other titles crediting Park as screenwriter that year. We would learn that Joseph De Grasse, her husband, was credited as the director for most of those titles, and that the films were mostly shorts. We would see, further, that this pattern shifted slightly the following year, when Universal credited Park with writing ten five-reel features directed by De Grasse. In 1917, Universal began to credit her as the director as well as the writer of such features. She made eleven features for the studio by 1919. The filmography would constitute all these films, whether directed by Park or De Grasse, as part of Park’s oeuvre. I’ll leave it to each of you to insert here your own critique or defense of the auteurism such filmographies encourage. In any case, here would be a list emphasizing Park’s career. It would point to several key issues in that career: her working relationship with her husband, her shift from the role of screenwriter to that of screenwriter and director, and her shift from work in shorts to work in features. These issues would begin to hint at how Universal interpreted gender. Using Park’s name to organize the filmography, however, forecloses a consideration of how Universal’s decision makers might have grouped these titles. Moreover, to make it answer the question of how women came to direct, we would have to decide to make Park stand for all women.
A different sort of filmography can address the question of Park’s representativeness. If I make a list of films Universal credited to women directors with years as subheads, I find two directors and six titles under 1915, four directors and thirty-seven titles under 1916, eight directors and forty-three titles under 1917. In 1918, the upward trend appears to reverse itself and I find four directors and sixteen titles. In 1919, four directors and six titles. In 1920, no directors. This filmography makes Park’s career part of a trend. If I look at the numbers of reels, I see women directing both shorts and features from 1915 to 1917, and features exclusively in 1918 and 1919. (This might explain why four women made thirty seven titles in 1916 and only sixteen titles in 1918.) I see evidence of other relationships like the De Grasse-Park screenwriter-director partnership: Lois Weber and Phillips Smalley, who were married, Francis Ford and Grace Cunard, who weren’t. If I look at who is credited as screenwriter or one of the key performers in these films I see a lot of the same doubling-up of roles that I see in Park’s screenwriting-directing credits. Working back and forth between this kind of filmography and filmographies that individualize women like Park, I can get a sense of how careers developed across the studio. I begin to see that Park’s move from screenwriter to director was one way career development typically happened. Another involved a move from actor to director. If I follow the same method of aggregating careers, I see that Universal is fairly consistent in assigning individual women to direct shorts before entrusting them with features. If I look into titles, I discover greater variety than if I looked at single directors alone. For example, I see Grace Cunard directing action-packed serial installments in 1917, the same year Park began to direct features. This provides a clue that the concentration of women in feature film direction in 1918 and 1919 might have been a factor in their elimination the following year. A look at features exclusively, moreover, leads me to the conclusion I mentioned earlier, namely, that there is much greater consistency of approach in the types of features women directed in 1918 than in 1916 and 1917. Unlike a filmography focused on a single director, this list of titles allows me to describe when and how the studio understood “women directors” as a group.

It will not have escaped your notice that describing when and how the studio understood women directors as a group is not at all the same thing as describing how it understood gender. To get at that, I needed a filmography that would allow me to set the credits of women directors in the context of the
studio’s output as whole. Only then could I hope to answer the question of how filmmakers and studio execs interpreted the difference between the kinds of jobs men and women might do. Luckily, in the case of Universal, Richard Braff had compiled and published such a filmography. Although it provided a starting point, Braff’s work also posed a huge problem: Universal released over 6500 titles from 1912-1920. How to make sense of such a large body of material? One way is to begin by acknowledging that this was a problem decision makers at Universal themselves faced. If I look at the output of 1915, I find Park and De Grasse’s *Alas and Alack* amidst 959 titles, which is still a big number, but easier to deal with than 6500. I find that those titles group fairly neatly according to fourteen brands. The brands correspond to loosely defined genres and are strongly associated with particular filmmaking teams. *Alas and Alack* was a Rex release. There were eighty-six such releases that year. De Grasse was credited with directing thirty-four of them and Ben Wilson most of the others. Producing-directors like this tended to work consistently with a screenwriter and a stable of actors. This grouping by brand carried forward habits from before 1912, when many of the brands were independent companies that merged to form Universal. Universal relied on these brands to organize production for its “daily change” variety program. For example, *Alas and Alack* was scheduled for release on Sunday, Oct. 10 with the two reel L-Ko comedy *A Bathhouse Tragedy* directed by Henry Lerhman, episode seventeen of *The Broken Coin*, a Universal Special credited to Francis Ford’s direction, but almost certainly co-directed by Grace Cunard, and *Marianna* a one real Laemmle drama directed by Harry Stafford (fig. 3).

In beginning to indicate how Universal grouped films and arranged their production, this kind of filmography reveals ways gender differences did and did not matter. For example, it lets us see that women directors were more strongly associated with particular brands than men. They were concentrated in short drama brands, like Rex, and never directed for the key short comedy brands--a harbinger of the pigeonholing that would occur at decades end. But we can also see that this brand-production company organization gave woman and men very similar opportunities for promotion. Relatively stable companies like the one comprising De Grasse, Park, and the cast you’re about to see in *Alas and Alack* provided apprenticeships through which performers and writers came to direct. Lon Chaney and Cleo Madison, the leads in *Alas and Alack*, both directed in 1915, for example. In fact, a *Moving Picture World* story credits
Cleo Madison as the producer of *Alas and Alack*, which would be consistent with the apprenticeship model. Titles officially credited to her direction by Universal begin the following month.

Rushing forward in this filmography to the output of 1919, it’s clear the feature film program wholly revised this way of organizing production (fig. 4). Short comedies and serials survive as distinct brands, but all features are released under either the general Universal rubric or the prestige “Jewel” label. An interpretive framework tuned to reproducing the success of individual feature film titles and marketing titles by association with one another in genres replaced a framework that thought in terms of the success of brands and particular companies of filmmakers making as many as two films a month. This change occurred through a crucial intermediary step represented by the Bluebird Brand. Briefly, these were five and six reel feature films initially marketed and released according to more or less the same model as two reel dramas. A filmography that lists titles in this way can show that women directors were concentrated in Bluebirds, directing twelve percent of its titles. In my book I explain how the process of interpreting what made a given Bluebird title successful not only helped define for the studio what a marketable feature film should look like, but also convinced it of an increasingly narrow interpretation of the term “women.”

I am arguing that to understand what sources can and cannot say about gender in the silent motion picture studio we need to work among several filmographies at once. Really, we need relational databases, and I did make one for my Universal project. These databases allow us to revel in the variety of possible ways of aggregating large numbers of titles into sets—as a starting point for research. From the outset, my aim was to understand how an institution correlated an understanding of gender with an understanding of work, so I tried to be guided by the groupings Universal performed.

An important next step will be to consider how filmmaking institutions collaborated and competed with one another in regulating gender. This will require yet another kind of filmography. To wit: *Alas and Alack* almost certainly wound up in the vaults of the BFI thanks to the mediation of the Trans-Atlantic Film Company, Ltd. through which Universal distributed shorts and serials in the United Kingdom between 1913 and 1920. The name “Universal” was already taken by another firm in the UK at the time of Universal’s incorporation. In addition to providing Universal a British distributor, Trans-
Atlantic also functioned as its agent in selling distribution rights for feature films. In January 1916, Trans-Atlantic announced it had sold exclusive rights to Bluebird films to the British distribution arm of Gaumont. Four months later came an announcement that “American Films” were the sole agents. If we pause to consider what this transposition from Universal to Bluebird to Trans-Atlantic to Gaumont to American Films might mean to the work of compiling and interpreting filmographies, I believe we can begin to get a clear picture of the task before us. To understand what historiographic sources do and do not tell us about “gender” in the silent motion picture studio, and to place those studios in the world, will require researchers to develop or significantly revise existing descriptions of all motion picture production, distribution, and exhibition everywhere. But I think we already knew this.
NOTES

1 Among the very large number of works that could be cited on these points, two have been particularly important in the development of my thinking: Denise Riley, 1988. "Am I that Name?": Feminism and the Category of "women" in history (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan Press, 1988), Joan Wallach Scott, 1986. “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” The American Historical Review vol. 91 no. 5 (1986):1053-75.


5 Ad. for Bluebird Photoplays, Bioscope, 27 Jan. 1916, 356c.