

Book Review

Jane Gaines. *Pink-Slipped: What Happened to Women in the Silent Film Industries?* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018.

Meredith Slifkin

Jane Gaines' latest book emerges at the juncture of an identity crisis for the feminist historiography project as it attempts to reconcile the successes and failures of the past—asking not just which histories are told, but who gets to write those histories, and whether those histories are valid. In a post-truth, post-#me too, post-post world, where the realities of the past are coming to the surface more quickly than they can be recorded for posterity, the floodgates to the injustices, omissions, and misrepresentations of women's experiences in the film industry and film academia are open. The result is a reinvestigation of the “historical turn” that emerged in feminist thought during the 1980s, and a renewed interest in histories that have not yet been rewritten.

Recent trends in scholarship which aim to take up this mantle, look to the past to make sense of the present. Such trends are made evident by projects like the Women's Film and Television History Network (responsible for the Doing Women's Film History annual conference and recent book), University of California Press's launch of the journal *Feminist Media Histories* in 2015, and Columbia's Women Film Pioneers project, of which Gaines is a founding member (the project was conceived as a series of edited collections in the 1990s, but in 2013 launched as a widely conceived digital archive meant to

promote and make readily available research on women's contributions to early cinema) (Gledhill and Knight 2015; Gaines et al. 2013; Feminist Media Histories 2015). While early feminist film theory did the work of revising the “great men” version of [film] history, it focuses mainly on the text—reclaiming archetypes (e.g. the fallen woman)—and engaging with post-structuralist and psychoanalytic frameworks. While indeed doing important work and finding agency in these characters and re-narrativizing women's representations on screen, these theorists often neglect the women behind the screen, be they women directors or women toiling in the everyday jobs of the industry.

As has been well-established, women played a large role in the fledging film industry (Mahar 2006). Prior to sound, film was still in the Wild West period of regulating its own production and exhibition practices, as well as imagining its own style and ideological goals: would it be a vehicle for documentation, propaganda, storytelling, or adaptation? It was certainly not considered an art form until much later with the inception of *Cahiers du cinéma*. With all of these possibilities open, the work of filmmaking was not yet gendered male, and many jobs such as editing were dominated by women and considered a woman's field (Hatch 2013). Which is all to say that women played an enormous role

in the early film industry before allegedly disappearing. Jane Gaines wants to find out what happened to these women, both in the changing film industry and in second wave feminism's failure to acknowledge them. Her work constitutes an important contribution to the field on three fronts: the history of women in the silent film industries, histories of film that omit their contributions, and how first attempts at revising that history fall short.

Pink-Slipped is an altogether different beast from much of the important historiographic work done for the Women's Film Pioneers Project. Gaines' approach is both empirical and philosophical. While she does the historical research necessary to shine a light on pioneering women who worked at all levels of the industry, this project is a Trojan horse for her overarching thesis, which argues for a reconsideration of historical philosophy and methodology, and is critical of the myopia of early feminist film historiography in particular, and second wave feminism more generally. The subtitle to her book, *What Happened to Women in the Silent Film Industries?*, is asked mainly in irony. In fact, Gaines refuses to answer this question, calling on the reader to instead use the rhetorical device of "What happened?" to "anticipate a theory in which past and present are put in constant relation" (Gaines 2018, 139). Each chapter is an exercise in juxtaposing historical events with their later narrations, and what was lost in between. It is through understanding this relationship between past and present that she hopes the reader will learn to challenge any history that is shaped to fit the narrative of an already established outcome, and to question our complicity as scholars.

In the first three chapters of the book, Gaines follows the careers and "disappearances" of multiple early cinema polyglots, both well-known and lesser-known, in order to underscore the discrepancy between past and present, and its implications for the future. She discusses trailblazing figures like Mary Pickford, Gene Gauntier, Marion Leonard, Antonia Dickson, Alice Guy Blaché, Lois Weber, and truly far too many others than can be mentioned here, whose

hyphenated roles as actor-director-writer-producer-editor have been well-documented, but not fully unpacked in terms of their influence. Gaines infers that the ostensible answer to the question of "what happened?" is that nothing happened to them: careers for women in the film industry did not disappear. Having fallen prey to Roland Barthes' theory of "the prestige of *this happened*" and the tendency to narrativize history, 1970s feminists crafted a story that there were no women in the silent film or that if they were there, they had somehow vanished overnight (particularly after 1925 when the industry shifted more towards the studio system, which did result in fewer roles for women though hardly constitutes a disappearance) (Gaines 2018, 20-23; Barthes 1986, 13). Gaines claims that such attempts to search for the significance of gender roles in history are inherently paradoxical insofar as they are searching for the existence of a hierarchical gender dynamic that they themselves are imposing through the "successful failure" narrative (Gaines 2018, 23). Much of Gaines' logic takes on this ouroboros-like structure, which ultimately creates more questions than it provides answers, but intentionally so, as she insists that this is the best way to encourage further research: through constant re-evaluation.

Gaines puts her theory of historical re-evaluation into practice in Chapter 3, for example, where she revisits the case of early film pioneer Alice Guy Blanché, a perpetually unstable figure in film history, whose "career narrative has been radically revised over the century [...] variously characterized, demoted and promoted" (Gaines 2018, 51). Gaines traces a century of histories on Blanché (industrial and scholarly alike) that in some cases omit her contributions completely and in other cases accredit her with directing or producing upwards of one thousand films for the Gaumont Company. Gaines' object of study for the chapter is the dispute over the supposed first film directed by Blanché, *La Fée aux choix* (Gaumont Company, 1896 [disputed]). Through discourse analysis as well as her own extensive archival research, Gaines muddies the water of the already conflicting accounts on the film discovered in the late 1990s at the Swed-

ish Film Archive: is this the first film directed by a woman? Should we question the indexicality of this image? Can the film be attributed to Blanche? Why does the image not fit with the one described in Blanche's memoirs? Have feminist scholars hastily claimed this as the first film by a female director? (Gaines 2018, 53; McMahan 2002, 20). As in each of her case studies, Gaines is less concerned with finding definitive answers to historical questions than with opening the field of inquiry and questioning those who have attempted to provide answers. She prefers to prove the ways in which a history is never singularly knowable, and to show that any historical investigation necessarily invites larger questions of "where films come from" (Gaines 2018, 70).

Later chapters in the book (five through seven) take a more explicitly theoretical and even philosophical tone, contesting concepts of "historical time," or the notion of a linear past, present, and future. She argues against the practice of "correcting" historical accounts, warning that "we revise the historical record at our peril, knowing that it will be revised again and yet again, long after this moment of reassessment" (Gaines 2018, 31). Gaines is essentially arguing for a sort of "block universe" view of history in which the past, present, and future are simultaneously occurring at all times, making them infinitely accessible and therefore impossible to accurately represent. Despite these metaphysical musings, she nonetheless remains rooted in the specificities of the silent film industries by utilizing the organizing principle of melodrama as a mode or prism through which to understand the condition of early cinema. In Chapter 5 she introduces her "melodramatic theory of historical time," which posits an experiential approach to the "everyday uncertainties of historical time," uses melodrama as a schematic to relate the moral to the temporal (Gaines 2018, 95-6). We see this in the tropes of *almost* or *too late* that generate melodramatic tension, or in the moral legibility of actions and consequences which form the narrative structure of fallen women films, and force the questions of uncertain futures rooted in a desire to return to

the categorically impossible past of "what was." As an example, Gaines uses the film *Shoes* (Lois Webber 1916), citing Peter Brooks' formulation that melodrama is propelled by the desire to reveal injustice and maintain existence in a "space of innocence" from beginning to end (Gaines 2018, 97; Brooks 1976). The idea of Brooks' moral legibility is hardly new to discourses on melodrama, but Gaines is approaching this familiar theme from a uniquely temporal position: she sees melodrama as a mode distinctly suited to a circular rather than linear view of historical time, insofar as it is driven by the desire to return to an impossible past. In the following chapters, Gaines interestingly relates this to the moral/temporal responsibility of any historian (film, feminist, or otherwise): to return over and over to the past, and to avoid the tendency of narrativizing the past by framing it in false equivalency to the present.

Gaines ends her book with an almost-answer to the original question of "what happened" (by her own estimation there is no way to provide a definitive answer to such an inquiry). Of course women never left the silent film industries, and their perceived disappearance is the symptom of a second wave feminist approach that aimed to impose a narrative on the past, therein failing to recognize the more subtle and less directly traceable waves of influence made by the myriad women workers in the industry. Which is not to say that women did not, in some ways, disappear. Gaines ends with the ironic and appropriately circular assertion that "women were replaced by the motion picture narrative structure that they had helped to develop," in essence "pink-slipping" themselves, only to be pink-slipped by history as well (Gaines 2018, 193). This claim is bold and inspires further thought, which is likely Gaines' intention—to keep the gyre of feminist historiography in motion. This extremely ambitious project many years in the making, provides a significant contribution to both histories of women in the silent era, as well as to philosophical discourses on history and time. Undeniably (though not entirely) Western in scope, this project calls for further research that might investigate the mechanisms of hist-

ory-making at work in the contexts of other film cultures and industries. Ultimately, the book is a valuable reflection on the processes of history-making, and an interrogation of the blind-spots that such practices create.

References

- Barthes, Roland. 1986. "The Reality Effect." In *The Rustle of Language*, translated by Richard Howard, 141-148. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Brooks, Peter. 1976. *The Melodramatic Imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Feminist Media Histories*. 2015. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gaines, Jane. 2018. *Pink-Slipped: What Happened to Women in the Silent Film Industries?* Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Gaines, Jane, Radha Vatsal, and Monica Dall'Asta eds. 2013. *Women Film Pioneers Project*, Center for Digital Research and Scholarship. New York: Columbia University Libraries. wfpp.cdrs.columbia.edu
- Gledhill, Christine and Julia Knight. 2015. *Doing Women's Film History: Reframing Cinemas, Past and Future*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Hatch, Kristen. 2013. "Cutting Women: Margaret Booth and Hollywood's Pioneering Female Film Editors." In *Women Film Pioneers Project*, eds. Jane Gaines, Radha Vatsal, and Monica Dall'Asta. Center for Digital Research and Scholarship, New York: Columbia University Libraries. Accessed August 27, 2019. wfpp.cdrs.columbia.edu/essay/cutting-women/.
- Mahar, Karen Ward. 2006. *Women Filmmakers in Early Cinema*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- McMahan, Alison. 2002. *Alice Guy Blanché: Lost Visionary of the Cinema*. New York: Bloomsbury.