

Alice Guy's Film Debut: The Restauration of a Herstory (1895-1907)

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This thesis aims to reconstruct the filmography and historical memory of Alice Guy (1873-1968), a pioneering figure as the world's first female film director, producer, and studio head. Despite Alice Guy's foundational influence on early cinema, her contributions have been marginalized or misattributed, with her legacy often overshadowed by disputes over her authorship and first works. Using an interdisciplinary approach—bridging microhistory, gender studies, and early cinema studies—this research critically reexamines her career at Gaumont studios, from her entry in 1895 to her departure for the United States in 1907.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Alice Guy's career developed during the nascent phase of cinema, a period marked by industrial fluidity, allowing greater diversity in film production roles than during the structured era that followed. By revisiting her early years at Gaumont, where she directed or supervised over 150 films, this thesis highlights Alice Guy's influential role in shaping cinematic practices at a time when the film industry was still in the process of defining itself. Despite her achievements, the

historiography of early cinema has frequently overlooked Guy's contributions, often due to the undocumented, unsigned, or lost status of her films, a challenge exacerbated by the absence of a formal directorial title during this period.

The feminist resurgence of the 1970s reintroduced Guy's work into academic discourse, aligning her rediscovery with broader efforts to unearth female contributions to cinema history. Yet, misconceptions about her filmography persist, spurred by contradictory archival evidence and the prevailing invisibility of early female filmmakers. This thesis therefore adopts an integrative methodology, engaging with diverse archival sources, including advertisements, film catalogues, previously unexplored archives, personal letters, and production stills, to establish a comprehensive filmography and accurate account of Guy's career in France.

CHALLENGES IN ATTRIBUTION AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF MEMORY

A significant portion of this research addresses historiographical challenges surrounding the

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dating and authorship of Guy's first films. Early scholars attributed conflicting production dates for *La Fée aux choux*—variously identified as having been made in 1896, 1900, or 1902²—reflecting broader issues of ambiguous authorship that characterize early cinema. This ambiguity has often reduced Guy's twenty-year career to a limited discourse on her initial film's provenance, marginalizing her extensive contributions. By examining her work through a microhistorical lens, this thesis repositions Guy as a central figure in the early cinema industry, advocating for a more nuanced understanding of her agency within the evolving practices of the Gaumont studios.

Guy's autobiography, *Autobiographie d'une pionnière du cinéma 1873-1968* (Guy 1976), serves as a critical source for this research, providing insights into her professional ethos and the challenges she faced. However, the memoir's subjective nature necessitates a balanced approach, integrating corroborative archival data to distinguish factual elements from personal narrative. This investigation thus navigates the tension between Guy's self-representation and external accounts, addressing the gaps that obscure her early career. Additionally, the study considers how contemporary feminist historiography has constructed and reshaped Guy's legacy, identifying her as a symbol of early female agency yet constrained by the historic erasure that plagues pioneering women in cinema.

FILMOGRAPHY AND CULTURAL IMPACT

Beyond reconstructing Guy's filmography, this thesis examines the aesthetic and cultural dimensions of her films within the socio-political milieu of the Belle Époque. Employing the

concept of intermediality (Gaudreault 1999), the analysis situates her works within broader visual and performative traditions, exploring how they reflect and subvert contemporary social norms. For instance, *La Fée aux choux* (1900) and *Sage-femme de première classe* (1902) are analysed in terms of their representation of fairy tale archetypes and gender roles, while *La Vie du Christ* (1906) is considered for its innovative staging and religious iconography, bridging biblical spectacle with cinematic expression.

The thesis' final chapter focuses on gender performativity in Guy's films, examining cross-dressing and other narrative techniques that challenge gender expectations in works like *Madame a des envies* (1906) and *Les Résultats du féminisme* (1906). By drawing on queer theory and Judith Butler's (1990) notion of performative gender, the analysis demonstrates how Guy's films critique conventional gender roles, positioning her as an early innovator in challenging societal norms through cinema. This interpretation contributes to ongoing discussions on early film as a medium for subverting traditional narratives and provides insight into how Guy's work addressed gender and identity within a rapidly modernizing France.

HISTORIOGRAPHICAL AND CULTURAL RECEPTION

The historiographical section traces the evolving scholarly and public reception of Alice Guy, particularly from 1910 to the present, illustrating how interpretations of her work have mirrored shifts in feminist film theory and historical paradigms. Identifying three key phases—1910-1976, 1976-1993, and 1993-present—this section argues that the resurgence of feminist historiography during the 1970s played a pivotal role in reestablishing

² Jean Mitry (1964) places her debut in 1899, Francis Lacassin in 1897 (Guy et al. 1976), Frédérique Moreau (1986) in 1896, Victor Bachy (1993) in 1896, Alison McMahan (2002) in 1896, and Maurice Gianati (2012) in 1902.

Guy's presence in film studies. However, while her profile has increased through biographies, documentaries, and popular media, these representations often oversimplify her legacy, focusing on her role as the "first" female director without recognizing the full scope of her influence and agency.

This study positions Guy as a central yet controversial figure whose career challenges conventional narratives of cinema history. Examining her relative obscurity in canonical film texts, it considers how the early cinema's archival practices have contributed to the inconsistent transmission of her legacy. The analysis also addresses how modern commemorative practices, such as exhibitions, documentaries, and the creation of the Alice Guy Prize in 2017, have helped counter historical erasure while sometimes contributing to mythologizing her life and career. Thus, this work highlights the need for a balanced historiographical approach that honours Guy's achievements without reducing her legacy to simplified narratives.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FEMINIST CINEMA STUDIES

This research provides a comprehensive re-evaluation of Alice Guy's contributions, advocating for her rightful place in film history as a pioneering creative and industrial force. Through the meticulous reconstruction of her French filmography, this thesis contributes to a more accurate understanding of early cinema and the structural barriers that female filmmakers faced. The interdisciplinary approach not only recovers the historical memory of Alice Guy but also situates her work within the broader context of feminist film history and gender studies.

The study's findings have broader implications for feminist cinema studies, demonstrating how the archival marginalization of figures like Guy perpetuates gender-based exclusions in

historical narratives. By integrating perspectives from archival studies, feminist theory, and early cinema scholarship, this thesis argues for an inclusive historiographical practice that acknowledges the complex identities and contributions of pioneering women in film. This research calls for continued investigation into early female filmmakers and highlights the importance of preserving diverse voices within cinema's historical record.

In summary, *Alice Guy's Film Debut: The Restoration of a Herstory (1895-1907)* addresses historiographical, archival, and cultural dimensions of early cinema, challenging the reductive narratives that have historically minimized Guy's legacy. This thesis contributes to the redefinition of cinema history by positioning Alice Guy as an essential figure whose work played a foundational role in early filmmaking practices.

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