



Article

Social Changes in America: The Silent Cinema Frontier and Women Pioneers

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Abstract: Silent cinema acted as a bridge between early motion pictures and today's film industry, playing a transformative role in shaping feminist film history and American society. This article explores pioneering American women in the silent film industry who ventured into technology, film culture, marginalized communities, and social movements. Despite the prevalence of racist and sexist propaganda, American silent films were a frontier for innovation, filmmaking, and exploring the New Women concept. This study examines 23 American silent films that have often been overlooked and rarely studied, whereby film analysis generally aligns with established feminist silent film theories. By shedding light on a previously overlooked film directed by May Tully, this study challenges the widespread belief that there existed "no women directors in 1925". The examination of databases reaffirms American women directors' contributions to silent films, especially during the early years of the silent film era. The results modify the previous scholarly notion that "influential women directors' involvement was over by 1925". Following an initial surge in their active leadership during the early years, influential women directors' participation was over after 1922, rather than 1925.

Keywords: silent film; historical sociology; historical analysis; feminist film history; women studies; film analysis; media studies; suffrage movement; marginalized community; deaf community

1. Introduction

This article focuses on the underexplored contributions of pioneering American women in the silent film industry. It encompasses their involvement in innovation, filmmaking, marginalized communities, and social movements. This study investigates databases of 54 American women directors and many female filmmakers, underscoring the contributions of women throughout the silent film era. It modifies the notion that "influential women directors' involvement was over by 1925, except for Lois Weber and Dorothy Arzner".

To analyze women's portrayals in silent films, a selection of American silent films was viewed from [Films by the Year \(2023\)](#) and searched from the [American Film Institute \(2023\)](#) catalog. These films were then cross-referenced with Google Scholar to analyze whether they had been examined in previous research. Among these silent films, 23 overlooked American silent films were identified (Table 1). By closely examining these 23 films, a silent film directed by a woman director in 1925 is uncovered. Consequently, this study questions the assertion that there were "no women directors in 1925".

The silent cinema era began in 1894. This period in history was characterized by technological innovation, rapid industrialization, and intense social reform. Before World War I (1914–1918), several successful American companies formed "Hollywood". Using novel silent film technology, these silent film pioneers created new systems of laws and influenced societies worldwide. While men dominated the entertainment industry during the early years, America's and Europe's participation in the war led to women working in the new movie industry ([Porter 2013](#)). By 1922, the film industry had become the most widespread commercial entertainment form globally ([Jowett 1976](#)). The era of sound films began in 1927 with the first talkie, *The Jazz Singer* ([Crosland 1927](#)), and silent films began to wane. Although the silent film period was brief, its impact is felt to this day.



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Table 1. The overlooked silent films analyzed in this study.

Film Title	Production Company	Director	Premiere
<i>Airy Fairy Lillian Tries on her New Corsets</i>	American Mutoscope & Biograph	McCutcheon, Wallace	1905/10
<i>Deaf Mute Girl Reciting “Star Spangled Banner”</i>	American Mutoscope & Biograph	Marvin, Arthur	1901/04
<i>Earthquake Ruins, New Majestic Theatre and City Hall</i>	Edison Manufacturing Company	Bonine, Robert	1906/06
<i>Girls Taking Time Checks</i>	American Mutoscope & Biograph	Bitzer, G.W.	1904/05
<i>Girls Winding Armatures</i>	American Mutoscope & Biograph	Bitzer, G.W.	1904/05
<i>Glory</i>	M. L. B. Film Co.	Berri, Maud Lillian	1917/11
<i>Her First Cigarette</i>	American Mutoscope & Biograph	Armitage, Frederick	1899/06
<i>Married for Millions</i>	American Mutoscope & Biograph	Bitzer, G.W.	1906/12
<i>Panorama, City Hall, Van Ness Avenue and College of St. Ignatius</i>	Edison Manufacturing Company	Bonine, Robert K.	1906/06
<i>Panorama, Nob Hill and Ruins of Millionaire Residences</i>	Edison Manufacturing Company	Bonine, Robert K.	1906/06
<i>Panorama, Notorious “Barbary Coast”</i>	Edison Manufacturing Company	Bonine, Robert K.	1906/06
<i>Panorama, Ruins Aristocratic Apartments</i>	Edison Manufacturing Company	Bonine, Robert K.	1906/06
<i>Ruins of Chinatown</i>	Edison Manufacturing Company	Bonine, Robert K.	1906/06
<i>Scenes in San Francisco, [no. 1]</i>	American Mutoscope & Biograph	Gove, Otis M.	1906/05
<i>Scenes in San Francisco, [no. 2]</i>	American Mutoscope & Biograph	Gove, Otis M.	1906/05
<i>That Old Gang of Mine</i>	Kerman Film Corp.	Tully, May	1925/12
<i>The Adventurous Soul</i>	H. P. Productions	Gene, Carroll, and Virginia Harriet	1927/11
<i>The Servant Girl’s Legacy</i>	Lubin Manufacturing Company	Hotaling, Arthur	1914/11
<i>The Girl in the Arm-Chair</i>	Solax Film Company	Guy–Blaché, Alice	1912/12
<i>The Great Fire Ruins, Coney Island</i>	Edison Manufacturing Company	Abadie, A.C.	1903/11
<i>The Wrong Hand Bag</i>	Lubin Manufacturing Company	Hotaling, Arthur	1913/07
<i>Theater Commercial—Warner’s Corsets</i>	Unknown	Unknown	1905/03
<i>Twos Ever Thus</i>	Bosworth Inc.	Janis, Elsie	1915/09

Note: The film links are listed in the reference section.

Before World War I, silent filmmakers did not shy away from controversial issues about women, sparking public debate and boosting box office sales. However, changes in audience tastes, audience demographic shifts, and restrictive censorship codes after World War I caused Hollywood to avoid exploring various controversial issues (Simmon 2007). Many film topics concerning women have been previously studied, including suffragettes (*The Strong Arm Squad of the Future* 1912), eugenics (*Free to Love*) (O’Connor 1925), abortion (*Where are my Children?*) (Weber and Smalley 1916), the temperance movement (*Kansas Saloon Smashers*) (Porter 1901a), racial stereotypes (*Laughing Gas*) (Porter 1907), the female gaze (*Love ‘em and Leave ‘em*) (Tuttle 1926), marriage (*Trial Marriages*) (Marion 1907), divorce (*Why Mr. Nation Wants a Divorce*) (Porter 1901b), women in the workforce (*Hazards of Helen*) (McGowan 1914), and gender discrimination (*The Red Kimona*) (Lang 1926). A comprehensive understanding of the social influence of silent films is crucial. Due to the challenges of preserving silent films and their large quantity, an analysis of the social impact of some silent films on women—both as filmmakers and viewers—has not been fully undertaken. This study aims to address this gap by analyzing the 23 frequently overlooked silent films.

In November 1925, Osborne raised the question, “Why are there no women directors?” This statement was the foundation for the belief that there were “no women directors in 1925”. Even in the 1970s, both feminists and film industry historians shared the common notion that “There were no women in the silent-era U.S. film industries” (Gaines 2004, 2018). In the book (Gaines 2018), the “over by 1925” question arises regarding the decline in the numbers of “influential women filmmakers at the top” and “their disappearance from the U.S. industry by 1925”. An answer to the question of “What happened?” is “not available to us today and remains unanswered” (Gaines 2018). This study represents the first attempt to uncover the directorial work of American women in 1925.

Reclaiming the work of female silent filmmakers requires re-evaluating their contributions. The study of women in filmmaking has been a dynamic ground for exploration (White 1998). Anthony Slide (1977) and Sharon Smith (1973) first observed women’s names in film credits from the silent era. Wendy Holliday (1995) and Shelley Stamp (2011) asserted that women screenwriters represented at least half of the screenwriting trade during the silent film era. Slide (2012) estimated that 20–25% of 11,795 silent film titles listed female credits. Moreover, the *Women Film Pioneer Project* (2023) has conducted substantial research on many female pioneers of silent films. Gaines (2018) combined the historical and theoretical aspects of early women’s film history and initiated a fresh perspective on feminist film study. Although women’s contributions have been assessed in both silent and post-silent film eras, the shift in the leadership roles of women filmmakers during the last decade of the silent film era remains ambiguous. This article offers new perspectives on the leadership roles of American women filmmakers during the last decade of the silent film era.

Additionally, non-extant silent films without attributed credits raise ambiguity regarding the contributions of women directors. Particularly, the directorial contributions of Alice Guy-Blaché at the Solax company from 1911 to 1913 remain unclear. As Slide ([1986] 2022) noted, she may not have directed all of the Solax films during that period. However, there is a lack of records regarding the films she did direct. This study provides new insights into Guy-Blaché’s directorial contributions during this period.

2. Results

2.1. Women Pioneers

According to the *Women They Talk About Project* (2023), over 800 American women worked behind the camera during the silent film era. Women directors, producers, and screenwriters who often received the highest pay in the film industry worked more prolifically in the silent film era than at any other time in the first century of American filmmaking (Slide 1977). Figure 1 shows a selection of contributions made by women pioneers during the silent film era. Scholars have previously examined women pioneers and women-centric topics, including female inventors (Leonard 2018), directors (McMahan 2002; Stamp 2015), producers and screenwriters (Holliday 1995; Slide 2012), musicians and artists (Porter 2013), comedians (Hennefeld 2014), actresses in melodramas (Hallett 2013), audiences (Bachman 1995; Hennefeld 2016), and the culture of the “New Women” (National Film Preservation Foundation 2007). However, the contributions of many women pioneers during the silent film era are often overlooked.

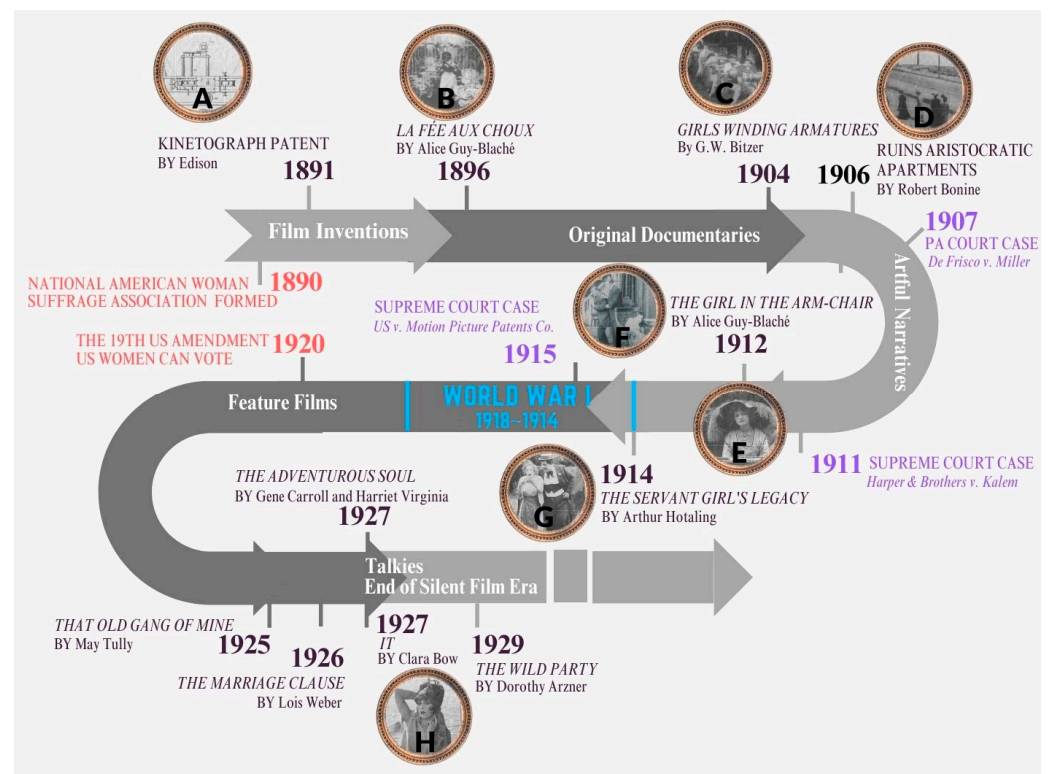


Figure 1. Timeline of women pioneers in silent film history, often overlooked films, related court cases (purple), and the women’s suffrage movement (red). Made by the author. (A) Kinetograph patent filed in 1891 (Edison 1893); (B) *La Fée aux Choux* (Guy–Blaché 1896); (C) *Girls Winding Armatures* (Bitzer 1904b); (D) *Panorama, Ruins Aristocratic Apartments* (Bonine 1906e); (E) *Madam, How would you Like to Sit behind the Hat you are Wearing*, ca. 1912; “A humorous photograph” of two spectators unable to see from behind a large hat (Library of Congress, as cited in Hennefeld 2016); (F) *The Girl in the Arm-Chair* (Guy–Blaché 1912a); (G) *The Servant Girl’s Legacy* (Hotaling 1914); (H) *It* (Sternberg and Badger 1927) starring Clara Bow.

2.1.1. Women and Technological Innovation

Silent films represent a technological frontier. The foundation of silent film technology was established by Étienne-Jules Marey, who invented the first chronophotographic and projection device in 1890 (French Patent 208,617 as cited in Rossell 1995). The Lumière brothers further refined this invention in 1895 (French Patent 245,032 as cited in Rossell 1995), eventually allowing for the rise of Cinématographe. On 22 March, 1895, the Lumière brothers premiered their first film, *La Sortie de l’Usine Lumière à Lyon* (Lumière 1895).

In 1891, Thomas Edison filed three patent applications for his movie apparatus, the Kinetograph (Figure 1A; Figure 2). There was heated negotiation within the patent office. However, all three patents were finally issued between 1893 and 1897, formulating the foundation of Edison’s many attempts to establish a monopoly on motion picture production. Both the Cinématographe and the Kinetograph were used to create silent films. *Edison Kinetoscopic Record of a Sneeze* (1894), the first known film, was made by the Edison Manufacturing Company (Rossell 1995).

Women played important roles in technological inventions in film history. Alice Smythe Jay was a film musician and inventor. In 1921, Jay patented her process to produce the “Masteroll Perforated Machine”, a historical contribution to film technology (Leonard 2018). In addition, Antonia Dickson co-wrote “*The Kinetograph, the Kinetoscope, and the Kinetophonograph* (Dickson and Dickson [1895] 2000)” with her inventor brother, William Kennedy Laurie Dickson, who was Thomas Edison’s chief assistant at the Edison Manufacturing Company. Furthermore, Antonia Dickson single-authored “*Wonders of the Kinetoscope* (Dickson 1895)”, providing insights into the functioning of moving pictures. Despite her

valuable contributions, Antonia Dickson did not receive the recognition she deserved during her lifetime (Gaines 2023).

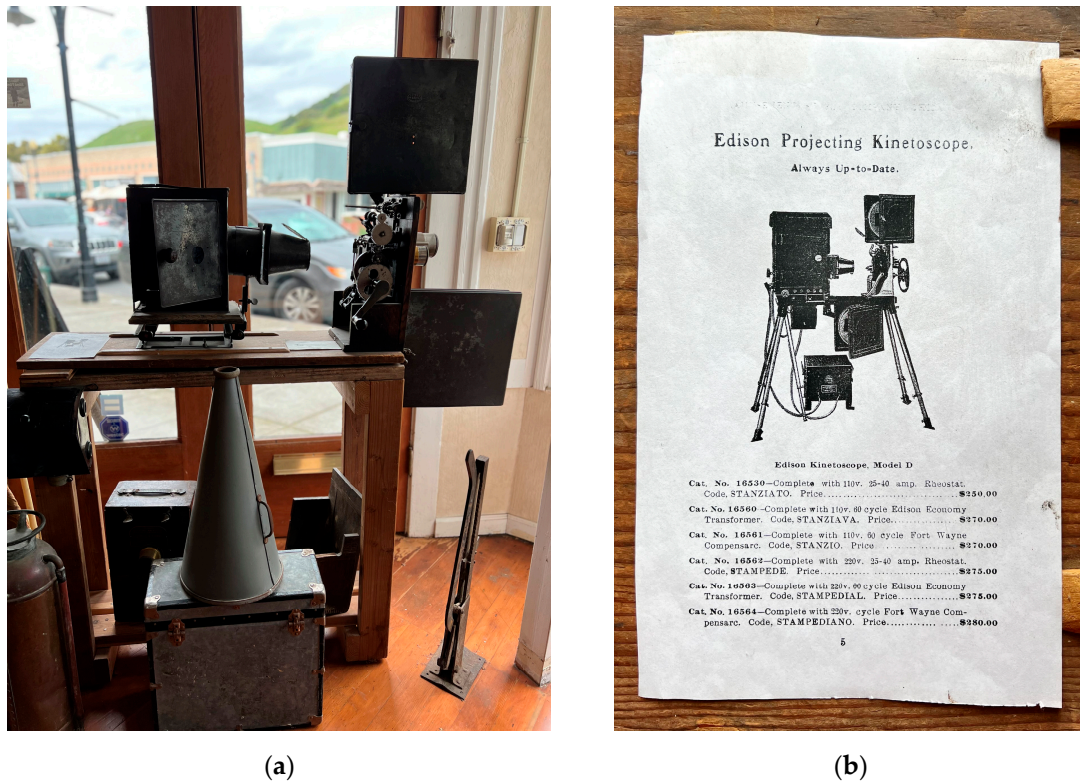


Figure 2. Edison projecting Kinetoscope (Improved Exhibition Model), 1898. Donated by Ray Phillips in 2008 at the Niles Essanay Silent Film Museum in Fremont (California). Photos recorded by the author in March 2023. (a) This projecting Kinetoscope was used for traveling exhibitions; (b) The flyer about the projecting Kinetoscope.

2.1.2. Women Directors

Alice Guy-Blaché and Lois Weber were pivotal pioneer female directors in American silent cinema. Although they had remarkable careers, they did not receive the same recognition as their male counterparts. Despite how little their husbands contributed to filmmaking, many members of the film industry and general moviegoers perceived Guy-Blaché and Weber as incompetent after their divorces in 1922 (Slide 2012). Although Guy-Blaché stopped directing after 1922, Weber directed four silent films from 1923 to 1927 (Stamp 2015). Notably, Guy-Blaché and Weber paved the way for female directors, but they did so mainly through the lens of a wealthy white woman instead of advocating for financially disadvantaged women of color.

An often overlooked example is Guy-Blaché's *The Girl in the Arm-Chair* (Guy-Blaché 1912a; Figure 1F). In this film, Frank Watson is introduced to Peggy, the girl in the armchair. Peggy's father had entrusted her to Frank's father, effective after his death. Frank's family urge him to marry Peggy, which he resists. Months later, he develops a gambling addiction and steals from his father's vault to pay off his debts. Throughout the film, Peggy remains invisible and ignored, blending into her armchair. This film shows the societal dynamics of the period, in which women were often rendered invisible and ignored.

Furthermore, Tressie Souders deserves recognition as the first black female director during the silent film era. It must be acknowledged that this era was marked by institutionalized racism (Morgan and Dixon 2013). *A Woman's Error* (Souders 1922) was acknowledged for its authenticity in portraying Black American life (Morgan 2013).

Apart from these directors, three women directors and their films were often ignored in scholarly works: *Glory* (Berri 1917) by Maud Lillian Berri, *Twice Ever Thus* (Janis 1915)

by Elsie Janis, and *The Adventurous Soul* (Gene and Harriet 1927) by Carroll Gene and Virginia Harriet (Table 1). All of these women are credited with the directing of these films. In Berri's *Glory* (1917), James Strong sends his lawyer to secure land that, unbeknownst to the residents of the town of Glory, holds valuable underground oil reserves. Justice is ultimately served, and the people of Glory reclaim their land. The film's heroine, along with her boyfriend, plays an important role in supporting the citizens' battle for the land and exercising their freedom to choose romantic partners. However, Berri is often remembered as an actress who had swallowed a small watch in her sleep in 1902, confirmed later through an X-ray (Dreben et al. 2011), rather than as a director. In Janis' *'Twas Ever Thus* (1915), heroines like cavewomen Lithesome, Prudence Alden from the American Civil War era, and novelist Marian Gordon in 1915 all face various challenges in romantic fulfillment and societal acceptance. Gordon frees herself from economic dependency on male relatives through her work. Her career opportunities allow her to embrace freedom and sexual autonomy. Following her boyfriend's death in World War I in 1916, Janis became a dedicated advocate for soldiers during the war. She performed one-woman shows for British and French troops and was recognized as "the sweetheart of the American Expeditionary Force" (Asselin 2015). In Gene and Harriet's *The Adventurous Soul* (1927), the ship owner plots to mistreat his son Glenn, but Glenn escapes. Dick Barlow, who is engaged to Glenn's sister Miriam, is mistakenly taken in his place. Later, Barlow's identity is exposed by Miriam.

2.1.3. Women Screenwriters and Producers

Silent films significantly changed job opportunities for women and broadened the perception of women in the media and society. Women are credited with writing 20–25% of silent films (Slide 2012) and are estimated to have written over 50% of silent film titles (Holliday 1995; Stamp 2011). In the era of the "New Women", they often smoked, drank, gambled with men, and claimed their place as men's equals in filmmaking (Holliday 1995).

Screenwriting can be traced back to the prominent pioneering efforts of women in narrative design (Azlant 1997). Four of the most prolific American women writers during the silent era were Frances Marion, June Mathis, Eve Unsell, and Cara S. Beranger. Each of them penned 80–120 films (Women They Talk About Project 2023). Additionally, Mary Pickford, one of the most famous women producers and actresses, produced and wrote over 30 films. Alongside Chaplin, Griffith, and Fairbanks, Pickford co-founded United Artists, a pioneering independent film distribution company in 1919 (Acker 1991). Many women stars formed production companies of their own by 1921, but most were defunct by 1928 (Lant 2006).

Black American, Latinx, and Asian American women also made valuable contributions as producers and writers during the silent film era. Beatriz Michelena was one of the first Hispanic women to attain stardom in the silent cinema. She appeared in over a dozen films and managed her production company, Beatriz Michelena Features (Lyons 2013). Marion E. Wong, a Chinese American, established the Mandarin Film Company in California. Wong held roles as a director, producer, and writer, notably crafting the film *The Curse of the Quon Gwon* (Wong 1916).

2.1.4. Women Musicians and Artists

Many women were music teachers and artists who met the rising demand for films in the 1910s (Tomadjoglou 2009). Silent films were not entirely silent, and women were recognized for their contributions to musical scores. Owing to World War I and depleting male musicians, female musicians filled the gap in silent film theaters (Porter 2013). Women also became makeup artists, ink artists, and costume designers in the silent film industry.

2.1.5. Actresses

Silent film stars pioneered present-day celebrity culture. The Supreme Court case *The United States v. Motion Picture Patents Company* (1915) led to the dissolution of the Motion Picture Patents Company's monopoly. It allowed individual film producers to

compete with major studios. After this case, many actresses, including Lillian Gish and Clara Bow, achieved stardom during the silent era. Hollywood recognized that stars could consistently draw audiences to theaters. Thus, the “star system” and “studio system” were developed and continue to this day (Wierzbicki 2008).

Actresses like Clara Bow reshaped public perceptions of gender roles through their performances in comedies and flapper films. Many female comedians played significant roles in slapstick films (Hennefeld 2014). Bow was one of the top five box office draws in the late 1920s (Pierce 2013). Unlike the stereotypical “refined, beautiful, chaste, domestic” woman, Bow rejected the idea that women should always aspire to be conventionally beautiful. She challenged the “women-are-not-funny” stereotype in comedies (Weinstein 2021), such as Gasnier’s lost comedy *Wine* (Gasnier 1924), a story about illegal wine selling during the Prohibition Era (1920–1933). In addition, Bow “radiates sexy appeal tempered with an impish sense of humor” (Whitaker 1924). According to Bow’s flapper film *It* (Sternberg and Badger 1927; Figure 1H), “the possessor of ‘It’ must be unselfconscious and must have that magnetic ‘sex appeal’ which is irresistible”. Coming from poverty in Brooklyn, New York, Bow’s portrayal of a shopgirl reflects elements of her personal life. Reflecting the new ideals of the flapper, Bow is bold and unafraid to demonstrate her sexuality. The film includes a sequence in which Bow’s character, Betty Lou, cuts one of her daytime garments to transform it into a daring, low-cut night dress. This portrayal established Bow as a “sex symbol” in Hollywood and aligned with changing societal values and trends. The enduring concept of the “It” factor continues to resonate in contemporary society, manifesting in the “It girls” of celebrity culture.

Love ‘em and Leave ‘em (Tuttle 1926), starring Clara Bow, conformed to stereotypical gender roles, while Bow challenged pre-existing notions of femininity and gender stereotypes in *Wine* (Gasnier 1924) and *It* (Sternberg and Badger 1927). Many silent films, such as *Love ‘em and Leave ‘em*, objectified the female body, emphasized female beauty, and normalized the male gaze (Güzel Köşker 2020). According to the psychoanalysis theory, men “look”, and women are the objects of their gaze (Mulvey 1975).

However, actresses of color faced segregated practices and inferior accommodations compared to their white counterparts. Racial segregation was expected in the silent film industry. Madame Sul–Te–Wan, a well-known black actress, was often offered subservient and villainous roles, which she transformed into notable performances (Regester 2010). Tsuru Aoki, the first Japanese American actress, starred in 28 silent films. Aoki frequently had leading roles, breaking new ground for Asian actresses of her time. However, her roles perpetuated stereotypes of Asian women as innocent and delicate (Ross 2013). In addition to racial segregation, the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882–1942) placed severe hardships upon Chinese American actresses. Anna May Wong, widely recognized as the first Chinese American star, appeared in over 50 Hollywood films (1919–1961). However, the prohibition of on-screen kissing between actors of different races due to anti-miscegenation laws limited her ability to secure leading roles. While laws discriminated against Chinese Americans, her films challenged the prevailing view of Chinese Americans as perpetually foreign in U.S. society (Hodges 2012).

2.1.6. Female Audience

Many moviegoers were women (Lant 2006), and silent films reached a broad cross-section of American society from diverse economic backgrounds. The American Nickel Theater, or “Nickelodeon”, was an affordable theater where audiences could see a film for the cost of just a nickel. The first American nickelodeon opened on Smithfield Street in Pittsburgh on 19 June, 1905 (Bartels 2010). By 1910, there were 10,000 nickelodeons across the United States (Azlant 1997), with an average daily attendance of six million people (Sharp 1969). Nickelodeons were affordable and showcased topics relevant to individuals of varying socioeconomic statuses, fostering interactions between economic and social classes (Wierzbicki 2008). However, by 1915, nickelodeons had become outdated, and audiences shifted toward more expensive and exclusive movie palaces with admission costs

amounting to USD 2.50 when most individuals earned USD 15–20 a week (Jowett 1976). In 1915, the inflation-adjusted cost of USD 2.50 would be equivalent to USD 75 in today's U.S. currency. This high admission price prompted a transition to affordable neighborhood theaters, eventually becoming the primary medium for 69.2% of children to watch silent films (Bachman 1995). Thus, silent films had a wide-reaching impact on female moviegoers and broader American society.

Silent films served as a powerful medium for women filmmakers to express their voices. Audiences were captivated by remarkable technological advancements and the novelty of visual storytelling presented by filmmakers. Audiences frequently formed deep connections with female leading roles, echoing the characters portrayed by these actresses (Noseworthy 2023). Controversial themes were fearlessly tackled during this era, initiating public discussions and influencing audience preferences (Simmon 2007). Women filmmakers, who understood the inner workings of a woman's brain better than any man (Mathis [1925] 2006), catered to the needs of the largely female audience and shaped their perspectives.

Many women in the audience included members of the women's suffrage movement, who wore hats to show support for women's suffrage in the United States (Hennefeld 2016; Figure 1E). However, this caused controversy in 1907 when a Pennsylvania district court ruled in *De Frisco v. Miller* (1907, as cited in Hennefeld 2016) that "Women sitting at public entertainment have a right to wear hats of whatever magnitude they please". These hats also symbolized ambivalence about women's mobility and participation in public life (Hennefeld 2023).

The influence of feminized consumerism is also reflected in silent film commercials. Hence, female audiences were treated as potential commodity consumers in film advertisements and promotions. For instance, *Theater Commercial—Warner's Corsets* (1905) was used to market products targeting female audiences. It demonstrates little girls' aspirations to wear corsets and how it is crucial in shaping the fashion of the time. The skit depicts two young girls accidentally dropping their mother's corset into the bathtub. Their mother comes upstairs to find the mess and proclaims, "Thank goodness it's a Warner's, and it's rust-proof!" Like present-day TV ads, silent films were an early medium for product advertisements.

2.2. What Happened to Women Directors and Screenwriters?

A quantitative analysis examined the contributions of women directors and screenwriters, specifically addressing two assertions: that there existed "no women directors in 1925" and that influential women filmmakers' involvement was "over by 1925". The silent film industry transitioned from anonymous productions to featuring screen credits around 1911 (Jacobs [1939] 1975). Regrettably, 60% of the directorial work by women from 1911 to 1930 remains uncredited. These films were categorized as possessing non-extant titles in this study. Furthermore, this study estimates the number of Alice Guy-Blaché's non-extant films from 1911 to 1913.

2.2.1. No Women Directors in 1925?

It is a common misconception that there were no female directors in 1925. Florence Osborne's article (Osborne 1925), "Why are there no women directors", has been repeatedly cited in scholarly works for a century, perpetuating the false notion that no women directors existed in 1925. Osborne's article was published in November of 1925. However, an ignored film with an extant title, *That Old Gang of Mine* (Tully 1925), was released on 18 December, 1925. This film was directed and written by May Tully. Disproving Osborne's statement, Tully and *That Old Gang of Mine* demonstrate the contribution of a female director in the silent film industry in 1925. Her first film with a non-extant title, *The Old Oaken Bucket* (Tully 1921), was released in 1921. *That Old Gang of Mine* was her second film, which depicts the diffusion of a political rivalry between two senators through a sentimental song, resulting in harmony between them. Unfortunately, Tully passed away in 1924, one year before the film's premiere. *That Old Gang of Mine* hit theaters just one month after Osborne's

statement was printed. This film has never been cited to contradict Osborne's statement in previous scholarly work.

2.2.2. Alice Guy-Blaché's Films (1911–1913)

The authorship of Alice Guy-Blaché's films (1911–1913) with non-extant titles remains unclear, necessitating additional research. Figure 3 illustrates the prolific careers of Alice Guy-Blaché and Lois Weber as prominent American women directors (1911–1930). According to Slide ([1986] 2022), Guy-Blaché's films lacked credits until 1912 and became fully credited after 1914. All Solax company films (1911–1913) with non-extant titles are listed in Guy-Blaché's filmography (McMahan 2002, 2013; Slide [1986] 2022). In 1911, Guy-Blaché directed 100 films with non-extant titles, followed by 91 films in 1912 and 75 films in 1913 (McMahan 2013). However, her films with non-extant titles during these three years constitute 68% of all films directed by women during this period, warranting further investigation.

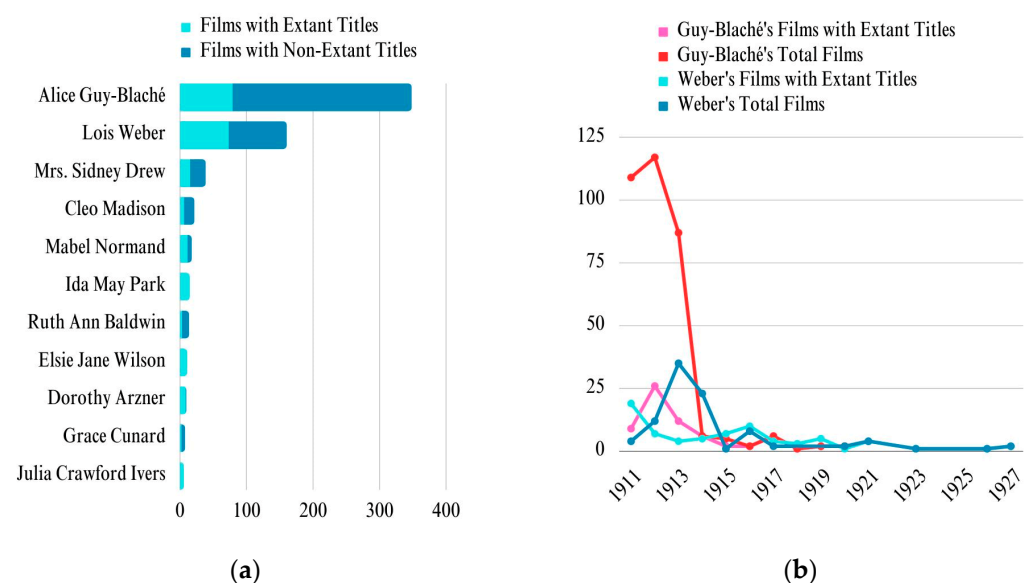


Figure 3. (a) Eleven influential American women directors (1911–1930) who have directed more than five silent films each; (b) Silent films directed by Alice Guy-Blaché and Lois Weber (1911–1930). Extant film titles refer to films with credited filmmakers, while non-extant film titles indicate uncertainty regarding directorship. Data were collected from the American Film Institute (2023), the Women Film Pioneer Project (2023), McMahan (2013), and Stamp (2013).

Discrepancies exist in Guy-Blaché's Solax filmography between 1911 and 1913. Scholars have compiled three versions of her filmography. Guy-Blaché's memoirs published a list of 403 French films at Gaumont (1867–1907), compiled by Francis Lacassin ([1986] 2022). Guy-Blaché provided this list to Lacassin during their last interview in Brussels in 1963. Before 1907, Guy-Blaché was the only director at Gaumont with annual maximum outputs of approximately 60 films in 1900 and 50 films in 1904. Unfortunately, Lacassin did not publish her filmography in the 1910s. Another filmography was compiled by McMahan (2002, 2013). The dataset used in this study employed McMahan's (2013) filmography, both with and without extant titles (Figure 3b). However, this filmography does not distinguish between Guy-Blaché's contributions and other Solax company films made from 1911 to 1913. According to McMahan (2002), Guy-Blaché supervised the production of all Solax films and directed most of them. She had three directors working under her supervision at Solax. For example, Wilbert Melville, one of the three directors, received credit for directing most of the 20 military pictures in 1911. McMahan's (2013) filmography relied on the works of Anthony Slide and Victor Becky as foundational references. McMahan extensively researched primary sources, including *The Moving Picture World*, *The Moving*

Picture News, *Variety*, and Guy-Blaché's papers from the Roberta Blaché Collection. Slide ([1986] 2022) compiled a third Guy-Blaché filmography, listing all Solax films from 1910 to 1913 in her filmography. Slide ([1986] 2022) noted that Guy-Blaché did not direct all the Solax films. However, "there is no record as to who directed those films which Guy-Blaché did not personally direct". Her directorial contributions (1911–1913) at Solax remain a perplexing problem. Adding other Solax company films (1911–1913) to Guy-Blaché's name may present a potential error regarding the number of her films (Figure 3b).

To explore this ambiguity, this study delved into historical records to gain insights. Guy-Blaché immigrated from France to America after her marriage in 1907. *Who's Who in Directing* stated that Guy-Blaché established the Solax company in New Jersey in 1910 "using her own money and acting independently" (Acker 1991). According to McMahan (2002), Solax produced two one-reelers (10–15 min) each week, and Guy-Blaché wrote and directed at least half of these films in 1912. This production rate equals that of D. W. Griffith. After Guy-Blaché's husband, Herbert Blaché, joined Solax in June 1913, producer credits were attributed to the Blachés (McMahan 2002). However, Lacassin stated that from "October 1910–June 1914, the Solax company produced some 325 films. At least 35 (possibly as many as 50) of them were directed by the company's lady president" (Lacassin 1971). This study reveals that Guy-Blaché directed 266 films with non-extant titles and 62 films with extant titles with Solax from October 1910 to June 1914. Out of these, 27 films with extant titles are documented by the American Film Institute (2023), and another 35 films with extant titles are sourced from McMahan (2013). All of the 266 films with non-extant titles were released from 1911 to 1913 (McMahan 2013). In general, the number of her extant films closely corresponds with Lacassin's estimates, indicating the possibility that she directed a minimum of 62 extant films from October 1910 to June 1914, including 47 extant films between 1911 and 1913.

This study estimates that Guy-Blaché directed 157 or more films between 1911 and 1913, including 47 extant films. Based on McMahan's findings (McMahan 2002) regarding Guy-Blaché's directorial work rate (at least one film each week), this accumulates to 157 or more films over 156 weeks from 1911 to 1913. Guy-Blaché gathered the talents, supervised, and oversaw every aspect at Solax. This is a remarkable achievement given her personal circumstances, including pregnancy and caring for two young children. Her son, Reginald, was born on 26 June, 1912, when her daughter Simone was five years old. Reginald and Simone rarely left her side and Simone spent considerable time with her mother (Gates [1912] 1986). Neither Guy-Blaché's (Slide [1986] 2022) nor Simone Blaché's memoirs (Blaché [1986] 2022) indicate that Guy-Blaché made considerable sacrifices in her work-life balance to accomplish this remarkable achievement.

The task of producing more than one narrative film every week for three years is a significant challenge, yet it may have been manageable for Guy-Blaché. Considering her record of directing 50–60 narrative and documentary films in 1900 and 1904 at Gaumont (Lacassin [1986] 2022), it is possible that she handled the challenge well at Solax. Many of her films are sophisticated, artful narratives that require considerable time and effort. Notable examples, such as *The Girl in the Arm-Chair* (Guy-Blaché 1912a) and *Making an American Citizen* (Guy-Blaché 1912b), display intricate storytelling and feature sizeable casts. *Dick Whittington and His Cat* (Guy-Blaché 1913), a three-reel film (45 min), had a budget of USD 35,000 and elaborate staging, including a burning boat (McMahan 2002). Furthermore, it is unclear how many of her films originated directly from theatrical productions, which may save time in the directing process. An example of a theatrical film was *Mignon* (Guy-Blaché 1912c; McMahan 2002), adapted from the opera. Another example, *Lure* (Guy-Blaché 1914), was directly derived from theatrical productions, with most of the play's cast reprising their roles in the film (McMahan 2013).

2.2.3. Over by 1925?

The commonly held belief that influential female directors' involvement in filmmaking was "over by 1925" perpetuates that the only influential female directors remaining in the

American silent film industry after 1925 were Lois Weber and Dorothy Arzner, a lesbian filmmaker (Gaines 2018; Gaines and Vatsal 2011).

While the real reason remains elusive, scholars have formulated several hypotheses to account for the decline in the number of female directors in the 1920s. Gaines (2018) attempted to explain this through investigating factors like political economy, gender discrimination, and undercapitalized independent ventures. Other previous scholarly works have posited reasons such as the high efficiency of studio systems (Stamp 2015), the divorce of major directors like Guy-Blaché and Weber (Slide 2012), unionization (Lant 2006), and the 1918 Great Influenza Pandemic (Gaines and Vatsal 2011). For example, the studio system was formed in 1919, disrupting the role of women as directors (Stamp 2015). What exactly happened to these female filmmakers by 1925 remains unanswered (Gaines 2018). Gaines (2018) argued that female filmmakers' creative contributions in melodramas allowed the presence of women's voices in films but also led to their redundancy, as they were replaced by the film narrative they had helped to develop. This is evident in women directors' contributions to building national film cultures.

This study proposes that influential female directors disappeared from the American silent film industry by 1922, rather than by 1925. After 1922, Weber and Arzner were the most influential women directors. This study compiled a comprehensive list of 54 American women directors active from 1911 to 1930 and their 270 extant films (Table 2). With over 110 non-extant titles by Guy-Blaché, this study only emphasizes the director's extant films in the data analysis to prevent statistical errors.

Table 2. Data on American silent films presented in this article.

Year	Total Films *	Extant Films by Women Directors	Non-Extant Films by Women Directors	Total Surviving Films **	Total Films from Films by the Year ***
1911	352	29	(104)	-	65
1912	426	32	(101)	(6)	82
1913	(94)	17	(109)	(9)	58
1914	373	19	30	66	55
1915	703	19	6	141	30
1916	959	26	23	216	91
1917	994	40	22	255	56
1918	882	18	8	152	42
1919	771	12	6	179	55
1920	749	10	8	209	138
1921	697	12	2	189	114
1922	681	4	1	168	62
1923	605	5	0	179	66
1924	678	2	0	244	91
1925	758	1	0	319	97
1926	742	1	0	328	86
1927	724	7	0	282	84
1928	703	5	0	236	87
1929	563	4	0	128	81
1930	535	7	0	-	225

* Total American film count sourced from the American Film Institute (2023). ** Count of surviving American films, including 9.5 mm, 16 mm, 28 mm, and 35 mm formats, preserved in the U.S. and other countries (Pierce 2013).

*** Count of American films accessible for home viewing, based on data from the Films by the Year (2023). () The number appears to be unreasonably high or low.

Figure 4 shows that women directors had decreased remarkably by 1922. The data demonstrates that women had their highest level of contribution from 1911–1913, with approximately 20–30 extant films annually (Figure 4a), constituting about 10% of the total films (Figure 4b). Between 1915 and 1921, their contributions declined to 2–4% of the total films, encompassing 15–40 films annually. In 1915, the layout of the new Universal City lot was completed in Los Angeles. This development produced the phenomenon known as the “Universal Women”. It was marked by “the largest concentration” of women directors from

1916 to 1921 (Gaines and Vatsal 2011). After 1922, women directors' annual contributions dipped into the single digits and fell below 1% of total films (Figure 4b). The years 1925 and 1926 marked a particular nadir in the number of female directors.

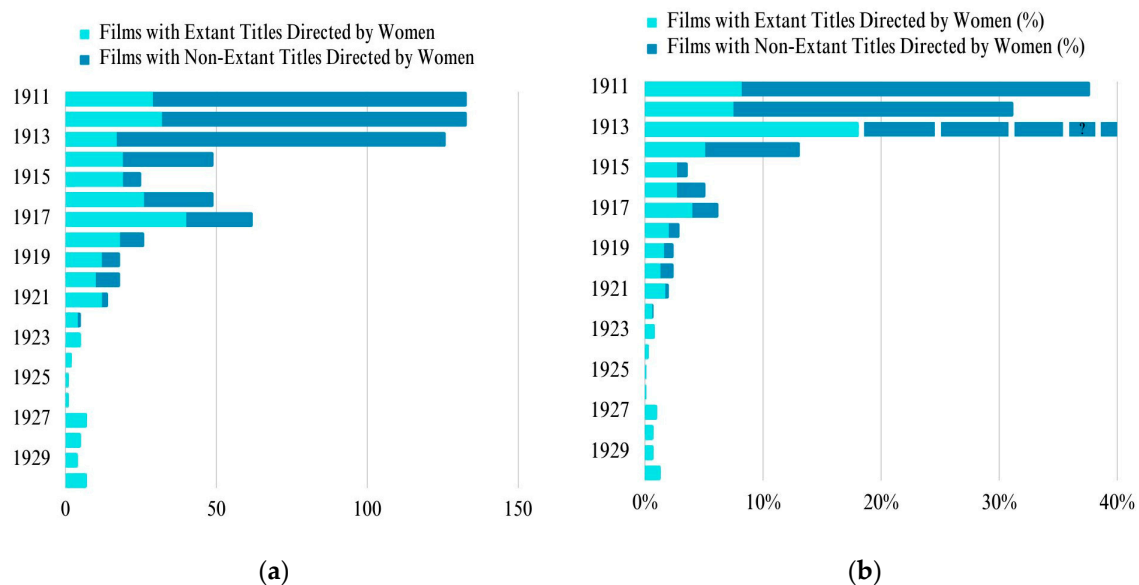


Figure 4. (a) Number of silent films directed by American women (1911–1930); (b) Percentage of silent films directed by women in America (1911–1930). Extant film titles refer to films with credited filmmakers, while non-extant film titles indicate uncertainty regarding directorship. Data were collected from the American Film Institute (2023), the Women Film Pioneer Project (2023), and Pierce (2013).

Figure 4 also illustrates a significant decrease in the number of films made by women in 1914. This decline can be attributed to the shift from one-reel short films (10–15 min) in the early silent era to multiple-reel films, which were more complex and required additional labor and time to produce. Before 1913, both Guy-Blaché and Weber directed 40 or more one-reel films annually. In 1914, over half of Weber's work consisted of one-reel films. Guy-Blaché focused on making four- and five-reel films after 1914. Consequently, the number of films directed by Guy-Blaché significantly decreased to six films in 1914.

Additionally, this study demonstrates that there were still approximately half of the number of women directors after 1922 (Figure 5). This number of female directors typically remained in the single digits during the silent film era. Figure 5 shows the number of prolific women directors who directed at least two films annually. Guy-Blaché and Weber directed nearly all the silent films created by women between 1911 and 1913. Between 1915 and 1921, there were typically three or more prolific women directors who authored two or more films, while another four directors contributed one film each year. From 1922 to 1930, the number of prolific women directors dropped to less than two. During this period, less than four female directors made only one film each year.

After 1922, Weber and Arzner were the only influential women directors (Figure 3a), who each directed more than five films. Women directors who directed between two and four films after 1922 included Frances Marion, Eloyce King Patrick Gist, Osa Johnson, Aloha Wanderwell Baker, and Zora Neale Hurston. Notably, most of their work was produced after 1927, which can be attributed to an influx of creative ideas and access to direct feature films.

The personal circumstances of each influential director could significantly impact their annual number of productions, considering relatively limited numbers of women directors in the silent film era. Guy-Blaché and Weber were prominent directors and collectively produced up to 152 films (1911–1930), representing 56% of the total extant films directed by women during this period. Both directors divorced their respective husbands

in 1922. This led to a halt in their careers, contributing to the decline in the number of films produced by female directors. Moreover, Weber's production company collapsed in 1921, a period marked by the dominance of vertically integrated studios and increased regulation. This made it challenging for smaller independent companies to compete with larger studios. However, Weber recovered and directed four silent films from 1923 to 1927 (Stamp 2015). In addition, Guy-Blaché and her studio staff fell ill from the Great Influenza Pandemic, resulting in the death of four of her studio staff in 1918. Following her divorce and bankruptcy proceedings in 1922, Guy-Blaché returned to France with her teenage children (McMahan 2002; Blaché [1986] 2022). This led her to retract from the film industry and focus on her personal life. These combined factors caused the number of films directed by women to decrease after 1922.

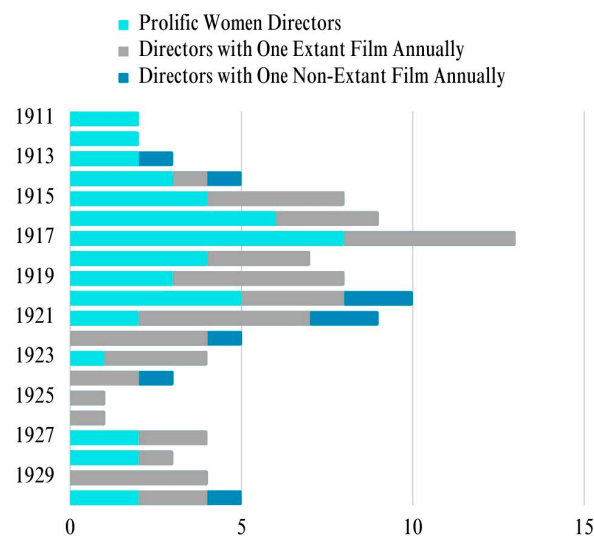


Figure 5. Number of American women directors in the silent film era (1911–1930). Prolific women directors were those who directed a minimum of two films annually. The others directed only one film in a given year. Extant film titles refer to films with credited filmmakers, while non-extant film titles indicate uncertainty regarding directorship. Data were collected from the [American Film Institute \(2023\)](#) and the [Women Film Pioneer Project \(2023\)](#).

2.2.4. Films Written by Women

This study highlights the substantial contributions from women screenwriters before and after 1925. Writing played a major role for women in the silent film industry. Between 1911 and 1920, there were 245 active women screenwriters, which increased to 299 between 1921 and 1930 (Slide 2012). This can be attributed to the convenience of writing from home. For example, Frances Marion preferred writing in bed on yellow pads (Beauchamp 1997). In Figure 6, the category of “Films Written by a Woman” includes women screenwriters, adapters, scenario writers, script girls, and novelists with both “credit” and “noncredit” notes, with screenwriters being the majority. The writer dataset used in this study indicates that 34% of the 445 films produced between 1924 and 1928 were written by a woman, surpassing the 25% out of 6606 films (1921–1930) estimated by Slide (2012). In 1925, the percentage of silent films written by a woman increased from 34% to 36%. In all silent films featuring at least one behind-the-camera female filmmaker, half the writing staff were women. Although the percentage of films written by a woman dipped in 1928, more women started participating in other roles within the film industry as costume designers, editors, artists, still photographers, and script and continuity staff. Their roles are categorized as “Films with Other Women Filmmakers” in Figure 6. The overall trend demonstrates that the industry was evolving beyond 1925, with increasing women participation from various quarters.

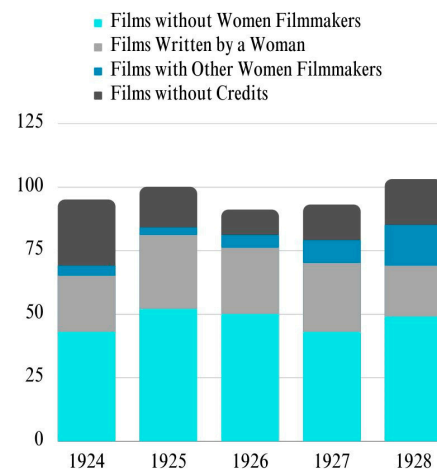


Figure 6. Number of behind-the-camera women filmmakers in American silent films (1924–1928). The count does not include actresses. The films were collected from [Films by the Year](#) (2023). The “Films Written by a Woman” category includes women screenwriters, adapters, scenario writers, script girls, and novelists. The category of “Films with Other Women Filmmakers” includes women directors, producers, costume designers, editors, artists, still photographers, and script and continuity staff, excluding women with writing credits. The filmmaker data were sourced from the [Internet Movie Database](#) (2023), the [American Film Institute](#) (2023), and the [Women Film Pioneer Project](#) (2023).

2.3. Women’s Portrayal in Silent Films

Women were portrayed in silent films through documentary-style films, artful narratives, and feature films. In the 1970s, three established feminist film theories centered around “images of women” ([White 1998](#)). The reflection theory ([Rosen 1973](#); [Haskell 1974](#)) posits that films “mirror” social reality, while semiotics and ideology critique ([Johnston 1973](#)) explored “women’s films as counter films”. The influential psychoanalysis theory ([Mulvey 1975](#)) explored the concept of “woman as image and man as bearer of the look”. This section analyzes women portrayed in 17 previously overlooked films made by male directors ([Table 1](#)) and evaluates their social influence. These films reflected both progressive and conservative views on gender roles.

2.3.1. Women in Documentary-Style Silent Films

Silent films are useful for gaining insight into historical events as many silent films produced between 1894 and 1905 were documentaries. The following often overlooked silent documentaries showcase working women, challenge gendered stereotypes, depict deaf women, and portray women during historical crises.

In *Girls Taking Time Checks* ([Bitzer 1904a](#)), female factory workers obtain a time check in a single-file line. They wear similar skirts and shirts. It shows women entering the factory workforce and how society depended on them as the basis of industry. *Girls Winding Armatures* ([Bitzer 1904b](#); [Figure 1C](#)) shows the repetitive task of making armatures. Men come to inspect the work of these electric industry women workers. At one point, a man inspects one of the girl’s works and shows her how to do it correctly. These two films illustrate the condition of working women in factories and their working spirit.

In *Her First Cigarette* ([Armitage 1899](#)), two women are captured smoking cigarettes. One of them takes deliberate puffs before passing out due to a nicotine high. This film was made in 1899 when film technology was relatively new and the idea of women smoking was unconventional. The early ideals were cemented in this film that foreshadowed women smoking in the next decades.

Film innovation also greatly improved accessibility for the deaf community, fostering better communication and integration into society. Silent films featured sign language in *Preservation of the Sign Language* ([Veditz 1901](#)), establishing awareness for the deaf community. In *Deaf Mute Girl Reciting “Star Spangled Banner”* ([Marvin 1901](#)), a deaf and

mute woman stands before the U.S. flag and utilizes sign language to recite the national anthem, representing a sense of national identity.

The documentation of women amidst the ruins of the Coney Island fire and the San Francisco earthquake marked the early use of films to document crises in America. *The Great Fire Ruins Coney Island* (Abadie 1903), created three years before the San Francisco Earthquake, provides historians insight into the fire ruins over a century ago. The film features a girl standing amidst the devastation in a beautiful dress and hat. The houses behind her have been consumed by the fire. She does not cover her mouth with a handkerchief like the others around her and appears to have her eyes closed. She holds her hands before her, conveying her deep sadness.

The Miles Brothers' *A Trip Down Market Street before the Fire* (Miles Brothers 1906) documented San Francisco's Market Street shortly before the infamous 1906 Earthquake. The film provides historians rare insight into life just before the destruction (Bradley 2023), showing a serene view of Market Street with horse-drawn coaches passing by leisurely. By contrast, after the earthquake on 18 April, 1906, several films were made to document the horrors of the aftermath and subsequent fire. The differences between the two types of films are striking. The scenes following the earthquake were chaotic, with San Francisco encased in a layer of rubble (Gove 1906a, 1906b). Robert Bonine filmed the aftermath and the fire at the earthquake ruins in different locations, including *Earthquake Ruins, New Majestic Theatre and City Hall* (Bonine 1906a), *Panorama, City Hall, Van Ness Avenue and College of St. Ignatius* (Bonine 1906b), *Panorama, Nob Hill and Ruins of Millionaire Residences* (Bonine 1906c), *Panorama, Notorious "Barbary Coast"* (Bonine 1906d), *Panorama, Ruins Aristocratic Apartments* (Bonine 1906e), and *Ruins of Chinatown* (Bonine 1906f). In these films, the city is covered with scattered debris, crumbling buildings, and the occasional onlookers. The haunting sequence of coaches traveling through the ruins of a once vibrant city torn apart by the earthquake is recorded on the previously charming street. *Ruins Aristocratic Apartments* (Bonine 1906e; Figure 1D) adopts a more humanistic film approach, showing residents walking amidst the debris, collecting rations, and clearing the wreckage. In this film, four elegantly dressed ladies with stylish hats navigate the ruins. A man approaches them, seemingly seeking information, and one of the ladies gestures toward a direction, which the man follows. These ladies maintain their elegant appearance and poised demeanor even after a major earthquake, providing insight into societal expectations regarding women's appearance and conduct a century ago.

2.3.2. Women in Artful Narratives

Many scholars have credited Guy-Blaché as the first director of artful narratives in cinematic history. She directed the first French narrative film, *La Fée aux Choux*, in 1896 (McMahan 2002; Figure 1B) and seven additional French films in 1897 (Lacassin [1986] 2022). Lacassin rescinded his claim, which mistakenly stated that *La Fée aux Choux* was made around 1900 (McMahan 2002). Edison's film, *The Great Train Robbery* (Porter 1903), marked a shift in American silent films from an objective documentary style to creative, fictional, and semi-fictional narratives (Wierzbicki 2008).

While progressive feminists aimed to liberate women from gender constraints, such as wearing corsets, conservatives viewed such constraints as societal norms that women must adhere to. The comedy *Airy Fairy Lillian Tries on her New Corsets* (McCutcheon 1905) objectifies and ridicules women. In the film, Lillian is a plus-sized woman whose husband tries to help her put on the corset. He struggles to lace her into the corset. Ultimately, he succeeds with great effort and then topples onto the bed in exhaustion. This illustrates the unfortunate trend of physically prominent women being ridiculed because they need extra effort to wear a corset.

Joshua Cattermole discovered *The Wrong Hand bag* (Hotelling 1913) at a car boot sale and presented it to the public in 2020. The film tells the story of a handbag mix-up between two couples, leading to a lively altercation and police involvement. Despite its dated style, the film offers a glimpse into early comedy shorts shot from one angle. The actors'

exaggerated performances contribute to a distinctive acting charm. These silent films unveil the conventional narratives of women's appearance, relationships, and fortunes.

The following two often neglected artful narrative films reflect women's social roles in early cinema, highlighting gender stereotypes and expectations that women rely on men for economic stability and success. In *The Servant Girl's Legacy* (Hotaling 1914; Figure 1G), Mandy is thrown into a whirlwind of events when she receives a telegram promising her an inheritance from her uncle. She finds herself flocked by people claiming to be her "friends". Once she receives the next telegram telling her of an inheritance of a mere USD 25, she watches her so-called friends leave. The only person who stays is Cy, her modest suitor. The plot takes a decisive turn when Mandy receives another telegram stating that the previous telegram was a mistake and that she would inherit a substantial USD 25,000. Thus, she finally sees Cy for who he is and rejects the renewed advances of her "friends". This is a common trope in media in which characters discern the value of certain friends after experiencing adversity and success. This film focuses on Mandy's success and fortune being based on the men around her. Her inheritance is derived from her uncle, defining her value as an asset and perpetuating female dependence on men.

Married for Millions (Bitzer 1906) intricately unfolds the complexities of marriage and social norms through the story of a poor man marrying a wealthy woman. The woman is crude and abusive toward him, subjecting him to physical violence. The marriage ends in divorce. This silent film provides commentary on the social structure of the period. With the dominant culture portraying financially disadvantaged women marrying older, wealthier men for money, it is interesting to see the concept reversed in this film. The film condones their relationship and faults the man for marrying such a woman. It characterizes the woman as violent and portrays her in a masculine way, reinforcing gender stereotypes and social norms. This conveys that "proper" women should conform to established standards and remain reliant on men to ensure stability.

2.3.3. Women in Feature Films

In 1915, the release of *The Birth of a Nation* (Griffith 1915) marked a turning point in American cinema and symbolized the birth of feature films. A Ku Klux Klan propaganda film full of harmful stereotypes, *The Birth of a Nation* was a pioneering film owing to its advanced and artful editing techniques and millions of dollars in profit, making it a fiscally successful film of its era.

Seventy percent of the feature film *The Gold Diggers* (Beaumont 1923) was found and uploaded digitally by Joshua Cattermole in 2021. In this story, Stephen marries Jerry, a chorus girl, despite his initial belief that all chorus girls are gold diggers. This film portrays women as dependent on their physical appearance and charm to secure marriages. Furthermore, it suggests that a woman's suitability for marriage is judged based on her financial interests and social status.

3. Discussion

3.1. Women Filmmakers and Silent Film History

The Progressive Era (1896–1917) in the U.S. was marked by intense social reform and political reconstruction. Silent cinema served as a medium for commentary on feminist social issues during this time. First-wave feminism (1848–1920) concentrated on reimagining social dynamics for greater equality, with a particular emphasis on pursuing women's suffrage rights (Sloan 1981). The women's suffrage movement, which granted women the right to vote, became associated with the *International Woman Suffrage Alliance* in 1904 (Malinowska 2020). The first-wave feminist movement was primarily led by middle-class white women. In 1906, Finland became the first European country to grant women the right to vote, and many European countries quickly followed. The 19th amendment of the U.S. constitution granted American women the right to vote in 1920 (Figure 1). With the new standard for women, Lois Weber became the mayor of Universal City in 1913, shortly after California granted women the right to vote (Stamp 2015).

Anti-suffrage content in silent films served as a “battleground for an ideological war”, undermining the suffrage movement and pushing propaganda. For example, Charlie Chaplin’s *A Busy Day* (Sennett 1914) portrays a masculine-looking suffragist disrupting society. Other anti-suffrage silent films featured the antics of man-hating suffragists, bumbling husbands, and confused children. From 1912 to 1914, the *National American Woman Suffrage Association* and *Women’s Social and Political Union* produced several melodramas to combat the negative portrayal of suffragettes (Sloan 1981). Hence, suffragists and anti-suffragists used silent films to further their political purposes. However, most women directors and screenwriters did not participate in formal feminist political movements (Holliday 1995). Alice Guy-Blaché came from France, where the term “feminism” was coined. Guy-Blaché’s daughter believed that her mother held strong feminist views but never publicly disclosed them and maintained a non-political public stance (Acker 1991). Lois Weber stated that people became hostile toward female directors and narrowed their vision of women on screen. Being a woman inhibited her career, and she tried to distance herself from feminist movements (Stamp 2015).

The copyright and anti-monopoly laws associated with the silent film industry promoted a fair society in America. Its influence extends beyond the silent era, with lasting impacts on our everyday lives. The silent film industry started as a lawless frontier, with entrepreneurs creating new approaches as it progressed (Bachman 1995). Gene Gauntier wrote a silent film adaptation of the novel *Ben-Hur*, for Kalem. However, Kalem did not obtain the rights to the story from the publisher (Tracy 2016). This led to the Supreme Court case *Kalem Co. v. Harper Brothers* (1911), in which a significant precedent in developing intellectual property laws in the U.S. was set. It prompted the Supreme Court to restrict the use of theatrical and literary source materials in films in 1911. Applying copyright law to storytelling materials in silent films elevated the value of women screenwriters and their original stories (Azlant 1997). Moreover, the Supreme Court declared the Motion Picture Patents Company (Trust) illegal because it violated the Sherman Antitrust Act in 1915 (Wierzbicki 2008). The dismantling of the Trust monopoly fostered a supportive environment for independent companies and made room for women filmmakers (Lant 2006). This contributed to the establishment of the “star system” and “studio system” that still exist. It remains a cornerstone of modern anti-monopoly laws and shapes American businesses.

This study attempts to restore rightful credit to the films created by women, indicating that these women filmmakers exerted substantial influence in silent film history. The contradictions in historical narratives about women filmmakers, namely that there were “no women at all”, “no women directors in 1925”, “more women in the silent era than at any other time”, and their involvement was “over by 1925”, have persisted throughout feminist silent film studies. Guy-Blaché anticipated that her directing and producing credits might be wrongly attributed to her colleagues. She was aware that her name could be omitted, intentionally or unintentionally, and her contributions could be ignored or demoted in the histories of French and American cinema. Therefore, Guy-Blaché returned to the United States in search of her films in 1927 as the only way to ensure her place in film history (Acker 1991). It is crucial to acknowledge that many women filmmakers remain uncredited in non-extant titles, rendering them the unsung heroes of silent cinema history.

This article employs a quantitative approach, seeking to estimate the influential achievements of women in the silent film industry. However, the numbers only provide a glimpse of the influential work of women. As filmmakers often assumed various roles at the time, focusing solely on directorial numbers may divert attention from the significant presence of women in other influential positions, such as producers and actresses. In addition, numerical statistics may overshadow uncertainties regarding women’s capabilities (Gaines 2016).

3.2. Traditional Gender Roles vs. the “New Women”

Cinematic portrayals of women show their evolving perceptions through films in conservative and progressive ways, as shown in the 23 often overlooked films in this

study. The film culture analysis of these films basically aligns with established feminist film theories and social impact studies of silent films in previous scholarly works.

Many silent films perpetuated traditional social expectations for women by emphasizing beauty and visual pleasure, as explained by feminist film theories centered around “images of women”. Women were often expected to maintain traditional appearances. In *The Great Fire Ruins Coney Island* (Abadie 1903) and *Ruins Aristocratic Apartments* (Bonine 1906e), women retain their formal appearances even in the midst of significant crises. Lillian’s physical prominence becomes a subject of ridicule in *Airy Fairy Lillian Tries on her New Corsets* (McCutcheon 1905). Historically, it was widely believed that women were legally and economically dependent on their husbands and male relatives. This was depicted in films such as *The Servant Girl’s Legacy* (Hotelling 1914) and *The Gold Diggers* (Beaumont 1923). These films portrayed women entering matrimony for economic security since their financial autonomy was severely limited.

Women directors, producers, writers, and actresses played prominent roles in silent filmmaking and film culture, significantly influencing the “New Women” culture. The “New Women” challenged traditions in male-dominated societies, demanding equal rights to citizenship, work, education, property, reproduction, marital status, and social agency (Malinowska 2020). Many women filmmakers acted autonomously, breaking barriers and achieving independence. Guy-Blaché stated, “Art in some forms is practically the only field open to [women]” (Gates [1912] 1986). Their careers blossomed and prompted the growing respectability of women’s employment. In their narratives, heroines often demonstrated intellectual and sexual autonomy, triumphing over social challenges. These narratives mirrored the filmmakers’ personal views and conveyed a beautiful aspiration—the desire for women to break free from societal constraints, embrace independence, and control their lives like the heroines in *Twas Ever Thus* (Janis 1915) and *Glory* (Berri 1917). Although Guy-Blaché and Weber grappled between marriage and careers, they believed in the possibility of women having both. Even after experiencing divorce, both women continued to maintain societal respectability, supported by peers and friends who endorsed remarriage. This was exemplified by Weber’s union with Captain Harry Gantz, witnessed by the most prolific female writer, Frances Marion (Stamp 2015).

The landscape of silent films adapted in response to shifting societal ideals surrounding the concept of the “New Women”. Silent films served as frontiers for women and feminism, disrupting the conventional portrayal of women expected to marry, be obedient, and be passive listeners to their husbands. In *The Girl in the Arm-Chair* (Guy-Blaché 1912a), Peggy’s armchair symbolizes the suppression of the female voice. Peggy loses herself in the armchair. Her silence in the film illustrates the roles delegated to women, where they were expected to follow rather than speak their minds. In the 1920s, flappers represented a new era of women, characterized by sexual liberation, frivolity, and a bolder approach to life. With white women gaining the right to vote, they had more freedom and autonomy, symbolized by knee-length dresses and venturing out to drink and smoke. Silent films reflected the changing societal perceptions toward women. This is exemplified by the characters Betty in *It* (Sternberg and Badger 1927) and Diana in *Our Dancing Daughters* (Beaumont 1928). In *Our Dancing Daughters*, Diana is the epitome of a “flapper”. She is seen dancing in a shiny, knee-length fringe dress with heels. She shops indulgently, epitomizing the glitz and glamor of a flapper lifestyle. Flappers like Diana and Betty exercised control over their lives, demonstrating sexual, social, and economic independence.

Furthermore, progressive silent films glorified working women (Enstad 2023) and challenged traditional gender ideals. The concept of the “moral working-class woman” emerged during the Progressive Era in the U.S. *Girls Taking Time Checks* (Bitzer 1904a) and *Girls Winding Armatures* (Bitzer 1904b) depict the working conditions in factories and the pride women took in their employment. *Hazards of Helen* (McGowan 1914) is the story of an adventurous, tomboyish woman named Helen who works in telegraph offices and on trains. Producers used Helen’s story to motivate women to help during World War I. While seemingly empowering, *Hazards of Helen* (1914) championed working women

who were often underpaid and mistreated in their respective industries (Enstad 1995). This occurred during the suffrage movements and strikes in female-dominated sectors. In reality, Clara Lemlich, who organized the largest women's workforce strike in U.S. history, was arrested 17 times and suffered six broken ribs at the hands of strikebreakers in 1909 (Women & The American Story 2023). Lemlich's story was portrayed in the documentary film *Clara Lemlich: A Strike Leader's Diary* (Szalat 2004). Hence, these silent films often over-glorified working women on screen.

3.3. Marginalized Communities

3.3.1. Deaf Community

Silent films were a frontier for deaf people, providing a medium to participate with their hearing peers (Schuchman 1984). *Deaf Mute Girl Reciting "Star Spangled Banner"* (Marvin 1901) is an example of sign language used in silent films. These silent films increased the accessibility of films for the deaf community, enabling them to comprehend the content on screen without external assistance. Furthermore, silent cinema fostered a means for deaf people to connect with America as a country through national pride and identity. However, once talkies emerged, films became less accessible to deaf people.

3.3.2. Racial Discrimination

Silent films are a reminder of the complex and troubling history of racism within the film industry. Rabinovitz (2005, 2023) emphasized socio-historical contextualization in the feminist film analysis of *Laughing Gas* (Porter 1907), which reflects the national rise of black female domestics. In *The Scar of Shame* (Peregini 1929), the morally good black characters have lighter skin tones than those depicted as morally bad (Brownlow 2005), illustrating how silent films perpetuated colorism and racism. *The Birth of a Nation* (Griffith 1915) is a glaringly racist film glorifying the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), a white supremacist terrorist group that targeted Black Americans (Wierzbicki 2008). Black communities protested and opposed films that led to the KKK's resurgence. Lester A. Walton, a prominent critic of the time, remarked that D.W. Griffith was the worst offender in spreading racist propaganda (Glick 2011). However, some newspapers in the American South promoted the film, praising its strong human appeal and superiority (The Atlanta Constitution 1915). Historically, silent films spread racist propaganda, regrettably impeding societal progress and failing to serve as a frontier for diversity.

Silent films were not truly silent and featured the voices of women filmmakers from marginalized communities. Despite racial and gender discrimination, this era is remembered for its names and cosmopolitan celebrity culture. The segregation era was a challenging period for women filmmakers from marginalized communities whose portrayals had varied impacts on audiences with different racial backgrounds and political perspectives. Their active voices in filmmaking were not silent (Noseworthy 2023).

Nonetheless, women audiences of color were often marginalized in the pursuit of the emerging "New Women" ideal. While appreciating the autonomy of the "New Women", they could not overlook the fact that it was largely achievable only for white middle-class women. Women from underrepresented backgrounds critiqued the cost of racial and gender inequality.

4. Materials and Methods

To investigate the belief that "influential women directors' involvement ended by 1925", this research studied previously documented female filmmakers' contributions and added newly uncovered evidence. The silent films in the American Film Institute (2023), Women Film Pioneer Project (2023), National Film Preservation Foundation (2000, 2004, 2007, 2010, 2023), Internet Archive (2023), Films by the Year (2023), Amazon Prime Video (2023), and DVDs provide excellent opportunities to analyze silent films in America. This study reviews many peer-reviewed articles and books, examines silent film datasets, revisits previously studied silent films, and explores 23 American silent films overlooked or only

briefly addressed in prior scholarly works (Table 1). It comprehensively investigates the societal implications of feminist silent film history through literature review, film analysis, historical analysis, and data analysis.

4.1. Lost Films

Silent film preservation issues have resulted in the survival of only 25% of all American silent films (Table 2). Most silent films were made from highly flammable cellulose nitrate, contributing to frequent fires at movie venues (Pierce 2013). Additionally, some silent films lost their perceived value. Dorothy Bradley, the president of the Niles Essanay Silent Film Museum, presented an anecdote where kids rolled out old films on pavements and set them on fire as a form of play (Bradley 2023).

4.2. Women Director Dataset (1911–1930)

This dataset of women directors covers the period from 1911 to 1930. This timeframe was chosen because numerous films had ambiguous or anonymous credits before 1911 (Jacobs [1939] 1975). Additionally, the silent film era started to decline in 1928/1929, although a few silent films extended into the early 1930s (Gaines 2018).

To address the challenge posed by films with non-extant titles, this study categorized films with women directors into two groups. Films with extant titles have been credited as sourced from the American Film Institute (2023) and Women Film Pioneer Project (2023). Films without known titles have been documented through the Women Film Pioneer Project (2023). The directorial roles in this study only include directors, co-directors, and assistant directors, as these positions hold the most influence in the filmmaking process. However, they do not include art directors, casting directors, company directors, or dialogue directors. Other published filmographies from top film directors serve as cross-references to validate films without known titles. The filmographies of such directors comprise Guy-Blaché (Lacassin [1986] 2022; McMahan 2002; Slide [1986] 2022), Weber (Stamp 2015), Ida May Park (Acker 1991), and Ruth Ann Baldwin (Acker 1991). Women frequently held multiple roles in these films, engaging in directing, writing, producing, and acting (Gaines 2018). Due to the difficulty of determining their exact contributions in non-extant films, it is essential to exercise caution when utilizing data.

This dataset incorporates 54 American women directors and their directorial works from 1911 to 1930. The Women Film Pioneer Project (2023) provides the most comprehensive list of 127 female silent film directors globally. In this study, 50 American women directors were identified from these 127 directors. However, Dot Farley, Fay Tincher, Harriet Parsons, and Helen Gardner are not included in this study due to the absence of films attributed to their directorial roles. Another four previously overlooked women directors were sourced from the American Film Institute (2023) catalog, including May Tully, Maud Lillian Berri, Elsie Janis, and Virginia Harriet.

This director dataset excludes films with controversy regarding the attribution of directorial roles. Discrepancies in the directorial attribution exist for *Nothing to Wear* (Drew 1917) between sources acknowledging Mrs. Sidney Drew as a co-director (Ionita 2013) and Mr. Sidney Drew being credited as the sole director by the UCLA Film & Television Archive (2023). For the directorship of *A Daughter of the Law* (1921), conflicting attributions are found for Grace Cunard (Bean 2013) and Jack Conway (Conway 1921). Dorothy Davenport's authorship of *Broken Laws* (1924) and *The Red Kimona* (1926) remains controversial (Anderson 2013). Alla Nazimova was excluded from the director dataset as she served as the art director for *Billions* (1920), not as the director (Horne 2013).

Additionally, pseudonyms were considered in this study. For example, Irene Sinclair was the pseudonym used by D.W. Griffith (Slide 2012). Mrs. Wallace Reid and Dorothy Reid were pseudonyms used by Dorothy Davenport. Mrs. Sidney Drew's pseudonyms were Lucille McVey and Jane Morrow. Moreover, gender-neutral names such as Lynn Reynolds, Noel M. Smith, Sidney Franklin, and Jesse Robbins turned out to belong to men.

4.3. “Films Written by a Women” Dataset (1924–1928)

This dataset of women screenwriters covers the period from 1924 to 1928. The [Films by the Year \(2023\)](#) includes 445 surviving American silent films accessible for home viewing from this period, constituting 32% of all the surviving films (Table 2). These films have both extant and non-extant titles. The names of behind-the-camera women filmmakers from these 445 films are documented in the [Internet Movie Database \(2023\)](#). The category “Films Written by a Woman” includes women screenwriters, adapters, scenario writers, script girls, and novelists, aligning with the categorization provided by [Slide \(2012\)](#). Another category, “Films with Other Women Filmmakers”, includes women in roles such as directors, producers, costume designers, editors, artists, still photographers, and script and continuity staff, excluding women with writing credits.

[Slide \(2012\)](#) outlined the methodology for documenting women writers and highlighted challenges in determining cases of pseudonyms or gender-neutral names. Consistent with Slide’s approach, this study identifies women with unconventional female names, including Fred de Gresac, Bradley King, and L. Case Russell.

5. Conclusions

Silent films represented a frontier for technology, filmmaking, the “New Women” culture, and the inclusion of deaf people. However, this progress did not extend to people of color, as pervasive racist and sexist propaganda spread throughout America. This study argues that influential women directors’ involvement ended by 1922, rather than 1925.

This article studies the multifaceted impact of silent films on technology, filmmaking, feminist movements, minority communities, and everyday life. In this study, 23 previously overlooked films were analyzed, and datasets of women directors and other behind-the-camera filmmakers were evaluated. The findings underscore the contributions made by women in the silent film industry. The results of film culture analysis for these films generally align with previous feminist film theories and social impact studies on women in silent films. Moreover, silent films offer insights into historical events and have influenced American copyright and anti-monopoly laws, with enduring effects on our everyday lives.

This study confirms women’s contributions to silent films, particularly in their early years. During the silent film era, a limited number of women directors were actively engaged in filmmaking each year, typically in single-digit numbers. Guy-Blaché and Weber played major roles in directing around 56% of extant films by women directors. However, uncertainties persist regarding the number of uncredited titles in Guy-Blaché’s films from 1911 to 1913. This study provides new insights into Guy-Blaché’s directorial works, suggesting a total ranging from 47 to over 157 films during this period.

By highlighting these often overlooked instances, this study emphasizes the leadership and active engagement of American women during the last decade of the silent film era. It identifies four often ignored women directors and challenges the prevailing notion that there were “no women directors in 1925” ([Osborne 1925](#)). Contrary to Osborne’s claims, May Tully’s film *That Old Gang of Mine* is evidence of a female director’s contribution in 1925. The overall number of women directors decreased after 1922, reaching its lowest point in 1925 and 1926. The previously held belief that influential women directors’ involvement during the silent film era was “over by 1925”, except for Weber and Arzner, is investigated by this study. This article shows that the most influential women directors’ work ended by 1922, rather than by 1925. With meager numbers of women directors each year, this decline can be attributed to Guy-Blanche and Weber’s personal situation, which led both directors to take a break from the industry in 1922. In the last decade of the silent film era, female producers, writers, actresses, costume designers, and other film professionals directly contributed to silent films and played significant roles in shaping silent film culture. This study reveals a high volume of films written by women, accounting for 34% of the films from 1924 to 1928, higher than the 25% estimated by [Slide \(2012\)](#) between 1921 and 1930.

With the evolving ideals of the “New Women”, the representation of women in films changed. Although influential women filmmakers often distanced themselves from

feminist movements, they challenged conventional perceptions of femininity and gender stereotypes through their films. This study further explores how silent films idealized working women and examines their connection to the women's suffrage movement and the presence of anti-feminist propaganda.

Additionally, this study investigates the intricate societal dynamics of marginalized communities. Silent films acted as a frontier for the deaf community, providing them with equal access to their hearing peers. Women filmmakers from minority communities contributed to a diverse film celebrity culture while facing racist laws. However, certain silent films perpetuated damaging racial stereotypes and narratives despite opening doors for women of color.

Finally, the study of silent films is ongoing. Silent films evolved amidst persistent challenges posed by feminism, racism, and inequality. Thus, future feminist film history research should include marginalized communities, such as indigenous women, women of color, women from the LGBTQ+ community, and women from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Exploring their contributions, challenges, and representation in silent films would enhance our understanding of their social impacts. There are some research limitations in this study due to the incomplete sampling of silent films. With 75% of films lost and 40% of films by women directors lacking complete credit accounts, further investigations into films with unclear credits are needed.

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