Learning to See on the Screen: Exploring Female Performance in Early Film through the Media Ecology Project

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Abstract

This article argues that the development of digital research and teaching platforms are changing the ways we understand and approach audiovisual archives today. Focusing on the Media Ecology's Semantic Annotation Tool (SAT) and its application to early film, it proposes that this new digital humanities resource profoundly impacts our understanding of female achievement in the development of the nascent cinema. Making reiterative viewing of a single shot or sequence of shots possible, the SAT evidences the importance of access to screen content in archives, the significance of reviewing physical agency on film in conjunction with technical and other developments, and the ongoing, critical need to develop a language capable of describing gestures and physical expression on screen. The article concludes with a reflection on our contemporary access to large collections of digital data and metadata. Microhistory, it is explained, is the methodological tool that allows us to reiteratively view materials while speculating about historical process and change. The development of research/pedagogic digital tools consequently broadens and focuses academic and cultural developments across the digital humanities today.

Introduction

This article is focused on what I regard as one of the most promising achievements of the Media Ecology Project (MEP): the development of digital platforms and collaborative initiatives that allow fresh attention to be given to performance in early film. As I will explain below, the Semantic Annotation Tool (SAT)—a time-based tool available to users so that they can annotate chosen geometric regions within the motion picture frame—directs our attention to what we see on-screen in new and interesting ways. Rather than focusing on the formal elements of film—the cut, the dolly, the zoom, and so on—users are instead asked to look within the frame and focus on the moving and gestural body of the actor to determine meaning. Traditionally, within film studies, the more mechanistic aspects of cinema have driven what we understand as "filmmaking." Theories and debates about film's nascent claim to medium specificity in the early twentieth century were focused on its capacity to reorder and represent the visual and social world anew, through experimentation with technical processes and technological forms. In contrast, SAT asks users to look at—and pay close attention to—the gestural nuance and emotional resonance of the acting body in early film. While we do not lose sight of formal film language and are invited to use this in our time-based annotations, we are equally urged to watch, describe, and recognize the work of performance on-screen.

The attention that MEP is bringing to questions of performance in early film is timely. In her recent book *Pink-Slipped: What Happened to Women in the Silent Film Industries?*, Jane Gaines employs the phrase "lost in plain sight" to highlight the invisibility of female achievement in early film. Gaines is particularly concerned with highlighting the film actress's contradictory invisibility in early film.[1] Although Gaines does not explore performance or theatrical gesture, her statement implicitly recognizes that we have lost the vocabulary and achievement of female performance, and a focus on celebrity—and with it, the field of star studies—has obfuscated the historical achievement of women in the entertainment industries. As I will explain, Gaines is not alone in noting the absence surrounding discussions of performance, particularly female performance, in early film. MEP is significant because it intervenes to direct our attention to this area, asking that we begin our exploration of film through this specific, yet enormously rich and large, lens.

I argue that MEP thereby provides an important example of a digital humanities project that cautiously and judiciously curates data so that a microhistorical method can be used to ask new questions of film history.[2] These questions are linked to gesture—the physical expression of meaning—and bring attention to actresses. In this way, film history's uneasy relationship to female achievement on screen and late nineteenth-century theater and its actresses is brought to the fore. As David Armitage and Jo Guldi confirm in *The History Manifesto*:

> Questions such as these draw deeply from the traditions of microhistory with its focus on how particular and vulnerable troves of testimony can illuminate the histories of slavery, capitalism, and domesticity. And, indeed, questions about how to preserve subaltern voices through the integration of micro-archives within the digitised record of the <u>longue durée</u> form a new and vitally important frontier of scholarship.[3]

"As in chess, openings in research are important, at times decisive."[4]

> **"The cases that MEP frames for Lawrence and Gish as unknown actresses pose important questions about agency and authorship on screen."**

MEP is a digital platform that provides us with a wide range of films to review. Drawn from some of the most important moving image archives in the world—the Paper Print collection at the Library of Congress, the Eye Filmmuseum in Amsterdam, the British Film Institute (BFI), and the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA)—these films feature actresses whose work in early film was significant. The availability of SAT to examine the early work of Florence Lawrence, Mary Pickford, Lillian Gish, Marion Leonard, Blanche Sweet, and Mae Marsh brings attention to the actress and her formation. Rather than addressing an actress's movement and gesture through the framework of D. W. Griffith, the celebrated director associated with many of their early films, we are instead asked to examine the actress as a professional and experienced creative worker in her own right. Her stance, gesture, physical phrase—and the minutiae of her moving limbs, face, or hands—are read and explored for narrative and emotional meaning. This takes some of the extensive resources that we have pertaining to Griffith in new directions; it builds, in a sense, on the collective Griffith Project that was curated between 1996 and 2008 at Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, Pordenone, under the foresight and leadership of Paolo Cherchi Usai.[5]

What is important about the films we can currently access is that they feature actresses performing before they became recognizable figures. In MEP Florence Lawrence can therefore be examined as the "Biograph Girl," just as Lillian Gish can be examined in her early work before she

claimed national attention in *The Birth of a Nation*—before she "emerged as a fully established star" in Griffith's *Hearts of the World* (1918).[6] The cases that MEP frames for Lawrence and Gish as unknown actresses pose important questions about agency and authorship on screen. We know, for example, that between 1912 and 1913, Gish appeared in thirty-one films, yet her name was unknown to the public. It was only in June 1913 that Motion Picture Story first announced her name in response to an "Answers to Inquiries" section of the paper.[7] In MoMA's fragmented print of *A Cry for Help* (completed in November 1912, available through MEP), we consequently see an experienced yet unknown actress playing the supporting role of a fainting maid (see Figures 1a and

Figures 1a and 1b. Lillian Gish faints in *A Cry for Help* (Biograph, 1912).

1b).

She receives off-camera instructions—presumably from Griffith—to repeat the dismay, confusion, and fear that she performs, leading us to believe that Griffith exerted immense control over his actresses. This view is reinforced by Eileen Bowser in her book *The Transformation of Cinema*. In it a photograph shows Griffith pointing a finger, holding papers in the other hand, all action frozen around him while he gives instruction on set for *The Battle of the Sexes* (see Figure 2).[8]
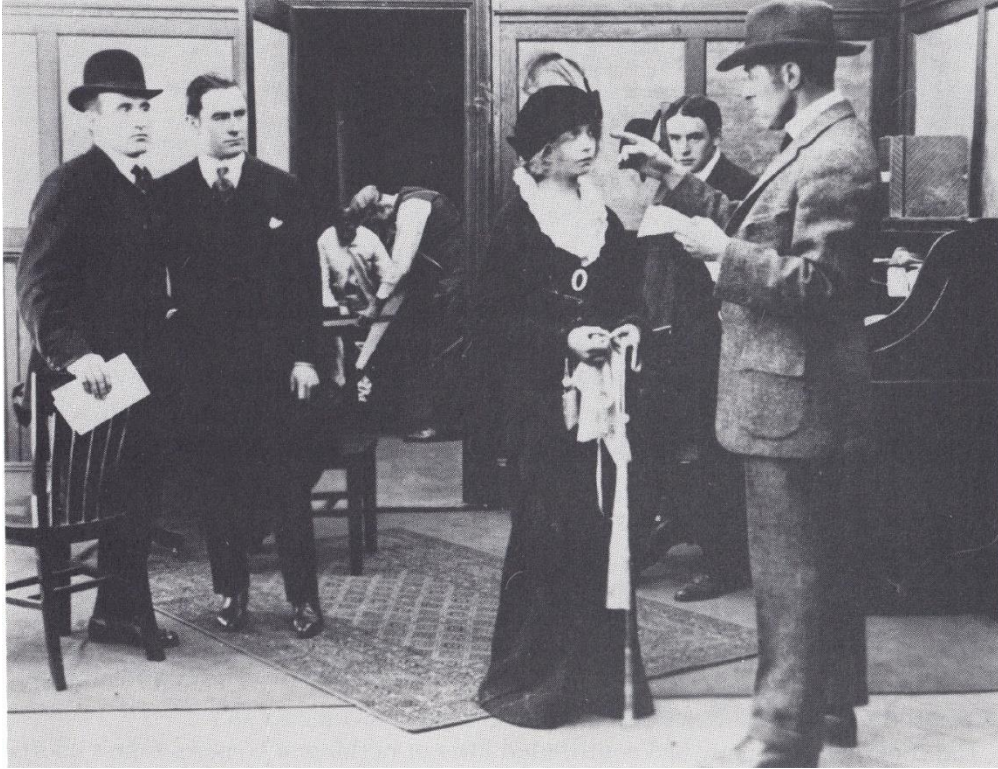
Figure 2. "D. W. Griffith directing Lillian Gish in *The Battle of the Sexes* (Mutual Film Corporation, 1914). This was Griffith's first feature after leaving Biograph. It is a lost film."

Through SAT, however, we are asked to repeatedly watch Gish while her expression and gesture change. While her performance, particularly in the repetitive framework of *A Cry for Help*, displays the role of theatrical rehearsal in early film, she also demonstrates her own acting skill and adaptive capacities. This agency can be considered alongside, or even in contrast to, the autonomy of Griffith's directorial vision or his renown as a theatrical coach.

In an important "Document of Performance" published in *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film*, Helen Day-Mayer provides evidence that supports the reiterative viewing encouraged by SAT. Discussing a series of six articles focusing on Gish that were published in the American homemaker magazine *Liberty* in 1927—preserved in a pair of scrapbooks compiled by a Philadelphia bachelor, Basil Clunk, and held in the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center in Austin, Texas—Day-Mayer argues that Gish was remarkably self-aware. As she explains, although most of the Liberty articles are "intended for the uncritical, but adoring, movie fan," the second article cites Gish's remarks on acting. These show the depth of her professional knowledge and skill. In this article, Gish is quoted extensively. She explains that actresses have to recreate stories in "a brand new way": on-screen, they must translate written worlds into widely intelligible performance. Within a single scene, this could mean that an actress employs "four different kinds of acting—a different technique every moment."[9]

In Gish's discussion of the attention that needs to be paid to her screen performance, she concludes that an actress's eyes and physical timing are the twin pillars of her performance. This is a reflection that returns us to the achievement of SAT. In asking that we cast Griffith as a figure who encourages a rapprochement between actresses and early film, we gain the visibility of the very actresses whose early film careers and knowledge of stage traditions and techniques have been all but elided in scholarly discussion. SAT also grants us the ability to watch rehearsals and repetitive gestures repeatedly on-screen so that the undeniable capacity of the actress to differentiate and change her performance is recognized. Through individual time-based annotations, we use our eyes to temporally identify change in her expressive body. In this way, our research reiterates Gish's final admonition to her readers: "It is my advised opinion that the most important things in motion picture acting are the eyes and timing—the former by far the most important thing in our world, and the second merely another name for the mountain of experience I call technique."[10]

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In addition to proposing a revision of our understanding of female acting in early film, MEP uses performance as a tool for comparative and critical analysis. As Mark Williams and John Bell explain in their foundational article "The Media Ecology Project: Collaborative DH Synergies to Produce New Research in Visual Culture History," MEP—and with it, SAT—invites us to witness "the uneven development of more 'cinematic' performance styles that evolved in relation to the proximity of the motion picture camera."[11] As they suggest, we might contrast, for example, the performance style of Lawrence with other Biograph actresses such as Pickford.[12] Performance variability emerges within a generation of young actresses, within the nascent work of a single production company, through the work of a single director, and within the context of a national cinema.

While Day-Mayer and Gish remind us of the minutiae of performance change within a given scene, the acknowledgment that physical style was divergent and idiosyncratic across a given series—however you might like to categorically define this: the actress, film company, national cinema context, and so on—is particularly empowering. In other words, the invitation to demonstrate difference between popular film actresses highlights, quite simply, the range of interpretative work they undertook. Moreover, if the comparative lens is extended to a cross-cultural analysis, we can newly appreciate the actress as a celebrity competitor. Indeed, in an era in which women were at the helm of the global acting industry as both empowered businesswomen and theatrical entrepreneurs, it makes sense to direct our attention to what they achieved on-screen. Moreover, during a period in which Gish lamented that she was not given license to play "great characters conveying human emotions in a great way," it makes sense to ask how she nevertheless instrumentalized her performance to achieve theatrical and popular renown.[13]

New Tools for Old Questions: Ekphrasis and our return to early film history

It is the visual availability of early film, as well as the ability to annotate gesture within a chosen scene, which fundamentally changes our relationship to film history. As most film historians know, a large amount of our work involves explaining what we have seen on-screen to readers who, we expect, have not watched the particular film we are discussing. If we

are fortunate, we can obtain screenshots or still frames of a film to illustrate physical action. Even if we provide these still images, they nevertheless fragment movement, describing it in terms of sequential still frames. Moreover, unless colleagues and students have watched the film or films we discuss, it is difficult for them to properly understand action. Indeed, even if a given title has been included in a DVD, screened at a specialized festival—such as Cinema Ritrovato in Bologna or Le Giornate del Cinema Muto in Pordenone—or specifically requested and accessed from an archive, we can presume that we are presenting new works to unfamiliar readers, or at best familiar works to readers who might not remember the particular detail we need to recount. As Miriam Hansen notes in her foreword to Heide Schlüpmann's groundbreaking book *The Uncanny Gaze: The Drama of Early Cinema*, this has meant that scholars have had to recreate early film through description and written words. Hansen explains that Schlüpmann's text returns readers to lost, elided, and overlooked works through "beautifully written ekphrastic accounts."[14] Schlüpmann, in her turn reflecting on the importance of writing film history through the experience of accessing, watching, and making early film available to viewers, celebrates finding women's history "there in the catacombs of the archives and in the light of the editing table projector."[15]

While MEP's collection effectively brings the editing table projector to the computer screen, it is not comprehensive. It does not include the Asta Nielsen films that Schlüpmann discusses, for example, and it is largely focused on American early film. Nevertheless, it goes a terrific way toward building communities of scholars around early film and avoiding the need to describe in words what users can see on-screen. In an interesting way, the tools available to us—SAT and the shared vocabulary tool from Onomy.org that has been developed for use in the time-based annotations—present film as a time-art that can also be uniquely and newly arrested. In Murray Krieger's 1967 article "*Ekphrasis* and the Still Movement of Poetry; or *Laokoön* Revisited," he argues a similar point in relation to poetry and literature. As Krieger explains, ekphrasis is no longer defined by its object of imitation—the still artwork—but by its ability to create stillness within the time-bound framework and serialized structure of poetry: he cites the poetic meter and poet's repeated description of the circular urn.[16] MEP similarly invites new considerations of temporality and stillness, ekphrasis and the visual image, yet places these within a new and accessible platform. In turn, renewed attention is given to the language we share and employ in order to describe physical gesture in early film.

The latter points—the establishment of a shared and transparent language around gesture in early film as well as the ability to freeze a gesture and then watch it spatially unfold—bring attention to the words we deploy in our discussion of film. The semantic taxonomies available through MEP are currently restricted to glossaries, themes, and topics that emerge from cinema studies. For early film, for example, there is Film Theme and Topic, developed by film historian Richard Abel (992 entries), a film language glossary of sixty-seven words developed by Columbia's School of the Arts, and a ten-term taxonomy of film roles. When the MEP Compendium is available for sustained use by scholars,

this linked data can usefully expand what we see in a given annotation, the language we might use to describe gesture, and whether series or patterns of movement can be identified within or between films.

The possibilities that this development of gestural language proposes are of wide, interdisciplinary use. Film historians might learn to integrate the language of theatrical performance into their discussion of silent film. Likewise, theater historians might newly appreciate the importance of film techniques in the circulation of late nineteenth-century theatrical performance as well as the impact the recording technologies have had on human expression.[17] Moreover, important work that Abel has recently undertaken—on the development of a critically active, culturally astute, and ambitious female writing workforce in American newspapers that collectively helped to develop the critical language of the early American film industry—might also be added to the taxonomies so that a contextual language of film criticism is understood.[18] In any case, whether or not annotative language is adapted or changed, MEP proposes theatrical gesture as a test case for the development of a new critical language of performance in early film.

Reading between the Lines: Embracing heterodox truths

In addition to inviting us to reconsider histories of screen acting that predate popular fame and performance patterns in early film through the evidence of films themselves, MEP realigns the scholarly practice of reading between the lines to the consideration of gesture in early film. This realignment is important. It builds on the established importance of conjecture as a driving impetus for the development of film history. This joins us to wider discussions in history while also giving focus to the specific and often quite different circumstances and media specificities of film history. The 2022 summer issue of *Feminist Media Histories*, for example, focuses on "Acts of Speculation." Building on the spring issue—dedicated to "Sites of Speculative Encounter"—Allyson Nadia Field argues that speculation now enables us to account for media history's losses, absences, and occlusions. Proposing speculation as a historic methodology and drawing on the work of Giuliana Bruno in *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map: Cultural Theory and the City Films of Elvira Notari*, Field argues that speculation is powerful precisely because it challenges established disciplinary methods and conventions. As the opening sentence to her summer editorial makes clear, speculative history is wide-reaching and unapologetic; it weaponizes gender, sexuality, colonialism, and race—and, implicitly, also class. Launching this editorial with a series of piercing what-ifs, Field asks a trio of questions that begin: "*What if* the implications for scholarship of the longstanding, ongoing, and pervasive misogynist, homophobic, transphobic, colonialist, and racist environment are not solely a problem of the archive but also of how we discern evidence and produce history?" (emphasis mine)[19]

A key authority for this historically speculative methodology is the Italian historian Carlo Ginzburg. Citing his 1976 book *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* as the source for her own historical method, Bruno explains:

> My microhistorical work on Dora Film participates in a vast cross-cultural project that, theorizing history and film historiography, investigates local and regional knowledge and female discourse . . . today savoirs mineurs and les savoirs des gens (suppressed knowledge) have claimed entrance into a history that is driven by a deeper curiosity for the knowable. This curiosity, which one senses in Carlo Ginzburg's detective inquiry into the microcosmos of a fifteenth-century miller, urged me to map out the production of a woman,

Elvira Notari, who operated within a Neapolitan cinematic "mill," within the shadow of the Italian film industry and a history interested only in the gestes of the kings, one in which "woman," accorded no space, remained out of sight.[20]

In Daniel Bilatereyst, Richard Maltby, and Philippe Meers's 2019 *Routledge Companion to New Cinema History*, both Judith Thissen and Mariagrazia Fanchi also cite Ginzburg, in their separate chapters, to explain their use of a circumstantial historical paradigm to explore forgotten and hidden directions in film history.[21] Thissen, stating that

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microhistory brings an important lens to local cinema history, cites Ginzburg's essay "Microhistory: Two or Three Things That I Know about It" to explain that she seeks to bring "a constant back-and-forth between micro- and macrohistory, between close-ups and extreme long shots so as to continually thrust back into the discussion the comprehensive vision of the historical process through apparent exceptions and cases of brief duration."[22]

Fanchi argues that Ginzburg's focus on data and materials that have been neglected by traditional historiography "allow[s] us to examine questions differently, reveal[s] neglected aspects, permit[s] us to formulate new hypotheses, and encourage[s] that sort of lowly inference typical of working with raw, lost, ill-organized empirical data that demand flexibility and rigor fitting for an historical reconstruction."[23] Fanchi also states that evidential value can be constructed through the historic accumulation of individual clues. In each of these instances—Field's speculations, Bruno's mapping, Thissen's expansion of local history, and Fanchi's reconsideration of data in relation to audience studies—we are reminded of the overlap between the work that scholars, particularly feminist historians, undertake when they explore new directions in film histories and the parallel efforts that MEP undertakes to direct us to the overlooked histories of performance and performing women in early film.

In the introduction to his recent book *La Lettera uccide*, Ginzburg cites Leo Strauss's 1941 article "Persecution and the Art of Writing" when he observes that the critical reading practice needed to undertake microhistories of this sort also involves learning to read between the lines.[24] Ginzburg characteristically explores a vast array of texts in his advocacy and illustration of this form of close reading, which, he mentions, might also be considered "slow." Strauss, in his article, instead focuses on how we might learn to interpret works penned by people who are independent enough of totalitarian regimes to publicly express a "heterodox truth." Strauss's hypothetical example is a historian whose work is being read by "young men who love to think."[25] Discussing how to read between the lines while also explaining how to write between the lines, Strauss urges the repeated reading of texts—"reading the book for the second or third time"—paying attention to places that are not necessarily the most obvious, and remaining aware that speech and candor are both contextual and ever-changing.[26]

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The similarities between Ginzburg's microhistorical close reading, Strauss's reading between the lines, and the identification of gestural nuance on film through the use of SAT on MEP can be readily listed. Films need to be rewatched repeatedly for a gesture to be chosen and isolated in the frame. Time-based annotation also draws attention to an aspect of the film that is not necessarily obvious: we can begin with a consideration of gesture itself, moving through to the interplay that gestures create between characters on-screen, and so on, in any given moment. Further, the notation of gesture must take into account the environment in which the originating performance was articulated. Early film was performed in conditions (spatial, cultural, physical, industrial) very different from those of our own time. Moreover, Strauss makes it clear that his focus is educative; he optimistically demonstrates that reading between the lines can be taught and argues that this is the sine qua non of education. He concludes:

> This always difficult but pleasant work [of reading between the lines] is, I believe, what the philosophers had in mind when they recommended education. Education, they felt, is the only answer to the always pressing question, to the political question, of how to reconcile order which is not oppression with freedom which is not license.[27]

MEP is similarly educative. It was developed as a tool for classroom use in a university context. Samples of assignment work that I was given access to on Mediathread were filled with notations by students who might or might not have understood microhistory as a methodology but who were certainly intent on marking physical moments in the temporal unfolding of the film. Yet whereas Strauss's hypothetical students are "young men who love to think," MEP positions us all as students. It is in this wider, more inclusive context that we can annotate acting on film and might each separately be prompted to ask "What if?"

Gestural Looking: Learning to look on the screen

It is one task to determine an occluded film history—for example, American actresses in early film, particularly in the years before they achieved fame—and quite another to distinguish gestural difference and technical variety in the terms that Gish describes. Theater historians David Mayer and Helen Day-Mayer have long advocated for our need to appreciate the cultural context of performance in early film, as well as the importance of recognizing variety and difference on-screen.[28] In an article comparing John H. Collins's 1917 silent film adaptation of *Blue Jeans* to Joseph Arthur's popular melodrama that debuted on the stage in New York's Fourteenth Street Theatre in 1890, they argue that film before 1920 is "a liminal area." This period saw film turn to the theatrical stage for its content, methods, and verification. Playing to audiences that were familiar with theater, they argue, film offers historians of the nineteenth-century stage evidence of otherwise lost creative practices. As they explain, "We are able to look at many early films and see the Victorian stage, actually witness performances and practices we had previously—and only—known through textual and pictorial sources."[29]

The process of looking at film in order to appreciate theatrical gesture and its visibility and availability on film enables exchange between two disciplines—film history and theater history—that have traditionally been separated within academia.[30] As Mayer and Day-Mayer explain, when *Blue*

Jeans was brought to film, significant change was effected in the structure and meaning of the original play. The play's comic roles, comic dialogue, political allusions, and musical interludes were removed. The narrative was also changed to create "a taut drama of love, ambition, family woe, and, significantly, to foreground female heroism."[31] In replacing the dominance of the traditional male melodramatic lead with a resourceful heroine, we are again prodded to acknowledge an actress's agency in early film. Developing a role that had not earlier enjoyed such a spotlight, Viola Dana—Collins's wife and the twenty-year-old "star" of the film—is asked to create a new performance. Is this visible on film to anyone but a theater historian, who has a gauge of what has been added to a performance we see on-screen? Moreover, when we are reminded that actors were stage-trained and so habituated to joining gesture to musical accompaniment, are we able to appreciate what this means when we watch a film silently, on a computer screen, with no accompanying music?

In his article "Acting in Silent Film: Which legacy of the theatre?", Mayer argues that music is not merely an accompaniment to gesture on stage and screen; it provides the tempo, coloring, tonality, force, rhythm, direction, and impulse for gesture. As he succinctly explains, "Music is to the actor what water is to the swimmer."[32] I cite Mayer and Day-Mayer to demonstrate that just as theater was inevitably adapted to film, so too is early film inevitably adapted to the computer screen in the movement of early film onto new digital platforms. Iterative and intergenerational, this movement repeats but does not and cannot replicate the originating circumstances of silent film gesture.

The need to explore catalogs with attentiveness but also with the experience and knowledge that help us frame what we see and cannot see—or hear, in the case of silent film history—is a point that Ginzburg makes when he discusses his own experience of searching an online catalog, specifically Orion at UCLA. Concluding his discussion of contingency with a reflection on Siegfried Kracauer's posthumous book *History: The Last Things before the Last*—a book in which Kracauer makes an analogy of the historian to the photographer—Ginzburg adroitly reminds us to remember that although a snapshot might be taken quickly, it is also constructed through memory and choice.[33] Citing Leo Spitzer and his use of the word "click" to denote the understanding and new insight that a critic can gain after a repeated reading of a text, Ginzburg reminds us: "It is the slow accumulation of experience that makes the instantaneous reaction to chance possible . . . the identification of a promising theme of inquiry (the snapshot) must necessarily be followed by a film. Simply put, research."[34]

Readying for Research: The films that follow

It is this last correlation between film and the research process—or a literary metaphor for research itself—that suggests a shift in how we might approach and interpret MEP and the research and pedagogic tools it offers. Rather than presume that we explore MEP with knowledge we already have—the importance of music for silent film, the gestural teachings of the late nineteenth-century stage, and so on—we might instead engage it in a game of chance that is similar to Ginzburg's word search in Orion. However, rather than begin our search in a catalog like this—which Ginzburg describes as "emic," following the American Kenneth L. Pike and referring to a cluster of unmediated data—on MEP we begin and complete our research using mediated data. That is, we might be watching digitized films we can annotate, but we are nevertheless undertaking our work in an etic context—one formulated in the external language of the researcher. Indeed, if we consider the range of the film prints that have been digitized and made available to us from leading audiovisual archives, the comprehensive information provided in the available metadata, as well as the

impressive array of resources available on MEP's Airtable resource, our digital catalog is not an emic deep dive but an etic cluster of roughly forty years of thorough, groundbreaking film history provided by some of the leading figures in our field.

The Airtable data set available to us on MEP is simply named "Early Cinema." It includes the metadata drawn from Charles Musser's 1890–1900 Edison collection, Paul Spehr's remarkable work on the American Mutoscope and Biograph Production Log (1890–1910), the American Film Institute's 1893–1920 catalog, Tom Gunning's Library of Congress Paper Print notes (with citations), and the

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early film pioneers data—otherwise available online through the Women Film Pioneers Project, including the names, roles, provenance, and place of work of female film workers as available. Thanks to the materials in this collection—there is also an Early Chinese Cinema collection and the EYE Filmmuseum 68mm collection, among other resources—we can appreciate that we are not merely looking at gesture and performance in early film. We are also privy to a unique collection that provides us with a sophisticated platform through which we might reconsider early film. Moreover, just as Williams and Bell collect institutions and scholars in order to build and expand their MEP resources, so too does the MEP platform encourage us to work collectively on the collections they amass.

Those of us who work in film history are aware that Musser, Gunning, and Spehr—as well as a host of other important film historians whose work is implicit in the breadth and depth of this resource—were part of the annual congress of the Federation Internationale des Archives du Film (FIAF) held in Brighton, England from May 29 to June 1, 1978. The scholars, researchers, students, and archivists at this event viewed 690 films from 1900 to 1906. Their response to these films—what they learned from watching film history together, focusing on a specific section and type of film history (largely American, largely narrative)—fundamentally changed our view of film history. Much has been written about this forum; what I wish to underscore is the collective process and procedure that were put in place in order to advance and expand our knowledge of film history.[35]

As Eileen Bowser retrospectively explained, "It [the FIAF congress in Brighton] is probably the first time that an international team of film historians undertook the study of a little-known period of film history as a collaborative project."[36] MEP, expansive in its outlook and ambitious in its effort to propose change in the methods, language, and focus we bring to early film, rekindles the collective vision and inquisitive collegiality of Brighton. It asks us to gather as a community of users around performing actresses in early film. How do we undertake this collective work? We join Spitzer in appreciating what a click can manifest, literalize Ginzburg's association of film with research, and understand that the overlooked history of female performance in early film is central to Field's question: What if?

A list of external links featured in this essay can be found here.[37]

About the Author

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Victoria is a founding editorial board member of *Feminist Media Histories*, on the editorial board of *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film and Media Peripheries*, and is a past president of Women and Film History International. Her most recent book, *Transnational Trailblazers of Early Cinema: Sarah Bernhardt, Gabrielle Réjane, and Mistinguett*, is available open-access through the University of California Press's Luminos.

[1] See Jane Gaines, "Introduction: What Gertrude Stein Wonders about Historians," in *Pink-Slipped: What Happened to Women in the Silent Film Industries?* (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2018), especially page 11, where she discusses a process whereby actresses, in particular, are rendered historically invisible.

[2] See David Armitage and Jo Guldi's discussion in "Big Questions, Big Data," in *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 103, where they state: "Digitisation by itself is not sufficient to break through the fog of stories and the confusion of a society divided by competing mythologies. Cautious and judicious curating of possible data, questions, and subjects is necessary. We must strive to discern and promote questions that are synthetic and relevant and which break new methodological ground. Indeed, the ability to make sense of causal questions, to tell persuasive stories over time, is one of the unresolved challenges facing the information industry today."

[3] Armitage and Guldi, *History Manifesto*, 113.

[4] Carlo Ginzburg, "Conversations with Orion," trans. Giovanni Zanalda, *Perspectives on History*, May 2005. https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/may-2005/conversations-with-orion#note9. Accessed June 3, 2022. See also "Conversare con Orion," *La Lettera uccide* (Milan: Adelphi, 2021), 139. Originally published as "Conversare con Orion," *Quaderni Storici* 36, no. 3 (2001): 905–13. http://www.jstor.org/stable/43779318. Accessed April 2, 2022.

[5] This project was organized in 1996 under the joint sponsorship of the Cineteca del Friuli, BFI, the Library of Congress, MoMA, and the George Eastman House. See Paolo Cherchi Usai, ed., *The Griffith Project*. Vol. 1–12 (London: British Film Institute, 1999–2008).

[6] Kristen Hatch, "Lillian Gish: Clean, and White, and Pure as the Lily," in *Flickers of Desire: Movie Stars of the 1910s*, Jennifer M. Bean, ed. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 70–71.

[7] "Answers to Inquiries," *Motion Picture Story*, June 1913, 160.

[8] Eileen Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema, 1907–1915* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1990), 220.

[9] Helen Day-Mayer, "Documents of Performance: Lillian Gish on acting on the silent screen," *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film* 29, no. 1 (2002): 81.

[10] Day-Mayer, "Documents of Performance," 82.

[11] Mark Williams and John Bell, "The Media Ecology Project: Collaborative DH Synergies to Produce New Research in Visual Culture History," *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 15, no. 1, 2021. http://digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/15/1/000524/000524.html. Accessed August 1, 2022.

[12] Williams and Bell, "Media Ecology Project": "In this study [of Florence Lawrence], primarily developed by Prof. Jenny Oyallon-Koloski, time-based clips of Lawrence's onscreen appearances were demarcated via brief description and tagged according to a simplified protocol of Laban Movement Analysis (LMA). Mediathread provided the capacity to codify her performance style (gestures, facial expressions, other aspects of the expressive body) and potentially contrast her performance style with those of other Biograph actresses of the era such as Mary Pickford."

[13] Day-Mayer, "Documents of Performance," 81.

[14] Miriam Hansen, foreword, in Heide Schlüpmann, *The Uncanny Gaze: The Drama of Early Cinema*, trans. Inga Pollmann (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010 [1990]), xi.

[15] Heide Schlüpmann, *The Uncanny Gaze: The Drama of Early Cinema*, trans. Inga Pollmann (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010 [1990]), 215.

[16] Murray Krieger, "*Ekphrasis* and the Still Movement of Poetry; or *Laokoön* Revisited" (1967), in *Ekphrasis* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 263–88.

[17] See Helen Day-Mayer and David Mayer's article, "*Blue Jeans* Stage and Screen," *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film* 46, no. 1 (2019): 59–72, that expressly states: "We repeatedly urge our theatre historian colleagues to recognise the value of early film. It is not a perfect time machine, but, used with caution and knowledge of Victorian stage praxis, 'silent' motion pictures become a formidable research tool" (69).

[18] Richard Abel, ed., *Movie Mavens: US Newspaper Women Take on the Movies, 1914–1923* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2021).

[19] See Allyson Nadia Field, "Editor's Introduction: Sites of Speculative Encounter," *Feminist Media Histories* 8, no. 2 (2022): 1–13, and "Editor's Introduction: Acts of Speculation," *Feminist Media Histories* 8, no. 3 (2022): 1–7.

[20] Giuliana Bruno, *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map: Cultural Theory and the City Films of Elvira Notari* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), 5.

[21] The point was also noted in Mélisande Leventopoulos's review of *The Routledge Companion to New Cinema History in 1895 Revue d'Histoire du Cinéma* 90 (Spring 2020): 208–12. See particularly page 210.

[22] Judith Thissen, "Cinema History As Social History: Retrospect and Prospect," in Daniel Biltereyst, Richard Maltby, and Philippe Meers, eds., *The Routledge Companion to New Cinema History* (London: Routledge, 2019), 125.

[23] Mariagrazia Fanchi, "For Many but Not for All: Italian film history and the circumstantial value of audience studies," in Daniel Biltereyst, Richard Maltby, and Philippe Meers, eds., *The Routledge Companion to New Cinema History* (London: Routledge, 2019), 388.

[24] Ginzburg, *La Lettera uccide*, xii.

[25] Leo Strauss, "Persecution and the Art of Writing," *Social Research* 82, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 79–97. Originally published in *Social Research: An International Quarterly of Political and Social Science* 8, no. 4 (November 1941): 488–504; 81, 80.

[26] Strauss, "Persecution," 82, 86, 89.

[27] Strauss, "Persecution," 92.

[28] See in particular David Mayer's groundbreaking article "Learning to See in the Dark," *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film* 25, no. 2 (1997): 92–114.

[29] Mayer and Day-Mayer, "*Blue Jeans*," 60.

[30] See my discussion in "Theater Actresses and the Transition to Silent Film," in *Women Film Pioneers Project*, Jane Gaines, Radha Vatsal, and Monica Dall'Asta, eds. (New York: Columbia University Libraries, 2022). https://doi.org/10.7916/b2jj-8714.

[31] Mayer and Day-Mayer, "*Blue Jeans*," 67.

[32] David Mayer, "Acting in Silent Cinema: Which legacy of the theatre?" in *Screen Acting*, Alan Lovell and Peter Krämer, eds. (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 20.

[33] Ginzburg, "Conversations with Orion."

[34] Ginzburg, "Conversations with Orion."

[35] See Jan-Christopher Horak's discussion on the UCLA Library Film & Television Archive for a concise overview. https://www.cinema.ucla.edu/blogs/archival-spaces/2018/06/08/fiaf-brighton-1978. Accessed July 20, 2022.

[36] Eileen Bowser, "The Brighton Project: An Introduction," *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 4, no. 4 (1979): 509.

[37] Links Featured in "Learning to See on the Screen: Exploring Female Performance in Early Film Through the Media Ecology Project"
Clip 1. *A Cry for Help* (Biograph, 1912):
https://mediaecology.dartmouth.edu/collections/other/pub/A%20Cry%20for%20Help%20(1912)%20Clip%201%20-%20Duckett.mp4
Abel's Film Theme and Topic: https://onomy.org/taxonomy/view/46
Columbia Film Language Glossary: https://onomy.org/taxonomy/view/34
Film Roles Taxonomy: https://onomy.org/taxonomy/view/77
Early U.S. Cinema Compendium: https://airtable.com/appVwqBAyZOW1pQju/shriYd7VkWOyymdtm
Luminos: https://www.luminosoa.org/site/