

Is there a time for Alice Guy?

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Summary. The resurgence of critical interest, that has surfaced over the past fifteen years, in the work of Alice Guy aims to re-inscribe, evaluate and legitimize her role in the history of cinema. Raising important questions about filmmaking, globalization and gender issues, Alice Guy's movies have long time withstood any form of classification. Considering this hypothesis in a double perspective of erasing and of rewriting film history, the paper provides a close analysis of three silent films directed by Alice Guy in 1912–1913. Thus, the relation of shot composition and narrative, active intervention and irruption of outside elements are taken up in detail.

Keywords: Alice Guy filmography; early silent cinema; film history; first filmmakers; narrative; Solax studios

Statement of the problem

In the context of last decade's effervescence around the figure and cinematographic work of Alice Guy (1873, France — 1968, USA), nearly all contributions engage the discussion by this kind of preamble-gateway: this was the first woman director in the world *and* of history. When film scholars begin to restore Alice Guy's filmography, their critical agenda presents itself as a redeemer of data erasure in early cinema. At the same time, it increases the number of controversies around this filmmaker whose very first fiction movies, right from 1897, seemed to deviate from the major concerns of her circles, namely, the further development of the cinematic apparatus and its documentary potential. The idea of disconnection and anachronism is at the heart of Giorgio Agamben's work about the contemporary [1]. As a response element, he suggested temporal tensions specific to this condition: the contemporary is always situated away from its own time to better perceive it as the form of an ungraspable threshold between a «not yet» and a «no more»; contemporaneity can be thought only

on condition to be split into several times, by introducing into time an essential heterogeneity. In this paper, I intend to question the currents running through the discussion of the figure of Alice Guy from one turn of the century to another, in order to think through the whys and wherefores of erasing and rewriting film history. I will get around the «first woman director in the world *and* of history» track by breaking it down into multiple strands: each of the words — «the first», «woman», «director», «world/history» — in this formula opens up a number of possible readings, of the work of Alice Guy, as it closes some others.

The analysis of the latest research and publications

«First»

The common historiographical conception, especially in such a mystified area as early film studies, wants to attribute to the past events a tag of «the first» as an intrinsic value in the quest for origins. In his short essay from 1950s, Gilles Deleuze uses an image of desert island [7, p. 11–17] to postulate

that creation is never such, but rather re-creation, just as beginning is never such, but rather a re-beginning. There is an origin, but the origin is always second, knowing that the second movement is not a succession of the first, but its reappearance. Cinema exemplarily demonstrates this second *origine* feature, insofar as it synthesizes different modes of expression inherited from literature, photography and theater, while also pursuing its singular method of image development. It is precisely this synthetic aspect that allowed the pre-cinema adherents to put forward the idea that the moving image anticipated its own technical invention. Yet it is precisely the latter which serves as an impulse for a recurring necessity to nominate the first of the first: the film's scientific component is at stake here.

It is important to qualify this oxymoron: while the filmic device has been the result of extensive research in optics, chemistry and mechanical fields, the technical improvement of the medium has always been taking into account its aim to work on length and time, and thus to provide a new narrative form. Similarly, photography inventors from the beginning aspired to deploy in time the image obtained with optico-chemical process, and L. Daguerre's dioramas are a good example. Thus, to focus on the pioneering feature (Whitney exhibition) of an invention, process, or practice implies the extraction of only its factual part, to the detriment of the specificity given by the context. Although the majority of works on Alice Guy attach great importance to the detailed description — or rather the resumption — of her early career, its role is still for posterity to define. In its occurrence, the huge debate on Alice Guy's filmography is an unrewarding enterprise because, first, the films in early cinema were unsigned, and second, what matters here is not providing exact information about a film but situating it and establishing its relationship to other films.

«Woman»

Gender identity was applied as criterion by certain film historians to establish Alice Guy's filmography: as if there existed typically female topics —

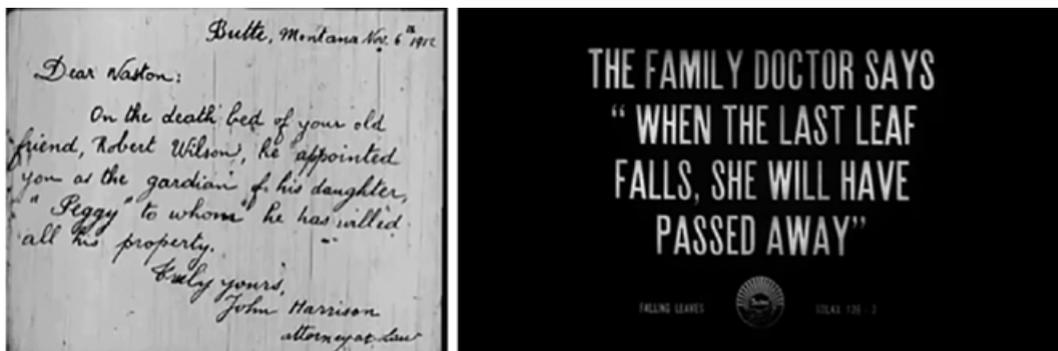
such as children, motherhood, women's status — that Alice Guy sought to explore through her films; this could explain why her work has been object of feminist studies¹.

These critics like to set up Alice Guy as a female-victim in order to justify the fact that she was forgotten, which is an argument among others: she was also young. To underline Guy's precarious condition, her biographers return to her childhood, which was divided between France and Chile, and discuss her secretarial experience with L. Gaumont (as described in her *Autobiography*) and then highlighting her ascension within the Photographic Society.

Yet, Alice Guy herself was well aware of her position as a combatant, at the same time that she adopted an ambiguous posture. She noticed a distinction between France and the US in regards to the status of women, considering art as the one area which offered them some freedom [2]. She testifies to this in her *Autobiography*, as well as in her films: Guy enjoys showing off as a filmmaker. In *Spain* (1905), the exploration of Spanish landscapes, mainly urban ones, is accomplished by circular tracking shots; at one point, Alice Guy appears surrounded by children followed by the title «Surprised by her camareman Anatole Thiberville». On the other hand, Guy's auto-fictional writing is a symptom of the lack of credibility she had experienced early in her career: did Alice Guy truly believe that narrative cinema was perfectly matched to the feminine sensibility? If such an explanation could function inside the studio of L. Gaumont, who was primarily interested in documentary, it collapsed when introduced to a broader coordinate system, L. Gaumont — G. Méliès, since the latter also aspired to the narrative cinema and was kept by historiography.

The mere fact of emphasizing that Alice Guy was a woman already begins to enroll her in a category of alterity and therefore assign her a different, and

1 Including the works of Jane Gaines and her website on women directors. Also see *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema*. Duke University Press, 2002. But this is a different approach for a different study.



In *The Girl in the Arm-Chair*, we learn the story of the young girl through a letter

obviously a minor, position (in occurrence in her working environment with Louis Gaumont). That means that these categories are opposite and unequal, and therefore incompatible. In addition, the minor category is considered to be derived from the major category; in other words, the major category includes the minor one by providing to the latter the necessary tools of its own definition. We read in the exhibition presentation at the Musée d'Orsay: «With her, like with other pioneers, Louis Feuillade or Léonce Perret, that she was rubbing at Gaumont studios, we are witnessing the birth of the cinematic view on the world» [14]. However, the exhibition organizers are in fact looking to legitimize her place in film history by overthrowing existing hierarchies. The formulation «Louis Feuillade or Léonce Perret, that she was rubbing» implies that Alice Guy was gravitating around these two filmmakers, but it does not specify that she trained them as well. She originally hired L. Feuillade to write the scripts for her films and he gradually begins to make movies on his own.

Nevertheless, the act of self-definition conducted by Alice Guy herself has found a way out of this rigid binarity, by granting a privileged place to her not-yet-affirmed condition, and has taken on a new dimension for the following reasons. Let me take as an example a movie that fits perfectly with the two logics I previously questioned, *La Fée aux choux*, 1896. The film was described as being perfectly feminine, as it deals with childbearing in a gentle and

joyful tone. Moreover, it is widely considered by film historians as the original entry in Alice Guy's filmography, as it was designated her first film by the director herself:

« At Belleville, next to the photographic laboratories, I was given an unused terrace with an asphalt floor (...) and a shaky glass ceiling, overlooking a vacant lot. It was in this palace that I made my first efforts. A backdrop painted by a fan-painter (and fantasist) from the neighborhood made a vague decor, with rows of wooden cabbages cut out by a carpenter, costumes rented here and there around the Porte Saint-Martin. As across: my friends, a screaming baby, an anxious mother leaping to and fro into the camera focus, and my first film *La Fée Aux choux* was born. Today it is a classic of which the Cinémathèque française preserves the negative » [12, p. 25–26].

— and therefore possibly *one among the concurrent first fiction films*. This film is erected as an eminent point of Alice Guy's career: «*The Cabbage Faire*, was so successful that Alice Guy became the head of Gaumont film production and remained so for the next 10 years» [4], as if the historiography needed strong moments at all cost.

However, Maurice Gianati, among other film historians including Francis Lacassin, Georges Sadoul and Jean Mitry², in his lecture at the French

2 That said, there are many critics who want to deconstruct the old myth and to build a new one instead; thus, some books adopt a mystical tone.

Cinemathèque expresses a hypothesis: although this film is appropriated by Alice Guy in her American correspondence with Gaumont Junior, and in his autobiography, many arguments disprove this (reference Gianatti number). First, the film does not appear in the Gaumont catalog of the year in question. Second, in the very few recorded traces of the film, its title has changed from *La Naissance des enfants* to *La Fée aux choux*. Finally, the transfer of 58mm to 33mm has been noticed, adding some more mystery to this survey. Therefore, it is very likely that this film was not made by Alice Guy, but by Gaumont's employees' team. Maurice Gianati believes that Alice Guy wanted to claim her title as author and chose the aforementioned date in order to assert herself as the pioneer of narrative cinema — a title usually attributed to Georges Méliès — at the price of introducing a breakdown in her own career, between the year when the film was released (1896) and the year of the construction of Gaumont studios (1902). By aiming to exclude any possibility of void and fictionalization in the history of cinema, Maurice Gianati gives us an understanding of his vision of the writing of history as a chronological accumulation of fragments of the past, according to the principle of causality and objectivity.

«Filmmaker»

The work of Alice Guy impresses with its generic diversity: although the predominant genre remains the comedy, including slapstick comedies, she also made films on religious and fantasy topics, as well as westerns and many «phonoscenes» combining moving images and music, where one can see a sound cinema dream. Screenwriter, director and producer — here is the triple title one would like to give to Alice Guy as an author, the ultimate goal aimed by every operation for filmography establishment.

The duality between marketable technique and artistic potential is brought out as crucial by all critics wishing to value Alice Guy. Many films that have been designated as written, directed and produced by Alice Guy herself were preparing a way for the

concept of the *cinema author*. But to what extent can we talk about authors in early cinema? The very first films were fruit of a common project within a company, without bringing out the personality of the director, and with actors being often employees of the same company. Sometimes, different companies would exchange decorations and themes; this is exemplarily the case in films featuring the magnetizer. If we want to identify an individual personality in the early cinema, it would not be the artist but the inventor, the technical father who created the conditions for the very realization of the idea of cinema. Some critics [5, p. 13] emphasize the absence of any artistic project among the first inventors of the cinema: during the public screening in Paris, Méliès asked the Lumière brothers to buy their invention, and the answer was the following: this invention may be exploited for some time as a scientific object, apart from that, it has no commercial future³.

This comment touches on the question of the combination of art and technology within cinema. Jean-Louis Comolli postulated two potential poles of discourse on the nature of cinema: the scientific and the ideological character. Following André Bazin, the author of *Cinema against spectacle* states that this art owes almost nothing to the scientific spirit, as its inventors were not scientists but artisans led by a dream of reproducing reality. In addition, the experience of photography had already shown this evolution from technical state of mind towards the artistic one, the latter flourishing in the late nineteenth century. It would therefore be surprising to believe that the inventors of the cinema did not notice this change. Alice Guy rubbed shoulders with Parisian photographic circles and witnessed the passage from photography to film practice among inventors.

Beyond the inventors' intentions, the nature of the cinematographic image oscillates between art

3 The meeting of Lumière and Méliès is re-imagined by Georges Franju in *Le Grand Méliès* (1952) and Jean-Luc Godard puts the same words in Italian in subscription to an image-field in *Le Mépris* (1963).



In *A House Divided* and *The Girl in the Arm-Chair*, plot development is made primarily by means of composition

and science as well. To consider that the cinematographic image finds its origins in the photographic image, the latter had as a project, first of all, to promote realistic representation of an accomplished fact or a verifiable element. With help of optics and chemistry, photographs then become fixtures of geometric images by emulsion. The camera, restoring the photographed object, produces the perspectivist's projections and records the light footprint on receptive surfaces. This is an instrument that universalized the project of Renaissance theorists and painters, as it promotes the type of image that rational thinking required of these artists: figurative images governed by the laws of geometry, which are perceived in their two-dimensional plane as though they were in three dimensions. Erwin Panofsky has shown in his essay «The perspective as a symbolic form» that the study of perspective was the promotion of art to science; thus, the subjective point of view on the world accesses the level of objectivity: by the invention of perspective, we managed to make a «translation of psychophysiological space into mathematical space; in other words, an *objectification of the subjective*» [15, p. 66].

That being said, the project of photography, once performed, overturned its own program: a photographer cannot aim for objectivity, since this is already included in the very device. Therefore, he seeks to appropriate what is already objective in its genesis [3, p. 7], so as to subjectivize it. Gerard Richter's photo-paintings exemplify this idea of re-

versal, a *subjectivation of the objective*, by imitating the photographic operation. Similarly, the cinematic image cannot be considered subject to the codes of Western classical representation, as J.-L. Comolli argues [6, p. 207], as its codes are recorded immediately in its very condition: the image cannot be dominated by something it is constituted with, still the filmmaker may explore these predispositions⁴.

«World / History»

Between her debut in France and the creation of «Solax» studios in the United States, Alice Guy had already become an embodiment of world cinema crossing the globe as it was dreamed of Sergueï Eisenstein twenty years later. The controversies turn mainly around the French part of her filmography: the number of films produced, their chronology, and especially the date of the first film directed by Alice Guy. The difficulty is that there is almost no existing documentation of that period, and therefore describing her filmography is an undertaking that can be based only on an arbitrary selection and accumulation of facts.

Rather than offering a more accurate filmography of Alice Guy, it would be more revealing to question the further implications of this operation. Thus, the first film would be of paramount importance in the

4 A famous example would be Deleuze's demonstration of the exploratory function of deep focus in Orson Welles films, cf. Deleuze, *Cinéma 2*, chapter 5 «Pointes de présent et nappes de passé», Paris: Les Ed. de Minuit, 1985. p. 129–164.



In *The Girl in the Arm-Chair*, Peggy is a looking character in the sense that she is not viewed by others

concurrency that Alice Guy would have had with Georges Méliès, as was mentioned earlier. In a DVD collection with an eloquent title, *Gaumont Treasures, 1897–1913*, Alice Guy's filmography begins with *The Fisherman at the stream* (1897), a unique frame film, and it is followed by other films with features and themes recurrent throughout the early cinema, such as theatrical or painted decorations, dances, special effects and amazement effects, substitution techniques, characters and frames roaming through different films, and the mise en abyme of new image production techniques like the gentleman destabilized by the camera in *At the photographer's* (1900). Yet it was not until 1900 and later that the films from this collection slowly began moving away from Lumière's conception of cinema as a way to capture the real. For example, in *The Landlady* (1900) the action is based on the hierarchical arrangement of the figures in the frame (the culminating points are moved to the center, while others are clearly at the margins).

Alice Guy continues her exploration of the image's multiple dimensions in her film *The birth, the life and the death of Christ* by situating some action in the image's background, which gives them both density and achieves an opening effect. To make a quick note about the falsification of links between facts, this film has long been attributed to Victorian Jasset who was assisting Alice Guy at the time [13, p. 33]. *The birth, the life and the death of Christ* was a blockbuster for the time, with three

hundred extras in the second version and featuring many wooden decorations made by Henti Menessier. Here is what Alice Guy herself says:

«[...] Jesus rising from the Sepulchre was one of our best superimpositions. This was one of the first big spectacle films and I had the honor, very rare at that period, of being named as director when the film was presented at the Société de photographie de Paris, as the bulletin of that showing can witness. Happily for me, as many persons tried to take credit for that work.

Certain authors of works on the debuts of the cinema state that we took only very short films. But *La Passion*, filmed in the first month of 1906, measured 600 metres and contained twenty-five solidly constructed sets, a cast of two or three hundred persons for each of whom we had, with my assistant Jasset, to drape each costume [...]. [12, p. 43]

The consideration of these two other films confirms the hypothesis about the disproportionate — and purely chronological — importance accorded by film critics to *The Cabbage Faire*, — and also unjustifiable, since the year of its shooting and Alice Guy's authorship have not been confirmed. The writing of history is not an exclusively empirical or linear matter as many of the films mentioned as attributed to Alice Guy have not been physically destroyed, and similarly, the erasure of history is both due to emptiness and to abruptness: to cut off the links between facts — between films, between subjects — is to delete them. Thus, the task of the his-



In the final scene of *Falling Leaves*, Trixie appears in the door to intervene in the resolution of the drama by getting her parents out of the room



The final scene «Wedding-bells» in *The Girl in the Arm-Chair*

torian could be first of all to fill the void and *create* a new place on erased ground, but reconstituting traces of the past also means, paradoxically, to create a void or to hollow out an absence. Thus, while rewriting film history from its interior, we are confronted with a major difficulty to define Alice Guy as set apart from those who have not been excluded from history, such as her pupils Louis Feuillade and Victorin Jasset.

By opening his investigation of the counter-history of cinema, Francis Lacassin doubts the credibility of film historiography built upon personal memories and archives — photos, movies and documents — that escaped destruction and oblivion:

«One should be wary of remembrance slavery.

It tends to freeze the old values scales [...] I sensed that film history would find its rigor only the day when it would be written by generations devoid of memories and reduced to take into account the smallest debris and constraints with the cold objectivity» [13, p. 20, my translation]

At the same time, I could not help but use many anachronistic terms throughout this work — be they names of technical processes, relationship names, or concepts that have been formulated retroactively, giving names to ruptures and destabilizing constituted meanings. In other words, rereading Alice Guy's work from one century's distance can be done only on condition of taking into account the writ-

ing of history to which she herself did not belong, one of erasure, falsification and fictionalization.

The goal of the article

Three Solax films saved from oblivion (Harvard Film Archives)

Upon her arrival in the United States⁵, Alice Guy was able to use the technical knowledge of filmmaking she had acquired in France in order to create her Solax Company in New Jersey, over which she presided, as the term «producer» was not used yet. It was during this «golden years» period of the 1910s that she directed the three films in question: *Falling Leaves* (1912), *The Girl in the Arm-Chair* (1912) and *A House Divided* (1913). These films, with these exact release dates, are included in Alice Guy's American filmography that was established by Anthony Slide in the English edition of the *Autobiography*. The first is a melodrama, while the two others belong to the comedy genre; they have a relatively simple structure, which is inscribed in the conjugal or family setting.

Observing the way Alice Guy constructs the aforementioned narrative dimension in her movies helps to identify the seeds she sowed in early cinema that would be developed later as major cinematic tech-

⁵ It seems like the situation in the United States with the cinema was very different from France: for example, public screenings were not in use.

niques. The central question to approach from this perspective is that of *mise-en-scène*: how to situate this step accompanying the technique of capturing reality⁶ — is it an extension, an intervention or a supplement? Between elaborated *mise-en-scène*, image work, and the freedom of sensitive signs printed on film, Alice Guy's movies have opened the conditions for this question to emerge and re-emerge through the twentieth century.

The main content

Text use among images

The use of intertitles is not abundant in Alice Guy's movies. In *A House Divided*, the intertitles tend to anticipate the image so that the viewer is already informed of what he will see next. One might think that the narrative dimension is outside the image, as the intertitles anticipate the image and predetermine the spectator's reading in order to get him accustomed to the new narrative form. But in this film the intertitles are less significant than other forms of text used, such as official documents (money loan, medical prescription etc.), handwritten letters and notes exchanged by main characters, and quarreling spouses who communicate exclusively in writing. Similarly, in *The Girl in the Arm-Chair*, we learn the story of the young girl through a letter; so the text has an informative and accompanying function to the image, and it appears occasionally throughout the story as a given fact, not as a guide, while intertitles become material within the film.

A filmed theater?

As the camera remains immobile and the number of shots is limited, one might think that the film is equal to the capture of a theatrical performance, where action is ordered by limited stage space. However, the exploration of visual possibil-

ities offered by cinema in the studied films exceeds the limits imposed by the framework. First, Alice Guy was experimenting with methods such as the overlay to show Frank's nightmare in *The Girl in the Arm-Chair*, dyed in blue with rotating cards. But in general, even if the framing limits visibility, it takes nothing away from the meanings that appear in image juxtapositions. Thus a cut of window and leaves at the left extremity of the frame takes nothing away from Trixie's — interpreted by Magda Foy, the «Solax kid» — plan to save her sister, but opens another possible space of the drama. On the other hand, the camera's stillness is compensated by (relatively) quickly linked images, especially in the sequence where Trixie gets up during the night to get to the garden and tie leaves on the trees. The camera keeps the same position and thereby creates an imaginary center around which the images move, and in doing so, it gives a visual continuity and motion without movement effect, so that we sense Alice Guy's intention to follow the character and thus to establish a participatory distance with spectator.

Image structure

The action is often placed inside, which gives a limited framework, so plot development is made primarily by means of composition, and the position of each character plays a decisive role. In *A House Divided*, for example, the failure of communication and the need for an intermediary have resulted in the triangle of Diana — Gerald — Lawyer, where both spouses look at each other and we see a lawyer look at them. This game of gazes is an important element of composition in Alice Guy's films. In *The Girl in the Arm-Chair*, Peggy is a looking character in the sense that she is not viewed by others: she is present when others are talking about her, she is present when she sees Frank stealing money from his father, and she is the one who settles his debts.

But these moments of apparent complicity with the spectator are always in the background or away from the central stage. One might consider this process as a precursor of deep focus because it relates

6 Thus, Italian neorealism does return to the cinema without a studio and without actors, so as to film life as the Lumiere brothers did. For Deleuze, neorealism aims a reality that would be to decipher, it does not produce «more real» as Bazin said (show the real more real than the real is), but it produces a real vision, a mental contemplation of reality.

different shots of the same image with a common line running through them. Similarly, in the final scene of *Falling Leaves*, Trixie appears in the door to intervene in the resolution of the drama by getting her parents out of the room. By the way, doors and windows are important in these enclosed spaces having Griffith-esque character (probably a common trait in early film). In the final part of *The Girl in the Arm-Chair*, «Wedding Bells», the image anticipates the way the action progresses: Peggy is sitting at the far left, and the central and the right parts remain empty, as though awaiting Frank's arrival, and he does indeed come in through the door on the right and pulls the action on his part toward the center, where he will conduct the conversation with Peggy. Thus, the door gives an idea of an elsewhere, of action in the wings where the so-called secondary things happen, while the prioritized things are being shown.

The filmed space is shown as a stage hiding a building site, with a subtle border between the two. Alice Guy thinks the cinema and she thinks as much of her cinema thought. Already in France she had produced a making-of one of her phonoscènes, equivalent of contemporary video. So in *Alice Guy films a 'Phonoscène' in the studio at Buttes-Chaumont, Paris (Alice Guy tourne une phonoscène sur le théâtre de pose des Buttes-Chaumont)* (1905) we can see decorations, actors at work, technical staff, the still photographer, and Alice Guy by herself.

Characters' development

Alice Guy was attached to her actors «Solax», such as Mace Greenleaf, who played the role of Dr. Earl Headley in *Falling Leaves*. It was the beginning of the star-ization of cinema (e.g. Olga Petrova who played in four films of Alice Guy) since early cinema actors were non-professionals or came from staff. Alice Guy had begun to use theater or music hall actors and circus artists to impersonate her film characters.

Character development is a process that works the image in limited framework conditions as well. Still it is not a matter of character development as

it is practiced in writing or in the theater. Instead, Alice Guy told her actors «Be natural»⁷, which was a novelty at the time. Yet this instruction does not stop Gerald (the suspicious husband from *A House Divided*) from having very expressive facial acting. However, it is in this formula that is seized Guy's awareness of the specific nature of staging in cinema (to be distinguished from the realistic capture as it was performed by the Lumiere brothers). In Alice Guy's films, we can glimpse an outline of the character as a two-leveled entity: first, it is a figure that shapes the filmic space, instead of what camera or editing would have been able to make; second, it is a sensitive surface with expressions that add something to the story but keep their original identity as such, which is not under filmmaker's purview but persists and is *there*, so the visual logic supplants the narrative.

Conclusions

The resurgence of critical interest in the work of Alice Guy that has surfaced in France and in the United States over the past fifteen years had as a goal to re-inscribe, evaluate and legitimize the role of the filmmaker in the history of cinema. In her own time, the work of Alice Guy raised important questions about cinema and globalization, as well film and gender studies. But the problems detected in her work, such as that of the author in cinema, and the oscillation between technology and staging, would only be articulated by later criticism, and it is only even later that Alice Guy would reappear as a subject of critical discussion. As the case is characterized by numerous controversies and data gaps, writing on Alice Guy today implies a recovery operation in regards to the present moment, rather than to the past time and a restitution rather of what she *became* and not what she *was*.

⁷ See also a documentary «Be Natural: The Untold Story of Alice Guy-Blaché» directed by Pamela B. Green, USA, 2018.

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