

The Most Famous Woman You've Never Heard Of

ALISON MCMAHAN ON ALICE GUY BLACHÉ

IN 1894, A YOUNG WOMAN named Alice Guy was hired as a secretary at a company in Paris that manufactured cameras and other optical equipment. Unknowingly, she had just stepped into the vortex from which cinema would be born. Barely twenty-one, schooled in convents, and trained as a secretary, she would go on to shape the greatest art form of the twentieth century. But by the time of her death in 1968, Guy had been all but forgotten, and despite a recent surge of interest in her career, her work remains grossly underrecognized. The retrospective “Alice Guy Blaché: Cinema Pioneer,” which opens this month at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, promises to be a long-overdue corrective.

Less than a year after Guy was hired at Comptoir Général de Photographie, the camera maker was forced to close down. Its second-in-command, young inventor Léon Gaumont, bought the company and

As head of film production for the Gaumont Company at the turn of the century, Alice Guy would almost single-handedly develop the art of cinematic narrative.

kept Guy on as office manager. On March 22, 1895, she witnessed a demonstration of the Lumière Cinématographe, a device that functioned as 35-mm film camera, printer, and projector all in one—nine months before a paying audience would see a similar exhibition in the basement lounge of the Grand Café on the boulevard des Capucines in Paris. The film she saw was *La Sortie des usines Lumière* (Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory), arguably the world's first commercial.

Gaumont, like other inventors, was feverishly developing a competing device, the Biographe, a 60-mm motion-picture camera. Guy persuaded her

boss to let her use the Biographe to direct a story film. The result, the one-minute *La Fée aux choux* (The Cabbage Fairy, 1896), which Guy wrote, produced, costumed, and directed, was not the first fiction film, as some feminist scholars would later claim (the Lumière brothers' *L'Arroseur arrosé* [The Sprayer Sprayed, 1895] probably deserves that honor), but it led Guy to a twenty-eight-year career in the movie business. As head of film production for the Gaumont Company, she would almost single-handedly develop the art of cinematic narrative. She defined the role of movie director as separate from that of camera operator. She eschewed expensive backdrops in favor of real locations, making her films look startlingly modern.

She pioneered the use of close-ups to dramatic effect, in films like *Madame a des envies* (Madame Has Her Cravings, 1906), several years before D. W. Griffith, who is usually given credit for that innovation, even started working in film. Her thirty-four-minute Gaumont masterpiece, *La Vie du Christ* (1906), highlights Guy's ability to transfer what she learned about special effects in still photography to motion pictures. Most important, she was the earliest to deploy character arc and the psychological perspective of a lead character in a film story, a technique her competitor at Pathé, Ferdinand Zecca, failed to master when he plagiarized films such as *La Marâtre* (The Stepmother, 1906) and *Sur la Barricade* (1907). And she trained the next generation of French filmmakers (Étienne Arnaud, Victorin Jasset, and Louis Feuillade) and set designers (Henri Menessier and Ben Carré).

Her work for Gaumont was not all silent. In 1901, the company patented a synchronized-sound system, the Chronophone, for which Guy directed more than

one hundred *phonoscènes*. The sound track was recorded first, then actors lip-synched to the audio. For projection, the phonograph and cinematograph were synchronized via telephone cable and a control board. These postsynchronized sound systems prefigured the dubbing and lip-synching practices of today's media. Guy pointedly reflected on the aesthetic effects of using synchronous or asynchronous, live or mechanized sound in silent films like *Canned Harmony* (1912), in which a nonmusical suitor convinces his musician father-in-law that he is a virtuoso performer through the judicious use of a phonograph hidden under a table while he mimes playing the violin. She also commented on the progressive mechanization of the cinema in films like *La Statue* (1905), in which two clowns struggle to dominate a windup automaton that breaks free of its control system.

Guy crossed the Atlantic in 1907 after marrying Gaumont sales manager Herbert Blaché, nine years her junior, when Gaumont transferred him to the



Alice Guy (foreground, center) directing a scene from the opera *Mignon* for a synchronized sound film, Gaumont Chronophone Studio, Paris, 1906.



From top: Alice Guy, *La Fée aux choux* (The Cabbage Fairy), 1896, still from a black-and-white film in 60 mm, 1 minute. Alice Guy, *La Vie du Christ* (The Life of Christ), 1906, still from a black-and-white film in 35 mm, 34 minutes.

United States. Blaché managed the Gaumont studio in Flushing, New York, where he produced English-language *phonoscènes*, in the process giving Lois Weber her first directing job and raising the number of female film directors in the world to two.

Bringing the Chronophone to the US quickly led to antagonism with Thomas Edison, who was promoting his inferior Kinetophone system, and the ensuing court battles meant that the Flushing studio languished. Guy Blaché gave birth to a daughter, Simone, in 1908, but this didn't stop her from forming the Solax company, and taking advantage of the underutilized Flushing studio during Solax's first year of operation. Business was so good that Guy Blaché, though pregnant with her second child, went from directing one film a week to three and was able to build a hundred-thousand-dollar glass-roofed studio in Fort Lee, New Jersey, in 1912. This made her the first woman to own her own studio and studio plant. At Solax, she developed a hierarchical but still cooperative system of studio manage-

ment, years before Thomas Ince would do so in Hollywood. She was one of the first among the Fort Lee studio heads to move to feature-length production; she led the way in the development of the star system, encouraged her actors to "be natural," and trained a number of the next generation of American filmmakers. In 1913, she directed her American masterpiece, *Dick Whittington and His Cat*, for which she blew up a ship off the Jersey Shore.

In June of that year, Blaché's contract with Gaumont ended, and his wife made him president of Solax so that she could concentrate on writing and directing. After three months, Blaché resigned and started his own film company, Blaché Features (with Guy Blaché as vice president and coproducer), which used Solax's facilities and actors, making the two companies nearly indistinguishable. For the next two years, Blaché and his wife would alternate producing and directing longer films (three or four reels) for Blaché Features at the rate of one a month. As a result of this breakneck pace, little time was left for Solax, and by 1914 Guy Blaché's company was virtu-

ally defunct. By that point, the demand for feature-length movies (five reels or more) had substantially increased the studio's costs per picture, making it harder to turn a profit. At the same time, the Blachés were hampered by limited access to distribution. They joined Popular Plays and Players, a company that produced features for distributors such as Metro, Pathé, and World Film Corporation. These films were shot in the former Solax studio in Fort Lee, which still belonged to the Blachés. When this arrangement soured, they began working as directors for hire. Three of the twenty-two feature-length films Guy Blaché directed survive, including *The Ocean Waif* (1916), starring Doris Kenyon, an interesting study in alternating his-and-her points of view, and the comedy *Her Great Adventure* (1918), starring Bessie Love, which turned the melodramatic genre story of old lechers ruining young girls on its head. Extant, but not yet restored, is *The Empress* (1917), a postmodern film *avant la lettre* that uses the painter's art as a meta-

phor for how cinema creates alternate realities for viewers and false personae for actors, a theme that preoccupied Guy Blaché as early as 1898, when she made *Chez le Photographe* (At the Photographer's).

In 1918, Blaché abandoned his wife and children and went to Hollywood. Guy Blaché directed her last film, *Tarnished Reputations*, the next year and almost died from the Spanish influenza. Moved by her plight, Blaché brought his family to Los Angeles, where they maintained separate households, though Guy Blaché worked as his assistant on several films starring Alla Nazimova. By 1922, the couple had divorced, and Guy Blaché auctioned off her film studio as part of bankruptcy proceedings. She returned to France, where, in spite of her efforts, she would not work in the film industry again. She lived another forty-six years, long enough to notice that her contributions to the art of cinema had been forgotten, credit for her innovations given to others (often men she had trained), and most of the films she had made lost in the shuffle of history. Guy Blaché spent the last decades of her life trying to right the record through a respectful letter-writing campaign, which led to her being recognized in 1954 by Louis Gaumont, Léon's son. In 1955, she was awarded the *Légion d'honneur*, France's highest honor. A handful of film critics began to mention her, but their articles were riddled with errors, and Guy Blaché decided to write her memoirs. These were published after her death in French in the 1970s and later in English. Still, she was in danger of being completely forgotten until fifteen years ago, when book-length studies on her work by film historians such as Victor Bachy and myself, and several documentaries, began to appear. To date, only some 130 of the 1,000 or so films she wrote, produced, and directed have been found. The Whitney will be screening more than eighty of those movies in the coming months, posing an extraordinary opportunity for anyone interested in early cinema and the development of film language. □

"Alice Guy Blaché: Cinema Pioneer"—organized by Joan Simon, with numerous films newly preserved by Kim Tomadjoglou—will be on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, Nov. 6, 2009–Jan. 24, 2010. An almost complete collection of Guy's Gaumont films is now available on DVD, distributed in the US by Kino International. For a list of related exhibitions, see aliceguyblache.com.

A WRITER AND FILMMAKER, ALISON MCMAHAN IS THE AUTHOR OF *ALICE GUY BLACHÉ: LOST VISIONARY OF THE CINEMA* (CONTINUUM, 2002). (SEE CONTRIBUTORS.)