Pearl White, the perilous “serial queen” film heroine of the 1910s, earned her nickname as “the Girl with Ninety-Nine Lives” in this 14-episode 1914 American film series, “The Exploits of Elaine.” White plays title character Elaine Dodge: a girl detective who repeatedly risks life and limb to help solve the murder of her dead father by the series’ homicidal villain, “The Clutching Hand” (played by Sheldon Lewis). In each episode, this ominous villain repeatedly invents new ways of imperiling Elaine: she consecutively survives drowning, a poisoned wristwatch, being gassed with small traces of arsenic dormant in her bedroom wallpaper, having all of the blood siphoned out of her own body, and being embalmed by notorious Chinese gang members. In one episode, “The Life Current,” Elaine literally dies and then returns from the dead, resuscitated by a makeshift defibrillator engineered by her love interest, Dr. Craig Kennedy (Arnold Daly).

Elaine’s bodily mortality functions as the limit case of narrative representation in this early film serial. Finding the thing that might destroy Elaine for good—after all, this is a lady who can return from the dead—becomes the driving force of every episode. It is no wonder that Elaine Dodge held such a strong appeal to World War I soldiers on leave from the trenches; they referred to White adoringly as “the peerless, fearless girl,” and reportedly demanded a full screening of the entire serial after having watched several episodes of “Exploits” in France while on furlough.

Marie WalcAMP, fostered the extreme popularity of the genre, starring respectively in “The Hazards of Helen” (Kalem, 48 episodes, 1914-1917), “The Adventures of Ruth” (Pathé, 15 episodes, 1919), “Lucille Love, Girl of Mystery” (Universal, 15 episodes, 1914), and “The Lion’s Claws” (Universal, 18 episodes, 1918). “The Exploits of Elaine” was published as a print serial, written by Arthur Reeve, released more or less simultaneously with each film episode (depending on the location of your local film theater).

Episodes of The Exploits of Elaine typically centered on some mysterious new technology—such as “The Death Ray,” “The Life Current,” or “The Blood Crystals”—that would alternately imperil or salvage Elaine, either threatening her life or delivering her from the grips of death. Feminist film historian, Jennifer Bean, has aptly described White as a...
"catastrophe machine." part of a "technology of early stardom ... [that] flaunts catastrophe, disorder, and disaster rather than continuity and regulation" (407). In opposition to the Clutching Hand's deadly machinations, Kennedy, Elaine's scientist-criminologist love interest, invents non-lethal devices in order to watch over Elaine and protect her from her incessant exposure to harm.

The list of ingenious gadgets that Kennedy invents in order to save Elaine from her own sense of adventure is amazingly exhaustive and disturbingly surveillant. These panoptic trinkets include: the Teleview (a repurposed periscope for "seeing from a distance"), the Seismograph (which accumulates intruders' footprints inside one's home), and the Detectascope (a modified fisheye lens for seeing through private keyholes), which Kennedy uses to spy on Elaine in her hotel room during Elaine's furtive meeting with a woman impersonating her mother-in-law. These surveillant technologies are shot through with gender connotations. At one point in the serialized novel, from which this film was continuously adapted, a character named Milton is imagined to have an X-ray apparatus that might read a woman's heart, as he was accustomed to read others of nature's secrets" (130).

Kennedy's spy technologies range from the visual to the aural: in another episode, intriguingly titled "The Hidden Voice," Kennedy devises a Vocaphone, which is basically a secret telephone with amplified sound used for monitoring Elaine's vulnerability in her domicile. Kennedy also hides the Vocaphone inside of Elaine's medieval plate armor, which for some reason has pride of place in her living room. In addition, Kennedy invents the Telegraphone, which is literally a wiretap that records phone calls. The Telegraphone, Kennedy explains, uses "no discs or cylinders but spoons of extremely fine steel wire...each particle of steel undergoes an electromagnetic transformation by which the sound is indelibly imprinted on it" (146). Sometimes it is hard to tell which end Kennedy is more excited about: the voyeuristic object or the surveillant device itself.

Indeed, the obsessive desire to watch over Elaine, allegedly in order to protect her from her own pluckiness, quickly becomes a panoptic nightmare that haunts everyone. The home interior is the least private space imaginable. The necessity to escape from the clutches of death becomes a pathological excuse for the pervasive obsession with self-surveillance, which is the reverse side of this unprecedented voyeuristic access. For example, in one scene, Kennedy and his assistant must conceal their awareness that they are being watched in order to prevent an even greater terror from materializing: a machine called "The Death Ray" that zaps and kills its victims from a distance, marking each body with a horrible coin-sized blotch on their skin. The death ray literalizes Michel Foucault's idea of a biopolitical apparatus: death is just a specter of this technology, which functions primarily through power-knowledge discourses and the manipulative administration of living bodies. Believing is not just about seeing, so much as it is about the possibility of oneself being watched.

Elaine Dodge may have had ninety-nine lives—inoculating her against the effects of vampires, a frozen safe, or even a death ray—but she inevitably lived out all of them at the wrong end of a Teleview or a Detectascope. Given the subsequent rise and proliferation of personal television screens, digital media, forensic technologies, and increasingly sophisticated home surveillance systems, "The Exploits of Elaine" represents a crucial text and remarkable history of how these gendered media devices have been finely woven into the history of American cultural identity and entertainment pastimes.

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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