

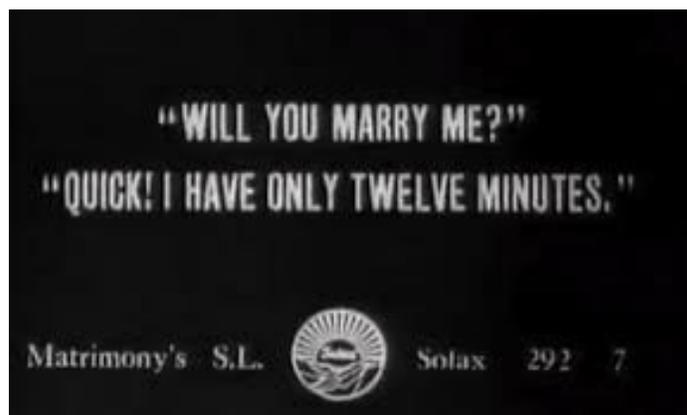
# Matrimony's Speed Limit

By Margaret Hennefeld

A chase film to the altar, “Matrimony’s Speed Limit” (Alice Guy-Blaché, Solax, 1913) depicts the plight of a financially ruined bachelor, Fraunie, who learns that he has exactly twelve minutes to marry a bride or else he will lose out on a very large inheritance. Made by one of the most prolific early silent filmmakers, Alice Guy-Blaché (1873-1968), this film provides a gendered, comic twist on the terrors of modernity: the collapse of separate public and private spheres, and the unprecedented speed of communications and transportation systems. An urgent telegram and hotrod automobile make a mockery of the institution of marriage, as the film’s title heralds. “Matrimony’s Speed Limit” draws on a long line of marital chase films, such as Biograph’s “Personal” (1904) and Lubin’s “Meet Me at the Fountain” (1904), both of which depict a bachelor who places a personal ad in the newspaper and is then chased over fences and through public fountains by a multiplying horde of would-be brides. Likewise, Guy-Blaché’s film inspired many memorable imitations, such as Buster Keaton’s hilarious “Seven Chances” (1925) and Pierre Etaix’s “The Suitor” (France, 1962)—not to exclude “The Bachelor” (1999) starring Chris O’Donnell and Renée Zellweger.

Alice Guy-Blaché made over seven hundred films between 1896 and 1920 in France (at Gaumont from 1896-1907) and in the United States (at her own production company, Solax, from 1907-1920). Although uniquely prolific, her participation in the silent film industry as a woman director, scenarist (i.e. scriptwriter), and producer was by no means unprecedented: hundreds of women such as Lois Weber, Mabel Normand, Dorothy Davenport, Frances Marion, Gene Gauntier, and Anita Loos worked in filmmaking at every level of production, administration, and performance. Guy-Blaché had incredible range across her filmmaking work, making everything from short slapstick trick comedies (“Turn-of-the-Century Surgery,” 1900), to religious passion plays (“The Birth, the Life, and the Death of Christ,” 1906), to patriotic capers about immigration (“Making An American Citizen,” 1912), and to longer dramatic feature films about the contradictory gender politics of American culture (“The Ocean Waif,” 1916).

In addition to her incredible productivity, Guy-Blaché represents an exciting figure for feminist film histori-



*An intertitle from the film conveys its frenetic comedy.  
Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.*

ans, as so many of her films uncannily speak to the frequent exclusion of important women filmmakers from canonical American film histories. While films such as “Madame’s Cravings” (1906), “The Consequences of Feminism” (1906), and “Matrimony’s Speed Limit” lampoon shifting societal gender norms, other films—including “The Cabbage Fairy” (1896), “Tarnished Reputations” (1920), and “What Will People Say?” (1916)—thematize the slippery relationship between documented history and personal memory: between knowledge and experience. They articulate the necessity of drawing on personal memoir, anecdotal narrative, and other forms of subjective testimony in order to record histories that are otherwise marked by archival lapses and missing information. Guy-Blaché, one of the earliest and most productive filmmakers in the history of cinema, had dropped out of public awareness and historical visibility for so long precisely due to a lack of official documentation of her career—a striking paucity compared to the records celebrating the achievements of male directors such as D.W. Griffith, Charlie Chaplin, and Edwin S. Porter.

Fortunately, Guy-Blaché’s personal memoirs (“The Memoirs of Alice Guy-Blaché,” Scarecrow Press, 1996), and her prolific body of films have helped to set the record straight. Moreover, these materials have raised crucial questions about the very form and practice of documenting and narrating film history. In the years since her cinematic rediscovery and historiographic recuperation by feminist film scholars (such as Jane Gaines, Alison McMahan, Amelie Hastie, and Joan Simon), Guy-Blaché has become a very generative figure for feminist documentary filmmakers: exemplified by “The Lost Garden: The Life and Cinema of Alice Guy-Blaché” (Marquise Lepage, 1995) and “Be Natural: The Untold Story of Alice Guy-Blaché” (Pamela Green, 2015).

In one of her earliest short films, “The Cabbage Fairy” (1896), Guy-Blaché depicts the childhood legend that babies are not born from the female uterus, but instead harvested from celestial cabbage patches. Her films frequently draw on childhood myth and folklore to provide comic correctives that exhibit the instabilities of all forms of knowledge and of historical documentation. Even modern societies have their own folksy mythologies. Indeed, the figure of the cabbage fairy makes a comeback ten years later in “Madame’s Cravings”: a perverse trick comedy about a pregnant woman (played by Guy-Blaché herself) who wanders around a public park indulging in her absurd maternity cravings, which include a young child’s lollipop, a wine lover’s absinthe, a traveling salesman’s smoking pipe, and a crippled beggar’s pickled herring. Her short films frequently use comedy to negotiate between the exciting potentials of women’s newfound opportunities in the public sphere, and pervasive anxieties about the destructive effects that this unprecedented freedom might wreak on democratic society.

For the failed suitor of “Matrimony’s Speed Limit,” it turns out that there is something *even more* terrifying than the romantically unavailable women who saunter through the streets and falsely tempt him over the course of twelve minutes. At approximately 11:58 AM, a racial sight gag drives Fraunie to utter desperation and the brink of suicide. He encounters a woman whose face is covered by a thick white veil: the perfect candidate to become his bride within the next two minutes. However, upon lifting her veil, Fraunie discovers that she is African-American, and then stumbles away in horror. As the film reveals, the speed limit of matrimony is, in fact, racial

miscegenation (in 1913 American culture). This becomes literalized when Fraunie’s supine, suicidal body actually stops traffic—fortunately, the occupant of the oncoming automobile turns out to be Fraunie’s jilted fiancée, Marian, who had devised the whole scheme, and is herself accompanied by a minister. The two wed immediately, and then retreat to their private domestic space whereupon she discloses her ruse and deception. Fraunie is outraged and attempts to storm off, but Marian steals his hat—of course he cannot go out in public without his hat—and then the two finally embrace. Instead of a marriage-contingent inheritance, Fraunie will have to be satisfied with Marian’s substantial dowry. What could go wrong?

More than just a zippy, entertaining film made by a foundational female filmmaker, “Matrimony’s Speed Limit” represents a crucial historical text that comically meditates upon the gendered, class, and racial fantasies and anxieties of early twentieth century American culture.

*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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