THE SCRIPT NEEDS A RE-WRITE

By Michael Ventura
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Alas for scholars – professionals as well as small-c catholic lay scholars (as I fancy myself to be). The dilemma of knowledge is that you can never know enough to be certain of your certainties. No matter how much you know, some new fact or set of facts can turn all you know on its head and make every previous conclusion partly or entirely wrong. Scientists are used to this; a comet enters the solar system composed of stuff comets aren't supposed to contain (as happened just last year), and every textbook becomes antique until someone explains that comet. But the history of cinema seems a more stable study than the mysteries of the galaxy, wouldn't you think?

Not so. Just that sort of unguessed-at comet landed in my mail last week, and no film school professor should give another lecture on cinema's origins until this comet is thoroughly examined: The new Kino DVD set, *Gaumont Treasures 1897-1913,* proves that – with apologies to D.W. Griffith, among others – it's rewrite time for all we thought we knew about how cinema was born and grew.

The unforgivable flaw of *Gaumont Treasures* is its mere five paragraphs of jacket notes, telling us next to nothing. Lots of grunt research by the paid scholars and their graduate students will be necessary to fill in the blanks. But the discs tell the basic, startling story.

Disc 1 gives us 64 films, most very short, by Alice Guy. Wikipedia calls her merely "the first female director." Leon Gaumont hired her as a secretary for his photography business in 1894. How a 21-year-old secretary became the premier force of her employer's new Gaumont Film Company by age 23 goes unexplained. She is believed to have directed the world's first narrative film, in 1896. Her earliest work in *Gaumont Treasures* is from 1897, two very short pieces, "The Fisherman at the Stream" and "Bathing in the Stream." What *really* goes unexplained is how a young Frenchwoman with no specific training achieved, right out of the chute, utter mastery of exterior black-and-white cinematography. The action of these films – boys playing self-consciously in front of a camera -- is unimportant. What stuns is how you feel you can rub your cheeks against the stream's richly textured boulders and how you run these films over and over to watch the incredible play of light on the rushing waters. In every Guy exterior from 1897 to 1916's feature "The Ocean Waif" (shot in the U.S., and available as a separate Kino release], her cinematography is breathtaking, still unsurpassed, rarely equaled. It would be more than a decade before any cameraman in America approached the standard set by Guy in 1897.

Watching two of her films from 1900, "The Landlady" and "The Cabbage-Patch Fairy," I was baffled. They're shot indoors, but the lighting is perfect. When Guy wants a shadow, she gets it; when she wants no shadows, there are no shadows. A fragment of 1905 documentary footage gives the answer I suspected but found hard to credit without proof: In her immense studio are two large banks of lights, each about two stories high, each light positioned a little differently, with some pointing straight down onto reflectors that bounced the light back up and blanched any shadow Guy didn't desire. Such technique wouldn't become part of Hollywood's toolbox until circa 1920. (In the doc, by the way, she directs a sound film – in 1905. The technology was too bulky and unreliable

to be commercially viable, but her music hall "phonoscenes" in *Gaumont Treasures* work fine on their own terms and preserve a performance style that would otherwise be lost.)

In 1906 Alice Guy directed what, to my knowledge, was the longest picture yet attempted, "The Birth, the Life and the Death of Christ," clocking in at 33 minutes. Its studio shots feature complex sets, masterful compositions of lights and darks heightened and made fluid by the actors' costumes and movements, and are good enough to blend with her always-stunning exteriors. Employing dissolves and camera pans that wouldn't be common in America for a decade, the tale is told solemnly but without exaggerated acting. And Guy introduced -- not a close-up exactly, but the *concept* of close-up -- a shot devoted solely to Saint Veronica's reaction to her moment with Christ.

That same year, the very funny "Madame's Cravings" is shot entirely in exteriors but for, again, the close-up concept: Madame, a pregnant woman with weird cravings indeed, has the screen all to herself, against a gray-ish background, to demonstrate her delight at each satisfied craving. I'd argue Guy's head-and-shoulders shots here are the first close-ups employed narratively. Also in 1906, Guy's hilarious "The Drunken Mattress" accomplishes two foundational innovations: intercutting, an invention for which D.W. Griffith has received sole credit, and comedy that can only be seen on the screen – that is, a series of exteriors and special effects that spreads the comedy all over Paris with bits of business only the screen can convey, including some very Keystone-ish cops and a Mack Sennett-like chase involving many, many people. (Sennett always said he stole his best ideas from the French.)

I could go on and on about Guy in 1906 alone, detailing "The Cruel Mother," a serious look at child abuse; "The Truth About the Ape-Man," a comedy that advances intercutting and the close-up; or "The Consequences of Feminism," a send-up of gender roles. During her years at Gaumont, from 1896 to 1907, Alice Guy made hundreds of films. D.W. Griffith would direct his first picture in 1908.

Alice Guy was, yes, the first female director. More importantly, she is the first genius of the cinema.

Guy's importance is underscored by the most startling revelation of *Gaumont Treasures.* I've been involved in film criticism, on and off, for 35 years, but until now I never heard of Leonce Perret. In the opening credits of "La Mystere des roches de Kador" ("The Mystery of the Rocks of Kador") and *L'Efant de Paris* (*The Child of Paris*), I recognized Perret's art director, Robert-Jules Garnier – he learned his trade under Guy. Perret's cinematographer, Georges Specht, is a mystery; his birth and death dates aren't noted even in the usually thorough Internet Movie Database; but it is Georges Specht who brought Guy's camera style to full feature-length fruition.

After viewing these Perret films, it is clear that one oft-repeated sentence must be erased from film history. Wikipedia's version is: "Regardless of whether [D.W. Griffith] actually invented new techniques in film grammar, he seems to have been the first to understand how these techniques could be used to create an expressive language." No. Unless the work of another unknown turns up, the first director to master fully the feature-length motion picture idiom, blending the elements of visual grammar as we employ them still today, is Leonce Perret.

Perret's 43-minute "The Mystery of the Rocks of Kador" was released on Dec. 1, 1912, 15 months before Griffith's first feature, the 61-minute *Judith of Bethulia.* "Comparisons," Emerson said, "are odious"; in this case, they're embarrassing. Perret

wrote, directed, and performed in, "The Mystery" (another first for a feature). It is a gorgeously shot Hitchcockian tale that surprises not by plot but by its symmetry of story and technique, the naturalism of its acting, and a sense of flow, of completeness, absent from the jerky, overacted spectacle that is *Judith of Bethulia.*

The Child of Paris, also written by the director, runs almost 2 hours and was released in September, 1913, nearly a year and a half before Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation.* Griffith's early features wowed with spectacle. Perret accomplished the much more difficult task of engaging our attention through pure cinema: the grace, variety and pace of his scenes; the detail of Garnier's sets; Specht's glorious photography (his lighting often anticipates Josef von Sternberg's); the skills of Perret's actors – all blend flawlessly in a film of consummate class.

Cinema history as it's been commonly taught is just plain wrong.

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