

Her Image Fades as Her Voice Rises

Films selected by
Lis Rhodes &
Felicity Sparrow

Often During the Day Joanna Davis GB 1979 15mins

A House Divided Alice Guy USA 1913 13mins

The Smiling Madame Beudet Germaine Dulac France 1922 35mins

Light Reading Lis Rhodes GB 1978 20mins

An Arts Council Film Programme



Sitting with her at the table, talking, her hands poised over the typewriter. The words in our minds turning between description and analysis – to write the image, or to write about an image. This will be a subjective gathering of threads of meaning, drawing attention to the spaces between four films that are dense with connections and difference. Seen thus, the programme becomes a fiction in itself; a looking at – a listening to – the relationships between the film-makers – their stories – avoiding false isolation, the separations determined by history as it is written – as it has been read – to mean meanings other than HERS.

We shall try to make explicit the links and fractures between four films made by four women whose lives and work belong to different times and different places – different languages even – but whose voices are placed within similar constraints. We all experience these constraints but most women are allowed no time or space to reflect upon them.

“Daughter of a publisher, I had read widely and remembered a fair amount. I had done a bit of amateur theatricals and thought that one could probably do better. Arming myself with courage, I timidly proposed to Gaumont that I write one or two sketches and have them acted by friends. If anyone could have foreseen the course of development this would take, I would never have got this permission. My youth, my inexperience, my sex, all would have conspired against me . . .

However I obtained this permission, on the express condition that it didn't interfere with my secretarial duties.”¹

“ . . . The idea came from the experience of sharing a kitchen with two men. Through realising, over a period of time, specific things that they didn't notice, I was able to crystallise my own response to particular tasks, particular parts of this room . . . I discovered several areas (often very small) within the kitchen that I was very aware of becoming dirty and enjoyed – or rather was urged – to clean. I developed a special relationship to these ‘corners’; I enjoyed the materials that constituted them and felt the repetitive cycle of things becoming dirty – the way each part became dirty and the different methods of cleaning. I became more aware of this in myself as I realised that the men had no understanding for it. Why? Was it education? My conditioning as a woman? Was it to do with me in particular? Or is it just part of ‘women's nature? . . .’²

Traces made, traces removed; a woman is caught mid sentence often during the day. The traces of sound from the radio, as a newscaster's voice surfaces and sinks in a burble of music, remain peripheral, outside and obscured by the unnaturally foregrounded sounds of tea being poured and bread being cut repeatedly throughout the film. *Often During the Day* opens with a series of still images of a kitchen, photographs that have been delicately hand-tinted by the film-maker. A woman's voice is heard describing a particular kitchen space, through its geography – every minute detail of which she is familiar with – and through the various activities taking place within it. The room is referred to as the centre of the house and the voice describes the traces left by the users of the kitchen (the splatterings of food left on the floor round the saucer after the cat has finished eating – the little pieces of hair washed from a razor after a man has finished shaving). She reflects on the tasks of cleaning and repair, the ‘small unnecessary’ tasks, the caring for a space.

“When we first constructed the sink there was a gap between the enamel part and the wooden drawers that support it. The gap worried me because I saw water trickled through on to the things in the drawers. The others didn't notice, or didn't mind, and it took me several months to do anything about it.”³



Often During the Day



The Smiling Madame Beudet

The attention given to a domestic space that Joanna Davis speaks of seems to avoid a strict definition of housework – the unpaid servicing that that usually implies – and centres on her pleasure. It is a pleasure that is expressed in relation to certain surfaces and textures, “the way each part became dirty,” and the placings of things. A different pleasure – the satisfaction of a job being done – is described by another voice, a man’s, reading extracts from the testimonies of women’s reflections on housework as catalogued in *The Sociology of Housework*.⁴ This conflict – can pleasure be pleasing if that pleasure is seen as oppressive? – is expressed by the film-maker through images showing the continual violation of her feelings for the space. In the final shot of the film, a long continuous take, the tea is poured; the bread is cut; an arm reaches across a woman’s body to reach the butter. SHE refolds the paper carefully after he has used it. Their consumption leaves traces: a scattering of crumbs on the surface of the table, the stain of tealeaves on the draining board. Disturbed by the crumbs she interrupts her meal to wipe them up.

This sense of impingement is confirmed by the quotations from *The Sociology of Housework*, which rest within the film as uneasily as the news from Armagh and the song ‘Dancing in the City’ . . . The printed words emerge from a thin veil of tissue paper with an authority of which Joanna Davis is extremely wary. Perhaps it is to enforce this distance from her own experience that a man’s voice reads the passages, just as the women quoted are defined by the men they are married to: carpenter’s or lorry-driver’s wife. The implication is that the male voice is placed outside of the experience of the female film-maker, within the parameters of sociological research.

In *Often During the Day* the woman is not socially placed by a particular man. Thus the issues of sexual and economic control are recognised, rather than suffered, and the historical determinates that underlie her feelings of pleasure and anxiety in relationship to domestic tasks can be analysed.

It is here that one of the central issues connecting the films is raised and can be clearly seen in the different positioning of the women in *Often During the Day* and the two earlier films. For Mme Beudet it is not only the institution of marriage, but also the collusion of the catholic church in reinforcing that institution, which is questioned. In *A House Divided*, Alice Guy approaches the domestic relationship as a civil bargain – the external social control being secular rather than divine. The marital relationship of the couple is represented by the ‘house.’ The ‘divine’ is privatised as romantic love, and now forms the fragile foundations of the ‘house.’

The bourgeois home depicted in *A House Divided* has already developed the characteristics of the industrialised family; separate supposedly equal spheres of work, the woman within the home, the man outside. A similar division of work is apparent in the office between the husband and his secretary. Thus the women are established as financially dependent, and their work is primarily concerned with providing service for the husband. A misunderstanding, an assumption of mutual infidelity, shakes the foundation of the home – the house divides into silence. Communication between the wife and the husband is a series of notes – a nice use of inter-titles – carefully stored in a jar in the kitchen. The wife refuses to service the husband. The marriage bargain is broken and the humour in the film asserts itself. A ‘new legal agreement’ must be arranged. Only now can the wife reclaim her identity and independence; she deletes the words “your wife” at the end of a letter and signs her own name (albeit her name by marriage). By contrast the cheerful independence of the unmarried secretary is established early on – surely Alice Guy must have directed those office scenes with glee, remembering when she herself was secretary to Leon Gaumont.



Often During the Day



A House Divided

The film plays upon the women's independence within dependency, and the husband's apparent independence – though, left to himself, he is incapable of even deciding whether or not to wear a raincoat! However for Alice Guy, rationality overcomes doubt, the divided house can be restored to unity – the infidelities are no more than misunderstandings. The contract is re-established, romantic love can reassert itself. The yawning chasms of prejudice and oppression determining a woman's position within marriage – so accurately portrayed by Germaine Dulac ten years later – were not part of Alice Guy's pragmatic optimism and trust in 'equality.'

To Alice Guy, it was obvious that:
 "There is nothing connected with the staging of a motion picture that a woman cannot do as easily as a man, and there is no reason why she cannot completely master every technicality of the art. The technique of the drama has been mastered by so many women that it is considered as much her field as a man's and its adaptation to picture work in no way removes it from her sphere. The technique of motion picture photography, like the technique of the drama, is fitted to women's activities..."⁶

The tradition of narrative film that Alice Guy initiated in 1896 with her first film, *La Fee Aux Choux*, appears to be drawn from the theatre. She used sets and actors to represent visually the only form of cultural expression in which women were allowed to play a major part – the writing of fiction.

"Writing was a reputable and harmless occupation. The family peace was not broken by the scratching of a pen. No demand was made upon the family purse. For ten and sixpence one can buy paper enough to write all the plays of Shakespeare – if one has a mind that way..."⁵

Alice Guy's determination and optimism were shared by many women at the time in their fight for equal education, better working conditions and the vote. However, this energy was rapidly dissipated by the outbreak of war, the ensuing nationalism and economic depression. The old patterns began repeating themselves.

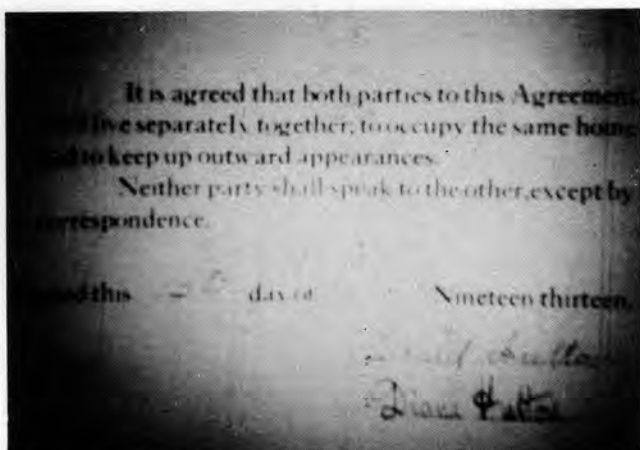
Her husband Herbert Blaché took over the production company in 1914. With him in control outside producers were brought in and she was forced out of the picture. She finally gave up going to production meetings because "... Herbert said I would have embarrassed the men who wanted to smoke their cigars and spit in peace while discussing business..."⁷

Imprisoned in Dependency or the Violence of Meaning

"The cinema can certainly tell a story, but you have to remember that the story is nothing. The story is surface. The seventh art, that of the screen, is depth rendered perceptible, the depth that lies beneath the surface; it is the musical ungraspable... Plot film or abstract film, the problem is the same. To touch the feelings through the sight and, as I've already said, to give predominance to the image... The image can be as complex as an orchestration since it may be composed of combined movements of expression and light."⁸

Six years before writing these words Germaine Dulac made *The Smiling Madame Beudet*. Its plot, the surface, is simple as a reviewer was to say sixty years later: "Madame Beudet is married to a bombastic idiot, refuses to go to the opera with him, dreams up the nearly perfect murder and, when it fails, gets away with it because of Monsieur Beudet's lack of imagination."⁹

The film's intensity, its visual impact and depth of feeling are achieved through an orchestration of emotive gestures and facial expressions. Often described as the first feminist film, we share Madame Beudet's (and Germaine Dulac's) point of view throughout – her 'voice,' although silent, can only be that of the first person singular as in *Often During the Day*.



A House Divided



Often During the Day

"In a quiet provincial town . . . Madame Beudet is isolated. . . behind the peaceful facades . . ." she is trapped.

Her gaze through the window is blocked by the view of the prison opposite; inwardly she sees the reflection of that institution in her wedding ring. Locked within the niceties of a middle class marriage she struggles to maintain her sanity. The interior space of her home is constantly reflective of Madame Beudet's mental restriction; her gestures and expressions, constantly juxtaposed with those of her husband, are reflective of her emotional suffocation. The placing of a vase of flowers becomes symbolic of conflicting sensibilities, the key to her piano the control of her means of expression. Her book of poetry provides a way for her to retreat into herself and her desires. Baudelaire, Debussy and the ghost-like apparition of a male tennis player stepping out from the pages of a magazine are her only cultural reference points. But even these are impinged upon by the distorted face of Monsieur Beudet. Escape is impossible. Outside, the institutions of justice and religion have sealed and sanctified her dependency. Inside "it was in this accumulation of other men's thoughts and experiences that she looked for affirmation of identity . . ." ¹⁰ She is excluded; even the running of the house is in her husband's hands; she is held accountable. Monsieur Beudet's obstructive and destructive presence occupies both her physical and mental space. With the loss of space she cannot act. In the absence of action she remains without response. She is shown looking at herself – alone with her own reflection – framed in a triple mirror.

In case we need more clues, Germaine Dulac shows the completeness of Madame Beudet's mental decapitation: as Monsieur Beudet tears the head off her ornamental doll, an inter-title reads "a doll is fragile . . . a bit like a woman. . .". And he puts the head in his pocket. A fine symbol of men's idea of femininity and how this can be manipulated and used against women – they can be handled, idolised and popped away . . . so the cigar smokers can spit in peace and continue to exclude women from the 'real' business and understanding of life.

Close-ups of Madame Beudet's face earlier in the film show her awareness of, and resignation to Monsieur Beudet's stupidity.

He thinks she knows nothing about Faust, that women have no minds of their own (which is probably true when their heads are forcibly removed). Her expression shows that she knows the story and recognises it as one of male dominance and female dependency. The bitterest moment of the film – the centre of the argument – is when he thinks she is suicidal. He is incapable of considering the possibility that she intended the bullet for him: "*How could I ever live without you?*" She is caught in *his* emotional dependency. She knows but cannot act. The ending portrayed in *A House Divided*, Germaine Dulac cannot accept. The happy conclusion reflected in the mirror, 'theatre,' to her, is a facade which the priest and Monsieur Beudet accept; the film ends with Madame Beudet's back to the camera while the two men greet each other and indicate their collusion and her exclusion.

"In the quiet streets, without horizon, under a low sky . . . united by habit."

The Smiling Madame Beudet ends where it begins, unsmilingly. The provincial town is the scene of her imprisonment; behind the facade of habit is the scene of her attempts to escape. But the escape, the analysis of her situation, remains private to her, voiced in her fantasies. She cannot change her situation however clearly she understands it.

"in her own voice she cried
the end cannot be confused with the end that ended
somewhere – but not here
not here at the beginning . . ." ¹¹

Light Reading could be picking up the thread of Madame Beudet's story, the voice could be hers after seeing herself on film sixty years later. She has in the meantime been granted the right to vote; film can now record her spoken words and we can hear them. As for her image . . . that has gone. Sixty years of film and television and advertising have much to answer for.



The Smiling Madame Beudet



Light Reading

"Who turned the light away
 the light away from her
 she will not be placed in darkness
 she will be present in darkness only to be apparent
 to appear without image
 to be heard unseen . . .
 her hands reach out
 she could only glimpse the shadow
 the faint reflection of the fading image
 stumbling on the traces of her knowing
 sinking in the ruts of her experience
 slipping amongst the shadows of her story
 she couldn't reach herself . . ."12

The film begins in darkness as a woman's voice is heard over a black screen. "She" is spoken of as multiple subject – third person singular and plural. Her voice continues until images appear on the screen and then is silent. In the final section of the film she begins again, looking at the images as these are moved and re-placed, describing the piecing together of the film as she tries to piece together the tangle of strands of her story.

The voice is questioning, searching. She will act. But how? Act against what? The bloodstained bed suggests a crime . . . Could it be *his* blood – was that the action denied to Madame Beudet? No answers are given, after the torrent of words at the beginning all the film offers are closed images and more questions . . . Is it even blood on the bed, what fracture is there between seeing and certainty? Could it be *her* blood – rape/murder of the mind, of the body, of both? Her image has gone. If there has been a crime, 'she' might still be victim . . . How can a crime of such complexity and continuity, be 'solved'? The voice searches for clues, sifting through them, reading and re-reading until the words and letters (in themselves harmless enough) loom up night-marishly, no longer hung on the structure of language.

"the violence of sequence tears at the threads of her thoughts
 the folds of light fade into deep shadows
 the sense of her dreams is disturbed by the presence
 of a past not past
 a past that holds her with fingers sharpened on logic
 nails hardened with rationality
 cutting the flow of her thoughts
 forcing her back within herself
 damned by the rattle of words
 words already sentenced
 imprisoned in meaning . . ."13

The clues suggest it is language that has trapped her, meanings that have excluded her and a past that has been constructed to control her. Do we have to delve into history and reappropriate it? Perhaps there are other ways, like examining the scene of the crime as we're told in detective fiction. But magnifying the stain on the bed only reveals a blur, measured with a ruler, but that doesn't add up to much. She's forced back within herself and her own thoughts; she begins again cautiously: "she watched herself being looked at she looked at herself being watched but she could not perceive herself as the subject of the sentence . . ."14

Madame Beudet's light reading can neither provide escape nor reflect her own thoughts and desires. In *Light Reading*, Lis Rhodes recognises that dead-end. She searches for other clues and other means of finding her own reflection. But she seems to be framed everywhere she looks: the cosmetic mirror gives her back only part of her image, photographing herself in a mirror gives her back another. There are fragmented images, multiple images and shadowy photographs but they remain enigmatic and implacable as the stain on the bed. The images (snapshots of a past) are torn up and rearranged leaving gaps which she tries to measure with letters and figures – fragments.

Where do we begin? There is the past, always, which we can re-read, re-frame, just as we can try and re-place Alice Guy and Germaine Dulac. But it's not just a question of balancing out the injustices: "There is nothing connected with the staging of



Light Reading



The Smiling Madame Beudet

a motion picture that a woman cannot do as easily as a man," it goes deeper than these crimes of exclusion and unequal opportunities.

"She stopped the action . . ."

Gertrude Stein said
 "And now she wrote
 and now mountains do not cloud over
 let us wash our hair and stare
 stare at mountains . . ."15

Her words, quoted, are like a light refrain running through the threads of meaning in *Light Reading's* monologue; and the thought of her there, so solidly, in the past and now . . .

Light Reading ends with no single solution. But there is a beginning. Of that she is positive. She will not be looked at but listened to:

"she begins to re-read aloud"

She is not alone, in speech, she can begin to find reflections of herself outside of herself. Nobody can say anything unless someone is listening. And we can't act without response . . .

"I read to you and you read to me and we both read intently. And I waited for you and you waited for me and we both waited attentively. I find knitting to be a continuous occupation and I am full of gratitude because I realise how much I am indebted to the hands that wield the needles."16

Lis do you think we've written what we meant to write?
 I mean is what we've written *fiction*?

Felicity We've shifted the 'facts' . . . but they needed shifting
 —like my carpet they gather dust—and that begins
 to obscure the patterns that make facts mean . . .

Lis Arguing all the way round to here . . . sitting with
 her at the table—still talking—
 We wrote this together—she wrote on light reading—
 —and we both wrote on the other three.

Notes

- 1 *Autobiographie d'une Pionnière du Cinema* by Alice Guy, Denoel/Gonthier, Paris 1976. Alice Guy is referring to her request to Gaumont to make her first film after having seen the Lumière Brothers' films documenting trains coming into stations, military parades etc. Gaumont's firm at the time was primarily concerned with the manufacture of cameras and projectors, but with the success of this first fiction film readily allowed his secretary to continue her directorial work. She became head of Productions for Gaumont until her departure for the USA in 1907 and marriage to Herbert Blaché. In Fort Lee, New Jersey, she founded her own production company, Solax, which was successful until its folding in 1914. *A House Divided* was a Solax production and is one of half a dozen of her short films to have been preserved—none of her features have survived despite their popularity at the time. She returned to France (divorced) in 1923 where she remained until her death in 1968.
- 2 Joanna Davis (from a conversation with Lis Rhodes & Felicity Sparrow (1978).
- 3 from *Often During the Day*.
- 4 *The Sociology of Housework* by Ann Oakely, published by Martin Robertson London 1974.
- 5 Virginia Woolf. Essay from 'Professions for Women' published in *Death of the Moth*. Reprinted in *Virginia Woolf. Women and Writing*, the Women's Press, London 1979.
- 6 *A Woman's Place in Photoplay Productions* by Alice Guy, from the *Moving Picture World*, July 11, 1914.
- 7 *Autobiographie d'une Pionniere du Cinema* by Alice Guy.
- 8 'Visual and Anti-Visual Films' by Germaine Dulac from *Le Rouge et Le Noir* July 1928. Reprinted in *The Avant-Garde Film* Ed. P. Adams Sitney, New York University Press 1978.
- 9 Helen MacKintosh from *City Limits* 16.4.82.
- 10 *Innocent Blood* P. D. James, Sphere Books, London 1981.
- 11 From *Light Reading*.
- 12 IBID.
- 13 IBID.
- 14 IBID.
- 15 'Sonatina Followed by Another' Gertrude Stein. The entire poem is re-printed in *'Bee Time Vine'*, Yale University Press 1953.
- 16 'Sonatina Followed by Another' Gertrude Stein.



Light Reading



A House Divided



Above: a production still from *La Fee aux Choux*, 1896,
Alice Guy is in the middle

Cover: *The Smiling Madame Beudet*, 1922, Germaine Dulac

Notes by Lis Rhodes and Felicity Sparrow

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