by VICTORIA DUCKETT

The Sixth International Women and the Silent Screen Conference held in Bologna this year was an important event that brought scholars, students, and archivists together from around the globe in order to examine the contribution of women to the early film industry. As a scholar who was part of the initial Utrecht conference in 1999, I was made aware of how much our understanding of gender, feminism, and film history has changed in little more than a decade. The conference also highlighted the need for generations to continue an ongoing dialogue, so that the work that has already been undertaken need not be repeated—even if repeated a little "differently"—all over again. I still remember clearly my own surprise at Utrecht; trained in queer theory, I believed that questions of performativity and difference had moved me far from Film Studies’ feminist roots. I was therefore quite shocked when speakers explained the ongoing relevance of feminism to the interpretation of film history. I might not have spoken German or Dutch, and I certainly did not know the journals and activities they were mentioning, but I finally understood that my own work in the archives made me part of an ongoing feminist movement.

We are now too large a group to hold intimate discussions such as these. Indeed, in Bologna three concurrent panels ran for roughly three days. Joined to this were the two evening screenings in the Lumiere Cinema, opening and closing plenary sessions, and opening and closing keynote addresses. What struck me throughout the conference was not just the physical size and breadth of our undertaking, but the diversity of the scholarship presented: Clara Bow in *It* (Clarence G. Badger, 1927) was reexamined, for example, within the context of her reception in
Finnish culture; the 1911 performances of Asta Nielsen were charted so that we could see precisely how the changed aesthetics of Monopofilm advertising coincided with the localized spread of her fame; and additional topics such as women of Chinese cinema, Egyptian cinema of the 1920s, and the relationship between prisons and film were all addressed. On the archival front, fan scrapbooks were considered as a source for the reading and writing of women's film history, while amateur travel films were used as documents highlighting not only the voyages and skills of female travelers but also the shifting and changing ways that global gender could be imagined and seen.

In all of these forums, women's history was charted by men as well as by women, and graduate students joined lecturers, professors, and archivists in debate and discussion. There was therefore no sense of women's history being an exclusionary disciplinary intervention tied to a specific theory or methodology. Nor was there evidence of traditional academic hierarchies being held in place. What I liked about this was the genuine involvement it enabled: Sofia Bull spoke alongside Astrid Soderbergh Widding in the plenary session dedicated to the presentation of the book they had published from the 2008 conference proceedings in Stockholm, while MA student Aimee Dixon spoke in the "New Interrogations, New Archives" plenary session organized by her professor, Jane Gaines.¹

What struck me the most about these more "youthful" interventions were the very different directions that women's film history seems to be taking today. Whereas the conference seems committed to expanding work on women outside Europe and America, it also seems that the push to acknowledge the international breadth of women's work in the nascent film industry has some students losing sight of gender altogether. Dixon, for example, actually removed gender as a category from her discussion, explaining that her interest was instead the career choices that African Americans made in the evolving US film industry. Other scholars—and this was particularly noticeable in a comment from the floor—considered gender a strategic alliance which helped in the development of an institutional career. Most contributors seemed to speak from somewhere between these two poles: they were individuals who wanted to properly contextualize and examine women's film history because they were genuinely excited by the materials they were unearthing. There was a palpable sense, then, that while we might be motivated by gender and history, we were hardly writing the same histories. And although some of our interests overlapped—Lois Weber, Asta Nielsen, the suffragettes, the new woman, comedy, and questions concerning the archive, nation, performance, and sound were all clearly meeting points—there was also much research that fell outside of these areas. I would argue that it is actually the mid-1910s that we all share, and that this "transitional" period provides us all with a moment—even if fleeting—of historical and theoretical convergence.

Because of this sense of being held within a rough temporal framework which has split into many divergent microhistories, I welcomed Christine Gledhill's and Heide Schlipmann's keynote addresses. Their studies of specific national cinemas within well-defined, transitional moments introduced and concluded the conference. In practical terms, these two keynotes focused on the open-endedness of the transitional

period of early cinema in order to theoretically (and paradoxically) hold our work "in
place." Because critical theory was largely absent from panel presentations, and there
was a general silence about historiographic method, these presentations were vital. In-
deed, both Gledhill and Schlipmann argued that gender (and feminism in particular)
is necessarily implicated in our reading of film history and that our task as historians
of women's film history is to challenge the meaning and scope of transitional cinema.
If, for example, we conceive transitional cinema not as the space between the cinema
of attractions and the fully developed cinema of narrative integration (the traditional
position) but instead as a paradigmatic space specifically suited to the rethinking of
film, then we might replace our institutional homelessness with a critical method and
purpose. As Gledhill observed, British films in the 1920s did not duplicate the physical
freedoms of "the new woman" so prevalent in American films of the 1910s. Women
might very well have been commodities, but they were also sites of cultural resistance,
physical reminders of the fact that changes, shifts, and developments ("modernity," if
you like) were not uniformly experienced.

Schlipmann later returned to this idea, arguing that while modernity has long been
defined in terms of money, power, and institutional interests, we might instead see this
c moment as a transitional period in which the paradigm of the "play" comes to the
fore. Schlipmann joined the more obvious discussion of the screen actress performing
in the photoplay to a discussion of the play which women enjoyed in the Victorian
home-women playing childhood-as well as perceptual play (meaning the opening
up of film's possible meanings once it becomes an object of vision). Film was, she
suggested, playfully and publicly female. It might very well represent a "transitional"
era, but this was one marked more by women's public emancipation than by shifts
in industrial development. Here, Gledhill's turn to British film, with its inflection on
class, can be seen to have anticipated some of Schlipmann's arguments. Indeed, the
clip Gledhill screened from *Hindlewakes* (Maurice Elvey, 1927) reenacted the Victorian
woman "playing" within her home.

I am not sure how many other participants interpreted Gledhill's and Schlip-
mann's contributions in tandem. I also do not know whether other audience members
appreciated just how cleverly they both enabled women's film history to embrace the
theoretical notion of play without losing sight of empirical film history. In conferences
such as these-and particularly in Bologna, where the sun was shining, our hosts were
relaxed, and the mood was so convivial-it was easy to allow presentations to start
or end late, which meant that discussion and debate often had to be folded before
they properly began. Coffee breaks, lunches around a rich buffet, and hastily eaten
dinners therefore usually provided the forum for ongoing conversation. Luckily, this
meant that Gledhill, Schlipmann, and a host of other scholars and archivists who
have been active since the 1970s and early 1980s were present and available to chat
with us. Richard Abel, Kay Armatage, Jane Gaines, Karola Gramann, David Mayer,
and Virginia Wright Wexman, for example, were all there to support screenings and
discussion. I found the efforts they invested in this conference quite remarkable. To my
mind, Women and the Silent Screen is one of those rare forums in which experienced
scholars mentor students who are not from their home institutions, and where intel-
lectual culture is still envisioned as a shared, political undertaking.
I cannot talk about Women and the Silent Screen VI without mentioning its archivists and programmers. For many of us, these were familiar faces: Annette Forster (who is also one of the founding members of the 1999 conference and a historian in her own right), Mariann Lewinsky, Bryony Dixon of the British Film Institute, Elif Rongen-Kaynakci of the Eye Film Instituut Nederland, and Kim Tomadjoglou of the Library of Congress. These women helped put together the remarkable screenings we watched each evening in the Lumiere. They also moderated panels, participated in plenary sessions, gave presentations, and spoke out from the floor. I love their passion and commitment to the forum, the focus they give the films, and their obvious awareness of the symbiotic relationship between the film archive and academic scholarship. As Lewinsky said in her brilliant introduction to the fantastic series she began last year with the Cineteca di Bologna, "Cento anni fa" (One Hundred Years Ago), programming is its own intellectual enterprise. While scholars might pen chapters, she finds films. Hearing Lewinsky talk, I finally realized that DVDs are not simply commercial enterprises driven by the dollar, but can also be collaborative endeavors driven by women's altruistic desire to make us see. I would have liked to hear more from these women who work in the archives and libraries, not just because they had intelligent things to say but because even their own contribution to our history has yet to be properly mapped.

Bologna was host not just to Women and the Silent Screen but also to the Cinema Ritrovato festival, which opened on the last day of the conference. The Lumiere Cinema therefore moved directly from our screenings to the program organized for the festival (see Hayden Guest's report in this issue). Archivists and scholars who were present for both events were therefore rushing crazily around by Saturday afternoon, trying to negotiate their commitment to both forums. I thought this confusion was wonderful, since it brought to the fore the fact that a conference held on alternate years about women and the silent screen had been offered as a prelude to a respected and popular film festival. Our conference directors-Monica Dall'Asta and Cristina Jandelli-therefore deserve a special congratulations for the way they timed and organized the event, and also for opening the conference in such a generous and inclusive manner. Rather than speak only to the history of our conference, Dall'Asta and Jandelli situated our research within the broader political climate of contemporary Italy. As GianLuca Farinelli (Director of the Cineteca di Bologna) explained in his opening comments, the national budget for film had been cut the previous day. In such circumstances, women's film history was welcomed as tangible proof of the industry's continued relevance. I actually liked this idea: we might not be lost in those archives, after all, but visible proof of a necessary presence.