

Women's Writing and British Female Film Culture in the Silent Era

Submitted by Lisa Rose Stead to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'LRS', written over a horizontal line.

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Abstract

This thesis explores women's writing and its place in the formation of female film culture in the British silent cinema era. The project focuses upon women's literary engagement with silent cinema as generative of a female film culture, looking at materials such as fan letters, fan magazines, popular novels, short story papers, novelizations, critical journals and newspaper criticism.

Exploring this diverse range of women's cinema writing, the thesis seeks to make an original contribution to feminist film historiography. Focusing upon the mediations between different kinds of women's cinema writing, the thesis poses key questions about how the feminist film historian weights original sources in the reclamation of silent female film culture, relative to the varying degrees of cultural authority with which different women commentated upon, reflected upon, and creatively responded to film culture.

The thesis moves away from conceptualization of cinema audiences and reception practices based upon textual readings. Instead, the thesis focuses upon evidence of women's original accounts of their cinemagoing practices (fan letters) and their critical (newspaper and journal criticism) and creative (fiction writers) responses to cinema's place in women's everyday lives. Balancing original archival research with multiple overarching methodological frameworks—drawing upon fan theory, feminist reception theory, audience studies, social history and cultural studies—the thesis is

attentive to the diversity of women's experiences of cinema culture, and the literary conduits through which they channeled these experiences.

Shifting the recent focus in feminist silent film historiography away from the reclamation of lost filmmaking female pioneers and towards lost female audiences, the thesis thus constructs a nationally specific account of British women's silent era cinema culture.

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