The photoplay or the pickaxe: extras, gender, and labour in early Hollywood

Denise McKenna

When he published his history of the unionization of Hollywood in 1941, Murray Ross was struck by the “general belief that extra work is a feminine occupation”, despite the greater number of men working as extras. The identification of women with extra work traces back to the early years of the film industry, with the “extra girl” emerging as a distinct type in the 1910s. Public fascination with the young women who sought fame and fortune in motion pictures resonated with the studio system’s growing reputation as a fantastical space that transformed dreams into reality. At the same time, the intense interest in the extra girl could raise awkward questions about studio culture and screen labour: What happened to these young women in their quixotic quest for fame? How were they treated in the studios? And what happened if they failed? A powerful combination of prurient speculation and social anxiety greeted the apparent onslaught of movie-struck girls who descended on Los Angeles in ever-increasing numbers.

But the lure of motion picture work was never limited to women. Extra work’s appeal to men and women from all walks of life was often celebrated in early accounts of the film industry in Los Angeles, and by the 1920s many more men worked as extras than women. Citing data from the Central Casting Bureau, Ross notes that between 1926 and 1941 the number of men employed as extras was nearly double the number of women. While there is no corresponding source of data for the 1910s, a snippet of information from Mack Sennett’s payroll sheet shows that twice as many men as women were employed by Keystone over a three month period in 1917. Despite evidence that film work attracted men in great numbers, the male extra has been overshadowed by the image of young women thronging the studio gates for a chance to break into the movies.

The ascendance of the extra girl was made possible by several factors: the developing connection between the motion picture and its female audience; public interest in the plight of working women; gendered associations with non-skilled labour; and recurring scandals that situated the female extra at the heart of decadent studio practices. Shelley Stamp suggests that the intense focus on the would-be actresses arriving in Los Angeles revealed deep anxieties about women’s economic and sexual independence during the 1910s, and at the same time obscured the substantive contributions that women made to the film industry in many different areas.

The fantasy of a process by which anyone could break into the hierarchy of silent screen acting was fostered by the necessary anonymity of the on-screen extra, whose main purpose was to provide background for a scene. The promise of fame underscored the success stories of famous film stars who began their careers as extras, undermining the cautionary tales that warned of the perils of motion.

Denise McKenna received her doctorate from the Cinema Studies Department at New York University and currently teaches at the University of California, San Diego. Her dissertation is called The City That Made the Pictures Move: Gender, Labor, and the Film Industry in Los Angeles, 1908–1917.

Email: dmckenna@ucsd.edu
picture work. These tales were most often directed at women, and were often couched as warnings to the movie-struck girl that the on-screen fantasy did not necessarily translate to real life. Yet these warnings about the film industry existed in tension with a wealth of material that celebrated the growing film world. As Stamp has argued, appealing to women was central to the film industry’s drive for cultural legitimacy during this period — although expanding female patronage posed certain challenges and exposed a contradictory understanding of femininity. For instance, attempts to lure the movie-struck girl into the theater in order to bolster cinema’s social and economic standing often had less to do with moral uplift than with the appeal of adventure serials, “white slave” films, and other subject matter not considered traditionally “ladylike”. In addition to courting a female audience in the theater, women were often the primary focus of attention in stories about the film industry, which ranged from the latest scandals and behind-the-scenes exposés to more sedate topics such as skin-care and fashion advice. This rich and wide-ranging discursive field consistently reinforced the association of women with the motion picture. Like the movie-struck girl, the extra girl literalized the association between the motion pictures and an expanding female fan base, but the extra girl narrative takes her to the studio gates. Both “girls” were bound up with an emerging mythology of moviemaking’s powerful appeal to women; but while the movie-struck girl was a national phenomenon, the extra girl was a character produced in and by the emerging studio system in Los Angeles.

**Movie madness and the popularity of extra work**

By the mid-teens, the extra girl was already established as a type — a character inspired by her love of movies, her confidence that she is as pretty as Mary Pickford, or the desire for an easy life — who travels to Los Angeles to break into motion pictures. After her arrival, however, the extra girl narrative moved in a more sinister direction. Local newspapers detailed charges against directors and managers who took advantage of screen hopefuls, recasting the extra girl as the latest incarnation of the fallen woman.

At the end of the decade, Grace Kingsley, entertainment staff writer for the *Los Angeles Times* and early observer of the film industry in Los Angeles, offered an antidote to the negative associations between women and extra work in a series of articles that followed the behind-the-scenes adventures of “Ella, the Extra Girl”. Reportedly based on real interviews, Kingsley’s series offered a glimpse into the everyday life of the studio — on the one hand deflating the spectacle of studio life with Ella’s homespun wisdom and on the other reinforcing the variety and glamour of film work. As a character, Ella plays against the extra girl type: she is respectfully married and down-to-earth, enjoys her work as an extra, and is successful because she is realistic about studio life. Most importantly, she consistently downplays any desire to be “discovered”, one of the central tropes of the contemporary extra girl narrative. Although she moves up through the ranks of extras, Ella’s sense of achievement is more profoundly tied to her husband’s successful transition from delivery man to working actor.

These “interviews” with Ella reinforce the connection between extra work and women’s work. At the same time, they rewrite the image of the delusional and transient extra girl into a character who reconciles domestic responsibilities with a satisfying work life. However, the salacious association between women and screen work was dramatically highlighted in the early 1920s, most famously in the scandal surrounding “Fatty” Arbuckle’s trial for the death of Virginia Rappe, an actress and model whose fate became a cautionary tale for the moral hazards of working in Hollywood. Heidi Kenaga traces the impact the Arbuckle scandal had on the treatment of female extras through the expansion of the Hollywood Studio Club and the organization of the Central Casting Bureau, established to alleviate the exploitation of extras. Earlier efforts to address the problems associated with female extras had been more haphazard. The Hollywood Studio Club opened in 1916 as a resource for women arriving in Los Angeles looking to break into the movies. But as Kenaga argues, expanding the Hollywood Studio Club in the mid 1920s provided more than just a “redemptive space” for the women it housed; it was another attempt to transform the image of the exploited extra girl into a respectable “studio girl”. More importantly, updating the Studio Club helped the industry retool its own image into that of a “benevolent” employer.

The shift of the motion picture industry to Los Angeles in the early 1910s, and the growth of permanent studios in the area, coincided with the public’s increasing fascination with all things film-related, giving the city and the film industry a joint interest in
making studio life appear respectable and transparent. The public’s understanding of the film extra consolidated around the figure of a hopeful young woman, with attention focusing primarily on the sexual economy of the growing studio system. The stars, the directors, and even the films themselves may have gained social standing as the decade progressed, but the extra girl eluded respectability.

Local newspapers and magazines provide some insight into the way that film work was characterized and how attitudes towards such work changed during the 1910s. For instance, in 1911 per diem film work was seen as a benefit to actors who were tired of stage life and wanted to settle down permanently to live healthier and easier lives in California. Aside from the physical benefits, these performers were reportedly very well paid at a rate of $3 a day (plus lunch), with the possibility of $5 if they received a minor role. Such generous pay could be seen as a deliberate lure to entice actors to leave the relative security of the theatrical hub of New York and risk the trip to Los Angeles. The growing presence of actors and extras in Los Angeles proved to be both a source of concern and celebration in a city caught between maintaining its association with its romanticized Hispanic past and cultivating a more modern identity. Actors and extras became part of the city’s colorful backdrop in booster newspapers and journals, such as the Los Angeles Times and Sunset Magazine, which boasted about the film industry as another tourist attraction in Southern California.

Amazed by the sweeping appeal of motion pictures, Grace Kingsley observed in 1914 that “movie madness” drew extra applicants from the “very air and earth”, and not just the pool of resting stage veterans. Even more remarkable to Kingsley than the numbers of people looking for extra work were the types of people applying to the studios.

There is one wealthy old man who insists he could be the greatest moving picture character man in the business if they’d give him a chance; wealthy society women come in their limousines and leave their names, and sometimes they are hired for the sake of their clothes; bank clerks, law students, stenographers, doctors, ‘everybody’s doin’ it.’’ Then there are the freaks, dwarfs, hunchbacks, every sort of deformed person, willing to trade on their misfortunes this way. There are a great many professional people of the stage who come from the East for their health [and] a minister and a teacher, both of whom have worked in the Lasky pictures because of their truth to type.

Kingsley’s somewhat bemused attitude to—
ward movie applicants reveals a certain discomfort with cinema’s democratic appeal, although it is still more generous than other accounts of film’s phenomenal appeal. Indeed, Kingsley produced her list of “unbelievable” applicants to counter the prevailing assumption that only “bums” and “lazy people” were drawn to the film industry. The idea that extra work paid $3 a day, which had circulated in early reports designed to appeal to theater actors as well as foster the economic respectability of film work in Los Angeles, had been established in relation to stock players with theatrical training. However, it was common practice from the earliest days of production in Los Angeles to pull “types” off the street for use as background characters. Lining up at the studio gates for a position, although slightly more systematic, still affirmed the happenstance nature of the selection process based on appearance, and no doubt shaped the perception that extra work was not only a side-job for actors but also a legitimate entry point for aspiring novices.

Extra work’s appeal to the masses inspired occasional quasi-anthropological explorations into Los Angeles’s ever-expanding film factories. In 1913, an article in the Los Angeles Times described the mixed crowd of day workers that appeared every day outside the studio gates. The applicants were sorted into categories that ranged from ambitious, career-minded young men to working class refugees, and from failed chorus girls to the down-and-out. While acknowledging that different “types” had a certain screen use-value and intimating that extra work drew numerous applicants from the working classes, the article also suggests that the qualities of the applicants can be more subtly defined by gender. Serious young men who are humble enough to start at the bottom as “Roman soldiers” are characterized as professional and allowed a reasonable chance for success. Former “chorus girls” with only a few weeks experience, however, who “think they should be able to step into motion pictures and play leads from the start”, are criticized for over-inflated ambition. Singling out former chorus girls also marks female applicants in a sexualized way. As the cultural prototype of the “gold digger”, chorus girls were associated with avaricious licentiousness and hedonism. Even more damning to the chorus girl’s reputation were the prostitutes who worked the streets around the theater district in New York and who often claimed to be unemployed chorus girls. Already morally suspect for trading on their youth and beauty, their association with sexual display on stage and the imagined excesses of their lives offstage combined to create a figure that was both an erotic object and social problem. The notion that former chorus girls were lining up at the studio gates aligned other female applicants with the most socially disreputable members of the theatrical world. By way of contrast, those young men who found positions in the studio as “Roman soldiers” were not only classified as more than mere “spear bearers” (theatrical nomenclature for extras) but also aligned with more dignified historical traditions than those associated with the chorus girl.

At the same time that local newspapers were making sense out of studio culture and the growing ranks of film workers in Los Angeles, “How to Make It” articles emerged as a distinct genre in entertainment reporting. The Motion Picture Story Magazine ran a regular interview column called “Chats with Players” in the mid-teens, and later added the regular feature “How I Became a Photoplayer.” Not only satisfying the public’s interest in the stars’ personalities and lifestyles, but also mapping various trajectories for success, suggestions for “how to make it” were as varied as the publications that printed them. While the focus tended to be on women, male stars and their success stories were popular subjects as well. In such interviews actors often emphasized their training and commitment to hard work, and being an extra often figured as a direct path from anonymity to fame for men and women alike. Although most of these interviews stressed the players’ professional stage background, occasionally they related the happenstance manner of their start in motion pictures. In these cases the actor’s “discovery” often depended on how well their appearance conformed to a type, or to the possession of a certain skill, like the ability to ride a horse. Wallace Reid, for instance, credited his career to “curiosity and an ability to ride a horse. Wallace Reid, for instance, credited his career to “curiosity and an ability to ride a horse. Wallace Reid, for instance, credited his career to “curiosity and an ability to ride a horse.”

Numerous cartoons poked fun at what was really required of Photoplayers – not talent, but a fearless disregard for personal safety. In an article with the promising title, “How Famous Film Stars Have Been Discovered”, Grace Kingsley claimed that such popular players as Mae Marsh, Mary Pickford, Arthur Johnson, Henry Walthall, Owen Moore, Florence Lawrence, Barry O’Neil and the Gish sisters all first appeared as extras. Details about how individual stars started may have been somewhat idiosyncratic, but one theme that emerged in the "how
to make it” articles was the importance of working under a director who is able to “discover” the extra’s “undreamed of talents”.

This discovery narrative, while not excluding male aspirants, connected more profoundly with the extra girl because it echoed the already popular myth of Pygmalion and Galatea, retold in numerous forms throughout the nineteenth century. Although the Pygmalion myth’s narrative structure was reworked and reformulated, what remained constant was the trope of discovery in which a man with vision transforms a young woman into something more beautiful, more talented, or more desirable than she was before. One of the last nineteenth century incarnations of this narrative was George du Maurier’s wildly popular 1894 novel *Trilby*, in which artist’s model Trilby O’Farrell is discovered by the evil mesmerist Svengali, and under his spell becomes a theatrical sensation. As a precursor to the extra girl phenomenon, *Trilby* established the narrative parameters for the public’s understanding of female performers whose success was the product of their manager’s (or director’s) talent and vision. By the teens, the discovery narrative invoked in both *Pygmalion* and *Trilby* was an already gendered trope, one that was reanimated in the stories of extras who became motion picture stars. Beyond offering a cultural touchstone for describing the artistic process, the discovery narrative also provided a framework for understanding the phenomenon of young women leaving home to look for work in motion pictures. Like Galatea molded out of stone or the pliant Trilby, the extra girl was a character defined by her relationship to the creative forces that were forging the film industry, and emerged as a seductive reminder of the power of motion pictures to pull talent out of an anonymous crowd and give it a name.

**Wages, women, and the working class**

Waiting – to get a job, to begin a scene, or simply to be discovered – was one of the defining characteristics of extra work and fueled the popular impression that extra work was easy. This ease was confirmed by the very name “extra”, which replaced the theatrical terminology of “supernumerary” or “spear bearer”, and which associated extra work with the superfluous or unnecessary. Anecdotal evidence based on the types of stories that circulated in newspapers and magazines suggests that young women sensed the possibility of an easier life working in motion pictures; however, there is evidence that men also preferred screen work to manual labour. In 1915, Los Angeles’s Municipal Employment Bureau reported that out of 700 men who applied for a job, only thirty-two stated a preference for steady work while the rest preferred the occasional spot with a motion picture company. The Employment Bureau had been established at the end of 1913 to help the city cope with a rising unemployment crisis brought on...
by a nationwide recession. The Employment Bureau was also supposed to help with recurring peaks in seasonal unemployment, a feature of California’s economy where agricultural and fishing industries usually laid off employees over the winter months. Displaced workers would often migrate to cities looking for temporary employment, but over the winter of 1913–14 California was hit unusually hard. In Los Angeles, estimates as to how many people were unemployed varied widely, depending on the source: the labour friendly Citizen claimed that unemployment was at 15,000 in August, while the more sensational Record suggested that 20,000 men and 10,000 women were seeking work. By the end of 1914, the Central Labor Council (CLC) asserted that 35,000 were unemployed, although the perennially conservative Los Angeles Times maintained that only about 3000 men with families were in difficulty and that another 2,000 were the usual winter unemployed.

As part of their free job placement service, in 1915 the Employment Bureau took orders from local motion picture managers for “mobs”. Each man was paid $1 a day, plus dinner and transport expenses. Some of these men may have been supplied from one of the work camps established throughout the city to cope with the influx of unemployed men. Seasonal transients in particular may have been attracted by the benefits of wages rather than the barter system of labour for goods offered by the city. Compared to city beautification projects, which required planting trees or breaking rocks for road work – jobs routinely assigned to unemployed men – the appeal of working as a film extra was understandable even at only $1 a day. Such a wage, however, did not meet subsistence standards according to the CLC, which had been established by the City Council in 1913 to investigate labour conditions in Los Angeles. Based on their own research, the CLC set the subsistence wage at $2 a day, $4 a day for a “breadwinner” with one dependent. The CLC found that the lowest wages were earned in canneries, laundries, department stores, clothing factories, dry goods stores, and restaurants, although jobs identified with women were the poorest paying. The CLC reported that 70% of laundry workers and 64% of department store employees made less than $2 a day. Experienced sales women could expect to make $8 a week (for a 6 day/8 hour a day work week), while clerks made as little as $5 a week. Male dominated occupations that were also as poorly paid. In 1910, drivers for local breweries made only $3 a week, while the many Mexicans who worked on street railways could expect to make only $1 a day. Upholsterers and carpenters were amongst the poorest paid skilled labourers and made around $3.50 a day, although this was still a better wage than found in dry goods and department stores. For many workers already living precariously at or below subsistence standards, work as a film extra may have appeared as a reasonable option, a legitimate alternative to much more physically demanding occupations.

There were, however, strings attached to find-
ing film extra work through the Employment Bureau. If the applicant stated his preference for motion picture work over "steady jobs, which include real labour", he was kept on the rolls for only that kind of employment. The Employment Bureau's punitive reduction in options was designed to dissuade "able bodied men [from] rejecting legitimate labour", relegating film work to the margins of acceptable work for men. This attempt to direct the applicant's options did not seem to have any effect, and movie work was so popular that no jobs were cancelled in 1916. If some commentators were uncomfortable with "extra girls" who fantasized about becoming stars, they were equally flummoxed by working-class men who preferred extra work to more "legitimate" occupations. 

Ambivalence toward extra work can be traced in responses to extra work's appeal to the working classes, and between 1911 and 1916 extra work's reputation shifted considerably. Compared to the young men whose desire to work as Roman soldiers was an acceptable start to a career, the men from the Employment Bureau were seen as "idle", and so anxious and unruly that they "crowd and jostle" for only a day or two of work. These working-class men are not characterized as looking for a career but for an easy break from "legitimate" or real work, suggesting how class-based bias shaped attitudes toward extras, and film work in general. Their interest in extra work was disdainfully attributed to a "histrionic" streak, effectively feminizing these men from the Employment Bureau with the delusional aspirations of extra girls who dreamed of an easier life.

Extra work, because of its heterogeneous appeal and the practical need to cast both men and women, effectively collapsed the gendered division of labour that most often clearly defined other occupations. Despite the numbers of men who worked as extras, as a type of labour it was more evocatively linked with women through the movie-struck girl who dreamed of being discovered, but also because of the nature of extra work, which required no special training and was most often temporary. The notion that women only worked on a temporary basis until they got married and had children had long informed the way women's work was perceived, profoundly impacting workplace attitudes towards "female" occupations that justified relegating women to positions that were temporary or easily replaceable. The transience of extra work for men and women alike was already linked to the impermanence that characterized women's labour in general.

The connection between extra work and women was further reinforced by the material practicalities of dealing with the unaccustomed influx of single women in Los Angeles looking for work at the studios. Unlike other major cities, Los Angeles had not historically appealed to female job seekers and only in the 1910s did women newcomers finally outnumber men. Shifting demographics heightened local tensions over the problem of single women in the city, which often focused on the rapidly expanding film studios where women were employed in great numbers and in many different capacities. Concern over the treatment of women working in the studios spiked in the wake of a scandal over immoral hiring practices, and local clergy called for an investigation into the treatment of female employees. In response, film studio representatives such as Jesse Lasky, David Horsley and D.W. Griffith reached out to local officials and business groups, and also publicized their efforts to protect women working as extras. Griffith's studio was opened up to local investigators who praised the "morally perfect" conditions they found under Griffith's leadership and the motherly supervision of a house chaperon. But filmmakers did not rely on snippets of good publicity; the industry and the city forged an alliance through the Los Angeles Police Department when women working in various studios were appointed as City Mothers. As representatives of the City Mother's Bureau, women were tasked with supervising female extras working in the studios, intercepting missing girls, and with interviewing prospective employees to make sure they had adequate funds and resources to live in Los Angeles. Like the Studio Club, which was founded around the same time to provide housing and services to women working in the studios, the film industry's affiliation with the City Mother's Bureau was rationalized as an attempt to prevent delinquency and to guide young women through the perils of urban life.

A former extra, Lucile Brown, who had become a casting agent or "type expert", was appointed as a City Mother in early 1916, complete with an official badge and blue uniform. Dubbed the "monarchette" of the Reliance lot, Brown was put in charge of all things "feminine" in the studio, including sixty "steady" girls and four hundred extras. The studios quickly found a more effective way to publicize their
good citizenship, however, and a few months later Paramount star Anita King was appointed as a City Mother. Professionally, King had already demonstrated her abilities as an emissary for the industry on her well-publicized adventures, driving cross-country alone to promote Paramount Pictures. King was assigned to work in a special capacity under the director of the City Mother’s program, Aletha Gilbert, and made numerous official appearances offering cautionary tales about the hardships of film work. King’s new-found moral authority and her high-profile appointment glamorized the alignment of the film industry, civic leaders, and local reformers at the same time it situated working women at the center of debates over the studios’ employment practices. Such connections materially reinforced the notion that women working in the studios were a problem to be solved and regulated, and further bolstered the associations between extra work and female applicants.

The extra underclass

Studio scandal and the use of stars as City Mothers spectacularized the “femininity” of extra work, but the extra also assumed a female face during the 1910s through associations with unskilled labour, transience, and low wages, all of which were historical hallmarks of women’s labour. Although extra work was humorously lauded for remunerating “colorful types”, or those with disabilities and distinctive appearances, for the working-class aspirant – either male or female – extra work was often described as an escape from real work. In these instances, extra work appeared as an illicit refuge from the type of physically demanding labour that otherwise defined the working-classes. In addition to being understood in relation to extra work’s logic of impermanence, male and female extras were increasingly bound together by a common discourse that linked extra work with idleness and disrepute. As Lawrence Glickman points out, the ideology of working class manhood depended on the “related virtues of physical strength and moral responsibility”, particularly the ability to function as a provider. Offering wages below subsistence level, extra work could not be considered adequate for a responsible family man. Wage labour posed different problems for working-class women. The fact that extra women were paid for their labour set them on a parallel trajectory with the prostitute, a link that was reaffirmed in stories that exposed the suspect sexual economy of studio life. Indeed, the perception that extra work was a morally questionable occupation for women only strengthened the gendered associations that defined extra labour as “feminine” and increasingly obscured the presence and participation of male extras. And as an occupation, the passivity and ease of extra work contradicted the expression of physicality and responsibility that defined working class masculinity, explaining the contemptuous suspicion toward unemployed men who preferred the photoplay to the pickaxe.

Despite the industry’s assiduous attempts to court middle-class respectability during the teens,
Filmmakers had a lot to gain from extra work’s wide appeal and its accessibility to working-class applicants. When Los Angeles began block-booking extras for mob scenes through the Municipal Employment Bureau, it effectively turned the city into a middle-man for the film industry at the same time it provided some economic relief to both the unemployed and the city itself. In sending men out for “snaps” (off-season theater work), the Employment Bureau institutionalized extra work as a form of unemployment relief and further fostered a relationship between film companies and the city. The Bureau may also have contributed to keeping studio wages in check. Trade Unionists in Los Angeles complained that the Bureau sent men into jobs without notifying them that they were replacing striking workers, a practice which may have had serious ramifications for extras attempting to organize. Labour leaders also argued that local boosters assiduously courted new industries, residents, and workers not just to improve the economy but as a means to control the local workforce. Drawing a constant surplus of workers to the city kept costs down by depressing wages, which made Los Angeles a desirable location for employers, and was a business practice that also benefited the film industry.

Reports in Variety suggest that the overall labour condition in California had a negative impact on stock players who came to Los Angeles looking for employment during the theatrical off-season. In early 1915, it reported that there were “too many extras” in Los Angeles, and that there were more “picture supernumeraries” looking for work than at any other time. Anyone considering a move West was warned to “stay away from the Coast” as there were more applicants than positions and “hundreds of picture people” were already out of work. The $3 day once promised to theater actors willing to travel to Los Angeles was no longer guaranteed, undermined by the availability of cheap labour in Los Angeles. For theater actors looking for snaps over the winter of 1915 and 1916, two problems converged: the Municipal Employment Bureau using extra work to take the unemployed off its roles, and the increasing acceptance, even desirability, of movie work. While problems for regular stock players looking for extra work were compounded by the larger unemployment problems in Los Angeles, the influx of applicants for film work benefitted the film industry during a period of rapid growth and institutional upheaval.

As movie making became big business, different strategies emerged for coping with both production costs and the burgeoning number of people involved in making feature length films. Organizing and controlling the crew, cast, writers, and directors rationalized film production and created areas of specialization and institutional hierarchies that impacted hiring practices and wages as well as how movies were filmed. As Janet Staiger observes, one of the first means of controlling the variables in industrial production was through the regulation of employment. This need for control was dramatized by Mary Pickford’s contract negotiations with Famous Players in 1915, which gave her $2,000 a week for ten pictures a year and half the profits from her productions. The following year, after a season of increasing salaries for stage stars lured to the film world, Pickford renegotiated her contract and her weekly rate was raised to $7,000. While stars were demonstrating their importance to the film industry with demands for ever-increasing salaries, the studio system became rationalized according to gendered hierarchies of skill and salary. Those at the bottom, the stock players and extras, were plentiful and replaceable. So while producers were fighting a battle with stars and their salaries in the 1910s, the constant influx of excess labour and the absence of strong union organizations in Los Angeles put film companies in a position to dictate the terms of pay for just about every other position within the studio.

Although film studios had rapidly expanded control over their workforce, there were moments of protest from the studio’s underclass. Sporadic attempts to organize resulted in occasional work stoppages but had little long-term impact. For extras, whose very status was defined by their anonymity and interchangeability, the ability to negotiate was almost non-existent. Reports in the Los Angeles Times linked extra agitation with the disruptive influence of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), a particularly feared labour organization. The IWW had been blamed for the Wheatland Hop Riot near Sacramento in 1913 and its members were often portrayed as violent and destructive agitators. The IWW’s connection with the film industry began as early as 1914, when members of the IWW tried to organize extras at Universal, demanding a pay raise from $1 to $2 or $3 a day. It is clear, however, that such demands had little impact. A year later, extras working on D.W. Griffith’s Intolerance made $1.25 a day, plus transportation and lunch; a meal that could mean a great deal to those who were living close to
Yet pay was not guaranteed at even $1 a day and abuse of the powerless and easily replaceable extra sometimes led to even lower wages. After receiving only fifty cents for two days of work, ninety-three men appeared at the State Labor Bureau in 1916 and demanded that the L-Ko Film Company pay them an additional $2.50 a day in back pay. Half of the men reported that they had accepted the film work from an agency in Los Angeles with the “distinct understanding” that they would be paid $3 a day.

In addition to poor pay, extras complained of poor working conditions. In 1916, extras attempted to organize a new union in order to improve conditions that were described as “chaotic,” “abominable,” and “appalling.” The newly organized International Union of Photoplayers of America compiled a list of demands that touched on unpredictable hiring practices, poor working conditions, and the lack of employee rights. Overall, the new union demanded that extra labour be systematically reformed for all extras, both men and women. Recognizing that extras alone lacked the ability to seriously impact production, Union organizers called for “all wage earners” in motion picture production, distribution and exhibition to unite. Two strikes were declared – one at Universal and another at Griffith – protesting conditions for the “poor slaves who are seeking temporary employment.” Despite this attempt at a cohesive strike, the new union’s efforts were thwarted by the fractured nature of production, which kept extras constantly moving amongst different companies. They were further undermined by increasingly rationalized production practices that stratified workers and studio design that housed extras separately in their own building. Industry leaders also consistently denied that there were any labour problems in the studios. They painted a harmonious picture of studio life, aided by the utopian optimism of film trade journals and the Los Angeles Times, which either minimized or demonized local strikes. Denying the significance of these strikes erased the appearance...
deferred and aligned extra work with a fantasy of success, not with a radicalized underclass of working-class agitators.

Hollywood’s industrial infrastructure was built upon the inability of workers to unite, which had a long term impact on motion picture production. As labour historian Danae Clark observes about the studio system in the 1930s, “studios were more concerned with promoting star images than with acknowledging or improving the working conditions of actors”. Clark argues that film studios encouraged a fetishistic attachment to the star’s body by erasing any evidence of its production, effectively distancing screen work from the individual performer. However, this process was not seamless. Disputes over how to define acting as labour were the core conflicts between actors and management during the studio era. These conflicts usually played out between the individual star and studio management, but how was management supposed to deal with the unruly body of film extras? During the 1910s, the conflict over screen labour also played out between the extras and the studios, as each side attempted to demarcate the boundaries that defined the film extra. Film companies needed both men and women extras, and as filmmaking expanded in Los Angeles it underwent the same kind of scrutiny as did other industries: how did one become a star, how did one get a start, what kind of work was it, and to whom did it appeal? The emerging understanding of extra work as women’s work was fostered by the public’s fascination with working women and the culture of motion picture production, while the de-professionalization of extra work, from off-season snap for trained actors to starting point for would-be stars, cleared the way for the extra girl’s dominance. As a labour structure was being organized during the teens, the film industry learned the importance of controlling its workforce and also the importance of controlling its workforce’s image.

As the extra girl came to stand in for a largely anonymous workforce, she became a star of a different order: abstracted from individual identity, she became a modern allegory for screen labour. With the extra girl, the studios could manage a persona that had the potential to impact production and profits. To the industry’s advantage, the extra girl represented a sublimation of labour through her association with the discovery narrative that cast her in a passive role – she was waiting to be discovered – not working, and certainly not striking, to improve...
her life. Though tainted by concerns about working women and the dangers of studio life, the “extra girl” effectively alienates the extra from screen labour by reducing a heterogeneous and disruptive body to a “star image.” The sad stories of appalling conditions were mitigated by the fabulous success stories of the fortunate few who survived the system. As an allegorical figure, the extra girl represents the most potent dream the industry offered: the dream of succeeding in Hollywood. Only after this dream was exploded by the public’s outrage over the Arbuckle scandal in the early 1920s, and the extra girl became associated with an abusive system, did the film industry begin to systematically address concerns about extras.69

The problems associated with the extra girl, primarily the sexual economy of the casting couch, defined extra labour to such an extent that it obscured the difficulties that all extras dealt with, such as unregulated working conditions and irregular or inadequate wages. Despite these difficulties, studios could depend on the popularity of motion pictures to draw screen aspirants to their gates. The industry also greatly benefited from Los Angeles labour practices that maintained a surplus of workers, helping to control wages and undercut the threat of strikes.

Although labour control through surplus was not a management strategy that could contain Mary Pickford’s ever-increasing salary, it was eminently applicable to the unruly extras who were defined by their superfluity, not their willingness to work. Effacing labour from the extra’s screen performance effectively neutralized the extras’ claims to compensation, or demands for a living wage. During a period in which film studios were crafting their institutional structure and also their public image, the extra girl emerged as both the representative of and rationale for a type of labour whose worth could be discounted. Though such “serious” young men as the promising Roman soldier might still respectfully look for a career in Hollywood, the gender and class politics of film labour concerned not only the extra’s body on the screen but also the management of working bodies behind the scenes, impacting labour and management relations at a critical moment in the industrial formation of early Hollywood.

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Notes

2. Ibid. The Central Casting Bureau opened in 1926.
3. Mack Sennett Collection, Folio 1154, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, CA. Despite the popularity of Sennett’s Bathing Beauties, the number of men needed to make Keystone Cop comedies helps explain such numbers.
9. See Grace Kingsley, “Ella, the Extra Girl: She Tells Her Chum About a Regular Sparklers Among the Star. Extra Girl and Her Views”, Los Angeles Times (16 February 1919): III, 1. The series continued through the end of the year. In 1923, Mack Sennett offered another wholesome version of the movie-struck girl’s trip to Los Angeles in The Extra Girl, which follows the humorous misadventures of Sue (Mabel Normand), who wants to take Hollywood by storm but gets diverted to the prop room and ends up happily married.
The photoplay or the pickaxe: extras, gender, and labour in early Hollywood

“Film Batteries Wink and Things Do Move”, Los Angeles Times (12 March 1911): II, 1.


“How I Became a Photoplayer”, Motion Picture Magazine (January 1915): 76.


The classical story of the sculptor, Pygmalion, who fell in love with the statue of a woman he carved out of ivory, appeared in many forms in poetry, painting, theater, and the novel. It proved popular on film as well, first appearing on the screen in 1898 and allowing Georges Méliès to take advantage of film’s malleability to explore the fantastical aspect of a statue coming to life. English language versions appeared again in 1911 and 1938, the last directed by Anthony Asquith and Leslie Howard, and famously based on George Bernard Shaw’s 1913 stage play Pygmalion.

Gail Marshall also examines the various manifestations of the “Galatea-aesthetic”, from poetry to the music hall, and specifically links Victorian actresses with the Galatea myth. See Actresses on the Victorian Stage: Feminine Performance and the Galatea Myth (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).


This connection was reinforced by theatrical management practices and contract law, particularly legal disputes between female performers and their male managers. See Lea S. VanderVeld, “The Gendered Origins of the Lumley Doctrine: Binding Men’s Consciences and Women’s Fidelity”, The Yale Law Journal 101.4 (January 1992): 775–852. VanderVeld also discusses the importance of the “Svengali paradigm”, which associated female talent with a visionary male and further emphasized the proprietary bond between female talent and management.

The phenomenon of working women who lived apart from their families at a time when women were primarily defined in relation to domestic life was a nationwide concern and inspired numerous civic programs and initiatives. See Joanne Meyerowitz, Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880–1920 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988).


Ibid., 8–9.


Ibid., 46.


Ibid., 31.

“On the Screen”, Los Angeles Times (3 March 1915): II, 12. Unemployed women also used the Bureau, but there were far fewer women than men, and their applications were handled in a separate office.


Ibid.

For more on the relationship between women and hysteria, see Elaine showalter, “Hysteria, Feminism, and Gender”, in Sander L. Gilman, Helen King, Roy Porter, G.S. Rousseau and Elaine Showalter (eds), Hysteria Beyond Freud, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). Tania Modleski also provides a succinct summation of the relationship between hys-


37. For more on the film industry’s campaign to improve its image in Los Angeles, see McKenna, The City That Made the Pictures Move, 106–145.


40. For more on the founding of the Studio Club, see Kenaga, “Making the Studio Girl”.


43. “New Play in Waiting”, Los Angeles Times (26 April 1916): III, 4. Her cautionary tales may have been undermined by her description of her travels across the country, which demonstrated the privileges film work provided, such as travel, financial independence, and fame.

44. “Screen Actor a Social Worker”, Los Angeles Record (29 March 1916): 3. Gilbert was Los Angeles’s first city mother. King herself acknowledged that her position was created because of recent concern over “movie morals.” It does not seem to have been a merely nominal appointment, although it is not clear how long her official appointment lasted. See also, “Judge Plans to Protect Screen-Struck Girls”, Exhibitor’s Herald (15 April 1916): 29.


46. Ibid. For more on the discourse about sexual exploitation, female extras and film work see Stamp, “It’s a Long Way to Filmland”, 343–345 and Sklar, Movie Made America, 76.


49. Ibid, 11.


54. Benjamin Hampton, A History of the Movies, 148


58. Sean P. Holmes, “The Hollywood Star System and the Regulation of Actor’s Labor, 1916–1934”, Film History 12.1 (2000): 100. Holmes relates a story from Griffith’s assistant director, Joseph Henabery, who remembered seeing an old man sitting beside the canvas fence that surrounded the set; every day he
would share the lunch with his wife by passing food under the fence.


65. “Men Who Refuse to Work Before the Camera in Nude.” One strike was called for at D.W. Griffith’s studio. It seems likely that the male extras who refused to pose nude were working on Intolerance, with its elaborate Babylonian sequences that required large numbers of extras, many of them scantily clad.


68. Ibid., 22.


Abstract: The Photoplay or the Pickaxe: Extras, Gender, and Labor in Early Hollywood, by Denise McKenna

During the 1910s, the extra girl emerged as a type of “star” whose persona was defined by the always ambivalent narrative associated with extra work: that the discovery of unknown talent or screen charisma could equal fame and fortune. This essay examines the emergence of the extra girl as the representative of the film industry’s anonymous underclass, whose rise as a figure of fascination and concern deflected attention from the heterogeneous appeal of extra work. Despite scandal and controversy, the extra girl represented a much more manageable image of Hollywood’s underclass than the chaotically diverse and potentially radical masses that were also glimpsed at the studio gates. In describing the cultural politics of extra labor, the essay focuses on the de-professionalization of extra work, narrative tropes that helped define extra labor as a feminine occupation, and attempts to manage labor problems with extras in Los Angeles’s burgeoning film studios.

Key words: Motion Pictures (labor issues); Los Angeles Municipal Employment Bureau; Hollywood Studio Club; Women in Motion Pictures; “The Extra Girl”