



Women Make History:

Stories we should have learned in school

Alice Guy Blaché is a “fine example of what a woman can do if given a square chance in life.”

[The Moving Picture News](#), 1911



Circa 1913, Apeda Studio, New York

Behind the Lens: Filmmaker Alice Guy Blaché

Pioneer of the French and American movie industry, [Alice Guy Blaché](#), is the first woman to direct or produce narrative films and the first and only to own a major studio.

Alice Ida Antoinette Guy was born near Paris in 1873. At the [age of 21](#), she talked her way into a position as secretary to Léon Ernest Gaumont, an already famous inventor, engineer, and industrialist. Soon after, Gaumont founded the world's first and oldest film studio. Guy Blaché volunteered to demonstrate the capabilities of the company's new motion-picture camera by making a short, promotional film. “It seems like a silly, girlish thing to do,” he said, but agreed on the condition that her office work not “suffer.”

Guy Blaché was hooked on filmmaking. Soon after, she became the company head of film production. In her first film, *La Fée aux Choux* (The Cabbage Fairy) she produces, directs,

and plays the role of a woman who selects babies from a cabbage patch, each one cradling an infant. When she left the studio in 1907, Guy Blaché had directed, produced, or supervised nearly 600 silent films—and another 150 movies synchronized with sound.

Guy Blaché's early work is highly regarded for its energy and [risk-taking](#). Preferring to make films using on-site locations rather than in a studio, her 30-minute movie, *La Vie du Christ* (The Life of Christ), used 25 sets, included several outdoor venues, and had a cast of more than three hundred extras.



On the set of Life of Christ, 1906

Guy Blaché also experimented with cinematic techniques. She developed the use of double exposures to block out sections of film and shoot over them to add additional elements. In describing her remarkable influence, French professor Alan Williams [remarked](#) that Guy Blaché “created and nurtured the mood of excitement and sheer aesthetic pleasure...” Her biographer, [Alison McMahan](#),

[considers](#) Guy Blaché's greatest achievement to be that she “focused on the psychological perspective of the central characters.”

In 1907, Guy Blaché married cameraman Herbert Blaché, and the couple immigrated to the United States. Three years later, she established the financially and critically acclaimed film production company, [Solax](#), in Flushing, New York. As company president, Guy Blaché directed nearly 50 movies and supervised an additional 300 productions. Success came quickly and, by 1912, Solax had outgrown its facilities. Guy Blaché had a state-of-the-art facility in New Jersey built at a price tag of [\\$100,000](#) and launched careers of movie stars and production crew members.

Guy Blaché produced melodramas, action films, westerns, and comedies with social themes, including marriage as an equal partnership. In her action films, Guy Blaché often reversed male and female gender roles, casting women as heroes.

The explosive growth of the film industry nationwide forced the consolidation or closure of many independent studios, including Guy Blaché's. In 1922, she declared bankruptcy. Her marriage failed and she returned to France with her two children.

Unable to find work within the industry, Guy Blaché lectured widely on film-making during the next 30 years. She also wrote children's stories and published novelized film scripts. As time progressed, she discovered that many of her achievements had been forgotten or wrongly credited to male colleagues. Although she never made another movie, she worked to reclaim her legacy.

The French government [awarded](#) Guy Blaché the [Legion of Honour](#) in 1953. Eleven years later, she returned to the United States where she wrote her memoir, [Autobiographie d'une Pionnière du Cinéma](#). (The Memoirs of Alice Guy-Blaché). It was published posthumously in 1976.





Guy Blaché died in New Jersey in 1968 at age 94. She is buried in the Catholic cemetery in Mahwah, New Jersey. Today, only a few of the hundreds of films she produced, survive. View her filmography [here](#).

Her star rose again in 2002, after the publication of her biography, [Alice Guy Blaché: Lost Visionary of the Cinema](#), by Alison McMahan. Scholarly articles and screenings of her films followed. In 2019, director Pamela B. Green produced the excellent film, [Be Natural: The Untold Story of Alice Guy Blache](#). The same year, The New York Times included Guy Blaché in its [Overlooked](#) series.

Bring it Home: Conversation Starters

At a time when women couldn't vote and had little legal standing, Alice Guy Blaché was an artistic innovator, visionary, and pioneer in the art and business of making films.

Ask a friend: Have you ever experienced credit being given to a male colleague for your work?

Ask yourself: What can I do to prevent this from happening to myself and others?

Spreading the Word: Recent / Upcoming Keynotes & Talks

Thank you Carol K. for inviting me to speak at the Salt Lake City [Town Club](#) on November 9. My schedule for **Women's History Month** in March 2023 is filling up. In **June**, I'm honored to be a panelist at the **2023 Berkshire Conference of Women Historians** in Santa Clara, California.

I appreciate the opportunity to share my passion—Mary Ware Dennett and other remarkable women whose stories we should have learned in school—the achievers, iconoclasts, catalysts and especially the troublemakers! If you have a group you'd like me to address, contact me at: Sharon@SharonSpaulding.com.



[Sharon Spaulding](#) is a feminist historian and researcher specializing in the life and times of Mary Ware Dennett (1872-1947). The curator of Dennett's family archives, Sharon is writing a book about Dennett. In 2020, Time magazine included Dennett as one of the most important women in American history.

Sharon received a grant from Radcliffe College's Schlesinger Library to support her work. Her essays have appeared in [Ms. Magazine](#), [Smithsonian](#), [New Hampshire Magazine](#), [BOLD](#), and others. She lives near Salt Lake

City with her husband and two dogs.

Sharon is available to speak about Dennett and the forgotten stories of other women, as well as the history of the suffrage and reproductive rights movements of the early 20th century. Contact her: Sharon@SharonSpaulding.com.

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