



What Happened in the Dressing Room

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What Happened in the Dressing Room is a video essay about early film's interest in backstage space and the relationship between cinematic interiority and the archive.





Creator's Statement

In *What Happened in the Dressing Room*, a video essay about early film's interest in backstage space, I explore the relationship between cinematic interiority and the archive. A reference to turn of the century cinema's fascination with surprise and spectacle, as manifest in films like *What Happened on Twenty-Third Street* (1901) and *What Happened in the Tunnel* (1903)—the era of the “age of attractions” to use Tom Gunning's phrase—the title of the video essay embraces a spirit of discovery and captures the allure of that which is hidden behind and inside. Like those early films, *What Happened in the Dressing Room* is not a question, but an ellipsis; it is a provocation to engage in an experience of revelation.

The dressing room is a particularly useful space for examining cinematic interiority given its anterior location in theatrical buildings and its frequent representation as a site of intrigue in popular culture. While the dressing room dates back hundreds of years, it was not until the late 19th and early 20th century that it became an object of fascination for the general public, owing in large part to the rise of popular entertainments like variety, vaudeville, and musical theater that employed masses of single women in their choruses; women's private exploits became the stuff of mass entertainment in the reports of theatrical critics, popular novels, stage skits, and the new medium of cinema. While print and live entertainment allowed audiences a glimpse of the backstage, only cinema had the power to fully immerse spectators into the space, offering an experience of voyeurism, of privacy, and of secret, potentially transgressive behaviors. The dressing room's power to transform its inhabitants—through its seclusion and its tools of disguise—rendered it a space that, as Henri Lefebvre argues, produces and is produced by modernity.

In doing a search for what I am calling “dressing room films” (films that take place exclusively or primarily in the dressing room), I discovered 31 titles released from 1897 to 1910. Of those, I was able to view 21 films at the Library of Congress and 13 are included in the video essay. While a few of these have circulated on YouTube, the majority have remained largely inaccessible, existing only on 35mm and 16mm prints in the archive. I selected the films presented here to foreground certain narrative and aesthetic intersections, rather than showcase an exhaustive search of extant titles.

I set out to explore how interiority is conveyed in these films, which represent a moment in early cinema before more familiar techniques for registering thoughts and feelings, like the closeup, mirrored reflections, and the interior monologue, were developed or widely used. Suggesting the experience of inside and outside, public and private through the thresholds of the *mise-en-scène*, including screens and doors, these films privilege spatiotemporal encounter over psychological subjectivity. As I emphasize in the video essay, there are numerous moments in which there are no inhabitants of the space, when the dressing room is empty. In others, peeping toms get their comeuppance or communities of women cavort with abandon. But whether the atmosphere is pensive or playful, the spectator is provocatively located to become aware of his or her access to a realm “in which we have no part,” as Theodore Dreiser observes.

I extended the experience of interiority outside of the films and into the epigraphic and audio dimensions of the video essay. I chose to include Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie* (1900) because it is contemporary to the period when dressing rooms captured filmmakers’ imaginations and documents the excitement surrounding popular theater at the turn of the century. Likewise, Blue Dot Sessions’ “A Little Powder” is a musical track that evokes the dressing table with its tools for transformation and instrumentally replicates the sounds of a music box, a personal object that when opened, offers a revelation inside.

In working with these films, what was initially a challenge became an integral formal feature of the essay—the materiality of the films themselves. Their relatively poor print quality, a product of the processes of aging and preservation, have left their marks on the surviving prints. Putting them into the timeline, I realized that the imperfections offered their own suggestion of something being concealed, posing as obstructions to the film that was hidden behind the scratches, tears, and strange visual forms. As I emphasized and altered the edging of the digitized prints, I came to interpret Dreiser’s text not only as a description of the backstage realm, but more broadly as a comment on the process of archival encounter itself; in other words, the process of video essay creation became as much about “what happened in the archive” as in the dressing room. Foregrounding my “right of return” and “meta-historiographic desire,” as my

reviewers have phrased it, I staged the terms of my encounter videographically, as scholar and spectator, with these spaces of early cinema.

Bibliography

Tom Gunning, “‘Now You See It, Now You Don’t’: The Temporality of the Cinema of Attractions,” *Velvet Light Trap* 32 (fall 1993), 3–12.

Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*. Blackwell, 1991.

Biography

Desirée J. Garcia is an Associate Professor in the Latin American, Latino, and Caribbean Studies Department at Dartmouth. Her most recent book, *The Dressing Room: Backstage Lives and American Film* (forthcoming in 2024), is a study of race and gender in backstage film narratives. Her previous books, *The Movie Musical* (2021) and *The Migration of Musical Film: From Ethnic Margins to American Mainstream* (2014), were both published by Rutgers University Press. She has a PhD in American Studies from Boston University and BA in History from Wellesley College. Garcia has also worked as an Associate Producer for American Experience/PBS and as an actress in the first feature film by director Damien Chazelle, *Guy and Madeline on a Park Bench* (2009).

Review by Maggie Hennefeld, University of Minnesota

What happened in the dressing room? A woman unrobes, a little boy metamorphoses into a buxom matron, a maid tidies up, and a peeping tom gets his comeuppance. Desirée Garcia poses this tantalizing question as a historiographic statement, evoking the title of semi-pornographic early film comedies such as *What Happened on 23rd Street, New York City* (1901) and *What Happened in the Tunnel* (1903). *What happened in the dressing room*. Rather than rely on the mechanics of concealment and exposure—raising a woman’s skirt or mashing a masher with the sight gag of racial miscegenation—Garcia looks instead at the curtain (not just behind it!) as a metaphor for all the unfilled longing and material loss that taunt our return to the early film archive.

What Happened in the Dressing Room is a short videographic essay consisting of archival snippets from thirteen early “dressing room” films, though Garcia has found 31 titles released from 1897 to 1910. *From Show Girl to Burlesque Queen* (1903) to *The Sleepy Soubrette* (1905), these archival excerpts are cropped, tiled, re-sized, animated, and playfully juxtaposed to her own textual musings so as to reclaim them as “glimpses of the joys and sorrows which we may never be permitted to feel on our own behalf.” Garcia thus understands the dressing room as a scene for the display of meta-historiographic

desire. If close-ups were harnessed as windows onto character emotion in the late silent era, early film dressing rooms set the stage for our epistemological curiosity to inhabit the lifeworld of the screen—to enter the archive, so little of which today survives.

“The life of the world behind the curtain is a fascinating thing to every outsider...”, observes Garcia in an intertitle. I would like to see even more of *what happened in the dressing room*. Beyond the thirteen films included, Garcia withholds mention or naming of the other eighteen, further eliciting our excitement for her forthcoming book on this subject. (A brief search of *FIAF Treasures* makes me wonder, for instance, about AM&B’s *A False Alarm in the Dressing Room*, which could have been a bad wig or a crinoline fire—I can find no further description.) And of course, there’s the curtain that becomes an impromptu murder screen in both the silent and talkie versions of Alfred Hitchcock’s *Blackmail* (1929): “They say you’re a wild, an awful child, Miss Up-to-Date.”

As Bonnie Honig argues in her recent *Cultural Critique* article, “[Epistemology of the Curtain](#)”, unlike the closet, the curtain converges on the concealment of an uncanny voice: the Wizard of Oz’s acousmatic disclosure, or Lina Lamont’s lip sync humiliation. Curtains in sound films provoke our drive to see the hidden source of what we can only hear, whereas in early film dressing rooms they serve as backdrops for a vortex of unruly fixations that catch light in the gaps, cracks, absences, and misplaced presences of the archive.

Speaking of sound, I was initially ambivalent about Blue Dot Session’s “A Little Powder.” But after lingering in the music track, I can feel how the song itself captures the sensation of ambivalence.

Review by Mark Lynn Anderson, University of Pittsburgh

Even today, it is not uncommon to recall how the 1978 FIAF symposium in Brighton radically shifted the historical understanding and appreciation of early cinema, creating the conditions for an expansive subfield within the established discipline of cinema studies, an intervention driven by a then still emergent discourse on the urgency of film preservation. As Jan-Christopher Horak observed in 2018, “After FIAF Brighton, the basis for writing film history became empirical research and the close reading of films and paper documents, rather than informed connoisseurship.” This move away from aesthetic film history toward analyses of filmic modes of (textual) production sought a more sober means to bring the motion pictures of the early period into clearer view by treating them as so much evidence to consider carefully when answering the question of *what happened*, rather than the question of *what matters*. Yet by the time of the Brighton symposium, a thorough critique of those long familiar teleological accounts

of a gradual discovery and parsing of cinematic language during the first decades of the twentieth century had already been well underway by leftist historians such as Jean-Louis Comolli and Noël Burch.¹ What the Brighton symposium ultimately achieved was a means of ignoring or at least displacing these emergent studies of early cinema as a material site of social struggle in favor of a disciplinary command to respect both the archive as an authoritative preserve and the semi-radical *alterity* of these early motion pictures, including the screen practices such films enabled. In other words, patient attention to the archive might provide a glimpse into a cultural formation that had already been historically foreclosed, a presumed knowledge effect to defeat an ambient presentism while providing a new paradigm of investigation called *the cinema of attractions*. To quote the last three sentences of one of the paragraphs from Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* that structures Desirée Garcia's *What Happened in the Dressing Room*, "Here was no illusion. Here was an open door to see all of that. She had come upon it as one who stumbles upon a secret passage and, behold, she was in the chamber of diamonds and delight!" (192).

Indeed, there is a certain charm in *What Happened in the Dressing Room* and in those early motion pictures of which it makes use. Ostensibly, that charm is about *mise-en-scène*: the many screens, linens, draperies, costumes, and undergarments that provide the viewer a delicate tactility, even as they are designed to conceal. While the title may ask us to remember a canonical early film such as *What Happened on Twenty-Third Street, New York City* (Edison 1901), with its promise of spectacular reportage on an unintended public exposure of a woman's legs and undergarments,² here the question of "What happened?" remains something of an intrigue, even as the text of Dreiser's narration suggests that we simply appreciate the "remarkable atmosphere" of the dressing room as a form of seduction to the mysteries of a particular place, one "more friendly" than the world we know. In this way, the essay is about a mode of revelation indicative of early cinema, one that both rewards and frustrates the historian who looks for a disclosure of secrets whenever privileged access is granted, whenever the curtain is pulled aside. History is about telling, not showing, and a history of showing can only be told in a manner embarrassingly inadequate to its

¹ See for instance the 1971–1972 series of essays by Jean-Louis Comolli, "Technique and Ideology," collected, (re-)translated, and republished in *Cinema Against Spectacle: Technique and Ideology Revisited*, translated by Daniel Fairfax (University of Amsterdam Press, 2015), 143–244, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv2z6qfdx>; and Noël Burch, "Porter, or Ambivalence," *Screen* 19:4 (Winter 1978): 91–106. See also Burch's six-part television series, *What Do Those Old Films Mean?: History/Cinema/Society* (UK/FR 1986, Pi Production/Channel 4 Télévision/FR3 Nord-Picardie/French Ministry of Culture), <https://rarefilmm.com/2022/05/what-do-those-old-films-mean-1985/>.

² See Constance Balides's discussion of incidental exposure and the place of performance in early cinema, in "Scenarios of Exposure in the Practice of Everyday Life: Women in the Cinema of Attractions," *Screen* 34:1 (Spring 1993): 19–37.

subject. Such a tension also exists between the videographic and the essayistic, and we might profitably consider Garcia's piece a meta-discourse on its own practice and the very *place* of that practice.

Through its embrace of an apparently unmasked, full-frame image rendered in still, slow, reverse, and rapid motion, *What Happened in the Dressing Room* demonstrates the analytic augmentation of vision characteristic of both videographic criticism and archival inspection. Also offered here as a part of what happens "behind the scenes" are instances of film leaders with writing and copyright inscriptions. Yet this materially reflexive exposé turns out to be just another scene where Mr. Jack merrily ponders how he might look in a corset, where the semi-privacy of the dressing room is violated time and again by those who repeatedly interrupt preparations for a performance about to commence or by those who lurk and watch the donning of costumes and disguises, undetected from a proximate *place* behind a carefully arranged screen in order to remain privy to a scene, while we delude ourselves that we are not of that scene, that the scene is not, in fact, *our* scene. Metzian insights into a radical fetishism at the heart of critical spectatorship have been routinely denigrated but never effectively deposed by repeatedly announced historical turns.³

The presumed alterity of a cinema of attractions was invented to construct an investigative authority free from attachments to its historical objects, an authority that might reconstruct *another* audience for whom early films worked *differently*. In many ways, Garcia's essay stages this alterity as a secret and separate world of which we might be afforded a precious glimpse, but she does so only to subvert this very relation through a deployment of the films' own farcical collapse of partitions separating viewer and viewed, even across and against that most recalcitrant partition that used to go by the name of sexual difference.

Dressing rooms would become a staple of narrative cinema and would exploit multiple ambivalences around the realities of constructing fictional performances. More often than not, such dressing rooms would be women's dressing rooms where the fictional star or chorine could be an actual star or chorine and where the question of "image" and its relation to reality might continually defer any need of decipherment. In relation to an extensive feminist inquiry into "women's place" in early cinema, Jane Gaines has posed the question, "Are they us?" A question of both promise and caution, Gaines asks us to reconsider the relationality of the historian to her subjects. Drawing on the work of Heide Schlüppmann, who describes how an emergent narrative

³ See particularly part 1, section 5 of Christian Metz, "Disavowal, Fetishism," translated by Ben Brewster, in *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* (University of Indiana Press, 1982), 69–80.

cinema sought to augment the deficiencies of actualities by depicting that which was unrepresentable, including the realities of working women's lives, Gaines points out

how this "reality of others" is reversed when, as the material of domestic melodrama, it fascinates cultural and social class outsiders. There, we will need to ask how the harsh "reality of others," so often the subject of naturalism and documentary realism, is drawn down into fictional melodrama so often faulted for its abandonment of the very social reality from which it may be drawing. This kind of ideological operation that dismisses melodrama is most clear with the move from "my reality is not your reality" to "your reality is *not reality*" at all. (21)

Here one might easily substitute "farce" for "melodrama," and the phrase "the quaint 'reality of others'" for "harsh 'realities of others,'" to consider how the category of alterity effectively prevents an acknowledgement of recognition but also makes the crucial situation of the film historian's enchantment of passing interest only.

One of the presumed deficiencies of videographic criticism is its seeming indifference to, or even "abandonment" of, provenance. This lack of respect for context is, however, the strength of Garcia's essay on early cinema's refusals to separate itself from its situated audiences wherever they might be, since *What Happened in the Dressing Room* rehearses ineffably not the actuality of the early dressing room films, but the historian's right of return.

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