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"A Man Like My Aunt": Community and Desire in *Working Girls* (1931)

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This video analyzes the opening sequence of *Working Girls* (Dorothy Arzner, 1931), which takes place in a working-class women's boarding house. Drawing on scholarship by Judith Mayne, I focus on five ways that the sequence establishes a sense of community in the house and suggests erotic attraction between its inhabitants.

Creator's Statement

Working Girls (1931) is one of director Dorothy Arzner's lesser-known films, but it stands out as one of the most enjoyable, memorable, surprising, and queerly resonant films of the pre-Code era. The film follows two sisters, Mae and June, in the months after they arrive in New York City from Indiana. Upon their arrival in the city, they move into a working-class women's boarding house, Rolfe House, which is where the film opens. From these opening moments onward, *Working Girls* is marked by a striking emphasis on female community and implied lesbianism. Throughout the film, Rolfe House functions as a communal space that exists outside of patriarchy, heterosexuality, and the workplace—the pressures of which increasingly weigh on the central characters as the film progresses. There are limits to this idyll, particularly in its naturalized whiteness and stark gender binary, which reflect the biases of the film's historical period and industrial context. Nevertheless, a negotiated reading of *Working Girls* can acknowledge these limitations while also recognizing its enduring power as a queer anti-patriarchal text. That power begins to take root in the first sequence, which establishes the film's central dynamics of community and desire and serves as the subject of this video essay. Judith Mayne argues that "one of the most distinctive ways in which Arzner's authorial presence is felt in her films is in the emphasis placed on communities of women, to be sure, but also in the erotic charge identified within those communities" (1990, 110). In this video, I build on Mayne's quote and analyze the first sequence of the film, in which Mae and June are introduced to Rolfe House and its inhabitants. My analysis centers on five key choices made by Arzner and screenwriter Zoë Akins that produce the house's intimate and erotically charged atmosphere. By repeating certain clips across the five sections of this analysis, I aim to draw attention to the density of technique in the

film's opening. Close attention to form highlights the many layered elements that work together to yield a film that, while light and comedic, is also deeply resonant, abundantly interpretable, and remarkably distinctive. This video has evolved considerably since its first iteration, and I am supremely grateful to the reviewers for their feedback. Thanks in particular to Jennifer M. Bean for drawing my attention to certain lines of dialogue and to the importance of blocking and framing in this sequence for this version of the video, in addition to her other invaluable comments across prior versions. And thank you to Judith Mayne for her feedback and kind response to my use of her work—her generous support continues to blow my mind.

Bibliography

Mayne, Judith. 1990. *The Woman at the Keyhole: Feminism and Women's Cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Biography

Kallan Benjamin is a PhD candidate in film studies at the University of Wisconsin Madison. She earned an MA in cinema and media studies from the University of Southern California and a BA in film studies from Wesleyan University. Her essays on historical intersections of gender, labor, and screenwriting have been published in *Film History* and *Feminist Media Histories*.

Review by Jennifer M. Bean, University of Washington

This delightful study meditates on the playful, flirtatious relations among a group of women dancing together in their boarding house in an opening scene of *Working Girls* (1931). Some might categorize the approach as a close analysis of a single scene in a mainstream narrative film, although it might equally be understood as a videographic deformation of studio-era cinematic techniques. Either way, Benjamin's exquisite attention to the scene's formal elements clarifies that videographic criticism can reveal in seven minutes what a written analysis might argue but never fully convey: this scene is queer.

"A Man Like My Aunt" parallels in many ways the approach at work in Barbara Zecchi's "Queering *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*," which joyously employs reverse and slow motion to undermine heteronormative assumptions and reveal the sea of women arranged as "viewers" gazing at Marilyn Monroe and Rosalind Russell in their opening performance of that 1950s musical. It makes sense that Benjamin's study of *Working Girls*, like Zecchi's study of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, puts videographic criticism into

play as a form of "retrospectatorship," to borrow Patricia White's productive term for a mode of viewing shaped by the fantasies and memories it elicits from a viewer. Both video essays enable contemporary viewers to retroactively see, glance, peer, look, scrutinize, and feel the erotic sensibilities between women that saturate these respective studio-era productions. I remember laughing out loud when I first watched Zecchi's study, a way of expressing my glee at the visible "evidence" she provides for a queer reading of that scene in a film I've taught many times but have never unpacked in quite the same way. I believe viewers of Benjamin's project will be similarly astonished as they witness anew the array of formal elements—dialogue and set design, blockings and framings, characters and performance— that together shape the women's homosocial community in the opening scene and the erotic charge that connects them.

It is impossible for me to watch this project without recalling the first version I watched, titled "Arzner And," which understood the dynamic interaction of these on-screen women as a reflection of the multiple women involved in creating the film: Dorothy Arzner (director), Zoe Akins (script writer), Vera Caspary and Winifred Lenihan (playwrights). To achieve this effect, the initial version of the project repeated select moments of the scene, some in slow motion, while introducing photographs of Arzner, then Akins, then Caspary and Lenihan. I found that approach fascinating and yet potentially essentializing. Could it be that the dynamic, intimate and flirtatious relations among the women in this scene reflect a similar set of relationships among the four women authors, and vice versa? Perhaps so. But it is risky to assume that the four women working on the film shared a creative sensibility simply because they also (presumably) identified as women.

When I first urged Benjamin to revise, I wondered if she might uncover supplemental archival sources that would link the careers and/or persona of all four women authors to homoerotic and queer sensibilities and thus extend the insights that scholars like Judith Mayne have offered to contemporary assessments of Arzner per se. But I'm delighted that she shifted course instead, directing our attention exclusively to the gestures, dialogue, visual structure, and choreography of the scene, in conversation with Mayne's now-canonical study. The point is clear. The experience is riveting. And the authorial perspective we are now invited to experience is Benjamin's—she employs videographic methods to recreate her affective response to the scene and share it with others. This mode of scholarship is a gift.

Review by Judith Mayne, Ohio State University

The video is a retelling of the film *Working Girls*, focusing on a key scene early in the film when the women who inhabit the boarding house enjoy themselves in a common area.

They chat, they listen to music, and they dance together. Benjamin focuses on how the women flirt with each other by repeating an eyeline match between two of the women and by lingering on, and repeating, the set-up of the scene.

The video also reframes my book on Dorothy Arzner, by stressing that groups of women, and not just Arzner herself, were responsible for what we see on screen. Arzner was a very collaborative artist, and Benjamin emphasizes the significance of those groups of women; in this case, the screenwriter Zoe Akins and the authors of the play *Blind Mice*, Vera Caspary and Winifred Lenihan. When I wrote my book on Arzner, I tried to find the play, with no luck. I hope that Benjamin will find it!

I have three observations, the first of which has to do with the importance of dance. We see photos of Arzner and her partner, Marion Morgan, who was a dancer and choreographer, but Morgan doesn't figure among the names of the collaborative group. True, her influence on the film was not as direct as the other three, but she was very much an active partner in how dance was presented in Arzner's films.

Second, for what it's worth, Zoe Akins and Arzner were frequent collaborators. Does it matter that Caspary and Lenihan were more incidental in the "and" of the video's title? I don't know.

Third, I'm curious as to why the soundtrack of *Working Girls* is eliminated. This emphasizes more emphatically the visual attraction between the women. But given that the collaborations (with Akins, Caspary, and Lenihan) presented in the video are mostly through words, this is an interesting (and to me, curious) decision.

The video is a true pleasure to watch. It reminds the viewer that behind (or, preferably, next to, or alongside) the woman in charge there is a group of women co-workers who create the very possibility of the female communities so central to the films directed by Dorothy Arzner.

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