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## Alexander Black's *Miss Jerry* (1894). A journalist in the prehistory of cinema

**Abstract**

At the dawn of the moving image, there was a plethora of initiatives that sought to reproduce reality in images. In 1894, one year before the Lumière brothers patented their cinematograph, the journalist, photographer and writer Alexander Black developed the *picture play* system. These fused images together to create a new form of audiovisual narration with which he aspired to create “an illusion of reality”. He refined the expressive capacities of existing photography to try to recreate what the first attempts to reproduce moving images could not achieve, namely, to tell complete stories using images. For his first work he chose to relate the tribulations of a young journalist: *Miss Jerry*. In the formative period of the cinema, Black's contribution – midway between photography and cinema – had no influence at all on the technical development of the new medium; it was, however, an elaborate antecedent of the construction of visual narratives and his success showed that the public was prepared to welcome cinematographic stories. The image of journalism provided by *Miss Jerry* also anticipated one of the most solid stereotypes of the woman-journalist in the cinema, known as the *sob-sister*.

**Keywords**

**Journalism, Cinema, Picture play, Alexander Black, Women Journalists.**

### 1. The dream of the moving image

The first public projection of the Lumière brothers' cinematograph in the Sal6n Indien du Grand Caf6 in Paris on 28 December 1895 inaugurated the age of cinema as we know it today and closed the period of inventions and laboratory experiences that had reached boiling point during the final decades of the XIX century. With the invention of the cinematograph, technology had finally attained the mythical goal of the graphic reproduction of movement (Gubern, 2005: 13).

Prior to this landmark event, the prehistory of cinema is filled with multiple attempts that sought the same goal with greater or lesser degrees of success. The first results of applying the knowledge of retinal persistence to the use of images took the form of optical games and

pastimes. These involved simple mechanics based on sequences of illustrations and were known by grandiose names, like John Ayrton Paris's *thaumatrope* (1824), Joseph-Antoine Ferdinand Plateau's *phenakistiscope* (1829), Simon von Stampfer's *stroboscope* (1829) or William George Horner's *zoetrope* (1834). Over time these processes were improved and perfected, and in 1888 Émile Reynaud patented his *optical theatre*, which enabled the projection of a sequence of drawings on a screen in front of an audience.

Applied to photography, the breaking down of movement into a series of images bore one of its first fruits in so-called *chronophotography*. In 1874 the astronomer Pierre Jules Janssen used his *astronomical revolver* to capture the transit of Venus across the Sun, while Étienne Jules Marey put his *photographic gun* to peaceful, illustrative uses related to the movement of people and animals. Their experiments were answered from the other side of the Atlantic by Eadweard Muybridge with his famous studies of galloping horses (1878-1881).

## 2. Alexander Black, a journalist in the prehistory of the cinema

At the same time as 35 spectators in the basement of the Grand Café du Paris attended the first public projection of the Lumière brothers' first ten films – each lasting barely thirty seconds – the journalist and photographer Alexander Black (1859-1940) was filling theatres and auditoriums on the East Coast of the United States with a production lasting one and a half hours titled *Miss Jerry* (1894), in which he related the adventures of a young and intrepid journalist.<sup>1</sup>



"I am willing to write about anything but society. And I'm so tired of reading about women that I would rather not write them in particular – you know what I mean" (*Miss Jerry*, 1895: 23)

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<sup>1</sup> The work, as it was conceived by Black, has not been preserved until the present day. The Alexander Black Collection at Princeton University conserves 144 photographs on glass plates out of the more than 200 that made up the original projection (Entin, 2002). Original material is also preserved at St Lawrence University, Cornell University and in the New York Public Library (transcriptions, scripts, etc.). Black himself novelized his works, meaning that a representative sample of his work is still accessible. In the case of *Miss Jerry*, the transfer of the oral representation with images to book format was published in 1896 (New York: Scribner's Sons), and included 37 images from the original projection. This is freely accessible at *Internet Archive*: <https://archive.org/details/missjerryooblaciala>. A somewhat shorter version, which includes several series of photographs, was also published in the September 1895 issue of *Scribner's Magazine* (vol. 18, no. 3).



"But how did you come to know anything about railroads?" Mr. Depew asked Jerry. And Jerry had to remind Mr. Depew that she was not the person who was being interviewed (Miss Jerry, 1895: 52).

The success of projections using magic lanterns was not, of course, the exclusive property of Alexander Black; instead, these spectacles were well established in European and United States society in the late XIX century (Rosell, 1999: 13-23). It is estimated that while a handful of Parisians was attending the Lumière brothers' first projection, over fourteen thousand magic lantern spectacles were being shown throughout France, whether in squares, salons, music halls or small theatres and cafés (Frutos & López, 2010: 24).

Before the invention of the cinematograph, the technical difficulties in achieving a fluent sequence of images meant that the "illusion of reality" was incomplete. The first technical approaches to the cinema did not get beyond laboratory experiments and were only destined for the eyes of the curious at fairs and popular spectacles. William Friese-Greene's *chronophotographic camera* (1889) never achieved stable projections, nor did the Skladanowsky brothers' *bioscope* (1895). Edison did manage to get his *kinetoscope* to reproduce very brief films like *Fred Ott's Sneeze* (William K.L. Dickson, 1894), although projections were confined to individual viewing in coin-operated machines.

Unlike these approaches that focused on technically reproducing the moving image, Black's intention was primarily to tell a story that would be accompanied by images, in the hope that the combination of both elements would create an impression of dramatic action. Black himself explained his goal as follows in *Scribner's Magazine*:

In *Miss Jerry*, my purpose has been to test experimentally, in a quiet story, certain possibilities of illusion, with this aim always before me, that the illusion should not, because it need not and could not safely, be that of photographs from an acted play, nor of artistic illustration, but the illusion of reality. (Black, 1895b: 348)

In his article "The Camera and the Comedy" (1896), this journalist and photographer explained that while waiting for the *vitascopes*, the cinematograph and similar inventions to be perfected, the photographic camera – together with the stereopticon – provided the greatest freedom to tell a story, not only because of the greater clarity and stability of the pictorial results, but also because of its greater versatility (Black, 1896: 605-610).

Black had shown his passion for journalism and photography from a very young age. Born in Williamsburg in 1859 into a family of Scottish immigrants, at the age of 11 young

Alexander was already occasionally writing and printing his own newspaper, *The Young Idea*.<sup>2</sup> His determination to become a printer led him to give up his first job in a department store and join the printing company of L.D. & J.A. Robertson, which published *The Scotsman*, as a typesetter. Shortly before he turned 16, Bernard Peters' *Brooklyn Daily Times* gave him his first opportunity as a reporter. In 1891 he took charge of the newspaper's cultural section, which enabled him to enter into contact with the main New York cultural circles (Black, 1937: 16–19, 71–90).

Parallel to his career in the press, Black developed a passion for images that led him to publish a large number of articles on photography. In "The Amateur Photographer" (1887) he showed his enthusiasm for portable cameras, while his *Photography Indoors and Out* (1894) became a successful manual for amateurs. He also had first-hand knowledge of experiments and inventions representing the moving image. For example, he participated in a course given by the realist painter Thomas Eakins, who had made his own studies on capturing movement through photography. He also attended the talk given by Eadweard Muybridge at the Oxford Club in New York in 1889. For his part, Wallace Goold Levinson showed him his device for showing images with glass plate negatives at his laboratory in Brooklyn, which seemed to Black to be an exasperatingly complicated mechanism for attaining the required speed (Black, 1937: 131).

In March 1893, on the request of his friend the painter William Merritt Chase, Black organized a projection of his photographs at the Society of American Artists. The favorable response to his presentation encouraged him to turn it into a travelling show for the theatre and lyceum circuit. He initially called it "Life through a Detective Camera", which he later changed to "Ourselves as Others See Us"<sup>3</sup> (Black, 1937: 112).

During his tour of East Coast localities, Black constantly re-elaborated his presentations to include new pictures so that the public could return to see his spectacle. This process of constant recreation led him to realize that on occasion a sequence of apparently unconnected pictures could by itself create an irresistible narrative logic amongst spectators, with the result that photographs without any apparent interrelationship could sketch a coherent story. Black understood that pictures, even combined in an undefined way, spontaneously produced the appearance of narratives that were completely independent of the intentions of the presenter himself:

The whisper began in the clutter of Pictures which I had been displaying with the screen talks. When I found parallels and sequences not only in action but in likeness, when the bit of story in one snapshot began to join quite naturally with the bit of story in another snapshot of a differing origin, the whisper became a shout. (Black, 1937: 129)

### **3. The birth of the *picture play***

The first projections of images painted on glass sheets using magic lanterns dates back to the second half of the XVII century. At first, some of the most usual subjects were caricatures and scenes of hunting or gallant love, to which socially relevant acts like battles,

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<sup>2</sup> The newspaper edited by young Alexander Black was an example of his entrepreneurship. He began to publish it at the age of 11, first in pen and then using type, at the family printing shop with the help of his brother John and his friend Warren McInley. As well as writing and printing it, he also sold publicity. He managed to register his newspaper at the Library of Congress and managed to have subscribers in all the states.

<sup>3</sup> The first manual cameras were popularly known as "detective cameras" because they made it possible to take pictures without the photographer being seen. The organizer of his tour, Mayor Pond, suggested that he use the title "Life Through a Detective Camera" to capitalize on this popular usage. This remained the title until the tour reached Omaha, where the publicity for the event introduced him as a real New York detective. Following this confusion, the title of the presentation was changed to "Ourselves as Others See Us".

dances, parades or coronations were soon added. During the XVIII century, travelling lantern operators became popular street figures with their pictures of children's fables and stories, allegorical, religious or comic subjects, and even current events (Frutos & López, 2010: 3-4).



"Now, this chair is very artistic, but how do you expect a man to propose to you in such furniture?"  
(Miss Jerry, 1895: 119)

In the early XIX century, this audiovisual spectacle reached maturity with phantasmagoria sessions that with great scenic and narrative skill combined Old Testament, literary and mythological subjects with others of a more trivial and popular character. During the second half of XIX century, the magic lantern had become established as a means of communication for all social spheres. In big theatres it was possible to see projections of proverbs, legends or moral fables, historical events, classical literary works, or sessions of scientific popularization (Frutos & López, 2010: 10-17).

This technique was also combined with the well-established tradition of the *tableau vivant*, in which costumed models reproduced poses corresponding to historical scenes, popular stories, songs, poems or famous paintings; in their pictorial version these were usually accompanied by a dozen projected images.

Although Black's proposal was essentially similar to that long tradition of talks illustrated with a magic lantern, it gradually evolved towards a subtly different model. Facing the complementary relationship between texts and pictures that had characterized books and illustrated magazines during the XIX century, Black saw the potential of images for developing their own narrative (Remshardt, 2004: 456).

After outlining a combination of fiction and photography, each devised with a regard for the demands and limitations of the other, it began to be quite clear that the pictures must do more than illustrate. Thus there would be two points of radical difference from the illustrator's scheme. In the first place, the pictures would be primary, the text secondary. Again the pictures would not be art at all in an illustrator's sense, but simply the art of the *tableau vivant* plus the science of photography. If it is the function of art to translate nature, it is the privilege of photography to transmit nature. But in this case the *tableaux vivants* must be progressive, that the effect of reality may arise not from the suspended action of isolated pictures, but from the blending of many. (Black, 1895b: 348)

The success of the projections of "Ourselves as Others See Us", joined to the perception of the capacity of pictures to build their own narrative, encouraged Black to undertake a much more ambitious project: to shoot and create a dramatic fiction in images. The result was his first *picture play*, *Miss Jerry*<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> In the same way that Alexander Black was concerned with the term with which his work could be defined, the modern bibliography on the prehistory of cinema has also tried to specify the historiographical categories in which these works can be classified (cinema, early cinema, primitive cinema, etc.). On this subject, André Gaudreault's essay *Film and Attraction. From Kinematography to Cinema* (2011) is worth mentioning. In it, the author makes a

Although there was widespread interest in combining photographs and movement, there was no consistent model enabling the reproduction of a long narrative. This was because everyone, including Black himself, recognized that to be successful it should at least provide a visual suggestion of action, which no one believed could be achieved with a mere succession of photographs (Black, 1937: 132). On the other hand, at the end of the XIX century, theatre works had also become notably more sophisticated in order to satisfy the demands of an audience that wanted increasingly elaborate plots and scenery. The economic risk run by big productions was enormous and the *picture play* provided the opportunity of combining all those elements at a low cost (Johnson, 1980: 602).

The work of shooting *Miss Jerry* lasted for several weeks during the summer of 1894. The exteriors were taken with hand-held cameras in the streets of New York, while the interiors were photographed at the Carbon Studio belonging to the photographer James Lawrence Breese, at number 5, 16 West Street, New York. The first draft script was 14,000 words long. Besides the photographs of exteriors, Black shot all the interior images, of which there were about 300,<sup>5</sup> on eight by ten inch sheets, to obtain the clearest possible image (Black, 1937: 134).

To achieve the goal of generating an “illusion of reality” with his studio work, Black photographed the different positions of the actors in the scene with a static camera against fixed backgrounds. The succession of images thus created the illusion that the characters were moving against the background sets when reproduced in sequence. Projected at a rhythm of four images per minute, the photographs’ frequency was far from sufficient to provide a realistic imitation of movement, but they did suggest this in a credible way. Finally, use of the stereopticon for projections also helped achieve this goal, given that unlike magic lanterns they had two lenses, which made it possible to achieve a fluid transition from one image to the next by fading, without abrupt leaps.

Black’s choice of which instants to photograph also made a delicate contribution to the verisimilitude of the visual representation. The still images did not represent the critical moment of the action, whose visual intensity it would have been difficult to maintain for several seconds of projection. Instead they showed the moments immediately before and after, so that it was the spectator him or herself who would culminate the transition between the moments. In his search for realism as the final goal of his stories, Black considered that it would be disastrous for maintaining the illusion, and the audience’s interest, if the photographs appeared to be illustrations or artistic compositions, and also if they were perceived to be shots taken from a theatre play (Black, 1896: 605–610). The action was not shown, instead it was implicitly suggested in the fading between images, while it was the narrator who described events.

This change in how the photographs were conceived subtly anticipated the coming of the audiovisual narrative. Until then, serial discontinuity was the omnipresent form of representation in all cultural manifestations, whether these were magic lantern projections, *tableaux vivants*, illustrated novels or dioramas. Importance was given to reproducing the high point of the action, the “telling moment” or *tableau*. Black rejected this aesthetic strategy and instead showed the intermediate moments, always with indications of the immediately preceding or subsequent action.

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rigorous description of the terms that have been used throughout the history, and defends that the beginning of the narrative cinema, as we understand it today, must be placed at the end of the first decade of twentieth century, since until then the use of the image in the new inventions was basically monstrational.

<sup>5</sup> The exact number of images used in his presentations is unclear. In the novelization of the work Black stated that he used 250 glass sheets in the projections, although during its ten years on tour the work underwent small modifications and, as can be seen in the scripts preserved at St. Lawrence University and in the New York Public Library, the number fell to 213 (Remshardt, 2004: 457).

In his proposal, Black anticipated and intuited the bases of filmic language, where the image becomes the element leading the narration. Emphasis was not placed on the individual image but on the sequence, understood as the change produced between one image and the next. The mode for creating visual meaning was differential rather than accumulative, and much closer to filmic grammar than any earlier scenic manifestation (Remshardt, 2004: 460-462).

The *picture play* also anticipated some of the problems that would be incorporated into films, like questions of continuity (in costumes, etc.) that were involved in shooting sequences. Apparently, Black also used the technique of utilizing spontaneous dialogues or improvisation to obtain natural reactions from the actors, a practice that would later be common in silent films. The union between interiors and exteriors was another of the characteristic elements of his proposal, and the multiple locations employed demonstrated that there were no limits to camera narrative.

On the contrary, in many other aspects the original *picture play* proposal was clearly theatrical, a characteristic that Black himself considered unnecessary years later.<sup>6</sup> The work was divided into several acts, each of them preceded by the curtain opening, and at the end of the work an image was shown of the actors bowing and curtsying to the public. The composition, which only used general shots, also contributed to that effect and resembled the theatrical proscenium (Black, 1937: 132-133).

#### 4. Miss Jerry, pioneer of journalists on the big screen

Miss Jerry relates the story of a young woman who arrives in New York with her father, by whom she had been brought up in a mining region in the West after the early death of her mother. At the age of twenty, driven by her impulsive and determined character, she is not prepared to remain at home but aspires to “do something in the world on her own account” (Black, 1895a: 5). Bored of a monotonous life lacking in incentives provided by her well-off position and the distractions of women’s clubs, she decides to seek work as a reporter at *The Daily Dynamo*.

In his memoirs, *Time and Chance. Adventures with people and print* (1937), Black recalls that what inspired him to write *Miss Jerry* was the story of Cynthia Westover. She was born in Iowa in 1858 and, after the loss of her mother, from the age of four she accompanied her father, a geologist and miner, on his prospecting from Mexico to the East Coast. After settling in New York in 1882, she worked as a journalist for the *New York Recorder* and *New York Tribune* (Willard & Livermore, 1893: 761-762).

The work is written in a popular style, along the lines of the melodramas then achieving success in the New York theatres, short novels, and the literary realism of stories published in the press (Hollyman, 1983: 241). Black himself confessed that the work had a light-hearted plot, that he had written it thinking more of the lecture circuit than theatres, and more in terms of literature than the stage (Black, 1937: 132).

The protagonist of *Miss Jerry* largely embodies the feminist ideal of the “New Woman” of the late XIX century. The term was coined by Sarah Grand in her article “The New Aspect of the Woman Question”, published in *The North American Review* in March 1894, shortly before Alexander Black started to write his work, and its examples were the strong female characters in the contemporary works of Henry James or Henrik Ibsen. This New Woman “was either what her detractors called an unattractive, browbeating usurper of traditionally masculine roles, or she was what her champions proclaimed an independent, college-

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6 After the development of the cinema years later, Black preferred to call his works slow movies, distancing them from the theatricality that the original term, picture play, alluded to (Black, 1937:132; 137).

educated, American girl devoted to suffrage, progressive reform, and sexual freedom” (Patterson, 2005: 2).

The choice of journalism, an eminently male profession at that time, strengthens this idea of conquering spaces traditionally reserved for men. This is summed up by Miss Jerry herself in her reply to the objections her father makes to her choice: “You think newspaper writing is a little wild and Bohemian. You are afraid someone will call me a reporter” (Black, 1895a: 48-49).

In a society where calling a well-off woman a reporter could be considered a dishonor, Miss Jerry's independent spirit acquires even greater strength. At her job interview she insists that she would like to write about anything except society news, the space traditionally reserved for women in the newsrooms of that time: “I'm so tired of reading about women, that I would rather not write about them in particular” (Black, 1895a: 24). Miss Jerry restates her determination concerning her perception of women's new role in the press when her editor suggests that she focus on a reportage from a female perspective. She replies that people are tired of the “everlasting woman's view in the newspapers”: “I'm proud of being a woman, but I don't wish to be either praised or pardoned for being one” (Black, 1895a: 49).

In historical terms *Miss Jerry* portrays the situation of women in the newsrooms of daily papers in the late XIX and early XX centuries, where they were relegated to functions that rarely went beyond fashion, the home, beauty tips and literary criticism. In 1901 the *Ladies' Home Journal*, which Cynthia W. Alden worked for, conducted a survey amongst press professionals on the presence of women in newsrooms and asked them if they would like their daughter to work for a newspaper. The result was devastating: 39 out of 42 women and all 30 men surveyed answered ‘no’. The majority of the women referred to the profession's hard profile. The answers amongst the men varied from paternalistic to reactionary; one of them was concerned about the harmful effect that the profession could have on a woman's health; while according to another, journalism instilled an “atrocious sense of freedom” in women which unconsciously degenerated into every type of “license of speech and behavior”; and a third underscored that the profession forced them to work like men, “which was not a good idea” (Teel, 2006: 25).

Nor was the choice of an advertising model to portray the young and vigorous journalist a matter of chance. In this period the new image of women was set by Charles Dana Gibson with his *Gibson Girl*, and Blanche Bayliss – who played Miss Jerry – worked as a model for Gibson's rival, A.B. Wenzell. Miss Jerry's characterization as an intrepid and self-sufficient woman, with a deliberately androgynous name, concurs with the new, independent and active female canon of the end of the XIX century (Remshardt, 2004: 474).

The sentimental plot of the work, which takes up almost the entire second act, contributes to completing the portrait of women journalists of the period. Miss Jerry must decide between the attentions of a rich, unscrupulous miner and her poor but honest editor at the *Daily Dynamo*. She ends up leaving her job to follow the latter as he pursues his career as a correspondent in London. In this aspect, Black's work anticipates the first great stereotype used in the cinema to portray women during the 1920s and 1930s. Miss Jerry becomes one of the first *sob-sisters*: the woman journalist who works alongside male colleagues, drinks and argues with them, but cries in a corner when the man she loves treats her as a sister rather than as a lover. As Saltzman notes, the destiny of the majority of these women journalists in the endings of films, irrespective of how strong or independent they might have been, was to give up everything for marriage, family life and children, the exact opposite of the route followed by their male colleagues (Saltzman, 2002: 187).

As noted above, this characterization was also related to the omnipresent Gibson Girl of the late XIX century, who, in Kitch's words, “was bold, confident, and free to do as she

pleased, but most often her freedom was superficial, a matter of style rather than substance" (2001: 41).

In this respect, the reality on which the work was based emulated fiction, as the ending of *Miss Jerry* did not differ greatly from the biography of Cynthia Westover herself. In his memoirs Black relates that after the work's premiere, he talked to the latter journalist about *Miss Jerry* and its parallel with the relationship she had had with her editor (Black, 1937: 315):

- There is one trouble with your story. You have made Jerry marry the city editor. Real life fails you there. I'm awfully sorry.
- Why don't you marry him? – asked Black.
- I would if he'd ask me.

Cynthia Westover's chief was John Alden, an obstinate bachelor who constantly made fun of any professional woman. "If I ever marry – Black recalls him saying – it will be some woman who can't read or write". However, reality emulated fiction, and Cynthia and John finally got married in 1896, and she came to be known as Cynthia W. Alden.

Beyond all the stereotypes associated with a beautiful young woman starting out in the world of journalism (Bezunartea *et al.*, 2008) and who takes on the job against the opinion of everyone around her, Alexander Black's work also raises other professional questions such as respect for sources, "off the record", and the orthodox definition of the criterion of public interest. All the professional dilemmas are resolved in favor of the integrity of the profession, of which a positive image is given.

This portrayal of journalism emulates the confrontation the work establishes between the savage and rural West and the cosmopolitan and urban East. Thus, journalism, a hectic and urban activity *par excellence*, allows Miss Jerry to meet some of the most important city authorities, but also some of the most needful sectors. The goal of creating an illusion of reality led Black to include in his fictions public figures in real locations so as to increase the story's authenticity (Black, 1895b: 353). Equally, the very sound of the newspaper's name, the *Daily Dynamo*, evokes that frenetic atmosphere that the young woman discovers in the newsroom: "She grew somewhat accustomed to the noises, to the moving of feet, the jingling of electric bells, the fragments of conversation, the clicking of a typewriter that seemed to be playing in rivalry to the finer staccato of the telegraph instrument!" (Black, 1895a: 43).

## 5. Success and the years on tour

*Miss Jerry* was presented at the Carbon Studio in New York on 9 October 1894. The first performance, which lasted two hours, had a musical accompaniment by John Hyatt Brewer. The premiere was attended by writers, critics from the press, members of the cast, relatives and friends. In his monologue Black read out the parts of all the characters.

The work was enthusiastically received in the press, where there were comments underscoring that Black's narrations, applied to Edison's invention, should reach the big screen. In its review of 13 October 1894, *Harper's Weekly* stated that nobody doubted any longer that entertainment was going to follow the course marked out by the *picture play* and that spectators would no longer be content with listening to stories; instead they would want to see and hear them "with the help of electricity". *The Critic* declared that the story resembled an illustrated short story, while the *New York Herald* said that it was an adaptation of illustrated magazines. For its part, the *New York Sun* spoke of a "kinetoscopic comedy" and declared that spectators lost the notion that they were watching images and imagined that real figures were involved.

Black gave up his job at the *Brooklyn Daily Times* to dedicate himself exclusively to presenting his work on the East Coast over the following years. His choice for making his

work known proved to be a good one, since instead of making his presentations in popular theatres, he opted to tour the lyceum circuit. This was attended by the upper and middle classes, to whom he appealed with the lure of intellectual stimulation that went beyond mere entertainment.

The *picture play* was a strictly unipersonal initiative that was prolonged for nearly a decade. As a genuine one-man band, Black was scriptwriter, director, producer, camera, decorator, electrician, responsible for costumes, mechanic and actor. In addition, he himself funded the production and, with the sole help of his technician Tracey Tisdell, put on the spectacles, as he neither franchised them, nor carried out a mass distribution. In spite of that, it is estimated that by the end of the 1890s nearly half a million spectators had seen *Miss Jerry*. This made the work about the young journalist into a blockbuster, which brought in nearly 10,000 dollars<sup>7</sup> in the 1897-1898 season alone. (Remshardt, 2004: 478). Its success encouraged Black to create two further *picture plays*, *A Capital Courtship* and *The Girl and the Guardsman*. The total number of spectators attending Black's three *picture plays* probably exceeded one million (Johnson, 1980: 598).

In 1900, after years of presentations and bored of the nomadic lifestyle forced on him by permanently travelling from city to city, he accepted the post of art manager at Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*, which he was offered by Don. C. Seitz. He began to cut down the number of his presentations, until stopping them completely in 1904. He transferred his experience with images to the profusely illustrated Sunday edition of the *World*, of which he later became editor (Askari, 2009: 154; Black, 1937: 172). After being forced to resign because of an accusation of "indecenty",<sup>8</sup> he abandoned Pulitzer's newspaper to become the editor of Frank Seaman's advertising bureau (1910-1913). Shortly after, thanks to Moses Koenigsberg, he returned to journalism as editor of the Newspaper Feature Service, the agency that coordinated the visual aspects (comic strips, photographs and illustrated reportages) of William Randolph Hearst's newspapers, and later of the King Features Syndicate (Black, 1937: 232-247).

## **6. The legacy of Black and *Miss Jerry***

The adventure of the *picture play* ended with the last public presentation Black made of his works. Black never ventured into the world of cinema. He considered that the limited audiovisual works, whose creation was made possible by the primitive cinema, were not a sufficient format for the stories he wanted to tell. "Under the circumstances no one was blamable for not foreseeing, at the beginning time, the destinies of full motion" (Black, 1937: 155).

Black was also highly ambivalent about being considered a cinema pioneer. He categorically denied being a precursor of the cinema, but he did credit himself with having developed the screen drama. He does so in a statement, signed in approximately 1920, that is conserved in the New York Public Library (Remshardt, 2004: 472).

Mr. Black explicitly repudiates all suggestions that he had anything to do with the origin or development of motion pictures. His relationship is as the originator of a 'slow movie', with registered images in continuity [...]. Mr. Black is not the pioneer of the movies but of screen drama [...]. He was the first to put drama on the screen, the first to use the term 'picture play' and to be known coast to coast as 'the picture play man', the first to hold an audience for an hour and a half looking at (and hearing) a consecutive play, the first to use sustained music with themes

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<sup>7</sup> In terms of constant dollars this figure would be approximately equivalent to 242,000 dollars today. See: *Mesuring Worth*, <http://www.measuringworth.com/uscompare/relativevalue.php>.

<sup>8</sup> According to Black the accusation was due to his having an "indecent" engraving depicting a nude female model on his wall. He accepted the accusation, paid the fine and left the *World*.

adjusted to the development of the plot, the first to use superimposed images to illustrate the thoughts of the characters, the first to use an opening curtain and a curtain call introducing all the characters, the first to use a picture playbill giving names of characters and actors, etc. All these features were introduced at the first showing of *Miss Jerry* in 1894.

Along the same lines, in an interview given to the *New York Times* in 1920, responding to a question from the journalist Joseph Anthony about how it was possible that he hadn't dedicated himself to the cinema, Black stated that he had used a knife to carve what would later become a big and complex machinery.<sup>9</sup> He denied having any influence on the development of the cinema industry, but he did claim his place as a precursor of scripts for audiovisual stories.

The day of one-man production is long past. Perhaps the reason I haven't written for the motion picture screen is because I know how little the writing can have to do with the result. A man can no more write a picture play than write a locomotive. He can build specifications, but unless he can be his own engineer he must trust the determining result to others. At present the movie people are on the wrong track in taking stories from books. The photoplay art is essentially pantomimic, and the photoplay should be written as pantomime. It is a separate art and it is worthy of its own technique. (Anthony, 1920: 54).

For its part, the first representation of journalists in the cinema followed a different route, more similar to the technical experiments of Edison and the Lumière brothers than to the dramatic story of the *picture play*. This consisted in very brief pieces showing everyday scenes of journalistic life, which at times had an anecdotal character like *Distributing a War Extra* (1899) or *Horsewhipping the Editor* (1900) (Ness, 1997: 7). It was necessary to wait almost two decades, as the length of films increased, for the appearance of more elaborate plots that were to become very familiar years later, like *The Conspiracy* (Allan Dwan, 1914) or *Making a Living* (Henry Lehrman, 1914). The first comfortable cinemas and long films would not arrive until 1915, provided by Adolph Zukor.

## 7. Conclusions

Alexander Black was not a filmmaker or an inventor, but a journalist with a passion for photography. He refined the expressive capacities of existing technical media to try and recreate what the first attempts to reproduce moving images could not achieve, namely, to tell complete stories using images. Black's work was closely related to the experiments being made involving moving images, of which he had first-hand knowledge. But unlike other pioneers Black had a story to tell, rather than a mechanical process that needed to be provided with content.

His contribution was unrelated to the technical advance of cinema, since his *picture plays* can be considered as a link in the longer chain of experiments leading up to the cinema, but not strictly as one of its precursors. Nonetheless, Black, who above all thought of himself as a writer, identified the narrative potential of a story told in images and his success showed that the public was prepared to welcome cinematographic stories with open arms. Together with other expressions of popular culture of the period, Black's *picture plays* showed that, far from any technological determinism, society was demanding and consuming elaborate audiovisual stories prior to the appearance of the cinema.

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<sup>9</sup> That same year, on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the birth of the cinema, Hollywood producers sought to legitimize the young industry by producing a historical account of its origins, and considered Black to be close enough in time to be relevant, above all because he offered cinema a label of high culture. In 1919 Adolf Zukor suggested that Black should make a short on the story "The Evolution of Picture Play" (Askari, 2009: 159).

Black's *picture plays* did not compete with the cinema or with the popular spectacles of the time; they were aimed instead at a more sophisticated public. For a decade, his spectacle coexisted with the cinema's first steps, and anticipated by two decades some of the narrative challenges that the film industry had to face during its consolidation. Due to the solutions he provided for problems that the seventh art would have to confront later on, he can be considered, in spite of not being a precursor, to have shown a proto-cinematographic sensitivity.

On the other hand, his initiative also had a completely singular character, since it was a personal one, which he had no wish to develop or transfer; that is, he kept it apart from any of the processes of industrial or collective exploitation that characterized the cinema from its very beginnings.

The image of journalism provided by *Miss Jerry* also anticipated one of the most solid stereotypes of the woman-journalist in the cinema, known as the *sob-sister*. This figure was presented as an incisive, capable, energetic and qualified woman, who in the final instance abandons the profession in favor of family life, to which she is finally destined in one way or another. Nonetheless, Black's story unaffectedly incorporated the necessary presence of women on equal terms into a profession that until then had almost exclusively male characteristics.

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