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*Cinema's First Nasty Women: An Irreverent Four-Disc  
Collection* ed. by Maggie Hennefeld, Laura Horak, and Elif  
Rongen-Kaynakçı

Lawrence Howe

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than a theoretical one. The participatory cultural framework, as Borum concedes, doesn't fully take into account how deeply racism, misogyny, privilege, and greed are built into the foundations of Hollywood, technology, and the comedy industry. It also doesn't acknowledge that marginalized comics and their comedy can also do harm. She mentions Hasan Minhaj as an example of a changemaker who combines social justice with his comedy. But Minhaj also has come under fire regarding the truth of some of his most impactful stories and also is facing allegations of misogyny against and mismanagement of members of his writing staff during his tenure on Comedy Central's *Patriot Act*. Not that this discounts the importance of the light his work shines on Islamophobia, but it reminds us that neither social justice organizations nor marginalized comedians are immune from perpetuating injustice. The strength of this book is its optimism and pragmatism in showing how to build coalitions that can create change working within existing systems, but for initiatives to make real change they must wrestle realistically with the darker sides of those institutions as well.

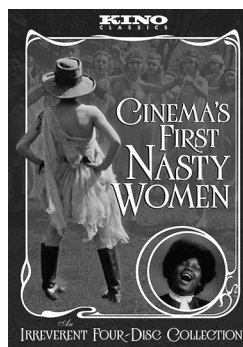
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*Cinema's First Nasty Women: An Irreverent Four-Disc Collection.*

Curated by Maggie Hennefeld, Laura Horak, and Elif Rongen-Kaynakçi. New York: Kino Lorber, 2022. Running time: 875 mins.

REVIEWED BY LAWRENCE HOWE

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Rarely does a collection like *Cinema's First Nasty Women* come along. In fact, I can't think of another one that accomplishes as much as this one does.

Showcasing ninety-nine silent films from Denmark, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, the UK, and the US from 1898 to 1926, this collection is a tour de force of painstaking archival work, film restoration, and original scoring. In short, it's a significant landmark of film scholarship. As a recovery project of forgotten cinematic texts, it warrants the gratitude and respect

of the scholarly community. Yet it does more: it frames this important swath of early cinema in terms of issues of race, class, and gender that are central to contemporary cultural inquiry. Thus, like the most successful works of history, it shows an appreciation for the past and an awareness of its resonances with the present.

The reissuing of these lost films prompts a revision of the conventional notion that silent film comedies are the domain of male performance. With assistance from a long list of archival and scholarly collaborators—the collection comes with a QR code for accessing an online booklet that includes 113 pages of description, short biographies of notable figures, film credits, and extensive bibliography—Hennefeld, Horak, and Rongen-Kaynakçi show that silent film, and especially silent film comedy, is a performance medium in which women excelled. Moreover, the women who appear in these films come from diverse backgrounds with respect to race and ethnicity, gender and sexual identity, and class. The films often depict their protagonists tackling social issues that intersect with these overlapping identities.

In addition to the films that are the primary content of the project, the four discs include introductory interviews with the curators and commentary on the films by featured scholars whose prior work distinguishes their expertise in their various fields, one of whom is Dana Reason, the music supervisor of the project. Reason worked with a range of composers—many of whom are women as well as Black, Indigenous, or people of color—to create sonic accompaniment that complements the visual content while avoiding simply imitating period music. The films consistently show how women actors of early silent cinema broke with and challenged stereotypes of gender, race, and ethnicity. Nonetheless, films produced a century ago are also not free from the prejudices of their time. Because the curators of the project are sensitive to the power of images, they formed an antiracism advisory panel in order to address the cultural conflicts that those images can evoke.

The films are organized on four discs around broad thematic titles. Disc 1, “Disastrous Domestic and Anarchic Tomboys,” includes twenty-six films that disrupt the conventional images of women in various and mostly domestic scenarios and is anchored by fourteen films from the popular French series of *Leontine* comedies that follow the chaotic hijinks of the mischievous eponymous heroine. Disc 2, “Queens of Destruction,” collects films that show women functioning (or dysfunctioning) beyond the domestic space. Of the thirty-two films in this category, there are several series that

feature recurring characters such as Cunegonde played by Little Chrysia and Rosalie and Pétronille performed by Sarah Duhamel. The titles in each series center on the personality of their particular screen personae, much like Leontine on disc 1. The production of multiple films about these characters demonstrates the popularity and star power of these women silent film comedians; Chaplin, Keaton, Arbuckle, and Lloyd were not the only screen performers to build loyal audiences. Disc 3, "Gender Rebels," could be the title of any of the discs in the collection, but the sixteen films under this subtitle focus on adventurous women who perform their exploits sometimes disguised as men. Although a number of melodramas are included in this category, comedy is still the preeminent mode. And because many of these films are set on the American frontier, they feature Indigenous actresses, such as Lilian St. Cyr (Ho Chunk) who in her seventy-film career was influential in challenging the entrenched, reductive image of the Native woman. Also noteworthy are four Griffith melodramas casting Edna Foster as the star in the recurring role of Billy, a boy protagonist who was a mainstay of Foster's film career. Disc 4, "Female Tricksters," includes films that represent their heroines as cunning individuals and not simply as, for instance, impulsive chaos agents. The final film, an American work titled "What's the World Coming To?" (1926) is a prescient farce set one hundred years in the future, "when men have become more like women and women more like men," predicting the gender fluidity that has come more prominently into focus in our own era.

An account of this remarkable project within the limitations of this review can only scratch the surface of what it accomplishes. I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that *Cinema's First Nasty Women* is worthy of the adjective "monumental." Every library should have a copy of this important work. It's an indispensable resource for anyone who is serious about the study and teaching of film, gender, culture, performance, history, and, not least, humor. The wide dissemination of these cultural artifacts will, I suspect, have an immeasurable impact on all of these fields. An added bonus is that these films are as enjoyable as they are illuminating about the disciplines they engage.

LAWRENCE HOWE, professor emeritus of English and film studies at Roosevelt University, is the coeditor of *Refocusing Chaplin: A Screen Icon Through Critical Lenses* (2013) and past editor of *Studies in American Humor*.