

The Exploits of Elaine

By Margaret Hennefeld

Pearl White, the perilous “serial queen” film heroine of the 1910s, earned her nickname as “the Girl with Ninety-Nine Lives”¹ in this 14-episode 1914 American film series, “The Exploits of Elaine.” White plays title character Elaine Dodge: a girl detective who repeatedly risks life and limb to help solve the murder of her dead father by the series’ homicidal villain, “The Clutching Hand” (played by Sheldon Lewis). In each episode, this ominous villain repeatedly invents new ways of imperiling Elaine: she consecutively survives drowning, a poisoned wristwatch, being gassed with small traces of arsenic dormant in her bedroom wallpaper, having all of the blood siphoned out of her own body, and being embalmed by notorious Chinese gang members. In one episode, “The Life Current,” Elaine literally dies and then returns from the dead, resuscitated by a makeshift defibrillator engineered by her love interest, Dr. Craig Kennedy (Arnold Daly).

Elaine’s bodily mortality functions as the limit case of narrative representation in this early film serial. Finding the thing that might destroy Elaine for good—after all, this is a lady who can return from the dead—becomes the driving force of every episode. It is no wonder that Elaine Dodge held such a strong appeal to World War I soldiers on leave from the trenches; they referred to White adoringly as “the peerless, fearless girl,” and reportedly demanded a full screening of the entire serial after having watched several episodes of “Exploits” in France while on furlough.²

Pearl White and Elaine Dodge were both far from peerless: White cut her teeth playing not Elaine, but Pauline in the also-alliteratively titled serial, “The Perils of Pauline” (Pathé, 20 episodes, 1914). Following on the popularity of “Perils” and “Exploits,” White appeared in numerous other Pathé serials through the 19-teens, including “The New Exploits of Elaine” (1915, 10 episodes), “The Romance of Elaine” (1915, 12 episodes), “Pearl of the Army” (1916, 15 episodes), “The Lightning Raider” (1919, 15 episodes), “The Iron Claw” (1916, 20 episodes), and “The House of Hate” (1918, 20 episodes). Meanwhile, other “serial queens,” such as Helen Holmes, Ruth Roland, Grace Cunard, and

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Another crime of the “CLUTCHING HAND” unsolved—that of

The Vanishing Jewels

in the third stirring installment of “ELAINE.” A criminal who warns his victim beforehand of the day and hour of his crime and in spite of all safeguards accomplishes it and vanishes, leaving no trail!

What suspense, what tenseness of situations, what remarkable manifestations of Science are here!

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Advertisement from January 16, 1915 edition of Moving Picture World touts the serial’s third installment “The Vanishing Jewels.”
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Marie Walcamp, fostered the extreme popularity of the genre, starring respectively in “The Hazards of Helen” (Kalem, 48 episodes, 1914-1917), “The Adventures of Ruth” (Pathé, 15 episodes, 1919), “Lucille Love, Girl of Mystery” (Universal, 15 episodes, 1914), and “The Lion’s Claws” (Universal, 18 episodes, 1918). “The Exploits of Elaine” was published as a print serial, written by Arthur Reeve, released more or less simultaneously with each film episode (depending on the location of your local film theater).

Episodes of The Exploits of Elaine typically centered on some mysterious new technology—such as “The Death Ray,” “The Life Current,” or “The Blood Crystals”—that would alternately imperil or salvage Elaine, either threatening her life or delivering her from the grips of death. Feminist film historian, Jennifer Bean, has aptly described White as a

“catastrophe machine:” part of a “technology of early stardom ... [that] flaunts catastrophe, disorder, and disaster rather than continuity and regulation” (407).ⁱⁱⁱ In opposition to the Clutching Hand’s deadly machinations, Kennedy, Elaine’s scientist-criminologist love interest, invents non-lethal devices in order to watch over Elaine and protect her from her incessant exposure to harm.

The list of ingenious gadgets that Kennedy invents in order to save Elaine from her own sense of adventure is amazingly exhaustive and disturbingly surveillant. These panoptic trinkets include: the *Televue* (a repurposed periscope for “seeing from a distance”), the *Seismagraph* (which accumulates intruders’ footprints inside one’s home), and the *Detectascope* (a modified fisheye lens for seeing through private keyholes), which Kennedy uses to spy on Elaine in her hotel room during Elaine’s furtive meeting with a woman impersonating her mother-in-law. These surveillant technologies are shot through with gender connotations. At one point in the serialized novel, from which this film was continuously adapted, a character named Milton is imagined to have an *X-Ray Eye* so that he might spy on a woman through a wall in order to expose her fake tears. And more pointedly, after Kennedy and Elaine have a lover’s quarrel, Kennedy laments that he does not possess “an X-ray apparatus that might read a woman’s heart, as he was accustomed to read others of nature’s secrets” (130).^{iv}

Kennedy’s spy technologies range from the visual to the aural: in another episode, intriguingly titled “The Hidden Voice,” Kennedy devises a *Vocaphone*, which is basically a secret telephone with amplified sound used for monitoring Elaine’s vulnerability in her domicile. Kennedy also hides the *Vocaphone* inside of Elaine’s medieval plate armor, which for some reason has pride of place in her living room. In addition, Kennedy invents the *Telegraphone*, which is literally a wiretap that records phone calls. The *Telegraphone*, Kennedy explains, uses “no discs or cylinders but spools of extremely fine steel wire...each particle of steel undergoes an electromagnetic transformation by which the sound is indelibly imprinted on it” (146). Sometimes it is hard to tell which end Kennedy is more excited about: the voyeuristic object or the surveillant device itself.

Indeed, the obsessive desire to watch over Elaine, allegedly in order to protect her from her own pluckiness, quickly becomes a panoptic nightmare that haunts everyone. The home interior is the least private space imaginable. The necessity to escape from the clutches of death becomes a pathological

excuse for the pervasive obsession with self-surveillance, which is the reverse side of this unprecedented voyeuristic access. For example, in one scene, Kennedy and his assistant must conceal their awareness that they are being watched in order to prevent an even greater terror from materializing: a machine called “The Death Ray” that zaps and kills its victims from a distance, marking each body with a horrible coin-sized blotch on their skin. The death ray literalizes Michel Foucault’s idea of a biopolitical apparatus: death is just a specter of the deeper nightmare of this technology, which functions primarily through power-knowledge discourses and the manipulative administration of living bodies. Believing is not just about seeing, so much as it is about the possibility of oneself being watched.

Elaine Dodge may have had ninety-nine lives—inoculating her against the effects of vampires, a frozen safe, or even a death ray—but she inevitably lived out all of them at the wrong end of a *Televue* or a *Detectascope*. Given the subsequent rise and proliferation of personal television screens, digital media, forensic technologies, and increasingly sophisticated home surveillance systems, “The Exploits of Elaine” represents a crucial text and remarkable history of how these gendered media devices have been finely woven into the history of American cultural identity and entertainment pastimes.

ⁱ Alice Hall, “The Ninety-Nine Lives of Pearl White,” *The Picturegoer*, Feb. 1921, p. 31.

ⁱⁱ “Pearl White, French Idol. Films of Pathé’s ‘Peerless, Fearless Girl’ Preferred by Sodliers.” *The Hobart Daily Republican* (Hobart, OK), June 22, 1916, p. 3.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jennifer Bean, “Technologies of Early Stardom,” in *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema* (eds. Jennifer Bean and Diane Negra) (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002): 404-443.

^{iv} Arthur Reeve, *The Exploits of Elaine* (New York: Harper, 1915).

The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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