
Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Alice Guy—Cinema Pioneer

Elisa Leonelli · Wednesday, May 6th, 2020

Despite the fact that I am a life-long cinephile and earned a Master's degree in Critical Studies from USC School of Cinematic Arts, I was not aware of the pioneering work of Alice Guy, the very first woman filmmaker in the history of cinema. So it was very exciting to discover the documentary *Be Natural: The Untold Story of Alice Guy-Blaché*, and meet the director Pamela Green and the co-writer Joan Simon. This event was to take place live on March 12 at the [Annenberg Space for Photography](#), in the context of their current exhibit [Vanity Fair: Hollywood Calling](#), but it was cancelled because of the coronavirus lockdown. It was rescheduled virtually for April 30 and more than 400 people participated, including me.



Alice Guy (c) Be Natural Productions

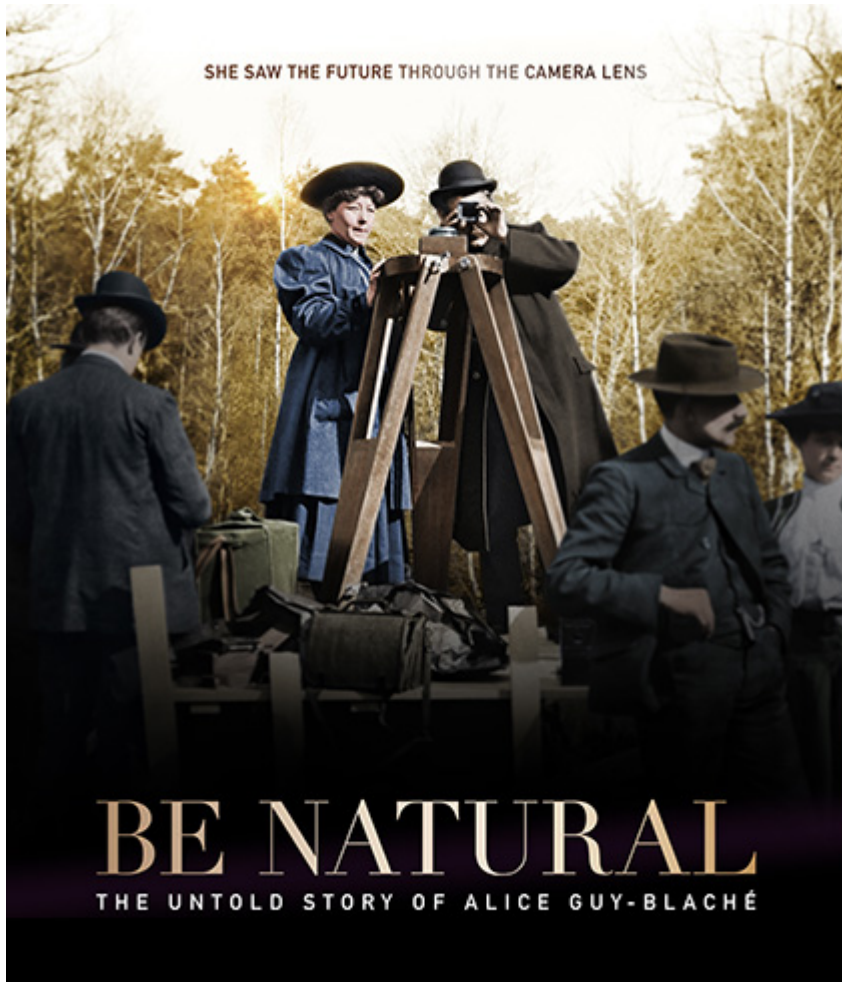
[Alice Guy](#) was born in Paris in 1873, and after the death of her father in 1891, she trained as a typist and stenographer to help support her widowed mother and three siblings. In 1895 she landed a job as secretary to [Léon Gaumont](#), and attended the first demonstration (March 22, 1895) of the

Cinématograph by the [Lumière brothers, Auguste and Louis](#). The Gaumont Company also produced motion pictures and in 1896 her boss allowed his young assistant to direct her idea, *The Cabbage Fairy*.



Alice Guy directing Bessie Love-The Great Adventure (c) Anthony Slide-Be Natural Productions

Alice would go on to write and direct hundreds of silent films, she introduced close-ups and hand tinting, experimented with the Chronophone system for synchronized sound. I love the humorous *Madame's Cravings* (1906) about a pregnant woman licking a lollipop, drinking absinthe, smoking, and giving birth to a baby in a cabbage patch, the hilarious role reversal in *Consequences of Feminism* (1906) with the men sewing, ironing and pushing baby carriages, while the women drink and smoke at the bar, and the all dancing *Irresistible Piano* (1907). In 1907 Alice moved to the US with her British cameraman husband Herbert Blaché (he was 24, she was 33). She had three children, all the while directing films, from dramas like *Falling Leaves* (1912) to comedies like *A House Divided* (1913), to westerns, and starting her own studio, Solax, built in 1912 in Fort Lee, New Jersey. A huge sign spelling BE NATURAL hung on the wall as advice for the actors. After divorcing from her philandering husband, she moved back to Paris in 1922 and was unable to get work as a filmmaker. She wrote her memoirs that were published after her death in 1968.



Be Natural premiered at the Cannes Film festival in 2018, was shown at Telluride, Deauville, and the New York film festival. You may watch it for free on [Kanopy](#), the streaming channel of the LA Public Library, where you will also find several films by Alice Guy. Another one that expresses her feminist convictions is *Making an American Citizen* (1912), where an abusive immigrant husband learns the hard way not to beat his wife or treat her like a beast of burden. I found more charming films on YouTube: *Midwife to the Upper Class* (1902), *A Sticky Woman* (1906), *Heroine* (1907).

In 2009 Joan Simon had curated the first [retrospective](#) of Alice Guy's films at the Whitney Museum in New York. These will be included in the Blu-Ray *Pioneers: First Women Filmmakers* available in November for \$60. There were several women filmmakers in the early years of cinema, such as the American [Lois Weber](#), whose work is also featured in this collection.

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