Early silent screen star, Annette Kellerman helped redefine gender norms in the United States by openly displaying her body as the feminine ideal of health and fitness. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, the Australian-born swimmer, vaudevillian, and film star achieved worldwide popularity for both her athletic prowess as a long-distance swimmer and her scandalous beach attire. She turned her notoriety into a successful entertainment career, first in vaudeville, then on screen in series of mermaid films. Kellerman also published books and delivered lectures that addressed the health and fitness of women.

Throughout the period of her greatest fame, Kellerman self-consciously addressed the gender-specific obstacles that confronted women athletes and performers, very often, addressing her female fans woman-to-woman. At the same time, she also demonstrated her desire to break down barriers by transgressing Victorian gender roles that insisted on the strict divide between the “separate spheres.” Like many other notable women of the period, she simply wanted the same opportunities as men to participate in sports and entertainment. While Kellerman did not openly describe herself as a feminist, her career illustrates what historian Nancy Cott has described as one of its paradoxes, namely that feminism “requires gender consciousness for its basis yet calls for the elimination of prescribed gender roles.”

The meaning of Kellerman’s physicality was certainly in the eye of the beholder. Kellerman was certainly self-conscious about the display of her physical beauty. However, she was anything, but a passive vessel, presented solely for the male gaze. She promoted the display of her own body, thus endorsing a definition of female beauty that emphasized fitness and active pleasure, rather than slenderness and leisure. Historian Joan Jacobs Brumberg explicitly contrasts Kellerman and her healthy body culture to the growing emphasis on slenderness and dieting for women that she also traces to the early decades of the twentieth century.
For Kellerman, her lifelong pursuit of physical excellence begins as a child learning to swim in the clubs and beaches in her native Australia. While film historians do not have access to most of Kellerman’s films, we do have biographical knowledge of her childhood and of her early successes as a swimmer and aquatic performer. Perhaps more than other screen performers, biography provides an essential insight into the film career of Kellerman, because her stardom depended less on her ability to act the part than for the part to fit her public persona. Her name was above the title of her best known features, so we must assume Kellerman and her athletic feats were, in Tom Gunning’s phrase, “the spectacle of attraction.”

What is more, early feature film producers such as Carl Laemmle and William Fox hoped to exploit her popularity by conflating her on-screen character with her off-screen achievements as a world class swimmer and adventurer in order to produce their studios’ longer, more exotic productions.

Kellerman’s public persona rested on both her achievement as a swimmer and the highly romanticized view of her native Australia as a rugged frontier. According to her most recent biographers, Kellerman, born in 1886, was raised in a cultured, bourgeois household in suburban Sydney. Her French-born mother, Alice Charbonnet, raised her four children in an environment of music and culture. She would later enroll young Annette in ballet class and dance would be a lifelong pursuit. Despite the comfortable and nurturing atmosphere of the Kellerman household, young Annette had to overcome early physical adversity. At the age of two, she was diagnosed with rickets and wore iron leg braces until she was seven. Her doctor prescribed swimming and soon she excelled at what was gaining great popularity as the national sport of Australia. While latter press releases and legend maintained Annette learned to swim among the sharks of the Great Barrier Reef, she took lessons at a local swimming pool. Managed by her father Frederick, the teenage Annette swam competitively at meets held at a growing number of swim clubs in Sydney and Melbourne. Her childhood experiences made her something of a saleswoman for the virtues of physical exercise, especially swimming, leading her to write three books: Swimming for Health, Exercise and Pleasure (U.K. 1906), How to Swim (1918), and Physical Beauty: How to Keep It (1918). Kellerman’s ideas on physical fitness also appeared in dance and general women’s magazines and even Bernarr Macfadden’s popular Physical Culture magazine.

Kellerman was at the forefront of changes that were occurring in international sports for both men and women athletes. When Kellerman began her swimming career, the line between amateur and professional athlete was not very clear and there were few internationally regulated venues for swimmers, especially women. When the first modern Olympics were held in Athens in 1896, only three men’s swimming events were held. The first women’s swimming Olympic meet was in 1912 (years after Kellerman began her swimming career), and was only a short 100 meter race. Rather than internationally sanctioned amateur events, newspapers and swim clubs sponsored long distance swimming events in Europe and England often providing lucrative prize money. Kellerman, going by the nickname “Australian Mermaid,” achieved renown by winning races held in the Seine and the Thames. She also wore what would become her trademark—a black, one-piece bathing suit. By 1905, she had made three unsuccessful attempts to swim the English Channel. However, her record of ten and a half hours in the water remained the women’s record until Gertrude Ederle became the first woman to cross the Channel in 1921.

This mix of pure athleticism and showmanship was the trademark of Kellerman’s career in vaudeville and later on screen when she moved to the United States. While Kellerman should certainly be understood as a pioneer in breaking down gender barriers, her career is also instructive in the way class and gender barriers often reinforce each other. Though trained in classical ballet and music, Kellerman’s best known performances were in the decidedly “low brow” realms of the popular stage and moving pictures. Her first appearance in the United States, like many of her later engagements, was at an amusement park, Chicago’s White City Amusement Park in 1907. During the 1890s and 1900s nearly every American city had created a waterfront amusement that featured aquatic themed attractions and Kellerman proved to be one of the most popular. As historian David Nasaw has argued the amusement parks of the era catered to a large diverse audience
during a period when American workers had gained more leisure time. However, the proprietors of this new form of commercial public space, despite some of its decidedly low-brow attractions—wax museums, freak shows, etc.—attempted with mixed success to attract a middle-class audience by the means of restrictive admissions policies and by promoting more “wholesome” forms of entertainment. Acts like Kellerman’s diving and swimming shows did offer a bit of sex appeal, but within the context of wholesome athleticism. Kellerman’s ability to challenge the confinement of Victorian gender norms on women could only have taken place in the context of the breakdown between “high and low culture” as the cultural signifiers of class difference. Kellerman was neither a burlesque star performing a striptease nor a classical ballet dancer, but her aquatic act provided elements of both.

Kellerman’s stardom as a popular stage performer occurred at the time when the commercial stage was attempting to appeal to a more genteel and wealthier middle-class audience. The advantages of anchoring the theater within the middle-class entertainment is two fold. Most obviously, middle-class audiences would be willing to pay a higher price ticket price, thus raising profit. Less obviously, attracting a “higher” clientele would also protect the stage from attempts at censorship from various church and civic groups concerned with the prurient influence of the popular. According to Andrew L. Erdman, the new breed of stage entrepreneurs, like B.F. Keith and E.F. Albee, attempted to clean up burlesque. Kellerman’s ability to challenge the confinement of Victorian gender norms on women could only have taken place in the context of the breakdown between “high and low culture” as the cultural signifiers of class difference. Kellerman was neither a burlesque star performing a striptease nor a classical ballet dancer, but her aquatic act provided elements of both.

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Japan. The main character in the 1920 Japanese film *Amateur Club* was depicted wearing a bathing suit modeled on Kellerman’s from *Neptune’s Daughter* (released in Japan in 1917). According to Bernardi, women in 1920 still wore traditional dress, the depiction of a Japanese woman in a swimsuit striking the familiar Kellerman diving “pose” certainly represented the coming of age of the modern “New Woman” in Japan. Bernardi also describes the plot of a popular Japanese novel from 1925 in which the main character, a “modern girl” brings her friend to see *Neptune’s Daughter* and “begs her to imitate a pose taken by its star Annette Kellerman.”

Her appearance in *Neptune’s Daughter* also seemed to have an immediate impact on one of the pioneers of film scholarship in the United States, Hugo Münsterberg. Münsterberg, a German born professor recruited by William James to chair Harvard’s new department of psychology, wrote one of the first book length studies on film theory published in the United States, *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* (1916). In an article published in *The Cosmopolitan* a year earlier in 1915, Münsterberg explained his interest in the new medium of the moving picture:

I may confess frankly that I was one of those snobbish late-comers. Until a year ago I had never seen a real photoplay. Although I was always a passionate lover of the theater, I should have felt it undignified for a Harvard Professor to attend a moving-picture show, just as I should not have gone to a vaudeville performance or to a museum of wax figures to a phonograph concert. Last year, while I was traveling a thousand miles from Boston, I and a friend risked seeing *Neptune’s Daughter*, and my conversion was rapid. I recognized at once that here marvelous possibilities were open, and I began to explore with eagerness the world which was new to me.

Perhaps we can credit Kellerman as the inspiration for Münsterberg’s *The Photoplay*. Can we infer the physical beauty of Kellerman had something to do with the attraction of Münsterberg to *Neptune’s Daughter* and later to the theme of film aesthetics? His description of his first movie certainly reads like a confession of a guilty pleasure. Why *Neptune’s Daughter* and not one of the other feature films that began to appear in 1914? Perhaps, his choice was a coincidence or one of convenience. However, his book length study of the film concerns itself primarily with aesthetics. It seems plausible the physical beauty of Kellerman and perhaps even a glimpse of skin were his inspiration.

The contrasted attitude Münsterberg and Kellerman have toward the new medium of moving pictures also can be understood in both class and gender terms. In his description of his day at the movies, Münsterberg all but describes his experience as a cultural slumming. As Seth Coven has recently argued, bourgeois Victorians in England were often repulsed and attracted to the lives of the underclass, and that attraction often took a sexualized form. In contrast, perhaps Münsterberg’s erotic interest in Kellerman was “de-sexualized” into aesthetic theory as a means of explaining the presence of an eminent Harvard University professor spending an afternoon watching a mermaid picture? His condescending attitude toward popular culture and the need to justify his interest is in marked difference to that of Kellerman. Despite her upper-class upbringing and her training in classical ballet, Kellerman embraces the new opportunities of popular culture with little fear. Her biographer even notes she was very popular among her fellow vaudevillians and never expressed any feeling of class snobbery. As cultural historian Kathy Peiss has argued, many working-class women at the turn of the century embraced new forms of commercial culture including the movies as a means of expressing greater autonomy. For Peiss, twentieth century popular culture created new heterosocial spaces that broke down both gender and class divisions. Though born of the upper class, Kellerman flourished in the world of vaudeville and the movies where the traditional boundaries of class and gender were less strictly policed.

Part of the lacuna regarding early silent era women may be due to later efforts to fit the movies into traditional definitions of art and aesthetic that either minimized or ignored movement as an essential element in the medium. Laura Marcus argues Hugo Münsterberg’s film aesthetics were influenced by an earlier scholar, Ethel Puffer. Puffer argued “the beauty of an object lies in its permanent possibility of creating the perfect moment. The experience of this moment, the union of stimulation and repose, constitute the unique aesthetic emotion.” However, appreciation of Kellerman’s talents did not come in a moment of repose, but in the din of the amusement park, vaudeville stage, nickelodeon, or the beach. The de-contextualization of the spectacle of movement is the part of aestheticism that may be an explanation for the disappearance of the female action star. Kellerman’s daring dives were experienced not in repose, but in active participation. The ohs and ah’s of the audience as well as the immediate physical responses of fear and joy are forgotten by film theorist like Münsterberg in favor of the frozen and penetrating gaze of the close-up captured in a single moment.

A closer study of early pre-classical cinema provides us perhaps with an alternative history of the cinema in which actresses had more power to create their star personas than they would in the more mature Hollywood studio system. Laura Mulvey’s groundbreaking article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975) has dominated feminist film scholarship with its model of male spectatorship in classic Hollywood cinema. She argues the entire apparatus of “classic Hollywood” has been organized around the male gaze and what she calls the “to-be-looked-at-ness” of the erotic spectacle of the female body. Implicit in Mulvey’s schema is the passiveness of the female body. Control of women’s bodies and the “fashioning” of their appearance are seen primarily, or indeed almost exclusively, as expressions of male power. Yet, Kellerman’s career on screen and off challenges much of Mulvey’s theory regarding classic cinema. It would be an overstatement to say Kellerman
or any other early pre-classical female film star had equal power with male producers like Carl Laemmle or William Fox. However, Kellerman was not a passive object for the manipulation of her male producers. She was able within limits to create a public persona and display her body for a male and female audience in a way that defies any simple model of objectification.

The haunting insight bequeathed to us by Karl Marx that “men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please” seems appropriate. In the context of Kellerman’s career, we need to revise Marx’s archaic language so as to include those women who did make history by creating their own film careers, and by redefining gender norms through the active display of their bodies, although they certainly did not do so entirely as they pleased.

ENDNOTES

5 Bean, p. 21.
7 Emily Gibson with Barbara Firth, The Original Million Dollar Mermaid: the Annette Kellerman Story, (Sydney, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 2005).
10 Gibson, 41.
16 Review of “Neptune’s Daughter (with Annette Kellerman),” Variety, 10 April 1914.