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Paige Brunsen

The Nineteen Twenties and the Birth of Modern America

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Female Filmmakers in the 1920s

The 1920s were a vibrant and exciting time for popular culture, especially in entertainment. With the expansion of entertainment came a newfound love of motion pictures— resulting in a multimillion-dollar industry. Before the industry exploded, women and men alike were found in positions of creative leadership such as directing and producing, but once filmmaking was recognized as an opportunity for big business, women were pushed into the shadows with unfortunate long-lasting consequences.

Prior to the 1920s, many female filmmakers held positions of creative power such as 'director,' 'cinematographer,' and 'producer.' This is largely due to the fact that production was mostly independent and seen as an art form; the filmmaking industry had yet to shift into the centralized studio system. According to film historian Erin Hill, these independent productions were "less formal, more holistic...systems in which women moved fluidly between different work sectors" (17). In fact, Hill argued that women were not hindered by their gender but often hired by these small production teams to learn the entire filmmaking process (17). It is quite logical that a small, independent production company would encourage its employees to learn many roles rather than specialize in one in order to maintain the ability to operate when a team member is absent. From there, filmmakers would find their niche and continue on in that specific creative role. This process furthered the art form as it trained many young artists and encouraged them to find their passions. Ally Acker, filmmaker and author, stated in an interview found in the *The Silent Era* documentary created by Reel Herstory, "Before 1920, anybody who wanted to be part of the industry could play if

you had energy and enthusiasm and desire...Nobody cared if they were getting paid or not, they just wanted to be in this new exciting medium” (Acker, 20:38). Filmmakers in this era only worked to support themselves or create art, not to make large amounts of money. Women flourished in this early, art-focused and innovative film industry. In fact, “For most of the silent era, women were deeply influential in the budding film industry...More women worked in powerful positions behind the scenes before 1925 than they did at any other time during the next 50 years” (Acker, 5:05). Another way young women started in the filmmaking business was by working for photography companies that began producing motion picture cameras. One such artist was Alice Guy Blaché, who was hired initially as a secretary, but created what is considered by some to be the first narrative film when she was experimenting with one of the motion picture cameras (Hill, 25). Blaché went on to create her own studio and become one of the most influential directors, and arguably one of the most famous directors, of silent films. Unfortunately, with the changing economy, Blaché, like many other independent filmmakers, was forced to stop making films due to financial problems.

The 1920s were a time of prosperity for America. Consumer culture was on the rise; people felt more self-indulgent than prior generations did. As a result, leisure and entertainment, including film, became very profitable businesses. Alicia Malone, film reporter and critic, wrote, “By the end of the 1920s, silent films featured complex plots, artistic cinematography, and glamorous movie stars, and attracted big audiences” (20). Not long after the film industry started to become highly commercially successful—Hollywood at this point was a \$500 million business—“talkies,” motion pictures with sound, completely changed the industry (Acker, 19:40). “When movies began to talk,

and film became a major industry, women were faced with what is now known as the 'Hollywood Studio System'" (Acker, 00:00). Like many other industries in the 1920s, the film industry became highly centralized favoring large corporations as opposed to small, independent firms. The five 'major' studios and the three 'minor' studios seized control of the market (Acker, 00:43). As these corporations had a business mindset rather than an artistic one, they became hierarchical, reorganizing the power of decision making from small, creatively independent productions to executive managers, resulting in women being pushed from creative roles of leadership (Hill, 38). "Women were not perceived as being business-minded or executive material, so positions of power on a movie set, such as directing, now were given to men" (Malone, 21). The fact that men were equated with having a business mindset reflects a divided and predetermined cultural idea of gender in the 1920s. As filmmaking had become an essential and popular industry in the public eye, studios focused on maintaining these gender roles valued by society in order to appear professional (Hill, 43). There was a shift from women being 'directors' or 'producers' to being "studio girls." These 'girls' were only valued as clerical workers or those in the "lowest-status, most repetitive, least desirable forms of labor" necessary in order to create efficient mass production demanded by the popularity of the film industry (Hill, 17). "Studio girls" were also physically separated from creative spaces, positioned on studio lots furthest from where the filmmaking or camera work occurred (Hill, 55).

As the film industry became a place for large corporations, pay became reflective of the limited value society placed on working women. Despite the 1920s "New Woman" making strides for her gender in sexual expression and physical

freedom, women were still expected to become mothers. Corporations justified paying them less because they were seen as temporary employees, especially when married women were often prevented from working. In contrast, men required a so-called “family wage” because they were expected to be the sole financial providers for their family (Hill, 20). For example, “early female lab workers [found in post-production] received \$7 to \$12 a week, whereas men received \$2 to \$5 more” (Hill, 79). Not only did pay reflect the newfound separation of gender in the film industry, but unions also reinforced this division. Unions naturally developed when the studio system became so corporation-based and centralized, and “with the unions coming in, women were very promptly shown the exit door” (Acker, 20:38). With this exclusion, women were solidified as unable to have any decision-making power, even over the rights of their own jobs. Hill writes, “Barring the occasional ladies’ night, women could not follow their male peers into these clubs and taverns to discuss how and by whom their jobs were to be carried out” (54). All of these limitations, spurred by the consumer culture of the time, firmly placed women in the filmmaking shadows.

In the 1920s, women working in the film industry were restricted to positions considered ‘trivial.’ Women working for studios were listed as actresses, art director’s assistants, copyists, typists, costume designers, cutters, dance instructors, dancers, film inspectors, lab workers, hairdressers, maids, servants, models, negative cutters, notetakers, nurses, pianists, readers, researchers, scenarists, screenwriters, clerks, or seamstresses (Hill, 60). These departments—especially art direction, costume design, hair and makeup, and nursing—later became known as the “Pink Ghettos” (Acker, 03:32). The nickname itself reflects the repressive nature of confining women to these

departments. Most of the positions available to women were entry level positions, demonstrating that these women were probably not very wealthy, but looking for wages to support themselves. The fact that these women held jobs in the 1920s, a time that did not yet culturally support the idea of working women, indicates that the jobs were likely necessary for financial support. The women were plausibly middle or lower class. Some of these women probably had connections in the industry—especially since it was such a large business in California—that allowed them to receive jobs other than clerical or entry-level work, but many of these women were probably looking for work and found themselves in the industry. Perhaps some women interested in creating films entered the industry in these clerical positions as a starting point to build their careers, but it is doubtful that the majority did so when so few opportunities were available to their gender. Despite being reduced to positions considered ‘trivial’ by their male peers, women were able find ways to become more involved in leadership and creativity in the studio system by pursuing the fields of editing and screenwriting.

Cutting film negatives and inspecting film were entry level jobs available to women due to the repetitive natures of these jobs and the fact that “women were held to be nimbler and neater than their male counterparts” (Hill, 20). They were encouraged to work in these very detail-oriented positions often equated to knitting. In fact, the first cutting machine looked very much like a sewing machine, pedal in all (Malone, 35). In an interview for Reel Herstory’s documentary, *The Silent Era*, Margaret Booth, the first person to be credited as ‘film editor,’ (Malone, 18) said that she “was given a job with all the other girls to put reels together, and that’s what [they] did all day long, just

assembled reels... [they] worked for hours sometimes on a close-up (Acker, 21:42). It was easy for women to make the transition from lab workers to editors, especially because editing was a very behind-the-scenes and unglamorized part of filmmaking. Booth excelled in this field, going on to become 'Supervising Editor' at MGM for thirty years (Malone, 36).

Similarly, women were able to work their way up to holding the position of 'screenwriter' in the unfavorable studio system. Many started out as 'readers' in the scenario department, processing, sorting, and evaluating incoming scripts (Hill, 47). In a firsthand account of the position during the 1920s, Bradley King described her responsibilities; "We open all the envelopes, get ready our little cards for criticism and filing—then get busy, reading, writing criticism on rejection cards and pass anything worthwhile up to a [script] editor" (Hill, 48). From there, some women were promoted to screenwriters. There were a few more screenwriters (by percentage) in the 1920s than ever before. In fact, "of the 5,189 films listed in the 1911–1920 volume of the American Film Institute Catalog, 1,077 (a little over twenty per cent) had any female screenwriting credit. Out of 6,606 titles listed in the 1921–1930 volume of the Catalog, 1,489 (a little under twenty-five per cent) had some female credit" (Slide, 114). This data shows that women were not forced out of screenwriting, probably due to it being another behind-the-scenes aspect of film; "thus the literary fields—with their timeworn associations between women and typewriters—afforded opportunities for women to succeed, at the cost of effectively distancing them from the site of real creative power: the masculinized spaces behind the camera and in executive suites" (Hill, 58). Hill's words, "timeworn associations between women and typewriters" effectively speaks to how

defined ideas of gender were during this time period. In analyzing positions afforded to 1920s women in the film industry, it is easy to conclude that women were only permitted in areas considered 'trivial,' 'feminine,' or 'unseen.'

It is important to note that there were two exceptions to this rule: Virginia Van Upp and Dorothy Arzner. Van Upp was the only female executive producer in Hollywood for thirty years. She started as a child film star during the silent era. Van Upp became the second in command at Columbia by writing and producing films for actress Rita Hayworth who received celebrity status as a result (Acker, 03:04). Arzner, working for Paramount, went from typist to reader to cutter to editor to assistant director to, finally, director, the *only* American female director in the 30's and 40's (Acker, 00:43). Commenting on this fact, Arzner stated, "Why should I be pointed out as a strange creature because I happened to be the only woman director? Intelligence has no sex. If there are no women directors, there ought to be" (Acker, 02:35). In this quote, Arzner is pointing out that she should not be the only one to find directorial success; she is not the only intelligent and capable woman. It should be normalized so she is not a "strange creature." Many have speculated why Arzner was the only female director to make it in the studio system, but there are no definitive answers. One person speculated that it was because her movies made large profits, another said it was due to the fact that she made films that appealed to women with strong and emotional female characters (Acker, 1:05). Although Arzner proved herself, and her gender, worthy of being in positions of creative power in the studio system, her success was not enough to convince studios. In fact, "between 1912 and 1919, Universal had 11 female directors who regularly worked for them, and who made a

total of 170 films in these seven years. But from the mid-1920s right up to 1982, the studio didn't hire a single female filmmaker" (Malone, 21). This fact demonstrates the unfortunate reality that the reduction of women from roles of creative leadership to so-called 'trivial' work in the 1920s had long lasting effects.

In conclusion, the boom of consumer culture found in the 1920s changed the film industry from independent small firms to mass corporations, pushing women from roles of creative leadership to positions considered 'trivial' like clerical work. It marked the end of seeing big-name female directors like Alice Guy Blaché. The fact that film unions denied membership to women also contributed to pushing women into the filmmaking shadows. While some roles like editing and screenwriting accepted women, they were denied the real positions of creative power like directing and producing. Although the 1920s "New Woman" was making strides for gender equality, women in filmmaking were set back by redefined gender roles in a culture driven by consumerism and large corporations, a phenomenon that had lasting effects.

Works Cited:

Acker, Ally. *Reel Herstory: The REAL Story of Reel Women with Jodie Foster - The Silent Era*. [San Francisco, California, USA]: Alexander Street, 2015.

Director Ally Acker focuses on bringing women filmmaking pioneers like the highest paid silent film director, Alice Guy Blaché, and the first person to be credited as film editor, Margaret Booth, to the limelight. Narrated by Jodie Foster, the documentary uses found archival footage and recorded interviews to give first person accounts of the history of female filmmakers. These interviews greatly contribute to the positive ethos, honesty, and credibility of the documentary. It was beneficial to hear from these pioneer women like Alice Guy Blaché, Lois Weber, and Margaret Booth, especially when so many of these voices have largely gone unheard. Acker does a great job of presenting the information in an entertaining and easily consumable way.

Acker, Ally. *Reel Herstory: The REAL Story of Reel Women with Jodie Foster - The Talkies*. [San Francisco, California, USA] : Alexander Street, 2015.

In a continuation of the documentary previously addressed, Acker's next part of the series focuses on how women went from creative roles of power like directing, such as the notable Alice Guy Blaché, to more behind the scenes, underrated and under-appreciated roles. The Hollywood Studio System

becoming more hierarchical and business oriented as well as the industry unions excluding women contributed to this. Regardless, a few important women were able to succeed in this repressive environment such as Margaret Booth who became a supervising editor. This installment of *Reel Herstory* continued to use archival footage and interviews with female filmmakers of the time period to establish credibility in an entertaining and engaging way.

Hill, Erin. *Never Done: A History of Women's Work in Media Production*. Rutgers University Press, 2016.

Media historian Erin Hill examines women as an unrecognized and under-appreciated labor force in the film industry. While most historical accounts of women filmmakers focus on the major accomplishments of rare female directors or producers, this book focuses on the large contribution of the female labor force on the bottom of the industry's hierarchical pyramid in a time when women were not readily accepted in these positions of creative power. Hill provides an honest and well-researched account of why women were placed in lower-paying, less glamorized jobs, and how this has negatively impacted women moving forward in the industry. Hill aims to highlight the important contributions these unrecognized women made for the film industry.

Malone, Alicia. *Backwards and in Heels: The Past Present and Future of Women Working in Film*. Mango Publishing Group, 2017.

Alicia Malone, film critic, provides a look into many successful female filmmakers by telling the history of women in film from the beginning of the industry to the present through stories of individual careers. Malone highlights work of such 1920s filmmakers like Alice Guy Blaché, Margaret Booth, and Helen Holmes. Using research and interviews, Malone created an enlightening, empowering, and entertaining account of influential yet unjustly underrated women filmmakers in order to shine light on those forgotten and give hope to seeing more female filmmakers in the future. In writing *Backwards and in Heels*, Malone aims to get women, in the film industry and outside of it, to think about their history and encourage them to fight for equality today.

Slide, Anthony. "Early Women Filmmakers: The Real Numbers." *Film History*, vol. 24, no. 1, Mar. 2012, pp. 114–121.

Author Anthony Slide analyzes data gathered from the *American Film Institute* film catalogs dating from the early 1900s to the 1930s. Looking at the number of female screenwriting credits listed, Slide determines that around 25% of silent films were written by women, conflicting with 50% as previously thought. Although Slide aims to show that overestimating the silent film statistics and glorifying woman directors like Alice Guy Blaché overshadows the work of other

directors like her husband Herbert Blaché—which is largely unproductive in trying to empower women and highlight previously unrecognized female filmmakers—the statistics regarding the amount of female filmmakers in the 1920s are accurate and important to female filmmaking history.