

Early Women Filmmakers: An International Anthology—A largely untold story

By Charles Bogle
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Early Women Filmmakers: An International Anthology, released by Blackhawk Films and Flicker Alley, brings together the work of 14 early women filmmakers (1902-1943). In doing so, the three-disc collection reveals the important contributions that these women, some of whom have been entirely forgotten or at least overlooked, made to the development of film as an art form.

Due to the length of this anthology, which features almost 11 hours of material, including 26 films, ranging from four minutes to feature length, the focus of this review will be limited to the work of women directors whose films are representative of the technical innovations and themes found in this collection. Several not so successful films from this otherwise significant anthology are also briefly noted.

There are some fascinating stories here.

The first woman film director in history, and indeed one of the first film directors male or female, Alice Guy-Blaché (born in Paris, nee Alice Guy, in 1873), took a job as a secretary for what was to become the Gaumont organization in 1894.

A manufacturer of photography equipment, Gaumont saw no practical use for the “child’s toy” that cinema pioneer Louis Lumière brought to him in 1895. Alice Guy thought otherwise—the camera could be sold, she concluded, but only if the prospective buyer found it intriguing and entertaining. She and Gaumont were actually present on March 22, 1895 at what is considered to be the first presentation ever of film projection by the Lumière brothers.

In making the five short films included in this anthology, Guy-Blaché (her married name) also created techniques that would become part of cinematic grammar. The 1902 “demonstration film” translated into English as *Miss Dundee and Her Performing Dog*, entertains us with a 4 1/2 minute vaudeville act featuring an attractive young woman directing her dogs in a continuity movement over platforms and sticks. And continuity of movement would quickly become part of the foundation of filmmaking.

Slightly longer, “Falling Leaves” and “Making an American Citizen,” were made in 1912 in America (Alice Guy-Blaché moved with her husband to New York in 1910). Each film is a study in the refinement of the continuity of movement.

“The Girl in the Armchair” (1912) is an early example of

narrative in moviemaking. The film is also notable for Guy-Blaché’s ability to stage action in the foreground and background of the same frame (what later come to be known as “deep focus”). The movie’s opening scene makes particularly effective use of this technique.

It is estimated that the energetic and imaginative Guy-Blaché made more than 1,000 films between 1896 and 1920, of which some 350 survive. Twenty-two of those films are feature-length, including her *Life of Christ*, in 1906, which made use of 300 extras.

Over a 21-year span (1913-1934), Lois Weber alternately produced, starred in, directed and wrote nearly 400 films. She was also the most highly paid director of the silent era and considered by some to be the equal of D.W. Griffith. Like Guy-Blaché, many of her films presented the problems faced by working class women as the result of economic and societal forces (See This Week in the Russian Revolution, May 8-14).

In her full-length drama *The Blot* (1921, 93 minutes), Weber portrays the degrading affect of capitalism’s class divisions and economic inequality on educators and clergymen as well as women. Phil West (Louis Calhern), son of the wealthiest college trustee, is attracted to his professor’s “pretty daughter,” Amelia Gregg (Claire Windsor), who works at the college library.

Visiting Amelia at her home, he discovers that her tattered clothing is matched by the tattered furniture and other signs of disrepair, reflecting a family that is forced to live in near-poverty, which, given her father’s profession, shocks Phil. He starts to see her and her family in a different, more sympathetic light and recognizes that her father deserves a better salary.

Phil also comes to know Professor Gregg’s minister friend, who also lives in near penury, and asks his father to see about improving the wages for both of these. He agrees to do so, resulting in a happy ending for Amelia, her family, and for the minister.

Weber makes use of jump cuts between scenes to graphically present the economic and social differences between the classes, e.g., the Olsens’ (who live next door to the Gregg’s) neighborhood party cuts to the West family holding a Country Club party. Weber also shoots a number of scenes from a

woman's point of view to create a sense of pathos, e.g., when Amelia's mother steals a chicken from her neighbor's kitchen and then returns it out of shame.

The happy ending arrives a little too fast, and the father's immediate, unquestioning acceptance of his son's wishes is difficult to believe.

Moscow-born Olga Preobrazhenskaia (1881-1971) was a famous pre-October Revolution actress who made her directorial debut in 1916 and taught at the first Soviet state-run film school from 1918-25. Not much was heard from or about her after the early 1940s; there is speculation that her career came to a close due to Stalin's purges.

At a little over 90 minutes, *The Peasant Women of Ryazan* (1927) is Preobrazhenskaia's most famous film.

It is spring 1914, in the farming village of Ryazan, and Vasili Shgironin has learned that his son, Ivan, is intent on marrying Anna, an orphan being raised by her poor Aunt Alyona, while his daughter, Vasilisa, is equally bent on marrying a blacksmith, Nikolai. Despite the well-off farmer's insistence that his grown children not marry beneath their class, Ivan does marry Anna and the emancipated Vasilisa openly carries on an affair with Nikolai. War is declared in August, and Ivan and Nikolai are drafted.

Two years later, Vasili, in Ivan's absence, ravishes Anna. When she becomes pregnant and has the baby, the village, including her aunt, falsely blame Anna for encouraging her father-in-law. Two more years pass; Vasilisa also has had a baby and with help of the village women and children, sets about transforming an abandoned mansion into an orphanage. When Ivan and Nikolai return from the war (the former had been a prisoner of war), Ivan learns from his sister of his father's transgression, resulting in an ending that is both tragic and tinged with hope.

Preobrazhenskaia brings highly creative (and meaningful) visual elements to this movie. At the end of the film's 1914 portion, a wheat field scene is shot from a panoramic perspective, and the movement of scythes and bundling of wheat are beautifully portrayed. Then, continuing the movie's motif of a cycle of joyous and hopeful scenes followed by sad, even tragic scenes (mirroring the cyclical nature of farm life), the village church bells ring in the news that war has been declared.

Also, the farm work is presented in a realistic manner; sometimes inspiring, as above, and sometimes demeaning, e.g., Vasilisa shoveling while stepping barefoot in manure.

The musical choices are excellent.

Director of the better known *Triumph of the Will* (1935) and *Olympia*, German filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl (1902-2003) made the shorter documentary *Day of Freedom* (the title refers to the Nuremberg Rally of 1935) at Adolf Hitler's behest because of complaints that the German armed forces were underrepresented in the previous year's *Triumph of the Will*.

Mock war battles are staged in front of Olympic-size

grandstands (complete with Nazi banners) full of thousands of cheering Germans. Deputy Führer Rudolf Hess, Air Marshall Hermann Göring and Hitler watch as artillery forces fight airplanes.

Immersed in high angle camera shots taken from above planes flying in perfect formations over equilateral land plots, soldiers (and their horses) standing and moving in straight lines, and artillery shells moving from hand to hand to load field cannons, one can readily understand, with some horror, how Riefenstahl's skills helped to promote the inflexible, tragic code of unity that fascism demanded.

Except for a couple of interesting plot twists, *The Woman Condemned* (1932), produced and directed by Mrs. Wallace Reid (Dorothy Davenport), is a slow paced, insipid movie. The characters lack development; the acting is stiff and uninspired; and several scenes lack realism, e.g., during a court scene, the dialogue does nothing to add detail and individuality to the stereotypical characters.

Meshes of the Afternoon (1943), written and directed by the "Mother of the Underground Film," Maya Deren, is technically innovative, but as a whole the movie has not aged well.

Early Women Filmmakers: an International Anthology is an important contribution to our fuller understanding of the crucial role women directors played in the development of film as an art form. In the process, many of them wrote about the oppression of women as the result of capitalism's class divisions and the economic and social inequality that follow.

Contemporary filmmakers, male and female, would do well to follow their example instead of remaining tethered to the gender politics spewed forth by academia and the media.

Included in this anthology is a booklet essay by film scholar and Women Film Pioneers Manager Kate Saccade. It is largely—and mercifully—free of postmodernist jargon. Several of the films discussed in this review, as noted, are available on YouTube.

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