



Forgotten Tales: Women Filmmakers in American Cinema

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ABSTRACT

The film industry in Hollywood has been slow in diminishing the gender gap, particularly among many behind-the-camera professions. To gain a better understanding of how this status quo came to be, this paper explores the topic of women in film production and the gender gap from a historical perspective. While this paper aims to shine a light on the impact women have had during the very early years of cinema in North America and Western Europe, little is still known about the years between the *then* and *now*. Because there is a limited amount of peer-reviewed literature available regarding women in film production of the past, it is difficult to find varied perspectives on the subject. Given the findings, women's contribution to Hollywood's cinematic history is indeed significant, but still mostly invisible to the contemporary viewer. Ultimately, further research is needed to position women back in their rightful place within American cinema history.

Keywords: women, film, history, Hollywood, gender gap, cinema

INTRODUCTION

In the following essay, the topic of women in film production and the gender gap will be explored from a historical perspective with a geographical focus on North America and to a lesser degree Western Europe. The underlying motivation for choosing this topic is to provide an overview of the development of the gender gap in Hollywood's film industry from its early beginnings of silent films through the various transitions brought upon by technological advances to create a more complete picture of the historical woman filmmaker. While the contemporary discourse of Hollywood's film history renders women nearly invisible, creating a false picture of absence, there was in fact a continued presence of women working in film production since the birth of cinema.

The film industry occupies a unique position because of its ability to reproduce our culture by making it visually accessible to viewers as well as its potential to influence society's culture in novel ways. Thus, films can be viewed as mirrors as well as creators of contemporary culture. The content disseminated through film does not only contain opinions, information, or artistic interpretations, there are also subtle or implicit messages of what is acceptable or desirable in terms of morals, behaviors, or lifestyles (Philo, 1990). In other words, "the influence of the media on everyday behavior is so insidious that it has been impossible to dispel it completely" (Giles, 2003, p. 11).

Background

To appreciate the importance of research examining the historical development of women in Hollywood's film production, there is a need to gain some understanding of the present developments relating to the gender gap in the film industry from a broader perspective. Current statistics suggest, as will be discussed in more detail below, that the gender gap is not only sizeable but also persistent among directors and producers as well as many other film professions. Because of its power to reach people and influence culture, the film industry could potentially have a negative effect on the existing gender gap seen in other industries by producing movies that reinforce the notion of a gender-unbalanced world. For example, screenwriters have

been predominantly male ever since the 1930s and little change had been detected over the decades to follow, leaving half of the population out of the film's core narrative perspective (Orwin & Carageorge, 2001).

The different sectors within the industry continue to have a significant gender gap in terms of age, wages, representation, or all of the above. According to Lauzen (2017), women working behind-the-scenes in 2016 were represented as follows: Producers (24%), editors (17%), executive producers (17%), writers (13%), directors (7%), and cinematographers (5%). This is in stark contrast to the male population employed in this industry.

Bottomore (2012) made an interesting argument to highlight the significance of the single digit representation of women among cinematographers: Films have been made without directors, producers, actors, or even scriptwriters, but no film had ever been made without someone operating the camera. Given this observation, Bottomore (2012) argued that the person operating the camera is indeed the most crucial person in film production. With that in mind, the statistical representation of women among cinematographers is even more startling. As shown by Lauzen (2017), women make up the smallest percentage among this crucial behind-the-scenes profession.

From 1998 to 2016, the gender gap in those behind-the-scenes jobs has widened rather than narrowed for directors, editors, and executive producers. However, for writers and producers, the gap remained the same. Only cinematographers have seen a slight increase in numbers, but those numbers as discussed earlier, are still extremely low (Lauzen, 2017). Overall, these statistics point towards a trend that is worsening rather than improving the gender gap.

To examine the economic side of the film industry, Dergarabedian (2008) had reviewed 745 films from 1992 to 2008 to see how many top-grossing Hollywood films had been solely directed by a woman. Out of all the films that had earned more than \$50 million at the domestic box office, only 20 films, directed by a total of 12 women, had made the list. That is approximately 2.68% of the films surveyed. Not only had female directors made up a tiny percentage of these top grossing movies, 19 of the 20 movies that had made the list were dominated by the romantic or comedy genre. There was only a single sci-fi action movie given to a woman to direct that had made the list. While this does not take female co-directed films into consideration, it shows that an immense gender gap remains prevalent into the new millennium.

As can be seen above, women are underrepresented across various professions in the film industry. However, difficulties are not only present in the industry itself but also in the educational institutions offering film-related programs (Orwin & Carageorge, 2001). For example, at the School of Film and Animation at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT), which offers a specialized film production program, the faculty is gender balanced, but only 20% of students attending are female (Orwin, 2002). Therefore, even if the attrition rate is the same between the male and female student population, any decrease in the number of female students could have a great impact (Orwin & Carageorge, 2001). While RIT offers film related programs, its main focus is on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) programs (Orwin, 2002). STEM programs are traditionally known for having a low female enrolment rate (Xu, 2015). However, it is worth noting then that the film department at this school had a much higher rate of male enrolment (80%) compared to that of the other STEM programs (65%), indicating that the film production field may have even greater barriers for women to enter than the STEM fields (Orwin, 2002).

Viewing the current underrepresentation of women in Hollywood, it becomes prudent to investigate the historical developments of the film industry's gender gap to gain a clearer understanding of how this status quo had come to be.

Significance

Over the past decades, many steps have been taken to decrease the gender gap, raise awareness, improve workplace policies, educate, and level the playing field in various industries (Dixon, 2010). Dixon (2010) remarked that in several fields, "the gender balance is tipping in favor of women" (p. 304), but the North American film industry remains resilient to change, particularly when looking at women directors. In recent years, several prominent actresses as well academic researchers have worked to raise the issue and gain media attention by starting organizations, doing research on the topic, giving interviews, or making public speeches (Armatage, 2008). While awareness is raised to draw attention to this unresolved problem, the

gender gap has stagnated on many fronts. Thus, studies investigating the gender gap in the film industry is relevant because there is a lot more work to be done to create an equal opportunity and equal pay society. Furthermore, Hollywood is of particular concern both because of its very slow progress toward diminishing the gender gap as well as its power to influence millions of viewers with its messages regarding equality.

Despite the importance of the change-resistant gender gap in the film industry and its direct impact on those working in the industry as well as on its viewers, the peer-reviewed research available is limited (Slide, 1996, 2012). When comparing the literature volume discussing the gender gap issues and potential solutions in STEM and other fields to the literature available in regard to the film industry's underrepresentation of women, one realizes how marginalized the discussion of gender within the film industry is. While there are newspaper and magazine articles available, offering insights about gender gap issues in Hollywood from a broader and more generalized perspective, there is a notable lack of governmental or institutional involvement on the topic.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that women were indeed an important and integral part of America's cinema history, but this reality often goes unacknowledged and remains hidden from popular media as well as scholarship (Slide, 1996). Dang (2020) stated that "until only some time ago, it used to be common knowledge in film studies that women played only a minor part in the early years of filmmaking" (para. 9). Archival absence of women's contributions to film history is also a theme seen in other areas of the world. Several researchers, including Kasandra O'Connell, Veronica Johnson, and Morgan Wait have tried to unearth "underrepresented and obscured histories of women in Irish film and television history" (Arnold & O'Brien, 2021, p. 5-6).

Part of this archival absence is a lack of recognition when the work was first credited. This can be seen for a range of film professions and in different countries. For example, both the German director Hortense Ribbentrop-Leudesdorff as well as the Hungarian photographer Lucia Schulz (also known as Lucia Moholy-Nagy) had collaborated with their partners in developing cinematic and photographic techniques. However, the credit often went to their partners while the women remained unrecognized (Molano & Amendola, 2022). In addition, some women used a male name as a pseudonym, as was the case with the Russian Alla Nazimova. In order to hide her identity as co-director in the adaptation of Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* (1923), she used the name Peter N. Winters (Mabrey, 2022).

In his book, *"The silent feminists: America's first women directors"*, Slide (1996) stated that

"... as far as most women in film in the 1990s are concerned, the first actress also to produce, write, and direct a film was Barbara Streisand. The names Lois Weber, Nell Shipman, and others who did precisely these same things more than seventy-five years ago must remain conveniently forgotten. The past is not prologue to what is happening today, but rather a dead topic that should remain buried" (p. xiii).

Rationale

The topic of this paper is relevant because of the following: there is a currently prevalent and significant gender gap within the field of film production in Hollywood; there is the issue of having an industry, with the power to influence millions of people, that continues to portray a gender unbalanced world; then there is a lack of scholarly literature addressing the topic; and finally, there is a mostly forgotten history of woman filmmakers that remains hidden from contemporary consciousness. Thus, it is of value to explore the existing research into the early beginnings of women in film to uncover gaps in the literature as well as bring to light more of women's history in American film production.

Scope

This paper focuses strongly on Hollywood, but also draws on some articles discussing the transnational nature of the earlier decades of the film industry. In addition, while there is a much broader international film industry present in many countries beyond North America and Western Europe, that industry will not be considered in this study. The time period explored in this article broadly includes the late 1980s to 1960s with a main focus on the 1910s and 1920s.

Objective

The aim of the paper presented in the following pages is to shed light on the early historical background of women in Hollywood's film production to further our understanding of how the past has paved the way to the skewed gender balance of today.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to gain a more inclusive view of cinema history and how women may be positioned within its context, a range of current as well as older peer-reviewed literature is explored to establish what has already been researched and how these findings add to the broader picture of women's historical position in film production and the development of the gender gap.

When trying to create a historically accurate picture of gender balance/imbalance in the film industry over the course of decades, it is valuable to keep some perspective on the general direction in which the film industry was going. Thus, this article reflects the chronological developments of cinema history, such as technological advances and other relevant historical events. The industry had gone through several phases and many inventions that furthered the technological advancements of the moving pictures until the film industry finally arrived at the color and sound pictures that we have grown so fond of today.

Some of the articles included are concerned with film history in general without mention of gender gap or examination of women's involvement in film production. The decision to include these articles is based on the paper's goal of gaining a stronger sense of the gender gap within the film industry over the course of time. As such, the gender gap did not, and does not, stand in a vacuum and therefore will be viewed within the broader development of film history.

While the focus of this paper is on women who were actively involved in film production in the past, the lines between the different job titles were often blurred during the early years of cinema. Thus, the term filmmaker could mean any combination of the following: screenwriter, producer, editor, and/or director. Sometimes, production design/art direction and cinematography were also part of the filmmaker's job (Mahar, 2006). Consequently, the wording chosen will reflect the original professional titles that were used to describe the women's profession in the literature.

Birth of Cinema

The following section explores the very beginning of cinema as well as the advent of the first woman director.

The first moving picture

The very beginning of film history is shrouded in somewhat of a debate because the crediting of the person who had first invented cinema had been difficult (Gaudreault & Gunning, 2009). Both Americans as well as the French had chosen to credit one of their nationals for the invention and subsequently named their chosen pioneer *Father(s) of Cinema*. While both the Lumière brothers as well as Thomas Edison had developed moving pictures, and were subsequently and independently credited for the invention, it is in fact the lesser-known Louis Aimé Augustin Le Prince who was the first to successfully capture the passing traffic on Leeds Bridge in England in 1888 (Howells, 2006).

After thorough scholarly examination of historical evidence, Howells (2006) suggested a re-writing of cinematic history since Le Prince had indeed succeeded in making the first motion picture seven years or more prior to the other *Father of Cinema* contenders. Unfortunately, Le Prince had mysteriously disappeared just before the public unveiling of his invention and was never seen again.

The early divide between France's and America's cinema was grounded in the partisanship over the primacy of invention and had taken "on distinctly political overtones" (Howells, 2006, p. 198). The Lumière Brothers were championed by France while the Ohio-born Edison was the all-American champion. Le Prince on the other hand had originally been a French citizen who then later moved to England where he had married and ultimately captured the moving pictures of the Leeds bridge. Finally, Le Prince had left England for the USA and renounced both British and French citizenship to take on the American. Howells (2006) argued that

although Le Prince was in the end an American citizen, he could not have inspired the same level of partisanship as Edison, given his cultural attachments to his previous two home countries. Thus, there would have been a lack of true partisanship or politically driven support for Le Prince had he lived. Howells further noted that while it was true that the crediting of the wrong people for inventing moving pictures did not change the way film technology had developed (given the similarity between the three inventions), it would be very likely that film history as we know it may have turned out to be very different had Le Prince lived.

Because cultural traditions go a long way in imparting gendered expectations in the professional field (Kalantari, 2012), it could be argued, had Le Prince lived and the early French-American divide in cinema history had not happened the way it did, that the role women had played in film production could have also been impacted. This, of course, could have been either a positive or negative influence, but perhaps some assumptions can be made based on further examination on how women's involvement in film production differed in France and America in those early years. For example, France gave way to the first woman to direct a film in 1896 (Slide, 1996), only a year after the Lumière brothers had their first commercial screening (Gaudreault & Gunning, 2009), showing that France did not have strong gender-based entry barriers in those early years.

The first woman director

According to Slide (1996), the concept of female directors was born in France. In 1896, Alice Guy, secretary to Léon Gaumont, was asked to direct the arguably first fictional film called *Le Fée aux Choux*. From 1896 until 1907, she continued on as Gaumont's head of film production to direct a total of 400 films. In 1907 she went on to marry the Englishman Herbert Blaché and resigned from her official position at Gaumont's arm in Paris, but continued with her business partnership (McMahan, 2013). Together, they moved to the USA where Alice Guy continued with her impressive career and directed or supervised an additional 354 films (Briley, 1997). In terms of output, it is highly doubtful that anyone had approached her staggering numbers. In 1912, she became the first American director (of either sex) to build her own film studios and was certainly the first woman regardless of professional background to have done so (Slide, 1996). Two years after Guy and her husband divorced, Guy returned to France in 1922 with two young children. There, she wrote novelizations of movie scripts as well as magazine fiction and lectured on film for the next 30 years, but never made another film (McMahan, 2013).

Seeing the strength and impact with which the first woman director had navigated these early years of cinema, one might wonder what had happened to the notion of female directors over the years to have arrived at today's low numbers of 7% for female directors working in Hollywood (Lauzen, 2017).

Silent Film Era

There is some debate as to when the silent era of film had begun and ended, but according to Howe (2011), most scholars place it in the 1910s and 1920s while a broader view extends the period from the late 1900th century until the early years of the 1930s. Throughout this period, the industry saw different phases, including that of the nickelodeon era, beginning 1905, which saw the rapid spread of early movie theatres (Aronson, 2008). This trend then caused significant changes in the film industry, encouraging a gender revolution. By 1909, women were represented in most facets of the American film industry and during the next two decades to come, women would write film history on a scale that had never been repeated since (Mahar, 2006).

Screenwriters

Screenwriters, during the early years of cinema, were often active in different film production roles and may have also worked as producer or director in either the same film or in other films (Mahar, 2006). In recent years, however, there has been some discussion about just how many silent films had been written by women. This renewed interest in women's film history has indeed unearthed many directors, producers, and screenwriters long forgotten and positioned them within the broader history of cinema (Curry, 2009; Gaines, 2004; Slide, 1996).

According to Slide (2012), Cari Beauchamp, a twice named Academy Film Scholar, had claimed at the 2011 Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences that 50% percent of all silent films were written by women.

When looking further into this claim, it can indeed be seen that Beauchamp (1997) had stated in her book *Without lying down: Frances Marion and the powerful women of early Hollywood* that “during the teens, 1920s, and early 1930s, almost one quarter of the screenwriters in Hollywood were women. Half of all the films copyrighted between 1911 and 1925 were written by women” (p. 11).

Shelley Stamp, another Academy Film Scholar, made the same statement in the documentary *These Amazing Shadows* which was released in 2011. However, Patricia King Hanson, editor of the *American Film Institute Catalog*, immediately took issue with Beauchamp's claim (Slide, 2012). To determine just what a more realistic percentage of silent films could be credited to female filmmakers, Slide embarked on a search through the old archives. Having determined that there were no contemporary documentation available listing silent short subjects, Slide had settled on coming up with a figure on the feature films from 1911-1930. The *American Film Institute Catalog* holds complete records from both the 1910s and the 1930s.

Slide's (2012) findings showed that around 20% of the films from 1911-1920 had a female listed under the screenwriting credits. That is 1,077 out of the 5,189 films. Of those films, 370 had a shared screenwriting credit with men. In the 1921-1930 volume, out of a total 6,606 films, around 25% or 1,489 had at the least one female credit listed. Of those films, more than half (797 titles) were shared with men. According to Slide's count, there was also a significant percentage of women who appeared to have been credited on only one film in their entire careers. Between 1911 and 1920, there were 245 active female screenwriters, 89 of those with credits only on a single film. Between 1921 and 1930, there were 299 female screenwriters and 103 of those had credits on only one film as well. Slide further noted that these findings left some unanswered questions regarding the reasons as to why such a high percentage of women who seemingly broke into the industry vanished after just one film.

Contemporary studio directories are invaluable sources of information in regard to lesser-known women during the silent film era and are therefore frequently accessed by those in search of information (Slide, 2012). Slide also noted that the numbers of those studio directories reflect the percentages that he could gather from his own research in regard to female writers of silent features. Furthermore, Slide pointed out some other discrepancies such as the fact that the Director's Guild of America as well as UCLA Film and Television Archive have given credit to Dorothy Arzner as the director of Paramount's first sound feature film called *The Wild Party*. However, it is indeed well-documented that the first feature was actually called *Interference*, directed by the male director Roy Pomeroy.

Slide is a well-known author and/or editor of more than seventy books including many solely dedicated to the women in the early film industry. It is worth noting the issue he takes with some of his contemporary peers in how women are portrayed and in how the media, in its effort to shed light on important historical women in the film industry, has distorted some of the facts that may not fit into a seamless feminist narrative.

Given the surge of feminist research activities in the 1990s surrounding women involved in the film industry during the silent era, the *Women Film Pioneers* projects and *Women and the Silent Screen* series began to attract attention and research into the subject began to significantly increase (Mahar, 2006). In 1999, the first conference called 'Gender and Silent Cinema' was hosted at the Utrecht University. Its inception garnered substantial sponsors and media coverage (Armatage, 2008).

In her article, Armatage (2008) recounted her experience at the conferences that were hosted in the following years. At the 2002 conference in Santa Cruz at the University of California, Cari Beauchamp was one of the keynote speakers. Beauchamp (1997) discussed the myriad of difficulties when trying to access the relevant archives to further her research. This topic then remained a prevalent theme in subsequent conferences as well. It is this same Cari Beauchamp mentioned earlier by Slide (2012) that had stated in 2011 that 50% of all silent films were written by women.

The large discrepancy between Slide's (2012) presented number of women who were credited for some, or all of the screenwriting credits compared to that of Beauchamp (1997) is rather significant: 20-25% versus 50%. One side presented women as still a minority (Slide, 2012), albeit significantly higher in numbers than nowadays (Lauzen, 2017), whereas the other showed women screenwriters on par with their peers during the silent era of film (Beauchamp, 1997). Looking at Beauchamp's (1997) statement as observed by Armatage (2008), accessing archival records and evaluating them in a way that yields meaningful information may be more challenging than Slide (2012) had recognized. It is unclear what criteria were used when establishing the

number Beauchamp (1997) had presented in her book as well as in 2011 at the Academy, but the '50%' notion seems to be a prevailing narrative in popular media.

Directors

Alice Guy, as discussed in an earlier section, was a remarkable and highly influential director as well as producer of her time. However, she was not the only one that had left a lasting mark on film history during the silent film era:

Not only were women making films, but contemporary observers were making little of the fact. It was taken for granted that women might direct as often and as well as their male counterparts, and there was no reason to belabor this truth (Slide, 1996, p. v).

For example, Charlie Chaplin's first leading lady Mabel Normand was among those women, having directed some of the comedian's first films at Keystone. However, little mention is made of her role as a director in the star's early career in the recent film biography *Chaplin* by Richard Attenborough (Slide, 1996). Women directors did not only seem to be a normal part of Hollywood, but they also occupied some of the highest ranks in the industry and flourished during the silent film era (Mahar, 2001), not limited to the romantic-comedy genre, but free to direct any film (Slide, 1996). To gain an appreciation of the influence some of these early women directors had, one only needs to look at the greatly acclaimed Lois Weber. She was Hollywood's highest-paid director and made a staggering \$5,000 per week in 1916 (Curry, 2009), and by 1934, she had 50 films credited to her name (Acker, 1991).

Women directors of silent films could be found in other countries as well (Slide, 1996). For example, the first woman director in England was Ethyle Batley. Initially, she began her career in theatre and then moved on to film-acting in 1910, but from 1912 to 1916, she produced, directed and/or starred in 64 films in a range of genres. While initially specializing in children's films, she later ventured into sporting and war subjects, but unfortunately her career was cut short when she died in 1917 (Turvey, 2009). The *Women Film Pioneers Project* lists over one hundred notable women directors from across the world that were actively contributing during the silent film era. Of those women, 23 were American directors and 33 producers/directors (WFPP, 2017).

Producers

Female producers were also present in larger numbers during the silent film era and could be found in Europe, North and South America, and as far away as Australia. Many of these producers were also active as directors, actresses, and/or screenwriters. For example, the Norwegian sisters Ada, Aud, and Gerd Egde-Nissen who became well-known during the 1910s and 1920s, had started their own production company in Germany, but were also renown actresses as well as directors (Iversen, 2013). Another three sisters from Australia, Paulette, Isobel, and Phyllis McDonagh, had produced films throughout the 1920s and into the sound era of the 1930s (Barry, 2013). Herminia Pérez de León (known by her artistic name of Mimí Derba), a Mexican actress, writer, singer, and producer, had established her own company called Azteca Film Company in Mexico along with Enrique Rosas and produced five films in their first year of business. In her lifetime, she had starred in over 70 Mexican silent and sound films (Miquel, 2013). Pérez de León was one of several other women who had a presence in Mexican cinema well before the 1960s (Rashkin, 2021).

By 1917, when filmmakers resettled in Hollywood and Hollywood had emerged as the central moviemaking Mecca of the world, it was not the wealthy moguls that held the most power, it was the on-screen stars. For example, the famous Mary Pickford (Mahar, 2006), a Canadian-born actress and producer known as "the silent era single greatest star" (Hallett, 2013, p. 26), was quick to recognize her worth and demanded enormous salaries, which she then also received. Pickford started the trend of demanding control of the stories, cast, directors, and sometimes even distribution practices within the major film studios (Mahar, 2006).

From 1916 till 1923, a newly established independent film market flourished because Edison's patents had become defunct. This market was made up of smaller companies, many with women in prominent company roles, that functioned outside of and in direct competition with the largest Hollywood studios. It was here that the rising film stars had the opportunity to become independent producers and could call the shots. When

these companies sprung up in the open market, they began to weaken the longer established major studios (Mahar, 2006). “*Photoplay*’s editor James Quirk disliked the development, exclaiming that the ‘her own company’ epidemic indicated the industry’s poor health” (Hallett, 2013, p. 88).

Transnationalism: In search for a more complete picture of women during the silent film era, Gaines (2010) explored some of the more unexpected outcomes of the feminist research of recent years. For example, Gaines (2010) mentioned that the discovery of the female producer Bahiga Hafez in Cairo, Egypt had come as a surprise and thus Gaines underlined the importance of viewing the women’s experience in the film industry during the silent era from an international perspective. To do this, she described two rules which should be followed by future researchers in this field. The first goes, as follows:

A revised rule of thumb for research on women in the international silent film industries might then be this: In parts of the world, we once thought women could not possibly have worked as producers, directors, or writers, *they will be found* (Gaines, 2010, p. 283).

The second rule stated, “that a woman producer might have worked in more than one national industry or even that she left one part of the world to start a motion picture venture in another” (Gaines, 2010, p. 283). One example of such a cross-national producer is Stephanie Socha who had travelled from Poland to Lima, Peru to start a film acting school just before embarking on a new film project as a director and producer (Gaines, 2010).

Overall, there appears to be many women who had embarked on a multi-national career, often across continents (Gaines, 2010; Mabrey, 2022; Molano & Amendola, 2022). Gaines (2010) also pointed toward an important vehicle used by women to prove their indispensability in the film industry: The custom of having women take on female roles in films is something taken for granted. This practice seems to have been predominantly a practice seen in the West. For example, in Japan, men would have acted out female roles during the silent film era (2010).

It is worth noting that there was an overwhelming number of women pioneers during the silent film era that enjoyed a multi-national career whose impact can only be appreciated if one looks at their careers across national boundaries. Just to name a few examples:

Anny Ondra was born in the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, which is now part of Poland, but pursued her career as a producer and actress in Czechoslovakia, Austria, and Germany; or Giulia Rizzotto (also known by her married name Cassini), who was an Italian director of only a few films, but which had screened even in the far-away Finland; or Musidora, who was another pioneer directing films in both Spain and Italy while acting in France (Dall’Asta, 2010).

The Silent Era is drawing to a close

Filmmaking, according to Mahar (2006), had been marked by a masculine frame when the first moving picture technology hit the market in the 1890s, but then changed into something more of an artisanal entrepreneurial spirit where women took on an integral role across the film industry until the 1920s just around the time when cinema shifted from silent to sound. During the 1920s the industry was *remasculinized*, creating the male-centric Hollywood that is now known to us.

Mahar (2006) argued that the phenomena of *her own company epidemic* may have put just enough pressure on Hollywood’s larger studios for them to move towards vertical integration by purchasing chains of theatres to increase their market position and financial strength. This shift required that Wall Street invested money. Wall Street, however, was functioning under the traditional modus operandi along the gender divide and “would not accept unbusinesslike methods” (p. 7) and ended up sending their own representatives to Hollywood to show the studios how it is done. Under this new way of doing business, the industry no longer found women’s participation workable. However, while the drop in women’s involvement was rather sudden from a historical perspective, subtle changes that had taken place years prior to the event had paved the way to make it happen.

Hollywood had grown in size, wealth, and power, and thus aimed to professionalize its institution, which was by definition considered masculine given the historical trend of male-only clubs, lodges, and guilds

(Mahar, 2006). For example, at the height of women's influence in Hollywood during the silent era, the Motion Picture Directors' Association (MPDA) was founded. This was an all-male club, making only one exception to allow the prominent Lois Weber to gain membership in 1916. However, the organization also established that beyond Weber, no other women would be admitted. More clubs were founded, most of which followed in the footsteps of old patriarchal establishments, disallowing women to participate. This in turn, denied women filmmakers the opportunity to network on the same scale as their male peers and prevented them from making important contacts for the furthering of their careers (Mahar, 2006).

Perhaps there was one person, unmatched in her level of output, that may have been able to preserve the strong female position in the film industry beyond the silent years (Slide, 2012). Slide had touched briefly on Alice Guy's decision to leave the United States after her divorce in his study and pondered on how film history and women's positions as directors may have been different had she decided to stay in the US to continue her remarkable career as a director until at the least the end of the silent film era when things for women started to change in the industry (Mahar 2006). Slide (2012) went on to suggest that Guy could have joined Universal Studios, as did her ex-husband. Universal did have a strong track record of hiring women directors throughout the 1910s. Even Lois Weber, who was a famous leading director-screenwriter in early Hollywood (Stamp, 2013) had joined Universal in the 1920s and therefore Slide (2012) suggested that Alice Guy could have done so as well in the 1910s.

Ultimately, as the end of the silent era drew near, women's involvement in film production began to dwindle and Mahar (2006) argued that "there was no memo circulated to studios heads asking them to eliminate women filmmakers in the 1920s. Rather, a shift in ideology brought gender roles within the film industry in line with those of other industries" (p. 7).

Sound

The transition from silent films to the early *talkies*, as the early moving pictures with sound were called, was not as abrupt as might be suggested. According to Crafton (1999), after the first sound film called *The Jazz Singer* was made in 1927, Hollywood went through a period of transition until 1931 when "sound production had been standardized and projection practice was again routine" (p. 4). Furthermore, Crafton (1999) described in his book that there was no clear date that divided Hollywood into a *before and after* sound. Instead, changes had come about in a gradual, measured way, calculated by the studios, and implemented when a better sound technology had become available. With the advent of sound, the *Golden Age of Hollywood* began and lasted from the early 1930s until the late 1940s (Acker, 1991). Film festivals as well as other awarding institutions also began to emerge, and the work of notable filmmakers became publicly recognized. The first *Esposizione internazionale d'arte cinematografica [International exhibition of cinematographic art]* in Venice in 1932 "marks the beginning of film festivals, which [was] then followed by the creation of flagship events within the era's most powerful nations" (Taillibert & Wäfler, 2016, p. 5). However, this was also the time when women filmmakers steadily ceased to form an integral part of the common Hollywood narrative (Mahar, 2006).

The Golden Age of Hollywood was anything but *golden* for women filmmakers. During this time and just a little beyond, Virginia Van Upp, a mainstream producer at Columbia Pictures, was the only female producer working for any of the major studios (Acker, 1991). Women directors did not fare much better and rapidly disappeared as well. There was one exception however: the prolific director Dorothy Arzner, who had started her career in 1919, had defied the odds and successfully continued to direct films during the 1930s and 1940s (Mahar, 2006). Despite the fast disappearance of women filmmakers in Hollywood during this era however, some made their first appearance. Frances Kavanaugh, who has over 30 credits to her name, entered the scene as an American screenwriter in the 1940s in the heavily male dominated genre of Western film (Johnson, 2021). Another notable woman was Matilde Landeta. Born in 1910, she had entered the Mexican film scene in the 1930s and became the country's first officially recognized and institutionally trained female director (Wilkey III, 2022). Unlike her Mexican predecessors, Landeta later "reemerged to become the mentor and *grande dame* of an entirely new generation of women directors" (Rashkin, 2021, p. 31).

In addition, on the heel of Arzner followed Ida Lupino, beginning her career as a producer and director in 1949. In the 1950s, she was perhaps the most successful woman director of her time. From 1949 until 1966,

she continued to direct both feature as well as television episodes across a range of genres. Beside Arzner and Lupino, there were very few directors active beyond the end of the silent film era. It was not until the 1970s that women began to enter mainstream cinema as directors again (Acker, 1991).

Color

The post-World War II years were fertile grounds for the rise of color films, but the transition from black & white to colored films did not develop in the same linear fashion as did the transition from silent to sound films. According to Cook (1990), in 1947, only 12% of American-made films were color, but a few years later in 1954, over 50% were made in color. Hollywood made its full transition, albeit in a slow manner, from black and white films to color from the early 1950s to the mid-1960s. However, color had actually been used for some films with varying successes right from the early years of cinema but lacked the technology to make its application feasible on a large scale (Misek, 2010). For example, Thomas Edison had manually applied color to his films before publicly screening them in New York City in 1896. While those were only two-colored films and not photographic in its range of color, it shows that the technological development took almost 70 years of technological development before the film industry permanently transitioned to color films (Yumibe, 2012).

In 1932, advancements in color technology was preparing Hollywood's slow move toward colored films. The new three-colored Technicolor technology invented by Herbert Kalmus allowed for more vivid and natural colors to be portrayed in motion pictures. At the time, many filmmakers and producers were reluctant to use color. However, Herbert Kalmus' wife Natalie Kalmus, now legendary for her work, had led Technicolor designers to develop an aesthetic style to complement the classical Hollywood filmmaking style of her time (Higgins, 2007).

Natalie Kalmus was highly involved in educating others about Technicolor's technology as well as the artistic importance of using color in film. Her written work supporting the use of color in film was published in the *Journal of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers*. In her paper, Kalmus (1935) discussed the importance of color in motion pictures by exploring humans' historical propensity toward depicting stories in color. One example Kalmus had used to show what an integral part color had played in human history's story telling was that of colorful cave paintings found in Spain that were more than fifty thousand years old (Kalmus, 1935). Higgins (2007) argued that Technicolor's technology, and by extension Natalie Kalmus' established color conventions, has had a lasting impact on filmmaking processes that can still be seen today.

DISCUSSION

This paper has shown, in a chronological manner, that two major shifts in women's representation and participation in cinema history happened between the 1890s and the 1920s. While the birth of cinema was marked by a masculine frame, the industry soon took on a new spirit where women became an integral part of cinema culture and production. However, once the silent film era came to a close, women filmmakers started to fade from the public eye as well as the production studios. Once again, Hollywood became male-centric—a trend that still holds sway in many areas of film production today, particularly amongst directors.

Mahar's (2006) proposed reasons for the shift toward a remasculinization can be summarized, as follows:

Women's success in owning and operating their own companies had put pressure on Hollywood's larger studios. This then led to the desire for expansion and the required financial capital from Wall Street. A traditionally male-centric institution, Wall Street did not accept women's participation in business dealings. The subsequent shift in Hollywood's work culture made women's involvement no longer workable. However, subtle changes in the years prior to this drastic shift had also occurred which had paved the way for this remasculinization to happen. Hollywood had grown, and with its expansion also came more traditional professional structures such as male-only clubs, lodges, and guilds—most of which barred women's membership. Ultimately, the lack of access to networking opportunities had pushed women out of the competitive race.

It appears that at the core of the dwindling of women filmmakers after the silent film era was a shift in ideology. However, there may also be other socio-economic factors or historical world events not yet explored that could have contributed to this shift in ideology.

Furthermore, looking at the existing research, there is a limited amount of peer-reviewed literature available that specifically relates to women in film production of the past. This makes it difficult to gain an accurate understanding of the historical woman filmmaker. Furthermore, there is a lot more literature addressing topics of the silent era compared to that of the decades following. It is even more difficult to find articles looking at the gender gap of the past. Because of this lack, it is challenging to find varied perspectives on the subject. Thus, it can be argued that the historical examinations as discovered in the pages above is mainly concerned with women filmmakers during the silent film era. In addition, most of that literature is focused on individual filmmakers and not on general trends.

While the current literature does point toward an often-hidden reality of women's strong presence behind the camera during the early years of cinema, a lot less is known about the decades that followed. In other words, research on how women's involvement as well as women's recognition in the context of cinema shifted over the course of time seems to be missing from academic research. In addition, the important contributions of women's work in Hollywood as well as their well-established place in many areas of film production during the early years is a fact that remains absent in popular discourse and media representation. While it is true that currently there is a significant gender gap in the film industry, that has not always been the case as can be seen in this paper.

This creates a two-fold gap between what actually is and how it is presented: A lack of recognition in popular media about women's significant contributions to American cinema history coupled with a lack of research into the developments that had led from the strong level of participation of women in early cinema to the notable gender gap present today.

Future Direction of Research

In general, any additional research into the topic of the historical women filmmakers in both the silent as well as other eras of Hollywood's cinema history would add to the narrative. In particular, research specifically looking at the gender gap of the past as well as other contributing factors that had supported the shift in ideology after the silent film era would help broadening our understanding of this subject. In addition, it is also worth exploring how these early years of women filmmakers connect to the present. In other words, it would be interesting to see the general trend of women's actual participation compared to the outwardly recognition of such participation (e.g., Academy Awards) over the course of decades.

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored both the visible as well as hidden contributions of women in film production during the early era of American cinema. Women have indeed played an integral role in the making of Western cinema and had achieved renown equal to that of their male peers. However, as Wall Street took an interest in Hollywood, women began to become marginalized and men-only clubs started to appear on the scene.

While the first part of this paper had provided a glimpse into various issues relating to the gender gap in the Hollywood's film industry nowadays and the literature review a better understanding of the level of influence and impact women have had during the early years of cinema, little is known about the years between the *then* and *now*. More research is needed on the subject matter in order to paint an accurate picture of cinema's gender gap through the course of history.

Ultimately, women's contribution to Hollywood's cinema history is significant, but still mostly invisible to the contemporary viewer. Positioning women back in their rightful place within cinema history would be a positive step towards furthering the discussion on the current gender gap seen in the film industry today.

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