



In Her Shoes

*LOIS WEBER AND THE FEMALE FILMMAKERS
WHO SHAPED EARLY HOLLYWOOD*

Developed by Jill Beale in collaboration with Sarah Clothier and Shelley Stamp

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

In 2019, the AFI Catalog of Feature Films embarked upon a new, three-year initiative titled “Women They Talk About” to support unprecedented empirical research about the role of gender throughout the first century of the American film industry, 1893-1993. With generous grant funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities and The David and Lura Lovell Foundation, the project repurposes AFI’s uniquely comprehensive, academic data to secure early female filmmakers in the historical canon.

“Women They Talk About,” named after the 1928 feature film, is specifically designed to use data as a narrative tool to engender the true story of women as forerunners in the industry. When the project launches to the public in 2022, user-generated and application-driven reports will be presented with data visualizations on the AFI Catalog homepage and at AFI.com to illustrate, and authenticate, women’s contributions, and to position gender parity as a foundational element of cultural, economic and labor history.

AFI Catalog researchers are revisiting records for pre-1930 releases to enhance documentation and add previously uncredited names to be integrated in report outcomes. Concurrently, AFI Catalog developers are creating database upgrades specifically for gender research. For example, AFI Catalog users will be able to evaluate actual data for the first time about widely circulated but unsubstantiated theories that women represented 50% of silent era story and scenario writers. The project aims to open doors beyond these immediate applications to prompt discoveries yet to be imagined. Collaborating with historians, educators and research institutions worldwide, AFI will bring the pioneering work of female filmmakers into the vernacular to ensure they are, indeed, “Women They Talk About.”

“Women They Talk About” is one of AFI’s pioneering efforts to empower female filmmakers, including the AFI Directing Workshop for Women, the AFI Cinematography Introductory Intensive for Women and the Young Women in Film Intensive. Read more about these programs at AFI.com.

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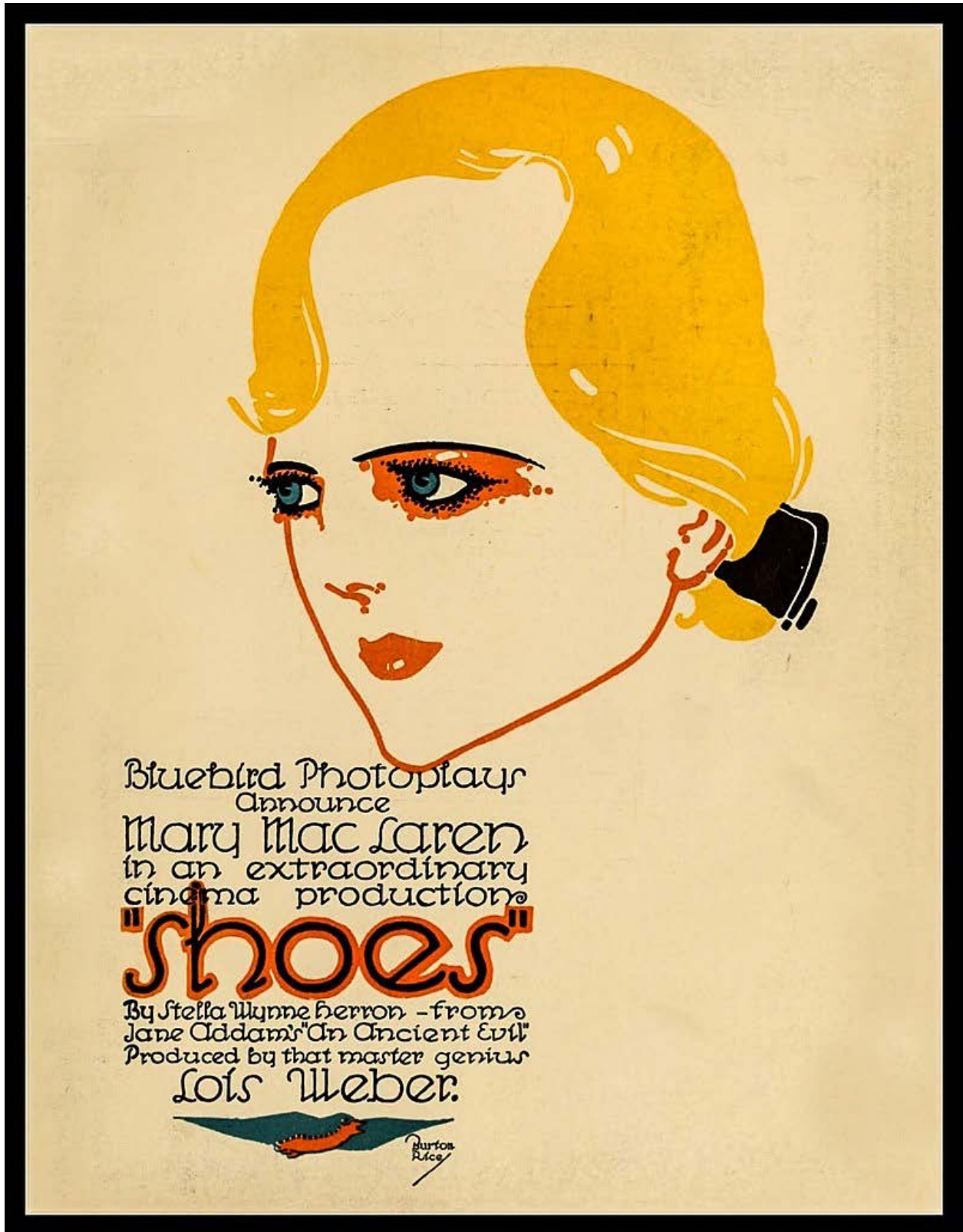


Image by Burton Rice for Bluebird Photoplays (Life time: pre-1925 publication of advertisement by defunct film company; expired copyright) - Original publication: The Moving Picture World (New York, N.Y.)

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Excerpts from “Women in Early Filmmaking: No Finer Calling”
by Shelley Stamp

Moviegoing became sensationally popular in the first decades of the twentieth century, quickly surpassing other commercial entertainments like vaudeville and amusement parks, creating a tremendous demand for films. Movie theaters changed programs several times a week, sometimes *daily*, showing a revolving program of short films. Opportunities abounded for virtually *anyone* interested in working in this new medium, including many women. One hundred years ago, the movie business was a place of incredible opportunity for women – arguably much more open to female filmmakers than it remains today.

Early moviemaking was also a flexible enterprise where it was relatively easy to move between creative positions and the role of “director” as we now know it was less clearly defined. People who entered the business in one capacity could move to other roles with relative ease. Women could move from screenwriting to acting to directing, as Lois Weber did, or from acting to producing to directing as Dorothy Davenport Reid did. Many began their careers acting in front of the camera, then graduated to creative roles behind the scenes like writing and directing, including Gene Gauntier ... Gauntier’s description of her work in the early days of Kalem [Studios] perfectly illustrates the fluidity of creative roles in early film production – and the opportunities this created for enterprising, artistic women: “In addition to playing the principal parts, I also wrote, with exception of a bare half-dozen, every one of the five hundred or so pictures in which I appeared. I picked locations, supervised sets, passed on tests, co-directed with Sidney Olcott, cut and edited and wrote captions...got up a large part of the advertising matter, and, with it all, averaged a reel a week.” She added, “It was work in those days – but *creative* work, blazing the trail.”

Why were so many women active in the early years of filmmaking? Why not. The movie business was a thriving industry. It offered opportunities for economic independence and creative work. During an era of the “new woman,” when women were thinking expansively about what they might do with their lives, the fledgling motion picture industry offered incredible opportunities. What is more, women’s voices were *valued* in the early years of motion picture production. Female moviegoers were actively courted in an effort to legitimate the new art form – and having female filmmakers working behind the scenes was considered an essential asset, not a liability.

In Los Angeles, the new Universal City complex was home to many female filmmakers. Lois Weber was the studio’s top director in the mid-1910s – studio boss Carl Laemmle called her his “best man on the lot” – but she was by no means alone. Cleo Madison, Ida May Park, Ruth Ann Baldwin, Elsie Jane Wilson, Ruth Stonehouse and Lule Warrenton all directed

for the studio as well. In fact, Universal released at least 170 films directed by women between 1914 and 1919, according to film historian Mark Garrett Cooper. And Universal celebrated its stable of female filmmakers, counting them among the “wonders” contained within Universal City limits, according to studio publicity. When Lois Weber ran for Mayor of Universal City on an all-female, women’s suffrage ticket in 1913, eliciting derisive coverage in the national press, Universal countered by boasting that its workforce included “some of the brainiest as well as most beautiful women in America.” Female filmmakers were an *advantage* for Universal in the silent era, something they were proud to celebrate.

In the end, the moment of opportunity for female filmmakers was relatively short-lived. The movie business quickly became extremely lucrative and after the first World War larger studios began consolidating power by buying up theater chains and forcing out independent producers and exhibitors. To finance these acquisitions, studios borrowed considerable sums of money from Wall Street, and in doing so became eager to adopt a more conventional “masculine” corporate ethos, as historian Karen Ward Mahar has shown. Women were pushed out of leadership roles and positions of creative control; those with independent production companies could not compete with the powerful studios and found it increasingly difficult to finance productions and get distribution. Ironically, then, just at the moment when women had achieved the right to vote with the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, their fortunes in the film industry, once so bright, began to fade. As film historian Jane Gaines puts it, silent cinema’s female filmmakers were “pink slipped,” pushed out of the industry, then “forgotten” in its subsequent histories.

So rapid was this shift that by the late 1920s Lois Weber found male crews unaccustomed to working with female directors and uncomfortable taking orders from them – a marked contrast to the universal respect she had commanded on movie sets early in her career. Interviewed about the changes that swept Hollywood at the beginning of the Jazz Age, privileging powerful studio conglomerates over small independent outfits, Gene Gauntier recalled, “After being master of all I surveyed, I could not work under those conditions.”

The first histories of Hollywood written in the late 1920s and early 30s excluded any consideration of female filmmakers, focusing instead on female stars like Mary Pickford and Gloria Swanson. Scores of women who had been essential to the fledgling movie business as directors, screenwriters and producers were forgotten in an initial rush to legitimate the newly powerful industry.

- e. Find two other films starring Mary McLaren. Based on their synopses, how do these films compare to "Shoes?" Do they have similar or different themes?

- f. How many other films were made about "poverty" in 1916? (You can search for films by *subject* and year)

- g. How many other women directors can you find between the years 1910 and 1930? What are some of their names?



Lois Weber (left) directing Anna Pavlova and Douglas Gerrard on the set of The Dumb Girl of Portici (1916). Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

SECTION II – BUILDING RESEARCH SKILLS

1. Read the [profile](#) on Lois Weber from the Columbia University Women Film Pioneer's Project and answer the question:
 - According to *Photoplay* (March 1917), for a time, Weber was the highest paid director in Hollywood. However, something shifted in the 1920s. The essay suggests three potential reasons for the downturn in her career, what are the potential reasons?

2. Read the [Library of Congress essay](#) on "Shoes" directed by Lois Weber and answer the following questions:
 - The author, Shelley Stamp, writes that the *Los Angeles Examiner* praised the film's "exact portraiture of the appalling currency of poverty." What was the date of the *Los Angeles Examiner* article?

 - The essay mentions three examples of "realism" in the set design of the film, "Shoes." One example is that the entire contents of a five-and-dime store were transported to the studio for the retail scenes. What is one other example?

3. Using the database, *Lantern - Media History Digital Library* (<https://lantern.mediahist.org>), find two original reviews of the film, "Shoes" and write a paragraph describing how the film was received at the time it was released, citing the primary sources. (Try searching "Lois Weber, Shoes" to get started).

4. Go to the Columbia University Women Film Pioneer's Project article, "[How Women Worked in the US Silent Film Industry](#)" and read sections 1 (*Who Worked at What and When*) and 5.1 (*Women's Work before It Was "Women's Work"*).

Then, answer the questions:

- What other jobs did women hold in the film industry during the silent film era, (approximately 1900-1920)?
 - Describe the phenomenon known as "Universal Women."
5. Read "[The Universal Women](#)" chapter from Anthony Slide's *The Silent Feminists: America's First Women Directors*. The author notes that in the 1910's, Universal Studios had nine women under contract as directors. Other than Lois Weber, can you find four other female directors mentioned in the chapter?
 6. Watch the short KCET documentary, [LOST LA: Dream Factory](#), and answer the questions:
 - Why did the film industry want to attract more women in the early 20th Century?
 - What happened in 1920 that created a backlash against women's freedom and led to Lois Weber's film being dropped from Paramount Studios?



Postcard of Universal City, 1915

“SHOES”

A BLUEBIRD Photo Play written and produced by Lois Weber, from the original story by Stella Wynne Herron in Collier's, which in turn was suggested by Jane Addams.



Eva felt that the end had come.

NO other comment on the latest Bluebird Photoplay, with the strange title, "Shoes," is necessary, after reading the following criticism by Miss Louella O. Parsons, the motion picture critic of the Chicago Herald. Miss Parsons writes as follows:

After sitting through five reels of the vice commission's villainous pictorial investigation at the LaSalle Theatre we whose duty it is to review the films made a solemn vow to give all moving pictures with the minimum wage theme a wide berth. The enigmatical title of "Shoes," terse, un-descriptive and meaningless, took me to the Bluebird offices. I am glad I did not know the story of "Shoes," else my readers would have missed hearing about and I would have failed to see one of the best moving pictures of 1916.

Risking even the vitriolic pen of my co-worker, Richard Henry Little, I am compelled to call into play some of the superlatives I have been saving for just this auspicious occasion. Mignonettes and other blossoms gath-

ered as symbolical of Richard Henry's professed idea of moving picture criticisms are scarcely fragrant enough to express what I really think about "Shoes" as a moving picture drama.

It loosens the heartstrings, stirs the pulse and makes one choke with emotion. All of these things I saw this one five-reel picture do when I reviewed it in the company of some exhibitors.

It deals with a subject difficult of discussion with a delicacy that cannot bring a blush of shame to the most modest cheek. It takes for its subject, instead of the craving for immorality, the sadness of poverty and the unspeakable misery which an empty pocket-book causes.

"Shoes" is the title that was given a story by Stella Wynne Herron which appeared last January in a current magazine. The story in turn was based upon a statement made by Jane Addams in a book called "A New Conscience and An Ancient Evil." The book has been used as authority by many societies and organizations which are working night and day for the establishment of a minimum wage scale for woman.

Neither the statement nor its fictional garment is entirely responsible for the beauty of the cinematic "Shoes." To Lois Weber, the producer of this Bluebird masterpiece, belongs most of the credit—her delicacy in treating an awkward subject, her fine perception in introducing the pathos and her psychological analysis of the deplorable situation.

The picture is not released yet. I am reviewing it in advance because I feel the exhibitor deserves to be told about this picture. It has a pink slip

attached to it, I am sorry to say, but even ticketed with this censorial criticism it is the cleanest version of a distressing story I have ever seen.

And Miss Parsons is a severe critic. This pitiful story is based upon an actual case which is recorded in all the simplicity of its tragedy in Jane Addams' book, "A New Conscience and An Ancient Evil." Out of this reality Stella Wynne Herron made her story for Collier's and then Lois Weber took it and her magic turned the simple material into the most poignant photoplay which she has ever put upon the screen.

The photoplay relates three eventful weeks in the life of a shop girl. Eva Meyer works by day in a five and ten cent store for the magnificent sum of five dollars a week. At home her mother takes in washing to support



"Sold out for a pair of shoes!"

Retrieved from Lantern (<https://lantern.mediahist.org/>), an open access co-production of the Media History Digital Library and the University of Wisconsin-Madison Department of Communication Arts.

SECTION III - CRITICAL VIEWING OF THE FILM, "SHOES," BY LOIS WEBER (1916)

Working in groups of four, each member of the group can focus on one element from below while watching the film, "Shoes," by Lois Weber. Please use the glossary at the back if any terms are unclear. In their groups, student can present their findings to each other.

<p>CHARACTERS Who are the characters and what do you notice about them?</p>	<p>SET DESIGN What do you notice about the scenery?</p>
<p>CLOSE-UPS What do you notice about the use of close-ups in the film?</p>	<p>EDITING What do you notice about the arrangement of shots, superimpositions, and juxtapositions?</p>



Film still of Mary MacLaren in "Shoes" (1916)

SECTION IV - ANALYZING THE FILM

1. In your opinion, what do the new shoes symbolize? What do the old shoes symbolize?
2. Before going to the Blue Goose, Eva stares into a broken mirror. What do you think is going on in Eva's mind? What might the broken mirror symbolize?
3. Share some examples of close-ups in the film. What effect did they have on you? Why might the filmmaker use close-ups?
4. How does Lois Weber (the filmmaker) use facial expressions to help tell the story? Provide an example from the film.
5. How does the set design help to tell the story? Provide an example from the film.
6. There are occasions when Weber uses juxtaposition and superimposition in the editing (see glossary for definitions). What might have been Weber's intention in using these techniques?
7. How does Lois Weber use symbolism to convey meaning throughout the film?
8. What do you think was the intent of the filmmaker (Weber) in making this film?

ASSESSMENT: APPLYING KNOWLEDGE AND MAKING CONNECTIONS

Choose ONE:

1. Respond to these two questions in a one-page written essay or 1–3-minute video: Why is it important to recognize Lois Weber and her impact on early Hollywood? Why do you think female film pioneers have been largely omitted from history books until now?
2. Imagine that the film “Shoes” was set in present-day America, how would it be different? How would it be similar? Write a synopsis for this new version of the film. Include the setting and locations, the characters and their backstories, the plot, and visual style. (Think about “Who, What, When, Where, and How”)
3. Using a variety of databases, research other films by Lois Weber. Create a slideshow presentation that provides an overview of five of her films (including “Shoes”). Include titles, production companies, dates, a synopsis for each, and images (a film still, a movie poster, a photograph of the director at work, etc.).
4. Using a variety of databases, research other films by “Universal Women.” Create a slideshow presentation that provides an overview of five Universal Pictures’ films by women directors other than Lois Weber. Include titles, production companies, dates, a synopsis for each, and images (a film still, a movie poster, a photograph of the director at work, etc.).
5. Create a visual timeline of Lois Weber’s career and filmography – using text, images, movie posters, movie reviews, and any other media that is appropriate.
6. Compare and contrast “Shoes” (1916) to a contemporary feature film about poverty (made in the last 20 years). Examples include: Parasite [R], Slumdog Millionaire [R], Shoplifters [R], The Breadwinner [PG-13], and Queen of Katwe [PG]. What are some of the similarities? What are the main differences? Consider both the story and the style of the films. Write a short essay comparing and contrasting these two films.
*R-rating means “Restricted,” children under 17 require accompanying parent or adult guardian. This rating means the film contains adult material such as adult activity, harsh language, intense graphic violence, drug abuse and/or nudity.
7. Imagine that you are a journalist in the 1910s and write a short review either praising or criticizing “Shoes.” Use the original reviews of the film as an inspiration and a model.

GLOSSARY

The following definitions are taken from Columbia University's Film Glossary: <https://filmglossary.ccnmtl.columbia.edu/> as well as other film terminology resources and online dictionaries.

Character

A character is a person or other being in a narrative such as a novel, play, television series, film, or video game.

Cinematography

Derived from the French word *cinématographe* coined by the Lumière brothers, cinematography literally means "writing in movement" and is generally understood as the art and process of capturing visual images with a camera for cinema. Closely related to photography, cinematography has as much to do with lighting as it does with film. Cinematography includes technical elements, such as camera, lens, film stock, and lighting, and more aesthetic concerns, such as camera angle, framing, duration of a shot, distance, and movement. The member of a film crew who is responsible for cinematography is known as the cinematographer or director of photography.

Close-up

A close-up is a shot in which a person's face fills most of the screen, although the term can also refer to any shot in which an object appears relatively large and in detail.

Director

A film director controls a film's artistic and dramatic aspects and visualizes the screenplay (or script) while guiding the technical crew and actors in the fulfillment of that vision. The director has a key role in choosing the cast members, production design, and all the creative aspects of filmmaking.

Editing (in film)

Editing is the process of putting a film together – the selection and arrangement of shots and scenes. Editing can condense space and time, emphasize separate elements and bring them together, and organize material in such a way that patterns of meaning become apparent. Editing can determine how a film is perceived: for instance, quick, rapid cuts can create a feeling of tension, while slow motion can create a dramatic effect.

Film Review / Film Criticism

Film criticism is the analysis and evaluation of films and the film medium. The concept is often used interchangeably with that of film reviews. A film review implies a recommendation aimed at consumers, however not all film criticism takes the form of reviews.

Film Studio

A film studio (also known as a “movie studio” or simply “studio”) is a major entertainment company or motion picture company that has its own privately owned studio facility or facilities that are used to make films, which is handled by the production company.

Intertitle

A word or group of words (such as dialogue in a silent movie or information about a setting) that appear on-screen during a movie but are not part of a scene.

Juxtaposition

Juxtaposition is the act of placing two or more things side-by-side to compare or contrast. It is used throughout art and literature to create meaning from two or more things. In film editing, to juxtapose a shot before or after another is to create meaning that the shots would not have without each other.

Lighting

The lighting is responsible for the quality of a film’s images and often a film’s dramatic effect. Early photoplays were usually filmed outside, with natural light, or in studios with glass roofs. Eventually, better lighting techniques made it possible for studio productions to have a more natural look.

Mise-en-scene

Literally translated as “staging in action,” mise-en-scène originated in the theater and is used in film to refer to everything that goes into the composition of a shot—framing, movement of the camera and characters, lighting, set design and the visual environment, and sound.

Plot

The main events of a play, novel, movie, or similar work, devised and presented by the writer as an interrelated sequence.

Producer

A film producer is a person who oversees film production. Either employed by a production company or working independently, producers plan and coordinate various aspects of film

production, such as selecting the script; coordinating writing, directing, editing; and arranging the financing.

Production Company

A production company, production house, production studio, or a production team is a business that provides the physical basis for works in the fields of performing arts, new media art, film, television, radio, video games, websites, and more. Generally, the term refers to all individuals responsible for the technical aspects of creating a particular product.

Set Design

Set design is the creation of theatrical, as well as film or television scenery such as the interiors of homes.

Silent Film

A silent film is a film with no synchronized sound (in particular, no audible dialogue). The plot may be conveyed by the use of title cards or intertitles. Silent films were almost always accompanied by live sounds, such as a pianist or theater organist, or sometimes a small orchestra.

Superimposition

Superimposition is when two or more images are placed over each other in the frame.

Synopsis

In screenwriting, a movie synopsis is a brief summary of a completed screenplay's core concept, major plot points, and main character arcs.

Treatment

A treatment is a document that presents the story idea of your film before writing the entire script. Treatments are often written in the present tense, in narrative-like prose, and highlight the most important information about your film, including title, logline, story summary, and character descriptions.