

How Wrong We Were:

Women in the Silent Era American Film Industry

Jane M. Gaines, Columbia University

The new American Film Institute data finally answers a nagging question: How wrong *were* we? That is, how wrong were film historians when, in the absence of data, they estimated that 50% of the silent era writers were women. Finally, the AFI study has revised that number, finding that women were 27.5% of the credited co-writers or writers on feature films 1910 to 1930. As important, AFI data on labor by gender shows that the percentage of director, writer, and producer credits that went to women in the silent era dropped from 10.9% to 6.9% in the following decades. So we can still say that there were more women in positions of creative power in the silent era U.S. film industry *than at any other time in the first century of American filmmaking*.

For years, film scholars overestimated the number of writers and likely underestimated the number of female directors and producers. But there was a companion miscalculation—the number of silent films women wrote, directed and produced that had been lost. We were wrong again. While it is estimated that only 25% of all silent American films survive, feature films from that era are still being “discovered.”¹ A surprising number of titles attributed to women have been identified and restored in the last two decades.² So where are they? Actually, they are still being “located” in the very archives in which they have been stored—worldwide in national Federation of International Archives (FIAF) vaults. And the answer to the question as to how to find long forgotten 35mm films is to follow the credits, check databases, and visit archives in person. This is the very work initiated by the AFI Catalog of Feature Films now refined by the “Women They Talk About” project that is helping us to search production credits by gender.

In summer of 2019, I set out on a Treasure Hunt in the U.S. Library of Congress Division of Motion Pictures, Broadcasting, and Sound Recording housed in the Madison Building, Washington, D.C. I was looking for films to screen at the Women and the Silent Screen XI Conference to be held at the



Poster, *Just Around the Corner* (dir. Frances Marion, Cosmopolitan Pictures, 1921).

Museum of Modern Art and Columbia University in New York, and on my list was a title attributed to writer/director Frances Marion. You’ll note that the new AFI study puts her at the top of their list of the 10 most prolific silent era feature film writers.

However, given her prominence one might think that all film titles attributed to Frances Marion would have been located in Federation of International Film Archives (FIAF) and by now restored. After all, she has a major biography, is the subject of a documentary, and many of her films are now available on DVD or via streamed media.³ But no. Although it had been established that Frances Marion directed as well as wrote at least one surviving feature film, *The Love Light* (1923) starring Mary Pickford, she apparently directed another film. This second film sat unidentified in the U.S. Library of Congress vaults. My search following the credits led to a 35mm print of *Just Around the Corner* (Cosmopolitan Pictures, 1921), a print missing the last reel.



Publicity photo, Frances Marion, c. 1924. Private collection.

Restoration entailed combining two different prints--the Library of Congress print from the domestic release negative and the foreign release print from a different negative located in the EYE Filmmuseum in the Netherlands which luckily had a final reel. We know that in addition to directing *Just Around the Corner* (1921), Frances Marion adapted it from the short story “Superman” by Fanny Hurst published in

the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1914.⁴ This story of a widowed mother living on New York's Lower East Side premiered June 6, 2022, at Women and the Silent Screen XI: "Women, Cinema, and World Migration." The film perfectly encapsulated the conference theme with its documentary evocation of the Lower East Side featuring ethnic characters such as sympathetic neighbor Mrs. Finshreiber and an immigrant family dilemma. Narrative tensions are between Ma Birdsong's traditional values and her children's new aspirations, especially Essie who wants to take a job that scandalizes her mother—taking tickets in a theatre. Worse, her mother just wants to meet the elusive man Essie is dating but who won't propose and who won't even come to dinner. When in October, 2022, *Just Around the Corner* was again screened at the Giornante del Cinema Muto international silent festival in Pordenone, Italy, contemporary viewers also noted a historical #MeToo moment in which brother Jimmie rescues his sister Essie from an assault by the manager overseeing women making artificial flowers in a dark basement. Because she can never go back to that job, Essie must find another.

What, then, is keeping these newly discovered titles from becoming part of the silent film canon? For one, to date we have only studied a small fragment of them. Fourth on the AFI top 10 List is screenwriter Clara Beranger who in 1918 published an article asking "Are Women the Better Script Writers?" There, she argues that "the heart throb, the human interest note, child life, domestic scenes and even the eternal triangle is more ably handled by women than men because of the thorough understanding our sex has of these matters."⁵ Yet how can we test this assertion when we have only screened the tip of the iceberg of the films Clara Beranger wrote and/or adapted? Although a lantern advertising slide for *Craig's Wife* (dir. William C. DeMille, 1928) adapted by Clara Beranger from the George Kelly stage play exists, the film itself does not, although it was later remade as a vehicle for Joan Crawford. Today, Clara Beranger is associated with *Miss Lulu Bett* (dir. William de Mille, Famous Players-Lasky, 1921) which has been screened in 1991 and 2021 at the Giornate del Cinema Muto and which is listed on the National Film Registry. But her credit is for the adaptation of the novel by the same name by Zona Gale who also wrote the award-winning play.⁶ So we credit Clara Beranger as one of many so often eclipsed by the idea of the *auteur*, a stubborn hold over from literary authorship. Film historians insist that motion picture films, industrially produced, have been the product of multiple creative contributions as well as labor at all levels. The AFI Introduction reminds us how many names are listed on the end credit roll.



Lantern slide. *Craig's Wife* (1928) adapted by Clara S. Beranger from George Kelly stage play, a William C. DeMille Production. Courtesy Cleveland Public Library Digital Gallery, W. Ward Marsh collection.

Today, returning to Clara Beranger's question, we may not agree on what criteria to use to make a case as to whether one silent era film is "better" than another, but it is clear that women screenwriters had their own high standards. We can defer the question as to whether women were "better" to the conventions they described in so many screenwriting manuals-- the majority of which were written by women who began in the silent era film industry. Astonishingly, 15 of these women wrote manuals, several as many as two, most of which were published during the silent era, beginning with Catherine Carr's *The Art of Photoplay Writing*.⁷

Finally, what is the answer to that old question as to whether women's writing or directing is different from work attributed to men? Feminists have long rejected gendered aesthetics for a more sociological approach. What topics did women writers, directors, and producers take up as a challenge? Let's consider another example. British immigrant Margaret Turnbull whose career, 1915 to 1924, began at the advent of the feature film. Of the 50 titles on which she received writing credit, only 8 survive, or 16% of the films



Margaret Turnbull. Courtesy Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Margaret Herrick Library.

she wrote are extant. But one of those surviving features, *The Case of Becky* (dir. Frank Reicher, 1915) adapted from a play by David Belasco and Edward Locke, is a case in point. The film features a *tour de force* performance by Blanche Sweet who plays a young woman suffering from multiple personality disorder and as such she performs a range of grotesque bodily distortions to indicate these transformations. Here is the point. Blanche Sweet was one of director D.W. Griffith's favorite actresses, seen as early as *The Lonedale Operator* (Biograph, 1911) and he cast her as sweet and sometimes tough but never malevolent.⁸ Although Griffith's films took up war, criminality, and alcoholism, mental illness was not a topic that he would have touched. Our job is to conjecture. What might Margaret Turnbull have contributed to adapting, that is, to reconceiving of the play not only for Blanche Sweet before a camera but to reconfiguring the story for the screen?

So our count may have been wrong. But now that we have the count right, we can proceed to the next stage of finding and viewing and writing about the strangeness of silent era film titles. Another generation will discover that the stories about the women who made these films are as intriguing as many of the films they co-wrote, co-directed, and co-produced.

End Notes

¹ David Pierce. *The Survival of American Silent Feature Films: 1912 – 1929*. Washington, D.C.: Council on Library and Information Resources and the Library of Congress.

² To list just some of the silent era feature as well as short films restored with funds by the New York Women in Film and Television Preservation Project: *Mixed Pets* (dir. Alice Guy Blaché, Solax Co., 1911), *Behind the Scenes* (1914) scenario: Margaret Mayo, *A Sister to Carmen* (dir./prod. Helen Gardner, 1913), *Deliverance* (1918) writer/producer: Helen Keller, *The Blot* (dir./prod. Lois Weber, 1921), *For the Soul of Rafael* (1920) writer: Dorothy Yost, *Unmasked* (dir./writer Grace Cunard, 1917), *My Lady of the Lilacs* (1916) scenario: Beta Breuil, Christine of the Bit Tops (1926) screenwriter Sonya Levien, *That Ice Ticket* (dir./writer/camera Angela Murray Gibson, 1923)

³ See for profile and DVD and streaming sources JoAnne Ruvoli. "Frances Marion," In Jane Gaines, Radha Vatsal, and Monica Dall'Asta, eds. *Women Film Pioneers Project*. New York, NY: Columbia University Libraries. 2013. <https://wfpp.columbia.edu/pioneer/ccp-frances-marion/>. Accessed December 14, 2022.

Cari Beauchamp, *Without Lying Down* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), *Without Lying Down: Frances Marion and the Power of Women in Hollywood* (Milestone 2003).

⁴ Le Giornate del Cinema Muto/Pordenone Silent Film Festival catalogue (October 1 – 8, 2022), 225 – 229.

⁵ *Moving Picture World* (24 August 1918):1128.

⁶ Laurie Rossiter, "Clara Beranger." In Jane Gaines, Radha Vatsal, and Monica Dall'Asta, eds. *Women Film Pioneers Project*. New York, NY: Columbia University Libraries. 2013. <https://wfpp.columbia.edu/pioneer/clara-beranger/>. Accessed December 14, 2022.

⁷ Catherine Carr, *The Art of Photoplay Writing* (New York: Hannis Jordan, 1914). https://wfpp.columbia.edu/essay/how-women-worked-in-the-us-silent-film-industry/#Screenwriting_Manuals_by_Women. Accessed December 14, 2022.

⁸ "The Case of Becky." Rev. *Moving Picture World* (25 September 1915): 2198. Sarah Delahousse. "Margaret Turnbull." In Jane Gaines, Radha Vatsal, and Monica Dall'Asta, eds. *Women Film Pioneers Project*. New York, NY: Columbia University Libraries. 2013. <https://wfpp.columbia.edu/pioneer/ccp-margaret-turnbull/>. Accessed December 14, 2022.