

fireweed anne vs. the feminists

by Anne Cameron

Anne Cameron participated in a film festival in Vancouver recently and had an uncomfortable time. She has written an uncomfortable article, and many readers may disapprove. But that doesn't worry the author. Meanwhile, jurists across the country may rise to salute her. Like those who did the preselection for the Canadian Film Awards, only to have to spend \$25 to see the show, Cameron learned that judging isn't all it's trumped up to be.



Illustrations by Don Arioli

I was sitting at my desk, staring out the window, watching my erratic neighbours totally insane Maltese bounce at the end of his tie-cord, pretending I was working on my novel, knowing in my heart of hearts that all I was doing was fantasizing more ways to get rid of the yapping dog. I'd been through the more obvious ways, like charge out of the house, run across the road and kick the little sucker to death, and had gotten to the more esoteric planning stage. I'd take fibre glass insulation, roll it up inside little balls of tempting hamburger, feed it to the ugly little scum and sit back and laugh while he died a slow and agonizing death, his innards shredded by the glass fibres, his yap-yap-yap diminishing as he weakened... and the phone rang.

It always does. I might have been able to swing from the yapping dog to an international spy thriller, written a script that would have been snatched up by hungry producers, made a smash hit movie and gotten rich and been able to move to... this week it's Little Cayman Island, I understand it is not only eternally warm there, they have few phones and a Canadian dollar will still buy a cup of coffee. A demi-tasse, no doubt.

The voice on the other end of the phone asked me if I would consider being on the jury of the Feminist Film and Video Festival in Vancouver. I've never been on any kind of a jury, not even the kind where the law demands you give up your job, home, and family, and decide fine points of law for eleven dollars a day. Besides, I'm a sucker for anything that might improve the disgusting lack of opportunity for talented women in film. So I said yes. Before we agreed that I would, in fact, be part of the jury, the caller stressed a point. "One thing," she warned, "this is a *feminist* film festival." "Yeah?" I replied with my usual verbal skills showing. "Are you sure you can work with *feminists*?" I was going to laugh, but she sounded dreadfully serious, which, somehow, 'everybody' does, more's the pity, so instead of laughing I tried a little humour for the folks on the mainland, a little Vancouver Island humour, which I keep forgetting is not always understood. "I've even been known to be able to work with men." I don't think I should have said that.

Anyway, we patched up that misunderstanding, and made arrangements for me to receive a package explaining the concept and planning of the feminist film festival. It wasn't a big package and it didn't take me long to read it, but it didn't answer very many of my questions.

Over I went to the mainland and braved the mysteries of the Vancouver transit system. Of course, I had help; a friend of mine met me and escorted me because I'm always getting on the right bus on the wrong side of the street, thus going away from instead of towards my supposed destination. My friends tell me the rest of my life is like that, too, the right bus, but the wrong direction and me watching out the window in happy ignorance, enjoying the scenery anyway.

I have to admit, right off the bat, that I didn't get to every viewing evening and didn't see all the entries. It isn't always easy to cross 42 miles of water (3 hours from downtown Nanaimo to downtown Vancouver), then make it clear across town on busses, even when you have people who will guide you like the badly directed hillbilly you are. Sometimes one

gets detoured. The more bits and snippets of bad film I saw the easier it was to get detoured. I have an alter-ego lives inside the sophisticated, demure veneer I present to the world. (!) Her name is Fireweed Anne, and she's eleven and a half years old. Her hair is unruly, she has a patch on the knee of her jeans and a Black Diamond softball mitt hangs from her belt. She chews DoubleBubble gum and snaps it viciously and looks with gimlet eyes on the doin's of the Big People. She also makes rude mental comments when bullshit tries to baffle brains and on those rare occasions when I lose my temper (which of course Never Happens) she stands on the sidelines yelling Sic 'em Cami... she loves good film and will sit with me happily through untold playings of **Duchess and the Dirtwater Fox** or **The Conversation**, but she curls up and goes to sleep when it's bad film and helped me do something in Toronto that I have never before done, not since I saw my first film at age six (it was **Lassie Come Home**). I walked out of a film, an event not unnoticed by half a dozen of my friends. An event I thought would be cause for Trudeau to declare a national holiday. And Fireweed Anne was not enjoying being around during the judging of the entries for the feminist film festival. I resisted the temptations she offered with dedicated zeal and did not detour by way of the aquarium to watch the whales. I did not go to watch the human zoo on Skid Row. I didn't even pop into the planetarium to see what the other kind of stars were doing, but I did miss some of the showings.

I get hardnosed and difficult when things which are supposed to kick off at seven haven't kicked off at eight. I begin to feel like a fool when I've been five hours in the journeying and find myself, out of a supposed jury of twelve, one of four in a viewing room. I get downright mean natured when I suspect that whatever the jury thinks or doesn't think a film will be shown at the festival anyway, *if* the right person wants that film shown. For whatever reason. "Why're you bothering to mark all them dumb pieces of paper when you *know* she's gonna show that dirty piece of trash?" F/A kept asking. And I didn't have an answer for her. And the piece of trash got shown even though it was ripped apart by the members of the jury present when it was previewed.

And people begin to dislike me intensely when I ask awkward questions. Like the one I asked the very first night of previewing. We'd sat through a couple of hours of agonizingly bad pieces of drivel and F/A was giving me a lot of trouble and the friend who had escorted me to the proper place was falling asleep and we broke for coffee. Nobody seemed to "know" anybody else and we were all being kind of hesitant and stiff and F/A gave me a kick in the slats that caused me to turn to the woman who had phoned me in the first place. I reminded her of the phone conversation and her question about whether or not I was sure I could work with *feminists*, and then F/A made me ask "What is a 'feminist'?"

Well, you don't ask questions like that, I guess. There was just silence. Everybody looked at everybody else. I, of course, *knew* in my heart of hearts they were looking at each other and thinking Christ, is she dumb! So I asked it again a different way. "What, exactly, do you mean when you say *feminist*?" The silence just got deeper, darker, and more disapproving. Finally, a woman filmmaker grinned at me and said "you're surrounded by a room full of them." F/A nudged me and I replied "I'm in a room full of women. If all wo-

Anne Cameron is the author of many poems and plays and of the screenplays for the films, *The Dreamspeaker*, *A Matter of Choice*, and *Drying Up The Streets*.

men are feminists, why ask the question. Can't men be feminists too?" Nobody answered that one.

I guess I'm still waiting for an answer to my question. I'm getting so confused about "the movement" that the more I read and ask, the less I understand.



Some very nice pieces of work done by women didn't get shown at the film festival. Pardon me, the Feminist Film Festival. Some pieces of unmitigated trash did get shown. And I don't understand that, either.

I didn't even attend all of the festival. So what, you ask, is she doing writing an article, she didn't go to all the judging,

she didn't understand what was meant by feminist, and she didn't attend the festival in its entirety; well, probably nobody else is going to write anything at all about it and nature abhors a vacuum (grade seven English, parables and quotations).

The festival ran from Friday to Sunday, inclusive and on Friday I was flying back from Toronto and the film awards and festival (where I walked out of my first film; a Canadian film at that, I just couldn't stand the tank and the crushed tent and found it impossible to endure another minute). Friday night I had a poetry reading in Vancouver, but on Saturday I went to the Feminist Film Festival. I was supposed to be part of a panel that was supposed to discuss Women, the Law, Violence against Women and Alternatives. The panel never really happened, or rather the panel happened, we just didn't discuss anything and I'm not sure why, everything was such confusion and none of us seemed to know what we were doing there.

I did see a couple of really nice films and the food facilities were extremely well set up, with good food available at reasonable prices.

And I had the wonderful experience of hearing Barbara Martineau give a talk on the history of women in film. A talk I think this magazine ought to print in its entirety because of the sheer superior quality of content. The audience not only enjoyed the talk, they asked if it would be possible to get copies and asked a question that needs answering; why don't we hear, read and see more about the women who have made good films and meaningful contributions to the history of film?

After Martineau's talk, I left. It was partly spite, partly the fact I *knew* the rest of the afternoon would be downhill and it's VanIsle to leave when the party is at its peak and go home with good memories. The spite? Well, I have a very small mind. My friend and I walked up to the front door and went inside and were asked if we were "registered." I said I'd only come to participate in the panel discussion and a little woman with an aggressive face and even more aggressive attitude told me I'd have to pay to get in anyway. For a start, anybody with an aggressive face and aggressive attitude isn't going to see the sunny side of *me*. Then there's the red-necked reactionary in me who is turned off by anybody who mixes their sexual identity and their politics and waves it in my face by gluing sequins (bright red ones) to the back of a jean jacket and walks around like a living advertisement for "Lesbian Unity." I openly admit, that kind of public display threatens me. I don't know *why* it threatens me and I don't care why it threatens me, but F/A just mutters "tacky tacky tacky" and I agree with her. Suddenly all I could think of was My God, three return trips by ferry at ten bucks a trip, then add the cost of meals while away from home and how many hours sitting on a hard chair watching crap and filling out forms and this little runt with the confrontation syndrome sticking out of her ears, wants another five bucks? "Bullshit" said F/A. "I'm not paying a cent," I said and walked in as bold as brass. I was told I could stay for the panel discussion but I wasn't to watch any films. And to spite them (because you will find few people more small minded than me when there's a point to be made or a nit to be picked) I watched two! So there!

We didn't go to the dance they threw on Saturday night. Cleo Laine was appearing at the Queen Elizabeth and we went to sit in comfortable seats and watch Professionalism at work

on stage. "Howcum you can't sing like that?" F/A asked and didn't pop her gum once in nearly three hours. After Cleo we went to my friend's place to listen to records, having agreed that there was no way we wanted to walk out of an evening of first rate music to go to a dance where they didn't even have a live band. VanIsle logic again, you don't ruin a good meal with a lousy desert!

And Sunday there were too many other things to do that seemed preferable to tangling with the aggressive lady at the front door; because there was no way at that point that I was going to pay, you understand! Besides we didn't get out of bed until nearly noon, jet lag and ten days in Tarana had caught up with me.

I still don't know what a *feminist* is. I do know women are making film. Some of it is bad. Some of it is very, very good. I watched and admired a half hour film *Anastasia* by a Quebec filmmaker, Paule Baillargeon and thought it as fine a short as I had seen; made with practically no money, using a theatre group of dedicated actors and actresses and, so far, not only ignored but deliberately suppressed by "everyone." The National Film Board, which seems somehow to help train and develop many less talented filmmakers, just refused to help this woman make a second film. Some of the stuff the NFB entered in the feminist film festival wasn't one-tenth the film *Anastasia* is, so I don't understand their decision process at all. Does anybody?

Women are making film and have a long history of making film. The history, like many women's films is being suppressed. They aren't teaching it in film courses, they aren't telling us or showing us. Good films are sitting in archives and libraries, being deliberately ignored. So every generation of bright young women who want to make film wind up having to find out for themselves, re-make mistakes other women have had to make, use up a lot of energy and time stumbling and experimenting, re-tracing the same rocky paths.

It's a good way to keep us from forging ahead and making real progress.

I guess some men out there are going to say Pshaw, more Womens Lib bullshit, I don't believe it, so what... there aren't enough *good* filmmakers in this country to support a national film industry. The women who could help and make vital contributions are being suppressed. It isn't only to the benefit of women that we be allowed into the sacred fields, it's to your benefit, too. We aren't all wearing confrontation messages on our backs, we aren't all politically committed to hating, distrusting or antagonizing men. Hell, some of us have even managed to work with you! But I suspect too many men are too locked in to the old silliness and believe the stereotypes. And of course, the bad filmmakers in the country don't want anybody showing them up as bad filmmakers.

I hope, for all the mistakes, misunderstandings and fumbings that there is a feminist film festival in Vancouver again next year. I will not sit on the jury, I will not donate hours of time and nearly ninety dollars to the festival and I will not sit on a panel that doesn't really happen. I'll just go, pay my money and see some films.

Maybe the only people who can ever enjoy a film festival are those who didn't have to work to make it happen!

And I hope that in future, as we find out more about our own history and see and hear more from people like Barbara Martineau, our prickly discomfort will start to diminish and we'll stop being so antagonistic and so quick to create a con-

frontation. I think there is more place for a *Woman's Film Festival* than a *Feminist Film Festival* because I think I am not the only person in the world who is no longer sure what the word *feminist* means. There was nothing happening that I could see that would have made a man feel welcome at that festival. If feminism means segregation by sex, then I am not a feminist. I have two sons and it might come as one hell of a shock to the several women with sequin'ed messages on their jackets, but my sons are human beings too, and as decent as their sister. And I refuse to live in a world, however *feminist* where my sons are not welcome. Radical anything makes me uncomfortable. Shrill screaming and deliberate impoliteness make me angry. And anybody who sets up a confrontation situation with me has just found all the confrontation they're apt to be able to handle! We don't have to be impolite, mouthy and deliberately insulting. Surely to god their is room still for good manners, pleasant faces, smiles and even a small touch of humour. I know there are a lot of men who have not yet learned the first thing about equality but we aren't going to teach them by making them so unwelcome and uncomfortable that they don't show up to see the films!

There isn't much future in talking to already listening ears; especially if what you're saying is closing some of those ears. And mine aren't as open as they were a few months ago.

But I still think there is room for women oriented film, for film festivals showing the work women are doing, and room for all the encouragement we can give to young women who want to work in film.

It's all this damned militant radicalism makes me agree totally with F/A that it's time to leave, the party's getting rough. □



powerhouse presents

In Montreal, there was another festival, less passionate, perhaps, than Vancouver's Feminist Festival, but important as a show place for Canadian women's films. Jane Dick gives a short report.

by Jane Dick

A selection of films concerning women's issues and made by Canadian women filmmakers was shown at Montreal's Le Cinéma Parallèle October 10-14, presented by Powerhouse Gallery. The main emphasis of Powerhouse is to provide a centre which reflects the trends of women artists. The

Jane Dick is a free-lance writer living in Montreal.

film festival was conceived as an extension of this. Femmedia and Studio 'D' of the National Film Board also assisted in the festival.

Seventeen films were presented, most of them from Montreal and Toronto and they played to packed houses every night. Proceeds were shared 50-50 between Powerhouse and Le Cinéma Parallèle.

Most of the films were documentary though there were a few animated films, including three by Veronika Soul, and two fiction films — Lois Siegel's **Recipe to Cook a Clown** and Nesya Shapiro's **Passages**. Among the documentaries were several portraits of individual women.

Patricia's Moving Picture (Bonnie Klein) talks with a west coast woman



Kay Armatage was among the filmmakers on hand to discuss film



Cross-country skiing isn't what it used to be in Lois Siegel's **Recipe to Cook a Clown**

who, at 40 with seven children, has to deal with a massive state of depression and comes out of it a much stronger and happier person. Designed as a catalyst for discussion, the film presents challenging situations but wisely draws no conclusions.

Jill Johnston... October 1975 (Lydia Wazana and Kay Armatage) follows Jill Johnston, author of **Lesbian Nation**, during one week of public readings and interviews in Toronto. The film captures her in transit, showing a woman at work, and though interesting and sympathetic, is not always flattering. Jill Johnston has since refused to allow the film to be shown in the U.S.

Lady from Grey County (Janice H. Brown and Margaret Westcott) is a well-wrought portrayal of Agnes Campbell Macphail, Canada's first woman Member of Parliament. As the film brings Macphail back to life via old stills, newsclips, and some of her own writings, we see a woman of considerable personal courage and resource. The film is also an important historical document since it chronicles a turbulent period of social and political change in Canada.

D'Abord Ménagères (Luce Guilbeault) interviews several women and one man who work outside the home but are still solely responsible for housework and childcare. Pointed and thought-provoking, it is unfortunately too long and often repetitive.

Some American Feminists (Nicole Brossard, Luce Guilbeault, and Margaret Westcott) interviews some of the more influential feminists in the women's movement. Again, they are seen in a particular place, time and frame of mind, but the historical perspective is clearly defined, and the interviews and their intercutting with one another are very articulate.

Though most of the films dealt with women's issues, **The Thin Line**, made by Holly Dale and Janis Cole, two recent graduates of Sheridan College, takes a look at the maximum security mental health centre at Penetanguishene, Ontario which houses men who have committed some of the most brutal crimes including rape and murder. The men interviewed for the film contributed a great deal to the structuring and ultimate purpose of the film — it is essentially, theirs — and it is a remarkable statement on the human capacity

for understanding and self-help. The NFB has bought ten prints of this film.

On Friday afternoon of the festival a workshop was held at Powerhouse Gallery. It was to be concerned with "Feminist Film Criticism: The Direct Approach." It was not. However, in a loose and relaxed atmosphere, those present were given the opportunity to meet with Holly Dale and Janis Cole, Kay Armatage, Bonnie Klein, and Ardele Lister — director of **So Where's My Prince Already?**, an overdone satire made by Reel Images, a no longer active women's media co-op in B.C., with, happily, a brilliantly funny animated sequence by Floy Zitten. Participants also saw the première of Kay Armatage's latest film, **Gertrude and Alice in Passing**, a charming and intelligent eight minute piece that explores, among other things, the camera as voyeur.

The workshop was not well attended — at least half the people there had to be — they were women involved in the making of the films presented — but discussions were both lively and thoughtful and with more publicity in the future, it has definite possibilities as a forum for women who make films.□



A wall poster in Luce Guilbeault's *D'Abord Ménagères*

notes for a study of **women's history in the media**

by Barbara Halpern Martineau

It is a fact that women have had a more difficult time making their way in filmmaking than have men. Yet women have participated importantly, both as independent filmmakers and as public servants in Canada. Barbara Halpern Martineau has made it her business to discover the facts.

photo: Chris Lund



Calais Calvert handling the Women and Welfare section at the NFB distribution division (1946)

Theme:

As women and as Canadians we share the problematic goal of emerging as users of the tools of media as opposed to being tools of those who use media.

Remembrance:

Masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice. Jane Austen should have laid a wreath upon the grave of Fanny Burney, and George Eliot done homage to the robust shade of Eliza Carta – the valiant old woman who tied a bell to her bedstead in order that she might wake early and learn Greek. All women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn... for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds.

– Virginia Woolf, "A Room of One's Own," 1928.

There is a double edge to these words of Virginia Woolf: an understanding of art in relation to the mass, and an understanding of the collectivity of women's experience in the arts, an experience which has been political/economic as well as creative/individualistic. No artist creates in isolation, although it may seem that way – art either challenges or perpetuates ideology, the illusions we are fed by the ruling system. I would, therefore, like to offer the following points to take into account when preparing to study women's history in the media:

1) That media, as we know it, is essentially *mass* media, designed (mechanically reproduced) to reach as many people as possible. 1

2) that, therefore, any study of media must look carefully at the relationship between the product and its audience (which no one has yet figured out how to do) – how do images relate to social reality? What do they reinforce and what do they challenge?

3) Such a study must also consider the relationship between the maker of the product and the ideological and economic structures of her or his society. Who is saying what to whom and for what reason? (Note that it's much easier to maintain established ideologies than to change them.)

4) That, as Virginia Woolf pointed out with reference to women writers, a woman must first have a room of her own if she is to create, that is, she must have a measure of economic independence.

5) And so a history of women in media must take into account the economic history of women in the twentieth century and also the economic history of the media.

More words from the past:

There is nothing connected with the staging of a motion picture that a woman cannot do as easily as a man, and there is no reason why she cannot completely master every technicality of the art. (Referring to the need for long careful study of photography and stage direction

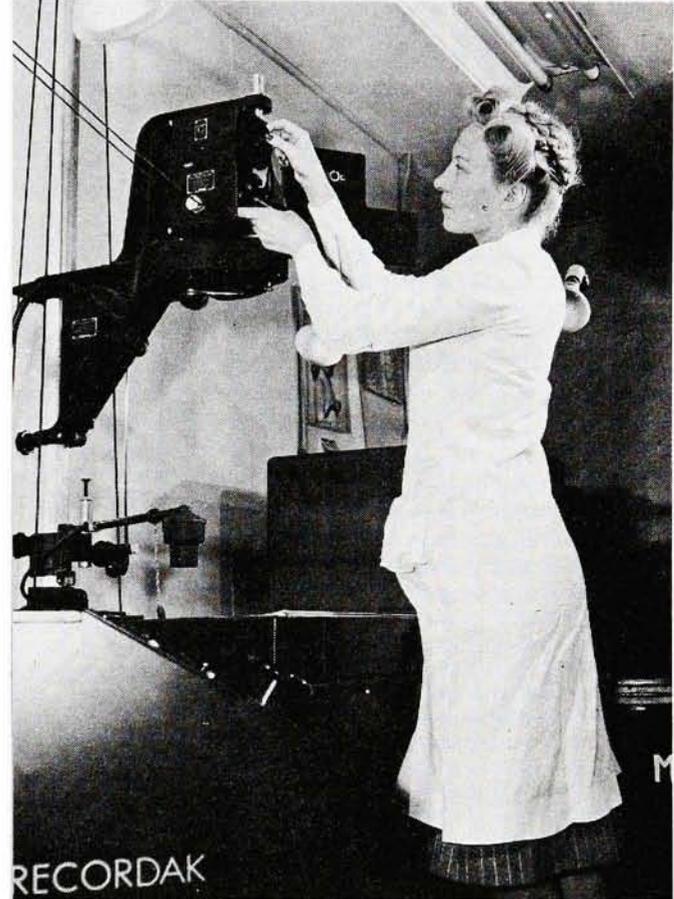
Barbara Halpern Martineau is currently teaching film production and theory at Queen's University in Kingston. She recently completed Good Day Care: One Out of Ten, a half-hour documentary film.

she concludes) both are as suitable, as fascinating and as remunerative to a woman as to a man.

– Alice Guy Blaché, 'Women's Place in Photoplay Production,' "Moving Picture World," July 11, 1914. 2

From Alice Guy to, I would argue, every woman and man engaged in the practice of filmmaking today, we all know that money and economic considerations are crucial. What is needed is an understanding of the connections between the economics of the media, particularly as they relate to women, and the ideology or counter-ideology of films in their effect on audiences.

photo: W. Doucette



Microfilm Recordak camera is loaded by Pat Poulton at the NFB laboratories, John and Susses Streets, Ottawa (1947)

Now:

It is only six years since we first began to realize that there is material for a history of women in the media, only six years since the first international festival of women's films in New York opened the way which other festivals and then study groups and conferences and women's studies courses and writers and scholars were to follow, of finding forgotten and neglected films made by women, bringing them together for screenings and discussions, looking for confirmation that women can make films, that we have since the beginning of filmmaking made films, that therefore we have every reason to assume we will continue to make films in increasing numbers. Because it is very difficult and very commonplace, we all know, having grown up female, to be told – you can't do that – girls can't do that – only boys can build towers, play baseball, fly planes, earn money, make films.

Many women are still trying to prove that girls can make films. But Alice Guy, who made the world's first fiction film in 1896, proved that by doing it over eighty years ago. And it's been proved over and over, by Lois Weber, Mabel Normand, Germaine Dulac, Esther Shub, Lotte Reiniger, our own Nell Shipman — who once jumped thirty feet into an icy, rock-bordered stream to spare a pregnant stunt woman and insisted that the woman be paid her \$10. anyway. These pioneer filmwomen, all important innovators in their fields, were followed in every decade in every country where film industries have existed by capable, often brilliant women filmmakers and television producers. Women have made feminist films and films you would never know a woman made if you weren't told: scientific, educational, experimental films, even recently exploitation features, and a couple of big-budget Hollywood films. These are all fuel for the argument that women are not biologically incapable of making films like men, a response to what I call the

bi 0 logical phallacy

but that argument is superficial, not key. The important questions and answers lie elsewhere, in a materialist analysis of history and in an ideological analysis of mass media.

The example closest to home is the story of how Canadian women played a strong creative role in making films at the National Film Board under John Grierson during World War II. There was no doubt then that women such as Jane Marsh, Evelyn Spice Cherry, Gudrun Parker, Judith Crawley, Margaret Perry, and many more could produce, direct, photograph, take sound, write, edit, and do research for films still studied as powerful examples of propaganda and education. It was wartime and the men were overseas — women were needed on the home front; women could do anything: build planes, fly them, do heavy farm work and factory work, make films about it all. Jane Marsh made a film about what women were doing, for which her title was *Work for Women*. (The NFB changed it to *Women Are Warriors*.) Her research began with a scathing indictment of the way women have been suppressed over the centuries, and her commentary in the film suggests that women would stay in the salaried workforce if they could.

But immediately after the war, as the troops returned looking for their old jobs and the country converted to a peacetime economy, women were laid off in great numbers. Films, magazines, all aspects of mass media including the films of the NFB joined in the praises of domestic life for women, the joys of unpaid work in the kitchen and nursery. Most of the women at the NFB left, for one reason or another — Jane Marsh was forced to resign for daring to argue with Grierson, who later told her she'd been right, but that he would never give in to a woman. She remarked about women's attitudes in those early years: "They were so grateful to be working in interesting jobs that they didn't realize they were slaves." 3

The lesson to be learned from that period of World War II, which had such a strong impact on both the content of the media and the position of women within the media, is that it is simply not enough to say, or even to prove, that girls can make films.

What we now, as women and Canadians must ask, and answer, is how to use the tools of film as opposed to being tools of the users of film (the powers that be). This means having control of the means of production and understanding the potential of the media.

A voice from now, south of the border:

From what is the 'independent' filmmaker or artist independent? She is not independent from the need to make a living. She is not independent from the need for capital — money which gives the power to make her films and distribute her films within a tight commercial media monopoly. When a feminist wonders why capitalists won't hand over the money to make anti-sexist films, she, like her 'independent' male counterpart, must face the terms of her dependence. She has begun to beg, borrow or steal (translated as win grants, go into debt, etc.) the capital to write herself into visual history making films about the experience of women; viz: the films of Julia Reichert, Yvonne Rainer, Barbara Kopple, Chantal Ackerman and many others. But who actually sees these films? They are shown in women's film festivals, in avant-garde and political forums in a few major cities. She is, in short, caught in that same economic trap. Cooperatives for pooling resources and sharing distributor efforts, such as New Day Films, are beginning to form; they are collectives like Heresies. But the absolute dependence on the inconsistent, discriminate charity of liberals is the underside of that ultimately romantic hope for 'independence.' The terms for independence, then, among artists and feminists, are the very terms of dependence. Yet another contradiction.

— Joan Braderman, 'Juggling Contradictions: Feminism, the Individual and What's Left,' "Heresies," no. 1, January, 1977.

In the early days of film it was taken for granted that film was both a business and an art, and it was only when film became big business that film, as art, retreated to the sidelines of avant-garde, experimental, underground, sometimes political endeavor. There is a tendency to make sharp distinctions between "commercial" films and "art" films, a tendency which has caused dissension in the women's movement, and some polarization. Some feminist critics have claimed that only commercial features and contemporary radical films should be considered in a feminist context because they alone present the stereotypes and the analyses of the stereotypes (in the case of radical films) which have oppressed women in forms we can recognize and criticize. Other feminist critics argue that the language of commercial films and many "radical" films is a patriarchal language, developed by a patriarchal industry, and that only in experimental films can women find the new language appropriate to feminists. All these arguments are based on the understanding that there are film languages, ways of conveying meaning other than simply by words on the soundtrack or titles, for example, the way people are dressed conveys meaning, as do the ways they are lit, framed, presented. 4

Such dialogue can be very useful to the development of a new women's aesthetic if carried on constructively, and it has important implications for the practice of filmmaking. Historical perspective can help to avoid polarization for instance, so studying the film *The Smiling Madame Beudet* by Germaine Dulac (France, 1923) shows how experimental techniques and popular melodramatic form were combined to express a powerful and accessible early vision of a married woman's oppression. Understanding the context of French filmmaking at the time and the fact that it was a time of widespread unrest and activity among women, followed by heavy repression, helps to explain how such a film came to



Women at the Film Board, past and present, always active

be made and why it has been neglected for so long and why it was not followed by many others in the same tradition.

I think that one of the most important and exciting developments of the conjuncture of the new women's movement, the discovery of the existence of hundreds of forgotten films by women, and the work of developing feminist theories of culture and ideology, has been that women are again changing and transgressing the lines of demarcation between popular and experimental, between commercial and artistic, between political and entertaining films; and we are seeking ways of expressing our ideas which are accessible to the majority of viewers. This has necessitated continual questioning, both theoretical and practical, of assumptions about how to make films, about how films affect people.

Some pitfalls are becoming apparent:

A) In feature films, it is not enough to have women in major roles, or even women who do exciting things. Films, unlike reality, have morals — if a strong woman dies or is raped or punished in any way, a connection is made between her strength and the punishment — i.e., a woman is punished for being strong, as Katherine Hepburn was in Dorothy Arzner's memorable film *Christopher Strong* (1933, U.S.). Nelly Kaplan hit that one head-on in *A Very Curious Girl*. And *La fiancée du pirate* (1970, France) was a film about a woman's revenge on an entire village.

B) There is a dominant tradition in feature films that the heroine must be conventionally beautiful and well-dressed,

usually surrounded by expensive trappings. Heroes, on the other hand, can be homely and shabby if they are interesting and strong.

C) Makers of alternative films have often, at their peril, ignored the strength of feature film conventions and failed to pay attention to audience expectations of technical competence, entertainment value, pacing, etc., and to the implications of using conventionally beautiful images of women, conventional narrative forms etc. So, two further points to add to our original five: (see above)

6) We must take into account the history of the representation of women in art and how artistic conventions have been oppressive of women (5) so that

7) Women can figure out how to express progressive attitudes in forms which are both accessible and non-exploitative.

Most people are most exposed to the glut of patriarchal ideology which dominates all the media. To oppose this is to take on enormous odds. The history of women's filmmaking offers some very positive examples of feature films which present alternatives to conventional narrative and subject matter, for instance: Lois Weber's *The Blot* (1921, U.S.) which shows that romance is dependent on economic reality and avoids a fairytale ending of happy couples; Leontine Sagan's *Maedchen in Uniform* (1931, Germany), Marie Epstein's *La Maternelle* (1933, France) and Astrid Henning-

Jensen's *Die Pokkersunger* (*Those Blasted Kids* 1947, Denmark) which treat children in unsentimental ways as subject to oppression closely tied to the oppression of women. *But*, we have to look to much more recent films, mostly *not* fiction features to find attractive images of women who are not conventionally beautiful, images of women which relate to work and politics and not necessarily romance or domesticity.

One early reaction of feminist theoreticians to the question of how women *should* make films, based on analysis of past practice, was that women should at all costs avoid the illusion of realism, because so-called realism in films expressing dominant ideologies has fed myths which are oppressive of women. More recently, it has been pointed out that we need not throw out the baby with the bath water, that while realizing the dangers of "realism" it is also important to show women images of ourselves which we can believe in and relate to, even while knowing that these images are produced by a manipulative technology. 6

From a global perspective there have been a great many breakthroughs in feminist filmmaking to be seen in the past few years. Women have perhaps had the most important impact in the fields of documentary and experimental films, where all the modern developments of cinema technology — such as light and portable sync sound equipment, video portapak and transfer facilities and new accessible methods of animation — have been pressed into service for making low-budget films which present women's visions of ourselves and the issues which concern us in ways which stimulate dialogue and further thinking on the part of the audience. A number of feminist filmmakers, especially in the U.S. and Canada, have been increasingly concerned with the need to share the *process* of filmmaking with the subjects of the film as fully as possible — one very important example is Bonnie Klein, with her work in VTR, and she has documented the process of teaching people to use video to organize themselves in the film *VTR St. Jacques*. Jo Ann Elam, from Chicago, has made an important film about rape in which members of a group of women who have been victims of rape videotape their own discussion about rape and the filmmaker expands the implications of their discussion with intercut titles and dramatized sequences. The striking thing about the film *Rape* is that it profoundly analyzes its subject without exploiting the women concerned, without a trace of titillation or sensationalism — yet it explodes upon the consciousness of every audience I have seen it with.

More and more feminist filmmakers are exploring ways of distributing their low-budget films on alternative circuits. This is much easier in the U.S., with so many community colleges and universities spread thickly across the country, or in Great Britain or France, where the population is densely concentrated and there are numerous cine-clubs, than in Canada, where a much more widely scattered population and a colonized distribution system are double handicaps for alternative filmmakers. Our own feature films, made by men or women, must often find alternative distribution, and our own establishment "alternative" for the industry, the National Film Board, is not entirely reliable or sufficient in its bureaucratic massiveness, to suit all the needs of feminist filmmakers across the country. Again, the brutal reality of the commodity nature of film must not be ignored when considering possibilities for feminists in the media.

In Hollywood, where film-as-commodity is an unquestioned fact, the great discovery has been made that a market exists for films which do not overtly exploit women, and in the past year a handful of modestly (for Hollywood) budgeted features directed by women have gone into production, much touted by the media as evidence that women need struggle no longer — we've arrived.

I'm curious to see what we'll do now that we are here now that it is again well-known that girls can make films. 7 But there is another popular myth to be dealt with in this context, and that is the myth of the Great Director. Great Directors, so the myth goes, are born, not made, and all the really great directors have been men. What woman has produced a body of work comparable to that of Eisenstein, or Bunuel, or Hitchcock? What woman, I would reply, of the many who have shown comparable promise in their first and sometimes second features, have been given the opportunity to go on and make the mistakes and acquire the confident skills that go into the making of Great Directors, who are, I would argue, made, not born? In fact, I would go on, oddly enough, in a certain socialist film industry a woman has been rather quietly producing, over the past decade, an increasingly impressive body of films, first documentaries, then features, which have all the symptoms of being the early work of a Great Director. Her name is Marta Meszaros, and her films are about women of all ages and classes in Hungary, and they'll knock the titles off any Hollywood and most European features I've seen for being films which are very strongly the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people. And Marta Meszaros should lay a wreath upon the grave of Lois Weber; and Joyce Wieland should pay homage to the robust memory of Nell Shipman; and all of us should let flowers fall upon the tomb of Alice Guy, who first claimed for us the right to make our living by our own vision and our own skills. We are still fighting for that right, and for the society in which we can strive to make our visions realities. □

1. The implications of mechanically reproduced art forms were just explored by Walter Benjamin in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," 1936, translated and reprinted in *Illuminations*, a collection of his writings, also in *Marxism and Art*, ed. Lang and Williams, 1972.
2. Reprinted in *Women and the Cinema*, ed. Kay and Peary, 1977.
3. From a discussion held during *Four Days in May*, a conference held at the NFB in Montreal in 1975. See also my article "Before the Gueidlières: Women's Films at the NFB during World War II," *Canadian Film Reader*, ed. Feldman and Nelson, 1977.
4. For further reading on this subject see the bibliography on feminist criticism in *Jump Cut*, no. 1.
5. See John Berger et alia, *Ways of Seeing*, 1972; also Carol Duncan, "The Aesthetics of Power in Modern Erotic Art," *Heresies*, no. 1, 1977.
6. See Christine Gledhill, "Whose Choice?; Teaching Films About Abortion," *Screen Education*, Autumn 1977.
7. I think it's important to distinguish between films directed by women which nevertheless exploit sexist attitudes (such as Lina Wertmuller's undeniably powerful "Swept Away") and films informed by a feminist consciousness which avoid exploitation and concentrate instead on exploration of women's (and often men's) experience (such as Claudia Weill's "Girlfriends" and the films of Marta Maszaros).

In the early years of the motion picture industry, an overwhelming number of young women, some talented and others not, left their secure, middle-class homes or factory jobs for new lives as Hollywood starlets. Those who did not find success on the silver screen soon slipped back into lives of obscurity. But some would-be actresses displayed such versatility behind the cameras that they became known primarily as writers, directors, and producers. Such were the cases of Lois Weber, Cleo Madison, and Canada's Nell Shipman.



The crew gathers round (circa 1920) as son Barry Shipman plays with a dog and mother holds on to a white cat

nell shipman:

girl wonder from god's country

by Judith Smith

The women who succeeded as filmmakers, rather than film stars, are rarely remembered in historical and critical accounts of film's first decades. Their movies are forgotten, and the details of their lives are scantily documented. Therefore, it is a difficult task to piece together the life and career of Nell Shipman or any of her contemporaries. As Murray Summers put it, "Unfortunately, Nell Shipman — film and stage actress, film producer and director, writer... is no longer with us. Unfortunately as well, she is no longer well known at all."

The anonymity Nell Shipman faced in her later years was chronicled by Summers in an article based on her letters to him appearing in *Filmograph*, February, 1974. Ms. Shipman, who was "one of the first writers and directors of her sex to gain some stature" in motion pictures, spent her last years flat broke, supported by the kindnesses of relatives. When she died on January 23, 1970, she left behind a manuscript of her memoirs, *The Silent Screen And My Talking Heart*, which she had futilely attempted to sell to various publishers.

Born Helen Barham in 1893, Nell Shipman grew up in Victoria, British Columbia. Her parents were English, and had come West in the 1880's "armed with tents, cook stoves, spinning wheels, bowie knives and six shooters, determined to wrest a living from the Redman," though Nell herself admitted in an article entitled "Me," published in the 1919 February *Photo Play* that the Barhams had rather gross misconceptions about life in the peaceful Canadian frontier. At age thirteen, she became smitten with theatrical ambition and left home to attend drama school. Six months later, she joined a travelling company, and by the time she was fifteen, she had tried her hand at vaudeville, musical comedy and repertory theatre.

In 1907, Nell danced, sang and played piano in the Jesse Lasky production "The Pianophiends." At sixteen, she toured Alaska, heading her own company, and in 1909, she was engaged as the female lead in Charles Taylor's touring company. Playing again in Alaska, Nell was featured in "The Girl From Alaska," a play written especially for her by Taylor.

In 1910, Nell accepted the leading role in "The Barrier," a play produced by Canadian producer and theatrical manager Ernest Shipman, who organized shows in Australia, Canada, France, the U.S., as well as the Orient. Married in 1911, the couple located in California, determined to break into the movie business.

Their son, Barry Shipman, was born in Pasadena in 1912, and that same year, Nell saw her first small success in film, winning the first and second place prizes in a scenario contest sponsored by the Tally Theatre in Los Angeles. One of these scripts was produced by the Selig Polyscope Company (probably *Outwitted By Billy*, copyrighted by Selig Polyscope in 1913). The other, title unknown, was produced by Ernest Shipman with Nell in the leading role.

In 1914, Nell scripted *Shepherd Of The Southern Cross*, one of the first films to be produced in Australia. Later that same year, she went on location at Lake Tahoe to write three 3-reelers for Jack Kerrigan. It was here that she made her directorial debut, after the director and his leading lady suddenly quit the production. Nell also assumed the vacated heroine's role.

Judith Smith is a Cinema Studies major at Montreal's Concordia University, Sir George Williams Campus where she will receive her degree in June. She is originally from Nashville, Tennessee.

When Nell offered a script adapted from James Oliver Curwood's novel *God's Country And The Woman* to Vitagraph Studios in 1915, it was accepted, and she was cast in the starring role — her first film for a major studio. The picture was a commercial success and led to substantial contracts with Vitagraph, Fox and Lasky in the next two years. Nell completed a total of thirteen films between 1916-1917. During the same period, she also was a frequent lecturer on behalf of Vitagraph, and published a smattering of short stories, magazine articles, and a novel.

In recent years, Nell Shipman has been noted for her profound loyalty to her Canadian homeland, a tendency so rarely exhibited by her compatriots Mary Pickford, Marie Dressler, Mack Sennett and Norma Shearer. She always wanted to make films about Canada in Canada. In early 1919, Nell wrote of her ambitions in an article for her fans: "And now; My Dream. It's a very real one to me. It is that some day I may go up into Canada, to the waterways of the Hudson Bay territory, to the plains of the Middle West, and to the mountains and forests of the coast, and make big human outdoor pictures." Her dream was to come true in a very short time, for within the year, Ernest Shipman arranged for the two of them to go to Canada and make another film based on the works of James Oliver Curwood, *Back To God's Country*. The picture was produced by Canadian Photoplays, Ltd. of Calgary. Nell played the leading role and adapted the screenplay. Ernest had negotiated a contract with Curwood which gave his wife exclusive film rights to the author's works and which guaranteed that she would star exclusively in pictures based on his stories. This contract was for a period of two years, and Ernest co-signed the agreement.

Back To God's Country, taken from Curwood's short story, "Wapi, the Walrus," was shot on location in northern Alberta along the Lesser Slave Lake and in California on the Kern River, beginning in March 1919. The bitter winter weather sometimes reached 60 degrees below zero F., and conditions were so harsh that the leading man, Ronald Byram, caught pneumonia and died, following a prolonged exposure. But despite this setback, the picture was completed in three months and was released by First National the following September. Viewed by audiences in North America, England, Australia, Japan and continental Europe, *Back To God's Country* became Canada's most successful feature film, grossing a half million dollars in its first year of exhibition.

Having received a 300 percent return on its initial investment, Canadian Photoplays, Ltd., went into voluntary liquidation, although almost a year remained on the Shipman-Curwood contract. James Oliver Curwood, who had been unhappy with Nell's adaptation of *Back To God's Country* (she had made ingénue the hero, instead of the dog), formed a new company, Curwood Productions, to produce films from his many stories and novels. In 1920, Nell and Ernest divorced and "Ten Percent Ernie" was given charge of sales and publicity for Curwood's company.

While Ernest maintained his northern base, Nell returned to Hollywood and began making short films independently. Never again would she make a picture under the auspices of a Canadian production company, though she did make several other feature films in Canada for American companies, including *The Girl From God's Country* (1921), and *The Golden Yukon* (1928).

By 1921, Nell had formed Nell Shipman Productions, and was busy grinding out *Canadiana* for the ever increasing movie audiences. Her production of *The Girl From God's Country* alone was enough to win Nell her nickname "A Jill of All Trades," for not only did she produce and star in this vehicle, but wrote the script and co-directed as well. She had long since gained notoriety in Hollywood for her off-screen versatility, though she remained best known as a leading lady. As one **Photoplay** rhymester put it, "She vamps and writes and lectures too, and sometimes she's an ingénue."

Between 1922 and 1924, Nell made a number of wild animal and nature shorts, some starring Johnny Fox and Flash, the Wonder Dog, though the bankruptcies of two different producers, American and Louis Selznick, kept her financial situation precarious. Now living with Bert Van Tuyle, her co-director and former production manager on *Back To God's Country*, Nell located in Upper Priest Lake, Idaho. Her home was a modest log cabin twenty-one miles from the nearest road and fifty miles from a railway line, and her cast and crew included 15 bears, 3 deer, 2 elks, 4 coyotes, 2 wolves, 1 cougar, 2 wildcats, assorted racoons, skunks, eagles, owls, porcupines, beavers, marmots, muskrats, rabbits, dogs, and cats, plus "Old Daddy," an ex-trapper and her young son Barry.

With the terrific blizzards and inevitable isolation which winter brought, the struggles of the Shipman Production Company were further complicated by Van Tuyle's illness and need for hospitalization. Van Tuyle had frozen his foot the previous March, during a night shoot in Alberta. Though it was apparent from that point that amputation would be necessary, he stubbornly resisted medical treatment. By September, he had become a near-invalid, but no money was available for surgery.

Nell arranged to give performances in two small towns to earn the cash needed for the operation. Setting off just before Christmas, she returned in early January, following a perilous journey by snowplough and canoe over the partially frozen lake near their home. Before she could manage to return to the village with Bert, his condition worsened and he fell delirious with pain. In his confused state, he set off across the frozen wilderness alone. He reacted belligerently to Nell's attempts to aid him, and she was forced to precede him at a distance, fearing he might fall and die in the snow. Finally Van Tuyle allowed her to accompany him, and together they made their way to the Lone Star Ranch, where they sheltered overnight with some wealthy vacationers, who could not believe that the disheveled, but determined woman they entertained was truly Nell Shipman the movie star.

The following morning, Nell, Bert and a lumberjack who had come to their aid, set off across the lake through icebergs and a blanket of heavy fog which they encountered as they neared their destination. Reaching the village, they were recovered by local search parties, (organized to look for Nell since her New Year's Eve departure) and Van Tuyle was taken under the care of a local physician, who performed the amputation without benefit of anaesthesia. The entire incident received considerable press coverage, which Nell apparently felt would enhance the success of the next Shipman-Van Tuyle film project. "Oh, what glorious publicity," she wrote.

In 1925, Nell married artist Charles Ayers and pulled up stakes to move to Florida, where she participated in the production of *The Tamiami Trail*, based on one of her own sto-



A classic portrait, animals and all, of Nell Shipman in the Artic landscape

ries which had been syndicated by Florida newspapers. The following year, the Ayers were living in LaCoruna, Spain when their twins, Charles and Daphne, were born.

Nell's activity as an actress seems to have been on the wane by the early 1930's. Her most outstanding film contribution of this period came as a writer. Her story, "The Eyes of the Eagle," which concerned aviators, received the support of President Franklin Roosevelt as an Air Force motion picture project. Slated to be filmed by the U.S.A.F. with William DeMille as director, the project was moved to Paramount studios, where it was produced in 1935 under the title *Wings In The Dark*, starring Cary Grant and Myrna Loy.

Wings In The Dark tells the story of a flyer (Grant), who is blinded in a plane crash and invents a device which enables him to pilot again. When his girlfriend, a stunt pilot (Myrna

Loy) becomes endangered during one of her flights, he steals an airplane and rescues her, proving the feasibility of his invention. As Loy lands her aircraft, she crashes into Grant's plane on the runway, and miraculously, both emerge unharmed with Grant's sight restored, due to the jarring. **The New York Times** found **Wings In The Dark** a "pleasantly performed and skilfully filmed melodrama," but were not impressed with the script, "an addle-pated narrative. The tedious plot machinery... proves to be disastrous to the work which is managed with such technical finesse that it ought to have been among the better pictures," the **Times** concluded.

Divorced from Charles Ayers in 1934, Nell made her way to South Africa to make more wild animal pictures in partnership with Arthur Varney, a one-time assistant to D.W. Griffith. The outbreak of World War II in 1939 halted production of **The Jungle Ship**, and Nell returned to America. During the war years, she made commercials, Army enlistment films and did voice-over narrations. She was also able to complete **The Jungle Ship** and made another film, **The Golden Road**, as well.



Little Nell stands up to the villain in Hartford's **Back to God's Country** (1919)

As anti-communist paranoia divided Hollywood during the fifties, Nell became more visibly American in her outlook, and worked on behalf of the right-wing front. At this time, she was living in Washington, D.C., and maintained close contact with members of Congress, and the departments of State and Finance. She wrote the screenplay for an anti-communist picture, **The Fifth American**, but the film encountered release difficulties. Later, in 1960, she scripted **The Fires Of Batsto**, a film about the American Revolutionary War.

Nell's activity as a writer may have left her a more enduring reputation than did her films. Her literary projects were ongoing after 1915, the year she published **Under The Crescent** (also titled **The Purple Iris**), a novel from which she also created a six part scenario, one of the first serials filmed at Uncle Carl Laemmle's Universal Studios. Other novels included **Get The Woman** (1930), **Abandoned Trails** (1932), **Tomorrow For Sale** (1941), **The Fifth American** (1962) and **Neeka Of The North**, date unavailable. Nell also published one children's story, **Kurley Kew And The Tree Princess**, in 1930, and was a frequent contributor to popular magazines of the day.

As a screenwriter, Nell lost two potentially important deals by chance, which would have undoubtedly added stature to her career. "M'sieu Sweetheart," a six part story she wrote for **McCall's** magazine, was chosen by Twentieth Century Fox as a comeback property for Clara Bow, but the deal was scrapped before production ever began. "Hot Oil," written in collaboration with G.P. Putnam, in 1934, was slated for a movie adaptation starring Will Rogers, when the humorist died unexpectedly in a plane crash.

Even in her old age, Nell remained creative, and in the last year of her life still bubbled with ideas for novels and film projects. She wrote of these to Summers, and particularly, of her desire to go to Washington, D.C. again, and make a documentary. In her seventies, she seemingly was quite willing to pick up and move across the country and once more open up offices as an independent producer. "Even at this ripe old age," she wrote, "I do not live in the past or pluck at memories' worn harp strings. (I) am most awfully keen for the now." She lived in a house with sixteen cats near Palm Springs, California. Since she had usually been her own boss, Nell was ineligible for social security benefits, and her main support came from her son Barry, who had become a top film producer for the United States Air Force. She was proud of Barry and revelled in delight each time he confounded the governmental hierarchy, "the Establishment," as she called them.

Nell Shipman, a diverse woman, who flippantly described herself in 1919, as being interested in " 'Feminism,' 'Socialism,' and other 'isms,' " was one of the very few women of her generation to maintain her place as a producer and director for more than thirty years. Her enthusiasm for film never diminished, from her earliest days as a scenarist in Hollywood through her last years of semi-retirement. She was also well aware, it seems, of the unique value of those early experiences. In 1925, she wrote: "It warms our hearts and inspires our minds to know there is a generation of young and lively students who care about our beginnings and the ring circles of our growth, and are ready themselves to contribute to the ever-present goal for film perfection." □

Selected Bibliography

- Brownlow, Kevin. **The Parade's Gone By**. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969.
- Fullbright, Tom. "Queen of the Dog Sleds." **Classic Film Collectors** (Fall, 1969): 30-31,39.
- Morris, Peter. **Canadian Feature Films Part 1, 1913-1940**. Ottawa: Canadian Film Institute, 1970.
- "Ernest Shipman and **Back To God's Country**." **Canadian Film Reader**. Edited by Seth Feldman and Joyce Nelson. Toronto: Peter Martin Associates, Ltd., 1977.
- The New York Times Film Reviews 1932-1938**. New York: Arno Press, 1970.
- Photoplay** "A Jill of All Trades." (April, 1917): 38.
- Rosen, Marjorie. **Popcorn Venus**. New York: Avon Books, 1973.
- Shipman, Nell. "Me." **Photoplay** (February, 1919): 47-48.
- "The Movie That Couldn't Be Screened." **Atlantic** (March, 1925): 326-332, (April, 1925): 477-482, (May, 1925): 645-650.
- Smith, Sharon. **Women Who Make Movies**. New York: Hopkinson & Blake, 1975.
- Summers, Murray. "Fragments From the Letters of Nell Shipman." **Filmograph** (February, 1974): 18-22.