

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

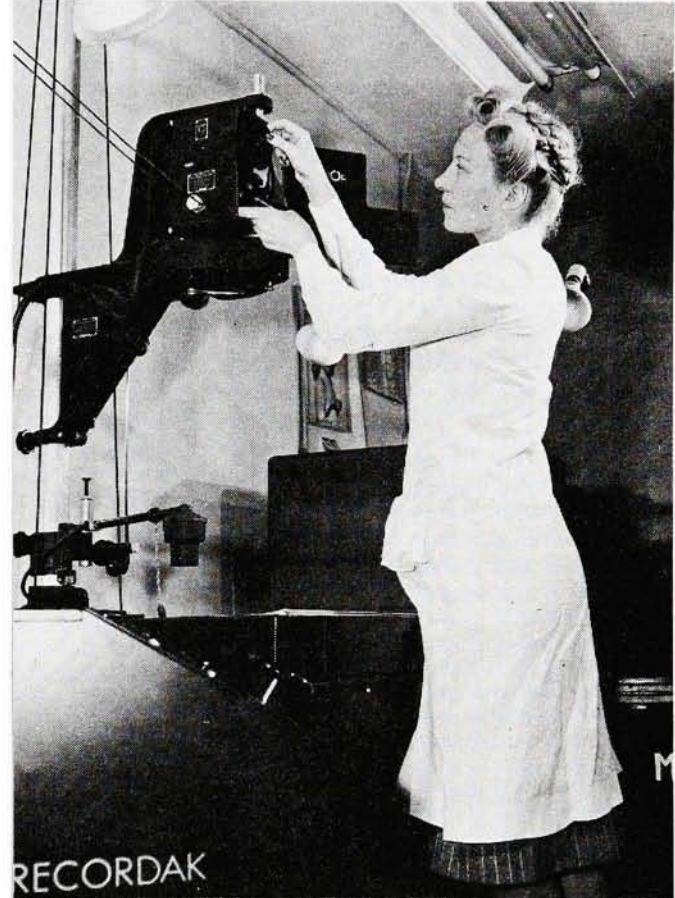
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she concludes) both are as suitable, as fascinating and as remunerative to a woman as to a man.

– 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

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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 Wertmüller'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).