

THE SILENT SCREEN AND MY TALKING HEART

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I first wrote this paper as a conference address, intending it to be simply a summary of my recent research on Nell Shipman, one of the very few Canadians making feature films in the silent period, and certainly the first Canadian woman to make a feature film. I had titled it after Shipman's autobiography, *The Silent Screen and My Talking Heart*. When I finally received the printed conference programme, I found that technology as usual had undermined me. I had phoned in my title to an answering machine, and it turned up in the conference schedule as "The Silent *Scream* and My Talking Heart". My first response was a mixture of amusement and dismay. However, upon reflection, I found that, as usual, technology had provided a new opportunity, for the *scream* on my lips was just waiting to be released.

I had done research on Shipman when I first learned of her existence, and the 1973 Women & Film Festival made it possible for the Canadian Film Archive to acquire a print of *Back to God's Country*, Shipman's magnificent 1919 feature. But I abandoned my historical research almost as soon as I started it. I got swept up into what seemed more exciting and revolutionary, the feminist theory project which in 1973-75 was in its germinal stages. Film theory was certainly a more comfortable terrain for me than history, because my literary training was more suitable preparation for it and because an active participation in feminism required the ideological framework which Anglo-French marxist film theory so unapologetically provided.

My return to history at this point is the result of a number of factors. When I was just beginning feminist film scholarship (*Women & Film International Film Festival Catalogue—1973*), I wrote that the feminist film enterprise must be a three-pronged initiative. First, it must be

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archival and historical: recovering women filmmakers whose work had been overlooked in mainstream film history, and continuing to document emerging women filmmakers. Secondly, it must be analytical, examining films made by women (at the time, we wondered whether certain themes, patterns, commonalities might emerge), and particularly feminist films. Finally, it must be theoretical, developing appropriate aesthetic theory to deal with women's films—for clearly the methodologies operating thus far in film, as in the other arts, were inappropriate for the study of women's films. Existing methodologies had been stunningly successful in overlooking or negating women's films.

We all know what has happened since then. The third prong of the pitchfork has developed into a veritable industry of theory. Books, journals and articles have poured off the presses, names and careers have been made, university courses have been inaugurated and ceaselessly revised in response to changing currents and eddies in the theoretical floodtide.

New films and new kinds of films have emerged. For nearly a decade we had "feminist theory films". Avant-garde in their formal strategies, in subject they deconstructed issues such as the mirror phase, the relation of language to the patriarchal unconscious, realism/illusionism, spectator/text relations, and so on. And there was some analysis of films by women filmmakers and some documentation of their work, extending in some measure the work of documentation and analysis.

However, in film studies the archival project and the continuing documentation/analysis of contemporary women's cinema were never developed quite so vigorously as the theoretical element. In the other arts, the opposite was more the case. In literature and the fine arts, for example, recovery of writers/artists has been the much more dominant tendency. Publishing companies such as Virago Press have thrived on such reclamation, special galleries showcasing only women artists have been founded (notably the architecturally splendid National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C.), and myriad books and journals on newly reclaimed individuals, themes, and critical issues can now be found in any gallery bookshop. Indicatively, there has even been a recent big-budget feature film, starring Gerard Depardieu and Isabelle Adjani, made about Camille Claudel, the mad sculptor who was Rodin's tragic nemesis.

The success of feminist scholarly work in literature and the fine arts is broadly reflected. Literature courses in universities make a point of including women writers where they once were ignored. In cinema departments, on the other hand, courses have not been revised on a broad scale to include women filmmakers where they previously didn't appear. At least this is the case in the programme where I teach.

There are, to be sure, two annual festivals of women's films (Creteil and Montreal), the cinematic equivalent perhaps of the Washington gallery. But a festival is not an archive: the films shown are mostly contemporary and not otherwise available for viewing, study or writing. This is not, in

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the end, the equivalent of Virago Press publications or a National Museum, for festivals cannot circulate or preserve the works, and thus make them a permanent part of a body of knowledge.

This very different situation in the other arts is the result of differing histories. Film studies as a discipline was newly-founded in the late sixties, and eager to construct critical methodologies specific to the medium. Labouring also under the stigma of the popular arts, progressive film scholars embraced the "scientific" approach developing from Marxist semiotics, structuralism and psychoanalysis in France. The other arts, which were already well-established in both critical methodologies and institutional acceptance, did not embrace as readily as film studies the psychoanalytic/post-structuralist model which by now has been generalized as cultural theory and applied to all of the other arts.

In film, on the other hand, where theory developed so prodigiously, feminist film work in history and analysis developed only in relation to what had become the mainstream of cinema studies. Women filmmakers were written about, but only certain women filmmakers: the makers of theory films especially, and some others who belonged to other traditions but whose strategies were embraced as theoretical. Of the older garde, the work on Dorothy Arzner represented at least one lost filmmaker retrieved. Marguerite Duras was written about extensively, as well as Chantal Akerman, who came to prominence contemporaneously with feminist film theory. Of the younger women filmmakers who made theory films and who were written about, only Yvonne Rainer and Trinh T. Minh-ha remain active. Lizzie Borden is struggling to make a third feature; Patricia Gruben, Sally Potter and Bette Gordon are all struggling to make a second. Jane Weinstock, Laura Mulvey, Michelle Citron, Anne Cottringer, the collective who made *The Amazing Equal Pay Show*—all settled back into teaching or writing and their films are more or less out of circulation.

The women filmmakers who were *not* written about are far more numerous. They include all of those women who were producing feminist work in traditional documentary or conventional realist dramatic fiction or unconventional but untheoretical art film. They also include all of those women who have been producing popular films throughout the history of cinema from 1896 to the present. No books were written about those women filmmakers, or any of the more "correct" ones for that matter. Let me be more precise: in the now twenty years of feminist film scholarship, no books have been written about women filmmakers. (The recent *The Films of Yvonne Rainer* may seem to be an exception, but it consists principally of Rainer scripts.) There has been a monograph on Dorothy Arzner, a pamphlet on Nelly Kaplan, a couple of anthologies and catalogues/guidebooks such as *Women in the Cinema* (1977) and *Women in Focus* (1974). In the category of documentation, there is of course the mammoth Maya Deren Project, now available in two hefty volumes, and there are several memoirs, notably of Alice Guy Blache and

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Nell Shipman. There are also several publications concerning Leni Riefenstahl and a few on Lina Wertmüller, but they are by no means products of a feminist critical or historical practice. There are as yet from feminist film scholars no historical surveys, no thematic studies of the sort that abound in literature, and no attempts at theorizing feminine subjectivity as represented by women filmmakers themselves.

How do we account for this? Feminist film theory has developed out of studies of the classic realist text, and it has remained embedded in the classic realist text. Needless to say, like anything else considered classical, that model was created and is largely perpetuated by men. And since feminist film theory has developed as a critique of the classic realist text, demonstrating the mechanisms of its complicity in the nurturing of the patriarchal unconscious, feminist film theoreticians, rather than studying the work of women filmmakers, have contributed importantly instead to the body of scholarship supporting canonical figures such as Sirk, Bunuel, Hawks, Hitchcock, Snow, Von Sternberg, Walsh, Minelli (and more recently Pee Wee Herman), and the many genre directors involved in the production of melodramas, films noirs, musicals, and porn films.

It must be noted here that there are a handful of texts which include some discussion of the work of women filmmakers as examples of counter-strategies to the classic realist text. In *Women & Film*, E. Ann Kaplan has written glowingly about the women filmmakers who bear the feminist theory seal of approval. Kaja Silverman has discussed Sally Potter and Patricia Gruben in *The Acoustic Mirror*. Teresa de Lauretis wrote about Lizzie Borden in *Technologies of Gender*. For the future, Kaja Silverman is planning a series of monographs on women filmmakers, starting with Duras and Akerman, and if the books are successful, going on to others.

In parenthesis, I should add that in Canada the situation has been somewhat different. The main thrust of feminist critical work here has been attention to women filmmakers, and Canadian ones at that. Brenda Longfellow has written on Quebec women as well as Chantal Akerman, Kass Banning has contributed to the study of Wieland, Gruben and myself, and I have also written on Wieland and Gruben as well as Bette Gordon. But as Longfellow, Banning et al. argue in a forthcoming *Camera Obscura* special issue on female spectatorship, Canada has itself been marginalized and has not made any major contribution to the development of international academic feminist theory. Nor, as far as I can see, has our work made much of a dent on the consciousness of male academics in Canada.

In Canada it becomes increasingly difficult, rather than easier, to teach a historically oriented course on women's cinema. The majority of the primary texts, whether from the twenties, the fifties, or the seventies, are simply not available. Important texts such as Mirielle Dansereau's *La Vie R'vée* (1972) are not in distribution; any Canadian film prior to 1950 is

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available only for archival work in Ottawa. Olga Preobrajenskaya, Esther Shub, Leontine Sagan, Jaqueline Audry, Yannick Bellon, Nelly Kaplan, Marguerite Duras, Sarah Maldoror, Safi Faye, Ulrike Ottinger, and Chantal Akerman are some of the important international figures whose films are unavailable in Canada. It is not entirely unreasonable to assume that this is due at least in part to a lack of demand from film scholars.

I do not sing this liturgy out of any sense of repudiation or retribution or to suggest that the last fifteen years have been a waste of time. Far from it. I believe that film theory and particularly feminist theory have been fruitful in just the way that theory should be: they have initiated new subjects for academic study, and new methodologies for analyzing those subjects. Perhaps the greatest achievement of the theoretical project has been the transformation of cinema studies into a truly scholarly enterprise.

But for feminists, I think it is time to reassess. That at any rate is part of the burden of my chant here, and hence the hilarious and inadvertent appropriateness of the mangled title of my paper, *The Silent Scream And My Talking Heart*. Melodramatic as it is, it nevertheless describes my present state. For me, the emphasis on the classic realist text and gendered spectatorship has obviated an equally important aspect of feminist work—the documentation, analysis and support for the work of women filmmakers. For now, it seems that a return to history is in order.

Feminist historians have engaged in fruitful debates about the efficacy of simply interpellating women historical figures into "malestream" history, and have also cautioned against the emphasis on heroic figures as a significant factor in obscuring the role of women in history. In *Old Mistresses* (1983), Griselda Pollock discussed the theoretical problems of such simplistic historical interpellation of women artists into fine art history, and called for new critical methodologies as well as new historical categories. New historiographical approaches have emerged as a result of such debates, notably the methodologies of oral history and the use of diaries and memoirs of "ordinary people" as historical sources. In cinema, however, a number of factors combine to suggest a historical configuration with rather different significance for women historical figures and for feminist historians. The novelty of the medium in its pioneering period, combined with its status as a popular entertainment growing alongside vaudeville and the "legitimate" theatre—terrains already occupied by women—resulted in a period marked (albeit briefly) by the presence of women in significant numbers. It would be foolish to argue that cinema was anything like a "free zone" for women, escaping utterly the discrimination against women endemic to the other arts and the culture as a whole. Nevertheless, in cinema as in the factories and workplaces of the earliest days of the industrial revolution, women worked alongside men in creative and powerful positions. In its earliest days at least, cinema did not practice the concerted exclusion of women common to other more established arts such as poetry, music and

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painting, in which women were denied access to the educational and professional institutions which shaped the arts. Subsequently, just as women were shut out of industry with the rise of male-dominated unions in the nineteenth century, the number of women in cinema would decrease dramatically with the monopoly practices that accompanied the coming of sound and the rise of the large Hollywood studios. For the first thirty years, however, women pioneers in cinema included Olga Preobrajenskaya, Esther Shub and Elizaveta Svilova in Russia, Lotte Reiniger and Leni Reifenstahl in Germany, Alice Guy Blache and Germaine Dulac in France, and Mabel Normand, Dorothy Gish and numerous others in the U.S.

The exclusion of women from mainstream histories of the cinema is another issue. It seems to me that it is time to plunge into that historical abyss, to set out once again, as in the other arts, to redress the balance of gender in history. In cinema, Nell Shipman is an exemplary figure, for her story parallels the entry, participation and finally exclusion from cinema that was experienced by women filmmakers as a group in the first stage of film history.

* * *

Nell Shipman was born in Victoria B.C. in 1892, to a poor family of somewhat genteel British roots. With her mother's permission, Nell left home at thirteen to become an actress with a small touring company. Eventually instead of bringing money to the family, Nell required help. In a show of support for women's career ambitions at a time when independent single women formed a very new social group, Nell's mother joined her daughter on the road, making her costumes, feeding her, and generally looking after her. By sixteen Nell had played every sort of vaudeville role and circuit. At eighteen, a leading lady, she became Ernest Shipman's fourth wife and bore a son two years later. She had already written and starred in her first film, *The Ball of Yarn*, which was so bad, she admits, that even Ernie couldn't book it (Shipman, 1987, 40). She directed her first film in 1914, "an outdoor yarn" (Shipman, 1987, 43) starring a handsome young leading man, Jack Kerrigan, in a buckskin suit. She acted in films for Famous-Players-Lasky and Vitagraph, and turned down a seven-year contract that would have made her a star with Goldwyn in favour of independence and creative control. Her stated reasons:

I did not like the way they dressed their contract players. This was in the period of curly blondes with Cupid's-bow mouths; and Wardrobe's main idea was to bind down a bosom with a swatch of shiny material which met yards of floaty gauze at the waistline and looked like a flowery pen-wiper. This long-legged, lanky, outdoors gal, who usually loped across the Silver Screen in fur parkas and mukluks, simply gagged at such costuming. And had the nerve to refuse it. (Shipman, 1987, 46).

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In 1915 she starred in *God's Country and the Woman*, the James Oliver Curwood-Vitagraph feature budgeted at \$90,000 that was Nell's big break. James Oliver Curwood was a well-known short story writer specializing in western, wilderness and animal tales. From the moment of her first association with Curwood, Nell was known as "the girl from God's country", driving a team of sled-dogs, canoeing, snowshoeing, and "undergoing pages of Curwoodian drama" (Shipman, 1987, 50). *Baree, Son of Kazan* (1918) was another Curwood feature, followed by *Back to God's Country* (1919). This magnificent adventure set in the Canadian north features Nell as the classic heroine, saving her invalid husband's life and bringing the villains to justice through her rapport with animals and her bravery and fortitude as well as wilderness acumen.

Despite the great box-office and critical success of *Back to God's Country*, upon which Nell never ceased to capitalize, her partnerships with both her producer/husband and James Oliver Curwood ended. After her divorce from Ernest Shipman, Nell took up with Bert Van Tuyle, a racing car driver with whom she was so infatuated that she made him co-director of her movies and partner in her company, Nell Shipman Productions, formed in 1921. She was famous already for her zoo of domesticated wildlife, including "film star" Brownie the bear as well as an extraordinary range of animals, many of which were considered untameable: deer, elks, coyotes, wolves, a cougar, two wildcats, assorted raccoons, skunks, eagles, owls, porcupines, beavers, marmots, muskrats, rabbits—along with the more prosaic dogs and cats. In her old age, countless numbers of them lived with her in the house.

Between 1922-24, she located in Upper Priest Lake, Idaho, living in a log cabin twenty-one miles from the nearest road and fifty miles from a railway line. To get out in winter, it was dogsled and snowshoe across the frozen lake, a two-day walk in the best of weather, and nightmarish in the blizzards. In her autobiography, she describes a heroic real-life adventure, chasing Bert when he left the cabin raving in delirium from frost-bite, herself barefoot for part of the journey because her socks had gotten wet and she knew better than to allow her feet to freeze.

Nell and Bert, cast and crew, lived up there in Priest Lake, making movies independently. Shipman wrote, directed and starred in at least two more feature films, *The Grub Stake* (1921) and *Something New* (1923), using a skeleton crew, doing all her own stunts, wrangling the animals, and supervising the editing. When the films were finished she would trudge across the lake to the nearest town and put on a vaudeville-type show at the local hall to raise money for her train fare to New York, where she would try to sell the films for distribution. By the end, it was almost impossible, for the exhibition and distribution circuits were being closed down by the monopoly practises of the rising studios. All of the stalwarts of the silent cinema collapsed along with her—Selig, Biograph, Vitagraph, etc. Her cottage industry mode of production, as Peter Morris points out in his afterword to Shipman's autobiography, was out of step

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with the new industrialization of Hollywood (Shipman, 1987, 216). After her production company collapsed, she married a third time, and supported herself as a screenwriter for the duration of her career. Nell Shipman's career trajectory thus parallels not only the history of the silent cinema itself, but also represents in microcosm the history of women's participation in the industry.

The Silent Screen And My Talking Heart is Nell Shipman's autobiography, published in 1987 with a second edition in 1988. The book was written by Nell herself—this is not an “as told to” star bio—in 1968, when she was 76 years old. It is a sprightly piece of writing, replete with vivid detail, particularly of the travails of the Priest Lake winters, although spotty in factual information, and it has a high sense of drama and tension, as befits a work by a writer of numerous screenplays over thirty years.

As an object and a work, the book is of great interest. Handsomely produced, it has close to fifty photographs, an afterword by Nell's son Barry, and a note from Peter Morris on “Nell Shipman in the Context of her Times”. The whole is the enterprise of Tom Trusky, of the Hemingway Center for Western Studies in Boise, Idaho, which is not far from Priest Lake, the scene of Nell's most heroic and tragic episodes. Trusky has also managed to collect the only six surviving films from Shipman's career, a collection of papers and letters, and what he claims is a complete filmography, as yet unpublished. The notes to the autobiography attest to a great deal of research and information, most of which unfortunately remains rather opaque and on the whole inaccessible, for only the autobiography has been published. Still there is a filmography with credits for the surviving films, and Trusky has made a videotape of a 1921 two-reeler (20 min.) called *A Bear, A Boy, And A Dog*, which Nell wrote, produced and directed—although it is one of her rare films in which she doesn't star. Another videotape of two short films, *Trail of the North Wind* (1923) and *The Light on Lookout* (1923), will be available in the near future, and *Something New* and *The Grub Stake* are being restored by the Canadian Film Archive and the British Film Institute.

As a scholarly enterprise, Trusky's is unique, for he is more interested in Nell Shipman than in her ex-husband Ernest. Canadian historians have not shown the same interest thus far in Nell, although she is clearly the more prolific, more creative and ultimately more successful of the pair. Peter Morris has written substantially about Ernest Shipman, and it is from those writings that the researcher gleans, in tidbits and asides, something of the career of Nell Shipman.

Of “ten percent Ernie” (Shipman, 1987, 31) as Nell calls him, we learn much more. Ernest Shipman made his film career off Nell Shipman, failing first at vaudeville as Nell's star began to rise, and finally getting into the movies as Nell accepted an exclusive contract with James Oliver Curwood. Curwood contracted with Nell that he would give her exclusive rights to his stories if she would star exclusively in the films (Morris,

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1977, 17). Nell's husband Ernie was to be the producer. As Morris notes, it was Ernie's "big chance" (Morris, 1977, 17). Nell wrote the screenplays, tamed the wild animals, and starred in the films. David Clandfield notes that Nell is also "credited with much of the work of . . . staging" (Clandfield, 1987, 4). The famous nude scene in *Back to God's Country*, in which she frolics with her pet bear in the water while the villain leers from the bushes, was clearly her idea and her decision, for example. In the autobiography, she tells of first wearing a modest flesh-coloured cover-up, which she discarded when she saw how wrinkly and bunched it looked when wet, and conceived instead a *mise-en-scène* which allowed discreet nudity. She also worked closely with the editor of *Back to God's Country*, as she did on all of her films. When her marriage to Shipman ended, so did Ernest's contract with Curwood.

Here Clandfield's story continues in much the same vein as Morris's. After mentioning Nell in connection with all of the creative work on one film, *Back to God's Country* (1919), Clandfield notes that "Nell left for the U.S. and a successful career as actress, screen-writer, and director, at a time when these last two professions included virtually no women at all" (Clandfield, 1987, 5). And then he carries on with his note on Ernest! Ernest made seven films in all, including one that was never released (Clandfield, 1987, 5). Although Nell suggests a rather different estimation, Clandfield calls him a "successful theatre and film impresario", noting that "his entrepreneurial style consisted in arriving in a city, establishing a film company with local money for one or two films, and then moving on. In five years he did this in Calgary, Winnipeg, Ottawa, Sault Ste. Marie, and Saint John" (Clandfield, 1987, 4).

Nell's portrait of Ernest adds some flesh to these bare bones:

Men like Ernie made the '90's gay. A vanished breed. He had the bounce of a rubber ball, the buoyancy of a balloon, though the first can wear out under hard usage and the last suffer ill winds and the prick of evil fortune. He was one of the great cocksmen of his time, not immoral but amoral, not lascivious but lusty. If they named him dishonest he was always within the law's fences contractually and the ten percent he required of his minion's wages he considered a fair return for his efforts on their behalf. (Shipman, 1987, 31)

It was thanks to Ernie that Nell began her screen-writing career. Ernie was trying to break into pictures. Nell was still recovering from the birth of their son Barry and so was unable to make a living as an actress. When pregnant and unable to work, she had begun a career writing magazine articles on the movies and the industry already, so it seemed natural to turn to writing screenplays. "Ernest", she writes, "scenting the golden future in store for even such shoddy entertainment, figured a day was coming when better-heeled motion picture makers would actually pay authors for the rights to their works". Thus Nell "was thrown into the maelstrom of film writing" (Shipman, 1987, 40), to support her family and to give her boulder husband another break.

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There is no need to pursue this shabby portrait of "ten-percent Ernie", the "successful impresario". Like other independents, Ernest Shipman was squeezed out as the Hollywood giants seized control of the industry in Canada as well as the U.S.

It is interesting that David Clandfield and Peter Morris, the preeminent Canadian film historians, give Ernest's career a solid summing up, while Nell's longer, more prolific, more varied, and more heroic career is left unmentioned. To be fair to both Morris and Clandfield, we could argue that they both concentrated on the more faithfully Canadian of the pair. Ernest did, after all, return to Canada for his last failures, whereas Nell remained in the U.S. for both her failures and successes. Nell is lost in a strange limbo, it seems. American scholars consider her Canadian. The Museum Of Modern Art, for example, featured Shipman in their tribute to Canadian cinema in the Autumn of 1989. But Canadian scholars don't deal with her because she went to the U.S. Thus, ironically for both feminist and Canadian film scholars, it is through the work of an American man that we will be able to recover this almost lost Canadian proto-feminist heroine of cinema.

Now the task remains to construct a theoretical and critical methodology that will be adequate to the study of her films. For it is clear that current critical methodologies, founded in feminist film theory and the interrogation of the classic realist text, are not appropriate to the study of Shipman's work. Adventure films, light entertainments from the silent era, they belong neither to the primitive cinema currently investigated both historiographically and narratologically, nor to the "gynetric" genres of classic melodrama and film noir which have proved so fruitful for feminist investigation of the patriarchal unconscious and the potentially progressive text. Further, in the postmodern era, there is no appropriate methodology for an auteurist study: as Janine Marchessault has pointed out, "now that women can be authors, the author is dead" ("Is the Dead Author a Woman?", unpublished paper, 1990). The recent work on *l'écriture féminine*, which tends to equate avant-garde and experimental forms with the feminine, also raises questions in terms of female authorship. As Marchessault notes, the invention of new languages entirely by means of negation works to deny female subjectivities and, with them, women's cultural traditions.

For Shipman, we must recast the critical model dramatically, from the female spectator to the female author, from the desiring body to the bear, the dog and the raccoon, from the masquerade to the mukluk. And if we follow in Nell Shipman's snowshoed footsteps, we may make some gains in the recognition of female subjectivities of the heroic stamp, and with them the beginnings of women's cultural traditions in cinema.

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