

## American Women Screenwriters of the 1920s

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Were we to look through the credits of much American cinema of the Twenties, an element would come automatically to the fore, which until the present day film history has overlooked: most screenplays were written by women. As Richard Corliss wrote about American silent cinema, "the industry's leading scenarists were by large majority, women" These women screenwriters wrote more than one third of American silent films and some of them turned out to be extraordinarily successful in their profession, becoming very important in the production process; however, film history bears almost no trace of their presence.

The names of women scenarists of the time, worthy of star billing in their category are: Clara Beranger, Ouida Bergere, Lenore Coffee, Beulah Marie Dix, Dorothy Farnum, Agnes Christine Johnston, Sonya Levien, Anita Loos, Josephine Lovett, Jeannie Macpherson, Frances Marion, June Mathis, Bess Meredyth, Lorna Moon, Jane Murfin, Olga Printzlau, Adela Rogers St. Johns, Gladys Unger and Eve Unsell: about twenty screenwriters writing more than one thousand films. Among these let us mention here Frances Marion with her 325 pictures, including some of the most beautiful roles for Mary Pickford and Lillian Gish and writing for all contemporary stars, two Academy Awards in her career; Anita Loos, the author of the novel *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, who started writing for Griffith, and later outlined the character role for the early Douglas Fairbanks, developed the concept of the "virtuous vamp" for Constance Talmadge, and created the gold-digger Jean Harlow in the Thirties; June Mathis who discovered and launched Valentino in his flamboyant career, planned the structure of *Ben Hur* (by Fred Niblo, 1925); just to give an idea of her importance for the studio system, let us recall here that Sam Goldwin underwrote an insurance for one million dollars in her favor. Jeannie Macpherson wrote almost all Cecil B. DeMille's features and masterminded their penchant for sadomasochist eroticism; Olga Printzlau and Clara Beranger wrote for the other DeMille, William; Clara married him. Sonya Levien, Jane Murfin, Lenore Coffee and Josephine Lovett had a relevant career also in the sound era.

According to different sources, the audience of the Twenties was composed mostly by women. Whether women did represent 75 % of overall cinema goers, as indicated by an article published by "Photoplay" in 1924, or rather a pure and simple "majority" of the audience, is of little concern here. Women's imprinting on this cultural and entertainment form undoubtedly derives from the audience composition, but it takes place precisely in this time and in the United States for socially and culturally defined factors. In a society where men are busy working within the context of Calvinist ethics of making money and being successful, women are called upon to play a key role in defining anew public/private spaces, by minding the house and the family, but also controlling social institutions such as the school, social and religious life, and most of all, leisure time and means of communication.

In the mid-Tens, screenwriting had already reached a very specialized form in the

production process. Screenwriters followed the film throughout its entire process, developing the project around a star or within a specific genre, from its layout to the finished product. The director would step in only at a later stage, and just for the shooting - the only line of work over which he would have full control. (Few directors, we all know it, could participate in the editing). On the contrary, screenwriters did not stop working on the film when they completed its script, but often they remained on the set to write, for example, actors' lines, to be read on their lips and not included in the intertitles, or to change the scripts as the shooting progressed. The titlist (working on the intertitles) would participate in the script-writing as well as in the editing stage, when silent films could still be modified and redone all over again, by adding a title in order to solve narrative problems. The term sometimes used in this period to indicate the script - continuity - evokes the different moments interspersing film writing and production, linked together inside a continuous organization of the plot, under the screenwriter's responsibility. In the production of American silent pictures, in fact, the screenwriter played a much more articulated and important function than even the director. By this we do not want to state that at the time the film "author" was the screenwriter (although sometimes this would be the case), but rather stressing the features of this production mode. The type of work carried out by the screenwriter and his/her constant presence during film production imply a production model based on the story-star relationship and on the close co-operation between producer and writer relations which do represent a strongpoint in Hollywood cinema, from this time onward.

Screenwriters not only participate in the different phases of film production, but sometimes they hold powerful posts within the studio hierarchy, quite close and similar to producers'. Let us just mention here Darryl Zanuck's role at Warner or let us analyze the careers of many supervisors (they are producers closely following film shooting): we would see right away that what they have in common is their background as screenwriters. Also for women writers, there are many instances, as for June Mathis and Frances Marion, where the writing activity overlaps and intermingles with the task of star-making and profile designing, including the possibility of having a say in casting or in picking directors. Also, most women writers directed at least one film during their career, but actually they seem to prefer writing. If we study their contracts we may discover that many were assigned the task of writing publicity material for the launch of a film or of a star. This implies a constant contact with audiences, outside film production, mostly done via fan magazines, novelization or other forms of promotional work. These contract items indicate the strong interlacing between the story being depicted and film advertising, within a system optimizing the narrative work and the Star System, by making them the hinge of both the film imaginary and of cinema distribution, via the screenwriter's pen.

Not all the studios did hire screenwriters according to an equal opportunity approach: while male writers of action films enjoyed unchallenged supremacy at Warners, at MGM the tip of the scale tilted on the opposite direction, with a very strong presence of women, also due to the extremely large and varied ensemble of female stars under contract with the studio.

Women screenwriters (as majority shareholders, but also as high profile figures in the

profession) played a crucial role, therefore, in the development of this means of communication in its core elements - the story and the way it is told, in relation to the actor. This happens in the very phase when cinema started to approach increasingly articulated ways of story telling. Beside contributing to the history of cinema, women writers' work had a strong social impact. In fact, these women play an essential role in modernizing society, either via the type of stories they wrote or via their presence in the film industry - a peculiar and visible labor market. Fan magazines often talk about them, describing their work and publishing their images, even in the gossip columns, thus indirectly advertising this respectable career opportunity (in contrast with acting) for women in Hollywood.

From a social and cultural perspective, this is an exceptional phenomenon because women writers are involved in the production of dominant ideology within the framework of the then prevailing mass communication means. This is not by chance, as we have seen, leading us back to the wider historical picture: modernization, the transition from Victorianism to the Jazz Age, are centered and targeted around and on women. Therefore Hollywood exploits specific gender skills and talents, the screenwriters' efficient and effective work focusing for the divas a vast gallery of endless character variations. The relationship between silent American cinema and women thus entails interesting "feminist" implications. It is necessary however to keep in mind that it would be really improper to project issues associated with women's rights onto this specific period. Even the most innovative women in this group are not *ante litteram* "feminists", namely, they are not aware of gender politics, neither are they motivated by these topics in their activities. They held important posts within the profession, although they have to pay for it with many contradictions: their biographies reveal a ceaseless search for a reconciliation between feelings and hard work in Hollywood, between creativity and domestic roles.

The presence of all these women in the writing for silent cinema may be explained by the history of the medium, as well as by the already mentioned trend in the history of mentality, namely the centrality of women in Victorian culture. When women writers entered the production realm, cinema was still considered a "low practice"; this explains why they were allowed to enter this field and why they did find there so much room (and power, as well). In fact the representatives of higher forms of culture, namely theatre and literature, were missing (or were inadequately motivated). At the same time women writers had already acquired a well-rooted position in the sentimental literature market, thus establishing an important precedent in the writing realm and a bridging experience in another field of narrative activity.

As previously mentioned, although these women held power posts within production, their activity has not been recorded as a historical phenomenon, not as a revolutionary or antagonist presence inside the Studio System. They do not appear as threatening for the rather patriarchal production system characterizing the silent cinema industry. Let us just recall here MGM with its pyramidal structure with many women writers at the base and the either paternalistic or authoritarian pair of Louis B. Mayer and Irving Thalberg at the top. With a remarkable co-operation spirit and with

their ability to work through fragmented activities without narcissistic drives, women screenwriters are totally "organic" to the system. Although showing a strong mutual solidarity, which often brought them to co-operate in the same projects, they do not present, however, a single, unified gendered front.

Although independent from an economic viewpoint, they often lead a regular married life; and yet, even when they marry actors or directors, they keep their maiden name, but in general they seem to move within a traditional family context. They "seem", we said, because Frances Marion's numerous marriages, as well as George Hill's suicide, and the commitment to a mental hospital of Anita Loos's husband, John Emerson, indicate that their purportedly happy married life is more the results of concocted fan magazines articles than real life.

The narrative structures of their films, the world vision they communicate, their biographies, although not revealing any antagonist stance, a "resistance culture", a "hidden voice", as feminists would say, do highlight interesting contradictions. In any case it is their work, which changed the planet's attitudes, mentality and imagery, thus creating in just a decade the culture of Modernity.

We could move now to a series of profiles of women writers, starting with the central figure of Anita Loos, and continuing with Jeannie Macpherson, Frances Marion, June Mathis, who started their film career as actresses, and Lenore Coffee, Josephine Lovett, and Agnes Christine Johnston.

The profiles of these women screenwriters allow us to detect similarities and points of contact, which help us drawing a more general perspective. In the career of many of them (as well as of many actresses) we find common traits such as the work with Griffith or the meeting with Thalberg, a "great producer of women writers", or the experience at MGM, the studio of the stars. Another constant feature is Sam Goldwyn, a producer of quality films, quite sensitive to narrative material. Almost all of them have a stage background and many (Jeannie Macpherson, Anita Loos, Frances Marion and Josephine Lovett) made their debut as actresses, or dreamed of an acting career, like Lenore Coffee. This experience implies a direct knowledge of the acting process and encourages an ability to "feel" the roles for the stars. From the theatre they draw a knowledge of America's popular drama, which is actually more relevant than literary competences in their work.

All of them show a particular gift for flexibility, efficiency and creativity, the necessary traits in screenwriting. Even Anita Loos, the most "writer" of the lot, always worked with professionalism and modesty, at the stars' and project's service<sup>22</sup>. Another relevant factor is their experience in advertising: both Marion and Coffee worked at first in publicity, showing great communication skills.

Often their career started with a script sold when they were very young: partly a Hollywood myth - the myth of an initial casual "discovery" which, as for young stars, would open up the door leading towards fame and success, as a clear mark of the celebrity's fate. This image seems to highlight one of the features associating women writers with the stars'

portrayal found in the popular press: fan magazines used different approaches for these two groups, although generating in either instance legends and fiction, with very little to do with journalistic reporting. Also, this early start, in particular when associated with a middle-upper class background, aligns them in continuity with their Victorian mothers or sisters, despite their being open to modernity and to the popularity of cinema. Even when recognizing the important contribution made by emigrants in American silent cinema, it should be nonetheless remarked that most of it was written by American women - young girls from that WASP bourgeois background which should have kept them away from this communication medium; they become instead its most important authors.

From a biographical-sentimental perspective too, women screenwriters do not convey a destabilizing image: they are married, often working with their husbands, and with such a close co-operation that it is often difficult to separate their individual contribution from the whole, although in several instances they are the leading personality within the couple. June Mathis married cameraman Silvano Balboni and turned him into a Hollywood director; Anita Loos put up with John Emerson, generously granting him credits which should have been hers; Sonya Levien (the writer of *Lucky Star*, by Frank Borzage, 1929) refused to move from New York to Hollywood, unless the studio accepted to sign her husband as well. Despite this apparently happy domestic and professional lives, however, none of them used their married names in their work; and today their names are remembered much more than their husbands': they have entered film history with an eternal "single girl" status.

American silent cinema developed several concepts of femininity, identifying a woman-spectatress in transition, caught in between different contradictions about her own gender role, her love and work life. Gaylyn Studlar defines the Twenties as "an era marked by an imposing number of cinematic novels, melodramas centered on female characters and roles, often drawn from popular novels written by women for women", and centered "on the well orchestrated exploitation of the star system mostly aimed at women audiences".

Stars and writers functioned together in building this new imagery, masterminding the modernization of American mentality from Victorianism to the flapper. According to historian Nancy Cott, in fact, in the Twenties, "the culture of modernity and urbanity absorbed the challenges of feminism and represented them in the form of the modern American woman". Cott, however, does not realize that the entire operation was not in the hands of a patriarchal elite, but rather of a great number of women screenwriters, responsible for an efficient production of a hegemonic vision. The efficiency of the message was not guaranteed by adopting a mechanical approach in their cultural work. On the contrary, it is based on contradiction, both in the films and in these women's work. In their films and biographies they embody a diversity which explains their impact: women screenwriters created a great variety of female roles, both in films depicting social conditions and touching upon feminists issues (including abortion), and in regressive melodramas, full of sacrifices and tears. However, when they were

arguing for social change, often their message seemed to go against the mood of the story: excessive sentimentality in the more socially-oriented pictures, too much suffering and defeat in melodramas.

These films, written by women and interpreted by divas, constitute the most effective introduction to new trends and lifestyles: they teach how to kiss, smoke, drive a car, wear a make-up, dress up and seduce. The beginning of *What Price Hollywood*, written by Frances Marion, is a vivid example of this. The Star System spread customs and fashions, standardizing both middle-class women, always hungry for celebrity and merry life, and working girls, who, as in *What Price Hollywood* (George Cukor, 1932), dreamed of becoming a star from their humble jobs as waitresses; just as it happened "in real life" to Joan Crawford. Cinema, popular literature, women's and fan magazines address women as their main target, playing on the "triumvirate of America's traditional femininity", namely marriage, sentimental life and consumerism, exploiting the Star System in order to elaborate the complexity of women's economic and sexual emancipation, leaving ample space for diversification and double standards.

The difference in personality, professional skills and themes among women screenwriters therefore allows for the variety of responses, necessary in such a complex historical context. The functional difference between divas and women writers in the imagery proposed by fan magazines articulates the diverse possibilities for women working in Hollywood. Let us not forget here the importance of this aspect, of economic emancipation and professional success, in proposing a new model for women. In general, both for stars and writers, while their fabulous salaries are big news, the idea of work is accepted if well reconciled with traditional roles in family life, but never as a career per se. In an interview published by a fan magazine, Gloria Swanson took a distance from the issue, by saying that career women should not get married as "it is impossible for them to be happily married and at the same time to have freedom of action", while also stressing that no modern woman could ever be happy without a strong man at her side. This seemingly contradictory desire for a "strong man" could be found in many films, like the ones written by Jeannie Macpherson, or transposed on the screen as desire for an "exotic" man, capable of seducing and taming like Valentino's Sheik, or as in *Night of Love's* torrid passions, where Ronald Colman, in order to make the transition from romantic hero to an erotic character, is transformed into a gypsy.

The contradiction is apparent also in women screenwriters' lives and backgrounds, ranging from good family college girls, to young show business workers. As already mentioned, many of them are nice looking girls who started their career in cinema as actresses. As told by fan magazines, which featured them as possible representatives of a lifestyle alternative to the stars', their biographies become a peculiar public discourse on women working in the movies. Fan magazines show their photos as a proof that they are not dangerous, bespectacled, intellectual and masculine ladies, but nice looking girls, maybe rather independent-minded and brave like Jeannie Macpherson in her pilot outfit, or humorous and coquettish like Anita Loos with her dark bobbed hair, or, most of all, nice homely ladies regularly married and even with children, as Agnes Christine Johnson with her three kids. Therefore a woman could well pursue a career, and even make more money

than her husband, as long as she is married and does not humiliate her companion publicly.

There is however an aspect of women writers' work which takes on an extraordinary importance, from a sociological viewpoint, deriving from their special talent in depicting the complexity of family life and relations, and in building romantic imagination. By following and expanding on the work of their colleagues writing popular romantic fiction, they developed the concept of companionate marriage, providing married life with a more attractive function, thus redefining anew this social institute at a time when women's possibilities of attaining economic independence could effectively undermine it. The Twenties saw in fact the development of a new problem area, specific to women: sexual demand. As shown in censors' detailed notes and correspondence concerning flappers at first and goldiggers later, these female characters were considered more dangerous and destabilizing for the social order, than gangsters: the erotic awakening of American women had radical social implications. In its association with women's entry in the work market, the desire for a gratifying sexual-sentimental life represented a strong change, almost a rebellion, in the attitudes towards middle-class standards, in reference to patriarchal authority and norms in general.

This thorough social change has been associated with cinema - and rightly so - as this medium negotiated the relations between the old standards of sexual repression, and the new possibilities of desire. Without sending female audiences back to a happiness made of domesticity, smiling babies or Victorian virginal love, films depict a family life made of companionship, equality and satisfying sexuality, namely companionate marriage.

As may be seen in many films from the decade concerning women's roles, the screen, although strongly stressing sentimental and sexual elements, proposed a gradual one-step-at-a-time policy in changing mentality and attitudes, at times jumping ahead with comedies which however maintained the status quo in the end, or backsliding in dramas where transgression was punished, by showing the fun-loving girl running into increasing danger, but rescued in the end by a former boyfriend.

As for the Twenties woman, historian Nancy Woloch writes, "The flapper, with her self-indulgent and independent flair, ends up by embodying the 'point of view' of her generation". Young, edonist and sensuous, she shifts the struggle for equality from a political to a social arena. The flapper's behavior and dressing oscillate between two polarities: the updated version of the vamp, sensuous and uninhibited, and the sporty girl, easy-going and provocative. In any case she represents "an omni-present advertisement for the clothing, tobacco, and beauty products industry[ ... ] The young woman growing up in the 1920s was more likely to be influenced by national culture, by the media and by her peers. Two particular influences, the campus and the movies, helped her to fuse the new morality with traditional roles". All historical essays on the culture of Twenties stress the fundamental role played by cinema in articulating the image of this emerging new woman, either the flapper or the entire gamut of new women's roles being created: the campus coed, now imbued more with hopes of marriage than with a sense of mission; the modern housewife, who adopted the role of companion and consumer; the new professional and businesswoman, who sought to

integrate marriage and career; and the post-suffrage feminist, sometimes embroiled in battles over legal and constitutional change and sometimes preoccupied with the new ideal of economic independence

All these figures are embodied on the screen in detail, deriving from the direct experience of the girls writing these stories, and of those acting in them: not in a mechanical reflection but rather in a choral and solid way, they reflect experiences, desires and concerns, shared by the women in the audience.

If it is true that Frances Marion achieved her biggest success in the early Thirties, with the Academy Awards for *The Big House* and *The Champ*, and pictures like *Dinner at Eight* (George Cukor, 1933) and *Stella Dallas* (King Vidor, 1937), or that Jeannie Macpherson wrote for DeMille two bizarre talkies, very interesting in their use of the possibilities of sound, such as *Dynamite* (1929) and *Madam Satan* (1930); if it is also true that Lovett and Coffee continued writing, and Loos made her comeback to cinema with the onset of the sound era, the majority of women screenwriters from the silent era, as well as several stars, from John Gilbert to Pola Negri, did not make it into sound. The technological element did not play, however, a relevant role in the case of women screenwriters: in some instances the introduction of sound created difficulties for the older ones, who did not have either the desire or the will to learn the new tricks of the sound trade. The underlying reasons seem instead to lie in history and culture. As for some stars, cultural factors determine the possibility for a woman writer to either work or not in sound cinema. John Gilbert had a rather pleasant voice, but maybe his image was outdated; likewise women writers might have no difficulty in giving voice to their characters, in writing dialogues, while they could feel uncomfortable in focusing new images and new characters for Depression America. The flapper or Anita Loos's Lorelei are cast aside, as undesirable figures for the Hays Code, notoriously more severe when dealing with behaviors and sexuality, than with violence or crime, thus emphasizing how truly transgressive were these women's characters depicted on the screen. Crazy times at the level of attitudes and behaviors, which, from a Puritan point of view, were being "chastised" and punished by the crash of Wall Street, banishing sexually freer women into melodramas (or locking them, later, in the elegant parlors of sophisticated comedies). **In** the movies, the Thirties appear as less romantic and - generally speaking - more male-oriented; it is rather difficult to identify which is the cause and which the effect, but the gender balance - and the balance among genres - in this phase seems to be tilted towards a male supremacy, if not on the screen, where the divas were still prevailing, at least backstage, where women writers slowly and silently disappeared.

Lenore Coffee, who in any case made a smooth transition from silent to sound cinema, gave an explanation of the phenomenon based on another perspective: "A silent film is like writing a novel, and a script is like writing a play. That's why women dropped out. Women had been good novelists, but in talking pictures women were not predominant". The key problems here are however structurally determined, in that they refer to work organization



and production hierarchy. The construction of the Writers' Buildings (the screenwriters' offices located in the studios) and the adoption of increasingly rigid working hours and schedules, from 8 to 5, created difficulties for women writers, often used to work at home.

Their specific quality, typically found in women, consisting in their ability to work as a team, by doing a bit of everything, does not help them in adjusting to a overtly rigid and increasingly specialized work plan. But mostly studios are changing into more complex industrial structures, with labor division and hierarchical organization, so strict that they provide producers with increasing powers, turning the relationship based on co-operation between writers and producers into a struggle for creative power. When they were asked to become producers or supervisors, for example, Lenore Coffee turned down the offer, while Marion Frances accepted the challenge, but she was not allowed to complete her project. And let's leave it to Frances Marion, the most significant representative of this group of women writers, the sad tale of this phase, of this slow but unrelenting cancellation:

But we knew male writers were complaining about "the tyranny of the woman writer" supposedly prevalent at all studios then, and particularly at MGM. I'd always worked closely with directors and producers on my own scripts, and at their own request, often worked as writer on the set, making scripts changes during actual production. But it was apparent that if a writer wanted to maintain any control over what he wrote, he would have to become a writer-director, or a writer-producer. Writing a screenplay had become like writing on sand with the wind blowing.