
In 1999 I attended the premiere in Calgary of Moving Pictures, the new play by much-feted Canadian playwright Sharon Pollock. The play recounted the life of silent film producer/director/star Nell Shipman, the first Canadian woman to direct a feature film. It was my first introduction to Shipman, and while I can’t remember the specific details of the production, I can recall being impressed by her colourful life and Pollock’s efforts to illuminate that life for a new generation of Canadian men and women.

In much the same spirit, Kay Armatage has written The Girl from God’s Country: Nell Shipman and the Silent Cinema as homage to this independent film pioneer who stood “in opposition to popular stereotypes of femininity in the silent era” (p. 4). Like Shipman herself, the characters she portrayed were athletic and intrepid. Traipsing across the northern Alberta wilderness in fur parkas and mukluks, these dogsledding, snowshoeing characters rescued their men, tamed wild animals, and expressed sexual desire. Armatage’s central claim is that revisiting Shipman’s life is important because the recovery of lost female cultural producers must be an essential pillar of feminist film scholarship: “We are richer for knowledge of women like her. Knowledge of these historical figures can assist not only in providing insight into the vast range of women’s interests and activities, but can construct a new understanding of the film industry in its formative years” (p. 54).

But of all the early women cultural producers out there, why Shipman? For Armatage, questions of whether Shipman was progressive, feminist, or even competent are beside the point. What makes Shipman extraordinary as an object of study, according to this biography, is in fact how typical she really was: “Neither ahead of her time nor heroically alone” (p. 77). Shipman is carefully positioned by Armatage (who finds treatments that exaggerate the achievements of women offensive) in the company of many other women like her—women around the world who scrambled their way working independently in a potentially lucrative new industry that was, in its earliest days at least, accessible to women.

Armatage chooses Shipman because she is a sort of Everywoman, an “exemplary figure whose 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” (p. 14). And that story had a very predictable track: 1) begin career as actress, then move into writing and directing roles; 2) enjoy success with independent or studio productions in the teens and twenties; 3) get shut out in the sound area; 4) make several attempts to revitalize career, all futile; 5) die broke and alone. However, to her credit, Armatage is careful not to paint Shipman as a tragic figure; rather, her optimism, resourcefulness, and tenacity are celebrated.

Resurrecting Shipman’s historical footprint is no easy task. Of her body of work, only three feature films and four short films are extant. And of the three Girl from God’s Country films, for which Shipman was best known, only one is known to have survived. In compiling her text, Armatage, who appears to be on a career-long quest to study Shipman’s life, relies heavily on Shipman’s own memoirs, letters, and novelizations, and the work of previous scholars (most notably Tom Trusky and Anthony Slide) to reconstruct Shipman’s life.

The first two chapters survey the existing scholarship on women filmmakers of the silent era and situate Shipman in the context of women directors both in North America and internationally. The bulk of the book is devoted to an analysis of Shipman’s known existing films. Working with the films in chronological order of production as the organizing principle, Armatage situates the films both within the cultural context of the historical period in which they were made and within various reading strategies both current and from the theoretical past. However, although understandable, Armatage’s lack of attention to Shipman’s other productions is regrettable. Even though so many of her films are gone, a stronger
sense of how the remaining productions sat within Shipman’s overarching career would have been useful.

Also regrettable is Armatage’s stated “resistance to personal biography” (p. 22). However, as she later acknowledges, “to set the work in a social, economical, and historical context is to continually encounter her personal as well as professional struggles” (p. 23). And why is this a bad thing? There should be no need to prefer the professional over the personal, especially when those personal details aid in making a life come alive for the reader. Consider this example:

Living in New York with a new partner (her fourth), Nell writes to her grown son approximately every five days. She tells of the projects she has underway … and her hopes for the rebirth of her career. In that year, she and her husband move six times. Their addresses include a rooming house, a hotel, a penthouse, and the street. Her reliable old Underwood typewriter has been pawned, and she eventually has to write on the back of old movie call sheets. (p. 30)

Yet ultimately, in her endeavour to shed light on the lives of women in the formative years of the film industry, Armatage largely succeeds at her task. Interweaving colourful anecdotes, photographs, and fascinating historical detail, informed by scholarship and scrupulous research, Armatage is at her best in her documentation of production conditions and how the studios squeezed out independent producers like Shipman. In the end, The Girl from God’s Country paints valuable portraits of both a fascinating woman and a dynamic period in film history, about which we still know too little. Shipman’s story, as this work and Pollock’s has demonstrated, is worth telling.

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