




2010

## Review: Karen Ward Mahar (2008): Women Filmmakers in Early Hollywood

Sara Ross

*Sacred Heart University*, [rosss2@sacredheart.edu](mailto:rosss2@sacredheart.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/media\\_fac](http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/media_fac)

 Part of the [Communication Commons](#), [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Ross, Sara, "Review: Karen Ward Mahar (2008): Women Filmmakers in Early Hollywood" (2010). *School of Communication and Media Arts Faculty Publications*. Paper 1.

[http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/media\\_fac/1](http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/media_fac/1)

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Communication and Media Arts (SCMA) at DigitalCommons@SHU. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Communication and Media Arts Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@SHU. For more information, please contact [ferribyp@sacredheart.edu](mailto:ferribyp@sacredheart.edu).

---



---

Review: Karen Ward Mahar (2008) *Women Filmmakers in Early Hollywood*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

## Sara Ross

Sacred Heart University

In *Women Filmmakers in Early Hollywood*, Karen Ward Mahar seeks to explain why a brief window opened for women workers in all aspects of the film industry in approximately 1908 and then began to shut again around 1916. To do so, she proposes to conduct a ‘historical analysis of the gendering of filmmaking,’ synthesizing methods and research from the sociology of gender, film and business history, and feminist film studies and adding to them new primary research into women filmmakers’ activities in this period. Mahar builds her argument on a solid foundation created by the surge of recent work on this period by film historians. While she may not fully achieve the ambitious synthesis that she proposes, she has produced a detailed and revealing account of the pioneering efforts of women filmmakers in this period.

Mahar divides the years between 1896 and 1928 into three periods, which she labels The Technological Decade, 1896-1908, The Period of ‘Uplift,’ 1908-1916, and The Period of Big Business, 1916-1928. The Technological Decade, she asserts, found the film industry gendered male from its inception, growing as it did out of several ‘masculinized’ institutions. These included the inventor’s laboratory, the technician’s shop and the popular science entertainment, which often featured male ‘professors’ who explicated technologies such as the Magic Lantern. This background helped establish filmmaking during this period as ‘a manly adventure.’

Contributing to this, she argues, was the centrality of the cameraman and the focus on technology and entrepreneurialism in cinema’s first decade.

She compares cameramen to preindustrial artisans, who had to learn the secrets of their trade and ‘actively gendered the occupation of cinematography’ as male. Those women who did find employment in the early industry were restricted to work, such as cutting negatives and polishing and assembling final prints, that was ‘within the culturally defined arena of women’s work...it was performed indoors, it did not require great strength or invite danger, and it required “dexterity but not skill”’ (24). Women were thus segregated into segments of the industry in which wages were low and opportunities were limited.

By contrast, Mahar describes the years 1908-1916 as ‘without question the most promising moment for women in the history of the American film industry.’ Women had an impact on the industry in this period not only as patrons and reformers, but also as theatre managers, actresses, directors, and producers. Mahar successfully illustrates once again that practices outside the film business had an impact on women’s role in the industry. With the increase in longer films and widespread importing of theatrical talent, Mahar argues that the existing theatrical culture of egalitarianism and flexible job responsibilities led to rising involvement of women in the film business. Within the industry, the growing importance of stardom, along with new opportunities for independent production, gave stars the leverage and means to produce films on their own terms. Finally, with the industry facing the threat of censorship, there was pressure to achieve respectability. The supposed moral superiority of women and their consequent involvement in reform movements led to the perception that female involvement in film production was a desirable way to ‘uplift’ the industry. Mahar’s conclusions here are supported in particular by the work of Lee Grieveson and Shelley Stamp. Alice Guy Blaché and Lois Weber are her key examples. She concludes that Weber’s middle class and religious background and her embodiment of the maternalist reformer made her the ‘ideal director at the height of the uplift movement’ (99). Weber’s social problem films dealing with topics including ‘white slavery,’ birth control and abortion were highly controversial but also successful.

Mahar here inserts what she terms an ‘interlude’ dealing with serials and two-reel comedies and their unconventional New Women characters between 1912-1922. She describes how the popularity of female stars such as Mabel Normand, Helen Holmes and Grace Cunard in short films provided an outlet for creative control behind the camera and for transgressive behaviour on screen. However, she argues, the New Woman style comedienne faded from short films mid-decade, while the serial queen experienced her own difficulties. Toward the end of the teens, both the difficulties of financing and producing serials and the censorship outcry against them led them to become marginalized. Given the sexual overtones of some material featuring serial queens, women stars were particularly problematic from a censorship perspective. After 1921, according to Mahar, male leads were regarded as safer for serials.

The final section of the book addresses the marginalisation of women filmmakers starting around 1916, a date which roughly corresponds to the beginning of the Classical Hollywood period. Mahar argues that women were squeezed out of the business at this time due to a number of shifts in the way that the film industry conducted business. Having largely achieved its goal of cultural legitimacy and in need of more capital to fund its growth, the industry focused its attention on gaining business legitimacy and enhancing efficiency. Reform films, such as those made by Lois Weber, lost out in favour of entertainment and fantasy. The qualities of artistry and moral authority that were considered important for a director in the uplift period gave way to an emphasis on management and organizational skills, which were considered to be masculine strengths. The flexible work culture drawn from the theatre faded as a greater scale of production and the need for efficiency led to a more rigid and gender segregated division of labour. The rise of masculine trade associations put up further barriers for women workers, while independent producers were squeezed out of the market.

Mahar argues that the film industry was in this regard much like other industries such as publishing and millinery. ‘As industries grew from being small and decentralized at the beginning of the twentieth century to

becoming larger and more “professional,” women who had once been welcomed were now defined as unfit’ (202). After a brief period in the early twenties during which opportunities for women still existed under pressure, she states, Dorothy Arzner became the one ‘great exception’ to the absolute barrier to women directing in Hollywood, as the factors that had briefly opened a window for women in the film business collapsed.

*Women Filmmakers in Early Hollywood* is primarily addressed to the general women’s and business historian. Those seeking a theoretically informed account of the interaction of women filmmakers with texts and/or audiences in this period will not find it here. There is also little depth to Mahar’s engagement with the work of other feminist film historians. She makes passing mention of bywords such as ‘flaneurs,’ ‘the gaze,’ and the ‘law of the father’; she cites the important names in the field, and at points she makes a pass at the thorny question of the wider significance of the presence of women film workers, but these tend to be cosmetic.

There is also relatively little analysis of the films themselves or of film style in the book. At points, Mahar seems content to refer to the descriptions of extant films written by other scholars rather than to the films themselves, while at other points, of course, prints are simply not available. Film historians will find her account of the development of the industry in this period quite familiar, drawn, as it is, from the work of a number of well-known scholars. Mahar is often able to bring a new perspective to familiar events, however, by exploring their impact on the efforts of women filmmakers to break into or stay in the business.

Mahar synthesizes this foundational film historical work with existing works in other fields, notably business history, in ways that are often illuminating. Her own research regarding when and how specific female filmmakers entered into or departed from the business is drawn from memoirs, fan magazines, press books, clippings files and exhaustive combing through *Moving Picture World*. Though she sounds the necessary cautions about the subjectivity of these sources, Mahar could more consistently acknowledge the different publishing contexts of, for example, *Photoplay*,

*Women's Home Companion*, or studio pressbooks. In Chapter 7 Mahar relies fairly heavily for evidence that women were regarded as unsuitable for directing in the 1920s on a short 1927 article in the general interest *Liberty* magazine titled 'The Gate Women Don't Crash,' by Charles S. Dunning. More about Dunning, his audience, and the relation of *Liberty* to the film industry would give useful perspective to Mahar's conclusions.

In her introduction she raises the question 'Did women filmmakers make a difference on the screen?' She notes the complexity of the concept of authorship but asserts somewhat vaguely 'the gender of the filmmaker undoubtedly influences the final product' (4). The specific forms of this influence emerge at various points in Mahar's argument. She occasionally points to women's role in bringing more women into the industry, as when she refers to Dorothy Arzner's hiring of a woman editor. She also suggests that women in the audience identified with women filmmakers. For example, when discussing serials and short comedies, she states 'these rich New Woman fantasies were often created by the women who starred in them, offering women in the audience yet another layer of identification' (101). However, she most frequently attributes influence over the progressive content of films to women film workers. Though she addresses workers in all aspects of the industry, including screenwriters, producers, editors and exhibitors, the subject of women's influence on content comes up primarily in relation to female stars and directors.

Discussing the formation of independent companies centred on female stars in the early teens, Mahar writes, 'many of the star vehicles created for these women under their own brand names featured unusually strong heroines' (62). One of her examples of this is Marion Leonard, who worked at several independent production companies with her director and husband Stanner E.V. Taylor. Mahar states that 'the more independence enjoyed by Taylor and Leonard, the stronger the female characters,' i.e. characters that were 'rewarded for cleverness,' 'in control of their destiny,' and 'triumphed over vicious men' (70). There are moments in Mahar's study that could usefully have opened into a more complex consideration of what she means

by 'strong female characters' and how women filmmakers can be said to have constructed them, such as when she points to the competing attitudes among (female) filmmakers and (female) reformers towards the violence inflicted on the transgressive serial queen.

A related assertion is that women filmmakers could sometimes address issues or show images that male filmmakers did not or even could not, such as when Lois Weber used a superimposition of a fully naked woman in *Hypocrites* (1915), or addressed the issue of birth control in *Where Are My Children?* (1916). Mahar offers the interesting conclusion that Weber's supposed female moral superiority and her background as a reformer 'allowed her to make films that perhaps no male filmmaker dared.'

The decided strength of Mahar's book is her nuanced description of film industry behaviour. She reveals the confusion, experimentation, and contradiction involved in industry decision making, as producers attempted to ascertain what their audiences wanted and negotiate a balance between box office success and social acceptance. For example, she describes Reliance's attempts to produce a 'refined' serial heroine based on mistaken assumptions about the gentility of the tastes of female patrons.

It is also notable that Mahar touches on all aspects of the industry, not just production, but also distribution and exhibition, for example the intriguing section in Chapter 1 on female Nickelodeon workers and proprietors. She vividly illustrates the struggles of individual women filmmakers within the larger context of business practices. Finally, insights drawn from the work of business historians with regard to the impact of other industries provide welcome context that can help us to understand the decision-making processes within the film industry. *Women Filmmakers in Early Hollywood* will thus prove a useful resource to feminist and film historians looking to expand their understanding of how film and business history can help to explain the gendering of filmmaking.