

ALLY ACKER

REEL WOMEN

PIONEERS OF THE CINEMA

1896 TO THE PRESENT



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Afterword by MARC WANAMAKER

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Alice Guy Blaché (center), the first director of a narrative film starring in the very first narrative film LA FEE AUX CHOUX (1896).



Lois Weber

Lois Weber

Alice

History

Never the cast of the first narrative film in history, the first female of the screen or the first director of a narrative film. Her life and work had a profound impact on the history of cinema.

When she was 19, she was discovered by the producer Charles Pathé in Paris. She moved to the United States and worked for Pathé in New York. She then moved to Hollywood and worked for the studio of Charles Chaplin. She was a successful actress and a talented painter.

Her films most often focused on women, although she was loath to pledge her allegiance to the suffragists, or to any other special-interest group. More important to Lois Weber was to attempt to change people's attitudes. She was the first to see how film could drive home a moral through story telling. From God's mouth to Weber's lens to the eyes of the masses.

Lois Weber began her career as a street-corner evangelist, singing hymns in the industrial slums of Philadelphia and New York in the late 1890s. But desperate finances and a zealous commitment to spread the doctrines of the Bible led her to take up an uncle's suggestion and try a more accessible soapbox. "Filled with a great desire to convert my fellowmen," said Weber later, "I went on the stage."

In a 1905 road company melodrama propitiously titled, *Why Girls Leave Home*,¹ she met and married the company's manager, Phillips Smalley. For a time, the couple continued their separate careers, and Weber achieved critical success as an actress at the great Hippodrome in New York. Perhaps it was not so coincidental that right after this, Smalley encouraged his wife to try her hand at what women have always been so good at: permanent housekeeping.

Two years of homemaking turned out to be quite long enough for Lois Weber. In 1908, she took a job at the Gaumont Film Studio in Fort Lee, New Jersey, where filmmaking began in this country, under the tutelage of Herbert Blaché, husband of the pioneer film director, Alice Guy Blaché.

Weber had finally found the perfect outlet for her evangelism. "Now I can preach to my heart's content," she said. "And with the opportunity to write the play, act the leading roles, and direct the entire production, if my message fails to reach someone, I can blame only myself."²

Her frank depictions of modern life gained her a reputation as a director/writer who stirred audiences to passionate outrage. Weber was at last on her way, and

her way was controversy! In the pervading atmosphere of a changing Victorian morality, the public was both ripe for and wary of her subject matter. But with her high-minded, fundamentalist eye, Weber's themes of birth control, divorce, abortion, and promiscuity ended up being a synchronistic complement to the social barometer of the day. Many of her topics were viewed as "sensational," although her purpose, she insisted, was not exploitation. Her movies often faced censorship hearings and were closed down by the police. At another point in history, her career might have been in jeopardy, but because the movie industry was just finding its feet, Weber won a lot of free press instead. Her films became commercial sure bets.

By 1916, with her husband now riding her coattails in a writer/director partnership, Weber was employed by Universal Studios as the top-salaried director of the silent era. She earned an astonishing five thousand dollars a week, and was elected "The Mayor of Universal City." Her plum assignment came with the Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova and the Ballet Russe in the only dramatic film Pavlova ever made. Now a classic, *THE DUMB GIRL OF PORTICI* (1915) was a historic costume drama set in Spain in the late 1600s. It was not Weber's favorite material, but the movie's moderate success won her the freedom to do the pictures she really wanted to do.

HYPOCRITES (1914) was a fascinating risk for Weber as well as a terrific success. Its concern was corruption in the modern world. According to Anthony Slide, the male protagonist, Courtenay Foote, played "a dual lead of a monk who sees the hypocrisy of the world and a minister stoned to death by his congregation for unveiling a statue of 'The Naked Truth.'" According to Slide, "The Naked Truth" was a nude girl whose real identity is dubious to this day. Some say Weber, unable to find a willing player, played the role herself.⁴ But Kevin Brownlow disagrees with this asser-

tion stating, "The nude in HYPOCRITES is a petite young girl—probably wearing a bodystocking—and could not possibly be Weber."⁵

The Ohio Board of Censors banned the film and the mayor of Boston demanded that clothes be hand-painted on "The Naked Truth," frame by frame. The critics were astonished. *Variety* in November 1914 wrote, "After seeing it, you can't forget the name of Lois Weber!" The film caused riots at New York's Strand Theatre. Always assured of a moral tale in an entertaining context, audiences quickly learned to spot Weber's trademark as well as they could Griffith's.

Her favorite and most famous foray came with the five-reel "spectacular," *WHERE ARE MY CHILDREN?* (1916). It advocated birth control while speaking forthrightly against abortion, or "race suicide," as it was referred to in the film. Tyrone Power (the elder) plays a district attorney who longs for children. His selfish wife and her social butterfly set, however, take due care that none of their social engagements are upset by "interventions of nature." The crisis is precipitated when the brother of the attorney's wife impregnates the housekeeper's daughter. The wife suggests to her brother that he consult her doctor who she knows performs illegal abortions. When the girl dies by the doctor's hand, he is brought to trial, and prosecuted by the district attorney. Power discovers his wife's involvement in the affair and berates her harshly. She admits to him that she's also physically "unable to wear the diadem of motherhood." "And all their lives together," say the concluding subtitles, "she must face that mute question, 'Where are my children?'"

The film was sufficiently controversial to stir up a sleepy 1916 Victorian audience. It was banned by the Philadelphia Board of Censors. *Motion Picture News* in October 1916 wrote, "Dr. Ellis P. Oberholtzer, a member of the board [of censors] expressed himself freely, 'The picture is unspeakably

vile . . . I would have permitted it to pass the board in the state only over my dead body. . . . It is not fit for decent people to see.' . . . The Reverend John C. Wheeler [another board member] and spiritual director of the Federation of Catholic Societies said, ' . . . One may not be able to say that the film is openly immoral, but most likely it is even worse in its suggestive situations.' "

The religiously dominated Philadelphia Board of Censors was soon in the minority of opinion. Censorship trials sprang up all over the country, creating just the kind of publicity the film needed to turn hundreds of curious viewers away from many screenings. *WHERE ARE MY CHILDREN?* grossed the happy, fledgling Universal Studios three million dollars. Universal President Carl Laemmle said in tribute to Weber, "I would trust Miss Weber with any sum of money that she needed to make any picture that she wanted to make. I would be sure that she would bring it back. She knows the motion picture business as few people do and can drive herself as hard as anyone I have ever known."⁶

As Weber grew as a filmmaker, her style became more subtle. After the excessive reaction to her five reeler, she felt she no longer needed to hit audiences over the head quite so hard to get her messages across. Instead, she followed with a string of successful, theatrical soap operas with sugary moral plots.

SHOES (1916) speaks to the issue of child labor. *THE PEOPLE VS. JOHN DOE* (1916) attacked the evils of capital punishment. The very contemporary message of *THE LEPER'S COAT* (1914) was that "science has proven that fear of disease will produce its symptoms more surely than contagion, and that thought governs the body."

By late 1916, she was at the height of her career. *Moving Picture Stories* hailed her as, "the greatest woman director."⁷ In 1917 she attained the highest goal of any director of that period: Universal sponsored, built,

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and provided Weber her own studio far from the bustling lot. On the occasion of this major coup she wrote in *Motion Picture Magazine*, "The public as a whole is sentimental and . . . unless you give them what they want you're not going to make any money. And let those who set themselves up as idealists chatter as much as they please about their art, the commercial side cannot be neglected. We're all in business to make money. You can pander to the whim of the moment; or you can build with an eye to the future. Personally, I prefer the latter."⁸

By 1920, her success was unprecedented. Paramount lured her away from Universal with a \$50,000-per-picture contract, and half of all profits.⁹ The very next year she turned out five features. Her most successful, and one still in existence today, *THE BLOT* (1921) (independently made and released by F. B. Warren Corporation), concerns itself with the pride of a poor family who would rather starve than accept charity. One critic called it "a brilliant, lively fugue of urban vs. rural values."¹⁰

"I'll never be convinced that the general public does not want serious entertainment rather than frivolous,"¹¹ she said in a 1921 interview. Yet it was specifically this stubborn resistance to reading the pulse of a changing time that was the beginning of her demise. For the twenties was the era of the jazz age. People were no longer interested in being preached to. They wanted to go to the movies to have fun.

Weber's films started to fail at the box office. By the mid-1920s she lost her company, divorced her husband Smalley, and suffered a nervous breakdown.

She returned to directing briefly in the late 1920s with *SENSATION SEEKERS* (1927), a film that did not mask her underlying disapproval for the era's easing of moral standards. A fashionable girl of the Long Island jazz set runs around with two men at the same time: a wealthy bachelor and the reverend of the church. When the offended

church community takes the matter up with the bishop, she runs off with the bachelor to his yacht. The bachelor drowns in a yacht accident, but the girl is saved by the reverend and the bishop, who finally decides that the best thing of all is for the reverend and the girl to marry. "It is disconcerting to watch the young girl of today grow into manhood!" says the film's protagonist.

Cecil B. De Mille gave her a chance in 1927 to direct her last silent film about "loose women" entitled, *THE ANGEL OF BROADWAY* with *Leatrice Joy* and written by *Lenore Coffee*. According to film historian *Richard Koszarski*, "A cabaret dancer burlesques the innocence of a salvation army girl—an oblique but bitter allusion to Weber's own early days."¹²

Its initial run closed to bad reviews and the film was refused further distribution because of its subject matter. The career of *Lois Weber* was all but over.

For the next decade, she struggled to make a comeback. But it was increasingly clear, except to Weber herself, that her skills lay mainly in depicting her own inner vision, not in entertaining audiences in the way they now were demanding to be entertained. One of only three talkies she ever made, *WHITE HEAT* (1934), concerned miscegenation and racism on a sugar plantation. Shot on location in Hawaii, a white sugar planter marries a native on the island.

Critics attacked the film as "humorless," and distributors in 1934 saw the topic as lethal. The film never saw the light of the silver screen after its initial run in Los Angeles.

The final proof of Weber as a thinker far ahead of her time came with her pioneering notion in 1937 to use film as an audiovisual aid in schools.¹³ Although newsreels and nature movies had been shown around the country since World War I, the concept of producing films specifically for the educational market was not yet popular. Professional use of 16mm film was introduced in

the 1920s, and 28mm and 9.5mm film distributors listed educational films in their catalogues. Still, Weber's idea was viewed as a costly "scheme," and would not be realized until the 1940s, when 16mm projectors became as common in schools as VCRs are today.

Like many of the silent screen's pioneers, Weber found the transition to talkies difficult. The form was wrong for her now anachronistic and preachy style. Unable to obtain work again as a director during the last five years of her life, she humbled herself to free-lancing as a script doctor and to testing "starlets" for Universal Studios. Lonely and bereft in the Hollywood of 1939, this most successful woman director died penniless and ignored by an industry she helped create.¹⁴

No filmmaker before or since achieved what Lois Weber achieved. "Not only was she . . . the most important female director the American film industry has known," remembers one encyclopedia of filmmakers,

but, unlike many of her colleagues up to the present, her work was regarded in its day as equal to, if not a little better than that of most male directors. She was a committed filmmaker in an era when commitment was virtually unknown.¹⁵

LOIS WEBER

- 1913 Eyes of God, The
 1914 False Colors
 Hypocrites
 It's No Laughing Matter
 Leper's Coat, The
 Like Most Wives

- Merchant of Venice, The
 Traitor
 1915 Cigarette, That's All Gold Seal, A
 Dumb Girl of Portici, The
 Scandal
 Sunshine Molly
 1916 Alone in the World
 Discontent
 French Downstairs, The
 Hop, the Devil Brew
 John Needham's Double
 People vs. John Doe, The
 Rock of Riches, The
 Saving the Family Name
 Shoes
 Where Are My Children?
 1917 Even As You and I
 Hand that Rocks the Cradle, The
 For Husbands Only
 Man Who Dared God, The
 Mysterious Mrs. M., The
 Price of a Good Time, The
 There's No Place Like Home
 1918 Borrowed Clothes
 Doctor and the Woman, The
 1919 Forbidden
 Home
 Mary Regan
 Midnight Romance
 Scandal Managers
 When a Girl Loves
 1921 Blot, The
 To Please One Woman
 Too Wise Wives
 What Do Men Want?
 What's Worth While?
 1923 Chapter in Her Life, A
 1926 Marriage Clause, The
 1927 Angel of Broadway, The
 Sensation Seekers
 1934 White Heat

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24. Smith, p. 7.
25. Peary, *Women and the Cinema*, p. 143.
26. Alice Guy Blaché, "Woman's Place in Pho-
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27. Ibid.
28. Peary, *Women and the Cinema*, p. 144.
29. Ibid.
30. Harrison, p. 1011.
31. Smith, p. 6.
32. Heck-Rabi, p. 16.
33. Ibid., 17.
34. Ibid.
35. Lacassin, p. 152.
36. Ibid.
37. Blaché, *Image & Son*, p. 47.
38. Ibid.

Lois Weber

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2. Richard Koszarski, "The Years Have Not
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- * 3. Anthony Slide, *Early Women Directors*,
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5. Kevin Brownlow, notes on the manuscript
 of *Reel Women*, August 29, 1990.
6. Slide, p. 51.
7. [No author cited], "The Greatest Woman
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8. Aline Carter, "Muse of the Reel," *Motion
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9. Koszarski.
10. Ibid.
11. Carter.
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14. Her funeral expenses were paid by Holly-
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 ion, who was indebted to Weber for her very
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 couragement that made possible her own
 unprecedented fifty-year career.
15. *The International Dictionary of Films and*

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Ida May Park

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Ruth Ann Baldwin

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Elizabeth Pickett

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Marguerite Bertsch

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3. Ibid.

Dorothy Arzner

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