

Women Filmmakers in Early Hollywood. By *Karen Ward Mahar*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006. x + 291 pp. Index, notes, photographs. Cloth, \$45.00. ISBN: 0-801-88436-5.

Reviewed by Pennee Bender

Karen Ward Mahar's study of the gendered work culture in the early film industry builds on the growing scholarship of women film pioneers. The book uses case studies of individual women directors and producers, beginning shortly after 1910 and continuing through the 1920s, to illuminate the social and economic forces that first opened and then closed such opportunities for women. Once films moved beyond the novelty stage dominated by inventor-showmen and into systematized exhibitions in nickelodeon theaters, the demand for short narrative films attracted writers, actors, and directors from the world of the theater. The more egalitarian work culture of the stage, in which women often played multiple roles behind the scenes as well as on the stage, combined with the high portion of women among nickelodeon patrons to draw women into film production as scenario writers, assistant directors, and directors as well as actresses. It was most often actresses who gained power as stars in the early films, as they could readily command greater say over their films or form their own production companies in the very fluid business atmosphere that characterized the years after 1910. As Mahar notes, these women stars-turned-producer-directors, such as Marion Leonard, Florence Turner, Eleanor Gates, and Florence Lawrence, usually worked with male partners. Their productions featured stories with strong and complex female characters in control of their own destinies. Very few of these films have survived, so Mahar relies on the film-industry journal descriptions, which lack visual detail, to analyze how, or if, these women directors significantly changed the screen image of women in films.

As women's public and political roles expanded in Progressive-Era reform movements, so too did their presence as movie producers and directors. Government attacks on action films and comedies as vulgar and on nickelodeon theaters as unwholesome places of entertainment encouraged the industry to embrace reform

ideology and promote women filmmakers like Lois Weber and her moralistic, message-oriented feature films. At the same time, the rise of the “New Woman” challenged notions of female moral superiority and the sanctity of women’s separate sphere. In the movies, the persona of the “New Woman” emerged as an adventurous heroine, turning up in a wide range of weekly serials as the leading lady who packed pistols, drove cars, and saved men from dangerous situations, or as a sassy comedian who often shunned proper manners, flirted openly, and bent gender roles in slapstick-style short films. Again, the female stars of these short films often managed their own production companies and wrote, produced, and directed the films in which they starred. The social contradictions for women caught between notions of middle-class respectability and greater social freedoms were not resolved on screen or in the production offices. Mahar deftly analyzes how the film industry tried to balance the popular appeal of the often lurid and suggestive serial stories with notions of middle-class respectability through contrived explanations for on-screen actions and publicity campaigns that feminized the stars off screen.

World War I led to a shift in the film industry that impacted women’s opportunities. As the industry expanded into global distribution after the war and became a more credible large business, Wall Street investors began playing a more significant role. The bankers brought with them a masculine work culture and more limited notions of the leadership role of women in the business. The new investors also began to implement vertical integration of producers, distributors, and exhibitors that would eventually form the major studios and force out the independent production sector where women were able to flourish. From 1916 to 1923, a number of women film stars broke out of the fledgling studio system to form their own companies, but by 1925 the studios had effectively shut out independent production companies from the luxury movie palaces that dominated first-run feature films. By 1928, as sound films triumphed, only one woman director remained in Hollywood, and, until the 1970s, film directing was redefined as requiring male leadership and discipline, rather than the artistic, moral, emotional, and intuitive traits that the industry attributed to women directors.

The book is very well written and organized, detailing film production chronologically as well as by film style. The case-study approach maintains a focus on the career trajectories of women producers and directors and effectively analyzes how

economics structured the film industry. Mahar uses film story lines and synopses of female characters to suggest that these early women filmmakers made qualitatively different kinds of films and offered radically different images of women, but film-content analysis is not a prominent feature of this study. Although Mahar notes that the images of women created by women filmmakers may have pushed the boundaries of acceptable female behavior, she does not explore this theme or discuss the implications of women's screen roles for other women workers. The source materials for early film studies present some limitations. Few of the actual films exist, and print sources rely heavily on the film-industry press, so much of the story remains an inside view of the industry. In the early chapters, Mahar makes great use of visual resources to examine the varied role of women workers in film laboratories and production plants. The book provides a valuable overview of women workers in all facets of early film industry, including exhibition, but it does not establish a strong link to women in other industries. More consistent comparisons with the entrepreneurial, executive, artistic, or managerial roles of women in other industries and the social forces that impacted opportunities in comparable industries would supply important context for evaluating the uniqueness of the film industry. *Women Filmmakers in Early Hollywood* offers convincing evidence of how economic forces shaped women's access to film production and presents a complex and engaging story of the women who took advantage of those opportunities.

Pennee Bender is associate director of the American Social History Project/Center for Media and Learning at the City University of New York Graduate Center. She is finishing a manuscript on Hollywood, newsreel, and educational film propaganda about Latin America during World War II, titled The Greatest Single Weapon: The Government Use of Film in the Good Neighbor Policy, and she has worked extensively in documentary film and television news production.