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Early Women Filmmakers 1911–1940

(BFI: London, 4-Disc Region 2 Blu-Ray Set, 2019)

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After more than a half century of neglect, pioneering women filmmakers are finally getting some of the attention they deserve. Foremost among these women is the figure of Alice Guy Blaché—also known simply as Alice Guy, before she married Herbert Blaché in 1907—who was responsible for numerous “firsts” in cinema history: the first film with narrative *La Fée aux Choux* (*The Cabbage Patch Fairy*; 1896), as well as early experiments with color dye processes, synchronized sound recording, multi-reel films, and other cinematic advances. Gaumont put out a set of her French films for that company—she was the head of production for Gaumont between 1896 and 1907—in a superb DVD in 2009 entitled *Gaumont Treasures Volume 1 (1897–1913)*, but this compilation necessarily did not deal with her subsequent work in America, where she founded her own production company, Solax, and set about making a series of energetic films in every possible genre.

But Alice Guy was far from the only woman filmmaker of the era, as documented in Kino’s excellent Blu-ray collection *Pioneers: First Women Filmmakers*, released in 2018, featuring films by Grace Cunard, Dorothy Davenport Reid, Alice Guy-Blaché, Zora Neale Hurston, Ruth

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Ann Baldwin, Mable Normand, Lois Weber, Elsie Jane Wilson, Marion Wong, Gene Gauntier, Cleo Madison, Nell Shipman, Ida May Park, Frances Marion, Lule Warrenton and many others. I have long argued that women were not only making films during the formative years of the cinema—they were, in fact, the central driving force behind film production, long before D.W. Griffith ever stepped behind a camera to direct. Yet women have been consistently written out of film history because of sexism, laziness, and creation of a male filmic canon in the early 1920s that effectively marginalized these remarkable artists.

In reviewing this latest offering from the British Film Institute, it is important to note that there are more comprehensive collections available, but this set serves as a sort of “sampler” of what is out there, and does contain several titles that have been overlooked in the previously mentioned sets, including Olga Preobrazhenskaya’s feature-length film *The Peasant Women of Ryazan* (USSR, 1927), and Marie Louise Iribe’s haunting fairy-tale featurette, *Le Roi des Aulnes* (*The Erl King*, 1929), one of the earliest sound films produced in France, based on a text by Goethe.

So, what is included here? First off, a generous sampling of Alice Guy’s American Solax shorts, including the heartbreaking *Falling Leaves* (1912); the immigration drama *Making An American Citizen*; the gambling melodrama *The Girl in The Arm Chair*; the Gold Rush themed *Greater Love Hath No Man*; and *Algie, The Miner*, an early queer film set in the “Wild West,” in which the titular character helps a drunken prospector regain his sobriety. All these films—all one-reel shorts, running about 10 minutes each, and all were made in 1912—give one some indication of what a veritable factory Solax was, churning out films at a furious pace.

The Alice Guy offerings are rounded out with the 1913 short film, *Matrimony’s Speed Limit*, in which a rather frantic young man loses all his money in the stock market, and thus refuses to marry his betrothed on the grounds that he cannot possibly provide for her, causing her to send him a hoax letter claiming that he will inherit a fortune in cash, but only if he marries by noon that very day. Needless to say, everything ends quite predictably in heterotopic bliss. More ambitious is Guy’s *The Ocean Waif* (1916), which at 41 minutes in length tells the tale of a couple who take up residence in an abandoned cottage, and at length, fall in love. Alice Guy directed this on a freelance basis for

William Randolph Hearst's International Film Service after the unfortunate collapse of Solax, whose films were being pushed out of the market by larger companies.

Lois Weber is represented by a group of her most effective films, including the home invasion thriller *Suspense* (1913); the materialist critique *Discontent* (1916); and one of her very finest films, which I run in class whenever I get the chance, *The Blot* (1921), starring Claire Windsor and a very young Louis Calhern, which—characteristically for the progressive director—addresses social inequality, class shaming, and the vicissitudes of romance, as well as offering a plea for better salaries for college professors, who labor in squalor while their better-off mercantile neighbors wallow in luxury. Even at 94 minutes, this breadth is a lot for one film to encapsulate, but Weber brings it off with style and aplomb, and the film speeds through its complicated narrative with absolute assurance.

Mable Normand, a brilliant comic writer, director, and actor, who among other accomplishments taught Charles Chaplin the basics of film grammar, thus jump-starting the young comic's long career, is represented by a series of typically light-hearted comedies. These films include *Mable's Strange Predicament* (1914), *Mable's Dramatic Career* (1913), *Mabel's Blunder* (1914), and other films that she co-directed without credit, including *His Trysting Place* (1914, co-directed with Chaplin) and *Should Men Walk Home?* (1927, co-directed with Leo McCarey), her last film.

Dorothy Davenport Reid, whose husband, Hollywood actor "Handsome" Wallace Reid, died from a morphine overdose, produced and/or co-directed a series of films about social ills. Examples of these films are *Human Wreckage* (1923, co-directed with John Griffith Wray), dealing with drug addiction; *The Red Kimona* (1925, co-directed with Walter Lang), centering on the problem of prostitution; and the sublime romantic drama *Linda* (1929), which Reid directed entirely on her own. In the BFI set, Reid is represented by one of her last films, the rather complex murder mystery *The Woman Condemned* (1934), another solo directorial effort, and one of her few sound films, made quickly and cheaply for producer Willis Kent.

Germaine Dulac's *La Souriante Mme. Beudet* (*The Smiling Madame Beudet*, 1922) is a well-known tale of an abusive husband who gets his comeuppance after routinely threatening to commit suicide with

a revolver to frighten his wife, and is included in this set. In addition, however, Dulac's rarely seen *La Cigarette* (1919), a 50-minute romantic comedy, is also presented, giving one a glimpse at the rest of her body of work. Sadly, her Surrealist classic *La Coquille et le Clergyman* (*The Seashell and the Clergyman*, 1928), from a script by Antonin Artaud, is not included here.

However, as mentioned previously, Olga Preobrazhenskaya's *The Peasant Women of Ryazan*, and Marie Louise Iribé's *Le Roi des Aulnes* are genuine discoveries, and are presented here in the best possible restorations, with new subtitles and a careful transfer for each film. *The Erl King*, especially, stays in one's memory as an evocative and atmospheric folktale, and Iribé's use of sound and special effects is remarkable for the period. Sadly, she died at the age of 39, and a German version of the film, which she directed a year after the version presented here, was her final testament as a cineaste.

Dorothy Arzner is perhaps the best known of the directors included in this set, whose work spans the silent and sound era, but all this collection offers is a four-minute clip from the feminist classic *Dance Girl Dance* (1940), which tackles the inherent sexism and inequities of Burlesque. Similarly, Mary Ellen Bute, who with her husband Ted Nemeth as her assistant, created a long series of challenging and transcendent experimental films, has just one entry in the set, the 1937 abstract short *Parabola*.

There are also several brief biographical documentaries included on the four discs in the set, in which historians Shelley Stamp, Anthony Slide, Karen Ward Mahar, and others comment on the lives and work of the directors included here, as well as a gallery of stills. All in all, this set is certainly worth owning, especially for the several more rare films listed previously. One should note, however, that the set is only available in Region 2 Blu-ray and is not available on DVD, so that in order to play the set in America, one needs an all-region Blu-ray player (which fortunately I own, but which is not generally available) to view the discs. In sum, this collection is another handsome set of classic films from the BFI, which has done such an excellent job of preserving lost works of art for the general public, and it is a great "starter set" for those who are just discovering the work of these talented artists.



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