



Director Alice Guy-Blaché rehearsing a 1918 film.
Insert: Mary Pickford at the camera. Moving Picture World

Pioneering Women Who Filmed the West

By Micki Fuhrman

Cherchez la femme. Look for the woman.

Alexandre Dumás penned the phrase in *The Mohicans of Paris* in 1854. It became a cliché in detective novels: If there's a mystery, look for the woman. The *femme fatale*, the sweetheart or wife – even the mother or daughter. There you will find the resolution.

Until recent years, researchers of pioneering filmmakers would have to look hard for the woman. Often their contributions to moviemaking (outside of acting) went uncredited. Fortunately, we are discovering more about their groundbreaking work, especially from the earliest days of moving pictures. Within those works, women were well-represented in the Western genre, although it has taken decades for their credits to come to light.

Early Western films owe a great debt to Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West show, as his traveling pageantry of the West fueled public enthusiasm for the frontier. Cody's troupe of trick riders, Indians and sharpshooters were captured on film by Edison Studios of New Jersey in 1894. The Cody show toured Europe eight times during the late 1890s and early 1900s

and, subsequently, a handful of Western films were produced during those years, the first being the British short (and first Western narrative), *Kidnapping by Indians*, in 1899.

Filmmaking was new, and there were no rules. That meant anyone could play.

Enter Alice

In 1894, a petite 21-year-old French woman named Alice Guy (pronounced ah-leese ghee) approached Léon Gaumont at a Paris photography company for a secretarial position. He expressed concerns over her age.

"I'll get over that," she replied, and was hired. It would be the most fortuitous decision Gaumont ever made.

He later bought the company from the owner, Félix Richard and, after seeing a demonstration of August and Louis Lumière's Cinématographe – a device that recorded, developed and projected moving pictures – Gaumont began manufacturing a similar machine called the Chronophone. Guy asked if she could experiment with it and he agreed, as long as her office work did not suffer. She wrote and directed *The Cabbage Fairy* in 1896, using friends as actors. Gaumont, impressed with the result, gave her free rein to write and direct short films (she also made sets and put

together costumes). She unknowingly became a pioneer – hand-coloring her films and syncing visuals with sound, using prerecorded wax cylinders. She was the first to utilize the close-up (an honor long credited to D.W. Griffith). Her films were artfully composed with remarkable imagery, considering that moviemaking was in its infancy.

Between 1896 and 1906, Alice Guy was the only woman film director in the world.

In 1907, Guy married Herbert Blaché, and they moved to the United States to help market the Chronophone, but the enterprise failed. They formed their own film company, Solax, in New York. At its peak, Solax produced three films a week.

Film scholar Alison McMahan, author of *Alice Guy Blaché: The Lost Visionary of the Cinema* (2014), has spent 30 years uncovering Blaché's legacy and tracking down several of Blaché's lost films.

“By 1910, the genre films that included the most Western elements were actually called ‘military films,’” McMahan says. “If the story involved ranch hands, sheriffs, Indians, etc., they belonged to a subcategory generally referred to as ‘Western drama’ or even ‘Western melodrama.’” McMahan terms them “Eastern Westerns.”

Back to the influence of Wild West shows. While Guy-Blaché was overseeing film production in Virginia, she saw the Cheyenne Days Company troupe of cowboys perform. Inspired, she used them as actors in *The Girl and the Broncho Buster* and *Outwitted by Horse and Lariat* (both 1911). The cowboys even taught her to throw a lasso. Other Westerns were *Greater Love Hath No Man* (1911) and *Two Little Rangers* (1912), featuring two young sisters on the trail of a villain.

The movie business underwent several changes by 1918. Thomas Edison and George Eastman created a trust, demanding filmmakers using the Edison camera must pay a licensing fee. Movie fans tired of “Jersey scenery,” says McMahan. Independents pulled up stakes and moved operations to California. Meanwhile, the Blachés divorced and a fire damaged Solax's studio. In 1922, Alice sold the company's assets and moved back to France with her two children.

This trailblazing visionary of the cinema lost her entire body of work. When she inquired at the Library of Congress years later, there was no record of her films. Of roughly 1,000 titles produced in her career, only about 110 survive, and that is due largely to McMahan's efforts.

Filmmaking: A Woman's Touch

What follows the story of Guy-Blaché is an interesting chain of mentorship, with her tutelage of Lois Weber, who in turn brought Frances Marion into the growing ranks of women filmmakers.

Lois Weber was hired in 1908 by Blaché as an actress and assistant. She eventually produced her own films and, in 1912, moved to Hollywood. Weber tackled social issues such as abortion, alcoholism, birth control, drug addiction and prostitution. By 1916, she established herself as the top director at Universal, then America's leading studio, and was the highest-paid director in the world. Among

WOMEN FILMMAKERS (continued on page 14)

Women find a voice as silent filmmakers

By Micki Fuhrman

A number of silent screen actresses (in addition to Lois Weber, Frances Marion and Anita Loos) made the ultimate camera angle shift, stepping from in front of the lens to behind it.

Grace Cunard, who acted on stage and in films, wrote Western screenplays for John Ford and many for his brother Francis. She is listed as director for *The Gasoline Buckaroo* (1920) and 1921's *A Daughter of the Law* and *Her Western Adventure*. Her innate sense for stories that appealed to popular tastes drove Cunard's success.

Waco-born Texas Guinan's stocky build and insistence on playing strong, unconventional characters kept her out of traditional feminine starring roles, so she fashioned herself as a rough and rowdy cowgirl actress and produced her own silent movies, including *Girl of the Rancho* (1919) and *Spitfire* (1921). She managed and performed in speakeasies during Prohibition years, earning the nickname “Queen of the Nightclubs.”



Grace Cunard

A love for nature marked the works of Nell Shipman, a Canadian who became an independent producer around 1919. She produced, wrote, codirected and starred in the action-adventure *The Girl from God's Country* (1921). For *The Grub Stake* (1923), she transported her personal collection of animals (including bobcats, bears, wolves, skunks and elk) by barge to Priest Lake, Idaho. Disaster struck: Shipman's distributor went bankrupt and the film release was held up by legal proceedings.

The Greatest Box-Office Picture Nell Shipman Ever Made

A tremendous romance and melodrama of virgin Alaska.

A story of gold and frozen, snow-capped wastes, of a doped girl who soon has fight against Man and Nature in their most merciless mood.

Filled in a dozen great episodes with the famous animals that no other stage has ever learned to handle so well.

Bert Van Tuyle presents

Nell Shipman in *The GRUB-STAKE*

A Story of the Klondike
Directed by Bert Van Tuyle

This tremendous eight-reel production could be played in amusing, unique, animal as a "road show." Mrs. Shipman and her distributors believe that pictures of this caliber should go to the smallest picture theatres to give them the greatest and exciting that they need and desire at this time more than ever before.

Prints of "The Grub-Stake" are on the way to all American Releasing branch offices.



Advertisement for 1923's *The Grub Stake*. Wikimedia Commons

Her codirector and love interest, Bert Van Tuyle, became mentally unstable. Money woes forced her to part with furniture, family silver, even her animal menagerie. By the mid 1930s, Shipman was no longer writing, directing or acting. (Her son, Barry Shipman had a long career writing for TV, mostly Westerns.)

Jeanie Macpherson acted in numerous D.W. Griffith films before she directed, on a fluke, a one-reel Western called *The Tarantula* (1913). The original finished reel was accidentally destroyed and she was asked to recreate it, since the previous director was unavailable. Her next job was writing for the legendary Cecil B. DeMille. She earned 32 scenario credits for his productions from 1915 into the 1930s, including *The Plainsman* (1936) and *Union Pacific* (1939). DeMille “told me I should do something that I could do at 90 as well as 19, my age at the time,” she once said. “I thank him for an accomplishment I might not have known without a DeMille to work for.”

Not all women directors and screenwriters arrived via the acting route.



Screenwriter Leigh Brackett with director Howard Hawks on the set of *El Dorado* (1967). Paramount

WOMEN FILMMAKERS (from page 13)

Weber's credits are two silent Westerns: *Captain Courtesy* (1915) and *When a Girl Loves* (1919). Both starred her husband, Phillips Smalley.

Former WWA president Kirk Ellis, who has won Emmy, Golden Globe and Spur awards for his scriptwriting, says, "Any discussion of women as writers in Hollywood, regardless of genre, should begin with Frances Marion, at the time and into the '30s, the most sought-after and highest-paid writer in the studio system." Marion wrote the script for *The Wind* (1928), Cecil B. DeMille's first full-length movie, which Ellis calls "one of the crowning glories of the silent era," starring a doll-like Lillian Gish as an Easterner struggling against harsh frontier elements and predatory men.

Marion happened to accompany actress and friend Mary Pickford to visit a handsome actor named Fred Thomson, who was hospitalized with a broken leg. Marion and Thomson soon fell in love and married. She wrote a series of Westerns establishing Thomson as a major cowboy star rivaling Tom Mix. After his death from tetanus on Christmas Day 1928, Marion continued writing, but *Northwest Passage* (1940) starring Spencer Tracy would be the only Western-themed script, for which she, and many other writers, received no on-screen credits; Laurence Stallings and Talbot Jennings were credited as screenwriters.

Anita Loos is best known for scripting *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (based on her 1925 novel), both the less-than-successful 1928 version and the iconic 1953 film starring Marilyn Monroe. Loos had a knack for writing to an actor's style and was highly influential in creating Douglas Fairbanks's

swashbuckling image, tailoring characters to his athletic ability and dashing looks. Her Westerns included *The Half Breed* (1916) and *The Cowboy and the Lady* (1938). *The Girl in the Shack*, *Saving Grace* and *Some Bull's Daughter* (all from 1914) are presumed lost.

Loos maintained a lifelong friendship with Marion and was delightfully quotable:

"I can never take for granted the euphoria produced by a cup of coffee."

"I'm furious about the women's liberationists. They keep getting up on soapboxes and proclaiming that women are brighter than men. That's true, but it should be kept very quiet or it ruins the whole racket."

The Door Closes

The number of women working as screenwriters and directors fell dramatically as the movie industry became more industrialized. Dorothy Arzner was one of the few, directing from the silent era into the 1940s. Her popularity among studio execs declined after her last movie, *First Comes Courage* (1943), possibly due to waning commercial success and Hays Code fallout (she dressed in masculine clothes and maintained a 40-year relationship with a female choreographer).

Dorothy Davenport acted in and wrote many movies, some Western, including *The Masked Avenger* (1922), starring her husband, Wallace Reid. IMDB.com lists six director and 12 producer credits for her, including *Rose of the Rio Grande* (1938). Davenport scripted two of the popular "Frances the Talking Mule" films of the '50s. She often wrote as Mrs. Wallace Reid.

"She wrote like a man."

Beloved cowboy star Gene Autry had a long string of Western films and his own TV show in the early 1950s. Most fans would be surprised to know the majority were written by a woman, Betty Burbridge. She was first a silent-screen actress, appearing in 62 films.

After a brief stint as a newspaper columnist, she was hired by the newly formed Action Pictures in 1924 as a scriptwriter and wrote Westerns almost exclusively. Her move to Republic Pictures in 1935 paired her with Autry. A 1941 Smith-Corona typewriter ad in *Life* magazine pictured her with the star and caption, "Gene Autry's script writer typed her way to the top!"

Gene Autry's script writer typed her way to the top!

Perhaps you too can find success through typing!

Handfuls of letters in our file testify to the benefits of typing. A Smith-Corona typewriter can aid you in school, college, business and any number of professions.

Learning to type is easy. Even an 8 year old can operate a Coroner portable. You see, Coroner are made with an eye for speed, easy operation and durability. All Coroner have the Regulation standard keyboard as on big office machines. Go to your Coroner dealer... pick out the Coroner best suited to your individual needs to take it home for a free trial.

Extension and Shortener - Phone our branch or dealer in your city for free demonstration of the Super-Speed L. C. Smith office typewriter. No obligation to buy.

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1941 Smith-Corona advertisement highlighting screenwriter Betty Burbridge.

WOMEN FILMMAKERS (continued on page 16)



WOMEN FILMMAKERS (from page 14)

Burbridge outlined her rules for writing family-oriented Westerns in a 1942 interview with Oliver Poole:

“The hero must never smoke or drink – and tobacco chewing is *out!* ... no intoxicants.

“The hero may go into a saloon to rescue someone, to consult someone, to meet someone or to beat up someone—but not to drink.

“The hero never kisses the girl if he can help it but he always wins her in the end.

“Keep gunplay at a minimum, and let the hero outwit the heavies rather than mow them down with a blitzkrieg of lead.

“If the villain must die ... let it be accidentally.”

Leigh Brackett worked for years without the public realizing she was a woman. She was known as “the Queen of the Space Drama,” writing pulp science fiction, sometimes partnering with Ray Bradbury, and mysteries in the 1940s. Director Howard Hawks had never met her, but he admired the gritty dialogue he had read in her work. Hawks sought her out to assist William Faulkner and Jules Furthman with the screen adaptation of Ray Chandler’s *The Big Sleep* (1946), starring Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall. Hawk told his assistant to call in “this guy Brackett.”

“In walked a rather attractive girl who looked like she had just come in from a tennis match,” Hawks said of the first meeting. “She looked as if she wrote poetry. But she wrote like a man.”

Brackett wrote *Rio Bravo* (1959) – which is worth watching just to hear Dean Martin sing “My Rifle, My Pony and Me,” accompanied by Ricky Nelson, while John Wayne and Walter Brennan look on, smiling. She would write two more Western screenplays starring Duke: *El Dorado* (1967) and *Rio Lobo* (1970). Not long before her death in 1978, she worked on early scripting for *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), the second release of the *Star Wars* saga films, which are often referred to as Space Westerns.

“Writing a film is like building a brick wall,” Brackett said. “You have a plan and you have the blocks. Then, somebody says, ‘I think we’ll take this stone out of here and put it over there. And while we’re at it, let’s make this stone red and that stone green.’ You still have to keep the story’s general shape, but you change the details.”

Regarded as the most prominent female filmmaker of the 1950s and 1960s, Ida Lupino was a London-born actress nicknamed “The English Jean Harlow.” She observed storyplotting, camera and lighting techniques on Hollywood movie sets as she worked. Cinematographer Archie Stout said, “Ida has more knowledge of camera angles and lenses

than any director I’ve ever worked with, with the exception of Victor Fleming. She knows how a woman looks on the screen and what light a woman should have, probably better than I do.”

Lupino accrued more than 40 directorial credits, most for television series, including *The Rifleman*, *Have Gun Will Travel*, *The Virginian* and *Daniel Boone*.

There is Lina Wertmüller, the first woman to be nominated for an Oscar as director (*Seven Beauties*, 1975) and the only woman to direct a Spaghetti Western (1968’s *The Belle Starr Story*, under the Nathan Wich pseudonym). When the 91-year-old, wearing her signature white eyeglasses, accepted a lifetime achievement Oscar in 2019, her interpreter (actress Isabella Rossellini) conveyed, “She would like to change the name ‘Oscar’ to ‘Anna.’”

A New Class

Thousand Pieces of Gold (1990, recently restored and rereleased on Kino Lorber) is the story of a betrothed Chinese woman who lands in an Idaho gold-mining town. Self-taught filmmaker Nancy Kelly directed Anne Makepeace’s screen adaptation of the 1981 novel by Ruthann Lum McCunn. In the 1980s, Kelly, who had no riding experience, moved from her native Massachusetts to become a ranch hand. Tackling Hollywood proved to be just as tough. “It never occurred to me that breaking into the film industry would be harder than breaking a horse. I was wrong.”

Director Kelly Reichardt’s restrained minimalistic style, called “slow cinema,” made *Meek’s Cutoff* (2011), in critic Roger Ebert’s words, “the first film I’ve seen that evokes what must have been the reality of wagon trains to the West.” Reichardt also directed *First Cow* (2019).

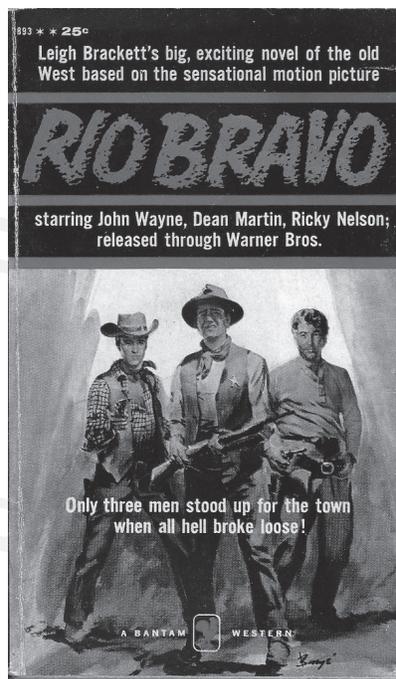
Chloe Zhao has filmed Westerns from many perspectives. An injured rodeo cowboy searches for a new identity in *The Rider* (2017). Her 2021 Oscar-winning film, *Nomadland*, harks back to Clint Eastwood’s bleak Westerns, with stark portrayals of loners and drifters.

Of the budget constraints during filming of *Songs My Brothers Taught Me* (2015), a coming-of-age Native American drama set on, and featuring actors from, Pine Ridge Reservation, Zhao said, “... we had to go with truth in front of the camera. Because truth was all we could afford.”

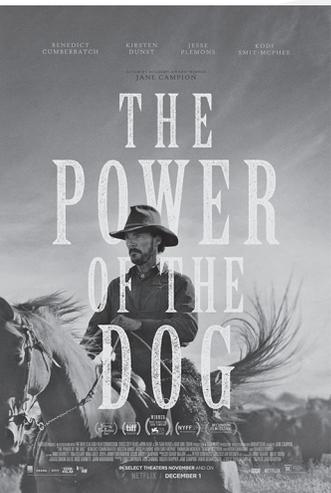
Lee Martin, a 2022 Spur winner for her screenplay *Last Shootout* (2021), has written a number of Western novels and scripts.

The recently released Western, *Dead for a Dollar*, was produced by Carolyn McMaster.

Jane Campion won the 2022 Academy Award (Best Director) for *The Power of the Dog*, a psychological Western



Leigh Brackett wrote a novelization of her *Rio Bravo* screenplay.



thriller that stirred acclaim and controversy. Campion read Thomas Savage's 1967 novel of the same name and was determined to capture its essence, spending time at the Montana ranches where Savage wrote the book (the movie was filmed in New Zealand) and sending lead Benedict Cumberbatch to learn roping, riding, and bull-calf castration.

Times have changed. Women no longer go uncredited as filmmakers or feel compelled to write under pseudonyms (unless they choose to) or as Mrs. <husband's name here>. Their work and their names are being heard, seen and celebrated.

Cherchez la femme. Look for the woman.

She is seated on the front rows of award shows in Hollywood, Cannes, at Sundance – not as a guest, but as a nominee. A winner. Thanks to a long line of women film pioneers, a new class of contemporary screenwriters, directors and producers of all genres – even of historically male-dominated Westerns – is getting well-earned screentime. Women are a growing, creative force in the business of visual storytelling and they are taking home their share of Oscars – or Annas, if you prefer – to adorn their mantles.

Outliers

Neo-Western films (or at least films with Western elements) directed by women worth mentioning:

√ Russian Alla Surikova's *A Man from the Boulevard des Capucines* (1987), a "Red" Western, whose playful tone compares to Mel Brooks's *Blazing Saddles* (1974).

√ An Oklahoma cowboy in Kathryn Bigelow's *Near Dark*

(1987) falls for a beautiful drifter who is revealed to be a vampire.

√ Mouly Surya's *Marlina the Murderer in Four Acts* (Indonesia, 2018) was described as "a Spaghetti Western by way of Indonesia."

√ *Little Woods* (2018), directed by Nia DaCosta, is a "modern Western," centering on two North Dakota sisters on the run from the law.

SILENT (from page 13)

Beulah Marie Dix was a writer contemporary of Macpherson's. She scripted *The Sunset Trail* (1917) and *The Squaw Man* for Cecil B. DeMille, the latter of which he filmed three times (1914, 1918, 1931).

Teenage Adele Buffington took a job selling tickets at a St. Louis movie theater in 1916. She was fascinated by the films, taking note of which characters and elements the audiences reacted to, and was compelled to write.

"Every night when my work in the cage was done, I went to the library and read, getting details and atmosphere for the scenes I had in mind – for the background against which I wanted those dear people I knew to move and make drama. Then when everyone else was asleep, I would write and write."

She made her way to Hollywood and was hired by Thomas H. Ince. Although Buffington wrote over a hundred screenplays, the bulk of them Western, she received little press at the time. She was mentioned in a 1924 article, "Beauty and Brains Go Together Here," published in the *Los Angeles Times*, saying she was sorry she didn't "look intellectual. I suppose I'll have to plaster my hair down with grease, wear huge horn-rimmed spectacles and talk the classic and evolution of drama and motion pictures, and tell them I am 44 instead of 24."

Buffington's work (including a few episodes for TV's *The Restless Gun* and *The Adventures of Wild Bill Hickok*) spanned from the silent era through the 1950s. She sometimes wrote as Colt Remington.

Another woman who used a gender-neutral pen name was Bertha Muzzy Bower, who wrote as B.M. Bower. When she was 18, her family moved from Minnesota to Montana, where she worked as a schoolteacher. She married unhappily, but started writing and selling stories based on Montana cowboy life. Her husband nicknamed her "my little red-headed gold mine."

The marriage ended, and Bower went on to write about 60 Western novels, the most popular being *Chip, of the Flying U*, which she serialized and turned into a screenplay. Tom Mix starred in the 1914 film. She has around 20 Western screenwriting credits.

Bess Meredyth provided scenarios for several Western movies spanning the silent and sound picture years.

Ruth Ann Baldwin wrote about 30 screenplays during the silent era. She is best known for writing and directing '49-'17 (1917), a Western genre parody wherein an aging judge wishes to recreate the Wild West town of his youth.

Unfortunately, the sound picture era (late 1920s) brought about a Hollywood change of command. Studios were run by men and, subsequently, the writing, direction and production of films became male-dominated. The "Golden Era" for women filmmakers quietly closed and would remain so for decades.



B.M. Bower Wikimedia Commons