

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Judith Mayne. *Directed by Dorothy Arzner (Women Artists in Film)*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-33716-0; \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-20896-5.

Reviewed by Steven Mintz (University of Houston)

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A 1927 story called her a “Horatio Alger Heroine,” who offered a model of how “ambitious girls” could get ahead in the film industry (p. 151). But, of course, her path was anything but typical. Although Dorothy Arzner was not the first woman director, for more than a decade and a half she was the only woman to direct a large body of work (sixteen films identify her as director; she completed several other films credited to men as well as training films for the Women’s Army Corps during World War II).

Although the volume does not purport to be a complete biography, it does explore in fascinating detail how Arzner succeeded in becoming a director, how her films reflected a distinct sensibility and set of life experiences, and how she was portrayed in the popular media. Several factors, Mayne contends, allowed her to break into directing: an unusual reputation for efficiency and economy as a film editor; the emergence of a new genre, the woman’s film, which seemed to demand a distinctive directoral sensibility (as Louella Parsons put it, “she understands feminine psychology”); and, above all, her reputation as a “star maker,” entrusted with guiding actresses from supporting to starring roles. Arzner had great success in advancing the careers of Esther Ralston, Clara Bow, and Ruth Chatterton.

While Arzner’s films sometimes reflect stereotypical Hollywood representations of women, her work did differ in important ways from that of her male contemporaries. First, Mayne argues, her films highlight women’s point of view, focusing primarily on women’s lives, work, friendships, and communities—with special

attention paid to the impact of social class and how it shapes women’s aspirations. Second, when Arzner dealt with heterosexual pairings, they were usually deeply troubled. By contrasting heterosexual relationships with intense female/female relationships, Arzner subverted the classical Hollywood boy-meets-girl formula. Third, Arzner’s directoral style emphasized dress and costume as symbols of change in women’s relationships and presented conventional roles of masculinity and femininity as poses.

Mayne is particularly interested in how a distinctive lesbian sensibility informed her films, evident in her celebration of female friendship and her concern with the fluidity of gender roles and the importance of costume and performance. While there are no lesbian characters or subplots in her film, “there is constant and deliberate attention to how women dress and act and perform, as much for each other as for the male figures in their lives” (p. 63).

Public representations of Arzner negated any awareness of lesbianism through clichés of spinsterhood, asexuality, and personal satisfaction sacrificed for the sake of a career. As a 1936 profile commented: “Her clothes, like the rest of her, are a compromise between the motion picture director who is neither man nor woman but sentient sexless machine” (p. 158).

Carefully balancing analyses of Arzner’s film career, the representation of women in her film, and her portrayal in popular culture, this book deserves a broad readership among those in cinema studies, women’s studies, and cultural history.

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