

**Cultivating the Popular:
An Intertextual Study of Nell Shipman**

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by

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ABSTRACT

Cultivating the Popular: An Intertextual Study of Nell Shipman explores Shipman's career in both the American and Canadian film industries, and how her career failed to survive film's transformation. Tracing her interactions with the American and Canadian film industries this study examines the commercialization of film, how film culture and movies were marketed, and Shipman's occasional ability and frequent inability to negotiate the centralizing business landscape. The study investigates the intersection of Shipman's career and the industries in which she worked, and dissects the relationship between Shipman and the systems on both sides of the border. While Shipman found modest success in her early career, her inability to transform herself and to understand and work within the parameters of the industries ultimately rendered her powerless and incapable of meaningful participation.

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INTRODUCTION

When I was thirteen I got the Bug – the Stage Bug. My mother, a sensible woman, forgot the Family Tree, locked up the Crested Plate, and said “Go to it.” I went. To a dramatic school, where I pursued the Bug for six months at the end of which time I caught him by the tail as he whisked through Seattle in the shape of a show which had lost its Leading Lady.¹

- Nell Shipman

From 1910 onward the American film industry grew by leaps and bounds. It was during this period that the studio system formed as a vertically integrated means of producing feature films, which placed the control of production, distribution and exhibition of a film in the hands of a major corporation, or studio. Film became big business. Prior to this shift towards streamlining film production, distribution and exhibition, the American film industry was less structured, allowing more artists and filmmakers to participate in the production and dissemination of movies, including many women filmmakers who were active members of this community.

Across the border in Canada, it was a different story. Canadian cinema was a blend of amateur filmmakers, government-controlled documentary and propaganda production, and melodramatic feature-length films. Broken up by a vast landscape and limited centralized production, the Canadian film industry existed in mostly independent pockets of production across the country. Nonetheless, a film industry did exist prior to the formation of the National Film Board in 1939. There were a few key players who worked outside the

¹ Nell Shipman, “Me,” *Letters from God’s Country*, ed. Tom Trusky (Boise, Idaho: Hemingway Western Studies Series, 2003) 324.

government documentary tradition and attempted to produce commercially viable feature films in Canada. Intermingled with these filmmakers were independent amateurs who were enraptured with the potential of film.

So what might these two, seemingly disparate film industries have in common? While the shape and formation of the industries differ, as do the films each country produced, one commonality was the people who worked on both sides of the border. The American and Canadian film industries collide in one such person. Nell Shipman was a vibrant, passionate, Canadian-born filmmaker who found limited success and considerable failure in both industries.

In this intertextual study of Nell Shipman and cinema I explore Shipman's career in both the American and Canadian film industries, and how her career failed to survive film's transformation. I use her career as a springboard from which to launch an investigation that traces the commercialization of film, how film culture and movies were marketed on both sides of the border, and Shipman's occasional ability and frequent inability to negotiate the centralizing and ever-transforming business landscape of the industries. An exploration of how the industries developed and evolved in both Canada and the United States is compulsory to yield an understanding of why Shipman first succeeded and later failed. My study is an exploration of the intersection of Shipman's career and the industries in which she worked, a survey that dissects the relationship between Shipman and the systems on both sides of the border. Film transformed from an open industry into a system of standardized mechanisms of production, distribution and exhibition. While Shipman found modest success in

her early career, her inability to transform herself and to understand and work within the parameters of the industries ultimately rendered her powerless and incapable of meaningful participation. Shipman's individualistic tendencies and her desire for a freelance career were at odds with the consolidating thrust of rationalization and bureaucratization that characterized the modernization of the film business during the silent-film period.

My study relies upon intertextuality as a primary method of investigation. Using various texts – books, films, magazines, newspapers, and advertisements – I explore the ways in which these sources stand in relation to each other and what their relationships can tell us about the silent period, Nell Shipman, and the way film consolidated and transformed during this time. Films quickly metamorphosed into sophisticated texts that were marketed in articles and advertisements within newspapers and magazines, and they featured narratives that were paralleled in novels. Because film was promoted intertextually during the silent period, approaching this study in a manner that reflects an intersection among the texts is the most appropriate and rewarding mode of investigation.

The transformation of film during the silent period began with a transfer of power from early manufacturers, such as Thomas Edison, who held patents that controlled the use of film's technology. The manufacturing companies of Edison, Georges Méliès, Selig and Lubin sold their inventions and films to vaudeville and nickelodeon owners.² In the later half of the twentieth century's first decade the industry began to transform as more production companies formed, and focus

² Eileen Bowser, The Transformation of Cinema, 1907-1915 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1990) 23.

shifted from the technology to the product, which increasingly took on a narrative form. Film had to become more standardized to provide uniformity for the audience and to attract new audiences. Eileen Bowser describes this change in

The Transformation of Cinema, 1907-1915:

The film as standardized product would be one that was clearly understood without the help of a lecturer; one that would be readily available on a regular schedule, that the exhibitor could count on; one that would draw the consumer to brand names, that would be familiar; and one that would be under the control of its producer. The standardized film would make it possible to rationalize production methods and would be more profitable for the producer.³

By 1910 this transformation was well under way, as lavish theatres appeared to elevate film's lower-class status and make it an attractive product to the middle- and upper-classes. More sophisticated film narratives began to fill theatre screens, and audiences eagerly supported the standardizing system. Nell Shipman found work within the industry just as the studio system was developing. By the late 1910s the studio system controlled the industry and put in place a series of limiting and centralized practices that pushed out many filmmakers whose less rigid production styles were at odds with the system's vertical integration. Women filmmakers in particular, Shipman included, were dramatically affected by the shift in production, distribution and exhibition practices.

Shipman's career as an independent filmmaker in the early 1920s is rich terrain from which to harvest an understanding of the industry forces that affected independent filmmakers and, in particular, women filmmakers and through a

³ Bowser, Transformation 54.

comparative analysis I explore the careers of other women filmmakers. Throughout this study I tread carefully and attempt to remain aware that Shipman's career was hers alone and rooted in the particularities of her life. While her interactions and exchanges with the industry can help us understand and interpret this period in film, it is important to remember that her life and career cannot be wholly generalized to speak for all women filmmakers or *all* independent filmmakers. This thesis attempts to find the balance between what we can extrapolate from Shipman's life and what may well be unique to her.

Who Was The "Girl From God's Country"?

A woman and a dog fleeing from a savage brute across an icy terrain, saving herself from a "fate worse than death" and rescuing her husband all at the same time; a spunky gal navigating rocky hills in her Maxwell automobile; a beauty bathing nude in a babbling stream with her befriended bear by her side. These are images of Nell Shipman from her films. Given the audacity they convey for their time, it is no wonder that Shipman has come to be understood as a passionate, independent filmmaker from the silent era. Add to this the fact that Shipman had a hand in crafting these images and formulating her own persona, and she is clearly a fascinating figure whose career and life offer a keyhole view into the development of the silent film industry both in Canada and the United States and how women and independent filmmakers were dramatically affected by the concentrated and homogeneous atmosphere manufactured by the transformation of film into big business.

Born Helen Barham in Victoria, British Columbia, in October 1892, Nell Shipman made her first foray into the entertainment business at age thirteen, as part of a traveling vaudeville show, when “the Bug” caught her. In her early career she secured only minor roles despite attempts to become a leading lady.⁴ By this point Shipman’s family had moved to Seattle, where they settled and put down roots.⁵ Shipman found adequate success traveling the vaudeville circuit, and by 1910, at age eighteen, she was a leading lady. In the same year she met and married Ernest Shipman. Ernest was a film promoter and sometime producer known as “Ten Percent Emie,” for the cut of profits he took in return for his services.⁶ Attracted to her beauty, Ernest left wife number three to make Nell number four. She gave birth to their son Barry in 1912.⁷

Nineteen-twelve marked the beginning of a frenzied pace of production in Hollywood, as well as Shipman’s feature-film debut in The Ball of Yam. She was the film’s leading lady, and she wrote the scenario. Despite garnering little attention and her own admission that the film was horrible, Shipman was not dissuaded from seeking out additional work in the industry. A large part of her career happened behind the camera, where she authored books, scenarios and screenplays, including Under the Crescent (1914), which was purchased by Universal and turned into one of the first serials.⁸ Serials were significant to this period because they purposefully targeted a female demographic that slipped

⁴ Shipman, “Me” 324.

⁵ Kay Armatage, The Girl from God’s Country: Nell Shipman and the Silent Cinema (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003) 16.

⁶ Peter Morris, Embattled Shadows: A History of Canadian Cinema, 1895-1939 (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1978) 102.

⁷ As an adult, Barry Shipman became a successful Hollywood screenwriter in his own right.

⁸ Ally Acker, Reel Women: Pioneers of the Cinema, 1896 to the Present (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1993) 59.

away to the theatre for a mid-afternoon retreat from reality; they were a key aspect of the commercialization of film.⁹

By 1916 Shipman starred in her first of three James Oliver Curwood productions, playing "the Woman" in God's Country and the Woman. Curwood was a very successful novelist in the early 1900s, best known for his wilderness stories and his fascination with the Canadian far north. This is a fascination Shipman shared:

And now: My Dream. It's a very real one to me. It is that some day I may go up into Canada, to the waterways of the Hudson Bay territory, to the great plains of the Middle West, and to the mountains and forests of the coasts, and make big human outdoors pictures.¹⁰

This passage, taken from an article originally published by Photoplay in February 1919, is Shipman's first foray into autobiography. Interestingly enough, the article's publication, declaring Shipman's dream of filmmaking in the Canadian wilds, coincided with her travels to Lesser Slave Lake in Northern Alberta during the winter of 1918 to begin filming Back to God's Country (1919), which she adapted from a Curwood magazine story, and which would be her most commercially successful venture. The film was the first from the newly formed Shipman-Curwood Producing Company, a business partnership that gave Shipman rights to Curwood's work in return for her starring solely in his films.¹¹ The joint venture was short lived, and Back to God's Country ultimately ended the partnership.

⁹ Shelley Stamp, Movie-Struck Girls: Women and Motion Picture Culture After the Nickelodeon (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000) 102.

¹⁰ Shipman, "Me" 325.

¹¹ Morris, Embattled Shadows 104.

After the dissolution of Shipman-Curwood Producing Company, Shipman's filmmaking career tapered off; she never again returned to Canada to complete her dream of making more films in the northern wilderness. Instead, she found her wilds south of the border in Idaho, where she settled after leaving Ernest and taking up with her Back to God's Country production manager, Bert Van Tuyle. With the termination of the Curwood contract her commercial career suffered dramatically. She was a sharp woman who struggled to keep her career alive, funding it any way she could and constantly trying to participate in a meaningful way. Shipman became a one-woman filmmaking team, writing, producing, directing and starring in The Girl from God's Country (1921), a film that attempted to revitalize the "Girl from God's Country" persona she had developed in her previous films. For the next few years Shipman produced low-budget short films around her Idaho homestead, Lionhead Lodge. The only film of particular significance is The Grub-Stake, which she produced in 1923 with Van Tuyle, and which ultimately bankrupted her. The remainder of Shipman's life is scattered with mostly fruitless but imaginative attempts to sell her scenarios, novels and ideas and to find some sort of success in the film industry.

Why Shipman Now?

Shipman's career, compared to that of a star such as Mary Pickford or a screenwriter like Frances Marion (both of whom offer points of comparison later in this thesis), was fleeting and limited. Lately she has received a significant amount of attention from the academic and popular press, such as Maclean's, Take One and newspapers from across Canada. It is not surprising. She is an

intriguing lady: an actress raised on vaudeville; a screenwriter with a penchant for animals; an independent producer determined to work outside the studio system; a woman with many a broken relationship under her belt and, on the whole, a failed career. For feminist film scholars Shipman is an ideal subject because of her activity in a period previously thought to have been dominated and created by male filmmakers. The fact that she not only acted in films, but also wrote, directed and produced, adds to her attraction. She forms part of a proof that women were active in the silent era and that they played a large role in its development.

Shipman was active during a key period within film's development. Beginning around 1912, she found modest success in the American industry by tapping into various facets of it – writing, acting, producing and directing – and taking advantage of the opportunities that came her way. Working consistently throughout the 1910s, she experienced the (negative) effects of the American industry's increasingly homogeneous production, distribution and exhibition atmosphere by the end of the decade. For the remainder of her career, between 1925 and her death in 1970, she faced systematic rejection. The underlying problems were her inability to understand and transform with the transmuting industry and her desire to work freelance rather than within the Hollywood system. An examination of Shipman's career as a case study illuminates industry consolidation from the margins. As promotion, celebrity and product demand evolved and shaped film into a commerce-driven cultural product, her independent style of filmmaking was increasingly out of step.

Investigating how the industries evolved in the United States and Canada through the career of Nell Shipman is the very purpose of this study. Chapter One reviews how Kay Armatage and Peter Morris have previously situated Shipman, which of their methods and approaches are valuable to my study, and which are not. With this foundation laid, Chapter Two traces Shipman's career in the American film industry, presenting her within the broader context of the industry's centralizing bureaucratization. In particular this chapter examines the way film was produced, marketed and consumed by women, creating a woman-centred industry. Key to the success of this cultural movement was the creation and maintenance of a star system and star-audience relations, which ensured the conditions in which celebrity was a valuable but fragile currency.

Chapter Three applies the same analytic methods as the second chapter to the Canadian industry, comparing how the Canadian and U.S. industries developed. The same economic trends are evident in the Canadian industry, though the form they take is a nationalist desire for domestic film production due to the overwhelming presence of American films on Canadian theatre screens. This led to a strong marketing campaign in the pages of trade journals and newspapers that promoted film as intrinsically important to Canadian identity.

Finally, Chapter Four examines Shipman's career after 1925, detailing her numerous attempts to participate and find meaningful work. She searched out alternative industries and imagined new exhibition spaces and forms for her (improbable) productions. Her inability to negotiate a role in the industry is directly linked to a lack of understanding and business savvy that both reflected

and reinforced her position. Shipman failed to remain current, which meant her ideas and innovations were far outdated and undesired.

What Shipman can tell us about this period is the very reason for this thesis. The very fact that she struggled, faced misfortune and ultimately found herself out of step with the centralizing film industry makes her more intriguing and fascinating than more familiar and famous actresses and filmmakers of this period.

CHAPTER ONE

Where History and Feminism Meet: A Literature Review

Unlike most others who worked in film during this period Nell Shipman stood at a crossroads. Nell was a woman and a Canadian. As such, she has been a subject of interest for the feminist project of reviving knowledge of women active in the film industry during the silent era (approximately 1896-1927). This project has exposed the mechanisms of film history that have camouflaged women's works and minimized the role women played in the formation of the industries in the United States, Canada and throughout the world. This systematic exclusion of early women filmmakers from history is congruent with the economic expansion of the industry, which was increasingly unreceptive to women and independent filmmakers. Shipman's Canadian connections have also made her a subject of interest for historians of Canadian film who seek to rescue Canada's filmmaking history in much the same way. Her presence in the Canadian industry was brief, but significant to the country's film history. The constant flow of American films to Canadian cinema screens during the early period allowed Shipman and her production company to take advantage of the less structured production environment and a heightened desire for domestic movies in the late 1910s. Her dual identity generates unique insights into the developing national systems of cinema on both sides of the border.

Many hypotheses have been posed to explain why women were so actively involved when cinema was first forming. Proportionally, there were more women working in film during the silent period than during any period that

followed.¹ It is my contention that a plethora of women filmmakers existed during this period because, while the art of filmmaking had been discovered, the big business that film would become was only just beginning to develop. As film developed into a sophisticated, economically driven industry, many of the women who were active in the beginning were unable to conform to its conventions and were forced from the industry. Early on, gender was not necessarily the barrier it became as filmmaking centralized. Anthony Slide suggests that women's presence in the American industry far exceeded simple participation: "During the silent era women might be said to have virtually controlled the film industry."² He attributes this power to the sheer number of female directors participating in the industry during this period. Celebrity also developed as a powerful commodity that actresses possessed in abundance compared to actors of the time.³ He may be overstating the power women wielded during this period, but their presence and vigorous participation in filmmaking were significant, if not as great an influence as that of men. Slide's research also suggests that the phenomenal growth of the studio system closed many positions to women, which in turn implies the system may have been inherently patriarchal.

Slide's assertion that women nearly controlled the filmmaking industry during the silent period stands in a stark contrast to many documented film histories that applaud such pioneers⁴ as the Lumières, Méliès or, later, D.W.

¹ Anthony Slide, Early Women Directors (New York: A.S. Barnes, 1977) 9.

² Slide 9.

³ Slide 9.

⁴ This thesis is working to extend past many of the terms adopted by early feminist film theory, such as the term "pioneer," which, at best, is excessively employed to connote a sense of heroism that has, in some cases, exaggerated the significance of some early filmmakers' careers.

Griffith, but which discount (or entirely neglect) the influence of women just as significant to the period, such as Alice Guy Blaché⁵ and Lois Weber. In the introduction to her encyclopedia of women filmmakers, Reel Women: Pioneers of the Cinema, 1896 to the Present, Ally Acker notes that the relegation of women to the margins – and sometimes they cannot be found even there – of history is a systematic bias embedded within the discipline of history writing: “Their very omission from major historic film texts is a testament to how women’s work has been minimized.”⁶ Acker swings wide in the opposite direction, collecting all women involved in filmmaking through to the 1990s under the umbrella of “pioneer,” as her title indicates. This approach undermines her arguments and reveals the naiveté that underscores much of her work. But she is accurate in her assertion that women, until feminists pulled them from the margins in the 1970s, were habitually left out of the history books in spite of the fact that their toils in the industry are evident from a simple scan of a trade magazine, and despite their deserved place somewhere closer to the centre.

The parallels of some women’s careers in the American film industry can yield an understanding of what it was like to be a woman filmmaker during this period. However, the desire to trumpet women’s involvement in the industry in any period must be tempered so that the lens of pioneering does not distort the valuable work of discovering and bringing to light the work of these women. That is to say, we must be careful to not overstate or exaggerate the work of individual

However, it is necessary to also recognize that many of the men *and* women of the very early silent period were literally pioneers for the very fact that they forged a new art form.

⁵ Alice Guy Blaché is also often listed as Alice Guy-Blaché (with hyphenation and with the accent). I refer to her as Alice Guy Blaché, as this is how she is listed most often.

⁶ Acker xix.

women involved in filmmaking. This is not to imply that their struggles and successes in the industry are not valuable; quite the opposite is true. Feminist film theory at times employs a method that seeks to locate the exceptionalism of each woman, often to the detriment of its arguments. Acker's work is a strong example of this. She categorizes all women filmmakers as pioneers, which calls her argument into question. We must work to locate the value of these women's careers and extract what knowledge they can offer us about the early film industry, without necessarily pinning a title on each. At the same time, we must also be prudent not to undervalue the works of women during this period, such as Alice Guy Blaché. Creating films as early as 1896, she was certainly a pioneer, not just for women, but also for all filmmakers. It is also necessary to point out that, while this thesis works with the broad category of "women," the individuals within this large category were numerous and each is distinctive. As Kay Armatage acknowledges, "Treating women as a group may mask the differences among women by suggesting that women are a unitary category marked only by gender."⁷ My treatment of women as a single, binding category is not at the neglect of other identities or because women can be said to be uniform.

The treatment of women as a unitary category has often led feminist film theorists on a scavenger hunt in search of traits or characteristics that women filmmakers in general possess, in order to classify (and often pigeonhole) them. In her work Women Filmmakers: A Critical Reception, Louise Heck-Rabi compiles the following list:

⁷ Armatage, The Girl from God's Country 33.

1. Most are married or work in collaboration with men. The fact that men open doors into the film industry for women is well known.
2. Most are of short stature, are considered attractive, restless, energetic, dynamic.
3. Most have had previous training in the arts, especially dance.
4. Most have made, or want to make, films about women, or from a woman's point-of-view.⁸

Using Heck-Rabi's list as a starting point, Acker makes similar divisions and develops her own rudimentary catalog:

1. From very early on these women see the world in a unique way. They often see themselves as outsiders.
2. They are born in families that range from middle-class to well-to-do, and are generally highly educated. They are given the opportunity to pursue eclectic, wide-ranging interests – hence, with the barest handful of exceptions, the stark absence of women of color.
3. Most would consider themselves workaholics.
4. Most have a tremendous drive, and feel that the necessity to make films is a "mission."
5. The majority of women in the directing category did not have children (Alice Guy Blaché and Nell Shipman are two notable exceptions).
6. Many in the early period came to sad or tragic endings. Divorces and nervous breakdowns were particularly prevalent in many of the careers.
7. Many, especially from the early group, didn't tend to think of themselves as "women" in their professions. Their gender, as women, never entered their consciousness.⁹

While these categories offer a method to interpret the careers of women in film, they lack any individual analysis. This approach to early women filmmakers tells us little about what it was like to be a filmmaker and a woman in the early period.

Academic Kay Armatage has taken on the work of re-establishing Shipman as a part of film history. She roots her study of Shipman in a revisionist

⁸ Louise Heck-Rabi, Women Filmmakers: A Critical Reception (Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1984) xii-xiii.

⁹ Acker xxv.

feminist approach, but extends beyond methods employed by Heck-Rabi and Acker. In 1995, as part of the compilation, Feminisms in the Cinema, she authored the chapter, "Nell Shipman: A Case of Heroic Femininity." Within this article Armatage provides a brief biographic sketch of Shipman and, using feminist revisionist film theory, argues that Shipman's persona and roles reflect what can "only now be termed a feminist attitude."¹⁰ That is, only with the tools provided by feminist revisionist theory can she be understood and interpreted in this way. Particularly useful in this article is the way Armatage outlines the idea of a "feminist historiography," the rescuing of feminist history.¹¹ She also summarizes feminist film theory, an approach that works to uncover historical (read: patriarchal) interpretations of film history and presents revisionist or woman-centred versions.¹² This method is a current that runs through her entire work. Feminist film theory has done much to unearth women filmmakers from the past, yet this approach also has a tendency to get caught up in rhetoric of firsts, anchoring value to pioneering achievements and diminishing the significance of participation.

In 2003 Armatage published The Girl from God's Country: Nell Shipman and the Silent Cinema, a more thoroughly executed investigation of the biographical elements and feminist theories she presents in "Nell Shipman: A Case of Heroic Femininity" and other articles she has authored about Shipman.¹³

¹⁰ Kay Armatage, "Nell Shipman: A Case of Heroic Femininity," Feminisms of the Cinema, eds. Laura Pietropaola and Ada Testaferri (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995) 126.

¹¹ Armatage, "Nell Shipman" 126-127.

¹² Armatage, "Nell Shipman" 132.

¹³ For example, "The Silent Scream and My Talking Heart" and "Dog and Woman, Together at Last: Animals in the Films of Nell Shipman." See bibliography.

As with the earlier chapter, the book systematically provides a biographical and theoretical sketch of the period within which Shipman existed. For this section she relies heavily upon her previous articles, reproducing passages from it at length. Armatage examines Shipman within the context of the American industry. At times she strays from this path, using Russian filmmakers Esfir Shub and Elizaveta Svilova and French avant-garde filmmaker Germaine Dulac as points of comparison. This international scope dilutes her focus and makes it difficult to flush out connections to the particular conditions of the American industry. She deals with women filmmakers active during the same period, but in different national systems of filmmaking, which limits the effectiveness of such a comparison. Discussing Shipman in the context of these international women affords her a level of success, which is not reflective of her actual career. My study places Shipman in the company of women filmmakers, actresses and screenwriters active during the same period and within the same national system of filmmaking. Another limitation is Armatage's failure to consider Shipman in the company of actresses and scenario writers. In fact, Shipman directed only a few films, most of which she produced independently, and which never found an audience. Shipman actively participated in the commercial film industry as an actress and scenario writer, and I argue that she has stronger ties to these trades than to directing.

Armatage's research on Shipman is particularly valuable because she moves beyond her best-known film, Back to God's Country, to provide detailed analyses of many of Shipman's lesser-known films, such as The Grub-Stake and

A Bear, A Boy and a Dog (1921). The addition of these studies further strengthens Armatage's interpretation of Shipman's persona and establishes thematic and stylistic motifs throughout her films. Armatage, however, often falls into the very trap she occasionally warns against. She digs deep to find any achievement or first that can be claimed for Shipman, infusing Nell's career with far more weight than is appropriate. Certainly this approach has been useful in the past, resulting in the discovery of many women filmmakers left out of the pages of history and incorporating them into a more rounded interpretation of the past, but the rhetoric she employs trips her up and is at odds with Shipman's actual career. Armatage uses some excerpts from Shipman's letters, many of which are now available in the anthology, Letters from God's Country. However, a more thorough exploration of the letters might have helped Armatage develop a richer and more balanced assessment of Shipman's career.

Peter Morris also examines Shipman within a feminist framework in his article, "The Taming of the Few: Nell Shipman in the Context of Her Time," which was published as an afterword to her memoirs, The Silent Screen and My Talking Heart. Unlike Armatage, Morris confines his focus to the American and Canadian industries, an approach that allows for a deeper exploration of the economic and political forces at work. He situates Shipman as part of the "first wave" of women filmmakers who dominated the American industry by writing, directing, and starring in many of the period's most popular films.¹⁴ Morris suggests that Shipman's career traces "the transition of women filmmakers from

¹⁴ Peter Morris, "The Taming of the Few: Nell Shipman in the Context of Her Time," The Silent Screen and My Talking Heart, ed. Tom Trusky (Boise, Idaho: Hemingway Western Studies Series, 1987) 197.

centrality to marginality."¹⁵ This conclusion is particularly valuable to my thesis, which explores Shipman's career to similar ends, though our paths differ appreciably. Morris determines that the industry's centralized structure was the primary cause of Shipman's inability to find sufficient work after 1920.¹⁶ While the changing industry environment was clearly a factor, so too was Shipman's difficulty in negotiating the new terrain and comprehending audiences' changing desires. Nonetheless, Morris's focus on the changing cinema system in the United States meshes well with my intertextual study, which uses Shipman's career to examine the consolidating industrial forces in the United States and the less fixed, nationalistically driven Canadian industry.

Morris entirely separates Shipman from her eventual fate, writing, "It was not any change in Nell Shipman's approach that led to the failure, it was the changes that had taken place in the film industry in the years since she wrote her first film script in 1912."¹⁷ This conclusion offers far too uncomplicated an answer and negates any influence Shipman had on her own career. The industry may have changed in ways that made it difficult for Shipman to participate, but her fate was also determined by how well she adapted to these changes. Failing to acknowledge the role she played in her later career also undercuts her agency in the early, more successful, period.

Shipman also appeals to Canadian film historians who have laboured to unearth Canada's film history before the formation of the National Film Board in 1939. Morris's Embattled Shadows remains one of the most significant books of

¹⁵ Morris, "The Taming of the Few" 197.

¹⁶ Morris, "The Taming of the Few" 197.

¹⁷ Morris, "The Taming of the Few" 199.

Canadian filmmaking history, despite the fact that it was published over twenty-five years ago. In this work he dealt with Shipman indirectly through her first husband, film promoter and sometime producer Ernest Shipman, in the chapter "Ten Percent Ernie." This approach is understandable; Ernest certainly participated more consistently in the Canadian film industry than Nell did and, comparatively speaking, an argument could be made that he is more Canadian because much of his work took place within the physical boundaries of Canada. Yet Morris's approach to Nell – discussing her in relation to Ernest and focusing solely on Back to God's Country – also underscores the difficulty Canadian film history can have in crossing borders. Caught in the trappings of political geography, it has problems with subjects that transcend national borders.

While Morris does note Nell Shipman's presence within the industry, he frames her career within her husband's and downplays her accomplishments by attributing them to Ernest Shipman's promotional skills. Morris's approach is curious, since it was Nell who adapted and wrote the screenplay, starred in the film and even trained the wild animals that appeared in Back to God's Country.¹⁸ It seems, then, that Nell was, at least, equally as integral to the success of the film as Ernest and that she deserves investigation independent of her romantic relationships. It is important to note that Embattled Shadows was published a decade before Morris's "Taming of the Few." The latter article, shaped in part by the publication in which it appeared, suggests he came to recognize Nell's significance independent of Ernest.

¹⁸ Morris, "The Taming of the Few" 107.

Christopher Gittings works with Shipman's most successful and only Canadian film, Back to God's Country, in his study, Canadian National Cinema. Surveying Canadian films from the early period through to the present day, he examines the ways film can reflect issues of identity and nationhood. Gittings's analysis of Back to God's Country focuses on the film's representation of immigration and empire building, determining that it offers "a disturbing yet fascinating cultural construction of Canadian nation as a white homosocial entity that does violence to racial and sexual otherness."¹⁹ The film fit within an existing framework of government propaganda films that targeted a particular (white) immigrant and promoted Canada as a land of unlimited opportunities. As Gittings underscores, a particular Canadian identity was promoted, but Canadian identity on the whole remained a contested ground that required negotiation and could be interpreted in various ways from differing positions.²⁰ Gittings's work is valuable for understanding notions of identity, which may have influenced the success of Back to God's Country in Canada. His arguments are grounded in highly detailed textual analyses and are focused on tracking the national in Canadian national cinema across various forms and periods.

Much of Gittings's study relies on the foundational archival research presented in Morris's Embattled Shadows. Morris was one of the first academics to include Shipman in a history of Canadian cinema, and because of this his book is important to the literature about Shipman; unquestionably, his section about her inspired further research. Morris's book is a heavily descriptive

¹⁹ Christopher Gittings, Canadian National Cinema (New York: Routledge, 2002) 21.

²⁰ Gittings 1.

narrative of the period, and his methods are sound and his sources are numerous and well researched. The use of both academic secondary sources and primary sources, such as magazines, general and trade newspapers and promotional material, strengthens his approach. His research notes and primary sources are housed at the National Archives and were a valuable source for my own research.

Along with Armatage, I take issue with the framework Morris employs when considering Nell in Embattled Shadows. Comparing Ernest and Nell, she writes, "Thus far, Canadian historians have not shown the same interest in Nell, although she is clearly the more prolific, more creative and ultimately more successful of the pair."²¹ Armatage's study is dedicated to proving this point, though in the section in which she makes this statement she does not shore it up with much evidence for Nell's superiority. However, Armatage goes too far in promoting Nell, discounting Ernest's career and in the end overstating Nell's place in the industry. Armatage employs the very language from which she so vigorously separates herself, using Morris's prominence in academia and historical studies to criticize his subject selection. Her implication is that a historian as important as Morris should focus on Nell instead of Ernest because, in Armatage's opinion, Nell is more significant. But in much the same way as Nell, Ernest was pulled from the margins. Situating Nell as more worthy of investigation misses the point. A study of her career is a valuable in itself.

In the past, film history and feminist film studies have often been at odds. Feminist film studies have tended to dwell in the theoretical, incorporating

²¹ Armatage, The Girl from God's Country 19.

psychoanalytical theory as a way of reading films and correlating these readings to our wider cultural beliefs and practices, and using the readings ultimately to undermine and challenge. On the other hand, much history has avoided stepping into the muddy waters of the theoretical and remained, on the whole, firmly planted in empirical and concrete research. Patrice Petro sums up this divide nicely:

It would appear from the writings of some film scholars that a certain division of labour has come to characterize film studies as a discipline – a discipline in which “historians” pursue the realm of the empirical, the quantifiable, the concretely known (the realm of history proper), and “feminists” explore the more intangible realm of theoretical speculation (the realm of interpretation).²²

This is clearly the case when one compares Morris’s Embattled Shadows and Armatage’s The Girl from God’s Country. Morris describes working to capture a part of Canadian film history previously unrecorded and connecting this to nationalistic and political trends in the early industry. Armatage, on the other hand, actively works to claim a piece of history for Shipman by reading the images from her films as progressive and decidedly feminist.

Both Morris and Armatage work toward the same end: to make “the invisible visible.”²³ Morris seeks to recapture a part of Canada’s long-forgotten filmmaking past while Armatage, benefiting from Morris’s foundational work, attempts to reveal Shipman as a strong feminist role model – a pioneer from the past. Although their approaches seem divergent – Morris uses empirical archival research, while Armatage relies heavily on post-1970s-brand feminist psychoanalytic theory – they are both working to make the unknown known.

²² Patrice Petro, “Feminist and Film History,” Camera Obscura 22 (November 1990): 9.

²³ Petro: 9.

Morris's invisible is Canadian film history prior to the National Film Board, and Armatage's is Shipman specifically, and women filmmakers more broadly.

The methods employed by Morris and Armatage have advantages and disadvantages. My study works to find a balance between the two. This thesis differs from many of the preceding works about Shipman in that its intent is not to demonstrate and attest to Shipman's status as a pioneering woman filmmaker. This is a striking difference from Armatage's study in particular. My interest in Shipman does not lie in which "firsts" she accomplished or in how she might be framed as extraordinary. Rather, much of my interest in Shipman is focused on her normalcy, in the ways she can be seen to stand for the many women who worked, succeeded and failed in the American film industry, and for what she can tell us about the burgeoning economic impulse of business in both Canada and the United States. It is also important, however, not to understate Shipman's career. Certainly within the framework of Canadian filmmaking history before 1939, Shipman is distinctive and in the company of few other women.²⁴

My intent is not to push aside previous feminist film history, but to use it as a springboard from which to launch into different discussions that are not preoccupied with terms such as "pioneer," "heroic" or "icon." I hope to examine Shipman in the fullness of her multiple identities as a woman, Canadian, actress, screenwriter, author, producer and director. My methodologies throughout this thesis draw from both Morris and Armatage, offering revisions to their

²⁴ One other known Canadian woman filmmaker working during this time is Dorothea Mitchell, who produced amateur films in the Port Arthur region of Thunder Bay in the late 1920s. See Michel S. Beaulieu and Ronald N. Harpelle, eds. The Lady Lumberjack: An Annotated Collection of Dorothea Mitchell's Writings (Thunder Bay, Ontario: Northern and Regional Studies Series, Lakehead University, 2005).

approaches. Intertextual and archival research is particularly important to my work, and for this I am indebted to the precise and detailed excavations of both Morris and Gordon Sparling, and to the collections they have made available to the public. My conclusions are reached through intertextual research that draws from many primary sources, films, fan magazines, letters and newspapers, and uses the theories and findings of academics from both history and film studies. If anything, my work shares Morris's focus on national systems of production more than Armatage's strictly feminist concentration, even though Chapter Two outlines a developing women-centred marketing and production strategy in the United States, which is clearly tied to feminist historical work and Armatage's approach to Shipman.

Understanding how Shipman has been contextualized is important to moving forward and delving deeper. Throughout this study I contend that Shipman's early success and later struggles are directly tied to the development of particular economically driven practices and parameters in the American and Canadian film industries and her ability (or inability) to understand and navigate the systems. The word industry is key. Its synonyms, "commerce" and "business," aptly denote how film became focused, much to the detriment of many independent and women filmmakers who fell behind its development and were unable to fully participate. Yet the focus of this study is Shipman and how her independent tendencies were at odds with the converging practices of studio system. She failed to understand the system's production practices and over the

years became further and further removed, relying on niche markets and independent pockets of production in order to participate.

CHAPTER TWO

The American Industry: Women Filmmakers and Moviegoers

The trajectory of Nell Shipman's early career in the film industries, particularly the American industry, is representative of how various facets of the business – production, narrative trends, star personas – evolved from the early 1900s into the late 1920s, by which time the major studios had a firm hold on production, distribution and exhibition. Her moderate success and significant struggles are illustrative of many women's experiences in the industry, rather than extraordinary for her time. Shipman worked in the U.S. film industry in a particularly significant period, during which studios were formed, stars were made, and filmmaking developed into big business. In the United States film became a tightly produced and heavily marketed cultural product. Shipman was one of a group of women who produced films that appealed to and were targeted towards female audiences. Women-centred production, as evident in movie serials, cross-over marketing campaigns with women's literature and the formation of star personas, coupled with women-driven consumption of films, film-related literature and star-audience relations, underscores the increasing level of industrial sophistication within the American film industry during the silent film period.

Early Women's Cinema

After its debut at the turn of the century, film evolved quickly throughout the early years of the twentieth century, and by 1910 it offered a social

experience much more complex than the simple act of watching movies. Theatres sprung up across the country, and moviegoing became a regular part of cultural life in America. Not only did film become a mainstay of entertainment, it also became a movement that spawned fan magazines specifically dedicated to cinema and celebrity culture. These magazines fulfilled fans' desires to learn more about films and helped push filmgoing further into the life of Americans. This in turn strengthened the industry. As early as 1911, these periodicals informed readers of upcoming releases, behind-the-scenes details, and personal information about film stars, who previously had been anonymous faces on the screen.¹ Around the same time, movies were gaining a respectability that had eluded them before.² Movies were finally accepted for the significant entertainment value they provided and as the big business they had become. This newfound decency combined with women's increasing presence in the cinema audience and forced film producers to recognize the profitability in creating and marketing films specifically for women.

Shelley Stamp, in her book Movie-Struck Girls, examines the marketing and promotion of film to women following the nickelodeon era and the various ways movies and filmgoing were presented as extensions of women's existing social lives. Stamp seeks to complicate the connection between women and filmgoing during the silent period, investigating the interplay between film as a social movement and spectatorship as an individual experience.³

¹ Stamp 6.

² Stamp 7

³ Stamp 8.

From about 1910 to 1920, film serials were immensely popular with female audiences. Short films, usually two reels in length, many serials followed the exploits of a female protagonist from film to film. The female lead was most often a working-class girl, though some stories occasionally featured middle- and even upper-class women in the lead. Stamp argues that these films were created specifically for women and “marked the industry’s first sustained, deliberate attempt to cultivate (and cater to) female patronage on a national scale.”⁴ In essence, they guaranteed audiences of women who could not wait to see what happened to Mary, Pauline or Helen from one week to the next.⁵ Serials were heavily marketed to exhibitors and theatre managers in the pages of trade magazines. For example, an April 1916 issue of The Bioscope featured a three-page advertisement for The Diamond from the Sky, claiming it as “the wonder serial.”⁶ The advertisement emphasizes its “extraordinary publicity campaign,” which included an audience contest for the best plot for a five-reel sequel, noting, “Here’s an opportunity for the latent scenario writers in your audience.”⁷ This style of cross-promotional and inventive marketing campaign was common practice and further added to the appeal of serials to women filmgoers. Promotional tie-ins, star-based advertising campaigns and lobby displays signaled the transition of film marketing from curbside placards to more

⁴ Stamp 102.

⁵ What Happened to Mary? (1912), The Perils of Pauline (1914) and The Hazards of Helen (1914) were all popular serials. See Stamp’s Movie-Struck Girls.

⁶ The Bioscope 20 Apr. 1916: 268-270.

⁷ The Bioscope 20 Apr. 1916: 270.

sophisticated forms. This conversion was a significant part of the commercialization of film.⁸

Many movie serials were partnered with women's literature, often magazines, but also, at times, novels. This intertextual approach saturated multiple areas of women's popular culture and helped guarantee repeat audiences for both the films and the magazines that carried the story. This sort of collaboration between women's literature and film studios began in 1912 when The Ladies' World magazine partnered with The Edison Company. The release of the What Happened to Mary? films was timed to coincide with the publication of the print version of the story each month in The Ladies' World.⁹ The concept was hugely successful, partly because serials were popular amongst working-class and middle-to-upper-class women alike. The narratives were wide enough to allow for the varying interpretations of women from different classes, Nan Enstad notes,

In order to understand serial texts...we must see them as artifacts of a complex set of relations between industry, market, audience reaction, and other cultural representations of the day. The series held commercial meaning for their producers: popular culture industries opportunistically borrowed and altered established narratives and ideologies in attempts to please women enough to prompt another sale.¹⁰

Movie serials were a key component of the women-centred film production and consumption environment that developed in the United States during the silent period. The targeted marketing of serials to women is evidence that the nascent

⁸ Stamp 107.

⁹ Nan Enstad, "Dressed for Adventure: Working Women and Silent Movie Serials in the 1910s," Feminist Studies 21 (Spring 1995): 69.

¹⁰ Enstad 69.

industry was transforming and becoming increasingly homogeneous and consolidated.

Around the same time serials were introduced to women, Nell Shipman was finding roots in Southern California after moving there with Ernest and their new baby, Barry. While she was pregnant and then when she was caring for her young son, Shipman took up writing scenarios as a pastime at the encouragement of her husband, first writing The Ball of Yarn (1912), which Ernest was able to have produced through his promotional connections.¹¹ The film failed terribly, but Shipman kept writing and authored a script called Under the Crescent in 1914. Another, Shepherd of the Southern Cross, was sold to an Australian production company.¹² By 1915 Shipman had established herself as a screenwriter. Though not overly successful, she was significant enough to attract the attention of the press. The March 27, 1915, issue of Moving Picture World exclaimed,

Nell Shipman to Write Book

Miss Nell Shipman has arrived in Universal City and is at work preparing a book on the life and adventures of the Princess Ibrahim Hassan who is shortly to be featured in a serial depicting various phases of harem life. Miss Shipman was a schoolgirl chum of the princess, who before her marriage in Paris was Miss Ola Humphries of Oakland, Cal.¹³

Shipman would turn her Under the Crescent script into a book about Princess Hassan, published by Grosset and Dunlap in 1915. For her efforts she was paid

¹¹ Morris, Embattled Shadows 101.

¹² Morris, Embattled Shadows 101.

¹³ Tom Trusky, ed. Letters from God's Country (Boise, Idaho: Hemingway Western Studies Series, 2003) 318.

\$1,000.¹⁴ Universal Studios also bought her script and in the same year released a series of six two-reelers by the same name. Here again we see the intertextuality of women's film-viewing practices. Women could visit the cinema to see the latest exploits of Princess Hassan or pick up the novelized version of the films and read ahead. The series did moderately well at the box office and, like most serials, captured its own audience. Though Under the Crescent received little attention, by June of 1917 three installments had been released, with the fourth on its way, about which Motion Picture News noted, "This narrative entitled 'For the Honor of a Woman' well maintains the pleasing standard set by the three which went before."¹⁵ In total, six installments were released and copyrighted from May 24 to June 29, 1915.¹⁶

Serials were part of a broader cultural movement that saw women move into exterior social spaces more readily. As newly established sites of consumption and leisure for women, for example, department stores offered a "women-oriented center of comfort and amenity."¹⁷ As with department stores, the cinema space became a commercialized social experience that film studios and, in turn, theatre managers sold to women. Exhibition sites and women-focused films evolved at the same time, and cinema spaces were restructured and tailored for the female consumers. Constructed as spaces that allowed women to participate, cinemas increased in popularity, and filmgoing became a common part of women's social lives. As Stamp notes, "Lavish services that

¹⁴ Armatage, The Girl from God's Country 57.

¹⁵ Motion Picture News 17 Jun. 1915: 66.

¹⁶ Tom Trusky. "Notes," The Silent Screen 169.

¹⁷ Susan Porter Benson, Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890-1940 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986) 84. Cited in Stamp 18.

would enable women to combine picturegoing with their daily patterns of socializing, shopping, and caring for young children also aimed to recast the tenor of exhibition sites."¹⁸ The idea of recasting cinema space as dignified is key. Just as department stores became not only sites of consumption, but also sites that augmented women's social positions, picture houses in this period lured women in with the promise of a refined experience. In Stamp's words,

Cinemas...aimed to create atmospheres that would cultivate an air of "distinction" in all of their patrons, not simply affluent women. Indeed, working women eager to emulate this culture might have been particularly attracted to this picture of filmgoing. Perhaps most significant, the visual spectacle offered by the array of products on display in department stores and shop windows provided women-oriented "domains of looking" that formed an important precursor to film viewing.¹⁹

Picture houses became a commercialized space akin to the department store; they sold films that sophisticatedly steered women towards repeat consumption, developing dependable and profitable audiences for the industry's bureaucratic systems. Both the form of film and the experience of moviegoing shifted to accommodate and attract women audiences. Nell Shipman operated within this framework of production and consumption, writing and acting in films that made attending the movies both a safer and a more exciting experience for women.

Creating Celebrity Culture: Star Personas and Star-Audience Relations

During the 1910s a significant aspect of the industry's development was the creation of stars: actors and actresses who became recognizable and tied to certain concepts and social ideals. Audiences began to anticipate the films of

¹⁸ Stamp 17.

¹⁹ Stamp 18.

certain stars, and fan magazines quickly started to publish personal information about actors and actresses to satiate the public's appetite. The notion of screen celebrities can be traced back to 1909, when the first article about a particular star, the cross-eyed comic Ben Turpin, appeared in the April 3 issue of Moving Picture World. About a year later articles about Pearl White – a popular serial star – and Mary Pickford materialized, and from that point forward this style of article became common.²⁰ In the same year, Florence Lawrence, a Canadian-born actress, became one of the first movie stars when she left Biograph for work at Independent Moving Pictures (IMP). Before her arrival at IMP Lawrence was an immensely popular, but nameless, actress simply promoted as the "Biograph Girl." IMP's Carl Laemmle intelligently played on her status by promoting her real name and, in turn, created one of the first movie stars.²¹ As early as 1911 film manufacturers offered theatre owners and managers lantern slides featuring popular stars to project between reels.²² A year later the star system was in full swing. As Janet Staiger notes, "Even then there were fears that the distribution system could not provide sufficient profits, but by 1912 the 'star system' – with legitimate theatrical stars – arrived."²³ The star system cemented film as an industry with multiple sources of penetration: magazines, newspapers, novels, and films all formed part of the robust enterprise and further stimulated the industry's closed systems.

²⁰ Janet Staiger, "Seeing Stars," Velvet Light Trap 20 (Summer 1983): 11. The article about Pearl White appeared in December 3, 1910, issue of Moving Picture World, the same magazine that featured Pickford three weeks later.

²¹ Charles Foster, Stardust and Shadows: Canadians in Early Hollywood (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2000) 152-153.

²² Staiger 13.

²³ Staiger 13.

By 1912 distribution was well enough established to support the burgeoning star system. Actors and actresses quickly became recognized stars tied to certain personas and on-screen characters. These personas became established patterns that played out repeatedly in slightly varying situations on the screen. Stars became linked to an image, as Charles Affron notes: "They are patterns, and they relate to the patterns of their surrounding structures."²⁴ Barry King extends this idea, noting, "Stardom is a strategy of performance that is an adaptive response to the limits and pressures exerted upon acting as a discursive practice in the mainstream cinema."²⁵ Star personas and the selling of stars, as they evolved in the silent period, are phenomena reliant on the intertextuality of cinema culture. Film magazines and newspapers played an important role in creating stars and strengthening their personas as did the films they starred in. The creation of celebrity culture further cemented film's place within cultural life. At the same time, the star system also marked the industry as more exclusive and increasingly difficult for an individual performer or other creative person to navigate.

Star-Audience Relations

It is important to understand how star personas, such as Shipman's, are created, interpreted and read by the audience. The concept of star-audience relations relies upon two fundamental ideas: the meanings of "identification" and "identifying" in the context of film and audience and the function the spectator

²⁴ Charles Affron, "Generous Stars," Star Texts: Image and Performance in Film and Television, ed. Jeremy G. Butler (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991) 96.

²⁵ Barry King, "Articulating Stardom," Star Texts: Image and Performance in Film and Television, ed. Jeremy G. Butler (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991) 127.

plays in this relationship. Identification is a term often employed to describe the process whereby an audience member is pulled into the narrative of a film through such methods as point-of-view shots and privileged information. As Jackie Stacey argues, identification can be subcategorized into three frameworks of understanding: psychoanalytic theory, literary analysis-based character identification, and the empowering effect the negotiation of popular culture can have.²⁶ Each mode of understanding involves a series of complex negotiations that allow identity fluidity and interchangeable multiple selves.

Both psychoanalytic and literary-based theory focus on the production of psychic alternative identities. However, Stacey, in her essay, "Feminine Fascinations: Forms of Identification in Star-Audience Relations," moves away from these more traditional theories of identification to what she terms "identifactory practices."²⁷ To Stacey, these involve a conscious approach to identification (as opposed to the unconscious of psychoanalytic theory) through such manipulations as "pretending to be a particular film star," "imitating particular star characteristics," and "copying a star's appearance."²⁸ All of these are important components of identification, but copying and its relationship to commodities and the purchasing of identity are particularly significant. Stacey stresses that identifactory practices are not about an attempt to negate the self, but rather an attempt to transform the self: "The boundaries between self and

²⁶ Jackie Stacey, *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 196-199.

²⁷ Jackie Stacey, "Feminine Fascinations: Forms of Identification in Star-Audience Relations," *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sue Thornton (New York: New York University Press, 1999) 202.

²⁸ Stacey, "Feminine Fascinations" 202.

ideal are quite fixed and stable...[but] the distance between the spectator and her ideal seems to produce a kind of longing which offers fantasies of transformed identities."²⁹ Star-audience identification need not necessarily be about extinguishing the self in order to adopt the otherness of the star, but may instead involve the desire to try on elements of the star, and the development of a popular literature devoted to stars offers a valuable tool for approaching these relations.

Fan magazines were written for the female audience, often detailing the likes and dislikes, life styles, love affairs, and the cosmetic and clothing choices of star-actresses. Samantha Barbas refers to this development in star-audience relations as "the new movie star cult of celebrity."³⁰ Fan magazines developed in the early 1910s, in response to a burgeoning filmgoing audience that demanded to know the movie stars. Barbas places the conception of star promotion and the studios' creation of star-audience relations at around 1910, when studios were urged by Moving Picture World to "dress their actresses beautifully so that 'women would go to see the dress' as well as the movie."³¹ Thus began the connections among stars, audiences, promotion and consumption, which led to the further commercialization of filmgoing. The female fan became the target audience, and by 1915 studios and companies joined together to market cosmetics and clothing to female moviegoers.³² Although movie magazines were originally aimed at both sexes, by 1915 the entire contents of the majority of

²⁹ Stacey, "Feminine Fascinations" 200.

³⁰ Samantha Barbas, Movie Crazy: Fans, Stars and the Cult of Celebrity (New York: Palgrave, 2001) 57.

³¹ Barbas 57.

³² Barbas 62.

these magazines left behind the male spectators and were directed instead towards the female fan. Women became the desirable film audience because, as consumers, they were an audience for more than the movies themselves, and, as such, studios began to cater to their wants. Moviegoing was part of women's consumer lives, and the magazines insured this cycle was maintained.

Women helped form the star system via their demands to know who the woman on the screen was. When Carl Laemmle of the Independent Moving Picture Company (later Universal) finally released the names of his leading men and women in 1910, it was because movie fans hounded him. From then on, actors' and actresses' names appeared during the opening credits of each film.³³ While women were active consumers of the promotion of their favourite stars, they were always seeking, creating and negotiating their relationships with those images. Star-audience relations are ever-shifting, actively pursued and mediated by the female spectator. This active consumption is directly linked to the commercial underpinnings of the industry during this period. As film became a big business, female patrons consumed movies and their related paraphernalia at a frenzied pace, and studios narrowed the scope of productions, turning out films that replayed familiar themes and narratives.

Shipman the Star

If stardom is based in patterns and the repetition of characteristics, then Nell Shipman certainly fits the mould. Introduced as a performer in 1916 with her role in God's Country and the Woman, Shipman repeated and revised her

³³ Barbas 10-11.

character of a girl/woman with an intuitive connection with nature and animals in Baree, Son of Kazan (1918), Back to God's Country (1919) and finally The Girl from God's Country (1921).³⁴ Shipman secured modest success in the late 1910s, starring in at least six feature films in 1918 alone. The number of films she acted in suggests audiences knew her, and that her star power was a valuable currency. Sadly, most of these films are assumed lost or destroyed. Of the lot only Back to God's Country, Shipman's most famous film, survives today. God's Country and the Woman was adapted from a James Oliver Curwood. It is this first association with Curwood in the mid-1910s that planted the seeds of what would become the "Girl from God's Country" persona for which Shipman was known. This persona relied on a femininity tied to an indissoluble connection with all things natural, animals in particular. Armatage confirms this connection, writing, "Shipman's femininity is in part defined by and through such intuitive connections with animals and nature."³⁵ The relationship between femininity and nature is an association repeated often throughout literature and film, particularly Canadian film. Referring to Joyce Wieland's association of Canada with the feminine, Brenda Longfellow notes that it becomes "an elemental principle of life, fertility, and eroticism."³⁶

Back to God's Country presents nature in contrast with civilization, which is situated as primitive and brutal. Shipman's alliance with nature and her

³⁴ Shipman starred in other films that played with or highlighted this nature persona, but these four films presented the nature girl/woman most prominently.

³⁵ Armatage, The Girl from God's Country 92.

³⁶ Brenda Longfellow, "Gender, Landscape, and Colonial Allegories in The Far Shore, Loyalties and Les Mouvements du désir," Gendering the Nation, eds. Kay Armatage, Kass Banning, Brenda Longfellow, and Janine Marchessault (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999) 167.

exaggerated womanliness connect nature with femininity. This is most apparent during a scene in which Shipman bathes nude, surrounded by nature and protected by a bear, while the villain Rydal, disguised in a Mountie's uniform, watches. Rydal's masculinity and immorality are visually demarcated and aligned with civilization, standing in contrast to Shipman's femininity. Ian Angus suggests that civilization in relation to nature is an irrational, chaotic existence:

The wilderness is not silence, but an unbroken outpouring of sound. Absence, not sensing, but of meaning – the Other side of the border a madness of unguided sound. Thus even stronger is the pull back towards convention. Civilization is a kind of madness, wilderness is a kind of order."³⁷

This dichotomy is prevalent in Shipman's persona and strongly ties her femininity to nature and, in turn, to purity and wholesomeness. Armatage delves far deeper into Shipman's femininity-nature persona in The Girl from God's Country, but my focus here is on establishing not only the meaning of her character, but also the repetition of this persona throughout her films and in the marketing and promotion of Shipman as "the girl from God's country." Shipman's connection to nature in Back to God's Country also plays with notions of the nation as feminine. As Susie O'Brien and Imre Szeman explain, "The personification of the nation as women has both political and quasi-spiritual resonance that emerges particularly clearly through the connection that is often made between women and the land."³⁸

³⁷ Angus, Ian, A Border Within: National Identity, Cultural Plurality and Wilderness (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997) 133.

³⁸ Susie O'Brien and Imre Szeman, Popular Culture: A User's Guide (Toronto: Nelson, 2004) 216. Also see Gittings's Canadian National Cinema.

Shipman's appearance signified an ultra-femininity: long, flowing hair that grazed her waist and large, dark, often astonished eyes coincided with society's ideal woman during the period, as Tony and Suzanne Bamonte note: "Nell Shipman was prized by filmmakers and audiences of the silent era as an ideal female."³⁹ A review of God's Country and the Woman in Moving Picture World described the film:

Far away in the timberlands of the North, where the purity of woman is placed above all else, lived Josephine Adare, a kind, honest soul, whose face plainly bore an expression of deep sorrow and anxiety. Up to this – God's Own Country – came a man, Phillip Weyman, to spend a year in that region.⁴⁰

Purity and womanliness are wholly and exclusively bound up together in Shipman's character and, in turn, her screen persona. She is the ultimate woman – kind, honest and pure – and these attributes are rooted in her life in God's Country. It is clear that Curwood wrote the character of Josephine Adare as the archetypal woman. An advertisement for the novel in the New York Times expresses in only a few words the womanly power the character possesses: "A strange promise made Phillip follow a girl he had never seen in God's Country and the Woman."⁴¹ Josephine's innate femininity pulls Phillip in, and this femininity is linked to her place within God's Country.

The persona Shipman established in God's Country and the Woman followed her into her next picture, Baree, Son of Kazan. Produced in 1918, this film situated Shipman as Marie, the daughter of a Northland trapper, who is terrorized by a male admirer while her father is away. Baree, Son of Kazan built

³⁹ Tony and Suzanne Bamonte, "Lady of the Lake." The Inlander 24 Aug. 2000: 12.

⁴⁰ Moving Picture World 20 May 1916: 1405.

⁴¹ New York Times 17 Jan. 1915: BR18.

on Shipman's nature connection in God's Country and the Woman and extended this association to animals, dogs in particular, when Marie's dog Barea takes down her attacker and her father's murderer. A review of the film in Moving Picture World offered marketing and programming advice to capitalize on the film's animal appeal, presenting slogans that could be employed: "Stirring and Picturesque Drama of the Great Woods and Wilds of the North-west"; "Half Wolf, Half Dog, Protégé, Protector and Final Avenger of Heroine's Wrongs"; "James Oliver Curwood's Famous Novel Brought to the Screen"; "Greatest Glorification of the Dog since Jack London's Masterpiece."⁴² The article goes on to suggest that exhibitors find a dog that looks half-wolf and use "him for street work, with a blanket lettered, 'I am Barea, Son of Kazan.'"⁴³

As the second James Oliver Curwood film to feature Shipman in less than three years, Barea, Son of Kazan cemented Shipman's connection to the Northern wilderness and animals, firmly establishing her as the "Girl from God's Country." The establishment of a consistent and known persona helped audiences interpret her films. They knew who the character was, even before the movie began. Shipman's persona cycled through her films and became a point of identification for audiences. An established persona also made the marketing and promotion of a film an easier task. Star personas allowed studios to be far more effective when publicizing films. But actors and actresses also became locked into certain roles, which affected their ability to secure lengthy careers.

⁴² Moving Picture World 1 Jun. 1918.

⁴³ Moving Picture World 1 Jun. 1918.

After finishing Baree, Son of Kazan, both Ernest and Nell Shipman recognized the potential success of a permanent collaboration with Curwood. Ernest proposed a two-year, exclusive contract between Curwood and Nell; she would star only in filmic adaptations of Curwood's writings, and in return Curwood would give Nell first right of refusal to his works. Curwood accepted the proposal and on November 1, 1918, both he and Nell signed the contract.⁴⁴ A week later Moving Picture World publicized the deal, announcing,

A combination of considerable moment and one which will undoubtedly become an important factor in the production field, because of the standing and ability in their particular field of each of the parties, has just been formed between Nell Shipman and James Oliver Curwood.⁴⁵

Curwood clearly understood Shipman's star persona and recognized the potential of their collaboration. When asked of their partnership he noted,

I have watched Nell Shipman's work closely in my stories. She is the only actress in America I would sever my present profitable association to enter into affiliation with, for she is the only star who can do outdoor work and do it big.⁴⁶

Curwood's willingness to leave a lucrative affiliation to work with Shipman suggests that her persona was well established, though it is unclear who he was working with prior to collaborating with Shipman. The partnership was a business transaction to which Curwood agreed because of her proven star persona. It is clear, in this instance, that the star system was a key component to the centralizing practices of the American industry. Shipman found moderate

⁴⁴ Morris, Embattled Shadows 104.

⁴⁵ Moving Picture World 9 Nov. 1918.

⁴⁶ Moving Picture World 9 Nov. 1918.

success because she had (and was) a commodity to sell, and at the time the industry was willing to buy.

The first production of the Curwood-Shipman collaboration was Back to God's Country, a film based on Curwood's Good Housekeeping story, "Wapi the Walrus", which appeared in November and December 1918. Working from the short story Shipman was given free rein to author the screenplay. Despite Curwood's differing opinion, she shifted the focus away from the dog to the lead woman, Dolores LeBeau.⁴⁷ Shipman re-titled the film Back to God's Country, clearly recognizing the popularity of her previous character and capitalizing on the marketability of it. Originally the film was called Our Lady of the Long Snows, a title that was, in Shipman's own words, "fortunately dropped, else we could not have enjoyed the spin-off of God's Country titles."⁴⁸

The film pushed Shipman's persona to a new extreme, depicting her bathing nude in a stream with a befriended bear protecting her. For its time the film was risqué, and its American advertisements played on this. A full-page First National advertisement for Back to God's Country (Fig. 1) features a nude drawing of Shipman with only her long hair covering her as she cowers behind a large bear, which stands between her and a menacing man. The text supports the connection between Shipman and the animal: "He had seen Dolores come dripping from the stream and tiptoed forward to seize her. Suddenly, from a chasm in the rocks, a great bear rose, growling fiercely and the girl snuggled

⁴⁷ Morris, Embattled Shadows 105-106.

⁴⁸ Shipman, The Silent Screen 101.

behind it.”⁴⁹ The advertisement also credited Shipman as “the brilliant and daring swimming star,” an unfitting title for Shipman who was not known for her swimming, but which highlighted her nude scene.⁵⁰ The effectiveness of the bathing scene clearly relies not only on Shipman’s apparent nudity, but also on the audience’s existing knowledge of Shipman as the “Girl from God’s Country” and a cultural ideology that correlates woman with nature. Shipman’s nude scene, while somewhat scandalous for the time, also serves to reinforce existing cultural norms.

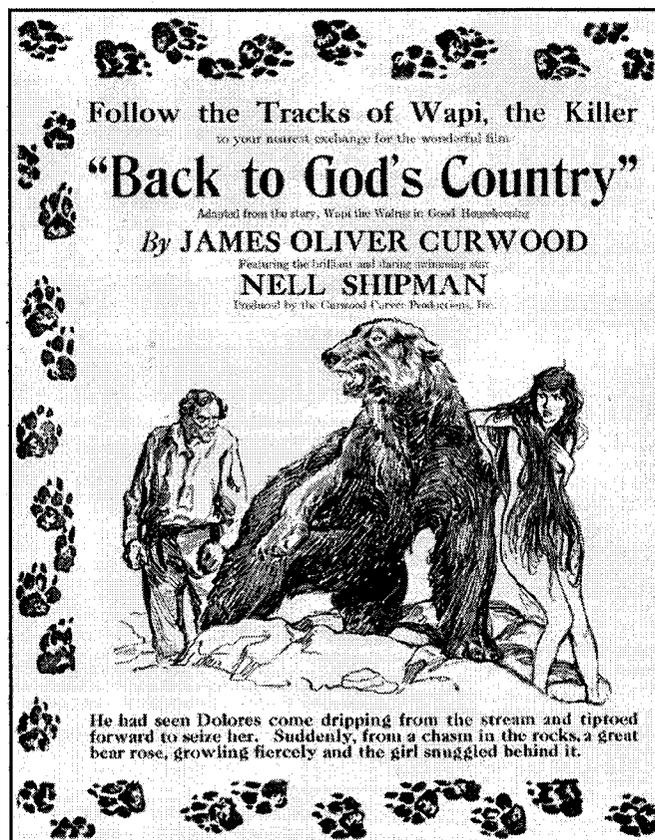


Fig. 1. First National advertisement for Back to God’s Country. Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

⁴⁹ Back to God’s Country by First National, advertisement. Back to God’s Country file, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

⁵⁰ Back to God’s Country by First National, advertisement. Back to God’s Country file, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

First National ran a series of similar advertisements in trade magazines that featured Shipman prominently and detailed the promotional possibilities for the film. Shipman was promoted as a daring and adventurous star, much the same way many serial actresses were marketed. The fact that Back to God's Country was filmed under extreme conditions and with many different animals added a new layer to the appeal of a courageous female lead; Shipman was promoted as the ultimate audacious woman. A program guide for the film from a 1922 screening in Ayer, Massachusetts, featured nine film stills accompanied by text that presents Shipman as "a true child of the wilds," who was "nurtured in the bosom of its primeval wilderness, raised in the depths of the woodland fastnesses."⁵¹ Her "Girl from God's Country" persona is referenced, and Nell is presented as one with nature, playing upon an essential femininity portrayed in her earlier films. The booklet features two still shots of Dolores leading a dog sled team across an icy terrain. The supplementary text underscores her activity: "Off over the Arctic snows the courageous Dolores starts."⁵² The booklet clearly capitalized on existing notions of femininity as presented in Shipman's earlier characterizations. The recycling of personas through numerous films became common practice during the silent period and helped to further solidify the industry, creating demand and eager audiences.

Following the production of Back to God's Country, the Curwood-Shipman relationship went sour for reasons that are not fully known. Among various possibilities the demise might have been tied to the end of Shipman's marriage to

⁵¹ Back to God's Country Program Guide (Ayer, Massachusetts: 21 December 1922).

⁵² Back to God's Country Program Guide (Ayer, Massachusetts: 21 December 1922).

Ernest Shipman, or Shipman may simply have wanted to strike out on her own to form an independent production company. Morris suggests that Curwood was upset with Shipman's treatment of his story and the way she shifted the focus away from Wapi the dog to the character she would play in the film.⁵³ A letter from Curwood dated August 7, 1919 – a month before the film's release – suggests something different:

I have been so rushed with the picture that I have not had time to think, much less reply to your letter of recent date – which, after all, had little in it for me to answer, as it was your formal notification of your resigning from all contracts with myself and Canadian Photoplays. I can only repeat, as I have repeated all along, that you should have played absolutely with us instead of taking sides in factional quarrels, and I think that perhaps you have made the biggest mistake of your life. Your vision will probably be more clear when you see that evidence which we shall reveal in the not distant future, when we shall come to Los Angeles not only to fight the cases against us but to let fall with merciless hands the axes of justice against the person or persons who has or have wronged us.

Can you expect us to have faith in you when, at the peak of our troubles there, your own brother attached the film out of which we were fighting to get your \$15,000 for you? No more comment is necessary.

I accept your resignation, and Canadian Photoplays have done the same. With a splendid organization, a splendid cast, and with certain great success ahead of us we very soon begin our second production, and because of your old association with my work I cannot but regret that you have chosen another road to travel. On that road I wish you only the greatest success.⁵⁴

While the wrongs to which Curwood alludes to in his letter are not entirely known, Judith Eldridge suggests that Curwood was approached by William Randolph Hearst, who was forming a production company to accommodate his girlfriend,

⁵³ Morris, Embattled Shadows 108.

⁵⁴ James Oliver Curwood, "Letter to Nell Shipman," 7 August 1919, Letters from God's Country, ed. Tom Trusky (Boise, Idaho: Hemingway Western Studies Series, 2003) 326. Canadian Photoplays was a production company headed up by Ernest Shipman.

actress Marion Davies. Hearst wanted to use Curwood's stories, and Curwood inquired if Hearst would join the partnership with the Shipmans, but the response was not positive.⁵⁵ Nell may well have received word of these negotiations and left the partnership before Curwood had the chance to pull out. Little over a year later an agreement was reached with Hearst, and Curwood produced three films with him between 1921 and 1926.⁵⁶ These three films followed two pictures he produced with Ernest Shipman and David Hartford (director of Back to God's Country). It is clear from Curwood's letter, at least, that Shipman initiated the termination of the contract, and that Curwood's ominous prediction that she was making the biggest mistake of her life may very well have been true. She failed to ever again secure the same success she had known while starring in Curwood films as the "Girl from God's Country."

Following the termination of her contract with Curwood in 1919, Shipman moved to Idaho with her young son Barry and Bert Van Tuyle, with whom she reportedly took up during the filming of Back to God's Country. At her home, Lionhead Lodge, Shipman lived as a character very much like her "Girl from God's Country." When her contract with Curwood dissolved, she agreed to purchase the large collection of animals used during the filming of Back to God's Country. This collection included domesticated animals, such as dogs, and more exotic creatures including an East Indian Honey Bear and a Serbian Wolf. Shipman continuously added to the collection, and eventually she was the owner

⁵⁵ Judith A. Eldridge, God's Country and the Man (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1993) 136.

⁵⁶ Louis Pizzitola, Hearst Over Hollywood: Power, Passion and Propaganda in the Movies (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) 188-189.

of the largest private zoo in the United States.⁵⁷ Shipman used the collection of animals to produce her first independent feature, aptly titled The Girl from God's Country, in 1921. The film, written, directed, starring and produced by Shipman with the aid of Van Tuyle, attempted to capitalize on her past success and her known public persona. She seems oblivious to other women who had already formed independent producing outfits, writing in her memoirs, "Charles Ray and some other male stars sought to wear the two hats as Producers and Actors, but so far, women had not stepped beyond the boundary of being non-acting directors."⁵⁸ Shipman had difficulty negotiating her relationship with the industry; she wanted to work outside of its rules, but attempted to sell her films back to the studios, pitching her ideas to them with little success. Certainly falling back on a character conceived and created by her work within the system was not all that daring, and Shipman failed to realize the in-house production practices of the studio system meant independent films were of little interest to the major corporations.

Nonetheless, Shipman was able to secure worldwide distribution of The Girl from God's Country, which was an impressive feat for the newly independent producer with little experience as a film promoter. Shipman closed a deal with the F.B. Warren Corporation to distribute the film, and the August 27, 1921, issue of Moving Picture World announced the release plans, calling the film, "A big seven-reel outdoor production."⁵⁹ Despite securing a significant distribution deal

⁵⁷ Armatage, The Girl from God's Country, 261.

⁵⁸ Shipman, The Silent Screen 66.

⁵⁹ Moving Picture World, 27 Aug. 1921: 796.

and the pre-release hype, once released the film was not as well received as Shipman's previous works. Variety declared that the film

Proves one thing, and that is that Nell Shipman, the authoress and star of the production, should stick to acting in the future and leave the writing of her stories to some one on the salary list qualified for that position instead of taking it upon herself to do everything to be done.⁶⁰

That Shipman was criticized for her writing skills is ironic and underscores the industry's quickly metamorphosing wants and desires. Only two years earlier she had written Back to God's Country with much success. Modestly crediting her acting, the review may be more symptomatic of her lost celebrity appeal than any lack of talent on her part. Shipman's failure to understand the industry's regimented parameters made it difficult for her to find work. She failed to modify and revise with the changing industry environment, instead falling back on what had worked before, only to discover that it no longer did.

Throughout the remainder of her career, Shipman often referred to her persona as the "Girl from God's Country" and used the role to jog the memories of those she came across. In a 1937 press release Shipman repeatedly alluded to her past roles: "Nell Shipman, nationally known motion picture star, producer and author, famous for her many screen stories and novels which have featured DOGS, is planning the most ambitious and important dog picture to ever be produced."⁶¹ In a 1969 letter to Riverside County Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals about a string of animal poisonings in her neighbourhood, she writes, "Old-timers may remember me as 'The Girl from God's Country' and for

⁶⁰ Trusky, Letters 332.

⁶¹ Nell Shipman, "Press Release by Nell Shipman," April 1937, Letters from God's Country, ed. Tom Trusky (Boise, Idaho: Hemingway Western Studies Series, 2003) 105. Emphasis original.

my work in silent movies."⁶² It is a title that sticks even now; Shipman is remembered as the "Girl from God's Country," as countless articles and books of recent years reveal.⁶³ The development of star personas and the evolution of celebrity culture during the silent period were powerful, lasting mechanisms that fostered the economic inclinations of the industry as it became increasingly centralized and profit-driven.

Comparing Nell

Clearly Nell Shipman was an intriguing woman who made interesting decisions about her career. The decision to become independent proved to be a disastrous one, for instance. Treated alone, Shipman seems as if she might fit the pioneer mould. However, when compared with other women working in the industry during this time, such as Alice Guy Blaché or Lois Weber, it is clear that, while Shipman managed to secure a decent career in the business, by comparison her career was quite short and less distinguished than others'. To sharpen this point and to situate Nell properly within the industry we can compare her career to those of some of her predecessors and contemporaries in America, Alice Guy Blaché, Lois Weber, Mary Pickford, and Frances Marion. This comparison is not meant to dwarf Shipman's success or her career, but to provide a framework for considering Shipman in relation to other female filmmakers of her time. Through this comparison it is evident that the industry's

⁶² Nell Shipman, "Letter to the SPCA," 13 May 1969, Letters from God's Country, ed. Tom Trusky (Boise, Idaho: Hemingway Western Studies Series, 2003) 311.

⁶³ See for instance, Moody Powell Cook, "Queen of Dog Sleds," Hollywood Studio Feb. 1977; William Arnold, "Heroine of the Silent Screen," The Spokesman Review 27 Nov. 1992; Armatage's numerous articles and books, including The Girl from God's Country.

ever-centralizing and bureaucratic structure swiftly ended the careers of a number of women and independent filmmakers, many of whom could not keep pace with its significant growth.

The fact that women found work during this period and made noteworthy contributions is not a radical idea. What is significant, as Richard Koszarski suggests, is that these women were entirely erased from history until feminists began the work of rediscovery.⁶⁴ They held various positions, from actress to screenwriter to director to producer, and Shipman of course held all of these posts at some point throughout her career. Universal employed many of these women during the mid-1910s. That studio became a gathering place, it seems, not because it set out to hire women, but because Carl Laemmle's company, more than other studios, readily accepted newcomers and amateurs to its lot to try their hand at film.⁶⁵ Shipman found work with the studio when it purchased Under the Crescent and produced six serial installments of the story. Shipman was not a lone woman working in the industry. She was part of a community of talented, successful women filmmakers – writers, directors, producers and actresses – who played significant roles in the industry's formation.

Alice Guy Blaché is a woman fitting of the term pioneer. Starting out as a secretary for Léon Gaumont, who was a manufacturer of film and cameras in the mid-1890s, Guy Blaché began to produce short films to demonstrate the capabilities of film and Gaumont's cameras. In 1896 she filmed La Fée aux

⁶⁴ Richard Koszarski, An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Picture (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1990) 223.

⁶⁵ Barbara Koenig Quart, Women Directors: The Emergence of a New Cinema (New York: Praeger, 1988) 18.

choux (The Cabbage Fairy), it is said, some months before George Méliès filmed his Le Manoir du diable (1896). Which filmmaker actually produced the first narrative film⁶⁶ is still a debated issue, but it is becoming widely accepted that Guy Blaché deserves the title.⁶⁷ Guy Blaché is recognized to have produced all of Gaumont's films up until 1906, when she followed her husband to the United States.

Upon her arrival Guy Blaché created her own production studio, Solax, and produced over 200 films until about 1920, when it became difficult for her to find work, as it was for many other women filmmakers. Solax pre-dates Nell Shipman Productions by fifteen years, and Guy Blaché's production outfit was successful enough that Shipman would likely have been aware of it. After the formation of her studio, Guy Blaché became known for pushing the boundaries of filmmaking and conceiving new ways to tell stories. As was common during this period, she was also famous for the stunts within her films – burning cars, using harnesses, and continually pushing her actors and actresses further.⁶⁸ The decline of her career is similar to the decline Shipman would experience. During the 1910s Guy Blaché found significant success and easily made a living in film, but by 1920 she had all but disappeared from filmmaking, and she was unable to secure the former success she once knew. At the same time the studio system peaked, and film production became distinctively different than it had been only a few years before. Like Shipman, Guy Blaché failed to negotiate the new terrain

⁶⁶ A narrative film incorporates a fictional plot and characters to tell us a story. This is in contrast to the films that preceded The Cabbage Fairy, such as those of the Lumière brothers, better known for cinematic capturing of real-life events, such as workers leaving a factory.

⁶⁷ Acker xxiv.

⁶⁸ Quart 21.

and was forced from the industry. In her retirement, Guy Blaché attempted to locate her footage, only to find that very little had survived and that often her work was falsely credited to others.⁶⁹

Lois Weber, another significant female filmmaker from the early period, saw films as tools that could be employed to disseminate her preaching. Weber came from a family of evangelical preachers, and she recognized the important sociological role film could play in society.⁷⁰ She was one of the first directors to anticipate the influence film would have and to understand that film could be more than just mere entertainment. During the mid-1910s, when her career flourished, Weber was perhaps the best-known woman director. She joined the Gaumont Studios in Flushing, New York, in 1908 and worked under Guy Blaché, writing, directing and starring in short one-reelers.⁷¹ Eventually Weber's husband, Phillips Smalley, joined the company, but it was not until 1917 that Weber actually took due credit for her films; prior to then the credits were always "the Smalleys," giving credit to her husband whether it was deserved or not.⁷²

Employed by Universal in the mid-1910s, Weber was its strongest filmmaker between 1916 and 1920, producing over 100 films throughout her career⁷³ (Shipman is associated with only twenty-eight). These films always contained a moralistic undertone, as Barbara Koenig Quart notes:

Weber's work usually involved a serious point to teach – anti-capital punishment, anti-saloon, anti-child labor – though she could also

⁶⁹ Heck-Rabi 17.

⁷⁰ Quart 19.

⁷¹ Koszarski 223.

⁷² Koszarski 223.

⁷³ Quart 19.

entertain, "making morality message movies with a shrewd recognition of box-office values."⁷⁴

Eventually Weber left Universal for a more lucrative, four-picture deal with Paramount. However, Weber's first two films fell flat at the box office, and she was released from her contract early.⁷⁵ She was never again able to find success in the industry. The early 1920s marked the rapid decline in Weber's career, charting a familiar path. Audiences no longer favoured Weber's moralistic approach. Like Shipman, she failed to adapt to changing industry trends, instead clinging to a previously successful pattern. The dramatic industrial shift coupled with difficulty interpreting these changes meant that Shipman, Guy Blaché and Weber were left behind as the industry continued its remarkable evolution.

Mary Pickford appeared in film in 1909 after gaining experience on the vaudeville stage, in much the same way Shipman did. While Shipman acted in, produced or directed twenty-eight films, Pickford was featured in nearly 250. The vast number of films in which Pickford starred also means that she was exposed far more often to the public, and that her star persona was far more solidified and lasting than Shipman's "Girl from God's Country." By the mid-1910s Pickford was a well-established and powerful actress who came to be known as "Our Little Mary," "America's Sweetheart" and, at times, "The World's Sweetheart" for the juvenile roles she played on screen in such films as Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm (1917), Daddy-Long-Legs (1919) and Pollyanna (1920). A 1914 issue of Bioscope expresses Pickford's appeal:

⁷⁴ Quart 19.

⁷⁵ Koszarski 225.

There are many young comediennes...but it is only Mary Pickford...who can create through the silent medium...just that particular kind of sentiment – ineffably sweet, joyously young, and sometimes, if only it may be put so, almost unbearably heartbreaking in its tender pathos – which has become identified with her name, and with which we are all familiar.⁷⁶

Pickford's persona was far more complex than Shipman's and required a great deal of negotiation on the part of the audience. On one hand she played girlish characters, yet magazines and celebrity culture clearly identified Pickford as a woman. This separation between on-screen and off-screen personas is quite different from Shipman, whose on-screen attributes were paralleled in her private life. Mostly this is due to the fact that Pickford received far more coverage in such magazines as Moving Picture World and Photoplay than Shipman ever did. Pickford's image is further complicated by the power she wielded in the industry; in the early 1910s she was already exercising a significant influence on her projects, which only increased and became more potent as the decade progressed. At the same time that her power amplified, her roles became younger and younger, and the audience and critics responded eagerly.⁷⁷ This odd contradiction worked for Pickford, who could easily make large demands during salary negotiations. This may be a central reason Pickford survived the industry's evolution into the studio system: she was far more established than Shipman and had a much more valuable commodity to trade. Pickford was able to evolve with the studio system because she understood its

⁷⁶ Quoted in Gaylyn Studlar, "Oh, 'Doll Devine': Mary Pickford, Masquerade, and the Pedophilic Gaze," Camera Obscura 16.3 (2001): 199.

⁷⁷ Quoted in Studlar, "Oh, 'Doll Devine' 199.

practices and was able to locate a sector – distribution – that was more open to independents than the production sector, which Shipman focused on.

In the late 1910s Pickford demanded the right to approve her scripts – essentially guaranteeing her full control of her persona – and top salary from Adolph Zukor at Famous Players/Lasky. When her demands were not met, she moved on to First National, which eagerly paid her \$675,000 plus fifty percent of the profits each year and allowed her to select her work.⁷⁸ Even that was not enough for Pickford, who in 1919, with Charlie Chaplin, D.W. Griffith and Douglas Fairbanks, formed United Artists, a studio that exists to this day.

Much of Pickford's success with United Artists was due to the caliber of the company's founding partners, their connections and the company's focus on distribution. Pickford had a clear understanding of the system and was able to work within it. Shipman, on the other hand, attempted to go it alone, concentrating on production and with little experience promoting films. The transition into independence was one that Shipman was not able to make. After producing four features and a series of shorts, Nell Shipman Productions went bankrupt. She was successful at first, securing worldwide distribution for The Girl from God's Country, but none of her following films was purchased. The final blow came to Shipman in 1925 when she was forced to give her entire collection of animals to the San Diego Zoo. In a letter to friends she wrote,

I have been having a heck of a time – the real reason for my long silence. With the final loss of the animals, and the end of my hopes that way, I seemed to begin a long down-hill slide. I suppose,

⁷⁸ Eileen Whitfield, Pickford: The Woman Who Made Hollywood (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1997) 186-187.

against all better judgment, I had clung to an illusion that some miracle would save the day.⁷⁹

At the same time that Shipman was mourning the loss of her company and animals, Pickford was beginning the transition from silent film into sound, a transition that many silent filmmakers found difficult. United Artists continued to produce and distribute films starring Pickford into the 1930s. Pickford's public persona remained so popular that when she cut her famous long curls in 1928 she made the front page of the New York Times.⁸⁰ Pickford managed to sustain the public's curiosity much longer than Shipman ever did. She transitioned from the silent period to sound, but she did have difficulty playing mature women as she aged, and her star power eventually waned. Much of Pickford's success is linked to her firmly established star persona and her personal business savvy – a trait Shipman sorely lacked. Pickford remained current and formed partnerships that further entrenched her within the industry, while Shipman fell out of sync and fumbled through her later career.

Much of the success of Pickford's films, and thus of Pickford herself, was due to her long and prosperous friendship with screenwriter Frances Marion. The two met in 1916 when Marion secured a position as a writer on Pickford's film The Foundling.⁸¹ They became fast friends and collaborators, Marion writing many of the star's films, including Poor Little Rich Girl (1917), Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm (1917), and M'Liss (1918). Marion also ghostwrote a daily

⁷⁹ Nell Shipman, "Letter to Russell and Ella Bankson," 31 October 1925, Letters from God's Country, ed. Tom Trusky (Boise, Idaho: Hemingway Western Studies Series, 2003) 2.

⁸⁰ Whitfield photograph caption.

⁸¹ Cari Beauchamp, Without Lying Down: Frances Marion and the Powerful Women of Early Hollywood (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) 172.

syndicated advice column for Pickford, which appeared in newspapers across the country as "Daily Talks."⁸² This column is also another example of the intertextual connection between women's literature – newspapers in this case – and films during this period. Pickford's advice allowed women the opportunity to emulate Pickford and make decisions as she would. This is another element that ensured her success; with multiple points of penetration, Mary Pickford was wholly immersed in the industry. As screenwriter and ghostwriter, Marion had a large hand in the maintenance of the Mary Pickford persona.

Marion originally arrived in the industry in 1913, working for Lois Weber as her protégée and a stuntwoman. Following the success of The Foundling, Marion worked for Biograph, Universal and Paramount and was able to negotiate open contracts that allowed her to accept outside work, a somewhat unheard-of arrangement during that time. By contrast with Shipman, Marion was an exceptionally successful screenwriter who was able to forge a living entirely from writing. In her later career, Shipman attempted to sell her books and screenplays to Hollywood with little success. In response to the rejection of her screenplay, Get the Woman (a proposed comeback vehicle for Clara Bow), Shipman wrote her agent in 1931:

Am dreadfully sorry but I'll have to quit. This past year and a half has been so packed with disappointments I don't think I can stand more and believe it will be best, in fact, it's imperative for me to turn to something else until there is a new break.⁸³

⁸² Beauchamp 53

⁸³ Nell Shipman, "Letter to Ann Watkins," 5 June 1931, Letters from God's Country, ed. Tom Trusky (Boise, Idaho: Hemingway Western Studies Series, 2003) 41.

Marion was able to easily transition between silent and sound films and found work as a screenwriter for over fifty years. At the height of her career in the late 1910s and early 1920s she pulled in \$17,000 a week⁸⁴ compared to the \$1,000 Shipman earned for the serial Under the Crescent.⁸⁵ Marion's level of success was phenomenal compared to Shipman's. Negotiating multiple projects at once, writing novels, newspaper articles, and films, she understood the industry well. Her widespread appeal was directly tied to her ability to gain exposure in multiple forums simultaneously, something Shipman failed to do. Marion also succeeded in securing her own public persona and was well covered by magazines of the day. Her first spread, called "Frances Marion: Soldieress of Fortune," appeared in a November 1917 issue of Photoplay and presented her as a powerful combination of beauty, brains and humour.⁸⁶ Marion secured a position of respect within the studio system; she was, for example, Universal and MGM executive Irving Thalberg's personal and business confidant.⁸⁷ She understood the industry entirely and her place within it, and she managed to adapt to its rapid changes and produce material that was current and desired by the studios.

The purpose of this comparative exercise is not to diminish or denigrate Shipman's career or her particular role in the industry. Shipman secured work substantial enough to support her in the American industry and was able to make her living writing, starring and producing films for nearly a decade, an achievement that many others could not claim. When she is compared to such

⁸⁴ Acker 171.

⁸⁵ Armatage, The Girl from God's Country 57.

⁸⁶ Beauchamp 80.

⁸⁷ Beauchamp 332.

other women in the industry as Mary Pickford and Frances Marion, however, it is clear that some were far more successful working during the silent period and even after. Shipman's career fits into a broader community of women filmmakers who worked successfully throughout the 1910s. The American industry during this time transformed dramatically. Film became big business and was packaged, marketed and sold to women through the creation of movie serials, a star system and star-audience relations. These mechanisms helped drive film's evolution from an open industry into a limited system of standardized practices, often to the detriment of women and independent filmmakers, like Nell Shipman, who failed to understand and negotiate the changes.

CHAPTER THREE

The Canadian Industry: Marketing Nationalism

Canada's early filmmaking was as widely scattered as its landscape. Movies arrived in Canada at the same time they found an audience in the United States, but the industries developed dramatically differently. Using vaudeville houses, public parks and storefronts, local business owners quickly tapped into the new entertainment form and realized its potential for profit and entertainment pleasure. At the turn of the twentieth century, filmmaking and film exhibition had a profile similar that which they have today. Much of the activity in the early life of the Canadian film industry involved distribution, exhibition and spectatorship. Foreign films dominated exhibition, and theatre owners were satisfied to play American films because they could turn a profit with that as their product. It was not until the 1910s, when film was firmly established, that Canadian productions became more of a preoccupation and cultural nationalism fueled by the First World War rose to the surface. Production existed, but it was fragmented and far less structured than the American industry. Where the American industry existed within a well-managed, self-sustaining system, the Canadian industry was disorganized and unable to maintain itself. The dominance of American films on Canadian screens meant there was little room at the cinemas for domestic productions, even if they were successfully produced.

Even in its youth it was understood that film could play an important role in disseminating ideology. Canadian Moving Picture Digest among other publications called for increased Canadian content as early as the mid-1910s.

These calls were answered with the creation and, oftentimes, the disbanding of many film-production studios and companies, including Canadian Photoplays, for which Ernest Shipman worked, and which produced Back to God's Country. Between 1912 and 1930 feature-film production increased as a focus for the Canadian industry, and at the same time exhibition and spectatorship grew by leaps and bounds. Nell Shipman's most famous and, by far, most financially successful film, Back to God's Country, was among those created during this period of production, which is best characterized by location shooting and melodramatic plot lines, and the themes and narrative undertones circulated in conjunction with the marketing of Back to God's Country support the notion that ideas of nationalism were rising during this period.

During the silent period Canadian theatres were, for the large part, extensions of the American film industry. Filled with foreign films, cinemas catered to female audiences and showcased women-centred serials and feature films in much the same way as the American industry. In many respects, they constituted a branch of the U.S. market. A demand for domestic films emerged as nationalism was fueled by the war and Canadian production companies and agencies attempted to define a domestic industry. Though Back to God's Country at times relies on stereotypical image of Canada as the North, the production and marketing of the film tapped into this particular political moment within the less structured and far less standardized Canadian industry to successfully produce and market the picture as an apparatus of Canadian nationalism.

Seeing the States: Exhibition and Spectatorship

While production began slowly in Canada during these formative years, exhibition grew at a much more frenzied pace, as businessmen acknowledged the popularity of this new and marvelous medium. An advertisement in the "Amusements" section of the August 29, 1896, edition of the Toronto newspaper The Daily Mail and Empire enthusiastically announced the arrival of Edison's Vitascope in the city at Robinson's Musee theatre, repeating three times throughout the advertisement, "first time in Toronto."¹ Following the show, the paper heralded the arrival of moving pictures to the city, proclaiming, "The Edison Vitascope has been received with great demonstrations of enthusiasm and will be retained as a feature of new week's show."² Audiences in Toronto, as in Montreal, Ottawa and other cities across Canada, quickly became enthralled with this new entertainment form. Exhibition and spectatorship, during the formative years of the industry, were the most stable components of Canada's participation in film. Ticket sales and audience demand for the cinema experience were rapidly mounting across the country. Between 1906 and 1913 Toronto was home to nearly 100 theatres, which drew an estimated daily audience of 15,000.³ While spectatorship dominated, it was consumption of a foreign product. In this way, Canadian cinemas became an extension of the American exhibition circuit. The same American feature films and movie serials were marketed to women,

¹ Hye Bossin, "First Time In Toronto," Canadian Film Weekly 19 Apr. 1963: 4.

² Bossin 4.

³ Peter Steven, "Pleasing the Canadians: A National Flavour for Early Cinema, 1892-1914", Canadian Journal of Film Studies 12 (Fall 2003): 14.

and the cinema experience in Canada was cultivated just as it was in the United States. Canada was part of the big business of the American industry.

In Montreal, Ernest Ouimet bought two of Edison's projectors and in 1906 opened the Ouimetoscope, a 600-seat theatre. Similar motion picture houses were opening across Canada. The Allen brothers opened their first theatre, the Theatorium in Brantford, during 1906.⁴ Earlier in the same year, John C. Griffin opened a theatre by the same name, Theatorium, in Toronto, constructing Canada's first permanent movie house.⁵ Jerry Shea, who operated vaudeville theatres in Buffalo, New York, crossed the border to re-open Robinson's Musee Theatre after it closed following a fire. The movie business was good to Shea, who opened Shea's Victoria, a vaudeville house, in 1910, and Shea's Hippodrome in 1914.⁶ Jule and Jay Allen were also successful theatre entrepreneurs. After expanding into the Allen Amusement Company they built their first Ouimet-styled, 800-seat luxury theatre in Calgary in 1911.⁷ The opening of their Monarch theatre inaugurated the building of numerous cinemas within Calgary's city limits. Over the next few years the Princess and the Majestic theatres opened their doors to the public, and filmgoing became firmly rooted as one of Calgary's primary leisure activities.⁸ The construction of theatres across the country declared film's permanence in Canada's cultural life. At the same time, it also firmly established Canada's dependency on American cultural production.

⁴ Steven 15.

⁵ Morris, Embattled Shadows 246.

⁶ Bossin 4.

⁷ Bossin 5.

⁸ Canadian Film Weekly 1 May 1963: 4.

As the only financially viable sector of the industry, exhibition dominated the Canadian industry, and little attention was given to the source of the films shown. As Ted Magder notes,

The first financially successful Canadians in the film industry were... exhibitors, whose economic well-being from the outset rested on a stable supply of popular films that could attract and sustain a regular audience. Apart from their ability to attract paying customers, the nationality of these films was irrelevant.⁹

Taking his cue from Peter Morris, Manjunath Pendakur notes that the industry's focus on exhibition was part of a larger Canadian economic scene best characterized as laissez-faire capitalism.¹⁰ That is, the Canadian entrepreneurs involved in exhibition were satisfied with reaping the financial benefits of the technology and did not demonstrate a desire to contribute to a more comprehensive domestic film industry or aid in the development of film as an instrument of nationalism.

With a purely economic focus dominating the Canadian industry, spectatorship in Canada became heavily marketed and publicized in a manner similar to that used in the United States. In particular, the cinemagoing experience in Canada was marketed to women, who were a desirable audience segment. In September 1918 the Allens opened a 1,100-seat theatre in Montreal with a full-page advertisement in Canadian Moving Picture Digest. The advertisement detailed the décor, noting, "the lighting, both ceiling and side

⁹ Ted Magder, Canada's Hollywood: The Canadian State and Feature Films (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993) 20.

¹⁰ Manjunath Pendakur, Canadian Dreams and American Control: The Political Economy of the Canadian Film Industry (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990) 47.

lights, is especially good.”¹¹ Such a focus emulated the significant structural and design changes American picture houses were undergoing at the same time. Referring to the U.S. model, Shelley Stamp suggests that these interior changes borrowed heavily from department stores and were designed to both attract women and ensure that they would feel safe and comfortable when they visited the cinemas.¹² The same advertisement for the Allens’ new Montreal theatre highlights the cinema’s proper ventilation, which was maintained by a glass windshield that “protects the audience from the draft of the entrance doors.”¹³ The language selected, which plays on ideas of protection and safety, speaks volumes about the experience the Allen theatre offered: women could feel assured they were participating in a dignified and safe form of entertainment.

Canadian Moving Picture Digest encouraged continuous improvements to theatres as a way to ensure theatres remained competitive and attractive. The December 29, 1917, issue of the publication featured an entire page dedicated to lobby displays and entrance decor, noting,

Within the last two years a new profession has been opened up in this industry, that of dressing up the front and entrance of a theatre to bring out the strong box office appeal of the attraction being shown inside.¹⁴

This article began a series of “Lobby Display as Investment” columns that appeared regularly for more than a year. The columns were devoted to encouraging theatre managers to invest in this particular form of advertising. Canadian theatre owners eager to increase their profits followed the advice.

¹¹ Canadian Moving Picture Digest 5 Oct. 1918.

¹² Stamp 20-21.

¹³ Canadian Moving Picture Digest 15 Oct. 1918.

¹⁴ Canadian Moving Picture Digest 29 Dec. 1917: 8.

That Canadian Moving Picture Digest was founded and managed by a woman, Ray Lewis, may have influenced its focus on cultivating movie theatres for women. The entire experience of cinemagoing was refined and marketed to the public with a particular interest in women. Along the same lines, advertisements for exterior theatre improvements began to appear. One particular advertisement exclaimed, "Mr. Picture House Manager Brighten Up the Front of Your House. Increase your Box Office Receipt. Keep up with the Times."¹⁵ The rapid expansion and development of filmgoing practices fueled theatre changes and demanded that theatre managers stay well-versed in audience expectations or risk losing business. The heavy focus on creating pleasing interiors and exteriors helped cinemas evolve into entertainment destinations. The targeted marketing to and cultivation of cinema audiences defined Canadian exhibition practices and was very much in line with the American industry.

Canadian exhibitors offered mostly U.S.-made serials and features to tap into the developing celebrity and fan culture, and women were an attractive audience for these movies. Mary Pickford – Toronto-born, but the "world's sweetheart" – was as well known in Canada as she was in the United States. By the mid-1910s she was so popular a star that she could support a weeklong celebration of her films at the Strand Theatre in Toronto, which featured "a different play everyday."¹⁶ One day into the week the Toronto Star reported "crowded houses from an early hour yesterday at the Strand Theatre boded [*sic*]

¹⁵ Canadian Moving Picture Digest 8 Dec. 1917: 18.

¹⁶ Toronto Star 23 Apr. 1915: 19.

well for the popularity this week of Mary Pickford."¹⁷ Although the newspaper did not highlight it, Toronto-born Pickford's Canadian roots might have added to her hometown appeal. This style of repertoire was widespread in Canadian cinemas. A little over a year later the Strand again featured Pickford, this time with Charlie Chaplin in an extended exhibition of their films.¹⁸ A broader cultural movement that marketed and sold celebrity culture to audiences developed on both sides of the border. Particularly popular stars, such as Mary Pickford, could support repeat screenings, and theatre managers often brought back already-released films due to demand, or, alternatively, created demand by bringing them back for return engagements.

Cross-border fan culture was a profitable business for theatre managers, and publications such as Canadian Moving Picture Digest recognized this. The intertextual connection between women's literature – novels, newspapers, and fan magazines – was as strong a trend in Canada as it was in the United States. Many film serials, such as Shipman's Under the Crescent, relied on the female consumer's knowledge of the story and plot details from other media. Serials relied on a saturation of multiple modes of communication. For newspapers and magazines, participating guaranteed a certain level of circulation and held the potential for increased sales. The Toronto Star ran a series of half-page advertisements in September 1915 for the soon-to-be released serial, The Goddess. A collaboration with the Vitagraph Company, the serial appeared both in the newspaper and on theatre screens, allowing both media to reach new

¹⁷ Toronto Star 20 Apr. 1915: 4.

¹⁸ Toronto Star 1 Aug. 1916: 4.

audiences. This cross-promotional marketing style was a key component of film's bureaucratic and institutional transformation into big business. As Stamp concludes,

Newspaper and magazine tie-ins that almost always accompanied the serials targeted new kinds of cinema patrons, untapped by more traditional forms of motion picture publicity like posters, heralds, and lobby displays that circulated at street level.¹⁹

Newspapers, such as the Toronto Star, offered the potential of reaching new spectators who might not have been traditional moviegoers while also offering a literary bonus to movie audiences.

Film exhibition was the primary attribute of the Canadian industry during the silent period. While production was scattered and unstructured, exhibition and the related promotion of fan and celebrity culture in the interest of developing and building audiences expanded and centralized rapidly in Canada in much the same way the industry evolved in the United States. The construction and renovation of luxury theatres and the institution of multiple advertising strategies and modes of communication situated filmgoing in Canada as a popular and influential pastime.

First Features: The Canadian Campaign

With the proliferation of American films on Canadian screens and exhibition practices that paralleled those south of the border, the Canadian production industry was deeply lacking in distinctive identity. Until the early 1910s, production in Canada was limited and reliant on government propaganda films, which were produced to encourage immigration to Canada. With film

¹⁹ Stamp 105.

exhibition and picturegoing firmly established as social pastimes, what was playing on the screen became a focus. Canadian narrative films in general and feature films in particular became highly desired by Canadian nationalists. Cinema's representational qualities and its depiction of time and place made it an apt vehicle for nationalism. The 1910s brought significant change to the Canadian film production landscape as numerous production companies and studios formed. The Canadian public, partially fueled by a patriotic war posture, demanded domestic productions. Many companies, such as Canadian Photoplays, formed to take advantage of the seemingly welcoming political environment and set out to produce some of Canada's first features. As early as 1911 film companies were established in Winnipeg (Starland Limited), Montreal (British American Film Company; Montreal Motion Pictures) and Halifax (Canadian Bioscope Company).²⁰ This context suggests that the Shipmans, like these operators, were on the margin of the industry, exploiting niche opportunities.

By 1913 the Canadian Bioscope Company was hard at work on its first feature film, Evangeline. The film was based on Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem about the plight of the Acadians and is widely accepted as Canada's first feature. At five reels, the film ran a lengthy seventy minutes. Bioscope employed a predominantly American cast and crew for the production. The National Film Archives catalogue, The Canadian Silent Feature, suggests that a comparable Canadian cast of experienced professionals might not have been available in Halifax, where Bioscope was based, and that a cast of known actors

²⁰ Morris, Embattled Shadows 248.

would have increased the appeal of the film in the United States.²¹ The distribution of the film in the United States and its reception there were considerations in its potential success. Canadians may have wanted their own productions, but the viability of Canadian film production partially depended on acceptance of its films in the United States, where the industry was far more profitable for producers. Fortunately, Evangeline was well received, which led to a greater desire for Canadian-produced films. For Canadians, the film proved that Canada could produce successful feature films that rivaled imported ones and further strengthened film's connection to national identity.

Following the release of Evangeline, the Canadian Bioscope Company completed six films. Only three were released, and each found little success.²² There seemed to be a contradiction in the industry: Canadian films were being produced, but often they were not distributed. Between 1913 and 1918, twenty-three Canadian-made films of various lengths were produced, but they rarely made their way onto cinema screens. Canadian films had to compete with the more established American productions that dominated the market. Competing against known stars and an established celebrity culture proved challenging for the still-developing Canadian production industry. Yet this did not stop Canadian audiences and theatre managers from seeking out domestic films. Upon its appearance in 1917, Canadian Moving Picture Digest was bombarded with letters from theatre managers asking for Canadian product. The January 5, 1918, issue addressed these requests with a lengthy article entitled, "Why the

²¹ National Film Archives, The Canadian Silent Feature (Hull, Quebec: Public Archives Canada, 1976) 5.

²² Morris, Embattled Shadows 50.

Production of Pictures in Canada is Impractical.” Managing Editor M.R. Nutting outlined three primary barriers to a successful film production industry in Canada: market and distribution, proximity and cost of materials, and talent.²³ Noting that success would depend on the ability to sell Canadian productions to the United States, Nutting argued, “it is not reasonable to expect that we could compete with the American Film manufacturers in their own country.”²⁴ The Canadian landscape was also offered up as an obstacle to film production: “The snow would also make it impossible for the making of any but winter exteriors for at least six months of the year. And the atmosphere conditions and lack of sunlight are not conducive to good photography.”²⁵ Nutting’s dismal forecast was rooted in the realities of an infant industry dominated by government and foreign film production. The failing box-office appeal of Canadian films only fueled public demand for a domestic industry as nationalism and the desire for a domestic popular cinema heightened.

Despite Nutting’s dismal overview of production in Canada, numerous articles calling for Canadian content began to appear in newspapers across the country. In March 1919 the Victoria Daily Times reported,

Members of the legislature believe the Star Spangled waves too often in B.C. movie houses. It’s a strange thing that even in our own picture houses we hardly ever see a Canadian soldier on the screen...It is seldom in our province that we can find pictures of the Canadian soldier who was in the fight from the beginning. These pictures are giving youngsters the false idea that the Americans really won the war, not the Allies.²⁶

²³ M.R. Nutting, Canadian Moving Picture Digest 5 Jan. 1918: 4-5.

²⁴ Nutting, Canadian Moving Picture Digest 4.

²⁵ Nutting, Canadian Moving Picture Digest 5.

²⁶ Victoria Daily Times 24 Mar. 1919.

This call for Canadian productions was underscored by a sense of nationalism that was rising to the surface in Canada. Following the end of the war, public concern about Canada's place in the war effort grew. For many, film offered the powerful potential of marketing Canada to both Canadians and Americans. In Canada film was not only a business, but also a valuable tool for promoting nationalism. The failing production environment stunted the possibilities for film to be an instrument of nationhood. While many Canadian production companies were established throughout the 1910s, most failed to produce any films capable of competing with the American industry. But even those films that were completed usually did not find their way onto cinema screens. Despite the many theatre managers who eagerly requested Canadian films, few actually purchased anything Canadian-made. Identifying this tendency, Canadian Moving Picture Digest asked,

Where is the Interest in Canadian Products?

From personal observations during the past few weeks, we find that the exhibitors of Canada are not taking an interest in the release of Canadian subjects. Where are all of the exhibitors who were crying a while ago for local product? They all talked a good deal about what should be done, but when producers put time and capital into Canadian releases, they now have many and varied excuses as to the reason for not booking them.²⁷

It seems that M.R. Nutting was correct when he predicted a bleak future for Canadian industry. One of Nutting's primary issues was the lack of Canadian players, many of whom – such as Mary Pickford – had moved south and found positions in the American industry.²⁸ The established American star system was

²⁷ Canadian Moving Picture Digest 3 May 1919.

²⁸ Canadian Moving Picture Digest 5 Jan. 1918: 5.

a strong opponent for Canadian producers. Moreover, the big business of American film had staked a claim on Canada's theatres. Audiences demanded their favourite stars, and the American industry delivered. Most Canadian films simply failed to tap into the market in a similar way.

To combat the draw of the American industry and the assimilation of Canadian theatre screens, a nationalist rhetoric was adopted to market and promote Canadian films. Rather than blending into the exhibition landscape, Canadian-produced films were celebrated as homegrown and marketed as proof that Canada could develop a popular cinema of its own. A Canadian film that managed to secure considerable success was The Great Shadow (1919). The Adanac²⁹ Producing Company, an outfit formed in 1918 by George Brownridge after the financial failure of his former company, Canadian National Features, produced the film, which highlighted a concern of the day, Bolshevism. The film's social concern was translated into a social mission to establish a movie industry in Canada, which Adanac adopted as its mandate. In a letter to Major Worthington at the Reconstruction Committee in Toronto, Brownridge described his company's objectives as "placing before the public good propaganda" and "establishing the Motion Picture industry in Canada."³⁰ The national rhetoric Brownridge employed marked Canadian production as significantly different from the industry in the United States. Film was deeply embedded in American culture, and the United States dominated production. The now-wholly

²⁹ Adanac is Canada spelt backwards and was a common term for Canadian production companies during the period.

³⁰ George Brownridge, letter to Major Worthington, 25 October 1920, Dreamland: History of Early Canadian Cinema collection, Library and Archives Canada, Hull, Quebec.

standardized production environment south of the border secured American dominance in film. Canada, on the other hand, tied its ability to produce and successfully market domestic films to a national pride and a nation-building agenda.

Upon its release, The Great Shadow found an audience and was praised in newspapers and trade magazines both in Canada and the United States. A May issue of Moving Picture World – an American publication – heralded the film as “Excellent as propaganda against industrial unrest and the forces of Bolshevism.”³¹ In the United States the film was accepted and praised for its focus on a contemporary political and social issue. In Canada, Saturday Night editor Hector Charlesworth was far more ecstatic in his review, hoping that the film would prove once and for all that Canada could produce great films:

It is a rather unique product, a film drama with a thesis, a type of entertainment devised by David W. Griffith and exemplified in his historic review of the Negro problem in the Birth of a Nation and his conglomerate work Intolerance. The Great Shadow is a more valuable contribution to the motion picture craft than these because it deals with an issue of greater moment to everyone and presents contemporary history in an impartial and graphic way. The mob episodes and other ensemble scenes are the best that one has witnessed because they are obviously the real thing and not the result of theatrical artifice. As a demonstration of what Canada can do in the way of motion pictures The Great Shadow is assuredly impressive. It has already been witnessed in private by many eminent publicists and labour leaders, both of Canada and the United States, and has received the endorsement of the American Federation of Labour.³²

The Great Shadow was charged not only with providing entertainment, but also with elevating the Canadian motion-picture industry to a new level, as Adanac's

³¹ Moving Picture World 29 May 1920: 1837.

³² Hector Charlesworth, Saturday Night 14 Feb. 1920: 1-2.

mandate had prescribed. Comparison of the film to D.W. Griffith's work was a powerful marketing tool. A very popular American director, Griffith was often called the "Father of film." His films were seen as spectacular and of particular social importance. Placing The Great Shadow in the company of Griffith's films generated public interest and helped foster an audience. While positive comparisons with a Hollywood icon were important to the film's marketing, characterizing the film as Canadian and using it as evidence of the industry's potential fits into a broader nationalist cultural movement that attempted to combat the control the American industry wielded in Canada.

Canadian Moving Picture Digest continued its praise a week later, when the film opened in Montreal:

Montrealers had an excellent opportunity of seeing what can be done in the direction of making motion pictures when The Great Shadow, the scenario for which was written by a Canadian and which was made in this country by a Canadian company, with Canadian capital, was shown at the Imperial theatre here for a week...the picture covered six reels, every foot of which was chockful of interest.³³

The Great Shadow seemed to be fulfilling its promise to provide a socially responsible, yet thrilling, picture that was easily comparable to any American product. While the film was described as a competitive product, it was also clearly marked as Canadian and linked to a larger nationalist movement. Canadian newspapers commended the producers and urged their readers to attend screenings. After outlining the film's production at the Trenton Studios and its Canadian financing, the Toronto Star concluded, "Toronto audiences can feel therefore that where we state that this is the first and only all-Canadian

³³ Canadian Moving Picture Digest 20 Feb. 1920: 15.

production...no attempt to appeal to Canadian patronage is being made.”³⁴ The demand for Canadian pictures coincided with a rise in thought about national identity during and following the war and a more conscious effort to culturally separate from the United States.

Certainly, the Adanac Producing Company benefited from the propagation of a patriotic sense of national identity. It helped the company survive. Adanac recognized the marketability of nationalism, addressing theatre managers in its advertisements, “Mr. Exhibitor, your patrons often having asked for ‘Canadian made’ moving pictures....” The advertisement was signed, “The Adanac Film Company Limited with all Canadian class of characters.”³⁵ Even with such marketing savvy and press coverage, like many companies that came before it, Adanac went under following the release of The Great Shadow and never again produced a film. A sense of nationalism fueled first by the war and then by Canada’s lacking a film industry pushed Canadian production companies to produce and market their films as culturally significant. This national battle cry was fostered by the desire to establish a financially viable industry, capable of competing with American productions.

Back to God’s Country: As Canadian as It Gets

While Adanac failed as a business, the mandate for Canadian content gained strength during the late 1910s and played out in other production companies. At the same time that George Brownridge was pontificating about

³⁴ Toronto Star 20 Mar. 1920: 15.

³⁵ The Great Shadow by Adanac, advertisement, Dreamland: History of Early Canadian Cinema collection, Library and Archives Canada, Hull, Quebec.

the need for a Canadian motion-picture industry, Ernest Shipman was actively working to create a viable film production company in Canada. A film promoter and sometime producer, Ernest had started out as a vaudeville tour manager. In the formative years of the movie business he dabbled in sales and promotion in various facets of the industry. By 1918 Nell had starred in God's Country and the Woman (1916) and Baree, Son of Kazan (1918), and Ernest, as her business manager, sensed the potential profits of the Shipman-Curwood collaboration. As outlined in Chapter Two, Nell and James Oliver Curwood signed a two-year, exclusive contract in November 1918. Ernest's name on the contract as a co-signatory aptly indicated his level of involvement; he was right in the midst of things. Canadian Photoplays, a company composed of Canadian investors persuaded by Ernest's salesmanship, took advantage of the Canadian political environment to set itself up as a corporation and participate in the big business of film. The success Back to God's Country would have been bolstered by Curwood's deep cultural connection to Canada and his work on behalf of the Canadian government, by the targeted marketing of the film as Canadian and by the figuring of Nell Shipman as a heroic outdoorswoman inextricably linked to the Canadian landscape.

From the beginning, the Shipman-Curwood partnership was applauded as a major boon for Canada. Much of the excitement about the film's production was generated from Curwood's long-standing association with Canada. The coming-together of an immensely popular writer and known actress proved M.R. Nutting wrong: Canada did have the talent to pull off big productions (even if one

of the partners was American and the other had to return from Hollywood, where she had made what name she had). Canadian Moving Picture Digest announced the first two productions of the relationship, playing upon Shipman's established star persona:

Miss Shipman's Company will be taken into the North Country and the barrenness so vividly described in the story will be screened so as to inject absolute realism into the picture... the dogs that helped make such a success in "GOD'S COUNTRY AND THE WOMAN" and "BAREE, SON OF KAZAN" will play a part in the making of the new picture, but, great Danes, bears, moose and elk, living amid their natural surroundings in the snow fastness of the North will be interwoven into both stories.³⁶

The connection between Shipman and nature fit well into the existing commodification of Canada as a northern wilderness and vast landscape. The production would not only prove that Canada could produce dramatic feature films, but the film's fundamentally Canadian plot line, characters and setting would also further a nation-building agenda.

Curwood and Canada

As Chapter Two establishes, James Oliver Curwood was closely tied to Nell Shipman's career in the late 1910s. She forged a living playing the characters he wrote and eventually came to embody his vision of femininity on the silver screen. Her star persona was significantly influenced by his vision of "God's Country" and an archetypal relationship between nature and woman. This vision sprang forth from Curwood's own adventures in Canada and his underlying reverence for the natural world that Canada epitomized for him. Curwood's connection to Canada ran deep; he was awed by the landscape and

³⁶ Canadian Moving Picture Digest 7 Dec. 1918: 17.

moved to write about his time north of the border. His relationship to Canada and his function in the Canadian film industry, and in Canadian culture more generally, are often overlooked. In Canada, he has become almost wholly tied to Back to God's Country and Canadian Photoplays. With regard to the cinema, in some ways this is rightly so, because they were his strongest and most publicized link to the industry, but the interchange between Canada and Curwood that peaked in the formation of Canadian Photoplays and the Shipman-Curwood partnership represents an evolution of Curwood's relationship with Canada that began long before Nell Shipman had even made a film. Curwood and his writings played a significant role in the marketing of Canada, and the pre-existing relationship between Curwood and Canada strengthened the marketing of Back to God's Country as utterly Canadian and helped the film exploit existing notions of Canadian nationalism.

Curwood's writing career began just before the turn of the century when he sold short nature stories to small publications with limited circulation. His fascination with adventures in the natural world was apparent from the beginning, in writings about Indian battlegrounds and the Klondike. His career grew substantially throughout the first five years of the twentieth century. During 1905 he sold fifteen different stories to such popular magazines as Redbook, Cosmopolitan and McCall's.³⁷ Many of these stories were fueled by the recollections of a man he had met three years earlier named Malcolm V.

³⁷ Eldridge 59.

MacInnes. A Canadian colonization agent stationed in Detroit, MacInnes fondly shared his memories of Canada with Curwood as their friendship developed.³⁸

By 1907 Curwood's stories had also found a significant audience north of the border, and Canadian government officials began to realize the marketing potential that lay within the pages of his writings. Demonstrating a significant degree of marketing savvy for the time, the Canadian Department of Immigration hired him for \$1,800 a year plus expenses. Curwood was to explore Canada and write articles that would attract new settlers.³⁹ The following year he wrote a series of articles about the Great Lakes, which were published as a book. Aply titled The Great Lakes, the book received significant attention in the United States. The New York Times concluded that the series was "as entertaining as it is informative" and that it "has...the advantage of being written by a man who knows the Lakes and their shores."⁴⁰ The Canadian focus of the book and its media attention easily convinced Canadian officials to continue to fund his trips north. Marketing Canadian nationalism and a nation-building agenda were clearly established goals early in the twentieth century. The marketing of Canada was twofold; it presented the country as a vast untapped terrain ideal for immigration as a means of propagating economical nationalism, and Curwood's writing also inspired cultural nationalism by reaffirming a mounting patriotic pride. The government also reaped benefits from its relationship with Curwood. Curwood's writings romanticized Canada and generated awareness about the

³⁸ Eldridge 50.

³⁹ Eldridge 61.

⁴⁰ The New York Times 10 Apr. 1910: BR217.

country and its possibilities, and additionally Curwood was quickly becoming a popular writer whose press coverage frequently mentioned his Canadian focus.

Curwood's business relationship with the Department of Immigration was akin to early product placement, and Canada was the brand he was selling by prominently featuring it in his stories. The department's decision to hire Curwood fits into a broader nationalistic marketing campaign that emerged during this period. Curwood's early writings glorified Canada and metaphorically framed it as deeply connected to the natural environment; they laid the groundwork for establishing Canada as God's Country.

While the government paid Curwood for his Canadian references, it also recognized the marketing potential of film as a compelling medium and an instrument of nationalism. Film production was limited and scattered during this period, but government propaganda films designed to attract new immigrants to the country were plentiful. These films usually featured a recognizable part of the Canadian landscape as a way of highlighting the country's offerings, and they functioned to visually brand Canada. Early titles include Panoramic View of Niagara Falls (1903), Niagara Falls, Winter (1903), Arrival of Train at Muskoka (1906), and Moose Hunt in New Brunswick (1906).⁴¹ Canadian Pacific Railways, Canadian Northern Railway Company and Grand Trunk Pacific all took a keen interest in disseminating Canada's potential by sponsoring the production of propaganda films. These companies also supplied Curwood with free travel across Canada, assuring that they would be recalled fondly in the pages of his

⁴¹ Dreamland: History of Early Canadian Cinema collection, Library and Archives Canada, Hull, Quebec.

stories. In 1912 Grand Trunk Pacific provided Curwood and his wife with \$500 worth of travel throughout Canada in exchange for a promise that the railway would be mentioned in his work.⁴² Curwood's travel coincided with a concerted effort on the part of the CPR to promote passenger travel. During the late 1800s the CPR advertised extensively through newspapers, brochures and posters highlighting the Canadian landscape.⁴³ The CPR and other railways saw Curwood's writings as one medium among others through which Canada and Canadian tourism could be publicized. Subtle references to the railways scattered throughout Curwood's stories were also good for business.

The same year, Curwood became a regular in the New York Times column, "Among Authors." His inclusion in this feature was a testament to his growing popularity, and he used the column to recount the Canadian adventures that inspired his stories. A series of three columns during June and July of 1912 solidified his connection to and marketing of Canada. A June 9, 1912, anecdote in the column details his love of hunting in the "far northern wilderness," describing it as "Mr. Curwood's paradise."⁴⁴ The following column applauded Curwood's interest in Canadian business, noting, "James Oliver Curwood... is an enthusiastic advocate of the tremendous opportunities for finance and commerce in that part of the British North America which has always been regarded as a

⁴² Eldridge 88.

⁴³ E.J. Hart, The Selling of Canada: The CPR and the Beginnings of Canadian Tourism (Banff, Alberta: Altitude Publishing Ltd, 1983) 22.

⁴⁴ The New York Times 9 Jun. 1912: BR352.

worthless desolation.”⁴⁵ The final column in the series, which appeared on July 21, 1912, described Curwood’s writing and his unique Canadian connection:

His work centred in Canada, and the Canadian Government seized upon him, and made him, as “Who’s Who in America” says, “the only American ever employed by the Canadian Government as an exploratory and descriptive writer,” in which capacity he won an international reputation as a writer on all Canadian subjects.⁴⁶

This column makes the connection between Curwood and Canada clear: each relied on the other. Curwood’s commitment to promoting Canada helped foster its place in popular culture, even if the Canada of which he wrote was highly romanticized. He was, in a way, an early press agent for the country. While the New York Times was selling Curwood, Curwood was selling Canada. It was this very vocation that brought him considerable success. He might have been employed by the Canadian government primarily as a means of fostering economical nationalism, in the hope that his stories might attract tourism or better yet, immigrants, but Curwood’s writings were also immensely popular with Canadian audiences. This suggests that Curwood’s imaginings of Canada resonated with Canadians as they did with outsiders. Curwood’s deep cultural connection to Canada and his significant political association with the marketing of Canada as a place and of ideas and images of Canadian life reinforced the relationship between Back to God’s Country and nationalism.

Back to Back to God’s Country

The connection between Curwood and Canada was firmly established by the time the Shipman-Curwood Producing Company was formed. For his part,

⁴⁵ The New York Times 30 Jun. 1912: BR394.

⁴⁶ The New York Times 21 Jul. 1912: BR420.

Ernest Shipman needed to find Canadian money to finance the making of Back to God's Country. He convinced the Calgary Board of Trade to back the picture with the lure of inevitable profits and the guarantee that the Albertan landscape would be featured prominently.⁴⁷ Canadian Photoplays was incorporated on February 7, 1919.⁴⁸ With financial backing in place, Nell Shipman was given the important job of adapting Curwood's short story, "Wapi, the Walrus," into a feature-film scenario. The original story presented Wapi, a killer dog, as the lead, with the human cast as secondary characters. Shipman's version shifted the focus and placed her character, Dolores LeBeau, at the centre, with Wapi as a peripheral but pivotal role in the plot. In her memoir, she recalls Curwood's initial reaction:

James had already damned the scenario as prepared by me. It did go rather far beyond and behind "Wapi, the Walrus." The dog was featured but we still had The Girl, her Sweetheart, her Papa and the Curwoodian Meanie as played by Wellington Playter, big, husky, menacing and as nice a person off-camera as one might wish to know. All these and the Arctic background... must be woven into a cinematographic tale to shiver the silver screen. Curwood objected to my treatment... my script illuminated marginally with comments, all critical: "Rotten! Not my story! Crazy! Bunk!"⁴⁹

Fortunately, concessions were made and a compromise reached. Nell's female protagonist remained the central character, but Wapi was introduced as central to the story in the first scenes of the film. In its filmic form the story is about the villain Rydal's obsession with Dolores, who in his pursuit of her kills her father and maims her husband. In the end Dolores and Wapi must face Rydal and save themselves and her husband.

⁴⁷ Morris, Embattled Shadows 104.

⁴⁸ Morris, Embattled Shadows 105.

⁴⁹ Shipman, The Silent Screen 70.

The film was shot on location in Lesser Slave Lake, Alberta, a location accessible only by dog sled and where the temperature at the time of year the film was scheduled to be shot, averaged -40° Celsius.⁵⁰ The film pushed the trend of location shooting to the extreme in the name of presenting the story as realistically as possible, an approach Ernest Shipman later sold as “telling truth in movies.” Curwood’s contract gave him the right to determine the location, and he insisted Lesser Slave Lake was close to the landscape in his story.⁵¹ The difficulties faced during filming became a part of the marketing and myth-making that surrounded the film’s promotion. The promotion of Back to God’s Country was a sharpened extension of the style of promotion George Brownridge had employed for The Great Shadow. Building on the cultural movement that called for wholly Canadian films, Back to God’s Country offered a quintessentially Canadian film starring a recognizable, and identifiably Canadian, star. Across the border in the States, the film’s connection to Curwood’s popular writings and the story’s appearance in Good Housekeeping virtually guaranteed an American audience. Its publication in that female-oriented magazine also boosted the film’s popularity by tapping into an existing female audience.

Back to God’s Country was released in Toronto and New York during September 1919, only a month after “Wapi, the Walrus” appeared in Good Housekeeping, suggesting the cross-promotion common in the cinema of the time. The same month a reporter for the American magazine Picture Play recounted the film’s location shooting:

⁵⁰ Joseph Walker, “Danger in ‘God’s Country,’” American Cinematographer (May 1985): 34.

⁵¹ Walker 35.

"It was absolutely wild up there," Nell told me the other day. "We were just about where the aurora borealis country begins, you know. Our food came to us by dog team twice a week; usually we ate fish and moose meat..." But I enjoyed it up there. Everything's real in this picture, you know – Indians, trappers, members of the Royal Mounted Police – even though it has been disbanded [*sic*] – Eskimo dogs, and even a whaler, built especially for the story."⁵²

Shipman's insistence on the picture's veracity points to the ways the film was marketed as authentic and true to life. Her comments are indistinct enough to allow for multiple readings, which aided the film's cross-border appeal. A Canadian reader might have interpreted the authenticity as connected to the film's Canadian production, while an American spectator would have likely tied it to a certain realism offered by location shooting, which was popular during this period. The duality of meanings meant the film could succeed in being Canadian enough to satisfy nationalistic cravings in Canada and culturally open enough to pique interest in the United States.

This duality helped the film find audiences in both Canada and the United States. Distributed by the American company First National, the film was featured in New York Times advertisements that spanned four months between December 1919 and March 1920, during which time the film played at multiple theatres simultaneously. The advertisements were non-distinct and featured only text, calling the film, "The daring, thrilling picture."⁵³ Variety's review of the picture in January 1920 was lukewarm: "In all the picture will be a novelty to most audiences because of the dog hero, and it will get by on that account: otherwise

⁵² Trusky, Letters 326.

⁵³ New York Times 14 Mar. 1920: BR6.

it is just one of the regular run of screen melodrama."⁵⁴ Despite the critical review, Back to God's Country was distributed in Canada, the United States, Britain, Japan, Europe and Australia.⁵⁵ Within a year of release the film grossed a half-million dollars, and its Calgary investors received a 300 percent return.⁵⁶

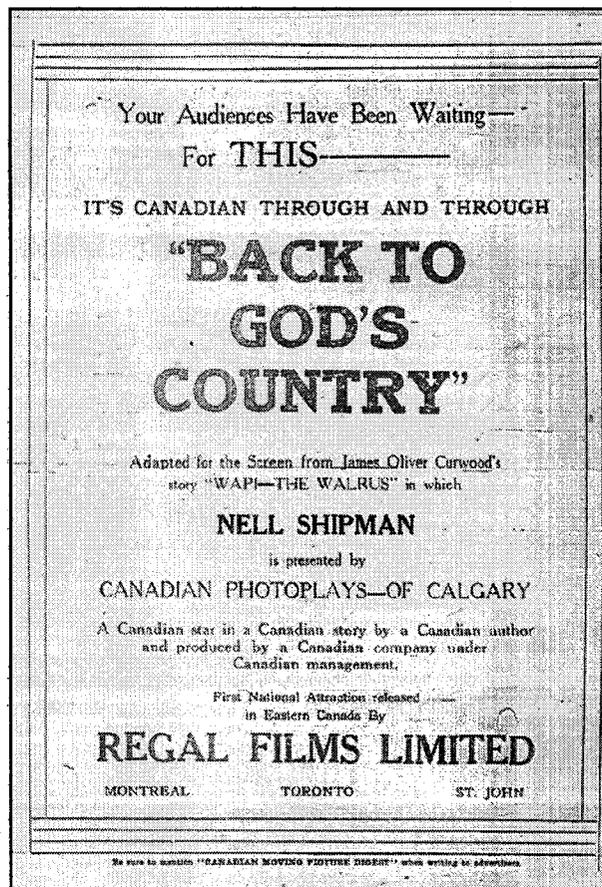


Fig. 2. Regal Films Limited advertisement for Back to God's Country. Canadian Moving Picture Digest 19. Oct. 1919.

Reviews of the film in Canada were quite different from those in the United States. Canadians welcomed the film warmly and showed their support through substantial ticket sales. The film was promoted as distinctively Canadian; a full-

⁵⁴ Variety 2 Jan. 1920: 73.

⁵⁵ Morris, Embattled Shadows 106-107.

⁵⁶ Morris, Embattled Shadows 107.

page advertisement in Canadian Moving Picture Digest (Fig. 2) declared, "Your Audiences Have Been Waiting for THIS – IT'S CANADIAN THROUGH AND THROUGH...A Canadian star in a Canadian story by a Canadian author and produced by a Canadian company under Canadian management."⁵⁷ It is not clear whether the "Canadian author" is Shipman or Curwood, though an earlier reference to Curwood in the advertisement implies that Curwood is essentially Canadian, stating, "Adapted for the Screen from James Oliver Curwood's 'Wapi the Walrus.'" The advertisement does not mention that Shipman wrote the screenplay, instead allowing Curwood to be interpreted as the sole author and framing him as Canadian. Again, his deep connection to Canada developed through his writings and his government employment situated him as Canadian and furthered the film's marketing power. A month later Canadian Moving Picture Digest featured a full-page article detailing the advertising possibilities of the picture. According to the article, Back to God's Country "proves conclusively that there is a demand for more films of Canadian manufacture."⁵⁸ For exhibitors, the Canadian heritage of the film was highlighted as an advertising strength:

The greatest point to consider is the fact that this is the first really successfully motion picture to be made in Canada... Tell the people what you have, a Canadian made picture which is a real thriller, filmed in the Arctic, with sixteen varieties of animals, ranging from bear cubs to malamut dogs.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Back to God's Country by Regal Films Limited, advertisement, Canadian Moving Picture Digest 18 Oct. 1919: 16.

⁵⁸ Canadian Moving Picture World 15 Nov. 1919: 21.

⁵⁹ Canadian Moving Picture World 15 Nov. 1919: 21.

The animals that appeared throughout the film were not unusual for the period – animal actors appeared in many films – but the sheer number of species displayed throughout this one film was novel and impressive for the time. The explicit marketing of Back to God's Country as Canadian was aggressive and effective; it sold the film to audiences and pulled in impressive box-office numbers.

The use of the animals throughout Back to God's Country is open to multiple readings. Armatage links the animals to Dolores's femininity and reads them as the ultimate signifiers of her deep connection to nature.⁶⁰ In a dramatic scene, Dolores is able to calm the vicious killer dog Wapi, who from that point forward is her steadfast protector. The signification is intertextual and reliant upon a knowledge and understanding of Shipman's previous roles in God's Country and the Woman and Baree, Son of Kazan. As Shipman's star persona is anchored in an archetypal femininity, and as she displays an innate connection to nature, Dolores's relationship with the animals throughout Back to God's Country heightens this image.

The animals can further be read in relation to Curwood's existing construction of God's Country and the multiple beasts his writings glorify. Returning to the link between Curwood and Canada and his utopian vision of Canada as God's Country, the animal focus of Back to God's Country serves to further solidify Shipman's connection to Canada and in turn the film's Canadian marketability. Animals, as signifiers of wilderness and natural life, were deeply connected to an imagined Canada that was a raw landscape, the Great White

⁶⁰ Armatage, The Girl from God's Country 92-93.

North. The relationship between Shipman's archetypal femininity and the primitiveness animals stood for was a potent formula for selling an idealized version of Canada. Toronto Star advertisements following the film's release promoted the animal actors. Featuring a sketch of Wapi, one advertisement noted, "One of the 16 Kinds of Animal Actors Who Play Their Parts in Back to God's Country."⁶¹ Another advertisement depicted Wapi protecting Dolores and exclaimed, "SEE Dolores and 'Wapi, the killer' who fights the fight of his fighting life to save her from a fate worse than death IN THAT ALL CANADIAN STORY Back to God's Country."⁶² The promotion added, "At Last a Photoplay Made in Canada for Canadians."⁶³ The advertisements were clearly effective. Back to God's Country had a strong run in the fall of 1919 and returned to Canadian screens the following June for repeat performances.

Back to God's Country was produced at a particular moment in Canada's history that allowed the film to flourish. Exploiting the pre-existing demand for Canadian films, the Shipman-Curwood Producing Company and Canadian Photoplays intelligently marketed the film and tapped into notions of nationhood to sell theatre tickets. Curwood's deep connection to Canada and his immense popularity situated the film in the privileged position. Adapting the scenario from a popular story published in tandem with the film's release ensured that Back to God's Country would reach multiple and wide audiences, while it was also part of the domestic push towards a Canadian popular cinema. On a larger scale, the

⁶¹ Back to God's Country, advertisement, The Toronto Star 31 Oct. 1919: 29.

⁶² Back to God's Country, advertisement, The Toronto Star 29 Oct. 1919: 27.

⁶³ Back to God's Country, advertisement, The Toronto Star 29 Oct. 1919: 27.

success of Back to God's Country proved to many that Canada could compete with the dominating American industry, if only on an occasional basis.

In the years that followed Back to God's Country, Canadian production units continued their attempts to appeal to potential popular audiences for domestically produced films. After the disintegration of the Shipman-Curwood Producing Company, Ernest Shipman continued producing films to meet the demand. He connected with Ralph Connor, a well-known Canadian novelist, and together they adapted five Connor stories as films, including Cameron of the Royal Mounted (1921), The Man from Glengarry (1922) and The Critical Age (1923). Shipman was the most stable producer in the Canadian industry during this period. On the whole, though, Canadian film production in the 1920s is best characterized as sporadic attempts to build a popular audience for Canadian cinemas with little effect on the dominance of American films. These attempts culminated in the production and release of Bruce Bairnsfather's Carry on, Sergeant in 1928, a film that received a great deal of media attention, and which was heralded as a confirmation that Canada could produce an appealing popular cinema of its own. In November 1928 the Toronto Star declared,

The first night audiences left the theatre with the knowledge that it had been done, and satisfied that the cliché that "you can't make pictures in Canada" may be regarded as discredited propaganda from now on.⁶⁴

Yet the film failed to captivate audiences the way Bairnsfather had hoped, securing only a short run on Canadian cinema screens.

⁶⁴ Toronto Star 13 Nov. 1928: 13.

During the silent period, film was packaged, marketed and sold to women through the creation of movie serials, a star system and star-audience relations, and it became big business, and Canada participated in this evolution as consumers of the American productions that dominated its cinema screens and through a prevailing, though often-times ineffective, nationalism that desired a Canadian national system of film production. Nell Shipman and her production colleagues took advantage of the demand for Canadian productions to successfully produce and sell Back to God's Country. The film was in a way the climax of many years of sporadic filmmaking driven by nationalism. It was also the pinnacle of Shipman's career. At that particular moment, and likely only then, Nell Shipman understood the industry environment and positioned herself effectively within it.

CHAPTER FOUR

Nell After 1925: Ideas and Imagination

With the release of The Girl from God's Country in 1921, Nell Shipman Productions was borderline bankrupt. After selling their house, car and some furnishings, Shipman and Bert Van Tuyle pulled together enough capital to begin production on A Bear, A Boy and A Dog (1921), Little Dramas of the Big Places (1923), and The Grub-Stake (1923).¹ All three films featured animals prominently and played on Shipman's established image. Of the three, only the last was feature-length. Like some of her previous films, The Grub-Stake presents her as a young woman tricked into marrying a villainous older man. Set in the Klondike, the film places Shipman in situations similar to Back to God's Country, and it is her connection with wild animals that ensures her inevitable safety. The film was a last-ditch effort to keep Nell Shipman Productions afloat. Production of The Girl from God's Country, during which Shipman and Van Tuyle went far over the original budget, set the company up for disaster, and they were never able to recoup the losses they experienced.² By 1925 the nail was in the coffin of Nell Shipman Productions, and Shipman found herself isolated from the Hollywood industry in which she had forged a living only six years earlier. It was the result of her geographic separation from the industry, despite her attempt to retain some long-distance relations. Between 1925 and her death in 1970 Shipman made multiple imaginative attempts to break back into the film industry.

¹ Armatage, The Girl from God's Country 212.

² Armatage, The Girl from God's Country 21.

Focusing on niche markets and smaller segments of the industry, she schemed and plotted ways to use her writing and production experience to gain sustaining work. Certainly she was creative in her endeavours, often taking advantage of transformations in the industry and locating alternative film industries, but in the end she was hopelessly behind the continually changing business and failed to negotiate and locate meaningful work.

Shipman's decision in the early 1920s to become an independent filmmaker and form Nell Shipman Productions came at a particular moment in film history when women filmmakers were being systematically forced out of the industry. The studio system had rapidly expanded, and studios were now the dominant producers of American film. The studio system's structured modes of production, distribution and exhibition were suffocating for most women and independent filmmakers. Shipman was not alone; Alice Guy Blaché, Lois Weber and many other women filmmakers saw their careers decline dramatically in the 1920s. In fact, by the late 1920s only one female director, Dorothy Arzner, remained active in the industry and managed to maintain a lengthy and successful career.³ Arzner was an exception within a system that relegated women as creative personnel primarily to acting and writing, as well as traditionally female vocations, such as costume. The studio system was a vertically integrated oligopoly; studios controlled production, distribution and exhibition. It was an assembly-line style of filmmaking, which churned out films and regulated creativity. Douglas Gomery suggests that the studio system operated in such a way that it restricted the participation of independents, noting,

³ Judith Mayne, Directed by Dorothy Arzner (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994) 1.

During the first three decades of the twentieth century, the American film industry evolved a complicated system for handling film production, distribution, and exhibition. This particular system guaranteed its major participants enormous profits, while maintaining effective barriers to keep potential competitors out.⁴

The seeds of the studio system were planted in the early 1910s when feature-length films and star-driven marketing began to develop, and assembly-line filmmaking became common practice.⁵ The same system that built up stars pulled many of them back down. When Paramount formed in 1916, founder Adolph Zukor adopted this style of filmmaking to maximize profits. Paramount went on to be the first to establish national and global distribution systems and to capitalize on this distribution network by block booking, piggybacking B-quality films with more desirable, higher-quality movies to ensure a market for the less obviously attractive titles.⁶ Many other studios followed suit, and within a decade five major studios and three minors were well established. Together, this group of eight studios generated nearly seventy-five percent of the industry's revenue and maintained control over the entire flow of the market.⁷ The studios' ability to control the system meant that most independents – like Shipman – were forced out. The studios' increasingly standardized practices pigeonholed artists and locked them into lengthy contracts with few privileges. Their in-house productions dominated the market. When Louis B. Mayer offered Shipman a seven-year contract as an actress, she turned it down to form Nell Shipman

⁴ Douglas Gomery, *The Hollywood Studio System* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986) 2.

⁵ Pam Cook and Mieke Bernink, *The Cinema Book, Second Edition* (London: BFI Publishing, 1999) 12.

⁶ Cook and Bernink 13.

⁷ Cook and Bernink 11-12.

Productions.⁸ For this fact, Nell Shipman was nothing if not brave and true to her independent inclinations. Yet it also underscores her naiveté about the changing industry environment. Shipman held on to her past successes and wrongly assumed she could imitate them with her own production outfit.

During the 1920s the studio system flourished with the invention of sound. When the Great Depression hit, all the studios felt its effects. Its production schedule manager by Mayer, MGM turned a profit every year between 1930 and 1940, when all other studios posted major losses, and was so successful that it pulled in three-quarters of the industry's profit for a decade and collected thirty percent of the Academy Award nominations.⁹ Frances Marion worked on and off for MGM for years and participated in much of the studio's success, earning the second and third Academy Awards ever given out for screenwriting.¹⁰ Shipman, by contrast, desired to work outside the system, to make it on her own. Who knows where that seven-year contract Mayer offered her might have taken Nell?

Following the bankruptcy of Nell Shipman Productions and the loss of her animals in 1925, Shipman focused on her writing as a possible means of finding work in Hollywood. Writing had been a mainstay in her fluctuating career. Most important, it did not rely upon her star persona, which was now out of fashion. It had been six years since Shipman starred in Back to God's Country, which was her last film to receive wide distribution and acclaim. It was unlikely that she could find work as an actress or filmmaker in the highly centralized and standardized studio system, especially after declining Mayer's offer in order to

⁸ Acker 61.

⁹ Cook and Bernink 17.

¹⁰ Beauchamp 267-268.

remain in Idaho. She returned to the craft that had first opened doors in the industry. Shipman began to write short magazine stories and feature-length screenplays. McCall's magazine published her story, "M'sieu Sweetheart," which was serialized in the magazine in 1929.¹¹ The same year, Shipman turned the story into the full-length novel, Get the Woman. At the same time a producer Nell knew when she worked with First National, Sam Rork, turned the story into a film scenario and requested the rights to the film. Shipman, now out of work for more than four years, had at least learned to take advantage of the opportunities that came her way and readily agreed. She fell back on her standard formula, setting the film in the Canadian North. This new project held great potential; the film was to be Bow's comeback vehicle after a lengthy illness. The film might offer Shipman a way back into the industry from which she had turned away a decade earlier. Clara Bow's return to the screen was a newsworthy event, and famous Hollywood columnist Louella Parsons carried the news in an October 1931 edition of the Los Angeles Examiner: "Clara is greatly enthused over it. She feels 'Get the Woman' is just the sort of thing she has been seeking."¹²

Clara Bow's star power convinced Shipman to accept a smaller payment than she might have expected for the story. Her original price of \$18,000 was trimmed to \$10,000, which Shipman accepted, understanding that the success of the film would influence her future.¹³ In a letter to The Dial Press regarding the publication of a novelized version of the story, she noted, "I accepted the drastic

¹¹ Lincoln MacVeagh, "Letter to Nell Shipman," 11 December 1929, Letters from God's Country, ed. Tom Trusky (Boise, Idaho: Hemingway Western Studies Series, 2003) 27.

¹² Trusky, Letters 47.

¹³ Nell Shipman, "Letter to Grenville Vernon," 20 November 1931, Letters from God's Country, ed. Tom Trusky (Boise, Idaho: Hemingway Western Studies Series, 2003) 48.

cut from \$18,000 to \$10,000 because Clara Bow was to star in the picture and I knew that anything the lady returned to the screen in at this time was bound to have tremendous publicity."¹⁴ Shipman's lack of business savvy and limited knowledge about financial aspects of the industry led her to undervalue her work and accept less than the industry standard. The idea of Clara Bow starring in a Nell Shipman scenario impaired her judgement and resulted in a poor business decision. The book rights were tied to Sam Rork's rights to the film, and in an unfortunate turn of events, which are not entirely apparent, the project fell apart, forcing Shipman to withdraw without payment.

Leaving Get the Woman behind, Shipman needed to find sustaining work. The failure of the project pushed Shipman even further away from the industry and rendered her isolated and incapable of staying current. Instead she began to focus on smaller niche markets, such as magazines. Writing stories, Shipman employed a literary agent based in New York City. Relying on her past success as a guide, many of her stories were about animals and nature. Shipman had difficulty abandoning her works, often slightly revising stories and resubmitting them to magazines. Turning out numerous stories did not help her secure work; magazines rejected her over and over. Her agent, Ann Watkins, wrote her in May 1932 to relay the latest batch of rejections:

My luck on BLACK ICE, MISTER MARY, and HEART OF DENALI has been rotten. The rejections on BLACK ICE have been: Cosmopolitan, McCalls, Liberty, Chicago Tribune, Red Book, Good Housekeeping, Tower Publications, and Clayton Magazines.

¹⁴ Shipman, "Letter to Grenville Vernon," Letters 48.

The rejections on MISTER MARY have been: Ladies Home Journal, Good Housekeeping, Tower, Five Novels Monthly, Country Home, Macfadden, Pictorial Review.

The rejections on HEART OF DENALI are: Photoplay Magazine, Love Story Magazine (Street & Smith), - these since we received of copy of the manuscript from The Dial Press. The former rejections were McCalls, Macfadden, Ladies Home Journal, Red Book, Chicago Tribune, Liberty, Tower Publications, Hollands, Good Housekeeping.¹⁵

Despite widespread rejection, Shipman managed to survive on the meager funds she made from magazines and the generosity of family and friends. Eventually Shipman conceived of an idea that worked. Heartbroken by the loss of her animals and production company, she turned the tragedy into a profit by selling her diary account of the downfall to the Atlantic Monthly for \$200.¹⁶ Casting aside her ego, she detailed the crashing-down of her career for a few hundred dollars. This decision dramatically attests to her desperation during this period, as well as her absolute desire to continue to participate in the arts. There was one thing that Shipman knew: melodrama sold, and, if nothing else, her life between 1920 and 1930 was melodramatic.

She forged on, writing the screenplay Wings in the Dark, about a blind aviator based on Amelia Earhart, in late 1929. Shipman relied on her standard formula; the film featured a seeing-eye dog, which played a key role in the plot. Paramount bought the screenplay, releasing the film in 1935 with Myrna Loy and Cary Grant starring.¹⁷ Wings in the Dark was her final Hollywood project, and her participation in the film's production was so absolutely unvalued that she was not

¹⁵ Ann Watkins, "Letter to Nell Shipman," 4 May 1932, Letters from God's Country, ed. Tom Trusky (Boise, Idaho: Hemingway Western Studies Series, 2003) 51-52.

¹⁶ Shipman, The Silent Screen 160.

¹⁷ Armatage, The Girl from God's Country 307.

credited. Shipman's name also may have been removed due to extensive revisions to her original text. Uncredited work was not extraordinary for the time, but it does underscore Shipman's lack of value in the industry. Her name was no longer a commodity to be sold; she no longer had currency. The studio system and Shipman's poor choices situated her as insignificant to the industry. Her inability to find decent work meant that each year she fell further and further out of step. Film was now a fully established business with accepted and inviolable practices. Shipman no longer had attractive goods to sell. Unaccepted by Hollywood, she became far more creative in her attempts to work within the film industry, moving deeper into further-removed niche markets.

The studio system had begun to crumble in 1933 when President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the National Industrial Recovery Act, encouraging fair competition in the film industry. By 1938 the government filed suit against the studios to bring the oligopoly to an end in what is known as the Paramount suit.¹⁸ By the time the studio system ended, however, it was far too late for many of the women who had helped form the industry. Forced out for not fitting into the studios' mould, and erased from the history books, many of these women struggled to break back into the business while the Paramount suit played out in court. The particular political moment opened up the industry, even if only slightly. Shipman took advantage of the uncertainty of this moment to push open the suffocating boundaries of the studios. As an independent filmmaker, Shipman had become increasingly interested in the documentary form. As a less popular and as less of a mainstream genre, it offered more opportunities for

¹⁸ Cook and Bernink 7.

participation than such forms as feature-length melodrama or comedy, which were dominated by the studio system. Documentaries played in alternative distribution networks, such as schools, and did not rely on mass acceptance from the public, which made them particularly attractive to Shipman. With the inevitable dismantling of the studio system, Shipman parlayed the political environment into an opportunity for the production of documentaries and a potential new career track. In a 1943 proposal for a series of documentary films she wrote,

It has become increasingly evident that a serious bottle-neck – rather, an actual stonewall – exists within the Motion Picture industry, making it well nigh impossible for either Government or independent producer to find outlet [sic] for the type of product which heretofore has been stigmatized as “documentary.”¹⁹

Shipman was intelligent in her bid, linking documentaries to a greater social good by providing “food for the mind and spirit.”²⁰ Her proposal also called for educational films designed to teach young minds “...by the clearly defined contrasts of ‘right way’ and ‘wrong way’ – the mind does not easily forget.”²¹

Documentaries had become a popular independent film form. Tino Balio, in Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939, identifies two distinctive traits of the documentary form:

First, documentaries were distinguished from more prosaic forms of nonfiction (informational or instructional films, newsreels, travelogues) by greater formal ambition and higher social purpose. Second, measured against the fictional cinema of Hollywood,

¹⁹ Nell Shipman, “Cine-Digest,” Letters from God’s Country, ed. Tom Trusky (Boise, Idaho: Hemingway Western Studies Series, 2003) 183.

²⁰ Shipman, “Cine-Digest,” Letters 183.

²¹ Shipman, “Cine-Digest,” Letters 183.

documentary possessed a privileged relation to contemporary social and political events.²²

By tapping into the uncertainty of the industry and combining this with increased public concern about education and the documentary's growing popularity, Shipman creatively pitched her documentary project to maximize its potential success.

Shipman's marketing savvy and desire to work in documentary were apparent as early as 1937, when she tapped into her "Girl from God's Country" image, circulating a press release about "the greatest out-door DOG picture," which she would produce.²³ Shipman had planned to purchase a farm, raise puppies and capture the activities in a documentary film. She attempted to combine her love of filmmaking with her love of animals and her previously established star persona. Shipman seemed unable to let go of this image and failed to comprehend that the industry had passed her by. For this project, she made a particularly distinctive Canadian connection, detailing her documentary as a canine version of the Dionne Quintuplets story, a media craze since their birth in 1934. She asked,

The world had gone mad over five little Canadian babies! In a lesser sense, but none the less cutely, would not a film record of "Five Little Puppies and How they Grew – the QUINT-PUP-LETS" – be a publicity sensation?²⁴

Tying into the strong publicity surrounding the Dionne Quints demonstrates Shipman's cleverness and determination, and that she possessed a certain level

²² Tino Balio, *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1993) 352.

²³ Shipman, "Press Release," *Letters* 105.

²⁴ Shipman, "Press Release," *Letters* 105.

of marketing skills, though they seem limited. She attached her sales pitch to an already newsworthy story, hoping to reach a larger audience than she could alone.

Her witty press release was also designed to secure funding for her dog project and was an obvious appeal for sponsorship. The second half of the release details the various promotional and publicity possibilities for the picture: "The services of the dog Stars can be secured for 'personal appearances' and to 'Paw-o-graph' (or sign!) their photos for their Fans."²⁵ Shipman pulls the entire sales pitch together by soliciting a pet food supplier, concluding, "One of the most important items, if not the most important, will be the feeding of these famous and valuable dogs. Whatever food Miss Shipman and her trainers personally recommend MUST BE GOOD."²⁶ This particular press release marks Shipman's foray into alternative film industries and ancillary sources of income, because magazine stories, novels and mainstream films were no longer viable sources of income, as the last fifteen years had proved.

She was clearly aware of the potential value a sponsorship could bring, if she pitched the dog film properly and generated interest. In 1921 she had employed a similar technique, using the limited budget for a Maxwell car commercial to create the feature-length film, Something New, which featured the car prominently. Unfortunately, Shipman's clever press release and her idea to produce and export a dog picture did not trigger much interest from either the film industry or pet-supply companies. There is no evidence of the film ever reaching

²⁵ Shipman, "Press Release," Letters 106.

²⁶ Shipman, "Press Release," Letters 106.

fruition. The pitch repeats a common pattern in Shipman's career. She continually conceived and concocted plans that would enable her to participate in some facet of the film or arts community. As she became further and further separated from the mainstream, studio system-controlled industry, she was forced to seek out alternative forms, such as documentaries, as potential sources of income and participation. On the whole, however, Shipman displayed a lack of business sense throughout much of her later career, which rendered her unable to find lucrative and meaningful work.

Between 1935 and the mid-1950s Shipman faced extreme financial difficulties while living with her romantic and business partner, Amerigo Serrao.²⁷ They skipped out on rent, left bills unpaid, and moved constantly to avoid collectors.²⁸ Her attempts to produce documentary films were merely a few of the many failed projects she and Serrao concocted. They settled in Norfolk, Virginia, around 1948, the same year the studio system was forced to begin dismantling itself. Ever hopeful (and sometimes naïve), Shipman again recognized the industry's unavoidable transformation and tried to seize on the opportunity. She and Serrao secured work to produce two films for Homeland Pictures Company. Homeland was based in New York, and its interest in Norfolk, Virginia, was "an experiment by a very rich man," in Shipman's words.²⁹ The pictures were to be filmed at various locations in the area. The news was carried in the January 9, 1948, edition of the Norfolk Ledger: "Recent events in

²⁷ Serrao had many aliases, including Peter Varney, Grover Lee and Peter Locke. He was her romantic partner until the mid-1950s.

²⁸ Armatage, The Girl from God's Country 308-309.

²⁹ Nell Shipman, "Letter to Barry Shipman," 15 June 1948, Letters from God's Country, ed. Tom Trusky (Boise, Idaho: Hemingway Western Studies Series, 2003) 199.

the movie industry have opened the door to independent producers and have led directly to the present plans...".³⁰ A large portion of the article was dedicated to Shipman. She was to produce the pictures while Serrao directed. As she did with all her projects, Shipman promoted the productions to her audience with vigour: "I hope we have our cameras here for years and years to tell the rest of this country what you have to offer."³¹ Norfolk was not a hub of film production during the period, which caused Shipman and Serrao's plan to receive more attention than they would have in better-established movie-making centres. In its remoteness, Norfolk as the location of their films was similar to Idaho. It also indicates that she was entirely removed from the mainstream film industry at this point and could only find less secure and far less profitable independent film work in smaller niche markets.

There is evidence that a production was completed. A Shipman film from 1947, The Clam-Digger's Daughter, was found in a private collection and all indications suggest the film was produced in Virginia.³² As well, the "first Virginia-made picture" was mentioned in a Norfolk Ledger article later that year.

³³ The same article publicized a million-dollar movie called The Golden Road that the couple had in the works. For this particular project Shipman relied upon her old Hollywood connections for promotion, guaranteeing that the film's "huge cast would be headed by Hollywood stars."³⁴ It was a promise that Shipman and Serrao were incapable of fulfilling. It had been more than twenty years since

³⁰ Trusky, Letters 193.

³¹ Trusky, Letters 193.

³² Armatage, The Girl from God's Country 343.

³³ Trusky, Letters 194.

³⁴ Trusky, Letters 194.

either had worked in the Hollywood industry, and neither had the necessary connections to draw a Hollywood cast to the Norfolk production. Shipman's Hollywood capital had dried up when she turned down the Mayer deal and chose to form her own production unit. Her career, though moderately successful in the late 1910s, was not significant enough to attract attention to her participation in a picture decades later. In June 1948 Shipman wrote a letter to her son Barry, asking him to write a script for her. An established screenwriter, Barry had written numerous films for Columbia Pictures and was one of her few connections to the mainstream industry. The timing of the letter suggests she had also asked him to write the million-dollar idea, The Golden Road, apparently another failed project, with few indications the film ever reached production.³⁵

Almost a year later Shipman devised of another plan; this one would occupy her for more than a decade. Her Skyvue Aquadrome project was the most grandiose and ambitious of Shipman's schemes. First mentioned in a letter to Barry in February 1949, the Aquadrome was to be a large, dome-shaped theatre capable of seating an audience of 1,500. The building would feature both live theatre and film set against watery backdrops. In her letter, Shipman explained,

The Florida thing is very hot. Land is being interested now, with an idea of our picking and choosing the location best suited. It may turn out to be central South Florida near Silver Springs!!!! I have christened the type of building at last (keep this under hat) Skyvue Aquadrome. Skyvue because of the great dome of the theatre which rolls upon to the Floridian night sky, etc. Aqua because of the moat circling the stage, the "water curtain" and such. Drome

³⁵ Nell Shipman, "Letter to Barry Shipman," 15 June 1948, Letters from God's Country, ed. Tom Trusky (Boise, Idaho: Hemingway Western Studies Series, 2003) 198.

because it will be used for many things besides the original Florida play.³⁶

Shipman may have seen the Aquadrome project as a way of participating in a creative aspect of filmmaking, outside the dominant channels. Her choice of such a grandiose project suggests Shipman's ambitions, but also that she still had not come to terms with her place (or lack thereof) within the industry. After nearly three decades of rejection and failure, she concocted her most expansive and by far least practical venture. She was consumed by the venture, drafting a thirty-page proposal. She was so passionate and resolute about the project that she convinced two engineer acquaintances to leave their jobs and devote themselves full-time to the Aquadrome, which proved an unfortunate move for the engineers.³⁷

Like all Shipman projects, the Aquadrome's development occurred while she drafted proposals for numerous other projects. She created the Shipman Play Company during the same period, hoping to create an organization capable of turning out scripts for film, live theatre and the newest medium, television. Her slogan was "Fifty for '50," signifying her desire to produce fifty pieces in 1950 alone.³⁸ For Shipman, ever the optimist, this endeavour was far too adventurous, large, and costly an undertaking for it ever to be successful, and it was significantly out of step with the realities of Shipman's life. Detailing her plans, Shipman's exuberance for television is palpable in a nearly five-page letter to

³⁶ Nell Shipman, "Letter to Barry Shipman," 6 February 1949, Letters from God's Country, ed. Tom Trusky (Boise, Idaho: Hemingway Western Studies Series, 2003) 200.

³⁷ Shipman, "Letter to Barry Shipman," 6 February 1949, Letters from God's Country, ed. Tom Trusky (Boise, Idaho: Hemingway Western Studies Series, 2003) 200.

³⁸ Nell Shipman, "Letter to Barry Shipman," 9 July 1949, Letters from God's Country, ed. Tom Trusky (Boise, Idaho: Hemingway Western Studies Series, 2003) 206-207.

Barry, throughout which she debates the company's name, sales pitches and promotional slogans. She closed the note enthusiastically,

Alright, Shipman Play Co., unless you have a better. New York address 49 West 84th; Hollywood – ? “50 for '50.” “Don't be a shipping clerk!” “Be a producer. Be original. Roll your own!”

P.S. All one acters to be copyrighted by the Shipman Play Company.³⁹

Two months later the scheme was thwarted, and Shipman bleakly wrote, “Now afraid I must do a reverse. I've hung out for the one-acters being 'live' as you know and have been blasted on all sides because this seems impractical.”⁴⁰

Once again her innovation and creativity were stonewalled by the industry that once briefly had welcomed her. Shipman failed to research and plan her projects, instead tackling them head-on with little knowledge of what was required for success. But Shipman's originality, ingenuity and hope are undeniable. Despite rampant rejection and dismal results, she continued to try to pursue meaningful work by recasting her role in the industry and attempting to evolve with the changing business environment.

With the collapse of another production company, Shipman returned to her Skyvue Aquadrome project, conceiving of everything from seat locations to backdrops to marketing plans. She hired architect William E. Gilmore to draw the blueprints. The design was extravagant for its time, featuring elevators, pulleys, theatre screens and waterfalls, all designed to add fluidity between media and forms of storytelling. She enlisted the help of filmmaker C.A. Stapler, who had

³⁹ Nell Shipman, “Letter to Barry Shipman,” 9 July 1949, Letters from God's Country, ed. Tom Trusky (Boise, Idaho: Hemingway Western Studies Series, 2003) 208.

⁴⁰ Nell Shipman, “Letter to Barry Shipman,” 10 September 1949, Letters from God's Country, ed. Tom Trusky (Boise, Idaho: Hemingway Western Studies Series, 2003) 209.

had more success in newsreels than feature films, and who became nearly bankrupt from helping Shipman and Serrao financially. The excessiveness of the project gave Stapler pause. Afraid of its diverse art forms he wrote, "I see very black for an extensive gamble like the Aquadrome. Films play to a much larger public, cost less, can be exported, and I know about making them."⁴¹ Despite Stapler's caution, Shipman invested heavily in the project, pitching it to anyone who would listen. She assured Stapler that the Aquadrome held much potential: "Don't be in a hurry to write out the Aquadrome show." She also fell back on the "million-dollar" film she had initially developed with Serrao in 1949, The Golden Road. A series of letters throughout 1960 and 1961 reveal that Shipman herself eventually wrote the screenplay.

She was so utterly convinced of the Aquadrome's future that she wrote Walt Disney in 1961 to offer the project to the Disney corporation. Her proposal was comprehensive, detailing the first three Aquadrome shows, the soundtrack and screen projections. Three weeks later she received a familiar response. Disney declined involvement in the project, listing the various ways his company had already conceived of and implemented all of her ideas, chastising her, "First may I say that your description of the method conceived for the purpose of 'telling a show on stage, live' is not new to us."⁴² That Shipman was not aware of Disney's preexisting shows and theatres – or that she might have thought Disneyland might not have been thought to be proprietary by its innovator and

⁴¹ C.A. Stapler, "Letter to Nell Shipman," 23 February to 5 March 1961, Letters from God's Country, ed. Tom Trusky (Boise, Idaho: Hemingway Western Studies Series, 2003) 255.

⁴² William B. Dover, "Letter to Nell Shipman," 29 March 1961, Letters from God's Country, ed. Tom Trusky (Boise, Idaho: Hemingway Western Studies Series, 2003) 261.

owner – aptly indicates that she was entirely isolated from the industry during this period. She naively believed her ideas and inventions were unique, and that they would help her reenter the industry.

With this final refusal she dropped the Aquadrome project entirely and devised a plan for a small chain of theatres in shopping malls. This project was perhaps the most feasible of her ideas and was grounded in the connection between shopping and culture first established in the silent era, but with a consideration of the increased mobility of consumers in the post-World War II era. Always aware of the necessity of marketing and promotion, Shipman sold the project as a means of advertising goods and services for sale in the surrounding stores:

Interspersed between [the programs] will be shown filmed advertising of special bargains, imports, or other interesting attractions which tie-in with the Shopping Center's stores. Also "spot" announcements with color slides on the screen. In the lobby and lounge and at the proscenium sides – spacing allowing – will be exhibited display stands...⁴³

If nothing else, she was brave and willing to recast her ideas into new projects, though most of her ideas yielded few positive results. The studio system had altered the industry completely. It forced out many women who had previously established viable careers and put in place a complex series of acceptable practices. Attempting to work outside the industry proved more difficult than Shipman had anticipated. Unarmed with a proper knowledge of the business, Shipman attempted to revive, reinvent and rescue her career as it

⁴³ Nell Shipman, "Center 16," Letters from God's Country, ed. Tom Trusky (Boise, Idaho: Hemingway Western Studies Series, 2003) 265-266.

moved further and further away from the mainstream industry. She was resourceful and ever hopeful, but she was never able to fully participate.

The next and final decade of Shipman's career was the most depressing of her life. The death of Serrao in 1960 affected her deeply, despite their separation before his passing. She returned to her first love, writing novels and screenplays, which were rejected and overlooked by both the film and publishing industries. Desperate, she applied to the Motion Picture Relief Fund for financial support and received this somber letter dated July 16, 1963, in reply:

Thank you for your letter of July 2 outlining your professional history. It sounds most interesting and varied. We apologize for not acknowledging the material before this but we held it to present to the Board in session on July 16.

Your brochure indicates you started writing for pictures in 1912. From then until 1924 (12 years) you wrote, directed and acted in films.

With the exception of 1929, when you wrote *Wings in the Dark* – which is mentioned in the Motion Picture Almanac of 1936-37 – we cannot see where you had any further association with the motion picture industry. Actually the major part of your writing since 1929 has not been used by the studios. Therefore, it was the consensus of the Board that they could not grant your request.⁴⁴

This letter must have been the final declaration of Shipman's inability to find meaningful and financially viable work in the industry; it solidified her relegation from the industry she adored and rendered her insignificant. Despite years of ideas, imagination and ingenuity, she could never re-establish her film career. Before her death in 1970, she began working on her autobiography, The Silent Screen and My Talking Heart. That Shipman ended her story after the dissolution of Nell Shipman Productions and the loss of her animals speaks volumes about how she regarded her career and life after 1925. The deep

⁴⁴ Shipman, "Center 16," Letters 270-271.

shadows of Shipman's lost career and the depth of her despair – she took to her bed for weeks at a time in absolute melancholy in the late 1930s – may not offer the heroic mythology of other early women filmmakers so revered in much feminist writing, but there is unqualified value in examining her career for the understanding it yields about the complex system of centralized practices that came to be the film industry, and the difficulties that many women and independent filmmakers, such as Shipman, had in sustaining a living in the industry in which they had once so actively participated.

CONCLUSION

There they go
Free from woe
Forgetting me
Aw, gee!¹

These are the words Nell Shipman chose to conclude her autobiography, The Silent Screen and My Talking Heart. For Peter Morris they signify how the film industry passed Shipman by.² It is a reading partially reflective of this study's central argument, but not one that takes into account Shipman's agency throughout her career. She made choices and decisions that were fueled by the industry atmosphere, but which in the end were her own. Though her doggerel actually pertains to the loss of her animals – they appear in a letter to Barry, reassuring him that the animals will be well taken care of by the San Diego Zoo – Nell, always a fan of metaphors, clearly personalized these sentiments.

A portion of Nell Shipman's career occurred during a significant period in the histories of American and Canadian cinemas, during which film evolved from a wide-open entrepreneurship in an industry improvising with new techniques and technology into a cartel with a refined system of production practices and international reach. In the United States this system was absolute and tied to major studios that controlled the industry. In Canada, the industry was less intricately structured and involved in production of feature films to a much lesser degree but was still closely linked to a developing national system that valued Canadian content and incorporated a desire for domestically produced films.

¹ Shipman, The Silent Screen 166.

² Peter Morris, "The Taming of the Few" 219.

These systems developed dramatically over the course of a decade. While they evolved and quickly changed the production environment, Shipman attempted to produce her own films, but with little success. Creatively driven and an inventive producer, she failed to ground her ideas in the current industry environment and was often a few paces behind.

Shipman has received a significant amount of academic attention and notice in the popular press, culminating in Kay Armatage's The Girl from God's Country, published in 2003. At nearly 400 pages, Armatage's account of Shipman is thorough, but certainly not the final word about her career or the conditions that shaped it. I have attempted to separate myself from Armatage's work – which often turns to hero-worship to the detriment of her study – by using Shipman's career as a case study to understand trends and transformations in the Canadian and American silent-film industries. In contrast, a primary focus of Armatage's study is the way Shipman's films can be interpreted textually and understood in relation to feminist film theory. Moreover, she says little about Shipman's career after 1925, using extended passages from letters she wrote in 1939 to reveal the particularities of her life over the course of only one year, followed by fewer than ten pages to cover the remaining three decades and to conclude the book. Shipman's abundant letters from 1920 through 1961 reveal the landscape of her post-Hollywood career, making it possible to relate these events back to the business focus of the industries and Shipman's difficulties in negotiating a role within them.

Armatage's study of Shipman fits into a wider trend in the popular press that identifies Nell as a pioneer, heralding her as Canada's long-lost screen queen. In Canada she has been classified as a pioneer, a hero, and an icon, all words from which I have worked to separate her. "Forgotten Actress was Once Huge Star"; "Film Pioneer Treated Animals as Equals"; "Film Pioneer Had Pluck"³: such headlines aptly indicate how Shipman has been constructed in popular culture. Yet the headlines seem at odds with her actual career. Shipman was not a huge star or a pioneer, but framing her as such reinforces the present-day desire for a popular Canadian cinema. She is proof that Canada has a filmmaking history and that there is a popular cinema that Canada might call its own. The desire for a successful domestic production system found expression through Shipman, who becomes a signifier of the early potential for Canadian film. This connection is very much in line with the calls for Canadian content in the late 1920s when Back to God's Country and The Great Shadow were produced. Canadian cinemas are still dominated by foreign (American) product, and nationalist battle cries for a cinema of our own continue. Shipman's present-day appeal is due in part to the appeal of an iconic female as a prototype of feature filmmaking in Canada, but also because of the parallels between production in the silent period and perceptions of contemporary Canadian cinema, which include the dominance of American films in Canadian cinemas and a production environment that is barely self-sustaining.

³ John McKay, St. John's Telegram 19 Oct. 2003: B5. Barry Grant, St. Catharines Standard 2 Dec. 1999: B1. Alan Hustak, Montreal Gazette 23 Aug. 2003: 1.5.

Shipman was also part of the development of the popular in the United States as an actress and screenwriter active during the formation of a system designed to create and maintain an audience for cinema. The popular evolved quite differently in the United States. It was not spurred on by a basic desire for an economically viable domestic industry the way it was in Canada. Instead, the desire for a popular cinema was translated into sophisticated practices set in place to attract middle- and upper-class audiences to the cinemas and to foster repeat consumption to ensure the long-term viability of the industry. In the United States the popular was wholly linked to profit. In Canada revenue was a significant consideration, particularly for individual producers, such as George Brownridge or Ernest Shipman, but film's potential to promote nationalism was romanticized and heralded in much the same way it is in the present-day Canadian production environment, which is heavily supported by government funding. Much present-day industry rhetoric underscores the need for a Canadian cinema for the sake of nationalism. The Department of Canadian Heritage's From Script to Screen: New Policy Directions for Canadian Feature Film, which outlines the goal of capturing five percent of the domestic cinema box office, suggests that "film matters because it provides a window on history and a mirror of society, allowing us to reflect on the past and assess the present."⁴ That is, film is important to Canada because it can strengthen a national identity.

Shipman's career coincided with a time of significant change in popular culture in both the United States and Canada, and my arguments are grounded

⁴ Department of Canadian Heritage, From Script to Screen: New Policy Directions for Canadian Feature Film (Hull, Quebec: Department of Canadian Heritage, 2000) 3.

in the reality of Shipman's life, in her struggles, failures and imaginative attempts to participate. Her normalcy, the way we can understand the industries' growth towards business, the development of popular culture, and how these changes influenced the careers of women and independent filmmakers through her career are what make Shipman intriguing and instructive. Using intertextual methods I have approached Shipman within the framework provided by feminist revisionist theory, but with the goal to extend it, revise it and filter out its tendency to force titles and lay claims that may not be appropriate. I have coupled this strategy with an approach to Canada's national cinema that draws on Peter Morris's, widening this method to incorporate a view of the American industry, as well as considering the role women played as producers and consumers of film in the development of the industry. Between 1910 and 1920 the American industry transformed dramatically into centralizing and standardizing production practices. The targeted marketing of films and filmgoing towards women and the commercialization of film into vertically integrated systems characterized both the American and Canadian industries. Shipman was able to forge a living during the mid-1910s because she fit into woman-centred production and consumption trends in the United States. In Canada, she made use of the country's desire for domestic product by producing a movie that was not only filmed in Canada, but which also contained Canadian settings and references within the narrative, and which could be sold as Canada-made. She took advantage of particular moments in each industry's development, but by 1925 she was out of sync with the American industry's rigid parameters. Living in the United States and

divorced from Ernest, she was far too removed from Canada to capitalize on any residual Canadian nationalism, and she did not possess her ex-husband's business savvy.

While my study diverges from Armatage's, it certainly is not the last word on Nell Shipman either. Her career and life still hold much more to be unearthed and can offer insight into areas of the American and Canadian industries other than those I have been able to cover in these pages. I have not worked textually with her films, partly because Armatage and Christopher Gittings have both approached her works in this way, offering extensive analyses of Back to God's Country in particular, and partly because textual analyses would not have furthered my particular arguments and study, which focus more on patterns and changes in the film industries. However, Shipman's films no doubt could be textually dissected with instruments different from those employed by Armatage and Gittings. For instance, there are links between her films (and other woman-centred films of the time) and the woman's picture, which developed in the 1930s and 1940s and which featured such stars as Bette Davis and Barbara Stanwyck. These films were produced for and targeted to a female audience just as movie serials were in the 1910s, and they featured women-centred narratives. Also, Shipman's career after 1925 was checkered with ideas and inventions that I have not dealt with here at length, even more than the few I have discussed. Independent studies of the various arenas of her career – director-producer, actress and writer – are also possible. She wrote extensively after 1925, selling stories to magazines and publishing novels. Her body of writing is worthy of

examination on its own. My study also has implications for further research about women and independent filmmakers other than Shipman. Archival and intertextual research of the period will surely reveal other actresses and writers with experiences similar to Shipman's that may resonate with my arguments here or offer alternative conclusions.

This intertextual study of Nell Shipman and cinema of her time uses Shipman's careers as a catalyst to investigate the atmospheres of the American and Canadian film industries during the silent period, their similarities and the ways they diverge. It traces the commercialization of film, how film culture and movies were marketed on both sides of the border, and Shipman's relative abilities to negotiate the centralizing and ever-transforming business landscape. Clearly, the cinema transformed from an open industry into a system of standardized mechanisms of production, distribution and exhibition. While Shipman found modest success in her early career, her difficulties in transforming and understanding and working within the parameters of the industries ultimately rendered her powerless. Yet Shipman's overwhelming failures do not negate her value to film history. The very fact that she worked, schemed, and attempted to participate in any form possible marks her career as significant and historically meaningful.

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