

Dr. Berrettini

Film History II

March 20th, 2023

Ida Lupino

The film industry, like many other industries in the 1950s, was not a welcoming place for women. While there were certainly opportunities for women on screen, behind the camera was a whole other matter. In an industry rampant with sexism, working as a director seemed impossible for women, but one woman was able to overcome these obstacles. Ida Lupino is an exceptional individual who broke through these prejudices and became a trailblazer for female directors in the Hollywood studio system, and whose contributions have shaped the orientation of the film industry today. Her films and her career are very important to examine both as products of their time and independently, because while they are certainly essential to look at in the landscape of 1950s Hollywood, they are also incredibly significant in their own right.

Between 1943-1949, there was not a single film directed by a woman in Hollywood (Dixon). In the times before the war, while the film industry was still developing, many women were on the ground floor; “most screenwriters and editors were women,” (Pirlot, 9). Eventually, in the 1940s there was a shift, and many women were ousted from the industry. The reasoning for this shift was that the introduction of sound had made the motion picture “too technical” for women to be able to meaningfully contribute (Pirlot,9). Certain branches of the film industry were still available for women, such as acting or costume design, but as a whole, women were almost completely absent behind the scenes. Being a female director was an almost unachievable feat, but Ida Lupino broke barriers and directed several feature films at a time when that was unheard of.

Lupino got her start as an actress, and first appeared in the British film *Her First Affaire* in 1933. She appeared in several other films in Britain in that same year, before signing a contract with Paramount Pictures and relocating to the U.S. She appeared in several films throughout the 1930s and early 1940s but soon realized that acting was not her true calling- directing was. She got her first opportunity to direct in *Not Wanted* (1949), when Elmer Clifton, the director, had a heart attack a few days after shooting began. Lupino stepped in as director but was uncredited. Now armed with experience, Lupino went on to direct several films, many of which contained biting social critique- *Outrage* (1950) contained a non-sensationalized depiction of rape, one of the first Hollywood films to do so (Dixon); *The Hitch-Hiker* (1953), a noir film about male violence; and *The Bigamist* (1953), her first film she directed as well as starred in, about infidelity. In addition to her work as an actress and director, Lupino was also a producer, and created her own production company- the Filmakers. Initially named Emerald Productions, the company was founded by Lupino and her husband at the time, Collier Young (Dixon). The Filmakers was some of her most important work, even being noted as “the high point of Lupino’s long career” (Dixon). The Filmakers made eight feature films, with six of them being directed by Lupino herself. This was how Lupino got her first chance to direct- *Not Wanted* was a Filmakers film. The film is about an unmarried woman giving her child up for adoption, which back then was a controversial topic (Dixon). Many of the Filmakers films are similar, covering taboo issues and bringing a new perspective to them. The Filmakers eventually went out of business following Lupino and Young’s divorce, but not before kickstarting Lupino’s career as a director and producing several noteworthy films.

After *The Hitch-Hiker*, Lupino did not have the opportunity to direct another feature film for many years, instead directing several TV shows for a few years. It wasn’t until 1966’s *The*

Trouble With Angels that Lupino got to demonstrate her skill as a film director once again. “It was clearly sexism that got her the assignment,” writes Dixon, noting that hiring a woman director to direct a film about women with an all-female cast was not a particularly bold executive decision, writing off the movie as a ‘woman’s film’. However, Lupino excelled in this film, and *The Trouble with Angels* is seen as one of her strongest works. The film is based on Jane Trahey’s 1962 memoir “Life with Mother Superior”, and was Lupino’s first time working with an all-female cast. The film was received well by critics and made enough money to earn a sequel that Lupino did not direct. The film centers around a catholic school run by an order of nuns, and two teenage girls attending the school who cause a great amount of trouble for themselves and the nuns. The film is noteworthy for being entirely about a community of women and their own struggles with identity and belonging (Morra); men are hardly present in the film at all. Hayley Mills stars as Mary Clancy, a rebellious girl, who repeatedly pulls pranks and gets herself and her best friend Rachel (June Harding) into trouble with the nuns. Mary is often at odds with the Mother Superior (Rosalind Russell), but over the course of the film, we see Mary become more receptive to her teachings while Mother Superior grows more fond of her. Pirlot notes the film as being particularly compelling due to its emphasis on the “female rite of passage” (60), a trope often overlooked in the previous decades of male-dominated film, and a theme that is still in the minority in films today. *The Trouble with Angels* would be the last film Lupino directed, though she continued directing TV for many years after.

The Hitch-Hiker is another of Lupino’s most famous works, and reportedly one of her favorites (Dixon). It is almost entirely different from *The Trouble with Angels*. It consists of two men on a road trip quickly gone wrong as they are overtaken by a wanted killer and tormented throughout the course of the film. It is a suspense film, a genre Lupino eventually began to favor

over social critique due to her immense talent for it (Dixon). *The Hitch-Hiker*, somewhat based on the true story of William Cook, is characterized by its intimate close-ups, use of wide shots taken on location in the harsh California desert, and classic noir lighting (Dixon). The film is a masterclass in suspense, building tension throughout the film as two men are psychologically tormented and their chances for escape come and go before their eyes. Their story is juxtaposed with U.S. and Mexican police trying to quickly track them down before the killer is tipped off and flees the country. *The Hitch-Hiker* is also noteworthy for being the “first American mainstream Film Noir directed by a woman” (Antonelli), earning it a place on the National Film Registry (Loc.gov).

Though quite different in topic, Lupino’s films deal in similar commentaries of gender. *The Hitch-Hiker* comments on male violence and cruelty- the antagonist, Myers, has a simple objective, to get to a ferry that will take him to Guaymas, where he can make his escape from the police. He takes the protagonists, Collins and Bowen, hostage, and forces them to drive him to his destination. However, rather than just forcing them to drive him where he wants to go, Myers delights in tormenting his hostages, forcing them to jump through hoops to please him under threat of death. In one scene, he gives Bowen a gun, and forces him to shoot a can out of Collins’ hand a long distance away, threatening that if he doesn’t, he’ll just shoot him himself. Myers’ doesn’t do this to further his own motives- it doesn’t benefit him in escaping from the police. He does this to establish dominance over the two men, to make them afraid. He wants them to know that he is in charge. This type of male dominance could be similar to how Lupino felt working in a man’s world; that some men do things to instill fear in those around them, rather than rely on the strength of their own work. In *The Trouble with Angels*, we see Lupino’s commentaries on gender from the opposite direction- an all women cast rather than an all male one. In the

IUCinema video essay “The Female Gaze in Ida Lupino's ‘The Trouble with Angels’”, the author discusses the female gaze present in the film, and how Mary’s decision to join the sisterhood is less centered on a religious perspective and instead on her “discovering an alternative to marriage and motherhood.” Mary chooses to join the nuns out of her desire to live in “a world of female relationships and female intimacy.” (IUCinema). This would not necessarily be a contentious decision today, but in the 1960s, it was not a popular sentiment. We see a life almost completely absent of men depicted in a positive light, and female friendships are portrayed as being as complex and nuanced as male ones. Despite existing in such different genres, both of these films have a lot to say on how we view gender.

Lupino herself also had a lot to say on her struggles with femininity in a male dominated industry; “I retain every feminine trait. Men prefer it that way,” (girlsdofilm) As a woman in a position of power, especially in charge of men, Lupino felt that she could not sacrifice her femininity, as “[men are] more co-operative if they see that fundamentally you are of the weaker sex.” In order for her authority to be respected on set, she needed men to view her as the pinnacle of womanhood, and not interpret her as a woman assuming the role of a man. “Her gender was just a factor that got in the way,” girlsdofilm notes. Her strategy was to ‘play by the rules’ enough so that she could tell the stories she wanted to tell in an industry that was hesitant to let her tell them. This is an unfortunate reality for many women in positions of authority even today- you are faced with the decision to either coddle the people who do not want you to succeed due to your gender, or fight back against their prejudices and risk ostracization. While unfortunate, Lupino’s recognition of the position she was in is interesting to look back on. Especially seeing as she was not just in the minority of female directors, but essentially *alone*- she had no one else to ally herself with. “Perhaps she knew how to play by the rules but subvert them too,”

girlsdofilm writes- though it is a controversial strategy, it worked out well enough for her in the end.

Ida Lupino was an incredible director during a time when being in charge of a crew of men as a female director was unheard of. She was a successful actress before deciding her true talents lied in directing, a much harder role to take on as a woman. Her work as a director and producer featured important topics that challenged norms and encouraged audiences to examine them with new eyes. Lupino broke many barriers and had a successful career despite the industry being hostile to women with her same aspirations, and was a pioneer of women's film. She told stories that she wanted to tell, and used her films to make commentaries on gender. Her films are fantastic contributions to the tapestry of film history, and her works deserve praise for revolutionizing the film industry.

Works Cited

Antonelli, Louis. "IDA LUPINO'S the HITCH-HIKER (1953) FILM RESTORATION (1993 to 1997)." *Vimeo.com*, vimeo.com/115625848. Accessed 25 Feb. 2023.

Custodio, Isabel, and Anne Morra. "Her Way | Magazine | MoMA." *The Museum of Modern Art*, 2 Aug. 2019, www.moma.org/magazine/articles/130.

Dixon, Wheeler Winston. "Lupino, Ida." *Senses of Cinema*, Apr. 2009, www.sensesofcinema.com/2009/great-directors/ida-lupino/.

girlsdofilm. "The Hitch-Hiker: Ida Lupino's Economical Noir." *Girls Do Film*, 1 Feb.

2015, girlsdofilm.wordpress.com/2015/02/01/the-hitch-hiker-ida-lupinos-economical-noir/.

“Hooray for Hollywood (December 1998) - Library of Congress Information Bulletin.”

Www.loc.gov, Dec. 1998, www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/9812/film.html.

IUCinema, and Laura Ivins. “The Female Gaze in Ida Lupino’s ‘the Trouble with Angels.’” *YouTube*, 17 Sept. 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=TY4xIq3pMXM.

Pirlot, Clémentine. *Working Women in 1940s Hollywood*.

clem.dev/img/Memoire_working_women_M1.pdf. Accessed 24 Feb. 2023.