closure and explanation that marks off this kind of filmmaking from the Hollywood style.

Alice Guy-Blaché and Lois Weber

Maya Deren was a woman who made films that spoke to the feminine. Extremely independent, Deren's films did not depend upon the studios to finance and distribute them. Since the core of our study is theatrical narrative film, we need to consider how women have fared in that realm. The answer is simple and unhappy: not well.

Two of the earliest filmmakers were women. One was French, Alice Guy-Blaché, who, after making films in France, came to America and set up her own production company in 1910. Another was Lois Weber, who, in 1916, articulated a strong statement of auteurism. "A real director should be absolute" in her control of a film, she wrote, while she was making progressive films on contemporary social issues. Both of these women made films in which women played a more active role than usual. Weber—whose career lasted into the twenties—may have been slightly more adventurous.

Her Two Wise Wives (1921) starts with a lovely image of a couple against a sunet and a title that says "our story should begin that way..." It then presents her heroine as a completely domesticated woman—"a martyred kind of wife who lives only for her husband..." Pipe smoking, book-reading husband and his knitting wife are shown in separate shots. She cleans up his smelly pipe ashes, and he moves into a flashback in which he recalls an earlier flame who didn't mind his smoking. But, back in the present, he relents and offers to wear the slippers his wife knitted for him, which he hates. The scene shifts to another wife, selfish and calculating: "A very successful wife." She performs that role. Much intrigue follows, letters, misconceptions, and at the end, the wives perform various acts of contrition. But on the way, there is an emphasis on women's power, some reference to the politics of the day, and a lovely scene in which the two wives make up to each other—a rare sequence, even then, of women's friendship. The film is shot carefully and with the intent to focus on the women. While it may not be a large step from female stereotyping, it does at least bring its female characters to the foreground and honor their personalities.

Dorothy Arzner

A later woman director was Dorothy Arzner, who, like many women in Hollywood production, started as an editor and a screenwriter. She began directing in 1927 and made seventeen films through 1943. Some of her works—especially Christopher Strong (1933) and Dance, Girl, Dance (1940)—speak in complex and knowing ways about women and their reduced place in the culture. They address the ways genders are shifting cultural constructs (in Christopher Strong, the main character, played by Katharine Hepburn, spends much of her time dressed as a boy) and how women understand their status as things to be looked at by men. In one of the most celebrated feminist moments in film, one of the female performers in Dance, Girl, Dance talks to her audience, expressing her outrage at being the object of their gaze. It is a rare moment when a woman is permitted to speak her understanding of what film and gender performance are about from a woman's perspective.

Ida Lupino

Ida Lupino was an actress in many films from the thirties through the fifties (some of her best are Raoul Walsh's High Sierra and Michael Curtiz's The Sea Wolf, both 1941; and Nicholas Ray's On Dangerous Ground, 1952). She wanted control of her work, but instead of fleeing the country and filing a lawsuit against her studio, as the actress Bette Davis had done and lost in the thirties, Lupino, at that moment in the history of the studios in the early fifties when contracts were running out and the monopolistic control the studios had wielded for so many years was beginning to dwindle, formed her own production companies so that she could direct her own films.

Lupino was a canny businesswoman as well as a good filmmaker. She also understood the cultural state of the decade in which she worked. In interviews, she always played up her role as mother and family woman, and she spoke about her directing talents as being largely passive and deferential. In the fifties, a woman might conceivably find herself in a traditionally male role, but might also find it necessary to use the more comfortable discourse of the homemaker, who—in this case—just happens to be a filmmaker as well.

Lupino's films are, at first sight, very much in the manner of fifties noir. Their subjects are, often, lower-middle-class men put in bizarre situations. But there can be an interesting switch. The Hitch-Hiker (1953) has no female characters. It concerns two men out on a fishing trip who are kidnapped by a sadistic madman and driven through Mexico until the kidnapper is caught. In place of female characters, the two kidnapped men, Gil Bovan (Frank Lovejoy) and Roy Collins (Edmund O'Brien), are forced into passive, childlike, or—in the terms of cultural conventions—"woman-like" situations. They are almost in thrall to their crazy kidnapper, who taunts them for being "soft" and thinking about each other's welfare. At the end, freed of their captor (whom Roy finally beats up, after the madman has been handcuffed by the police), the two family men walk into the darkness. Gil puts his arm around Roy and tells him, "It's all right now, Roy, it's all right."

This is certainly not the only film by a man or a woman in which male characters show some affection and care for each other. However, it is not a male bonding film, because the characters do not work as a "team" or share their joy.
in the absence of women, despite the fact that no women are present. Both characters are oppressed by their condition: they cannot escape it, and they remain good, middle-class family men. Even though, early in the film, Roy wants to find prostitutes in Mexico, Gil refuses, in fact pretends to be asleep while this is all going on. It is suggested that Roy's would-be diversion is what put them in the path of the mad hitch-hiker. Precisely these kinds of subtleties mark this as a film made by a woman: that the men get into trouble because they want to chase women; because the men are reduced to passive, even weeping childlike characters; because, despite the momentary thoughts of extramarital play, they remain attached to their unseen families through the end. Within the tough, hard lines and rigorous compositions of late noir, Lupino manages to see masculine softness and vulnerability, mock these qualities just a little, and indicate a strength that comes from places other than male braggadocio and a pumped-up sense of the heroic.

There's a similar reversal in The Bigamous (1953), a film that shows Lupino's talents at composing and framing sequences which achieve a proximity to her characters in ways that quietly but markedly reveal emotional states. The film is structured in flashbacks as Harry (Edmond O'Brien, again, who with Frank Lovejoy were icons of the fifties ordinary man) takes two wives. Lupino creates a complexity here that belies the sleaziness of the story. Harry's first wife, Eve, can't conceive a child and turns to running Harry's business. This is a major and ugly fifties stereotype: the childless woman must transfer her maternal yearnings to "man's work" in order to be fulfilled, thereby forgoing her femininity. It is even suggested by Harry that he and his wife don't have sex anymore. But Lupino refuses to take this on face value. The Eve she depicts is a loving wife who wants to adopt a child and run a business. Harry, who often has to travel to Los Angeles, is shown as lonely and alienated. He falls in love with, impregnates, and marries a waitress he meets in L.A., Phyllis (played by Lupino).

The melodramatic potential of this conflict—especially when Harry's secret is discovered by the man investigating their adoption request—is underplayed. In this film, Lupino is interested in gazing closely at both male and female faces of loss and loneliness. She condemns none of the characters and gives their neediness equal attention. Even more than The Hitch-Hiker, the male character is endowed with what, in conventional film, are considered female traits; shifting emotions, vulnerability, failings, even weakness. Male directors too created "sensitive" men, and we'll examine the phenomenon in detail in Chapter 7. But Ida Lupino, the only female director of the decade—of many decades—understood that gender was not something defined by the movies, only stereotyped by them. Unlike many other filmmakers, she can show sympathy to all her characters and create a film that touches upon such a taboo issue as The Bigamous: sympathy across the board, an understanding of what men and women might need and even get, were it not for the demands of their culture and gender.

Women Filmmakers Today

With the end of the old studio system and the rise of the feminist movement, there was a hope that filmmaking would be more welcoming to films made by and about women. There seemed to be some opening in the seventies and eighties. Some male directors—perhaps most notably Martin Scorsese in Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore (1974)—attempted to portray women freeing themselves from intolerable domestic situations. But, as in Alice, most of these films decided that their women characters had only to find a "better" man, thereby re-creating the traditional narrative closure of heterosexual union.

There was a brief flurry of opportunity for women directors in the eighties and early nineties. Diverse filmmakers undertook a variety of approaches to women's issues, such as Susan Seidelman in Desperately Seeking Susan (1985) and Making Mr. Right (1987), a film that suggested the perfect man had to be constructed like a robot. Donna Deitch, whose Desert Hearts we mentioned earlier, touched on lesbian themes. Barbara Streisand, particularly in films such as Yentl (1983) and The Prince of Tides (1991), used melodrama to present images of strong women. In House of the Spirits (1993), Nancy Savoca created an extraordinary and surreal film about ethnicity and the feminine. Kathryn Bigelow, most especially in Strange Days (1995) (cowritten and coproduced by James Cameron), tried to alter the action genre in ways that redirected male centrality and the focus of the male gaze. Strange Days is set in a apocalyptic L.A. at the end of the millennium. The people are up in arms, and the cops are out of control. In the midst of this chaos she creates a technological fantasy in which a recording device worn on a person's head can record and play back experiences as if they were actually occurring. One of these recordings is of a woman being raped, with the recording device placed on her head to capture her terror. The result is a gruesome sequence, and only a woman filmmaker, I think, could have created it in a manner that downplays the inherently exploitative elements and emphasizes how horrible the act is to the woman involved.

The film's "hero" is an African American woman who is in love with a white man, who is definitely not a hero but a kind of human punching bag. In the climax of the uprising, and despite the fact that Bigelow seems to yield to convention by introducing the patriarchal figure of a good police commissioner to set the cops right, this couple emerges, suddenly and openly in love. They kiss—a kiss between a white male and a strong African American woman, a kiss that is simply given and revealed to the audience, without commentary, without sensationalism, in a way that suggests that all the gun play, all the violence and