

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by film historian Dr. Shelley Stamp, a professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Her books include *Movie-Struck Girls: Women and Motion Picture Culture After the Nickelodeon*, and *Lois Weber in Early Hollywood*. So let's start with an introduction - who was Lois Weber?

SS: Well, Lois Weber was one of the most famous filmmakers of the early Hollywood period that very few people have heard of. She was, in her time, considered one of the three great minds of early Hollywood, alongside D.W. Griffith and Cecil B. DeMille. Most people who know anything about film history have heard the names Griffith and DeMille. Lots of people are far less familiar with Weber, but in her time, she was considered their peer. So she was a very important director in the early years of filmmaking, and her career is particularly interesting because it spans some of the earliest filmmaking before it was even based in and around Hollywood and Los Angeles in the US. She was based in New York originally, making short films and then extends all the way into the sound period in the early 1930s. So she's got an incredible long arc of a career, where she experienced all sorts of changes in that period having to do with the kind of rise of Hollywood as a production center in the US, the incredible flowering of creative talent there, particularly women directors and screenwriters, the demise of that, the coming of sound, the rise of the sort of Hollywood studio conglomerates. So her career is really interesting in that respect, in the kind of arc it has, and for a whole host of other reasons that I'm sure we can start to talk about, but she's a really important figure in terms of both the history of American filmmaking and the history of female filmmakers.

What sets her apart from Griffith and DeMille, her peers at the time, is that she was also a screenwriter, and she wrote almost all of her films, and also a performer. She acted in most of her early films, almost all of her shorts, and some of the features. She stopped acting when she really got, it was too much, direct and act all of her features. But that really sets her apart from Griffith and DeMille and arguably makes her even more of a single, you know, auteur or author of those films, she wrote and directed her work.

AT: Even today, you hear people saying that they wrote a film or a spec script for a TV show because they didn't see the kind of stories that they wanted to be in, or they weren't getting the opportunities that they wanted to be performing in, and so they just wrote it themselves. But my understanding is that it was arguably easier for women to break into the film industry in the early days because everything was less established. Is that correct?

SS: Yes, yes. So Weber's part of a kind of amazing generation of women in the early years of filmmaking. Women who were directors, women who were screenwriters, women who were producers, women who were actresses, many involved in multiple roles as whatever it was, right? She was a director, writer and performer. And because the early years of filmmaking were relatively loose before the studio conglomerates kind of took over. And there was also at the same time a tremendous demand for film. Movies became incredibly popular, incredibly fast in the 1910s, or even the decade before, the first decade of the 20th century. And so there was a tremendous, almost insatiable demand for film products. Movie theaters would change their programs two or three times a week. So the combination of an industry that's less structured

and an industry where there's a tremendous demand for product means that there's opportunities for lots of people who have some creative ingenuity. Some of these people had experience in the theater, as Weber did. So she's got a kind of background in performing from the theater. She brings that to film, begins writing, begins directing.

The other thing that happened during this period is that the role of the director that now is so established in our minds, what a director does that was far less established in the early years. So it was very easy for people to move between roles as Weber and many women did. Acting and writing and what we would now think of as directing, but might have at that point meant figuring out where to put the camera and giving other performers some pointers on what they should do and not do in the scene and things like that. So yes, Weber's part, she's not a lone woman in early Hollywood. She's part of a whole generation of creative women that were really important to the early years of filmmaking, particularly in the US, but there's other international examples, but particularly in the US, there was a concentration of female filmmakers that were really important in the 1910s in particular. When the industry's getting established, when Hollywood's getting established, when feature films are becoming the norm, all of that, women are really important in that moment.

AT: And I believe it also helped that she was collaborating, at least at first, with her husband. So if there are folks who only want to deal with a man, she can just throw him at them. And I believe Alice Guy-Blache, who was another early filmmaker, also worked with her husband and it was an established pattern for their company that he would deal with the people who didn't believe a woman could handle business while she was doing the actual work of producing the films.

SS: Yes, there's a number of male-female husband-wife collaborative teams in this early years of filmmaking. And Weber and her husband Phillips Smalley did work together at the beginning. I believe that she was the dominant creative partner from the beginning. She wrote the scripts, they acted in them together, they co-directed their early shorts, but given that she went on to be the sole director of the feature films, I really do think that she was the creative lead from the beginning. And I think that she was very vocal about being a competent filmmaker and being a competent writer and being a competent businesswoman. I don't think she hid behind Smalley in that sense. But I do think that her persona as a married middle-class white woman was really important. She had a kind of respectability that comes with that persona of being a white middle-class married woman that helped her, I think, navigate the Hollywood industry, helped her navigate business and helped her navigate some of the really challenging, controversial subject matter that she tackled in her films. I think that she really leaned into that persona, particularly in the kind of early years of her fame. It was important, right, that she was married and that she had this kind of creative partnership with her husband. So it's a kind of conservative element to it. But also, they really presented themselves as this modern couple, this equal; they had an egalitarian marriage, they worked together on these collaborative creative projects. I mean, there was a very kind of modern element to it as well, right? But it's a really interesting part of her persona. And you're right to kind of emphasize how important it was to her work life, but also to this, the kind of way she circulated in public as a professional

woman.

AT: It seems like there was a bit of balance between, she's stepping outside of traditional roles and what may be expected of a woman. But it's okay because she's still married and her husband's there and her husband approved. So it is an interesting balancing act that she seems to have been doing there.

SS: Yes.

AT: And especially, you mentioned that this helped when she might have faced more backlash about the controversial subject matter that she was talking about. And it's always funny to me when you see the topics that we're talking about were controversial in the 1910s. And some people still seem to find them controversial today. So can we talk about the topics that she was covering in her films?

SS: Yes, yes. So at the height of her fame, when she was the top director at Universal, she wrote and directed films on very controversial topics of that time period. So we're talking about the mid-1910s. Probably the most controversial topics of her era - the fight to abolish capital punishment, drug addiction and drug trafficking, religious intolerance, poverty and women's wage equity. And she made two films on abortion and birth control. So her film *Where Are My Children?* was a film about abortion and birth control that was Universal's top money maker in 1916. So I always like to remind people of this fact because we find it hard to imagine over 100 years later that Universal in its current incarnation would even greenlight a film about abortion and birth control written and directed by a woman, let alone that it would be Universal's top money maker in 2023. But that was true in 1916. So that gives you a sense of not only the range of subject matter that she was dealing with, but how popular her films were. These aren't documentaries, these are narrative feature films that take on these really difficult issues. And she does not shy away from taking on these difficult issues.

AT: I think there's a definite misconception of the difference between early Hollywood and the Hays Code era of Hollywood, which I don't think she was still working when the Hays Code came into effect. But would you mind just giving people a bit of background on what the Hays Code was and how it differs from the types of films that, because what we're talking about, the types of films she was making would never have passed in a Hays Code era.

SS: From the beginning, Hollywood films were controversial because of, particularly around sexuality and violence. This is the same old things. And the controversy is just escalated in the 1920s. So that by the 1930s, the industry itself was so worried about escalating state censorship and the very real possibility of federal film censorship that it instituted its own industry self-regulation. And so it created the Production Code Administration, which enforced a code about the depiction, all kinds of things, not just sexuality and violence, but race relations and politics and crime and all kinds of stuff. And that code was enforced by an office that was initially run by Will Hays. So it's often called the Hays Code, but it's more properly called the

Production Code. And you're absolutely right. The Production Code was very conservative. In terms of all crime must be punished, all adulterous relationships must end, incredibly rigorous rules about depictions of all kinds of things. The code was written in 1930, it was strictly enforced from 1934 onwards. And then it was really enforced through the late '50s. It kind of started to be unenforceable in the late '50s and early '60s. There was a series of code breakers. But for a couple of decades, kind of at the height of the Hollywood studio era, the Hays Code would very much enforced, right? So you're absolutely right. The kind of films that Weber was making probably wouldn't have passed the Hays Code.

But that's not to say that there wasn't censorship in her era. In her era, there was state censorship. So several states had censorship boards that reviewed films. There was municipal censorship. So a city like Chicago had a very powerful and influential police censorship board that kind of governed everything that was shown in the Midwestern US. So it was still censorship. And there was also an internal industry body called confusingly the National Board of Censorship. It wasn't sounds like it's a federal government agency, but it was another kind of internal entity. And so Weber did run up against some censorship trouble. And she was very vocal about, she held the very anti-censorship stance. But she ran into trouble several times. So she ran into trouble with one of her 1914 films called *Hypocrites*, which is about the hypocrisy of pious Christians. So already kind of controversial, right? And that film included a kind of allegorical figure called the Naked Truth, which would hold a mirror up to these hypocritical Christians about the ways they were conducting their lives that were not in keeping with their supposed Christian faith. And the figure of the Naked Truth was played by a young woman in a flesh cover colored body suit. So this film got censored in some cities, they did not want to see the Naked Truth. And Weber really railed against that. And *Where Are My Children?*, the film about birth control and abortion that I'm talking about, that also encountered some trouble with censors. And not always for the reasons you might think. So even though the film is quite bold, I think, and radical in a way in that it's tackling subjects like abortion and birth control in 1916, its ultimate message is quite conservative. It has a kind of pro-eugenics message. That eugenics message is enforced through a kind of argument that is very convoluted that critiques wealthy white women who are having abortions to avoid child bearing, but advocates birth control for working class and immigrant populations, right? So very classic eugenics argument of that era. And so that film ran into trouble with the National Board of Censorship, the industry self-regulatory body because they thought they called her out. They said, you're including medical misinformation about abortion, you are confusing contraception and abortion in a way that is not correct. And so they did call her out. The film continued to play, and obviously did very well the box office. But she so she did not escape censorship or regulation in her day.

AT: The combination of someone who is promoting birth control and someone who believes in eugenics, that was super common. So I'm not saying it's right. I'm not saying it's good, but it is definitely reflective of the period that she would have been making the movies in.

SS: Absolutely.

AT: But we do need to remember also, you know, she wasn't doing this just to be shocking. It

was more that, you know, she saw the potential or the power of film to influence people. And she really wanted to use that.

SS: Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. And this is I think another way in which she was very forward-thinking about cinema and another way that she distinguished herself from Griffith and DeMille. So that three of them were really interested in the mid-1910s to establish cinema as a legitimate art form. And alongside the theater, alongside literature, right, and really establish it as a legitimate art form. And the way Griffith and DeMille went about that is to make historical dramas, literary adaptations, biblical stories, like very kind of highbrow culture that they lean into that as a way to establish film's status as a legitimate art form. Weber kind of went the other way, which is to kind of embrace the popular possibilities for cinema. So she compared her films to both the editorial page of a daily newspaper and sermons. And so she really thought of herself as sermonizing or editorializing on these issues that she was dealing with, the really difficult, troubling issues. And I love the comparison to the newspaper editorial page and the sermon because it gives us a sense of both how she saw the intimacy of cinema, you know, like a sermon delivered to a congregation, but also she clearly understood the mass media element of cinema, like a mass circulation daily newspaper. Like she understood that she was sort of preaching in this intimate way to a mass audience. And she also called cinema a voiceless language. And by that, what I think she meant is that cinema, maybe unlike daily newspapers of that day, was accessible to everybody. Even people who didn't have a command of English, even people who didn't read well, could go to the movies and get introduced to really difficult stuff like, should capital punishment be abolished? What would that look like? Or what is drug trafficking? And what happens to folks who are addicted to narcotics? You know, it's all these sort of difficult things that she's dealing with. What's it like to live in poverty? Can young working women live on the wages that they're given? All these sort of questions, she really tackled in this quote unquote voiceless language. And so she really embraced the popular possibilities of cinema. She really saw, in this case, I think she's quite visionary in the way that she saw cinema as a modern language. She didn't need to tell biblical stories or historical reenactments or adapt highbrow stage plays to make cinema legitimate and modern.

AT: Yeah, I think the highbrow versus popular debate is one that is never going to end. And I also find it silly. So let's move on. One of the things that Weber is remembered for is finding and nurturing talent in other women, which I believe was later used as a way to overshadow her own legacy and downplay her own work as a writer, as a director, as an actor, and instead just depict her after her death as just a star maker, someone who helped other people find their fame.

SS: Yes. Yeah. So throughout her career, she really fostered creative relationships with other women. The screenwriters that she did work with when she didn't write her own material and actresses that she worked with, she really fostered creative relationships with women. And you can see it when she was at Universal. So she's Universal's top director in the 1910s. And many of the actresses that she directed at Universal went on to also direct at Universal. So you can't help but see that both her example of being a director, but probably also her very clear mentorship helped those other women move from positions of acting into directing.

One of her very first mentorship relationships was with the screenwriter Frances Marion, who went on to win, I believe two Academy Awards in screenwriting. And they remained very close friends right up until Weber's death. And there was a sort of a friendship, but also a mentorship. And then in the, in the 1920s, there was several actresses, I think most notably Billie Dove and Claire Windsor, who were already working, whose career she kind of elevated by writing and directing for them roles that helped them show off their talent. And so she really kind of nurtured creative relationships with female performers and female screenwriters throughout her career. But you're right, what happened towards the end of her career in the 1920s, and then after her death, is that she became known as a quote unquote "star maker", which is, okay, yeah, she did right and direct these roles that really galvanize the careers of Billie Dove and Claire Windsor. But I don't really like that term because it's such a passive term that makes it seem like she just kind of recognized somebody in the cafeteria line in the studio, as opposed to the very real labor she performed, both in writing and directing. That was really important. And the other thing I don't like about the star maker moniker is that it it solidly reinforces the idea that the main aim for women in Hollywood is to become famous actresses, not writers and directors. And so I think it's unfortunate that towards the end of her career, she was became known as a star maker. It's a way to way to both celebrate her relationships with other women in the business, but also undercut her own accomplishments, I think.

AT: I would also say that the whole concept of, "oh, I discovered her" or, you know, that trope that we see over and over again really dismisses the agency of the stars, of the actors who, you know, may have taken all sorts of classes, who are showing up, putting in the work every day on these films, made the connection for this person and helped them find opportunities. But they're the ones whose performances are now being lauded. So yes, it's a bit annoying.

SS: Absolutely. No, that's that's a great point that it, yeah, it not only does it does it invalidate Weber's labor as writer and director, it invalidates the performers labor as performer, absolutely, absolutely.

AT: Now she produced a massive body of work, but a lot of it has been lost over the years. Is that the nature of the early film industry where things weren't necessarily preserved the way they should have been or were there other factors at play?

SS: Oh, you know, it's a little of both. I mean, I would say, yeah, so she produced 44 feature films and at least 150 shorts, possibly more. And you're right that most of that work doesn't survive, but an awful lot of that works survives. So about half the features survive, many of the shorts survive, and most I'm proud to say is now available on DVD. 15 years ago, almost nothing was available outside of film archives. Almost everything that survives now is out on DVD, hurrah, so people can see it. But you know, on the one hand, it is very typical - most silent films don't survive. Early industry did not preserve its work. It did not think about preserving the work. A lot of early films were shot on nitrate film stock, which is self-combustible, and so really isn't safe at all. So there's a whole bunch of early films that are buried underground in a vault in Maryland that really can't ever be watched.

So on the one hand, it is typical that, you know, so few films from the silent era survive. On the other hand, I think Weber's legacy is complicated because we live in a patriarchal culture, and because so much attention, I keep mentioning Griffith and DeMille, but so much attention has been made to preserving the work of Griffith and DeMille, and not as much to preserving Weber. Some of her films were miscatalogued under her husband's name. Or, especially her early work, it's particularly difficult because the early short films did not have credits. And there's been a lot of detective work going back to sort of figure out, "okay, this is her." Luckily she acted in the films that she wrote and directed. So that's a fairly good gauge of, "okay, this is her, this is her work," and it might have circulated under another name when it played in Europe. And so, "oh, yes, there's the film, that's the film. It has Dutch intertitles, but that's it. I recognize it." So there's definitely more will be found. I have absolutely no doubt that more will be found. For me, the most, the film I'm most curious about, that I believe survives somewhere, is the very last film she made. In 1934, her only sound film called *White Heat*, which was shot on the island of Kauai in Hawaii, the first film shot in Kauai, and it is about an interracial romance on a sugar cane plantation. It showed on Hawaiian television in the 1960s, which tells me there's a 16-millimeter print circulating somewhere. In Hawaii, I believe it's in Hawaii. No one has ever found it. Lots of people want to find this film. But I believe, if not *White Heat*, other films of hers will definitely be found. But I am very proud of the fact that so much now, so much that we have now circulates in beautifully restored DVDs with musical soundtracks. And so it's much easier to watch and appreciate her work now than it was 10, 15 years ago.

AT: Now, she was also influential as film really found its footing as a narrative medium, rather than just this novel gimmick.

SS: Yes, yes. So she begins in the industry in 1910, when the film industry is based in New York, and not in not in LA or Hollywood. And she is at that point making one-reel short films. So one-reel film is about 10, sometimes 20 minutes, but usually more like 10-minute, very short films. She was writing and directing and acting in one per week, just an extraordinary output, absolutely extraordinary output. So she worked for a company called Rex that was incorporated into Universal, which was kind of an umbrella company for a lot of little makers in the 1910s. Universal then set up a huge Universal City production facility in LA in 1913, Weber moved west to be part of Universal City in LA in 1913, served as mayor of Universal City briefly. And she was she got into feature filmmaking, that is multi-reel, longer films of at that point 50, 60, 70 minutes, very early on. In fact, she left Universal in order to make features. Carl Laemmle, who ran Universal didn't think features were a viable thing, wasn't really interested in having his company make features. She left Universal in order to make feature films. And so she was among the earliest directors to make a feature, alongside Griffith and DeMille, of course, they keep coming up. And so she's the first woman to direct a feature film in the US. And the first feature that she makes is an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*. So she does initially kind of lean into that highbrow culture thing. But then before she returns to Universal, she makes a whole series of other feature films that are not highbrow culture and that begin to explore difficult things like her film *Sunshine Molly* looks at sexual violence and sexual harassment in the workplace. *Hypocrites* deals with religious hypocrisy. But yes, so she was she was part of

that generation of filmmakers that is really thinking through the possibilities of much more complicated storytelling and cinema. Once you've got longer films like that, you have to have much more complex storytelling, much more complex character development, and therefore more complex cinematic techniques, more complex editing, more complex camera positions, more complex lighting. So she was part of that that generation of filmmakers that did that.

AT: Now in 1916, she became the first and only woman elected to the Motion Picture Directors Association, and she remained the only woman to have achieved that for decades. What happened there? Because we know there were other female directors.

SS: Yes, yes. So she she was the first woman admitted to the Motion Picture Directors Association, which is a precursor of the contemporary Directors Guild, the DGA. And they had to make an exception to policy to let her in because they had an explicit policy that female filmmakers were not to be a part of this group. They let her in. She also fought her way into the Photo Playwrights League, which was a precursor to the Screenwriters Guild. Again, saying, why am I not allowed in this space with all of you gentlemen? And so yeah, so she was the only woman in the Motion Picture Directors Association. When the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences was formed in 1927, they formed a director's committee to kind of advise the academy on things related to directing. She's the only woman on that committee. There's a fantastic photo of her sitting with this group of guys. So none of her kind of contemporary female filmmakers were achieved that kind of renown. Dorothy Arzner, who becomes the director in the late '20s and then into the '30s and '40s, does become a member of the director's guild. She's the only, Arzner's case, she's really the only female filmmaker working in Hollywood for most of the '30s and into the '40s. So Weber's generation of directors really disappears and Arzner becomes this kind of sole female filmmaker, but she is also in the DGA.

AT: And Weber was also one of the early businesswomen of the film industry, but she certainly wasn't alone in the sense that you've got people like Alice Guy-Blache and Mary Pickford. They were running businesses.

SS: Yeah. Yeah. No, you're absolutely right. Yeah. So Weber at kind of the height of her fame in the 1910s when she's Universal's top director strikes out on her own and forms her own production company called Lois Weber Productions. She leases a residential estate in Hollywood and converts it into production facilities. So the house becomes her production office and then the grounds become outdoor shooting stages. And she's really among the very first filmmakers to do that in 1917. Very few directors are doing that, she's really on the vanguard of kind of independent production. But as you say, so she's kind of alone, she does it before Griffith and DeMille. I hate to keep bringing them up, but she doesn't, she's really on the vanguard. But as you say, there are other kind of important models of female business women in the movie industry. Alice Guy-Blache is a great example. So Alice Guy-Blache emigrates to the US from France. She sets up her Solax company in New Jersey, which has absolutely state-of-the-art production facilities in the early 1910s. So before Weber is really known, Guy-Blache has this incredible production facility in New Jersey. That's kind of celebrated in the industry trade press



as this state-of-the-art production facility. So she's running Solax. And then performers like Mary Pickford, and Mary Pickford is the best example. Pickford was an incredibly astute businesswoman during this period. So on screen, Pickford is playing little girls well into her 30s, right? When she's well beyond 30, she's playing little girls on screen. But behind the scenes, she was incredibly savvy and incredibly powerful. So she was very, very early to demand and get control over scripts, and choice of directors and promotions. She was an uncredited producer on a lot of her early films. When she learned the salary that Charlie Chaplin was earning, she marched right into her studio and said, "I'm more famous than him. You've got to pay me more than him." So she's very, very savvy about controlling her image, having creative control over the projects that she worked on. And she was one of the founders of United Artists in 1919, so an early independent production company that still survives, obviously. And one of the founding members of the Academy in the late 1920s. So Pickford was very, very savvy. And she was also, kind of set the tone for other actresses in the mid- to late 1910s. Other actresses watched what Pickford was doing. And one commentator at the time said there was a kind of "her own company epidemic" in the sense that so many actresses decided, "I need to have a production company too. Look what Mary Pickford's doing." And so there was a kind of her own company epidemic, which was good, in the sense that actresses were starting to assert creative control, use their fame to assert creative control over the work that they were doing, which is terrific.

AT: I just love that when a woman takes control of her career and starts a company, it's an epidemic.

SS: Yes. Yes, it's pathologized. Yes, exactly, exactly.

AT: And Pickford also established the Mary Pickford Company in 1919 that was devoted exclusively to producing films that United Artists distributed. And then she and Fairbanks produced and shot their films after 1920 at their jointly owned Pickford Fairbanks studio. So the idea that, you know, she was just one of multiple co-founders of United Artists and it's like, no, no, she she was a boss.

SS: Yeah, yeah, and the other thing that Pickford was very savvy about that most women of her generation in Hollywood were not. She understood the power of film preservation, of film history. She went around in her later life and bought every single copy she could find of her own work and preserved it. So that's why we have a lot of Pickford work, it's because she did that work. She found it, she collected it, she preserved it, she understood the importance of that history, her own history. So incredibly, incredibly savvy in every respect.

AT: Well, I wonder if she learned from what happened to Alice Guy-Blache, who before she came to the US, she was working for a company in France where after she left, they basically tried to erase all of the massive body of work that she had produced. They tried to erase her name from it and she had a really difficult time even remembering, because she produced so many films. She had a hard time even remembering for herself and trying to make a list of all the

ones that she had worked on, much less actually getting recognition for it. So I wonder if Mary Pickford might have seen that and said, "that's not happening to me."

SS: Yeah, I would not be surprised at all. Yeah, and Alice Guy-Blache is famous for challenging the first historian of French cinema to say, why am I not in this history you've just written? And there's a number of the women who were active in early Hollywood as actresses and producers and writers and directors wrote their memoirs in the 1920s as the sort of fortunes of women in the industry were starting to change. They really understood about their marking that moment that was disappearing. So the whole bunch of them write memoirs in that period, really, really wanting to ensure their legacy, which was very savvy.

AT: Now going back to Lois Weber, her style changed after she struck out on her own and founded Lois Weber Productions in 1917. So what changed?

SS: This is a really interesting question because Weber herself, so she's at Universal, she's Universal's top director, she's making these hugely popular and controversial films on abortion and birth control and capital punishment. She strikes that on her own and she says, "I'm not going to make those heavy dinners anymore." And she makes a whole series of films first on kind of bourgeois marriage and then on and then later in the '20s, not when she's still not at her production company, she makes a series of films on kind of celebrity and stardom. I would argue that even though that subject matter seems like less of a heavy dinner and seems less controversial than let's say abortion and birth control, that the film she makes about bourgeois marriage are very critical of that institution and real social commentary. So even though she's taking on subject matter that seems more conventionally feminine, that seems less controversial, I actually think she's bringing quite a critical eye to the institution of heterosexual marriage and I would say the same things about the trio of films she makes in the late '20s about stardom and celebrity, particularly female stardom and celebrity. I think again, they're real indictments of Hollywood and celebrity culture and what happens to women and women's bodies in that industry. So she says she's not going to be making heavy dinners, but I actually think she is. There is a noticeable change from the film she makes at Universal in the mid-1910s and then the film she's making in the late teens and early '20s and late '20s. There is a noticeable difference in those films, but I think that her interest in editorializing and sermonizing, her interest in social commentary does not go away. It just kind of shifts its focus.

AT: And there was another distinctive shift in the 1920s where her creative output just slowed down. Now obviously you were saying there was a time when she was churning out a film a week and that's not sustainable, but why do you think her output did slow significantly in the '20s?

SS: It slowed for a bunch of different reasons. It slowed because her production company collapsed in 1921. 1921 was a kind of watershed year in Hollywood history, a number of independent production companies collapses. So Guy-Blache's company collapses, Nell Shipman's company collapses. Because it's the year when power consolidates in Hollywood

studios, it becomes very, very difficult for independents to operate in that landscape anymore. It was difficult in the late teens and early '20s. It becomes nearly impossible after 1921 because the studios have asserted so much control. So her production company collapses. She takes a break and then finds it difficult to get back into the industry because the industry is less interested in female filmmakers at that point and because the kind of films that she's associated with, editorializing and sermonizing that she's done in her kind of social issue films, is less appealing to Hollywood in the 1920s at the height of the jazz age. She tries to re-enter the industry in 1923 when Hollywood was making films about flappers and so she's running up against a patriarchal industry and she's also a little bit out of step. In 1927, she writes about what it's like for her to walk onto a film set as a female director in 1927 and she said it's utterly different than it was 10 years ago, when she would have automatically commanded respect, everybody knew who she was. There was no question about her authority. When she walks onto a set in 1927, nobody believes women can direct and nobody remembers who she is. So it's a very, very different industry. The change comes very fast and swift.

AT: You've got to love the nonsense of people not believing that women can do a thing that women have been doing for over a decade. It's a little enraging.

SS: Yeah, and then the other factor is that the first histories of Hollywood are getting written in exactly this period, the late '20s, early '30s, and they're absolutely erasing any memory of female filmmakers. The only way they talk about women is to talk about stars. So the erasure of historical memory is really profound in this period.

AT: That's not surprising that they would only focus on actresses in terms of women in Hollywood from the standpoint of, first off, they are the most visible. You can't erase them when they are right there, although I'm sure people have tried. But it's also acting is largely seen as, although it's considered a skill in its own right, it is very much considered that you are not the person in control. You are not the person writing the script. You are not the person directing. You're not the cinematographer.

SS: Yeah.

AT: So I feel like there is a disregard of the agency of actors, sort of like what we were talking about earlier with the "discovery" aspect. But speaking of diminishing women and enraging nonsense, her marriage ended in 1922. And some men have latched onto this as the reason that her output slowed. And one guy even said that she couldn't function without the (*mockingly*) "strong masculine presence of her husband." I doubt he said it like that, but that's how I hear it to make me a little less angry. So would you agree that that is almost certainly not true?

SS: It's infuriating. Not only is it not true, it's infuriating to hear that. Yes, her marriage collapsed shortly after her production company collapsed. Yes, those two things happen together in 1921 and '22. And yes, she takes a break after that. But Phillips Smalley, her husband, did not play an active role in directing any of the films at her independent production company all those years,

from 1917 to 1921. He didn't ever direct on his own afterwards. And so there's absolutely no evidence that she leaned on him in that way. In fact, she continued to hire him to act. So yeah, it's absolutely infuriating, the kind of misread of the coincidence, of her company collapsing and her marriage collapsing to suggest that that's why, you know, her career had trouble in the 1920s. There was lots of other stuff going on in Hollywood in the 1920s that I just talked about in terms of the rise of a kind of patriarchal culture, lack of respect for female filmmakers and the studio conglomeration of power. That's what explains why she had trouble getting back into work.

AT: And all those factors aside, I mean, if my marriage fell apart and my company crashed, in addition to, I'm sure she must have been seeing examples of the larger factors that you're talking about. I'd definitely need a break. I assume she was quite a strong person, but even so, that's a lot.

SS: Yeah, yeah, absolutely.

AT: And although she was working until a few years before her death. So even though she wasn't working as much, she was still putting out films, *A Chapter In Her Life* (1923), *The Marriage Clause* (1926), *Sensation Seekers* (1927), *Angel of Broadway* (1927). And as you mentioned, she sort of came back for *White Heat* in 1934. But she went from being one of the best known people in the industry, one of the most powerful people in the industry. But by the end of the 1930s, her reputation was just severely diminished. So what happened? What? How, how did that happen?

SS: I guess I'm still slightly mystified myself. I mean, the Hollywood industry has a notoriously short memory. But it is still a little difficult to imagine that when someone like Weber dies in 1939, that her stature, 20 years earlier, would have been completely forgotten.

AT: Yes, she even wrote a memoir called *The End of the Circle* that was supposed to have been published shortly before her death. But it never was, even though her sister was trying to push for the publication, and then it was stolen in the 1970s, which just from a historical documentation standpoint seems incredibly frustrating because you have to think that would have been an amazing record of such a pivotal time in the industry.

SS: Yes, yeah, it's an incredible loss. So, you know, I talked about how so many women of that generation wrote memoirs, right, including Alice Guy-Blache, Weber did too, but it's lost. And there are no papers, there are no diaries, there is nothing. So in order to write about her, you have to really just research around her, right, research what was written about her, look at the scripts that she wrote, watch the films she made, look at the publicity that was generated around her. But there's no, her voice is absent. So there's no there's no memoir, there's no papers, there's no diaries. And so that's really challenging for a historian, and it's such a loss. I mean, I think that's another thing where I feel like a maybe that'll show up like, like one of her old film prints, although I think at this point it's, that's probably gone. So I've met members of her

extended family, and of course, it's the first thing I ask every single one of them, and they do not have it, and they would, they would love to have it.

AT: There's something tragically ironic about a titan of silent film being silenced.

SS: Yes, yes, exactly. Exactly. She, she made all that work. And yet her voice at the end is, is silent.

AT: And I think you touched on this with the sort of reflection that her career really demonstrates the arc of the early decades of the film industry in, in the US. But was there anything in particular? Because obviously there were a lot of really amazing women that you could have written a whole book about. So was there something about Lois Weber in particular that really caught your fancy?

SS: I think it's both the fact that of all the women active in early Hollywood, she had the most sustained and substantial career. She really did. And so there's that, that was interesting. You know, apart from Alice Guy-Blache, she directs far more film than films than any American woman over a much longer period of time. So, that was definitely a hook for me. But, but I think also I was interested, the initial hook for me was the social problem films and dealing with these kind of controversial issues - that really appealed to me as a filmmaker who was taking on that subject matter. And that was the initial spark of my curiosity is, who is this woman that is making two films about abortion and birth control in 1916 and 1917 at the height of the American debates about legalizing contraception? Like, who is this woman? You know, she's making these films when Margaret Sanger is being imprisoned. So that, I just thought, oh, I need to know more about that. So I think that that's the initial spark for me.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast and remember - well-behaved women rarely make history.