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Introduction

Jill Nelmes and Jule Selbo

In this study of female screenwriters, from the first film scenarios produced in 1896 to the present day, we highlight the work of more than 300 writers from over 50 nations. Each entry gives an overview of the history and background of women screenwriters in that country, highlighting its most influential females in individual entries.

The scope and range of the book is ambitious and there is no existing work that gives such coverage of the subject. The guide is divided into six sections by continent: Africa, Asia, Australasia, Europe, North America and South America. There are entries for the more frequently written about nations such as the US, the UK, France and Australia, as well as countries like Malta, Romania, Korea, Poland, South Africa and Switzerland where we have found a rich but rarely discussed tradition of female screenwriting. Indeed the entries for individual countries show how varied the experience of female screenwriters is – experiences that are very dependent on historical, social and political factors. We have tried to include entries on all the film-producing countries, although unfortunately it has not been possible to do this where there is very little information available or where we were unable to find a contributor. We hope that publication of the book will encourage discussion of these omissions as well as promoting the subject further. In subsequent editions, we hope to include information on more females who have used their talents as screenwriters in the feature film industry.

Women screenwriters were at the forefront of the film industry in its earliest days in many nations around the world. The sudden popularity of early filmmaking created opportunities for women in key creative positions; early screenwriters and filmmakers such as the Frenchwoman Alice Guy, Americans Gene Gauntier and Lois Weber, Australian Lottie Lyell, and Fatma Begum in India were writing, directing, producing and creating their own film companies.

In most countries the myriad opportunities for women in the film industry changed after a relatively short period. By the coming of sound in 1928, it had become evident how much money might be made in the industry. This meant that corporate interests (dominated by males) began to dictate, more males were drawn to the industry and the ranks of female screenwriters diminished. Even in Sweden, a country with a strong tradition of female writers, women only wrote

6.5 per cent of the 240 films made during the 1930s. In the UK, for instance, a small number of talented women writers such as Muriel Box and Janet Green were very successful in the 1940s and 1950s, but most women only wrote one or two films. The decline of the studio system in the 1950s in Hollywood and parts of Europe did little to help women writers and, as audiences fell, fewer films were made. At the same time, television began to attract millions of viewers and some female screenwriters moved their careers to the new medium, not only in the United States but wherever television programmes were produced. In Sweden, Astrid Lindgren adapted her very popular Pippi Longstocking children's books for film and television in a career that lasted 33 years.

More recently there are grounds for optimism; in countries such as Sweden, the Netherlands and Denmark the gender balance is now almost even. In South Africa, for example, television has provided a platform for women writers like Sara Blecher (*Zero Tolerance*, 2011); she has gone on to make feature films and documentaries. Indeed it is noticeable how many women now move from film to television with ease. However, there are still nations that pose restrictions and strong censorship; Iran levies severe constraints on women's freedom, yet some of its female writers and filmmakers, like Rakhshan Bani-Etemad and Samira Makhmalbaf, have received worldwide acclaim for their films. In the Soviet Union, after World War II, countries like Estonia, Czechoslovakia and Romania had strict censorship imposed on the content of screenplays. Greater freedom following Stalin's death in 1953 allowed women writers and directors to work, and Perestroika, in 1985, ended state control of the studios. When Estonia gained independence in 1991, it took some time for women screenwriters to gain a foothold, but by the 2000s a new generation of women had emerged.

The late 20th and early 21st centuries brought a greater awareness of gender inequity in the film industry, particularly regarding writing and directing. Many countries are now trying to redress this imbalance and some have initiated quotas to ensure there are more women film writers; in the Netherlands many of their most successful films are written and directed by women. In Argentina, of 64 films made in 2005, 13 were by women; however, the numbers have not remained this high; in 2012, of 51 films produced, only five were by women. Unfortunately, for every success, or partial success, there are other countries, such as Romania, where very few scripts written by women are produced.

Despite difficulties along the way, a great many outstanding women screenwriters from across the world have emerged in the last 110 years and there is reason for celebration. Poland boasts award-winning screenwriters such as Agnieszka Holland, Italy celebrates Suso Cecchi d'Amico and others, and China claims Li Yu and Ann Hui among their talents. Women screenwriters in the Middle East are exploring difficult narratives of identity and freedoms, and female filmmakers in Africa are contributing stories that are shining lights on social and political situations.

There is still a need to encourage the film industry in the majority of nations to be more receptive to women writers and women's stories. We hope this volume will inform and inspire and point to the fact that women screenwriters have

shown their creativity, capabilities and value from the beginning of cinema into contemporary times.

We thank all the contributors who have been so diligent in their research and helped to illuminate these women's lives and work.

Enjoy!

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