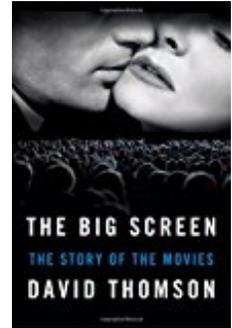


Jenny McPhee

Hardly a Female in Sight: David Thomson's *The Big Screen*

Midway through David Thomson's meandering and (self-) reflective history of world cinema, *The Big Screen: The Story of the Movies and What They Did to Us*, he discusses British director David Lean's classic film *Brief Encounter*, a "woman's film" about an adulterous affair. Thomson is mystified by the film's "tacit admission of women's tragic position, whereas in Lean's best-loved films (*Bridge On the River Kwai* and *Lawrence of Arabia*), the world is dominated by active men doing big things to change history with hardly a female in sight." For years I have appreciated Thomson's film criticism -- his book jacket claims he is "the greatest living writer on film" -- and I regularly consult his *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film*. So it was with dismay, indeed horror, that I discovered his new book presents the history of cinema, from its origins to the present, with hardly a female in sight.



I eagerly anticipated reading about some of my favorite bombshells. In early cinema these include Lillian Gish, Clara Bow, Louise Brooks, Gloria Swanson, and Mary Pickford. Thomson describes Pickford as having accrued "perhaps the greatest success and fortune any woman has yet achieved in the movies... the most hardworking and fiscally astute partner in United Artists, the distribution company she formed"; then ignores her, lamenting "she's been all but forgotten." If *you*, renowned and popular film critic and historian, don't write about her, that becomes one self-fulfilling prophecy.

As Thomson provides profiles of great man upon great man -- Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Louis B. Mayer, D.W. Griffith, Cecil B. DeMille, F.W. Murnau -- we hear next to nothing of the era's female superstars -- Lillian and Dorothy Gish, Mabel Normand, Norma Talmadge, Pola Negri, Delores Del Rio, Clara Bow. Thompson grants several paragraphs to Louise Brooks but primarily to emphasize how she was a "bad girl" on screen and off. Gloria Swanson gets billing only for her role as Norma Desmond, the washed-up diva in *Sunset Boulevard*.

I expected Thomson to give at least a cameo to some of the pioneering female film directors -- Alice Guy Blaché, Ida May Park, and Lois Weber. Nothing. Nor does he mention the well-documented fact that during the silent era, because film was considered a low-class medium and a passing fancy, women controlled the industry. Most of the important stars were women; many of them had their own production companies regularly hiring women as directors,

producers, editors, writers, and technicians. (Three excellent books on the subject are: Ally Acker's *Reel Women: Pioneers of the Cinema, 1896 to the Present*; *Women Filmmakers in Early Hollywood* by Karen Ward Mahar; and *Early Women Directors* by Anthony Slide.)

As for the talkies, Thomson omits Dorothy Arzner, who directed a string of bankable movies starring actresses such as Rosalind Russell, Merle Oberon, Claudette Colbert, Joan Crawford, Katherine Hepburn, giving many of them their debuts. Negligible coverage goes to bombshells Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, and Katherine Hepburn. Mae West? Besides creating one hell of a screen presence and persona, she was a highly successful playwright and screenwriter who brought the subject of sexuality and eroticism to the big screen in a big way. She saved Paramount from financial ruin and launched Cary Grant's career (Thomson, of course, covers him amply). West's name appears once in Thomson's book on a list. Jean Harlow? Nowhere. The phenomenal fast-talking dames of '30s comedy -- Irene Dunne, Myrna Loy, Jean Arthur? Hardly noted. His pages on Ingrid Bergman exist only to describe her as a "compulsive man-izer" and revel in her public downfall following her affair with Roberto Rossellini, whom he lauds as "a collector of spectacular women." Thomson waxes lyrical about Howard Hawks, Frank Capra, Alfred Hitchcock, King Vidor, Fritz Lang, Eisenstein, Peter Lorre, and Humphrey Bogart -- all of whom are wonderfully worthy subjects but hardly alone in giving birth to the movies. And so it goes on and on and on. Women's contribution to world cinema is virtually ignored by Thomson right up to the present.

Thomson writes at length about the marvelous Luis Buñuel but doesn't even give a nod to the great Maya Deren. Known as the "Mother of the Underground Film," the "Virginia Woolf of filmmakers," her work directly influenced Buñuel, Marcel Duchamp, Salvador Dali, Jean Cocteau, and John Cage and has inspired generations of experimental filmmakers. Her *New York Times* obituary stated, "From the early 1940s until her death in 1961, Maya Deren both evoked and exemplified the American avant-garde movement virtually by herself." Apparently, Thomson has never heard of her. Similarly, he writes extensively about experimental documentary filmmaker Chris Marker and fails to say one word about Agnès Varda, writer and director of dozens of films who, along with Marker, was a key figure in the Left Bank Group, an offshoot of the French New Wave in the '60s and '70s.

The '40s, '50s, '60s, and '70s were notoriously bad decades for women directors in Hollywood -- a fact Thomson notes but doesn't address. Still, between 1949 and 1954, Ida Lupino, established as a notable noir actress since the early '40s, wrote and directed six features for her own company, The Filmmakers, tackling controversial issues such as rape, bigamy, and unwed motherhood. Later, Lupino would direct hundreds of episodes for various television series, including *Thriller*, *Have Gun Will Travel*, *The Fugitive*, and *Gunsmoke*. Thomson barely accords her a sentence.

The only female directors to whom Thomson devotes more than a line are Leni Reifenstahl, Hitler's notorious celluloid propagandist; Debra Granik; and Clio Barnard. A few of his most glaring omissions: Lee Grant, Elaine May, Lena Wertmuller, Margarethe von Trotta, Chantal Ackerman, Barbara Streisand, Susan Seidelman, Penny Marshall, Gillian Armstrong, Jane Campion, Mira Nair, Martha Coolidge, and Kathryn Bigelow.

He writes little about female movie stars' contributions to the form though he makes an extended observation on the humiliation Maria Schneider endured in her role in *Last Tango in Paris*, and how her life and career fell apart afterward. Marilyn Monroe gets several pages, only to be reduced to "the oblivious dirty joke in her own picture."

Thomson occasionally raises the issue of how women are perceived on film (he has a section on pornography) and the book's leitmotif centers on "the medium's ultimate core: a way of realizing desire on the big screen." He talks about film as voyeurism, how cinema eroticizes the very act of looking, but neglects to ask the questions: Who is assumed to be predominantly doing the looking? Whose desire is being expressed? Has gender bias had an effect on generations of moviegoers? And, to paraphrase Thomson's subtitle, what has that done to us? Apparently, Thomson hasn't heard of the film theorist Laura Mulvey, his compatriot, and her renowned theory of "The Male Gaze."

Another year of the Oscars and another year of an abysmally low number of women nominated for awards across the board, but most conspicuously in the category of best director. In the Oscar's eighty-five-year history, only four women have ever been nominated -- Lena Wertmuller, Jane Campion, Sofia Coppola, and Kathryn Bigelow. According to a recent Sundance Institute study, women comprise less than thirty percent of directors, writers, producers, cinematographers, and editors in the industry. Reading Thomson's book, one might be surprised to hear the number is so high. The Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film reported that women accounted for only twenty-eight percent of the speaking roles in top-grossing family films last year. For leading characters, the number drops to eleven percent, and for women in roles of power and influence, that number plummets to three percent.

Stacy Smith, one of the authors of the Sundance study, writes: "In our digital age, ideas and culture are increasingly shaped by the stories told with moving images. This context elevates film artists to an enormously influential role in determining how we see ourselves, one another, and the world around us." Thomson's gross under-representation of women in his history of world cinema does an injustice to the integrity of the art and industry; moreover he does a disservice to future generations of girls seeking a career in film. As Melissa Silverstein of the blog *Women and Hollywood* says, "If you can't see it, you can't be it."

David Thomson's history of the movies perpetuates sexism by maintaining the invisibility of women on all levels of participation. At the very least, he should have been more honest about his subject matter. The subtitle of *The Big Screen* should have been "The Story of Men, Movies, and What They Did to Us."

Jenny McPhee's novels include A Man of No Moon, No Ordinary Matter, and The Center of Things. She lives in London, but mostly she resides at www.jennymcphee.com.