



RESEARCHING WOMEN IN SILENT CINEMA

NEW FINDINGS AND PERSPECTIVES

EDITED BY MONICA DALL'ASTA, VICTORIA DUCKETT, LUCIA TRALLI

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ALMA MATER STUDIORUM
UNIVERSITÀ DI BOLOGNA



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1

Researching Women in Silent Cinema: New Findings and Perspectives

Edited by: Monica Dall'Asta, Victoria Duckett, Lucia Tralli

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Researching Women in Silent Cinema: New Findings and Perspectives

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This publication has been edited through a blind peer review process. Papers from the Sixth Women and the Silent Screen Conference (University of Bologna, 2010), a biennial event sponsored by Women and Film History International, were read by the editors and then submitted to at least one anonymous reviewer. When the opinion of the first reader was entirely negative or asked for substantial revision, the essay was submitted to a second anonymous reviewer. In case of a second negative opinion the essay was rejected. When further changes were deemed necessary for publication, the editors worked extensively with the authors to meet the requests advanced by the reviewers.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
Monica Dall'Asta, Victoria Duckett <i>Kaleidoscope: Women and Cinematic Change from the Silent Era to Now</i>	2
PROLOGUE TO PART I	12
Heide Schlüpmann <i>An Alliance Between History and Theory</i>	13
I. HISTORICAL IMAGES	27
Martin F. Norden <i>Alice Guy Blaché, Rose Pastor Stokes, and the Birth Control Film That Never Was</i>	28
Veronica Pravadelli <i>Lois Weber's Uneasy Progressive Politics: The Articulation of Class and Gender in Where Are My Children?</i>	42
Donna R. Casella <i>Women and Nationalism in Indigenous Irish Filmmaking of the Silent Period</i>	53
Dunja Dogo <i>The Image of a Revolutionist: Vera Figner in The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty</i>	81
Margaret Hennefeld <i>The Politics of Hyper-Visibility in Leni Riefenstahl's The Blue Light</i>	96
Federico Pierotti <i>Coloring the Figures. Women's Labor in the Early Italian Film Industry</i>	106
Mark Garrett Cooper <i>Archive, Theater, Ship: The Phelps Sisters Film the World</i>	120
PROLOGUE TO PART II	130
Christine Gledhill <i>An Ephemeral History: Women and British Cinema Culture in the Silent Era</i>	131
II. WOMEN AND THE CULTURAL DISCOURSE	149
Mary Desjardins <i>Fading Stars and the Ruined Commodity Form: Star Discourses of Loss in American Fan Magazines, 1914-1929</i>	150
Anne Morey <i>School of Scandal: Alice Duer Miller, Scandal, and the New Woman</i>	163
Mark Lynn Anderson <i>The Impossible Films of Vera, Countess of Cathcart</i>	176

Anke Brouwers	
<i>If it Worked for Mary. . . Mary Pickford's Daily Talks with the Fans</i>	197
Claus Tieber	
<i>Mary Pickford—as Written by Frances Marion</i>	220
Kristen Anderson Wagner	
<i>Silent Comediennes and “The Tragedy of Being Funny”</i>	231
Qin Xiqing	
<i>Pearl White and the New Female Image in Chinese Early Silent Cinema</i>	246
Ansje van Beusekom	
<i>Getting Forgotten. Film Critic Elisabeth de Roos and Dutch Culture Before World War II</i>	263
Luca Mazzei	
<i>The Passionate Eye of Angelina Buracci, Pedagogue</i>	273
 PROLOGUE TO PART III	 288
Jane M. Gaines	
<i>Wordlessness (to be Continued)</i>	289
 III. GENDER ON STAGE	 302
Annette Förster	
<i>A Pendulum of Performances: Asta Nielsen on Stage and Screen</i>	303
Victoria Duckett	
<i>The “Voix d’Or” on Silent Film: The Case of Sarah Bernhardt</i>	318
Elena Mosconi	
<i>Silent Singers. The Legacy of Opera and Female Stars in Early Italian Cinema</i>	334
Stella Dagna	
<i>A Tribute to Her Creativity: Maria Gasparini in The Stage</i>	353
Michele Leigh	
<i>Alexander Khanzhonkov and His Queens of the Screen</i>	362
Amy Sargeant	
<i>However Odd—Elsa Lanchester!</i>	374
Laraine Porter	
<i>A Lass and a Lack? Women in British Silent Comedy</i>	384
Johanna Schmertz	
<i>The Leatrice Joy Bob: The Clinging Vine and Gender’s Cutting Edge</i>	402
Viktoria Paranyuk	
<i>Riding Horses, Writing Stories: Josephine Rector’s Career at Western Essanay</i>	414
Luciana Corrêa de Araújo	
<i>Movie Prologues: Cinema, Theater and Female Types on Stage at Cinelândia, Rio de Janeiro</i>	424

Lois Weber's Uneasy Progressive Politics: The Articulation of Class and Gender in *Where Are My Children?*

ABSTRACT: After decades of oblivion the status of Lois Weber's production has emerged as one of the most important in American cinema of the 1910s. Indeed, recent historical research has made clear that by 1915 Weber had become a popular celebrity whose work was as distinctive as that of Griffith and De Mille. In her most famous and successful films, Weber tackled some of the controversial issues of the period which she treated in a moral fashion. *Where Are My Children?* (1916) is the first of four films dealing with birth control while *Shoes* (1916), for example, deals with underpaid female labor. In both cases, as in other films, Weber's social discourse develops along a dual axes, that of gender and class. Though she didn't consider herself strictly a feminist, she thought of her work in line with that of activists and reformers, including feminists such as Margaret Sanger and Jane Addams. It is interesting to note that well before current debates around essentialism and anti-essentialism, Weber was well aware, like many feminists of the time, that women's condition as gendered subjects was not unique and universal, but intimately related to their class.

After decades of oblivion the status of Lois Weber's production has emerged as one of the most important in American cinema of the 1910s. Recent historical research has made clear that by 1915 Weber had become a popular celebrity whose work was as distinctive as that of Griffith and De Mille. For some she was "the greatest woman director," for others "one of the top six directors in the entire industry" (Mahar 97), while according to *Photoplay*, in 1917 she was the highest paid director in Hollywood (Mahar 140). In her most famous and successful films, Weber tackled some of the most controversial issues of the period—birth control, abortion, capital punishment, underpaid labour, etc.—which she treated in a "moral" fashion. Around the mid-1910s, Weber's peak years, the filmmaker represented the industry's ideal since her films were a perfect example of cinema's contribution to the uplift movement. As Karen Ward Mahar has argued, Weber "achieved her reputation as a serious social uplifter [because] she did not take a simplistic approach. Her films did not talk down to the working classes that frequented the movies" and questioned middle-class values and attitudes (90). As another critic has pointed out, Weber believed that "social improvements could be inspired and implemented by films and that the films could serve as a vanguard to develop many necessary social reforms" (Heck-Rabi 55). In the opening title of *Where Are My Children?* (1916) we read:

The question of birth control is now being generally discussed. All intelligent people know that birth control is a subject of serious public interest. Newspapers, magazines and books have treated different phases of this question. Can a subject thus dealt with on the printed page be denied careful dramatization on the motion picture screen? The Universal Film Mfg. Company believes not ... In producing this picture the intention is to place a serious drama before adult audiences, to whom no suggestion of a fact of which they are ignorant is conveyed.

While her cinema has been described as a mixture of realism, melodrama and propaganda, I would like to stress Weber's ability to "investigate" the issue she chooses from multiple perspectives. In *Where Are My Children?* Weber builds up, along with and within the narrative logic, a series of dialectical oppositions which open up the problem of birth control to different "solutions" and judgments. Very much like the public debate that was going on at the time, the film gives voice to diverse positions. By introducing an *essayistic mode* into the narrative logic the film inevitably forces the viewer to experience an intellectual process. To this end Weber, an extremely talented filmmaker with a penchant for complicated visual imagery, uses specific formal and aesthetic devices. In my opinion, in this film *crosscutting* is the most important one.



Lois Weber on set.

In this paper I will discuss *Where Are My Children?* in the attempt to unravel the film's position vis-à-vis birth control, abortion and female agency. Recent research has focused on the topic by looking especially at the film's complex struggle with censorship. Annette Kuhn and Shelley Stamp ("Taking Precautions") have similarly argued that the film was censored because its message appeared ambiguous and confusing. Yet they both interpret the film in a straightforward way: for Kuhn and Stamp the film supports birth control but is against abortion. Differently, I would like to consider the relation between contrasting positions on birth control, motherhood and femininity and Weber's formal articulation of such materials, in order to show that the film may be read in a different way. While to my mind the film's ambiguity stands—the proof that the film is not propaganda—I would argue that such an ambiguity can be explained vis-à-vis competing discourses on women, motherhood and sexuality available in the social arena of the time. In this context, the relation between gender and class is a fundamental tenet. Well before recent debates around essentialism and anti-essentialism, Weber was well aware, like many feminists of her time, that women's condition as gendered subjects was not unique and universal, but intimately related to their class.

Lois Weber's "serious cinema" was very much in line with the work of activists and reformers/feminists such as Margaret Sanger and Jane Addams. After Emma Goldman, Sanger became the leader of the birth control movement in the mid-1910s and influenced Weber enormously. Birth control was indeed a key issue both in the social debate of the period and in Weber's cinema. In 1917, a year after *Where Are My Children?* was released, Weber made *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle*, inspired by Sanger's legal troubles for disseminating birth control information. No print of the film is known to exist, but we can gather a lot of information from the continuity script. In the film Weber plays Mrs. Broome, the wife of a physician who refuses to give his patients birth control information. The woman, on the contrary, secretly helps out women by informing them on how to limit the size of their family. Like Sanger, she gets in trouble with the police and is arrested.

Similarly, in the opening episode of *Where Are My Children?* a doctor is brought to trial for disseminating birth control information among the poor. This event is the focus of the first part of the film. While the overall narrative centres on the life of Mr. and Mrs. Walton and their opposite views on parenthood—Mr. Walton, the DA at the trial, desires to have children, but his wife doesn't—the film also focuses on two more episodes concerning birth control *and* abortion. Besides the opening trial of doctor Homer, the middle part of the film tells the story of the seduction, pregnancy, abortion and death of Lillian, Mrs. Walton's maid's daughter. The last section of the film deals with the trial of doctor Mitlif, who has performed the abortion. During the trial Mr. Walton discovers that his wife and most of her friends have also had an abortion. The discovery causes a dramatic fight with his wife to whom he shouts "Where are my children?" At the end, the childless couple sits sadly in front of the fireplace "imagining" the children they haven't had: via spectacular superimpositions—a visual device Weber is very fond of—the screen is filled first with infants, then with children and then

Where Are My Children?

Blocks Broadway Traffic

Old Timers along the Great White Way who saw the huge mob struggling to gain admission to the GLOBE THEATRE to see "Where Are My Children" pronounced it "Unbelievable" that Broadway Traffic could be blocked by **ANY** Moving picture ever produced.

Yet the crowd shown in the picture reproduced below is **ONLY** the crowd that jammed the sidewalk in front of the Globe Theatre.

Inside, in the lobby (which is nearly 100 feet deep),

another huge crowd was massed from doors to entrance. That's how "Where Are My Children" packed 'em in on Broadway, the hardest show street in the world, and in spite of the fierce competition in this, the greatest Theatre neighborhood in the world. The New York Newspapers, the Clergy, the Trade Press and the Public pronounced it "Wonderful," "Amazing," "Sensational," "Dignified." With

TYRONE POWER

playing the lead, supported by a brilliant cast, including Marie Walcamp and others, "Where Are My Children" presents the Box Office Attraction of the decade. Scenario and story by that brilliant genius of filmdom,

LOIS WEBER

Produced by Lois Weber and Phillips Smalley. STATE RIGHTS Now Selling. (State of Ohio Censors have passed the production.) To State Rights buyers who understand the game and to Exhibitors who are in business to get the money—"Where Are My Children" is the hugest financial opportunity offered in years.

Huge Box Office Attraction

The right to the territory still open will not remain open long. At the time of the writing of this advertisement 16 States have already been sold with negotiations for many more, therefore it will require **IMMEDIATE ACTION**. Many of the shrewdest State Rights Buyers in this country have already snapped up this picture. The time to act is **NOW**.

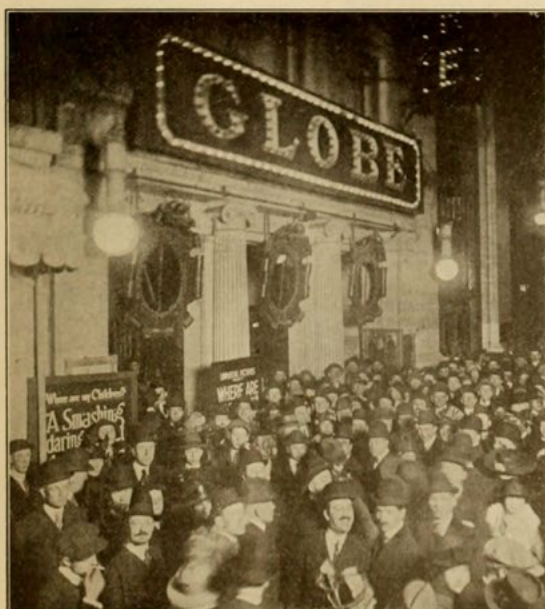
Still a Few States Left

is all the description that you need to know about "Where Are My Children." The largest and most complete newspaper advertising campaign ever instituted for ANY production is ready. Complete musical score ready also. Send for the Ad sheet. It points the way to get the **BIG** money. Direct all communications, wire, letter or otherwise, to the STATE RIGHTS DEPARTMENT of the

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"Where are my children?" Blocks Broadway Traffic," *The Moving Picture World* June 3, 1916.

teen-agers.

Critics have tended to read the film mainly in relation to the Waltons' trajectory. They have overlooked the tripartite division of the film and the relevance of other characters and events. They have privileged the narrative logic and selected the two trials as the key to the film's ideology. Studying the film's reception in the US and England, Annette Kuhn has argued that the theme of eugenics that runs through the film allows us to understand "the apparent inconsistency of the film's pro-birth control and anti-abortion stances" (34). The lower classes, the unfit, "were breeding at a rate which threatened the extinction of the best elements of the race" while bourgeois women like Mrs. Walton, the best type, were not. "For such a woman to 'evade' motherhood by resorting to abortion or other forms of birth control was thus doubly reprehensible" (33-35). Shelley Stamp makes the same point when she states that "*Where Are My Children?* appears far less contradictory if the film is seen as an argument for eugenics-based family planning rather than pregnancy prevention per se *Where Are My Children?* makes the case that poverty-stricken women ought to practice birth control in order to limit the size of their families, whereas women of wealth and good breeding were selfish if they chose to remain childless" ("Taking Precautions" 275). Such comments are lacking in two respects: on one hand, they don't consider the way Weber represents her female characters. Mrs. Walton and Lillian's choice to have an abortion is never criticized. The film also promotes female agency and does not simply comment on family planning. Second, one needs to consider that the debate over motherhood, sexuality and women's rights at the time presented a whole web of positions. Therefore the film's supposed confusion is a sign of the complexity of the debate.

As Linda Gordon has shown, towards the end of the nineteenth century "eugenic thought emphasized heredity . . . hereditary arguments explained social problems in terms of individual biological inferiority Beyond suggesting birth control as a means of abolishing existing vice, the same people also suggested that involuntary motherhood produced vice" (76). Eugenics also tainted feminist thought as some believed that women's emancipation, especially through voluntary motherhood, education and financial independence, would foster "race progress" (80-81). But when motherhood was proved to be weakened by women's higher education—women who had a career had fewer children than poor and uneducated women—eugenics became predominantly anti-feminist and anti-birth control. The race-suicide controversy lasted from about 1905 to 1910 and enlisted among its fiercest exponents the President Theodore Roosevelt himself. The demographic changes at the beginning of the twentieth century—smaller families were becoming a trend in American society—led to an attack on women's emancipation: women were accused of selfishness and self-indulgence in avoiding their duty of having babies. Women were thought to avoid conception by using birth-control devices without the complicity of their husbands "or by bamboozling their husbands into accepting their selfishness." Roosevelt wrote, "a desire to be independent, that is, to live one's life purely according to one's own desires... in no sense substitutes for the

fundamental virtues” (Gordon 89).

Feminists responded to these attacks by rejecting motherhood, something they had never done before. In fact, by 1870 the women’s rights movement in the US advocated, first and foremost, “voluntary motherhood,” that is, women reclaimed the right to decide *when*, not *if* to become mothers. Only in the 1910s some feminists started to reject motherhood. While the issue was often posed in terms of the opposition between motherhood and career, more radical positions defended childlessness even within marriage. Some said, “some marriages ought to remain childless” (Gordon 94). Those who challenged motherhood but accepted marriage implicitly separated sexuality from reproduction and defended sexual activity *per se*. These positions seem to explain quite well Mrs. Walton’s attitude: she has an autonomous opinion but also loves her husband—the reason why at some point she changes her mind and decides she will have a baby—, she likes to indulge in luxury and probably sex (with her husband), and she prefers having fun with her friends instead of taking care of a flock of children like her neighbor. Several times we see her looking at her husband while he looks/talks to their neighbor’s children or hugs his sister’s baby. Mrs. Walton seems selfish, but she also feels guilty towards her husband: she finally decides to have a baby only to make him happy.

If we consider the representation of the main female character the argument that the film is against abortion is shaky. Mrs. Walton epitomizes, first of all, the sexual revolution that began before WW1 and that revolutionized women’s sexuality, not men’s. Freud’s writings, as well as those of others sex theorists such as Havelock Ellis, were read in the US “against the grain,” that is, in order to promote sexual expressiveness (D’Emilio and Freedman). Reproductive self-determination was of course an obvious effect of this new freedom. While the sexual revolution has been associated for a long time with flappers and the jazz age of the 1920s, some historians have argued that these cultural changes began earlier (Gordon 128). I would thus claim that the sexual politics of the film is not “unclear or confused,” as many reviewers and critics have stated. *Where Are My Children?*’s sexual politics registers the inscription of different and divergent points of view on these issues. The strategy of Weber’s social problem films was not to end up with a straightforward answer, that is, to solve through a narrative solution all the implications that had emerged at different moments of the film. Rather, it seems that the ultimate scope of Weber’s cinema was to present different cases and perspectives on the same problem in order to arouse an intellectual experience in the viewer.¹ Significantly, the continuity script of *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* ends with the title “What do *you* think?” This seems to be also the scope of *Where Are My Children?*’s rhetorical structure. In this fashion, Weber’s film bypasses the standard representation of “troublesome” topics common at the time. Janet Staiger has argued that in the 1910s the movie industry devised rules for talking about women and sexuality. In particular, “the total-picture theory” allowed to display “immoral or improper behaviour” provided that the film ends “with a principled

¹ Perhaps the notion of “progressive text” would be relevant here. On the “progressive text” see Klinger.

resolution that would teach youth and wayward souls about restitution for good and evil actions. This *prescriptive*, reformist function for storytelling . . . *stimulated and directed talk about sex, sexuality, and gender characteristics*" (78). My contention throughout this paper is that *Where Are My Children?* luckily fails to conform to such a prescriptive model.

Critics have interpreted the film in relation to eugenics by linking the opening episode, doctor Homer's trial for disseminating birth control information among the poor, with Mrs. Walton's decision not to have children. Since the film refers specifically to eugenics, one may indeed compare the healthy children of the Waltons' neighbors to the sickly ones that we see in the slums. While nobody can dispute the fact that the debate on eugenics is inscribed in the film, I don't think that Weber simply supports it. In particular, I disagree that the character of Mrs. Walton should be seen only in relation to it. There is no textual cue indicating that we should read the opening in this fashion. On the contrary, I think that crosscutting suggests that we interpret the episode differently. As in other scenes, editing choices are the key to the film's politics. In those years crosscutting was being popularized by Griffith especially in his last-minute-rescue scenes. Yet Weber's use is significantly different from Griffith's since in *Where Are My Children?* crosscutting doesn't have a "narrative" function, but an *intellectual* one. The standard use of crosscutting requires that two actions, evolving in different spaces at the same time, finally converge on the same locale. When Weber crosscuts from the scene in the slums where poor women have multiple pregnancies and are unable to support their family, to the rich women like Mrs. Walton who know how to avoid motherhood, I read the episode as a comparison between women with different options and possibilities. Such a difference is connoted in terms of class: working-class women have no agency, are unable to avoid motherhood, while bourgeois women know how to escape it. Class difference implies a different degree of self-determination. In this regard, it is interesting to recall Sanger's account. In *My Fight for Birth Control* (1931) she states that poor women were aware of this: "It's the rich who know the tricks' they'd say 'while we have all the kids'. Then if the women were Roman Catholics, they talked about 'Yankee tricks' and asked me if I knew what the Protestants did to keep their families down They would nudge each other and say something about paying me before I left the case if I would reveal the 'secret'" (338).

Weber's strategy is to confront poor and rich women in order to reveal how gender is inextricably intertwined with class. I read her formal choice as an invitation not to condemn bourgeois women for refusing motherhood, but as a statement in favour of those women who lack self-determination. Class difference is exacerbated by crosscutting: the viewer cannot but empathize with the sufferings of poor women and advocate birth control. On a broader level, a female viewer cannot but support the idea that any woman should become the active agent of her life. The expository style of the film avoids any judgment on society women's desire not to be mothers. The husband's desire to have children doesn't appear more legitimate than his wife's desire not to have any. Mrs. Walton is never condemned throughout the film and her choice is not presented as a threat to the race. After all, the

Waltons are surrounded by children: their neighbors have four little kids and Mr. Walton's sister has just had her first baby. The ending suggests that in their old age the couple had a sad life, but the comment has no real social or ideological value.

One should note that crosscutting is essential to create the film's meaning. In other words, while Weber's progressive cinema depends on her use of sociological studies, journalistic exposés of real events and true-to-life facts, it's cinematic language that finally decides the film's point of view on its subject matter. In her study of Weber's *Shoes*, also made in 1916, Shelley Stamp has similarly argued that the film's "address fluctuates between an imagined identification with a reformer's gaze from outside diegetic space . . . and, at the same time, an identification with the heroine's own fears, desires, and emotions fostered through narrative and cinematic tropes. Even as Weber explicitly aligns her filmmaking eye with Addams's sociological observations, *Shoes* engages specifically cinematic modes of identification that counteract and complicate this address by focusing on psychological interiority and subjective experience" ("Lois Weber, Progressive Cinema" 144).

Weber's treatment of Lillian is also sympathetic. The middle section of the film centres on the seduction of the maid's daughter. The episode is also structured around class difference. While visiting her mother the girl meets Mrs. Walton's brother. The man is sexually attracted to the girl and seduces her. The iconic and narrative texture of the episode is explicitly melodramatic. The viewer recognizes the typical melodramatic conflict narrated in Richardson's novels, in Schiller and Lessing's dramas and in the stage melodramas studied by Peter Brooks in his famous *The Melodramatic Imagination*. The male character is the "aristocratic villain" who seduces a pure and naïve girl of a lower class. Predictably, the woman gets pregnant. Like in the classic melodramatic plot the male character doesn't take responsibility for his deeds. The girl is taken to a doctor to have an abortion and will die for its effects. But before dying she tells her mother the truth. Even though the doctor who practiced the abortion will later be brought to trial and condemned (abortion was illegal then), the narrative logic of the episode puts the blame on the villain's immoral behaviour. He is educated and rich, and perfectly aware that he is cheating Lillian. The girl, on the contrary, is of humble origins, totally inexperienced and unaware of what is going on. When she dies, all the protagonists condemn Mrs. Walton's brother. At this stage, no comment is made on abortion. The young woman is presented as the victim of the man's vicious tricks. In this episode the convergence between gender and class suggests that women of humble origins are victimized by men of higher social status. Therefore, Lillian is a victim in the same way that the poor women visited by Doctor Homer in the slums are. Like in the other episode the film spurs the viewer to support female agency.

To conclude, the rhetorical structure of Weber's film, namely the technique of confronting the trajectories and choices of women of different social conditions, along with the strategy of exposing a social issue—birth control and abortion—from different points of view, force the viewer to interrogate the "nature" of women's role and sexuality. But sexuality is of course



LOIS WEBER

is the best known and most able woman director in the film field as well as a capable actress and a clever writer. She went into pictures back in 1908 with Gaumont after a successful stage career and most of the time since she has been with Universal, although she was with Bosworth long enough to win lasting fame with her "Hypocrites." She directed "Where Are My Children?" "Shoes," "Jewel" and other film "best sellers."

Lois Weber portrait, *Photoplay* 11.12 (Feb.-Sept. 1917)

inherently social. In Gayle Rubin's words "a sex/gender system is the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity" (106). In *Where Are My Children?* Weber shows that in the 1910s the social apparatus devised by patriarchy to "domesticate" women was starting to be questioned. Especially through the character of Mrs. Walton, Weber shows that female agency and desire were devising new lifestyles and modes of behaviour in which sexuality and reproduction were separated. The task of *Where Are My Children?* was, very much like Sanger's conferences and seminars, to disseminate knowledge, promote reason and increase the social awareness on women's rights.

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