NOIR TRAILBLAZER

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Ida Lupino, Filmmaker
Phillip Sipiora, Editor
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IN HIS RECENT ESSAY, "PULP FICTION IN PROVINCETOWN" (which can be found in Justin Bozung's 2017 book, *The Cinema of Norman Mailer: Film Is Like Death*), James Emmett Ryan summarizes the overall impact of Norman Mailer's neo-noir film, *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (1987): "What Mailer delivered in *Tough Guys* was an uncensored frankness of perspective on American crime crossed with a sense of changing attitudes towards such matters as class identity, narcotics use, and sexual behavior." Upon reading that line, it struck me that much the same could be said of Ida Lupino's classic films noir of the early 1950s.

In his 1988 nonfiction book, *The Devil Thumbs a Ride & Other Unforgettable Films*, Barry Gifford (author of the 1990 crime novel, *Wild at Heart*, and co-writer of David Lynch's 1997 film, *Lost Highway*) reviewed Jean Negulesco's *Road House* (1948) in this way: "What I like about this movie is the pretense itself, the ultra-phony noir attitude, the hokey sets (especially for the outdoor scenes), and Ida Lupino's unparalleled drop-dead persona that comes off as screenwriter/producer Edward Chodorov's *idea* of hardboiled patter." It's a backhanded compliment, but a compliment nonetheless, and the quotation encapsulates Ida Lupino's position in cinematic history at the time Gifford wrote his retrospective of the film noir genre.

Lupino either starred in, co-wrote, or directed over a dozen films noir. As an actress, she dominates such unforgettable crime dramas as *They Drive*

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By Night (1940), *High Sierra* (1941), *Out of the Fog* (1941), *Moontide* (1942), the aforementioned *Road House* (1948), *Woman in Hiding* (1950), *On Dangerous Ground* (1951), *Beware, My Lovely* (1952), *Women's Prison* (1955), *The Big Knife* (1955), and *While the City Sleeps* (1956). As a director and/or cowriter, she created *Outrage* (1950), *The Hitch-hiker* (1953), *The Bigamist* (1953), and *Private Hell 36* (1954). As Gifford implies, by the late 1980s Lupino's persona had become inextricably entwined with the "*idea* of hardboiled" film noir. Without a doubt, Lupino deserves to be remembered for her contributions to the film noir genre, but as Phillip Sipiora's new anthology, *Ida Lupino, Filmmaker*, amply demonstrates, her other achievements in Hollywood history should also be acknowledged. Sipiora and a team of fourteen knowledgeable film scholars reframe Lupino's career in a contemporary context. Sipiora states in his introduction, "This experience has been particularly rewarding for me because Ida Lupino has so much to tell us about gender, ethics, relationships, responsibilities, and the constant human challenge to learn how to lead our lives in a more meaningful way."

When Lupino transitioned from being an actress to a writer/director, she elected to use cinema to tell transgressive stories not usually dealt with in the populist medium of film. In her contribution to the book, "Outrage and Trauma: A Reconsideration and Reevaluation," Kathleen Robinson writes:

> Many decades before the culture and times were ready for a film about rape, Ida Lupino exposes that extreme risk that she made to direct such a film [*Outrage*]. In the face of production codes, cultural insecurities, and gendered thoughts on feminine roles, Lupino asserts a stance in her film that provides a basis for conversation and discussion. William Donati, one of Lupino's biographers, observes that "bringing to the screen such a socially sensitive subject as rape brought Ida into numerous conferences with Jeffrey Shurlock of the Production Code Administration." Lupino was aware of the tension in her decision to use certain subjects as the foundation for her work as a director, and it is for this reason and so many other reasons that her *Outrage* should be viewed in a new, informed light. That *Outrage* focuses on a rape in Lupino's second film is and should be seen as ground-

> breaking for not only the time that it was written but also for our contemporary time.

Outrage was not the only film in which Lupino attempted to push the boundaries of what was considered acceptable subject matter for cinema. Within the context of the crime genre, Lupino succeeded in distorting the noir landscape with a proto-feminist perspective. In his essay, "Accidental Outlaw," Michael L. Shuman elaborates:

> [I]n *Not Wanted* and the four other films she directed between 1949 and 1951 for Filmakers, the production company that she formed with Colllier Young and Marvin Wald to create edgy, socially relevant films on limited budgets, Lupino very nearly flips the conventions of film noir head-over-heels. Rather than masculine concerns expressed almost exclusively through male characters, Lupino courageously employs the female gaze to examine such ostensibly taboo topics as unwanted pregnancy, rape, polio, and the catastrophic effects of a morally compromised parent on a young athlete attempting to find her place in life. These films, for the most part, retain the brooding demeanor and mounting suspense of noir films realized by male directors, but with [more socially conscious] themes [. . .]. Male characters, more importantly, assume the inert and vacant presence of women in most other noir films, troublesome beings who generally propel the action, when they are active at all, through procrastination and bad decisions. As Richard Koszarski points out in a comment now ubiquitous in studies of her directorial work, "Lupino was able to reduce the male to the same sort of dangerous, irrational force that women represented in most male-directed examples of Hollywood film noir."

Ida Lupino, Filmmaker, a comprehensive reexamination of Lupino's career, does not limit itself to her time in film. Recent scholarly articles that attempt to shine a spotlight on various auteurs from the Golden Age of Hollywood often ignore the subject's subsequent career in television. For example, articles that analyze Joseph H. Lewis' classic film noir mysteries (such as *My Name Is Julia Ross* and *So Dark the Night*) will often neglect to

mention that he also directed numerous episodic television westerns like *The Rifleman* and *The Big Valley*. Books that focus on Jack Arnold's science fiction films of the 1950s will inevitably ignore his directorial contributions to such TV shows as *Peter Gunn*, *Mr. Lucky*, *Gilligan's Island*, and *The Brady Bunch*. Fortunately, *Ida Lupino, Filmmaker* does not commit this oversight. Three of the fifteen essays included in the book (that is, Ann Torrusio's "Unsolicited Bequest: Ambivalent Inheritance in Ida Lupino's 1960s Mysteries," Adam Breckenridge's "A Subtle Subversion: Ida Lupino Directing Television," and Fernando Gabriel Pagnoni Berns' "Ida Lupino's Thrillers: The Terror of the 'Lethal Woman'") focus on Lupino's television career in great detail, highlighting her ability to subvert the nascent medium to her own ends.

It could be argued that some of Lupino's most important works were made for television. Dedicated noir/mystery fans and horror/suspense fans should definitely go out of their way to check out Lupino's episodes of such classic television shows as *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, *Thriller*, *The Untouchables*, *The Fugitive*, *The Twilight Zone*, and *Honey West*. As Adam Breckenridge writes in his essay:

> [T]here is [. . .] a clear streak in her television work of choosing scripts that challenged gender stereotypes, at least for their time [. . .]. She directed many [. . .] episodes where the roles of women, if they are not always outright progressive, are at least complicated enough to warrant some reflection on their merit [. . .]. She said many times in her life that she preferred directing for television, claims that are usually dismissed as her covering for what has traditionally been seen as back step in her career. Perhaps it is true that television directing allowed Lupino to explore the themes that she was interested in without the rabble rousing that was inherent in her studio productions, which did tend to incite controversy [. . .]. Thus, a stronger case can be made for viewing her television work as an extension of her film work and, therefore, an important key to understanding Lupino's interests and motivation as a director.

Whether working as an actress, a producer, a screenwriter, or a director (in film or television), Ida Lupino's "unparalleled drop-dead persona" blazed

a trail through five decades of Hollywood history. Overall, *Ida Lupino, Filmmaker* is an essential addition to the library of any cineaste interested in learning more about an iconoclastic artist whose accomplishments enriched so many classic films noir and set the stage for generations of feminist filmmakers who emerged in her wake.