

Creating the Girl from God's Country: From Nell Shipman to Sharon Pollock

She experiences her life by telling stories about her life that living her life never gave her. Meaning is derived from the act of telling the story. Meaning is not derived from living the story.

(Sharon Pollock, qtd in Nothof 174)

I

How does one take an autobiography from the page to the stage, and what happens to the life story and its meaning when it is performed? These are not simple questions, but in this study I examine two autobiographical texts that invite comparison, provoke my questions, and promise some possible answers. The first is a prose narrative called *The Silent Screen & My Talking Heart* (1987) by Canadian-born silent filmmaker, actress, and script-writer Nell Shipman (1892-1970); the second is a stage play called *Moving Pictures* (1999), by contemporary Canadian playwright Sharon Pollock, in which Pollock creates her version of Nell Shipman as she relives, through telling, her life.¹ Each of these texts is fascinating in its own right, and each is complex and multi-layered. Embedded within Shipman's narrative, for example, are the movies that created her even as she was scripting and acting in them; she became "the Girl from God's Country" due to casting and marketing pressures and an internalized identification with her screen image. Embedded within Pollock's play are events and passages from Shipman's autobiography, but the Nell Shipman figure in the play is much more than the woman Shipman herself portrays because Pollock creates a multiple self-portrait of a woman artist looking back on her life to understand its meaning and value. Because these two texts are so closely linked, they make an excellent case study for what is only my first step in theorizing the performance of autobiography on stage.²

While the play *Moving Pictures* is my main concern, *The Silent Screen & My Talking Heart* provides essential context for my analysis and is too inter-

esting, too apposite, and too useful for my comparative investigation to dismiss as mere backdrop. My chief goals, however, are to examine the autobiographical strategies in each text in order to draw some distinctions between them and then to trace some of the ways in which this stage play constructs an autobiographical process and to suggest some preliminary conclusions about how plays perform autobiography. Through comparative semiotics I isolate some of the ways in which these texts signify and consider what their signifying practices might mean in performance.

To uncover these signifying practices I draw primarily on the recent work by Paul John Eakin, in *Making Selves: How Our Lives Become Stories*, and E. Ann Kaplan, in *Looking for the Other*. While neither Eakin nor Kaplan works on theatre, they do suggest at least two *foci* for considering the representation of autobiography on stage: one is the relationality that Eakin identifies as a primary factor in all autobiography; the other is the phenomenon of the gaze that has received so much attention from feminist film theorists and that Kaplan critiques. However, these two concepts—relational selves and the gaze—are in turn connected to a much wider set of issues that have been explored and debated by many other scholars (feminists, film theorists, and students of autobiography) since the 1970s, and my thinking on these questions of representation and autobiography, or representation *in* autobiography, owes much to this wider discourse.³

As I see it, both Eakin's concept of relational lives and Kaplan's re-conceptualizing of the gaze are informed by the principle of Bakhtinian dialogics. In its simplest formulation, a relational life is one that takes its autobiographical shape through the stories of a self's relation to others. Moreover, this narrated relationality can be *interrelational*, that is between the self and other people, usually family members, especially parents, and/or *intrarelati-*onal, when a narrator addresses the self, or fragments of the self, as *you* (Eakin 55-59 and 93-98). Above all, such stories are conversations; they are addressed to an implied or represented addressee, and they exist within the condition of addressivity. Such a dynamic of address is fundamentally dialogic, whether or not Bakhtin is invoked to support the concept of relationality (Eakin 64-65). And Eakin summarizes this dynamic precisely when he comments that "the dialogic play of pronouns [in autobiographical texts] tracks the unfolding of relational identity in many registers, in discourse with others and within our selves" (98).

In *Looking for the Other*, Ann Kaplan argues convincingly for the limitations of the "gaze," as that term has come to be understood and used in film

criticism, and she develops a separate concept called the “look” in order to explain the structure of looking in certain films that problematize the gaze (xvi-xx). According to Kaplan, the look, or what she often refers to as the “looking relation,” is a process that facilitates the returning of the gaze in a potentially interactive, interrelational activity of looking at, of looking into, and of exchanging looks that resists the binary trap of the gaze in which the objectification of one participant reinforces and confirms the subjectivity of the other. It is precisely this objectification that is central to the gaze and makes it such a powerful instrument of oppression. But the “looking relation,” or simply, the “look,” is a two-way process that allows the traditionally marginalized, silenced, and exploited in society to return the gaze, to see themselves as self as well as other. When the looking relation succeeds in film (Kaplan’s subject), one result is the creation of a complex, dynamic restructuring of identity as multiple, evolving, and interactive, in short, as dialogic. I will return to both Eakin and Kaplan in the discussion that follows, but for the moment it is enough to say that both “relational lives” and the “looking relation” acquire a particular force in autobiography, where they structure the multiplicity and addressivity of identity and of the stories that tell us who we are. When these two structuring principles work together, as they do in Pollock’s play, then autobiography takes to the boards with some very interesting results. But first Nell Shipman and her story.

II

Nell Shipman (1892-1970), born Helen Foster Barham in Victoria, British Columbia, knew as a child that she wanted to be an actor. By 1910, when she married Canadian producer/entrepreneur Ernest Shipman, she had performed in stock touring companies and vaudeville, seen many “Flickers” (as silent short films were then called), and become a convert to the new medium. The feature-length silent that brought her serious public attention was *God’s Country and the Woman* (1915), a film based on a James Oliver Curwood nature story, and in 1917 she co-directed, co-wrote, and starred in another Curwood adaptation called *Baree, Son of Kazan*, thereby consolidating her connection with Curwood’s northern wilderness material and her image as the outdoors woman in tune with nature and animals. Shipman’s biggest hit, and the film for which she is remembered, was *Back to God’s Country* (1919), a film she adapted from a Curwood story to give the heroine (played by herself) the major role (see Figure 1). Two years later, with *The Girl from God’s Country* (1921), Nell’s image, life-style, and film

aesthetic seemed secure: she *was* that girl and God's country was a northern wilderness in which animals were free to play themselves and human beings fitted into their natural surroundings.⁴

By 1922, however, a rapidly emerging film industry was catching up with Shipman. Because she wished to continue her brand of nature film she moved, with her second partner, director/producer Bert Van Tuyle, to a remote northern Idaho lake, where she set up her independent film production company and headquarters, complete with an entire zoo of wild and domestic animals. Lionhead Lodge was her home for the next two years, but when she left it in December 1924, she was virtually bankrupt and would never again succeed in films. She died in poverty thirty-six years later, with the loss of Lionhead Lodge, the demise of Shipman Productions, two more husbands, two more children (she had one son with her first husband), and a great many unsuccessful ventures behind her. The failure of her professional endeavours after 1924 is as much the story of Hollywood studio monopoly, of talkies, and of the marginalization of women within the new industry, as it is the story of one woman's life (see Morris), but her later failures and the rise of Hollywood are not mentioned in *The Silent Screen & My Talking Heart*. The autobiography covers only the glory years, 1892 to 1924, from her birth to the loss of Shipman Productions and Lionhead Lodge.

As a narrative, Nell Shipman's autobiography has some unusual qualities that shed light on Pollock's use of the text for her play. The first of these is the ending. While it may be common enough to begin a life-story at the beginning—with one's parents and birth, as does *Tristram Shandy*—it is not as common to end the story in the middle, especially when one is writing that story late in life as Nell Shipman was. Apparently she was not planning to continue the autobiography in another volume, so I must assume that December 1924, with Bert gone mad, her favorite dog poisoned, other of the Lionhead Lodge animals starving, and no prospects for money, work, or success in view, represented the end to her. Moreover, her December flight to safety through the snow with her young son, while it recapitulates her films, most notably *Back to God's Country*, offers no hint of a conventional happy ending, and Shipman provides no commentary, no distance shot, as it were, to contextualize or interpret her life up to that point. We are left wondering what to make of such an ending to such a grim story and why, finally, we have been told this story. The ending, with its dangling questions, is precisely where Pollock begins, but before I turn to the play, I want to consider how Shipman deals with relationality and the gaze.

The structure of *The Silent Screen & My Talking Heart* is highly fragmented and episodic. Time as a linear force is not an organizing principle in this narrative, which develops through flashbacks and flashforwards with very few dates. Instead of linearity, causality, or historical perspective (all of which serve to ground relationships), there is a strong sense of immediacy because Nell lives in the present moment. The intensity of this present is further heightened by the spatial intangibility of her descriptions; seldom does she give her readers a precise or detailed sense of where she is, either geographically or, more generally, within physical space. She seems unaware of, unrelated to most aspects of external reality. Nevertheless, the narrative does convey a strong sense of location within Nell herself as the feeling, perceiving centre of all that goes on around her. She constructs a sense of self as a chronotopic lens for focussing the emotional, remembered scenes of her life.⁵ Both this abstract immediacy, or what I prefer to call her chronotopic sensibility, and the fragmented nature of the narrative derive from and, at the same time, constitute the scenario-like structure of the narrative. This structure combines the “silent screen” of her career with the chronotopic sensibility of her “talking heart,” but Nell is only talking to herself in a monologic narrative that reduces or eliminates a fully relational self.

This restricted relationality is painfully clear in the descriptions of her human relationships. The autobiography opens, in a chapter called “This Is Where I Came In,” with this startling line: “The doctor said, ‘I’m sorry Mrs. Barham, but your baby is dead’” (1). However, she describes her mother carrying the “blue, breathless, ten-day-old creature” to the cliffside near Victoria, British Columbia, overlooking Juan de Fuca Strait, where she stood rocking the dead child in her arms until “it came alive,” as if miraculously reborn by “the wind from [the] snowy mountains” of her Canadian homeland (2). Not entirely satisfied with this rebirth story, she goes on to speculate that, if the cold, pure Canadian air did not revive her, then perhaps she is a “changeling” (2), and she links these complementary theories about her birth to explain her love of all things contrary to her parents’ lifestyle—wilderness, wild animals (especially bears), primitive living conditions, and her life in theatre and film.

Nell’s second rebirth occurs in 1918. She caught the influenza that killed millions that year and returned to her parents’ home to be nursed by her mother, who shortly thereafter fell ill and died. But Nell survived, and in her telling of this rebirth, she wonders if her mother “bargained or prayed” for God to “take her instead of the woman upstairs [the daughter]” because

the daughter was the one “with something still to be said” (66). In a seeming contradiction, however, she concludes that her mother’s sacrifice was pointless: “A life grown useless—or so she believed—exchanged for one I must come to believe completely worthless” (67). This puzzling comment haunts the rest of the narrative, although Nell will not pick up this thread again to question the value of her own or her mother’s life. Instead, she quickly scripts more scenes and plays “the Girl from God’s Country” right up to her third rebirth from the icy waters of Priest Lake.

This time she tells her story *as if* she were on camera. Life is going very badly at Lionhead Lodge; Bert is increasingly deranged; she cannot sell her films and make the money needed to keep Shipman Productions going. One winter night, while she is walking alone on the frozen lake, the ice suddenly breaks plunging her into the water and an “adventure” for which she has “no camera” (140). As she describes struggling to save herself, she protests that the last thing she wanted at that moment was a camera with “its three legs, its one eye, its celluloid gluttony, its demands and my own failure” (140), and yet her retrospective description captures the drama and danger of the scene, as if she were viewing it through a camera lens. After a struggle, she drags herself out on the ice and runs, half frozen, for the Lodge, where she changes quickly, dresses in dry clothes, and goes “into the kitchen to fix supper” (141). She has performed the role of stoic heroine, the girl who can survive the worst in God’s country and be reborn.⁶

Even from this brief description, it should be clear that Nell Shipman’s construction of identity through relationality and the gaze is complex and problematic. Nell’s primary relationship is not with people but with animals and nature, and above all with a camera. Two early experiences appear to have consolidated these relations for Nell: the first occurred when she learned, apparently in a brutal telling (12-13), that her best friends on the touring circuit were gay; the second occurred when she was on tour in Dawson City, Yukon. As a consequence of the first experience she rejected humans in favour of animals because they “made no false promises, betrayed no trusts” (13). The second she identifies as a symbolic identification with the natural world, “a home-coming of the soul,” during which “something was stirring within me, something answering the width of the limitless skies, the tumult of the river, the boundless heights of the ranges beyond” (21). These experiences underscore Nell’s bond with nature, which is privileged in her rebirth stories, and consolidate her self-definition as a woman who is part of nature and whose closest relations are with animals—“the Girl from God’s Country” *avant la lettre*.

But if Nell's articulation of her relational identity is unusual (in her preference for animals and wilderness over other humans) and limited by her narcissistic obsession with the camera, her use of the gaze is troubling. Over and over again, she objectifies herself, watching herself perform for an imagined camera or, indeed, for a specific male gaze. The imagined camera (as in the near-drowning adventure) often operates as a trope for a mirror in which she can see and judge her own performance as a female object on display. This self-objectification is especially clear when she describes being seen by the great Cecil B. DeMille. She invites us to watch her as she pauses on a "Dark Stage" to speak to a caged bird. Without her having seen him, DeMille has also entered the stage, but Nell senses his presence:

I knew that in my long-tailed, blue-sequined gown, posed by the gilded cage, making pucker-up whistles to the inmate, I was framed. Mr DeMille paused. I felt deep eyes pry my marrow. After a bit, he exited. I had given no sign, but *I had been seen.* (46)

Exactly what good this being seen does for her is unclear, and yet she fully identifies with the male gaze and hopes, somehow, to gain by cooperating with it. As the acting, posing female, she is penetrated by this gaze, and she re-presents this economy of the gaze by looking at herself as DeMille sees her (or as she hopes he sees her). She constructs herself, in her own autobiography, as the passive object of his subjectivity. There is no trace of Kaplan's "look" in this scene, either as it might have occurred on that Dark Stage, or as Nell recreates it forty years later.

The Silent Screen & My Talking Heart is a hybrid narrative merging elements of early film history with memoir and apology. However, the subject created by the narrative is not multiple but singular and singularly centred on her self as the perceiving, experiencing, active, yet observed "I." Shipman creates herself, after the fact, as "the Girl from God's Country," from the scene of her first rebirth to her escape from Lionhead Lodge. Moreover, she makes rebirth a key to her identity, which does not evolve but springs from that originating miracle and does not relate her to her human parents but cements her primary and defining relationality with animals and the wilderness. Of particular note, at least for my present purposes, is the static, self-objectifying focalization of this narrative. Rarely does Nell indulge in self-criticism or self-analysis; we seldom glimpse her inner or private self, or learn about her doubts or her questioning of motivation, aesthetics, or mores. She speaks monologically and presents her self from the outside as she performs for a real or imagined camera, as she

appears, or wants to appear, in the reader's/spectator's gaze—a heroic female, capable in the bush and able to communicate with wild beasts and vicious dogs, yet always feminine, reliant on men, vulnerable, and basically helpless.⁷ The dominant image created by this autobiography is of a woman posing before us as she once posed for DeMille, seeking our approbation and our confirmation that her life had worth, while withholding necessary information about motivation, ambition, and choice, or refusing, as Ann Kaplan might phrase it, to look back at us or, indeed, to look into her self.

In *Moving Pictures* it is as if Sharon Pollock, sensing the aporia, the gaps in Nell Shipman's autobiography, has written her play so that Nell can complete the autobiography, flesh it out with interpretation, and bring it forward in time to the moments shortly before her death. Pollock's Nell—or Nells, for there are three of them—argues with her selves, challenges past decisions, provokes, criticizes, accuses, and pushes for a reconstruction of memory and identity, before reaching understanding and acceptance of her own complexity and multiplicity, failures and successes. The image of Nell that emerges from the play is of a woman who is more three-dimensional, more self-reflective, and more intelligent (or self-aware) than the "Girl from God's Country" that Nell Shipman created.⁸

Moving Pictures, a title Pollock might have taken from *The Silent Screen & My Talking Heart* (27), follows the autobiography closely in the events to be remembered, but it differs radically from the narrative in other ways. Pollock takes as her initial premise the importance of telling stories in order to give meaning to a life. The character who leads and bullies the others into telling stories is the elderly "Shipman" in her seventies, quite near her death, and at the age when Nell Shipman wrote her autobiography. "Helen" is her younger self, the idealistic young actress who falls in love with the "Flickers," but the self to be reckoned with is "Nell," the woman in her prime as an actress in *Back to God's Country* and as the independent filmmaker who created Lionhead Lodge at Priest Lake, Idaho. It is "Shipman," however, who provides the focalizing centre in the play because she demands to know what "Helen" and "Nell" make of her life:

/ say Now, as you sit here, essentially destitute, in your little rent free cottage, courtesy of affluent old friends, Now as you digest the meat of the message, Now as The End looms up there on the screen—what do you make of it? (13)

Making something of her life will involve stories and performance because "Shipman" will force her younger selves to face facts, failures, betrayals, errors, guilts, losses, and some successes, before the three aspects of the self

can come together in understanding and with a modicum of forgiveness at the end (see Figure 2).

In a sense, the entire play takes place within “Shipman’s” mind, or on the literalized metaphor of the Dark Stage screen for the set design.⁹ The men in her life are remembered presences, powerful but abstract and lacking the three-dimensionality of the women who constitute “Nell Shipman.” Thus, one male actor plays Carl Laemmle, the founder of Universal Studios *and* Ernie Shipman, while a second plays Bert Van Tuyle *and* Sam Goldfeldt, the founder of Goldwyn Pictures. In addition, there are two important male voice-overs: one for Barry Shipman, Nell’s son with Ernie, and another for Thomas Edison, the inventor of moving pictures. Pollock’s intention is to demonstrate the degree to which Nell Shipman was surrounded and controlled by these masculine forces that occupy the recesses of memory and haunt her even in old age. In the initial stage instructions, Pollock stipulates that the two men who play the four male roles “are always present on stage and observing the action”:

While they may seem to play roles assigned by the women, real power is vested in them; they have an ultimate interest in maintaining that power; in blocking any challenge to it and in preventing any loss of it. (3)

In their re-enacted encounters with each of these men, “Helen” or “Nell” will re-tell what happened in the past, while “Shipman” watches and scoffs or criticises or, most devastatingly, falls silent before the spectacle of her younger selves’ failure or foolishness.

Of the two voice-overs, that of Thomas Edison is the more interesting and is Pollock’s invention. Barry, who does appear in Nell’s autobiography, functions as a kind of externalized conscience in the play, reminding “Nell” of her refusal to pay any attention to him. Edison, however, operates as a kind of touchstone for reality and history, the male voice of authority and power “*describing his greatest achievement, savoring the words*”: “The Illusion of Continuous Movement Through Persistence of Vision!” a claim that opens the play and is repeated several times (4).¹⁰ Pollock’s use of this voice-over device is strategic. Booming out over the beginning of the play, it provides historical and technological context, linking Nell’s fate and life-story with the “moving pictures” (Edison 63), while commenting, with complex irony, on the nature of film itself as an illusion of reality, as virtual motion created from stasis that can seem, even *become*, more real (convincing, consuming, authoritative) than life itself. Indeed, the metaphor of illusion, based here on the principle of optics called “persistence of vision,” links the theatre/film

stage with one of the most persistently powerful of theatrical metaphors (life as mere illusion on the stage of this world), and describes what unfolds on Pollock's stage: by looking at her selves and forcing her selves to look at each other, so to speak, "Shipman" creates the illusion of meaning performed for an audience, which must participate in this illusion to make it (appear to be) real and acquire meaning.

As the action unfolds, in a one-act flow of memory, story, and debate, uninterrupted by scene or act division, Pollock has her three Nells relive, through replay, a series of defining scenes drawn from *The Silent Screen & My Talking Heart*. Thus, we watch young "Helen" perform as Lady Teazle; we look on as "Nell" confronts Sam Goldwyn and rejects his seven-year contract; we share in "Shipman's" struggle to remember how she and "Nell" and "Helen" related to "daddy" and "mummy"; and we observe Bert's turning on "Nell" to accuse her of a self-involved obsession with her animals and her films.¹¹ These scenes from the past are contained within a frame located on "Shipman's" memory screen, and the action frequently returns to the present to allow the old woman to reflect, digest, and come to terms with what has just been replayed. The shifts in time, between the present of an elderly "Shipman" remembering and of her younger selves telling and performing the stories of her life, are triggered by the command: "Play." At this command, given by any one of the three women, a new scene unfolds, or a new version of a scene we have already had supersedes the previous one as a series of overlapping interpretations of past events emerges. At the end, which represents the stopping of the play and of "Shipman's" remembering, as well as the end of the stories from Nell's autobiography, the old woman's "persistence of vision" has allowed her to make something of her life through telling her stories. The three Nells move together on stage, "*the sound and the flickering black and white film stop*," and "Shipman" instructs the lighting technician to "Gooo-to Black" (139). But just as the lights begin to dim, "Nell" contradicts "Shipman" with a "Never!" and the lights come back up. "Shipman" protests that all she wants now is peace because "I'm an old woman you know. You're an old woman! We're an old woman!" to which "Nell" again insists "Never" (139). And the playing, the illusion of motion, stops on the promise that it could start again at any moment.

Pollock's Nell leads an intensely relational life, especially what Eakin calls an *intrarelatational* life, performed in the play through the second-person addressivity among the multiple selves. Because Nell's animals do not appear on stage, except in the fragments of film projected against the

women and onto the upstage flats, her identity in the play is constituted by her primary relation to her selves and her secondary relation to men. I will consider the men when I examine how Pollock works with the gaze, but Pollock's staging of Nell's constitutive relations with selves and parents are of paramount importance to any understanding of this play's "autobiographics."¹²

In *The Silent Screen & My Talking Heart*, Nell Shipman described both her mother's and her father's deaths: the first she related to her own rebirth in a brief scenario which, I believe, hides much more than it reveals; the second she described in terms of her own loss and mourning, with the eye of an imagined camera tightly focused on the weeping Nell comforted by her two Great Danes (*Silent Screen* 76). Pollock reverses the order of the replays to make "Nell" first remember her father's death, while she was on location in northern Alberta filming *Back to God's Country* (44-49), and then, step by step, unwillingly, to replay her mother's death (56-58). When "Nell" and "Helen" refuse to participate, "Shipman" tells "the real mummy story . . . How Mummy Died for Nell" (56), and in doing so she brings the entire play to one of its most terrifying stops and silences. Following the autobiography closely, "Shipman" forces her selves to listen as she tells this unwelcome story about "Mummy's" "pact with God," made on that night in 1892, when her ten-day-old baby was declared dead. Now, twenty-six years later, "Mummy went up and lay on her bed. She'd made a pact. And in the morning, *you* woke up" (57). A long silence follows this shattering revelation and accusation, for without spelling out the meaning in so many words, Pollock makes this the most complex and profound confrontation in the play, the opening of a wound, the articulation of a daughter's unresolved and unresolvable guilt and responsibility.¹³ Neither "Helen" nor "Nell" is able to continue the game, so "Shipman" concludes: "I win," but Pollock's stage instruction for this line reads: "(*defeated*)" (58). As I read this scene, "Shipman" has held herself accountable to the mother who died for her, and she has found her selves wanting.

When the silence is broken and the story-telling resumes, "Helen" begins "*an alternative to SHIPMAN's story in an effort to reassure, comfort, support NELL,*" that recaps Nell's mourning for "daddy" with the scene, drawn directly from the autobiography, in which Nell wept and her dogs comforted her with their love. "Helen" lifts the storying from death, failure, and guilt to "a love story, Shipman! Not old and not dying but living!" (60) The identity that emerges from a sequence like this, as from the entire tra-

jectory of the play, is one in which the three selves of Nell Shipman argue with each other, tell and re-tell their versions of their life-story, address each other in anger, bitterness, and grief, but always come together again around the “persistence of vision” that transforms the transitory illusions of living into the meaning of storying by integrating the past into the present and connecting various pasts with a process of living into the future. Where “Shipman” forces the ugly secrets to the surface, her more ebullient, younger self, “Helen,” insists on reliving the joys, and her spirited, determined, undaunted (if selfish and self-centred) self, “Nell,” never gives up or concedes that “Shipman” has won.

But while “Shipman,” and “Nell,” and “Helen” are telling their stories and forging a strong sense of identity through an *intrarelational* process that integrates family relations into a sense of who Nell is, the men are always on the stage watching, and the voice-overs of Barry and Edison continue to insist on their definition of what she is—or should be. They are always there, employing the gaze and trying to force Nell to see herself as they see her: as mother, as sex object, as star material to make them money, in short, as a commodity with no agency or subjectivity of her own. Pollock leaves no doubt that she sees these men as representatives of masculine authority (3), but she manipulates the story to allow her women the power of refusal that goes hand-in-hand with the look. She stages her women as looking back at these men as well as looking into her selves; she “figures the looking relation as process, as becoming, beneath the superficial subject-object structure” (Kaplan 15). One example will suggest how this process works on stage.

In *The Silent Screen & My Talking Heart*, Nell gave us a story about being seen by the great DeMille, but she dropped the story before examining its purpose or meaning in her life. In *Moving Pictures*, Pollock takes this moment of seeing and conflates it with the seeing of all the other men (Ernie, Sam, Carl, even Barry and Edison) to construct a powerful, homogeneous masculine gaze against which her women must struggle to survive. Thus, “Nell” (as Nell did in life) refuses to be called mother and insists that her son call her “Nell,” and, when she refuses to sign Sam Goldwyn’s seven-year contract, she does so in a fully articulated analysis of what the contract would do to her. In this long scene with Sam (74-80), “Nell” takes the offensive and in doing so forces the audience to see *her* as active, decisive, and smart enough to see the danger of his offer and to see *him* as a “stupid . . . ass” (78). Unlike the historical woman in her own autobiography, Pollock’s “Nell” defiantly tells Sam that she is making her own film:

I'm writing the screenplay and I'm playing the role. Guess what? Female lead: strong woman. Male lead: sick husband. She beats arctic weather and villains. Saves husband and self with the aid of a great vicious hound. . . . The villains all want it. But none of them get it. Here's your contract. . . . I'm not for sale. (78)

In this superb theatrical upstaging of the gaze, Pollock puts words into "Nell's" mouth that one wishes the real woman might have used, while at the same time re-enforcing "Nell's" chosen identity as the "girl from God's country" through this description of the plot for *Back to God's Country*. As the looking "Shipman" realizes, "Nell" has both won and lost here: she has refused to be bought, but she has also refused an opportunity and insisted on going her own way as an independent producer; she has taken an irrevocable step towards her future ruin. But most importantly, and most theatrically, Pollock has created a scene in which "Helen" and "Shipman" watch "Nell's" encounter with Sam and comment upon it, discussing and assessing its meaning for her life. In addition, we watch them watching her refuse him, and we watch as she debates the significance of what she has just done. In short, she sees her former self as an active agent, resisting the authority of a masculine economy, and we see this conversation between "Nell" and Sam and between "Nell" and her selves as a performance of the "looking relation"; we are constructed as spectators (which is not the same thing as *being* spectators), and, as a result, we are able to see through both our identification with the male gaze of Sam and our participation in the "look" of "Nell" and the "looking relation" of "Helen" and "Shipman."

The representation of self in *Moving Pictures* is the result of a complex process of conversation among selves and an articulation, through these often heated and aggressive exchanges, of the self's relations with others. When those others are family members, notably father and mother, the dialogised debate about issues of guilt, betrayal, abandonment, and debt, focussed through "Shipman's" *intrarelationality*, constitutes a gradual approach to recognition, acceptance, and a moving forward that preserves the metonymic multiplicity of identity while bringing those selves together around a coherent meaning centred in the old woman. When those others are the men, added pressures are brought to bear upon the relational selves: where "Helen" seems prepared to accept her role as object of the gaze, "Nell" resists this objectification and dares to look back at Ernie, Sam, and even poor Bert, while "Shipman" looks at all the men and at her younger selves performing for and against their masculine power. Pollock effectively problematizes the gaze for her characters and for her audience, which cannot sit back and assume the masculine perspective; she forces *us* to identify

with both sides, with the men's gaze and with the women's look. The result is a staging of an extremely dynamic series of *moving pictures* that refuses to settle into a finalised product. "Shipman's" "persistence of vision" enables her to create a meaningful story of her life out of its many scenes, fragments of film footage, memories, relationships, and contradictions and to realize a dynamic, multiple, dialogic self that makes sense without reducing that self to some essentialized core or objectified image. Although "Shipman" cannot deny that she has been shaped in part by the gaze, she also knows she has performed a "looking relation" that supports and empowers her own complex subjectivity. If there are no ultimate truths, no absolute forgiveness or atonement, in this play, it is because the story does not conclude. Conclusions and finalities are not Pollock's goal. Like her "Nell," she will only call a temporary halt to on-going conversation and story-telling with the assertion—"Never."

III

The Silent Screen & My Talking Heart, though written by an elderly Shipman and cast in a retrospective mode, does not acknowledge the old woman or incorporate her potential wisdom and hindsight into the narrative. Because of the loosely chronological structure, the stories have very little overt causal relation or linear connection; they do not reveal or build an awareness of motivation or an assessment of what the life-story means. Nell is certainly self-conscious and at times self-reflective—she knows she is setting up scenarios, projecting scenes from life as if they were from her films—but her voice throughout is monologic: there is little or no sense of inner debate, of addressivity with self or others, in short, of the dialogic that would ground an interactive relation with others or an *intrarelationality* with the self. Thrice re-born and thrice named, she remains stubbornly singular: Helen Barham *is* Nell Shipman, who *is* the Girl from God's Country. When she could no longer sustain the metaphor of that identity, she stopped telling the story and seems to have been unable to identify another life-storying role.

By comparison, *Moving Pictures* is a highly complex, ironically self-reflective text. Pollock locates the play's unifying centre in a vibrant, combative, intelligent, demanding, and ruthlessly honest old woman whose desire to understand the meaning of her life motivates the play. While the play is, like the autobiography, a retrospective and loosely chronological narrative, it returns repeatedly to its firm location in the present remembering of old

“Shipman,” before swinging back into the past at the command: “Play.” Significantly, past stories come to life through the medium of past selves, who are both separate from and parts of “Shipman”; they are still with her in old age, still contributing to her self-awareness, but they are different from her, never neatly subsumed or erased or silenced by the old self. The identity created by these voluble, story-telling selves is profoundly dialogic; as such, it is produced by and is inseparable from the processes of address, conversation, and relationality in *performance*. Where Nell Shipman seeks and isolates the dominant metaphor of rebirth to define herself, Sharon Pollock shatters that metaphor into a metonymic complex of multiple selves who are held together by an illusion—the persistence of vision that tricks us into the metaphor of seeing life as a meaningful continuity of moving pictures.

The condition of performance that produces this powerful metaphor of illusion, which is, in its turn, based upon the metonymic structure of relationality, takes the play in directions that the narrative cannot go, and I say *the* narrative, not *this* narrative, deliberately. While both works present stories of Nell Shipman’s life, narrative cannot escape its metaperformativity, its being *about* the life, even while that life is a carefully scripted performance. A play, however, *is* performance, and a written playtext, as Pollock insists, is a stimulus for performance (see Nothof 172-73). The narrative is fixed, locking Nell Shipman into her chosen role, but the play is performed anew each time the houselights go down and the actors’ voices break the silence to create live theatre. The difference between the two media is nowhere more dramatically clear and effective than in the play’s problematization of the gaze, which is fixed in the narrative but open to resistance and subversion in the play.¹⁴

This narrative fixity is further enforced by the conditions of the book’s posthumous publication and by the photographs chosen as illustrations. In every photograph Nell appears as a young woman—Helen the stage actress, Nell with her beloved animals, Nell as a movie star, and Nell in fur parka as “the Girl from God’s Country.” There is one image of Nell, taken about four years after the autobiography ends, showing her as Mrs. Ayers with two young children, but there is no image of her in middle- or old-age. This visualization serves to freeze her in time. The play, however, disrupts this attractive image by placing an old woman on stage for all to see and by showing, through the live contrasts with two younger selves, what has been lost in beauty and youth but gained in resilience and understanding over the years.



Figure 1:
 Poster advertising the film *Back to God's Country* (1919) showing Nell Shipman as Dolores in her northern cabin threatened by the villain. National Archives of Canada, C-137813. Reprinted from D.J. Turner



Figure 2: From the Calgary Theatre Junction premiere of Sharon Pollock's *Moving Pictures*, March 1999, directed by Brian Richmond with Shawna Burnett (l) as the young Helen Barham (her original name), Thea Gill (r) as Nell, and Lori Wainberg (c) as the elderly Shipman watching her younger selves. This production photograph has been provided by Theatre Junction and is reproduced with permission. Photo: Charles Hope. For help in securing this photograph it is a special pleasure to thank Lourdes Arciniega of Theatre Junction. My thanks, also, to Joyce Doolittle and the actors.

After considerable research on Nell Shipman and the times in which she lived, Sharon Pollock concluded that this woman did not consciously reject a system on principle and that she never understood her situation or why making films her way would not work (Nothof 173). Pollock, however, does understand the politics of trying to be a woman in a male-dominated industry, the difficulty of resisting the system, the ethical and aesthetic necessity of doing so, and the terrible cost to anyone who tries. Her “Nell Shipman” is a vehicle for enunciating this consciousness and conscience. By recreating Nell Shipman’s autobiography in/as performance, Pollock brings this forgotten artist back to life and gives that life meaning. She frees it from its narrative freeze-frame into a process of storying that Nell Shipman did not tell (about becoming an old woman), but that Sharon Pollock can imagine and tell by drawing deeply on her own experiences as a woman, an artist, and a mother looking back and into a life lived in theatre. From her own autobiographical position, which exceeds while it informs “Shipman’s” performance of autobiography, Pollock creates Nell Shipman as the “Girl from God’s Country” . . . and much more.

NOTES

- 1 Shipman’s autobiography, edited and designed by Tom Trusky, was published posthumously with an Afterword by Shipman’s son and a contextualizing essay by Peter Morris. Trusky provides notes, maps, and several photographs. The published text follows Shipman’s draft, left at the time of her death, with only minor editorial corrections (confirmed by Trusky in a December 2000 e-mail). Pollock’s play has not yet been published; my discussion is based on the script for the March 1999 premiere by Calgary’s Alberta Theatre Projects. This premiere, commissioned and directed by Brian Richmond, starred Lory Weinberg as “Shipman,” Thea Gill as “Nell,” and Shawna Burnett as “Helen,” with sets by Terry Gunvordahl.
- 2 Other examples come to mind, such as Terrence McNally’s treatment of Maria Callas in *Master Class* (1995) or Maria Campbell’s and Linda Griffith’s *The Book of Jessica* (1989), but the subject is a large one that blurs the boundaries between biography and autobiography, between text and performance, and, in many recent examples (the biography and film about cellist Jacqueline du Pré or Istvan Szabo’s 1999 film *Sonnenschein*, or Ken Russell’s 1989 film *Salomé’s Last Dance*), between text and film. Susanna Egan has begun the analysis of some of these issues, with particular attention to *The Book of Jessica*, in *Mirror Talk*; see chapter 3.
- 3 See Gilmore and Smith. For a discussion of theatre practices and the gaze, see Aston (41-44); for a consideration of performance and performativity, see Butler and Worthen.
- 4 For discussion of Shipman’s life and work, see Armatage, Trusky, and Turner. I analyse *Back to God’s Country* in *Canada and the Idea of North* (156-58), and Armatage analyses the films in “Nell Shipman: A Case of Heroic Femininity.”

- 5 In "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," Bakhtin articulates a theory for "assimilating real historical time and space" into narrative based on the figure of the chronotope (or time-space). The chronotope facilitates the "visualization" of cognition in a novel and, among the available types of chronotope, the "adventure chronotope" most closely approximates Shipman's chronotopic sensibility; see Bakhtin 84-104.
- 6 Much remains unresolved in Shipman's relationship with her parents, especially her mother, and the role of the real and symbolic mother (here Mother Nature) is important in the autobiography and deserves greater attention than I can give it here. In this third rebirth the maternal element is both life-threatening and revivifying; the shock of the cold water is clearly meant to jolt Shipman out of her suicidal thoughts at this bleak and desperate point in her life.
- 7 Armatage comments that "Shipman's is not a cinema that poses the *difference* of women's filmmaking, but one which plunks its ample derriere firmly on its generic [narrative] base" (25). As Armatage goes on to demonstrate, that base is gendered because Shipman constructs her heroic feminine identity in conventional patriarchal terms: as an essentialized unity with nature and the body, as an ability to cope in the wilderness that arises from intuition, or instinct, rather than skill or reason, and as the embodying of a fundamental weakness or inferiority, before the superior forces of men, that leaves her in need of rescue by a male dog. See Armatage 25-33.
- 8 Pollock describes Shipman as a woman who neither understood her economic environment in the new film industry nor consciously decided to be an independent filmmaker with an oppositional aesthetic (Nothof 173). Because she found Nell lacking in perception, she sought another way into her subject and "became engaged in the reasons for telling stories" (Nothof 174).
- 9 All references to staging are to Terry Gunvordahl's set, which evoked a film *Dark Stage* with vintage cameras, limelights, and upstage flats on which fragments of Nell Shipman's films were projected to include the three women situated downstage.
- 10 Edison describes "persistence of vision" as "the principle of optics . . . which proves that the sensation of light lingers in the brain for anywhere from one-tenth to one-twentieth part of a second after the light itself has disappeared" (Edison 71). This principle, he explains, accounts for the "illusion" of "moving pictures," a phrase he uses in the diary (Edison 63).
- 11 While Nell makes it very clear that Bert became hostile and violent, she does not describe the scene that Pollock creates in the play, where Bert accuses "Nell" of killing him and beats her savagely (125-26).
- 12 See Gilmore 42-45. I analyse Pollock's "autobiographics" in "Sharon Pollock's Portraits of an Artist."
- 13 Pollock may well be drawing upon her own life and family relationships to deepen her treatment of this and other moments in her creation of Nell Shipman, but biographical speculations are beyond the scope of this study. For other plays in which Pollock works from autobiography, see *Doc* and *Getting It Straight*; see also Zimmerman (97).
- 14 For discussion of feminist subversion through performance in Pollock's plays, see Clement and Sullivan, and Stratton; for discussion of the broader issues, see Worthen.

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