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Ida Lupino, Forgotten Auteur: From Film Noir to the Director's Chair, by Alexandra Seros. University of Texas Press, 2025, 240 pp.

Gabrielle Stecher Woodward

Encountering Ida Lupino for the first time can be a remarkable, but also potentially destabilising, moment for any film enthusiast: which version of Lupino might they encounter? The fantasy of redemption in Raoul Walsh's 1941 film noir *High Sierra*, starring opposite Humphrey Bogart? The director of one of the earliest films to take seriously the experience of a working woman artist grappling with the disabling and disorienting impacts of polio? Or, perhaps, the television star of the late 1950s sitcom *Mr. Adams and Eve* (Collier Young, 1957–59), in which Lupino and her real-life third husband satirise the Hollywood studio system? These three examples alone testify not only to the breadth and depth of Lupino's almost fifty-year career but to the many lenses through which the creative powerhouse invites careful re-reading. Now, three decades after her death, feels like an exciting time to focus on Lupino. Alexandra Seros's *Ida Lupino, Forgotten Auteur: From Film Noir to the Director's Chair* offers a compelling and timely critical appraisal of a woman whose myriad contributions to the performing arts demand renewed recognition, particularly in light of conversations that emphasise diverse forms of female authorship in classical Hollywood.

Ida Lupino, Forgotten Auteur foregrounds Lupino as an auteur whose work was shaped as much by intense collaboration and generic hybridity as by her own empathetic authorial vision and diverse technical skills. Seros emphasises Lupino as "neither masculine nor feminine, but always 'mother'" before situating her within a broader constellation of male auteurs such as Alfred Hitchcock (15). At the same time, Seros pushes back against feminist detractors who have long exiled Lupino for being "anti-feminist," arguing that Lupino's story is ultimately "a feminist [one] because it narrates the woman's point of view as distinct from the man's, revealing the real, underlying cultural differences in how women and men were perceived in the world" (3).

Furthermore, Seros frames Lupino as the female counterpart to Orson Welles, another director-performer whose movement between film and television was equally dexterous. This claim is developed across a three-part structure that traces Lupino's evolution from a film actor and "auteur-in-waiting" to a director of social realist films, including *Not Wanted* (1949) and *Never Fear* (1950), each inspired by contemporary social crises such as teenage pregnancy and the polio epidemic. From there, Seros extends her analysis into Lupino's television work, including her direction of episodes of *The Twilight Zone* (Rod Serling, 1959–64), *The Untouchables* (Quinn Martin, 1959–63), and *The Fugitive* (Roy Huggins, 1963–67). As Seros reminds us, Lupino's

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resistance to easy classification has led to an uneven critical reception. It is in response to this instability that Seros turns to branding as an underlying framework, one capable of rendering Lupino's career in increasingly coherent terms.

The most striking aspect of Seros's portrait of Lupino is the sustained attention she pays to the construction and maintenance of the Lupinian brand. In Seros's hands, branding emerges not as a capitulation to the market but as an additional, overlooked yet crucial site of creative agency for a woman who moved with unusual authority across media industries. For women working within mid-century Hollywood, branding could be both fraught and generative, depending on who controlled the vision, values, and parameters attached to her star image. Few figures exercised this level of control as consistently as Lupino in ways that were self-contained and proactive, rather than system-controlled and reactive. Lupino treated branding not as a panicked, appearance-driven form of image maintenance as she aged out of femme fatale roles but as a dynamic, ongoing practice of self-definition.

To take Lupino seriously as a brand is to recognise branding itself as a strategic, interpretive, and aesthetic practice: a means of crafting coherence across disparate roles, media, and industrial contexts. Rather than signalling vacuous self-aggrandisement, Lupino's brand functioned—and functions still—as a form of career management: a values-driven narration of who she was, what she did, and why her work (still) matters. This is especially vital for a figure whose labour spans acting, directing, and writing at a moment when such multiplicity risked dismissal or marginalisation. Crucially, Seros emphasises how responsive the Lupinian brand really was. Lupino's brand was defined by its capacity to evolve: she "rebrand[ed] herself strategically by revising her image when her work in the industry changed (21)", nevertheless maintaining a cohesive authorial presence even as she moved between film and television, performance and direction.

Branding, in this sense, informs the legibility of Lupino's career: it renders visible the hidden forms of creative labour and strategic self-positioning that the industry structurally obscures, particularly when undertaken by a single figure rather than a studio. Unlike stars whose repeated reinventions threatened to dissolve into perceptible, if not laughable, instability, Lupino cultivated a coherence grounded in flexibility. As Seros notes, "as she started writing and directing for other television series, she quietly took control of her image. She purposely kept it underdefined, and as a result, she ultimately became an obscured figure […] To keep working [amid threats to financial security by way of freelance lifestyle], she adjusted her persona to fit the circumstances" (28). Such adjustments were not signs of dilution but instances of deliberate calibration—what Seros aptly terms the "careful management of her rebranded persona" (175). A key component of this strategy was Lupino's decision to downplay her sexuality in favor of a maternal identity, a move that facilitated her access to television work and institutional authority even as it obscured the full extent of her technical expertise. Her brand, understated but exacting, allowed her to navigate precarity without relinquishing control.

But while Seros argues that she "ultimately became an obscured figure" (28), this obscurity demands a more pointed interpretation. Obscurity does not necessarily signal a loss of control but rather marks the limits of Lupino's intentional brand strategy—one that minimised spectacle in order to maximise mobility and stability. At the end of the day, Lupino made herself legible as a

multi-talented worker rather than as a spectral phenomenon, resisting the kind of sex symbol mysticism that would otherwise elide the depth and diversity of her craft. However, it is precisely this refusal of spectacle that simultaneously complicates her historical visibility while securing her creative agency. Seros argues that Lupino's "recovery today is a phenomenon, as she endures without the help of an archive or self-promotion. She endures because she is exemplary" (165). Yet the very terms of that endurance are what invite recalibration. Lupino endures, in part, because her branding was so exemplary. Lupino's self-presentation was deliberate, adaptive, and attuned to the constraints and possibilities of her moment. Her brand strategy continues to resonate as a form of posthumous self-articulation: even in the absence of robust institutional preservation, it sustains the coherence of her authorial identity across time and space. Branding, here, is not ancillary to the work but one of the conditions of its visibility, durability, and eventual recovery; in other words, intentional branding is a mark of creative and professional foresight.

Branding ultimately proves to be one of Seros's most compelling interventions into the study of Ida Lupino. This line of thinking can, and should, inspire more careful attention to the branding and self-advocacy of creative women working across media and roles in twentieth-century Hollywood. The repeated insistence on branding as a framework through which to re-read Lupino works, but this sustained emphasis also reveals some of the study's limitations. There are certain contextual points—particularly those that situate Lupino within broader industrial, authorial, or cultural frameworks—which are reiterated in ways that ultimately feel excessive. Two examples include the filmography of Lupino's company the Filmmakers, as well as the repeated insistence of Lupino's alignment with directors such as Nicholas Ray, Robert Aldrich, and Alfred Hitchcock.

At the same time, such repeated context or claims are not without some value: it renders *Ida Lupino, Forgotten Auteur* especially adaptable for pedagogical use. Individual chapters could easily stand on their own as powerful case studies in the undergraduate or graduate classroom. Still, one cannot help but feel that some of this space might have been devoted to extended analysis of additional films or television episodes. The length and breadth of Lupino's career seems at odds with the study's 178-page scope, resulting in a rapid survey that could easily have sustained additional chapters. Nevertheless, Seros's study provides a lucid and inviting engagement with key frameworks, from auteurship and genre to branding and microhistory. In this sense, *Ida Lupino, Forgotten Auteur* succeeds as an accessible entry into broader debates about authorship across the twentieth-century media landscape.

References

The Fugitive. Created by Roy Huggins, Quinn Martin Productions/United Artists Television, 1963–67.

High Sierra. Directed by Raoul Walsh, Warner Bros., 1941.

Mr. Adams and Eve. Created by Collier Young, Four Star-Bridget, 1957–58.

Never Fear. Directed by Ida Lupino, The Filmmakers, 1950.

Not Wanted. Directed by Elmer Clifton and Ida Lupino, Emerald Productions, 1949.

The Twilight Zone. Created by Rod Serling, Cayuga Productions/CBS, 1959–64.

The Untouchables. Created by Quinn Martin, Desilu Productions/ABC, 1959–63.

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