THE WOMAN'S FILM,

AN HISTORICAL CONTEXTUALISATION

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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO:

THE FACULTY OF HISTORY OF ART AND DESIGN

AND COMPLEMENTARY STUDIES

AND IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE:

FACULTY OF FINE ART

DEPARTMENT OF SCULPTURE

MARCH 1990

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INTRODUCTION

Cinema involves its audience emotionally and sensorialy, catering to private fantasy in a way that other art forms seldom approach. Christian Metz described watching films as the social activity most comparable to dreaming; the ego sleeps, sight and sound senses are heightened, and looking is intensified.[1]

Cinema-going is a particular kind of event; you pay in and there is a deep sense of involvement and concentration with the on-screen events. The characters portrayed and the filmic narrative can have a profound influence on its spectators. Its anticipated spectators, in accordance with Hollywood system of analysing its market, also influence the film's content, and it is from this premise that I am discussing the women's film of the 1940s.

This group of films made around the time of the Second World War is unique in that they were addressed to women living at that time, and often dealt with issues directly affecting them.

It is my aim in this thesis to examine this group of films, their meaning to women at the time of their release and the more complex issues of subjectivity and spectatorship.

I begin with a summary of America's social and political situation in the 1940s, the situation of women in that decade and the historical processes that led to the creation of the woman's film.

In Chapter two I enquire into the women's film, its production and reception, themes and audiences and the conflicting theories put into practise for its comprehension.

In Chapters three and four I will look into two popular women's films of the time, Mildred Pierce (1945) and Now Voyager, both films with a strong maternal theme, and both were significant for women viewing them in the 1940s. These two films have also been subject to contrary analyses in feminist film theory, aspects of which I will consider and discuss.

Women in movies, according to Michael Wood, represent moral positions that we all more or less endorse but 'that grown men for some baffling reason see as sentimental self-indulgence if they are taken seriously in practice'. [2]

I am taking the woman's film and its production and reception seriously here as an important part of women's culture, the analysis of which is important for feminist history.

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CHAPTER 1

PART I

AMERICAN FILM & SOCIETY IN THE 1940S

As my discussion of 'The Woman's Film' throughout this essay includes many references to the effects society had on its formation and themes, it is necessary to consider the events and the general climate in the America of the 1940s that precipitated the content of this group of films.

There is no doubt that history reveals itself through the persisting images, themes, styles and legends prevailing in films. We can learn a lot about women's position in 1940s America by viewing and analysing the group of woman's films made for women in the 1940s. Film is more and more frequently being used as historical evidence: evidence being 'the life blood of history'[1].

'Does art reflect life?' asks Marjorie Rosen in her book Popcorn Venus; she answers herself: 'in movies, yes. Because more than any other art form, films have been a mirror held up to society's porous face'.[2]

Films reach large numbers of people and connect with the experiences of the general public, and being such a popular art form, they are bound to interact with and reflect society's mood. If you consider that those involved in making the films are affected by the same tensions, fantasies and fears as everyone else, and their profits usually depend on gauging the current trends and feelings of the disparate groups

in society and what will touch their heartstones, they are bound to reflect dominating societal trends.

Quart and Auster, in their history of American cinema are of the opinion that if sculptors and painters ceased to function, a relatively small section of society would lament their absence, but if the same happened to the movies it would be 'catastrophic'.[3] They acknowledge this as an overstatement, but it acts to emphasise the importance of movie-going in society, particularly American society.

Hollywood had and still has a monopoly on American movies, so it is through this institute that I am examining American film. About 95 percent of film time in the United States is dominated by Hollywood, so US films and Hollywood I am taking to be synonymous.

However, before I go into the films of the forties, it would be useful to examine the political and social situation in the United States during the forties.

AMERICA IN THE FORTIES

It was the war years that formed America as the most powerful country in the world. The United States emerged as an imperialist, interventionist nation.

After the depression years of the 30s, America went to war, and this is where the entire country's energy was being channelled. The enthusiasm and energy evident in the war years carried over to the post-war years, where the victory combined with the energy during the war, gave American people a sense of purpose and community that brought people together in a strong wave of patriotism.

This had a lot to do with a new-found affluence in US society, due to enforced savings during the war years, and a new era opened up to people in America, prosperous and victorious. There was a baby boom in post-war America and with that a sense of national pride and power, sharply contrasting to the anguish of the depression years.

President Roosevelt died in 1945, and Vice President Harry Truman took over the presidency. At that time, the social fabric of America was changing: there ws a great deal of internal migration. During the war, many women had moved around the country for employment and now there was a migration of poor blacks from the south to work up north in the defence plants. Families moved around the States, and the whites were also moving in their millions out to suburbia.

The United States found itself in a leading international position, after years before the war of neglecting foreign relationships. This put them in

an alliance position with Russia, amongst suspicious undercurrents from conservatives. After Stalin broke the Yalta Agreements, the liberals began to share this distrust.

Relations between the two 'allied' countries deteriorated rapidly, and 'The Cold War' escalated, each country seeing the other as a threat. In 1947, Truman broke American's policy of non-alliance by giving financial aid to Greece and Turkey in their fight against communism, and the crisis deepened.

As anti-communist hysteria grew, America dealt with the threat by rooting out anyone in its society suspected of spying or conspiring against the motherland. An institute was established in the post-war paranoia to try and dig out 'The Reds', called HUAC (The House of American Activities Committee).

The HUAC was drawn to Hollywood by its prestige and glamour and in 1947 they began to hold hearings against potentially subversive elements presiding in the motion picture industry.

Ten 'unfriendly' witnesses were cited. Not that the HUAC was alleging that their films were communist, but they were concerned about the political affiliations of some of these writers and directors.

'The Hollywood Ten' as they came to be known had to renounce certain ideologies, and Hollywood was

compelled to establish a blacklist and refuse to re-employ those pointed out.

However, despite the fear of 'The Reds', the forties was an optimistic time, and this was evident in the post-war films.

Although there were labour troubles in the studio system, Hays[4] code restrictions and HUAC and supreme court hearings to contend with, the 1940s were the last great years of the true movie era before the death of the studio system and the competition the introduction of television brought about.

Despite the dark side of forties films, personified by the sleazy underworld of film noir, films of the time hung onto the overriding sense of promise in American society and they nurtured and protected the American dream machine.[5]

From 1942 to 1944 Hollywood produced 440 films a year and 1946 was its most commercially successful year in its history. The movie stars at this time were a significant element in the appeal movies had. They presented, particularly the female ones, entertainment, glamour, sophistication and fantasy and provided role models for many who went to see them. More often than not, the stars portrayed subversive elements in society, and although they reverted back, or were reverted back to 'normality' to support the dominant middle class value system,

they were the ones who stayed with the viewers when the lights came up.

Movie going was very popular at this time: there was more money around for entertainment due to enforced war savings, and films reached a large portion of American society. The popularity of film-going in the 40s is attributable to a number of other factors, cinemas had improved in comfort and style, confectionery sales and air-conditioners were introduced and this altered the way Americans experienced cinema going. It is interesting to note the introduction of popcorn to cinema audiences. In the thirties, vendors sold it outside and then by the late thirties the proprietors brought them inside and soon everyone was doing it. The film industry alone made popcorn enjoy the status of an important American farm crop. Its value went from £5m in 1934 to £100m in 1940.[6]

With this responsibility, and the awareness of their far-reaching productions, towards the end of the war, Hollywood began making realistic films that were more relevant to society. The purpose of these films was, or seemed to be, patriotic uplift.

In 1945, Hollywood began making films about the transition from war to peace. They held their own messages about the societal and domestic conflicts arising as a result of the returning GIs. Some examples of the kind of films made were Pride of the

Marines (1945) and Till the End of Time (1946). These films were about the returning GIs and the difficulties they encountered in adjusting to life at home. For the most part, everything ended happily ever after..

The Best Years of Our Lives (1946) by William Wyler was hailed at the time of its release as an instant classic. A generation later, it was not considered so, but it is recognised as an important step in Hollywood's development towards maturity.[7] It was adapted from a novel by Mackinlay Kanton and dealt with four returned soldiers and the psychological, physiological and economic problems they encounter in their readjustment to society.

In 1946, it contained a valid insight into the problems that returned veterans were experiencing, and in the final scenes in true Hollywood style, they were lured or helped by the redemptive power of love provided by mother, daughter or lover.

In the late forties, America was showing signs of what it was to become in the fifties: 'A society obsessed with consumer goods, personal comfort and amusement'.[8]

The economy of abundance in the latter half of the forties created 'A powerful suburban consumer culture where materialism and conformity were the order of the era'.[9] The end of the 40s also

signalled the end of the movie era, with the introduction of TV and the collapse of the studio system, and the face of Hollywood film production changed.

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4 The Hollywood Production Code which was fully established and adopted officially in 1934, was a moral code produced after pressure from groups such as the Catholic Legion of Decency.

The woman's film developed along the parameters set by the code. Films could only portray heterosexuality, and only in a limited manner. Andrea S. Walsh, in her work on the woman's film, prints the code in full (p. 206).

'The sanctity of the institution of marriage and home shall be upheld'. 'Scenes of passion were not to include 'excessive and lustful kissing' or 'lustful embraces'.

The sexual object was much more difficult to portray, and the career heroine was much more adaptable to code guidelines. It was not until the early sixties that the code ws revised, but in the three decades it covers, everything is sexual yet nothing is in the suggestive love scenes of the woman's film; for example, the sensual cigarette lighting ritual employed by Jerry and Charlotte in Now Voyager.

5 Film noir of the 40s was an element in American popular culture, characterised by dark chiaroscuro lighting, incredulously evil characters, and the collapse of societal norms.

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9 Ibid., p. 113.

PART TWO

WOMEN IN AMERICAN SOCIETY IN THE 1940s

On the Verge of Revolt, Brandon French's book about women in films of the 50s starts off with a quote from the Bible: 'But I would have you know that the head of every man is Christ and the head of every woman is man, and the head of Christ is God' (Corinthians, Ch. 2).

She uses this quote as exemplary of the way American society was for women in the thirties. Male supremacy was rarely challenged and feminism had last been apparent over two decades previously.[1]

The thirties took their form from the great depression and for many American women 'feminism' conjured up images of a band of ageing spinsters fighting for rights that seemed irrelevant in the 30s. Male employment was prioritised as the main social problem, and though some women were working, they were occasionally criticised for 'stealing' jobs from male breadwinners. Female unemployment rose and male unemployment declined as the 40s approached, and in 1940 the percentage of women workers equalled that of 1910.[2]

In the years before the attack on Pearl Harbour, women were encouraged literally to tend to their knitting and to stay out of touch with earth-shaking questions: 'Be glad you're dumb where your husband is saving the world - home concerns are more up your alley'.[3] In the same article in a late 1930s Ladies Home Journal, men were urged to make their wives dependent on them in all aspects of live.

Women felt the impact of economic and technological change, but fundamental for them during the 30s was their loss of moral stature. This situation did not go unnoticed. In Pearl Buck's book published in 1941, called Of Men and Women[4] she made many points Betty Friedan would make some twenty years later in The Feminine Mystique.[5] She presented the view of housewives in a lonely crisis and suggests that women should be entitled to a more rounded live, and that perhaps the husband could assume more domestic duties. This book went virtually unnoticed, and more popular in the years between the two world wars in literature were stories of the predatory housewife. Significant among the contributors to this trend, was a well-known novelist, Sinclair Lewis, who introduced, among other authors, the idea of 'The Great American Bitch'. It was reflected in the novels of the thirties and so affected films of the 30s. One illustration of this anti-mother/wife trend was the film Craig's Wife (1932). It was based on a play by George Kelly and starred Rosalind Russell.

It is the story of a housewife who was bossy, manipulative and obsessed by maintaining order in her house. Eventually, Craig leaves her amidst accusations that she was trying to reduce him to 'a wife ridden sheep'. Domesticity was undermined and devalued, and if a woman did have ultimate control of

her home, she was scorned. 'Female assertiveness thus came to be defined as bitchery.'[6] Women were expected to stay at home and to be subservient in all aspects of their lives.

The year 1940, however, marked the onset of a crucial decade for American womanhood. When America joined the war at the end of 1942, drafting and the war emergency propelled American society to re-evaluate and question depression era stereotypes. What precipitated these changes was the fact that over 15 million women entered the work force during World War Two in a mass mobilisation of workers for the war effort and social roles shifted at an incredible speed.

Initially the government was reluctant to employ women as a labour reserve, and did not think it necessary. After it proved to be so, propaganda was reversed to the promotion of the working woman. The mass media cob-operated in the mobilisation of millions of women into the work force as miners, mechanics, welders, greasing machines, swinging sledges and other heavy duty work that previously no one would have ever associated with women.

In 1942, Rosie the Riveter, Norman Rockwell's interpretation of America's new working woman appeared on the front cover of the Saturday Evening Post.[7] Rosie was a buxom, overalled woman with a

Rosie the Riveter - Post Cover 1943

drill on her knee and an American flag flying behind her, and was apparently the womanly ideal for World War Two women.

The face of the labour force turned around and factories provided ladies' washrooms and pregnancy leave, and some, but not many, provided child care facilities.

The industrial world was amazed by the women's capabilities and efficiency,and the speed they learnt their skills in. When asked, 98 percent of women were delighted at their new-found independence and well paid jobs. Marjorie Rosen observes: 'Necessity undoubtedly mothered emancipation'.[8]

Women sought war work for different reasons initially: out of financial need, social interaction, self fulfilment, patriotism or economic and psychological autonomy. Wives, mothers and children were also manning the farms. The number of women working in wartime agriculture soared to 1.9 million, a 900 percent increase from 1940.

In 1981, a film called The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter was released. It is a study of women working during World War Two and was directed by Connie Field in 1940.

It includes interviews with women who worked during the war and their perception of the wartime situation and clips of propaganda films released during and after the war.

The propaganda makers toured the factories asking women why they took war jobs: some replied cheerily from behind welder masks: 'Why, to help win the war'. One woman replied that she did not have a family before, and now she had one of 10 million.

This retort exemplifies the camaraderie in the world of the women workers. Many racial and class barriers were broken down and there was a great sense of unity.

However, remaining men were experiencing a loss of territory, and occasionally there was harassment in the work place. This was overcome out of necessity, but there was a large amount of inequality abounding, particularly when a woman was managing a situation or in an executive position.

Many working women were leading a double life: homemaker and mother on the one hand, coupled with a nine to five job or even one with irregular hours.

Polls taken in 1941, indicated that women wanted to stay working solely for the duration of the war. The year 1944 revealed a different scenario: poll results taken then revealed that the majority of of women (80 percent) wanted to stay, not only working but in their wartime jobs, specifically. 'They had encroached on male territory and wanted to stay'.[11] One worker interviewed remarked: 'work makes life sweet'.

Wartime Propaganda Poster, advocating the Working Woman

The propaganda films set about demobilising the women. Wartime Rosie in the post-war years was described as a job stealer and a family neglecter.

The ubiquitous male commentator took a trip with his crew to the factories again before the GIs returned:

Man - "How do you enjoy your job?

Pretty smiling woman - "Oh, I love it".

- Will she go on working after the war?

Woman: "Oh no, when my husband returns, I'm gonna be busy at home'.

Man: 'Good for you'.

He then approaches another women in a welding suit and asks of her career plans:

Woman: 'Oh this job belongs to some soldier, when he comes back he can have it'.

She talks about returning to her job as a baby nurse. The interviewer tells her, 'That's swell'.

Bill Jacks, the leader of working women during the war gave an address to the workers at the end of the war:

> You women and girls will return to the home to be housewives and mothers again as you promised to do when you came to work for the war effort. If you do that, there will be no serious problem of post-war unemployment. 12

Women were laid off in their millions and post-war unemployment affected women the most. The forecast of the economy was optimistic and many of these women dreamt of re-building new cities with their specialised skills and the returned men.

However, about 70,000 women a month were being discharged and they found they could not get their jobs back or even related jobs despite their skills and experience: some were ridiculed for even trying. Apparently, women were not going to partake in the new economic boom. As one of the interviewees reflected in The Life and Times of Rosie Riveter, 'It was all over for us'.

The family, for the most part, reverted back to the original patriarchal structure: man as breadwinner, woman as cook and nurse.

The dominant culture supported the demobilisation, and the importance of traditional femininity was stressed. There was discontent with the women's circumstances but there was no centralised movement to articulate the angry voices of all those who had lost their jobs.

In the post-war years, one of the worst trends and disruptions of marriage, according to various psychiatrists, was the independent working woman. Women were blamed for scores of society's misdemeanours. Another propaganda film showed shots of children playing with matches in the street with a male voice-over urgently saying: 'Everywhere, there are insufficiently supervised children'.[13]

Fear, suspicion and anger were directed to the economically independent woman: people feared that American life would never be the same again, without

a cooking and knitting Mom holding up the homestead. A film such as Mildred Pierce (1945) is indicative of the detriment a career woman supposedly caused to her family.

The Best Years of Our Lives, which I referred to earlier, seems to suggest that being a good, attentive and patient housewife could lay the post-war foundations of economic and emotional sustenance:

> The terror of advice to men after World War Two was that they had a right to be self-centred and self-indulgent and the wife who would not accept this was by implication if not by explicit charge, a bitch. 14

A book called Modern Woman : The Lost Sex was published at this time. It targeted the working woman and was written by Dr. Marynia Farnham, ironically a working woman herself. She wrote of: the 'catastrophic social forces' that propelled women away from femininity. Dr. Farnham propounded that husbands of working women 'do not have real women as partners, instead their wives have become their rivals'.[15]

Women's magazines celebrated the woman who was willing to sacrifice her ambition for her husband. Advertisements were published with captions such as 'Your baby or your job', printed over a worried looking baby's face. Another propaganda advertisement depicted a little girl staring disconsolately out of a window, ribbons in her hair, with the caption, 'Why doen't Mommy stay home no

more?' The five workers interviewed in Connie Field's film had wanted to stay in their wartime jobs and found them very satisfying, but the message was to 'have babies and then stay home and look after them' and women were blamed if they did not conform.

The anti-feminism of the post-war forties held women responsible for society's ills, either because they were failures as mothers or because they had left the home for work. [16]

Moms were the scapegoats in America. Magazines wrote articles about over-protective, uncaring moms; some even alleged idleness, but no one was encouraging them to work. Adolf Hitler was cited as an example of a victim of the over-protective mother.[17]

After the war years, men were looking for soothing mothers, wives and homes. Home became the haven of American life once again. However, with the move to suburbia, housewifery was lonely and isolated and homemakers' self-esteem dwindled. Lola Weixel ruminated on the fact that 'Even the movies turned slushy'. Roles reversed again: the women became submissive and the men macho.[18]

The new femininism that began in the 60s started as a reaction to the sentimental glorification of marriage and motherhood that began in the late 40s.

Women had forged themselves a small niche in the workforce during and after the war, despite the

accompanying turbulence, but these statistics were lost beneath the media image of woman as homemaker in the late 40s and 50s. At the same time, the majority of working women during the war never retrieved the kind of jobs they had during the war and wanted to continue. Gladys Belcher in The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter said it in one: 'We gave up everything'.[19]

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CHAPTER 2

THE WOMAN'S FILM

'The woman's film' was a commonly understood phrase for American women watching Hollywood movies from the thirties to the fifties.

It is a term referring to Hollywood movies created for a female audience in and around the time of the war.

Hollywood regularly took tolls analysing its audience and it geared its films towards who was watching them. During the war they established whether this was a fact of not, that their audience was primarily female, as millions of men had left for war. Hollywood directed much of its advertising propaganda towards women's clubs and associations.

Movie theatres responded to these statistics by creating special 'crying rooms' for mothers' with infants and women were regular movie goers due to more available money from well paid war time jobs, more free time due to the absence of lovers and husbands, and frequent afternoons off after late-night shift work.

So the woman's film became popularly identified with particular themes and narrative devices designed with women viewers in mind. A lot can be learned about the emerging femininity of the time from these elements of popular culture in the examination of the plots, narrative and characteristics of the male and female characters.

Women's films or the woman's film provides a rich source of material for women's history: a history which still has many gaps and which, due to one reason or another, mainly the overriding patriarchal discourse presiding through the years, is severely lacking.

Women have of course contributed to the formation of our society, but these contributions have not been sufficiently documented and for the most part, this was because they were considered too insignificant to merit a place in the annals of history.

The production, content and reception of women's films reveals a multi-layered reality about women living in and around the time of World War Two in America. They are by no means feminist films but nonetheless they are important sources for feminist history. These films, presenting a distorted mirror on reality, give a historical dimension or angle on society that other sources do not and cannot. Along with other historical sources: 'they are essential in reconstructing the experience of women in a particular era'.[1]

When the 11 million or so men returned from the war, they encountered a new American womanhood and many found this new independence difficult to contend with. American society altered and it was an important decade for American women.

When the men were absent, many women also moved into the field of film production, both sides of the camera, and despite continuing male domination, a woman's narrative emerged.

> Yet while finding our culture impossibly weighted with patriarchal values and with sexism women kept discovering hidden pockets in which vestiges of 'female culture' have grown usually unnoticed or condescendingly ignorant by the male media majority, one such place is the cinema.[2]

This pocket of female culture is invaluable to tracing their position in society and the kind of voice they had during those years. Molly Haskell points out in her book From Reverence to rape: 'Women have figured more prominently in film than in any other art,industry or profession (and film is all three) dominated by men'.[3]

Women had different preferences to men in the subject matter they enjoyed in films. In general, they tended to prefer romantic themes, more emotive and with a strong interpersonal element. Despite these trends, the women's film is not considered as a genre. It is a combination of a variety of different moods (comedy, melodrama) visual styles (film noir and mainstream humour) and plot structures (romantic triangles, female dramas and murder mysteries). However, women's films do compromise a recognisable group of films that entail noticeable psychological motifs that distinguish the films made for female viewers and these made for male or mixed audiences.

STARS OF 'THE WOMEN'S FILM'

The stars of these films were a large factor in the appeal of the movies they were in. Female film stars were considerably more popular among women than male stars. Women tended to identify with the stars. Andrea S. Walsh lists the star types that corresponded to particular kinds of dream images.:

The tragic innocent (John Fontane)

The sacrificial mother (Barbara Stanwyck)

The wholesome girl (Ingrid Bergman)

The witty aristocrat (Katherine Hepburn)

The acid tongued, individualistic career woman (Bette Davis) and superwoman, austere and proud (Joan Crawford). These were the heroines of the 40s. More emotional and neurotic than their spunky and stoical counterparts in the thirties. The 40s film stars tended to alternate between the waiting war wife and the more aggressive independent types. Working women in film had a penchant for being pseudo tough in the 40s. The men were nervous about the societal shifts of women and were concerned about the sacred home being left unattended.

At that stage, women had better paid jobs due to the shortage of men in the work force, but after the war they would pay for this in the movies. 'Naturally,' Molly Haskell comments, 'They were more of a threat'.

Women identified with the stars and star-types and some of the emotional struggles they went through in the films. The fictional aspects of 'the woman's film' drew on a wider woman's culture and for some women they created a symbolic system in which they could try and make sense of their lives and create imaginative spaces for resistance.

In my investigation into 'the women's film', I am working under the assumption that popular culture reflects, though myth and symbol, significant themes in the popular consciousness of the time. According to Raymond Williams:

> An essential hypothesis in the development of the idea of culture is that the art of a period is closely and necessarily related to the generally prevalent way of life, and further, that in consequence, aesthetic, moral and social judgements are closely interrelated. 5

In the making of a film, the producer, director and the conglomeration of individuals working as a team constitute an interactive process, and the result is not discordant with their social realities. Class, generational, sexual and racial conflicts are played out on the set and influence the final product. So to view women's popular films of the 40s is to observe recurrent patterns and threads running through the lives of women at that time.

THEMES OF THE WOMEN'S FILM

> The domestic and the romantic are entwined, one redeeming the other in the theme of self-sacrifice which is the mainstay, the oceanic force, high tide and low ebb of the woman's film. 6

In the woman's film, the central dilemma is one of choice: career or domesticity, career or love, and so on. Often the choice made results in sacrifice and loss to the heroine. Most of these films are about the upper class elite pitted against the rest of the world. The heroes and heroines appear to have endless financial supplies and large houses, as exemplified in Rebecca, Gaslight, The Two Mrs. Carrolls, Now Voyager, and countless others. Women in these films appear in two roles generally: women as model or women as victim.

Then come the ordinary women, women whose options in life are foreclosed by marriage, children or age: All about Eve (1950), Mildred Pierce (1945) and Sunset Boulevard (1950). The very popular women's films were the fictions where the ordinary woman becomes extraordinary. These films begin where the woman started as a victim of discriminatory circumstances and through determination, obsession, defiance and pain, struggles her way to the top.

Molly Haskell, in her chapter on 'The Woman's Film', separates its themes of the woman's film into four categories: 1) sacrifice, 2) affliction, 3) choice and 4) competition. In the first category,

the woman at the centre of the film must sacrifice herself for her children, i.e. Madame X, Mildred Pierce, The Sin of Madame Claudel, her children for their own welfare, Old Maid, Stella Dallas or marriage for her lover, or her lover for marriage like Kitty Foyle and, lastly, love for her career or her career for love, i.e. Lady in the Dark, All About Eve

The sacrifice film may end happily or tragically exemplified by the last tragic scene in Stella Dallas where Barbara Stanwyck watches her daughter's happiness from far off in the cold.

The joy of suffering and the pain of joy are seen closely related and most films of the thirties and forties seem to end unhappily, particularly on the part of the woman:

> American women's appalling self sacrifice and unending moral courage that America has always expected is constantly reasserted. 7

Then the theme of affliction, the heroine is afflicted with something that she either keeps secret or that has been brought about by her husband. Examples of this theme are Gaslight: Ingrid Bergman being convinced of her insanity her husband; The Two Mrs. Carrolls: Humphrey Bogart trying to murder his wife Barbara Stanwyck by dosing her with poisoned milk; Sorry Wrong Number, where Barbara Stanwyck is a cripple this time who overhears her husband plotting to kill her.

Linda Williams in her text Something Else Besides a Mother[8], puts the women's films' preoccupation with victimisation and suffering down to the fact that Freudian fetishisation is out of place in the women's film as it was geared towards a female audience and it is replaced by the repression and hystericisation of women's bodies. This posits them into what Mary Anne Doane has called 'the medical discourse'.[9]

The 'choice' theme is typified by films such as Daisy Kenyon and The Seventh Veil, where the heroine is pursued by two suitors who hang around waiting for her decision.

The category of competition entails the heroine meeting and doing battle with the woman whose husband she loves or who loves her husband/lover. This scenario may end bitterly (All About Eve) but occasionally the two women discover that they prefer each other's company and together they discuss the obtuseness of men.

According to Haskell, the sacrifice film appears to thrive on its own conventional morality, synonymous with the women's film is the notion that 'You can't have your cake and eat it too'.

A central element in the woman's film is children. There is a spectacle of the obsessive, over zealous woman who eventually gets overcome by her efforts, and this is very much a part of the women's

film. However, the children, particularly in a film like Mildred Pierce tend to be ungrateful little monsters who wreak havoc in their mother's life. There seems to be an underlying hostility towards children and the whole idea of them. This is concealed by sacrificial themes, martyrdom and the sacrifice of and for them.

The women's picture in its transition from the thirties to the forties underwent some changes, affecting and affected by the change in the image women had of themselves. 'Thirties films unfolded against a' normal' society whose set of standards the heroine automatically accepted'.[10] However, social structures altered in the 40s: women came down from their pedestals and climbed up the employment ladder, 'paying for one with their fall from the other'.[11]

'THE WOMAN'S FILM' HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL MODES OF ANALYSIS

The women's films of the forties are united in that they are addressed to women. Hollywood's system of analysing its own market ensured this, and they participated and directed their films towards female spectators, therefore the woman's film, expresses themes that are universal and historically specific for women. The analysis of popular culture is of paramount importance as it offers 'access to the dream world of popular consciousness as well as its

surface manifestations'.[12] There are many popular theories employed to understand and analyse the politics of cinema and the relationship between the spectator and the film. The many recent developments in film theory particularly feminist film theories would the impossible to summarise given the scope of this essay, but are discussed continuously in magazines such as Screen, Camera Obscura and Framework.

The aspects I am going to discuss in relation to the women's film are the debates in current feminist film theory for and against the uses of a historically specific analysis as opposed to a more psychoanalytically based form of analysis.

Many sources are used in the analysis of cinema. In the early seventies Freudian and Lacanian theories were introduced into the understanding of films. These suppositions however, rely on the presumption that films, like dreams, have a latent and manifest content, and they depend on some kind of unconscious activity. It is difficult to gauge the effect on the unconscious of the imagery and text of a film.

Raymond Williams said on art that it should be there to learn, describe and educate, and that it is not only unconscious but it has political, social, structural and aesthetic meanings and functions.[13] Women of the 40s viewing the films directed towards them were (if subconsciously) cine literate, aware of

filmic language and narrative devices, and with experience became more discerning. Women identified and do identify with the female protagonists of the women's film and the reason for this may be that are socialised to greater media sensitivity in accordance with Andrea S. Walsh's statistical analysis.

In a discussion of identification and film, Sue Clayton remarks that:

> There's more to films than characters, which leads irrevocably to PSYCHOANALYSIS . . . not a discipline to let you get away easily with talk about strong women, know what I mean . . . [15]

The effects these analyses have is to make us think about the actual structures of cinema: how film, through these structures, addresses certain fears and desires and what causes us to make these identifications.

Claire Johnston was one of the first feminist film theorists who applied the work of Roland Barthes in describing ideology as rendering patriarchal social relations invisible in relation to film. Johnston, in a frustrated reaction to the theorists who analyse film in a socio-historical based way, asks 'Do feminist critics simply want to introduce women into film history?'[15]

Mary Ann Doane in her essay 'The Women's Film, Possession and Address', replies:

> To retrieve and reestablish women as agents of history is to construct one's discourse upon a denial of the more problematic and complex aspects of subjectivity and sexuality. [16]

It is with the questions of subjectivity and sexuality that Sigmund Freud enters filmic discourse:

> Projection, defence, distortion, symbolism, trauma, obsession, fixation, regression, the oedipal crisis, persecution, delusion, the inferiority complex - the psychoanalytic vocabulary that entered American cinema in the late 30s and emerges no less vividly in writing about the cinema. 17

Laura Mulvey, in her now classic text, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' considers film using psychoanalysis to discover:

> Where and how the fascination of film is reinforced by preexisting patterns of fascination already at work within the individual subject and the social formations that have moulded him. 18

She makes an enquiry into the role women play in the movies and their exhibitionist values, their perseverance connoting(what Mulvey refers to as their 'to-be-looked-at-ness) in terms of the male gaze.

According to Mulvey, the spectator in terms of voyeurism, fetishism and scopophilia is inevitably male. This mode of interpretation posits the women on the screen not as a subject in her own right but as the object of another's, the male's gaze. Mulvey splits the pleasure in looking at film into two unequal parts: active/male and passive/female. 'The determining male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female figure which is styled accordingly".[19] She cites different looks associated with the cinema: the characters as they look at each other on the

screen, and that of the audience. Mulvey concludes in her summary that this complex interaction is specific to film: an all-powerful system of male signification: women equalling lack and only able to be expressed in a male constructed and female objectifying discourse.

According to these theories, the filmic gaze belongs to the male audience; the female audiences' response identifies with male-as-subject and female-as-object.

This implies, as E. Deirdre Pribam points out in her introduction to Female Spectators that if that is the case then women have no active spectatorial position at all.[20] Pribam concludes that therefore any pleasure derived by women from Hollywood classic realist film (this includes the woman's film) is false, as it is based on the woman as the object of someone else's desire.

Mary Ann Doane acknowledges that Hollywood narratives tend to be analysed as compensatory structures designed to defend the male psyche against the threatening female.[21] She is of the view that this mode of analysis is useful in classic cinematic narratives but she agrees that it only repeats the historical tendency of psychoanalysis to discuss the world in terms of the males's point of view at the expense of the female's. Doane goes on to discuss the male spectator and the manner in which he is

posited in film theory as a discursive construction i.e. the operation whereby filmic texts presume or anticipate an angle for the spectator to take and outline in terms of their understanding.

But considering the woman's film of the forties is a discourse specifically addressed towards women: what kind of viewing process does the woman's film attempt to activate? This is a crucial question in the understanding of the woman's film: its theories of spectatorship, and why perhaps a socio historically based analysis is more appropriate.

Some feminist film theorists exclude any kind of historical considerations and this can result in a monologue of discussions on the sexed subject. History is especially ignored in theories of spectatorship, The consumption of the films, and their terms of address.

Maria LaPlace in her dissertation on Now Voyager defines her approach in the examination of this and other women's films as: 'an historical process of intertextuality".[22] In her introduction, she, like Pribam, states that ahistorical readings often miss the complexities of these films' textual and ideological operations. In her examination of Now Voyager, she attempts to contribute to an historical understanding of the woman's film and its functioning for female spectators in that respect.

Both Pribam and LaPlace give psychoanalysis its due for recognising gender as a primary cause of subject formation and social division. However Pribam makes the point that they fail to address other factors involved in the politics of cinema such as race, class and more particularly, time.

> In addition, the transhistorical nature of psychoanalytic models - the presumption that they apply equally across all time and instances - leaves them open to justifiable charges of inaccuracy and inflexibility. 23

Since Mulvey's work Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema, much has been expounded upon in relation to the sexed subject, the contradictory aspects of spectatorial theories and the influence of women on popular film.. The woman's film centres on female protagonist and others' resistance to Mulvey's to-be-looked-at-ness theory. The texts assume a female spectator and women have a different position in relation to the cinematic gaze. The female gaze is no longer necessarily involved with the psychical mechanisms of voyeurism and fetishism.

Jackie Byars in her essay Gazes, Voices Power also finds difficulty in the dominance of Freudian and Lacanian theories in the work of feminist film theorists. She questions the assumptions made by Mulvey and Mary Ann Doane that women are silent in classic realist cinema, and concludes that a female discourse is operating at narrative and enunciative

levels. She does make a distinction that, although women in these films may be repressed, they are not necessarily without a voice.

Mary Ann Doane discusses this voice by examining the women's process of identification in her viewing of the women's film and the contradictions arising out of female as opposed to male subjectivity presiding in the textual process of the woman's film. She traces:

1) The deployment of space and the activation of the uncanny. She specifies the mapping of gender, the differentiated societal spaces onto films. In family melodrama (eclipsing the woman's film), the woman's implied space is in the home.. She exemplifies the paranoid woman's films, where the house is foregrounded and the wife invariably fears her husband is going to kill her.

She points to Hitchcock's Rebecca as an example of this category and Manderly, the big mansion/estate as the paradigmatic woman's space that in these type of films are associated with dread and fear.

In terms of spectatorial theories in this category, as a female spectator is presumed, scopophilic energy is deflected in other directions, away from the woman's body, but now the process of seeing is invested with terror and fear as the woman's body is free floating , objectless and so Doane terms this positioning as perverted

Rebecca with the imposing Manderly

specularisation. She does not believe this viewing process is possible on an emancipatory level. She feels there is instability in the representation of female subjectivity, and for this reason the female protagonist is sometimes presented as ill or neurotic.

2) The Medical Discourse : Here women are represented as an element in medical discourse as a stamp of their identity. The woman is ill and is saved by a doctor/father figure. This discourse is central to films such a Now Voyager, The Spiral Staircase, and in Rebecca it is the doctoir who gives the final prognosis on Rebecca's death. She feels the discourse indicates yet another contradiction in the construction of a female subjectivity in that this female discourse is once again distortedly confined to the female body.

3) The Economics of Female Subjectivity : In this section Doane discusses the Freudian paradox of pleasure in pain, male and female fantasies, and how in the women's case, these entail victimisation and observation. She relates these ideas to the woman's film and suggests that the woman's access to these films is in: 'Masochistic fantasy instead of sexuality'.[24] She identifies with Hollywood classical narratives in two ways:

a) Narcissistic identification with the female figure as spectacle and a transvestite identification with the male character.

b) The female spectator imaged as having a mixes sex: a hermaphrodite.

This oscillation for Mary Ann Doane demonstrates the instability of the woman's position as spectator.

Because the woman's film offers itself to woman and because she feels it pretends to offer the female spectator an identification other than identification with the male hero, it deflects energy away from the transvestite option. But, on the other hand, the woman's film reduces the specularisable nature of the woman's body, so narcissistic identification is also problematised.

For Doane, in patriarchy to desexualise the woman's body is to deny its existence: 'The woman's film thus functions in a rather complex way to deny the woman a space of a reading'.[25] Doane nevertheless acknowledges this group of 40s films for women as revolutionary in that they did make an attempt to shift sexual terms of address away from masculine structures of seeing. She finds that the lack of epistomological validity ascribed to these films (i.e. their labelling 'the weepies'):

> Is an active recuperation of the contradictions which necessarily arise in attributing the epistomological gaze to the woman for, a bodyless woman cannot see. 26

Doane's appraisal of the woman's film is certainly a valuable one and it is necessary to employ psychoanalysis for an understanding of female

subjectivity in male oriented cinema.But I believe that the group of films in question are a vestige of female culture necessitating historical contextualisation in order to fully understand the complexities of their textu al and ideological operations.

The woman's film circumscribed a space for the female spectator, and although Doane concludes that it failed in this respect, cultural representations are historically specific and substantive evidence exists to suggest that women consuming the woman's film in the forties identified with the female protagonists and the issues prevailing on a personal level.

The woman's film forefronted a female discourse creating a symbolic place for women. They mark the beginning of the changing position of women in society and pose wider questions about gender and culture.

It is only after a historically specific analysis of the woman's film and the relation of text to context that the complexities of patriarchal ideology and female resistance to it can become clear.

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CHAPTER 2

MILDRED PIERCE

Mildred Pierce, a Warner production directed by Michael Curtiz, is a classic example of a powerful mother-daughter bond and the rise and fall of a career woman in films in the 1940s.

Mary Haskell refers to Warner's as:

> The studio most likely to advance the cause of woman as a working member of society and most likely to pull the rug out from under her with a sentimental ending. 1

Mildred Pierce was adapted from a novel by James M. Cain, published in 1941.[2] In her Oscar-winning performance, Joan Crawford plays the part of Mildred Pierce, a woman devoted exclusively to her children, more particularly to her spoiled older daughter Veda (played by Ann Blythe). She sacrifices everything for Veda, and even Mildred's ambition stems from her desire to advance her daughter: she is not permitted such an ambitious drive for her own fulfilment. As well as being a good example of the sacrificial theme in the women's film, Mildred Pierce also illustrates the women's film interplaying with other filmic styles of the forties, film noir, the crime movie and melodrama.

The story of Mildred Pierce as a struggling working class heroine here is appropriate material for Warner Bros. 'With its strong tradition of proletarian heroes and heroines and concern for social causes'.[3]

Bette Davis, Ida Lupino and Ginger Rogers are other examples of Warner Bros.' working class heroine-type casts. Warner's tradition of tough crime movies such as They Cry by Night (1940) was adhered to in Mildred Pierce. After the success of the adaptation of another Cain novel, Double Indemnity (1944) and its story of love, murder and corruption which was a successful combination of crime and the woman's film, the insertion of a murder into Mildred Pierce was practically ensured. It heralds the disenchantment of post-World War Two America and its noir style, and the flashbacks in it variating between the present dark noir world and the flashbacks shot in higher key lighting more typical of the women's film.

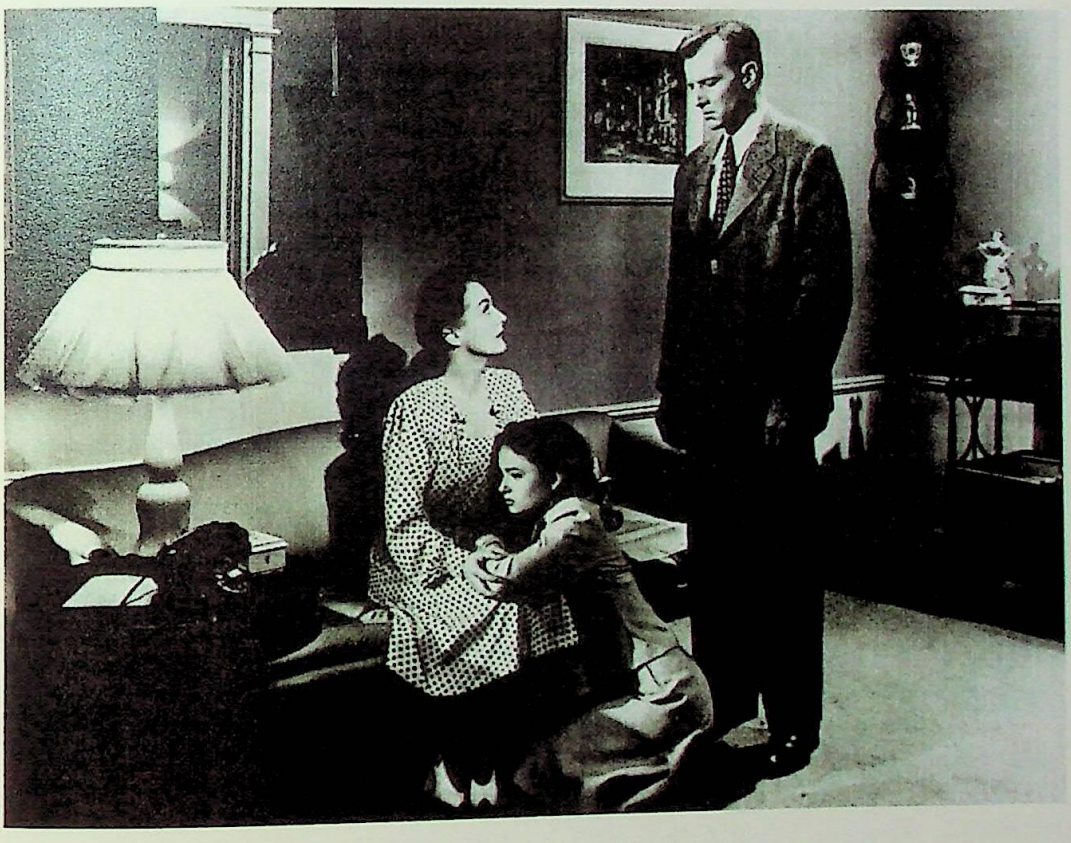
Mildred Pierce begins with a murder, the first shot is of a beach house: we hear gunshots and then we are presented with the interior. A middle-aged man staggers with bullet wounds, muttering his last word: 'Mildred'. We are not shown the murderer and this is the question mark of the film, the 'who dunnit'. What we are shown next is a woman standing on a boardwalk gazing at the sea below and we are led to believe she is the murderess. She looks as if she may jump in but is intercepted in her thoughts by a sarcastic policeman who ushers her away. We learn that she is Mildred Pierce as she meets an old friend, Wally. They drink together discussing elements of what seems to be a chequered past.

Eventually she invites her friend back to the beach house for more drinks, but manages to exit by the back door leaving Wally trapped inside where he discovers the body of the man we saw dying previously. Wally escapes to find more sarcastic policemen outside whom he leads to Mildred. Then they all end up at the police station and we discover who is who. The corpse is Monte Beragon, Mildred's second husband. Mildred's daughter, first husband and her business partner, Ida, are all present as Mildred is interrogated.

Detective Peterson is a sarcastic kind of guy who announces the owner of the murder weapon is Bert (Mildred's first husband) and therefore the murder is solved. Mildred insists to the contrary, thus throwing everyone into suspicion.

The main characters have been introduced now and Mildred is in the witness stand as she tells the story of her life and the events leading up to the murder. Mildred narrates this story in flashback and these sequences are brightly lit, and more cheerful than the dark world of the present we have been exposed to so far.

We are presented with Mildred bustling around a kitchen in a small Californian suburban home, struggling against poverty. Her husband Bert appears as a good-for-nothing unemployed insurance agent and is peripheral to his family, like many other fathers



Mildred and Veda, with Bert on the periphery

in maternal dramas. Mildred, on the other hand, is strong and is making every effort she can to become solidly middle class and to provide a decent and respectable standard of living for her daughters. As she says to Bert, and this is the key note to the major theme of Mildred Pierce and other maternal melodramas as in Stella Dallas: 'I'll do anything for those kids, do you understand - anything'. In this scene she is baking pies to make more money for her two daughters to buy them the extras necessary for their development as young ladies: piano and elocution lessons and new dresses: traditionally feminine desires. at this stage, Bert begins to have an affair with a neighbour, Mrs. Biederhof, and Mildred throws him out of the house.

Mildred subsequently finds herself in a situation that many women in real life would have found themselves in: no money and no skills to support her family. She sets out to find work in offices and stores all over Los Angeles but is confronted with the same reply from everyone: 'Sorry, we need someone with experience'. She finally lands a job waitressing downtown in a restaurant managed by a strong-willed woman, Ida Corwin.

Sharp-witted and sarcastic Ida and Mildred become good friends, and Ida's cynicism towards men and hard business sense helps Mildred in her

difficult transition from marriage to divorce and home to outside work.

Mildred, in the meanwhile, makes every effort she can to hide her new job from her children, particularly Veda, who eventually discovered the terrible truth and exclaims: 'My mother - a common waitress'. They get over the ensuing row, but this incident is not enough for Mildred to realise what a monster Veda is turning into, whose greed can only be satisfied by wealth and material goods.

Kay, the younger daughter, is carefree and tom-boyish and does not mind much about anything, but early on in the film she dies tragically of pneumonia which developed in Mildred's absence. Her death (which happened at the home of Bert's lover) leaves Mildred guilty, grieving and coveting Veda even more.

There is no direct criticism of Mildred in this occurrence, but it is implied that it was as a result of the Pierce's divorce and Mildred's career obsession that Kay may have been neglected.

Mildred has had a tragic loss, but now she begins to make economic gain. Ida and Mildred buy property from Monte Beragon and with some help from the lecherous Wally Fay, they set up a restaurant and achieve huge successes. Although they were helped realise their goals by kiniving, manipulative men, Mildred and Ida are honest, hard-working business women.

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Mildred's status is unconventional for a woman but this is excused as her motives are traditional for a mother: she does it all for the advancement of her daughter.

Ida, on the other hand, is treated as asexual and not a 'real' woman in the sense that she is not affiliated with any man in the film. Haskell remarks of her character as being 'the most treacherously and heart breakingly sexist of all'.[4] She is independent witty and intelligent; a true friend to women and she maintains a wry continuous commentary on the stupidity of men throughout the film. Her freedom from men gives her the perspective to judge them cynically and correctly. She is apparently sexless and out of the running:

> When men are around me they get allergic to wedding rings, I'm the big sister type, you know, good old Ida, you can talk with her man to man.

The message seems to be here that career women are, or should be, ambitious for some higher purpose i.e. for their family, or if they are doing it for their own self-fulfilment they are lonely and asexual and would give it all up for the love of a man.

During the boom in Mildred's restaurant business, Veda's greed and selfishness has been expanding at twice the pace. Mildred gets involved with Monte Beragon, the wealthy good-for-nothing, and it seems this is also for Veda's sake as the class

Monte belongs in and that Veda is aspiring to do not have to work for their money, especially not in greasy restaurants.

Mildred marries Monte eventually, to win Veda and her love. However, Veda falls in love with Monte and they both use Mildred for her money. Monte is also uncommitted to Veda, however and when she asks him to leave Mildred he refuses. She shoots him dead and the murder is solved: it was Veda who shot Monte Beragon.

After the detective has established this and Veda is behind bars, he pulls up the blinds to let in a new day into which, to our surprise, Mildred walks off into with spineless Bert. As they leave, two women on their hands and knees are scrubbing the stairs of Justice, keeping the facade clean.

Mildred Pierce is a very suggestive work as well as being ambiguous. Its narrative structure differs from the classic maternal drama such as The Grapes of Wrath (Ma Joad):

> Although Mildred herself is depicted as a slightly obsessed paragon of virtue, her 'dark mirror' Veda reflects the insidious side of social mobility. 5

The film has many different levels, commenting on class, nouveaux riches and women's status. Stella Dallas (1937) is also closely aligned with Mildred Pierce in this respect: Veda, backed by Mildred is aspiring to an aristocratic class from her poor

background, and likewise in Stella Dallas, Barbara Stanwyck is pushing her daughter Laurel into the upper classes.

The Mildred/Veda relationship appears as a double image mirror, precipitated by the visual imagery of the film which frequently presents them facing each other with similar hair styles and clothing.

Another explanation given for Mildred's obsession with Veda is the electra complex where Mildred imagines herself as Veda, and Veda is in love with her (step)father: then, as Parker Tyler believes, it was Mildred who fundamentally, if not actually, pulled the trigger.[6] He sees the whole movie as a suggestion of Mildred's dream of guilt.

La Valley upholds the idea of Mildred's guilt in his introduction to the script of Mildred Pierce. He allegates that Mildred's money-making schemes appear noble, but actually they are corrupt in that they are carried out to win Veda's love. He feels that they are mirrored in Veda with her blackmail and her aborted marriage for class and money. 'Mildred's commitment to realise her wish exerts a repression of sexuality that takes revenge upon her'.[7]

La Valley notices that Mildred prefers to snuggle up with Veda rather than with Bert or Monte and that she projects her sexuality onto Veda. He finds it an unsurprising conclusion that Veda sleeps

with Monte towards the end. Molly Haskell sees the relationship as 'A veiled expression of self love that takes on the aspect of narcissism'.[8]

Mildred Pierce seems to be warning women against self-love, incest or lesbianism: the male parts in the film are all more or less peripheral and despite the fact that law and order and domination are all restored to the male side at the end, they represent negative role models: objects to be manipulated and dominated.

The detective, to whom the story of Mildred's life is being narrated, represents masculine law and he puts everthing back in the correct patriarchal box at the finale.

Pam Cook sees the detective as a function of masculine law in her essay which adopts a more theoretical semiological stance on the film.[9] She attempts to suggest a way of reading Mildred Pierce which opens up the question of the working of patriarchal ideology and the place it holds for women and men and the implications of this question for feminist film criticism and sexual politics.

She discusses the basic schema behind the relationship between mother right and father right as propounded by J. J. Bachofen as a means for understanding the duplicity in Mildred Pierce. She illustrates this conflict in terms of genre,

melodrama and the woman's film v. film noir and style (high and low key lighting), and characterisation (Mildred v the men).

All the way through the film the maternal principle rejects patriarchy but is overthrown by it in the end.

After Inspector Peterson has overseen the teasing out of the truth, he opens the blinds of the station, symbolically letting in the light of dawn; light as the masculine principle which heralds the dawn of culture and the defeat of matriarchy.[10] He has broken up Mildred's lie and has reasserted patriarchal authority and Mildred is paired off with Bert again. 'The reconstitution of patriarchal order is seen to be a necessary defence.'[11] However, La Valley finds fault with Cook's theoretical approach. He feels she overlooks some important respects of the film: for example, Mildred's bad behaviour and Veda's unworthiness. He believes her theoretical approach and concentration on psychoanalytic theories and Bachofen's description of mother-right, father-right transitions miss the more obvious points in Mildred Pierce.

Cook's attempts to read the film in these terms are informative in psychoanalytic terms and to understand the women's film as previously discussed, I believe it important to include a reading of these family dramas in a psychoanalytically informed manner;

with the application of psychoanalysis, the suggestion and unanswered riddle from the beginning posits Mildred as a possible agent of death and the journey to the truth is determined by the detective.

Cook points out the male appearance of Crawford, the impression of height in her appearance and padded shoulders.

In the beginning, Cook locates her as the uncastrated mother, orchestrating a trap for Wally and protecting herself from the discovery of her true condition.

She traces Mildred's career and replacement as the head of the family, and places this in the symbolic oedipal field where Mildred is denying her castration. She now has invaded male territory, but is obsessed by her relationship with Veda. The other important person in her life is Ida, and Cook interprets this friendship as representative of the pre-oedipal bi-sexual state, a regression from patriarchy.

She posits the Mildred-Veda relationship as narcissistic, and Veda as Mildred's double was created as a defence against castration.

Chaos threatens the business world that Mildred is involved in, nothing is stable and business and sexual relations are closely aligned. Mildred's business begins to collapse towards the end, and it is implied that for a stabilisation of the business

world, sexual order must be re-established. And it is; Veda is imprisoned, the business collapses and Mildred is returned to Bert by the male powers that be. Bert represents the grim moralistic side of society to whom Mildred must acquiesce; she must learn that a woman and a man's world are mutually exclusive.

In a way Mildred is doubly castrated: she has lost both her daughters and her business and is parcelled off with Bert.

Mildred Pierce was released in September 1945 when millions of soldiers were returning home. The film's ideological function seems to be to justify the relegation of women from the workforce back home again. Mildred Pierce no doubt held a message for ambitious women of the 40s. It also said something about the detrimental effect working women were preported to have on their children, and perhaps reflected their guilt in this respect.

Walsh stresses the recognition of emerging feminism at that time:

> This film reflects the conservative backlash as well as the commonly felt underside of the new female power. [12]

Walsh asserts that the underlying message inherent in Mildred Pierce is that despite the tragedies she experienced, she was also a winner and a survivor. Women who watched the film most likely

identified with these elements, and there is also a tale of female bonding and success, and this is important in the film.

Walsh reads the film as it is announced and interprets it as having been more positive than negative for 1940s women. However Pam Cook's psychoanalytic interpretation lays emphasis on the film's enunciation and stresses the repression of female consciousness: reflection and repression being the key terms of the respective readings. Linda Williams finds fault with Walsh's reading:

> Her reading simply isolates the text's static reflection of a political and historical referent. Emerging female consciousness created by new wartime opportunities for women. 13

The historical placement of films such as Mildred Pierce is crucial I believe to their interpretation. Both psychoanalytic and historical readings are important in their understanding but the importance Mildred Pierce holds stems from its popularity at the time of its release. The women who viewed it in 1945 were experiencing confusion and guilt over their changing roles; they may have identified with Mildred's sacrifices for Veda and her ensuing horror at her daughter's behaviour. The film has an unconvincing ending, and the meaning behind it for women in 1945 and today is ambiguous, just as wartime women's roles are.

Walsh and Cook's different approaches to Mildred Pierce highlight the debates within feminist film theory.

Pam Cook's analysis is psychoanalytic, where women are believed to be denied access to male viewing pleasures, where there is only objectivity of women, and they are represented as absence or lack, where their representation is their repression.

Walsh and feminist film theorists who relate the film text to context examine film in a historically specific manner, where the social climate at the time of a film's release is understood as the most influential factor in its understanding.

I discussed these approaches to film in the previous chapter, and the debates prevailing in filmic discourse. But another factor to take into account in Mildred Pierce is a historical female spectators' perception of the film most probably differed dramatically from current feminist awareness of varying theoretical stances.

This film has many contradictory aspects and multiple different meanings and it is therefore problematic to give a definite analysis of it.

However, in Mildred Pierce and other films included in 'The Women's Film', women were identifying with the stars represented, and relating their filmic experiences with their own lives as working women and mothers in the 1940s.

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11 David Bordell, Making Meaning, Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema, Chpt.5 'Semantic Fields'.

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13 Linda Williams, 'Something Else Besides a Mother'; Home is Where the Heart is, p. 309.

CHAPTER 4

NOW VOYAGER

Publicity poster for Now Voyager

Like Mildred Pierce, Now Voyager is another film about 'A Woman Alone', with a strong maternal theme running through it. It also expresses both traditional and alternative conceptions of femininity in a time of shifting morals and difficult life choices for women.

Now Voyager was directed by Irving Rapper in 1942 and was adapted by Warner's from a novel by Olive Higgins Prouty (also authoress of Stella Dallas) and is the story of a woman's struggle for adulthood and independence from her overbearing mother. In America, 'coming of age' and the separation from parents in film was generally achieved through heterosexual romance as in the case of Now Voyager.

Prouty's 1941 novel is a vivid presentation of a maturing, increasingly confident and self-reliant woman, focussing on the emotional elements in this progress to autonomy.

Women's emotional lives and the films and novels that narrated them were and are frequently dismissed as trivial emotional outlets, and are sometimes regarded as fantasmical and escapist. Recently as feminist film critics have salvaged and analysed these vestiges of women's culture, they have assessed the importance they held in women's lives.

One scene in Now Voyager portrays Charlotte showing Dr. Jaquith her den of forbidden pleasures,

amongst which she covets a number of romantic novels, and these represent her struggle for independence and sexual liberation.

The film opens inside a stately Boston house where a renowned psychiatrist, Dr. Jaquith has been summonsed to examine the youngest daughter of the aristocratic Vale family, Charlotte.

Peter Mathews comments sardonically on the role of the family in melodrama:

> At least until the compulsory restoration of equilibrium in the final reel, the melodrama ritually rehearses, from a variety of view points, all the thrilling frission of the subjects situation within that terrain of contradictory tensions known as the Bourgouis family. 1

Charlotte is the subject here, and in the first scene her sister-in-law, the doctor and her haughty mother, who refuses to accept that her daughter is sick, discuss her predicament. Suspense builds up as we await introduction to Charlotte herself - will she look deranged? What exactly is wrong with her?

The first glimpses we have of her are fragmented body parts: hands putting out a cigarette and hiding it, and legs in heavy tights and orthopaedic shoes walk hesitantly down the stairs.

Our first look at her is from Dr. Jaquith's point of view: it is a Betty Davis unlike any other representation of her, and her appearance shocks us. She wears a matronly dress, and looks dumpy and old fashioned with heavy glasses and an unflattering hairdo.

When Charlotte discovers the purpose behind Jaquith's visit she becomes agitated but nonetheless agrees to show him her room. He is shown old photographs of her through which we are presented a second Charlotte out of the four in the film.

In the flashback she is transformed, it is twenty years previously and Charlotte is pretty, passionate and defiant of her mother. She is discovered necking in a cabin with a naval officer while on a cruise and it seemed ever since then she has been dominated by her mother, who appears to have felt threatened by her budding sexuality.

Jaquith responds sympathetically to her story as Charlotte talks about her undesirability resulting from the oppression by her mother, and her insistence on her wearing glasses and her disapproval of dieting. She sees herself as 'Charlotte Vale, spinster' and the film implies that indeed no man would want her as she looks. Charlotte is a lesson for women: be beautiful and if you do not make the effort you might go insane.

Jaquith recognises the source of her illness and recommends she spends some time at Cascade, his sanatorium and she accepts. There she improves dramatically: she loses weight and is calmer, free of tyranny. However returning home would reactivate her former condition so Jaquith sends her off on a six-month cruise.

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The Charlotte on the cruise ship is physically transformed: the metamorphoses has taken place: she is glamorous, slim and beautiful in every scene. Her hair is swept up and she wears dramatic hats and outfits. She is still unsure of herself though, and to complete her recovery the next stage of her cure arises: the love of a good man.

She meets Jerry (Paul Henreid) who constantly admires her appearance and they strike up a friendship. He talks about his children, particularly his younger one, Tina, whom he refers to as his ugly duckling. Charlotte's curiosity is aroused, seeing a parallel with herself and she asks Jerry 'Does she know she wasn't wanted?'

Jerry and Charlotte begin a romance despite his continuing marriage to the mother of his children. His marriage is unhappy and his wife is depicted as ill and consumed with jealousy and martyrdom, much like Mrs. Vale. Despite this and Jerry's love for her, after a passionate affair at the end of the cruise, they agree not to meet again.

The sexuality in their relationship is implied in the way that he lights cigarettes for her, one for him and one for her simultaneously and they inhale and exhale the smoke deeply.

Upon Charlotte's return to Boston, Mrs. Vale expects immediate subservience once again. Charlotte holds her own though and reasserts herself. They

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live together in a truce. Subsequently, Charlotte is proposed to by a wealthy Bostonian widower and she accepts, only to meet Jerry shortly afterwards at a party where she realises her true feelings and terminates her engagement.

Mrs. Vale is appalled and in an ensuing row dies of a heart attack. Consumed with guilt, Charlotte takes off back to Cascade only to encounter Tina, Jerry's daughter, esconsed there, unhappy and alone.

They become inseparable. Charlotte plays surrogate mother to the child, bringing her camping and shopping, all unbeknownst to Jerry. Eventually Tina goes to live with Charlotte in Boston on condition from Jaquith that herself and Jerry never have any sexual relations. Jerry feels ashamed of the sacrifices she makes and objects. Charlotte recognises his distress and explains her view of the situation. Jerry's pride bothers him and he needs reassurance that she is not sacrificing herself unduly.

Charlotte sees Tina as a reflection of herself as a girl and surrogate daughter to whom she can be the mother she never had. Tina has replaced Jerry and is an expression of their love.

As Max Steiner's romantic score swells up in the last scene Jerry lights two cigarettes and gives one to Charlotte. They ruminate on the arrangement:

Jerry: 'And will you be happy, Charlotte?'

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Jerry: 'And will you be happy, Charlotte?'

Charlotte: 'Don't let's ask for the moon, we have the stars.'

Stanley Cavell makes an interesting observation on the symbolism in the last classical line.[2] He considers thge moon as a romantic symbol, and comments that stars are commonly known as examples, or guides, but at the same time Charlotte and Jerry are settling for them as the inferior option.

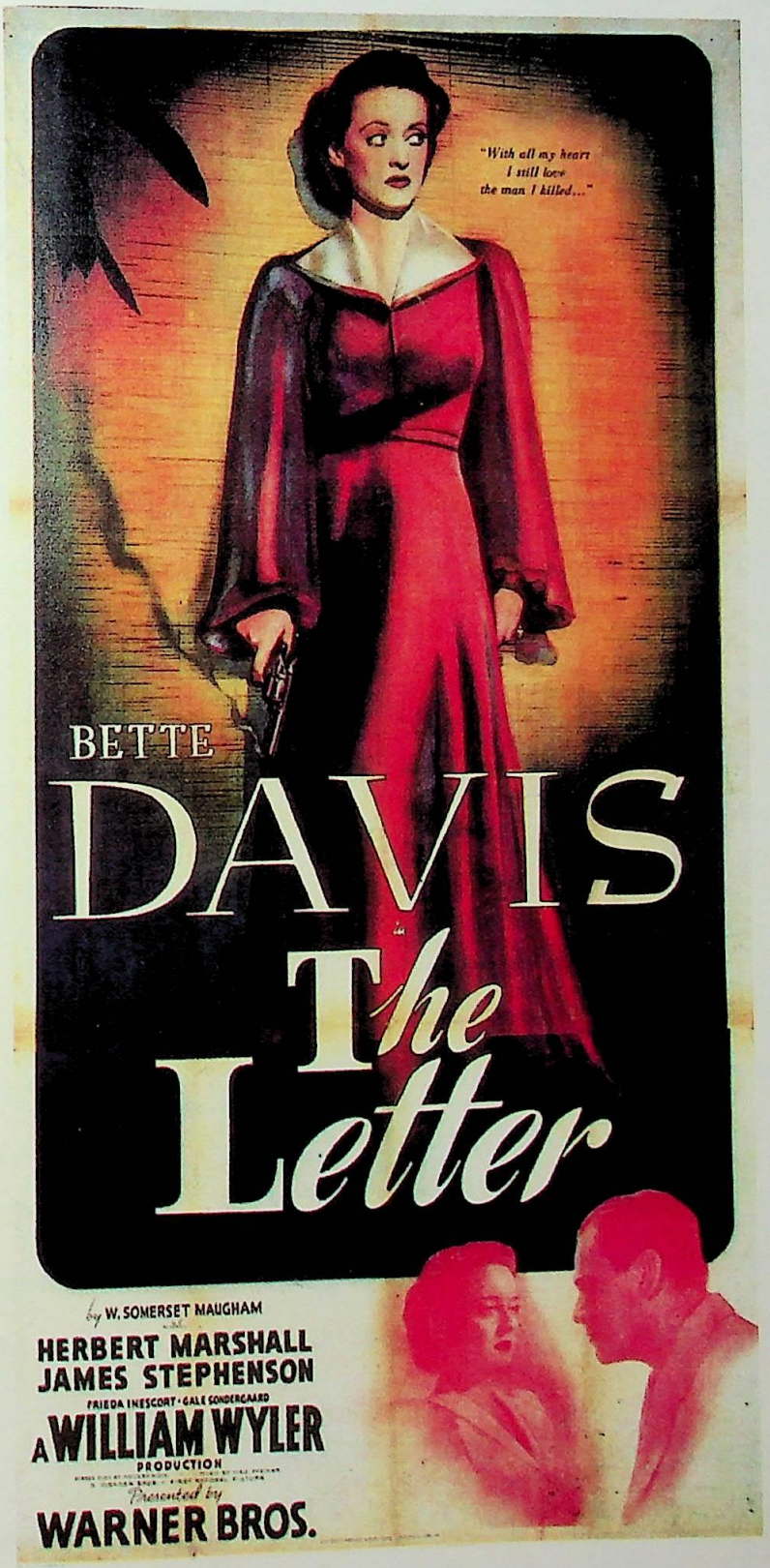
He also alludes to the fact that Bette Davis is a 'star' of Hollywood and this brings us to the David phenomenon and her star status.

BETTY DAVIS AND NOW VOYAGER

Now Voyager was the fourth highest top grossing film of 1942 for Warner Bros. Bette Davis' Charlotte and the strong self-sacrificing women of Hollywood melodrama bore a striking resemblance to Davis' own life.

Bette Davis was often considered to be too strong and pushy for her male contemporaries, but she had an evolved person as a star and this made an impact on the narrative structure of Now Voyager. Bette Davis is well known for becoming involved with the production of the films she was in and had more power than most stars in the studio set-up.

Davis had a certain discourse that carried into the parts she played. Other examples of her persona in the women's film are films such as All About Eve (1950) and All This and Heaven Too (1941).



Love, Death and Davis

The publicity for Now Voyager marketed Davis as a combination between the strong self-sacrificing woman and the vampish superwoman. The poster portrays her languishing back with a cigarette staring out nonchalant with 'Don't blame me for what happened' written across it.

From 1938 to 1943 Davis was one of Hollywood's top grossing stars: she appeared almost exclusively in 'the woman's film' and her appeal to female spectators was well known.

Stars, according to Richard Dyer, became identified with or are constructed along the lines of various social types and cultural stereotypes.[3] One of these stereotypes is the independent woman, ubiquitous in the woman's film and core of the Davis persona.

In most of the roles she plays she is sharp-witted, headstrong, intelligent and often self-sacrificing. Her personality is continuous in her roles, characterised by deliberate clipped speeches, darting eye movements, a confident walk and sudden intense drags on cigarettes. Her performances are skilful and add an extra dimension to the film for the spectator.

The construction of the star's image is carried out in the publicity material about the star gossip, commentary and biographical details. It was known that Davis came from a fatherless, lower middle class

Another Warner Bros. appearance for Davis

family and, like many of the characters she portrayed, made her way to the top by knowing who she was and what she wanted from life.

CONSUMARIST DISCOURSE IN THE MARKETING OF NOW VOYAGER

The film was sold as a Davis vehicle, exploiting the audience's previous knowledge of her appearances. The film was discussed in terms of what Bette does in it rather than Charlotte Vale. The promotion of Now Voyager used women's fiction as part of its selling strategy. Also written on the poster was 'Another best seller from the author of Stella Dallas, another great role for Bette'.[4]

The advertisements dwell on the romance in the film, how Paul Henreid meets Davis: 'The lover to match her every emotion': these were points the advertisers felt would draw women to see the movie. Consumerist culture is closely related to the marketing of this film. Consumerism could be properly defined as:

> The ideology of fetished commodity consumption in twentieth century capitalism. 5

And Bette Davis was presented as the commodity in the sale on Now Voyager: putting a cigarette in Davis' hand in the poster equated her with independence and glamour.

The idea about Charlotte's 'cure' from a neurotic nervous woman existing outside of society's

dictates to her transformation into a beautiful and desirable woman is a favourite ploy of advertisers: the 'before' and 'after' concept. Her appearance defines her identity: initially she is 'sick' because of her appearance and after a doctor transforms her she wins the ultimate goal: heterosexual love. Some of the publicity read: 'Proper coiffure the key to beauty and success. Bette shows how not to be glamorous in her new film'.

It is the classic story of the ugly duckling< the taunts from her niece, her painful awareness of her undesirability and rejection by men and her subsequent metamorphosis into a swan, a perfectly dressed, made up and coordinated woman.

NOW VOYAGER FAMILIES FREUD AND SYMBOLISM

Mary Ann Doane interprets Now Voyager as a combination of the medical discourse and the love story.[6] Her appraisal of the film seems to contain contradictory elements. According to Doane the medical discourse 'completely forecloses the possibility of a feminine position', whereas the love story renders the woman's position as potentially negotiable. These two discourses are evident in the film, the medical discourse at the beginning and from when Jerry enters the scene, it alters to the love story.

Maria Laplace refers to the woman's novel and its history and traces its move into the twentieth century and the ambivalent acknowledgement it made to the notion of female sexuality with the further complication of 'vulgar' Freudian theories.

> Women's fiction began to represent female desire and even to embrace the (vulgar) Freudian notion that sexual repression leads to neurosis. 7

La Place studies the basic narrative patterns of women's fiction and its recurring themes. She finds there is generally a heroine who triumphs over adversity; hardship she experiences due to circumstances beyond her control. After doing so, she must create a happy home and community composed of the needy and relatives.

Now Voyager certainly offers this ending in opposition to the self-destructive biological family presented at the outset. The biological family seems to be a time bomb in the woman's film, dangerous, sexless and suffocating to all involved with it.

All this and Heaven Too also offers an alternative family structure with Davis as the mother figure, but not the biological one, in the final scenes it is Davis who replaces the natural mother who is portrayed as a hysteric and a failure.

Now Voyager is also a story of a failed mother and a woman whose sexuality has been repressed in no uncertain terms by her mother. It contains aspects

Before . . .

And after

of popular Freudianism, the repression of a woman's sexuality leading to hysterical neurosis.

Charlotte starts out in a state of lack: her father is dead, she does not know herself, and in keeping with many women's films she is used and abused within her family.

Then following a Freudian oedipal scenario, paternal Jaquith intervenes and releases her from her condition. Psychoanalysis is presented positively in this film. Jaquith cures her psychiatric conditions and is a benevolent, caring character.

She finds it difficult to return home as it has been the site of her repression. Charlotte's sexuality is the key element in Now Voyager and although the Hays code prevented it from being any more explicit, it is suggested throughout the film. Her references to sex while talking to Livingstone: her frankness shocked him, and the reference to marriage indicates the end of desire.

Tina and Charlotte have an odd relationship in the scene at Cascade where Davis goes in to comfort the child. Stanley Cavell calls their embrace 'The Freudian cuddle'. Cavell asserts that the child is replacing the woman's desire for a penis.[8]

Cavell goes on to discuss the significance of the naming and renaming of people and the description of things. For example, Jerry's name for Charlotte is Camille. This is the new chique she equates

herself with. When Jerry notices her butterfly on one of Charlotte's evening gowns and names it a 'tritillary' she has not heard of it and this indicates the instability of her position at the time. The butterfly is also a classic image of a creature that metamorphosis.

He points to the birth of Charlotte's freedom as it coincides with the death of her mother. He draws up a relevant coda.

When Charlotte first doffs her name (to Camille with a little help from Jerry) her mother must accept the change in her, but when Charlotte later refuses to doff it in favour of a man's name (Livingstone), she thereby causes her mother's death.

In the woman's film, there is sometimes a villain out to upset, kill or dominate the heroine. In Gaslight for example, Charles Boyer is dominating and driving Ingrid Bergman insane, and Humphrey Bogart is poisoning Barbara Stanwyck in The Two Mrs. Carrolls, but the villain in Now Voyager is Mrs. Vale, Charlotte's mother.

The real biological mother never fared very well in these films: she was hysterical, over-protective, not protective enough or over-ambitious.

Now Voyager was a box office hit and promoted a strong response from female audience. Hundreds of women wrote similar tales of maternal domination to

Davis and how they overcame their situation after watching the film.

The role of Davis, her position in the romance and the alternative family structure in the end reinforces the old ideas of the inviolability of the American family after its initial subversion. Charlotte's success as a mother, according to Jean Allen, confirms a fundamentally conservative ideal about women's roles and a reverence for motherhood.[9] However Davis is not the natural mother so this is distorted slightly: there appears to be an overriding irreverence for biological mothers.

Now Voyager's political stance is positive for women. It may appealed to wartime women in a number of ways. It has a few messages in it: Charlotte is fortyish when she metamorphisises, so it is never too late: you too can be beautiful: mental illness is tolerable and curable: to be rich does not necessarily ensure happiness and is linked with repression and domination.

The Charlotte/Jerry relationship and the adoption of Tina 'supports as well as challenges traditionalism.[10]

Marriage is not what Charlotte desires:she threw it in for 'true love' and Jaquith and Charlotte's relationship ends ambiguously. They work together discussing plans for a new wing to Cascade. He who rescued her seems to be the father/husband figure in

this ideal matriarchy. At the end of the film the wicked mother is dead and Davis controls her relationship with Jerry and his child, and is master of her household. Laplace points out:

> There is no real resolution of the discourse of female sexuality; the film begins with a strong stance against the repression of female sexuality and though romance and eroticism are permitted, a complete expression of sexuality is not. 11

The last classic line of the film speaks for the mood of the resolution of the drama: 'Oh, Jerry let's not ask for the moon when we have the stars'. The theme is compromise and recurs in many other films of the 40s.

Charlotte Vale was allowed transcend the traditional bounds of morality and found sympathy in the end. She abandons her dreams and is satisfied with what she can realistically attain.

Female audiences could relate to this ending in the 1940s:

> Whose wartime insecurities intensified needs for love and parenthood, while limiting opportunities for achieving them in traditional ways. 12

The compromise Davis/Charlotte makes and accepts in Now Voyager may have provided solace to the wartime Rosies who were perhaps without a husband, or with a wartime lover, or single with a married lover, or even the many who were looking after children who were not their own.

Spectators with knowledge of the Bette Davis discourse could interpret the ending as speaking for women. Davis in the end hangs on to her independence and passion in keeping with the Davis image.

Now Voyager fits into the fictional processes of the woman's film and draws on a wider woman's culture as it was in the early forties. With its commodity aspect of the star system and consumerist female culture, it created a symbolic progression towards the creation of an alternative lifestyle for women and a space for their discourse.

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CONCLUSION

In my exploration into 'The Woman's Film' I have presented the various modes of discourse employed to understand its mechanisms, its representation of women on different levels and their meaning in cine-psychoanalytic and historical terms for the female spectator.

I have attempted to estimate the more relevant analyses for the understanding of the woman's film, particularly in relation to Now Voyager and Mildred Pierce.

I believe it is essential to preclude a discussion on any group of films with a consideration of the historical processes that formed them. I do not undermine the importance of a psychoanalytic reading of film, but as it is applied to the women's film, the conventional theories of spectatorship alter significantly.

In accordance with psychoanalytic theories. Again women are denied a voice in filmic discourse. To study and fully understand the woman's film and film in general, theorists are more frequently engaging in multiple readings, assessing the many different elements contributing to the formation of film, from contemporary social situations to Freudian and Lacanian interpretations.

The woman's film is a sphere of female orientated popular culture that emerged in wartime America and it can only be fully understood within

this cultural context. It attempted to construct a feminine narrative in Hollywood and succeeded in presenting a recognisable picture of women's position under patriarchy with the depiction of assertive independent women and strong female bonding during and around the time of the war.

To assert that a woman's voice is absent from these films is tantamount to allegating that women are absent from film history.

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