

dance in our footsteps, warmth and tenderness, love and strength.”

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**Women's Film and Female Experience, 1940-1950.** Andrea S. Walsh. *New York: Praeger, (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Canada), 1984. Pp.257.*

The assumption which guides Andrea S. Walsh's useful analysis of American "women's films" of the decade between 1940 and 1950 is straightforward. She believes that mass culture, while not *by* the people, is *for* the people and, most importantly, *of* the people. Popular culture, even that often ersatz version channelled through the mass media by corporate controllers, can't be wholly dictated from the top. By examining the content of popular films of the forties we can gain an insight into what women were experiencing and thinking.

While I don't find her analysis convincing, anyone interested in the film or sociology of that decade will find a great deal of useful information in this book.

The content of films can't be dictated from the top for two reasons, says Walsh. One of these is called the box office. During the forties women became more important consumers of movies than ever before and, perhaps, ever since. Many men were at war, more women were working and box office take became increasingly dependent on women. Advertising, fan clubs, movie magazines can't generate the mass audiences needed unless the film in question services, touches and resonates to some experience vital to an audience. To a modern feminist the "consciousness" reached may be a false one. Nevertheless, we can begin to understand that consciousness by studying film—or so Walsh believes.

Perhaps, perhaps not. But there can be no disagreement that women flocked to the movies. Many attended weekly and remember this was the era of the double bill. It was common to see a double bill during the week and another on the weekend: four movies a week, talk about role modelling. And with husbands and boyfriends far away, a pattern of shared female viewing became common. "Going to the movies itself was perceived as an autonomous act by many women" (p.31).

A second reason exists why the content of films cannot be wholly dictated from the top, argues Walsh. Studio bosses may have financed films, but they couldn't make them. That's the job of directors, scriptwriters, performers, set designers and a host of others. These artists will have interests and artistic aspirations not wholly subservient to career advancement. Some of these artists were women. And so, says Walsh, even though the films in question were directed by men, they have distinctly "feminine" (sic) quality and with good reason. Some were adaptations of novels by women (e.g., *Little Women*), or scripted by a woman (e.g., *Tomorrow Is Forever*), and, of course, starred women.

This meant that the battle of the sexes often portrayed in film's like *Adam's Rib* was fought off-screen as well as on. Walsh thinks that a different reading must be given to the actual film than one obtains from the script. The script, Walsh claims, depicts career woman as bitch; that's not the way Katherine Hepburn plays the part nor is it the way George Stevens directs. The screen credits for *A Letter to Three Wives* had to be arbitrated by the Screenwriters' Guild of America to determine whether Vera Caspary should be listed as one screenwriter. (She lost; unfairly in many people's minds.)

Walsh argues that women's films of the forties can be grouped into five types. Three of these she regards as major categories. One is the maternal drama (e.g., *I Remember Mama*), a genre featur-

ing a strong sacrificial mother figure. A second is the “working girl” drama; *His Girl Friday* is probably the most familiar of these. A third is the film of suspicion and distrust, (e.g., *Gaslight*) in which a woman fears her husband means to harm her.

The two minor categories are the “woman in suffering” film and the “good woman/bad woman” film. But this typology presents some problems. Walsh presents little rationale for dividing the films in these categories. This is a major flaw because there are a number of popular films of this era that one has difficulty fitting into her typology. An example, for this reader at any rate, is *Joan of Arc*. And what about *Pride and Prejudice*? The screen adaptation of Jane Austen’s novel eludes the categories of Walsh. Another example is *Song of Bernadette*. A typology which fails to accommodate these and other examples just isn’t on. The problem is compounded because Walsh only deals in depth with her three major categories. One presumes space limitations account for this. But why the “woman in suffering” type, which includes films such as *Snake Pit*, is a minor category eludes me.

Perhaps the strongest section of this book is the analysis of the maternal drama. This is certainly a major category; all the big stars of the era appeared in at least one of these. Walsh argues that the mothers in these films are not feminists: “their rule” is born of necessity. She sees Ma Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath* as the prototype of these film mothers. She does not want to be the strength of her disintegrating family. But the depression, the dustbowl and machinery has robbed her husband of his economic strength. If her family is to survive intact, she will be the instrument. In *I Remember Mama*, the story of an immigrant family during the depression, again it is the mother who has the fortitude and humanity to keep the family together. Claudette Colbert in *Since You Went Away* becomes the focus when her husband leaves for war. She be-

lieves and says that she lacks courage but her actions tell a different story. In these films mothers sustain daughters and daughters sustain mothers. In one key episode Colbert’s daughter loses her fiance to war. She channels her grief by becoming a nurse’s aid and argues vehemently with a family friend who sniffs that nice young women from nice homes don’t do such things. Colbert, inspired by her daughter’s example, becomes a welder.

While Walsh clearly has a great deal of affection for these films, her book is often lacking in visual analyses. This is not because she is unaware of what the camera and editing can do. She supplies a good example of this in her discussion of *I Remember Mama*. Katrin (the daughter and narrator) often finds her working class mother too busy to talk. In one sequence we see a montage of images where Mama appears in a flurry, sewing, washing windows, hanging laundry and the like. This montage dissolves to a long shot of mother and daughter strolling down the street arm in arm. The camera makes the point about comradeship and work. Walsh seizes on this example and makes an important point with it. I wish she had done this more often. Indeed, she often relegates important material about camera work to the footnotes.

I found another difficulty. Many of these films have been interpreted before and Walsh certainly makes it clear that she is aware of this. But, while her readings of the films are invariably interesting and suggestive, she often fails to “take on” in a substantial way alternative readings. For instance, in her analysis of *Since You Went Away*, she suggests that the character played by Claudette Colbert serves as a womanly, capable model for women. In a footnote (p.135) she mentions a reading of the same film by Michael Renov, who sees the film as a prime example of patriarchal discourse. One longs for some substantial discussion of Renov’s argument by Walsh. She disagrees with Molly Haskell’s analysis (*Reverence to Rape*) of Hildy, played by

Rosalind Russell, in *His Girl Friday*. This disagreement is one of substance: to what extent must Hildy become "male" to survive in the journalistic jungle portrayed in the film. It's a disagreement I wish were tackled in the body of the text, not in the footnotes.

Why did women respond to these films? Walsh feels that the films as a group reflected both the aspirations and achievements of women, as well as the anxieties coupled to these aspirations. The films of maternal drama celebrate female kin bonding and show sisterhood as a source of joy, pain and most importantly sustenance. The film portrays (often) female achievement positively. And just as important for women thrust into new situations by war, they rebut the argument that powerful mothers destroy daughters. The "working girl" dramas illustrate a different model of male-female relating and in the screwball comedies present the idea that women's verbal facility allows them to tackle powerful males.

There is a dark side to this. Not all of the popular films of the decade celebrate the achievements of women. Many films, for instance *Mildred Pierce*, can be read as being deeply critical of the achieving woman. And there are the films of suspicion and distrust. In the latter part of the decade men returned home. These were men who had become to some extent strangers, both by their length of absence but also by their experiences during those absences. Some of the returning men had fought and killed; some had experiences of different lands and different women. They returned to women, some of who had been altered too. Walsh poses the question as to what extent the fears associated with this change accounted for the popularity of the films of suspicion and distrust.

Perhaps the fundamental problem with books of this type is that each film is open to such a wide variety of readings. The better the film the wider the variety of possible readings and the

more interesting and controversial these readings will be. *Mildred Pierce* is a case in point. Walsh feels that this Joan Crawford vehicle informs us that "female business success is narratively linked to motherly failure" (p.131). Perhaps; Walsh does present convincing reasons for reading the film that way. But thanks to the late show, I had a chance to see this film again a few weeks ago. The tragedy of *Mildred Pierce* it seems to me stems not from her business success but that, in spite of her success, she remains emotionally dependent on a man. He is a smooth and selfish loafer, a man bent on endless, conspicuous and vulgar consumption.

That films are open to different readings is not a problem when the different readings come from critics and scholars. Indeed, this becomes a source of illumination and pleasure. We can read the different interpretations, sift them, accept and reject in accord with our estimation of the potency of the supporting arguments for a critical reading.

From Walsh's book we can agree or disagree with her readings of the various films. But how do we establish that her readings are those of women of the 1940's? A reading of a film always takes place in a particular consciousness. Walsh's is that of the 1980's. However great her sympathy, even empathy, for the women of the forties, she fails to convince me that she has entered into the consciousness of the time. Nevertheless, she is to be thanked for the effort for she turns up much useful information and much food for thought. Her book will surely inspire and provoke other researchers. And, given the variety of ideas Walsh discusses in this book, one expects she herself will have more useful things to tell us in this area.

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