

British Popular Cinema

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1 The hour of the cuckoo

Reclaiming the British woman's film

Melanie Bell and Melanie Williams

Yes, but what makes a woman's picture? Is it a fabulous fashion show, decked out in Technicolor – and guaranteed to make any woman view her last year's good tweed with distaste? Is it a highly strung yarn of feminine conflict with *All About Eve*-ish undertones? Is it a dominating female star performance? Or is it a trio of handsome heroes, all amorously inclined and romantically involved? *It Started in Paradise* is all this, but something more. Personally, I'm inclined to think it's that something more that makes this tale of an ambitious woman and a fashion house so successfully yet so simply a woman's picture. Dramatic intensity is the nearest I can get to it in print.

(Hinxman 1952: 12)

In the pages of *Picturegoer* in the early 1950s, the critic Margaret Hinxman considers a new British release *It Started in Paradise* and mulls over the various elements that make it a 'woman's picture', citing the importance of qualities such as visual splendour (and indirect encouragement to go shopping in emulation of said splendour), feminine conflict, female star performance and handsome heroes before finally deciding that 'dramatic intensity' is the distinguishing feature of the species. In its attempt to get to grips with the conventions of this particular genre, Hinxman's article pre-empts a very sizeable body of academic literature engaged in the same task from the 1970s onwards. One of the earliest examples was Molly Haskell's *From Reverence to Rape*, which queried the idea that the pejorative industry category of 'woman's picture' offered nothing more than 'soft-core emotional porn for the frustrated housewife'. Instead she tentatively celebrated a filmic form in which 'the woman – a woman – is at the center of the universe' for a change (1974: 155), drawing attention to powerful performances by actresses such as Bette Davis, Joan Crawford, Olivia de Havilland, Margaret Sullavan, Katharine Hepburn, Barbara Stanwyck and Joan Fontaine in movies dealing with the grand themes of 'sacrifice, affliction, choice, competition' (1974: 163).

Scholarly interest in the woman's picture continued into the 1980s, part of a growing feminist interest in 'gynocentric' cultural forms such as soap opera and romantic fiction (Kuhn 1984; Modleski 1984; Brunsdon 1986; Doane 1987b; Radway 1987). With their unabashed courtship of the female cinema goer, woman's films posed an interesting challenge to psychoanalytic theories of cinema



Figure 1.1 Fabulous fashion, feminine conflict, dramatic intensity: Kay Kendall and Jane Hylton in *It Started in Paradise*, directed by Compton Bennett (1952).
Source: The Steve Chibnall Collection.

spectatorship which had hitherto conceptualised the gaze as inflexibly male. The very nomenclature of the genre, as Mary Ann Doane pointed out, 'stipulates that the films are in some sense the "possession" of women and that their terms of address are dictated by the anticipated presence of the female spectator' (1987a: 284). However, this is not to say that the woman's film is necessarily a progressive or proto-feminist genre. Unsurprisingly, many critics have taken issue with the gender ghetto-ism implicit in the generic label 'woman's film' (pointing out the lack of any masculine equivalent, the 'man's picture') and have questioned the automatic assumptions about women's cinematic preferences that such categorisation seemed to entail. In 1949, British critic Catherine De La Roche complained that in film marketing 'you will find that sentimentality, lavish and facile effects, the melodramatic, extravagant, naively romantic and highly coloured, the flattering, trivial and phoney – these are the elements in pictures, whatever their overall qualities, that are supposed to draw women' (De La Roche 1949: 27). A few years later, Eleanor Wintour, occasional critic for *Tribune*, went even further in her angry dismissal of a special category of films just for women:

If the frustrated female audience is really so important to the film producers, can they not give them special showings as they do of films for small boys? Screen them on Saturday afternoons at reduced prices, and frankly call them Ladies' Afternoons. Adults of both sexes could then avoid them as they avoid the Saturday morning cowboy films.

(Wintour 1955)

Moreover, the pleasures of woman's pictures are often masochistic ones, delighting in feminine agony, and the films frequently close on a conservative note, with the heroine safely ensconced in a traditional female role in spite of what adventures may have gone before. Yet the woman's film is above all else a Janus-faced genre which is simultaneously complicit with and critical of the gender status quo. In spite of attempts at narrative closure, woman's films are frequently riddled with contradictions that cannot be contained, and in fact, as Laura Mulvey has argued of Douglas Sirk's melodramas, the value of such a form for feminist critics 'lies in the amount of dust the story raises along the road, a cloud of over-determined irreconcilables which put up a resistance to being neatly settled in the last five minutes' (Mulvey 1989: 40).

One of the key issues for scholars of the woman's film has been the question of where to draw the precise perimeters of a genre variously thought of 'as escapist entertainment for women, simply as films that men do not like, as examinations of capable, independent female characters and their empowerment, as emotional "tearjerkers", as tales of female bonding, and as the antithesis to male-orientated action films' (Hollinger 2008: 225). Often considered alongside or as a sub-section of melodrama (as in the 1987 essay collection *Home is Where the Heart is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*) because of a shared concern with effect and pathos, the woman's film is defined by Maria LaPlace (in the above collection) as being 'distinguished by its female protagonist, female point of view and its narrative which most often revolves around the traditional realms of women's experience: the familial, the domestic, the romantic – those arenas where love, emotion and relationships take precedence over action and events' (LaPlace 1987: 139): a useful encapsulation of the standard definition of the genre. However, Janine Basinger has suggested a more catholic categorisation which can find room for films such as 'Rosalind Russell's career comedies, musical biographies of real-life women, combat films featuring brave nurses on Bataan, and westerns in which women drive cattle west' (Basinger 1993: 7) alongside the more familiar romances and melodramas. Basinger finally settles on a pluralistic working definition of the woman's film as simply 'a movie that places at the center of its universe a female who is trying to deal with the emotional, social, and psychological problems that are specifically connected to the fact that she is a woman' (20).

This collection of essays will mobilise Basinger's admirably open definition of the woman's film, originally formulated in relation to classic Hollywood, but apply it to the very different national context of British cinema, in the hope of bringing to light a parallel heritage of British woman's films, perhaps less well

known than their Hollywood counterparts but no less significant. These range from the female-centred dramas of silent British cinema right through to the contemporary British 'chick flick', covering the work of actresses from Mabel Poulton to Keira Knightley, and literary inspirations ranging from Ethel M. Dell to Helen Fielding; films that have performed the same function as their American cousins – 'to articulate female concerns, angers, and desires, to give substance to a woman's dreams and a woman's problems' (Basinger 1993: 36) – but imagined within a British cinematic consciousness. The contributors to the collection deploy various methodologies in their respective chapters but they are linked in their common aim to re-address the question Margaret Hinxman first asked her readers back in 1952 – what makes a woman's picture – and what does it mean when (as with *It Started in Paradise*) the woman's picture is also a British picture?

The woman's film and British cinema

As we have seen, the focus has tended traditionally to fall on Hollywood in critical discussion of the genre, with substantial attention paid to *Stella Dallas* (1937), *Rebecca* (1940), *Now, Voyager* (1942), *Mildred Pierce* (1945), *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948) and the work of émigré directors Douglas Sirk and Max Ophüls. In spite of the existence of British films such as the female-centred, fashion-orientated, dramatically intense *It Started in Paradise*, the woman's film has rarely been seen as an inherently British genre. In one of the few pieces of academic writing to examine this phenomenon (updated for this collection), Justine Ashby (writing as Justine King) suggests why 'British' and 'woman's film' seem to have been incompatible terms:

The conceptualisation of the 'typically English film' constantly seems to attract the ideologically loaded epithet 'restrained' (which reflects not only a middle-class bias but, I would argue, a masculinist bias too) whereby demonstrative displays of 'excessive' emotionality – worst of all, tears – are regarded as inappropriate, both on and off screen. It is, then, an easy enough matter to see why the woman's film might be regarded as something of an unwelcome cuckoo-in-the-nest here. For, despite twenty years or more of sustained critical attention which has repeatedly demonstrated the aesthetic and ideological complexities of the genre, the woman's film still carries the taint of triviality, emotional excessiveness and brash Hollywood populism. In short, it might well be considered as rather 'un-British'.

(King 1996: 218–19)

Back in the 1940s, the association of the woman's film with triviality, excessiveness and brashness stood uncontested, and as a result British films clearly identifiable as woman's pictures, such as the Gainsborough melodramas of the 1940s, suffered extreme critical derision at the time of their release. For instance, the *Sunday Graphic's* review of *Caravan* (1946) suggested that 'to enjoy it, you

need to have a mind that throbs to every sob of the novelette and a heart that throbs to every exposure of Stewart Granger's torso' (quoted in Harper 1987: 168); a damning dismissal that simultaneously aligns lowbrow culture (the novelette), excessive emotion (the sobbing), intellectual vapidness (a throbbing mind), bodily thrills (a throbbing heart) and inappropriate female desire sparked by a bare male chest – a potent stew of misogynist assumptions if there ever was one.¹ Gainsborough films, populated by lively heroines and dashing heroes, usually showed scant regard for the niceties of historical accuracy, preferring instead to use the exoticism of the past to 'usher women into a realm of female pleasure' (Harper 1994: 122). The visual lushness of the films often prompted imitative behaviour, with women apeing the look of their favourite heroines: 'Margaret Lockwood's beauty spot was something new, we all started to add them on with eye pencil'; 'My mother, like many others, bought the fashionable "Wicked Lady" style hat' (quoted in Thumim 1992: 167).² Further proof of their psychological influence is provided by their appearance in cinema-goers' dreams, as recorded in J. P. Mayer's 1946 book *Sociology of Film* in which subjects recalled oneiric visions of female instability and male brutality indebted to *Madonna of the Seven Moons* (1944) and *The Man in Grey* (1943) (cited in Harper 1987: 189–90). The threat they posed to rationality was enough to have them relegated to outer darkness in the British critical milieu of the 1940s with its emphasis on realist 'quality' cinema (Ellis 1996), even though it was (ironically) also the source of their later critical rehabilitation from the 1980s onwards (Aspinall and Murphy 1983; Harper 1994; Cook 1996) when they played an important role, along with Hammer horror, in the reconfiguration of British cinema and the rediscovery of significant traditions other than reticent restrained realism in its history.

However, Ashby discerns a further disavowal of a native tradition of British women's cinema. While some woman's pictures are openly disparaged, other potential candidates for woman's film status are not recognised or categorised as such due to 'a peculiarly skewed and selective characterisation which fails to take account of British cinema's sustained investment in melodramatic emotionality', and hence many female-centred films like *Millions Like Us* (1943), *Two Thousand Women* (1944), *A Taste of Honey* (1961), *The L-Shaped Room* (1962), *Jane Eyre* (1970) and *A Room with a View* (1985) find themselves 'swept under the umbrella of other film movements or genres (the wartime morale film, the New Wave film, the "quality" literary adaptation) in order to fit them, however reductively, into a dominant scheme of national cinema' (King 1996: 219). If one returns to British cinema with Ashby's revisionist schema in mind, many other instances of potential woman's pictures spring to mind, often from the heart of the British cinema canon; *Brief Encounter* (1945), for instance, is an example of 'quality' realist cinema but it is also a masterpiece of 'melodramatic emotionality' (Ashby's phrase) and 'dramatic intensity' (Hinxman's phrase) with a very 'un-British' soundtrack of pounding Rachmaninov. It features a woman at the centre of its universe (and in control of its voice-over narration) and focuses on what Janine Basinger deems 'the major action of a woman's

film: making a choice' (1993: 19), in this case between untrammelled passion and marital fidelity. The woman's choice also lies at the heart of *The Red Shoes* (1948), a film more frequently discussed in terms of the authorship and aestheticism of Powell and Pressburger (represented on screen by the diabolical impresario Lermontov) than the dilemma of its heroine Vicky, who must choose between fulfilment in her private life or her career; a typical woman's film conflict. It's not that either film has been mistakenly *mis*-categorised as anything other than a woman's film, merely that placing them in a continuum of British woman's films permits another way of interpreting them. In short, such films are not *solely* woman's films but they are *also* woman's films, and to fail to recognise that means ignoring a large part of their substance and their appeal.

It should be noted that in non-academic discussions of cinema, there is no suggestion that the woman's film is somehow 'un-British', and a number of more populist film books happily include many British productions in their discussions of woman's films alongside Hollywood's output. For instance, Samantha Cook's *Rough Guide to Chick Flicks* gives honourable mentions to the 1940s classics *Black Narcissus* (1947), *Brief Encounter*, *The Red Shoes* and *The Wicked Lady* (1945) as well as more recent favourites like *Bend it like Beckham* (2002), *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993) and *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001) along with Merchant Ivory films and Richard Curtis rom-coms (Cook 2006). In addition, Jo Berry and Angie Errigo's *Chick Flicks: Movies Women Love* name-checks many of these and adds the bio-pics *Dance With a Stranger* (1985), *Elizabeth* (1998), *Iris* (2002), *Mrs Brown* (1997), *Odette* (1950) and *That Hamilton Woman* (1941), the buddy movies *Career Girls* (1997), *Girl's Night* (1998) and *Me Without You* (2001), the weepies *Shadowlands* (1993) and *Truly Madly Deeply* (1990), the wartime dramas *Charlotte Gray* (2001) and *Yanks* (1979) and the literary adaptations *The Heart of Me* (2002), *Hideous Kinky* (1998), *Howards End* (1992), *I Capture the Castle* (2003) and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1969), along with many other British films (Berry and Errigo 2004). The sheer abundance of British titles in two books with an international scope suggests the wealth and diversity of woman's picture material that exists in British cinema history for those willing to look with an open mind. Even looking back at Molly Haskell's original analysis of the genre, one finds a remarkable amount of room given over to discuss British films such as *The Seventh Veil* (1945) and *Love Story* (1944) and in fact it is British cinema rather than Hollywood that inspires one of Haskell's most rhapsodic peacans to the form:

[H]ow is one to explain the degree to which some of them enthrall us: the mesmerized absorption, the choking, the welling up of tears over some lugubrious rendition of a famous piano concerto that will haunt us forever afterward with the memory of James Mason rapping Ann Todd's knuckles or Margaret Lockwood banging away in [the] Albert Hall?

(Haskell 1974: 164)

No shortage of dramatic intensity there. Instead, Haskell presents an evocation of overwhelming effect achieved through the synergy of powerful music

and striking image that is the very antithesis of British cinema as 'emotionally quite frozen', to use Lindsay Anderson's memorable phrase (quoted in Barr 1998: 119).

The clinching evidence for the centrality of the woman's film to British cinema history is provided by the British Film Institute's 2005 compilation of the top 100 films at the British box office over the past 75 years (Gilbey 2005). All three of the *British* films that make the top ten could be considered woman's pictures: at number five, the spritely Anna Neagle romantic comedy with terpsichorean interludes, *Spring in Park Lane* (1948); at number nine, Gainsborough's highway-robbery bodice-ripper *The Wicked Lady*; at number ten, that delirious confection of psychoanalysis, sadism and symphonies, *The Seventh Veil*.

These films come way ahead of more canonical British cinema, in the shape of *The Third Man* (1949) at number 26, and surpass even the successful Harry Potter and Bond franchises in popularity. Their high position clearly demonstrates that in order to achieve any understanding of British cinema at its most domestically successful, it is imperative to look at the place of female-centred films within the national cinema. Such films are not cuckoos-in-the-nest or exceptional aberrations but rather form the very core of popular national cinema. Similarly, there needs to be an acknowledgement of the 'woman's-picture-ness'



Figure 1.2 British cinema at its most domestically popular: James Mason and Margaret Lockwood in *The Wicked Lady*, directed by Leslie Arliss (1945). Source: The Steve Chibnall Collection.

of many key British films which are usually siphoned off into other generic categories. As Pam Cook asserts in her work on Gainsborough melodrama, 'the reassessment of femininity is central to any discussion about national identity in and of "British" cinema' (Cook 1996: 7) and with its sustained focus on the British woman's film, this collection of essays aims to play its part in that process of reassessment.

Tracing British women's cinema from the 1920s to now

Even in its earliest decades, British cinema was attuned to the female audience, and Nathalie Morris's chapter demonstrates how well established the woman's film had become by the 1920s. With a focus on literary and theatrical adaptation (Wilde, Dickens), and bio-pics of key female historical figures from Boadicea to Mary Queen of Scots, the woman's film was instrumental in the battle waged by domestic film producers to stake a claim for a distinctively British cinema in opposition to Hollywood's emerging hegemony. Morris explores how the idea of a 'distinctively British product' was central to the activities of the Stoll Film Company, whose film adaptations of Ethel M. Dell's popular romance novels were intended to capitalise on 'feminine interest'. Dell's spirited heroines sought romantic and sexual fulfilment in escapist fantasies that were extremely popular, not least because they responded imaginatively to women's hopes and fears for social mobility and marriage at a time when society was still adjusting to the decimation of the male population caused by the Great War. The critical derision heaped on these films points to the frequent marginalisation of women's literary and cinematic culture, in Britain as elsewhere, and this misogynistic disparagement runs throughout the history of the British woman's film. Stoll's use of Ethel M. Dell as a lure to female cinema-goers is a reminder of the centrality of literary adaptation to the British woman's film. Although the work of writers such as Olive Higgins Prouty and Fannie Hurst often provided source material for Hollywood, the inter-relationship between literature and film seems even more pronounced in the British woman's film, which frequently has a literary bent, perhaps reflecting the high value placed upon literary culture in Britain. Fine films have been made from proto-feminist novels and plays such as Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* (1961), Lynne Reid-Banks's *The L-Shaped Room* (1962), Penelope Mortimer's *The Pumpkin Eater* (1964) and Nell Dunn's *Poor Cow* (1967). Gainsborough's celebrated melodramas often took novels by female authors such as Eleanor Smith, Margery Lawrence and Dorothy Whipple as their starting point. More recently, Jane Austen has become a central figure in female-orientated British film and television whether in terms of direct adaptation (*Sense and Sensibility* (1995), *Emma* (1996), *Mansfield Park* (1999), *Pride and Prejudice* (2005) on film in addition to several television adaptations, most notably the BBC's hugely popular 1995 *Pride and Prejudice*) or indirect inspiration, as with Gurinder Chadha's *Bride and Prejudice* (2004), ITV's time-travel drama *Lost in Austen* (2008) and Bridget Jones's fixation on Colin Firth as *Pride and Prejudice*'s Mr Darcy,

fuelled by the aforementioned BBC series, intertextually referenced by having Firth also play her love-interest in the film, the serendipitously named Mark Darcy.

With the growth of the 'picture palace' in the 1920s, Morris reminds us, cinema was increasingly imagined as a feminine space graced with decor and amenities designed with female pleasure and comfort in mind. While the films on screen often worked through feminine dilemmas, the exhibition space itself afforded a temporary reprieve from those problems. Winifred Holtby provides a blissful evocation of the delights awaiting female patrons of a provincial 'super-cinema' in her 1936 novel *South Riding*:

It blazed with lights and rippled with palms; a commissionaire in a gold-and-scarlet uniform paraded the entrance. Up on the first floor Lily could see ladies in green arm-chairs eating muffins behind great sheets of plate glass. The thought of tea and toast suddenly tempted her. She went in and dragged herself up the shallow carpeted staircase.

The tea-room was palatial. Marble pillars swelled into branching archways. Painted cupids billowed across the ceiling. Waitresses in green taffeta tripped between the tables; from some hidden source a fountain of music throbbed and quivered, 'Tum tum tum *tum*, ter-um, ter-um, tum tum tum *tum*, ter-um, ter-um.' The beautiful Blue Danube. ... She lay back in her chair. It was richly padded. The tea was good. The toast was hot, dripping with butter. (Holtby 1988: 214)

From 1929 to 1939, according to Nicholas Hiley, no fewer than 60 per cent of British cinema-goers were women (Hiley 1999: 47) and at the beginning of the 1930s the woman's picture flourished in the guise of the 'society drama' (Aldgate 1998). Several of the most popular British stars of the 1930s were women, among them the musical stars Gracie Fields and Jessie Matthews, as well as Anna Neagle (the subject of Josephine Dolan and Sarah Street's chapter) who would go on to enjoy even greater success in the 1940s. Indeed, one of the greatest shocks of the BFI's 2005 'ultimate film' research was the unexpectedly high placing of Neagle's films, with *Spring in Park Lane* at number five followed by *The Courtneys of Curzon Street* (1947) at 17, *Piccadilly Incident* (1946) at 42 and *I Live in Grosvenor Square* (1945) at 49. Neagle embodied a version of glamorous yet dignified femininity that was carefully differentiated from more overtly sexualised images of contemporary womanhood aligned in the popular consciousness with brash Americanism. Dolan and Street demonstrate the importance of her voice to her popularity, with its gentle tonal register functioning as the 'physical articulation of feminine ideals' and sustaining 'a glimmer of warmth and hope even within the bleakest scenario' of war-time. They also examine the star's presentation on screen via the new technology of colour photography, used for patriotic pageantry in some of her films such as the regal biopic *Victoria the Great* (1937) but also for female-orientated fashion fantasy in *Maytime in Mayfair* (1949). The popularity of Neagle's 'quintessential English

femininity' indicates some of the ways in which the woman's film is simultaneously disavowed while its icons of femininity are pressed into the service of national cinema.

In spite of her remarkable popularity with British audiences, Anna Neagle's films are yet to receive the same kind of critical attention and rehabilitation as the contemporaneous Gainsborough melodramas, perhaps because her more measured and well-behaved output is much less appealing to revisionist scholars of British cinema than the lively vulgarity of Gainsborough which addressed itself primarily to working-class women. Neagle's films belong in the category of the 'middlebrow', offering neither the proletarian vigour of the lowbrow nor the intellectual acerbity of the highbrow, and seldom seen as a happy hunting ground for those seeking cultural treasures. Nonetheless, as Lawrence Napper has demonstrated, it is a significant category in British cinema to which many underrated films worthy of rediscovery belong (Napper 2000), and this is perhaps particularly true of many British woman's films whose more polite pleasures have been eclipsed by the focus on Gainsborough's excessive modes. Undoubtedly the ultimate middlebrow grouping is the heritage film, which often functions as a kind of 'woman's film *manqué*'. Alan Parker's much-quoted comment on Merchant Ivory productions as the 'Laura Ashley school of film-making' damns the most visible exponents of heritage film by association with femininity and consumption through reference to a female-headed retailer of faux-vintage clothes and homeware. Yet the heritage film's attention to decor and costume are a source of considerable spectatorial enjoyment; appealing to what are frequently characterised as feminine reading competences. Furthermore, heritage films continue to offer central roles to women and provide a valuable forum for actresses of all ages to deliver powerful and articulate performances that may not be viable in other more action-orientated genres (Geraghty 2002). Such films may not attract the passionate advocacy of 'Young Turk' film critics (it's difficult to imagine the likes of *Ladies in Lavender* ever gaining a cult following) but their importance to British cinema's cultural formation (not to mention its appeal to audiences both home and overseas) is indisputable.

Given how the woman's picture is generally identified as a Hollywood genre, it seems fitting to spend time examining how an exemplar of the form was greeted on British soil. Mark Glancy's chapter investigates the British reception of the quintessential Hollywood woman's film *Now, Voyager* and its star Bette Davis. At a time when British film critics (and middle-class audiences) prioritised realism and maturity in film production, Davis's well-publicised defiance of Hollywood star conventions and demand for 'serious' film roles contributed significantly to the critical and popular success she enjoyed in Britain. Her hard-working, anti-glamour Yankee persona suited British film critics who were steeped in anti-Hollywood discourses, and had a particular emotional resonance for a nation at war. Drawing from a range of sociological studies of cinema audiences, Glancy demonstrates the importance of class to questions of taste. Middle-class audiences couched their approval of Davis through a focus on her acting ability and an eschewal of the label 'woman's film' while working-class

audiences used direct, emotional terms to explain the pleasure they derived from Davis, who also functioned for many as an aspirational figure. Glancy also provides a salutary reminder that many men also enjoy films that are deemed to be 'woman's pictures', putting the brakes on an overly strict categorisation of film according to gender and acknowledging the polymorphous identifications inherent in all film spectatorship.

The transatlantic traffic in woman's films was certainly not all one way, and while British audiences gloried in Bette Davis at her finest, British woman's films such as *The Seventh Veil* enjoyed considerable success in the USA (as implied by its rapturous description in American critic Molly Haskell's book). In addition, Marcia Landy has written warmly of her enjoyment of Gainsborough films in the American Midwest in the 1940s, and notes the prominent position given to an interview with Margaret Lockwood in an Ohio-based newspaper (Landy 2000: 67), suggesting something of the British woman's picture's reach into the American heartland, in spite of the 'serious obstacles' (Street 2002: 1) of protectionism and prejudice facing British films across the Atlantic. Arguably, the British woman's film of the 1940s even influenced the Hollywood genre: the Joan Crawford film *Possessed* (1947) begins with the mentally disturbed heroine being injected with a truth-serum to help her yield her secrets (and the narrative), strongly recalling the opening of *The Seventh Veil*, a film which enjoyed significant success in the USA in the previous year, 1946. In addition, Hollywood woman's films of the period frequently drew inspiration from British women's literature ranging from classics by the Brontës and Jane Austen to contemporary works by Jan Struther (author of *Mrs Miniver*) and Daphne du Maurier.

Back in the context of British studio production, Brian McFarlane's chapter compares the careers of two key actresses of the 1940s, Phyllis Calvert and Googie Withers, and explores the range of cinematic femininities available in wartime and post-war Britain. Calvert, McFarlane argues, was 'the ideal woman of the times', whose gentle, hard-working and determined persona brought a degree of complexity to the paradigm of the good woman. In comparison, the roles played by Withers afforded greater scope to showcase qualities of strength and independence of spirit. Both women, in different ways, dramatised some of the problems of, and responses to, being a woman in Britain in this period. Their critical reception, however, must be understood within wider discourses of British cinema. Withers has received greater critical attention (and approval) than Calvert, whose prolific career as 'good girl' of Gainsborough melodrama ensured her marginalisation. By comparison, Withers was cast in roles that fitted a realist bill and worked for Ealing, a studio ineluctably linked to dramatising the national character. However, one of the advantages of applying Janine Basinger's more open definition of the woman's film genre (any film 'that places at the center of its universe a female who is trying to deal with the emotional, social, and psychological problems that are specifically connected to the fact that she is a woman') is that it encourages us to look beyond the conventional generic placement of films and to connect otherwise disparate texts in

terms of their shared evocation of female subjectivity and experience. Calvert's *Madonna of the Seven Moons* with its exotic setting and melodramatic scenario is a woman's picture, but so is Withers's *It Always Rains on Sunday* (1947) despite its deliberate focus on the quotidian world of Bethnal Green and eschewal of flamboyant fantasy. Both films focus on women with a split personality, but while Calvert's Maddelena expresses hers through psychological disorder and the creation of a passionate peasant alter-ego, Withers's Rose suffers in silence, glowering over the trappings of domesticity, only coming to life in flashback and with the reappearance of her criminal ex-lover. Only the former film would normally be classified as a woman's film but the lineaments of the genre are clearly present in both, and as Christine Geraghty suggests, 'although Ealing's drive for realism certainly makes [its] films different from Gainsborough's costume dramas, it does not necessarily mean that they fail to acknowledge the concerns of women in the late 1940s or to deny the emotional cost of the decisions they make' (Geraghty 2000: 86).

While chapters three to five stress the important of stars, Rachel Moseley's chapter shifts the focus to landscape, specifically Cornwall as a recurring romantic setting in the British woman's film. In films ranging from Gainsborough's *Love Story* (1944) to the more contemporary *Ladies in Lavender* (2004), Cornwall functions as a 'passionate periphery' where female desire can be expressed, an idea that Moseley examines through the careful scrutiny of a number of gendered views of the landscape in both films. This is perhaps another distinctive feature of the British woman's film: the relationship of woman and landscape, which has been central to British romance texts from the Brontë sisters onwards. In comparison with the studio-bound or urban settings of the classic Hollywood woman's film, the British woman's film frequently features natural locations, revelling in the beauties of the English countryside (and the well-ordered country house estate in the heritage film) or wilder Celtic topographies as in *I Know Where I'm Going!* (1945), and sometimes placing its women characters in ravishing and transformative foreign landscapes, from the Greek islands of *Shirley Valentine* (1989) and the Italy of *Enchanted April* (1992) to the India of *Heat and Dust* (1983) and *A Passage to India* (1984).

Ensemble playing has always been a feature of British cinema, and this extends to the British woman's film, encompassing wartime productions with predominantly female casts such as *The Gentle Sex* (1943) and *Two Thousand Women* through to comedy-dramas of the 1980s and 1990s such as *She'll Be Wearing Pink Pyjamas* (1985) and *Bhaji on the Beach*. Melanie Bell's chapter focuses on the recurrence of the female group film in British cinema and examines how it extends the demands of the woman's film beyond the heterosexual 'love and emotion' of LaPlace's description, opening up a space where female friendships take precedence and older women play an important and valued role in the proceedings. Through a case study of two popular 1950s films – *A Town Like Alice* (1956) and *The Weak and the Wicked* (1954) – Bell demonstrates how British cinema continued to produce variants of the woman's film in a decade often considered inhospitable to engaging with women's issues.

In common with the status of the woman's film as a Janus-faced genre, Bell illustrates how female agency is offset by strategies that 're-feminise' the women in accordance with gender norms. Despite such limitations these group films offer complex portrayals of femininity and their commercial success suggests that their particular depiction of women's concerns resonated with the social and psychological needs of 1950s audiences.

The 1960s saw seismic changes in the position of women in British society, on the surface at least, and this was reflected in changes to the British woman's film. Marcia Landy's chapter explores a number of films produced in Britain and Italy in the 1960s that share a common concern with the mobile young woman who makes physical and conceptual journeys across borders of nationhood, class, generation and sexuality. In British films such as *Girl with Green Eyes* (1964), *The Knack and How to Get It* (1965) and *Darling* (1965), the young woman becomes the adventurer in search of an independent existence and sexual fulfilment, loosening the traditional bonds of femininity. In the Italian film *La Ragazza con la Pistola* (1968), the heroine played by Monica Vitti moves from Sicily to Britain where she can ultimately transform herself into the 'transnational embodiment of newly liberated femininity'. Just as British women in woman's films often 'find themselves' abroad, the reverse is also true in continental films featuring European women drawn to the emancipatory opportunities of the then-swinging British metropolis. These kind of cultural exchanges are an important aspect of the British woman's film, with Gainsborough films, for instance, frequently inviting British audiences to 'identity with British stars playing French, Spanish, Italian and ethnically mixed characters, and to journey into a fictionalised "Europe" which called into question many of the prevailing notions of Britishness' (Cook 1996: 6), evoking a 'vagrant spirit' (Cook 1996: 3) reminiscent of Virginia Woolf's famous assertion that as a woman she had no country. In fact, Pam Cook suggests that the transnationality of the British woman's film may have been just as much of a stumbling block to its critical acceptance as its melodramatic excess, with films like *Madonna of the Seven Moons* 'doubly threatening to the criteria of 40s consensus cinema: not only overwhelmingly feminine but also chaotically "foreign"' (Cook 1996: 96). Such films are much less easily mobilised to the patriotic cause of constructing a national cinema, since they openly admit the lure of 'abroad' in comparison with the perceived inadequacies of home (and in an indirect slur on British masculinity, that Britain cannot offer any sight as fair as Ivor Novello gorgeously essaying the role of Parisian thief in *The Rat* (1925) or Stewart Granger kitted out in figure-revealing Spanish bolero and gypsy earrings for *Caravan*).

Sue Harper's chapter opens up for discussion questions of methodology concerning the woman's film, distinguishing between films *by* women, necessitating a focus on female agency; films *for* women which address a female audience, a market category that flourished during the 1930s and 1940s but which was largely defunct in British film production in later decades; and films *about* women which shed light on the symbolic function of the female figure at any given historical moment. For Harper, films may be usefully defined as either 'limit-texts'

demarcating a boundary between the 'acceptable and unacceptable female libido', those operating as 'comfort-zones' offering the viewer the 'delights of the sexual status quo' or, most radical of all, 'gauntlet-throwers' which challenge established sexual politics. Throughout she emphasises the centrality of industrial organisation in shaping the narrative function of women (or any other group) in film. Her case study of the 1970s demonstrates how the social and sexual advancements of the 1960s were absorbed into the mainstream, and how the erratic funding and organisational structures of the British film industry threw up a 'swirling kaleidoscope of contrasting takes on women'. Through an analysis of the performance style of a number of key actresses of the 1970s, Harper identifies distance and irony as common features, strategically deployed to mediate the effects of feminism and the challenges it brought to bear on patriarchal structures, among them cinema. The decade may not have offered riches in terms of the woman's picture but it gave rise to a number of memorable female performances across a variety of genres in British cinema.

Moving into the 1980s, Claire Monk presents a detailed case study of *Breaking Glass* (1980), a film whose credentials as a woman's film are ambivalent despite its narrative being centred on a protagonist described by Margaret Hinxman (still reviewing nearly 30 years after *It Started in Paradise*) as 'the best female role in British films for years'. It would appear on the surface to be the kind of film ripe for re-categorisation as yet another 'woman's film *manqué*', swept under the umbrella of the punk film. However, this is somewhat problematised by the film's deliberate refusal of gender-consciousness. Monk reads the film in terms of punk's utopian gender-neutral ethos where 'the hurdles of gender difference and acceptable femininity can be overcome just by ignoring them at will' (and to which obvious gender-targeted marketing would be anathema).

However, as the 1980s progressed, the woman's film gathered pace, as documented in Justine Ashby's aforementioned 1996 article 'Crossing Thresholds', which is revisited and updated in chapter eleven. Ashby traces the impact of feminist cultural politics on British cinema, looking at a number of 1980s films including *Educating Rita* (1983), *Letter to Brezhnev* (1985), *Wish You Were Here* (1987) and *Shirley Valentine* which share a 'motif of escape', as each film's heroine crosses a threshold into a new more emancipated identity which challenges, to an extent, formations of class as well as gender. Bringing her assessment of the British woman's film up to date, Ashby finds later examples of the genre such as *The Land Girls* (1998), *Morvern Callar* (2002) and *Bend it like Beckham* more diverse in their 'emotional and thematic complexity', and 'politically opaque' rather than overtly feminist; a reflection perhaps of broader changes in contemporary culture, particularly the shift from feminism to post-feminism. Despite the possible dilution of the genre's radicalism, Ashby concludes, the woman's film's 'formal and political elasticity' stands as evidence of its continuing place in a changing commercial and cultural climate. Her discussion of Gurinder Chadha's *Bend it like Beckham* provides a reminder of the significance of the stories of women from ethnic minorities to the formation of the modern British woman's film, with Chadha's light-hearted work complemented

by films tackling British Asian experience in a more art-house mode, such as the accomplished adaptation of Monica Ali's best-selling novel, *Brick Lane* (2007), a film which self-consciously references its indebtedness to a tradition of British women's cinema with intertextual mentions of *Brief Encounter*.

All three of Ashby's recent examples of woman's films devote considerable space to the depiction of friendships between women, and this might be seen as a hallmark of the modern British woman's film which often dwells on the intense pleasures and perils of close female friendships, as in *Women Talking Dirty* (1999), *Crush* (2001), *Me Without You* (2001), *Anita and Me* (2002), *My Summer of Love* (2004), *Notes on a Scandal* (2006), and *The Edge of Love* (2008).

Women's friendship is also pivotal to *Calendar Girls* (2003), one of the films discussed by Imelda Whelehan in the collection's concluding chapter. She considers the importance of older women to recent British cinema and how their visibility calls into question some of the assumptions of youth-driven contemporary culture. Films such as *Calendar Girls* and *The Mother* (2003) challenge long-held ideas about the 'social place and function' of the ageing woman, traditionally located in the role of spinster or mother of grown-up children, and considered beyond sexual desirability. In these films, post-menopausal women become objects of desire, their active sexuality partially destabilising the established social order. Whelehan concludes her chapter (and the book) with an upbeat assertion of hope that more 'nuanced and challenging' representations of the ageing women will gradually emerge as popular culture responds to an ageing demographic.

From the vantage point of 2009, it seems that the maxim that C.A. Lejeune coined back in 1926 – 'the cinema must please women or die' (quoted in Lant

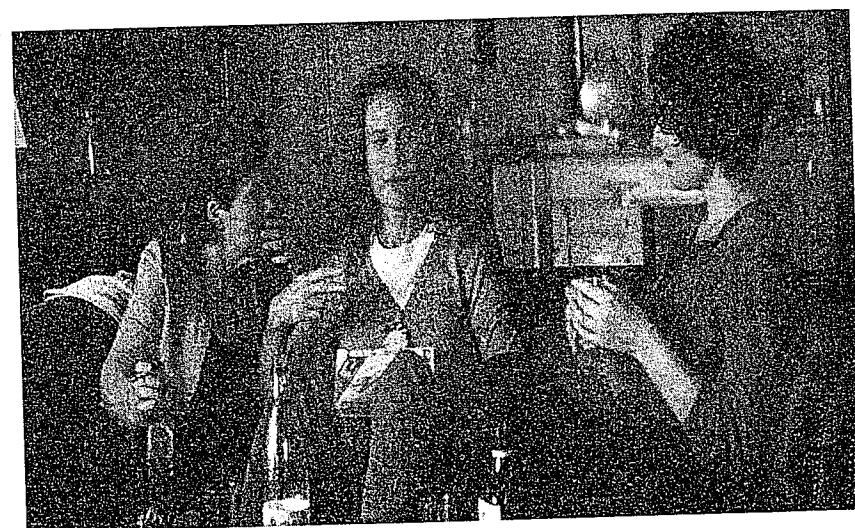


Figure 1.3 The pleasures and perils of close female friendship: Imelda Staunton, Andie MacDowell and Anna Chancellor in *Crush*, directed by John McKay (2001).

2006: 1) – has never seemed truer. The enormous blockbuster success of two unabashed woman's films, *Sex and the City: The Movie* and *Mamma Mia!*, during the summer of 2008 has consolidated the renewed importance of the female viewer to contemporary cinema. This phenomenon spans all age groups, ranging from the young girls characterised as 'strong moviegoers' by Clark Woods, president of theatrical distribution at MGM (in comparison with boys the same age who are 'more interested in Xboxes and cable television' than cinema) to older women who 'hadn't got out of the cinema-going habit, had cash flow and plenty of time on their hands', according to producer Nik Powell (both quoted in Solomons 2007). Of course, many of these female cinema-goers will continue to reject the notion of a separate sub-category of film-making aimed only at women (just as Catherine De La Roche and Eleanor Wintour did) but many others will embrace it and derive satisfaction from its specifically feminine address. While the Hollywood 'chick flick' offers its myriad gratifications, the 'Brit chick flick' is also likely to continue its strong showing, providing a variant of the genre which evokes what it is to be female within the particular context of British society. For instance, Gurinder Chadha's *Angus, Thongs and Perfect Snogging* (2008), although part-funded by Paramount and Nickelodeon, locates its story of the eternal tribulations of being a 15-year-old girl within the defiantly British setting of the genteel seaside town of Eastbourne. Chadha is a film-maker who has demonstrated a recurrent interest in the lives of girls and women but she also emphasises how she 'relish[es] telling culturally specific stories about our nation' (quoted in Clarke 2008: 6), indicating how questions of femininity and nationality can overlap in the British woman's film. Other recent films with female directors at the helm have told women's stories of great 'dramatic intensity' within unmistakably British contexts, among them Andrea Arnold's grim Glaswegian *Red Road* (2006) and Joanna Hogg's *Unrelated* (2007) which uses the typical woman's picture manoeuvre of deploying a foreign setting to throw Anglo-Saxon attitudes into relief. The continuing presence of these films and others like them, running the gamut from tortured to tinselly, demonstrates the ongoing cultural currency of feminine narratives in British cinema. Although the woman's film has often been considered a foreign interloper – an 'un-British' genre – it has constituted a significant proportion of British film production and continues to do so. Its contribution to British film culture is considerable and worthy of attention: the cuckoo-in-the-nest may be viewed suspiciously but it is a native species nonetheless.

Notes

- 1 Although it should be noted that more highbrow women were far from immune to the charms of Granger, with C. A. Lejeune even pronouncing him 'scrumptious' (quoted in Sargeant 2005: 179).
- 2 Other important non-Gainsborough woman's films of the period elicited a similar imitative response, with one woman confessing that after seeing Ann Todd in *The Seventh Veil* (1945) she 'learnt to play Beethoven's *Pathétique* Sonata and made myself a dirndl skirt from a cretonne curtain' (quoted in Thumim 1992: 167).

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2 Pictures, romance and luxury

Women and British cinema in the 1910s and 1920s

Nathalie Morris

In 1926, the film critic Iris Barry urged that the 'one thing never to be lost sight of in considering the cinema is that it exists for the purpose of pleasing women. Three out of every four of all cinema audiences are women' (Barry 1926: 59). The importance of the female patron had, in fact, long been recognized by the industry, and from the earliest days of moving pictures women had been courted as audience members. Their attendance at fairground film shows and penny gaffs was thought to confer an element of family respectability on the new entertainment form (although the presence of unmarried women simultaneously gave rise to moral concerns) (Shapiro Sanders 2002; Stamp 2000) and as the cinema negotiated its move upmarket during the 1910s, women were increasingly targeted through the creation of purpose-built venues, the provision of films deemed to have a 'feminine interest', and the emergence of a wealth of associated print media. The first film fan magazines appeared in Britain in 1911 and, as Jane Bryan has argued, these publications addressed a female readership to such an extent that, by the middle of the decade, they had effectively become a 'sub-genre of the woman's magazine' (Bryan 2006: 191).

By 1916 it was estimated that women made up over half of the British cinema-going public (Hiley 1995: 162). While it is difficult to accurately ascertain audience composition during this period, there is little doubt that women did constitute a substantial, and growing, section of the cinema audience by the mid-1910s. Miriam Hansen has pointed out that after the First World War women became 'the primary target of Hollywood's publicity and products' (1991: 18) and as American films began to occupy an increasing percentage of British screens in the post-war period, it can be safely surmised that these films and their stars made up a generous part of the viewing of British women cinema-goers.¹ At the same time, however, domestic producers also recognized and made determined bids for female audiences, often seeking to entice them with products which could be recognized as distinctively British (through their literary, theatrical and historical sources, their filmmaking style, and their use of well-known British actors and/or British settings and location work, for example). This audience was, of course, by no means homogenous. In 1926, Marjorie Williams, a columnist for the trade paper *Kinematograph Weekly*, attempted to outline what she saw as the main groups of women cinema patrons: