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# The Woman's Film of the 1940s

Gender, Narrative, and History

Alison L. McKee



# The Woman's Film of the 1940s

This book explores the relationship among gender, desire, and narrative in 1940s woman's films which negotiate the terrain between public history and private experience. The woman's film and other forms of cinematic melodrama have often been understood as positioning themselves outside history, and this book challenges and modifies that understanding, contextualizing the films it considers against the backdrop of World War II. In addition, in paying tribute to and departing from earlier feminist formulations about gendered spectatorship in cinema, McKee argues that such models emphasized a masculine-centered gaze at the inadvertent expense of understanding other possible modes of identification and gender expression in classical narrative cinema. She proposes ways of understanding gender and narrative based in part on literary narrative theory and ultimately works toward a notion of an androgynous spectatorship and mode of interpretation in the 1940s woman's film.

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“My tears mix with the ink as I write him letters—letters with only the barest hope that he’ll so much as read them!” Duchesse de Praslin (Barbara O’Neil), *All This, and Heaven Too* (Anatole Litvak, 1940).

# **The Woman's Film of the 1940s**

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**Alison L. McKee**

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**For my mother,  
Mary Driscoll McKee  
(1919–1987),  
whose narratives were lost;  
for Charles,  
who listened to mine;  
and  
for Harold,  
who made writing them possible**

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# Introduction

## To Speak of Love

### “IF ONLY IT WERE SOMEONE ELSE’S STORY AND NOT MINE”

A middle-aged woman with handsome, expressive eyes sits in an armchair across from her husband in their comfortable, middle-class living room, where they are passing the evening. A fire burns quietly, and their two young children are in bed for the night. He is doing a crossword puzzle, as is apparently his custom, and requires a missing word to complete a line from Keats, which he seeks from his wife: “‘When I behold upon the nights starr’d face / Huge cloudy symbols of a high—?’ Something in seven letters.” “‘Romance,’ I think,” she replies, after a moment. “I’m almost sure it is,” and tells him it will be in the *Oxford Book of English Verse*. “No, that’s right, I’m sure,” he says, as he writes it into his puzzle. “Because it fits in with ‘delirium’ and ‘Baluchistan.’” A moment passes. The woman rises to put some music on the radio, and almost immediately the sound of Rachmaninov’s second piano concerto fills the room. The woman sits again and takes up some needlework but is soon diverted. Not by anything external this time, such as a question from her husband, but rather (we are about to learn) by her recent painful memories of a love unexpectedly found and far too quickly lost, chronicled in an exquisitely crafted series of flashbacks. For this is David Lean’s *Brief Encounter* (1945), and as the film quickly makes clear to its audience, we have just entered the narrative terrain of the woman’s film—in which love and loss are often twins, in which the experience of female characters is marked and rendered as subjective, and in which feminine subjectivity itself performs a haunting game of hide-and-seek within and across the landscape of narrative.

I invoke *Brief Encounter* because it is a woman’s film par excellence, and the sequence I have described is eloquently emblematic of concerns that this cycle of films addresses in the 1940s. As the passage so clearly demonstrates, if hermeneutics and puzzles are the traditional cinematic province of the male (think of the detective films and film noir also popular during the 1940s), then romance (albeit in the popular rather than the literary Keatsian sense) is deemed the province of women: it is, in fact, with love and romance that the woman’s film is so often intimately preoccupied. Occupying what is,

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from a patriarchal perspective, a fantastic no-man's land lying somewhere between "delirium" (a morass of emotion verging on madness) and "Baluchistan" (at the time still a British province of India, a far away and exotic locale near which romance may reside without troubling British colonial patriarchy too particularly), romance and desire are the very stuff of which this ordinary woman's inner landscape in these films is comprised. Although momentarily invisible to the eye, their haunting presence is already evoked in the strains of Rachmaninov's music, associated throughout the film with this woman's subjectivity.

"Fred. Fred. Dear Fred. There's so much that I want to say to you. You're the only one in the world with enough wisdom and gentleness to understand. If only it were someone else's story and not mine. As it is, you're the only one in the world that I can never tell. Never, never." So begins Laura Jesson's (Celia Johnson) one-sided inner dialogue with her husband (Cyril Raymond), spoken in a celebrated voice-off that rivals and even exceeds the beauty and nuance of the equally well-known voice-off in Max Ophüls's *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948) only three years later. As in Ophüls's film, the voice-off is a prelude to a lengthy flashback to a woman's painful tale of love found and lost, and as voice-offs and flashbacks tend to do in any genre, they highlight the act of transmitting narrative, even of the difficulties that occasionally inhere in that task. In the woman's film, when such narrative structures exist, they are inextricably linked to questions of desire, usually of that of the female protagonist, and of the representability of that desire narratively (in the story world of the film), culturally (in the world in which the film was created), and institutionally (in terms of the film industry that produced it). In Laura's case, her desire is at least threefold: it encompasses a romantic and sexual desire (however thwarted) for Alec Harvey (Trevor Howard) with whom she has fallen in love; a desire to know (another kind of life from the surface calm of her ordinary middle-class existence); and a desire to tell (her story), which ultimately she both does and does not do. Precisely because it is so manifestly about her own desire(s), Laura can never tell her story to the one person whom she feels would understand it best—her husband—for fear of hurting him. Thus, her tale takes the form of what I shall call in this volume a "lost narrative," one that is structured as a story that, paradoxically, cannot be told yet must be told, a tale that can be communicated only with the greatest of difficulty.

In such lost narratives in the 1940s woman's film, as I shall discuss in ensuing chapters, processes of transmission and elision within the tales are highlighted and are the result of multiple pressures brought to bear upon the stories—again, narrative, cultural, and institutional. My critical approach to elision both is predicated upon and departs from Freud's view of ellipsis within the dreamwork, because for Freud an absence cannot necessarily be filled in with a corresponding "presence"; rather, such gaps or absences can suggest many others, as well as refer to, and cause a reinterpretation of, the manifest content. Thus, in the following chapters, I will be arguing in part

for a kind of feminist “guerilla” reading of woman’s films that, like older “recuperative” interpretations, read against the grain and allow for the elucidation of those lost narratives. At the same time, however, I will extend the textual reading process into historical research that will inform such readings. For example, the flashback structure that marks *Brief Encounter* is not present in Noël Coward’s original *Still Life* (1936), the brief one-act play on which the film is based. These flashbacks accentuate the process of narration and the difficulties that inhere in the task of Laura’s telling her story at all. As well, mindful of the need for the film to pass the British Board of Film Censors to secure its release, the filmmakers decided that the consummated affair between Laura and Alec in *Still Life* would be recast as a narrowly averted unconsummated love affair in *Brief Encounter* (as the Production Code Administration’s story summary for the film’s distribution in the United States in 1946 put it, using an editorializing tone, the two go to the flat of a friend of Alec’s, and “*fortunately*, the friend arrives before anything can happen, and [Laura] runs away in horror, oppressed by the feeling of degradation” [italics mine]). (Story Summary, *Brief Encounter*). Together, these two simple decisions greatly affected the shape of the film’s presentation of this tale of desire, love, and loss, recasting it as Laura’s story more than Laura and Alec’s and affecting the cinematic treatment of a woman’s desire, as I shall suggest in a subsequent chapter.

Because *Brief Encounter* is marked by flashbacks, it inevitably also raises issues of temporality (time in the film is alternately elongated, compressed, and even repeated). As Richard Dyer observes, “Time, its pressure, its fleetingness, is endlessly referenced in the film” (1993, 45). In turn, issues of temporality are related to issues of representing the past generally and history more specifically, as Maureen Turim has pointed out:

If flashbacks give us images of memory, the personal archives of the past, they also give us images of history, the shared and recorded past. In fact, flashbacks in the film often merge the two levels of remembering the past, giving large-scale social and political history the subjective mode of a single, fictional individual’s remembered experience.

(1989, 2)

On the one hand, *Brief Encounter*, shot in 1945 before the end of World War II, is set just prior to the beginning of the war, and on the surface it would seem that the very private tale Laura tells has little to do with a public history generally or with World War II specifically. And yet some of the emotional response it generated in its original audiences derived from its indirect invocation of the unseen war nearing an end during the time of the film’s production. Indeed, Kent Puckett argues that *Brief Encounter*

is almost entirely *about* war . . . many of the film’s images, scenes, and sounds would have reminded contemporary audiences of wartime: war

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monuments that mourn a war to come; trains and train stations that conjure the boredom of life between battles; cups and cups of tea that, in their very abundance, invoke the ongoing privations of rationing; and train whistles that sound like buzz bombs” (2011, 58).

In the skilled hands of David Lean, who was known for his early work in sound editing, the omnipresent train whistles also give voice to the threat of imminent departure and farewell, as well as to the inner shrieking of the human heart when it is torn from a thing or person it loves.

And so it is that *Brief Encounter* also points to a tension between private and public histories and women's relationship to them, which is something that a number of 1940s woman's films do. It is common to assert that Hollywood film specifically (to which the English *Brief Encounter* obviously does not belong, although it participates in the conventions of the woman's film) represents historical events in terms of the story of its impact on individuals rather than on larger social, political, cultural, or economic groups. However, much remains to be said about the discursive relationship that the woman's film constructs among history, temporality, narrative, gender, and subjectivity. If classical woman's films often represent history neither accurately nor with much historiographical complexity, what exactly *do* they do with history? Are the love stories told by the woman's film truly “situated outside the arena in which history endows space with meaning,” as Mary Ann Doane has suggested (1987, 96)? Or do some woman's films combine issues of history and gender in ways that are narratively meaningful, if rarely historically accurate or ideologically progressive? Moreover, how do answers to these questions further our understanding of what is at stake in the classical woman's film and in existing critical studies of them? These are some of the questions that this volume ultimately explores in the chapters that follow.

#### A PHANTOM GENRE?

In 1999, advocating for what he called a “process-oriented” approach to genre in which parameters are forever shifting and transforming in an interactive process among film, producers, critics, and audiences, Rick Altman traced a brief history of the terms “melodrama” and “woman's film.” Noting that producers are more flexible in their conception and application of generic categories than academics and critics, Altman prefaces his remarks by observing, “We critics are the ones who have a vested interest in reusing generic terminology, which serves to anchor our analyses in universal or culturally sanctioned contexts, thus justifying our all too subjective, tendentious and self-serving positions” (1999, 71). Invoking both Russell Merrit's and Ben Singer's astute observations that melodrama has been a “slippery

and evolving category” (71), Altman then returns to the work of Steve Neale (1993), concluding that

it seems clear that a major goal of the 1993 article is to demonstrate that scholars have misused the term melodrama and its derivatives in describing what are now often called “woman’s films.” As Neale shows, in the 40s and 50s melodrama meant something else; recent critics thus make improper use of the term when they apply it to “the weepies.” Yet a generation of feminist critics has systematically used the term melodrama in reference to the female-oriented films of the 40s and 50s. Their analyses have taken for granted—and thus reinforced—the existence and nature of this genre and its corpus.

(72)

There are multiple difficulties here in Altman’s assessment. Present in Altman’s quotation of Neale’s work is a curious idea that there is a definitively “proper” use of the term “melodrama” (and, by extension, “woman’s film”)—as opposed to different historical and interpretive uses of it as Neale describes them. Some critics, like Linda Williams (1998, 2001), consider melodrama a transgeneric mode of expression rather than a discrete genre, as do I, which might be applied to many genres, as evidenced by the historical record to which Altman points by way of Neale. Further, if a conflation of the terms “melodrama” and “woman’s film” is a topic of Altman’s writing here, he himself conflates and flattens differences between “melodramas” of the 1940s and those of the 1950s. Others, I among them, would question Altman’s phrase “female-oriented films of the 40s and 50s,” noting distinct differences (notwithstanding some similarities) between the “‘feminine’ excesses of 40s ‘weepies’ and 50s films directed by Douglas Sirk” (71). For me, what differentiates the woman’s film of the 1940s from the 1930s and from the family melodramas of the 1950s and 1960s is not so much the presumed address to a female audience (a key point for Doane, as I will discuss in a subsequent chapter), as its different narrative emphasis and dynamic. While woman’s films from the 1930s and 1940s occasionally share similar plots, the 1940s woman’s film speaks to the issue of desire gendered as feminine in a more direct way than does its 1930s counterpart, in part because the 1930s woman’s film, produced during the Great Depression, is often at least as preoccupied with class and economic issues as it is with questions of desire. The 1940s woman’s film, on the other hand, foregrounds the issues of subjectivity and desire usually (though not always) at the expense of an explicit consideration of class.<sup>1</sup> The world it depicts is usually comfortably middle- or upper-middle class, and questions of economic survival generally pale before questions of sexual, emotional, or psychic well-being. Both the 1930s and the 1940s woman’s film generally differ from the melodramas of the 1950s, however, in that there is a strong tendency in the 1950s to

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focus on the configuration of the nuclear family, and particularly on the role of father (and son as potential father) within that family. Even when the 1950s family melodramas do center on a female protagonists and her desires (as, e.g., in Douglas Sirk's *Magnificent Obsession* [1954] and *All That Heaven Allows* [1955]), they usually do so in ways that foreground the woman's relationship to her family rather than the woman as (relatively) autonomous being and her own experience of subjectivity.

While acknowledging Neale's point and, by association, Altman's, that the very real earlier and broader application of the term "melodrama" was to such films as the war, adventure, horror, and thriller categories, I find curious in Altman's assessment of Neale an implicit assumption that there is a singular, proper way to apply the term—as if, somehow, feminist critics of the 1970s and 1980s made some kind of error in asserting the existence of the woman's film as a genre, as opposed to asserting a deliberate political and aesthetic call to critical and filmmaking action. Beginning with Molly Haskell's work in 1973, then moving on through Mary Ann Doane's *The Desire to Desire*, Altman rightly asserts that "one of the major tasks of feminist film criticism over the past twenty years has been to rehabilitate the term woman's film and thereby restore value to women's activities" (1999, 77)—still, however, without fully seeming to appreciate the complexity of those films and of the nuances of their importance to feminists. That is, even as Altman recognizes the existence of a political project and, indeed, makes it part of his point about the influential role that Doane and others played in defining and arguing for the existence, however blurry, of a genre of woman's films that might earlier have been discussed according to different paradigms, he asserts,

I do not mean to claim that Doane was by herself capable of turning a motley assortment of old films into a widely recognized genre, but I would suggest that a major purpose of *The Desire to Desire* is to establish the woman's film as a genre.

(75)

A "motley assortment of old films"? Even if writing facetiously or ironically, Altman here seems to reproduce the exact contempt that he himself quotes Haskell describing as far back as 1973: "As a term of critical opprobrium, 'woman's film' carries the implication that women, and therefore women's emotional problems, are of minor significance" (Haskell [1973] 1974, 154). After nearly forty years of dedicated scholarship about women and cinema, such an attitude is disquieting, as is Altman's surprise at how long it took for critical attention to be paid to the genre:

We have already noted the extent to which the building of genres is often a critical, rather than a production-based, concern, so the only thing surprising about Haskell's attempt to rehabilitate the woman's film by