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Author

Lloyd, Justine, Johnson, L.

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The Three Faces of Eve: The Post-war Housewife, Melodrama, and Home

Justine Lloyd and Lesley Johnson

Introduction

In this essay we wish to trouble a received history of popular cultural narratives about women's lives in the 1940s and 1950s as shaped by dominant ideologies of the home as women's "proper place." By comparing two post-war Hollywood films that feature housewives as main characters, we show that these texts, rather than being concerned with promoting domesticity as women's proper social role, actively explored a tension between discourses of modernity and femininity. We suggest that the housewife in such popular cultural forms of the period must work through the problem of the modern individual's relationship to home; that is, the discourse of self-determination that requires the modern self to be completed in the public world of work. Gender complicates the housewife's story: she must become a modern citizen; yet still complete her feminine subjectivity "at home". We suggest that popular films of the 1940s and 1950s therefore reveal changes in a historically formed emotional ambivalence about the figure of the domestic woman.

In this respect, our argument builds on the analysis of the woman's picture developed by Mary Ann Doane in her 1987 book *The Desire to Desire*. In 1940s films aimed at a female audience, Doane (1987) identifies narrative conventions that operate to exclude women from occupying identities of maternal reproduction and economic production simultaneously. We argue, in a parallel but different vein, that these conventions figure the domestic as a contested space of subjectivity for both women and men. Films produced for a female audience in the 1940s and 1950s worried over the questions that also concerned women's magazines and marriage guidance manuals: how much should a woman care about her home? How should she deal with the tension between her desire for own identity as a modern individual and the inevitable sublimation of her self into her social roles as mother and wife? What did the good (and bad) housewife do and what did she look like?

Family and home in these films offer a space of realisation for female identity outside the world of work. In the Hollywood films that we study, the domestic embodies the place at which modern life could be "brought home," representing the fragile locus of a new world that had been promised before the war. In a comparison between the films *Mildred Pierce* and *The Three Faces of Eve* (made in 1945 and 1957, respectively), we examine two stages in the constructions of the figure of the housewife and home in Hollywood cinema. Both films rework the position of home set up in the masculine narrative of modernity—as a place to leave behind—and articulate a different relationship to domestic space. We suggest that significant transformations in the figure of the "housewife" occurred during this period. These films demonstrate an important shift in representations of housework, from a form of gendered *labour* to housewifery as an inflexibly gendered *identity*.

Homework and housework

Representations of women at home in Hollywood films of the 1940s and 1950s suggest that the identity of the housewife was under pressure during the post-war period from competing discourses that each defined femininity in quite different ways. Characters often debate the cultural and economic value of women's work both inside and outside the home, and the plots of "women's films" often deal with conflicts between different roles and expectations of women: mother, wife, worker, consumer, and so on. Studied over time, films aimed at female audiences particularly demonstrate contemporary changes in views about the agency of the housewife. In the 1940s, feminine identity was economically defined as "invisible," as women's work was unpaid, voluntary or temporary (although, of course, many working and middle-class women did work outside the home). Yet culturally, femininity was mobilised as a site of the shaping of new consumer identities. Further adding to the complexity of the figure of the modern woman in cultural texts of the post-war period, femininity was an identity constituted and interrupted by discourses of class, race, and nation, yet the housewife was predominantly a white, middle-class construction.²

In post-war Hollywood film, the emergence of the "modern woman" represents a tension between the gendered identities of working woman and housewife. An alternative experience of modernity is explored for women, constructed through an ideology of "separate spheres" that Nancy Armstrong (1987) has identified in her study of women's writings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This gendered modernity was imagined through a separation of home and work that is seen by Armstrong as cohesive and transformative, rather than oppressive and isolating for women. The household in these writings, she argues, is represented as a centrifugal force tempering the effects of the marketplace

as a centripetal force (Armstrong 1987). Armstrong observes that:

The writing of female subjectivity opened a magical space in the culture where ordinary work would find its proper gratification and where the very objects that set men against each other in the competitive marketplace served to bind them together in a community of common domestic values. (1987: 95)

Despite this desire for an alternative modernity shaped by such domestic values, the home—while modernised and brought up-to-date in the twentieth century by the latest domestic and communications technology and the popularisation of techniques of child-rearing, relationship management, dietary and health advice—has remained unassimilable to the site of the real action of modernity: the public sphere figured in the world of work and the streets of the modern city. The desire to be modern, to participate in self-determining goals and achievements outside the home, while maintaining links to family and traditions are shown to be the terms of women's modernity in the films we examine. These films explore the gendered divisions between the public and the private, the marketplace and the domestic: the home becomes a hinge between masculine and feminine views of the world that play out in emotive ways.

Cinematic melodrama as the “woman's film”—only described as a coherent body of films in the 1970s and 1980s (Rick Altman 1999: 72–7)—both formed and addressed a largely female audience in the 1930s. Hollywood melodrama was consolidated in the 1940s with lavish budgets and high-profile stars working for studios such as Universal and MGM. In 1941, a substantial number of men working in Hollywood left to join the US war effort. As a result, studios like Warner Brothers, which had signed a series of female stars to long contracts (including Bette Davis and Joan Crawford), actively sought female writers for a series of quality pictures for these leading women (Catharine Turney 1987: 234).

Because women were assumed to be the main audience of these films, melodrama was constituted as “low culture” and associated with a presumed submission to manipulative cultural practices: escapism into over-sentimental and unrealistic scenarios. Thus the “unfulfilled housewife” often appears as the archetypal viewing subject of melodrama, a characterisation against which Molly Haskell (1979) has railed (and in part constructed) in *From Reverence to Rape*:

Among the Anglo-American critical brotherhood (and a few of their sisters as well), the term “woman's film” is used disparagingly to conjure up the image of the pinched-virgin or the little-old-lady writer, spilling out her secret longings in wish fulfilment or glorious martyrdom, and transmitting these fantasies to the frustrated housewife... At the lowest level, as soap opera, the “woman's film” fills a masturbatory need, it is soft-core emotional porn for the frustrated housewife. The weepies are founded on a mock-Aristotelian and politically conservative aesthetic whereby women spectators are moved, not by pity and fear but by self-pity and tears, to accept, rather than reject, their lot. That there should be a need and an audience for such an opiate suggests an unholy amount of real misery. And that a term like “woman's film” can be summarily used to dismiss certain films, with no further need on the part of the critic to make distinctions and explore the genre, suggests some of the reasons for this misery. (Haskell 1979: 154–5)

Declarations such as this inaugurated an important critical project to re-examine these films as feminist critics sought to jettison the assumption that they were purely “emotive” and without redeeming intellectual content. Subsequent to Haskell's book, these films were critically re-evaluated by film historians in the 1970s and 1980s as containing the seeds of an ideological critique of then bourgeois family and capitalism in the cold war era, thus transcending emotion with rational analysis. In 1981 Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, in the journal *Screen*, argued that:

Melodrama can thus be seen as a contradictory nexus, in which certain determinations (social, physical, artistic) are brought together but in which the problem of the articulation of these determinations is not successfully resolved. The importance of melodrama... lies precisely in its ideological failure. Because it cannot accommodate this problem, either in a real present or in an ideal future, but lays them open in their shameless contradictoriness, it opens a space which most Hollywood forms have studiously closed off. (Nowell-Smith 1987: 118)

The critical project of the 1980s reinscribed distinctions between public and private that were carried over from the nineteenth century ideal of domestic womanhood. But, rather than looking for ideological loopholes in the films, and reading the subversive feminist messages “behind” the texts, it is possible to look for the ways in which these films produce gendered subjectivity; that is, how they

show women how to be women. Through its address to women at particular historical moments—specifically in the ways in which these films establish a discourse of frustrated affect, rather than a form of false consciousness—the woman’s film represents a rich site of analysis of ideas about women and the structuring of feminine subjectivity.

A melodramatic structure of feeling thus manifests in characters’ lives as an emotional economy of excess and lack: either the housewife is tragically indifferent to, or over-invested in her home and family; she is either insufficiently open to modern ideas of the home and marriage; or she is a victim of modernisation by embracing it too intensely. This characterisation of the housewife as a particular mode of femininity caught between tradition and modernity certainly contributed to the devaluation of women’s work and the projection of the negative traits of over-mothering, immersion in the private sphere, and excessive consumption on to the figure of the domestic woman. Yet this problem of modern womanhood also revealed the new role of women in the market economy of the post-war period. The narratives of the films we examine construct the modern woman as facing a series of limited options. At the one extreme, she can become like a man and express an autonomous self, which means she must be opposed to her family and focus on the world of work. At the other end of the spectrum, she can throw herself into femininity and her own identity in the family to the point of living her life through others and circumscribing their own expression of autonomy. The equivalence of the role of housewife with a feminine identity is the exact problem of these films, and one that their main characters must resolve or resign to by the end of the last reel. The “desire to desire,” named as the subject of these films by Mary-Ann Doane (1987), is the problem of the fictional housewife, however her task in these films is more precisely the desire to desire “properly.”

This problematisation of female subjectivity is not equivalent to the pathologisation of the housewife that emerged in a number of key texts before and after the 1950s. From Sigmund Freud’s ([1905] 1977) essay on the hysterical teenager, Dora, and her house-obsessed mother, to Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* ([1963] 1983), the effects of boredom and frustration associated with the housewife rest on a widespread projection of lack of power and failure of individual development on to the persona of the woman at home. In the 1950s and 1960s, a dissatisfaction with the capacities and responsibilities of housework among early second-wave feminists cast the emotional state of the housewife as a case of arrested or incomplete development within the terms of modernity: her daily life was characterised as being about repetition rather than progress; her association with cleaning, child-rearing, and dreary routines of shopping made her a worker who produced no product; and her spatial confinement to the home placed her crucially outside the urban and public world of mass culture and the dynamics of spectacular changes and developments in modernity. As we will show, however, any vision of the domestic as temporally and spatially “other” to modernity was not easily accepted in the popular cultural forms which were shaping female subjectivities of the time.

Definitions of melodrama

Melodrama has been claimed to be a “genre whose conventions make ideologies ‘visible and watchable’ ” (Mary Beth Haralovich 1990). It has also been defined as “the genre of domesticity” and as such, particularly important to feminist cultural studies (Laura Mulvey 1994: 122). Film critics in the 1970s and 1980s, influenced by Peter Brooks’ 1976 study, identified it as an intrinsically modern cultural form for the ways that it “starts from and expresses the anxiety brought by a frightening new world in which the traditional patterns of moral order no longer provide the necessary social glue” (1976: 20). They consequently re-evaluated the “low” cultural form of melodrama in order to seek out its “ideological failures.” Melodrama was thus “discovered” in the 1970s and 1980s as the scene of narrative resistance to a total ideological closure of the meanings of femininity. While this focus on transgressive content has been the motivation for many feminist studies of melodrama, in the 1980s such feminist critical work was also significant for the ways in which it drew attention to the historical nature of the categories of feeling and sentiment (Christine Gledhill 1987). Because melodrama works through an opposition between romance and the ordinary, its structure of feeling begins with the material of everyday life and expands and hyperbolises emotions contained within it. This opposition produces the emotional economy of melodrama, and foregrounds its modes of storytelling in everyday life. Feminist investigation of melodrama as a genre has uncovered the ways in which the domestic as the private sphere has been figured as the space of emotions. By drawing on Raymond Williams’ (1977) notion of the “structures of feeling” as a recognition of the ways in which political change, social categories, and subjectivity are related, we can understand how the films of the 1950s spoke to feminist critics of the 1970s and 1980s in ways beyond ideology.

Through the concept of “structures of feeling” Williams connected emotions to historical phenomena and social categories:

For what we are defining is a particular quality of social experience and relationship, historically distinct from other particular qualities, which gives the sense of a generation or of a period. The relations between this quality and the other specifying historical marks of changing institutions, formations, and beliefs, and beyond these the changing social and economic relations between and within classes, are again an open question: that is to say, a set of specific historical questions... We are talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity. (1977: 131–2)

Williams (1977: 133) distinguishes feeling (“meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt”) from ideology (“formally held and systematic beliefs”), noting that they are of course interrelated in practice:

Methodologically, then, a “structure of feeling” is a cultural hypothesis, actually derived from attempts to understand such elements [affective elements of consciousness and relationships] and their connection in a generation or period, and needing always to be returned, interactively, to such evidence.

Feminist analyses of the themes of women’s repression and suffering, mistaken guilt and cathartic innocence in melodramatic texts have represented melodrama as “a (social) safety valve,” yet this critical “structure of feeling” about the form itself demonstrates changing relationships of women (as intellectuals) to domesticity.³ While Laura Mulvey has argued that the function of 1950s Hollywood melodrama was to “provide an outlet for [ideological] inconsistencies... by touching on sensitive areas of sexual repression and frustration; its excitement comes from conflict between enemies, but between people tied by blood or love” (Mulvey 1987: 75), it is possible to understand melodrama as a form of training of the emotional subject. Through watching melodrama, we participate in a realisation of the inequities of family ties. Melodrama produces emotional and social bonds through such conflict, rather than simply providing an outlet for the audience to vent collectively inexpressible or unspeakable emotions.

The kinds of emotions associated with domesticity in melodrama reflect historical shifts in subjectivity, and the organisation of emotion along gender lines. The emotional mode of melodramatic heroines has been called “hysterical” by Lacanian-influenced feminist theorist, Joan Copjec (1998), in an interesting discussion of melodrama as a feminised sublime. However, the ways that melodrama uses an hysterical mode to amplify “the gestures of suffering,” according to Copjec, is not a sign of women’s irrationality or the text’s unreality, but “like wrestling... in a world which is unsure what justice should look like” the genre “manages justice... so that virtue always wins out” (1998: 260). Sentimentality in Western culture has been a feminised affect, emerging at a historically specific moment of the construction of gender and domesticity.⁴ Copjec explains:

My initial premise is this: crying was an invention of the late eighteenth century. I offer as proof of this thesis the fact that at this precise historical moment there emerged a brand new literary form—melodrama—which was specifically designed to give people something to cry about... I suggest... that we pay closer attention to this modern social imperative in order to distinguish crying in the modern sense... and for the wholly new emphasis in art and art criticism on the sentimental, emphatic relation between spectator and character—to distinguish this *modern* crying from all the lachrymation of earlier times. (1998: 249)

Despite ongoing critiques of the opposition between emotionality and rationality, such as those developed by Alison M. Jaggar (1989) and E. Ann Kaplan (1989), critics of classical Hollywood cinema, with some notable exceptions, have tended to repeat the “ideological” rather than the “affective” reading either discussing them as damning critiques of the status quo, or as morality tales that punish deviant or rebellious characters. Peter Biskind (1983), for example, in his extensive and detailed analysis of films of the 1950s, judges their message as either conservative or pluralist. In a more complex analysis, Kathleen Anne McHugh (1999), in a discussion of housework in Hollywood film, argues that the prominence of the figure of the middle-class woman in melodramatic genres elides both the representation of and real labour of black or working-class women in the home. McHugh (1999: 19) observes that the housewife, as a construction of a white middle-class, heterosexual femininity has often been taken as the feminine *per se*. As a highly visible figure of the

modernisation of gender during the twentieth century, in the 1940s and 1950s the housewife came to stand for the completion and assumption of a “proper” feminine identity, of the “natural” completion of womanhood. On this point, Angela Y. Davis has remarked: “Although the ‘housewife’ was rooted in the social conditions of the bourgeoisie and the middle classes, nineteenth century ideology established the housewife and mother as universal models of womanhood” (1983: 229). The challenge remains to understand these films as simultaneously social and textual; as working towards a set of meanings at the same time as forces outside the text shaped these meanings. As Barbara Klinger (1994: xvii) has noted in her study of Douglas Sirk, the context of reception, or the ways in which we view film at any given time, are always guided by “systems of intelligibility and value” that, rather than offering one true reading over another, “help us understand the role history plays in negotiating and renegotiating meaning.”

As our study is concerned to show, the gendering of women’s work in the home has created certain unstable and untenable divisions between public and private, home and work. While acknowledging the invisibility of issues of class or race in the image of the happy, clean, post-war home, this essay departs from some of these assumptions about the housewife as a stable, unchanging figure of gendered culture. Instead, we ask what shifts and changes in representations of women in the home occurred during this period? Popular film genres such as the melodrama articulated an address to a female consumer that was crucial in constructing a sphere of difference and distinction for women’s agency in the 1940s and 1950s. No one film can be judged as ultimately conservative or progressive since each text is complex and the range of meanings open to audience interpretation is relatively open. The characters are often contradictory and non-heroic, with motivations that are obscured by personal circumstances. Most of all, melodramas portray the domestic sphere as an ambiguous and liminal space that is in need of constant work to maintain its value as a home, or a psychical and emotional space, and not just a house, which is just a physical location. The previous section of this essay argued that women’s modernity was imagined in popular film through a rhetoric of domesticity, drawing on traditional ideas of separate spheres. This section has suggested that melodrama as a cultural form reflects and constructs a “structure of feeling” for women’s modernity. We will now examine these arguments in more detail through *Mildred Pierce*, a film from the 1940s that has long puzzled feminist film critics with its rather confused representation of a housewife (Pam Cook 1980; Julie Weiss 1992; Linda Williams 1989).

Putting on the apron

Mildred Pierce has been categorised as belonging to both the “film noir” and “melodrama” genres of Hollywood cinema. Vivian Sobchack draws a distinction between the two genres in the “loss of home [that] becomes a structuring absence in film noir” (1998: 144). Film noir also represents a domestication of crime and transgression. Instead of exposing an inherent criminal tendency or evil in the hearts of men, the novels and films that deal with women characters emphasise the ordinariness of crime. All of James Cain’s three novels that have been made into classic film noir—*Double Indemnity* (1944), *Mildred Pierce* (1945), and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946)—establish relationships between strong female characters and men who work only intermittently or in very routine occupations. The couples commit murder or embezzlement because of a mixture of lust and economics, rather than through a pathological need to murder or destroy. Based on Cain’s extensive experience as a journalist, the novels emphasise the ordinariness and prevalence of violence, and locate it in the suburbs and small towns rather than the big city’s alienated public sphere. Cain’s novels, and the films made of them, show that the housewife-next-door is capable of murder if she is pushed by social conditions and the lack of a good male provider.

The film of *Mildred Pierce*, directed by Michael Curtiz, exemplifies this merging of melodrama with film noir. Cain’s novel is a classic melodrama in realist style, but the film frames this central melodrama with two noir segments depicting a murder and the hunt for a killer. Mildred (played by Joan Crawford) has to support her two children, Kay and Veda, after her marriage ends suddenly when her husband loses his fortune as a property speculator in Los Angeles in the early 1930s. Bert still sees the home as a site of leisure, lazing around reading the newspaper and resenting Mildred for nagging him about his household duties. The focus on failed men (rather than good and bad girls) makes femininity distinctly more ordinary and less threatening to the social order than a failed masculinity embodied in shiftless, over-consuming, and un-productive men. These gendered types appear in film noir, depicting the massive social changes associated with the economic depression of the 1930s, the transitional period of work and thrift during the Second World War, and then the relative affluence of the 1950s.

Like many melodramas, *Mildred Pierce* shows a housewife dealing with life at home despite an absent or inadequate husband. It explores the question of how such women might deal with the modern world on their own, while still maintaining the image of domestic womanhood. These women use their experiences in the private sphere to their advantage in the public sphere, becoming waitresses or restaurant and service industry entrepreneurs. They negotiate the damning diagnosis of being “just a housewife,” as an employment agent describes Mildred Pierce, explaining why she is only offered demeaning jobs as a domestic worker when she looks for work after her husband leaves, rather than as her preference for becoming a receptionist (James M. Cain 1985: 401). As another character eventually explains during her search for work during the depression of the 1930s, the skills of home making can only translate into the most menial paid work:

All right, you wanted to know why that lady offered you a job as a waitress, and why I recommended you for this. It's because you've let half your life slip by without learning anything but sleeping, cooking, and setting the table, and that's all you're good for. So get over there. It's what you've got to do, so you may as well start doing it. (Cain 1985: 361)

Mildred is determined that her children will have greater opportunities in life than she and Bert have had. In the first flashback sequence, which allows her to tell her life story, she explains:

I was always in the kitchen. I felt like I'd been there all my life except for the two hours it took to get married. I married Bert when I was seventeen. I never knew any other kind of life... Just cooking and washing and having children. (Albert J. LaValley 1980: 97)

Following Bert's departure to live with the “other woman,” Mildred finds work as a waitress and saves enough money to build up her own chain of highly successful restaurants. Because of her experience as a wife and mother, she extends her domestic duties efficiently and professionally into the public sphere. She quickly figures out that despite a lack of ready cash during the depression, and perhaps because of widespread economic hardship, many people want home-cooked food in an atmosphere of domestic comfort. She knows, however, that there is a sense of shame associated with serving food to other people, and hides her waitress uniform from her children, only working when they are at school.

Although she becomes more than “just a housewife” by the film's ending, her domestic labour posed the problem of ensuring the film's star remained attractive and glamorous while she was playing a housewife. Clothing such as Mildred's fur coat, and her heavy make-up, solves this tension. Veda, during a fight about her marriage to the son of a rich family, actually tells Mildred that despite her “new hairdo and some expensive clothes,” she is nothing but “a common frump, whose father lived over a grocery store and whose mother took in washing” (LaValley 1980: 201). Particularly telling is the appearance of the apron that Mildred wears when working in the kitchen, both at home and in her business, which allows the kind of manual and dirty work that she does to be distanced from the love scenes. The apron in the film moves around characters (being worn by Bert's ex-business partner, Wally, and Mildred's black maid), as the material symbol of both maternal labour and an eroticisation of the domestic scene, anticipating the “new look” which emerged as a mode of a sexy yet domesticated femininity in the late 1940s. *Mildred Pierce* suggests that domestic labour, when transposed to the public sphere, reverses notions of gender and class. This is literalised in a scene that shows Mildred putting Wally, Bert's former business partner and investor in Mildred's business venture, to work in the restaurant kitchen. By putting on the apron, Wally figures ongoing shifts in the organisation of gender in the 1930s and 1940s.

This redistribution of the affect of domestic labour is most explicit in the novel, when Veda reveals to Mildred that it is exactly her *lack* of class sophistication and role as a domestic worker that her shiftless playboy lover, Monty Beragon fetishises:

Really, he speaks very nicely about your legs. He has a theory about them. He says a gingham apron is the greatest provocation ever invented by women for the torture of man, and that the very best legs are found in kitchens, not in drawing rooms. “Never take the mistress if you can take the maid,” is the way he puts it. And another thing, he says a pretty varlet is always agreeably grateful, and not too exacting, with foolish notions about matrimony and other tiresome things. I must say I find his social theories quite fascinating. (Cain 1985: 463)

Monty deals with the problem of his own ambiguous social position and lack of traditional masculinity by sexualising Mildred's working-class identity. Yet this speech obscures the real dilemma of the downwardly mobile, post-war gentleman: Monty is unable to provide, so Mildred must work. Her

management of the “Pie Wagon” causes her constant preoccupation with smelling of grease from fried chicken, so her lavish spending on clothes and cars and her ambition for her daughter to achieve fame as a singer or movie star are signs of her need to escape the domestic and abject nature of her work. Mildred’s double life at work and home in order to maintain her new middle-class status makes her responsible for the way that Veda has turned out. When arrested for Monty Beragon’s murder, Veda blames Mildred: “It’s your fault I’m the way I am— Help me.”

The class transformation of Mildred’s family through consumerism is posed as antithetical to the puritanical achievement of spirituality through hard work. Phillip Wylie’s ([1942] 1955) diatribe on modern motherhood, *Generation of Vipers*, demonstrated an emerging anxiety about the influence and role of mothers in the modern family. Wylie claimed that American women’s tendency to emotionally over-invest in their children’s success was a widespread social problem. Controversially, he accused contemporary mothers of living through their children to a degree that was detrimental to the development of their children’s independent and healthy identity. This paradox of the modern mother is embodied in Mildred’s story of self-actualisation through her daughter, especially apparent after her younger tomboy daughter dies of pneumonia. While her story reveals a stark lack of choice and limited options in the face of husbandly desertion, Mildred’s refusal of the domestic-angel model of womanhood allows her to make many instructive mistakes in her rearing of her children. She transgresses several social conventions: first, her divorce, then through her successful working life, economic support and remarriage with an unemployed man of higher social standing than herself, and finally in pretending to be Monty’s murderer to save her surviving daughter from jail. The emotion evoked by Mildred’s story is an “outlaw emotion,” in Jaggar’s (1989) terms. Such emotions are “distinguished by their incompatibility with the dominant perceptions and values” and as “potentially or actually feminist emotions” (Jaggar 1989: 16). *Mildred Pierce*, by merging the codes of film noir with the narrative of maternal melodrama, complicates any simple story of maternal sacrifice. This new post-war development indicates that rather than a clear separation of good and bad mothers, these discourses could be embodied in one character at different times. This complex “structure of feeling” around women, work, consumerism, and domesticity emerges in the depiction of Mildred as a housewife in a fur coat with a gun. By assembling a series of incompatible spheres of experience (housework, crime, the city, suburbia), the film demonstrates the ways that these phenomena have never been unrelated.

Posing some bother for feminist film critics, the film’s final shot reunites the glamorous fur coat-wearing Mildred with the scene of the domestic abject. When Bert and Mildred exit the Justice building to the left of screen into a new post-noir dawn, two women wearing headscarves and pinafores scrub the hallway on their hands and knees. As Linda Williams (1989: 28) has argued, this shot “literalises” the relationship between middle-class and working-class women. It also foreshadows the re-inscription of housework on to a low “other” and the complex relationship of the middle-class woman to the household economy of the migrant worker in the global economy. Furthermore, the scene foregrounds the labour of housework, and demonstrates the “splitting” of housewife as gendered subject. The middle-class woman defined through the labour of consumption is able to exit the domestic scene into the public sphere not as “just a housewife” but in the discourse of equality, alongside her husband. The working-class woman is still defined by her labour since the work of cleaning and tidying up persists. What the shot also anticipates is the splitting of the housewife into a subject and object in feminist debates around housework in the 1970s and 1980s. While most people do have to do some housework, the “housewife” as an identifiable persona associated with a particular historical period represents a key transformation in feminist constructions of self, in the passage from home-making as an activity undertaken by women to an identity belonging to some (insufficiently modern) women. The next section of this paper examines a film that deals with the housewife as a “personality fragment” that must be dispensed with in order for the modern woman to emerge.

A doubled plot of femininity

By the 1950s, individual imperatives to monitor one’s own life and ensure that all aspects of the housewife’s life were kept in check intensified in magazines and domestic management guides in the US and other westernised countries. The next Hollywood film we wish to examine, *The Three Faces of Eve* (1957), reflects an intensification of the gendering of home in the 1950s. The film tells the story of Eve White, played by Joanne Woodward, who is a “rather sweet, rather baffled young housewife” living in a small southern American town with her husband and a young daughter.⁵ After unsettling her husband by behaving completely out of character, and suffering migraines and blackouts, Mrs White

visits a psychiatrist. During these sessions another personality reveals herself within the body of Eve White: Eve Black, a sexy, uninhibited, outspoken, and glamorous woman who supposedly expresses those parts of Eve White's personality that she has repressed. Eve White is demure, married, and modest in her desires; Eve Black is outrageous, single, consumes irrationally, and behaves irresponsibly. Eventually, guided by the therapist and by the end of the film, a third self called Jane emerges as a new persona, "born" during the sessions; an intelligent, sensible, educated woman, who helps resolve and integrate the different facets of Eve's personality into a "whole and healthy human being."

The film is based on a case history of multiple personality written by two psychiatrists, Doctors Corbett Hilsman Thigpen and Hervey Milton Cleckley (1957), who bestowed the names of Eve, White and Black on their patient, Chris Sizemore. Their popular book documenting the analysis was published in the same year as the film was released. Both book and film represent the story of Sizemore, a woman who has been diagnosed with what is now called dissociative identity disorder. Ian Hacking (1995) has discussed the ways in which Eve White's story and Chris Sizemore's diagnosis diverge in his magisterial study of multiple (or as it is now classified, dissociative) identity disorder, *Rewriting the Soul*. Here, we do not want to take issue with the truth or falsity of the psychiatrist's story, but to look at how these personality fragments are used to narrate a story of a gendered identity in the film.⁶

The case history of Eve is located in the dynamics of an encounter between madness and housewifery in the popular imagination of the 1950s. The biographies of female multiple personality outlined in both the case history *and* the feature film reflects significant assumptions about women's position between the worlds of work and home. These changes indicate that a sense-making structure, emerging from social and cultural conventions of femininity, overlaid the un-narratable or unacceptable parts of her story. This generic and melodramatic structure created a resonance for her life story with wider concerns and anxieties over women, mass culture, and the domestic. The film version of *The Three Faces of Eve* and the book upon which it was based can be related not just to pop psychology, but also to the woman's film. More specifically, it falls within the genre of the maternal melodrama that emerged during the high point of classical Hollywood production in the 1930s and 1940s (Kaplan 1987; Christian Viviani 1987).

The story of *The Three Faces of Eve*, as a sub-genre of melodrama, emerges from the fascination of the woman's film with a doubled female identity in the many "twin sister" plots of the gothic melodramas in the 1940s. Identified by film historian Lucy Fischer (1983: 26) as a "canon of texts on the female *doppelgänger*," the emergence of the genre of "double films" in the late 1930s was marked by a divergence from male double narratives in that they "reflected established patriarchal assumptions about women." Rather than reflecting an eternal conflict in the feminine psyche, films like *A Stolen Life* (1939 and 1946), *Cobra Woman* (1944), and *Dark Mirror* (1946) should be historicised to show that their generic features "do not represent real poles of the female psyche but rather two opposing *male* views of woman" (Fisher 1983: 34, italics ours). The same actress playing two separate characters embodied these two views. Such stories represent a materialisation of a discourse on femininity as split into either the good twin—who was able to form properly managed heterosexual desires and a domestic identity by the end of the film—or a deviant twin—who loved excessively or obsessively, and was disposed of by either murder, accident, or suicide. Fisher's argument about the misogyny of this concept is persuasive. Despite being understood and discussed as the "woman's film" this description of the genre was certainly misleading because of its notable absence of women screenwriters or directors. Their popularity with female rather than male audiences, however, challenges Fisher's reading of the films as misogynist.

A more nuanced understanding is hinted at by Fisher herself, that this "male" view of women in the 1940s "would seem to have cultural determinants—since woman's *persona* was seen as divided, and its aspects as mutually exclusive" (1983: 38). By the 1950s, this division fell across a different line, as "normal" femininity was increasingly represented not just by a heterosexual woman who loved and was loved, but also by the middle-class housewife. Rather than the good and bad twins of the war period, of whom the evil one had to die to resolve the narrative, the post-war period established the housewife as the central figure of women's modernity inside these divisions.

Despite their decline in the 1950s beside the new cultural forms of television soap opera and drama, such melodramatic narratives organised and discursively plotted out women's lives in the post-war period. The cinematic adaptation of Sizemore's story reworks an untidy and undirected sequence of events of suffering and trauma into a narrative of a woman's search for a modern self. Eve's "split"

identity reproduces the divided female subject explored in the “twin” plots of these films, and this parallel with such cinematic convention may explain the attraction of producers and audience to the story of Sizemore a decade later. In the 1950s, a story as bizarre as Sizemore’s could be efficiently transposed to a cinematic narrative as an internal conflict in women’s identity: taking place in the same body, and the “split” personality resolved by psychic integration into a “whole” person rather than an exorcism of the evil element. Both the film and the book combine scenes of dissociation into a plot with fixed entry and exit points into Eve’s inner life. Indeed, Thigpen actually advised Chris against revealing the persistence of her illness in her own book because it would create confusion for the reader if it lacked a neat and tidy ending (Chris Costner Sizemore and Elen Sain Pitillo 1978: 371). In *his* story, like the dirt that the housewife expels from the domestic, the therapist performs a cleaning process on Eve’s psyche to unearth and re-organise her traumatic memories; thereby maintaining the boundaries between self and other, inside and outside, health and sickness. In *her* story, the combined stresses of financial problems, her husband’s unemployment, miscarriage, a forced abortion, strict social restrictions on what constituted a proper feminine identity, and her own fragile sense of home overwhelm her daily life and prevent any realisation of her desired capacity to love and build a safe place for her family to grow. According to Sizemore, these factors, rather than any inherent conflict in femininity or the female psyche, forced the different “personalities” to take on the unsafe areas of sexuality, anger, work, and child-bearing, thereby creating unstable and uncanny boundaries between self and other that Thigpen’s version maintains. This sense of an uncanny and transgressive selfhood is reflected in Sizemore’s original book title: *Strangers in my Body* (Sizemore and Pitillo 1978: 368).

The film uses flashbacks and special effects to portray the forces that “fractured” Eve’s self into “two personalities battling for dominance.” The film also gives the viewer access to a panoptic yet intimate outsider’s perspective on Eve, a perspective unavailable to Eve herself. Hacking (1995: 5) establishes that a panoptic vision in representations of multiple personality was used from its earliest diagnoses in the 1880s, when multiple personality was visually recorded in Charcot’s photographic studies of hysteria (Hacking 1995: 5).⁷ These splits and separations create suspense and fascination for the audience in the film because, as many critics have noted, melodrama, works through a tragic structure of feeling that “grants its audience greater knowledge than its characters possess, and this disparity produce pathos” (McHugh 1999: 94).

For the housewife self, “Eve White,” later observed by the integrated self, “Jane White,” reading sentimental poetry and classical literature offered a way of transcending her unhappiness and personal problems. Eve Black, however, finds her alter ego’s reading habits “the quintessence of dullness. They leave her cold in the literal sense as well as the spiritual” (Thigpen and Cleckley 1957: 158). Eve Black prefers to spend her afternoons in movie theatres and evenings in nightclubs. She actually participates as a performer in clubs by singing and dancing to the amusement of her suitors and the displeasure of her husband (and Eve White). In a therapy session she takes pride in her role as amateur nightclub singer and pop chanteuse:

Her face will be a sight to see if you tell her about the time I was out at the Lido Club. Had some champagne cocktails with a fellow there. I like to sing you see... I put some charge into it when I got to ‘rockin’ and rollin’—*Rockin’ and rollin’/All night long...*

With a little toss of her head she carried a snatch of the tune for a moment. “But what really sent ‘em,” she said, “was when I stood there in the middle of that dance floor with the spotlight on me and let ‘em have ‘Sixty Minute Man’.” (Thigpen and Cleckley 1957: 69)

The split between different areas of everyday life is figured here in the separation of black popular culture from white culture, regional tradition from urban modernity. The story of the two Eves embodies uneven development of the northern and southern United States, associating the “lowly” and primitive Eve Black with the South as the excluded subtext to the American narrative “of capitalism and modernisation, of individualism, materialism, education, reason and democracy” (Kathleen Stewart 1996: 3). In the film, as the two Eves become less dominant, the character’s southern accent, most noticeable in Eve Black, fades until it is almost gone in the speech of the educated Jane. However, because the film figures this national and economic difference as a split between housewife and her “others,” it subsumes these national and racial tensions within a feminine struggle for identity. This gendered narrative constructs the conflict between incompatible elements of the female persona as primary and prevailing over other social and cultural divisions.

Both the film and Thigpen and Cleckley's (1957) book strongly textualise the particular historical circumstances of Chris Sizemore's life as romance narrative and journey of discovery. Both stories coerce the details of a still-living woman with a psychiatric disorder into a kind of uber-narrative of feminine identity and ego psychology that stands for all women—most strikingly in their re-naming of Sizemore as the essential, eternal, and biblical "Eve." The notion of Eve's deeply split and contradictory "immature" feminine identities as either saintly housewife or good-time bad girl works in Thigpen's version because it operates from widely held understandings of these subject positions as conflicting social imperatives of womanhood: one could be either one or the other in the same body, but never both in the same self.⁸ For the female viewer, the story of the fictional "Eve" offers a resolution of all these tensions in the figure of a "modern woman" (Jane) who manages these multiple and conflicting pressures and finally integrates all aspects of her sexual, maternal, and economic identities as a wife, mother, *and* worker. Her character only achieves this difficult task of self-completion and self-understanding with the help of analytic techniques mediated by her male psychiatrist. These changes are visually expressed in her assimilation of both good and bad Eves into Jane's sexy, yet sophisticated, style of dress and a modest beauty. Jane's labour of self-production involves her keeping up with the latest ideas in fashion and beauty (at this point in the film her hair-do rises abruptly upwards into a back-teased and lacquered beehive anticipating the styles of the early 1960s), through proper expression of her femininity in re-marriage and reunion with her child, and most crucially through the articulation of her personal and most interiorised life story with familial and public history through memory work and analysis.

Yet in one very striking way, this film—highly popular although criticised at the time and later as unbelievable and ridiculous—allows the resolution of tension between identities of mother and worker (as noted above in Doane 1987). By the mid-1950s, this exclusion did not seem to be so obvious or easily held in representations of women. Jane White is a working woman, and she is able to remarry and drive away with her re-united family (and second husband) at the end of the film.

The film's extrapolation of an exceptional, individual case to a foundational dilemma for all modern women points to breaches in the figure of the housewife in popular culture in the 1940s and 1950s. The shifting balance between social, economic, family constraints, and individual desire is played out in the very different structures of feeling that the two Eves express. The housewife, a figure of lack and boredom is set against the working woman as feminine fulfilment and self-actualisation; women's struggle for economic independence and self-determination against their primary roles as carers and home-makers; and the zone of popular culture itself is constituted as a problematic source of pleasure and consumption in opposition to the moral and upright institution of the family.

Conclusion

By looking at how these texts figure changes to the figure of the housewife as "woman as wife-companion" (Jackie Byars 1991: 156) and the home as a space of self-completion, they ask us to see what has been left out of history. The material presences of home in the suburban house as setting and locus of action in these films uncovers the relationship of representation and the everyday: "a significant insignificance" these things are so taken for granted that they do not warrant filming or narration (Roland Barthes 1982: 12). Our account of these films shows that what is the unrepresentable material of the maternal melodrama is what is lacking from Eve White's life as a drab housewife. What "Eve Black" (and Mildred Pierce to some extent) enjoys and excels at is everything that everyday life is not: glamorous clothes, dancing, flirting, singing, travel, fame, attention. Located outside the everyday yet taking it as a departing point, these films examine the possibility of a gendered version modernity.

Melodrama—as it was manifest as a cultural form in the post-war period—by representing narratives of women's "choice" between public and private, paid and unpaid work demonstrates that female subjectivity was under negotiation. Precisely because family and love, work and money were shown in these films as mutually exclusive, and something women had to choose between, they generated a structure of feeling of forbidden passions and impossible circumstances. Yet they also questioned these very oppositions: because melodrama is grounded in realism and the everyday, these films show women in the home and the practice of everyday life. Herein lies a paradox that resonates throughout the history of the housewife. Because domestic labour is invisible to the economy and to culture, because it is part of the backstage operation of the production of the self and life, such labour is very rarely documented on film, unless it is aberrant, unusual, or strange. The figure of the housewife

gathered up all the contradictions of modern life like those other contraband of modernity: dirt, repetitive time and ritual that exist outside time and resist transformation into their other. So housewives on film, like Mildred Pierce and Eve White, are troubled, lazy, bored, or mad. The films usually end with a return to domestic reality, but with a change or transformation in the characters. When Veda is charged with murder, and Mildred is let off the hook in *Mildred Pierce*, Mildred's over-investment in her daughter's life is surmounted. In *The Three Faces of Eve*, Eve must give up both the dependency and passivity of her housewife persona and the irresponsibility and autonomy of her single-girl persona so that she can take up the "correct," modern femininity of the mature Jane and so be a good mother. Although the films set up contradictions between women and work outside the home, they do not necessarily accept them, but show that they exist. The emotional structure produced by these films is a way of knowing how these social and political conditions impacted on women's lives. Because these films, and other popular cultural forms that engage melodrama, "speak beyond the capacities of representation" (Byars 1991: 167), they offer and provide a method to track what work the figure of the housewife actually did in this period. Between the two films is a transit point from housewifery as a form of work, to housewifery as identity. While one can stop doing housework, the identity of the housewife is harder to cast off: an "inadequate human being." Feminist critiques of representation must acknowledge this shift from a material economy of housework to an economy of the subject in order to begin to recognise second-wave feminism's absences. As Mary Russo (1994: vii) has argued, feminism has been marked by a wilful ignorance of the ordinary and mundane. The splitting of the identity of the housewife from the figure of the modern woman is one aspect of this absence.

Notes

1. Versions of this paper were presented to the following during 2001: "Affective Encounters: Rethinking Embodiment in Feminist Media Studies" conference, Media Studies Department, University of Turku, Finland; Centre for Cinema Studies and Unit for Critical and Interpretive Theory, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, USA; Women's Studies, York University, Toronto, Canada. Justine would like to thank both the organisers and participants for their useful comments on those occasions, and especially Susanna Paasonen, James Hay, Caitlin Fisher, and Liz Millward. We would also like to acknowledge the perceptive suggestions made by this journal's anonymous reviewers. We are very grateful to the staff of the Jerzy Toeplitz Library at the Australian Film Radio and Television School and Interlibrary Loans, University of Technology, Sydney Library for assistance in locating film and video materials. The Australian Research Council, University of Technology, Sydney, and the Ian Potter Foundation have supported our research.
2. McHugh (1999) discusses this at length. Anne McClintock (1995) provides an excellent account of the pre-history of domesticity and whiteness in the Imperial project.
3. See Charlotte Brunsdon's (2000) recent book for an account of this relationship through interviews with feminist media scholars.
4. Our larger project examines the way that boredom, modernity, and femininity have been interrelated. See also Patricia Meyer Spacks (1995) and Patrice Petro (2002).
5. This description of "Eve" is from Alistair Cooke's documentary-style introduction, which frames the rather unbelievable story of "Eve" by addressing the audience in front of the screen in an empty cinema. Cooke refers to her as a housewife several times in his narration of the film.
6. In her own accounts of her treatment, Sizemore indicates that Thigpen neglected the persistence of several other selves (up to twenty-two) associated with her identity disorder during this period, leaving her far from "resolved" into a single identity at the end of treatment. Unhappy with Thigpen and Cleckley's version of the events of her life and highly critical of the psychiatric treatment she received in the 1950s and after, she twice attempted to correct this misunderstanding of her condition and its "cure." She first tried to publish her own account of the analysis in the late 1950s, in *The Final Face of Eve*, but her co-author and publisher changed her version of events to more closely resemble the film. On Thigpen's advice, she did not reveal her identity to her closest friends and family as the subject of the film and did not see the film herself until the 1970s. Finally, her cousin published a book based on her diaries and interviews in 1977 in *I'm Eve* which she provided with an alternative ending to the 1950s' books and film.
7. By keeping a diary and writing notes and letters, Sizemore allowed her personalities to communicate with and demonstrate awareness of each other. She watched the documentary films that the psychiatrists made of her separate personalities in order to "introduce" her two "sides" to each other for therapeutic purposes.

8. Sizemore had several personalities around this time and after, many of them unnamed as they were not truly separate “personalities” but could only be identified by their significant objects and hysterical obsessions: Freckle girl, Turtle lady, Bell lady, Banana Split girl, Strawberry girl, Blind lady, and the Virgin.

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Justine Lloyd is a postdoctoral research fellow in feminist cultural studies in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Technology, Sydney. She has taught media production, cultural studies, and digital culture at Monash and Southern Cross Universities. She has worked as an editor and researcher on several book and journal projects, including Communal/ Plural and Planet Diana: Cultural Studies and Global Mourning (both at the Research Centre for Intercommunal Studies, University of Western Sydney Nepean). E-mail: Justine.Lloyd@uts.edu.au

Lesley Johnson is Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Research and Development) and Professor of Cultural Studies at the University of Technology, Sydney. She is the author of a number of books, including The Modern Girl. Girlhood and Growing Up (Open University Press and Allen and Unwin (Australia), 1993).