



PROJECT MUSE®

---

*The Woman's Film of the 1940s: Gender, Narrative, and  
History* by Alison L. McKee (review)

Andrée Lafontaine

Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal, Volume 46, Number 2, Winter  
2016, pp. 70-72 (Review)

FILM & HISTORY

WINTER 2016

Published by Center for the Study of Film and History

➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/643304>

meditation on how understandings have changed over time. The piece on director Michael Winner, for example, acknowledges how unfashionability and the fortunes of time have often downplayed perceived contributions to the national tradition (430-431).

The book is not without flaws. Given the length of the text, it is almost inevitable that a few errors slip through. Conflicting release dates are occasionally given for the same film, such that Ken Russell's *The Devils* is pegged at either 1970 or 1971 (19, 369). At one point, actor Tod Slaughter's first name is spelled "Todd" before reverting back to "Tod" upon next mention (223, 284). But these are minor problems, at worst.

Slightly more interesting--not necessarily bad or problematic--is the set of trade-offs that Burton and Chibnall make to keep the text manageable. Two of the major entries in the book are severe distillations of complex topics that are books unto themselves. The "Television and the Cinema" entry highlights just how cinema-focused the book is, as many scholars collapse the two into a national moving image culture. However, the piece is good on reconciling the threat of television—it initially threatened the financial viability of cinemas because audiences stopped attending—with its messianic stature: in the 1980s, Channel Four television revived a flagging national film industry and gave many young filmmakers a platform for their work (400-402). More unfortunate is that the historical reality of the British film industry is such that the entry on "Women" has to quickly move through over a century's worth of contributions to almost all aspects of the production process. While the *Historical Dictionary of British Cinema* does have a number of good entries on women outside of this single entry--

Margaret Lockwood, Muriel Box, Judi Dench--it is striking that Harry Potter gets a dedicated entry while Sally Potter does not.

Overall, Burton and Chibnall's *Historical Dictionary of British Cinema* is an eminently useful book for scholars of British cinema, and will likely remain so for years to come.

Kevin M. Flanagan, University of Pittsburgh

\*\*\*

Alison L. McKee

*The Woman's Film of the 1940s: Gender, Narrative, and History*  
Routledge, 2014; 207 pages

The woman's films of the 1940s are an inexhaustible source of cinematic and scholarly pleasures, so it is no surprise that a recent book from Alison McKee, *The Woman's Film of the 1940s: Gender, Narrative, and History*, revisits the classics despite some forty years of feminist work on the corpus. Positioning herself against the psychoanalytic frameworks that fuelled early feminist film theory's re-discovery of the genre, McKee focuses on narrativity rather than visuality. According to the author, the woman's films of the 40s make female desire their very object and confront it directly. While focusing on the flow of desire propelling the film's narratives, McKee attends to what she calls "lost narratives"—personal tales that generate tensions and frictions within the narrative because they could not, yet *must*, be told. McKee thereby seeks to excavate gendered desires that have been partially suppressed by both classical Hollywood's patriarchal mode of film production and film theory.

In the first chapter, McKee situates her work within and against the larger frame

of classic feminist film theory, advocating for the spectator's identification with the flow of narrative movement rather than static positioning. Desire, the author asserts, is at the root not only of this narrative flow, but is in fact the real impetus and primary mover of the films in question. By anchoring interpretation and identification to narrative flow rather than subjects, McKee makes desire, a force gendered "as sometimes masculine, sometimes feminine" and sometimes both (20). In the second—and strongest—chapter (a shorter version of which was published twenty years ago as "L'affaire Praslin"), McKee examines *All This, and Heaven Too* (Anatole Litvak, 1940) in conjunction with other accounts of the Praslin scandal to underscore the various, conflicting desires driving them. In addition to providing a novel and compelling interpretation of the film, the author highlights the conflict between "proper" historical accounts and melodrama, venturing that melodrama provides a venue for the expression of feminine voices that were silenced by traditional history, but are no less correct or accurate than history proper.

Pursuing the exploration of the discursive interconnections between narrative, desire, gender, and history in WWII and romantic ghosts films, the two middle chapters support rather than bring additional elements to the book's overall argument. Chapter 3, "Melodrama, History, and Narrative Recovery," looks at *That Hamilton Woman* (Alexander Korda, 1941) and *Random Harvest* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1942), reading them as lost (melodramatic) accounts of the Second World War, and emphasizing the oft-overlooked historical groundedness of many woman's films. In "Temporality and the Past," McKee then turns her attention to non-visual elements

that propel narratives and express gendered nostalgic desire through an analysis of ghost stories—specifically *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1947), *Enchantment* (Irving Reis, 1948), *Portrait of Jennie* (William Dieterle, 1948) and *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (Max Ophüls, 1948).

The question of gendered desire resurfaces in chapter 5 with *Now, Voyager* (Irving Rapper, 1942) and *Brief Encounter* (David Lean, 1945). Here McKee argues that although these films articulate a desire that is explicitly gendered feminine, it is "experienced as both masculine and feminine by men and women alike" (9). This is done, McKee asserts, through an offering of multiple points of entry for male and female viewers. Although enticing, this proposition remains speculative, with McKee providing little discussion of spectatorship *per se*. It is in this chapter that androgyny makes its first fleeting appearance, to be elaborated on further in chapter 6, "Telling the Story Differently: Toward an Androgynous Spectatorship and Interpretation." This last chapter breaks down the now commonplace masculine subject/feminine object binary to offer an admittedly quixotic vision of androgynous spectatorship. Films such as *Rebecca* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1940) and *Enchanted Cottage* (John Cromwell, 1945) feature flashback sequences whose structuring gaze is possessed by neither male nor female character, only an androgynous camera (174). Rather than simply pointing toward subjective and narrative ambiguity, these flashback sequences operate an *intermingling* of male and female subjectivities so that the spectator becomes unsure whose desire structures the flashback. In this sense, according to McKee, the flashback could be female, male, both,

or neither. As the chapter's title indicates, however, McKee's analysis only hints at what an androgynous form of spectatorship and interpretation would look like, and generally leaves open the question of whether androgynous spectatorship is a privilege of the woman's film of the 1940s, or what the conditions of possibility of such a mode of spectatorship and interpretation would be.

Alison McKee's greatest contribution is to show that you can talk of gender, desire and subjectivity and provide fruitful interpretations of the 1940s woman's film without the immense theoretical baggage deployed by feminist film theory pioneers. For readers enamoured with theory, however, McKee's exposé will appear undertheorized and lacking conceptual depth. McKee moves seamlessly between conceptions of desire as gendered—attributed to a gendered subject—and a blind drive that traverses gender, and it is not always clear how these two conceptions differ and/or cohabitate, or to what extent the gendering of desire present in the film is purely an effect of representation relying on nothing more than gender preconceptions. Indeed, McKee appears to be stuck with that Achilles heel of feminist theory: mobilizing a normative conception of gender (naming a desire as feminine), on the one hand, and as criticizing such normative labeling, on the other. This volume has the merit of being easily accessible to anyone interested in the woman's films of the period—and in melodrama in general—and will be of benefit to advanced undergraduate and graduate students alike.

Andrée Lafontaine, Université de Montréal

\*\*\*

Martin Loiperdinger and Uli Jung, Editors  
*Importing Asta Nielsen: The International Film Star in the Making, 1910-1914*  
John Libbey/Indiana UP, 2013; 400 pages

The standard historical account of early film stardom focuses primarily on the American cinema. Such histories privilege the evolution of a star system initiated by major figures such as Florence Lawrence, Mary Pickford, and Charlie Chaplin in the early 1910s. *Importing Asta Nielsen: The International Film Star in the Making, 1910-1914*, offers a carefully researched riposte to this standard history. A collection of essays on transnational stardom taking Danish actress Asta Nielsen's early career as its case study, this second volume of *KINtop, Studies in Early Cinema* moves beyond the standard view through thoroughgoing archival research. The book offers a broader view of Nielsen's career across national borders and demonstrates how her emerging stardom was shaped by a variety of aesthetic, economic, national, and discursive forces. The book is invaluable for scholars interested in the reception of stardom and performance across varying national, cultural, and social contexts, and will be a useful text for historians looking to add more nuance to their understanding of the star system's early development.

The book collects papers delivered at the German Film Museum in September of 2011 for the international conference, "Importing Asta Nielsen: Cinema-going and the Making of the Star System in the Early 1910s." In the introduction, the editors point out how important the development of the feature-length film was to the economic survival of European film industries. As they suggest, Nielsen's stardom was key to the development of the feature. Her appeal to different audiences –