Miranda

Revue pluridisciplinaire du monde anglophone /
Multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on the English-speaking world

2 | 2010

Voicing Conflict : Women and 20th Century Warfare

New Slants on Gender and Power Relations in British Second World War Films

Elizabeth de Cacqueray

Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/1146>

DOI: 10.4000/miranda.1146

ISSN: 2108-6559

Publisher

Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès

Electronic reference

Elizabeth de Cacqueray, "New Slants on Gender and Power Relations in British Second World War Films", *Miranda* [Online], 2 | 2010, Online since 03 July 2010, connection on 16 February 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/1146> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.1146>

This text was automatically generated on 16 February 2021.

Miranda is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

New Slants on Gender and Power Relations in British Second World War Films

Elizabeth de Cacqueray

- ¹ A state of warfare is generally an all-out test of relative power between nations and such a test of power was engaged between Germany and Britain (and the Allied forces and Axis powers) in the years 1939 to 1945. Within the context of armed conflict and power struggle between nations, different forms of conflict and power within each nation may be developed, even exacerbated, whilst others may be modified or possibly disappear: within this scheme of potential changes, positions of power for both men and women may shift. This paper examines the representation in cinema of the evolution of power relations between men and women in Great Britain during this period in order to see whether relations in power were represented as undergoing change and, if it was the case, to determine in what ways they were shown as altering. In the area of cinematic representation did women lose or gain power or did their position remain stationary? The study is based on the viewing of a large number of films of different filmic genres but here refers more specifically to three films which offer a variety of examples of new slants in gender relations. Other examples are briefly referred to. The article analyzes three feature films produced by different production companies, over a three-year period: *Went the Day Well?* (Ealing Studios, dir. Alberto Cavalcanti, 1942), *Millions Like Us* (Gainsborough Studios, dirs. Frank Launder and Sidney Gilliat, 1943) and *A Canterbury Tale* (Rank/Archers, dirs. Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1944).¹ These films were selected because they were well-known at the time of production and were produced by three of the major production companies of the period; they do not, therefore, represent points of view directed towards a minority audience. At the same time they are somewhat different in nature. *Millions Like Us* follows a fairly classical melodramatic narrative tradition, whilst *Went the Day Well?* is unusual for the period in its choice of representing on the screen a disturbing infiltration of the enemy on British soil and *A Canterbury Tale* foregrounds a negative attitude towards women's war efforts which was not often the case in films of the time.

Their representations of male and female power relations are examined in domains which have often been the focus of study by feminist academics outside the domain of cinema: that of place and space and that of language. In addition, attention is paid to the position of the female protagonists in relation to the kinds of action they are permitted to undertake within the film narratives. The study leads to the pinpointing of the forms of behaviour which are put forward as being of the most value to society in this period and shows how they are situated in relation to gender stereotypes and power relations.

1. Women, men and power: spatial relations

- 2 Traditional stereotyping of gender roles in Western, industrialized societies in the nineteen thirties confined women, in the main, to the private sphere and attributed to men dominance in the public sphere. Thus, the place and space² in which women had some degree of freedom of action and power was that of the home whilst, conversely, this was the space in which men figured to a lesser degree and in which they played less significant roles. Films produced in Britain during the war period are interesting in their representations of the home and of women's and men's occupation of the space of the home. On the whole, the home is accorded much less time and importance in the narratives than in films of earlier or later periods (in British films) and women, during the war period, are not necessarily closely associated to the homes which are portrayed. This can be observed in the three films chosen for study here. In *Went the Day Well?*³ much of the action takes place in the village church at Bramley End. When a home is shown it figures mainly in order to indicate that it has been occupied by the invading German army, so it is not so much associated with its possible female occupants, and their feminine influence, as with the notion of its violation by the enemy. Furthermore, this violation is portrayed in the light of its danger to the village community and, beyond it, to the nation as a whole, rather than in relation to the safety of individual women, although this does also figure. The postmistress's home, which is included briefly in the narrative, is directly connected to her work place and it is her attachment to her job which is placed in the foreground of the narrative. The final and main assault of the German army is directed against the home of the local lady of the manor: the fact that it is her home is only important to the extent that she is shown as housing and protecting a group of child evacuees. She is shown as participating in the collective defence of the children undertaken by men and women working together and not in the process of leading her life as lady of the manor.
- 3 Similarly, the representation of the home in *Millions Like Us* deviates from pre-war norms. The film focuses on a family in which we are made aware that the father has been used to occupying a position of patriarchal authority. His wife having died, his son already at war, he is well looked after by a daughter-in-law and two daughters. The former asks his permission to go back to her pre-war and pre-marriage workplace, which she does. One daughter, Phyllis, defying her father's possible refusal, joins the ATS⁴ and tells him afterwards that she has joined up. The second daughter, Celia, considered to be "a mobile woman",⁵ is called on to join up or to take on a war job: she is evidently the more docile, dutiful daughter yet, as an obedient citizen, she gently remonstrates with her father's protests to explain that she has to obey the Recruitment Act. So, the traditional stereotype is inverted: the women come to occupy the public

sphere and only the father is left, represented alone in the home. The film breaks with conventional gender representations by moving the female protagonists out of the home, leaving the father to fend for himself in this indoor environment to which he is, one might say, confined by the camera. However, the film does not stretch to portraying him as whole-heartedly embracing his new role: he is shown returning from his round as air-raid warden, in a rather grumpy mood. The house is in a state of considerable untidiness, his socks need darning and he plonks his fish and chip dinner on the table before reading his mail. He is definitely “making do” but no more than that. With their disappearance from the house, he has certainly lost power over the female members of the family and the home has lost its usual signified as a comfortable, welcoming place for the male to return to. Women, by leaving the home have gained a considerable degree of power. From time to time the flighty daughter, Phyllis, brings her boyfriends into the house, without so much as mentioning it, whereas to begin with the father would frown and grumble in disapproval of them, even when they were restricted to the pavement outside. Celia, although formerly so meek, simply writes home to inform her father of her forthcoming marriage to Fred: there is no question of deference to patriarchal authority or asking his permission.

- 4 In the way the concept of home is introduced *A Canterbury Tale* offers another variant since three of the main characters, a woman and two men, are far from their homes and in this state of displacement are subject to an equality of treatment which unites them beyond their gender. The only home represented is that of the upper-class Mr Colpeper, who is given a negative role to play, almost a villain. Allison is several times “homeless”, as she has left her home to come and work as a land girl for Mr Colpeper, but he turns her down, because she is a woman, leaving her something of an outcast. Meanwhile, her pilot fiancé is thought to have been shot down and killed, so a promise of a future home is also denied her. She does, however, have an *ersatz* home, a caravan in which she spent a holiday with her fiancé. Bob, the American soldier, is far from home and homeland. Peter, the British soldier, is far from home and is destined to go further when he leaves for the D-Day attack in France, preparations for which figure at the end of the film. Allison is an unusual and interestingly independent protagonist. Soon after arriving in the fictive Collingbourne, near Canterbury, at night, she is attacked by an unidentified individual, subsequently known as the “glue-man”, who plasters glue in her hair. The next day, having been turned down by Colpeper, she finds another place of work and decides to research into the identity of the “glue-man”, to satisfy the affront to her own person but also in the interest of other women in the village who have been attacked. She is the only character, male or female, who has the determination to do this but she is assisted by the young American soldier. Of the three characters far from home she is the one the narrative invests with the greatest power over its unfolding.
- 5 Thus, in the three films women are portrayed almost exclusively outside the home, whilst in two films it is men whom we see inside the home, although even male presence in the home is limited, in each case, to that of one man: in the case of *Millions Like Us* a rather grumpy father and in the case of *A Canterbury Tale* an apparently rather villainous character. So the home tends to become a fairly empty, not very attractive or positively connoted shell. Possibly the concept of home as the base from which the individual circulates and as the space to be defended has been replaced by the wider context of homeland.

2. Women, power and language

- 6 In the three films the uses of language attributed to women offer them opportunities of demonstrating a certain degree of power over their destinies and the destinies of those around them. *Millions Like Us* is characteristic for its large number of female protagonists—three women in the family, then all the women in the aircraft factory where Celia is sent to work—and it offers several interesting examples of representations of women's relations to power, language and men. The conversation between two women of different social classes, given a bedroom to share, indicates that although both are women there are plenty of ways in which they are very different, due to class and social origin. Yet, in their verbal exchange neither gets the upper hand and relations remain cordial in spite of class difference.⁶
- 7 Of these two women, the supposedly upper-class woman, Miss Jennifer Knowles, is a particularly interesting case study in class and gender: when she arrives in the factory she cuts herself off from everybody on the grounds that she feels that this work is beneath her. She is portrayed as dominated by her class values, snubbing the foreman, Charles Forbes, and scorning to do a good job in the factory. The mutual weapons of the foreman and the woman are those of coldness and of language and they engage in sharp exchanges of points of view: male and female possess equal power through language. The woman is in fact finally won over to doing a good job by her attraction for the foreman, an attraction which supposes that she forego her former class prejudices. An interesting scene in the film consists in a discussion between Charles Forbes and Jennifer where the former expresses his doubts as to whether the apparent effacing of class barriers in the course of the war can be relied upon to continue after the war, thereby enabling them to envisage a permanent relationship. The foreman is mistrustful of the future and concludes that he will not propose marriage until he sees how class relations evolve once the war is over: at this point his power lies in not asking Jennifer to marry him, thus in the withholding of language and the control of emotions. The Charles-Jennifer couple provides an interesting foil to the Celia-Fred pair who represent a very classical romance film couple, leaping starry-eyed into marriage. Jennifer and Charles point to the possibly illusory, ephemeral nature of social and gender changes during the war. The verbal exchange between them, mentioned above, is amusing. They both adopt a dry, sarcastic position, mocking, in play, each other's short-comings and denying their affection or attraction the one for the other.⁷ Neither really dominates although it is the male who is finally in control, taking the negative decision of refusing to propose marriage to Jennifer.
- 8 *A Canterbury Tale* also offers interesting associations of women, language and power due to Allison who is characterized by her forthright, dynamic approach to speech acts. Once the young protagonists are installed at the inn for the night she leaves her room in order to find Bob and to ask him to help her to look for the "glue-man". The following day she asks questions all around the village to forward her research. Proof of her capacity to fend for herself is further offered thanks to a little linguistic jousting match between Allison and the blacksmith, when Allison is sent by her new female inn-keeper boss to have a cartwheel repaired. She finds herself placed in the centre of a group of rather grotesque elderly men who partake with amusement in the exchange between her and the blacksmith.⁸ The camera first shows her, observed at a distance by

the blacksmith and his assistant, thus passive under their gaze, a voyeuristic one, in that she is unaware of them within the smithy: a shot which, in spite of the relatively unglamorous protagonists, could be typical of classical Hollywood voyeuristic cinema, as defined by Laura Mulvey. She is then subjected to the blacksmith's ironic questioning as he mocks her lack of linguistic knowledge regarding the wheelwright's profession.⁹ However, at this stage the camera has changed sides and it is now placed near Allison, so that she is returning the gaze. She soon also begins to return the comments. Once the blacksmith has had his say she asks him if he has ever worked anywhere else and whether he thinks he would manage well behind a shop counter. The idea of the blacksmith behind a shop counter makes everybody laugh and he takes the criticism with a good grace so that, in the end, it is Allison who wins the match. She also proves she can physically manage a man's job as she puts the horse back between the shafts of the cart. Powell and Pressburger take this little lesson in female-male equality a stage further by next leading Bob to be subjected to the blacksmith's application of stereotypical judgements of Americans: he deems that Bob, as an American, must only be interested in cinema and as such cannot be aware of the value of Canterbury Cathedral. As Allison has just done in the realm of horse managing, Bob, in turn, wins over the blacksmith by showing that he knows all about different sorts of wood. Having proved he is not a total ignoramus in this practical field he gains the blacksmith's respect. These two little scenes are interesting in that they show both female and male characters winning respect with the same tools, those of language and good humouredness: gender difference and differences of national identity are treated on a similar level—each could be a handicap but each in turn is overcome.

- 9 Early feminist research into women and their use of language (Lakoff 1975, Spender 1980) stressed the norms of male dominance and female deference in conversations. These linguists considered that the patriarchal social system forced women to speak in a subservient way whereas it enabled men to dominate speech. In the cases presented above we observe that these norms have not been applied to the characters' linguistic behaviour. The women are seldom linguistically subservient whilst the men, when they do attempt to dominate, are not very successful.
- 10 *Went the Day Well?* offers some different examples of women's supposed linguistic practices, their advantages or drawbacks. If, in general, the male propensity for dominating speech may be coded positively and therefore presented as desirable, the film perhaps, in part, underlines the necessity of holding back speech and listening, rather than occupying systematically an active linguistic position. Thus, if the lady of the manor had been more attentive, listened more carefully, she might have realized sooner that the soldiers were German, not English. Greater sensitivity to her interlocutors, in other words a generally coded more feminine attitude would have been desirable. When Nora is able to save the day, stopping Oliver Wilsford, the squire, from opening the manor house up to the German enemy, it is thanks to the fact that she listens to a conversation, learns that he is downstairs, where he has no reason to be and acts on her knowledge. She then hunts him out and eliminates him. If listening is stereotyped generally as a female attribute this film opposes "passive" listening, which is negative, to what might be termed "active" listening—Nora and Miss Grant—which is positive.
- 11 On the other hand, the generally stereotyped representation of women as gossips, as talking too much, is presented in the film, negatively coded, as the cause of the failure

of an attempt to warn the outside world of the Germans' presence in the village and of the postmistress's death: the postmistress tries to get through to an interlocutor by phone, to inform them that the village has been taken hostage but the female telephone operators are too busy chatting to notice the call and this leaves the Germans the time to discover the postmistress's ploy and to kill her.

- 12 The notion of the importance of listening is also represented in *Miss Grant Goes to the Door*.¹⁰ In this film Miss Grant hears a noise, goes to the door and finds first an invading German soldier who dies, from whom she gets a gun, then a second German soldier, disguised as a British one but whom she realizes is a fraud due to his mispronunciation of a place name: listening carefully proves to be life-saving. She holds him at gunpoint whilst her sister goes to get the police. Listening is her defence, acting becomes a weakness when she gives in to his request for a cigarette and is distracted from her close guard over his actions. He nearly gets the better of her. Fortunately the police arrive in time to save the day and Miss Grant can get back to the more familiar female activity of tea-making.
- 13 The view of the danger of women's misuse of language is strongly portrayed in *The Next of Kin*, a film in which secrets are always given away due to male attraction or infatuation for women: a secret is not safe when a woman is around, either because women are evil, vulnerable or unthinking or because men lose their heads at the sight of them.
- 14 On the whole these films thus give women more scope for speech actions than was necessarily thought usual, less deference in linguistic behaviour on the part of women is apparent but the stereotype of women being incapable of keeping a secret remains in evidence.

3. Women, power and narrative action

- 15 A certain number of films made in Britain during the war are devoted to classically military subjects and foreground male battle scenes. However, these are possibly in a minority in relation to the number of films which focus more on Home Front issues and which give considerable narrative space to women. It is certainly the case in the three films mainly under study here that the female characters are central characters and play very active roles in forwarding and carrying the narrative. In *Went the Day Well?* it is the parson's daughter, Nora, who is first suspicious of the newly arrived soldiers. The postmistress tries to warn the outside world. Both men and women participate in the defence of the manor house and the children. Men tend to give more directions as to how to run the defence and they teach the women how to use firearms, but once engaged in action the women are efficient agents. That they are not supposed to be used to manipulating firearms is underlined by one woman's slight shock at having killed a German; however, she is shown as quickly recovering and getting back into action. In reality, women who joined up or participated in the Home Front were forbidden from using firearms, except in the case of invasion, so the women in the film narrative are abiding by the rules. The same can be said of the woman in *Miss Grant Goes to the Door*: she uses the German soldier's gun because he has invaded the nation.
- 16 In *Millions Like Us* the main subject of the narrative, the reason for its existence, is that of the need for women to participate in the war effort: their work force was required in industry to replace men who were engaged in military combat and was equally called

for in the armed forces, to do jobs behind the lines and to free men for combat. The film was really made to encourage women to participate and to persuade parents that their daughters were needed, that they should therefore let them leave home. As we said the film begins with the various women deciding to join up or to go out to work. The only character not taking active decisions is the father figure. Among the other characters, apart from Jennifer, the supposed society lady, the young women are portrayed as willing and happy to help. In a sense Celia is powerless in the face of the State, being called up and designated to a place of work in a factory, whereas she dreamt of joining the WAAFs,¹¹ but she is no less powerless than the men called up or ordered into combat. It is quite possible that certain situations of warfare could lead to an even greater subjection to submission for women, however, this was not the case in Britain during the Second World War: persuasion and propaganda were used in order to encourage women to assist, alongside the Recruitment Act. They were actively encouraged to leave the home and join in the war effort. Cinema was one of the means of persuasion: the films made during this period at once show what people were doing but at the same time encourage people towards behaviour which is useful to the nation. Its powers of persuasion were directed towards men but even more towards women, to the extent that it was encouraging them out of the private sphere they were used to being confined to and out into the public sphere. For men the fact that they should join up and fight was less in contradiction with the traditional male-stereotyped roles.

- 17 Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger were not averse to participating in the war effort via contributions to what can be termed as propaganda films: Michael Powell was advised by Alexander Korda's associate, John Sutor, to ask Kenneth Clark for "direct backing from a newly established propaganda fund". By these means Powell and Pressburger made *49th Parallel* (Christie 36). There is little doubt that in their eyes *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*, made in 1943, was not aimed at undermining Britain's image abroad and, in its unconventional way, was merely suggesting that the days of gentlemanly warfare, if that ever existed, were over and needed to be replaced by harsher methods. However, the film met with Winston Churchill's profound disapproval since he considered that it made the British army appear weak and ridiculous and that it could discourage the Americans from supporting Britain in the war. On these grounds he wanted the film to be banned.¹² Where Powell and Pressburger felt that they were simply showing that the rules of warfare had changed and that new methods were essential Churchill saw negative propaganda. Again unusual in its approach,¹³ *A Canterbury Tale* was, however, far less tendentious, even if it tended to leave the public a little perplexed. This is partly due to the nature of its narrative, centred apparently on revealing the identity of the "glue-man", something which might be considered as of rather minor concern in the context of total warfare in which Britain was engaged. It is perhaps also due to the fact that it is a narrative which really revolves around the female character and which is relatively discursive. There is little high drama: at the opening, the pursuit of the "glue-man" and the entry into Colpeper's office create a rather lugubrious atmosphere but this disappears from the film with the passage to the next day. Quite a long episode shows a battle between two groups of children but again nothing dramatic takes place: it seems to constitute a sort of *mise en abîme* of warfare. Once Allison has found out that the "glue-man" is Colpeper she leaves him to his own conscience: if he intended to prevent young women from distracting the soldiers Allison herself is proof that his idea of male-female relationships in war time is not a pertinent one in the context of World War Two in

Britain. It is very much a film about the nature of relationships between men and women and the form of the film participates strongly in the expression of its apparent argument. All the characters and action are presented against the background of the ancient pilgrims' way to Canterbury so they are all, women and men, portrayed as part of an historical process of national continuity stretching from the 14th century of Chaucer's tales to the present. The most active protagonist is the female character, any "story" in the film arises from her decisions but she is shown as just one tiny link in this chain of humanity: all the protagonists in their different ways are set on defending and perpetuating this chain. The main aim of the narrative is perhaps just to show that each must advance, each working with the same direction in view, each working to help her/his fellow traveller along the way, a path which should lead to a positive conclusion for all.

- 18 Each of these films relies on the women protagonists to forward the narrative. Women can undertake a much wider variety of actions than in most films made before the war. They are all active outside the home. They are seldom shown engaged in activities within the home.¹⁴ Their activities include being a Land Girl, a member of the ATS, a factory worker, postmistress, milk deliverer, member of the Home Defence; other films show women as nurses, members of anti-aircraft teams, canteen ladies, telephonists, assistants in the fire brigade, chauffeurs, mechanics... Although women were not supposed to handle firearms *Went the Day Well?* and *Miss Grant Goes to the Door* show them doing so, in the context of an invasion by the enemy.
- 19 Among the elements pointing to the fact that *A Canterbury Tale* is perhaps a more complex film, which undermines traditional gender roles possibly a little more acutely, it is worth underlining that it is one of the rare war films to portray a negative male reaction to female participation in the war effort, outside conventional gender roles. Indeed, Colpeper rejects Allison as a Land Girl, saying that he asked for a farm labourer, implying that the latter is, by definition, male. Most of the films show men as cooperating in the integration of women into the work force, just as *Millions Like Us* shows the father accepting the new gender situation he has to put up with: this is no doubt somewhat idealized in comparison to the situation in reality where some men saw women's entry into the workplace as a threat to their male predominance!

Conclusion

- 20 In these filmic representations women certainly appear to have gained some power or some powers. Michelle Coquillat, in her essay "Femmes, Pouvoir, Influence" distinguishes between "*le pouvoir*" and "*un pouvoir*", saying that "*le pouvoir*" can only be the prerogative of a single individual, it is by definition unshared and masculine. She also states that power for women is presented as something which is forbidden. Exercising power amounts to breaking a taboo (Coquillat 16). She bases this on the grounds that "*le pouvoir*"—maybe supreme power would best translate this in English—is by essence linked to the symbolic, from which women are by definition excluded since they are linked to the biological and the sexual. It is pertinent to note that the women in *A Canterbury Tale* and *Went the Day Well?* tend not to be put forward as vastly pretty: they are very much ordinary, everyday women: this "ordinariness" perhaps plays down their femininity, according to stereotypes, distances them from their sexual attributions and qualifies them better for an approach to the symbolic and the wielding

of power. As far as taboo breaking is concerned it is interesting to note that in each case the narrative is brought back under male control at the end of the film: this would suggest that, indeed, an overstepping of acceptable gender boundaries could be a possibility and that the female protagonists, however much apparent freedom they have been given, are under male control. *Went the Day Well?* is a narrative “framed” by a male character: he introduces the narrative by commenting on a tomb in the graveyard of a village church, a tomb of German soldiers. The narrative is then a flashback telling the story of the German attempt at invasion and the film ends with the initial male character pointing to the failure of the Germans’ attack. If the women use firearms in this dire situation it is a man who concludes the narrative, taking back final control over events. In *A Canterbury Tale*, in the concluding scene, Allison goes into the cathedral with her future father-in-law’s arm round her shoulder. She was led to act on her own initiative but now she is taken back into the fold, under the authority of a father figure. However, she is no more, nor less, powerful than her two male, soldier companions since Bob and Peter will both join their regiments and also be lost in their respective groups. In *Millions Like Us* the foreman and the society lady are equally powerless, it would seem, in the face of a global social scheme which will either perpetuate the effacing of class difference or re-establish it after the war. Perhaps in the case of these two films what is most strongly underlined is the equality of most men and women facing a context of armed conflict which they have not chosen, who are therefore globally powerless but where they are left the choice of combating actively or of attempting to evade. Most choose to combat actively: in these three films there is only one traitor (the “squire” in *Went the Day Well?*), although traitors are to be found on occasion in other films.¹⁵ To return to Michelle Coquillat’s point “*le pouvoir*” in this context is the prerogative of political leaders, and is precisely masculine, both ordinary men and women are excluded from it. There remain for each of the two latter categories “*des pouvoirs*”, subsidiary powers, they can exercise and to this extent women seem to be able to exercise more powers than in pre-war filmic representations. Interestingly, a corpus of post-war representations in Britain were dubbed “kitchen-sink films”¹⁶ which, as well as being derogatory and ironic, is a clear indication of the extent to which narratives returned within the private sphere and the context of the home!

- 21 Another set of well-known films which began to appear towards the end of the war, melodramas aimed at a female public—such as *The Man in Grey* (1943) and *The Wicked Lady* (1945)—are also interesting with respect to Michelle Coquillat’s remarks on the distancing of the symbolic and the sexual; these films offer to some of the female protagonists a certain degree of power but it is power linked to their sexual attraction and their sexual defiance. These female protagonists seem to bear out very pertinently Coquillat’s point that women may wield some power but are excluded from supreme power precisely because the power they are given to wield is power via the sexual and not via the symbolic. These female protagonists do break taboos, consciously, and they are punished for it by death.
- 22 A last point to bear in mind is that of the relative popularity and therefore influence and significance of these various films. It is not easy to find information on the audience figures for all wartime films as statistics for details of cinema watching were not top priority (overall statistics for admissions show how immensely popular it was as an entertainment during the war years). It is thought that *Went the Day Well?* with

Nora shooting down her prospective fiancé was not immensely popular but opinions are rather divided and hard evidence does not exist. *A Canterbury Tale* met with a certain degree of puzzlement. *Millions Like Us* with its pretty, unfortunate heroine bride was much enjoyed. The last-mentioned melodramas were hugely appreciated (as was *Gone With the Wind*, 1939) by female audiences, so it would seem that women preferred these rather over the top, improbable heroines, wielding a traditional form of sizzling female sexual power, possibly of escapist value, to the quieter more, possibly, “masculinised” heroines of the realist genre war films. You can lead a horse to water but you cannot make him/her drink!

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Chapman, James. *The British at War: Cinema, State and Propaganda, 1939-1945*. London: I.B. Tauris, 1998.
- Christie, Ian. *Arrows of Desire: the Films of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger*. London : Faber and Faber, 1994.
- Coquillat, Michelle. “Femmes, Pouvoir, Influence.” In *Femmes de pouvoir : mythes et fantasmes*. Eds. Odile Krakovitch, Geneviève Sellier, Eliane Viennot. Paris: Harmattan, 2001. 17-75.
- Greene, Graham. “The Lieutenant Died Last: an Unrecorded Victory in 1940.” In *Complete Short Stories*. Introd. Pico Iyer. London: Penguin, 2005. 464-473.
- Lakoff, R. *Language and Woman’s Place*. New York: Harper and Row, 1975.
- Lant, Antonia. *Blackout: Reinventing Women for Wartime British Cinema*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991.
- Mills, Sara. “Language.” In *A Concise Companion to Feminist Theory*. Ed. Mary Eagleton. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003.
- Mulvey, Laura. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” In *Screen*, 1975. Republished in *Movies and Methods*. vol. 2. Ed. Bill Nicholson. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985. 303-315.
- Plain, Gill. *Women’s Fiction and the Second World War: Gender, Power and Resistance*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996.
- Spender, D. *Man Made Language*. London: Routledge, 1980.
- A Canterbury Tale*. Dirs. Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger. Rank/Archers. 1944.
- Gone with the Wind*. 1939. Dir. Victor Fleming. With Clark Gable, Vivien Leigh, Leslie Howard. Selznick International Pictures. 1939.
- In Which We Serve*. Dirs. Noël Coward and David Lean. Rank. Two Cities. 1942.
- The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*. Dirs. Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger. Archers. 1943.
- Millions Like Us*. Dirs. Frank Launder and Sidney Gilliat. Gainsborough Studios. 1943.

Miss Grant Goes to the Door. Dir. Brian Desmond Hurst. For Ministry of Information. D+P Studios. 1940.

The Man in Grey. Dir. Leslie Arliss. With James Mason, Margaret Lockwood, Stewart Granger. Gainsborough Studios. 1943.

The Next of Kin. Dir. Thorold Dickinson. Ealing Studios. 1942.

They Also Serve. Dir. Ruby Grierson. Ministry of Information. 1940.

Went the Day Well? Dir. Alberto Cavalcanti. Ealing Studios. 1942.

The Wicked Lady. Dir. Leslie Arliss. With James Mason, Margaret Lockwood. Gainsborough Studios. 1945.

NOTES

1. The filmography gives a broader vision of film production during the period 1939-1945 and enables the placing of these titles within the wider production. One can consider whether traditional stereotypes were subject to greater change at the beginning or at the end of the period and or whether stereotypes were treated differently in docu-dramas and in feature films.
2. The term of “place” corresponds more to an actual topographical place whereas “space” refers more to the symbolic.
3. From the short story by Graham Greene, “The Lieutenant Died Last: an unrecorded victory in 1940.”
4. ATS, Auxiliary Territorial Service, the women’s branch of the British army, first established as a voluntary service on 9 September 1938. After the 1942 Recruitment Act it became one of the services women could be enlisted into. It consisted of 190,000 women at the time of demobilization. It existed until 1 February 1949 and was succeeded by the Women’s Royal Army Corps, created on the same date.
5. 1942 Recruitment Act, according to which women were to be enlisted into the army or would be called up for work in industry.
6. Annie watches Jennifer putting on her face cream and says: “Are you going out?” [...] “You do all that every night!” (she laughs) “You do look funny!” Jennifer, in turn, sees that Annie does not take her underwear off when she gets into bed. Jennifer: “You’re not getting in to bed like that?” Annie: “Like what?” Jennifer: “Well, without undressing.” Annie: “But I am undressed!” Jennifer: “Aren’t you going to take your underclothes off?” Annie: “Why? They’ve only go to go on again in t’morning. You are fussy!”
7. Forbes : “You can’t cook or sew, I doubt if you can even knit. You know nothing about life, not what I call life. You are still only a moderate hand at the milling machine and if you had to fend for yourself in the midst of plenty you’d starve to death. Those are only your bad points. I’m not saying you don’t have any good ones.” (Jennifer laughs) Jennifer: “You’re mighty generous, Mr Forbes. As for you, you’ve no looks, you’re old-fashioned, morbidly suspicious, dull and your pipe makes horrible bubbly noises.” Forbes: “We’ve precious little in common.” Jennifer: “Practically nothing.”
8. DVD chapter. “Solve the mystery.” Second part, at 28mn30sec.
9. Mr Horton: “Jim had to cut the tire off. Know what the tire is?” Allison: “Yes.” Mr H.: “Then he had to sole it down. Know what soling down means?” Allison: “No.” Mr H.: “Ah well, soling down means, hum ... soling down, see?” (Laughter from all present). The scene continues with comments from Mr Horton on “fellyjoints.” Allison finally replies by pointing out that, due to the war, she has changed her place of work considerably and she wonders what he would look like

behind the counter of a Department store, her original workplace. He takes the remark with a good grace and there is again laughter all round, this time at his expense and to the benefit of Alison.

10. *Miss Grant Goes to the Door*. Dir. Brian Desmond Hurst. Mass-Observation noted it as being well-received by the public. 13 August, 1940.

11. WAAF, Women's Auxiliary Air Force. Women's branch of the Royal Air Force, established in 1939. At its peak of employment of women over 180,000 women were serving. It was succeeded by the Women's Royal Air Force on 1 February 1949.

12. "When Churchill heard about the film (then in the course of production at Denham studios) from the War Office in September 1942, he immediately decided it must be suppressed. 'Pray propose to me the measures necessary to stop this foolish production before it gets any further,' he instructed Brendan Bracken. 'I am not prepared to allow propaganda detrimental to the morale of the army, and I am sure the cabinet will take all necessary action.'" James Chapman, *The British at War: Cinema, State and Propaganda, 1939-1945*. London: I.B. Tauris,

13. An example perhaps of what Christie calls: "[...] breathing life into clichés and bringing quirky humour to the grimmest of issues" (Christie 36).

14. *In Which We Serve*, (dirs. Noël Coward, David Lean, Rank. Two Cities, 1942) is perhaps the film which focuses the most on the home as it cuts from episodes on the warship to scenes within the sailors' homes where their wives, mothers and children are left alone to face the difficulties of air raids and so on. *They Also Serve* (dir. Ruby Grierson, Ministry of Information, 1940) takes place exclusively in the home. It foregrounds the importance of the role of the housewife in enabling her family members and her female neighbour to participate efficiently in the war effort. Although one might judge the film less innovatory in terms of gender roles, in its narrative matter it is, in fact, quite innovatory because it casts the role of the housewife as of equal importance to the war effort carried out by the men and women who "serve" their country in the armed forces or in the factories. It is a film which portrays the mother within the private sphere but which makes this private effort as important as other efforts in the public sphere: it is private effort for the public need.

15. *The Next of Kin*. Dir. Thorold Dickinson, 1942.

16. For example: *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*. Dir. Karel Reisz, 1960; *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*. Dir. Tony Richardson, 1962.

ABSTRACTS

When nations are engaged in an all-out military power struggle, as it was the case between the Allied and the Axis powers between 1939 and 1945, conventional relations and stereotypes controlling gender difference may undergo considerable modifications. This article examines changes in the representations of gender roles, more particularly, women's roles, but also those of men, in British films released during this period. Particular attention is paid to the uses of space in relation to gender representation, to the distribution of power between genders via access to language and speech acts and to the potential offered to female characters to forward the narratives. Traditional stereotypes are significantly modified but although women, as represented, appear to gain access to increased powers, supreme power seems to remain a masculine prerogative. Meanwhile, rather than the female protagonists of the realist-style war films, female audiences of the day possibly appreciated more the heroines of the increasingly

frequent melodramas appearing on the screen, heroines whose power lay more classically in their sexual attractiveness and dangerousness and not in war heroics or stoicism.

Lorsque les nations s'engagent dans une lutte militaire pour le pouvoir, tel que fut le cas entre les Alliés et les pays de l'Axe entre 1939 et 1945, les relations conventionnelles et les stéréotypes régissant les différences entre les genres peuvent subir des modifications considérables. Cet article examine les modifications dans les représentations du genre, plus particulièrement les rôles féminins mais aussi les rôles masculins, dans les films britanniques réalisés pendant cette période. Une attention particulière est accordée à l'utilisation de l'espace par rapport à la représentation du genre, à la distribution du pouvoir entre les genres en fonction de leur accès au langage, ainsi qu'à la possibilité offerte aux personnages féminins de faire avancer la narration. Les stéréotypes normatifs subissent des modifications significatives mais, bien que les personnages féminins semblent accéder à des pouvoirs plus étendus, le pouvoir, paraît rester une prérogative masculine. Par ailleurs, plutôt que les protagonistes féminins des films de style réaliste associés à la guerre, il est possible que le public féminin du jour appréciait plus les héroïnes des mélodrames qui apparaissaient de plus en plus à l'écran, des héroïnes plus flamboyantes, dont le pouvoir se trouvait plus classiquement dans leur attrait sexuel et leur parfum de danger, et non dans le stoïcisme ou l'héroïsme discret.

INDEX

Mots-clés: femme, représentation, cinéma, espace de la représentation, classe sociale, langage et pouvoir, films de guerre, mélodrames, pouvoir, défense intérieure, cinéma britannique, propagande, stéréotypes, genre, ATS, Auxiliary Territorial Service, WAAF, Women's Auxiliary Airforce

Keywords: women, representation, cinema, space and representation, social class, language and power, war films, melodramas, women and work, power, Home Front, British cinema, propaganda, gender stereotypes, narrative, ATS, Auxiliary Territorial Service, WAAF, Women's Auxiliary Airforce

AUTHORS

ELIZABETH DE CACQUERAY

Maître de conférences

Université de Toulouse 2 - Le Mirail

elisabeth.de-cacqueray@univ-tlse2.fr