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Re-representing “The Great American Institution that Never Gets Mentioned on the Fourth of July”

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Cristelle Maury

- 1 Todd Haynes’s miniseries *Mildred Pierce* is the second adaptation of James Cain’s novel of the same title. It was first adapted as a film noir by Michael Curtiz in 1945. It tells the story of a middle-class housewife who divorces her unemployed husband and struggles to support herself and her two daughters in the context of the Great Depression. She starts working as a waitress and then opens her own restaurants. In the process, her younger daughter dies of pneumonia, and her elder daughter Veda turns into an ungrateful “monster.” This ironic reworking of a success story, with the rise and fall of “a grass widow with two small children to support” (Cain 229), plays with the values of the American Dream as she becomes rich and then loses it all.
- 2 Cain’s characters are universal in dimension and Mildred is emblematic of middle-class American women. As David Madden and Kristopher Mecholsky have shown, Cain “wrote operatic stories of the American experience” in which “protagonists are stripped bare to what he deems the most basic American traits, and their stories chronicle the various but almost always disastrous consequences of the Nietzschean assertion of will at the heart of the American pursuit of success.” (Madden and Mecholsky 77).
- 3 The transposition of Cain’s 1930s setting to new historical contexts—the post-World War Two period in the film noir, and the 2008 subprime crisis in the miniseries—allows for different perspectives on the place, the status and the role of women in American society. The first aim of this article will be to show that the story of *Mildred Pierce*, an individual woman, can be read as representative of women’s collective history at

different periods in history. Adapting this Depression-rooted novel in 2011 indicates that the plot is still topical over six decades later. I will explore how Haynes reinterprets the shared history of women in the light of comparisons with the source novel and also with the first adaptation by Michael Curtiz, bearing in mind the idea that "adaptation as a 'reading' of the source novel [...] is inevitably partial, personal, and conjectural" (Stam 62). The theoretical basis informing this article comes from recent scholarship on adaptation studies, following the principle of "neutering" established by Richard Strong, according to which a plot is recycled so as to say something about the contemporary period (52, 77), and the idea voiced by Robert Stam that the transformation of the source novel's hypotext can result in a "reculturalization" (68). In the wake of such claims, the aim will be to explain why the story of "the grass widow" is still topical in the present decade by looking at the ways in which the Cain plot has been taken over so as to say something about the 2010's.

- 4 The adaptation of this story of female ambition as a classical film noir has inspired a whole array of feminist film scholars who have interpreted the film as a reaction to women's temporary war years' emancipation. The historical context of the film's release—September 1945, within weeks of Victory over Japan Day—reinforced this inclination for seeing the film as an attempt to stop the Rosie-the-Riveter impulse and encourage women back home once the war was over. As Richard Maltby puts it, "from Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton to Foster Hirsch [a number of critics] have identified a noir sensibility, traced it across a body of films, and then sought to attach it to a general American cultural condition of 'postwar malaise'" (41). Indeed, a great deal of feminist scholarship from the 1970s onwards converges to interpret the film as reflecting the postwar anxieties regarding women's alleged emancipation, and the drive either to reinstate or conversely to resist patriarchal order. Of course, these interpretations, which insist on the political dimension of the film, are themselves historically, politically and ideologically situated and cannot be taken at face value. This is what Linda Williams argued about feminist readings of the film which are "typical of a whole generation of feminist daughters who seek to discover the nascent feminism of their mother's generation in the popular films of the 1940s" (15). There is no question that Haynes is aware of these theoretical debates. Having gone through film school, it is more than likely that he is familiar with the theses developed in feminist film studies and especially those about women in film noir which focus on the 1945 version of *Mildred Pierce*¹. So what I am concerned with here is to look at the status of these theories in the miniseries. Moreover, since the political and social dimensions of both Todd Haynes's films and of HBO are well-known, it is also likely that the miniseries takes part in feminist debates. In doing so, the series reflects the complexity and diversity of the past and current feminist debates on women's right to work, and more generally on their social and economic emancipation as well as on the politics of the family. Given Haynes's publicly expressed political commitments², it is possible to argue that he has turned Cain's novel into an explicitly feminist film. In that regard, it is only logical that he would have refused to acknowledge the influence of Curtiz's film on the miniseries³. To show this, I will compare the miniseries' treatment of Mildred's job search, with that of the novel and of the classical Hollywood film noir. This particular theme was chosen because equality in the workplace has been one of the key issues of feminist campaigns at large.

From a rags-to-riches story to a committed discourse about women and work

- 5 The episodes concerning Mildred's efforts to get a job and achieve upward mobility are treated very differently in the novel, in the film noir and in the miniseries. Three main adaptation strategies (condensation, expansion and omission) will help trace the evolution of the discourse about women and work.
- 6 In the novel, many passages describe Mildred's upward trajectory step by step. There are details about finding a job (chapter 3, 254-269), and learning a trade (first part of chapter 4, 270-275). Her financial situation is regularly assessed: "Two months before, she barely had pennies to buy bread. Now she was making eight dollars a week from her Tip-Top pay, about fifteen dollars on tips, more than ten dollars clear profit on pies. She was a going concern. She bought a little sports suit; got a permanent" (297-298). Details about her trying to aim higher are extensively given throughout chapter 6 when she decides to open her own restaurant: her financial plan includes the number of pies, the sums of money, the number of potential customers (293), how she gets a place, borrows money on interest and decorates it (chapter 9), so that the reader participates in her upward mobility as in a rags-to-riches story:

The equipment was in, particularly a gigantic range that made her heart thump when she looked at it; the painters were done, almost; three new pie contracts were safely past the sample stage. The load of debt she would have to carry, the interest, taxes and installments involved, frightened her, and at the same time excited her. If she could struggle through the first year or two, she told herself, then she would 'have something'. (319-320)

So the novel praises the virtues of hard work and is thus in keeping with the tradition of the American work ethic. As in a Horatio Alger success story, the reader follows the tribulations of the heroine.

- 7 In Curtiz's film, the details of Mildred's upward mobility have been omitted. The episodes in which she looks for a job, works as a waitress in a restaurant, and struggles to be successful in the trade are summarized in montage sequences that are accompanied by Mildred's voice-over narration, explaining her difficulties and stressing her financial instability:

I had to get a job, any kind. I had no experience in the business world, but I had to get a job. I walked my legs off. Getting a job wasn't as easy as I thought. Days seemed like weeks, and everywhere I went I heard the same thing: Sorry, we need people with experience. [32'42"-33'08"]

In six weeks, I felt like I'd worked in a restaurant all my life. In three months, I was one of the best waitresses there. I took tips and was glad to get them. And at home I baked pies for the restaurant. [35'08"-35'18"]

While condensing the stages of her upward mobility, the film expands on the details of her domestic life. A whole scene is devoted to Mildred cooking, cleaning, tidying up and looking after her daughters at home. This expansion of the novel has been read as aiming to highlight Mildred's place as a housewife and mother and to play down her role as a career woman. This is the case with Jacqueline Nacache who claims that the reason why the professional sphere has been greatly reduced in the film is to maintain the dominant representation of women in the private sphere (89-90). This argument ties in with the conclusion that several feminist film scholars have reached when contending that the ideological function of the film was to justify the move of women

from the workplace back into the home in the postwar context. Therefore, although the war is absent from the plot, the film has been repeatedly read as the demonstration that women should give up their wartime jobs and go back home (Nelson 457; Gledhill 19; Cook, 1978 68; Walsh 131; Biesen 143). However, these critics do not take into account the more dazzling aspect of Mildred's characterization. Indeed, the casting of Joan Crawford gives glamor to the character and highlights the positive effects of upward mobility. Curtiz's theatrical, sometimes operatic direction (with a profusion of tracking shots and sophisticated angles) enhances her status as a star as in the opening of the film where a crane shot introduces her as a tragic heroine. As she is walking along a deserted promenade by the sea front in a rainy night, the camera tracks in to a bejeweled and elegantly dressed Crawford, in a fur hat and padded-shouldered mink coat. The music and a magnifying low-angle shot add to the dramatic tension. Thus the visual style and the soundtrack present Mildred in a glamorous light. Curtiz's film cannot be solely read as advocating the return to traditional gender roles as a number of critics claimed.

- 8 Likewise, the film's flashback structure has been interpreted as a means to present Mildred's successful career in the light of the tragic ending: the murder of her second husband and the destruction of all hopes for emancipation (Mildred gets out of the police station, having been found innocent, she is back with her husband, bankrupt and childless). The representation of success would therefore be highly compromised by the retrospective knowledge that her story came to a bad end and her story would aim at teaching a moral lesson about the downsides of emancipation and financial autonomy for a woman, or, as Hayward puts it, about "the inadvisability of a wife and mother having too much socio-economic and class ambition for her family, especially an ungrateful daughter" (Hayward 135). In Hayward's words, the flashbacks are "redolent with ideological connotations" (135). However, as Julie Grossman has shown, the discourse of the characters should not be confused with the film's message. Curtiz's film does not necessarily endorse its screenplay. According to Grossman, the audience and critics appropriate the characters' discourses that articulate the dangers of ambition and emancipation to "argue that the film blames Mildred's ambition and concludes by reinstating patriarchy," instead of just considering that it is the characters' "point of view and not the film's" (Grossman 55).
- 9 In the series, Haynes seems to respond to these critical interpretations in several ways. First, instead of the vague postwar context of Curtiz's film noir, the events are explicitly grounded in the Depression era thanks to a minute historical reconstruction (in Pam Cook's words "the screen is littered with archival detail—cars, costumes, settings—on which the camera lovingly lingers" [2013 379]). Then, instead of being condensed, the stages of her job search are expanded. Finally, her domestic life is presented in an extremely positive light. So in conspicuously taking the opposite direction of Curtiz's main adaptation choices as they have been highlighted by a number of feminist film scholars, Haynes enters into dialogue with them, and alongside with the feminist scholarship on the film. This could well be an example of what James Morrison calls « theory-in-practice » in his study of Todd Haynes's films (133). Indeed, in a sense, Haynes has a scientific approach to Curtiz's film in that he questions the restrictive readings to which it has given rise. But instead of giving a research paper at a conference or writing a scientific article in a scholarly journal in which he would explain the limits of reading Curtiz's *Mildred Pierce* as an attack on bad mothers and on

the disastrous consequences of Mildred's ambition, or as a reinstatement of patriarchy, he shows it in a miniseries which proves the critics wrong. In other words, the miniseries puts into practice the theory that, for example, film scholar Julie Grossman has advanced in *Rethinking the Femme Fatale in Film Noir: Ready for Her Close-Up*, a monograph that questions the received notion that the femme fatale is an intrinsically malevolent film noir type. For Grossman, Curtiz's film is an example of how "promotion, advertising, and film criticism collude in some cases to recast a film's sympathetic representation of female struggle and agency as malevolent." According to her, the film "sympathetically examines the difficulties of balancing postwar realities of female drive and ambition with traditional gender roles" (57). And Haynes portrays Mildred exactly in these terms, as I am now going to show.

- 10 In the miniseries, sixteen minutes of the first 57 minute-long episode are dedicated to Mildred's job search, from the moment she starts reading job advertisements in the papers to the moment when she finally accepts a waitressing position. Her efforts to find employment and her professional success are narrated in great detail. Her professional activities are highlighted in long, quasi-lyrical panning shots. This results in bringing to the fore the disparities between men and women in the world of work, in which women are disadvantaged. Several scenes are devoted to bringing out women's work in an attempt to recognize their skills, which otherwise remain invisible. For example, Mildred's unexceptional start as a waitress lasts six minutes in the first episode. Her initial clumsiness with carrying dishes is emphasized, proving that it is a very tiring job, requiring specific skills, as the opening of the second episode of the series shows: Mildred is seen gracefully practicing plate balancing to the tune of the popular song "I'm Always Chasing Rainbows." Finally, a contrapuntal scene in the second episode shows that she has become a very efficient waitress. These scenes are extremely faithful to Cain's novel. However, while in the novel the details aim at showing Mildred's business sense and determination to reach the top, in Haynes's series, they show that being a waitress requires skills, and even artistic talent. She almost dances with her tin plates, lined with crocheted mats and weighted with stones. This brings back into favor an allegedly unskilled job. In this way, the novel's rags-to-riches subtext is recycled so as to enhance the value of women's work.
- 11 Likewise, the series opens on this celebration of women's work with a tracking shot of the cooking utensils and an insert on Mildred's hands rolling out a piecrust. Mildred's baking is the focus of the scene unlike the novel which focuses on Bert's gardening activities⁴. This opening seems to be responding to critics of Curtiz's film for whom Mildred's cooking and cleaning tasks are mere stage movements that confine her to the domestic sphere. A series of inserts and tracking shots show her hands working a piecrust, whipping egg whites until foamy, adding sugar gradually, and spreading meringue over the pies. The camera focuses on Mildred's dexterous, precise gestures as she adds coloring agents to creams and prepares her palette to decorate the birthday cake. Baking is celebrated as an art. Her expertise and know-how are thereby highlighted in a respectful acknowledgment and admiring recognition of women's work, otherwise kept invisible by patriarchy. The inserts of the very elaborate ingredients are intercut with very blurry tracking shots of Bert gardening outside. Mildred's craft comes into clear focus in contrast to the hazy image of Bert working outdoors. The representation of the traditional gender division of roles is respected—women in the kitchen, men in the garden—but the widespread prejudiced assumption that male tasks are worthier of attention than female ones is here turned upside down.

Instead of being "returned to a subordinate domestic role" as Cook contended about the Curtiz version (2007 309), she is *elevated* to this very function.

- 12 The sequence also echoes one of the major arguments in feminist cultural criticism that "woman is traditionally positioned as the 'Other' with the effect of positioning her outside culture, which is gendered male" and that one response to this involves "redefining traditional aesthetic categories by creating a new aesthetics which recovers women's 'invisible' arts, such as quilting or cooking" (Gamble 177). Gamble gives the example of feminist fiction writer Alice Walker, whose "evocation of maternal cultures by African-American women [is a] loving description of her mother's gardening skills in *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*" (177). This example could perfectly apply to the miniseries, which is but another "crucial contribution to feminist criticism" in that it is "a loving description" of Mildred's cooking skills.
- 13 Moreover, Bert is represented as abiding by macho values. His lack of reaction in view of his wife's craftsmanship is underscored by the unusual composition: the depth of field enables the spectator to observe Mildred decorating the cake in the distance. But in the foreground, Bert's body is framed from shoulders to hips and his back blocks the view. The composition makes his lack of interest conspicuous. Instead of looking at her, he looks in the opposite direction, through the window, to the garden. He focuses on himself, enumerating what he has just done there: "I fixed up these trees." Quixotically, the camera does not show what he did. While remaining at Bert's level in a head and shoulder shot, the camera tracks laterally to follow him from the window to the sink, where only Mildred's head is visible in the foreground. The cake is offscreen. These bland shots feel devoid of meaning. They contrast harshly with the beauty of the inserts on which the series opens. This unbalanced composition can be read symbolically: it draws attention to the fact that men take up too much space and thereby prevent women's talent from being recognized. It is this very talent that will enable Mildred to overcome the dire straits in which she finds herself as a grass widow.
- 14 In the novel, the narrator also draws attention to Bert's indifference to his wife's artistry, and yet is not so admiring of Mildred's baking skills. There is a tinge of sarcasm in the description of the cake's decoration. It is excessive and verges on bad taste:

She was studying a design, in a book of such designs, that showed a bird holding a scroll in its beak, and now attempted a reproduction of it, with a pencil, on a piece of tablet paper. He watched for a few moments, glanced at the cake, said it looked swell. This was perhaps an understatement, for it was a gigantic affair, eighteen inches across the middle and four layers high, covered with a sheen like satin. But after his comment he yawned, said: "Well—don't see there's much else I can do around here. Guess I'll take a walk down the street." (Cain 221)

In the series, Mildred is presented in a positive light, and the sequence strikes a new balance in the value attributed to male and female work by laying the emphasis on Mildred's baking activities. The focus of attention is shifted from Bert to Mildred so as to direct the audience's attention to baking, and to redress the balance between the value attributed to men's and women's work. A feminist statement about the lack of recognition of women's work is thus implicitly woven into the narrative fabric of the series. It makes visible what is otherwise invisible—and unpaid, in the case of domestic work—and thereby shows that it is thanks to her craft that she will succeed. The presentation of Mildred's work at home and outside in each of the three works in fact echoes the debate about the division of labor in every sphere of human activities, paid

or unpaid. In this sense, Mildred's individual story becomes universal and Haynes re-presents what is not presented in Curtiz's film.

A Criticism of Feminism

15 While participating in feminist debates by directing the audience's attention to women's work, the series also highlights the reductionism of essentialist feminism, thereby reflecting the internal divisions of second wave feminism. Beyond the basic and consensual commitment to ending female oppression, feminism has taken many, sometimes conflicting directions. The series displays a deep awareness of the diversity of feminist approaches and debates. It also comments and takes a stand in these debates, implying that under the guise of promoting female solidarity, women themselves contribute to perpetuating traditional gender roles and male domination, and that they are the victims of this.

16 Haynes conceives of Cain's *Mildred Pierce* as a (proto)feminist work. Indeed by replicating the novel faithfully, the series brings to light Cain's feminist subtext. This is the case, for example, with the episode in which Mildred tells Mrs. Gessler about her date with Wally shortly after she has separated from her husband (Cain 243-247). In warning flabbergasted Mildred about the consequences of her separation, Mrs. Gessler spells out all the suspicions that surround women in her situation, as we see in the following dialogue that begins with Mildred's line:

"[...] the second he heard Bert was gone, well it was almost funny the effect it had on him. You could see him get excited. Will you kindly tell me why?"

"I ought to have told you about that. The morals they give you credits for, you'd be surprised. To him, you were a red-hot mamma the second he found out about you."

"About what?"

"Grass widow! From now on, you're fast." (243-244)

This passage denounces the adversities women face as single parents who strive to get a status outside marriage. It foreshadows Simone de Beauvoir's assertion that marriage is "the only way to be integrated into a group, and if [women] are 'rejects,' they are social waste" (504).

17 The episode also shows how women are instrumental in the perpetuation of traditional gender roles through Mrs. Gessler's advice that Mildred seek a new husband in order to ease her financial situation, thereby maintaining the domestic division of labor in which men should provide for their family, while women are responsible for the management and performance of housework and caring work. Indeed, Mrs. Gessler talks Mildred into seizing this opportunity to trap Wally and force him to marry her. She prophesizes: "inside of a week your financial situation will be greatly eased, and inside of a month you'll have him begging for the chance to buy that divorce" (246). So she advises her to cook dinner for him and play the perfect hostess instead of going out on a date, "[a]s an investment, baby, an investment in time, effort, and raw materials" (245). However, Mrs. Gessler's predictions prove wrong and Mildred seems to become aware that this plan was but an instance of what second-wave feminist Juliet Mitchell denounced as "the attitude of the oppressor within the minds of the oppressed" (19). Indeed, in the novel, Mildred is presented as very lucid and does not seem to believe all men are "dirty bastards": "somehow the words didn't come. There was some core of honesty within her that couldn't quite accept Mrs. Gessler's interpretation of life." She rejects the idea that women suffer from common oppression and, instead, admits that

"she had set a trap for Wally. If he was wriggling out of it the best way he could, there was no sense in blaming him for things that were rapidly becoming too much for her, but that he certainly had nothing to do with" (Cain 253). Mildred uses this unfortunate episode as a springboard to struggle for financial autonomy—the next chapter opens on "From then on, Mildred knew she had to get a job" (254,) thereby presenting economic independence as the logical outcome and an alternative to marriage.

- 18 This feminist subtext is given full vent in the miniseries which adapts this episode very faithfully in a *mise-en-scène* that dramatizes Mildred's introspective journey. The sequence in which Mildred has Wally over at her place is filmed in a succession of tracking shots taken from behind windows, first the car windows as Wally rings the bell to Mildred's house, then from the outside through the house windows blurred by the rain. This instills the idea that the scene is staged. The spectator is placed in a position of outside observer as in a play. By challenging the basic codes of realism and breaking the illusion of reality, Haynes creates distance and encourages the audience to reflect upon the staged nature of this dinner and upon Mildred's condition. It calls attention to its artificiality and challenges the ideology of female bonding and common oppression, as well as the notion that women need to be married to secure their future. The next sequence—the following morning—opens on a loud metallic clatter in the soundtrack and a strange shot of Mildred, framed from shoulder to hip with an empty wine bottle under her arm. The few words to Mrs. Gessler, where Mildred lets her know that her plan misfired, are accompanied by a loud noise and a shot of the inside of the trashcan as she throws the bottle away. This strange composition made of bland shots expresses the situation and Mildred's emotions in a rather literal way: a feeling of waste, perhaps the concrete illustration of Beauvoir's words that women without men are "rejects" or "social waste" (504). The sequence shows the limits of female bonding, one key ingredient of essentialist feminism. The limited scope of the feminist discourse is underscored and so is the need to go beyond feminism.
- 19 Therefore, Haynes's intentions—to "[f]orget the 1945 noir classic" and "stay [...] true to the mother-daughter story at the heart of James M. Cain's novel"—are in fact two complementary strategies that are indicative of his political agenda. He fully exploits and brings out the feminist potential of Mildred's story and the enduring aspect of feminist struggles across time by rejecting point by point Curtiz's film noir adaptation choices as they have been described by feminist scholars, and by systematically taking the opposite direction. He thus pledges allegiance to what he views as the real implications of Cain's novel through his extremely faithful adaptation of several key scenes. He also points to the limits of what bell hooks called "the model of sisterhood" (45) when he shows that woman bonding is not the best way to promote the feminist cause and defend the interests of women. In fact, Haynes adopts an intersectional perspective showing that women do not form a homogeneous group and that their interactions are class-driven.

An Intersectional Perspective

- 20 Haynes's anti-essentialist perspective on the absence of a collective feminine identity is nowhere more apparent than in the job interview sequence where Mildred turns down a position as housekeeper at Mrs. Forrester's (Part One 35'25"-38'35"). In the novel, the episode of Mildred's reluctant application to this job (Cain 266-268) only provides a

contrast to the waitressing job that she finally takes, and which seems less demeaning in comparison. The only thing she fears is her daughter's disapproval. As Mrs. Forrester lays down her conditions, she realizes she cannot take the job:

Mildred listened, or tried to, but suddenly a vision leaped in front of her eyes. She saw Veda, haughty, snobbish Veda, being told that she had to come in the back way, and that she couldn't fraternize with Forrester offspring. Then Mildred knew that if she took this place she would lose Veda. Veda would go to her father, her grandfather, the police, or a park bench, but not even whips could make her stay with Mildred, in the Forrester garage. A surge of pride in the cold child swept over her, and she stood up. (267-268)

In the miniseries, the episode has been altered or "neutered"—to borrow again Richard Strong's terminology—to acknowledge the existence of differences among women and to illustrate what feminist writer Florynce Kennedy called the "sisterhood mystique." For this, the sequence stresses the humiliation that Mildred undergoes as she presents herself at Mrs. Forrester's. As in the novel, she knocks on the door, the butler opens and asks, "housekeeper?" As she is about to answer in a full sentence, he replies, "Back door," and slams the door in her face (Part One 35'25"-35'32"). The camera is placed inside the house behind the butler so that the audience sees Mildred's reaction in a close-up that captures her expectant gaze, followed by her immediate dismay. Then the camera cuts to a long shot of Mildred in front of the large house. The cut from a close-up to a long shot, from the inside to the outside, creates a contrast and evokes the shock that Mildred receives at being treated in such a degrading way. It literally expresses her rejection: the audience gets the physical impression of her being hurled away.

- 21 The interview confirms this violent sign of discrimination. Mildred places herself on an equal footing with Mrs. Forrester, but the latter makes it clear that they are not in the same league and enhances the hierarchy between mistress and servant. Again, the series is very faithful to Cain's dialogue: "It's customary, Mildred, for the servant to sit on the *Mistress's* invitation, not on her own *initiative*. [...] It's perfectly all right, but on little things, especially with an inexperienced woman, I find it well to begin at the beginning" (Cain 267). But whereas, in the novel, Mrs. Forrester's words only give Mildred more determination to succeed, in the series, they bring out all the required ingredients to ignite internal rebellion. As Mrs. Forrester goes into the details of the job, her voice fades, becomes a mere echo, and overlaps with the singing of birds. Both the aural and visual channels of expression reproduce Mildred's subjectivity. In this way, the audience has access to Mildred's point of view, as she stops paying attention and shuts herself off. She becomes aware that the situation is unacceptable and is able to refuse to be exploited. This multisensory identification with Mildred helps the audience participate in her sudden awareness of class exploitation. Mildred's refusal to take the housekeeping job all but amounts to class rebellion.
- 22 Far from the idea of "shared victimization" and the "emphasis on common oppression" (hooks 45), the sequence shows that women can be equally responsible for oppression by unearthing the ways in which they actively participate in it. It also points to the necessity of making allowance for women when analyzing social divisions based on the unequal distribution of economic resources. It illustrates hooks's strong stand that "we [women] cannot develop sustaining ties or political solidarity using the model of Sisterhood created by bourgeois women's liberationists" (hooks 45). Class issues prevail over female solidarity.

- 23 Moreover, casting a black actor in the role of the butler introduces an intersectional dimension and adds another layer of meaning to the sequence. It shows that minorities themselves can participate in class oppression. The butler is a stock character of slave narratives: the loyal house slave who is an accessory to his own oppression. By emphatically and eagerly carrying out the white mistress's orders that the servants should use the back door, he actively participates in the enforcement of class oppression, of which he is himself a victim. Mrs. Forrester uses the same methods that were used by the slave owners on plantations: she implements oppressive relations in which the servants themselves are set against each other and against their own interests. The sequence thereby shows that the perpetuation of oppression by the oppressed stems from alienation. The butler has no sense of belonging to a race or a class. He is the perfect representation of the alienated slave.
- 24 The intersectional argument is reinforced in the next sequence, which shows that the interests of African Americans converge with that of the working class, and of women. A sense of collective identity is displayed when Mildred takes a crowded bus at rush hour and feels as tired and run down as the other workers: they are all enduring the effects of the Depression. Economic oppression is then associated with racial discrimination via the soundtrack in which a newsboy shouting in the distance can be heard: "Nine have been arrested for attacking white girls! Read all about it! 'Riot feared in Scottsboro Alabama!'" (Part One 38'49"-39'35") This is a reference to the arrest of the Scottsboro boys and to the ensuing case that was brought to the Supreme Court after white women accused teenagers of rape in Alabama in 1931. It was an unfair trial with a wrongful accusation. Despite the absence of evidence, they were sentenced to death. This trial was exposed as a blatant miscarriage of justice after one of the alleged victims admitted fabricating the story. The Supreme Court's decision remained famous because it put an end—at least theoretically—to all-white juries in the South. So this scene binds together issues of class, gender and race. It shows the need to take into account diversity and difference in gender relations, as well as the interrelationship between gender and race in order to move toward a synthetic view of class, race and gender. Oppression and entrapment are given visual expression through the superimposition of windows, frames within the frames. The three critical discourses of race, class and gender are embraced collectively, from an "intersectional" perspective. The interactive effects of race, gender and class dynamics are being examined, and the sequence shows how inequalities are created and maintained.

Conclusion

- 25 With such invariants as invisibility, motherhood and financial emancipation through work, Mildred is clearly an allegory of the American woman. So as Mrs. Gessler puts it on learning the news of the separation, Mildred is definitely "the great American institution that never gets mentioned on the Fourth of July—a grass widow with two small children to support" (Cain 229). This, in fact, points to the universal dimension of Cain's plot material, since it has been adapted to different contexts and has given rise to radically different readings. Being an American woman does not have the same implications during the Great Depression, the post-World War Two period and the 2010s. Issues of class were banned from the film noir, reflecting the postwar insistence on national unity, whereas the series displaces the issue from a working-class to a

middle-class environment, in keeping with the context of the 2008 subprime crisis that hit American middle classes very hard, and durably impoverished this social category. These transformations illustrate how a source text can be "neutered" (Strong 52). They attest that adaptation is about "the appropriation of a meaning from a prior text" (Andrew 9) to make it relevant in another context. So from the same narrative basis, the two adaptations offer divergent gender and class conventions. As McFarlane puts it: "Conditions within the film industry and the prevailing cultural and social climate at the time of the film's making (especially when the film version does not follow hot upon the novel's publication) are two major determinants in shaping any film, adaptation or not" (McFarlane 21). While the political and ideological stakes concerning the condition of women have changed, some questions remain relevant across time. Gender roles, the relations between the sexes, the place and role of women in American society, and the question of equality are as topical in 1940 as in 2011.

- 26 As the product of the intertextual activity between the novel, the film noir and feminist scholarship, the series is also an example of how Haynes "puts into practice" multiple theories. Besides bearing the mark of Hollywood cinema, the series is also informed by film theory, feminist theory and feminist film theory. It comes as no surprise given Haynes's "keen awareness of the theoretical issues surrounding cultural production [that he] approaches [...] from a decidedly postmodern perspective" (Morrison 1). And indeed, the series is "both metafictionally self-reflexive and yet speaking to us powerfully about real political and historical realities" (Hutcheon 5). By multiplying the framing devices, it draws attention to its artificiality; in Cook's words, "there are multiple quotations from various sources and a reliance on mirrors and frames within frames that create an opaque surface" (2013 379). Moreover, while maintaining a naturalistic aesthetic by following to the letter the narrative and aesthetic codes of classical Hollywood, the miniseries challenges and pushes further debates on gender and sexuality. This is evident in its use of elements of film form such as framing and editing that provide literal illustrations of the emotions of the eponymous heroine to drive feminist points home.
- 27 Lastly, as one of the main representatives of the New Queer cinema movement whose films "give voice to the marginalized" (Aaron 3), it comes as no surprise that Todd Haynes should have added race and class dimensions to the question of gender, in an attempt to thwart binary—male/female, white/black or straight/gay—essentialism. As a "new queer artist" he "defies cinematic convention in terms of form, content and genre, [...] reappropriates mainstream genres and formats [...] [and] also incorporates a defiance of the sanctity of mainstream cinema history" (Aaron 4).
- 28 Adaptations are privileged sites for queer cinema whose aim is to reintroduce controversial political text where it was previously elided and to resist "the normative codes of gender and sexual expression" (Aaron 5). This series challenges not only the assumptions of the 1930s and postwar period of US society concerning identity, gender, class, family, but also those of the present.

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NOTES

1. As Pam Cook has shown: "Despite Haynes's insistence that the miniseries was not a remake of the film but an adaptation of the novel, it seems he found it difficult to erase the film from his mind: in interviews he recalled seeing the Joan Crawford vehicle as a student on a feminist film theory course at Brown University in the 1980s" (Cook, 2013 378).
2. Haynes has openly expressed his feminist commitment. For example, he stated in a 1993 interview: "I tend to have a continued gut-level criticism that kicks in whenever essentialism is brought up. In a way it wasn't until gay theory was ushered in by people like Diana Fuss, identifying the essentialist versus social-constructivist perspectives, that I realised how significant and important feminism is. Gay theory of course, but there's been so much more written about feminism." (Wyatt 7).
3. The subheading of a *Time Out* interview with Todd Haynes reads: "Forget the 1945 noir classic—Todd Haynes tells Gabriel Tate how he stayed true to the mother-daughter story at the heart of James M Cain's novel to make 'Mildred Pierce' the miniseries" (24 June 2011).
4. Amelie Hastie has already noted this "minor change from Cain's novel" which is, in fact, "very telling" because it shifts attention away from Bert: "In Haynes's version, we are with Mildred from the beginning" (25).

ABSTRACTS

This article relies on theories of adaptation to analyze Todd Haynes's 2011 miniseries *Mildred Pierce*, in the light of its source novel written by James Cain in 1941 and of Curtiz's 1945 film noir. It explores the way in which the story of an individual woman is representative of women's collective history while being tightly linked to the historical context. For this purpose, and given

Todd Haynes's affinities with feminist film studies and feminist theories at large, it looks at the transformations of the representation of women's work, at the status of feminist discourses and at the introduction of two new parameters, race and class from an intersectional perspective.

Cet article s'appuie sur les théories de l'adaptation pour analyser la minisérie de Todd Haynes *Mildred Pierce* (2011) à la lumière de son texte source, le roman de James Cain et de la première adaptation de Michael Curtiz (1945). Il explore dans quelle mesure l'histoire individuelle d'une femme peut être représentative de l'histoire collective des femmes tout en montrant que les représentations sont étroitement liées au contexte historique. Pour cela, et en prenant en compte les affinités que Todd Haynes entretient avec les études filmiques féministes et les théories féministes en général, il analyse les transformations de la représentation du travail des femmes, les discours féministes, et l'introduction de deux nouveaux paramètres : la race et la classe dans une perspective intersectionnelle.

INDEX

Keywords: adaptation, upward social mobility, women's work, feminism, gender, history of women, intersectionality, James Cain, Michael Curtiz, Todd Haynes, Mildred Pierce, race

Mots-clés: adaptation, ascension sociale, femmes au travail, féminisme, genre, histoire des femmes, intersectionnalité, James Cain, Michael Curtiz, Todd Haynes, Mildred Pierce, race

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