

'the classical hollywood style' essay



It is claimed by David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson in their book 'The Classical Hollywood Cinema, Film Style and the Mode of Production' that the correlation between film style and mode of production are, "reciprocal and mutually influencing". Attributable to such topics as politics, economics, and technology over time, they implied that between 1917 and 1960 the Hollywood studio system produced films of an almost uniform quality, focused upon using the same established conventions time and time again which they dubbed 'The classical Hollywood style'. This conclusion was drawn by a detailed critique of 100 random films produced within this time frame.

Having also recently viewed a number of films from the same time frame (not quite 100), I took a more analytical approach to my second viewing of the 1945 classic, *Mildred Pierce*, and attempted to see parallels to other films which fell into 'the classic Hollywood style'. When watching *Mildred Pierce*, it is vital to bear in mind that the movie is an adaptation of a popular book written by James M. Cain. The changes that were implemented by producer Jerry Wald in the storyline were applied in order to make the story darker and ultimately to lend itself better to the popular film noir genre. Of course, film noir is not simply a term for a black and white movie; it demands an ambience that was always unmistakably recognisable through a fairly specific set of conventions. Influenced primarily by German expressionism, the film noir *mise-en-scene* is dominated by low-key lighting, often barren, open settings and deep shadows, creating feelings of uncertainty, isolation and entrapment.

The opening sequence of *Mildred Pierce* certainly remains true to this ambience and the initial impressions are supplemented throughout the film by the poignant plot. The narrative was adapted in order to provide points of sorrow, mystery, irony, shock and the ultimate downfall of an evil protagonist, regular conventions of film noir. In the 'classic Hollywood style', narrative follows a manner of progression that is part and parcel of most plots such as the most shocking events taking place near the conclusion of the movie and linear chains of cause and effect. The narrative of a classic Hollywood movie is clearly structured with discernable beginning middle and end which generally provides comprehensive resolution by the closing stages.

The main protagonists' goals are either achieved or have no hope of ever being achieved; *Mildred Pierce* follows the latter resolution. The accepted norm for sexual innuendo in a Hollywood movie kept the taught sexual tension ever present in the novel from reaching the big screen. Mildred's obsession with Veda is "less like a mother but more like a lover who has unexpectedly discovered an act of faithlessness and avenged it. (Mildred Pierce, Cain's commentary). This is exemplified in the book: "she [Mildred] took the lovely creature [Veda] in her arms and kissed her, hard, on the mouth." (Mildred Pierce, 268).

Or Mildred's relationship with Wally who constantly tries to seduce her whereas, in the book Mildred seduces Wally in order to entrap him into marriage. Mildred has far more power over the men in her life in the novel but in the movie adaptation the roles are almost reversed to conform with Hollywood's view of how far a female protagonist may use her sexuality to

gain power. Physical acts of power however (the role of the 'femme fatale') were more than acceptable if executed subtly enough. The movie adaptation does little more than insinuate sexual attraction or relations in keeping with the Hollywood's discipline for social values and in abidance with the Production Code of 1934, implemented in response to "pressure from the Legion of Decency and public protest against the graphic violence and sexual suggestiveness of some films" (History of The Motion Picture, Encyclopaedia Britannica Online). This is exemplified in a scene in which Wally whispers something, to which Mildred replies "I don't feel romantic".

The likely scenario is that this was her way of saying "I don't feel like having sex" and this was the manner in which such issues were addressed. But since the 1960s, it has been a fact that controversy sells and that Hollywood has no qualms with exploiting the inherent evils of society, Mildred Pierce was, in this area, representative of the wider classical Hollywood cinema. In the book, the murder of Monte does not take place at all but in the movie adaptation it is the axis upon which the storyline rotates, constantly keeping us guessing as to who the murderer is. Mildred? Bert? Or in true Hollywood fashion, the unassuming young girl Veda who could not possibly have any motivation for this heinous act. Her progression from a spoilt brat into a vindictive young woman is not an overnight sensation but a journey through the whole film.

The downfall of Veda is another tool to supplement the dark storyline in the movie adaptation. In the novel, Veda's career thrives and takes her to the top just as she always aspired to be. In the film however, she is nothing but a singer and a bare midriff dancer in Wally's cheap night club with shady men

leering over her. The irony is apparent as throughout the whole film she berates Mildred for being low class, cooking for strangers, smelling of grease, and serving people hand and foot as a mere waitress, implying that her mother had no pride because of the jobs she had. Veda's job at Wally's night club contradicts everything she thought of as disgusting and pathetic and turns her into the hypocritical villain who got her comeuppance.

However, this is not the end of Veda's story. It leads to her ultimate role, in classic Hollywood style, to the generic 'femme fatale' who would rather kill her lover than be rejected and humiliated. The character of Veda symbolises best, the way in which the book was adapted to fit snugly into the established film noir genre and is indeed representative of the 'classical Hollywood style'. Aside from genre and narrative, perhaps the most important and most influential elements of cinematic form that characterize classical Hollywood cinema are continuity editing and mise-en-scene. The definitive goal of continuity editing is to make the cut invisible and to convey actions as subtly as possible. Editing is subservient to narrative and is usually constructed in a way that it does not draw attention onto itself, particularly in older Hollywood productions.

Critical to good editing is the ability to plant notions in our heads which suggest likely scenarios in which the plot may progress. The opening sequence of *Mildred Pierce* sees the murder of Monte take place followed by Mildred fleeing the beach house to go and throw herself off the pier. The mise-en-scene in the preceding shot showed no other characters clearly and the cut to the exterior location immediately followed the murder. The

cohesion of these elements leads us to almost instinctively infer that it is Mildred who has committed the crime.

Such suggestive editing techniques are not only effective but also established and almost necessary in the eyes of most directors. The techniques used throughout *Mildred Pierce*, fades to create a more lingering progression to the next scene (a signifier of the previous scenes importance), the use of the 180-degree rule or the relative lack of jump cuts (cuts that leave out a time period of a continuous action) are all established conventions within both the film noir genre and in the wider 'classical Hollywood style' which have led to the evolution of more complex methods used by Hollywood today. Without having seen an extensive number of films from the period outlined by Bordwell, Thompson and Staiger, it makes it difficult to make an informed subjective argument as to the validity of their claim. However, having seen some of the more renowned texts and having now grasped the commonalities present in a sub genre such as film noir, I feel that *Mildred Pierce* is a story that was undoubtedly transformed to fit a mould. This mould can not only be classed as something that defined a genre but also, an industry.

Amongst the codes of film noir, the traits of all Hollywood films were present. The star power of Joan Crawford, the dedication to invisible editing, the political correctness of the more sexual content and the climactic, resolute finale. To me, *Mildred Pierce* is indeed representative of the wider classical Hollywood cinema most notably through its narrative allegiance to the film noir style. A homogenised form of film making, yes, a fairly

standard murder mystery, perhaps, but a classic film, in a technical or a subjective manner, most definitely.