

Fidelity and Adultery at the Movies: From F.W. Murnau's *Sunrise* to David Lean's *Brief Encounter*

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In *Adultery and the Novel: Contract and Transgression* Tony Tanner argued that as the literary form of the novel emerged and evolved concurrently with the bourgeois construction of modern European society it came to concern itself with the contractual character of bourgeois life, exploring and testing this through elements of theme, character and narrative form. In particular, the novel increasingly came to focus upon the marriage contract and, as the title of his study implies, infractions of that contract. 'It is my contention,' writes Tanner,

that whereas the ideal belief of bourgeois society was that it had effected a harmonious interrelationship of patterns of property and patterns of passion and feeling, and that it was in possession of a language that could both effectively mediate those patterns and stabilize the environment, the knowledge about that society as it began to emerge in the explorations of the novel was that in fact these patterns were all awry. With this knowledge the novel began to lose its innocence and realised that its own patternings were not simply reflections of social patterns but existed in a very problematical relationship to those patterns. I am suggesting in general that bourgeois society, more than any other, sought to establish its own stability within history ... But as the novelists began to scrutinize this self-created, self-stabilizing, self-mythologizing society, they discovered a series of discontinuities and

instabilities that effectively gave the lie to the bourgeois's image of his own society.¹

What chiefly 'gave the lie' to this image was the dissonance that emerged between passion and propriety, human relations and social relations, in the act of adultery. In this paper I would like to speculate on the role of film in the continuing evolution of this kind of cultural reflection and consider the degree to which narrative cinema—often seen as an inheritor of the novelistic tradition—took up similar themes and issues to the classic realist novel as it began to establish itself as the bourgeois, and indeed proletarian, entertainment medium *par excellence*. I would also like to take the opportunity this provides to offer a view on the 'fidelity debate' in literature and cinema studies by considering how cinema has dealt with, and perhaps thereby reflected on, the question of fidelity.²

Tanner's main concern in his study is the nineteenth century novel, and it is appropriate to note that cinema emerged as a mass entertainment just as, in his view, the (bourgeois) novel began to lose interest in the binding constraints of marriage. Indeed, he goes as far as to suggest that:

The bourgeois novel is coeval and coterminous with the power concentrated in the central structure of marriage. As bourgeois marriage loses its absoluteness, its unquestioned finality, its 'essentiality', so does the bourgeois novel. On another level we may say that as the contract between man and wife loses its sense of necessity and binding power, so does the contract between novelist and reader. This contract is still binding in Goethe; it is abrogated in certain calculated ways by Flaubert (for example); it becomes extremely problematical in the work of the late James; and of Lawrence (and Joyce) we may say that the old contracts no longer have any force at all.³

¹ Tony Tanner, *Adultery in the Novel: Contract and Transgression* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), p.52.

² I take this up in my discussion of *Brief Encounter*, below. With its attendant moralistic vocabulary of impropriety and cultural scandal, as Robert Stam has pointed out, it would perhaps be improper in a discussion of adultery in the cinema not to raise the question of fidelity in all of its senses. See Robert Stam, 'Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation,' in James Naremore (ed.), *Film Adaptation* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), pp.54-78.

³ *Adultery in the Novel*, p.15.

Certainly it is the case that by the time of Joyce the ‘contract between novelist and reader’ was unravelling as the modernist novel was leaving its mass reading public behind, but this was just at the time the cinema was picking up its audience. For this reason the period of most interest for me runs from the mature silent period (after 1922 and the publication of *Ulysses*) up to the 1950s and early 1960s, when attitudes towards adultery are profoundly changed in the wake of advances in contraception and the sexual revolution these helped to bring about, and as divorce laws relaxed towards more easily accessible no-fault arrangements. If film was in one way or another to take the place of the novel as an aesthetic medium within society at large, it is at this time that the cultural contour of that role—at least in the matter of sexual morality—will be most clearly delineated.⁴

Despite the view that the old bourgeois contracts were losing their force in the early twentieth century it is worth pointing out that novelistic interest in adultery was not necessarily on the wane at this time, although there is evidence to suggest that its focus was shifting from earlier points of interest. Indeed, one of the more fascinating inclinations of the modernist novel of adultery is its movement away from central agents like Emma Bovary and Anna Karenina towards an interest in injured third party figures like John Dowell in *The Good Soldier* and Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses*,⁵ or even in bystander figures like Nick Carraway (*The Great Gatsby*) or Jake Barnes (*The Sun Also Rises*), both of whom feel implicated in and troubled by their role as effective pimps to adulterous liaisons. Something about the decentred status of these characters within the narrative (although not the narration) becomes of interest to the novelist, who writes not about the passion of adultery but rather of its oblique repercussions within the bystanding consciousness—what Maisie knew, and not the ‘knowing’ itself, to speak with biblical ellipsis. And Maisie

⁴ As Nicholas White observes:

In societies where unwanted pregnancies and births from illegitimate couplings can often be avoided (and the division of sex for pleasure and sex for reproduction thereby asserted), the issue of legitimacy no longer functions in quite the same way as in those nineteenth century texts which belong to what we have termed the High Age of Adultery.

‘Introduction: The Present State of Affairs,’ in Naomi Segal and Nicholas White (eds.), *Scarlet Letters: Fictions of Adultery from Antiquity to the 1990s* (London: MacMillan, 1997), p.3.

⁵ In this they are rather like Eliot’s ‘attendant lord’ Prufrock, who find himself unaccountably in the glare that should be Hamlet’s.

aside, it is noteworthy that in each of the cases just referred to the masculine point of view is dramatized, either through direct first person narration or through stream of consciousness, in keeping with a general modernist interest in the problematics of narration and narrative point of view—an issue I will return to later.

In the case of the nineteenth century, however, the most celebrated novels of adultery tended not to concern themselves with a male protagonist and a male perspective. This may have been because men did not suffer from the ennui of bourgeois domestic life—they were, rather, fulfilled by it. This was certainly not the case for women like Emma Bovary, however, who found married life with her husband Charles as ‘cold as a garret whose dormer window looks on the north, and ennui, the silent spider, was weaving its web in the darkness of every corner of her heart.’⁶ Edna Pontellier, the protagonist of Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (who, as the name ‘Edna’ indicates, combines something of the condition of both Emma Bovary and Anna Karenina), suffers from a similar sense of spiritual lassitude, which becomes for her, as it did for Emma, the impulse to an adulterous inclination:

An indescribable oppression, which seemed to generate in some unfamiliar part of her consciousness, filled her whole being with a vague anguish. It was like a shadow, like a mist passing across her soul’s summer day. It was strange and unfamiliar; it was a mood. She did not sit there inwardly upbraiding her husband, lamenting at Fate, which had directed her footsteps to the path which they had taken.⁷

And yet Edna *could* have inwardly upbraided her husband, Léonce, for he is both free of the effect of this nameless heaviness of spirit and yet somehow implicated in her experience of it, as it is in one way or another the condition of married life with him. The consequence of this is a feminine yearning for fulfilment beyond the confines of that life, and inevitably adulterous passion seems to promise just that. In this way, as Naomi Segal has argued, oppressed by the consciousness of marital responsibility and drawn by longings for personal autonomy, the adulteress is the woman who places desire where maternity belongs, in her ‘inside

⁶ Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*, trans. Francis Steegmuller (London: 1993), p.26.

⁷ Kate Chopin, *The Awakening* (Norton: 1993), p.8.

body', thus incarnating 'the scandal of [her] own, never autonomous desire and its relation to a never quite subordinate other.'⁸

Similarly, unlike women, men are not objectified by bourgeois marriage, rendered as material property and sexual possession in a scheme of bartering which might alienate affection—quite the opposite. The uxorious character of husbands like Charles Bovary or Alexei Alexandrovich Karenina partakes in part of this proprietorial pleasure, which Chopin makes explicit when Léonce Pontellier voices his displeasure at his wife staying too much in the sun: 'You are burnt beyond recognition,' he complains, and the narrator continues: 'looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of personal property which has suffered some damage.'⁹ Thus the weight of narrative interest in the matter of adultery in the nineteenth century novel falls inevitably upon the woman in the case: in Tolstoy's contrapuntal narrative of *Anna Karenina*, the female Anna's is the story of adultery, while the male Levin's is the story of marriage triumphant. And this is so because it is in and through the woman's capacity for sex and reproduction that there lies the greatest threat to property rights and the bourgeois ordering of capital and social relations—a point perhaps best exemplified in Emma Bovary's adultery leading to her securing Charles's power of attorney in order to covertly sell his property to maintain her illicit liaison.

The moral attitude at play in these texts, however, is more complicated than the simple gender division of its narrative concerns. And it is precisely here, at the intersection of moral complexity and ideological simplicity, that these texts interrogate most searchingly the emotional insufficiencies of bourgeois life and the deceit of its self-affirming romance narrative of marital fulfilment. The ennui which impels these women towards adulterous passion is not treated as mere wilfulness but, in one way or another, rather as the outcome of their social and existential circumstance. Even Emma Bovary, who is treated with the greatest irony as a specimen of bourgeois life, is nevertheless a pitiable creature in her lost aspirations:

Before marriage she thought herself in love; but the happiness that should have followed this love not having come, she must, she thought, have been mistaken. And Emma tried to find out

⁸ Naomi Segal, *The Adulteress's Child: Authorship and Desire in the Nineteenth century Novel* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), p.26.

⁹ *The Awakening*, p.4.

what one meant exactly in life by the words felicity, passion, rapture, that had seemed to her so beautiful in books.¹⁰

In a more compelling way, Edna Pontellier awakens to a sense of the fundamental wretchedness of her condition, an apprehension that is also communicated here with irony by the narrator, but an irony that is itself shaded by the image of the fatal sea to which Edna will ultimately commit herself in an effort of existential emancipation:

In short, Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her. This may seem like a ponderous weight of wisdom to descend upon the soul of a young woman of twenty-eight—perhaps more wisdom than the Holy Ghost is usually pleased to vouchsafe to any woman.

But the beginning of things, of a world especially, is necessarily vague, tangled, chaotic, and exceedingly disturbing. How few of us ever emerge from such beginning! How many souls perish in its tumult!

The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation.

The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace.¹¹

If Flaubert's irony allows him to dramatize the movement of Emma's mind through a mode of free indirect discourse which Joyce, among many others, would greatly admire, here we are deeply inside the mind of Edna through a narrative mode that recalls Flaubert but also strongly prefigures the stream of consciousness that Joyce would employ to allow his readers to access a profoundly sympathetic understanding of his characters. But the point is that here the pitiability of Emma and the depth of feeling for Edna are at the service of a sympathy that cuts across and threatens to subvert the socio-moral and, indeed, legal conventions in which they and presumably their readers found themselves. It is this that Tanner highlights as one of the most fascinating aspects of the bourgeois novel—perhaps at once the

¹⁰ *Madame Bovary*, p.21.

¹¹ *The Awakening*, p.14.

triumph of the form and the cause of its demise in the unfolding history of sexual morality: 'it is arguable that it is just such a tension between law and sympathy that holds the great bourgeois novel together,' he writes, 'and a severe imbalance in either direction must destroy the form.'¹²

2

While the question of property hovers over the middle class form of the novel, the question of propriety tended to supervise the narrative of mass entertainment forms such as cinema. This already suggests precisely that imbalance of moral forces of the kind to which Tanner refers above—here, an imbalance in favour of the law—and thus indicates the sort of problem cinema will encounter should it attempt to attain the kind of moral sophistication achieved by the nineteenth century novel when dealing with this theme. While it is true that the authorities sought to ban *Madame Bovary*, they were unsuccessful and, indeed, the effect of the court case was to increase sales of the now notorious book. In the case of popular cinema, however, a heavier weight would be given to its cultural role as a 'family entertainment' and a more sternly conservative moral prohibition would govern the production of film narratives and the nature of the characters and themes represented. The first general principle offered as the basis for the Hays Code regulations governing the production of movie narratives reads:

I. No picture shall be produced which will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrong-doing, evil or sin.¹³

Given this, it is unsurprising that the first commandment of Section II of the Code, dealing with matters of sex, reads:

II. Sex

The sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home shall be upheld. Pictures shall not infer that low forms of sex relationship are the accepted or common thing.

¹² *The Awakening*, p.14.

¹³ 'The Motion Picture Production Code of 1930 (Hays Code),'

<http://www.artsreformation.com/a001/hays-code.html>, accessed 20/8/2016.

1. Adultery, sometimes necessary plot material, must not be explicitly treated, or justified, or presented attractively.¹⁴

Even before the introduction of the Code, however, makers of popular films were aware of the need to satisfy conventional moral expectations, even if they wished to explore aspects of modern living that might confront that morality. Thus the movie of adultery was obliged to configure character according to certain constrained moral types, which allowed little of the nuanced sympathy achieved in the novel. What this meant in practice was that adultery came to be seen as related to elemental carnal appetites rather than social circumstances, and therefore—as the moral logic of the times demanded—a problem for men rather than women.

F.W.Murnau's *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* (1927) is perhaps the exemplary movie of adultery of the 1920s. Based on the 1917 short story 'The Trip to Tilset' by Lithuanian writer Herman Sudermann, *Sunrise* is an allegory of elemental passion centring on three figures identified only as The Man, The Woman, and The Woman from the City. In the grip of adulterous desire for The Woman from the City—a dark, highly sensualised vamp associated with the high life of 1920s urban excess—The

¹⁴ The framers of the code also published the rationale for their regulations in a statement of 'Reasons Underlying the General Principles':

I. No picture shall be produced which will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrong-doing, evil or sin.

This is done:

1. When evil is made to appear attractive and alluring, and good is made to appear unattractive.
2. When the sympathy of the audience is thrown on the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil, sin. The same is true of a film that would throw sympathy against goodness, honor, innocence, purity or honesty.

Note: Sympathy with a person who sins is not the same as sympathy with the sin or crime of which he is guilty. We may feel sorry for the plight of the murderer or even understand the circumstances which led him to his crime: we may not feel sympathy with the wrong which he has done. The presentation of evil is often essential for art or fiction or drama. This in itself is not wrong provided:

- a. That evil is not presented alluringly. Even if later in the film the evil is condemned or punished, it must not be allowed to appear so attractive that the audience's emotions are drawn to desire or approve so strongly that later the condemnation is forgotten and only the apparent joy of sin is remembered.
- b. That throughout, the audience feels sure that evil is wrong and good is right.

Man abjures his roles as father, husband and protector, which are explicitly defined as obligatory marital roles in the film in a marriage service that The Man and his wife witness. The Woman from the City urges The Man to murder his wife—a fair, meek, dutiful and loving mother—to sell his farm, and to come with her to the city, suggesting to him a plan of drowning her on the lake. Here the narrative strongly recalls the central incident and other elements of Theodore Dreiser's 1925 novel *An American Tragedy*, in which the protagonist Clyde Griffiths—not married but affianced to the naive young Roberta Alden who has become pregnant to him—comes to desire the more sophisticated and glamorous Sondra Finchley.¹⁵ In the circumstances this is effectively an adulterous passion, and Clyde plans to murder his fiancée by drowning her in an apparent boating accident. His nerve fails at the critical moment but Roberta does drown, with Dreiser purposely blurring Clyde's role in her death. In *Sunrise*, however, as The Man's nerve fails him, too, the wife manages to escape, although a later set of events will make it appear that she has indeed drowned. The Man is consequently thrown into a state of grief and guilt, causing him to finally renounce The Woman from the City and to fully realise the extent of his love for his wife, with whom he is ultimately reunited.

Contrary to the narrative logic of the novels of female adultery of the nineteenth century, then, this movie of adultery does not engage with the widening tear in the socio-moral fabric through the opposition of stifling marital duty and individual desire in the figure of the female,¹⁶ but deals rather with the stitching up of the lives of domesticity, passion, and social responsibility in the singular masculine figure. Rather than interrogating the order of things as the nineteenth century narrative of adultery had done, the story of *Sunrise* fundamentally affirms it; little wonder the same story was later filmed in the self-congratulatory atmosphere of Hitler's Reich in

¹⁵ Murnau's film was certainly based on the Sudermann story but the similarities with Dreiser's then famous novel—itsself based on a notorious incident from 1906—could hardly fail to be recognized by audiences and filmmakers alike. In the same way, it is difficult not to suspect a reference to Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, published only one year previously, not only in the title but more forcefully in the opening prologue, which reads:

This song of the Man and his Wife is of no place and every place; you might hear it anywhere at any time. Wherever the sun rises and sets in the cities turmoil or under the open sky on the farm life is much the same; sometimes bitter, sometimes sweet.

¹⁶ And which indeed Dreiser also explores but in the character of Clyde and against a background of the stifling pressures of capitalism.

1939 as a tribute to the wholesome and dutiful Aryan woman, typified by the wife threatened by her adulterous husband. Veit Harlan, director of the 1939 version (and, incidentally, of *Jud Süß*), claimed his was a realist work, as opposed to Murnau's earlier adaptation which, he scoffed, was 'only a poem', a comment that throws some light on Murnau's extraordinary achievement in producing an artistically engaging film from what is little more than a sentimental story.¹⁷

Two things in particular stand out in this regard—the structural character of the aesthetic conception of the film and Murnau's use of a psychologically charged screen imagery. Of the former, Molly Haskell comments:

The oppositions in *Sunrise* (and it is dialectical on every level) are between sunrise and sunset, the country and the city, good and evil, salvation and sin, divine grace and black magic, natural and unnatural acts, and finally the blonde, beatific wife and the dark sultry city woman in their struggle for the man's soul.¹⁸

Divided thus between starkly dichotomised images of womanhood the film focuses upon the psychological torment The Man endures as masculine desire struggles with moral responsibility, and it is in this that the film achieves some of its most cinematically innovative and dramatic effects. Brad Prager has argued that these effects—such as the dramatic superimposition of vampish images of The Woman from the City over an agonising Man—are cued directly to his psychological state:

The moments in *Sunrise* that contradict its otherwise naturalistic representations are associated with motifs of 'untamed' sex drives and the unconscious. The film plays with form only when it renders visible its protagonist's psychological consternation. The distortion of space is not treated in *Sunrise* as part of the unavoidable pathology of

¹⁷ George Sadoul and Peter Morris (eds.), *Dictionary of Films* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972), p.362.

¹⁸ Molly Haskell, 'Review Article of *Sunrise*' in *Film Comment*, Summer 1971, quoted in Richard Dyer MacCann, *American Movies: The First Thirty Years—Films of the 1920s* (London: 1996), p.107.

everyday life, as it is in German silent cinema; the appearances of Ansa's fantasies are therefore taken as aberrations.¹⁹

Yet it is fair to say that these 'aberrations' are nevertheless frequently set against a background of allegorical minimalism in which the imagery gains an iconic power beyond naturalism and manages to suggest a universality of significance: this is not a social condition, it is the human condition. This is particularly the case in the scenes in the countryside, on the lake, and among the marshes as *The Woman from the City* seductively 'vamps' *The Man*, provoking imaginings of the sensual high life in the city.



The image is pared down to fundamental masculine and feminine elements, composed in high contrast, both formally and cinematographically. In this

¹⁹ Brad Prager, 'Taming Impulses: Murnau's *Sunrise* and the Exorcism of Expressionism,' *Literature/Film Quarterly* 28.4 (Oct 2000), 289. Note that Ansa is the name of the male figure in 'The Trip to Tilstet'; Prager chooses to call the film's protagonist by the same name, but I suspect Murnau had his reasons for preferring the more allegorical titles.

way the film identifies an elemental masculine propensity for a purely libidinal fall from grace, against which it figures two diametrically opposed states of womanhood, and between which masculine desire appears destined to agonise, as visions of the Woman from the City plague the Man's waking mind, leaving him with tormenting and domestically destructive desires.



And this is where Murnau's adaptation gets especially interesting, because I would suggest that it is his insistent focus on male sexual torment that leads to the necessity to reductively portray women in this way, and it was this that presumably required changing *The Woman from the City* from a simple cleaning woman, as she was in Sudermann's story, to a lascivious and paganistic city vamp. No wonder he chose to jettison the character names from Sudermann's original tale, opting instead for the portentous titles of *The Man* and *The Woman*, to say nothing of the universalising prologue which claims this as an eternally recurrent story. And indeed it is a recurrent story—or at least it set the pattern for what was to become a recurrent cinematic story, because from Phyllis Dietrichson to *The Lady*

from Shanghai, it is *the* story of film noir, to which the theme of adultery was soon to be co-opted in its most memorable filmic forms.

3

The drama of adultery is clearly as much a psychological as a physical one, and indeed it is the unfolding of consciousness in and around the act of adultery that can prove the most profoundly unsettling in socio-moral terms, and at times the most liberating for the person involved. We know nothing of Hester Prynne's original dalliance with Arthur Dimmesdale in *The Scarlet Letter*; but we are privy to her most secret and anguished thoughts as she deals with its consequences, symbolised in all of their complexity by the scarlet letter itself:

For years past she had looked from this estranged point of view at human institutions, and whatever priests or legislators had established; criticizing all with hardly more reverence than the Indian would feel for the clerical band, the judicial robe, the pillory, the gallows, the fireside, or the church. The tendency of her fate and fortunes had been to set her free. The scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread.²⁰

Adultery works in mysterious ways: for Hester it is strangely emancipatory, which is certainly not the case for The Man in *Sunrise*. Nevertheless Murnau, quite as much as Hawthorne, recognised the interiority of the drama he was dealing with and his film is noteworthy for its innovative attempts to cinematically dramatise the turbulence of mind of The Man as he grapples with adulterous desire. Masculine in focus and psychological in interest, in this way Murnau's approach shares something with those contemporary developments in the novel I mentioned earlier—where men like John Dowell or Leopold Bloom dwell upon the event of adultery in their lives—even if here the male is the adulterous figure. My point is that in the case of novels like *The Good Soldier* and *Ulysses* and films like *Sunrise*, the psychological condition of the man bears upon the narrational mode of the story in a compelling way, and it was to this in particular that Murnau bent his most significant stylistic efforts,

²⁰ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), ed. Thomas E. Connolly, p.174.

exteriorizing the mental torment of *The Man* in expressionistic displays of desire and guilt. Moreover, he knew the significance of what he had achieved in this, stating in 1928: ‘I think films of the future will use more and more of these “camera angles”, or, as I prefer to call them, these “dramatic angles”. They help photograph thought.’²¹ To ‘photograph thought’, or to dramatise consciousness—from Flaubert to Chopin and beyond, is this not what the novel was moving towards in its absorption with adulterous women in the 19th century, and is it not an essential concern of the modernist novel? Few topics have given greater food for thought than the matter of adultery, in novel and film, but the thoughts of women and men appear to diverge, as do the thematic implications of adultery, across the two mediums. If the novel invokes the place of women and the social contract, with the thoughts of women like Hester Prynne opening onto new vistas of social formation and gender equality,²² film appears to resolve the problem of women in dichotomised stereotypy while it universalises the problem of men as that of ‘Human Desire’ itself (in the words of Fritz Lang’s 1954 noir meditation on the subject).²³

²¹ Graham Petrie, *Hollywood Destinies: European Directors in America, 1922-1931* (London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), p.74.

²² Cf. *The Scarlet Letter*:

Indeed, the same dark question often rose into her mind with reference to the whole race of womanhood. Was existence worth accepting even to the happiest among them? As concerned her own individual existence, she had long ago decided in the negative, and dismissed the point as settled. A tendency to speculation, though it may keep women quiet, as it does man, yet makes her sad. She discerns, it may be, such a hopeless task before her. As a first step, the whole system of society is to be torn down and built up anew. Then the very nature of the opposite sex, or its long hereditary habit, which has become like nature, is to be essentially modified before woman can be allowed to assume what seems a fair and suitable position. Finally, all other difficulties being obviated, woman cannot take advantage of these preliminary reforms until she herself shall have undergone a still mightier change, in which, perhaps, the ethereal essence, wherein she has her truest life, will be found to have evaporated. A woman never overcomes these problems by any exercise of thought. They are not to be solved, or only in one way. If her heart chance to come uppermost, they vanish. Thus Hester Prynne, whose heart had lost its regular and healthy throb, wandered without a clue in the dark labyrinth of mind; now turned aside by an insurmountable precipice; now starting back from a deep chasm. (p.184)

²³ Lang’s erotically charged noir of adulterous passion adapts Renoir’s similarly universalized sense of masculine desire in *La Bête Humaine* (1938).

That, at least, is the preliminary conclusion one might draw from Murnau's great film. But it may be that the form and meaning of this film had something to do with the historical circumstances of cinema in the 1920s. At this time, in fact, could cinema undertake at a technical level the kind of sophisticated exploration of an individual's moral and existential circumstance with the kind of reach and subtlety that the novel had managed? What the novel had shown is that the more one gets inside the mind of the character, the more complex and sophisticated a sense of that character's reality can emerge, and so the greater the understanding, and often sympathy, that can be elicited, even in the morally challenging matter of adultery. On the other hand, and despite the sophistication of narrational styles silent filmmakers like Murnau managed to achieve, I would argue that a truly nuanced filmic narration of the kind novelists developed to explore their worlds would only emerge with the introduction of sound cinema, and even then it would be a full ten years before filmmakers began to explore the subtleties of perception and subjectivity in filmic narration that would give psychological vividness and complexity to cinematic narrative in this way. Murnau certainly gets inside the mind of his male protagonist, but only insofar as he is able to expressionistically dramatise a sense of heightened desire coupled with a profound guilt. It is the advent of sound that makes available a fuller and more searching dramatic rendering of consciousness because it allows for a greater use of language, partly as a revelatory expression of personality in dialogue but also as a mechanism permitting the dramatising of point of view through a more adventurous use of techniques such as voiceover narration. And yet it is one of the ironies of the medium that at the very moment it arrived at a technical maturity that would potentially enable it to deal in a more sophisticated and complex way with the great novelistic themes, it found itself under an obligation to treat these with a delicacy that bordered on the sophomoric, as the moral expectations to which a film like *Sunrise* played would be crystallised within a few years into the regulatory Code of the Hayes Office. Adultery was consigned to mere wickedness, and the effect of this was to bring about a kind of congealing of the morally simplistic stereotypy at play in *Sunrise* within popular cinematic narrative, thereby pre-empting its capacity to play that questioning and subversive role within culture that may be charted in novelistic tales of adulterous women.

One might summarise these developments in this way: as the focal point of adultery shifts from the female in the novel to the male in cinema, the mainspring of marital transgression moves from the social to the biological, and the mode of the narrative moves from the situational and

morally exploratory to the allegorical and didactic. While the novelistic figure of the adulterous wife metaphorises social discontent, and illicit sex for her is an expression of (rather than a satisfaction of) yearning, the re-centring of the narrative upon the adulterous male allows for these feelings to be removed from the domestic sphere and exteriorised in a feminine figure represented as decadent, threatening, and, in a word, sinful. This is crucial, effectively pointing to the adulterous woman transmuting into something else in a change so powerful that it is signalled here in the use of the allegorical mode in the representation of *The Woman from the City*, who appears as the prototype for the kind of sexually transgressive woman who would dominate film screens within a decade—the *femme fatale*. The principal difference between *The Woman from the City* and the adulterous *femme fatale* of film noir, as the *Woman's* lurid dance among the marshes suggests, appears to be that she desires pleasure for its own sake—a pleasure that can only be provided by the sensual excitements of modern, decadent city life. The *femme fatales* of film noir, on the other hand, are realists, and they aim beyond the pleasure principle. For them, sex is merely a means to that end, as Elisabeth Bronfen notes:

the classic *femme fatale* has enjoyed such popularity because she is not only sexually uninhibited, but also unabashedly independent and ruthlessly ambitious, using her seductive charms and her intelligence to liberate herself from the imprisonment of an unfulfilling marriage. Furthermore, though she gains power over the noir hero by nourishing his sexual fantasies, her own interest is only superficially erotic. She entertains a narcissistic pleasure at the deployment of her own ability to dupe the men who fall for her, even as she is merciless in manipulating them for her own ends.²⁴

Thus the vexed brooding of Hester Prynne that issues in visions of a revolutionary social transformation in which men and women become equal partners and equal citizens,²⁵ shrinks in the dark, masculine, libidinous world of film noir to a wicked feminine desire for mere material gain: she will take what she can, and whenever she can she will take what belongs to the male.

²⁴ Elisabeth Bronfen, 'Femme Fatale: Negotiations of Tragic Desire,' *New Literary History*, Vol. 35, No. 1, *Rethinking Tragedy* (Winter, 2004), 106.

²⁵ See note 22 above.

Or this is the way the men see it—and this brings me to the second point regarding the historical development of film at this time. I mentioned that the narrational limitations of silent era cinema weighed upon the sophisticated management of this kind of narrative, limitations which become clear when one considers that within a decade of the introduction of sound, filmmakers were actively engaging with the novelistic propensities of the medium in startlingly inventive ways. By 1940 a film like Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* can be seen to have been influenced by as challenging and adventurous a text as William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, published only four years earlier, with its complex play of diffracted narratives from various and even conflicting points of view assembled into a precarious but ultimately elusive whole, centring on an ambiguous figure whose epic story reflects and refracts in some way the story of the nation itself. While this film is rightly seen as a turning point in the history of cinematic form, its indebtedness to the prior narrative medium of the novel can often be overlooked amid the bravura of its cinematic style. But this is only the most evident instance of a general wave of formal exploration in narrative cinema, propelled in large part by the greater access to voice and tense that sound appears to have made available. As the example of *Citizen Kane* indicates, chief among these innovations was a particular interest in first-person forms of narrative that began to emerge in the late 1930s and early 1940s.²⁶ Bruce Kawin has provided an insightful reading of *Citizen Kane* in these terms in *Mindscreen*, and he goes on to identify a drift of first-person narration in cinema towards *nouvelle vague* modes on the continent in the 1950s and 1960s, but prior to this development more conventional filmmakers in Hollywood had shown a fascination for the possibilities of a linguistically enriched medium that offered the opportunity for narrational explorations similar in kind—and possibly depth—to the great narrational experiments of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century novel.

Kawin identifies voiceover as the first cinematic mode of 'signifying subjectivity within the first-person narrative field,'²⁷ and, as the name implies, it is a device that only takes its place within the repertoire of cinematic narrative styles with the coming of sound. When combined with the flashback, a mode of narration was created which was, and probably still is, the most convenient and insistent cinematic device for cueing

²⁶ Famously, Wells had originally planned an adaptation of Conrad's first-person modernist masterpiece *Heart of Darkness* as his first Hollywood project.

²⁷ Bruce Kawin, *Mindscreen: Bergman, Godard, and First-person Film* (Princeton University Press, 1978), p.10.

extended point of view, and in all the grammatical repertoire of cinema the voiceover-flashback comes closest to novelistic first person narration. This mode of narration in a literary text is very familiar, and from its earliest days in novels such as *Moll Flanders* through the high Victorian era with texts like *Great Expectations* and on into the modernist period, literary narrative has used it as a resource for the dramatic exploration of personality in tandem with the memorial unfolding of story. Punctuated by a reiterative 'I', narratives of this kind easily bear multiple significance in terms of the character who tells and the action that is told (two novels of adultery mentioned earlier, *The Great Gatsby* and *The Good Soldier*, are perhaps highpoints of the form). In the case of cinema the flashback was a common enough device from the silent days, but it took the addition of voiceover for filmmakers to find they could manage narrative fluidity and cinematic style in such a way as to maintain a subjective focus without overburdening the frame with its insistence.²⁸ Naturalising this mode for cinema quickly led to its use in stories involving confession, testimony and so on, and so it became a staple for the mystery and thriller where the matter at hand, as it happened, frequently involved criminal adultery. Maureen Turim notes of this development:

While thirties flashback films did introduce the bleeding voiceover transition, it is only in certain forties psychological melodramas, and certainly in film noir, that this disjunct voice attains a strong narrative motivation and continues beyond transitional moments.²⁹

The conjoining of voiceover and flashback in this way in turn naturalised the increasingly expressionistic character of the *mise-en-scène*, as the screen image was understood as dramatically rendering a central, often disturbed psyche as it recounts its traumatic story in a situation of high stress—a dying Walter Neff speaking into the dictaphone in *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944), a distraught Frank Chambers confessing to the prison priest moments before entering the gas chamber in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Tay Garnett, 1946), to take only the two most notorious examples.

²⁸ As was the case in Robert Montgomery's experimental effort *The Lady in the Lake* (1947), shot entirely, but ultimately distractingly, in point of view.

²⁹ Maureen Turim, *Flashbacks in Film: Memory and History* (London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1989), p.171.

The stories these men have to tell take us back to the fundamental elements at play in *Sunrise*, but now the femme fatale has manoeuvred her way into the domestic sphere, and the men are the intruders. This does not change the way in which women come to be represented in the narrative, however, because this is now the way that men imagine them—with the voiceover-flashback, cinema has arrived at a convenient and unobtrusive way of ‘photographing thought’, as Murnau might have put it. But unlike in *Sunrise*, where The Man’s visions are demarcated from the rest of the narrative as ‘aberrations’, as Prager notes, the screenspace in films like *Double Indemnity* operates as a mindscreen, blurring the distinction between the real and the imagined.³⁰ Consequently, in American cinema at this time the masculine voice takes control of the narrative either through direct on-screen narration (*Double Indemnity*, *Murder My Sweet* (Edward Dmytryk, 1944), *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, and so on) or through free indirect discourse (as in, say, John Huston’s use of the over-the-shoulder camera in his 1941 adaptation of *The Maltese Falcon*) and the masculine view came to dominate screen conceptions of womanhood, with tales of adultery centring on the figures of the hormonal male and the femme fatale.³¹ On the rare occasions that women assume narratorial command in these situations they tend to do so by writing letters, as in *A*

³⁰ It is true that this use of voiceover-flashback can bring to the screen the potential operation of an even more complex kind of irony with which the literary mind has long been familiar from forms such as the dramatic monologue, whereby the given reality of the narrative can only be accepted as one person’s view of the matter. In these instances the insistence of the speaking voice, the first-person perspective, evokes the possibility of competing counter-narratives contesting the truth or plausibility of the narration, and I will deal with this in greater detail below. In this respect Bronfen has argued with great subtlety from a study of specific shots in *Double Indemnity* that Billy Wilder implies just such a counter-narrative and counter-fantasy to the overt confession of Walter Neff, a fantasy narrative of the femme fatale enveloping the male speaker, culminating in a transcendence of female desire in an ultimately tragic gesture of anagnorisis and fatalistic acceptance as Phyllis Dietrichson bows to the inevitability of her film noir fate. But, even apart from the shots Bronfen specifies, I would argue that the narrational mode of voiceover-flashback puts this possibility into play in the first place through the complex levels of narrational irony it generates, and with this development cinematic narrative has moved exponentially forward from the ‘photographed thoughts’ of *Sunrise*.

³¹ In general, of course, these films adopt the masculine point of view uncritically, but some of the more thoughtful excursions in the genre acknowledge that at some level the figure of the lustful and manipulative woman should be understood as fundamentally a male projection—an idea Fritz Lang plays with brilliantly in *The Woman in the Window* (1944).

Letter to Three Wives (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1949), which explores the fragility of the suburban American marriage under the threat of adultery, and the sublime *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (Max Ophüls, 1948), which reverses the moral polarity entirely as the cad replaces the femme fatale as the agent of wickedness, and a female voice reveals the catastrophic effect of predatory masculine sexuality to a man who has never taken responsibility for his actions. But these are the exception, and even feminine epistles can be co-opted to the dominant stereotype, as in *The Letter* (William Wyler, 1940), where Bette Davis's eponymous correspondence only serves to confirm her lethal wickedness. Meanwhile, when Vincente Minelli came to make his handsome adaptation of *Madame Bovary* in 1949, after a decade of film noir gender figurations, it was felt necessary to *instruct* the audience on how to respond positively to an adulterous woman: the story is framed within the legal proceedings caused by the book, and in a manoeuvre that represents the very antithesis of Flaubert's novelistic approach the author is enlisted on-screen as defendant-narrator with a firm didactic purpose, instructing the audience—both at the trial and in the theatre—that they are not to precipitately condemn Emma, but rather that they should find a measure of sympathy for her. It all concludes with a gravely thoughtful James Mason as Flaubert staring off to the right of screen in an elegant profile of puzzled contemplation, thereby licensing whatever feelings of bewilderment Minelli's audience might well be sharing at the time.

4

Four years after appearing as Madame Bovary in Minelli's film, Jennifer Jones was teamed with Montgomery Clift in Vittorio De Sica's neo-realist study of adulterous passion in the claustrophobic atmosphere of the Rome railway in *Terminal Station* (1953). Montgomery Clift had only recently appeared as Clyde Griffiths in George Marshall's 1951 adaptation of *An American Tragedy*, so each star brought to the movie an evocative background regarding the theme of adulterous passion and its dark consequences. Added to this, Jones's husband at the time, producer David O. Selznick, objected vociferously to another man's directorial handling of his wife and what he no doubt regarded as her star vehicle, and so the tale of adultery was itself adulterated when Selznick produced a re-edited version for American audiences, known as *Indiscretion of an American Wife* (1953). One can only wonder at the emotional dynamics of this increasingly fraught situation, in which Clift sided passionately with

director De Sica's aesthetic vision against producer Selznick's interference, while resisting the misplaced but apparently earnest romantic interest of his co-star, and yet still producing an on-screen performance of irresistible desire for her amid the stark and unpromising surrounds of the Rome railway station. There are significant differences of emphasis between De Sica's and Selznick's films but what is most striking is that in each case the film's centre of consciousness rests with the Jennifer Jones character, a housewife from Philadelphia whose European journey has unhinged her close and uneventful suburban world, releasing feelings of passion which she finds irrepressible and which lead to her indiscretion in an abandoned railway car on a siding in the station. Perhaps the filmmakers were counting on a residual sense of understanding of Jones's adulterous character due to the actress's earlier appearance as Emma Bovary, when, as I mentioned, audiences were instructed to find some sympathy for her. Or perhaps they were hoping that the narrative itself would conduct audiences to a higher level of empathy, for the couple are arrested in the indiscreet act and forced to submit to the judgement of the Station Security Chief, who turns out to be an indulgent figure willing to wink at this evidence of a pardonable vice, possibly because the station at which he works had only recently been rebuilt after the ravages of true human viciousness had reduced it to rubble during the war. Whatever the case, however, the film failed to find an appreciative audience.

One is tempted to think, though, that it was the railway setting that encouraged De Sica and Selznick to think that they could get away with it. A place of heightened opportunity for the chance encounter and the recent scene of so many emotional welcomes and tortured partings against a general background of human misfortune in wartime, the railway station presents a setting that readily metaphorises the complexity and random contingency of individual romantic fulfilment. It is almost as if the normal rules of social behaviour might be momentarily suspended in and around the railway—a view that appears to have been taken by the Clift and Jones characters in *Indiscretion of an American Wife*. It had figured this way already in the novel of adultery—most notably in Tolstoy as the venue for Anna's meeting with Vronsky and as the site and means of her tragic end³²—and of course it had been successfully employed, and indeed raised

³² Not only did Anna meet Vronsky, and ultimately her tragic fate, at the railway station but it was on a train, after a carriage conversation on the emergent rights of women and the changing role and obligations for women in marriage, that the outraged Podsnicheff told of how he murdered his wife on the presumption of

to its highest metaphorical pitch, not so long before by David Lean in *Brief Encounter* (1954). He used it again for near-tragic effect in *The Passionate Friends* (1949), transforming the train station into a London tube station as the distraught Mary Justin seeks a blessed release from an impossible marital situation that has been exacerbated by her prior adultery. In the H.G.Wells novel from which it was adapted, Mary took poison—like Emma Bovary and Florence Dowell before her—but here Lean appears keen to accent the romantic abandon of her act by alluding to Anna's suicide, although he spares Mary a full tragic fate by having her rescued at the last moment by a repentant husband. He used it with a lighter touch in *Summertime* (1955), opening with an aerial view of Santa Lucia station in Venice as the train pulls in, delivering Jane Hudson (Katherine Hepburn) to her unexpected romantic rendezvous with the married Renato de Rossi (Rossano Brazzi). Jane is morally outraged when she discovers the truth, but circumstances are such that her strict spinsterish moral sense comes undone in the exotic Venetian night. When the train takes her away in the film's final moments it is with the audience's approval of her morally questionable but enlarging romantic adventure, as her adulterous lover waves fondly to her, so very unlike the character of Clift who finds himself sprawled on the gravel of the Rome Terminal Station, a picture of undignified injury as Jones's train departs.

Audiences clearly made allowances for Katherine Hepburn's character in *Summertime* in a way they did not for Jones's in *Indiscretion*, and perhaps this was because David Lean approaches the matter of adultery—perhaps his most prominent theme—without any of the sensationalism that appears in its other cinematic uses that I have been considering. In Lean's films all of the associated tropes of adultery return with novelistic subtlety. In *Brief Encounter*, for example, in an episode that could never have occurred in the play (in which the action is confined to the train station) Laura and Alec go boating, but he turns out to be a poor oarsman and they get caught up with the bridge fencing, at which point Alec is obliged to suffer the indignity of stepping out of the boat into the shallow water to redirect it.

adultery in *The Kreutzer Sonata*. Cf Tanner's discussion of the importance of the railway setting in this context—pp.72-73.



It is an engaging and naturalistic image of romantic escape colliding somewhat shamefacedly with social restriction, but in its modest way it recalls similar episodes of drifting lovers and loosening morality from the novelistic past, such as Maggie Tulliver's ill-fated boat trip with Stephen in *The Mill on the Floss*, of which Tanner observes:

Maggie temporarily yields to this abdication of responsibility and allows herself to drift with the river, to succumb almost entirely to the 'fatal intoxication' of the moment, almost deprived of the right to make any choices. But the abandonment is not complete. 'All yielding is attended with a less vivid consciousness than resistance; it is the partial sleep of thought; it is the submergence of our own personality by another. Every influence tended to lull her into acquiescence....'³³

It is precisely this conflict George Eliot delineates between the yearning desire for easeful acquiescence and the peripheral but shameful awareness of moral requirement that Lean evokes effectively but unobtrusively here in

³³ Tanner, *The Novel of Adultery*, p.69.

his own suburban-scaled boating scene, as he does in so many other ways throughout this film.

Similarly, when he came to make *Ryan's Daughter* (1970), his adaptation of *Madame Bovary* which he relocated to western Ireland, Lean makes a point of associating Rosy Ryan with a parasol, which she carries about with her in her wanderings around the rugged Irish coastline.

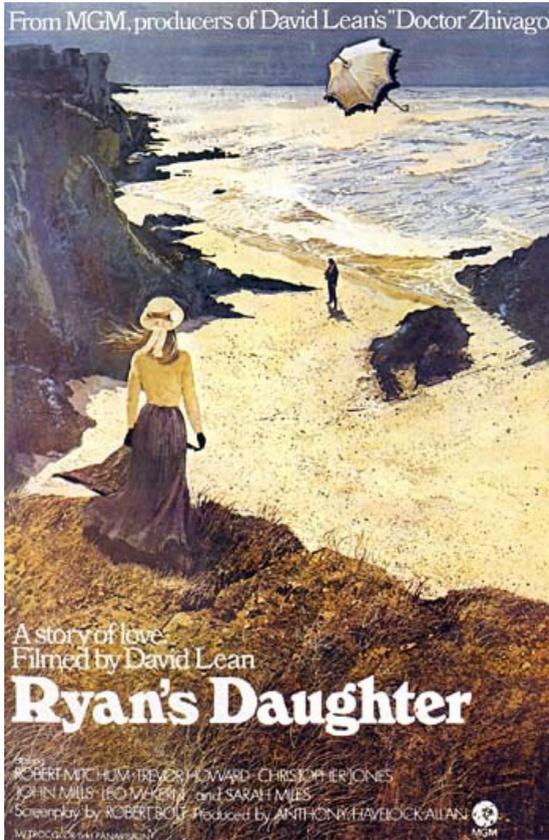


The opening shot of the film, however, shows that parasol drifting down through the air off a cliff and landing in the water, where it is retrieved by the parish priest who sees that it is returned to Rosy. Was it lost or was it thrown? The question arises because of the generic significance of the item—the same significance that attached to the parasol under which Edna Pontellier is first glimpsed by her husband at the opening of *The Awakening*.³⁴ The parasol is there to protect male property from the harsh effects of the sun—which Léonce Pontellier would afterwards complain of to his wife—so its loss, whether wilful or torn from Rosy by an irresistible force of nature, is significant. Audiences at the time may have been cued to this significance by the parasol having already figured in this way in the

³⁴ See *The Awakening*, p. 4:

Mr. Pontellier finally lit a cigar and began to smoke, letting the paper drag idly from his hand. He fixed his gaze upon a white sunshade that was advancing at snail's pace from the beach. He could see it plainly between the gaunt trunks of the water-oaks and across the stretch of yellow camomile. The gulf looked far away, melting hazily into the blue of the horizon. The sunshade continued to approach slowly. Beneath its pink-lined shelter were his wife, Mrs. Pontellier, and young Robert Lebrun.

advertising for the film, where its free, windblown form can be seen to be drawing her to what turns out to be a moral precipice.



In a film which identifies women as the property of men in its title, the casting aside of this fashion accessory is the first sign of an emancipatory moral abandonment that will climax in Rosy's flight into the rainswept night in nothing but her shift to meet her lover. As with Edna Pontellier, whose ambiguously tragic and triumphant destiny climaxes in a naked swim, this symbolic pattern of divestiture underscores an existential struggle to throw off the trappings of the troubled and constrained place of women in a world of masculine order. Significantly, the lost parasol is returned to Rosy by the village priest, a well-meaning, celibate representative of that order who will later instruct her in her conjugal

duties, providing an ironic perspective on her relations with men which the film will then tease out in various other situations, including her marriage to her caring but effete teacher-husband and her unconscious involvement in the machinations of Anglo-Irish politics through her traitorous merchant-father and her psychologically damaged soldier-lover. Surrounded by images of male authority in a fractious world from which she yearns to escape, seduced by an unfulfilling adulterous romance narrative and dragooned into a mystifying political conspiracy, Rosy is ultimately divested of her social identity, literally shorn of it, in a scene of communal shaming that is every bit as traumatic as, and considerably more violent than, Hester Prynne's vigil on the scaffold. Unprotected by the cossetting niceties of patriarchal order symbolised by the parasol, Rosy is ultimately left brutally exposed as her hair is violently cut by the mob.

But above all it is David Lean's railway stations in his stories of adulterous women that reach back into the novelistic past and evoke a sense of crossing paths, of the random chances of romance and the wages of social sin. Nowhere is this more powerfully managed than in *Brief Encounter*, where rail timetables announce a suburban but still urgent warning of *carpe diem* as express trains thunder through the station with that juggernaut force of desire to which Laura Jesson momentarily threatens to sacrifice herself, either in physical love with Alec or physical destruction like Anna. 'I want to die,' she tells Alec at their final meeting at the train station, and it is significant that her fatality is inward and personal, the very antithesis of those impulses that were driving the murderous femme fatales of American cinema at the time. The vacuity of bourgeois life appears to have instilled in her the same blurred yearnings for romantic escape or final release that bedevilled Emma Bovary, Anna Karenina, and Edna Pontellier. And like those heroines from another time and another medium, Laura's plight is told in such a way as to profoundly interrogate the nature of her social circumstance. Or, rather—and this is the point—Laura *tells* her story in voiceover flashback in such a way as to pose questions of her situation, without ever knowing that that is what she is doing.

The film camouflages many of its own subversive impulses under a narrative that ostensibly resolves in commitment to moral and social duty, and in doing so it appears to remain faithful to the Noel Coward drama from which it was adapted. For Coward there was a nobility to middle class sacrifice, a theme that is evident from his very first collaboration with Lean, *In Which We Serve* (1942), in which Coward himself plays the self-

sacrificing upper middle class naval captain with a fully patrician air. Even in this, his first collaboration with Coward and his debut as director, however, Lean's cinematic interests can be seen to be at odds with Coward's thematic inclinations. Lean is keen to focalize narrative through a series of individualised points of view, and although for the most part this is managed in the interests of narrative progression rather than psychological exploration it nevertheless serves to inflect each narrative episode with a particular subjective sense that engages the viewer's emotional response through the use of flashbacks from the perspectives of various characters. The wave-like dissolves into and out of these flashbacks blend actuality and memory into poignant moments of a reality heightened by individual perception. This is most marked in the scene in which Celia Johnson is called upon to toast the ship that will carry her husband (Coward) and crew into the perils of war. It is a very affecting moment, beautifully managed by Johnson's delivery which communicates the required sense of nobility under pressure but more intensely projects a keen feeling for the torment of individual sacrifice and the helpless frustrations of those women who must stand and wait. It is a scene that momentarily tips the film off thematic balance, and the tension it generates between social requirement and individual desire—particularly in the case of women—came to absorb Lean in many of his later films, and perhaps explains why he chose Johnson for his Laura when it came to adapting Coward's drama of adultery, *Still Life*, to the screen.

It is likely that Coward conceived of *Still Life* as a kind of modern pastoral with the aristocratic characters transposed to the upper bourgeoisie, meeting by chance in a railway station as they once might have met in the forests of Arden, momentarily relieved of courtly burdens and seemingly free to indulge in the kind of rustic sensuality that civic morality frowns upon and sense of duty should forbid. Here the rustic clowns of theatrical tradition have been modernized to working class station attendants and teashop ladies, whose freer morality and bawdy antics counterpoint the romantic agonies of Laura and Alec (Trevor Howard). And as her name implies, Laura is a Petrarchan figure who finds herself in a modern world, but one in which the old courtly notion that true romantic fulfilment can only be attained outside the bonds of marriage still functions. Yet *Brief Encounter* is not a film of adultery—the illicit liaison is never consummated. It is, however, in the play, and the two most important infidelities of the film with respect to the play, it seems to me, are this decision never to allow Laura's passion to find sexual release, binding her all the more intensely within her feelings of moral and social

constriction, and the decision to give the point of view of the film totally over to her in flashback voiceover. In the first instance this allows Lean to explore the emotional impact of Laura's deep sense of shame without counterbalancing this with an act of guilt to which it could answer, and without ever providing her with a sensual experience that might provide some sense of emotional release. The tension around Laura is raised to such a high pitch that it exceeds the capacity of the narrative to provide any sense of satisfactory resolution: the story simply concludes, it does not resolve, and there is no promise that next week's trip to Milford won't bring her another episode of adulterous desire and emotional torment. And in the second instance, Laura's flashback voiceover allows Lean to dramatise her consciousness with that ironic play of meaning which I noted earlier in relation to the masculine narrators of film noir. Thus it is not just that we are enjoined to comprehend this situation compassionately from Laura's point of view, but we are also given the opportunity to understand what weighs upon that point of view in a way Laura cannot. She can't say why, but Laura experiences adulterous desire as an emancipatory passion: she is unable to understand why she might unconsciously desire liberation from a situation which she knows to be the normal and approved mode of life for women like her, just as she is unable to get past her own sense of her husband, Fred, as wise and caring, a view she reminds herself of at various points through the film. But there are aspects to her telling of her tale—her confession, to herself if to no other—which ironically are revealing to others, but not to her.

None of this is in Coward's play, and all of it is managed with considerable cinematic art. The cumulative effect of Lean's approach here is to bring into play the dangerously subversive implications arising from the sympathetic psychological explorations of the plight of women in the novel of adultery, because although Coward's theme of the nobility of middle class commitment to duty is acknowledged, it is also simultaneously recognised by Lean as a fundamentally manipulative principle of civic life, and it is the tension between these two forces—played out so vibrantly in Laura's sensibility³⁵—that gives the film much

³⁵ And in Johnson's extraordinary performance, of which Richard Dyer—in his excellent study of this film—observes:

The effect (of Celia being Laura) is reinforced by Johnson's great ease before the camera ... I have emphasized this perception of her, because it suggests the degree to which her voice and presence (Celia Johnson's, Laura Jesson's) in the film could invite the audience in, not treating her as a symptom or spectacle but rather as a place from which to view this kind of life. Thus the inflections she

of its extraordinary power. All too vividly, all too ashamedly aware of her duty, Laura is unable to recognise that manipulation, but this plays itself out in the mindscreen of her memories of the brief encounter because it structures her consciousness and determines her apprehensions of her world. In this, Lean seems to have taken the lesson of the master—not Coward but rather Henry James, the great novelist of adultery, who, as he approached the writing of *The Portrait of a Lady*, recalled that he cautioned himself in this way:

‘Place the centre of the subject in the young woman’s own consciousness,’ I said to myself, ‘and you get as interesting and as beautiful a difficulty as you could wish. Stick to THAT—for the centre; put the heaviest weight into THAT scale, which will be so largely the scale of her relation to herself.’

It is the scale of Laura’s relation to herself that is dramatised in this film, and despite an air of naturalism that at times borders on the gritty, it is only Laura’s sense of self and her world that is on display, not an objective sense of the reality of the matter. In this sense *Brief Encounter* is not about adultery, as the play was—it doesn’t even contain the act of adultery—but it is a searching examination of the adulterous mind under the pressures of bourgeois moral stricture, and in this way it takes its place among those other great modernist works that take as their point of interest the psychic repercussions of adultery—*What Maisie Knew* or *The Good Soldier*—with this twist: that here, the psychic intensity is ratcheted up to an almost intolerable pitch because the person puzzling over the moral outrage of adultery is not a bystander but rather the same one beset by unrealised but irrepressible adulterous impulses. And adultery does not even occur! But then, as Tanner notes, according to biblical injunction adultery need only happen in the mind, and that is why Laura’s mind is simultaneously adulterous and the censorious voice of introjected social order, and her sense of guilt refines to a perfect extremity the admonitory perspective of social morality, rendering hers a Gothic world of her own imagining.

There are times when this imaginary element of memory is cued to the audience, as when Laura recalls her romantic fantasy of a prospect of

gives to the script, especially the way common sense and yearning, amusement and despair, eddy across her face, voice and body, come to suggest an inwardness with this situation, a sort of running commentary on it, that is different from her formal presentation of guilt to male authority.

Richard Dyer, *Brief Encounter* (London: BFI, 1993) p.33.

life with Alec, studded with clichés reminiscent of movie trailers like *Flames of Passion*—the movie which she and Alec find risible—but this only gives an added pathos to the quality of her desire, since this is the only way in which she can frame her sense of yearning, and thus she finds her own emotional life here both compelling and simultaneously rather inauthentic and confected. But this overt signalling of Laura’s awareness of the mediated character of her sense of self at this point distracts us from the fact that it is *always* mediated in this way. This comes out in particular in scenes such as the framing of her sense of shame as she sits under the war memorial, physically and morally diminished both by the honour it symbolises and the high angle at which she is shot, which does not express the film’s judgement of her so much as her own sense of self.



Similarly, the screen is frequently inflected by expressionistic imagery of this kind which serves to externalise her fraught inner life, as when the staircase to her children’s room momentarily takes on a look of Gothic chiaroscuro as she is assailed by disembodied male voices (her husband’s downstairs, her son’s peremptory commands from upstairs) after her first encounter with Alec, when the first glimmerings of a liberating passion collide with the dreary realities of a life determined by the same social

conventions and biological patterns that Edna Pontellier ultimately found intolerable.



Thus, where Coward's play makes educated reference to prior genres of romantic narrative, Lean's film gathers these into the furniture of Laura's mind. In this way the imagery of the film can be seen to be shaped by the movies Laura sees every Thursday and the books she borrows from Boots.³⁶ Her personal drama of renunciation is saturated with suburban renderings of Gothic, pastoral, and courtly romance—they are all at play here, the pastoral setting of the working class cafe, the triadic relationship between courtly lovers and the Lord at home in the Castle, and the suicidal impulses from the heroines of nineteenth century fiction. The difference from the play is stark: there, the text compliments the audience with these seemingly high-brow associations; here, they are the very fabric of Laura's tormenting imaginings, adding a psychological dimension totally absent from the play, but one that was increasingly becoming of interest to

³⁶ For a discussion of the sorts of books these would be and how they may have influenced the narrative see Dyer pp.37-41.

filmmakers as they explored the narrational and expressionistic capacities of film in the early 1940s, as I have argued.

But Lean's most interesting and adventurous use of this mode of narration occurs in its most camouflaged moments, when the screen presents a scene at which Laura could not have been present. There are only two of these—first when she calls Mary Norton to back up her story about lunch, and next when she rushes out of the flat when Alec is confronted by Stephen after he arrives home unexpectedly during Laura and Alec's tryst. In the first scene Laura remembers sitting at her dressing table as she tells her first lie to Fred; here she is surrounded by the appurtenances of female vanity, her face reflecting duplicitously in a number of mirrors as she fashions herself in memory as an image of cosmetic deceit (Fred observes that she is 'beautifying' herself).



When she telephones Mary, she pictures her in precisely the same attitude, preening herself and even plucking an eyebrow as she studies herself in the mirror while conspiring with Laura's deception.



This, then, is how Laura comes to imagine women—an image which conforms to a masculinist stereotypy of feminine duplicity and sensuality, and which informs her own self-reflections. In the later scene, however, we see how she imagines men. In the play we cannot know what occurs between Alec and Stephen when he interrupts the tryst—Laura guesses that it becomes a diminishing masculine conversation about sexual conquest, but Alec assures her it wasn't that way. In the film, we see—or it seems we see—precisely what happens: Stephen morally reprehends Alec, with particularly heavy sarcasm, in a scene which has the dual effect of morally excoriating Laura for her part in the affair, but simultaneously giving Alec a further nobility insofar as he is now seen to be shielding her from the moral censure he received but will not visit on her when he later speaks slightly of the event. But I think this scene must be read as constructed from Laura's sense of Alec's nobility, projected back into the unknown scene in the bedroom; and if this scene is merely Laura's imagining of what happened it is profoundly revealing, for it not only gives one male figure moral authority (Stephen), it also gives another male figure, Alec, a nobility from which she is necessarily precluded (she can shield no-one, and her honour now is understood by her as being in Alec's chivalrous gift), which can only serve to accentuate her own ignoble sense of self.

Alec is not a figment, as some modern viewers have speculated,³⁷ but he is fashioned from Laura's imaginings all the same, and he embodies both romantic and patriarchal aspects of the male which dramatize the schizophrenized nature of her social position as woman in which she can figure and comprehend herself only as deceitful adulteress and idealized mistress of the chivalric hero upon whom her honour depends (the Petrarchan Laura), or as domestic possession of a dull, neglectful and affectionless lord of the manor and inadequate and sinful mother (as when she blames herself for her son Bobby's accident).



It all adds up to a state of wretchedness, of quiet desperation, to which Laura apparently re-dedicates herself at the end, having survived her suicidal impulse at the train station. I would argue, however, that this sentimental conclusion simply papers over the issues raised by this film, allowing it to apparently conform to the general cinematic morality regarding the matter of adultery that had been evolving over the previous 15 years. Against this sentimental view, Lean's narrative gambit of voiceover flashback and the ironies it generates has put this wretchedness

³⁷ Cf Dyer p.19.

into play, and the audience cannot simply dismiss it: it lingers beyond the ending as part of the fundamental experience of the film even if Laura tries nobly to disavow it. Not that she can, because it is her sense of the wretchedness of the world that is on screen, not the world as it is, objectively speaking. This, too, is where the dramatic intensity of this film comes from: this fundamental contradiction between its espoused objective morality—traditional, communitarian, socially idealistic—and its subjective narrative conduct and empathetic mode of narration, which is of a piece with the ‘immoral’ conduct and consciousness of Laura, who cannot help finding that morality claustrophobic and stifling even as she judges herself harshly by it. And the tension here arises from the fact that although this ‘nobility’ eclipses and subjugates personal desire in its appeal to a supposed collective good, the deeper implication of the film is that this subjugation actually works in the interests of a masculine status quo and against the interests of women like Laura—a perception which the film dramatises but which Laura’s deep sense of guilt prevents her from recognising.

The audience, then, briefly encounters a dark and troubling irony in this film which has the effect of subverting the comfortably familiar moral sentiment it appears ultimately to espouse. Prior to the war, in Coward’s play, that was not the case—the sentiment was indeed espoused, but here it is adulterated in the filmic experience as Lean appeared to find the process of adaptation drawing him towards different perspectives, different conclusions. Perhaps the war changed things, making it impossible to ignore the fact that noble sacrifice in a class-based society generally benefited those not required to make it, and was generally made by those who did not enjoy the privileges of nobility—a perspective which this film applies to the gender divide.³⁸ One wonders, though, whether for Lean it

³⁸ This discounts Alec’s noble sacrifice in part—his decision to go to Johannesburg on his idealistic medical mission—but then we really don’t know anything about Alec, other than Laura’s idealized memory of him. We certainly don’t know what he was telling his own wife during this period, for example, or whether he was enduring the same kind of agony as Laura, since it’s not his film. Nor do we know what impels him in the first place. It is interesting, however, that Alec comes across as a much less chivalrous figure in the play, where his arguments have a rather specious air, and sound very much like pompous and self-serving persuasions to love:

Alec: Everything’s against us—all the circumstances of our lives—those have got to go on unaltered. We’re nice people, you and I, and we’ve got to go on being nice. Let’s enclose this love of ours with real strength, and let that strength be that no-one is hurt by it except ourselves.

was a case of fidelity to the medium taking precedence over fidelity to the source, as his exploration of the narrational potentialities of cinema served to open up possibilities of interpretative meaning that transformed Coward's theatrical study into a very different experience for cinema audiences. For—in Laura's weekly trip to the cinema at Milford, which opens briefly onto something so much larger—at the heart of this film about adultery is a connection between the seductions of the screen and the seductions of life. Faithful in narrative structure to a morality it may have been obliged to follow, the film's aesthetic effect, moment by moment, is nevertheless to dramatize the pull of a scandalous departure from the settled existence of suburban life, and when it does so it may be a secret admission that film is a medium that seduces us from and adulterates the precarious reality of our lives whenever it is most faithful to its own aesthetic desires, to the genius of its own forms.³⁹

Laura: Must we be hurt by it?

Alec: Yes—when the time comes.

Laura: Very well.

Alec: All the furtiveness and the secrecy and the hole-in-corner cheapness can be justified if only we're strong enough—strong enough to keep it to ourselves, clean and untouched by anybody else's knowledge or even suspicions—something of our own forever—to be remembered --

Laura: Very well.

Alec: We won't speak of it anymore—I'm going now—back to Stephen's flat. I'll wait for you.... —Noel Coward, *Still Life* (London: Samuel French, 1966), p.30.

Laura is persuaded, and she does go to the flat on this night in October, and continues to do so until December, when Stephen eventually interrupts their liaison.

³⁹ In this the film is like the Rachmaninov concerto Laura absorbs herself in, or the Chopin prelude that Edna Pontellier finds awakens her sensibility, or the Kreutzer Sonata that Podsnicheff finds so troubling, to the extent that he is carried away by suspicions of his wife's adultery and murders her, because, as he says, 'music provokes an excitement which it does not bring to a conclusion.' (*The Kreutzer Sonata*, ch. 23—<http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/t/tolstoy/leo/t65kr/chapter23.html>, accessed 1/7/2016.) In this respect Tanner observes:

music—particularly romantic nineteenth century music, which in various ways extols the projection of an individual's subjective mood—is dangerous to the extent that it suggests the possibility of new and exciting mergings and a sense of 'agitation' and discontent with one's established position and habitual range of feelings... From one point of view music can be seen as an adulteration of ordinary consciousness—a new and exciting relationship with the mood of another, which, however, can find no realization in the realm of society... From this point of view, both music and adultery, within the rigid confines of bourgeois society, offer

'My heart is black with rebellion against my lot and against the lot of woman,' writes Mary Justin in her letter to Stephen, with whom she had had her adulterous and defiantly liberated affair in H.G. Wells's *The Passionate Friends*.⁴⁰ When he came to adapt that novel David Lean took the narrative from Stephen—Wells's male narrator who was in fact in the process of writing his autobiography in a patriarchal epistle to his young son—and turned it inside out, bringing it to the screen as Mary's story, which she tells in flashback-voiceover narration. Just as his passion for cinema represented for him a means of 'getting out of Croydon', as he famously claimed, Lean appeared to recognise the emancipatory force of any passion that had the effect of revealing the stifling existential conditions imposed by an unquestioned propriety. This analysis of his sources and adaptative approach suggests that in doing so he was drawn to explore modes of feminine consciousness in conjunction with exploratory modes of cinematic expression which yielded challenging perspectives upon each. In the matter of adultery he returned to a novelistic sympathy with the adulterous heroine, thereby reversing the prevailing paradigm of the femme fatale, who had become necessary to a mass entertainment morality and thus central to the cinematic depiction of adultery. And by giving the woman the narratorial point of view he explored with great subtlety modes of cinematic dramatization of consciousness—in particular, female consciousness beset by bourgeois constriction—which both deepened the expressive reach of the medium and brought into view aspects of social existence commonly occluded by prevailing cinematic and cultural mores. Like Murnau before him, it was fidelity to the medium itself that led him to an interest in exploring the possibilities of 'filming thought', and like Hester Prynne, cinematically speaking anyway, the scarlet letter was his passport into regions where others dared not tread.

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the possibility of an extrasocial excitation that cannot be translated back into a way of life within society... This is an apt formulation for what the novel of adultery sets out to explore—not this or that illicit coupling, but the fate of awakened energy 'unsuited both to the time and the place'.

(p.79)

⁴⁰ H.G.Wells, *The Passionate Friends* (New York: Harper Bros., 1913), p.303.