Treasures from the Yale Film Archive

Mildred Pierce

Friday, October 13, 7 p.m.
Humanities Quadrangle Lecture Hall

Directed by Michael Curtiz
Screenplay by Ranald MacDougall
Based on the novel by James M. Cain
Cinematography by Ernest Haller
Produced by Warner Bros. (1945), 111 mins.
Starring Joan Crawford, Jack Carson, Zachary Scott, Eve Arden, Ann Blyth, Bruce Bennett, and Butterfly McQueen
At Warner Bros. in early 1944, producer Jerry Wald was stalled in his attempt to bring James Cain’s best-selling 1941 novel to the screen, and Joan Crawford was stalled in her attempt at a comeback. That these two ambitions, independent of each other, would coalesce and result in a classic film was far from inevitable.

Wald’s major battle was with the censors. In February 1944, Joseph Breen, head of the MPAA, which administered the Production Code, cautioned Jack Warner not to proceed: “the story contains so many sordid and repellent elements that we feel the finished picture would not only be highly questionable from the standpoint of the Code, but would, likewise, meet with a great deal of difficulty in its release.” Nevertheless, on March 15, the studio purchased the rights (for $15,000). After unsuccessfully trying to get Cain to write the screenplay and make character and plot changes to satisfy the Code, Wald turned to a succession of eight studio contract writers, including William Faulkner. Ranald MacDougall, who received sole screenplay credit and an Oscar nomination, contributed the flashback structure, but it was Wald’s idea to begin with a murder and frame the story around a mystery. The crime element is nowhere in the book: it takes 20 minutes of noir before *Mildred Pierce* catches up to the beginning of Cain’s novel, whereupon the film segues into melodrama, or what was known as a “woman’s picture.”

Crawford, whose career began in 1925 at age 19, was one of the silent era’s biggest stars—F. Scott Fitzgerald called her “doubtless the best example of the flapper” — and her smooth transition to sound placed her among the top ten box-office stars in every year from 1931 to 1936. But her popularity waned, and in 1938, she appeared on the Independent Theatre Association’s notorious “box-office poison” list (along with Hepburn, Garbo, and Dietrich). In 1943, Crawford and MGM agreed to end her contract (which had lasted 18 years and had included almost 70 films), and Crawford signed a three-picture contract with Warner Bros. where she expected “tough woman” roles. After all, it was the home of Bette Davis.

Her first Warner Bros. film, *Hollywood Canteen*, where she did a cameo as herself, was a box-office success, but far from what Crawford sought. She rejected everything else the studio offered, until *Mildred Pierce* came along: she felt that playing, in critic Imogen Sara Smith’s words, “a fiercely hardworking perfectionist driven by a dogged, unappeasable longing for approval,” was made for her. But director Michael Curtiz, calling Crawford “a has-been,” hoped for Bette Davis, Rosalind Russell, or Barbara Stanwyck. Curtiz’s opinion was significant: the studio’s premier director, he had been with Warner Bros. since 1926 (and would remain there until 1954, with a total of 86 films!); had directed such hits as *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (and 11 other Errol Flynn films), *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, and *This is the Army*; and had won the Best Director Oscar in March 1944 for *Casablanca*, also named Best Picture. After Crawford (reluctantly) did a screen test in October 1944, he hired her, but they fought throughout the production.

*Mildred Pierce* began shooting on December 7, 1944, was released on September 28, 1945, received mixed reviews but with Crawford almost universally praised, was a commercial success, and received six Oscar nominations including newcomer Ann Blyth for her supporting performance as the ultimate daughter-from-hell. Crawford received the Best Actress Oscar, her career was rejuvenated, and she went on to star in many celebrated 1940s and 1950s noir melodramas.

The film’s holding out hope that a woman can rise in social status does not include Lottie, Mildred’s maid. Played by Butterfly McQueen, Lottie is the stereotypical befuddled servant, just a step above McQueen’s Prissy in *Gone With the Wind*. Despite her talents as an actor and singer, McQueen remained relegated to demeaning roles, and here, sadly, she didn’t even receive a screen credit.

**DID YOU KNOW** Ann Blyth, 16 years old at the time of filming, turned 95 on August 16, 2023. She is the earliest living acting Oscar nominee.

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**NEXT UP** Two filmmakers rediscover and reimagine documentaries they embarked upon decades before: *The Way It Was: Paris Restaurants in the 1970s* (1973/2023) and *A Cooler Climate* (1960/2022) screen with filmmakers Stephen Scher and James Ivory in person, Sunday, Oct. 15 at 2 p.m.