

Re-discovering the kitchen sink

Introduction

Woman In a Dressing Gown is a key British film of the 1950s. Its individual elements of cast and crew and script and aesthetics point to various changes in British cinema and the film itself says something about 1950s Britain and attitudes towards cinema.

Within British film studies, the conventional wisdom for many years was that the 1950s was a period of mundane British filmmaking – full of stiff upper-lipped men in war movies and eccentric rural types in gentle comedies about steam trains. There were such films and they were successful at the box office, but there were many other films as well and together they represented what was in many ways the most successful period of British filmmaking commercially – when Rank and ABC were the two main players in a British studio system that also featured a range of independent producers. At the same time, British producers were learning to come to terms with the new medium of television.

Between 1950 and 1955, admissions to cinemas in the UK fell – but not dramatically. The real decline began in 1956 with the first broadcasts of ITV which gradually spread around the country. Between 1957 and 1959 the annual total fell by 300 million admissions to 600 million per year – and then went on falling. As one of the most popular films of 1957, *Woman In a Dressing Gown* is linked to these changes in two ways. First the film itself was actually a ‘remake’ of a play that appeared on the new ITV *Television Playhouse* in 1956. (At that time, TV plays were performed live and there is no recording of the original transmission.) Secondly, like other British films of the period, this film ignores television completely. Even though the film is set in a typical London household of 1957, there is no TV set and no mention of TV. Film studios (and film directors) saw television as the enemy and when they didn’t pointedly ignore TV altogether, they often portrayed it in a poor light – mocking the programmes and those who watched them.

Woman In a Dressing Gown is a drama about adultery in an ‘ordinary family’ and its impact on the unsuspecting wife and mother Amy Preston. The film



Yvonne Mitchell (foreground) as Amy in *Woman in a Dressing Gown* with (from left) Andrew Ray, Roberta Powell and Anthony Quayle

has been out of circulation for some time – it hasn’t been shown in cinemas and there hasn’t been a DVD until this month. Its warm reception on re-release is a sign of a film with a strong reputation that is explored in these notes. We’ll explore:

- the creative talents involved
- its status as a ‘quality film’ winning prizes
- its status in relation to the ‘British New Wave’ of 1959-63
- the reaction of critics and audiences
- its presentation of female characters

Four talents

Woman In a Dressing Gown boasts four notable talents – and a number of commendable supports such as Anthony Quayle and Sylvia Syms. Scriptwriter **Ted Willis** contributed to his first film script in 1948 and continued for nearly 40 years, becoming the most prolific and most respected screenwriter of his generation, first in films then, after the early 1960s, mostly in television. A mainstream Labour supporter, he invariably wrote about working-class/lower middle-class life in London. Perhaps his most famous creation was George Dixon as portrayed by Jack Warner in first *The Blue Lamp* (1949) and then *Dixon of Dock Green* on TV from 1955 until 1976.

Director **J Lee Thompson** and cinematographer **Gil(bert) Taylor** were collaborators throughout the 1950s. They worked on a variety of genres including comedy, drama, and a musical. Most notably they made two 'women in prison' pictures *The Weak and the Wicked* (1954) with Glynis Johns and *Yield to the Night* (1956) with Diana Dors. The latter is an excellent film based on the story of Ruth Ellis, the last woman to be hanged in the UK. Thompson proved he could direct a female-centred story and with Taylor he developed a unique style which includes the use of objects in the foreground, framings through doors, shelves, windows etc. and dramatic close-ups so that interiors are very claustrophobic. Exterior shots are similarly stylised as we will see in extracts. Thompson and Taylor became very successful at the end of the 1950s before Thompson moved to Hollywood (via *The Guns of Navarone* (1961)).

Yvonne Mitchell who plays Amy, the central character, was already a well-known actor on stage and screen by 1957. She had been Cathy in *Wuthering Heights* and *Julia* in 1984 on BBC TV. She gave an award-winning performance in the Ealing 'social melodrama' *The Divided Heart* in 1954 and she was the second lead in *Yield to the Night*. Her busiest years as an actor were roughly 1957-62.

A 'quality film'?

In the late 1940s, British cinema was acknowledged in the international film market for the production of 'quality films' by directors such as David Lean, Carol Reed and Michael Powell as well as various directors from Ealing Studios. These filmmakers were honoured mainly because of the perceived 'realism' of their stories (although in the UK, Michael Powell was often seen as too interested in fantasy).

In 1957 (before the film's UK release) *Woman In a Dressing Gown* won three prizes at the prestigious Berlin Film Festival, including Best Actress for Yvonne Mitchell. This has been widely quoted as a significant moment for British cinema in the 1950s but in fact an Ealing film with Jack Hawkins, *The Long Arm* had won a Berlin prize in 1956 when J Lee Thompson's *Yield to the Night* was also recognised with a competition screening at Cannes. Thompson returned to Berlin with *Tiger Bay* in 1959 for which Hayley Mills won a special prize.

The discussion of *Woman In a Dressing Gown* as a similar film to Lean and Coward's *Brief Encounter* (1945) (see Hill, 1986: 97-101) can be seen as making this quality film link. There are certainly some similarities, except that this time the central female character is the injured party, not the husband.

Woman In a Dressing Gown also has a different social class context – more on this below.

Realism and the kitchen sink

The 'British New Wave' is often defined as a distinctive film movement beginning with *Room at the Top* released in January 1959 and ending with *This Sporting Life* released in February 1963. These dates are fairly arbitrary and it seems reasonable to consider *Woman In a Dressing Gown* as a precursor or even an early example of the New Wave. But does the film really link to a 'movement' of any sort?

There are three separate trends/cycles at play in UK film, theatre, novels and TV in the 1950s. One is the idea of the 'kitchen sink drama' – a conscious turn away from the 'drawing-room' play of the West End. Such plays (and their actors) had been directly linked to British films in the 1930s, but new playwrights in the 1950s were turning to working-class settings and telling stories with new kinds of characters, often from a socialist perspective. Arnold Wesker and Joan Littlewood were part of this move, as in a slightly different context was John Osborne with his creation of the 'angry young man' in *Look Back in Anger* (1956). This theatrical context would produce Tony Richardson as a director and Shelagh Delaney as a new writer and feed directly into the New Wave.

Ted Willis was a more mainstream and populist writer whose scripts fed into films and early TV drama. His inspiration was partly from similarly 'gritty', working-class plays on American TV from writers like Paddy Chayefsky. Willis knew about working-class culture in London but his work seemed to be closer to one of the major trends in British cinema in the 1950s – what is sometimes called the 'social problem' picture (Hill argues that he was one of the most important writers in this mode). The 'problem' was most often connected to juvenile delinquency – thus allowing producers to insert popular music and to feature young actors in provocative narratives that might appeal to the new younger audience (e.g. Joan Collins in *Cosh Boy* (1952), David McCallum in *Violent Playground* (1958) and Adam Faith in *Beat Girl* (1959). Crime stories and the addition of (the possibility of) teenage sex were joined as social problems in the next few years by films about race – *Sapphire* (with Yvonne Mitchell) in 1959 and *Flame in the Streets* (written by Ted Willis) in 1961 – and homosexuality in *Victim* (1961) (with Sylvia Syms). Willis himself had gained his first credit on *Goodtime Girl* (1948) a crime melodrama with a moral underpinning about how a young girl can 'go bad'. These films were 'social' in the terms of issues and we might see *Woman In a Dressing Gown* as dealing with the social issue of

adultery – divorce under English law was still difficult for married couples before the 1971 Divorce Law Reform Act.

Most of these social problem pictures played more towards sensationalism than realism, but this doesn't mean that realist filmmaking was unknown in the UK before 1959 and the New Wave.

Wartime cinema in the UK saw the drafting of documentary filmmakers into both documentary and fiction feature film production in support of the war effort. Ealing Studios was one of the main producing studios to benefit from experience of location shooting and aspects of documentary practice carried over into several feature film productions after 1945. Examples of Ealing films with a more realist depiction of working-class lives in London than had been seen in pre-war cinema include *It Always Rains on Sundays* (1947), *Dance Hall* (1950) and *Pool of London* (1951). Crime films, the most frequently-produced genre in British cinema of the 1950s, featured varying amounts of location footage and realist depictions of various neighbourhoods. There was also the extensive use of low-key lighting and other elements of the visual style of *film noir* in British crime films.

Finally, there was the impact of the group of working-class writers whose novels fed into the New Wave cinema at the end of the decade. Most of these were based in the Midlands and the North – John Braine, Alan Sillitoe, John Wain, David Storey, Stan Barstow, Sid Chaplin, Keith Waterhouse and Willis Hall etc. These stories were more likely to be focused on young men rather than families or young women as in many of the London stories.

The disputed cinematic connection to the stories of these Northern writers was 'Free Cinema', the loose movement of tyro filmmakers headed by Lindsay Anderson and Karl Reisz which organised screenings at the National Film Theatre and produced a series of documentaries and short features between 1956 and 1959. Anderson, Reisz and Tony Richardson went on to make New Wave films. The Free Cinema screenings also included short films from young European filmmakers including Chabrol and Truffaut and the Swiss pair Claude Moretta and Alain Tanner. However, these were still mainly middle-class filmmakers observing working-class life (at the seaside in youth clubs and jazz clubs etc.).

All of these different strands of realist depictions of social issues and working-class life were part of the background to British cinema in the 1950s. All the films referenced here were black and white

productions and often 'A' or 'X' rated for adult audiences.

The big difference in many of the films of the New Wave was that a new breed of actors with more authentic-sounding local accents and mannerisms were much closer to the working-class characters they portrayed. Anthony Quayle and Rita Tushingham (see below) were actually born only a few miles apart but it's hard to imagine them playing father and daughter – Quayle had lost his regional identity as part of his acting persona by 1957, as was usual with most stage actors at the time.

Social class

Representations of social class are very important in British cinema. *Woman In a Dressing Gown* is often quoted as depicting a 'working-class' home. But this can't be right. The flat where Jim and Amy Preston live is in a block which gives the impression of being privately-owned rather than public housing. (The actual location is in Kensington and Chelsea and is now quite an upmarket district.) There is no attempt to place the family in far more familiar London County Council estates or other London housing schemes such as Peabody Trust or Guinness Trust housing.

Jim Preston works in a timber company on the river as a chief clerk/accounts manager. He wears a suit everyday and has a secretary. He isn't 'working-class' but more correctly 'lower middle-class'. His son works in a factory but wears a suit and tie to work. They are both 'white collar' workers. It could be argued that London settings are less likely to include central characters from heavy industry but Jim could have been a docker, a brewery worker, a bus conductor etc.

The second odd aspect of the social class designation is Amy's status as a 'housewife'. What exactly does Amy do all day? The film narrative suggests that she is a bad housewife, unable to manage the washing, ironing, cleaning and cooking – in a small two bedroom flat? Since her son is now out at work, a working-class woman in Amy's position would already have sought out work in order to supplement the family income. In this sense, her position seems contrived – the narrative requires that she hasn't got money of her own. These issues are quite important in terms of the sociology of the period. Geraghty (2000: 157-8) refers to research in which the general view, and indeed government policy, during the 1950s was to see working women as most likely to be older with grown-up children. (None of this is meant to imply that housework is not hard work – nor that Amy's depression is not genuine.)

In this sense, *Woman In a Dressing Gown* feels 'inauthentic' as a depiction of a working-class family living in a small London small flat. The casting seems to confirm this. Anthony Quayle and Yvonne Mitchell are middle-class actors (or at least middle-class personas) and Andrew Ray as their son seems an unlikely product of a secondary school on either side of the Thames. Compare the household to that of Albert Finney in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960) or the culture shock for Alan Bates as Vic in *A Kind of Loving* (1962), leaving his terraced house by the railway for the lower middle-class pretensions of Ingrid's mother's suburban semi. Perhaps more pertinently, consider the South London landscape of the Ken Loach film *Poor Cow* in 1967. In terms of its sociology, *Woman In a Dressing Gown* seems caught in several contradictions. The block of flats suggests modernity but the world faced by Amy inside seems set much further back in time.

Women in British Cinema

On the DVD of *Woman In a Dressing Gown*, Melanie Williams, a film studies academic from the University of East Anglia describes her research which included responses she received from women who had seen the film in the 1950s when they were in their teens or twenties. These women felt that the film had acted as a warning about what might happen if they didn't take their housewifely duties seriously. At the same time, other women spoke about seeing the film as offering a coded discourse about depression, possibly post-natal depression (there is a plot reference to support this). The producer Frank Godwin in an audio interview also refers to 'clinical depression'. Based on these kinds of responses, Williams suggests that the film is potentially conservative but also possibly progressive. She also points out that younger women might have tended to identify with Georgie, the Sylvia Syms character, but older women 'sided' with Amy. (The women who saw the film for a second time when they were older, tended to shift their allegiance.)

The film narrative, unusually for the period, offers two central female characters and their meeting is the climactic sequence in the film – as almost direct opposites (young/old, confident/anxious, well-groomed/dishevelled etc.)

All Williams' female correspondents refer to the same memorable scene in which Amy has had her hair 'done' and disaster befalls her. The film writer/critic Raymond Durgnat described the sequence as "almost embarrassingly moving" which seems very accurate. A variation on the same sequence opens *Georgy Girl* from the novel by Margaret Forster some nine years later – perhaps a memory?



'Preston' and Georgie in a classic *noir* melodrama composition – behind the bars of their self-created prison.

Sylvia Syms suggests that the film has not been as well-remembered as the New Wave films that followed primarily because it was a 'female-focused' film and that the industry and film culture generally was more disposed to the films with strong male leads. It is certainly true that the film industry in the UK has often been 'gendered' and was perhaps even more so than usual in the 1950s, but there are some other factors to consider. First, it may well be Amy's age as a 40-something character that is as important as her gender. The films of the next few years did include female-centred productions such as *A Taste of Honey* (1961) and *The L-shaped Room* (1962). By the mid 1960s, in the era of 'Swinging London' films, female leads were common – in the shape of Julie Christie, Vanessa and Lynn Redgrave and Rita Tushingham – but these were all young women.

Perhaps more important has been the unavailability of the film. As an independent production it seems to have somehow got lost until this restoration and re-release. An indication of what this might mean is the title's complete absence from Christine Geraghty's (2000) well-regarded study of gender in 1950s British cinema, a book in which *Woman In a Dressing Gown* might seem to be the perfect choice for a case study. Geraghty was aware of J. Lee Thompson's work since she had already written extensively on Diana Dors, including *Yield to the Night*, but she mentions neither the film or Mitchell/Syms.

I don't want to spoil the ending of the film but Williams makes the valid point that although it may appear a 'closed' ending with all the narrative threads tied

up, on reflection, most audiences are likely to feel that several of the questions raised have been left unresolved. In this sense, the film is progressive and questioning about women's lives in the late 1950s.

Reading the film's style

Thompson and Taylor had a distinctive style as outlined earlier in these notes. This added an expressionist feel to the supposedly realist aesthetic of the film. Although perhaps not as striking as in the opening to *Yield to the Night*, the camerawork and *mise en scène* do work for and against some of the other ideas about the film. Overall, I think the treatment suggests a *film noir* melodrama in which Amy's state of mind is what is being expressed through the image of the dark and cluttered flat. In this scenario, Georgie becomes the possible seducer of the doomed man, Jim. (Note that Amy calls him 'Jimbo' and Georgie uses his surname 'Preston' as a pet name.) Anthony Quayle does an excellent line in being persecuted and Jim is clearly 'pained' by being addressed in this way.

Despite the claims to a realist style, we rarely see any outdoor location shots apart from the (stylised) views of the flat and the long shots of the timber yard. At other times when the characters are outside the flat, Jim's office, Georgie's room etc., Thompson uses close-ups or other devices to focus on the emotional state of the characters (e.g. Amy visiting the hairdresser). Much of the time, however, the film does seem to betray its TV theatre origins with its focus on the three main sets.

Williams discusses the extent to which the film might be described as a comedy or suspense film as much as a straight drama. The narrative is certainly gripping and as Durnat's comment picks up, it engages an audience completely. A comedy response is likely to be very subjective, but it's worth pointing out that horror is quite close to comedy in terms of releasing emotion. A few years later Gil Taylor photographed another story about a woman alone in a house and feeling under pressure. His images for Roman Polanski's *Repulsion* have some of the same feel as his work on *Woman In a Dressing Gown*.

Woman In a Dressing Gown is a fascinating film in many ways and it's great to welcome it back.

Sources

The DVD of the film was released earlier this month with 'Extras' including interviews with Frank Godwin, Melanie Williams and Sylvia Syms.

Books:

Geraghty, Christine (1986) 'Diana Dors' in Charles Barr (ed) *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema*, London: British Film Institute
Geraghty, Christine (2000) *British Cinema in the Fifties: Gender, Genre and the 'New Look'*, London: Routledge
Hill, John (1986) *Sex, Class and Realism: British Cinema 1956-63*, London: British Film Institute

Several of the clips used in the presentation can be found on YouTube. British Cinema in the 1950s can also be explored via the material on Screenonline: <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/>

Roy Stafford, 28/8/2012

If you have any other queries based on today's presentation, please email me on:

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