

'B' for Blane and 'B' for Budget: Female adventures and Industry Strategies in the Hollywood series film

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Introduction:

My paper today concerns not so much a key neglected female figure in Hollywood, nor a lost/rare film, or genre, it doesn't 'revise' a previous reading of a well known film, but turns, instead, to a group of films that we might think of as hidden in plain sight. That is the very large number of low budget films – or B Films – made by Hollywood studios (as well as the Independents and 'Poverty Row' studios) which feature active female characters.

Between the mid 1930s and late 1940s (so within the 'classical' studio era) there were a host of B films made. Featuring fast-paced narratives, these films often centre on young working women and they both advance (and exploit) ideas of female independence in the spheres of work and romance. I'm thinking of films such as: *Private Detective* (Noel Smith for Warner Bros, 1939 – starring Jane Wyman), *Quiet Please, Murder!* (John Larkin for Twentieth Century Fox, 1942 – with Lynne Roberts), and *The Undercover Woman* (Thomas Carr for Republic, 1946 – with Stephanie Bachelor).

These films are often quite generically mixed (as I'll go onto to explore in more detail) but many circle around a crime, and taking on a detecting role mobilises the heroine and motivates her adventures.

A number of these films caught my attention in the course of researching another project (on questions of gender and genre in American film noir of the 1940s) My concern/drive in that project was a widening of the critical conception of

film noir away from its definition as a 'male' genre, associated with male action and concerns. Today my concern is not so much genre definitions but how the female-centred B-Film firstly modifies historiography of 'the woman's film', and, relatedly, what are the appropriate methodologies to employ in researching it.

The textual structure, address and narrative form of the B-film have a different feel, and quality (in more than one sense of the word) for a feminist critic. The important, foundational feminist history and analysis that has been undertaken on 'the woman's film' has provided a history of Hollywood that determined to re-insert the experience of women into an cultural industry which repeatedly produced representations, and narrative machinery, which defined, delimited and contained them. This foundational history might be represented by Maria LaPlace, who conceives of 'the woman's film' as follows:

The woman's film is distinguished by its female protagonist, female point of view and its narrative which most often revolves around the traditional realism of women's experience: the familial, the domestic, the romantic – those areas where love, emotion and relationships take precedence over action and events (Maria LaPlace, 139)¹

In his history of Hollywood cinema in the 1930s, Tino Balio includes 'the woman's film'² in his analysis of key production trends. He underlines the well known assumption by Hollywood producers of the importance of female audiences to the industry, citing this as a factor underpinning the production of prestige level dramas, with, in industry parlance 'femme appeal'. Balio does acknowledge the diversity of films that might come under the term woman's film:

¹ Maria LaPlace,(1987), 'Producing and Consuming the Woman's Film: Discursive Struggle in *Now Voyager. Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*. C. Gledhill. London, BFI: 138-166, p. 139.

² Tino Balio(1993). Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise. New York, Charles Scribner, p. 235.

***Woman's film* is a term of convenience to describe a range of pictures commonly referred to as fallen-woman films, romantic drama, Cinderella romances, and gold-digger or working-girl stories. The titles of such pictures are often taken from the names of their heroines or make some reference to women's conditions. The conflicts of the pictures involve interpersonal relationships that present the heroine with dilemmas the resolutions of which usually entail loss.³**

Balio's conception seems rather odd to me – as he gives a taste of the very diverse films that were broadly female addressed, but simultaneously narrows that address, and definition of narrative operations, to one focused on the heroine's 'dilemmas' and ultimately 'loss'.

The female-centered B-films that are my focus today offer a rather different picture, and can modify conceptions of the woman's film as primarily a 'prestige' production category with headline Hollywood stars. The reason these films have tended to dominate our critical imaginations is that, of course, they were key to attracting audiences to the cinema⁴ [as economic historians such as John Sedgwick have noted]. And they shine out to the historical researcher in their presence in a range of sources – publicity, media coverage, star materials, oral histories, memoirs, academy award nominations etc. HOWEVER – in terms of the overall output of Hollywood studios the numbers of prestige films made were actually rather few. By far the biggest production category – in terms of numbers of films made and in terms of contributions from revenue – was the B film.

³ Balio, *Grand Design*, p. 235

⁴ See John Sedgwick, (1995). "The Warner ledgers: a comment." *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* **15**(1): 75 - 82.

I now want to move on to consider its in industrial context, to ask what economic and strategic value it had. I'll be focusing specifically on a series of B-Films at Warner Bros – those featuring newspaper reporter Torchy Blane.

BACKGROUND ON Bs

The production of B films in Hollywood arose as a consequence of specific economic conditions and trade practices in the wake of the Depression of the early 1930s. In 1933, as part of National Industrial Recovery Act, new regulations came into play allowing the Major Hollywood studios to package their films into 'blocks' and require independent exhibitors to book the entire block (which might include all the films produced by a studio in a season).⁵ Regulations also governed the first-run, and subsequent runs, of new releases. The most profitable downtown theaters were those affiliated to the studios. In this highly controlled exhibition market one of the ways that independent exhibitors outside the 'first-run' circuit, could compete with the Majors was to offer moviegoers two films for the price of their ticket. The 'dual programme', or double bill had been a promotion strategy during the straitened times of the Depression, and once the Majors saw its success they also began to adopt it. By 1934 it was a widespread exhibition practice.

The increased playing times of double bills created a need for a larger number of films. The Major studios reacted by stratifying production into two groups: Class-A pictures, costing roughly \$400,000 or more to produce, and Class-B pictures, from as little as \$50,000 to c. \$200-\$300,000 (depending on the studio). The division of product allowed Majors to plan and predict revenues with great accuracy. When packaging their season of films for exhibitors, Majors priced A and B product

⁵ See Balio Grand Design pp. 18-20. The Code of Fair Competition for the Motion Picture Industry was signed on 27 November, 1933.

differently. Exhibitors paid different percentages for A pictures, but a lower, flat fee for class-B features. This structure permitted producers to forecast, and scale, production costs with great accuracy.⁶

As well as having a guaranteed, predictable financial return, [as Brian Taves notes out] making B-films at allowed the Major studios to keep production flowing – using sets, technicians and craftspeople and their contract stars – to full capacity.

Taves outlines the key parameters for Bs: (1) they were designed to fill the bottom half of a double bill (2) Had leads with moderate, questionable or unknown box-office draw (3) limited budgets and shorter shooting schedules than 'A's - usually made in three weeks, or as little as one week. (4) Running time on average between 57-70 minutes (averaging six reels, some Bs as short as five reels).

SERIES FILM

In addition to the one-off B films, from mid 1930s onwards studios began to produce strands of B films in series, centered on female as well as male characters, so alongside Charlie Chan (193* to 194*) and Sherlock Holmes (dates) at Twentieth Century Fox, RKO produced a series of films around sleuthing school marm – Hildegard Withers (7 films 1932-1937), MGM created a series of ten films covering the adventures of Brooklyn chorine Maisie Revere (played by Ann Sothern) (1939-1947).

Warner Bros developed series for Ronald Reagan as a secret service spy Brass Bancroft (4 films 1939-1940), a series of adaptations of Carolyn Keene's Nancy Drew stories – starring Bonita Granville (1938-1939), and During the Warner Bros gradual development of Bs in series. Commentators noted this was a growing

⁶ Balio, Grand Design, p. 29.

trend – referencing Sherlock Holmes at C20th Fox, as well as the Torchy Blane series.

TORCHY FILMS

Appropriately ‘The Lady Newshound’ - Torchy Blane began her life in print in the form of the hard drinking ace crime reporter Kennedy ‘of the Free Press’, in a series of popular stories by Frederick Nebel published in pulp magazine *Black Mask*⁷. Kennedy’s crime reporting frequently put him in conflict with Captain Steve MacBride. Nebel’s story ‘No Hard Feelings’ provided the basis for the *Smart Blonde* (released 1937), the first of nine Torchy Blane films produced at Warner Bros. B-unit between 1937 and 1939. *Flyaway Baby* (1937), *Torchy Blane: Adventurous Blonde* (1937), Glenda Farrell and Barton MacLane featured as the romantic antagonists – of reporter Torchy and Police Lieutenant MacBride in seven of the nine films, with Lola Lane taking the role of Torchy in *Torchy Blane in Panama* (and with Paul Kelly as Steve in no 5 in series, 1938) and Jane Wyman and Allen Jenkins in the final film of the series *Torchy Blane.... Playing with Dynamite* (1939).

Smart Blonde set the pattern for the series, and contained within it key aspects which the Torchy series could both exploit, and use to produce coherence. Writing about series narrative structures, Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik note the importance of ‘synchronising motifs’ that appear across series - that is ‘regularly occurring bits of business, repeated situations, and catchphrases’⁸ as well as an ‘internal hermeneutic’ for the series as a whole. For the Torchy series these motifs

⁷ <http://www.thrillingdetective.com/kennedy.html>

⁸ Neale and Krutnik, citing Phil Drummond, in *Popular Film and Television Comedy*, p. 235

are evident in a number of aspects: The films are characterised by fast paced action and dialogue, particularly piquant lines are delivered by Farrell in her performance of Torchy. In each film Torchy's job as reporter motivates her presence on the scene of the crime, and repeatedly it is Torchy's deductions that ace Steve's more conventional detections as she beats him to the conclusion of the case, *and* files her copy before her rival reporters. These newshounds, and the amiable but slow-witted police driver Gahagan (Tom Kennedy) provide some broad comedy and produce a blend of genres in the series - comedy with crime (which reviewers described as comedy-melodrama). Typically the crime is committed by the upper echelons of society, and the series tends to privilege the working classes (and the working girl in particular). But probably the key structuring aspect to the series is its use of deferral in the romance plot between Torchy and Steve. Here the film series shares strategies with series in other media (radio, newspaper series) as it reinstalls their state of 'being engaged' but continually puts obstacles in the way of their arriving at the altar.

The following clip from the third film in the series: *Torchy Blane: Adventurous Blonde* (1937) illustrates the series key 'synchronising motifs' – as well as how deferral of a wedding is essential for the continuity of Torchy's adventures.

PLAY CLIP – TORCHY BLANE: ADVENTUROUS BLONDE 30.38-33.22 – 2 mins 44 seconds. [Narrative context – Torchy's rival reporters try to play a practical joke on her getting her to report the death of an actor playing dead. Then he is really murdered and Steve investigates. In the meantime, Steve is determined to marry Torchy....]

Conclusions:

Looking more closely at the Torchy Blane series, and its recurrent deployment of female independence as a marketable aspect with key currency might offer some ways in which we modify histories of 'the woman's film'.

Rather than 'love, emotion and relationships' taking precedence over 'action and events', the Torchy series privileges female action and adventures. And rather than stabilising male-female relationships and character destinies by 'closing' in matrimony, the Torchy series exploit an image of female independence. This independence is essential to the generation of its next instalment, both in terms of Torchy's career as a crime reporter, and the deferral and suspense that is generated by the myriad of ways that Torchy escapes the trip to City Hall to marry Steve.

As I suggested earlier in discussion of development of Bs – this area of production was key to filling bills, and maintaining the economies of the studios by keeping stars and plant working. But Bs also offered low-risk investment and reliable returns. In his discussion of risk strategies at Warner Bros. John Sedgwick details that in the period between 1922-1941 83% of Warner's revenue came from films in the B-budget category. The Torchy series were profitable for the studio, Flyaway Baby and Torchy Blane in Chinatown were listed in Warner accounts as key performers in their season in terms of rates of return, outperforming 'prestige' films in terms of profitability. This suggests that the studio considered the character of Torchy, and an appeal to an audience of working women, as repeatedly bankable. And might suggest some ways of thinking again, both about how 'the' woman's film has been defined in terms of its narrative composition and concerns, and about how the film industry marketed and exploited images of female independence and adventure.

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