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Mildred Pierce, Warner Bros., and the Corporate Family

Overdetermined Mothers

For more than twenty years feminist film critics have agreed that the basic and ineluctably masculinist project of Mildred Pierce (Warner Bros., 1945) is to dismantle the threat to the patriarchal order that the protagonist’s discourse, sexuality, and labor entail. Crucial to these analyses have been the conditions of the film’s production and release and its possible meaning for audiences in the forties. Developed and produced during the last year and a half of World War II, Mildred Pierce was released on 20 October 1945, just as soldiers were leaving the military and civilian women were heading home after an unprecedented welcome in the workplace. The coincidence of its release and these momentous returns has informed most feminist treatments of the film. Pam Cook points to its unusual split structure to argue that the “masculine” conventions of film noir, which deal with police efforts to solve the murder of Monte Beragon (Zachary Scott), Mildred’s (Joan Crawford) second husband, prevail over the domestic melodrama flashbacks, in which Mildred narrates the more “feminine” story of the family and describes her career, first as a waitress and then as a successful restaurateur. Noir always has the last word, especially, of course, at the end, when Mildred loses her business and her daughter Veda (Ann Blyth), the real murderer whom she tried and failed to protect, and is reunited with her first husband Bert (Bruce Bennett). This ending, which “strip[s]” Mildred of her power in an act of “violent repression,” marks the subjection not only of the generic “Woman” but of actual American women as well, who received a powerful lesson that their wartime freedom was dangerous to family and society and therefore justly coming to an end.¹ In another influential essay, Linda Williams likewise relies on the rhetoric of repression to turn the virtual absence of references to World War II in Mildred Pierce into the strongest evidence of its obsession with that event and with its impact on women. Williams argues that only by obscuring the war can the film represent the very real gender disturbances caused by the war, as the story of Mildred’s career, love interests, and family life addresses women’s newfound independence rather than their temporary patriotic
duty. The film reveals the liberatory potential of her labor and sexuality at a critical juncture in American history, and by the end “a much more massive repression of that power” is necessary. Mildred’s story is thus routinely cast in terms of one clear message, a message that resonates throughout films of the classical Hollywood period: “Women of America, know your place.”

This essay reopens the question of what and where Mildred Pierce’s place might be, as it seeks to re-place Mildred Pierce in relation to more pressing postwar issues, for the film industry and American business in general, than cultural anxieties about working women or the “guilt and confusion” women themselves faced pending their return to the home. Certainly the combination of film noir and melodrama works to create a coercive structure, in which Mildred’s account of events is repeatedly undermined by the male detective whose questions elicit and interrupt her story. And it is difficult not to read this coercion as explicitly gendered, given the differences in subjectivity and style that dominate Hollywood’s treatment of these genres. Nonetheless, in focusing almost exclusively on the film’s disciplinary attentions to Mildred—both relative to other central characters, male and female, and at the expense of its often indulgent, exculpatory treatment of her, which culminates, I will argue, in the noir ending—critics have seriously underestimated the value that is placed on Mildred’s labor and as a result have miscast the meaning of that labor in relation to her maternity. A certain predisposition to make patriarchal oppression the bottom line of classical Hollywood film has expressed itself in the equation of Mildred’s rise and alleged ruin with the historically overdetermined downfall of American women in general. It has led virtually all critics of the film to commit to a premature teleology: Mildred’s success as a businesswoman inevitably dooms her as a mother, and in losing her business she is punished as a failed mother. These assumptions have forestalled the reciprocal and equally pertinent question: what does the fact that Mildred is a mother tell us about the film’s representation of business? In an analysis of the woman’s film in the forties, Mary Ann Doane observes that motherhood is always about the obvious, a metaphor for the natural. “Everyone has a mother,” as Doane puts it, echoing Veda’s own reflection on the subject: “Everybody has a mother.” The film’s singular identification of the natural fact of motherhood with the commercial world of Mildred’s, Incorporated, does not necessarily mean that Mildred allows business to undermine her duties as a mother or that maternity impairs her for business purposes. Rather, I want to suggest that at the volatile threshold of a new economic and social order, Mildred Pierce seeks to naturalize the market economy through its association with mothers; because business is so obvious and necessary, it is what mothers do.

My reading of the corporate family in Mildred Pierce shifts the historical center of the film from the absent war and the narrow topic of women’s employment and independence to the manifest national imperatives of reconversion to a peacetime economy. The requirements of postwar capitalism rewrite everything in Mildred Pierce—home, family, sexual desire, work, money, and the relations between them.
—even writing a world in which the disruptive political and economic event called war has no place. That is, the war is absent because it is in a sense irrelevant; like American business, which had pondered the shape of the postwar economy before victory was certain, before, indeed, the United States had entered the war, Mil- dred Pierce is preoccupied with the question “what comes next?” The fear that the United States might slip back into depression after World War II, and the corresponding pressure to effect a smooth transition from the “fantastic new world of production” made possible by the war to a thriving postwar economy, direct the film’s treatment of the entrepreneurial mother, whose insatiable determination to produce fuels the capitalist economy, and of her daughter, whose insatiable desire to consume threatens to overwhelm it.

As the author of a government publication on the task of reconversion observed in 1944, the full-scale conversion of American industry to war production had not merely given the economy a crucial, albeit violent, boost; it had also quickly made “bedfellows” of “patriotism and private profit,” rehabilitating the image of American business following the public relations nightmare it had faced during the Depression. Exempted from total war conversion, the film industry served the nation by continuing to do what it did best. But the sheer proliferation of combat, espionage, and home-front pictures, as well as war-related documentaries by such established directors as Frank Capra and John Ford, all made under the watchful eye of the Office of War Information, similarly brought Hollywood’s product in line with the profitable patriotic practices mandated in other American industries. The period that would substitute peace for war and private consumption for government spending required a new model of corporate virtue. In this light, the project of Mildred Pierce may plausibly be understood as one studio’s attempt to redefine its corporate image and the image of the corporation as such through its most potent promotional device—film.

One purpose of this essay is therefore to invite critics to rethink the communicative function of classical Hollywood film, to encourage them not only to respond to what cinematic language might repress or suppress (and the absolute centrality of the analysis of censorship to film studies demonstrates the critical emphasis on suppression as well), but also to consider what it blatantly affirms in line with the most fundamental interests of its corporate authors, interests that are, at most, only indirectly served by hurrying women back home in 1945. Corporations can assimilate anything in the service of those interests, even, in this case, the economic and emotional value of the working mother. With Mildred Pierce, Warner Bros. imaginatively resolved the problem of finding an economic and public-spirited substitute for war by attempting to give corporate culture some of the sentimental credibility of home. Because business is so natural, it is what mothers and brothers do. And because business is ultimately more natural than families, corporations endure even when the families that underwrite them fail.
The Corporate Family

The work of melodrama in *Mildred Pierce* is to offer a striking refiguration of the film’s modal categories: home, family, and business. In the first interior shot of her Glendale home, we see Mildred hard at work in the kitchen, the picture of the dedicated suburban housewife. But her voice-over narration immediately reverses the expectations raised by the visual representation of her labor. She is not baking for family consumption but for Mrs. Whitly, her neighbor—Mildred bakes for money. When Bert asks her where she got the money to buy a new dress for Veda, she responds: “baking cakes and making pies for the neighbors . . . I earned it.” At stake in her argument with Bert is Mildred’s right to spend her money freely and raise her children as she chooses, to spend her money on her children. The immediate connection between cooking and commerce, maternity and money, reveals that from the first there is no domestic space in *Mildred Pierce* inhabited outside the realm of the commercial, no isolated home to which she could possibly be returned. The integration of paid labor and the home is soon established visually as well. After she has become a waitress, the film dissolves from a shot of Mildred clearing dishes in the restaurant to a close-up of her putting a pie into her oven at home, one of the dozens she bakes each night to sell. The mise-en-scène now conveys the decidedly commercial nature of her domestic labor. Industrial ovens and an assistant, Lottie (Butterfly McQueen)—the apparatus required for a large-scale baking operation—figure prominently in what the melodrama segment’s opening had visually marked as a simple private kitchen.

Initially Mildred is also shown to be hard at work in the kitchen of her first restaurant, but her natural talent for making money soon downplays the relation between work and economic reward. Her original claims to having “earned” what she spends are vacated in favor of effortless accumulation as her story unfolds: “Everything I touched turned into money.” Money appears like magic in part because of Mildred’s commitment to homelike businesses as well as to a businesslike home; it is precisely the woman’s touch that is also the Midas touch. Her domestic faculties are brought to bear on business when she decides to locate her first restaurant in an abandoned house. The reclamation of the house as a restaurant rather than as a private home underscores the peculiarly domestic nature of a business that provides a crucial service of home for a fee. In the opening night scene, Mildred reprimands a waitress who carries out a plate with insufficient potatoes. As Mildred piles more on, the waitress in turn reprimands her: “You’ll never make any money that way.” She responds: “Well, that’s all right. As long as the customers are satisfied.” Mildred seems to be less interested in making money off the customers than in feeding them properly; but the restaurant’s phenomenal success suggests that it is her solicitation of customers as family and friends that makes her fortune. The place is packed, but the crowd does not prevent her commercial contacts from being
surprisingly personal. Mildred greets customers as familiar guests, calling them by name, and in one instance, casually refers to the fact that she will see some of them the next day. The difference between a customer and a neighbor is as slippery in the restaurant, where economic exchanges preserve the feeling of social calls, as it was in Mildred’s own kitchen.

Through Mildred’s labors and throughout her narrative, in other words, business is transformed into something like a second home, to the extent that the restaurant replaces the house in Glendale as the domestic center of the film. It is here that Mildred raises Veda, learns that Bert has agreed to a divorce, and breaks up with Monte. Whereas domestic melodrama is typically associated with the rise of capitalism and the tensions attendant upon its separation of the economic and the familial, in *Mildred Pierce* it is as though this crucial division has never taken place. The generic field of melodrama consolidates domestic and commercial spheres; not only does it interweave the stories of family life and career, but through Mildred’s economic ventures it dissolves the boundaries that might otherwise separate homes from businesses, domestic and sexual from financial partners. The film registers the elision of partnerships on formal as well as thematic levels, in particular through crucial point-of-view shots. In another reading of feminine repression in *Mildred Pierce*, Pamela Robertson argues that the camera denies Mildred a privileged subjectivity by refusing to grant her the point-of-view shots typically accorded male narrators in film noir, through whose eyes the femme fatale is often first seen and marked as the object of his sexual desire and conquest. *Mildred Pierce* demonstrates its masculinist bias when the camera invites the viewer to appreciate Mildred’s sexual availability as though she were a character in someone else’s story. Mildred has, according to Robertson, very few point-of-view shots, and these are exclusively of her daughter; because the camera is identified with masculine subjectivity, Mildred’s gaze is indistinguishable from the “male gaze,” and Veda becomes the object of incestuous passion, not maternal affection.

The nuances of point of view in *Mildred Pierce* cannot be so easily assimilated to the predictable sexual problematics of “the gaze.” First, Robertson’s assertions about point of view are inaccurate. In fact, Mildred is granted more point-of-view shots than any other character, and by no means is Veda the sole or even principal focus of them. And the most pronounced point-of-view shot in the film functions analogously to the typical film noir narrator’s point-of-view shots, insofar as it introduces someone with whom Mildred will become sexually involved. Monte first appears in a long shot through her eyes; the shot continues as she watches Monte enter the room through a glass door and, with his eyes on Mildred’s business partner, Wally Fay (Jack Carson), approach the pair. As Wally begins to talk, the camera cuts to a reverse over-the-shoulder shot of the threesome, but once Wally has introduced Mildred, her point-of-view shot of Monte resumes. This time she looks at him looking or rather, leering at her, his eyes lingering on hers for just one extra beat, a perceptible pause that signals his attraction to her (fig. 1). Because this look is re-
corded through Mildred’s eyes, we not only know that he desires her, but we also know that Mildred knows. In contrast, then, to the film noir convention that identifies point of view with the subject’s sexual desire, the shot just described might seem simply to reveal Mildred perceiving herself as the object of someone else’s desire, what Robertson might consider a reflected or internalized male gaze that is still consistent with her assumptions about the masculinist and sexually oriented construction of the camera’s subjectivity.

The relation of this shot to other point-of-view shots in the film, however, suggests that Mildred’s gaze here is not stimulated by Monte’s sexual desire but is motivated by nonsexual considerations of her own. In classical Hollywood cinema, actors do not generally look into the camera, and so the most realistic and easily distinguished point-of-view shots are those directed toward an inanimate object or a character who does not look back. The illusion of the camera’s and the character’s subjectivity can suffer if the object of the gaze returns it, for the object’s eyes will almost always be slightly to the right or left of the camera, an off-centeredness that can make it difficult to differentiate between a point-of-view shot and a close-up. Previous to this scene, Mildred’s subjectivity is twice indisputably identified with

Figure 1. Monte leers at Mildred. Mildred Pierce (Warner Bros., 1945).
the camera: fingers within the frame indicate her point of view when she shuffles through a stack of unpaid bills and a photograph, and later when she records a healthy balance in her bank book. These shots associate Mildred’s point of view with her financial insecurity and ambitions rather than with sexual desire. She goes to meet Monte because she requires his financial help to fulfill her own economic ambitions. Monte owns the house where Mildred wants to establish a restaurant, but she has no money to buy it; he must allow her to renovate it and open the restaurant but wait a year for her to purchase it. Her point of view introduces Monte, just as it earlier informed the viewer of her financial situation, because she literally sees him as a further economic opportunity.

Robertson cannot see Mildred’s point-of-view shots for that reason; they militate against the now conventional emphasis on the inherently sexual and masculinist orientation of the camera in film noir and classical Hollywood film more generally. Nor can Mildred’s point-of-view shots be described as passive “consumer look[s],” which have been associated with women as both cinematic spectators and the addressees of commodity culture. Mildred issues a predatory economic gaze that Monte returns with a predatory sexual one. Put another way, Mildred’s subjectivity here engineers a visual exchange that constitutes Monte as a sexually desiring subject in answer to her own economic aspirations. He desires her because she desires something from him. But in contrast with thirties cinematic women from Jean Harlow to Joan Crawford herself in The Women (1939), whose characters direct their abundant sexual attractions toward receiving cash and gifts, financial support and security—toward getting a man to take care of them—Mildred wants credit from Monte. She seeks the chance to make her own living as a businesswoman.

As their relationship develops, the connection between Monte’s sexual desires and Mildred’s economic urges becomes clearer. In a famous shot of the first restaurant’s interior, her bare legs dangle at the top-right of the frame as she sits on a ladder, fixing a chandelier. Unlike Fred MacMurray’s Walter Neff, who is similarly transfixed by Barbara Stanwyck’s truncated limbs as they make their seductive way down a staircase in Double Indemnity (1944), Monte does not share a point of view with the camera. He enters the scene from behind Mildred and while ogling her legs comments that he has come to check on his “investment” (fig. 2). In a letter to Jack Warner, Joseph Breen of the Production Code Administration had warned that Monte’s notice of Mildred’s legs must not be offensive. The film’s ambition to affirm the priority of economics is perfectly consonant with and, indeed, anticipated the concerns of industry censors on the topic of sexual desire. The reference to Monte’s “investment” mitigates but also focuses the sexual charge of this moment by infusing it with the rhetoric of finance capital. For Monte, what underwrites Mildred’s desirability is her capacity for making money. Conversely, Mildred’s interest in Monte ebbs with his fortunes. The third and last point-of-view shot of financial material occurs when we examine with Mildred another sheaf of bills, this time luxury items that Monte has charged to her. Monte, formerly her economic
opportunity has become an economic burden as her lover. When in the same scene she writes him the check that terminates their affair—"You can mark our account ‘paid in full’"—the camera does not adopt Mildred’s point-of-view shot of the check, banishing at once a sexual partner and an economic liability.

*Mildred Pierce* is not satisfied simply to conflate business partners and sexual partners. Mildred’s economic aspirations dismantle the traditional home, but they also remake the family. The film is preoccupied with the contractual nature of marriage and the status of spousal relations as actual partnerships. Long after Bert has left her for another woman, Wally informs Mildred that under California’s community property laws, she must begin divorce proceedings against him before opening the restaurant or risk losing everything to his creditors. As her husband, however estranged, Bert is the co-owner of her business. At this point business and marriage seem incompatible; the founding of one dissolves the other. But to Mildred’s biological family and in substitution for the husband created by one kind of contract, the film adds a surrogate family produced by another kind of contract. In order to proceed with plans for her own restaurant, she enlists the help of Wally, an attorney,
realtor, and Bert’s former business partner, who knows “the angles” and receives a hefty one-third share in the venture for his services. It is Wally who brings Mildred and Monte together to make a deal for the property. Although Wally has repeatedly shown a sexual interest in her and will continue to do so, it is impossible not to see him in this scene as a kind of pimp, who facilitates on Mildred’s and his own behalf the exchange of her moneymaking and sexual appeal for the deed to Monte’s property. By helping to negotiate this delicate transaction Wally is marginalized in relation to the principles, but with his permission and in a telling way. Before they meet Monte, Wally tells Mildred to “Watch your Uncle Wally go to work.” After striking the deal, he intrudes upon Mildred’s and Monte’s celebratory toast: “Hey, how about Uncle Wally here?” Through his self-naming, which is repeated yet again, Uncle Wally willingly yields his sexual interest in Mildred to Monte in the overriding economic desire to join a lucrative business family.

With Monte, not only do business relations not preclude sexual relations, but neither business nor sex eliminates the family metaphor. When he tempts Mildred from the restaurant for an afternoon swim at his family’s beach house, he leaves her to choose from a closet full of bathing suits, all belonging to his fictional “sister.” Before the seduction scene, he toasts her with the words, “To brotherly love,” and when he tells her how beautiful she looks, she replies: “I bet you say that to all your sisters.” At first it is as though only incestuous innuendo can arouse them, but economic considerations resurface to normalize their relationship. A commercial transaction secures a more literal extension of the family, when Monte progresses from a figural “brother” to Mildred’s husband. Worried about his influence with Veda, Mildred breaks up with him, only to discover that she needs him to save her relationship with Veda, who “want[s] the kind of life that Monte taught [her],” a life of the right social connections lubricated by Mildred’s money. From a confrontation between the mother and daughter, the film dissolves immediately to a close-up of a large sign—“For Sale: Inquire Within.” The camera pulls back to reveal a mansion and grounds, Monte’s Pasadena estate. Mildred visits him on the pretext of purchasing the house, but she really wants to purchase Monte. At first he tries to deny his true relation to the market, complaining that all he has “is pride and a name” and that both lie outside the circuits of exchange. This is wishful thinking or an attempt to fetch a higher price, because when Mildred proposes that they marry, he agrees on the condition that she give him one-third of what is now her restaurant empire, Mildred’s, Incorporated. Monte answers the profitable commodification of her domestic duties by commodifying his social class, and she buys his name with a piece of her own. The climax of their negotiations clarifies the relation of sexual to economic desire that has always been implicit in Mildred’s involvement with Monte. When he attempts to seal their deal with a kiss, she prevents it by thrusting her drink between them, saying: “Sold—one Beragon.”

This financial transaction brings husband, wife/mother, and daughter under one Pasadena roof, restoring the family unit. Just as the restaurant becomes a way
for the mother to treat customers as though they were neighbors, to whom she already ministers as though they were family, the corporation makes entrepreneurs out of mothers and transforms family members into business partners and business partners into family members. Whether its relations are biological or contractual, the corporate family in *Mildred Pierce*, like the corporate family that brings us the film, is a quite literal proposition. Rampant nepotism was the rule at the Hollywood studios; some were founded and, for a time, sustained by families that antedated the corporate connection—the Cohns at Columbia, the Laemmles at Universal—and the fraternal venture that became Warner Bros. was the most successful as well as the most clearly advertised of these partnerships. By the release of *Mildred Pierce*, it was the only studio to remain under a single family’s executive control, with Harry Warner handling the financial end in New York, Abe Warner in charge of the company’s chain of movie theaters, and Jack Warner overseeing production in Hollywood.¹⁶ Warner Bros., like *Mildred Pierce* and Mildred’s, Incorporated, transcended the conventional divisions between family and productive economic activity that have been understood as integral to capitalism and thus to modern patriarchy, but it is hardly surprising that none thereby articulates a particular challenge to those systems.¹⁷ While World War II fostered a number of Hollywood films—and countless advertisements—that sought to persuade the public that the United States was fighting to preserve the American home, that more or less tangible incarnation of the abstract American “way of life,” the melodrama of *Mildred Pierce* offers home and family as the reason we go into business. Economic investment is naturalized through its connection to the family, through its ability to make families, even as the family is revealed to be a highly flexible economic and social unit. Energy is redirected from unproductive wartime concerns about the absent husband/father/brother/uncle—as we have seen, there is a superfluity rather than a scarcity of such men in *Mildred Pierce*, as at Warner Bros.—toward the constructive economic expansion that builds (corporate) families. Families have their problems, as is the case with the permissive Mildred, the grasping Veda, and the faithless Monte, as well as with the endlessly squabbling brothers Warner, but they may nonetheless turn a profit so long as conflicts are contained and usefully channeled.¹⁸ When families cease to be productive, film noir steps up. The controversial noir ending offers a fraternal correction of maternal overindulgence and, with Mildred’s cooperation, ultimately remakes the family once again when the interests of business so demand.

**What Did Mildred Pierce Really do?**

The final third of *Mildred Pierce* narrates the failure and dissolution of the new family, which is intimately connected to the financial troubles of the corporation and Mildred’s eventual expulsion from it. In purchasing Monte as a husband...
Mildred has drastically overspent; his name is worthless in comparison with her own incorporated one, to which the film pays frequent neon tribute. She goes bankrupt in her effort to buy the love of the rapacious Veda, who has been described by Doane as “a type of consumer vampire,” and whose greed is uniformly cited by other critics as evidence of the film’s ruthless judgment of Mildred’s maternal conduct. Mildred’s indulgence of Veda is seen as particularly objectionable given wartime privations and results in her own emotional and financial ruin. She has carelessly raised a monster who is not merely avaricious but lawless as well. Both mother and daughter must be punished, the moral of the film is supposed to go; to protect society from a legion of Vedas, women must stay at home and care for their children properly.

This reading has tended to obscure some of the causes and stakes of Veda’s behavior. Some reviewers did blame Mildred for her daughter’s greed, although it is worth noting that they did not assume a necessary connection between Mildred’s work outside the home and her maternal difficulties. And others were instead outraged by Veda’s ingratitude toward her self-sacrificing mother. The emphasis on ingratitude suggests that, far from condemning Veda’s materialism wholesale, audiences could identify with her unquenchable longing for consumer goods. The release of Mildred Pierce coincided not only with the end of fighting and return of veterans but also with what was referred to well in advance as the beginning of the “biggest seller’s market” in American history. Early in the film, when Veda complains to Mildred that “There’s so many things that I . . . that we . . . should have and haven’t got” (ellipses in script) the pronoun slip indicates her selfishness and self-conscious effort to mask it from her mother, but the rhetoric of unfulfilled desire also echoes both wartime and postwar appeals made on behalf of frustrated consumers: for example, a February 1946 advertisement that claimed “America hasn’t HALF the things it wants and needs,” or the January 1944 Fortune article that rejected the prospect of simply returning to prewar production levels because in 1939 “too many men and women . . . didn’t have so much to eat, wear, and spend as they could have had.” Although the United States maintained an extremely high standard of living relative to other nations at war, limitation orders on consumer durables production had already begun to be issued in the summer of 1941. Soon the production of all kinds of basic consumer goods, from refrigerators and automobiles to radios and the nylon’s Mildred doesn’t wear, was discontinued altogether, as plants shifted to munitions and other war materials and government adopted the slogan: “Use it up, wear it out, make it do or do without.”

Long before the war was actually won, American business and the government directed serious attention toward planning the postwar economy. Restrictions on manufacturing during the war had limited the outlets for the high wages of full employment. Pent-up consumer demand, “the natural force of a greatly enlarged yet damned-up economy,” was thought critical to the task of replacing the frenetic wartime economy of extravagant government spending and debt with a robust,
well-adjusted postwar economy of confident, employed, and reliable consumers. In much of the popular press, private consumption began virtually to look like the new patriotic duty for which Americans must prepare themselves. To progress with “a great dynamic, forward-moving tide of healthy productivity” after the war, “the needs of consumers” had first to be satisfied. The New Republic speculated that Americans would have to spend $30 billion more per year than ever before to compensate for the drop in government spending; its editors echoed the sentiments of a number of national publications when they claimed not to “doubt that consumers want enough goods and services . . . to spend this amount if their income were sufficient and the goods were produced.” Fulfilling the demands of consumers meant reconverting factories to the production of civilian goods in a timely way, which meant jobs for returning veterans and war workers displaced by the termination of war contracts, which in turn meant no lengthy gaps between wartime and postwar paychecks and a steady flow of income for more private spending. The mission of reconversion, according to the text of an advertisement for Texaco, was to generate “another ‘miracle of production’” to match that created by the war, but the illustration emphasizes the condition for this feat—a timely miracle of consumption (fig. 3).

In Mildred Pierce, when two black maids discuss whether the 1927 champagne they are serving to guests at a party is better than the 1928, one of them replies, “Well, it’s the newest we could get.” Their brief exchange is a conventional bit of racist Hollywood humor, but it is difficult not also to see it as the expression of something else, the manifest desire of all Americans for new things. If reconversion is the event that drives the film’s representation of family, business, and business families, we would expect consumption in Mildred Pierce to be figured rather differently from war-focused Hollywood melodramas, and it is. Its artifacts lack the emotional freight that infuses objects in a film such as Since You Went Away (1944), the consummate example of home-front melodrama, in which the “miracle” of the commodity is its refusal of exchange value. Things represent only the absent people they are capable of summoning up—the pipe that stands for the husband at war, the watch that is valuable because it was grandfather’s, not because it is made of gold. By contrast, when Veda receives a fancy cigarette lighter from Monte for her birthday, she insists upon her right to smoke, not because the lighter means anything to her but because it would hurt Monte’s feelings not to use it: possessions have significance for the people who don’t possess them. Veda never experiences sentimental attachment to particular things. The pressure is on accumulation not connotation—we never see anything she receives ever again—and so there is nothing to stall the process of endless acquisition. But if Veda doesn’t fetishize particular objects, she does plant a big kiss on a ten-thousand-dollar check, expending on purchasing power the emotional energy that she withholds from actual purchases.

Mildred’s younger daughter, Kay (Jo Ann Marlowe), has an antithetical relation to consumption. Kay falls sick while on an overnight trip with her father shortly
before the opening of the new restaurant. After months of hard work Mildred spends the afternoon with Monte, their first time together, and she returns only to witness the doctor’s ministrations and embrace her daughter before she dies. Here an implicit causal relation between Mildred’s romance and her daughter’s death provides the strongest evidence for critics who argue that *Mildred Pierce* represses women’s power and independence. But there is also an alternative explanation for Kay’s death in light of the film’s economic imperatives. Kay is a sweet, uncalculating, self-sufficient tomboy who is childishly impatient—“Aw, pretzels”—with her sister’s careful social distinctions. She is the opposite of Veda, who possesses none
of Kay’s charm, but the problem with Kay is that she doesn’t want anything. If the errant mother is chastened here, so too is the inadequate consumer with nothing to contribute to the economic transition. It may also be that Kay’s allegiances are not quite what they should be. In one of Kay’s few scenes, Veda plays a “South American” rhythm on the piano while Kay does a Carmen Miranda impression, complete with dangling hoop earrings and a fruit-filled headpiece, a parody of female sexuality. Miranda was under contract with Twentieth Century-Fox, not Warners; it is as though Kay can’t keep her corporate families straight. The next time we see her after this small act of disloyalty, Kay has begun to cough in that fatal Hollywood way.

To point out Kay’s deficiency as a consumer is not to suggest that Veda is the heroine of the film and of the economy. The problem with Veda is that she wants too much. In the postwar period the consequences of excessive acquisitiveness were potentially devastating. With a “powerful . . . consuming demand for everything that one can eat, wear, enjoy, burn, read, patch, dye, repair, paint, drink, see, ride, taste, smell, and rest in,” as Fortune breathlessly put it once the boom was underway, Americans were widely cautioned to consume wisely and responsibly. Unless savings were converted “into purchasing power in a systematic way,” consumption would threaten to outstrip production with inflation as the outcome. Both of Mildred’s daughters are economically destructive, but Veda’s consumer desires, seemingly limitless, exercised without restraint and thus inflationary, are more directly threatening, because so much more plausible in the postwar context, than Kay’s lack of desire. Veda’s spending, or Mildred’s spending on her behalf, outpaces the rate at which her mother can turn food into money, with the inevitable result: Mildred is bankrupting the corporation and is driven from it by her partners and creditors when Monte decides to sell his share.

Consumption is often figured as women’s work, and lest we conclude that the problem of overconsumption is by extension associated exclusively with dangerous excesses of female desire, we must remember Monte and his own taste for new things, evidenced in the bills for polo equipment and tailored shirts, among other extravagances, that Mildred impatiently sorts through just before she cuts him loose. Monte’s and Veda’s efforts to spend Mildred’s money fits neatly with the representation of consumption in the Texaco ad: while the consumption of particular goods is gendered—the woman carries an iron and toaster, for example, while the man has a car and lawnmower—the basic activity of consuming this dazzling oversurplus is not. It appeals to the desires of men as well as women, to everyone who has done without. In Mildred Pierce both must finally be restrained. If we understand Veda’s arrest and, we presume, eventual trip to the electric chair as punishment for unhealthful economic practices—and her punishment is of course the most literal and unmistakable within the film—then Monte’s death can only be read in the same light. Their corruption and resultant demise do not, however, represent a general indictment of capitalist greed; rather, they offer a cautionary
tale against unbounded consumer desire, a particular kind of greed that is usually associated with a flourishing capitalist economy, but that can in fact be construed as antagonistic to it, at least at this critical turning point in the nation’s economic fortunes.30

Veda and Monte can also be seen to stand in for the type of dangerous consumer that Hollywood most feared. Thomas Schatz draws the title of *Boom and Bust*, his comprehensive study of American film in the forties, from the stark contrast between the record-breaking profits of the war and immediate postwar period, at precisely the moment when civilians had so few consumer options, and the economic catastrophe of falling attendance and declining box office receipts by 1947. After achieving all-time peak profits in 1946, studio and exhibitor profits in the United States plummeted almost 200 percent by 1950.31 Hollywood’s postwar “bust” corresponded with an economic “boom” for other industries, to which consumer dollars had been redirected. The undisciplined consumer is not simply a problem with respect to inflation; he or she anticipates a crippled film industry. In addition, Monte’s upper-class background and Veda’s social aspirations, which prompt her to steal her mother’s well-born husband, lead them to repudiate Mildred’s humbler origins and, by implication, the icons and plots of mass culture. In a particularly heartless speech, Veda confronts Mildred, “whose father lived over a grocery store, and whose mother took in washing,” with her inability to transcend her working-class past. Veda’s attack addresses not only the career of Mildred but also that of Joan Crawford (formerly Lucille LeSueur), whose mother was a laundress and lived, for a time with her daughter, over the laundry. Moreover, Crawford, the star, was marketed to an audience of LeSueurs, the daughters of laundresses; as the first MGM star to have “a screen personality [created] from scratch,” Crawford, once a “shopgirl,” reigned at the studio for almost eighteen years as the “Shopgirl’s Dream,” the attractive working girl who made good in film after film.32 Warners’ publicity campaign for *Mildred Pierce* exploited both Crawford’s working past and her subsequent success to demonstrate her unique fitness for the role of Mildred, her first under contract with the new studio.33 The skeptical Veda openly disavows the film’s and the studios’ plots. Working girls like Crawford and Mildred can’t make good: “they always smell of grease,” as Monte cruelly admonishes Mildred as well. Veda’s and Monte’s undemocratic sentiments demonstrate an irredeemable distance from the ordinary trajectories of the Hollywood narrative, trajectories that Veda is, unlike Monte, in no position to reject. Veda only aspires to Monte’s position, craving status as well as things, Mildred’s upper-class husband as well as her money. True to his social theories, Monte rejects Veda, a fitting denial of what she wants—the possibility of social transformation that these narratives hold out. But Hollywood is more powerful than Veda, and despite her resolve she is in the end driven to embrace a less gratifying Hollywood type, that of the murderous femme fatale.

Veda and Monte are the logical scapegoats of *Mildred Pierce*, the characters who
pose the biggest threat to American business and the film industry in particular, but it is important to keep in mind that the murder that eliminates both at once is not the film’s only crime. In James M. Cain’s novel, published in 1941, Mildred has no business partners; when she transfers funds from the corporation to her personal account, she is in a sense “stealing” money from herself. In the film, however, she is accountable to two equal partners, Monte and Wally. When she starts “bleeding the business dry so [she] could live the way [she has] since Veda came home,” as Wally puts it in the scene where she is ousted from the corporation, Mildred is guilty of embezzlement. Reviewers responded with scorn to the advertising campaign for the film, which revolved around the inflammatory question “What Did Mildred Pierce Do?” and the injunction to audiences: “Please don’t tell anyone what Mildred Pierce did.” Their complaints that Mildred didn’t do anything, that Veda was the murderer, attest to the film’s successful erasure of Mildred’s offense; the crime against the person completely obscures the crime against property, which is brushed off as yet another manifestation of the mother’s fallible affection.

The film noir world of the police station abrogates some of its responsibilities. Noir may tend to dominate the film discursively by shaping Mildred’s narrative within the melodrama according to its own agenda, but it ultimately does so in the service of letting the embezzler go free while the murderer is punished. It buries the business scandal and leaves the corporation to sort out its own tangled finances. Given that film noir was adopted by Warner Bros. “more than any other studio” as something of a signature style in the mid-forties, its generic role in solving Monte’s murder and in erasing Mildred’s crime seems rather like the studio’s endorsement of these linked projects. By presenting the private family and not the corporate family as the proper concern of the state, by failing even to address Mildred’s criminal malfeasance and to intervene accordingly, Warner Bros. transforms its putative “women’s weepie” into a prolocutor for the freest of free enterprise.

Mildred Pierce’s corporate maternalism prevails over the paternalism of the state, which had assumed an unprecedented place in peacetime economic life with the coming of the New Deal, giving way only to the far greater constraints and controls of wartime. Among other opportunities, the postwar period held out to big business the promise of a potential end to the kind of government interference with its affairs that had troubled it since the thirties. Toward this goal, an extensive “crusade for ‘free enterprise’” was launched late in the war in numerous advertisements and articles by prominent businessmen and their allies (even as big business also promoted government quotas and other techniques to direct the pace and paths of reconversion, consolidate its wartime gains, and crush competition). Eric A. Johnston, President of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, member of the Committee for Economic Development, and one of the most powerful voices in postwar economic planning, warned against a stagnant, hampered postwar economy by invoking the prospect that “the government will take over and private enterprise will be doomed.”

Mildred Pierce, Warner Bros., and the Corporate Family
The influence of Johnston’s work on behalf of the business community was celebrated in a June 1944 feature story in *Life* magazine, which pronounced him, with missionary zeal, the self-proclaimed “savior of his free-enterprise faith, the Luther of a business reformation.” An important aspect of salvation lay in the arena of public relations; Johnston had successfully “tackled the job of redeeming business in the public mind” (98) and thus had “already fulfilled his destiny, which was to rescue a class—the class comprising the American business community—from despair and even from possible suicide” (108). At the time of *Mildred Pierce*’s release, Johnston had left off reforming the image of business in general and set to work on Hollywood by replacing William Hays as the head of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), the trade association and public relations arm of the eight most important studios. Shortly before the Hays Office officially became the Johnston Office, Warner Bros. had become the first major studio to leave the MPPDA in its twenty-three year history. According to the *New York Times*, Warner Bros. left because it disapproved of Hays’s handling of their labor problems and wage negotiations; *Business Week* added that Warners thought Hays had “failed to provide intelligent leadership in creating goodwill for the industry.” Less than two months after Johnston succeeded Hays, Warner Bros. was back in the fold. It was surely Johnston’s reputation as a public relations–minded advocate of American business and his vocal position on the wisdom of business solving its own problems, in addition to his personal experience in management–labor issues and foreign trade, that made him seem a propitious choice for the “savior” of postwar Hollywood.

The first shot of Mildred reveals the businesswoman, draped in furs, walking along a studio replica of the Santa Monica pier as she contemplates suicide. Proving herself a member in good standing of Johnston’s redeemed business community, she doesn’t do it. At the end of the film, after Veda has confessed to Monte’s murder, Mildred and Bert leave the police station together in the final shot. The scene has been read as the restoration of universal gender dichotomies, “the dawn of patriarchal culture and the defeat of matriarchy” and, more concretely, as the final triumph of postwar masculine opportunity at the expense of women’s independence.

Both accounts are too simply drawn. *Mildred Pierce* has already let Mildred off the hook, and it is too committed to the rewards of government indifference to business practice to end by crushing its businesswoman. The arrest of Veda in the final moments of the film, despite Mildred’s efforts to protect her daughter, is frequently cited in support of these interpretations. But although it is tempting to understand the separation of mother and daughter to entail always, intrinsically, primarily, the punishment of the mother, it is simultaneously the moment of Mildred’s liberation. *Mildred Pierce* is not *Stella Dallas* (1937), a maternal melodrama in which the empathic spectator recognizes the necessity of the mother’s sacrifice—the unrefined Stella gives up her perfect, beloved daughter Laurel to the upper-class lifestyle
to which the father’s background entitles her—while also experiencing the profound loss of mother to daughter and daughter to mother. In *Mildred Pierce*, by contrast, it is difficult indeed to experience the separation of Mildred and Veda as loss. Moreover, the most jarring moment in the film may be Mildred’s failure to put a stop to Veda’s confession. Once the detective (Moroni Olsen) accuses Veda, Mildred waits a good five seconds, long enough for Veda to implicate herself fully, before stepping in with the now pointless instruction that she keep silent. Because Mildred, in effect, enables the confession by allowing Veda to think the truth is out and further denial pointless, it is less persuasive to think of her daughter as taken away from Mildred as a form of punishment than as yielded up by her, as though Mildred has finally come to her economic senses. After all, it is Mildred who brings to the beach house the gun that Veda uses to shoot Monte. When the family ceases to pay its way, emotionally or otherwise, the ties must be severed. Once Mildred is exonerated of Monte’s murder, his third of the restaurant chain, which he “wants to sell” but never has the chance to, reverts back to her under the same community property laws that precipitated her divorce. Mildred leaves the police station, not to go back to child-rearing and household drudgery but to return home to her business. And hence the other answer to the question “What did Mildred Pierce do?” as supplied by a movie quiz in the *New York Post*: “This is a question that stops even the quiz master. There is no one who knows ‘what Mildred Pierce did,’ even Joan Crawford. The best answer would be that Mildred Pierce did big business.”

Notes

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3. June Sochen, “*Mildred Pierce* and Women in Film,” *American Quarterly* 30 (Spring 1978): 9. Sochen suggests that as “the end of a genre, the culmination of the woman’s film of the thirties and early forties,” *Mildred Pierce* “became Hollywood’s ultimate comment on the fate of all women” (9). Annette Kuhn associates *Mildred Pierce* with the general “tendency” of classical Hollywood narrative to attempt “to recuperate
woman to a ‘proper place’”; Annette Kuhn, *Women’s Pictures: Feminism and Cinema* (London, 1982), 35.

4. Andrea Walsh, *Women’s Film and Female Experience, 1940–1950* (New York, 1984), 131. Walsh finds a burgeoning feminist consciousness in *Mildred Pierce*’s depiction of women’s labor, but she notes the link between “economic gain” and “maternal failure” in the film and ties it both to the exigencies of postwar demobilization and to the ambivalence of working women toward that labor.

The meaning of women’s increased participation in the paid labor force during the war has been debated among historians. It has been argued, for example, that World War II was less a watershed in women’s employment than a continuation and acceleration of changes that had been occurring since World War I. World War II did radically transform, at least for the duration, opportunities for women in jobs that had been traditionally defined as “male,” the kind of work Mildred doesn’t do. See Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (New York, 1982), 273–99; and International Labour Office, *The War and Women’s Employment: The Experience of the United Kingdom and the United States* (Montreal, 1946), 175.

5. Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman’s Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington, Ind., 1987), 70.


11. Mildred breaks up with Bert shortly after the discussion about Veda, and critics have unaccountably complained that Mildred is thereby demonized as an obsessive mother and bad wife. See Cook, “Duplicity in *Mildred Pierce*,” and Eric Lott, “The Whiteness of Film Noir,” *American Literary History* 9 (Fall 1997): 542–66. The couple does not split up because they disagree about how to raise their children. Mildred tells him to leave only when Mrs. Biederhof, a woman with whom Bert is having an affair, calls at the house. His betrayal of the family underscores her commitment to it.


point of view is something of a sine qua non of cinema studies with the publication of Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in Visual and Other Pleasures (Bloomington, Ind., 1989), 14–28. Mulvey and her followers elaborate a theory of “the gaze”—the camera’s, the characters’ within the film, and the spectators’ of the film—that is uniformly structured in terms of masculine desire.

14. Mary Ann Doane, “The Economy of Desire: The Commodity Form in/of the Cinema,” in Movies and Mass Culture, ed. John Belton (New Brunswick, N.J., 1996), 132. The role of women as consumers has greatly influenced film criticism. Hollywood has a long history of advertising various merchandise, including women’s fashion, through product tie-ins with film and star endorsements. In addition, feminist critics such as Doane interrogate how feminine identity in film is often negotiated through commodity exchange.

15. See the letter from Joseph Breen to Jack Warner, 7 December 1944, Warner Bros. Collection, Cinema/Television Library, Doheny Library, University of Southern California, Los Angeles (hereafter WBC), box 1. Monte’s line about his “investment” is present in the final revised version of the script by Ranald MacDougall and Catherine Turney, dated 5 December 1944, WBC, box 1.

16. Another brother, Sam Warner, died on the eve of the release of The Jazz Singer (1927), a film that helped Warner Bros. to become one of the major studios.

17. See, for example, Eli Zaretsky, Capitalism, the Family, and Personal Life (New York, 1976).

18. On the Warner family fights and power struggles, especially between Jack and Harry, see Michael Freedland, The Warner Brothers (London, 1985). See also note 44.

19. Doane, Desire to Desire, 81.

20. See the review clippings, WBC, box 1. For a useful overview of the Mildred Pierce reviews, see Mary Beth Haralovich, “Too Much Guilt Is Never Enough for Working Mothers: Joan Crawford, Mildred Pierce, and Mommie Dearest,” Velvet Light Trap 29 (Spring 1992): 43–52. Tom Doherty has generously shared an anecdote with me that hints at a possible correspondence between the reviewers’ and the popular response. His father saw Mildred Pierce while still abroad with the military; during a scene with Veda that featured some particularly atrocious conduct, a soldier in the audience uttered aloud, almost unconsciously: “Why, that ungrateful bitch!”


and expenditures and what adjustments would have to be made after the war to prevent depression. See “Transition to Peace: Business in A.D. 194Q.”


33. On the publicity for *Mildred Pierce*, see Mary Beth Haralovich, “Selling *Mildred Pierce*: A Case Study in Movie Promotion,” in Schatz, *Boom and Bust*, 196–202. Haralovich indicates that the promotion replicated the film’s internal discursive split. The advertising campaign focused on the film noir aspect and featured Mildred as an enticing femme fatale. The publicity campaign, which gave in-depth treatments of the film through prepared publicity releases, attended to the melodramatic portions of the film, drawing upon Crawford’s now infamous experience as a mother and her humble background before Hollywood fame.
36. Warner Bros. had been a supporter of New Deal policies and of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, for which the studio was later made to pay, when its pro-Soviet film, *Mission to Moscow* (1943), made at the behest of the president, became a center of controversy during the 1947 HUAC investigations into communist influence in Hollywood. The Warners’ loyalty to Roosevelt did not extend to his successor, Harry Truman, who was unpopular with good reason. In 1943, as a senator, he led hearings on the studios’ control of and alleged profiteering from military contracts. Truman was also a trust-buster, and under his administration the Justice Department reactivated its antitrust lawsuit against the film industry in October 1945. The Truman administration further supported the HUAC investigations. In an era when yesterday’s New Dealers became today’s communist sympathizers, it was hardly surprising that Warners took a harder conservative line in their filmmaking and operations. See Freedland, *Warner Brothers*, 150–53, 187–89; and Schatz, *Boom and Bust*, 288, 325–26.
37. C. Hartley Grattan, “What Business Thinks About Postwar America,” *Harper’s* 188, February 1944, 199. Small businessmen, backed by Henry Wallace, Roosevelt’s vice president before Truman, likewise and more accurately cast their struggle as a battle
to save free enterprise, but for them the source of the threat was big business as much as government. See, for example, Henry Wallace, “We Must Save Free Enterprise,” Saturday Evening Post 216, 23 October 1943, 12–13, 51–54.


41. Johnston was an expert in management-labor disputes and had a few years earlier represented Warners in negotiating a strike settlement. In Eric Johnston, America Unlimited (Garden City, N.Y., 1944), he argued at length the position on postwar America’s economic future that I have outlined above; war had resulted in a combination of accelerated and frustrated consumer impulses, and the “tremendous backlog of accumulated demands for all types of commodities,” along with “unprecedentedly large savings with which to satisfy their deferred demands” (136), would allow national prosperity to continue. He also urged an “ordered and sensible” (138) reconversion.

42. Cook, “Duplicity in Mildred Pierce,” 74.


44. I am grateful to Jerome Christensen for this observation. It is difficult to say whom Jack Warner came to resemble more, Monte or Mildred. Like Monte, Warner eventually wanted out of the family and the corporation; like Mildred, he cheated his partners and family members. As Michael Freedland tells the story in Warner Brothers, 214–15, Harry, Jack, and Abe sold eight hundred thousand shares in the company to a group of investors in 1956, but Jack bought his back on the sly for what he had been paid for them and became both president of Warner Bros. and its largest shareholder. Like Mildred, he really only wanted out of the family.

45. One might make a similar claim about Christmas in Connecticut, another Warner Bros. film released in 1945. Like Mildred, Elizabeth Lane, played by Barbara Stanwyck, makes a career out of home comforts; she writes popular articles about her family and homemaking for a national women’s magazine. Unlike Mildred, she lives in a New York flat and has neither children nor a husband. When the owner of the magazine comes to spend an old-fashioned Christmas with her, she promptly manufactures a family, which yields at the end to the real family she is about to form with her new love. After firing Elizabeth over the fraud she has been perpetrating on her readers, the boss changes his mind and offers her the job back at double the salary. It is unclear at the end whether she will resume her job, but there is no reason to believe she will not simply because she is getting married. The magazine has always valued her because it assumed she really was a wife and mother; her task now would be to integrate work and family rather than to fake that integration. And, indeed, her comic misadventures only serve to suggest that no real family could be as much work as maintaining a fictional one.