

THE POLITICS OF MOVIE MEMORIES — THE PRE-CODE SERIES

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Memories of movies are written within all of us that exist within a mediated world, they circulate around and within us and help to give us a sense of ourselves. The imaginary world that is constructed through half-remembered film sequences gives us the vocabulary to understand the important role that cinema has played in our emotional landscape. The drawings by Nina Mae Fowler are to be seen within this context of the imaginary realm. In this essay I will provide a historical context for the films that inspire her work and also for the role that memory plays in our understanding of an artistic practice that is reliant on the skill of the artist but also on the knowledge of the viewer.

Fowler's *Pre-Code series* consists of closely observed graphite and pencil drawings of stills taken from films made in Hollywood between 1931 and 1934. Her focus is on the female protagonists in these films and their controversial characterisations. There is a particular focus on five films: *The Cheat* (George Abbott, 1931); *Merrily We Go To Hell* (Dorothy Arzner, 1932); *Hot Saturday* (William A. Seiter, 1932); *Torch Singer* (Alexander Hall and George Somnes, 1933) and *Search For Beauty* (Erle C. Kenton, 1934). Working from a series of photographic stills taken from television versions of the films, Fowler's practice resolves into singular works that account for the multiple instances of an individual film still. Photographing different aspects from the same few frames of film, she merges them together before beginning work on the final version of a drawing. Her methodology therefore creates something new — montage moments in a memory bank that's forever in need of replenishment.

In this series of work, Fowler's interest lies in the re-creation of close-up portraits of film stills of female protagonists that are adapted from an era of filmmaking that still remains quite understudied. Both the era and the films made during 1930-1934 give us a fascinating insight into the world of filmmaking that went on to inspire many subsequent filmmakers. It was a singular moment when filmmakers had a level of freedom to make films in a manner that was not possible ever again. The 'Pre-Code' era of filmmaking in America, as it is now known, gave rise to a number of films that did not comply with censorship rulings that came into effect in 1934 (often referred to as the Hays Code). There is a distinction between the films that came before and afterwards.¹ The American films of the early 1930s highlight a number of recurring themes and characterisations that go on to be shielded in the public imagination forevermore in subsequent films.² For example, the gangster films associated with this time (the trilogy that make up the classic gangster genre includes *Public Enemy* (William A. Wellman, 1931), *Little Caesar* (Melvyn LeRoy, 1931) and *Scarface* (Howard Hawks, 1932), although falling outside of Fowler's interest, provide us with an important insight into the now commonly understood cinematic associations between criminality and ethnicity,

since all of the characterisations have their ethnicities marked out within the contexts of the narratives.

Significantly, the representation of masculinities in all of these films is considered within the wider debates of genre theory and the gangster genre in particular.

The films addressed within Fowler's work give us another insight into the narrative frames that fall outside of the subsequent generic conventions usually associated with the 1930s and it is some of these themes that Fowler addresses so eloquently in her work. Before going on to discuss the work in more detail it is important to address some of the significant aspects of the era in question in relation to the significant role played by women, since the artist's main focus is on the female protagonists and their controversial characterisations. Some of the most distinct actresses that are associated with the Pre-Code era such as the French-born American actress Claudette Colbert (1903-1996) or the British-born American actress and director, Ida Lupino (1918-1995) are crucial figures in our understanding of the role that sexuality played during the course of this era. Other actresses associated with this era are Tallulah Bankhead (1902-1968), Sylvia Sydney (1919-1999) and Nancy Carroll (1903-1965).³ All of these actresses star in the films that so fascinate Fowler and it is their faces that we see looking back at us through her graphite drawings. Some of these actresses are remembered more so than others but they all hold a particular power in the cinematic imagination and we are reminded of them anew through Fowler's deft representations. Some of their distorted faces are barely distinguishable because they operate as signifiers from a different life, an era in film when women were freely portrayed in roles that became impossible to cast after the censorship code became more rigorously enforced (after 1934). For example, the drunken bottle-sucking whilst driving a car that is evidenced in Joan Prentice (Sylvia Sydney) in *Merrily We Go to Hell* was the very type of image to be curbed by the new legislation.⁴ It is brilliantly brought back to us through Fowler's microscopic detailing in the work *Merrily* (2010).

Merrily operates on many levels as a memory bank for half-forgotten film stars, but also for forgotten filmmakers. *Merrily We Go to Hell* (1932), which is the film that gave rise to the inspiration for this drawing, was directed by Dorothy Arzner, adapted from the novel by Cleo Lucas, *I, Jerry, Take Thee, Joan* (1931), *Merrily We Go To Hell* is about an alcoholic who has an affair with another women so his wife, Joan, in turn goes on to also have an affair herself. One of the most memorable (and controversial) scenes from the film is a medium long shot of an entire room of overtly drunken companions slumped across seating and flooring, whilst another is the very film still that Fowler draws our attention to in *Merrily*, when Joan, is drinking at the wheel.

Unusually for this period in Hollywood, Arzner was a female filmmaker who worked for Paramount Studios. Her filmmaking career spans from the late 1920s until 1943 and, despite her many achievements, she has been buried in film history.⁵ After working for Paramount as a scriptwriter and film editor, she became the first female Hollywood director with *Fashions For Women* (1927) and went on to make 16 more feature films in addition to other co-directions. Significantly in *The Wild Party* (1929), which starred Clara Bow and is set in a women's college, she is credited as having invented the boom mike – in order to allow Clara Bow to more easily move her body, Arzner decided to put the microphone on a fishing rod. It is often forgotten that not only was this the first talkie film for Paramount, but it was also Arzner who discovered key actresses from this period such as Lucille Ball and Katherine Hepburn. She was a film director who gave women central roles with characterisations that fell outside of any known stereotypes. Early representations of lesbian eroticism often associated with her films can be found in *The Wild Party*, she went on to make *Honour Amongst Lovers* (1931) and *Working Girls* (1931) before making *Merrily We Go to Hell* in 1932.⁶ This film is one of the key films that Arzner made during the Pre-Code era. She was part of a generation of film directors that wanted to lift the spirits of the Great Depression era in

America and took full advantage of the weakness of the Pre-Code enforcement era to do so.⁷ These films dealt with all manner of societal excesses that included sexual transgression, alcoholism, gambling, prostitution and many other forms of anti-social behaviour.⁸ The titles of Fowler's works are as evocative as the films that she is referencing. *Branded* (2010), which is referencing *The Cheat* (1931) starred Tallulah Bankhead as Elsa Carlyle who is a compulsive gambler forced to shoot the man who tries to rape her. The film was a remake of the eponymous 1915 film directed by Cecil B. DeMille. The female protagonist is the only person in the film who is prepared to tell the truth about the shooting during the court trial, when her husband is attempting to take the blame on her behalf. Her attacker had 'branded her', by burning his seal into her chest with a branding iron. Elsa shows the courtroom this seal as proof of her experience. The complexities of how we are to understand the idea of cheating and truth-telling are explored in this film in an emotionally charged manner and we witness compulsive behaviour in a woman that we cannot easily reconcile with any other characterisations created before or since. Fowler's *Branded* gives a contemporary twist on notions of how women get 'branded' as a particular personality type and the emotional scar that is literally stamped onto Elsa's body gives credence to the truth of her experience.

Fowler will often heighten certain aspects of the film sequence that interests her when she is working on the final image, emphasising one particular detail or another.⁹ Part of what makes the drawings so powerful is their cinematic quality, their dreamy black and whiteness that compulsively recalls another time and another place. In *Singer* (2010), the teary-eyed woman that penetrates our gaze presents us with a fascinating glimpse into the pained world of the *Torch Singer* (1933), played by Claudette Colbert.¹⁰ In this film Colbert plays a mother who is forced to give up her child for adoption and becomes a torch singer (a performer of sentimental love songs) in order to cope with the anguish that this brings to her life. The heightened emotions we witness force an empathic response in the viewer, and the traumatic experience of a mother unable to support a child born outside of wedlock turns this film into something like a memory-image created in advance — at least as potent in our own period as that of its creation. Sentimentality, which is more traditionally associated with the melodramas that followed later on in Hollywood, is politicised here through our engagement with the social order of things when women exist outside of the traditional sphere of experience. Fowler's ability to overlay emotion with identification of the everyday makes *Singer* one of the most potent drawings in this series of works. The close-up face of the tearful woman, her huge eyes staring out of the picture frame make for a haunting image that stays with you long after you have looked away.

In *Hot Saturday* (2010) we have the only drawing that shows us a full frontal positioning of the female body. The film of the same name stars Nancy Carroll as Ruth Brock, a bank clerk who is harassed by the men in her neighbourhood and plagued by rumours that they initiate.¹¹ The film features Cary Grant in his first leading role, and although he is happy to upset the social order of things by living with his girlfriend, his pursuit of Ruth highlights the double standards at play in terms of the different conduct tolerated between men and women. Rumour and gossip surround every engagement that Ruth has with each of the men and any possible misinterpretation of her actions all work towards the damning of her character. The injustice of her fate is paralleled through the striking pose we see her in as she lies across the frame in Fowler's drawing. Her arms spread out and her wet clothes (she has been caught in a rain storm) capturing her slender frame enable multiple readings of a woman away from the frustrations that make up her life outside of her current surroundings. Her innocent behaviour leads to the assumed heat of a passionate embrace with a notorious 'playboy' and her social standing, her loss of job and peace of mind are all encased in this moment — it is a moment when she does not have to put up with the misogyny and instead has the time alone to think.

In *Heroes* (2010), the final drawing in this series, the film *Search For Beauty* (1934) is treated as source material for the portrait of Barbara Hilton played by Ida Lupino in the film. Hilton, who along with her swimming partner Don Jackson (played by Buster Crabble) is an Olympic diver and they are asked to be on the front cover of a new health magazine. This leads to attempts to con them but also to break them up as a couple, as the producers of the magazine are interested in pursuing Hilton for themselves. Interestingly the film highlights an early focus on the male torso (a real-life Olympic champion swimmer played the male lead)¹² and his highly toned body is given equal status to that of Lupino's. The pensiveness in the face that is created in *Heroes* shows us a portrait of a woman very much in control of her surroundings. Her drawn-in eyebrows and manicured hair give shape to a face that will not be beaten down and the sculptured expression gives credence to the heroic actions she is forced to take in order for her world to remain as she would like it to. The marble-like quality of this face has the same tonal qualities often attached to the statuettes of various religious iconographies and the Madonna in particular. Fowler's ability to recall the lives of other women is etched into the expressions of each of these drawings but in *Heroes* the plurality of experiences echoed in the title is especially poignant.

The heroism often associated with masculine conduct is superseded in these works and there is a collapsing of gender roles and the cultural mores usually associated with them. Memories resurface and, in these drawings, echoes of previous film lives are created for the contemporary audience. The re-archiving of an early mode of moving image is resurrected via the still image and the tactile gestures of enabled pencil and graphite. Societal mores are scrutinised through a pausing of the button and the still motion usually attached to the photographic image is recreated here through drawing. Memories are often attached to random images but in this work we are forced to think through the different register that we give to black and white films we may or may not have seen before. The emotions that each of the drawings register exist within a world of silence but our memories of these films are accompanied by the sound that we hear in our imagination. As Susan Best explores in relation to feminist art history, Fowler challenges what is innovative in contemporary art¹³ through the simplicity of her practice but also through the complexity of her source materials, the films. Whilst re-looking at these films through the cultural context of the contemporary era, one is forced to make connections between then and now – how everything has changed but how so little has changed.

The drawings remind us of the continual suffering that is etched on the faces of others – it is in these faces that we find ourselves. Fowler links memory into an art practice that involves many hours of concentration and studied endeavour. The emotional life of images has to be reconsidered in the light of contemporary political and cultural contexts¹⁴ and the black and whiteness of these works exist as a reminder of this very solid fact. We remain unaccustomed to seeing women in these poses – their strength exudes through the frame of each drawing. The close-up detailing of every tonal change in the skin colour, its lighting and its make up give a heightened sensibility to the emotions being conveyed. A moment in time is hinted at but not everything is revealed, we have to scour our own memories in order to think through the possible narrative or the fragments that we do remember. If seeing the portraits for the first time and hence meeting the female protagonists outside of their original context, the era-defining attributes of clothing and painted faces aid us into submission – we have entered the world of Hollywood, a world that both includes and excludes us. The identifications that were enabled through the roles played by these actresses show us that voices usually associated with existing outside of the usual societal margins were actually being heard. Uninhibited behaviour patterns in the Pre-Code films and the desire to suppress them

both inside and outside of the worlds of the films present us with a finger pointing in our direction in Fowler's work. These drawings reflect back at the viewer the extent to which memories can trick us into harmonious versions of ourselves, whilst in fact different versions of each of us exist in every drawing in this series.

Text featured in *Measuring Elvis*, 2015

1 For a development of this argument see Thomas Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema: 1930-1934* (Columbia University Press, 1999).

2 See Mick LaSalle, *Complicated Women: Sex and Power in Pre-Code Hollywood* (St. Martin's Griffin, 2001).

3 All of these actresses had to go on dealing with persistent questions about their sexuality throughout their careers as a result of the roles that they played in these and other films.

4 For an appraisal of the censorship enforcement see Nora Gilbert, *Better Left Unsaid: Victorian Novels, Hays Code Films, and the Benefits of Censorship (The Cultural Lives of Law)* (Stanford Law Books, 2013).

5 See Judith Mayne, directed by Dorothy Arzner (*Women Artists in Film*) (Indiana University Press, 1995) for an important assessment of Arzner's work.

6 Arzner left Paramount in 1932 to direct films independently. She continued to work, directing television commercials and Army training films. She produced plays and then also worked as a professor at UCLA film school, teaching screenwriting and directing until she died. Arzner lived with her choreographer partner, Marion Morgan (they met when she was a dancer and Arzner was directing her first film *Fashions for Women*, 1927) for over 40 years and died in 1979.

7 For an analysis of the relationship between the producers and the censors in relation to the films of this era see Mark A. Vieira, *Soft Focus: Pre-Code Hollywood*, (Harry N. Abrams; First Edition, 1999).

8 Other notable films include *Blonde Venus* (1932) with Marlene Dietrich where she sells her body in order to feed her child, *Faithless* (1932) with Tallulah Bankhead where a married woman also sells sex in order to support her family since her husband cannot work and *Tarzan and His Mate* (1934) which is a highly erotic film whilst also being an important early example of underwater filming.

9 Personal conversation with the artist – 28/07/15.

10 The film was based on *Mike* a short story written by Grace Perkins, published in Liberty Magazine, May 20-27, 1933. It was then written as a screenplay by Lenore J. Coffee and Lynn Starling

11 The film was adapted from the novel *Hot Saturday*, Harvey Fergusson (A. A. Knopf, 1926).

12 Alongside his acting career, Buster Crabbe had won the Olympic 400 metre freestyle swimming championship for America in 1932.

13 Susan Best, *Visualizing Feeling, Affect and the Feminine Avant-Garde* (I.B.Tauris, 2014), p3.

14 See Jill Bennett, *Practical Aesthetics, Events, Affects and Art After 9/11* (I. B. Tauris, 2012) for an analysis of this issue in relation to key contemporary artists' works.