

IMAGINING WOMEN: FILMS OF THE 1940s

The films of the 1940's project an image of women that begins to establish a more modern character. The image is one of a more grown-up self-consciousness, self-confidence, and worldly effectiveness. There are new aspects of attractiveness and style, both in the way a woman looks and dresses but also in the ways in which she acts and speaks. The look of the actors immediately signals some new trends but so does the context in which they are acting and the personalities that their characters establish.

Especially important is how the story treats the woman's role in the action. She has to have a capacity to act on her own, to assert her will –whether to do good or to be bad. She aims to be equal with the men in her life and works towards independence in her dealings with them. She is not afraid to be “bad”, to take advantage of men as perhaps they have taken advantage of her. She doesn't mind being dominant, although she may not seek to impose her will. We will observe, also, her lapses into too much shadowing and supporting the male characters. Throughout all of this, she is meant to stay attractive: to “look the part”, to be perhaps even more obviously alluring than the heroines of earlier films.

We will look at the images of 6 actors. 5 of the films were made from 1940-1947 (featuring Ida Lupino, Mary Astor, Barbara Stanwyck, Joan Bennett, and Gloria Grahame), and 1 film –an introduction to these new trends- was made in 1934 (Myrna Loy). Each film had a different director. The films will represent different approaches for imagining women and establishing them as actors and as Hollywood personalities. The range of plots will include mysteries, comedies, comic mysteries, melodramas, and even films with an interest in social issues.

Participants should expect to watch parts of a film in class after my introductory remarks and then to get involved in a class discussion of what they have seen. Most of the films are available on DVD's, on TV, or on a streaming device; it will be useful to have seen the entire film before the class. A syllabus for the term will be available at the first class as well as suggestions for readings on the films.

LEADER: Judith B. Walzer is a retired Provost and Professor of literature at the New School.

FORMAT: In-person

MAXIMUM: 35

TUESDAYS 1:00 to 3:00 p.m. 6 sessions starting October 11th through November 15th