Reconstructing boundaries: gender, war and empire in British cinema, 1945-50

In Against the Wind (1947), a British film released soon after the Second World War, the fate of Max -- who is shown working for the British-led resistance in Belgium -- is sealed by two women.[1] The film is careful to establish that Max (Jack Warner) does not identify as British before he is revealed as a traitor. He is shown telling his fellow resistance workers that 'My mother was Belgian, my old man was a Yank and his father was German'. Both his own non-Britishness, and that of the Irish woman, Bridie (Sheila Carty), to whom he sells his secrets, are emphasised during their clandestine meeting. He calls her 'Shamrock' while she tells him that: 'A man without some sort of country is a poor sort of mongrel'. It is through his association with Bridie, who is passing his information to the Nazis, that Max's treachery is discovered by the British authorities. The discovery comes too late to stop him being dropped by parachute in Belgium, and the information about his treachery has to be passed on from Britain to the wireless operator in Belgium. As soon as she decodes the message, this wireless operator -- Michele (Simone Signoret) -- shoots him.

The two women who seal Max's fate might be taken as emblematic of the way in which women's active involvement in the Second World War began to be portrayed in its immediate aftermath. Bridie in Against the Wind, the Irish woman from a neutral country who spies against Britain, is a figure who is much more extensively developed in I See A Dark Stranger (1946), embodying the active woman as a threat to the British nation.[2] Michele, the continental woman whose country is occupied by the Nazis, and who works loyally for the resistance under British leadership, is a figure much more extensively developed in Odette (1950), embodying female heroism.[3] None of these films feature active British women, and Against the Wind

and Odette do not feature British women at all. They thus suggest not only a double coding of femininity in representations of women's war-time roles – heroic service, a threat to the nation – but also the extent to which the active British woman disappeared from view once the War was over. In so far as the idea of women's active involvement in the Second World War survived in imagery produced after 1945, it was frequently represented through the figure of a non-British woman.

Antonia Lant comments that: 'War devolves on geographical territory, exploding and rebuilding national boundaries, but it simultaneously shapes the landscape of gender, eroding and sculpting boundaries between the sexes'.[4] In much of Europe, Nazi invasion and occupation involved widespread collapse of pre-war national boundaries, while the erosion of gender boundaries was particularly apparent in the common fate of many European women and men: transportation to enforced labour or death in German camps. In British territory, pre-war boundaries were also extensively disrupted. Imperial boundaries collapsed with the fall of Singapore, Malaya, Burma and Hong Kong, and the 'Quit India' movement signalled a further danger from the spread of nationalisms. Although Britain did not experience Nazi occupation, the boundaries of the metropolis were breached from the air, in bombing attacks by Germany. As the threat of Nazi invasion receded, an invasion of American troops began. By D-day, over one million American soldiers were in Britain, threatening national pride in the idea that victory was dependent on America. The boundaries of pre-war gender roles were extensively breached through the mobilisation of women for war-work, and the idea of war as a masculine sphere was further eroded as the home front became a place of danger in the black-out and the blitz.

This essay explores the significance of gender in representations of national and colonial relations in a range of British films of war and empire made at a transitional moment in the late 1940s, as the war was coming to an end, and in its immediate aftermath. As Britain made the transition to a post-war world, gender, I argue, was highly important to imagery which, in reworking national identity, attempted to reconstruct boundaries which had been disrupted during the war. The active female figure drew on a double coding of femininity not only in films that made reference to the War but also films of empire. However, war films and empire films took opposite trajectories, for the transposition of the figure of the active woman onto non-British women signalled an increasing expulsion of British women – and especially active British women -- from national imagery of the Second World War. In contrast empire films increasingly incorporated the British woman, and also drew on a double coding of femininity – one in which British women could symbolise a modernised imperial identity or attract blame for loss of imperial power, and the collapse of imperial boundaries.

Crossing boundaries

In Against the Wind the opening credits come up against shots of parachutes falling through the sky. Subsequently the camera lingers on an open parachute which is shot from below and fills the screen, its silk billowing. The parachute drop is a recurrent image in both Against the Wind and Odette, always taking place at night, emphasising secrecy. The importance of the sky as a means by which Britain can breach national boundaries already breached by Nazi Germany, is demonstrated in shots which show aeroplanes from Britain dropping personnel and supplies into Nazi-

occupied Belgium and France. The interior of the aeroplane is sometimes shown before the drop, as men get ready to jump, but the standard shot is the one used at the opening of Against the Wind: parachutes falling through the sky. Characteristically the camera then moves to the ground to show parachutists' landings, or women and men who are waiting to pick up people or supplies.

Antonia Lant has noted that in British films of the Second World War, the sky is a masculine sphere.[5] In Odette, the eponymous heroine is involved in parachute drops only as someone who watches from the ground. It is from her hotel window that Odette (Anna Neagle) sees the drop of supplies which she has ordered from Britain for the Maquis. It is from a snowscape on high ground that she is reunited with Peter Churchill (Trevor Howard) – the British leader of the resistance group -- who is shown getting ready to jump and parachuting into France, while Odette lights a bonfire on the ground to signal the location for the drop. In Against the Wind, the first parachute drop into Belgium is of Father Philip Eliot (Robert Beatty) a Canadian Roman Catholic priest, and Julie (Gisele Preville), a Belgian wireless operator. The standard shot of parachute falling through the sky is used for Father Philip, but Julie's parachute is shown only as it reaches the ground and snags in a tree, killing her. However, the second parachute drop associates Michele with the sky. Like her male co-workers – Max, Johnnie (Gordon Jackson) and Emile (John Slater) -- she is shown in the aeroplane's interior before the jump, and hers is one of the four parachutes which the camera follows as they fall through the sky.

The coding of femininity in these parachute drops could be read as corresponding to a more general coding of femininity in the active non-British women represented. Michele is given the emblems of the modern active woman – trousers and cigarettes. Her transgression of gender boundaries attracts explicit comment when she

rebukes Johnnie (Gordon Jackson) – a Scottish explosives expert who has been recruited to train saboteurs on the Belgian mission -- for talking to Max about his role. This prompts Johnnie to tell Max that: 'I don't like them (women) in slacks and uniform and authority. I like them where they belong'. Julie's rejection of conventional femininity is also made apparent – as, for example, in her preference for an accordion to disguise her wireless receiver rather than a sewing machine. Odette is represented in terms which conform more closely to conventional femininity. She rarely wears trousers and, in a recurrent image, she refuses cigarettes. Although early sequences show her recruitment, training and engagement in resistance work, much of the film focuses on her interrogation, torture and incarceration, where her resistance is largely passive: refusal to speak, endurance of suffering. Peter is arrested with her, but his imprisonment is shown only sparingly and in terms of a more active resistance: attacking a prison guard in an attempt to escape, and exercising furiously in a prison yard as a cover for messages of love called out to Odette, who is in her cell.

Despite these different codings of femininity, crossing national boundaries is closely associated with the disruption of gender boundaries in the portrayal of all the non-British women in these films. Whether they are shown as threatening Britain or performing heroic service, their presence transforms domesticity into conspiracy, danger and death. Characteristically, when they are shown in domestic interiors, these fail to meet the credentials of a home. Bridie's London bed-sitting room is the setting where Max sells her his secrets -- their conspiracy associated with deficient domesticity in the sleazy associations of the room, where Max removes Bridie's petticoat from the back of a chair before sitting down, and Bridie spends the interview removing her stockings and examining them. This is a theme extended in <u>I See a Dark Stranger</u> where, in crossing national boundaries the Irish female spy – who is also

called Bridie -- moves from one hotel or boarding house to another, and all become places of conspiracy and danger. It is in a hotel bedroom that Bridie (Deborah Kerr), meeting Miller (Raymond Huntley) -- the German agent who has recruited her to espionage -- finds that he is dying, and is left to dispose of his body. In Against the Wind Michele discovers Max's treachery in a Belgian farmhouse. What has begun as a domestic scene, with Max whistling as he shaves, and Michele seated at a farmhouse table, ends with Max lying dead on the floor. It is from a sewing machine – the disguise for her wireless receiver – that Michele draws the gun to shoot him.

In crossing national boundaries non-British women are also engaged in work which takes them from family and home. Bridie leaves both at the outset of I See a Dark Stranger, never to return. Odette not only leaves her three daughters behind in Britain to work in France but, in training for this work, learns to deny her motherhood, repeating a cover story in which she has no children. As they are parachuted into Nazi-occupied countries, home-coming for Belgians and French is to a place of danger, which produces the opposite of family reunion. This is an experience which is common to non-British men as well as women. In Against the Wind, Jacques (Paul Dupuis) is one of the team who are sent to Belgium and has an alias as a Nazi officer. When his fiancee enters the Catholic church in Belgium which is being used as a centre for the resistance organisation, he has to ensure that she does not see him. When he meets her on the street, she recognises him despite his Nazi uniform, and he has to deny her. Emile is not even recognised by his wife when, before the mission, he meets her in a British hotel. Since he has been in a German concentration camp, the British organise surgery to change his face and ensure that Nazis do not recognise him when he gets to Belgium. Both Jacques and Emile die on the mission, and so even the possibility of eventual reunion at the end of the war is foreclosed.

It is Nazi occupation which makes Belgium and France into places of danger, but it is on British orders that Odette learns to deny her motherhood and Emile has surgery which means that his wife no longer recognises him. However, while the British contribute to disruption of families, the resistance groups in Against the Wind and Odette, supply a type of substitute family, headed by British men in London who give the orders.[6] Ackerman (James Robertson Justice) and Colonel Buckmaster (Maurice Buckmaster) offer contrasting images of heads of these families -- Ackerman as a strict patriarchal figure and Buckmaster providing a more benevolent paternal image. The 'home' of these families -- the headquarters where resistance groups are trained, and where workers sometimes return to report back during missions -- offers an image of safety and stability in contrast to the dangers they encounter away. This is an image which is very apparent in Odette, which ends with the heroine's return to headquarters in Britain. After the suffering she has endured in France under the interrogation of the Nazis, and in Ravensbruck concentration camp where they deport her, she is weakened, exhausted and ill -- her eyes dark-ringed, and her walk halting. Her return to Britain marks the end of this suffering, and her arrival in a place of peace.

Odette's return to Britain is also the moment when she is finally reunited with Peter Churchill. After they are arrested, she plays a protective role towards him – inventing a story for her interrogators where he is not only a playboy who played no significant role in the resistance, but also a relative of Winston Churchill. This traditional femininity of sympathy, self-sacrifice and love is further emphasised as the film closes with the end of her war-work and a future where she will marry a British man. Like many other war films, Odette is careful to establish its credentials as a true story, and the audience knows that, after the war, Odette the heroic resistance worker

becomes 'Mrs. Peter Churchill'. The substitute family which Britain has provided for resistance workers is extended in the idea of Odette's marriage to a British man. The image of Britain as a place of stability is reinforced not only by the end of the Second World War which has liberated Odette from German concentration camp and brought her back to Britain, but also through the idea of a future where the gender order, disrupted by the War, will be restored. Crossing national boundaries may serve as a sign of Odette as active war-worker in early sequences of the film, but it is a romantic border crossing, in her developing cross-national relationship with Peter, which provides its resolution: a sign of Odette's transition from war-worker to wife.

Romances which cross national boundaries are common to other films which show non-British women's active involvement in war. In Against the Wind Johnnie comments on the threat posed by Michele – her uniform, authority and slacks – but their romance softens her image. It is at Johnnie's darkest moment – when he holds himself responsible for Jacques's death – that Michele declares her own feelings for him, providing him with consolation, as well as love. Romance between a British man and non-British woman is more problematic in I See a Dark Stranger. David Baynes (Trevor Howard), a British army officer who is engaged in scholarly study of Oliver Cromwell on sick leave, is an unlikely partner for Bridie whose anti-British activities include vandalising a Cromwell statue. In the final sequence of the film, Bridie's discovery that the hotel where they arrive to spend the first night of their honeymoon is called the Cromwell Arms, causes her to abandon David in a furious temper. Unlike Odette, there is no assurance that, in the future, Bridie will make a transition from her active involvement in the war in anti-British espionage, to become a good wife to a British man. But while the plot cannot bring Bridie finally under control, it reduces

the sense of threat, for David tames Bridie's anti-British ardour sufficiently to marry her.

Romantic plots allow the representation of active women to incorporate aspects of conventional femininity, while the construction of national relations through gender relations, and the theme of romance between British men and non-British women, positions Britishness as masculine in relation to other nationalities. Britain is paternalistic -- the leader, champion and protector of Nazi-occupied European nations. It is a place of stability in contrast to war-torn Europe – its own boundaries intact. Through the transposition of the idea of women's active involvement in war onto non-British women -- whether her active involvement in war is heroic or treacherous – Britain is also re-positioned as masculine in relation to war. Gender boundaries between British men and British women are reaffirmed, and a gendered nation – one in which men bear arms, fighting for a country for which they are ultimately called upon to die, while women guard their homes – is reinstated. This transposition marked an increasing expulsion of active British women from national imagery of the Second World War, and coincided with an emphasis on British women as a symbol of the home to which men were returning.

Good wives and sweethearts

'Would you take Frieda into your home' asked the publicity poster for Frieda (1947), illustrated by a picture of Mai Zetterling, who played the part of Frieda in the film.[7] In its address to a 'you' defined by 'your home' the poster echoes many of the concerns of the post-war period, when national belonging was increasingly associated with the idea of home as a symbol of peace and stability.[8] In its construction of this

idea against the female stranger, the poster indicates some contrasts between Odette and Frieda. The former associates marriage between a British man and a non-British woman with a return to Britain which provides the resolution to the film, but Frieda begins by posing such a marriage as a problem, and associates it with war-torn Europe. Opening with a wedding in a liminal 'no-man's land between the German and Russian armies', and a ceremony which takes place in a bomb-damaged church to the sound of gun fire, the film shows the couple climbing over rubble as they leave. In the marriage service, questions to Frieda and her responses are spoken in German, but the British man that she is marrying – Robert Dawson (David Farrar) -- speaks in English. Thus, from the outset, the image of their marriage is ambivalent, emphasising national difference between Britain and its wartime enemy.

While the plot of Frieda emphasises national difference, it also emphasises equivalence between white women, tracing the process by which a German woman becomes a good wife to a British man. In contrast to Odette which foregrounds a non-British woman's war-work, Frieda makes only brief references to Frieda's work as a nurse in Germany who has helped Robert to escape from prisoner-of-war camp, and does not show her in this role. In a period when the image of Britain as a place of peace was associated with British women in domestic settings, Frieda is set mainly in the domestic interior of Robert's home, inhabited by British women – his mother, aunt and widowed sister-in-law, and their housekeeper – and shows Frieda joining them in this domestic space. Frieda is one of a number of films made in the late 1940s which, in constructing national relations through gender relations, incorporates white non-British women into what was an increasingly dominant image of femininity: that of good wife or sweetheart to a British man.

The idea of Britain as a haven from war-torn Europe in Odette recurs in Frieda. After their wedding, Frieda and Robert escape from danger on a train. This scene is juxtaposed against images of a peaceful small town – Denfield – where Robert was born. His voice establishes its significance as an emblem of Englishness as he tells Frieda about this 'pleasant peaceful spot', inhabited by 'kindly, good-natured people'. As Robert continues his story of Englishness, telling Frieda of his family, the images are of Denfield gathering to celebrate his brother's wartime wedding, five years earlier. The contrast with Robert and Frieda's wedding is sharp, for in Denfield the only disruption to the order and conviviality of a wedding, even in wartime, is the sound of an aeroplane, which disturbs the bride with fears for her pilot husband's future. As Frieda and Robert speed towards Denfield on a train, the camera moves to show the domestic interior of Robert's home, and the women who are guarding its domestic order.

This association of home with British women in domestic settings marks a shift in ideas of home from many wartime images. During the war the notion that Robert conjures for Frieda -- England as a pleasant peaceful spot -- was disrupted by images of the home front as a place of danger in the blackout and the blitz, and a place where British women were active and mobile. Although many films showed women as good wives, others such as Millions Like Us (1943), The Gentle Sex (1943) and A Canterbury Tale (1944) showed them abandoning domesticity to serve in aircraft factories, the services and the land army.[9] Films made as the war was coming to an end, however, shared the vision of home portrayed in Frieda, showing a place of safety, inhabited by women. Diary for Timothy (1946) foregrounds gentle, domestic images as its central character – a baby boy – is shown the story of what has been happening in Britain in the first six months of his life, and entrusted with the task of

making a different world when the war is over.[10] In The Captive Heart (1946), home is represented in opposition to the hardships of a German prisoner-of-war camp where British men are incarcerated – a haven to which they long to return.[11]

Increasingly in these films British women are shorn of most associations with war-work, and represented as figures who have spent the war at home, patiently waiting for their men. In Diary for Timothy Timothy's mother has no name and says almost nothing. She is portrayed mainly in a domestic setting, and is waiting for her husband's return. Although this is not shown in the film it is promised through the voice of Timothy's father in a letter promising that 'we will all be together again'. In The Captive Heart the return is shown through the early release of some of the prisoners, and resolves the anxiety and pain of the men in the prison camp, as one receives news of his wife's love affair, another of his wife's death in childbirth, and a third feels obliged to break off his engagement because he has lost his sight. As the audience knows, however, women have been guarding the home during the war – for apart from one shot of a mobile woman in uniform saying farewell to her family as she boards a train, they are shown in domestic settings. Women have been faithful to men, or unfaithful only through unfortunate misunderstandings, and are waiting for them to come home. As the men return, order is restored, and all is well.

In incorporating a German woman into this dominant image of femininity, in images where she is shorn of most associations with war-work, and shown as a good wife to a British man, Frieda draws on ideas of transnational white femininity, where differences of nationality can be subsumed under a common defining womanhood. The possibility of equivalence between white women of different nationalities is signalled early in the film when British men, discussing Frieda's arrival in Denfield over a game of billiards, remark that 'As soon as you meet her, you won't think of her

as a German, you'll think of her as a girl'. As Charlotte Brunsdon and Rachel Moseley have observed, this notion of equivalence is heavily underlined in an exchange between Frieda and Robert's mother on Frieda's first night in Denfield, as both discover that they have been bereaved during the war in air-raids on what Frieda calls Koln and Robert's mother calls Cologne. Frieda has lost her parents, while Robert's mother has lost her pilot son.[12] It is at the end of this sequence that Frieda tells Robert's mother that: 'I try to make for Robert, for you, a good wife'.

It is through her demonstration that she is a good wife to Robert that Frieda earns acceptance in Denfield. While the opening sequence of their marriage associates Frieda with the danger of war, and she wears trousers for her wedding, she assumes an increasingly passive role on arrival in Denfield, taking up domestic tasks in Robert's home where she wears skirts. The problems of national difference posed by Robert's marriage are extensively rehearsed, and Frieda's nationality initially earns her hostility and even hatred in Denfield. But as the film moves to show the end of the war, its inhabitants increasingly conform to Robert's description of 'kindly, good-natured people'. Frieda earns complete acceptance from Robert's family only after her attempted suicide. This is the culmination of her transition to passivity, and is elaborated in images where she consigns herself to death by jumping from a bridge and, rescued by Robert, lies unconscious in his arms, her body limp. The film ends on an image of a passive Frieda, confined to bed, fervently embracing Robert and her future as his wife. This acceptable version of German national identity supplied by a female who becomes a good wife is in sharp contrast to the version supplied by Freida's Nazi brother, Rikki (Albert Lieven). Rikki represents German militarism and war crimes, and declares that he wants war 'again, and again, and again'. As Freida

urges Rikki to stay in England, where he will learn peace, and Rikki remains devoted to war, both figures enforce an image of Britain as a place of stability and order.

Gender relations in Frieda emphasise equivalence between German and British women, but non-equivalence between German and British men. But in films of British-American relations, images of male bonding in a common male endeavour were an important symbol of 'the special relationship'. British-American alliance was shown through images of heterosexual union which gave American women to British men, and drew on the same idea of transnational white femininity as Frieda. British films, however, did not give British women to American men. As Antonia Lant comments, they showed such liaisons as problematic and dispatched the American men – usually to death.[13] Cross-national heterosexual plots involving British women were thus foreclosed in films that moved on to emphasise British-American alliance through images of male comradeship. British women remained guardians of national boundaries.

A Matter of Life and Death (1946) and Picadilly Incident (1946) are both films which, like Frieda, emphasise equivalence between white women in plots where American women are shown supporting and loving British men. As in Frieda, there is some reference to non-British women's active role in war-work, but the films quickly move to show a transition to good wife and sweetheart. In A Matter of Life and Death (1946) the first encounter between the British Peter (David Niven) and the American June (Kim Hunter) is over the air-waves as June, serving in Britain as a wireless operator, urges Peter to bail out of his aeroplane.[14] In Picadilly Incident (1946) the British Alan (Michael Wilding) first meets his future American wife – Joan, who is serving as a nurse -- when she picnics in the grounds of his house with American

servicemen.[15] After these initial meetings, however, American women are never subsequently associated with war work.

Picadilly Incident offers a particularly striking example of the notion of equivalence between British and non-British women for, through her marriage to Alan, the American Joan displaces the British Diana (Anna Neagle). Diana's own marriage to Alan is by special license, and they have only one night together before she departs on active service in the WRNS. Diana's involvement in the war, however, is shown as largely passive, for she is shipwrecked on a deserted tropical island, and forced to do nothing while waiting for rescue, while her main struggle involves defending herself against sexual harassment from a Canadian serviceman, rather than fighting the enemy. Her rescue means that she returns to Britain, and unusually home-coming is represented as female. It is a miserable affair. There is no-one to meet Diana at the station. When she arrives at Alan's home it is to find an area strewn with rubble, and a house which is cordoned off, and which she cannot enter. When she tracks down Alan's country estate, it is to find that Alan, believing she is dead, has remarried. Joan now occupies her place as his wife in a comfortable and spacious domestic interior, and cradles Alan's baby in her arms. In usurping her place as Alan's wife and becoming the mother of his child, the American Joan has successfully made a transition from active involvement in the war to good wife, which is now impossible for Diana.

Joan is represented as a good wife to Alan through the consolation she provides for what he believes is the loss of his first wife. Mending and healing the lives of British men was a prominent role assigned to good wives and sweethearts as the end of the war brought increasing attention to the psychological and emotional traumas that men had suffered.[16] Some films of the late 1940s explored this theme,

showing male vulnerability, but in a way which contributed to ideas of heroism, for their traumas were a result of dangers they had encountered and risks they had taken. In A Matter of Life and Death Peter is a poet, and the film emphasises that his intelligent sensitivity exacerbates the effects of war-time traumas, but he is also a hero -- his illness produced by flying too many missions. This threatens his life, but June restores him. In Picadilly Incident, Alan can provide little consolation in his turn for Diana, and the moment when they are finally reunited after her return is also the moment of Diana's demise. Hers is not heroic death in action, but civilian death caused by a bomb attack in which Alan is also hurt. The outcome of her active service is her expulsion from her marriage and her home, and the final wartime scene in the film, where she is on her death-bed, might be regarded as a symbolic moment in the expulsion of the figure of the active British woman from post-1945 imagery of the Second World War. Framing sequences at the beginning and end of the film show a British judge pronouncing the legitimacy of the marriage between Alan and Joan, endorsing the displacement of an active British woman by an American who has successfully made the transition to good wife and mother, while also placing the wartime action of the film firmly in the past. The transition to a post-war world is marked by the good wife who is in possession of home and belongs there, while the active British woman is dead.

The notion that Americans can displace British was treated very differently in films where British-American romances were between British women and American men, like I Live in Grosvenor Square (1945) and The Way to the Stars (1946).[17] Both films develop themes which echo those in Picadilly Incident suggesting the idea of displacement of British by Americans, but stop short at sealing the notion of British-American alliance through heterosexual union. In I Live in Grosvenor Square the

relationship between a British couple -- Patricia (Anna Neagle) and David (Rex Harrison) -- is disrupted by the advent of an American serviceman John (Dean Jagger) who threatens to take David's place as Patricia's lover. In The Way to the Stars the idea of equivalence between the American airman Johnny (Douglas Montgomery) and the British airman David (Michael Redgrave) is extensively developed. By the time that Johnny arrives in Britain, David is dead – killed on a mission. Assigned David's room in the barracks, Johnnie develops an affection for one of David's possessions – a sign over his bed – and decides to keep it there. He acquires another of David's possessions -- a cigarette lighter that he had carried on missions as a good-luck charm – as a gift from Toddy (Rosamund John), who is David's widow. But while the equivalence between Johnny and David is emphasised and extends to Johnny's increasingly close relationship with Toddy, it does not extend to the idea that Johnny can displace David as Toddy's wife. In Picadilly Incident an active British woman dies to legitimate the union between an American woman and a British man, but in I Live in Grosvenor Square and The Way to the Stars the possibility of union between British women and American men is denied by a common plot device: the death, on active service, of the American men.

'Anyone would think we were an army of occupation or something', an American serviceman comments in I Live in Grosvenor Square, as he encounters British hostility to his presence in Britain. After John's death, however, British and Americans gather in an English village church for the funeral and pay 'deep tribute' to American courage and sacrifice. The idea of British-American alliance may not be sealed through heterosexual union between American men and British women, but it is fervently endorsed in images of male comradeship in war, and the film ends with the British David being piloted by an American airman, to be dropped by parachute

over France on D-day. The Way to the Stars also ends with a strong image of British-American alliance as a common male endeavour. Toddy comforts Johnny's friend in his bereavement by reading a poem written by her husband David before his death. Claiming that the British David wrote this for the American Johnny, she conjures a notion of male bonding, beyond the grave. The image of British-American alliance contributing to national strength was thus associated with masculinity, producing some sense that this could be transnational. But both films also take care to reconstruct the boundaries between Britain and America.. They emphasise an equal partnership -- one in which British and American men jointly secure victory -- in the context of American departure from Britain, allaying anxieties of American occupation of Britain or British dependence on America. The Way to the Stars begins with shots of a deserted barracks which, the commentary tells us, is 'all that is left of people who lived here'. American airmen in Britain belong to the past, and have long since departed.

In 1943 a report on the Psychological Problems of Troops Overseas had suggested that:

> [Radio and film] can illustrate essential femininity (as a reassurance against the soldier's fears about this) and should give forth affection and the suggestion that they are waiting for the return of armies abroad...The women of England must be shown as having a non-anxious but non-hedonistic daily life. Their needs for men's company can be expressed by their wishes that the boys were back home...With extreme care a Canadian voice might talk to a female one, in a friendly fashion, but as a decided outsider'.[18]

In the immediate aftermath of war, these recommendations resonated in filmic representations of British women's lives in war and its aftermath. But the white non-

British woman was also used to represent the idea of 'essential femininity'. Mobilised in some films to associate active involvement in war with non-British femininity, and thus restore gender boundaries between British men and British women, she could be used in other films to show the good wife and sweetheart who, like her British counterpart, was engaged in a common task of healing and mending the lives of British men. These images associated national recovery, after the dislocations and traumas of war, with British masculinity, while white women provided consolation and love. British men represented important service to the nation, and white women, including non-British women, represented service to men.

Imperial boundaries

Before 1939, the empire film was a strongly masculine genre, which commonly showed white British men finding and demonstrating their manhood through struggles and adventures in far-off territory – a theme which was common to Hollywood as well as British films of empire. In the late 1940s, however, as imperial boundaries began to collapse – notably with Indian independence in 1947 – the empire film began to take an opposite trajectory from the Second World War film. Although the figure of the white British woman who was actively involved in war was increasingly expelled from ideas of war and Britishness, the figure of the white British woman who was actively involved in empire was increasingly incorporated into imperial identity. In some representations, British women were aligned with British men, sharing his qualities of authority, rationality and expertise. This produced Britishness as a racial identity, common to women and men -- its modernity emphasised through the idea of an emancipated woman, constructed in opposition to

the primitivism and superstition of colonised women and men. But active white British femininity in empire, like active non-British femininity in war films, was double-coded, symbolising not only modernity, but also regression into hysteria and madness.

This double-coding of active white British femininity in empire is apparent in the contrast between Men of Two Worlds (1946), set in Africa, and Black Narcissus (1947), set in India.[19] Both films portray colonial encounters, and foreground British women who are actively engaged in the colonial civilising mission, which is refused and resisted by local people. In Men of Two Worlds modernity is embodied as much in the figure of a female doctor -- Catherine Munro (Phyllis Calvert) -- as in the male District Commissioner Randall (Eric Portman), and divisions in the film are organised around ideas of racial rather than gender difference. At the end of the film Munro and Randall come together in a common effort to save the life of a Westernised African who has nevertheless been overwhelmed by superstition when he is cursed by an African witch-doctor. In Black Narcissus, however, it is white British nuns who are overwhelmed by the eroticism and exoticism which the film associates with India. As they lose control, and the film shows their repressed sexuality aroused by contact with the exotic, the boundaries of racial difference threaten to collapse. They are reinstated only by the nuns' withdrawal from their mission.

Men of Two Worlds opens with images of a war-time concert in the National Gallery in London. The piano soloist is an African – Kisenga (Robert Adams) -- wearing suit and bow-tie, accompanied by an entirely white orchestra and choir with white conductor, and earning rapturous applause from a predominantly white audience. But as Kisenga embarks upon a mission to assist Randall to control an outbreak of sleeping sickness in Africa, and makes the journey to a place he calls

'home', the contrast is between London – celebrated in a familiar repertoire of images from war-time documentaries showing concerts at the National Gallery -- and Africa as a place of disease and death. The film explicitly explores essentialist ideas of racial difference, particularly in Kisenga's own explanation of his terror of the effects of the witch doctor's curse: 'Fifteen years in England – what's that against ten thousand years of Africa in my blood'. The project of the British, and of the film, is the defeat of the witch-doctor, and the battle between the forces of progress, represented by the British, and the forces of darkness, represented by the witch-doctor, becomes a battle over whether Kisenga will die or not.

As a main representative of scientific rationality against African superstition, through her medical expertise, Catherine Munro is given a masculinised image associated with the modernity of the emancipated British woman -- smoking, wearing trousers and, on occasion, drinking whisky. She is authoritative and, at the outset, more forceful and hard-line than Randall, who is prone to describe the resistance of Africans to his efforts to relocate them as 'a bit ticklish', while Munro advocates that he should not 'stand any more nonsense from these people'. This is later reversed and Munro's image softened as she diagnoses Kisenga's illness as a nervous breakdown, and her role towards him becomes that of nurse – tucking him into bed – while she rebukes Randall for being too harsh with him. The brief appearance of another white British woman – Mrs. Upjohn (Cathleen Nesbitt) -- provides a double-coding of British femininity within the film, for in a set-piece debate, Upjohn represents the opposite of rationality, arguing that science is incapable of understanding 'the soul of a primitive people' and that education will destroy this soul.

While the image of Munro aligns her with British men, her modernity is constructed against African women, highlighting the idea of racial difference, and

ruling out any suggestion of transracial femininity. African women are all characterised as backward and hostile to Western medicine -- burning down the dispensary, and believing that Kisenga will die. But Munro's image is also in opposition to different versions of African masculinity -- not only the witch-doctor and his followers, but also Westernised African men. One message of the film – that Kisenga as an educated African is the key to a modernisation process – is constantly undercut as he is shown increasingly overwhelmed by superstition. Beside Munro, Kisenga is a very fragile and ambivalent figure, who is reduced to a pitiful state when the witch-doctor curses him and loses all the attributes of Westernised masculinity – crying, sweating, shaking. As the film ends with victory in the battle to save Kisenga's life, Munro's image becomes aligned more closely with British men against Africans. She and Randall, cool and collected, come together in a vigil by the bed in which Kisenga lies sweating and hallucinating, while it is only as a result of their wisdom, succour and determination that Kisenga survives.

Men of Two Worlds affirms racial boundaries, and reasserts the importance of the colonial civilising mission in an African context where, in the 1940s, British imperial boundaries were still intact. In contrast Black Narcissus, released in the year of Indian independence, represents the collapse of boundaries and the failure of the civilising mission. Where pre-1939 films had represented empire in terms of communities of British men as soldiers or administrators, the focus of Black Narcissus is on a female community of nuns, and only one white male is represented: the British agent Mr. Dean (David Farrar). Characterised initially in terms of piety, caring and sexual purity, the image of the nuns is coded differently from Catherine Munro in Men of Two Worlds. But like Munro, they are actively engaged in a civilising mission, as they are shown travelling from Calcutta to the Himalayas to establish an

outpost of civilisation, where they intend to provide health care and education for the local people. Their relation with local people -- one of authority associated with the modernity of their medical expertise – also resembles Munro's, and their own view of these people as 'like children' is endorsed by the images in the film. Like Munro they are also associated with independence, and one of their early failures is an inability to manage without the aid of Mr. Dean.

The nuns' failure provides the main narrative of the film. From the outset they are disturbed by the environment, especially by the wind which brings them out in spots, and produces a pervasive sense of unease and tension in the film. The erotic paintings on the walls of the Mopu palace, where they base their mission, are initially more easy to control. The paintings are emblems of the former status of the palace as a 'house of women', signifying Eastern sexuality as exotic in contrast to the nuns' purity. The nuns eject the paintings, and convert the palace into a Christian place, establishing a chapel. Eastern sexuality is also signified as exotic in the figures of the Young General (Sabu), and his 'beggarmaid' Kanchi (Jean Simmons), who run away together. Kanchi is constructed in opposition to the nuns – narcissistically preoccupied with her appearance, deficient in domestic virtues, and decked out in richly coloured clothes and elaborate jewellery, in contrast to the simplicity of their white habits. The Young General, like Kanchi, is resplendent in rich colours and cloth, offering a highly feminised version of exotic Eastern masculinity. He is named 'Black Narcissus' by Sister Ruth (Kathleen Byron) after the perfume that he wears.

The idea of narcissism is central to the representation of the colonial encounter in Black Narcissus, and threatens to breach racial boundaries. The nuns are distracted from their task by self-preoccupation, and the colonial civilising mission is reversed. Setting out to bring the values of order and discipline to local people, the nuns become

disordered and undisciplined. Sister Phillipa (Flora Robson), seduced by the beauty of the place, becomes preoccupied with her work, planting flowers in the garden instead of vegetables. Sister Clodagh (Deborah Kerr), who is the Sister Superior, becomes preoccupied with a past love affair, and begins to lose control and authority. This reversal, and the collapse of racial boundaries is most apparent in the figure of Sister Ruth. The moment when she abandons her nuns' white habits, and displays her sexuality, is shown as a move towards hysteria and madness. She has named the Young General 'Black Narcissus', but is aligned with his narcissism. Surveying herself in a mirror, she decorates her mouth with bright red lipstick – and in what is represented as a pathological transgression of gender boundaries, makes herself into a sexual offering for Mr. Dean, who refuses her. Her death, plunging from a cliff, seals the failure of the civilising mission. Racial boundaries are restored only by the nuns' departure. Their failure, predicted from the outset by the cynical and worldly Mr. Dean before the rains come is, in part, a triumph for the judgement of a British man. Although profoundly affected by their contact with the East, the nuns leave behind no trace of their presence and, as Mr. Dean waves them off and the rains finally come, they are obliterated from sight. In a film released in the year of Indian independence, British withdrawal is thus coded as a female failure.

The Gendered Nation

The prominent part played by gender in attempts to rework national identity in the immediate aftermath of war involved assigning a wide and shifting range of meanings to white British femininity. Where imperial boundaries remained intact, an active emancipated woman, with characteristic emblems of trousers and cigarettes, could signify modernity against the primitivism of the colonised. These

representations articulated Britishness as a predominantly racial rather than a gendered identity, showing British women participating in a common modernising project with British men whose qualities – rationality, authority, expertise – they shared. Elsewhere, as imperial boundaries began to collapse, the British woman, however active in the colonial civilising mission, was shown as a figure through whom racial boundaries might be breached -- the point of entry for national weakness as, seduced by the exotic, she moved from rationality to hysteria.

The empire film's increasing incorporation of the figure of an active British woman coincided with the Second World War film's expulsion of this figure. In so far as the idea of women's active involvement in war survived, it was transposed onto non-British women. But non-British women, like their British counterparts, were also cast in the role of good wives and sweethearts, where their most notable characteristic was passivity. As some films moved to explore the psychological traumas that men had suffered during war – generally obscuring those of women – they portrayed male traumas produced through important service to the nation, and mobilised transnational femininity to show white women engaged in a common task of serving men.

Films of the late 1940s foreshadowed developments in the war and empire genres in the 1950s, when filmic images of heroic British masculinity were transposed from an imperial to a Second World War setting, and white British women became more prominent in a fading empire genre.[20] As the Second World War became increasingly significant to ideas of national identity, and empire became increasingly problematic, the war film became a vehicle for the celebration of the virtues of the old imperial hero – courageous, resourceful, expansive, and associated with the traditional values of a middle- or upper-class, public-school educated gentleman. Second World War images were used to enlarge and dignify ideas of Britishness, associating national

strength with white British masculinity, while in images of empire, loss of imperial power and national weakness were associated with white British femininity -- reworking the gendered nation.

[1] Against the Wind (Charles Crichton, 1947).

[2] I See a Dark Stranger (Frank Launder and Sidney Gilliat, 1946).

[3] Odette (Herbert Wilcox, 1950).

[4] Antonia Lant, 'The Female Spy: Gender, Nationality, and War in 'I See a Dark Stranger'', in Robert Sklar and Charles Musser, (eds), Resisting Images: Essays on Cinema and History, Philadelphia, 1990, p. 173.

[5] Antonia Lant, Blackout: Reinventing Women for Wartime British Cinema, Princeton, 1991, p. 53. *They Flew Alone* (Herbert Wilcox, 1941) is an interesting film in this context. It celebrates Amy Johnson's pioneering achievements as an airwoman between the wars. The advent of the Second World War is problematic in this celebration since, on joining the WAAF, Johnson is confined to a subordinate role where she can pilot aircraft only for transport, not for combat.

[6] Antonia Lant has noted the tendency of films made during the war to produce pseudofamilies rather than conventional families – diverse groups of characters who are united through their war-work. See Lant, Blackout, 1991, pp. 47-8.

[7] Frieda (Basil Dearden, 1947).

[8] See Wendy Webster, Imagining Home: Gender, 'Race' and National Identity, London, 1998, pp. 1-24.

[9] Millions Like Us (Frank Launder and Sidney Gilliat, 1943); The Gentle Sex (Leslie Howard and Maurice Elvey, 1943); A Canterbury Tale (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1944). For a discussion of the image of the mobile woman in wartime British cinema see Lant, Blackout, 1991.

[10] A Diary for Timothy (Humphrey Jennings, 1945).

[11] The Captive Heart (Basil Dearden, 1946).

[12] Charlotte Brunsdon and Rachel Moseley, ' 'She's a Foreigner Who's Become a British Subject': Frieda', in Alan Burton, Tim O'Sullivan and Paul Wells (eds), Liberal Directions: Basil Dearden and Postwar British Film Culture, Trowbridge, 1997, p. 132.

[13] Lant, Blackout, 1991, p. 213.

[14] A Matter of Life and Death (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1946).

[15] Picadilly Incident, (Herbert Wilcox, 1946).

[16] See Webster, Imagining Home, 1998, pp. 6-15.

[17] I Live in Grosvenor Square (Herbert Wilcox, 1945); The Way to the Stars (Anthony Asquith, 1945).

[18] From Psychological Problems of Troops Overseas (1943), quoted in Barry Turner & Tony Rennell, When Daddy Came Home: How Family Life Change forever in 1945, London, 1995, p. 117.

[19] Men of Two Worlds (Thorold Dickinson, 1946); Black Narcissus (Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, 1947).

[20]For developments in the Second World War film in the 1950s, see Andy Medhurst, '1950s War Films', in Geoff Hurd (ed), National Fictions, London, 1984, pp. 35-9; Nicholas Pronay, 'The British Post-bellum Cinema: A Survey of the Films Relating to World War II Made in Britain between 1945 and 1960', Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television, vol. 8, 1988, pp. 39-54; Neil Rattigan, 'The Last Gasp of the Middle Class: British War Films of the 1950s', in Wheeler Dixon (ed), Reviewing British Cinema, 1900-1992, New York, 1994, pp. 143-52; John Ramsden, 'Refocusing 'The People's War': British War Films of the 1950s', Journal of Contemporary History, vol. 33, 1998, pp. 35-63; Michael Paris, Warrior Nation: Images of War in British Popular Culture 1850-2000, London, 2000, pp. 222-230. Developments in the empire genre in the 1950s have attracted little attention, but see Marcia Landy, British Genres: Cinema and Society 1930-1960, Princeton, 1991, pp. 110-120; Wendy Webster ' 'There'll Always be an England': Representations of Colonial Wars and Immigration, 1945-68', Journal of British Studies, 40 (2001), pp. 557-584. There has been considerable scholarly interest in exploring the meanings of white British femininity in a range of British films and television programmes of the 1980s which, through their focus on India, earned the label 'raj nostalgia'. See, for example Laura Kipnis, 'The Phantom Twitchings of an Amputated Limb: Sexual Spectacle in the Post-Colonial Epic', Wide Angle vol. 11, 1989, pp. 42-51; Richard Dyer, 'There's Nothing I Can Do! Nothing!', in Richard Dyer, White, London, 1997, pp. 184-206; John Hill, British Cinema in the 1980s, Oxford, 1999, Chapter 5.