

'Happy housewife' myth debunked by new book

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Many believe that 1950s cinema portrayed women as complacent, conservative housewives who liked nothing better than to rustle up a three-course meal for their hardworking husbands, but a new book has shown it was not so clear-cut.

Dr Melanie Bell, of Newcastle University, has written *Femininity in the Frame* (published 7 January 2010), which argues that, rather than being a decade where popular cinema was hostile towards [women](#) and offered audiences a bland reflection of gender conservatism, it actually created female roles that were challenging, ambiguous, contradictory, and frequently surprising.

“What has emerged from my research is a sense of how remarkably bold some popular cinema was,” said Dr Bell. “Many concerns of the time were explored through film, such as whether women should give up work to look after their children or have sex before marriage.

“Equally evident were the messages that choosing [marriage](#) over a career was ‘dangerously romantic’ and that women were more than housekeepers, mothers and sex objects.”

These concerns were articulated in films which spanned the cultural map, from low-budget productions like *The Perfect Woman* and *Easy Money* to more prestigious productions such as *A Town Like Alice* and *Madeleine*.

Films and critical writings at the time played an integral role in mainstream society and showed how British cinema was engaging with, negotiating and working through social change in relation to women.

In the early 1950s, women were bombarded with a number of contradictory messages. They were simultaneously addressed as housewives and mothers while the employment rates for women actually increased. Female [sexual desire](#) was increasingly recognised whilst women continued to navigate double standards and different attitudes to pre and extra-marital [sex](#).

“To be commercially successful, what women saw in the cinema had to engage with the shifts that were taking place in women’s roles in the real world,” said Dr Bell. “While the popular consciousness may be dominated by the figure of the housewife, women’s experiences in real life were varied and diverse, and to date only a partial account has been offered concerning gender and femininity in this decade.

“There is another, more challenging side to British [cinema](#) and when we engage with that a completely different picture emerges.”

Femininity in the Frame draws across a range of genres - war, comedy, science fiction, crime, social problems and key figures - the prostitute, the femme fatale, the incarcerated woman - to explore in depth how British popular film engaged with the new ideas and contradictory understandings of femininity that were surfacing in the 1950s.

Provided by Newcastle University

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