



Directed by John M. Stahl for Universal in 1933, *Only Yesterday* is notable on four main counts: as a powerful melodrama, as Margaret Sullavan's film debut, as a production that exploits the greater freedom allowed before the imposition of stricter Hays Code rules, and as an extraordinary instance of the process of converting book into film. It would surely have featured by now in the increasingly crowded, often arid, field of Adaptation Studies had it not been so hard to find: it seems never to have been issued on VHS or DVD, and the British Film Institute contrived to lose its 16mm distribution print sometime in the 1990s. My own copy derives from a screening on Channel 4 television in the early 1980s.

The credits claim that the film is 'based on the novel by Frederick Lewis Allen'. In fact, far from being a novel, Allen's book is a work of popular history, subtitled 'an informal history of the 1920s', first published in 1931 and seldom if ever out of print since. It starts by looking back, in a 'Prelude' chapter, to the eve of that decade:

Let us refresh our memories by following a moderately well-to-do young couple of Cleveland or Boston or Seattle or Baltimore – it hardly matters which – through the routine of an ordinary day in May, 1919 (1).

The couple, Mr and Mrs Smith, never become characters: as their names suggest, they are token representative figures. After this introductory chapter evoking their dress and their lifestyle, they are virtually forgotten, as the book traces the public events of the 1920s that impinged upon citizens like them, culminating in the Wall Street Crash.

The book's success gave it value as a film property, and Universal bought the rights. But how to convert its essentially documentary mode into a work of popular cinema? Surviving documents from Universal show Stahl and others playing with a variety of ideas and characters that could bulk out the 'Mr and Mrs Smith' concept, embodying and bringing to life elements of the history – a multiplicity of threads that could be woven together in the style of a film like *Cavalcade* (Frank Lloyd, 1933) or, later, *Nashville* (Robert Altman, 1975). A few of these bits and pieces make it into the film, but are absorbed within a fresh and strong structural framework, that of a *letter from an unknown woman*, drawn from Stefan Zweig's 1922 novella of that name.

The adoption of this strategy remains, so far at least, as mysterious as the incorporation of Kim Novak's 'flashback'

into *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1958): that device, far from being part of Hitchcock's original conception, as he liked to tell subsequent interviewers, did not appear until a very late version of the script, after a full year of drafting and discussions, nor do the abundant archival memoranda include any data about it (other than, ironically, the evidence of Hitchcock's own frustrated last-minute attempts to *remove* the flashback from the completed film). It just pops up suddenly in a late rewrite. Likewise, at least in the records so far available, there is no hint as to how and when and from whom came the late inspiration – and this seems the appropriate word for such a bold piece of lateral thinking – to combine Frederick Lewis Allen's history book, *Only Yesterday*, with Stefan Zweig's short fiction. There is no acknowledgment of Zweig on screen or in publicity, nor do any contemporary reviews that I have seen pick up the connection. His story had been published, after ten years, in English translation in 1932, standing alone as a slim volume of 111 pages, but may have remained relatively obscure until the official adaptation of it by Max Ophuls, again for Universal, fifteen years later. Universal had, of course, bought the rights to it in 1933, while choosing not to publicise the fact. To summarise:

Stefan Zweig: born Austria 1881, died Brazil 1942

1922: *Letter from an Unknown Woman* published in German.

1931: *Only Yesterday* as a book.

1932: translation of *Letter from an Unknown Woman* published in the US.

1933: *Only Yesterday* as a film.

1942: autobiography of Stefan Zweig, nicely titled *The World of Yesterday*.

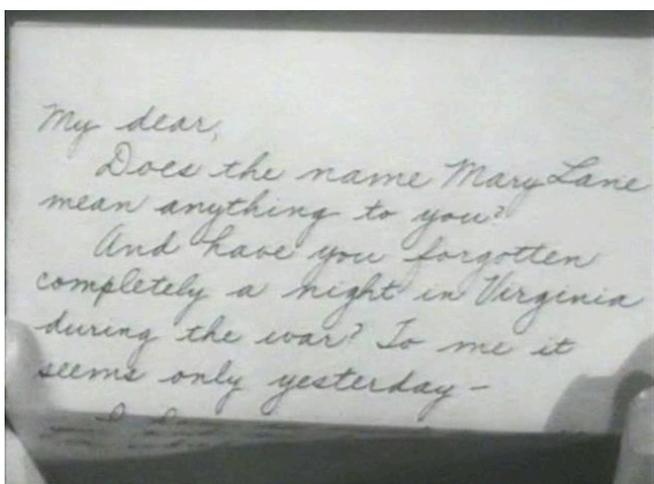
1948: *Letter from an Unknown Woman* as a film.

Stahl's film takes seventeen minutes to reach its letter, and its star, Margaret Sullavan. It begins where the Allen book ends, with the Wall Street crash: a close-up of the calendar date (29th October 1929), then three minutes of frantic stock market activity, then a protracted scene of panicky reactions at a crowded cocktail party hosted by stockbroker Jim Emerson and his wife (John Boles and Benita Hume). Ruined like so many others, Jim retires to his study, gets out a handgun, and writes a suicide note. At this point he notices the envelope on his desk, and opens it. The first lines of the letter, unspoken, fill the screen:

My dear
Does the name Mary Lane mean anything to you?
And have you forgotten completely a night in
Virginia during the war? To me it seems only
yesterday ...

Dissolve to that night in Virginia 1917: the camera picks out Mary, centre-frame, within a formal dance scene, and moves forward with her towards her meeting with Jim.

Like several others involved with this Journal, I recently contributed to a collection of short essays on memorable *Film Moments* (2010: 74-77). In the event, I wrote about a moment from a more familiar and accessible film – *City Lights* – but could easily have chosen this wonderful high-intensity moment of transition in *Only Yesterday*.



The first seventeen minutes have been devoid of music: we hear Stock Exchange bustle, and incessant nervous talk, followed by two minutes of silence as Jim prepares to shoot himself. The camera has moved restlessly in reporter style from person to person, privileging no-one for long. We can identify nearly 30 speaking parts in this section; publicity boasted of, in all, '93 featured players'. This initial busy world is overwhelmingly masculine, created and driven by 'Masters of the Universe' like Jim. The women depend entirely upon them, and fear being ruined by and with them.

Then we go suddenly into waltz music, and into a different kind of camera movement; from objective to subjective, from a world of men and money into the woman's memory. And it is from this perspective that the film now works through the events of Allen's decade, from the late stages of the war through to the Crash: it will only catch up with the letter-reading in its last few minutes.

As this flashback unfolds, Mary herself drives the action. She accosts the young officer, Jim, whom she has loved from afar; they go walking in the moonlight, and don't return until the dance is over, having evidently made love. While this is covered in an ellipse, the implications are made clear enough by the long lapse of time, and by her body language and nervous adjustment of her clothing as they emerge from the woods. When she subsequently finds herself pregnant, she will be entirely unashamed.

As Tom Milne noted in the *Monthly Film Bulletin* in 1981 – a review linked to the film's then availability on 16mm – this episode could not have been presented so frankly after the more rigid enforcement of censorship codes that came a few months later (231).¹ The same can be said of two elements in the pre-flashback section. The party guests include a gay male couple represented in a less oblique way than would become the enforced norm. Likewise, the suicide theme is presented very directly: scene 1 (Wall Street) ends with one, scene 2 (the party) leads up to the reporting of another, and scene 3 (Jim at his desk) prepares us for a third. This multiple frankness enhances both the historical interest of the film in relation to censorship issues, and its vividness as an account of the decade.

Various themes from the Allen book (notably chapter 5: the Revolution in Manners and Morals) are brought pointedly together in the first conversation between Mary and her sophisticated Aunt Julia in New York, where she has been sent – in Jim's absence serving in Europe – to have her baby. Welcoming her to the apartment, Julia tells her 'I just can't wait to see your hair bobbed' and, when she protests, launches into a set-piece speech which is saved from excessive didacticism by the skill and wit of the actress (Billie Burke):

Women have cut more than their hair. That's just a symbol. We've cut a lot of the whole silly nonsense. We can get good jobs now and hold them. We're not dependent any longer. And what's more, we've kicked the bottom out of that old bucket known as the Double Standard.... [and in reference to Mary's pregnancy] It's just another of those biological events. Listen, little southern daughter of an age of chivalry: today a woman can face life as honestly as a man can. I mean by that, this sort of thing isn't a tragedy, it isn't even good melodrama. It's just something that happens.

But of course good melodrama is exactly what it is shaping up to be.



After Mary's night with Jim, they had planned more meetings, but his regiment is at once called to Europe at short notice, and her dash to the railway station is too late even for an emotional goodbye: instead, we get the equally intense emotion of the *missed* meeting so common in melodrama, the classic example being Stahl's immediately preceding film *Back Street* (1932).² The months pass, she gives birth to their son in New York, the war ends, the heroes return to a carnivalesque victory parade (cf Allen chapter 1: Prelude, May 1919). She spots Jim marching at the head of his men and, when he dismisses them, goes eagerly to meet him, but others are already surrounding him. When she accosts him he is polite enough, but doesn't seem to know her – another woman, Benita Hume, whom we recognise as his future wife, takes him off with her. It's another devastating 'film moment', playing the festive crowds and the military music against a series of four desolate close-ups of Sullavan, magnificent in her first film role.

By the time she considers making herself, and the boy, known to him, he has left for Europe on honeymoon. From this point, based still at Julia's, she dedicates herself to her son, to a small business, and to cherishing the memory of Jim. As in the Zweig story, she sends him an annual anonymous New Year's greeting ('from one who does not forget'). As in the story and in the Ophuls film, she meets him again by chance, and attracts him afresh, years later (New Year's Eve, 1928). The Ophuls film could not, for censorship reasons, have her sleep with him this second time, but Stahl's film is here able to stay closer to Zweig, creating a scene of great delicacy and poignancy set in the functional 'bachelor pad' which he has, we infer, been using for a series of mechanical seductions. He is touched more deeply by her, feels he may even have met her before, but she is, half-teasingly, saying nothing unless and until he can show himself worthy of her commitment by remembering, which he cannot.

... until, that is, he is enabled to by reading the letter, ten months later. Mary has sent it because she is now dying; when he receives it he has been, as we know, ruined financially, with his own childless marriage effectively finished as well.

Having read it, he rushes to see her, but this time, reversing the movement of the 1917 scene of the troop-train's departure, it is he who is too late. He is received by the son of whose existence he has learned only today. The boy is a grave 12-year-old in uniform, Jimmy junior, summoned home from his military-style boarding school. The two sit down for a getting-acquainted talk, taken mainly in a static two-shot. Jim gets the boy to talk about the medals he is wearing, gained for manly pursuits. Would he like to come out sometime with him on expeditions, say for a bit of hunting? This is exciting enough to take Jimmy's mind off his mother's very recent death. But 'Why not? I'm your father'. On Jimmy's stunned response, 'My father?!', the film fades out.



I don't think I have ever seen or shown *Only Yesterday* without hearing a certain amount of shocked, nervous laughter at this ending. How wonderfully easy and convenient it is for the man to move in and take over. There is extra outrage in the fact that Jimmy is dressed in his military-style uniform and seems to be embracing the pursuits and values associated with it. It is impossible not to think back to the scene early in Mary's flashback – that is, in the dramatisation of her letter to Jim – in which she reacted against the departure of him and his contemporaries to fight in Europe. Around the family dining-table, her father saw only the glory of war, while her mother deprecated it, and Mary sided passionately with her: 'If I ever have a son, he'll never go to war'. Yet it must be she who later takes the decision, which we never see made or discussed, to send her son away at so young an age to the military school.

The shocking irony of this, and of the ending, is like that of the final scene of *Fort Apache* (John Ford, 1948). In his dealings with the Apache and their chief Cochise, Captain York (John Wayne) has consistently, and with some success, opposed the hardline racist strategies of his commanding officer, Colonel Thursday (Henry Fonda). Thursday's arrogance then leads him and his men into a disastrous defeat: unlike him, York survives, and inherits his command. And he seems, too, to have inherited his policy: the film ends as he leads out his men in a vigorous new military campaign against Cochise. Some critics have taken this as confusion or bad faith, showing Ford slipping back into a default mode of Manifest Destiny triumphalism, but others, and they are surely more persuasive, see him and the film as being fully aware of the tragic irony of what it presents. This is the momentum of history, and of America's inexorable territorial expansion: liberals, if they stay within the system, cannot but be caught up in it. The very dissonance of the ending, its startling inconsistency with all that Wayne's character has stood for, makes this point all the more powerfully.

It is wrong, likewise, to take the ending of *Only Yesterday* as a shallow re-imposition and endorsement of patriarchal values, though some audiences at the time and since may have chosen to welcome it, or to dismiss it, as such. The ironies are too extreme. The film has used the freedoms of the melodramatic mode to dramatise conflicts and anomalies at a profounder level than a straighter version of the Frederick Lewis Allen book could have achieved.

Many of its episodes are far-fetched by normal standards. Not only the fact that Jim should fail to show any glimmer of recognition of Mary on his return, but that she should have taken it for granted that he will know and embrace her, after a year without any letters. Not only the abrupt onset of her fatal heart disease, for which nothing has prepared us, but the fact that this, and the arrival of the letter that it causes to be written, are so perfectly synchronised with Jim's equally abrupt slide into suicidal despair. But this is consistent with what Ben Singer, in his useful taxonomy of melodrama devices, refers to as a characteristic 'tolerance, or indeed preference, for outrageous coincidence, implausibility, convoluted plotting, deus ex machina resolutions' (2001: 46). Christiane Viviani expands on this notion:

Melo must be moving, and thus it has recourse – not to the grotesque, as many believe – but to situations, feelings and emotions which everyone has experienced at one time or another. These elements are juxtaposed, telescoped, multiplied, in order to maintain the pathos at an intense level, simultaneously creating both an outer layer, which seems unreal by

virtue of its excessiveness, and an inner core, which calls upon a collective experience of real life. Successful melo maintains the difficult equilibrium between its narrative form – often of a baroque complexity – and its emotional content of disarming simplicity (1997: 83).

The 'emotional content' here is obviously the painfully asymmetric man-woman relationship. But beyond this, the 'baroque complexity' of the form conveys meanings about public life. Jim's macho private behaviour is writ large in his professional behaviour, and by extension that of Wall Street. What is the lesson of the 1929 Crash, and of all the crashes that have succeeded it? Financiers *forget*, in their pursuit of profits – forget sound principles, and forget, repeatedly, the lessons of what has happened before (cf Allen chapters 12 and 13, *The Big Bull Market and Crash!*). It makes perfect sense that Jim should go through the 1920s living a life of double unreality, double obliviousness, in public and personal life alike, and that the two should converge so dramatically on this day in October. The letter from the unknown woman in effect functions partly as a rebuke for the tunnel-vision forgetfulness of the Wall Street community that he represents.

Could any 80-year old film be more relevant today? One of the consistent laments, in the context of all the recent bank bailouts, was that the greed-is-good banking culture was too macho, that women should be more involved – as if that in itself would transform the culture (any more than Margaret Thatcher did as Prime Minister). The idea of alternative *values* being taken on board (or on Boards) is a different matter, and we might be tempted to give those values a shorthand label of 'feminine'. The values of 'one who does not forget'. At the end of the film, Mary has died and Jim has slipped complacently into the patriarchal role, ready to train up the son to follow him. Insofar as he has finally *remembered*, and has belatedly honoured the fact, and the offspring, of Mary's love, we might see him as being therapeutically transformed; but, equally, he has survived, like so many recent delinquent bankers, and the tone of the ending, as well as the lessons of history, suggest that he will simply prosper anew in a ruthless system as resistant to radical reform as that of *Fort Apache*. *Only Yesterday* seems to me to be fully alert to the complex implications of its ending.

Charles Barr

For responding quickly and generously to queries, and providing some useful data, I am grateful to Ned Comstock of the USC Cinematic Arts Library, which houses the Universal Collection; to Gerda Morrissey, Assistant Curator of the Stefan Zweig Collection at the State University of New York; and to the Ophuls scholar Lutz Bacher, of Robert Morris University.

Charles Barr taught for many years at the University of East Anglia, and is currently Professorial Research Fellow at St Mary's University College, Twickenham. His publications include *Ealing Studios* and *English Hitchcock*, both of them 'Movie Books' edited and published by the late Ian Cameron.

© Charles Barr, 2013

[*Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism*](#), 4.

Works Cited

- Allen, Frederick Lewis Allen ([1931] 1997) *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920s*. New York: John Wiley.
- Brown, Tom & James Walters (eds) (2010) *Film Moments: Criticism, History, Theory*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Milne, Tom (1981) 'Only Yesterday', *Monthly Film Bulletin*, 48 (574), 231.
- Singer, Ben (2001) *Melodrama and Modernity*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Viviani, Christian (1997) 'Who is Without Sin? The American Maternal Melodrama 1930-1939' in Gledhill, Christine (ed.) *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*. London: BFI, 83-99.

¹ The 'Retrospective' section of this issue contains other reviews of Stahl films, as well as a short article by Tim Palleine, 'Stahl into Sirk'.

² *Back Street*, Universal 1932, starring Irene Dunne, based on the novel by Fannie Hurst, author also of *Imitation of Life*. Sullavan took over the lead role, opposite Charles Boyer, in the 1941 re-make directed by Robert Stevenson; John Boles had played the male lead in 1932.