Gaslight (1944): Portraying 'Crazy' Women to American Audiences in the 1940s

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The film *Gaslight* (1944) tells a story of a woman insidiously subjugated by her husband in a psychologically volatile way: he tries to convince her that she is insane when she is, in fact, not. The effect that the film had on American audiences of the 1940s was a statement as well as a critique of the poor treatment of women, especially as it pertained to issues surrounding mental health. While so many men were serving in World War II, women were left as the primary consumers, and in this case, the primary audiences. *Gaslight*'s director, George Cukor, casted the powerful, revered Ingrid Bergman which, whether intentionally or unintentionally, brought to light gender injustices that plagued centuries leading up to 1944 and ones that have perpetuated since to varying degrees. Female audiences were able to witness the injustice in an overt way and find relatability and comradery with Bergman and her character Paula in stark contrast to the experience the female protagonist had in the film itself.

Gaslight was originally written in 1938 as a Victorian screenplay in England by Patrick Hamilton called *Angel Street*. In 1940, the play was made into a British movie called *A Strange Case of Murder*. A year later, Vincent Price and Judith Evans played the leading roles of its Broadway performance. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) Studios bought the rights to remake the movie *Gaslight* in 1944. Director George Cukor cast Ingrid Bergman and Charles Boyer in the lead roles.[1] The film produced a gross revenue of $4,613,000,[2] while the most financially successful film of 1944, *Going My Way*, brought in $14,170,000.[3] However, for her performance in *Gaslight*, Ingrid Bergman won the Academy Awards Best Actress in a Leading Role, the

[1] Fristoe, Roger. "Gaslight (1940)." Turner Classic Movies. 2005.
[2] Smith, Emily. The Ingrid Bergman Handbook - Everything You Need to Know about Ingrid Bergman. Emereo Publishing, 2012.
[3] "American Movies: Top 5 Box Office Hits, 1939 to 1988." Latter-day Saint Filmmakers. June 21, 2005.

Golden Globes Best Motion Picture Actress and second place as the New York Film Critics Circle Awards Best Actress.[4]

Gaslight (1944) is set in the late 19th century in London. Paula Alquist (Ingrid Bergman), the protagonist, leaves her studies in Italy behind to marry Gregory Anton (Charles Boyer) and the two move back into Paula's childhood home. Ten years prior, Paula's aunt had been murdered in the home and the case had yet to be solved. When the couple moves in, Paula sees a letter addressed to her aunt with the name 'Sergis Bauer', which upsets Gregory. Thereafter, Gregory begins to psychologically torture Paula by convincing her she is going insane. He takes things, moves them, and then interrogates her later about their whereabouts, blaming it on her developing insanity and blackouts.

Police detective Brian Cameron (Joseph Cotten) takes an interest in the couple's move back to the home and a particular interest in Paula. He begins to realize that Gregory is doing everything he can to keep Paula refined in their home and away from the outside world. Cameron becomes suspicious and opens an informal investigation. Meanwhile, Gregory continues to systematically torment Paula into convincing herself she is insane and he takes up an affair with her maid who she feels is always making fun of her. Paula's cousin tries to visit her, as word has gotten around that she is 'ill', but Gregory kicks him out of the house before Paula even gets a chance to speak with him. The more time that goes by, the worse Gregory makes Paula's mental state out to be and the closer he gets to forcing her into an insane asylum. While she is miserable and sometimes doubts herself, she mostly protests and maintains her innocence.

[4] "Gaslight (1944) Awards." IMDb. http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0036855/awards.

The night before she is to be sent away to the asylum, Cameron puts the pieces together that Gregory murdered Paula's aunt in order to steal her jewels, and has now returned to the home ten years later to find them. He enters their home while Gregory is out cheating on Paula with her maid and informs Paula that she is, in fact, not crazy. Gregory is in fact the Sergis Bauer who murdered her aunt and because she saw the letter with his name on it (and because the letter was written in Gregory's handwriting), he could not risk her or anyone else discovering the truth. The sounds Paula was told she was imagining from the attic and the gaslight that would sporadically dim for no apparent reason was in fact Gregory rummaging through the attic looking for the jewels. He created the story of her insanity in order to invalidate her opinions, observations, memories, and anything else she could do or say that could lead to him being discovered, culminating in his final plan to put her away in an asylum where no one would ever listen to her claims. If his plan worked, he would have then returned to his wife and child in Australia.

Cameron and Paula are interrupted when Gregory/Sergis comes home early. A physical altercation between Cameron and Sergis ensues, but Cameron and Paula emerge victorious. In a final statement to Sergis, Paula says defiantly, "If I were not mad, I could have helped you. Whatever you had done, I could have pitied and protected you. But because I am mad, I hate you. Because I am mad, I have betrayed you. And because I'm mad, I'm rejoicing in my heart, without a shred of pity, without a shred of regret, watching you go with glory in my heart!" Sergis is arrested and taken to jail.

The concept of threatening Paula with sending her to a mental institution hit close to home for many of the women who would have been watching in the 1940s. The history of

mental institutions (or madhouses, insane asylums, etc.) is extensive leading back to the sixteenth century when women in particular were incarcerated against their will. In the 17th century in a French institution called the Salpêtrière, prostitutes, pregnant women, poor women and young girls had special wards. By the end of the 19th and 20th centuries, these institutions had spread to North and South America and Australia. Additionally, psychiatrists and novelists during this time associated insanity most directly with women.[5]

In his book *The Age of Madness,* Thomas Szasz discusses E.P.W. Packard's incarceration at the State Insane Asylum in Jacksonville, Illinois from 1860 to 1863. Passed in 1851, Illinois state law states: "Married women and infants, who, in the judgment of the medical superintendent (meaning the Superintendent of the Illinois State Hospital for the Insane) are evidently insane or distracted, may be entered or detained in the hospital on the request of the husband of the woman or the guardian of the infant, *without* the evidence of insanity required in other cases," such as in cases involving men.[6] Packard, specifically, was religious and in response her husband abused her and imprisoned her in their own home.

In England, a woman was put in the St. Catherine's Hospital for the mentally handicapped for having an illegitimate child: "The woman was committed as a 'moral defective' under the Mental Deficiency Act of 1913. She was 19 and had just had a baby." The woman was incarcerated in 1923 and released when she was 68.[7]

Paula's terror at the possibility of not only being insane, but also not being in control of her own fate was certainly founded, especially during the period in which the film is set (late 19th century).

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[5] Chesler, Phyllis. Women and Madness. New York and London: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1972, 73.
[6] Szasz, Thomas, ed. The Age of Madness. Garden City, NY: Anchor Press Doubleday, 1973, 55.
[7] Szasz, Thomas, The Age of Madness, 200.

Szasz argues (in 1973) that the hundred years prior showed an increase in the value of hospital psychiatry in the American social structure.[8] Up to the 15th century was considered the Age of Faith; the 17th and 18th centuries considered the Age of Reason; the 19th century considered the Age of Ideology; and the 20th century considered the Age of Anxiety. Szasz proposes, instead, combining everything from the end of the Thirty Years' War (1648) to the present and naming it the Age of Madness. He sees the Age of Faith (leading up to 1648) as the societal structure of Christianity, and in the Age of Madness was replaced with science. The Age of Faith reflected its values with cathedrals, religious shrines, and by converting nonbelievers involuntarily. In the Age of Madness, Szasz describes involuntary mental hospitalization as one of the primary methods of social control which he believes has only developed since. Szasz argues that, "To be truly human now means to worship Science (Technology, Progress), to be virtuous means to be healthy (happy), and to be evil means to be mentally sick (unhappy)."[9]

These restrictions on acceptable human thought, emotion and behavior, particularly in women, extend beyond the three just mentioned, as they likely did in the Age of Faith as well. Women, particularly white middle class women, were to lead submissive lives as housewives for their husbands and were required to present themselves as simple-minded and easy going for society as a whole, as behaving differently would have been considered unacceptable and perhaps leading into the realm of 'insanity'. In her book *Women and Madness*, Phyllis Chesler states that, "For years [women] denied themselves -- or were denied -- the duties and privileges of talent and conscience. …[M]any women… buried their own destinies in romantically extravagant marriages, in motherhood, and in approved female pleasure. However, their

[8] Szasz, Thomas, The Age of Madness, xi.
[9] Ibid., 2.

repressed energies eventually struggled free, demanding long overdue and therefore heavier prices: marital and maternal 'disloyalty,' social ostracism, imprisonment, madness, and death."[10]

Traits of supposed female madness extend into some of the most absurd and extreme realms imaginable. In his review on a female patient's mental improvement, a psychiatrist states, "...whereas during the summer she was repulsively ugly, since then she has grown more and more feminine and almost pretty."[11] This misogynist perspective from a doctor of a woman who is being involuntarily held in an asylum (who may or may not be mentally ill to begin with) is enough to drive someone insane. In this vein, a comparison with the traits of supposed male madness would be in order and "Chesler documented the 'double standard of mental health,' which is interwoven into the structures of patriarchal dominance. Women 'are categorically denied the experience of cultural supremacy, humanity, and renewal based on their sexual identity,' she writes. 'In different ways, some women are driven mad by this fact.'"[12]

Women like Paula, even without a murderous gaslighting husband and regardless of their demographic ran the seemingly arbitrary risk of being put into an asylum for not adhering to one individual's specific perspective of what it meant to be a proper woman.

Though it fluctuates, the overall number of American women of all demographics who believe themselves to be 'neurotic' or 'psychotic' and who believe they ought to be in a psychiatric hospital has increased over time.[13] For the women discussed, "...madness and confinement were both an expression of female powerlessness and an unsuccessful attempt to reject and overcome this state. Madness and asylums generally function as mirror images of the

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[10] Chesler, Phyllis, Women and Madness, 46.
[11] Ibid., 55.
[12] Hubert, Susan J. *Questions of Power: The Politics of Women's Madness Narratives*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2002. Print, 17.
[13] Chesler, Phyllis, Women and Madness, 38.

female experience, and as penalties for *being* 'female' as well as for desiring or daring *not* to be."[14] Sigmund Freud's theories continued to be accepted in psychiatry and reinforced male dominance. Meanwhile, after the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, the feminist movement experienced a period of inactivity, opening up the door to new forms of misogyny. Because there was nothing to contradict these theories at the time, women began to accept and trust their doctors.[15]

"During the period between the so-called first and second waves of the feminist movement (from the 1920s to the 1960s), the movement became submerged, and, for the most part, women's madness narratives of this time period reflect the decline in feminist discourse."[16] Those in the 19th century were more focused on false imprisonment and were aware of it. Twentieth century women seemed to become more complacent: "Madness narratives [during this period] exemplify internalized oppression to the extent that the writers of these narratives accept the role prescribed for women in patriarchal society."[17]

In 1890, Charlotte Perkins Gilman was treated for neurasthenia after her daughter was born. Merriam-Webster defines neurasthenia as "a psychological disorder marked especially by easy fatigability and often by lack of motivation, feelings of inadequacy, and psychosomatic symptoms."[18] She consulted with Silas Weir Mitchell, "...whose famous rest cure had become the standard treatment for neurasthenia. 'This eminent physician,' she writes, 'was well versed in two kinds of nervous prostration; that of the business man exhausted from too much work, and

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[14] Chesler, Phyllis, Women and Madness, 55-56.
[15] Hubert, Susan J., *Questions of Power: The Politics of Women's Madness Narratives,* 58.
[16] Ibid., 60-61.
[17] Ibid., 61.
[18] "Neurasthenia." Merriam-Webster; Encyclopaedia Britannica Company.

the society woman exhausted from too much play. The kind I had was obviously beyond him.'"[19] Gilman wrote the Yellow Wallpaper which was a partially autobiographical account and critique of the Mitchell rest cure.[20]

In *Gaslight*, over 40 years later, Paula is given very similar, strict instructions by her husband on how to deal with her nonexistent insanity. In his critique of *Gaslight*, Adam-Troy Castro illustrates Paula's circumstance as well as the circumstances of many wives who have been witch-hunted and accused of being mentally ill: "[T]he household becomes a closed system, where the wife is cut off from any possible reality check on the part of friends and family who might be able to halt her disintegration; she is made to believe that everything that happens is her fault; she is offered little moments of affection and reward that are just as cruelly withdrawn, in a manner designed to make her feel that the blame for the loss is her own."[21]

While Paula was terrified by the prospect of being put into an undesirable insane asylum unwillingly, the female audience members would have been relating to her struggle. Though set in an earlier time period, the rush, hysteria and popularity of insane asylums was still very much present in the 1940s. Castro continues: "[Gregory] uses his wiles to first deprive her of her ambitions and then of her property and then of her freedom of movement and then of her sanity; it's a much greater series of betrayals, and it's all focused on a girl we *know*."[22] Here, Castro is referring to the young Paula who was removed from her home after the murder of her aunt, but in a different light, the girl the audience of the 40s 'knows' is in fact Ingrid Bergman, herself.

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[19] Hubert, Susan J., *Questions of Power: The Politics of Women's Madness Narratives,* 63.
[20] Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. "The Yellow Wallpaper." The New England Magazine. 1892.
[21] Castro, Adam-Troy. "When Your Husband Drives You Crazy: The Two Versions of GASLIGHT." The Remake Chronicles. July 29, 2012.
[22] Ibid.

Bergman was born in Sweden in 1915 and came to the U.S. in 1939 for a remake of *Intermezzo* (1936), and was immediately accepted into the hearts of the American audience. She was a versatile actress, enabling her to relate to a vast range of Americans. Perhaps her greatest accomplishment was *Casablanca* (1942) and Bergman was the second most Oscar-awarded actress: "Ingrid Bergman was one of the greatest actresses from Hollywood's lamented Golden Era. Her natural and unpretentious beauty and her immense acting talent made her one of the most celebrated figures in the history of American cinema."[23] When Charles Boyer refused to play Gregory in *Gaslight* unless his name was first in the credits, Bergman was so unpretentious and humble that she, against the advisement of her mentor David Selznick, willingly agreed to Boyer's terms just to have the opportunity to work with him.[24]

In her book *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, Christine Gledhill describes in depth the role of a star in society. Ingrid Bergman embodied many of these qualities to the American audience, primarily female, of the 1940s: "The star challenges analysis in the way it crosses disciplinary boundaries: a product of mass culture, but retaining theatrical concerns with acting, performance and art; an industrial marketing device, but a signifying element in films; a social sign, carrying cultural meanings and ideological values, which expresses the intimacies of individual personality, inviting desire and identification; an emblem of national celebrity, founded on the body, fashion and personal style; a product of capitalism and the ideology of individualism, yet a site of contest by marginalised groups; a figure consumed for his or her personal life, who competes for allegiance with statesmen and politicians."[25]

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[23] Jackson, Denny. "Ingrid Bergman: Biography." IMDb. http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000006/bio?ref_=nm_ov_bio_sm.
[24] Bergman, Ingrid, and Alan Burgess. 1980. *Ingrid Bergman, my story*. New York: Delacorte Press, 133.
[25] Gledhill, Christine, ed. Stardom: Industry of Desire. London: Routledge, 1991, xii.

Gledhill continues by articulating the path of negotiation between the star and the spectator (from the perspective of the spectator): "...beginning with the denial of self, in favour of praising the screen goddesses, and moving on to the desire to become like the star, but realising the impossibility of such desires, and ending with the pleasure in overcoming the difference and merging with the ideal on the screen."[26] In this way, female audience members were able to relate to Bergman as a star and as a result relate to the character of Paula, making the film all the more affective to the audience. While stars are cast due to their talent, fame, and a variety of other reasons, they also hold a particular position as a role model to their fans. Because they feel a personal connection with Bergman, *Gaslight*'s female audience was perhaps able to identify more strongly with her story of overcoming the adversity many of them were struggling with in different ways. This identification inadvertently leads to a strengthening of hope for their own situations.

Additionally, Walter Reisch, a director and screenwriter with strong ties to the production of the film, said that, "Bergman is a powerful woman with enormous shoulders, strong, healthy, and no man on earth can talk her into being silly or insane."[27] While she came close to succumbing to her victimhood, she ultimately walked away victorious, creating a dynamic narrative as well as a story of triumph for the women at that time who saw themselves as less powerful and saw her as an inspiration. Unfortunately, this is tainted by the reality that she did not in fact save herself in the end, but was instead saved by the male detective. Nevertheless, she did survive and under her circumstance, perhaps survival is commendable in and of itself. In an interview, Cukor, said, "I like the point that [Bergman] wasn't normally a timid woman; she was

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[26] Gledhill, Christine, Stardom: Industry of Desire, 157.
[27] McGilligan, Patrick. Backstory 2 Interviews with Screenwriters of the 1940s and 1950s. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, 230.

healthy. To reduce someone like that to a scared, jittering creature is interesting and dramatic."[28] It is a striking and apparent choice, and perhaps plays into the narrative of *Gaslight* as an inspirational film. If Cukor cast a more fragile woman, perhaps the female audience would not have had the same confidence in her and by extension in themselves in their attempt to identify with her.

This enters into the subject of the 'Woman's Film' genre. The 'Woman's Film' genre can be broadly defined as having generally female protagonists and an appeal to female audiences through what were considered to be female-centered themes and issues. It was popularized during World War II, mostly due to the lack of men in Hollywood who were fighting in the war. This is a genre that attempts to fight against the reality that "...the most widely disseminated images of women have been those fashioned by directors who dislike women, nastiness being a more fashionable attitude than generosity."[29] On the other hand, some feel that the concept of having a genre called 'Woman's Film' is automatically misogynist in nature, as there is no specific 'Man's Film' genre counterpart, but rather is considered to be all other films. The stories of women as victims who fall are criticized as misogynist and the stories of women as victims who triumph are also criticized because they portray women as victims in the first place. *Gaslight* is an example of, "The 'ordinary woman who becomes extraordinary,' the woman who begins as a victim of discriminatory circumstances and rises, through pain, obsession, or defiance, to become mistress of her fate."[30] There are fewer stories about women simply as

[28] Lambert, Gavin. On Cukor. New York, NY: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1972, 183.
[29] Haskell, Molly. From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974, 204.
[30] Ibid., 161.

people; the woman's film genre focuses on women as necessarily connected to their gender identity.

During World War II, the majority of the movie-goers were women. Due to supply and demand, "...at one time the 'matinee audience' had considerable influence on movie production and on the popularity of certain stars."[31] Though they may have agreed or disagreed with the messages and images that women wanted to see, filmmakers are first and foremost businesspeople and will likely go where the money takes them.

There were directors who did films in the woman's genre that depicted and exposed inequalities as well as films that portrayed women as equals and focused less on their status as victims, such as George Cukor, Raoul Walsh, Max Ophuls, Douglas Sir, Otto Preminger, Lubitsch, John Stahl, Edmund Goulding, and more. Regarding Walsh's directing, "...even his action heroes are not swaggerers and have very little machismo. Because the men don't have to prove themselves, the women can take the initiative without emasculating them, can be tough and soft at the same time. Walsh plays one kind of woman off against the other, but without diminishing either."[32]

George Cukor was a major director in the woman's film genre. Cukor had an ability to empathize with the genre in a way that enabled him to write, in some ways, from the perspective of his female characters as opposed to his own. Additionally, "though he worked in all genres - from comedies and dramas to musicals - his true focus was the complicated entanglement of relationships between friends and lovers in the face of political, social and interpersonal conflicts…" Cukor's friend a colleague Gavin Lambert, "noted in a 2002 essay, Cukor's true

[31] Haskell, Molly, From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies, 187.
[32] Ibid., 202.

interest lay with stories about truth, identity, and the self-deception that was often an integral part of the show business world, as well as interpersonal relationships between men and women. These themes would remain at the core of Cukor's work…"[33]

Sylvia Scarlett (1935) "...is Cukor's first film (and last for a while) in which he dared to challenge, in a lyrical stage whisper, our traditional assumptions about male-female roles… The delicate equilibrium between a man and a woman and between a woman's need to distinguish herself and the social demands on her become the explicit theme of Cukor's great films of the late forties and early fifties, specifically the Judy Holiday films and the Hepburn-Tracy vehicles written by the husband-and-wife team of Ruth Gordon and Garson Kanin."[34] The couple wrote multiple screenplays for Cukor after that.

The major missing component to this analysis of *Gaslight* is that of the women who saw the film in the 1940s. Either there were no reviews of the film by women or they are buried somewhere in the archives of history, but without that perspective, it is difficult to ascertain exactly the effect the film had as a woman's film: did it enlighten to gender oppression and inspire women to speak out? It is difficult to say without speculation. Additionally, the majority of reviews that do remain have little focus on the gender component of the film and have more focus on the 'gaslighting' as a psychological phenomenon.

Gaslight was certainly not the only film like it of its time. *Gaslight*, "...the gothic, noirish and effective melodrama, with the theme of a menaced, terrorized, sheltered or threatened woman (or wife) by a deranged man (often a husband), was one of a number of similar films made in the 1940s," some of which included: Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca (1940)*, with Joan

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[33] "Overview for George Cukor." Turner Classic Movies. 2005.
[34] Haskell, Molly, From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies, 224-225.

Fontaine; Alfred Hitchcock's *Suspicion (1941)*, with Joan Fontaine; Robert Stevenson's *Jane Eyre (1943)*, with Joan Fontaine; Alfred Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt (1943)*, with Teresa Wright; Otto Preminger's *Laura (1944)*, with Gene Tierney; William Castle's *When Strangers Marry (1944) (aka Betrayed)*, with Kim Hunter; Joseph H. Lewis' *My Name is Julia Ross (1945)*, with Nina Foch; Robert Siodmak's *The Spiral Staircase (1945)*, with Dorothy McGuire; Vincente Minnelli's *Undercurrent (1946)*, with Katharine Hepburn; Richard Whorf's *Love From a Stranger (1947)*, with Sylvia Sidney; Anatole Litvak's *Sorry, Wrong Number (1948)*, with Barbara Stanwyck; and Victor Saville's *Conspirator (1949)*, with Elizabeth Taylor.[35]

Whether intended or unintended, Cukor's woman's films at the very least made a statement of gender relations primarily in the 1940s, if not a critique of gender oppression. *Gaslight* is a film that exposes the issue of just how much was at stake with gender inequality when the film took place as well as when it was produced. Women who did not adhere to certain societal norms were so quickly swept under the rug, into mental hospitals, and into oblivion. *Gaslight*, at the very least, contributed to bringing this issue to light.

[35] Dirks, Tim. "Gaslight (1944)." AMC Filmsite.

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