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### Into the Lion's Den: Joy Davidman and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

#### Abstract

Looks at Davidman's involvement with Hollywood—her short and unlamented stint in the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Junior Writer Program in 1939, and her movie reviews for the Communist Party of the USA newspaper, *New Masses*, in 1941–1943. Davidman's incisive wit, impatience with any hint of phoniness, and passion for social, racial, and gender justice come through clearly in her writing.

#### Additional Keywords

New Masses (periodical); Davidman, Joy—Association with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios; Davidman, Joy. Movie criticism; Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (film studio)



INTO THE LION'S DEN:  
JOY DAVIDMAN AND  
METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER

DON W. KING

By 1938 Jewish activist Joy Davidman was a self-confessed atheist and strident Communist. The critical success of her volume of poetry, *Letter to a Comrade* (1938), gave proof both to her Communist convictions and her poetic prowess.<sup>1</sup> Within a short time of joining the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA), Davidman, eager to use her talents as a writer, looked for a way to help. Since she had become a regular reader of the semi-official weekly publication of the CPUSA, *New Masses*, she made her way to the offices of *NM* in New York City and offered her services.<sup>2</sup> Almost immediately she was brought on board as a poetry editor, and she threw herself at contributing to *NM* via both her own poetry and her publication of poems by others.<sup>3</sup> Poetry was not the only literary contribution Davidman made to *NM*; it was her facility as a book, theater, and movie reviewer—especially the latter—that best portrays her contribution to the cause.<sup>4</sup> However, from June through December 1939 there was a significant gap in Davidman's appearance in *NM*: she moved to Hollywood, lured by the \$50 a week offered by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) as a part of its Junior Writer Project, an effort intended to develop young

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<sup>1</sup> *Letter to a Comrade*, winner of the Yale Younger Poet competition for 1938, appeared to signal the beginning of a significant writing career as Davidman also won in the same year the Loines Memorial award (\$1000) for poetry given by the National Institute of Arts and Letters.

<sup>2</sup> *New Masses* (1926-48) was the literary descendant of two radical periodicals: *Masses* (1911-18) and *The Liberator* (1918-24). Davidman contributed poetry, was poetry editor, and reviewed books, theater productions, and films for *New Masses* 1938-46. For more on this see King, "Joy Davidman and the *New Masses*."

<sup>3</sup> The poets Davidman published included Langston Hughes, Margaret Walker, Alexander Bergman, and Aaron Kramer.

<sup>4</sup> It is worth noting in brief here two other activities Davidman participated in during the period of her Communist fervor. First, she joined the Communist writer's guild, League of American Writers, and actively promoted their events. Second, she was on the faculty of the School for Democracy, an anti-fascist and pro-Communist institution in New York City. Records show that for the fall 1943 term she taught "Poetry Workshop."

screenwriters.<sup>5</sup> In what follows, I explore why Davidman's tenure at MGM was unsuccessful, including her personal unhappiness and rejection of the Hollywood ethos as well as her later acerbic writings about the film industry, focusing particularly upon its political conservatism, its racism, and its sexism. I conclude with a brief note about how Davidman's experience in Hollywood influenced her maturation and eventual (and some might say unlikely) marriage to C.S. Lewis.

The key insights into why Davidman was so unhappy in the Junior Writer Project come from the only two letters written during this time that survive. On July 18, 1939, after less than two months in Hollywood, she writes her friend James Still and admits to her unhappiness.<sup>6</sup> She begins by contrasting the physical environment of Hollywood and New York City: "Look at where I am!<sup>7</sup> It's horrible. I'm a New Yorker, used to crowds, strangers, loud noises and sudden explosions—but not to this" (*Out of My Bone: The Letters of Joy Davidman [Bone]* 25). More problematic, however, is the unsavory ethos she finds in Hollywood:

All you have ever heard about Hollywood is true; not only are the people mad, dishonest, conscienceless, and money-grubbing, but they are all these things at the top of their voices. There is a continuous rapid-fire rattle of talk at a Hollywood party, louder than any machine-gun. Perfect strangers rush over, wave their drinks in your face, tell you discreditable stories about their best friends (who are always famous stars), remark that Joan Crawford Is Slipping, and announce how much they paid for their clothes, manicure, and cigarette holders.<sup>8</sup> Intelligence is measured by the raucousness of the laugh and the speed of the wise-crack. Genius is measured by the expensiveness of the automobile and the number of screen credits. (Screen credits are an invention for giving each of one hundred writers a share of the responsibility in a bad picture.) (25)

She envies Still's life in rural Kentucky and contrasts it with hers: "I am entangled in a nest of cement. I am writing this from a studio; there are thirty

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<sup>5</sup> Since she had been unpaid at *NM*, earning a regular salary was very attractive. For more on this, see Pilat, "Girl Communist," and Dorsett, *And God Came In*. In addition, the gap of Davidman's publishing in *NM* extended until December 1940.

<sup>6</sup> James B. Still (1906-2001) was a poet, short story writer, and novelist who lived most of his life in Knott County, Kentucky. He and Davidman met in the summer of 1938 while both were in residence at the McDowell Colony, a writer's retreat in New Hampshire.

<sup>7</sup> The letterhead features a picture of a lion's head within a circle. Above the circle is "Loew's Incorporated: Ars-Gratia-Artis." Below the circle is: "Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures, Culver City, California."

<sup>8</sup> Joan Crawford (1908-1977) was a very popular MGM film star in the 1930s and 1940s.

sound stages all around me with films flowering on each. I don't like it" (25). Yet at this early point she is willing to stay, in spite of her dissatisfaction with her work: "But it pays for my food and drink—reasonably well too. I never got money before for doing nothing; but although I've tried to work here, it's impossible. I get the work done, and nobody cares. As for finding someone to read it, [it is impossible]" (25).

It is also obvious that Davidman misses Still personally, suggesting they may have been romantically involved before she left New York:

I wish you'd write me more. I'm homesick for the peace and quiet of the subway in this terrible flat city full of pink and green stucco and frowsy palms. I wish I could be in New York to see you. I can't leave here for six months—not then, unless they throw me out (which they probably will). I expected you North in April; was looking forward to it. Why on earth did they ever want me here anyhow? (26)

She further confides to Still how much she longs to be doing her own writing rather serving as a hack film writer: "How I would like a log house deep in the hills just now, and a chance to work at my own work. I've finished a new book of poems though; to be called *Red Primer*" (26).<sup>9</sup> Her final comment in the letter is a wistful allusion to a Scottish love song made famous by Robert Burns: "Green grow the rashes, O. Do they still? Write me" (26). Is she punning on Still's last name in the last line of her letter? Although it is impossible to confirm that Davidman and Still were romantically involved at this time, her letter clearly suggests there was more than a casual relationship between them; moreover, her unhappiness in Hollywood would be even more understandable if we could attribute it not only to homesickness but also to romantic longing.

In the second letter to survive from this period, Davidman writes a friend and laces the letter with scathing satire and sarcasm about Hollywood:

As you will see from the sunburst lion overhead, I am a slave of the films now, degraded past all recognition.<sup>10</sup> Every day at lunch I have to strain Robert Taylor out of my soup.<sup>11</sup>

Every horror you have ever heard about Hollywood seems to be true. God knows there's plenty of heartlessness in the writing game and plenty of fakes; but out here they're the rule. Most of us in New York were decent people living lives that made sense; but something seems to happen even to human beings here. Of course most of those here aren't human beings;

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<sup>9</sup> This book has not survived.

<sup>10</sup> The letterhead is the same as the previous letter.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Taylor (1911-1969) was a popular male film star in many MGM films of the 1930s and early 1940s.

they're bright boys whose poppas are down to the last yacht, so they're making a bit of extra cash to redeem the old palace from the mortgage. But there are a few who were once Marxists, and who have turned into collectors of swanky houses, expensive phonographs, beautiful automobiles, and who announce the price they paid for everything the minute you meet them. O I do not like this place. (*Bone* 26-27; July 19, 1939)

Her disdain for the people she works with does not extend to the actors, most of whom she says "aren't really so bad though; the ones I have met around here are hardworking and seem normal" (27). Instead, she despises most of the writers, directors, and producers; the one exception "is my immediate boss [who] is a swell person, and I enjoy working with him; but none of the writing I do is very likely to be looked at by a producer" (27). Presumably part of her loathing was self-directed since she herself was one of the writers, and this explains the self-fulfilling prophecy which concludes her letter: "In six months the company can kick me out of here if it wants to. I am looking forward to it. God, I'm homesick" (27).

In fact, by January 1940 she is back in New York, and in another letter to Still we find an additional insight into her dissatisfaction with Hollywood: she could not bear for her film scripts to be critiqued:<sup>12</sup>

New York is a foot deep under snow this morning and I love it. The film business fired me with many compliments two months ago; the consensus of opinion was that I didn't take kindly to "consultation." Once, in a moment of emotion, I said No to a producer, so they were right. I'm too much of an egoist to listen to anyone tell me how to write; I wouldn't take it from [John] Steinbeck,<sup>13</sup> let alone some degenerate illiterate of a producer whose knowledge of America is gleaned from glimpses he gets from an airliner. (*Bone* 27; February 15, 1940)

Davidman's self-confessed pride often comes across as arrogance at this point in her life. For example, she goes on in the same letter to lambaste almost everything associated with her MGM experience: "Have you ever spent any time with the disgusting rich? I used to think there was no sort of human being I couldn't understand and get along with. But I've learned otherwise; I can't even talk to café society without losing my temper" (27-28).

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<sup>12</sup> For more on this, see Pilat, "Girl Communist," and Dorsett, *And God Came In*, 38-39.

<sup>13</sup> Novelist and short story writer John Steinbeck (1902-1968) wrote mostly about simple people confronting insurmountable problems. His best-known works include *Of Mice and Men* (1937), *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), and *East of Eden* (1952).

With her Hollywood experience behind her, Davidman returns to writing for the *NM*, so it is not surprising that she begins writing film reviews that appeared almost weekly from March 1941 through July 1943.<sup>14</sup> In general she is a very good film critic, drawing in large part from her experiences in Hollywood. First, she is conscientious and regular in her reviews; even if she dislikes a film, she explains why, although she often wields a poisoned pen. For instance, she begins an early review with “when all the hack ideas in Hollywood are laid end to end, you get something like the package labeled *Come Live with Me*.” Then she adds: “The laughs are spaced as widely as a seven-year-old’s teeth [...] and Jimmy Stewart’s attempt to get into his wife’s arms is nothing you ought to see after a heavy meal” (“Humdrum Cinema” 29-30). Second, she is not always caustic and can be quite generous; for example, about *Out of the Fog* she says: “[It] is so good as to leave this reviewer without a chance to exercise her poison pen. A tale of decent, ordinary human beings threatened by a gangster, the film has obvious symbolism, and its final rallying of the gentle people to destroy the gangster is the rallying of the oppressed the world over” (“The Face of China” 27).

Third, she often writes about the technical excellences or failures of a film, including writing, lighting, camera angles, editing, musical scores, and direction; another way to put this is that she took her craft as a movie reviewer seriously, relying upon her Hollywood experience for the technical insights she makes on a film under review. For instance, she is almost gracious in her comments about *Rage in Heaven*: “[This film] has passed through many hands since James Hilton [who wrote the novel upon which the screenplay was based] let it fall with a dull thud. This reviewer had a crack at writing it, too, in her Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer days, and it is with great magnanimity that she admits the film is much better than she or James Hilton left it” (“Huey Hooey” 31).<sup>15</sup> Fourth, although she turns a blind eye to the critical defects of films coming out of the Soviet Union, in other regards she is an honest reviewer.<sup>16</sup> When films fail to deliver, for example, she rarely minces words:

Writing a film script is much like writing anything else; you get a bright idea, you put it on paper quickly in the first flush of inspiration, and then the hard work starts. The bright idea will not carry you through the intricate business of developing a coherent plot and creditable motivation. For some Hollywood offerings, however, that first fine careless rapture

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<sup>14</sup> For a more detailed discussion of Davidman as a film critic, see King, “Joy Davidman and the *New Masses*.”

<sup>15</sup> The writer she is complimenting for the screenplay is Christopher Isherwood.

<sup>16</sup> For more on this see King, “Joy Davidman and the *New Masses*” and her autobiographical essay, “The Longest Way Round,” reprinted in *Bone* 83-97.

seems to be enough. Behold such a job as *Million Dollar Baby*, which is terribly clever as long as the sap is still rising, but, in its latter two-thirds, as juiceless as last year's pine needles. ("Fantasy and Fun" 30)

Fifth, she uses language effectively; she never wastes words, opines thoughtlessly, prattles for effect, or panders to the lowest common denominator. Finally, she treats film as art; accordingly, she tries to write movie reviews that respect film for its potential to move viewers toward a great understanding of the human condition.

That said, in many of her film critiques she attacks the ethos of Hollywood, including its political conservatism (read: its failure to support a Communist agenda), its racism, and its sexism. Frequently she castigates filmmakers for making movies that support the political status quo or that fail to attack the ills of the early 1940s. A case in point is her critique of Frank Capra's *Meet John Doe*. She criticizes the movie "that presumes to speak for the common man, the John Doe who is unemployed, confused, bedeviled by a sick economy. Yet, all through, the picture slyly sabotages the common man" ("Huey Hooey" 30). Davidman's Communist convictions slant her summary of the movie, noting that "John Doe's program for saving the world consists of staying out of politics and preaching a few homilies. No better opium could be devised for the people, as the Moral Rearmament boys know. On top of this, [a] fascist millionaire decides to use the movement to get himself elected President" (30). Furthermore, she excoriates Capra for betraying his own convictions:

In the past Capra has refused to soft-pedal his slashing assaults on the little tin gods running the country. Here, however, he seems eager to be as inoffensive as possible. The millionaires keep the power and the poor stay poor and are more contented about it. And a really nasty touch in the film is a leering caricature of a labor leader, complete with eyebrows. As an approach to the genuine problems of working people, the film seems a deliberate attempt to obscure the issues; to conceal war, starvation, and homelessness in a tangle of spun sugar. (31)

Her final comment is deft and damning: "All the picture needs to make it complete is to have F. D. Roosevelt lean from the clouds in the finale, a god from the Democratic machine, and make Capital and Labor kiss each other" (31).

Davidman also consistently attacks the financial leverage the elite film companies—Paramount, Loew's, Twentieth Century-Fox, Warner Brothers, RKO, Columbia, Universal, and United Artists—use to create and maintain a monopoly. In one review essay she details the abuses of the monopoly and then offers a blistering conclusion:



Put in plain words, the function of capitalist films is to lie to the people. [Americans] are to be lulled, by soft music and high-grade [female] legs, into accepting every horror that the monopolists have in store for them. At the moment the horror on the menu is war; so your evening's "entertainment" is a compact dose of war propaganda. Comedians adjure you to buy defense bonds; romantic heroes, fluttering their eyelashes, urge you to die for the British empire. The movie industry, with its brothers in monopoly, has its own program for solving industrial problems; a program that will brush [governmental oversight committees'] good intentions aside like straw. ("Monopoly Takes a Screen Test" 29-30).

In another review essay, this time of Leo C. Rosten's *Hollywood: The Movie Colony—The Movie Makers*, Davidman observes that "what should have been objective research disintegrates into a hash of gossip, generality, and prejudice," especially because Rosten "slanders the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League and the Motion Picture Democratic Committee [...]. This book is not a survey of Hollywood; it is an appeasement of Hollywood—the Hollywood of reaction, labor-baiting and Red-baiting, and cheap escapism" ("Quack, Quack" 24).

A second focus of attack by Davidman is Hollywood's racist portrayals of African-Americans. At times, she admits, Hollywood appears to mean good in its presentation of African-Americans. For instance, she argues that *Tales of Manhattan* has "quite genuine good intentions":

The trouble with it is its ineptitude; it wants to do right by the Negro, but doesn't know how. The Hollywood cliché of the Negro as clown has been with us too long a time, and, like all people who use clichés to save the trouble of thinking, the Hollywood producers have come to believe in their own creation. Many of them are constitutionally incapable of seeing the Negro as anything but uneducated, superstitious, yet happy-go-lucky. Thus it comes about that while Negroes of *Tales of Manhattan* are voicing the ideas of sober and responsible adults, they are simultaneously cavorting like . . . like café society. ("Heroes are Human Beings" 31)

About MGM's re-release of *Gone With the Wind* in 1942, Davidman writes that "no one needs to be told that this four-hour explosion of technicolor is an offensive racist and fascist plea for disunion; no one, apparently, but its makers. The attenuated graces of Vivien Leigh will hardly compensate Americans for being told to hate each other on geographical, racial, political, or any other grounds" ("Fourth Down" 30). It is not that Davidman is blind to sincere efforts by Hollywood to critique racism; she has high praise for *Native Land* and its gritty portrayal of violations of civil liberties:

A church in Arkansas, where white and Negro meet; the ambush, the cries of deputy sheriffs blending with the voices of bloodhounds, the white man and the Negro hunted into the swamp. In an unforgettable sequence they cower among the lush reeds and the glittering summer bushes. The white man supporting the wounded Negro, they emerge cautiously on the road, while [Paul] Robeson's voice sings a magnificent lament; and they are shot down there. ("Native Land" 28).

But, according to Davidman, films such as *Native Land* are the exception. Too often stereotypical racist views dominate Hollywood films. Her ire reaches a boiling point when she learns about the planned release of *Captive Wild Woman* by Universal Studios. In an open letter to the readers of the *NM* on March 23, 1943, entitled "Goebbels's Missing Link," she unloads her full fury:<sup>17</sup>

No idea of Herr Doktor Goebbels has ever been too grotesque for our American fascists to ape.<sup>18</sup> Two words from the wizened little monkey in Berlin, and Martin Dies starts cutting monkeyshines in Congress.<sup>19</sup> It would appear that Dr. Goebbels has imitators in Hollywood as well; for his racist propaganda, in its filthiest form, is expressed in a picture planned by Universal Studios.

Hollywood's treatment of the Negro has usually been ill-informed and ill-natured to an outrageous extent. *Captive Wild Woman*, however, out-Herods Herod. Among the more brutal and unprincipled exponents of southern lynch law there used to be a theory that the Negroes were the mythical Missing Link. Possible only to minds of the ultimate degree of illiteracy, this idea was used as a sort of warped justification of the bestialities inflicted upon helpless Negroes. But it was too grotesque to survive long except among the most virulent poll taxers.

It is a shock, therefore, to discover that Universal Studios is planning to resurrect the Missing Link idea, in conformance with Nazi racial theories by which only that non-existent animal, the Aryan, is quite human. In *Captive Wild Woman*, apparently a horror quickie of even more incoherence than usual, the inevitable Mad Doctor decides to turn a female gorilla into a human being. By itself this would be merely silly; but someone had the idea of making that human being into a Negro girl! Lest you should conceivably miss Dr. Goebbels' point, the final script leads the girl up to a mirror while she is giving way to her "lower emotions" —

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<sup>17</sup> This letter is reprinted in *Bone* 32-33.

<sup>18</sup> Joseph Goebbels (1897-1945) was the German propaganda minister under Adolf Hitler and the Nazis.

<sup>19</sup> Martin Dies (1900-72) was a congressman from Texas who was fiercely anti-communist. In May 1938 his congressional resolution created the House Special Committee on Un-American Activities.

namely jealousy. As the emotions get lower, her skin grows darker, until she relapses through stages of subhumanity into the gorilla again!

Sheer illiteracy, though it explains some Hollywood phenomena, can hardly be the sole cause of this piece of fascist propaganda. It is tempting to suggest that the gentlemen responsible, in trying to reduce human beings to the ape level, were looking for company in their own misery; but it is more to the point to ask who gave them their orders? And it is still more to the point to see that those orders are countermanded by the American people. This film has not yet been released, has not even been publicized; its makers no doubt intend to slip it over quietly as a routine horror melodrama. They can be stopped.

Protest to the OWI [Office of War Information] as well as to Universal Studios should be effective in throttling Dr. Goebbels' apes. Meanwhile, one might suggest to the gentlemen responsible for *Captive Wild Woman* that, if they must hunt for a Missing Link, they might try to find one between themselves and decent humanity. (29)<sup>20</sup>

In a not so subtle way, she accuses Universal Studios of being the stooge and toady of the Nazi propaganda machine—Universal Studios, according to Davidman, is no more than a puppet of the master Nazi propagandist, Joseph Goebbels. This letter is not the critique of an objective film reviewer; instead, it is the jeremiad of a zealot. It is more like the outraged rant of a fire-and-brimstone preacher than a critical debunking and dismantling of a seriously flawed film.

The tone of this open letter, moreover, suggests that underneath Davidman's controlled veneer of informed critical judgment, an Old Testament prophet lurks, ever ready to call down the wrath of an angry God upon those in Hollywood who perpetuate racist stereotypes. This air of self-righteousness carries over into Davidman's greatest negative judgment against Hollywood: its condescending, manipulative, and degrading portrayal of women. In many film reviews she attacks what she sees as Hollywood's sexism. For example, in her review of *She Knew All the Answers*, Davidman says the film becomes "downright offensive [...] in the presentation of an office spinster of the old school, who lifts eyebrows constantly, simpers over her imaginary beauty, and faints at the mention of passion. If this lady ever really existed, she has gone to an unwept grave long ago. Cannot Hollywood give us a rest from the comic old maid?" ("Tripe and Taylor" 31). Davidman is capable of seeing satire in some of the portrayals of women; in fact, she delights in *The Feminine Touch* because Rosalind Russell's "combination of cavewoman and dumb bunny is enough to carry any story. This reviewer, indeed, inclines to the belief that no picture is bad if Miss

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<sup>20</sup> The movie was released on June 4, 1943.

Russell's in it" ("New Movies" 28). Russell also comes in for praise for her role in *Take a Letter, Darling* when Davidman writes about her

that an independent woman who earns her own money is not only more honorable but also more desirable than a clinging female who proposes to marry it. [...] [Russell] is explicitly and sincerely complimented for standing on her own two feet like a self-respecting adult instead of hunting a millionaire like . . . well, the average Hollywood heroine. ("Exciting Soviet Film," 29)

Hollywood's sexism bears the full weight of Davidman's scorn in the longest review essay she published in the *NM*. "Women: Hollywood Style" is a careful, thorough, well-supported, and articulate piece of rhetoric intended to expose and eviscerate the sexist ethos of Hollywood's major film studios. Her damning indictment of Hollywood for its screen portrayals of women may also be a delayed response to her own lack of success there. "Women: Hollywood Style" is essentially a charge that the men running Hollywood are male chauvinists. She begins by citing a line from the movie *Tom, Dick, and Harry* where the female lead, Ginger Rogers, says: "It's as natural for a girl to want to make a good marriage as for a man to want to get ahead in business" (28). Davidman then argues that the male producers of the movie would be surprised that such a line might open them to a charge of misogyny:

[T]hey sincerely believed themselves to be glorifying the American girl [...]. *Tom, Dick, and Harry* accepted as natural and right and healthy the doctrine that the American girl should sell her sex in the most profitable market. Nor does the market end with marriage. Once caught, the husband must be held; and woman's life work, hundreds of films imply, is holding her man with the aid of the beauty parlor and judicious fits of the sulks. The movies dress this doctrine prettily; they adorn it with revealing negligees, demure maidservants, and incredible kitchens that are paradises of labor-saving gadgets. (28)

Long before feminism was a cultural given, Davidman argued several of its principal tenets:

[I]n the United States, the emancipation of women is part and parcel of the democracy we are fighting for. Increasingly, women succeed along lines once reserved for men; as in the Soviet Union and Britain, women replace men whenever possible in the war effort. Nor are their homes worse run, their children worse cared for. On the contrary; as any psychologist knows, women who have realized their potentialities as creative human beings make better mothers than frustrated women who must take all

their ambitions out on their children. Thus the films are lagging behind the country. Their half-unconscious war against the emancipation of women certainly gives unintended support to one of the tenets of fascism—the deliberate debasement of womanhood. (28)

Although Davidman does note the legitimate strength of *Tom, Dick, and Harry*—it did not mock “the historic fight of women for independence”—in the end the heroine opted for marriage with a man who would take care of her:

*Tom, Dick, and Harry* never made any suggestion that the heroine might have something to offer the world as an individual; she was merely, to put it nakedly, something to be marketed. The salient feature of the film, indeed, was a series of dreams forecasting the girl’s probable future with each man. In each case, her life was entirely what the man chose to make it. (28)

She then analyzes a group of films dealing with unhappy wives who, rather than acting as independent agents, become briefly infatuated with another man; however, once these “romances” prove equally unsatisfying, the wives crawl back to their husbands, “chastened among the dolls.” As a result, Davidman argues, most Hollywood movies suggest women can only be happy not when they exercise their own desires and aspirations, but rather when they “know their place” and settle for being good wives, mothers, and home-makers. “The cardinal point of woman’s emancipation—the admission that she can have a successful career and a successful marriage—is almost never made” in popular Hollywood films (29). Instead, films are filled with caricatures of women: the crotchety schoolteacher, the frustrated and unglamorous professional woman, or the office sourpuss.

Davidman then contends that Hollywood glorifies female beauty and objectifies women into sex objects:

In forcing women into the harem, the important thing is to make the women like it; they must be induced to accept their unhealthy fate as highly moral and emotionally desirable. Consequently we have [a whole school] of films, glorifying a morbidly passive and self-effacing female type; the great range of movies, superficially quite inoffensive, which never say a word derogatory to women yet present them in a dependent and inferior position as a matter of course [...].

The routine film heroine has no integrity, no sense, no reliability. She is always breaking off her engagement when a more enticing prospect comes along; yielding spinelessly to the blandishment of the brash youth whom she began by resenting; falling among thieves and Nazi spies; dancing helplessly in the background while the villain conks the hero; slapping

faces at insults to her imbecile "dignity"; making an idiot of herself at baseball games. But ah, she has beauty! She has S[ex] A[ppeal], she has It, she has Oomph; she has a wonderful apparatus for getting men excited. [...] That is all she knows on earth, and all she needs to know. (29-30)

Davidman claims the reason for this sexual exploitation is simple: money. In addition, "this nakedly financial motive" shows "the plain fact that film-makers write as they think. If they regard woman as a commercial article, that is because pretty girls come to Hollywood from all over the country to trade in their beauty. Beauty is a drug on the market in southern California" (30).

In the final section of the essay she moves to a discussion clearly reminiscent of her jaundiced experience in MGM's Junior Writer Project. In spite of the many good people working in the film industry in southern California, Davidman notes that the film culture "concentrates in articulate people most of the prevailing attitudes of our civilization, good and bad [...] [so that] in Hollywood may [...] be found some of the most degenerate and parasitic elements of our society—the swamis, the astrologers, the debutantes, the fifth columnists, the reactionaries of every size and shape" (30-31). It follows, then,

[I]n presenting woman as they do, the films present in intensified form an attitude that exists wherever reaction may be found; an attitude based at least in part on facts. For there is no denying that thousands of young girls do think of themselves as articles for the marriage market; do track down a husband as the sole end of existence; and do feel cheated when they discover that glamorized Love is not a sufficient full-time occupation. Neither, let it be admitted, is having a baby.<sup>21</sup>

How great a part the movies play in forming girls according to this pattern is not easily measured. Perhaps the greatest single cause of harm is in the compensatory mechanism which women develop, and which the movies encourage, to overcome the unhappiness of their frustration and disappointment—a mechanism which has made the neurotic, attention-getting woman so frightening familiar in our society. Taught to value herself only by her reflection in a man's admiring eyes, many a woman spends her whole time in desperate scheming for attention, in frenzied resentment of people or ideas that "come between her and her family"; many a woman clings pathetically to girlishness well into her fifties. These cases are not intrinsically inferior people but poisoned people; the film is

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<sup>21</sup> Here Davidman is not speaking from experience with regard to marriage and having children. Less than three weeks after the publication of this article, she married William Lindsay Gresham on August 2, 1942, and her first son David, was born March 27, 1944; her second son, Douglas, was born November 10, 1945.

not the major source of poison, but an important contributory cause of what amounts to an undermining of the family. (31)

Although she affirms that movies are not the sole cause of a woman's lack of genuine self-esteem, she does see a vicious cycle: "The movies, out of carelessness or miseducation or corruption, imitate and prettify some of the worst features of daily life; and life promptly imitates the movies" (31). In her conclusion, she offers a possible solution: "Meanwhile young women are miseducated out of respect for themselves as human beings, and—equally deadly—their menfolk are warned not to respect them. [...] The true corrective is in the education of the American people. When the people at last repudiate completely all expressions of male chauvinism, the movies will hastily follow suit" (31).

The importance of "Women, Hollywood Version" is threefold. First, it illustrates Davidman's willingness to take on an entire industry—one from her perspective that had essentially chewed her up and spat her out—with energy, insight, and candor. Many of her arguments against the way in which movies trivialize women and glorify sex are still valid, albeit it much has changed in Hollywood's portrayal of women during the last seventy years. Second, it shows her expressing radical positions that she never bothers to document—for instance, the claim that "any psychologist" knows working women make better mothers "than frustrated women who must take all their ambitions out on their children" is never linked to an expert study. This is the zeal of the revolutionary, the argument of one who knows she is right, the righteous (and sometimes arrogant) word of one whose authority is her own sense of moral superiority. Finally, it reveals a passionate personality intent on righting the wrongs perpetuated by a system she finds repellant, exploitive, and manipulative.

Davidman's early success—she was only twenty-three when *Letter to a Comrade* was published and twenty-four when she first went to Hollywood—may in part explain her scorn for what she found in Hollywood—that and its rejection of her. She did not suffer fools lightly, and in her view she encountered many fools at MGM and the other film studios. A piqued self-image and bruised ego are not easily assimilated into the psychology of someone like Davidman—brilliant, opinionated, focused, confrontational, perceptive, and zealot-like.<sup>22</sup> Marriage to William Lindsay Gresham and having two children ameliorated some of her views, but she still evidences disdain for stereotypical views of women five years after her Hollywood experience, writing her friends Jerry and Alice Jerome on January 19, 1945: "I'm feeling very cheerful these days [...]"

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<sup>22</sup> She writes James Still on February 15, 1940: "I've sold my novel [*Anyja*] to Macmillan—it happened when I was still in California, and I gloated over my writer-colleagues, none of whom were capable of producing more than a ten-page screen story" (*Bone* 28).

except for the limited opportunities for writing. In the grimmer moments of floor scrubbing I meditate between my teeth articles on male chauvinism. Why, why, why, is it always the Joys and Alices that stop writing to mind infants, and never the Bills and Jerrys? Men is WORMS" (*Bone* 40; Davidman's emphasis).<sup>23</sup>

Of course by the time of Davidman's celebrated marriage to C. S. Lewis on April 23, 1956, she had softened considerably some of her youthful ideas, including a rejection of Communism. However, even her conversion to Christianity did not stifle her strong sense of self, her insistence on sexual equality, and her brilliant mind. Numerous stories survive illustrating these attributes. One of my favorites was re-counted by Lewis's brother, Warren:

I was some little time in making up my mind about her; she proved to be a Jewess, or rather a Christian convert of Jewish race, medium height, good figure, horn rimmed specs., quite extraordinarily uninhibited. Our first meeting was at a lunch in Magdalen [College, Oxford], where she turned to me in the presence of three or four men, and asked in most natural tone in the world, 'Is there anywhere in this monastic establishment where a lady can relieve herself?' (*Brothers and Friends* 244).<sup>24</sup>

C.S. Lewis himself almost certainly was first attracted to Davidman because of her brilliant mind, her gift of repartee, and her quick wit. He best summarizes this in *A Grief Observed*:

For a good wife contains so many persons in herself. What was H. not to me? She was my daughter and my mother, my pupil and my teacher, my subject and my sovereign; and always, holding all these in solution, my trusty comrade, friend, shipmate, fellow-soldier. My mistress; but at the same time all that any man friend (and I have good ones) has ever been to me. Perhaps more. If we had never fallen in love we should have none the less been always together, and created a scandal. That's what I meant when once I praised her for her "masculine virtues." But she soon put a stop to that by asking how I'd like to be praised for my feminine ones. It was a good *riposte*, dear. Yet there was something of the Amazon, something of Penthesileia and Camilla. (*A Grief Observed* 39)

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<sup>23</sup> V.J. Jerome (1896-1965) emigrated from Poland in 1915, and joined the Communist Party of the United States of American in 1924. In 1935 he became editor of *The Communist*, publishing many essays in support of communism and related causes. Alice Hamburger was his third wife.

<sup>24</sup> Warren Lewis genuinely loved Davidman, writing on the day she died: "God rest her soul, I miss her to a degree which I would not have imagined possible" (250).



For Lewis to relate Davidman to Penthesileia (her name means “mourned by the people”), the Queen of Amazons who led her troops in support of Priam during the battle of Troy, and Camilla, who in the *Aeneid* aids her ally King Turnus against Aeneas and the Trojans, suggests not only his deep love for her but also his admiration of her invincible spirit and courage as she battled the cancer that eventually took her life. Only a woman with an intellect the equal of Lewis’s could have ever won his heart—something Davidman certainly did. The intelligent, articulate, and forceful mature woman Lewis married owed at least part of her attractive character to the brilliant but brash young woman who years earlier had invaded the lion’s den and emerged chastened but wiser.

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