The Golden Age Holiday:

Bakhtin's Chronotope and the Representation of Christmas Across Film Genres in 1940s Hollywood

Tong Zhang

100364154

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Abstract

This thesis provides a cross-genre study of Christmas in 1940s Hollywood films through Bakhtin's concept of the 'chronotope'. Existing research has largely focused on single-genre analyses, typically family Christmas films, or broader historical studies treating Christmas films as a category. Drawing on textual and comparative analyses, my research addresses this critical gap by providing a comprehensive study of how Christmas functions as a cross-genre representational motif and its cultural and political roles. The 1940s are a key focus due to the dominance of the studio system and the decade's social and economic upheavals, including the lingering effects of the Great Depression and World War II. I argue that Christmas emerged as a narrative trope of growing resonance, exemplified by films such as *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) and *Miracle on 34th Street* (1947), shaping narrative structure, thematic development, and marketing strategies, and establishing conventions that influenced later cinematic depictions. Using Bakhtin's (1981a) notion of the chronotope, this study treats Christmas as a distinct spatio-temporal configuration. It examines four genres—family melodrama, fantasy, romantic comedy, and film noir—to uncover the narrative and generic strategies mobilizing Christmas. Within the specific social and historical context of 1940s America, including wartime anxieties, shifting gender roles, and evolving notions of family and national identity, Christmas emerges as a site of narrative and ideological tension. Textual analysis shows that its chronotopic deployment simultaneously reinforces dominant ideologies and social stability while articulating underlying anxieties and exclusions. Genre variation fosters a complex cultural dialogue, revealing subtle dynamics of power. This research constitutes the first sustained study of Christmas as a cinematic chronotope and demonstrates the value of integrating chronotope theory with genre analysis. The framework offers potential for examining other cultural rituals across cinematic traditions and historical periods, providing insights into how spatio-temporal configurations reflect and shape social ideologies.

Content

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Introduction

There are many men and women in America—sincere and faithful men and women—who are asking themselves this Christmas: How can we pause, even for a day, even for Christmas Day, in our urgent labor of arming a decent humanity against the enemies which beset it? And even as we ask these questions, we know the answer. There is another preparation demanded of this Nation... the arming of our hearts. We must be steadfast to endure sacrifice and brave to achieve a victory of liberty and peace. Our strongest weapon in this war is that conviction of the dignity and brotherhood of man which Christmas Day signifies—more than any other day or any other symbol. Against enemies who preach the principles of hate, we set our faith in human love and in God's care for us and all men everywhere. It is in that spirit... that we light our Christmas candles now across the continent from one coast to the other on this Christmas Eve.

— Franklin D. Roosevelt, Christmas Message to the Nation, 24 Dec. 1941

As Roosevelt acknowledged in his 1941 Christmas message, the first Christmas after the United States' official entry into World War II was inevitably a difficult one, with many Americans struggling to embrace the festive cheer. However, Roosevelt argued that it was precisely in such challenging times that the celebration of Christmas became more essential than ever. Drawing on Christian imagery and symbolism, he emphasized Christmas's inherent "conviction of the dignity and brotherhood of man" and its "faith in human love and in God's care for us and all men everywhere". For Roosevelt, Christmas served not only as a political counterpoint to the enemies "who preach principles of hate" but also as a powerful tool for fostering collective identity. In this light, I suggest that Roosevelt's speech can be seen as a pivotal moment in the redefinition of Christmas within American culture and cinema, with its influence continuing to resonate in contemporary representations of the holiday.

This thesis examines the representation of Christmas in 1940s Hollywood films, encompassing a range of popular genres including family melodrama, romantic comedy, fantasy, and film noir. Using Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981a) concept of the chronotope as a theoretical framework, Christmas is considered a distinct temporal—spatial configuration, and the study explores how this representation is constructed within these films and interacts with other chronotopes. The thesis thus aims to identify both the commonalities and the distinctions in the depiction of Christmas across these genres, and how these representations respond to the sociocultural context of 1940s America. Through close textual and contextual analysis,

I argue that the depiction of Christmas provides a particularly fruitful way to explore broader questions concerning American culture and history during this period. The selected case studies show how Christmas functions as a site for mediating and negotiating various cultural tensions, including those surrounding gender, family, and national identity. The chronotope is central to this process, providing a framework for understanding how these tensions are represented. Rather than following singular, linear narratives, these films often have polyphonic and dialogic structures; for example, family melodramas sometimes integrate elements of noir—including moral ambiguity, shadowy visuals, and narrative tension—creating multiple overlapping perspectives and accentuating the conflicts between domestic ideals and broader societal anxieties.

The forms of closure employed across the selected genres and case studies typically reinforce the dominant ideologies—particularly those concerning gender roles, class structures, and family hierarchies—while simultaneously revealing their flaws and fragility, presenting social anxieties and uncertainties and reflecting a notable complexity. As a powerful cultural mechanism, Christmas creates a distinctive sense of time and space—a 'mythic holiday temporality' —to enact the American myth, encompassing ideals of family harmony, social stability, and cultural traditions. This temporal framework helps to bridge disruptions and uncertainties caused by war, social upheaval, and displacement, linking the past, present, and future and providing viewers with a sense of continuity, safety, and reassurance as the Christmas setting contains and mediates anxieties.

In this thesis, 'Christmas' specifically refers to the annual festival commemorating Jesus Christ's birth on 25 December, where it functions as a narrative and thematic construct in film texts. References to 'the holiday' or related terms such as 'the season', 'holiday celebrations', or 'festivity', are considered to refer to Christmas only when one or more of the following criteria are clearly met:

(1) Visual cues: the presence of traditional Christmas symbols, such as a Christmas tree, wreath, lights, snow, or Santa Claus.
(2) Narrative cues: the plot explicitly includes Christmas Eve (24 December) or Christmas Day (25 December), or its characters refer to gift-giving, a Christmas meal, or family gatherings associated with Christmas.
(3) Cultural cues: the film draws on American Christmas conventions or holiday practices culturally associated with Christmas.

Consequently, 'the holiday' is treated as Christmas in this analysis only when these cues are sufficiently evident. The term 'the holiday' is a stylistic substitute for 'Christmas' only when the cinematic context makes the reference unambiguous. 'Festive holiday' emphasises moments that foreground sensory or atmospheric elements associated with Christmas—such as décor, music, or ritualised gestures—rather than treating the holiday as a narrative subject. 'Holiday season'

denotes the broader cultural and industrial period that is traditionally understood in America to span the period following Thanksgiving to New Year, in which Christmas is the central and most culturally prominent holiday. This term is used only when discussing film release cycles, marketing practices, or audience reception linked to this commercial time frame.

Even after more than 70 years, audiences are still enthralled by 1940s Christmas classics such as *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944), *Miracle on 34th Street* (1947), and *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946). Despite the profound social and cultural transformations since their release, these films—which are emblematic of Hollywood's Golden Age (late 1920s to the early 1960s)—remain central to holiday rituals, enduring as both cultural artefacts and cherished family traditions. According to Chapman (2017), Hollywood has appropriated and colonised Christmas, with Charles Dickens also subsumed into this endeavour. By the time of *It's a Wonderful Life*'s release, cinema was already an integral part of the Christmas celebrations, with film-going functioning as a social practice closely tied to the holiday. This study, however, goes further by examining how Christmas was represented across different genres and revealing how these representations had a crucial role in shaping this cultural phenomenon.

This examination of the representation of Christmas in 1940s Hollywood cinema is underpinned by the following main research questions:

（1）What new knowledge does this cross-genre, comparative study contribute to our understanding of the representation of Christmas in 1940s Hollywood cinema?

（2）How can Bakhtin's chronotope model be used to analyse the cinematic representations of Christmas in the selected films examined in this thesis?

（3）What insights into the broader relationships between the cinematic representations of Christmas in these films and their placement within the wider cultural context of 1940s America do these approaches provide?

Existing scholarship on Christmas films has typically followed two main analytical trajectories. The first has treated these films as a definable—or at least recognisable—genre, emphasising a constellation of shared motifs, visual and aural signifiers, and recurrent narrative structures and thematic patterns. As John Mundy (2002, p. 178) observes, films such as *It's a Wonderful Life* and *Miracle on 34th Street* "established a cinematic language of Christmas", establishing conventions that continue to shape both the production and reception of holiday cinema. These seminal works are enduring prototypes that have been frequently referenced, reimagined, or subverted in subsequent decades. Recurring character types—ranging from Scrooge-like cynics to George Bailey-style figures confronting existential

despair—typically experience an emotional or spiritual transformation, reflecting broader cultural investments in redemption, moral resolution, and affective closure. Film theorist Frank Thompson (1998, p. 101) similarly emphasises the persistence of tonal qualities including "humor, sadness, whimsy, and fantasy", and identifies *Remember the Night* (1940) as paradigmatic for its "delicate mood of whimsy, nostalgia, and optimism". These affective registers, Thompson suggests, are essential narrative and aesthetic ingredients that shape audience expectations and sustain the genre's cultural resonance.

The second approach focuses on the representation of Christmas within specific genres. For example, *Home Alone* (1990) is examined as a Christmas family comedy (Arnold, 2023), *The Holiday* (2006) as a Christmas romance (Rosewarne, 2017), and *Black Christmas* (1974) as a Christmas horror (Connelly, 2000a). While these studies offer valuable insights into the genre-specific functions of Christmas, they often lack a comparative framework that considers how the holiday operates across multiple genres. To address this gap, the present study examines four key genres within 1940s Hollywood cinema: family melodrama, fantasy, romantic comedy, and film noir. It explores how Christmas is represented across these genres, identifying both their unique conventions and shared elements. In doing so, this study proposes a more flexible, multidimensional framework for understanding holiday films.

Central to this thesis is Bakhtin's (1981a) concept of the chronotope, which provides a principal theoretical framework to explore Christmas across genres in 1940s Hollywood cinema. The chronotope, denoting the intersection and interaction of time and space, is a concept that is not only central to literary creation but equally applicable to film studies. This study conceptualises Christmas itself as a distinct chronotope, aiming to explore the ways in which it interacts with, integrates into, and at times conflicts with other chronotopes operating within and across specific film genres. Through close textual analysis, the study examines how case study films from different genres represent Christmas via particular temporal and spatial configurations. This approach enables an understanding of how Christmas is constructed with unique cultural significance within each genre, while also revealing the commonalities that have contributed to its widespread cultural codification. Moreover, this study challenges the notion of genre as a fixed or sufficiently stabilised site of social and ideological action, arguing instead that genre boundaries are continuously negotiated and potentially disrupted through socially and historically situated configurations of time and space (Schryer, 1993, p. 200). In this regard, genre is better understood as a form of discursive practice: it develops and shifts over time, yet retains a degree of coherence and recognisability.

Literature Review

1. Bakhtin's Chronotope and Genre Study: The Temporal and Spatial Dynamics of Christmas

As a Russian philosopher and literary critic, Bakhtin developed his ideas in response to the limitations of formalist and structuralist approaches, rejecting their rigidity in favour of emphasizing the fluid, dialogic nature of meaning-making within texts. Central to his contributions is the concept of the chronotope, which he explores in depth in his seminal essay *Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics* (hereafter FTC) (Bakhtin, 1981b). One of the most frequently cited passages appears in FTC, where Bakhtin (1981b, p. 84) offers a provisional definition of the chronotope, highlighting its role in shaping the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships in literature:

> In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. The intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope.

In summary, the term chronotope refers to the "intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed". Its theoretical strength lies in its capacity to link representational forms with broader cultural and epistemological frameworks (Bakhtin, 1981b, p. 84). Thus, the chronotope can be regarded as a valuable analytical tool for examining how space-time configurations inform narrative structures and ideological meaning, making it essential to various strands of cultural critique (Bakhtin, 1981b, p. 84).

Crucially, Bakhtin's (1981a) concept of the chronotope enables scholars to move beyond formalist analysis and explore how artistic representation engages with social discourse. The chronotope not only shapes the perception of fictional worlds but also situates human action within specific spatial and temporal frameworks. It helps illuminate how individuals interact with their physical (biotopic) and symbolic (semiotic) environments through narrative structure, and how artistic and narrative spaces reflect an author's worldview and the cultural context of production. By analysing the symbolic and narrative roles of specific times and places, scholars can uncover how representational space articulates ideological, historical, and social

concerns. For this thesis, this theoretical framework is particularly valuable because Christmas itself functions as a highly charged temporal–spatial construct. Understanding Christmas as a chronotope makes it possible to examine not only how the holiday is represented in 1940s films, but also how its temporal and spatial conventions organise narrative meaning, mediate cultural tensions, and shape ideological messages.

Existing scholarship has increasingly applied Bakhtin's (1981a) theory of the chronotope to film studies, despite his limited direct engagement with cinema. Among these contributions, Robert Stam's (1989) work stands out for its significant elaboration of the chronotope concept within film studies, particularly regarding identity politics and representational practices. According to Stam, cinema is inherently multichronotopic, unfolding across a spatial surface—the screen—and within literal time, typically at 24 frames per second. He famously notes that cinema "temporalizes space and spatializes time", meaning that "time takes place and place takes time" (Stam, 1989, p. 37). This fusion of time and space makes film a unique medium where narrative events become both visible and ideologically charged.

Adopting a multicultural and interdisciplinary approach, Stam (1989) addresses a wide array of topics, including critiques of Saussurean semiotics and Russian formalism, linguistic diversity in cinema, Latin American national culture, and the carnivalesque in literature and film. A key achievement of his work is the exploration of how the chronotope can illuminate ideological frameworks within cinema. In his analysis of films focused on colonialism, Stam highlights the use of the frontier chronotope to depict space as a contested arena where dominant and subordinate narratives collide. His scholarship represents a significant contribution to film studies, serving both as a foundational resource for researchers applying Bakhtin's (1993) ideas to cinema and as an intellectually vibrant, methodologically flexible alternative to the often narrow specialization found in traditional film theory.

A different approach to the chronotope is developed by Michael V. Montgomery (1993), whose extension of Bakhtin's (1981a) theory demonstrates that particular settings and familiar forms of mise-en-scène possess unexpectedly deep historical and ideological roots. He argues that seemingly ordinary cinematic environments—living rooms, staircases, castles, roads, small villages, or idyllic river scenes—function as historically saturated chronotopes. These spaces are not merely narrative backdrops or stylistic choices; they shape meaning, direct interpretation, and structure audience affective response. Montgomery's readings of filmmakers such as Quentin Tarantino and Jean-Luc Godard reveal how directors deliberately manipulate chronotopic structures to subvert conventional narrative logic. Through such manipulation, linear temporality is disrupted and spatial organization reconfigured, allowing past, present, and future to coexist within a single cinematic moment. This produces a layered,

dynamic viewing experience that challenges audience expectations and encourages more active interpretive engagement. By emphasising the ideological implications of chronotopic disruption, Montgomery makes an important contribution to film theory, demonstrating how Bakhtin's concept can illuminate the narrative, affective, and political work performed by cinematic space-time. These insights are particularly productive when considering films such as *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) and *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944), where domestic spaces operate as ideologically charged chronotopes that mediate nostalgia, national identity, and the tensions brought about by urban uncertainty.

Bakhtin's (1981a) theorization of the chronotope, first introduced in *The Dialogic Imagination*, is also deeply rooted in genre theory, particularly in its role as a foundational element for distinguishing literary forms. He analyses several genres, from pre-novelistic antiquity to the works of Tolstoy and Flaubert, in order to determine the chronotopic patterns therein. Therefore, he argues that "chronotopes serve as the foundation for differentiating generic types, crucial to the evolution of distinct variants within the novel genre, shaped and refined over centuries" (Bakhtin, 1981b, pp. 250-251). This emphasis is reflected in his detailed analyses of key chronotopes such as the adventure novel of ordeal, the chivalric romance, and the idyll—each illustrating how configurations of time and space generate both narrative structure and thematic meaning.

For Bakhtin (1981a, p. 29), the chronotope operates not only as a formal narrative device but also as an ideological mechanism, shaping representations of human experience and worldview. This dual function aligns with broader theoretical approaches that view genre as both an aesthetic classification and a cognitive tool for organizing cultural meaning. As Bakhtin (1981b, p. 85) notes, the chronotope is "a formally constitutive category" that directly influences how reality and subjectivity are structured in literature. Recent scholarship has extended this line of inquiry by exploring the cognitive and epistemological dimensions of the chronotope. He contends that certain chronotopes are linked to specific genres, each of which reflects a unique worldview, highlighting the chronotope's role as a framework for both philosophical and ideological understanding. In this sense, chronotopes are not only embedded within genre conventions but also serve as cultural mediators, shaping how space, time, and identity are experienced and represented in literary discourse.

As for the genre theory, scholarly approaches to it have developed along multiple, often conflicting, lines. The term genre was originally adopted from literary criticism and further influenced by taxonomic concepts drawn from the biological sciences. Its application in classifying works into "genus" or "species" lends an appearance of objectivity to what is, at its core, a fundamentally interpretive and subjective act (Schatz, 1976, p. 12). As Gunning (1995, p. 14) notes, the beginning of genre

classification by film critics occurs in the 1940s. Yet it seems that the act of definition cannot ever be adequate to the notion of genre as a historical process. On one hand, Rick Altman's (1999) *Film/Genre* offers one of the most influential and comprehensive frameworks for reconceptualizing film genre theory. He proposes that genres are not inert categories shared by all but rather discursive claims made by real speakers for particular purposes in specific situations. This emphasis on discourse, context, and intention marks a significant departure from earlier formalist or taxonomic models.

Further developing Altman's approach, Bould and Vint (2011, p. 16) argue that genres should be understood as "fluid and tenuous constructions" that emerge from the interaction of multiple agents: writers, producers, distributors, marketers, fans, critics, and audiences. These agents continuously negotiate, contest, and reshape genre boundaries through both institutional and informal discursive practices. From this perspective, the critic's definition of a genre becomes just one of many competing claims, rather than an authoritative or final classification. Indeed, Bould and Vint suggest that the only definition of genre consistent with this historical and discursive model would be a tautological one—genre is whatever its agents claim it to be. This relativist understanding of genre challenges the project of genre theory itself, especially as it pertains to stable classification or predictive utility. Instead, genre becomes a site of cultural negotiation, always in flux, and always embedded in specific industrial, social, and textual contexts.

On the other hand, Steve Neale (2000) offers a critique of such relativistic models. He argues that while genres are indeed shaped by discourse, this discourse is not entirely open or free-floating. Instead, genre is both an instance of "repetition and difference" and a product of institutional frameworks, especially within the Hollywood system (Neale, 2000, p. 207). He warns against overemphasizing discourse at the expense of understanding the industrial, economic, and textual mechanisms that structure genre production and reception. Neale (2000, p. 207) thus tempers Altman's claim that genres are discursive claims made by real speakers by highlighting the material conditions under which those claims are made—particularly the standardization practices of studios, audience expectations shaped by marketing, and genre's role in managing narrative predictability within commercial cinema. For him, genres do not merely float between texts and viewers, but are actively reproduced through regulatory systems, such as censorship codes, distribution channels, and economic imperatives. In this view, Neale reintroduces a degree of structural constraint and historical specificity into genre theory, resisting the idea that genre is whatever any speaker claims it to be.

According to Schatz (1997), this is particularly true of Hollywood's classic period (roughly 1930s to 1960s), when its studio production system was geared to genre film-making. During this period, the studio system was deliberately organized around genre-based film-making, with production practices becoming increasingly

standardized across all phases—from narrative development to marketing and exhibition. As a result, genre emerged not simply as a set of aesthetic or thematic conventions, but as an industrial mode of production designed to efficiently manage audience expectations and narrative coherence. These generic frameworks enabled filmmakers to explore recurring cultural tensions in a manner both accessible and resonant.

For instance, Schatz (1997) suggests that the Western genre consistently revisits foundational American myths, such as the taming of the frontier, the valorization of rugged individualism, and the tension between individual heroes and the broader community. Although formal variations may occur between texts, the thematic structure of the genre remains remarkably stable, reaffirming its function as a cultural ritual. Moreover, he notes that within this system, certain filmmakers gained recognition as genre directors—those who specialized in specific narrative forms and thus served a particular role within the industrial structure. John Ford, for example, became synonymous with the Western; Vincente Minnelli with musicals and melodramas; Howard Hawks with screwball comedies and action films; and Alfred Hitchcock with psychological thrillers. These directors, while working within genre constraints, contributed to the refinement and evolution of genre conventions through their distinctive styles.

However, later scholars such as Staiger (1992) point out that the generic descriptions of classical Hollywood cinema are products of critical methodologies that, by their very nature, impose a single genre category to label and analyze a given text. For instance, New Criticism focuses on how exemplary works resolve apparent contradictions to achieve a masterful coherence—either by integrating all elements seamlessly or by dismissing texts that fail to do so as artistically inferior. Structuralism, on the other hand, seeks to identify an underlying binary opposition that shapes the narrative surface. Semiotics examines narrative patterns and transformations, uncovering fundamental, albeit sometimes contradictory, structuring paradigms. Building upon critiques of the "purity hypothesis", Staiger (1992, p. 6) further argues that the pivotal shift is not a historical movement from pure to hybrid, but rather a critical acknowledgment that hybridity has always been an inherent feature of Hollywood cinema.

Therefore, this study contributes to the ongoing debates in genre theory by introducing the concept of the chronotope as a critical tool for rethinking Hollywood film genres. Sobchack (1998) draws on the chronotope to explore how the concrete conditions of film noir inform its narrative possibilities. She identifies lounge time as a dominant chronotope of film noir, in which contemporaneous cultural anxieties found vernacular expression. Lounge time encompasses spaces such as nightclubs, cocktail lounges, bars, anonymous hotel and motel rooms, boardinghouses, inexpensive roadhouses, and diners. Dark in tone (if not always chiaroscuro in

lighting), twisted in vision (if not always in framing), urban in sensibility (if not always in location), impotently angry and disillusioned in spirit (if not always in execution), noir circumscribed a world of existential, epistemological, and axiological uncertainty—and inscribed a cinema that film critics and scholars saw as an allegorical dramatization of the economic and social crises of the postwar period. It is precisely through these concrete and visible premises that exist materially and recognizably within both the films and their broader context—that the historical and cultural intelligibility of film noir as a film style or genre is located. And I return to this more fully when discussing film noir in chapter 4.

For Bakhtin (1981a), the road is an exemplary—albeit minor—chronotope, a spatiotemporal structure that resonates significantly in film studies but, like film noir, presents challenges to traditional genre analysis. The road picture is often—and uncomfortably—regarded as a subgenre of the adventure film, itself a broad and ill-defined category, or it is treated as a discrete genre, with discussions tending to overlook its generic status. The chronotope of the road concretely structures and limits the nature of narrative events, positioning them temporally against the backdrop of its spatial journey. It inscribes time as passage and journey, which tends to exclude—or especially privilege, by virtue of their exceptionality—those temporal structures that emerge from a cultural space articulated as self-contained and self-sustaining, such as the 'home'. Only certain kinds of characters find their way onto the road, and only these characters, shaped by the road's particular spatialization, interact in specific ways, defining the depth and nature of their encounters and social relations. The road, though a deceptively simple example, is one of the many chronotopes Bakhtin identifies and explores in his work. However, due to his extended focus on more general chronotopic structures such as folkloric time and adventure time, the chronotope of the road remains somewhat underelaborated and underhistoricized. Significant differences exist between the road of the picaresque and that of the Winnebago, between a meandering country road and a toll road or urban freeway. Nonetheless, because it immediately speaks to us in terms of both potentialities and limitations, Bakhtin's chronotope of the road is deeply suggestive of how concrete spatiotemporal articulations shape narrative structures, figures, characters, and tropes.

Building on Bakhtin's analysis, Flanagan (2009c) further develops the chronotope theory in the context of action films. He argues that action movies, for instance, exhibit the same interchangeability in space that Bakhtin observes in the Greek romance. Bakhtin's (1981b, p. 151) description of adventure-time as breaking down into a "sequence of adventure-fragments" aptly captures the episodic and fragmented nature of action film plots. Additionally, Flanagan (2009c, p. 53) argues, the frequent use of the game motif in action films suggests that it may serve as a defining chronotope of the genre. In these films, the abstract quality of space and time

functions as a narrative catalyst, driving the element of chance: “any concretization […] would fetter the freedom and flexibility of the adventures and limit the absolute power of chance” (Bakhtin, 1981b, p. 100). This aligns well with the action genre, where improbable events consistently occur in spaces that are at once strange and eerily familiar—spaces that evoke Christian Metz’s (1974, p. 64) concept of “primal space”, the simultaneously intimate and unreachable “elsewhere” in which film unfolds. Thus, the combination of abstract time and space forms the foundational structure for both the Greek novel of ordeal and the modern action film's plot construction.

The nature of the hero in action texts, and their interaction with temporal and spatial elements, is similarly characterized by abstraction and non-specificity. Referring to the novel of ordeal, Bakhtin (1981a) discusses the purely physical properties of adventure heroes, noting that they must be as ‘abstract’ as the space in which they exist. If too much attention were paid to individual psychology, it could expose a web of socio-historical relations and anchor the narrative to a specific moment that could have really happened. In this context, character traits are introduced early in the narrative, with little to no development afterward; these characters are “completely passive, completely unchanging” (Bakhtin, 1981b, p. 105). Bakhtin (1981b, p. 239) further refines this model when describing the Rabelaisian hero as “completely external […] All that a man is finds expression in actions and in dialogue”. The action film hero is traditionally constructed along similar lines: physicality takes precedence over psychology, and broad sentimentality replaces emotional complexity or depth.

However, while Flanagan (2009b) effectively highlights the metaphysical and representational capacities of the chronotope, his analysis occasionally lacks critical subtlety, especially in differentiating the allegorical frameworks of individual texts. This limitation is exemplified in his conflation of Reagan-era revisionist heroes with post–Cold War villains, where he characterizes the chronotope as “at once metaphysical manifestation of ‘pure time’ and structural ground for the very possibility of fictive representation,” serving as a site that “uniquely hosts a kind of ‘conversation’ between historical and narrative energies” (Flanagan, 2009a, p. 141). Complementing this perspective, Hirschkop’s (1992) more nuanced critique of Bakhtinian terminology aligns with the idea that chronotopes are indeed loci of ideological and historical negotiation. He emphasizes that foundational Bakhtinian concepts such as dialogism and carnival are not static; rather, they represent the accumulation of previous applications, ongoing and historical social struggles, and the evolving forms of ideology (Hirschkop, 1992, p. 102). In other words, Bakhtinian categories are themselves dialogic and ideologically charged, calling for a flexible and historically sensitive application of chronotopic analysis.

Given the ideological entrenchment of genre and its fundamentally social nature, as Frayling (1981, p. 139) argues, “there is strong justification for a deeper integration of Bakhtinian theory into film genre analysis”. Despite this, much of the current research

overlooks an emerging yet crucial area: the systematic exploration and mapping of chronotopic features across different film genres. This oversight limits our ability to fully engage with the socio-historical functions that genre performs within cinematic narratives. This project positions the chronotope as a central theoretical construct, aiming to revitalize genre theory through a Bakhtinian lens without succumbing to a monologic or totalizing framework. Such an approach addresses a significant challenge within film studies by reinterpreting genre not merely as a classificatory tool but as an ideological and historical form of cultural production. This perspective highlights genre's dynamic role in shaping and reflecting socio-cultural contexts, emphasizing its function beyond formal categorization.

2. Christmas in American culture and cinema

The conceptualisation of Christmas as a chronotope is central to this study, as it enables an understanding of how Christmas, as a representational trope that mediates cultural and political functions in cinema. Existing research on Christmas literature traces the festival's symbolic functions back to pre-Christian ritual frameworks. Early studies highlight how winter-solstice celebrations—honouring Saturn, the Roman god of agriculture—embedded Christmas within a cyclical temporal structure: the dying of the old year and the rebirth of the new. These rituals informed many of the spatial and temporal markers that persist in later literature, including decorated homes, the suspension of labour, and the lighting of ritual fires to ensure the return of the sun.

A key transitional figure in the development of the modern Christmas chronotope is Washington Irving, whose *Sketch Book* (1820) revitalised Anglo-American Christmas imagery. Irving's essays, including *Christmas Eve* and *Christmas Day*, reintroduced readers to an idealised, quasi-feudal English Christmas—an imagined space insulated from the pressures of industrial modernity. His depictions of decorated manor houses, crowded hearths, and snow-laden landscapes established spatial conventions that would become central to Victorian and later Christmas literature, with Charles Dickens among the most prominent inheritors of this tradition. Although Dickens addressed the holiday in multiple works, none proved as influential as his 1843 novella *A Christmas Carol*. Widely regarded as a foundational text in shaping modern conceptions of Christmas, the novella intertwines moral reflection with social commentary. As Golby and Purdue (2000, p. 45) observe, "in it Christmas becomes a bridge between the world as it is and the world as it should be". Dickens' literary construction of Christmas reflects a utopian nostalgia, rooted in an idealised attempt to recreate an imaginary past. The invention of Christmas during the Victorian period often invoked the revival of a long-lost golden age—'Merrie England'—where social hierarchies were harmoniously observed. Such representations offered readers a carefully structured temporal and spatial fantasy, designed to alleviate the anxieties of a rapidly industrialising present and the uncertainties of the future.

In *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens transforms the narrative possibilities of space and time through the chronotopic function of the Christmas ghosts. The ghosts act as temporal vehicles, transporting Scrooge across his own life—from boyhood to old age—within the compressed duration of a single Christmas Eve. The Christmas ghosts function as temporal trains, shuttling Scrooge to and fro across time and space in relatively little space on the page, as easily as a digressive passage into a character's memory. What makes these forays striking in a way that 'mere' literary representations of memory are not is the physical dislocation and chronological whiplash which accompany them. Wolfgang Schivelbusch (2014, p. 33) summarizes the warped geographic perspective: "A given spatial distance, traditionally covered in a fixed amount of travel time, could suddenly be dealt with in a fraction of that time; to put it another way, the same amount of time permitted one to cover the old spatial distance many times over". The narratological schematics of Scrooge's Christmas Eve can be read as a direct response to the developing technology which opened up new relationships between time and space, Dickens' novella reorients the energies of modernity and the anxieties toward the pace of change in a web of reenchanted potentiality, borrowing the trappings of the realist biographical novel.

Christmas, as a cultural phenomenon, has emerged and evolved over time. According to Penne Restad (1996, p. 58), prior to the 1840s, Christmas traditions in the United States were largely shaped by a diverse range of regional and cultural practices. Between the 1840s and 1870s, these local customs began to coalesce into a more cohesive national celebration, driven by the proliferation of national media, developments in the marketplace and industry, and the social integration fostered by the Civil War. During this period, new customs and symbols—such as Christmas cards, public Christmas trees, carol singing, candles in windows on Christmas Eve, and the figure of Santa Claus—were incorporated into the celebration, reflecting both the discursive and material processes that shaped the holiday. By the early 1910s, as Restad (1996, p. 33) notes, Christmas had evolved into a civic holiday, marked by communal festivities in hundreds of towns and cities across the United States. This transformation illustrates how Christmas gradually moved from a set of localized traditions to a nationally recognized cultural phenomenon, highlighting the holiday's development as a central feature of American social and cultural life.

While the modern celebration of Christmas is largely shaped by cultural and social practices, its origins are rooted in Christian traditions. The observance of Christmas originally marked the birth of Jesus Christ and was celebrated within the liturgical calendar, illustrating that today's secular celebrations did not emerge in a vacuum. The most widely accepted explanation for the choice of December 25 as the date of celebration is rooted in the History of Religions theory. First proposed by Usener (1911) and subsequently supported by Botte (2000), this theory argues that the early Christian Church strategically aligned Christmas with pre-existing pagan festivals—most notably, the Roman celebration of the Dies Natalis Solis Invicti (the

Day of the Birth of the Unconquered Sun). Forbes (2007) reaffirms this position, noting that such alignment was likely intended to ease the cultural transition from paganism to Christianity by appropriating familiar calendrical rituals. Historical accounts from the period lend credence to this view. A fourth-century source cited by Clauss (2000, p. 66) states: "But when the teachers of the Church realised that Christians were allowing themselves to take part [in the celebrations of the Day of the Birth of the Unconquered Sun], they decided to observe the Feast of the true Birth on the same day". This decision, as Clauss suggests, reflects a calculated effort by early Christian leaders to reframe not only cultural but also political practices within a Christian ideological framework. And we continue to see echoes of these origins reflected in the representational landscape of contemporary cinema and visual culture.

Despite ongoing appeals from religious authorities to reclaim the 'true meaning' of Christmas, scholarship suggests that by the nineteenth century the holiday had shifted away from Christian spirituality towards what Golby and Purdue (2000, p. 80) term "sentimental humanitarianism", centred on the family, childhood, and an imagined national community. Restad (1995) further argues that Christmas has long functioned as a cultural mechanism for reinforcing continuity within dominant family structures, a process that can be understood as the domestication of the divine through the translation of cosmological principles into the familial sphere. Drawing on anthropological approaches to religion, particularly those influenced by Durkheim, this perspective situates Christmas at the intersection of cosmology and social organisation. At the same time, the historical development of Christmas reveals a persistent tension between its domestic, moral functions and its carnivalesque dimensions (Restad, 1995, p. 13). As Waits (1994) observes, Christmas has also operated as a centrifugal force, extending into public spaces through spectacle and ritualised transgression. When this festive dimension comes to dominate, Christmas is less understood as a religious or familial observance than as a form of carnival, in which social norms are temporarily suspended and the sacred is increasingly secularised.

On the other hand, Christmas also operates along a centripetal axis, consolidating meaning around the family as the fundamental unit of sociability. In this inward-facing configuration, it either extends towards the divine for religious celebrants or, in secular contexts, relocates moral authority within the family itself. As a result, the family increasingly functions as the primary site of goodwill, obligation, and moral coherence traditionally associated with religious belief. This dual movement highlights an enduring tension between secular and religious interpretations of Christmas, as well as between its public, collective expressions and its private, domestic forms. The historical shift towards a family-centred Christmas underscores the growing cultural centrality of the nuclear family in modern society, while simultaneously revealing the exclusions and limitations produced by this normative model.

Santa Claus functions as the central icon of Christmas in America, which encapsulates the holiday's broader cultural and historical evolution. As Golby and Purdue (2000, p. 12) note, the modern visual and conceptual figure of Santa Claus was consolidated through Thomas Nast's illustrations for *Harpers' Weekly* from 1863 onwards, drawing on earlier poetic formulations by Clement Clarke Moore. This hybridised figure—combining American, Dutch, and English traditions—reflects both the pluralistic composition of American society and the processes of cultural amalgamation that shaped modern Christmas. Golby and Purdue further argue that the emergence of Santa Claus signals a shift away from overt religious observance towards a secularised, modern form of Saturnalia. Yet, this secularisation does not fully displace Christian associations. Rather, Santa Claus embodies an ongoing negotiation between religious and secular meanings, a dynamic that persists within cinematic representations of Christmas. As Connelly (2000b, p. 118) observes in relation to *Miracle on 34th Street*, the character of Kris Kringle derives from *Christkindlein*, the German Lutheran "messenger of Christ", underscoring how ostensibly secular Christmas imagery continues to draw upon Christian symbolic frameworks.

Historical evidence further suggests that by the mid-nineteenth century, a Father Christmas-like figure had already begun to appear in seasonal advertising, but it was in the 1930s that the commercial appropriation of Santa Claus truly reached a turning point. The Coca-Cola Company played a pivotal role in popularizing the now-iconic red-and-white image of Santa, based on Haddon Sundblom's illustrations, which were initially created to promote winter beverage sales. While Coca-Cola did not invent Santa Claus, it undeniably solidified and standardized his contemporary appearance (Golby&Purdue, 2000, p. 20). This commercial entrenchment was further strengthened in 1939 with the introduction of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer by Montgomery Ward. The character of Rudolph, coupled with the massive success of the accompanying song, further cemented Christmas's role as a dominant force within the American consumer market, embedding these figures into the cultural consciousness, particularly during wartime (Golby&Purdue, 2000, p. 20). Yet, this rapid commercial evolution of Christmas brings to the forefront what Pimlotit (1953, p. 3) refers to as the "paradox of Christmas". Once the most sacred religious holiday in the Christian calendar, Christmas has now transformed into one of the most commercially-driven events of the year. This shift highlights a fundamental tension: the holiday's religious significance, once central to its observance, now coexists—and at times competes—with the forces of consumerism. In fact, at least four of the seven deadly sins historically condemned by Christianity—greed, gluttony, lust, and envy—are arguably celebrated or even encouraged during Christmas festivities (Louden, 2020, p. 2013).

The commercialization of Christmas has not only propelled its prominence in advertising but has also gradually extended to various other media forms, including magazines, popular music, and television. Among these, cinema holds a particularly

influential position. Connelly (2000a, p. 1) argues that "cinema has shown people what the festival of Christmas is like, particularly how it is celebrated in America, more than any other medium". Historian Gerry Bowler (2012, p. 149) notes that "films have been made about Christmas ever since the late 19th century", highlighting the deep-rooted connection between cinema and the cultural fabric of Christmas. One of the most direct and fundamental criteria for determining whether a film can be considered a Christmas film is its temporal setting. For Christmas films, time is not merely the specific date of "Christmas Day"; it is a core element of the narrative. This is precisely why Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope is so significant in the study of Christmas films. While December 25th remains the central date in these holiday films, due to commercialization, the festive celebrations and shopping frenzy for holiday season often begin around late November, right after Thanksgiving, and continue through to the New Year. For example, the film *Miracle on 34th Street* reflects, to some extent, the trend of Christmas gradually becoming a part of consumer culture of the 1940s.

The evolution of cinema as a medium for celebrating and narrating Christmas finds its origins in early film adaptations of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol.* One of the earliest known cinematic interpretations, *Scrooge*, or, *Marley's Ghost* (1901), marked the nascent use of special effects in film and signaled the transition of Dickens's holiday classic from literary tradition to visual storytelling. As Connelly (2000a) notes, during the nineteenth century, the domestic reading of *A Christmas Carol* was itself a central part of Christmas rituals, reflecting the broader cultural significance of Dickens' work in shaping Victorian holiday sensibilities. The silent film era played a formative role in this development, with numerous early adaptations of *A Christmas Carol* appearing throughout the early 1900s. Notably, directors such as D.W. Griffith explored Christmas themes in original narratives, as seen in *A Trap for Santa Claus* (1909). While the film's fragmented structure can make its narrative difficult to follow, it nonetheless anticipates many of the thematic concerns that would define later Christmas cinema—such as domestic upheaval, redemption, and the tension between material hardship and moral renewal. As such, Griffith's work contains elements of motifs and structuring mechanisms that come to be central to the Christmas films of the 1940s and beyond.

The question of whether Christmas films constitute an independent genre has been a topic of ongoing debate in film studies. One key argument in favor of Christmas movies as a separate genre is their recurring thematic focus on family, goodwill, redemption, and the celebration of holiday values. Typically, these films feature a protagonist who faces personal or familial crises, only to find redemption or emotional resolution through the spirit of Christmas. The climactic moments often involve acts of kindness, reconciliation, or miracles, which result in emotional catharsis. This formulaic structure, according to Miller (1993), has become a defining feature of the genre and lends it consistency and coherence. Meanwhile, Scholars like John H. Bump (1999, p. 328) highlight the aesthetic choices that are typically present

in Christmas films, such as lighting, color schemes, and music. The use of holiday imagery—such as snow, Christmas trees, and festive decorations—and the incorporation of well-known Christmas carols further emphasize their genre-specific nature.

However, John A. Zukowski (2011) presents a different view, arguing that Christmas films should not be regarded as an independent genre but rather understood as part of a seasonal and cultural film tradition. The holiday season, spanning from Thanksgiving to the end of the year, holds a unique cultural significance. During this period, Christmas movies are repeatedly watched and are ubiquitous across cinema (including both first-run films and classic re-releases), and cable TV channels. These films, ranging from *It's a Wonderful Life* to *Elf* (2003), become an annual celebratory ritual, typically viewed only during this time of year. This phenomenon is unmatched by any other time of year. While horror and romance films experience peak viewership in October and February, respectively, their popularity is not confined to these months. The holiday season, however, is a time when Christmas dominates all aspects of culture—from radio to news reporting, and even politics. As Eve Sedgwick (1993, p. 5) puts it, "all institutions are speaking with one voice". Christmas movies are part of this "one voice" and serve as an extension of the holiday itself. Their existence and influence cannot be fully explained through traditional genre analysis; instead, they require specialized analysis due to their role as a unique cultural phenomenon. Furthermore, Zukowski (2021, p. 37) highlights that Christmas itself is a cultural phenomenon in constant flux, evolving from a religious holiday to a more secular celebration and transitioning from strong moral and family values to commercialized expressions of the season. As a result, Christmas operates as a fluid and mutable symbolic system, which does not adhere to the conventions of traditional genre films. Christmas films often span multiple genres, such as family dramas, romantic comedies, or adventure films. In this way, Zukowski (2021, p. 41) suggests that Christmas films should be viewed as a cultural tradition shaped by the evolving meaning of the holiday, rather than a fixed or independent genre.

I align with Zukowski's perspective and would argue that Christmas films should not be seen as a distinct genre. However, it is worth noting that the feature length Christmas film as we know it today did not begin to take on its standard form until World War II and the years immediately following it. From today's vantage point, we can see that the iconography, narrative structures, and themes of these films could be viewed as part of an ongoing process of genre building discourse—similar to the way film noir developed. This comparison will be explored in detail in Chapter 4. While film noir was not initially conceived as a fixed genre, it has retrospectively been recognized as a product of a specific historical context, particularly in the post-WWII period. These contextual factors—such as social anxiety, urbanization, and moral ambiguity—helped shape the defining characteristics of film noir, including its somber atmosphere and morally complex characters. Even with the emergence of

neo-noir, which reinterprets and extends the original noir, the genre's core atmosphere and visual style remain rooted in the particular social and cultural climate of its time. Nevertheless, Christmas films have further undergone significant development over time and continue to evolve to this day. Unlike film noir, however, they have never evolved into a genre with rigid tropes or conventions tied to a specific historical period or social context. Instead of focusing exclusively on the holiday itself, Christmas films use the holiday as a metaphorical lens through which a wide range of themes can be explored. This adaptability is key: Christmas in cinema has remained fluid and versatile, functioning not as a fixed genre but as a flexible tool that can be seamlessly integrated into various film genres.

3. The 1940s Hollywood and Christmas

Hollywood has played a crucial role in shaping and disseminating cultural depictions of Christmas, both in America and internationally. During the 1940s, a period marked by global instability, social upheaval, and the War, Hollywood found itself in a unique position to address the shifting cultural landscape. In this complex and uncertain global context, Christmas films emerged as a vehicle for exploring broader societal values, family dynamics, and the idealized version of the American Dream. This is something that Restad (1995) notices in her extensive study of Christmas in America. She refers to these settings as "highly telegraphic conditions", and they serve as condensed symbolic markers of the cultural norms that are prevalent in America (Restad, 1995, p. 13). Hollywood is able to codify Christmas in ways that reinforce broader social ideas by using references that are brief but powerful. These references include decorations, music, and seasonal settings.

Barnett (1946) examines how Hollywood cinema, particularly mid-20th-century Christmas films, serve as a site for ideological production. He argues that the portrayal of Christmas follows stable narrative and aesthetic conventions that normalize and legitimize dominant social values, framing family cohesion, community solidarity, and moral harmony as natural and universal. These representations, however, are not neutral; they are shaped by a hegemonic framework rooted in Christian, white, middle-class American norms, which were integral to Hollywood's institutional and economic structures. By privileging these values and marginalizing alternative cultural experiences, Hollywood films reinforce cultural hierarchies and ideological consensus. Barnett positions Christmas cinema as a cultural tool that affirms normative identities and social structures, illustrating Hollywood's role as a dominant cultural institution intertwined with broader power structures. His analysis anticipates later cultural studies approaches, particularly those focused on cultural hegemony, by showing how popular films actively shape and circulate dominant meanings. Barnett suggests that any critical analysis of Hollywood's Christmas representations must consider the relationship between

cinematic form, institutional power, and ideology, recognizing cinema as an active force in maintaining cultural dominance rather than merely reflecting social reality.

The Christmas season is unique in that holiday-themed films occupy a cyclical and ritualized position within popular culture, re-emerging each year to be watched as part of established Christmas traditions. This phenomenon became particularly pronounced during the 1930s, amid the hardships of the Great Depression. As Jenkins (2022, p. 152) observes, Christmas movies of this era responded not only to the emotional needs of a society marked by economic insecurity but also to the conditions of everyday deprivation that shaped audience experiences of leisure. Within this context, cinema functioned simultaneously as a treat—a special, affordable indulgence—and as a retreat from the mundanity and anxieties of daily life. Holiday-themed films offered audiences temporary access to worlds characterized by abundance, fantasy, and moral resolution, thereby intensifying their appeal during the Christmas season. Films such as *Alice in Wonderland*, *Babes in Toyland*, and *A Christmas Carol* became particularly significant because their commercial success was closely tied to the timing of their release. Distributed during the holiday period, these films capitalized on audiences' heightened desire for emotional comfort, spectacle, and escapism. In doing so, they helped stabilize the film industry by establishing a reliable seasonal market, while simultaneously reinforcing cinema's role as a ritualized form of pleasure and emotional respite within the rhythms of everyday life.

Watching Christmas films during the holiday season, therefore, is not a passive act but rather an active participation in the Christmas chronotope—a temporal and spatial framework that encompasses the period from Thanksgiving to New Year's Day, with the movie theater as a key site of this experience. Films like *Alice in Wonderland* and *A Christmas Carol* transport audiences to realms where time seems to slow down or even pause, and where the usual constraints of reality are suspended. This shared experience of escape and transformation continues to resonate today, linking the ritual of watching holiday films with the enduring power of the Christmas chronotope, especially during times of social or economic difficulty.

This tradition took on a new significance during the 1940s. While Hollywood produced iconic films like *Citizen Kane* (1941) in the lead-up to World War II, the industry remained somewhat insular despite global instability (Bordwell&Thompson, 2014, p. 178). Though earlier films like *Remember the Night* (1940) incorporated Christmas into their plots, it was not until *Holiday Inn* (1942), starring Fred Astaire and Bing Crosby, that the concept of releasing a Christmas movie around the holiday became viable. As Glancy (2000, p. 59) points out, "it was *Holiday Inn* that established the commercial potential of Christmas films". The film, centered on a showbiz hotel that opens only during holidays, features two key Christmas scenes, with the protagonist's hopes expressed in the song "White Christmas", which went on to become the best-selling single of all time.

By 1942, Hollywood had decisively aligned itself with the national war effort, marking a critical turning point in the relationship between the film industry and American society. Doherty (1999, p. 3) describes this period as Hollywood's "finest hour", highlighting its dual role as both a social institution and a cultural force, as well as its successful "transition to war production". This alignment underscored Hollywood's pivotal position as the nation's cinema and its influential role in shaping cultural narratives during wartime. Central to this was a recognition of Christmas' cultural significance and its capacity to convey meaningful ideas across American society. The war also triggered a five-year economic boom for the Hollywood film industry, elevating box office revenues and studio profits to unprecedented heights. At the same time, the cultural impact of the conflict dramatically transformed American social life: sixteen million Americans served in the military, while countless civilians—including both married and unmarried women—actively supported war-related industries. This context can be understood as a key factor influencing Hollywood's production choices: Christmas-themed films provided a mechanism through which the complex cultural environment could be negotiated, navigated, and refracted, while simultaneously preserving an important space for entertainment, celebration, and morale-boosting. Beyond the way Christmas is defined through a distinctive chronotopic iconography, its specific representation in individual films of the period was also shaped by genre conventions. Integrating these elements allows for a more nuanced analysis of the roles these films played and the particular cultural functions that Christmas performed within them, thereby offering insight into the evolving and often complex social dynamics of the wartime era.

Foremost on the American political agenda at the time was the prevention of economic catastrophe following the Great Depression and the assurance of success for the various wartime initiatives designed to foster economic recovery. In this context, the shift observed by Connelly (2012, p. 264) from attention to everyday domestic realities toward an emphasis on marketplace optimism reflects the political leadership's vision for America's future. While the bombing of the US military facility at Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941 by Japan represented a significant international event and initially caused considerable domestic shock, its immediate cultural impact was limited. Within two days, The *New York Times* (1941) predicted a rapid recovery, stating that "following a brief period of indecision, holiday commerce was expected to proceed, driven by a revival of consumer sentiment suggesting this might be the final chance for extravagant purchasing". Connelly (2012) corroborates this observation, noting that neither the attack on Pearl Harbor nor the broader wartime context appeared to dampen Christmas customs or consumer behavior.

Although The *New York Times* (1941) correctly anticipated the resilience of holiday shopping habits in the wake of Pearl Harbor, it underestimated the duration of this trend: Christmas spending continued to rise throughout the war. This pattern persisted into the postwar period, prompting Waits (1994) to argue that Christmas became a central feature of the postwar U.S. economy, rendering the holiday season both an opportunity and a source of anxiety for business leaders, who were highly attuned to

overt signs of consumer uncertainty. In response, corporations actively publicized their wartime contributions and sought to justify their actions, aiming to safeguard their reputations and maintain market positions in the postwar economy. Such efforts not only rehabilitated the public images of companies still burdened by lingering resentment from the Great Depression but also preempted accusations of war profiteering—echoing similar critiques that had emerged during the First World War.

As a result, state and business entities sought to foster national solidarity among the American public by leveraging Christmas to articulate the ideals citizens and servicemen were expected to uphold, thereby promoting a strong nation grounded in consumer culture and a liberal-capitalist economy. This rhetoric was widely disseminated through marketing campaigns and cinema, with Hollywood playing a crucial role in normalizing these themes. This approach has become a common strategy in Hollywood Christmas films; as Connelly (2012, p. 72) notes, all Christmas films reference the nature of capitalist society. While a critique of that society is invariably present, it remains highly limited and carefully controlled. Consumerist values succeed in these films only after undergoing scrutiny, with these ideals ultimately sustained by being portrayed in an ostensibly impartial and sincere manner. Even holiday shopping narratives like *Miracle on 34th Street* include criticism of capitalism, as protagonists lament the rampant commercialization of Christmas, marked by the annual push for new products and superfluous pleasures. However, this critique is largely illusory, since the film ultimately reaffirms belief in the status quo. The problem is not Scrooge's unearned wealth, amassed through the exploitation of others, but rather his refusal to share it (Connelly, 2012, p. 41). In contrast, Alexander (2014) argues that not all Christmas films follow this pattern. *It's a Wonderful Life*, for example, offers a profound critique of capitalist society by denying its antagonist a Scrooge-like redemption, instead celebrating the virtues of community and wealth redistribution. In doing so, it diverges from the conventional narrative structure that resolves tension by reinstating capitalist order and instead advocates for a more collaborative, if idealized, vision of American society.

In the post-war period, American society experienced profound transformations, including shifts in family structures, gender roles, and urbanization patterns. Scholars have explored how Hollywood cinema, particularly Christmas films, engaged with and reflected these social changes. Johnson (2015, p. 30) argues that these films played a significant role in both responding to and mediating the cultural shifts of the time. They established a connection to an idealized and nostalgic past, offering psychological solace in the face of the uncertainties brought on by modern life. Additionally, these films reinforced a moral discourse centered around goodwill, emphasizing communal responsibility and ethical values that had been strained during the war. Johnston (2015, p. 31) further asserts that Christmas films created a cultural space where parents could reaffirm ideals of childhood innocence and protection, offering a counterbalance to the increasing social and familial instability of the postwar era. In this way, postwar Christmas cinema not only reflected dominant social

ideals but also functioned as a critical coping mechanism, helping American audiences navigate and reconcile the broader cultural and societal transitions of the time.

However, while Johnston's arguments emphasise the role of Christmas films in providing comfort and nostalgia, other scholars have critiqued this idealized portrayal of the past. For instance, James E. Young (2003, pp. 23-45) argues that these films function as a form of escapism, masking the real struggles of postwar life. The global political climate of the Cold War placed immense pressure on American society, and within this context, Christmas films, by idealizing family and community values, may have concealed the true anxieties and uncertainties that many Americans were grappling with. Critics like Robert Sklar (1992) argue that these films not only failed to offer meaningful social reflection but also reinforced conservative social norms, neglecting the societal changes and insecurities brought on by the Cold War.

With the focus on familial relationships, the domestic space of the home, and the feminized activities of cooking, decorating, and shopping, it is unsurprising that many Christmas films highlight the evolving roles of women during the war and postwar periods. During World War II, women entered the workforce in large numbers, taking on many jobs traditionally dominated by men. William H. Chafe (1972, pp. 199-225) points out that the female labour force increased by more than 50 percent at this time. Susan Hartman (1982, p. 21) similarly notes that women's employment expanded in every field except domestic service, and that the addition of six million female workers raised the proportion of women in the American labour force to 36 percent by 1944. The most dramatic gains occurred in war manufacturing, where women entered occupations previously regarded as almost exclusively male domains, producing a 460 percent increase in female employment in that sector (Hartman, 1982, p. 21). According to Karen Anderson (1981, pp. 3-5), wartime labour mobilisation significantly reshaped gender roles, family structures, and women's social status, even though postwar culture later attempted to reassert traditional domestic ideals. D'Ann Campbell (1984, p. 4) similarly observes that women "went to war with America" in multiple capacities, contributing not only in army barracks, nursing stations, and industrial assembly lines, but also through clerical labour, domestic work, and everyday consumer practices. The war consequently required engagement with public affairs "at every level," with women participating through community activity, paid employment, and interaction with wartime government structures (Campbell, 1984, p. 6).

However, historians such as Hartmann (1982, p. 21) stress that many of these wartime gains were temporary. Although millions of women entered the workforce, twelve million women had already been employed outside the home before the outbreak of war. The more significant transformation lay in the growing participation of married women and mothers in paid labour, as well as the opening of certain skilled occupations traditionally reserved for men. Wartime public policy also created a contradictory position for women. While state propaganda and the media celebrated

women who temporarily assumed traditionally male roles such as riveters, pilots, and soldiers, opportunities for genuine authority and long-term inclusion within political or industrial power structures remained extremely limited (Campbell, 1984, p. 8). Women were encouraged to support the national war effort, yet not to establish a permanent presence within domains historically dominated by men. Moreover, despite the visibility of women in wartime labour campaigns, the majority of women continued to contribute through less publicly acknowledged domestic and supportive roles. Although postwar culture strongly promoted the suburban ideal of companionate, child-centred marriage—partly as a response to the social disruptions created by wartime mobilisation—alternative perspectives also emerged. Social scientists and journalists such as Margaret Mead (1944) and Mira Komarovsky (1953) challenged conservative assumptions by advocating new gender roles more suited to modern social conditions. Christmas films often reflect and reinforce these tensions. Female characters are frequently depicted as selfless mothers and devoted wives, as exemplified in *It's a Wonderful Life*, where women occupy supporting, nurturing roles within the family. Similarly, films such as *Christmas in Connecticut* present women navigating the contradiction between domestic expectations and professional ambitions, illustrating how Christmas films both idealizes domestic femininity and subtly negotiates the social and cultural pressures women faced during the wartime and postwar eras.

While existing scholarship has illuminated how Hollywood Christmas films of the 1940s reinforced familial cohesion, dominant narratives of patriotism, and capitalist consumerism during wartime, much of this research falls short in critically engaging with the deeper ideological functions embedded within these cultural texts. Studies by Connelly (2012, p. 5), Johnston (2015, p. 22), and Whiteley (2008, p. 34) demonstrate how Christmas films operated as instruments of national unity and moral reassurance; however, they often neglect to interrogate the underlying ideological mechanisms at work. Notably, there is a persistent gap in scholarship regarding how these films served as ideological apparatuses that naturalized white, middle-class, patriarchal norms and presented capitalist values as unquestionable moral imperatives. Furthermore, although the interplay between state power, corporate interests, and cinematic narratives has been acknowledged, their collaborative role in forging wartime consensus through the symbolic potency of Christmas remains insufficiently theorized (Koppes&Black, 1987, p. 56). Critical issues related to race, gender, and class largely remain marginal, and the ideological exclusions embedded within these holiday cinematic representations have yet to be fully examined. By analyzing ideology through Christmas as a chronotope, this study not only examines how the mainstream ideologies considered self-evident at the time were naturalized, but also seeks to uncover whether these films go beyond mere exclusion. It investigates the implicit, deeper reflections and tensions, thus uncovering the complex social, political, and cultural dynamics at play.

Methodology

1. Research objective

This study employs a cross-genre conjunctural approach to examine the representation and cultural function of Christmas in 1940s Hollywood cinema. As outlined in the literature review, Christmas is conceptualized as a chronotope that provides the intellectual framework through which it is approached as a recurring representational motif within this period. This framework enables Christmas to be placed in a dialogic relationship with genre, understood here as a key mechanism through which the cultural and discursive questions raised by these films can be analyzed. Central to this methodology is the positioning of the film text at the core of analysis. The study treats the cinematic text as the primary interface through which the Christmas chronotope is constructed, articulated, and made meaningful, examining how it is framed and shaped by generic conventions. Accordingly, the analysis is grounded in detailed close readings of key films, sequences, and scenes. On this basis, the study argues that the recurring formal and thematic patterns identified across these texts are most productively understood as indicative of an emergent process of genre formation.

The family melodrama has long been closely associated with Christmas in Hollywood cinema (Grant, 1996, p. 3). This connection is rooted in the cultural significance of Christmas as a familial celebration and in the central role of the family in shaping the representation of the holiday within popular culture. In contrast, film noir frequently depicts Christmas as marked by the absence of family and domestic stability. Emerging as a distinct genre in the 1940s, film noir is characterized by complex, pessimistic narratives and psychologically troubled characters, foregrounding moral ambiguity and internal conflict (Hayward, 1986). As such, it provides a particularly effective framework through which to examine alternative and dissonant representations of Christmas that depart from dominant festive ideals.

The fusion of fantasy and festive imagery established by *A Christmas Carol* has been repeatedly reworked across subsequent Hollywood films. An examination of the fantasy genre therefore reveals how films of this period engaged with themes of miracles, the supernatural, and moral transformation, while also demonstrating how Christmas motifs were reinforced and perpetuated through recurring narrative and aesthetic strategies. At the same time, the romantic comedy genre offers a contrasting perspective shaped by the distinctive social conditions of the 1940s. This decade was profoundly influenced by the Second World War and its aftermath, which significantly reshaped gender relations. During the war, large numbers of women entered the workforce, occupying positions traditionally held by men, while men were either engaged in combat or readjusting to postwar life (Naremore, 2000). These social transformations had a marked impact on Hollywood's representations of romance, marriage, and domesticity. Romantic comedies set during the Christmas

season frequently register these tensions, alternately reinforcing or challenging conventional gender roles. Taken together, an analysis of these four genres—family melodrama, fantasy, romantic comedy, and film noir—demonstrates how 1940s Hollywood cinema mobilized Christmas as a multidimensional narrative and cultural device through which complex social relations, emotional conflicts, and shifting cultural meanings could be explored and articulated.

2. Data collection

The selection of films that are relevant to the focus of the study was accomplished through the use of a purposive sampling strategy for the objective of data gathering. This procedure, which followed a defined approach, was carried out in order to guarantee that every film selected was pertinent to both the genres that were being investigated and the Christmas theme. This means that the study includes both well-known classics and films that are less frequently discussed. In addition, the utilisation of film reviews in conjunction with scholarly literature guarantees that the study is contextualised within the historical period as well as the academic discourse. The initial phase was compiling an exhaustive filmography of all films released from 1940 to 1949 that prominently featured Christmas as a thematic or narrative element. I performed systematic searches on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) utilising keywords such as 'Christmas', 'holiday', and 'Christmas-themed' for the designated decade. A total of 73 films were identified through this process (see Appendix 1 for the full film list). The reason I use IMDb as a search engine rather than focusing on the films' original release is because my research is not a historical study per se. Instead, it combines existing film studies and cultural research to propose a cross-temporal analytical framework.

The goal is to provide a new perspective for reinterpreting 1940s Hollywood cinema, allowing me to understand how these films have been introduced, understood, and even redefined in different historical contexts. I emphasize that the value of these films lies not only in their artistic or cultural qualities but also in the role of time. This helps explain why certain films, such as *It's a Wonderful Life*, eventually became classics. Using IMDb as a modern film critique platform allows me to transcend historical context and offer a more comprehensive interpretation. For instance, noir films were not clearly defined by audiences and critics when first released, but they were later reevaluated and recognized as a unique product of 1940s cinema. Therefore, my choice of IMDb is grounded in my contribution to the existing academic discourse: I offer a new framework that reinterprets 1940s films, integrating their historical significance with modern perspectives.

This approach allows me to highlight how time influences the cultural and artistic value of these films, ultimately reshaping their legacy. The preliminary search results were subsequently refined to encompass only films produced or distributed by

Hollywood studios, so removing non-American or independent works to concentrate on mainstream Hollywood cinema. Subsequently, I examined plot summaries, synopses, and existing film critiques to evaluate the degree to which Christmas was fundamental or integral to the narrative, thereby avoiding films in which Christmas was merely referenced casually. This technique produced a selected collection of films that significantly integrated Christmas themes. I subsequently categorised these films into genres according to their primary classifications on IMDb, underpinned by academic genre definitions and thematic content analysis.

Following the completion of the film classification, the subsequent stage is to identify samples that fall into the categories of family melodrama, fantasy, romantic comedy, and film noir. Through the use of a stringent set of criteria, the selection of case studies from this corpus was carried out. In the first place, the representativeness of each film within the specific genre was given priority. Exemplars were chosen that manifest the defining formal and thematic conventions that are characteristic of that genre. This made it possible to investigate the interaction between Christmas motifs and genre-specific characteristics. For the second point, classification decisions were made for films that exhibited characteristics of more than one genre. These classification decisions were based on the predominant genre affiliation, which was determined by the relative narrative weight of Christmas themes. These films were occasionally designated as cross-genre cases in order to facilitate a more nuanced analysis of genre hybridity. Lastly, in order to identify films that have had a substantial influence and will continue to be relevant in the future, metrics of cultural impact are utilised. These criteria include concurrent box office performance, critical reception, and enduring recognition from either the academic community or the general public. Through the utilisation of this methodical and multi-criteria methodology, a curated selection of films was achieved that is not only thematically consistent but also analytically representative.

The final selection consisted of nine films. Among the films that fall under the category of family melodrama are the films *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), *Miracle the 34th Street* (1947), and *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944). *Christmas in Connecticut* (1945) and *Remember the Night* (1940) are two examples of romantic comedies that could be included in this category. *Cover Up* (1949) and *Christmas Holiday* (1944) are the two films that are included in the selection of film noir. Both *Beyond Tomorrow* (1940) and *The Bishop's Wife* (1947) are examples of films that fall into the fantasy genre. It is essential to take into consideration the fact that certain films demonstrate genre crossover. Despite the fact that *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) and *Miracle on 34th Street* (1947) both contain elements of fantasy, these films were categorised as family melodramas according to the selection criteria that were presented earlier. This is due to the fact that the primary narrative focus of these films is on the dynamics of families, and Christmas is thematically most closely related to the domestic context. By taking this approach, classification is designed in order to represent the major narrative and thematic emphasis, rather than aspects of minor genres. On the other hand, this study prioritises the analysis of representative examples rather than a

complete survey of all Christmas-related films from the decade. Although nine films may not constitute a large sample for studies on the portrayal of Christmas in 1940s Hollywood, this study does emphasise the examination of representative examples. Both academic literature and industry discourse have given these films a great deal of attention, as they have been acknowledged as significant works within the Hollywood industry.

In addition to operating within distinct genre categories, these films, to some extent have also gained widespread recognition as Christmas films in their own right, which is a point that deserves special notice. *It's a Wonderful Life*, an iconic family melodrama directed by Frank Capra, is widely regarded as one of the most influential Christmas films in American cinema, evidenced by its inclusion in the National Film Registry and recognition by the American Film Institute in multiple canonical film rankings (Arnold, 2023). An additional holiday classic that has stood the test of time and is frequently discussed, *Miracle on 34th Street* continues to have a significant impact on the cultural imagination of Christmas. The film *Meet Me in St. Louis*, which was directed by Vincente Minnelli, is lauded for its sentimental portrayal of the way American families lived at the turn of the century (Arnold, 2023). One of its most well-known musical numbers, "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas", has practically become a cultural icon that is linked with the holiday season. *Christmas in Connecticut* has become a yearly tradition that is enjoyed by many people due to its endearing qualities and humorous characteristic (Arnold, 2023, p. 48). *Remember the Night* is a romantic comedy that is notable for its sensitive blending of romance and the Christmas scene. It was directed by Mitchell Leisen and is a less well-known film, although it has garnered favourable reviews from critics. At the same time, *Christmas Holiday* is recognised as one of the most personally evocative depictions of Christmas that filmmaker Robert Siodmak has ever created (Arnold, 2023, p. 96). It is also considered to be one of the darkest film noirs that was produced during the 1940s. This film is both disturbing and wistful, and it serves as a testament to the emotional undercurrents that are present during the Christmas season. *Cover Up* delivers a fascinating blend of mystery and festive feeling. Moreover, *Beyond Tomorrow*, which was directed by A. Edward Sutherland, might be interpreted as a new version of *A Christmas Carol*. *The Bishop's Wife* is a work that successfully combines supernatural and festivity, and it has been a reassuring presence in the background of seasonal celebrations for a remarkable amount of time.

3. Method of analysis

This study employs textual analysis as the primary research method to investigate the depiction of Christmas in 1940s Hollywood films across several genres. Textual analysis is a prevalent qualitative method in film studies that entails a thorough investigation of a film's narrative, dialogue, cinematography, and mise-en-scène to reveal the underlying themes, symbols, and meanings inherent in the cinematic text.

This study utilises Christmas as a lens to enhance film studies by illustrating its representation across specific genres and serving as a means to examine the continuities and transformations in genre conventions during the 1940s. The narrative analysis examines the importance of Christmas within the plot—whether as a primary theme, a chronological location, or a symbolic turning point—and how its narrative function differs between genres. Dialogue is examined to investigate how characters express cultural ideals, emotional conditions, or social conflicts through allusions to Christmas, illustrating genre norms and ideological undercurrents. Cinematography is analysed to comprehend how visual approaches, including lighting, framing, and camera movement, shape Christmas atmospheres, ranging from warmth and closeness to alienation and irony. The study examines mise-en-scène—decor, clothing, colour palettes, and spatial configurations—to explain the visual encoding of Christmas images in genre-specific manners. Through the integration of these factors, textual analysis provides a methodical approach to comprehending how Christmas functions as both a narrative device and a cultural icon within the formal and thematic structures of genre filmmaking in the 1940s.

Following the completion of textual research for each individual film, a comparative study is carried out in order to determine the parallels and contrasts that exist between the holiday imaginary throughout the various genres. According to Merriam (2009), this is a research strategy that involves systematically comparing different objects, texts, or phenomena in order to uncover commonalities, contrasts, and patterns. This research highlights the fact that Christmas is not a solitary, unchanging symbol but rather a fluid narrative device that is changed by the genre conventions and cultural circumstances of the moment. Comparative analysis reveals general themes and contrasts, while textual analysis provides comprehensive insights into the particular genre being studied. In light of the fact that this combination makes it possible to conduct a nuanced investigation into the similarities and contrasts between the various genres in the depiction of Christmas, it is the most suitable method for this study.

The implementation of Bakhtin's (1981a) chronotope is a significant innovation of this work. The chronotope, and more specifically the idea of Christmas itself as a chronotope, is a technique that has not been fully utilised in the field of genre studies. Conceived of in analogy to Einsteinian mathematics in the 1930s and 40s, the chronotope serves as a means of measuring how, in a particular age, genre, or text, real historical and fictional time and space are articulated in relation to one another; Bakhtin's (1981b, p. 84) term refers to the "intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed". Christmas is not merely a temporal holiday marker (i.e., December 25 each year); rather, it constructs a unique spatial and socio-cultural atmosphere, functioning as an organizing principle of narrative time and space (Arnold, 2023). This is similar to Bakhtin's viewpoint, which states that time in literature and film is not linear but rather cyclical, and that it

embodies the cultural and moral transitions that occur inside a society. Consequently, we might think of Christmas as a chronotope that influences the development of characters, the progression of plots, and the portrayal of social ideals across a variety of fictional genres.

Genre criticism, emerging as a separate discipline within film studies since the late 1960s, has acknowledged the phenomenon termed "extreme genre imperialism" by Andrew Tudor (2000, p. 95). The pursuit of a singular "factor X" in all films within a specific genre inherently depends on arbitrary selection, resulting in the absurd exclusion of particular films due to this very subjectivity (Hollows et al. 2000, p. 85). In my opinion, place, understood as the tangible expression of spatiality and social space shaped, experienced, and inhabited by individuals, is formed by social occurrences. Recent research in cultural geography indicates that place is not inherent but rather a social construct that must be negotiated and (re)produced (Crang, 1998). Film, as a socially constructed set of practices, akin to everyday experiences, delineates spaces and time based on specific chronotopes; these chronotopes do not exist in isolation but interact with and rely on various other realities, including gender, race, and class. The aforementioned influences, together with story concerns and norms, coalesce to create identifiable entities that may be analytically characterised as though they were pre-existing categories. With regard to the representation of Christmas, then, it is specifically important to approach it as a socially produced and spatially situated chronotope whose meanings are continually negotiated through genre conventions, narrative structures, and broader cultural discourses.

By taking this approach, a theoretical and methodological focus is placed on the construction of space and time within texts. It is emphasised that these texts are never unmediated or natural, but rather that they are always ideologically charged, historically specific, and play a constitutive role in the formation of genre (Fiske, 1992, p. 154). My objective is to reintroduce the ideas of space and time into the arena of cultural theory, specifically with regard to the examination of film from the point of view of cultural studies. A spatial turn has been observed in the humanities since the 1980s, and this trend is most noticeable in the work of New Cultural Geographers like Edward Soja. However, when it comes to the examination of cultural phenomena, location and place are generally thought of as less important terms. Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope provides a theoretical technique of explaining these relations, disregarding and blurring the borders that exist between films that are considered to be arthouse or auteur films and popular Hollywood movies in ways that yield productive discussions and understandings to emerge.

In films that privilege internal time over historical time, narratives often operate within a chronotope of random contingency. Such films are characterised by uncertainty, with events unfolding through coincidence, rupture, and disturbance

rather than through linear or historically grounded causality. This shift reflects a broader movement from time to space as the dominant narrative axis, whereby cinematic space becomes saturated with dislocation, unease, and an apocalyptic sense of temporality—a time that is, in Roberts' (1997, p. 45) terms, "out of joint". These tendencies highlight the particular value of Bakhtin's (1981a) concept of the chronotope in comparison with more conventional approaches to film analysis. Bakhtin's insistence on the coexistence of multiple, relational, and dynamic chronotopes within a single text allows for a flexible understanding of how time and space interact to produce meaning. As a critical framework, the chronotope enables a more nuanced reading of cinema, especially films that disrupt classical narrative logic or foreground contingency and subjective temporality. Ultimately, this approach offers a powerful means of understanding how cinematic representations of time and space articulate broader concerns of identity, social transformation, and ideological tension across specific historical and cultural contexts.

Moreover, Bakhtin's (1984, p. 71) concept of the chronotope is connected to his broader theory of dialogism. This theory emphasises the significance of dialogue and interaction in the process of meaning construction. It provides a more in-depth analytical framework for comprehending how films construct meaning depending on the socio-cultural context in which they are viewed. In the films that I am currently analysing, which are hybrid in nature and, in many instances, are dependent on incorporating components of a variety of genres into their dialogue, this is very helpful. It is my intention to use it in this context in order to demonstrate its usefulness as a versatile approach to comprehending filmic textuality that has the potential to bring into play critical sensibilities that certain disciplinary paradigms have a tendency to pervert. The theory of dialogism assumes that communication is taking place and claims that it does so wherever there is an understanding and a response, even when there is a monologic appearance or purpose occurring; in this regard, it maps effectively onto the stylistic and narrative forms employed by Hollywood filmmakers.

Foregrounding the relationship between film form, meaning-making, and socio-cultural context provides a flexible methodological approach that allows for both the malleability of genre and detailed, nuanced readings of specific case studies. This approach reveals the complexities of individual texts and the multiplicity of their interrelationships. Central to Bakhtin's (1984) paradigm is the emphasis on meaning-making, which asserts that communication occurs whenever understanding and reaction emerge—even when the conversation appears monologic in nature or purpose. This framework proves particularly valuable for analyzing Hollywood's cultural ecosystem. Within this dialogic framework, genres are not isolated narrative forms but active participants in an ongoing process of contrast, collision, and negotiation, collectively shaping what can be seen as Hollywood's expansive cultural discourse. Each genre offers a distinct chronotopic configuration and narrative logic,

reflecting specific social anxieties, beliefs, and cultural aspirations. Through cross-genre interaction, Hollywood cinema constructs a negotiated cultural space in which various genres collaboratively engage with crucial societal issues such as identity, family, and social order. Amidst these tensions and conflicts, a form of ideological synthesis often emerges. This polyphonic interaction not only mirrors the historical and social transformations of the 1940s but also exposes the complexity and fluidity of film as an artistic medium. By focusing on how these dynamics play out in the representation of Christmas across a range of films, this thesis provides a new framework for understanding and engaging with films that are both familiar and under-explored.

4. Limitations and ethical considerations

The study relies on publicly available films, reviews, and scholarly critiques, adhering to fair use policies for academic research. Films refer to those first shown in cinemas and do not include videos, microfilms and television movies. Only those in English are analyzed. If including images or direct quotes from films, proper citation and adherence to fair use principles must be maintained, ensuring no copyright infringement. No copyrighted film materials were reproduced in ways that violate intellectual property laws. Genre classification is subjective, as some films blend multiple genres (e.g., romantic comedies with family elements). Cultural assumptions embedded in Hollywood's portrayal of Christmas may not be universally applicable. This study is based entirely on textual analysis of films, there are no ethical concerns regarding human subjects—no direct interactions with individuals, surveys, or interviews are involved. The only ethical considerations pertain to proper citation of secondary sources, fair use of copyrighted material, and ensuring historical accuracy in interpretation. While textual analysis focuses on primary film texts, historical context often comes from secondary sources, which may contain biases or incomplete information. Promotional materials, scripts, and behind-the-scenes information may be incomplete or unavailable, limiting the depth of contextual analysis.

The study may not fully capture the behind-the-scenes decision-making that influenced how Christmas was portrayed in these films. Some films may contain outdated or problematic representations of race, gender, or class. Ethical responsibility includes acknowledging these aspects while analyzing their historical context without reinforcing harmful stereotypes. Other cultural or religious holiday representations (e.g., Hanukkah, Kwanzaa) during the same era are not covered, potentially overlooking diverse holiday experiences. As a contemporary study analyzing historical films, there is an inherent risk of interpreting them through modern perspectives rather than their original historical and cultural context. Efforts were made to account for this by referring to period-appropriate critiques and scholarship.

5. Chapters breakdown

Chapter 1 Family and the Christmas Myth: From Domestic Sentiment to National Ideology in 1940s Family Melodrama

This chapter opens with an in-depth examination of family melodramas such as *It's a Wonderful Life*, *Meet Me in St. Louis*, and *Miracle on 34th Street*. The close association between family and Christmas was particularly reinforced in the 1940s, a decade marked by profound social and economic transformations in the aftermath of the Great Depression and World War II. In these films, the tensions intrinsic to the family melodrama are spatialized through distinct cinematic settings: Potterville's dystopian vision of unrestrained capitalism, the nostalgic, pre-industrial tranquility of St. Louis, and the consumerist holiday spectacle epitomized by Macy's department store. These contrasting chronotopes not only dramatize the perceived erosion of traditional family and community values but also reconfigure them within the conditions of modern capitalism, urbanization, and industrialization. As both a narrative and symbolic framework, Christmas functions as a microcosm of broader societal struggles, ultimately reinforcing the notion that, despite external pressures and structural change, the nuclear family continued to be positioned as the cornerstone of American national values.

Chapter 2 Fade to Holiday Miracle: Divine Interventions and the Suspension of Reality in 1940s Fantasy Cinema

This chapter shifts its focus to the fantasy film, another genre that became a popular vehicle for Christmas themes in 1940s Hollywood. By incorporating elements of divine intervention and metaphysical journeys, these films offer a heightened sense of wonder while reinforcing timeless moral lessons associated with Christmas. Through an analysis of *Beyond Tomorrow* and *The Bishop's Wife*, this chapter examines how celestial beings, such as angels and ghosts, function as supernatural guides who intervene in the lives of ordinary people at critical moments. These divine visitors serve as catalysts for self-discovery and redemption, challenging characters to reassess their values, confront their past mistakes, and embrace a more altruistic way of life. The tensions integral to the fantasy films are articulated and resolved through threshold chronotopes—liminal spaces and moments that suspend the rules of everyday reality and allow for miraculous intervention or moral revelation. These transitional zones offer a heightened, symbolic perspective from which characters—and by extension, audiences—can re-evaluate social values and personal priorities. Through their interventions, the supernatural visitors challenge both individuals and society to prioritize love, empathy, and human connection over ambition, wealth, and reputation, reinforcing the enduring cultural belief in Christmas as a season of miracles and moral awakening.

Chapter 3 The Utopia of Femininity: imagination, gender and festivity in 1940s romantic comedies

This chapter examines the romantic comedy genre as a key site through which 1940s Hollywood negotiated Christmas themes through humor and romance. Central to the development of this genre was the legacy of screwball comedy, a subgenre characterized by rapid-fire dialogue, zany plots, and sharp wit, which laid the groundwork for the romantic comedy by blending social sophistication with slapstick humor. Through case studies of *Remember the Night* and *Christmas in Connecticut*, the chapter argues that romantic comedies mobilize Christmas as a narrative mechanism for managing contradictions between traditional domestic ideals and the expanding social roles of women. These tensions are spatially organized through a movement from the individualized, commercially driven urban chronotope to an idealized pastoral or domestic space that temporarily restores emotional intimacy and social harmony. By comparing these two films, the chapter further demonstrates that the evolution of the romantic comedy genre during the 1940s is marked by increasing ambiguity and controversy. In doing so, romantic comedies deploy Christmas as a symbolic resolution that offers comic reassurance without fully dismantling underlying social conflicts. Ultimately, this chapter contends that Christmas in the romantic comedy functions less as a site of genuine transformation than as an imaginative framework through which unresolved cultural contradictions are momentarily reconciled.

Chapter 4 Noir Nights and Christmas Shadows: Representing Festivity and Darkness in 1940s Film Noir

This chapter explores film noir, a genre typically defined by its bleak, morally ambiguous narratives, shadowy cinematography, and complex, flawed characters. It examines how Christmas functions within noir not as a beacon of unambiguous virtue, but as a symbolic space where ethical dilemmas and moral ambiguity come sharply into focus. With *Christmas Holiday* and *Cover Up* as case studies, the chapter shows that noir presents Christmas as a moment when societal façades fracture, exposing the contradictions inherent in human behavior. Acts of kindness may conceal self-interest, while seemingly corrupt characters can display unexpected glimpses of grace or redemption. These tensions are articulated and left unresolved through two distinct cinematic strategies: the temporality of lounge time in *Christmas Holiday* and the spectral presence of the idyllic town in *Cover Up* (Sobchack, 1998). Rather than subverting dominant moral and social norms, noir reinforces mainstream ideology: the Christmas ideal retains symbolic authority, and violations of moral expectations are often met with punishment. By staging the failure of the Christmas ideal, noir reinvests it with tragic urgency: the ideal gains power precisely because it is lost. In doing so, the holiday deepens the genre's philosophical inquiry, reinforcing the notion that the world is neither wholly dark nor entirely light, but exists in a perpetually shifting realm of gray.

Conclusion

The final chapter of this thesis synthesizes the key findings and comparative analyses from the preceding chapters to offer a comprehensive understanding of Christmas in 1940s American cinema across different genres. It argues that Christmas is deployed not only to reinforce dominant social and moral orders but also to reveal underlying social anxieties, discrimination, and uncertainty, imbuing the holiday with a productive tension that negotiates continuity and stability amid periods of social and cultural transformation. By examining family melodramas, fantasy films, romantic comedies, and film noirs, the chapter demonstrates the value of cross-genre analysis for uncovering complex cultural dialogues and the mechanisms through which mainstream values are naturalized. This study's central contribution lies in demonstrating the methodological value of the chronotope for film genre analysis. While noting its limitations and avenues for future research, it emphasizes the chronotope's broader applicability beyond specific holidays, illuminating genre hybridity, fluidity, and interconnections.

Chapter 1 Family and the Christmas Myth: From Domestic Sentiment to National Ideology in 1940s Family Melodrama

Introduction

This chapter undertakes a critical examination of the representation of Christmas within the family melodramas of the 1940s. It foregrounds three seminal films—*It's a Wonderful Life* (Frank Capra, 1946), *Meet Me in St. Louis* (Vincente Minnelli, 1944), and *Miracle on 34th Street* (George Seaton, 1947)—as case studies to analyze how Christmas operates as a pivotal thematic and narrative device in shaping familial relations and broader cultural discourses of the period. While Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life*, has become somewhat synonymous with the very idea of a Christmas

movie, Christmas is a central narrative device in all of the films under discussion in this chapter (Connelly, 2000a). As I outlined previously, I conceptualise the cinematic rendering of Christmas as being used in ways that create specific kinds of spatial and temporal frameworks. These associated chronotopes, I argue are deployed in such a way in these family melodramas that these films appear to collectively construct what we might term as a 'home away from home': an imagined, nostalgic space through which the tensions between tradition and modernity are explored and, to some extent, reconciled—and I suggest that this is particularly resonant within the cultural context of the period of American history dominated by the Second World War and the traumas of national identity that it precipitated.

Within this symbolic setting, the stakes of identity—both individual and collective—are negotiated, challenged, and ultimately reaffirmed. A prime example of this can be found in *It's a Wonderful Life*, where George Bailey, on Christmas Eve, experiences a transformative 'What if I had never been born' fantasy. This journey not only helps George rediscover his personal identity but also reaffirms his role as 'the man of the town', confirming his significance in the collective identity of his community. In doing so, I suggest that these films advance an idealized vision of family and community, positioning them as the emotional and moral bedrock of American life and as an essential foundation of social cohesion and national stability, and that this was of particular cultural and political import during the end stages and immediate aftermath of the Second World War. The representation of Christmas finds one of its most sentimental canvases within the realm of family-oriented films: where the significance of the familial connection is so deep-rooted that it often becomes synonymous with the holiday imagery (Schatz, 1999). Family melodrama, with its focus on moral values and depiction of a coherent nuclear family, has significantly shaped Hollywood family entertainment (MacKinnon, 2004, p. 29). The impact is further enhanced by the genre's alleged universality, which depends on widely attractive narratives and the extensive reach of Hollywood's distribution networks (Bitney, 2022).

The rise of family melodrama in the 1940s can be ascribed to three principal elements. Although each factor individually was inadequate, collectively they established the industrial and cultural circumstances essential for the genre's proliferation. The initial measure was the Production Code, a stringent form of self-censorship that resulted in a significant rise in the number of Hollywood films considered ethically appropriate for all audiences, including children. The second involved a series of educational reforms implemented in the late 1920s and early 1930s, which resulted in the widespread adoption of 'film appreciation' by numerous schools across the country, thereby generating an immediate demand for family-appropriate productions with educational merit. The third factor was a broader acceptance of 'middlebrow' norms in America throughout the 1920s and 1930s, which hindered the emergence of explicitly adult-oriented films (Newsom, 2017). Within this context, and against the

backdrop of uncertainty and violence of the Second World War, it seems that Christmas became a particularly resonant narrative focus for the ways in which it not only allowed for a temporary respite from the realities of daily life, but it also offered—optimism, renewal and hope—but in so doing, raised tensions and thus this is the focus of this chapter.

It's a Wonderful Life, *Meet Me in St. Louis*, and *Miracle on 34th Street* are the case studies in this chapter, not only because they are central to 1940s American family melodrama but also due to their enduring status as foundational Christmas films. Among these, *It's a Wonderful Life*, released at Christmas in 1946, stands out. Despite an underwhelming box-office performance (grossing $3.3 million), its cultural impact grew over time. The *New York Times* (1946) described it as a "quaint and engaging modern parable" but concluded: "…the weakness of this picture… is the sentimentality of it – its illusory concept of life. Mr Capra's nice people are charming, his town is a quite beguiling place… But somehow they all resemble theatrical attitudes rather than average realities". It was directed by one of the most celebrated filmmakers of the pre-war era, Frank Capra. Originally titled *The Greatest Gift*, the narrative revolves around the assertion 'I wish I had never been born' (Wineapple, 1981). The film extended a familiar Capra pattern associated with the Great Depression into the post-war period, featuring a plot centred on a local individual, and engages with many of the themes that the director became known for, such as negotiating ideas of community, morality, corruption, and the narrative centrality of the everyday common man (Arnold, 2023, p. 61). This ideological continuity was further reinforced through the star persona of James Stewart, whose screen image frequently embodied sincerity, moral decency, and the anxieties of ordinary American masculinity. As Dennis Bingham (1994, p. 22) argues, Stewart's performances often constructed a distinctly vulnerable and democratic form of masculinity that resonated strongly within broader national narratives of American identity. *It's a Wonderful Life* recounts the story of George Bailey's (James Stewart) noble battle against the schemes of the avaricious and influential banker, Potter (Lionel Barrymore). As a representative of the ordinary person, George embodies the knowledge of the populace and possesses a commendable inability to comprehend established fallacies and customs.

The film's promotion disclosed the ambiguity over its genre classification. The promotional material for the picture obscured its darker elements and mostly omitted reference to its Christmas motif. Rather, it was marketed to spectators as a comedic family fantasy infused with heartfelt romance. There have been numerous discussions among film historians about how *It's a Wonderful Life* is intriguing due to its contrasting mise-en-scène and narrative structure. One of the dominant themes in this scholarship and an argument presented by both Robin Wood (1977) and Robert Ray (1985) focuses on the ways in which the film juxtaposes the generic tropes of small-town family comedy with those of the post-war crime thriller as seen in the sequence where George's financial troubles lead him to rush out of his bright, warm

house in despair, to a dark, ominous bridge to contemplate suicide. Meanwhile, the deterministic atmosphere and sombre mise-en-scène in the Potterville sequence may be ascribed to the stylistic and thematic continuum of film noir.

Although *It's a Wonderful Life* borrows from multiple genres, I argue it is best viewed as a family melodrama, with its emotional core and narrative driven by family, home, and community dynamics. While it incorporates elements of fantasy, noir, and romance, these cinematic modes primarily serve to amplify the tension between individual desire and familial duty—key themes of melodrama, often expressed through heightened emotions and moral crises (Newsom, 2017, pp. 285-308). In this regard, I suggest that the family melodrama, and in particular, the ways in which Christmas is deployed within the context of the family melodrama, enables us to return to this much studied film afresh in order to examine how the holiday setting interacts with the film's generic hybridity, enhancing the overall framework of the family melodrama.

Contrary to *It's a Wonderful Life*, *Miracle on 34th Street* was an instant hit, both commercially and critically upon release in 1947. Written by Valentine Davies, it takes place in New York City during the period between Thanksgiving and Christmas Day; set in a department store, the protagonist, Kris Kringle (Edmund Gwenn), is employed as the store's Santa Claus, but the twist is that he is adamant that he is, in fact, the genuine Santa Claus. Whereas *It's a Wonderful Life* derives its fantasy from a supernatural encounter influenced by the Dickensian tradition of *A Christmas Carol*, *Miracle on 34th Street* constructs a different form of fantasy grounded in Christmas folklore through its representation of Santa Claus. In the aftermath of decades shaped by economic depression and the Second World War, *Miracle on 34th Street* was a literalisation of hope and restoration—rendered though the power of compassionate capitalism and belief in the childhood icon of Santa Claus. Despite their differences in narrative approach and source of fantasy, both *It's a Wonderful Life* and *Miracle on 34th Street* centre the primacy of the nuclear family at their heart to create melodramas that make use of fantasy to navigate the structural and moral dilemmas in the postwar America.

Meet Me in St. Louis strikes a rather different tone. Released in 1944, it is a wartime production and in my analysis of the film I suggest that this context intensifies its detachment from the harsh realities of war by immersing the audience into a nostalgic and idealized vision of American domestic life and for this reason, it offers a useful counterpoint to the other two case studies in this chapter. Directed by Vincente Minnelli and produced by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), it stars Judy Garland and is adapted from Sally Benson's semi-autobiographical collection of short stories recounting her childhood experiences. Set in the year preceding the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair, the narrative centers on the quotidian rhythms of the Smith family, offering a pastoralized depiction of middle-class life in turn-of-the-century America.

Garland's poignant performance of “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas”—a song that would go on to attain canonical status in the American holiday repertoire—further amplifies the film’s affective appeal.

Prior to delving into a detailed examination of the three chosen films, the first section of this chapter offers a broader historical context regarding the connection between Christmas and family melodrama in American cinema. I start by exploring the beginnings and development of the family melodrama, pinpointing its foundations in 19th-century European literary and theatrical traditions (Newsom, 2017, p. 285). In the early 20th century, as the Hollywood studio system developed, family melodrama emerged as a prominent cinematic form, especially during the 1930s, playing a crucial role in addressing themes of nationhood, gender, and class (Elsaesser, 1972). The section subsequently explores the role of Christmas in early cinema, especially its symbolic and narrative alignment with the conventions of melodrama. Prior to the 1940s, Christmas in cinema was mostly used as a narrative backdrop—serving to amplify emotional climaxes or aided in narrative resolution. In the 1940s, this ancillary role saw a substantial shift. In the context of the social turmoil created by World War II and an increasing societal need for domestic security, Christmas progressively transitioned from a seasonal backdrop to a primary thematic emphasis. Throughout this era, the holiday developed as a symbolic embodiment of ‘home’, serving as a central theme for the emotional conflicts and ethical dilemmas associated with family life—issues that the family melodrama has always aimed to portray and address.

From section two onward, the focus shifts to exploring how Christmas constructs and interacts with different chronotopes in three key films. It primarily analyzes the idyllic chronotope presented in *Meet Me in St. Louis*, the fantasy-inflected Potterville chronotope in *It’s a Wonderful Life*, and the modern department store chronotope framing the holiday season in *Miracle on 34th Street* (Montgomery, 1993, p. 81). These spatial-temporal frameworks reveal a comparative trajectory—from traditional ideals, to distorted present under the pressures of capitalism, and finally to an urbanized, commercial future. This analysis emphasizes the comparison among the films and their respective dominant chronotopes, highlighting the changing symbolic significance and functions of Christmas within the family melodrama. While the previous section traced the broad chronotopic distinctions and connections between films, this section turns inward to explore the complexities and tensions of Christmas as portrayed within individual texts. Here, the holiday emerges as a contested space, marked by nostalgia and the interplay of conflicting narrative forces (Liere&Sremac, 2024). By examining how past, present, and future temporalities intersect with specific spatial settings, particularly around the figure of Christmas, the analysis reveals how these films amplify conflicts and negotiations within family dynamics. Attention will be given to how gender roles are represented and contested in holiday setting, such as the division of maternal and paternal responsibilities or the contrasting perspectives of children and adults. By emphasizing time and space as key

dimensions of narrative tension, this approach links shifts within the family structure to broader transformations in the social, historical, and physical landscape. It enables a deeper exploration of how both personal and collective identities are negotiated within the family melodrama.

1.1 Constructing the Domestic Holiday: Christmas and Family Ideology in Cultural and Cinematic History

The Dickensian Christmas emphasises the principles of family, the innocence of childhood and domestic warmth, influencing societal conceptions of the holiday (Jaffe, 1994). Penne Restad (1995, pp. 13-19) asserts that *A Christmas Carol* significantly contributed to the transformation of this holiday from a religious or community celebration into a more private, family-oriented event. We see evidence of this in the portrayal of the Cratchit family. Despite their financial hardship, and in direct contrast to the narrative antagonist, Ebenezer Scrooge, the Cratchit's exemplify a particularly Victorian Christian ideology of Christmas that has remained dominant through to modern times: the notion that the spirit of Christmas resides in togetherness, compassion, and charity rather than in worldly affluence—the message reiterating the central import of love and family over wealth and material possession. Dickens' novel embodies the Victorian-era idealisation of the family as a moral and emotional sanctuary, a feeling that would persist in shaping Christmas festivities into the 20th and 21st century—evoked in modern television advertisements for companies including Coca-Cola, John Lewis, and multiple supermarkets, all of whom trade upon these notions of family togetherness and shared domestic spaces. Pimlott (1978, p. 2) further underscores the connection between the material and the ideological aspects of this creation of a collective imagined utopia, highlighting that the focus on family, hearth, and home is fundamental to the ideology of Christmas, serving as a touchstone and an idealised source capable of effecting societal change.

Smith (2015, p. 8) notes that early film adaptation of *A Christmas Carol*, including *Marley's Ghost* (1901), *Scrooge* (1935) and *A Christmas Carol* (1938), profoundly influenced the cinematic representation of Christmas. He also asserts that these adaptations were essential in creating the idealised, family-oriented storyline that would become a hallmark of Christmas films. Consequently, Christmas movies with prominent family themes came to be a prevailing genre over the holiday season. As Karal Ann Marling (2000, p. 22) puts it, the enduring presence of the nuclear family in films signifies a desire for continuity and stability amidst a changing environment, once more serving to consolidate the ideological linkage that exists between national identity and the heteronormative nuclear family as a symbol of stability. Despite the

emotional significance of the nuclear family being increasingly challenged by the realities of divorce and dysfunctional familial relationships, Hollywood films persist in depicting Christmas season as an alternate reality, wherein the domestic life occupies a pivotal position. This tendency is most apparent in the lasting appeal of films like *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) and *Miracle on 34th Street* (1947). Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life*, in particular, draws inspiration from the spectral narrative framework established by Charles Dickens. Nonetheless, the picture integrates significant modifications that embody the particular cultural and historical concerns of the 1940s and has, within American culture, come to occupy a role similar to that of *A Christmas Carol* as a definitive Christmas narrative (Smith, 2015). This chapter will look from this perspective and examine these contextual adaptations in more detail.

While I argue that the films in this chapter align with the popular melodrama genre of the 1940s—particularly in their emphasis on family, morality, and the search for individual and collective identity—I do not use the term to denote a fixed genre, as Kappelhof (2016) suggests. Instead, I follow scholars like Mercer and Shingler (2004), who advocate for a more nuanced approach, viewing melodrama as a style or sensibility inherent in Hollywood cinema. This focus on moral and emotional truths, expressed through a dialectic of action and sorrow, and specifically mobilized within the Christmas chronotope, aligns with Peter Brooks' (1976) argument that the connection between melodrama and morality is central to the stylistic features of these films. Brooks argues that a post-religious society requires melodrama as a mechanism for negotiating moral legibility, attempting to uncover and acknowledge virtue in the absence of a singular religious or moral authority. His central thesis is that melodrama emerges as a response to the "loss of tragic vision", defining its domain as "the imposition of basic ethical and psychic truths" (Brooks, 1976, p. 19). Such truths require continual reaffirmation in a society deprived of an organic, hierarchical order. This gradual disintegration of social cohesion was intensified by the Industrial Revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries. The resulting consolidation of the bourgeois class, with its characteristic nuclear family structure, coincided with an ethical void in the public sphere.

Moreover, Linda Williams (1998), tracing the evolution of melodrama, links it to social upheaval and the rise of such narratives. She further asserts that melodrama continues to resonate in modern times because it represents the ongoing loss of moral certainty; it attempts to locate moral good in a world where virtue has become increasingly difficult to discern. Brooks (1976, p. 12) addresses this issue of legibility through his concept of the "moral occult", which he defines as the realm of spiritual values that are both signaled within and concealed beneath the surface of reality. In this sense, melodrama provides linguistic signs that point to and reveal a deeper, concealed reality of Manichean moral struggle, while simultaneously presenting these signs on the surface. Melodrama, therefore, creates a cinematic space where these

tensions are foregrounded as a narrative concern and are mediated through the chronotopic potential of Christmas, which functions as a mechanism for redemption, resolution, and reassurance.

Melodrama has deep roots in Hollywood history and has long been a staple of the industry (Cagle, 2012). Yet, as Richard Maltby (1998, p. 40) has lamented, "What is certainly true of the history of classical Hollywood as it is currently written is that the industry's prestige product has been excluded from the critical canon, as criticism seeks to construct a Hollywood cinema worthy—both thematically, aesthetically, and ideologically—of study." As a subset of drama, melodrama occupies a complex and somewhat uncomfortable position. On one hand, it is praised for pushing the boundaries of restrained drama; on the other, it is criticized for being overly emotional and excessive. This critical ambivalence reflects the historical undervaluation of melodrama in comparison to more legitimate or highbrow forms of cinema. Positioned at the bottom of the genre hierarchy, not only within drama (i.e., below tragedy, comedy, poetic, and epic drama), but also across genres (i.e., below poetry, tragedy, comedy, the novel, and other forms of prose fiction), melodrama has often been regarded as a cheap, escapist form. Tainted in the 19th century by its commercialism, melodrama fell further out of favor in the 20th century when the new promoters of mass media entertainment—film, radio, and television—found that melodramatic formulas were precisely what attracted large audiences.

The melodrama genre has long been a focal point for feminist film scholars, who have critically examined its representations of gender and the cultural hierarchies that diminish its artistic value. Scholars such as Haskell (1974b), Doane (1980), Gledhill (1992), Kuhn (1984), Mayne (1990), Klinger (1994) and Thornham (1999) have made significant contributions to understanding melodrama from feminist perspectives. These scholars critiqued the gendered biases that marginalize the genre as a 'low' cultural form. Although my own analysis does not fully embrace a feminist film studies framework, it is inevitably shaped by feminist critiques, particularly in my exploration of 'family melodramas'. These films are often regarded as a distinct subgenre within the broader category of melodrama and have been recognized for their feminist potential. In fact, scholars like Laura Mulvey (1989) have argued that family melodramas can be seen as a feminist form due to their unique engagement with the gendered dynamics of family life. For Mulvey (1989, p. 44), this type of melodramas offer "a dramatic rendering of women's frustrations, publicly acting out an adjustment of balance in the male ego is socially and ideologically beneficial… The phallocentric, castration-based, more misogynist fantasies of patriarchal culture are here in contradiction with the ideology of the family, and in melodrama are sacrificed in the interests of civilization and reaffirmation of the Oedipus complex."

In family melodrama, a crucial aspect is that the good/evil axis becomes polarized around the positioning of the woman. The narrative often revolves around the

problem she causes, which stems from her resistance to her correct role within the family structure (Kaplan, 1983a, pp. 40-48). For example, in *Stella Dallas* (1937), the protagonist becomes problematic to the extent that she refuses to accept her designated position as Mother—that is, as absent, passive, and a spectator in her daughter's life. Her fault is not in any ethical failing, but in resisting her subordination to the patriarcha order. As a result, her submission becomes necessary to restore the functioning of that order. At the same time, however, the female spectator of *Stella Dallas* is given a brief glimpse of something outside the traditional male-dominated world: the loving, intimate bond between mother and daughter, and the satisfaction this relationship can bring. These relationships offer alternatives to the oppressive dominant-submission dynamics that define bourgeois, patriarchal society. This dynamic creates a tension in family melodrama, which feminist critics have often described as both subversive and oppressive. In many ways, both characterizations are accurate. It is through exploring this very contradiction between oppression and subversion that feminist critics may discover the gaps and fissures through which we can begin to build art forms that are less repressive to women (Kaplan, 1983a).

In identifying the films under discussion here as 'family melodrama' I am not proposing the term as a simply descriptive designation for American films that prioritize life at home, seeing family dynamics as more than just a backdrop for love endeavour (Elsaesser, 1972). I am arguing that the role of the family and the ways in which notions of the nuclear family become imbricated within the moral and ideological matrix of the films, is a deeply ideological manifestation and one which demands further investigation. The family melodrama emerged as a distinct genre during its golden period (1940-63), characterised by expert practitioners such as Vincente Minnelli, Nicholas Ray, George Stevens, and Elia Kazan. According to Elsaesser (1972), the family melodrama epitomises the convergence of these two components serving as a pinnacle of both American cinema and the extensive evolution of melodrama (a novel form of refined melodrama capable of fully portraying complex social processes). His work's continual engagement with these two directions indicates that he examines the family melodrama not in isolation but in connection to both the history of melodrama and the structural and artistic characteristics of American cinema. He seeks to identify a specific medium during a defined period (the Hollywood family melodrama from approximately 1940 to 1963) precisely highlights the ambiguity, as it conflates an examination of a singular genre (the Hollywood family melodrama) with an inquiry into the medium of film itself (one medium). The discrepancy between genre and medium underscores that, despite its title, Elsaesser's essay does not primarily theorise the family melodrama but rather examines a specific dramatic form of mise en scène—one frequently encountered in family melodramas yet also significant to the Hollywood aesthetic as a whole.

Although Elsaesser (1972) references the Hollywood family melodrama from 1940 to 1963, he provides extensive analysis mostly for the latter years (1955 to 1963) and a

limited selection of films and directors. The predominant emphasis of melodrama studies on Elsaesser's (1972) work has resulted in the 1940s family melodramas receiving less scrutiny. In the 1940s, melodrama's conventional focus on the acknowledgement of virtue extends much beyond a single figure. These films risk the integrity of the American household and subsequently try to make that integrity apparent. According to Williams (1998, p. 42), a fundamental aspect of melodrama is the desire to return to an idealised past; the 1940s family melodramas clearly depicts such era. They effectively offer a conception of home where domestic life embodies transformational and curative potential role of nostalgia in this and how it returns women to the home (Williams, 1998, p. 42). Hollywood reacts to financial prosperity, and the box-office and critical successes of *The Grapes of Wrath* (John Ford, 1940), *How Green Was My Valley* (John Ford, 1941), and particularly *Mrs. Miniver* (William Wyler, 1942) undoubtedly prompted producers to see that A-list films centred on families might generate significant revenue.

Prior to the 1940s, the most thorough investigation of family life was presented in MGM's Andy Hardy films, a collection of B-movie comedies; nonetheless, this theme subsequently evolved into the focus of high-budget, star-studded productions (Newsom, 2017). The trend illustrates studios' inherent responsiveness to audience demographics: the baby boom commenced in the early 1940s, not post-war, coinciding with a decline in marriage age, an increase in marriage rates, and a propensity for earlier childbearing. Consequently, it is logical that marriage and family life emerged as prevalent themes in films as both America and birth rates surged (Coontz, 1992). In this way, a greater number of individuals went into matrimony, resulting in the emergence of a family-centered society. For instance, the metamorphosis of the illustrious deities of 1930s film into the parental figures of the 1940s: Cary Grant transforms into Mr. Blandings, while Joan Crawford assumes the role of Mildred Pierce. Ultimately, and most significantly, the 1940s saw the rise of what Elaine Tyler May (1982) refers to as the home ideology. Given the essential risks and anxieties faced by individuals in the 1940s, such as the Depression, warfare, and nuclear weapons, it seems reasonable that familial life and the perceived protection it offers would acquire a heightened ideological significance.

The separation and uncertainty brought about by the war rendered family and home powerful emotional refuges (Connelly, 2000a). As a result, Hollywood films increasingly associated Christmas with domestic life and familial values. Despite the frequent use of Christmas imagery in wartime films, family melodrama was rarely among the genres that fully engaged with it. According to Newsom's (2017) research, Christmas in films was more often employed as a comforting symbol that created warmth, eased public anxieties caused by the war, and supported the construction of national ideology by emphasizing the collective value of home worth protecting, rather than a medium for exploring the complex private emotions and sometimes unsettling dynamics typical of family melodrama. Therefore, Christmas was rarely deeply integrated into the narrative logic of family melodrama at that time (Newsom,

2017, p. 285). This absence makes *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944) particularly noteworthy. As one of the few wartime family melodramas to integrate Christmas into its emotional and narrative arc, the film stands apart from prevailing cinematic trends and therefore warrants closer analysis.

While Brooks (1976) further notes that such mundane scenarios might appear overly dramatized when summarized, my study analyzes how these seemingly minor plot points operate as crucial sites of moral and emotional tension within the film. In *Meet Me in St. Louis*, for example, the fragile domestic idyll is disrupted by the looming prospect of relocation to New York. Within this framework, I will further examine how Christmas functions—not as a dominant theme, but as a chronotopic narrative and emotional catalyst that punctuates key moments. This dynamic is echoed in other films like *Little Women* (1949), where Christmas similarly amplifies emotional turning points. In one notable scene, the March sisters sacrifice their own Christmas gifts to provide for their mother, showcasing their selflessness and reinforcing themes of familial love and duty. Thus, the holiday is a time allowing the ordinary to become extraordinary and elevating the significance of seemingly small moments within the larger narrative.

After the war, the inclusion of Christmas in family melodramas became more prevalent, establishing it as a significant component of the genre. Numerous iconic Christmas films were released during this era, such as *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), *Miracle on 34th Street* (1947), and *Holiday Affair* (1949). According to May (2008), postwar American culture prioritises the reinstatement of conventional family structures, with government and media advocating the ideal of returning home to restore social order. Dwyer (2017, p. 5) observes that postwar cinema is replete with themes of "rebuilding", with family reunion as a crucial narrative element. The Christmas season served as an ideal setting that made the reconciliation of familial bonds even more emblematic. Nonetheless, the social changes have influenced family structures, especially regarding gender roles. During the war, women joined the labour and assumed economic duties within the family; yet, postwar society urged them to revert to domestic roles, resulting in familial difficulties. Spigel (1992), in his examination of postwar American family culture, contends that the family melodrama of this era frequently mirrored social realities through conflicts—such as the reestablishment of patriarchy and the recalibration of female roles—with Christmas often acting as a pivotal moment for resolving these tensions.

While this connection to the security and sanctuary of domestic space is central to the family melodrama, these films are not entirely dominated by a return to interiority; as Barefoot (2001) suggests, this domestic tendency is located alongside the emergence of postwar consumer culture and many of the films produced during this time emphasise the tensions produced as a result. In this regard, I argue that the family melodramas that I am analysing in this chapter use Christmas as a mechanism through which both emotional expression and the trauma of the Second World War are

worked through alongside and intertwined with America's growing postwar economy, its material affluence and burgeoning consumerism, something which is evidenced in the more frequent representation of exemplified by holiday shopping and gift exchanges across many films. For example, *Miracle on 34th Street* and *Holiday Affair* intertwine romantic plots with Christmas commerce, exemplifying the postwar society's emphasis on the holiday economy. This pattern underscores the postwar reconfiguration of family values and signifies the evolution of Christmas from a religious custom into a predominant motif in popular culture and commercial movies. Although the family melodramas of this time mostly target adult middlebrow audiences, they accommodate younger viewers to a greater extent than those of the 1930s. The growing commercialisation of Christmas paralleled the emergence of family-oriented watching tactics, sometimes addressing the general child viewer explicitly. *Miracle on 34th street* and *Christmas Affair* prominently showcase a juvenile character, whose sometimes amoral escapades manifest as concise, self-contained serial-like episodes—such a structural approach suggests an attempt to engage with a younger audience than more traditional melodramas—and again, this is something that has remained an important component of Christmas films over the course of time. Despite these seemingly substantial shifts in style and tone, I argue that the dominant tensions of the melodrama remain complex and that by investigating the specific implications of Christmas within these films, we are able to approach these much studied films in new ways.

1.2 Negotiating Christmas: Tradition, Modernity, and the Spatial Politics of Hometown and City

It's a Wonderful Life, *Meet Me in St. Louis*, and *Miracle on 34th Street* are all examples of Christmas family melodramas. These films adhere to what Mark Glancy (1999, p. 60) aptly describes as the "Dickens model", where characters embark on journeys of self-discovery and transformation, reminiscent of Scrooge's redemptive experience in *A Christmas Carol*. At the heart of these films lies Christmas, as a disruptive force that interrupts the regular rhythms of life. Within these narratives, the festive occasion forces characters into close proximity, heightening tensions, exposing unresolved conflicts, and revealing the harsh realities of their lives. Yet, as the day unfolds, this temporal salve of Christmas provides the space for these tensions to dissipate, allowing for emotional and moral reconciliation. In each of these films, Christmas becomes the catalyst for resolution—turning disunity into unity, materialism into humanism, and broken relationships into reconciled ones. Christmas, in these narratives, embodies the transformative potential of the holiday: it is both a symbol of personal growth and a moment of collective harmony, offering a chance for estranged families and lovers to reunite and restore a sense of wholeness in the face of adversity.

Both *It's a Wonderful Life* and *Meet Me in St. Louis* portray idealised versions of the American middle-class family; nevertheless, they diverge in its depiction of family structure and gender roles. The *Wonderful Life* tells the lifelong story of George Bailey (James Stewart). His biological family comprises his father, the owner of Bailey Brothers' Building and Loan, his mother, and his younger brother, Harry Bailey (Todd Karns). Following his marriage to Mary Hatch (Donna Reed), he establishes his own family and subsequently has four children. George Bailey's two families exemplify the nuclear model, consisting of a father, mother, and children, but *Meet Me in St. Louis* portrays an extended family structure that encompasses several children and a grandfather. Notwithstanding these structural distinctions, both films uphold mid-20th-century bourgeois norms, especially in their depiction of gender roles. The fathers in both scenarios exemplify the instrumental position as delineated by Talcott Parsons (1959, p. 21) that they are economically productive, symbolically authoritative, and mostly absent from domestic life. Concurrently, the mothers act as an expressive role, fostering emotional warmth and sustaining home solidarity, particularly evident at Christmas. Festive labor—including cooking, decoration, and emotional support—primarily rests with women, emphasising the privatized, feminine domain of the household.

This manifestation of gender politics is particularly noticeable with regard to the representation of the younger women in the films: while the Smith sisters are shown to visibly enact the process of gender socialisation, transitioning from boyish freedom to romantic docility. Tootie (Margaret O'Brienand) Agnes (Joan Carroll) are permitted to adopt androgynous and hoydenish appearances by dressing like boys, particularly in the scenes leading up to the Halloween festivities. Tootie wears a loose shirt and baggy pants, while Agnes also dons a shirt, tie, and trousers, challenging conventional gender norms. They interact freely with other boys, especially Tootie, who engages in pranks, embodying the boldness and independence typically associated with male characters. This brief escape from the restrictive gender roles of their daily lives highlights the tension between individual desire and societal constraints. Rose (Lucille Bremer), the oldest sister, having finished her indoctrination, is unexciting and serene. Esther (Judy Garland), who is just beginning to explore romantic feelings for boys, is still granted the carefree exuberance of childhood—a freedom that is no longer afforded to her older sister (Connelly, 2000a, pp. 1-8). This process legitimises bourgeois femininity as a viable life trajectory, a concept that remained mostly unchanged from 1903 until 1944. Conversely, *It's a Wonderful Life* presents Mary not as a character undergoing development, but as someone who is already fully embedded in the feminine ideal: supportive, self-sacrificing, and domestic. From preparing a house for her marriage to raising children every day, and even sacrificing her honeymoon to help her husband's business, every action Mary takes reinforces the traditional message about the role of women in the family. Mary's behavior exemplifies stoicism, a form of resilience that transcends emotional impulse and emphasizes reasoned endurance. Her romantic

feelings for George are not presented through expressions of physical desire, but rather through a deep sense of love and loyalty embedded within her domestic role.

Through a comparison of these two films, it can be noticed that the young women initially possess their own desires and personalities, but ultimately their fates unfold in a predictable and uniform manner. This idealization of female roles is often criticized by feminists. For example, Bell Hooks (2015, p. 42) argues in her work that traditional gender roles tend to confine women to the roles of "household laborers" and "supporters", depriving them of autonomy and limiting their opportunities for diverse representation and personal development. As a result, women's morality is primarily manifested in the private sphere—the domestic space of the home. This stands in stark contrast to the public sphere, which is typically dominated by men and is more associated with rationality, power, and economic success (Benhabib, 1994). Therefore, both films embrace a nostalgic patriarchal structure, framing the family—and by extension, women—as the moral and emotional foundation of American life.

By contrast, Doris Walker (Maureen O'Hara) in *Miracle on 34th Street*, is a divorced mother living with her daughter, Susan (Natalie Wood). Doris works as an executive at Macy's department store and has substantial authority in both domesticity and her workplace. Even Susan recognises that her mother's occupation embodies the real power behind Christmas: "My mother is Mrs. Walker," Susan admonishes Kris Kringle when he enquires why she doubts his legitimacy as Santa, "the woman who employed you." Doris operates, communicates, and engages in a mostly masculine setting. This film embodies the cultural rationale of Christmas, as described by Fredric Jameson (1981, p. 53), as a ''strategy of containment'' that symbolically restricts and mitigates the norm-defying ''misrule'' required by an economy and society mobilising for war, during which women were unexpectedly urged to abandon social and sexual conventions by joining the workforce in unprecedented numbers.

Despite differences in geographical setting and historical period, *It's a Wonderful Life* and *Meet Me in St. Louis* similarly build a hometown life via a leisurely rhythm and an emphasis on everyday events (Vermeulen, 2014). In both storylines, the hometown serves as an emotional anchor that cultivates a profound feeling of rootedness and belonging (Fish, 2007). The *Wonderful Life* employs a flashback narrative to illustrate the evolution of Bedford Falls, a small American town, from 1919 onward. George's life is profoundly connected to this place; it is the site of his childhood memories, the foundation of his marriage, and the center of his lifelong work and commitments. Conversely, *Meet Me in St. Louis*, although situated in the large and cosmopolitan metropolis of St. Louis, reveals an unexpectedly introverted and introspective neighbourhood. The film transpires over the course of a year before the 1904 World's Fair, emphasising daily details such as anticipating a phone call, extinguishing lights at night, engaging in flirtation with the neighbour, or having ice cream with family.

This episodic story eschews dramatic climaxes, instead cultivating emotional depth via repetition and regularity. According to Brooks (1976, p. 7), ostensibly ordinary moments accrue significance as they establish a lifestyle that seems consistent and secure. Consequently, both films interweave personal experience with the hometown, so eliciting a feeling of identity that is both physically and spiritually anchored in an attachment to place.

Meanwhile, the time displacement of the story in these two films contributes to enhancing nostalgia. This can be seen as what Emanuel Levy (1991, p. 66) identifies as a purported "return to the soil", a viewpoint bolstered by the chronological dislocation produced by these tales. By situating their narratives in a period several decades prior to their production in the 1940s, these films create a temporal distance that enhances the credibility of the ideals they convey. The passage of time thus becomes a form of narrative insulation, allowing the audience to project current desires for order, continuity, and belonging onto a selectively constructed past. In this way, this displacement enables the audience to see these past times as more straightforward and genuine, making the need to return both emotionally persuasive and culturally meaningful.

From this viewpoint, both Bedford Falls in the *Wonderful Life* and the of turn-of-the-century St. Louis in *Meet Me in St. Louis* could be seen as instance examples of what Bakhtin (1981a) refers to as the idyllic chronotope. This chronotope is characterised by its intricate connection with a folkloric concept of time, which defies historical advancement and instead highlights repeated, cyclical patterns rooted in quotidian life activities such as family, labour, and seasonal transitions. It links temporal experience with a stable, familiar environment, such as the home, village or small town, so generating a feeling of stability and organic continuity. Life occurs inside an insular realm, detached from wider historical or planetary dynamics, but abundant in generational recurrence and collective traditions. This temporal mode deviates from linear historical progression, emphasising cyclical life patterns and natural rhythms that mirror persistent human behaviours rather than ephemeral cultural advancements (Bakhtin, 1981a). As Bakhtin (1981b, p. 225) notes, "it is precisely this fusion of time and place that generates the distinctive rhythmic, cyclical temporality of the idyll, in which past, present, and future seem to coexist in a shared space of meaning". This chronotope integrates human endeavours with the natural environment—rivers, woods, and agricultural lands where time progresses smoothly and interpersonal connections are uncomplicated and genuine. It underscores the continuity of existence via cycles of development, familial customs, and the transmission of generations (Montgomery, 1993). Progress can only be assessed via the developmental phases of the society and the human beings. Both films exhibit a discernible allusion to the Bacchanalian, wherein typically respectable individuals momentarily transgress conventional standards of decorum, thereby redirecting robust associations with the work ethic in quotidian life while simultaneously reinforcing analogous connections to its beneficial forms of recreation.

Rendering the temporal structure of the year as a structuring device for the film, the narrative of *Meet Me in St. Louis* transpires across four seasons using seasonal title cards to emphasise its nostalgic undertones (Ochonick, 2020). Each card displays a sepia-toned image of the Smiths' home, encircled by an ornate floral border, and labels the respective seasons as Summer 1903, Autumn 1903, Winter 1903, and Spring 1904. With each card appearance, the camera concentrates on the picture, which then transitions into a vibrant, dynamic setting shot. For example, during winter, the sky, mirroring the snow-laden earth below, permeates the window on Christmas Eve, illuminating the kitchen with a frigid, blue-white glow. The video creates the appearance of the camera penetrating the image to animate and reconstruct the past. The film portrays the past as more vibrant and luminous than what is attainable via historical records and images from that time; it substitutes the obscure, distant past with an enhanced cinematic representation that is both dazzling and colourful.

The increasing prominence of dance-and-song sequences—exemplified by *Buffalo Gals* in *It's a Wonderful Life*, and *The Boy Next Door*, *You and I*, and *The Trolley Song* in *Meet Me in St. Louis*—demonstrates attempts to diversify and innovate within the aesthetic and structural arrangements of the family melodrama by borrowing from other film forms and genres. In *The American Film Musical*, Altman (1987, p. 56) asserts, "Traditional notions of narrative structure assume that chronological presentation implies causal relationship… in the musical, chronological presentation and causal relationships alike are at climactic moments eschewed in favor of simultaneity and similarity." In other words, within the diegetic space of the musical, the divisions between past and present are conflated and suspended at pivotal times in musicals, creating a a temporal vacuum that is not contained by the same structural limitations and conventions of day to day life.

This disturbance creates what may be characterised, in accordance with Bakhtin (1981a), as a musical chronotope. In *It's a Wonderful Life*, George and Mary reconnect as young adults and walk home together after attending George's brother Harry's high school senior prom. This musical chronotope suspends time instead of advancing the narrative: under the gentle moonlight and the evocative melody, the scene transforms into an eternal emotional capsule. The song, derived on a 19th-century folk tune, evokes a feeling of rustic Americana while also embodying a romantic present, emotionally shielded from exterior reality (Sergeant, 2021). Consequently, the musical chronotope enhances the joyful connection, expanding its allure while retaining the traditional draws of story. This sensation of complete immersion in the present moment—of perceiving oneself in time rather than using time to comprehend a logical sequence of events—is effectively exemplified.

Meanwhile, George and Mary invoke a series of contemplations on their respective lives. They reflect on their past, with George incredulous that the adult Mary is the same girl he once reprimanded for disliking coconut on her ice cream, while Mary

struggles to conceal her joy through her body language at the sight of the boy to whom she once earnestly professed her love, now standing before her. Subsequently, their discourse shifts to the next stage. George enumerates his numerous aspirations for the future, a list that Mary rejects since it conspicuously excludes her. In response, she throws a stone at the old Granville house to convey her own desire for the future: that she and George will eventually marry. Both characters reflect on the past and contemplate the future, while the present subtly eludes their awareness (Sergeant, 2021).

As such, the inclusion of holiday in these two films accentuates the ritualistic aspect of everyday existence. The commencement of *It's a Wonderful Life* occurs on Christmas Eve similarly emphasizes familiar Christian practices and Anglo-American imagery from the snow-laden Christmas tree embellished with shimmering lights, to the choir of voices ascending in prayer for George. This Christian imagery is continued throughout the film, for example with George and Mary assuming pastor-like roles as they consecrate Martini's new residence with communion-themed items: Mary provides bread, George delivers wine, and they each bring salt. Evoking the blessing of the Eucharist and Jesus' declaration "You are the salt of the earth", (Matthew 5:13:), the film assumes an explicitly Christian hegemonic framework. These moments are associated with moral integrity, and spiritual resilience as Ryken (2000) suggests but also importantly they create a direct connection between Christianity and American national identity by evoking biblical narratives within popular films. In this instance, the scene relates connects the actions of generosity and social support enacted by Mary and George with the biblical message of Acts 2:44-45: All the adherents were united and had all things collectively. They liquidated assets and belongings to provide for those in need. In this regard, the movie portrays the holiday as a season of faith-a period when the community unites to exemplify Christian beliefs in action. According to Durkheim (1912), celebratory rituals enhance collective consciousness, enabling people to attain a feeling of belonging via the communal experience of shared ideas and ideals. Consequently, Christmas appears as reinforcing the coherence and stability of rural life in the *Wonderful Life*.

Likewise, Christmas in *Meet Me in St. Louis* also functions as a communal event via the holiday ball, characterised by a delightful exhibition of seasonal sophistication, with rich reds and greens highlighted by golden tones, making the most of the new Technicolor technology (Arnold, 2023). Central to the party, Esther, radiates as the evening's focal point, her flowing white gown accentuating her luminous presence as eagerly she awaits her romantic fate. The ballroom's opulence, characterised by its carefully curated decorations and the sophisticated comportment of its attendees, highlights the entrenched traditions of Christmas—serving as reminders of the enduring quality of established rituals—which, for the young attendees of the ball include the passing from childhood to adulthood and with it the expectation of finding and marrying a suitable partner.

A notably touching moment transpires as Esther's grandfather grasps her hand and guides her under the majestic Christmas tree. Upon passing through, she appears on the other side with her partner, John Truett (Tom Drake), in a visual transition. This refined transition represents the transfer of tradition from one generation to another, as grandfather metaphorically entrusts Esther to John. His involvement in directing Esther towards her destiny reflects the manner in which elders sustain and perpetuate life, safeguarding its rituals and values over the ages. Consequently, the film employs Christmas as a temporal conduit in order to create a generically anchored chronotope that motivates and sustains specific narrative patterns—including ritual, social custom, familial cohesion, and collective purpose—within societies that might otherwise lack such unifying structures. Although these practices may appear trivial or repetitive over time, they quietly cultivate a psychological space of comfort and stability (McBride, 1992), reinforcing a sense of order and belonging through their ritualized familiarity.

In comparison with *It's a Wonderful Life* and *Meet Me in St. Louis*, *Miracle on 34th Street* is set in New York, the global capital of the emerging post-war transitional economy, where the holiday season is orchestrated and controlled by corporate entities (Macy's) and governmental authorities (New York City and State) (Hansen, 1964). The film opens with the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, a grand civic event featuring colorful floats, marching bands, and oversized balloons. While nominally a tribute to Thanksgiving, the parade primarily functions as the launching point of the Christmas shopping season, signaling the tight entanglement between festivity and consumerism (Baker, 2009). An enormous American eagle is paraded, the band performs 'Stars and Stripes Forever', followed closely by Kris Kringle, employed to portray Santa Claus (Jerman, 2020). The iconography and spectacle of this opening sequence is unambiguously celebratory and creates explicit connections between Christmas (as both a secular, consumer driven event and a Christian festival) and American national identity. This religious history is further alluded to via the character of Kris Kringle whose name is derived from a mispronunciation of the German Lutheran *Christkindl*, a moniker meaning "messenger of Christ" or "gift-bearer" (Joy, 2023, p. 78). Kris Kringle, dressed in his Santa Claus costume is positioned in a sleigh hauled by reindeer, he gestures to the audience from the highest vantage point, personifying the celebratory spirit within the bustling, commerce-oriented environment of the metropolis.

The film gestures to the transnational characteristic of Christmas and the figure of Santa Claus, pointing specifically to a cultural connection with Norther Europe which is demonstrated in the scene in which Santa's magic calms a distressed child. A young Dutch refugee girl, who is visibly distressed at having to spend Christmas far from her homeland is visiting Santa; when she is placed on Santa's knee, he immediately begins to speak to her in fluent Dutch. This moment not only calms the child but also serves as a quiet revelation to the audience, this Santa may indeed be the 'real' Santa, not merely another department store imposter. While the scene works on an emotional

level, it also carries a layered historical and cultural symbolism, one that resonates particularly with American audiences. The child's Dutch identity invokes the enduring Saint Nicholas tradition rooted in the Netherlands, thus drawing a direct line from Old World customs to New World practices. In choosing to portray the refugee girl as Dutch, the film evokes the legacy of Sinterklaas, the original prototype of Santa Claus, while simultaneously tying New York back to its colonial past as New Amsterdam (Joslin&Cann, 2003). In this way, Santa becomes a figure who not only transcends geographic boundaries but also symbolizes historical continuity that he has, metaphorically speaking, been in America since its infancy. Furthermore, this moment also reinforces the Christian roots of the Santa Claus myths, as Saint Nicholas, the 4th-century Christian bishop, is venerated as the patron saint of children and a symbol of charitable giving, thus embedding the meaning of Christmas in both cultural and religious traditions (Joslyn-Siemiatkoski, 2011).

This Old-World reference acquires further significance when placed within the geopolitical context of 1947 (Mayers, 2018). At the time of the film's release, the United States had emerged from World War II as an unchallenged global superpower, effectively replacing a devastated Europe as both economic leader and moral authority (Zinn, 1973). The interaction between the American Santa Claus and the displaced European child thus takes on a subtle allegorical dimension: it reflects the postwar reality in which the United States assumes a caretaker role, offering stability, security, and emotional comfort in a fractured world. In this reading, Santa becomes a powerful stand-in for American internationalism (Ambrosius, 2017, p. 44). His transatlantic roots are not erased but appropriated—folded into the narrative of American exceptionalism (Ramrattan&Szenberg, 2019). The miracle of belief, then, is not simply that a magical figure exists, but that he now belongs to the United States, embodying its values of tolerance, multiculturalism, and benevolent power (Neal&Youngelson-Neal, 2014). In this way, the film negotiates a delicate ideological balancing act: it honors European tradition while asserting American modernity; it acknowledges displacement and trauma while promoting assimilation and continuity; and it transforms a refugee child's longing for home into a moment of national affirmation. Thus, the scene becomes not merely sentimental but politically resonant, reinforcing postwar America's self-image as both heir to Western tradition and architect of the world's future stability.

As the film progresses, it becomes increasingly evident that while Santa Claus may have originated in myth and may have once resided at the North Pole—a place notably first reached by American explorers—he is now fully absorbed into the American national identity. This symbolic naturalization reaches its climax in the courtroom scene on Christmas Eve, which serves as both the dramatic and ideological fulcrum of the narrative. Here, Kris Kringle's identity as the 'real' Santa Claus is not confirmed through religious authority, folklore, or tradition, but through the legal and bureaucratic mechanisms of the American state. Fred Gailey (John Payne), is the lawyer defending Kris Kringle. His final, decisive proof comes from a federal agency:

the American Postal Service. In response to the judge's demand for recognition from a 'competent authority', Fred presents thousands of letters addressed to 'Santa Claus', all delivered directly to Kris Kringle by the Post Office. As Thompson (2024) notes, this gesture carries immense symbolic weight. The Post Office, a branch of the federal government, inadvertently becomes the arbiter of metaphysical truth, and in doing so, confers state legitimacy upon a figure of folklore.

At this moment, the convergence is complete: corporate capital (represented by Macy's), the legal profession (Fred and the court), state governance (the State of New York), and the federal government (through the USPS) all align to ratify the existence of Santa Claus. The decision is not left to private faith or personal conviction but is instead enacted through the authority of national institutions, marking Santa as an official citizen-subject of the United States. The message is unmistakable: only America has the institutional capacity—and the moral authority—to determine who Santa truly is. On Christmas Eve, it is the American people, via their institutions, who recognize Kris Kringle as Santa Claus, and by extension, claim ownership over the myth itself.

This moment reveals a deeper ideological operation at work. The trial does not merely affirm belief in Santa; it enacts the Americanization of belief itself. By translating spiritual or mythic identity into legal status, the film affirms the uniquely American ability to transform myth into law, folklore into national property. In this way, the movie stages a ritual of civic faith, one in which belief is no longer a private matter or religious truth, but a collective, state-sanctioned decision. The film implies that to truly believe in Santa Claus is not simply to embrace wonder or childhood innocence—it is to participate in the ideological structures that produce and legitimize such belief within an American framework. As such, Santa Claus emerges a mythic embodiment of American institutional coherence, where capitalism, law, and national identity all work hand in hand.

The Macy's New York City store, located on 34th Street, functions as a dynamic social environment. Drawing on Bakhtin's (1981a) concept of the chronotope, this Christmas department store is not to be described solely in terms of its floor plan, location, or size, but as a spatio-temporal matrix through which countless trajectories intersect. Without the circulation of people, the department store is lifeless—not only in an economic sense but also in a spatial and experiential one. Its existence is dependent on movement; the kinetic presence of the crowd is constitutive of the Mall's very identity. Crucially, this crowd is not a homogeneous mass. As Montgomery (1993) notes, it is a heterogeneous and mobile assemblage of agents—each with distinct motivations, desires, and temporal rhythms—who continually reshape the Mall's spatial narrative, even in the face of its subtle spatial scripting and the imperative to purchase. A particular scene captures this interplay of time and space. Kris Kringle, playing Santa Claus, sits on stage awaiting customers, instructed by the toy department head, Mr. Shellhammer (Philip Tonge), to steer

shoppers toward overstocked goods. Here, the store's chronotopic quality becomes evident: although the corridor leading to Santa's stage measures only two hundred meters, the journey through it is elongated by temporal interruptions—festive decorations, window displays, and the ambient holiday spectacle—which stretch space through the modulation of time (Gierl, 2021).

The architecture of the store reinforces this dynamic. Most of its windows face inward, turning corridors into a stage where consumption becomes part of the display. Those moving between stores watch shoppers inside, while those within the stores look out on the steady stream of passersby. This reciprocal visibility amalgamates observation with business, establishing a feedback loop where seeing is as integral as purchasing. While the corridors embody the energetic circulation characteristic of the street, this vitality is subject to deliberate scripting and regulation, producing a carefully curated urban environment. In this sense, the mall becomes a condensed and controlled city, one that embodies what Jameson (1991, p. 10) describes as "the waning of affect"—the flattening of emotional depth and subjective engagement in postmodern culture. Its liveliness is choreographed; its sensory density coexists with emotional neutrality. Among the crowd, many are parents with children, temporarily transforming the mall into an extension of the home, where private life momentarily merges with public space. This spatial scripting extends to the experience of time. Within the mall, 'natural' time is suspended; the only rhythms are those of foot traffic and the business day. The perpetual illumination and regulated climate of the mall exclude signs of the sun's progression or seasonal changes. Only festive decorations and the outer garments of consumers indicate the time of year. In fact, the most distinct perception of the store's suspended spatial and temporal atmosphere arises upon crossing the time-space border and re-entering the world outside.

Later on, Kris Kringle forms a friendship with the young janitor Alfred (Alvin Greenman), united by their shared interest in the figure of Santa Claus. Alfred enjoys playing Santa because of the joy it brings to children, and he reassures Kringle that he also rejects the commercialism surrounding Christmas. His attachment to the traditional role of Santa Claus—as a benevolent gift-giver—reflects a nostalgic yearning for a purer, more innocent past, particularly a childhood imbued with festive warmth (Bansal&Sviridenko, 2006). The figure of Santa thus becomes a site of cultural negotiation, reflecting broader conflicts between tradition and commercialization in modern Christmas. In a scene, Alfred explains to Kringle that he has been declared mentally unfit by the store's mental examiner, Mr. Sawyer (Porter Hall) and therefore will not continue as Macy's Santa. Later in the film Sawyer interviews Kringle, diagnosing him with "latent maniacal tendencies". Through these assessments, Sawyer pathologizes acts of generosity, outright rejecting the possibility that altruistic behavior may arise simply from genuine concern for others' happiness. This reductionist view reflects a broader cultural skepticism towards altruism in modern society (Jensen, 2017). It reveals a pervasive crisis of moral decline, where social interactions are increasingly mediated by personal interests rather than human

connection (Joy, 2023).

Sawyer's perspective further reflects the pervasive impact of commercialism on human values and social relations. In stark contrast, Kris Kringle emerges as a moral agent resisting this corrupted societal norm, poignantly capturing the ideological clash between two opposing worldviews (Christmas, 2017). However, the film does not wholly reject commercialism. By positioning Macy's as "the store with a heart," it subtly endorses the possibility of ethical consumerism, suggesting that gift-giving within commercial frameworks can coexist with sincere generosity. This portrayal ultimately reinforces the idea that commercialism has become an integral and unavoidable component of modern Christmas celebrations (Foertsch, 2008). As seen in the earlier scene, Kringle's concerns extend directly to the wallets of the parents. His authenticity is further demonstrated when he suggests trying an alternative store to customers who are searching for a product that is unavailable at Macy's. Initially, this candidness infuriates the store manager. However, customers respond positively, praising Macy's for offering the best service and expressing a renewed commitment to shop there more frequently and thus the narrative message is that authenticity and integrity are more important.

While the sacrifice in this scene might not be the literal monetary sacrifice undertaken by George and Mary as seen in *It's a Wonderful Life*, the underlying ideological commitment to the greater good remains the same. This is further demonstrated when, Mr. Macy adopts Kringle's approach as official store policy. Yet, this policy is not implemented with Kringle's idealistic intention "to get the commercialism out of Christmas," but rather as a strategic move "to make more profits than ever before." In this way the film draws attention to the ideological tension at the core of the narrative and offers a commentary on the changing nature of capitalism in the post-war era. This misappropriation of Kringle's approach as a mechanism to maximise the sale of goods via the performance of a more sophisticated and caring façade, draws attention to the ways in which the corporation mediates between intimate, subjective experiences of care and the impersonal imperatives of consumption and Christmas becomes a key site through which this process can be enacted. In other words, the new merchandising policy rebrands consumption as an act of emotional engagement cloaked in selflessness, thereby deepening individuals' entanglement in commercial logic (Payne, 2020, p. 47). Kris Kringle's fate becomes emblematic of Santa Claus's broader transformation: his myth is appropriated by the department store to serve an exploitative commercial agenda designed to boost sales and foster customer loyalty (Penfold, 2016, p. 22). This is another sign that modern Christmas has to make concessions, which is an ongoing cultural survival plan. In order for this traditional holiday to keep its importance in post-war society, it needs to change and fit into the frameworks of modern capital systems (Luke, 1990, p. 219).

1.3 Christmas as a time of redemption and nostalgia: Reconstructing Identity in times of crisis

The very process of constructing and redefining Christmas can be understood as a simultaneous re-examination and reshaping of both personal and collective identities. This dynamic is illustrated in *Miracle on 34th Street*, where Christmas functions not only as an expression of faith—encompassing both figurative states of mind and literal Christian celebration—but also as a political space in which belief is subjected to the intersecting forces of state authority and capitalist logic. As Kris Kringle declares, "Christmas is not merely a celebration; it is a state of mind," yet the figure of Santa Claus remains meaningful only to those who believe, positioning faith as a prerequisite for interpreting reality itself. In contrast, characters such as Doris embody a rationalist worldview, in which empirical reality is paramount and Christmas is reduced to an ordinary day. Viewed through this lens, Christmas as a chronotope encapsulates multiple layers of cultural meaning while simultaneously exposing the ideological tensions at play—tensions that form the critical point of departure for the analysis that follows.

The subplot with the slow evolution of romance between Fred and Doris further emphasises the concept of faith. Once again evoking the notion of the personal sacrifice for the benefit of the greater good, Fred quits his job on account of his steadfast belief in Kringle. His dedication is also an adherence to the overarching ideas Santa embodies such as kindness, generosity, and the moral obligation to help those in need, which are virtues profoundly entrenched in Christian beliefs (Connelly, 2000b, p. 115). Doris responds to Fred's choice with disbelief, unable to understand his readiness to forfeit his career stability for abstract principles. Fred's escalating irritation arises from Doris's emotional reserve over their connection and her seeming lack of faith in his defence of Kris Kringle as Santa Claus. Thus the central narrative conflict revolves around disagreements over questions of love and faith. In this regard, the film can be seen to draw on the Dickensian lineage, but with Doris taking on the role of Scrooge. In Dickens' novel, it is Scrooge who enquires of his nephew the reason for his marriage. When Fred replies that he married for love, Scrooge is incredulous, snarling "Because you fell in love!" as if it were the only thing that ever existed more absurd than a merry Christmas. Like Scrooge, Doris experiences a narrative arc of redemption and quasi-religious revelation; however, unlike *A Christmas Carol*, where ghostly spirits guide Scrooge's transformation, Doris finds spiritual restoration through Santa Claus.

Accordingly, the film uses differing attitudes toward Santa Claus—and toward the broader realm of fantasy—to reflect the challenges faced by modern families. Doris' pragmatic values extend decisively to the upbringing of her daughter, Susan. Doris is intolerant of "filling [children] full of fairytales," insisting instead on rational, literal

explanations that confine Susan's opportunities for imaginative play and wonder. When Fred questions this approach, Doris immediately shuts down the discussion, revealing not only the rigidity of her worldview but also an authoritarian streak in her parenting—one that leaves little space for alternative perspectives or the open exploration of ideas. In this regard, we see the traditionally 'masculine' codes of modernity–those of science, reason, and rationality being upheld by a woman who is subsequently upbraided for her lack of emotional sensitivity.

Fred Gailey: I see she doesn't believe in Santa Claus either. No Santa Claus, no fairytales, no fantasies of any kind, is that it?
Doris: That's right. I think we should be completely realistic and truthful with our children, and not have them growing up believing in a lot of legends and myths like… Santa Claus, for example.

From Doris's perspective, fantasy generates internal conflicts that are incompatible with the demands of a modern society privileging reason and realism. When she insists on eliminating fantasies to prevent Susan from "daydreaming about a Prince Charming," Fred pointedly questions whether this stance truly serves Susan's well-being or merely reflects a projection of Doris's own emotional disappointments. This moment exposes a deeper psychological dynamic: Doris's unwavering commitment to realism functions less as a pedagogical principle than as a defensive mechanism to shield herself from further vulnerability. Yet, in imposing this worldview on her daughter, she inadvertently limits Susan's capacity for wonder, imagination, and hope—qualities that, within the Christian-inflected tradition of Christmas, are not only virtues but essential to moral and spiritual development. Therefore, it can be seen that, on one hand, as in *Meet Me in St. Louis*, the film showcases an intimate mother-daughter relationship and mutual dependence, highlighting a key feature of family melodrama in which the axis of good and evil is often polarized around the positioning of female characters. This exercise of maternal authority disrupts conventional patriarchal structures. On the other hand, by presenting Fred as a corrective to Doris, the film also implies the potential dysfunction within this mother-daughter relationship and the limits of female autonomy, pointing once more to the importance of paternal authority in maintaining balance and order within the family.

It is not just Doris who is impacted by her perspective; by presenting the possibility that Doris's beliefs are potentially harmful to Susan, depriving her of the cultural space and formative childhood experiences that other children could enjoy is an important commentary on the gender politics of the film and the desire within American culture of the time to reassert the connection between nuclear family and national identity. Doris's inability to join in a simple game of make-believe with the children in her apartment building becomes a potent ideological marker of the extent to which childhood itself is endangered when adult rationalities are prematurely imposed on developing young minds. The film presents this deprivation not as a

benign byproduct of good parenting, but as both a broader, systemic loss of imagination and a personal shortcoming on her part as a mother.

In each instance, it is the intervention of fatherhood that offers potential resolutions to this dilemma—Fred Gailey actively challenges Doris's worldview by confronting her directly and, in defiance of her wishes, introducing Susan to Kris Kringle; Kringle, in turn, teaches Susan to imitate monkeys so she can join the other children, while Fred distracts Doris to allow the lesson to unfold. These moments function on both a narrative and symbolic level: narratively, they enable Susan's immediate social inclusion; symbolically, they restore the imaginative capacity that Doris's rationalism has repressed and in this way, they facilitate her redemption via her return to the 'rightful' set of beliefs, practices and habits of culturally sanctioned motherhood.

Compounding this idea of Doris's motherhood as a site of complexity and ambiguity is her role as a divorced woman with a high-profile career. The impact of corporate capitalism on Susan's life is situated simultaneously as the source of her mother's capacity to provide for her and as the rationalized career framework that stands in stark contrast to Susan's unspoken dream of a different life. The conflict between them is not overt but manifests in what is left unsaid—a quiet tension embedded in their daily interactions. The portrayal of Doris can be understood within the framework of the postwar social gaze directed at divorced women and single mothers. In mid-20th-century American society, such figures were often stigmatized as deviating from the hegemonic model of the nuclear family. As Erving Goffman (1963, p. 7) observes, individuals who fall outside socially sanctioned roles are marked by a "spoiled identity" and are subjected to ongoing scrutiny and marginalization.

For single mothers like Doris, this stigma was intensified by a moral panic—a collective anxiety over whether women without husbands could raise psychologically well-adjusted children (Coontz, 2000). Thus, Doris's character encapsulates the postwar tension between traditional femininity and the emerging figure of the independent woman. Therefore, the film's resolution—in which Doris and Fred plan to marry, and, with the magical assistance of Kris Kringle, acquire the very house pictured in Susan's magazine—reinforces the film's insistence on patriarchy as the vehicle through which an appropriate form of capitalist consumption is restored. This resolution also exemplifies what Belk (2001, p. 197) terms the reconciliation of the "sacred and profane oppositions emphasized in the secular world," achieved through the reinstatement of the nuclear family as the normative social and economic unit. At this point, the core elements of family melodrama are clearly at play—emotional conflict, stark moral contrasts, and an ultimate return to family harmony.

In *Meet Me in St. Louis*, the disruptive patriarch, Mr. Smith (Leon Ames), can be seen as a stark contrast to the more harmonious familial figures depicted in *Miracle on 34th Street*. Mr. Smith's presence in the household is emphasized from the very beginning as that of an "outsider"—an individual who does not fully synchronize with

the rhythms of domestic life. The film establishes this characterization through montage sequences that present the Smith household as a space of emotional warmth, musical harmony, and domestic cohesion. The interactions between Mrs. Smith (Mary Astor) and Katie (Marjorie Main) over the seasoning of the ketchup, although trivial, reinforce the everyday rituals that structure familial intimacy. This atmosphere is further strengthened through collective musical performance, particularly when Lon Jr. and Agnes begin singing "Meet Me in St. Louis," soon joined by Grandpa. These sequences reflect Jane Feuer's (1993, pp. 1-23) account of the utopian function of the Hollywood musical, in which performance reorganises social relations through voice, movement, and synchronised staging into a more immediate, participatory, and harmonious form of expression. Extending this idea, the film mobilises what Richard Dyer (2005, pp. 20-33) describes as a "utopian sensibility" within entertainment cinema, where social tensions are not resolved but temporarily suspended. The later intrusion of Mr. Smith therefore gains significance as a disruption of this affective construction, reintroducing hierarchy and dissonance and revealing the limitation of this utopian moment.

The announcement of the family's relocation to New York further intensifies these tensions. For each member of the Smith family, St. Louis can be regarded as an "imagined community," in which collective identity is constructed through shared cultural experiences, emotional affiliation, and a sense of symbolic belonging (Anderson, 1983, pp. 6-7). The film repeatedly reinforces this communal identity through images of neighbourhood interaction, seasonal rituals, musical gatherings, and civic pride, all of which contribute to an idealised vision of local community life. It also serves as a symbolic site onto which the characters project their desires, personal histories, and expectations for the future. Esther associates the city with her romance with John, Rose links it to her hopes for marriage, and even young Tootie expresses fierce civic loyalty through childish debates over the superiority of St. Louis. In this respect, the film's nostalgia for St. Louis reflects broader anxieties surrounding modernity, mobility, and urbanisation, where traditional forms of community and domestic stability increasingly appeared fragile and vulnerable to disruption.

Following in narrative traditions such as Dicken's *A Christmas Carol*, it is Christmas Eve itself that is used as the centrifugal point in the narrative. On this night, Mr Smith finally faces the heartache and upheaval his unilateral decision has caused. While Esther attempts to reassure Tootie about their uncertain future in a new city, her melancholic rendition of "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" suggests that she is fully aware that her budding relationship with John is unlikely to survive the move. Tootie picks up on the emotional undertones of the moment and her realization creates a hysterical tantrum. In a violent outburst, Tootie destroys snowmen in the yard. This act serves as a raw, visceral metaphor for the distress of uprooting the family as a whole. The lyric "From now on, our troubles will be miles away"

emphasizes the promise of a future escape from hardship, yet it is the weight of the past—their previous Christmases and shared domestic memories—that gives this 'now' its depth. As Altman (2004, p. 73) notes, musicals often employ a "double-focus narrative," where songs interact with the story to reveal hidden subtexts. Here, the song evokes both personal and collective histories, creating an intimate yet socially resonant musical moment. In this context, "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" embodies the tension between nostalgia for the past, anxiety over the present, and hope for the future.

Mr Smith witnesses Tootie's outburst from an upper window and then solemnly walks downstairs. As he stops on the stairway to check his pocket watch, he notices a grandfather clock obscured by packing material; notably, the composition of the frame positions his shadow centrally between himself and the long-case clock. This vital shot graphically contrasts the film's two conflicting temporalities: Mr. Smith's fixation on the future and progression through time, in opposition to his family's nostalgic yearning to freeze time or revert to the past. In this climactic moment, his contemplation of a stopped clock and the relentless ticking of his own pocket watch functions as the ultimate impetus that prompts him to embrace—or succumb to, depending on the perspective—the compelling allure of the nostalgic spatiality that has enveloped the Smith household (Ochonicky, 2020, p. 8). Thus, Mr. Smith finally realises the deep emotional attachment his family has with their hometown and decides not to move. It was at that moment, the chimes of Christmas bells ring out—Christmas day arrives—and the family exchanges greetings and presents, cementing the ritualistic reconciliation of the home. Mr. Smith's apparent concession to the family's nostalgic desires actually strengthens his patriarchal authority by aligning himself with the household's emotional and ritualistic rhythms, subtly but firmly establishing his role as head of the family and protecting traditional structures. Christmas, here, reinforces patriarchal order, family unity, and traditional values.

The Smith family's intention to relocate from St. Louis to New York further illustrates Turner's (2017, pp. 132-139) claim that American culture is currently introspective, serving as a geographical counterpart to the temporal phenomenon of nostalgia. In other words, much like nostalgia operates as a retroactive interaction with time, America's introspective condition functions as a spatial counterpart to this temporal phenomenon. According to Turner (2017, pp. 132-139), settlers of European descent progressed in a linear fashion westward until they finally arrived at the Pacific Ocean. This endpoint marked a difficult juncture in American history: the cessation of territorial growth prompted American culture to introspectively reconstitute its identity and significance within the nation's restricted confines. This inward spatial folding generated and intensified a widespread sensation of nostalgia, becoming a fundamental element in Turner's (2017, pp. 132-139) theoretical framework. He converts this framework of linear advancement followed by abrupt reversal into not just a psychological state but also a national cultural tale. St. Louis, as a Midwestern metropolis, epitomises frontier ethos, home values, and the perpetuation of the

American Dream. Similar to Turner's fixation with lost frontiers, the film identifies a specific space and time as the Smith family's most coveted object of nostalgia: their collective mood of prolonged expectation in 1903 for the inauguration of the 1904 World's Fair. Their yearning for geographical continuity and familial stability can be understood as a response to the cultural disjunction and identity anxieties produced by modernization. It further acts like an emotional barrier against the loss of a bygone epoch.

While Tootie's outburst in *Meet Me in St. Louis* may initially appear as an abrupt and unexpected emotional release, it is in fact the culmination of sustained repression. A parallel can be drawn with George Bailey in *It's a Wonderful Life*, whose emotional eruptions are similarly foreshadowed throughout the whole narrative. George is torn between his altruistic, self-sacrificing impulses, which tie him to his hometown, and his ambitious dreams of travel and personal achievement. As a child, he aspires to become a millionaire, subscribing to National Geographic and dreaming of distant lands. In his first adult scene, he buys a suitcase and prepares to leave Bedford Falls, intending to attend college, become an architect, and design grand bridges and skyscrapers. Yet, each time he attempts to depart, circumstances intervene, compelling him to remain at home. As the elder son, George is fated to inherit his father's building and loan company—a small, precarious institution perpetually on the brink of financial collapse—and to navigate it through the Great Depression and World War II. These external responsibilities serve as projections of George's internal restlessness: growing up, for him, entails breaking away from the safe domestic nest and forging a life of his own, a process fraught with inevitable inner conflict. This conflict becomes especially visible when George proposes to Mary. He initially resists marriage, perceiving it as another trap anchoring him to his hometown, only to ultimately embrace the union with enthusiasm, reflecting the oscillation between desire and obligation that defines his character.

This tension between personal ambition and domestic attachment is visually articulated in the scene where George first enters his new home at 320 Sycamore. The camera pans across a living room filled with a dense layering of signs: travel posters over the windows advertise the exotic pleasures of the South Seas, while a makeshift record player plays Hawaiian music. This spatial logic can be productively understood through Elizabeth Rawisch's (2012) discussion of Capra's films which repeatedly stage a dialectic between the security of localised community and the lure of distant, idealised spaces. This tension becomes central to the film's ideological structure, as desires for escape are continually counterbalanced by the ethical value of community, belonging, and social rootedness.

Simultaneously, two game hens roast over the fireplace, and Mary stands nearby, a figure of warm domesticity rendered in soft focus. In this intricate mise-en-scène, Mary greets George with the weighty words, "Welcome home, Mr. Bailey," before

revealing the personal desire underlying the creation of this home: “Remember the night we broke the windows in this old house? This is what I wished for.” The scene suggests his eventual acceptance of home life is not a surrender, but a negotiated reconciliation of personal aspiration with relational and cultural continuity. The layering of exotic and domestic imagery underscores that desire and obligation coexist, revealing the film’s treatment of home as both a site of personal compromise and emotional fulfillment. As such, his marriage and parenthood signify the total relinquishment of his ambitions. On Christmas Eve, George confronts bankruptcy, controversy, and imprisonment after his uncle Billy misplaces $8,000 from the Bailey Building and Loan revenues. His enduring self-sacrifice for his family and community seems to have culminated only in his downfall. This highlights the predicament of material fragility of middle-class Americans inside the Darwinian corporate capitalism framework.

Eventually, George’s long-suppressed resentment surfaces, and he lashes out at his family, spiraling into a frenzied outburst. Through his exaggerated gestures, sudden mood swings, and melodramatic self-reproach, the film externalizes his inner turmoil, showing rather than telling the profound struggle of the soul for guidance. This psychological conflict reaches its critical climax in the bar scene, where George, overwhelmed by despair, emotionally calls upon God. The scene functions not merely as a moment of personal crisis but as a ritualized turning point: it crystallizes George’s isolation, the weight of social and familial responsibility, and the emotional consequences of deferred dreams. At the same time, it underscores the film’s broader moral framework, suggesting that salvation—both spiritual and relational—is contingent upon acknowledging vulnerability, embracing communal bonds, and reconciling personal desires with ethical imperatives.

George Bailey: Dear Father in heaven, I’m not a praying man, but if you’re up there and you can hear me. [begins crying]
Show me the way... show me the way.

The scenario underscores the influence of Christianity on George’s ideals and introduces the spiritual realm into the natural via the character of Clarence Oddbody (Henry Travers), a second-class guardian angel. This narrative, whereby the quest for salvation prompts supernatural intervention, is also present in another film, *The Bishop’s Wife*, a connection that will be explored further in the forthcoming chapter on fantasy genre. From this stage, it can be seen that the bar scene presents the film’s engagement of Christmas via Christian metaphysics, transcending sentimentality and approaching the mythological, suggesting that Christmas inspires deeper reflection on faith, human struggle, and salvation (Riccomini, 2009, p. 7).

Then George decides to commit suicide for the insurance money, an act that represents the ultimate self-sacrifice for his family. This decision resonates with the

film's opening moments, where the townspeople are shown praying for him. Beginning with sweeping shots of Bedford Falls, the camera ascends into the skies above, floating beyond the rooftops to provide a vision of heaven. This celestial perspective establishes a narrative frame in which Joseph, by projecting certain visions of the townspeople and their histories for Clarence—and, by extension, the viewers—constructs a fictive, selective, and imaginative recreation of the landscape. According to Raymond Carney (1986, p. 18), this use of the heavenly frame implicates both the angels and the film's audience in a form of cosmic voyeurism, one that is deliberately curated by Joseph, the cosmic moviola operator. As angels, Joseph and Clarence possess the magical ability to move backward and forward through time, pausing moments to interject, comment, and evaluate their significance as if wielding a celestial remote control. This device carries significant analytical weight: by rendering time malleable and mediated through the angelic perspective, the film transforms what might otherwise be routine narrative transitions into moments of reflective contemplation. The viewer is encouraged to consider the moral, emotional, and social weight of George's actions rather than passively consuming the plot. In this way, Bedford Falls becomes both a real and a mythic space—a moral and emotional landscape whose significance is continuously interrogated by the celestial observers.

The film initially encapsulates George's life in a flashback, ostensibly designed to acquaint Clarence with him, thereby preserving a sense of chronological time. Yet this chronological progression simultaneously serves as an a priori framework defining George's character with a set of intrinsic, timeless qualities. His life unfolds over decades—both in the narrative's depiction of time and in the condensed experience of a single Christmas Eve—allowing the audience to witness the entirety of his existence while simultaneously inhabiting a compressed temporal frame. By positioning viewers as quasi-celestial observers alongside Clarence, the film cultivates a dual temporal experience: we are both distanced from and intimately connected to George's life. Since the position we have been asked to occupy is the same as the quasi-celestial beings, it throws us into a kind of temporal hesitation in which our relationship with the film's chronology and sense of time is thrown into question (Wineapple, 1981).

The way in which *It's a Wonderful Life* engages its audiences induces a comparable kind of time displacement. Detaching from our endeavour to interpret time on screen as a linear continuum from past to future, the ambivalence we may experience regarding the narrative occurrences, juxtaposed with a sense of the celestial and the divine, enables us to perceive time in an alternative manner, evaluating each moment on screen for its intrinsic worth rather than its relation to preceding or subsequent events. In fact, the movie's sense of drama relies on that disparity. By simply accompanying George on his trip, we would presumably come to the same conclusion as he did, considering the improbability of his ultimate rescue from financial devastation. However, it is not the sensation that the movie intends for us to have. The

tragedy of the movie's second act arises from George's inability to perceive what is evident to us: his life is not merely a progression from one phase to another, but a collection of moments that enable him to engage with the world rather than merely traverse it. It is these moments that have made George's life so 'wonderful'. Audiences are asked to identify this trait as watching each scene played out on screen from the opening reel, but George himself does not fully understand it until the very end of the film (Matković&Oklopčić, 2023).

Standing on a snow-laden bridge at the edge of the town, George contemplates his seemingly unfulfilled, singular life and its accumulation tragedies. He decides to jump into the river below. Clarence sets out a plan to show George how the town would have turned out if he had never been born. They visit a family restaurant and bar named Martini's. Upon entering, George is confronted with an unsettling sense that the familiar social and spatial order has been fundamentally disrupted. The familial ambiance has gone. Honky-tonk music resounds loudly as several inebriated individuals engage in raucous revelry inside the smoke-filled venue. The bartender, Nick (Sheldon Leonard), is the same person; yet, he seems not to know George at all and exhibits hostility towards him. He is now the proprietor of this disreputable tavern, named "Nick's Place". In an attempt to redirect attention from himself and Clarence, George acknowledges his former employer, Mr Gower (H. B. Warner), who has entered the bar. However, another close friend behaves as if he had never come across George before. Mr. Gower has devolved into a severe alcoholic, after spending twenty years in jail for the poisoning of a child. Nick declares George and Clarence guilty through their association with Mr Gower, resulting in their expulsion into the snow. At this juncture, George is able to see that the chronology unfolds if the variable of his presence is eliminated. He transforms into a dislocated hero, situated in a space that negates his existence, thereby highlighting a substantial ontological fracture (Johnston, 2018).

Then George proceeds into what was once the heart of Bedford Falls. However, the familiar town centre has now been usurped by the self-serving, uncouth, and avaricious Henry Potter, George's long-time nemesis (Beuka, 1999). As George hastens along Main Street, he is appalled by the metamorphosis: the formerly clean neighbourhood has devolved into a little Bourbon Street, replete with red-light districts, taverns, neon-lit nightclubs, strip clubs, pawn shops, billiard halls, and sidewalks crowded with inebriated revellers. Potter, despite his absence throughout this sequence, remains ubiquitous via his impact. He has ultimately attained his long-held aspiration—uncontested supremacy. The Bailey Brothers Building and Loan, once emblematic of resistance and communal unity, has completely disappeared, obliterated as if it had never existed, leaving behind the oppressive shadow of Potterville in its place.

What renders this vision so unsettling is not merely the debauchery of its appearances, but also the sense that a single individual's unchecked power can corrode the moral

and cultural fabric of an entire community. The mise-en-scène enhances this effect: low-angle views, distorted perspectives, and congested, chaotic compositions inundate the audience, imparting a sense of imprisonment and bewilderment. Thus, space serves as a medium of criticism, illustrating the deterioration of Bedford Falls into the constricted landscape of monopoly capitalism. Potterville serves as a dystopian antithesis to Bedford Falls and as a metaphorical illustration of modernity itself—urban, industrial, commodified, and alienated. The juxtaposition of the two worlds thus compels both George and the viewer to acknowledge the social and ethical stakes of his existence.

In one of the most violent and aggressive scenes, George witnesses Violet Bick (Gloria Grahame) being forcibly taken away, struggling and screaming, from a "Dime a Dance" hall into a police wagon. The Pottersville segment is especially compelling in its setting since this "Dime-a-Dance club", ironically titled "Dreamland", is situated in the former location of the Bailey Building and Loan. The replacement of the institution representing social togetherness with one that commercialises female bodies highlights the profound moral decay of Bedford Falls into Pottersville. In this context, Violet symbolises unbridled desire and societal chaos, reflecting George's own tumultuous impulses. Similar to George's aspirations for liberation being perpetually constrained by family and societal responsibilities, Violet's sexuality is regulated, penalised, and finally redefined as aberrant. It can be argued that Bedford Falls embodies an imaginative universe linked more to the suppression of sexual desire. The nightmarish Potterville serves as a parallel dimension where these cravings are fully liberated (Carney, 1986, p. 7). The landscape here dramatizes that the repression of desire and the unchecked unleashing of it are two sides of the same cultural anxiety.

The climatic moment of the Pottersville nightmare sequence occurs when George, having endured all the other hardships, confronts Mary Hatch, a spinster, as she closes up the library. Mary's bespectacled, unadorned, gray-attired presence symbolises the obliteration of her beauty and social status as Mrs. Bailey—her only cultural capital within the movie's gendered framework. She is shown as a parody of the professional woman: asexual, humourless, and without sympathy. This portrayal not only promotes the patriarchal notion that a woman's identity is defined only in connection to a man but also reveals this movie's complex engagement with postwar gender politics. Mary and Violet, as contrasting characters, exemplify the diminishing opportunities for women in both Bedford Falls and Pottersville. Violet's unrestrained desire is penalised, but Mary's domestic potential is diminished in George's absence. Collectively, they illustrate what critics such as Joseph McBride (1992, p. 523) have recognised as characteristic of postwar political regression, where "female independence was reined in to reinforce conservative domesticity". Yet, apart from its sexual politics, the movie's account of these female characters also embodies wider apprehensions over modernity: in postwar America, women's autonomy and desire needed to be subdued or obliterated to maintain the facade of social order.

As for the rest of George's family, his children were never born, and their house is desolate and unoccupied. His uncle Billy is institutionalised in a mental facility, while his mother presents as a resentful, acrimonious widow. Overall, this reversal dramatizes a paradox: once the dream to leave home comes true, it does not liberate him but becomes taboo, threatening the very foundation of belonging and identity. Visually, the sequence amplifies this eerie dislocation through noir aesthetics. Intense low-key illumination creates shadow-laden areas; Dutch angles disrupt spatial equilibrium; deep focus imagery and extreme compositions elicit a disjointed reality devoid of cohesion. The accompanying soundtrack, starting with subdued restraint, intensifies in pace and intensity with each jump cut, culminating in a frenzied cacophony. This audio surplus reflects George's mental condition—his confusion and fright in a world where familiar relationships and social frameworks have disintegrated. Therefore, it can be argued that the scene's use of noir iconography constructs a fantasy of commerce run rampant, a dystopian vision of capitalism consuming the community's moral and familial fabric. Yet because this vision is framed as fantasy—a nightmare conjured only to be dispelled—it deprives noir of its radical edge. The noir's potential for social critique is folded back into the very system it opposes. Noir's bleak landscapes of alienation are reabsorbed into a narrative arc that reassures audiences of capitalism's ultimate containment. In this way, the film both stages and neutralizes the menace of commerce: it equates noir with rapacious capitalism only to contrast it with the bland but stable capitalist ideal embodied in Bedford Falls, thereby reinscribing the ideology it ostensibly critiques (Hillis, 2005).

Within the chronotope of Pottersville, space is not a container for life; rather, it functions as a mechanism for structures of behavior and rhythms of life. Time neither points to the future nor preserves memory or historical context. Instead, it mirrors the enclosed, self-replicating temporality of the "clock space"—each second neatly segmented and unemotionally measured in units of desire and commerce (Strathaus, 2003, p. 344). Individual behaviours are meticulously regulated, and George is not acknowledged as a distinctive figure; they have collectively yielded to Potter's control and the stifling cadence of his town. Pottersville illustrates that capitalism diminishes human existence to mechanical repetitions, depleting subjectivity of agency and reflective ability. As such, time in Pottersville is further seen as an institutionalised type of "efficiency time", resembling the structured work hours of industrial corporations—more of a manifestation of the unyielding cadence of the capitalist system than a reflection of genuine social experience (Strathaus, 2003, p. 344). George's estrangement in this environment arises from this paradox: despite his awareness of where everything is, he no longer comprehends what it signifies. The sequence depicts the ordinary in an extraordinary way, transforming normal Bedford Falls into something retroactively remarkable and even otherworldly. Overall, the spatial and temporal logics of Pottersville symbolize the systemic indifference and structural violence toward which capitalist modernity tends in the absence of ethical

and communal regulation. In contrast, Bedford Falls appears less as a naturally stable community than as a fragile ethical alternative, one whose survival depends on resisting the dehumanizing forces embodied in Pottersville's mechanical temporality.

The most devastating realisation comes when George observes his brother, Harry's name inscribed on a gravestone. He incredulously asserts that Harry served in the war as a fighter pilot, rescuing an entire convoy and receiving the Congressional Medal of Honour. Clarence responds with a sickening finality: "All the men on that transport died. Harry wasn't there to save them, because you weren't there to save Harry." The aggregation of deaths in this nightmare scenario serves not merely as a chronicle of bereavement, but also as a moral challenge. The severe conditions aim to confront George—and the audience—with the moral implications of individual effort. This chain reaction not only exemplifies George's concealed influence but also embodies Capra's persistent humanism perspective that an individual's empathy and ethical duty may significantly impact the lives of others (Beckwith, 2023, p. 12). In a postwar society marked by widespread mortality and existential doubt, this framework of loss resonates profoundly with audiences, illustrating the precariousness of existence and the persistent ethical need of human connection.

Accordingly, the chronotope of Potterville, characterised by alienation and distortion, creates a parallel universe to Bedford Falls (Bakhtin, 1981a). This backdrop serves not simply as a contrast to George's 'wonderful life' but also as a contemplation on the origins of the perception of life as 'wonderful', a process essentially influenced by fantasy. Freud (1920) and Lacan (1951) propose that fantasy is not the antithesis of reality, but a framework that facilitates the subject's connection to reality. In order to let George acknowledge the significance of his life, he must face a hypothetical reality in which he was never born. Through this fantasy—a theoretical absence—he comprehends his existence not as something to be assumed, but as a reality profoundly rooted in family, connections, and societal obligation. This concept aligns with Paul Virilio's (2007) idea of negative space, which posits that the importance of an entity is often only comprehended in its absence. In George's situation, the obliteration of his existence underscores its essential significance—not by what he has, but by what is forfeited in his absence.

In this way, the story ends with George ultimately comprehending the values and meanings of his existence. His recognition that even his small life made a beneficial impact is rewarded with a return to the ostensibly 'real' world of Bedford Falls. That is, in a film that devotes much of its narrative to shifting between different temporal frameworks and the landscape of a single town, the nostalgic sense of community functions as nothing less than a necessary illusion, one that holds the social milieu together. George Toles (1984, p. 62) asserts that Capra was putting forth in this movie the "fantasy premise [. . .] that a beloved place could be utterly obliterated, and then magically re-established". It is this excessively romanticised portrayal of the Bedford Falls landscape of 1919 that contributes enormously to the dramatic impact of the

community's reaffirmation at the conclusion.

Meanwhile, according to Northrop Frye's (1964) theory of mythic narrative modes, it can be observed that romance corresponds to the second half of the mythic cycle, marked by a narrative progression from darkness to light, despair to hope, and death to symbolic rebirth. The film may be seen as being at a complicated junction of generative modes and characteristics. The picture, visually and tonally inspired by film noir standards, has chiaroscuro lighting and existential themes, while also using a chronological framework via a fantastical lens that presents various universes and probable fates. Simultaneously, it is mythologically rooted in the romantic cycle of renewal, presenting a story that converts sorrow into redemption and individual loss into a community revival. The amalgamation of noir, fantasy, and romance—filtered via the prism of Christmas—emphasizes holiday's role as a cohesive element, uniting diverse story forms. This multifaceted framework amplifies the emotional intensity of the familial tragedy. The movie first portrays family and morality in crisis to emphasise their worth, even briefly demolishing these principles. It underscores the rich and varied potential of Christmas as a representation of inclusivity, renewal, redemption, reflection, and forgiveness. The holiday serves as a narrative mechanism for reconciling shattered ideals, recalling religion, and re-establishing order.

Similarly, fantasy is also crucial in *Miracle on 34th Street*. On Christmas morning, Susan feels disillusioned when Kris Kringle fails to provide her with the present she had desired for a long time. As they prepare to go, Kringle offers Fred and Doris a shortcut home, ostensibly to avoid traffic. Along her trip, Susan is elated to see her ideal house—precisely resembling the drawing she had shown to Kringle before—displaying a 'For Sale' sign in the front yard. After learning that Doris encouraged Susan to maintain her faith, Fred asks Doris to marry him so they can buy this house as their home. He thereafter asserts his prowess as a lawyer, having achieved the seemingly unfeasible task of demonstrating that an eccentric elderly man is the real Santa Claus. Upon seeing a cane propped against the fireplace that looks like Kringle's, he halts, contemplating, "Maybe I didn't do such a wonderful thing after all." This open-ended moment suggests that Santa may actually exist and that Fred's actions solely sought to validate his existence. While the open-ended narrative indulges a romantic or nostalgic fantasy ending for the audience, it is also the case that it serves as a reminder that the film is not able to provide a solution without breaking the deceits of the fantasy upon which it is built.

Christmas miracles are also afforded to Susan when she receives the Christmas gift previously deemed unattainable, demonstrating the material rewards of faith and wonder. By doing so, the narrative challenges Doris's earlier rigid binary of fantasy versus reality, suggesting instead that these realms are not inherently oppositional but can mutually reinforce one another. Moreover, the film encourages viewers to reflect on the transformative power of belief: the greatest miracle is not merely the proof of

Santa's existence, but the act of believing itself, which rekindles hope and reshapes lives (Davies, 2021). Drawing on Belk (2000, p. 21), "Santa Claus is to American material faith what Jesus Christ is to Christian spiritual faith." Magic and faith combine to produce a physical result, a daddy and a house. This is, perhaps, an admission that no modern audience would be happy by an abstract ending. An ideal Christmas should be about a spiritual well-being combined with a large slice of material happiness.

Moreover, the final relocation to establish a new family in *Miracle on 34th Street* can be read as reflecting the emerging trends of suburbanization in postwar America. It is from urban New York City to a Long Island cottage with a 'real backyard' in what Valentine Davies's original novel describes as the countryside. Historically, 1946 saw the groundbreaking of Levittown, NY, the prototype for the postwar, pre-planned resettlement, heralding the rise of suburbanization (Beuka, 1999, pp. 36-47). *It's a Wonderful Life* also engages with these developments. The distinctly suburban Bailey Park, envisioned as the future of Bedford Falls, functions symbolically in the subplot of Mr. Martini's move-in. Through this narrative thread, the film links new home construction and private property ownership with the preservation and reconstruction of traditional community values, suggesting that the material expansion of suburbia need not entail the erosion of social cohesion.

As the historian Charles McGovern (2006, p. 360) points out, *It's a Wonderful Life* is emblematic of America's conflation of citizenship with consumption in the post-war period: "Bedford Falls without George Bailey is enslaved to unbridled commerce, a market in place of society, commerce without purpose or limits". George, however, is not against consumption in general; rather, he embodies the Rooseveltian idea that economic prosperity and consumption may be properly directed towards the common welfare of the country and its citizens. The Bailey Mortgage and Loan is committed to achieving the American dream that every individual or family should possess a home—ideally a detached suburban residence, particularly in the small-town replica of Bedford Falls—connecting George's vision of consumption and civic duty to the mid-century emergence of the suburban consumerist paradigm. When a depositor requests his funds, George responds that they do not exist as cash but have been allocated to another's residence, and yet another's, and another's. Ultimately, George himself is saved by means of this accountable consumption strategy.

By contrast, Potter serves as a parody of a bygone era—a remnant of the Gilded Age, reminiscent of the monopolistic power of robber barons and the predatory mentality of corporate towns. Bailey Park's chronotope, marked by homogeneous dwellings and a consumer-oriented promise of homeownership, serves as a depoliticised contrast to Pottersville (Bakhtin, 1981a). Rather than addressing the structural imbalances and exploitative rationale represented by Potter, the movie alleviates its tensions by a portrayal of regulated, commercialised expansion. The future suggests that it is not characterised by the disorder of urban moral decay, but rather by the structured

expansion of suburbia—neat, monotonous, and ideologically secure. The movie's lasting allure lies in its depiction of society as an ideal that, while perhaps never realised historically, seems almost inconceivable in the future. *It's a Wonderful Life* serves as a primer on the potential for establishing traditional small-town communities within a contemporary context, progressively relocating the rustic charm of Bedford Falls into the suburban expanse of Bailey Park—an endeavour to transfer the historical sense of belonging and unity into the swiftly evolving modern environment (Beuka, 1999, pp. 36-47). As such, *It's a Wonderful Life* constitutes a retelling of *A Christmas Carol*. Potter, deeply associated with Scrooge, functions as the embodiment of unchecked greed and ruthless capitalism. Whereas the Carol ends with Scrooge's moral transformation, *It's a Wonderful Life* relocates this redemptive arc to George Bailey, who is coerced into virtue on Christmas Eve. The Cratchits, who in Dickens represent the working-class victims of industrial capitalism, are here reconfigured as the bourgeois agents of commerce centred on the civic qualities of small-town life. Paul Davies (2021, p. 6) contends that this adaptation can be read as the Americanization of the Carol, one that endorses a morally regulated form of capitalism. In this light, Capra's film transforms Dickens's critique of economic exploitation into a celebration of responsible consumption, aligning capitalist practice with American ideals of democracy and community.

The release of *It's a Wonderful Life* and *Miracle on 34th Street* coincided with the large-scale rise in new housing construction and the emergence of suburban landscapes in the United States. This shift followed the urbanization process of the first half of the 20th century. The trend is reflected in *Meet Me in St. Louis*. allowing for a comparative reading of all three films as documenting a continuous transition from urbanization to suburbanization. Rather than framing suburbanization as opposed to urbanization, these films suggest it is an extension and complement of earlier urban development. In *Meet Me in St. Louis*, alongside the impending transition from the familiar rootedness in St. Louis to the unresolved modern promise of New York, there exists another subtle and almost subconscious process of urbanisation, wherein the perception of the external world is assimilated and reinterpreted through a lens of hometown pride. The eagerly awaited arriving of the World's Fair—prominently featured throughout the narrative—can be seen as a precursor to advanced capitalism and industrialisation. It simply becomes an exaggerated extension of the Arcadia, characterised by vibrant, Technicolour lights, distant ambience and hazy colours (Genné, 1983). Although the Smiths' finally decide not to leave St. Louis, they do not fully dismiss change or withdraw from the future. Instead, they intentionally let the outer world in, accepting a modernising influence that enriches rather than diminishes their feeling of rootedness. They expect their hometown becoming the centre of the attraction of the whole world. Thus, modernity becomes familiar—urbanization is seen not as an intrusive force but as an element that can be seamlessly integrated into the local cadence of life.

The historical circumstances surrounding the initial release of *Meet Me in St. Louis* are particularly significant in relation to the film's conclusion, due to the temporal dissonance between the audience's lived experience and that of the Smith family. For viewers living through the upheavals and uncertainties of the first half of the twentieth century, the film offers a compelling imaginative space: the possibility that a desired moment might be occupied indefinitely, rather than being consumed by an uncertain future. Throughout the narrative, the future oscillates between anxiety—embodied in the potential move to New York—and excitement for the upcoming World's Fair (Higgins, 1998). The Fair itself exists as a temporally distant object of desire, removed from the immediate present of the film, reinforcing a sense of anticipation and longing. The nostalgic desire to preserve the protracted anticipation for the World's Fair greatly impacts the movie's ending. Similar to a nostalgic individual longing for the past, though, the Smiths appear more preoccupied with experiencing desire than attaining the actual object of it. When the Fair eventually comes to life, the characters' desire is met by the current reality, which leads to a new objective: to maintain the first instant of contact with this long-desired spatiotemporal coordinate (Altman, 1989, p. 22).

By closing at this point, the story reflects the family's wish to remain fixed in an idealized time and space, leaving viewers with the image of an immobile family absorbed in nostalgic rapture (Sprengler, 2009, p. 11). What the film truly longs for is not the World's Fair itself, but the last moment when the future still appeared open and full of possibility—a perceptual state the Smiths locate in St. Louis. Yet this future they anticipate is already situated in the nation's collective past, prior to many viewers' own lifetimes. For audiences aware of the global upheavals that followed such moments of optimism, the Smiths' joyous capacity to believe in the future becomes itself an object of nostalgia (Kaufman, 2019). Together, these three films illustrate a dual strategy of negotiating modernity: spatially, by reconciling urban growth and suburban expansion with community cohesion; temporally, by projecting desire and hope onto a future carefully integrated with the comfort of an idealized past.

Likewise, *It's a Wonderful Life* also presents an idealised vision of the nuclear family on Christmas Eve. The climactic scene positions George in the midst of his living room, surrounded by his family and the broader Bedford Falls community, who rally to his rescue. The citizens bring forth their cash to cover the mislaid funds, a gesture that echoes the enduring cultural legacy of Dickensian Christmas generosity. The communal singing of Hark, the Herald Angels Sing elucidates the symbolic significance of the occasion: resurrection, rebirth, and renewal are central to the celebration. This is followed by Auld Lang Syne, a song that often evokes solidarity, belonging, and the resilience of community ties. The perennial Christmas tree, under which the neighbourhood congregates, further represents the green world of fertility and rejuvenation—a wellspring of vitality that George had sought elsewhere but ultimately discovers inside his own home and town. Nevertheless, the scenario also

illustrates the enduring gender disparity. Despite Mary's display of logic, decisiveness, and financial independence in securing the funds that save George, her agency is diminished. The narrative reinterprets her pivotal action as essentially ancillary, a continuation of the male protagonist's storyline. The important acknowledgement is given to George, whose dominance is reinforced when his brother Harry honours him with the title of "the richest man in town." George's decision to remain on the home front throughout the war, taking on the duty of preserving communal stability, establishes him as both the protector of the family and the steward of local order (Valenti, 1981, pp. 23-34).

Notably, unlike Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*, Potter does not show up in the last scene, or get rehabilitated on Christmas Eve, but is left a permanent, threatening presence in Bedford Falls. Throughout the entire movie, he has no family or children, resulting in a complete disregard for others; all his connections revolve around commercial transactions—individuals are either employees or business partners, nothing beyond that. There is no indication that he will return the money, no evidence he will face repercussions for retaining it, and no proof he will get better change. Capra's choice to keep Potter unaltered preserves Christmas from excessive sentimentality, maintaining a stark, realistic quality that affirms the possibility of cultivating spiritual significance in one's life and that of others, as George has achieved, yet acknowledges that it is a continual struggle and that the allure of pride and power cannot be eradicated. Consequently, George's redemption on Christmas Eve, from a religious—specifically Christian—viewpoint, mirrors the archetypal journey of Christ, who, ostracised by society for his radical teachings, endures suffering and dies on the cross as the ultimate sacrifice, undergoes resurrection, and re-enters the world to guide humanity towards spiritual salvation. In this sense, Christmas signifies not a guarantee of an ideal and effortless conclusion, but rather an opportunity for rebirth that emerges only after enduring agony (Riccomini, 2009).

More importantly, it is by repudiating Potter and renouncing his own materialistic desires, can George neutralize (but not eradicate) Potter's power over him and provide the foundation for his ultimate spiritual metamorphosis. Throughout the movie, George undergoes maturation and transformation, whilst Potter remains unchanged. Over the twenty-six-year duration shown in the town, Potter exhibits no signs of ageing and practically remains the same in physical appearance until the end. From a Christian perspective, Potter's offer of employment to George resembles Satan's temptation of Christ in the desert or Eve in the garden. Similar to Satan, he seeks to manipulate George into succumbing to temptation; essentially, Potter presents George with everything that he believes he desires. Potter does not explicitly compel, but rather subtly facilitates George's actions. Initially, George is enticed by Potter's alluring proposition; in one regard, he mirrors Potter's aspirations for power, fortune, and notoriety. However, as George listens, his moral compass starts to stir, leading him to recognise his manipulation. Like Christ in the desert, George must, and does,

summon the determination to dismiss his tempter's subtle overtures. The key is to recognise the inherent capacity for malevolence within mankind and, in response, to choose for virtue.

To act otherwise would be to reject his capacity for spiritual development, to disregard that part of himself that prioritises giving above receiving. In this sense, then, George, as a Christian, has encountered evil directly, succumbed to its temptation, and then rejected it. Consequently, the psychodramatic and archetypal dimensions of the story enable the movie to emphasise George's internal struggles as a Christian odyssey of the soul in pursuit of redemption. In this way, the movie elevates George Bailey's character and narrative from cliché to archetype, infusing a festive amusement with profound Christian principles (Zukowski, 2021). It, therefore, assumes the core of a fable or parable—narratives so intrinsic to human experience that they become permanently embedded in our consciousness, along with their profound spiritual and religious implications, particularly the principles of sacrifice and generosity, and through these principles, the potential for redemption.

Hence, it can be found that the central and ultimate dilemma of the movie revolves on how to motivate the character George Bailey to embrace and even celebrate the senses of entrapment and confinement he endures in his whole life. George goes home on Christmas Eve as an indication of his acceptance of the family and destiny he previously rejected. Carney (1986, p. 388) contends that Capra's picture exemplifies a continuation of American "Post-Romantic" narratives that portray the contrasting attractions of frontier adventure and a more communal, home existence. George imagines the possibility of a life that cannot evade or suppress competing imaginative tendencies and must coexist with these inconsistencies. This struggle is exacerbated by the urgent endeavour to extricate George from the harshness of his secular reality through a Christmas fantasy, resulting in contradictory interpretations aligned with a period of maladjustment to peace.

On the surface, the film favours optimism over scepticism in its resolution of conflict. Yet the candid treatment of George's uncertainties and the subsequent dependence on Christmas fantasy creates an ambivalence that contrasts with the film's victorious conclusion. In this condition of deep denial, George almost pleads to return to his identity role. His aspirations are restructured, not solely about the objects he previously derided, but also regarding the subjectivity that these objects contribute to forming. During the moment of rebirth, he fervently accepts the very artiefacts that most explicitly represent his cultural enslavement—his bleeding lips, the fractured bannister knob, ZuZu's petals, and the financial turmoil instigated by Uncle Billy. He has evolved into a quintessential masochistic male subject, internalising suffering as a kind of self-affirmation and converting subordination into psychological comfort. This reconstruction of subjectivity illustrates a process of socialisation; during periods of crisis and uncertainities, an individual's identity is not inherent but is formed

through ongoing social discipline and re-identification processes in return for the recognition and value afforded by the shift from traditional to modern societal frameworks. The movie's dramatic ending illustrates the victory of Christian paradox, converting George's suffering into pleasure, his scarcity into abundance, and his debt into profit, so exemplifying Christmas through a lens of contradiction.

Conclusion

To sum up, *It's a Wonderful Life*, *Miracle on 34th Street*, and *Meet Me in St. Louis* can be understood as products of the culture industry that mobilize the Christmas family melodrama to manage the contradictions of American modernity in the 1940s. These films situate the family as an ideological apparatus through which the disruptive forces of war, industrial capitalism, and shifting social relations are rendered emotionally intelligible and narratively resolvable. The recurring invocation of Christmas functions as a ritualized spectacle that temporarily suspends social antagonisms, transforming structural anxieties—economic precarity, corporate domination, and the erosion of communal bonds—into personalized moral dilemmas and affective resolutions. In doing so, the films do not offer a genuine critique of capitalist modernity; rather, they sustain the belief that a return to community, simplicity, and moral certainty remains attainable within the very structures that have precipitated their erosion.

Christmas, as a spatial-temporal marker in these films, delineates the intersection where past, present, and imagined futures converge. It organizes narrative meaning by intersecting with and reconfiguring other chronotopes, thereby exposing the tension between historical continuity and social transformation that structures each film. In *It's a Wonderful Life* and *Meet Me in St. Louis*, Christmas is embedded within an idyllic chronotope anchored in locality, tradition, and familial rootedness. Bedford Falls and turn-of-the-century St. Louis operate as temporally saturated spaces in which the past is idealized and historical continuity is affirmed, allowing Christmas to function as a ritual moment of renewal in which memory, moral coherence, and intergenerational belonging are symbolically secured. By contrast, *Miracle on 34th Street* situates Christmas within a distinctly modern commercial chronotope, structured around the department store and the circulatory rhythms of postwar New York consumer culture. Here, the holiday is reframed through the spatial logic of consumer capitalism, foregrounding the commodification of belief and the reorganization of communal values within an increasingly rationalized and market-driven social order.

When placed in dialogue, these three films further chart a cultural trajectory from the processes of urbanization in the first half of the twentieth century to the suburban expansion of the postwar years. Taken together, they suggest that these processes were conceived not as oppositional but as sequential and complementary phases. *Meet Me in St. Louis* reflects the subtler dynamics of urbanization: the Smith family's anticipation of the World's Fair channels modern capitalist progress into the framework of hometown pride, suggesting that urban growth could be incorporated without erasing rooted community values. It displaces its audience to 1903, offering wartime viewers a nostalgic return to a prelapsarian moment of national optimism before the upheavals of the twentieth century. The Smiths' anticipation of the 1904 World's Fair represents a future still filled with possibility, yet for 1940s audiences that future was already the past. As Susan Stewart (1993, p. 23) notes, the nostalgic longs for a world "where lived and mediated experience are one," and this is precisely the spatial logic the film evokes: a Midwestern city untouched by the disruptions of modernity. In this sense, the movie is not merely remembering the past but actively attempting to restore it through cinematic means. This visual reconstruction of a lost spatiotemporal condition aligns with Svetlana Boym's (2001, p. 49) concept of restorative nostalgia—a desire to "conquer and spatialize time." This temporal disjunction creates a double nostalgia, allowing modernity to be reimagined as something continuous with community pride rather than disruptive of it.

By contrast, *It's a Wonderful Life* and *Miracle on 34th Street* rely on the cyclical temporality of Christmas to reframe postwar anxieties, yet what is particularly striking is the incorporation of fantasy. In *It's a Wonderful Life*, the divine intervention transports George Bailey into an alternative version of Bedford Falls, allowing audiences to apprehend the profound impact of an individual's existence on family and community; in *Miracle on 34th Street*, Santa Claus's miracles provide both the enchantment of the holiday season and a symbolic reassurance against the anxieties of a materialistic society. While the family melodrama framework in both films already facilitates empathy, the infusion of fantasy concretizes it, translating abstract social anxieties into comprehensible personal and familial narratives. Audiences are invited into a world that is simultaneously familiar and idealized, one in which the hardships of everyday life coexist with the possibility of hope and wonder. Fantasy elements not only heighten narrative tension—through devices such as flashbacks, parallel realities, or miracles that resolve central conflicts—but also offer a parable-like moral affirmation, demonstrating that goodness and integrity ultimately yield reward. Moreover, the fantastical dimension renders the exploration of death, loneliness, and loss emotionally 'safe', appealing simultaneously to children's delight in magical occurrences and adults' appreciation of symbolic meaning, thereby enhancing the festive atmosphere and the films' suitability for family viewing. In this sense, the fusion of fantasy and family melodrama enriches both emotional and narrative complexity, while providing psychological and moral solace to a postwar society negotiating uncertainty and dislocation.

Overall, the fusion of Christmas with family melodrama is particularly effective in bridging the intimate and the expansive: the personal conflicts—whether a courtroom argument, a pivotal choice to stay or leave, or a fleeting glimpse of an alternative life—become conduits for reflection on communal values and ethical continuity. By embedding quotidian experiences within the emotionally heightened temporality of the holiday, these films transform the ordinary into the symbolic, revealing that everyday life can be harnessed to articulate broader cultural ideals. By presenting the family as the foundational unit of the society, the films articulate a vision of modernity in which societal stability is contingent upon the internal harmonization of domestic space. In this sense, these Christmas family melodramas operate as prescriptive models: they offer an idealized template in which the maintenance of family bonds becomes the linchpin for ethical comportment, civic responsibility, and collective belonging, rendering the private deeply political and the intimate fundamentally social.

Chapter 2 Fade to Holiday Miracle: Divine Interventions and the Suspension of Reality in 1940s Fantasy Cinema

Introduction

Building upon the previous chapter's discussion of family melodrama, it is important to recognize that *It's a Wonderful Life* and *Miracle on 34th Street*—despite being rooted in domestic realism—relied significantly on fantasy elements to resolve emotional and moral dilemmas. Therefore, this chapter shifts focus to the representation of Christmas in 1940s Hollywood fantasy cinema, with *Beyond Tomorrow* (A. Edward Sutherland, 1940) and *The Bishop's Wife* (Henry Koster, 1947) serving as the primary case studies. Drawing on Bakhtin's (1981a) concept of the chronotope, I argue that Christmas, in conjunction with other temporal and spatial configurations such as the study room, the urban street, and the hospital, collectively forms a chronotope of the threshold. Within this framework, the suspension of ordinary reality creates a point of contact where celestial beings from the outside world—angels, ghosts, and devils—can enter the mortal realm as agents of transformation. Their interventions disrupt the realist fabric of daily life, suspending conventional logic and opening a reflective space in which characters are compelled to reexamine their values and rediscover their true priorities, often hidden beneath the weight of ambition, material success, and social status.

As one of the oldest forms of fiction, fantasy exists across cultures worldwide and has remained a significant mode of storytelling into the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (Furby&Hines, 2012, p. 1). Building on this historical breadth, Furby and Hines (2012) situate fantasy film within a broader cultural and critical framework that moves away from earlier tendencies to treat fantasy primarily as escapist spectacle or pure visual excess. Their study traces its development from myth, legend, and fairy tale traditions into cinema, shaped by changing understandings of human experience (Furby&Hines, 2012, p. 6). Importantly, their approach responds to critical traditions that have often marginalised fantasy in favour of realism or subsumed it within science fiction and horror studies. In contrast, Furby and Hines (2012) argue that fantasy functions as a central cultural mode through which societies negotiate identity, desire, and social order. In a complementary account, Walters (2011, p. 2) situates fantasy within broader debates on genre and cinematic form, characterising it as "a fragile, ephemeral, and volatile element in cinema." He emphasises that fantasy operates through the deliberate disruption of everyday reality via the introduction of impossible or supernatural elements. Importantly, this disruption does not undermine narrative coherence; rather, it depends on the spectator's willingness to temporarily accept the impossible through processes of suspension of disbelief (Walters, 2011, pp. 1-12).

The convergence of the fantasy and Christmas also has a rich cultural history. A prominent illustration of this confluence is Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (1843), which employs supernatural elements like ghosts and time travel to depict personal awakening over Christmas. Dickens created a narrative framework that mirrors wider societal issues while emphasising Christmas as a time of contemplation and rejuvenation. The amalgamation of fantasy and festivity provided a foundation for subsequent cinematic adaptations, particularly evident in 1940s Hollywood films such as *Beyond Tomorrow* (1940) and *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946). This chapter also explores the development of modern fantasy, particularly during the 1930s and 1940s. Hollywood fantasy films saw a significant rise in popularity throughout the 1930s, reached their peak in the mid-1940s, and then began to decline by the end of the decade (Valenti, 1978). During this period, various forms of fantasy emerged, including stories about angels, spirits, mysterious reincarnations, and pacts with devils. Another trend involved the suggestion of the existence of otherworldly entities, but without fully defining them, leaving the supernatural elements somewhat vague and ambiguous.

A key example of this is *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939). Adapted from L. Frank Baum's 1900 book, the film is notable for its vibrant colors, magical landscapes, and whimsical characters, all set against the backdrop of the real world. While the film features magical and supernatural elements, it does not attempt to force a 'scientific' or 'realistic' explanation for these elements. Instead, it integrates them into

the story in a dreamlike manner, preserving a sense of mystery throughout. This blend of fantasy and reality marked a major milestone in both cinematic technology and narrative techniques (Baum, 2011, p. 2) . The film's focus on personal growth and self-discovery resonated deeply with audiences and filmmakers alike, influencing the direction of fantasy filmmaking in the years that followed. It set a template for many films to come, where characters undergo significant transformations through extraordinary experiences.

Then this chapter turns to a close case study of *Beyond Tomorrow* (1940) and *The Bishop's Wife* (1947). Released in 1940, *Beyond Tomorrow*, directed by A. Edward Sutherland and featuring Harry Carey, C. Aubrey Smith, and Charles Winninger, was described by *The New York Times* (1940) as a latter-day *Christmas Carol*. The film depicts three wealthy elderly men who, after their death, return as ghosts to assist a young couple in discovering love and repentance over the festive season. *The Bishop's Wife* (1947), adapted from Robert Nathan's 1928 novella and directed by Henry Koster, is an American romantic fantasy that won an Academy Award in 1948. The narrative focuses on Cary Grant as a charming angel who arrives on Earth to help a bishop in reclaiming his faith and mending his strained marriage.

Central to this study is Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981a) concept of the chronotope. In this chapter, the focus falls specifically on the chronotope of the threshold. This concept has a somewhat peculiar and belated position within Bakhtin's body of work. Despite finalising the principal essay in 1938, the concept of the threshold only emerges in the concluding remarks added in 1973—two years prior to his death—where it is mentioned succinctly and superficially, spanning merely half a page in contrast to his extensive examination of time in Hellenistic adventure narratives. Posthumous remarks indicate that Bakhtin considered this an incomplete endeavour, emphasising the importance of thresholds, doors, and stairways as sites where "hell" may instantaneously be converted into "paradise" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 299). Although briefly mentioned in Bakhtin's works, the chronotope of the threshold has been subsequently adopted by other academics (e.g., Falconer 2012; Olufunwa 2005; Krogstad 2016), who have used it to analyse narrative spaces of liminality, crisis, and transition. My project thus, joins this ongoing conversation, attempting to further elucidate this undeveloped aspect of Bakhtin's theory.

What can be learned from Bakhtin's scattered, surviving remarks is, first and foremost, that the chronotope of the threshold is profoundly transformative. As he writes, "its most fundamental instance is as the chronotope of crisis and break in a life" (Bakhtin, 2011, p. 248, italics in the original). It is hard to predict the changes or 'breaks' that such thresholds in time and space bring about. Movement from one place to another is always connected with symbolic significance, unlike the world of Hellenistic adventure, where mobility merely signifies a passage across abstract space—that is, between locations that may be exotic but are never substantially distinct from one another. Yet in the chronotope of the threshold, the places on each side of its breaks

are radically different. It can, in fact, be observed that Christmas in films often exhibits characteristics of a threshold or intertwines with threshold elements. However, I specifically treat Christmas, along with other time-spatial markers constructed around it, as the chronotope of the threshold within these fantasy films. This approach can also be seen as a means of highlighting the unique characteristics of a film genre through the concept of the chronotope.

Bakhtin's framework for this research is complemented by Rosemary Jackson's seminal book, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, which was published in 1981. This work offers a foundational understanding of the fantasy genre's capacity to interrogate and critique social norms. Even if it recombines and inverts the real, fantasy does not escape it, according to Jackson's (1981) point of view; rather, it lives in a connection with the real that may be described as either symbiotic or parasitic. It is impossible for the fantastic to exist out of the 'real' world, which it often depicts as being frustratingly limited. Although Jackson's theory is primarily grounded in literature, it is equally inspiring for film studies. The fact that she places such an emphasis on rejecting established limits and categories provides a prism through which one may see how fantasy films embrace ambiguity and attempt to undermine standard narrative frameworks. Through the combination of apparently incompatible worlds of the supernatural with realism themes, these films produce what Jackson refers to as a liminal space. Within it, the viewer's vision of reality is tested, and the borders of what is perceived to be 'real' are expanded. By means of the creative techniques, the tensions and concerns that are inherent to the human condition are also investigated and resolved inside this very place. Taken together, Bakhtin's (1981a) concept of the chronotope and Jackson's (1981) framework for fantasy provide a robust theoretical lens for analyzing the representation of Christmas in the case studies examined in this chapter.

2.1 Fantasy and Christmas: Tracing the historical roots of holiday imaginary

Whether it be in the realm of film or other forms of media, fantasy has been acknowledged for a long time as a subject of study that is both expansive and captivating (Jackson, 1981). It is notoriously hard to describe or identify with accuracy due to the fact that it is closely associated with imagination and desire. It seems that much of the value of fantasy lies in its resistance to restricted categorisation, a trait that is represented in that it is fluid and free-floating. Jackson stresses that this indeterminacy is not a constraint but rather a generative aspect of this

genre. It enables the fantasy to question traditional bounds and interact critically with social, cultural, and narrative conventions.

Swinfen's (2019, p. 11) acknowledgement of fantasy broadly congruent with Fowkes (1998, p. 4) but narrows the focus to what he terms "the marvellous." To put it another way, this idea originates from Tzvetan Todorov (1975), who is widely regarded as one of the most prominent critics in the field of fantasy studies. In a similar manner, J.R.R. Tolkien (1984, p. 140) explores the idea of "the Secondary World", which is a fictitious realm that allows for the credibility of extraordinary phenomena, such as a "green sun". The scope of Todorov's work, on the other hand, is more extensive than that of Tolkien's, because he handles the more general category of the literary fantastic. For Todorov, works that cannot be rigidly contained by the artificial borders of genre are considered to be the fantastic. It develops in situations when there is "a breach in the acknowledged order, an irruption of the inadmissible within the changeless everyday legality" (Todorov, 1975, p. 41).

This tension between the ordinary and the extraordinary makes it possible for uncanny effects to be introduced, which are often linked with ghost stories, horror narratives, or other instances in which one world seems to bleed into the everyday realm of reality, rupturing the membrane that separates the two worlds. According to Todorov's (1975) paradigm, the fantastic is a malleable term that may be found throughout the whole spectrum of literature. It is predicated on a delicate balance between the marvellous and the uncanny. According to his explanation, the marvellous refers to a fictitious universe that is regulated by "new laws of nature... to account for the phenomena" (Todorov, 1975, p. 41). This description is closely matched with what is often believed to be fantasy. Todorov (1975) places an emphasis on the fact that the fantastic is fundamentally unstable, necessitating a continuous hesitance between natural and supernatural explanations. This leaves the reader unclear as to whether the occurrences are produced by supernatural or psychological (hallucinatory or deluded) factors.

Researchers have found essential structural and thematic characteristics that separate fantasy from other genres that are connected to it. One of the hallmarks of the fantasy is the existence of a fundamental break, which is often referred to as a "ontological rupture" (Fowkes, 2010, p. 2). The phrase "rupture" is used to distinguish the fantastical aspects of fantasy from those of science fiction, where normally irrational or scientific explanations underlie apparently unusual happenings (Fowkes, 2010, p. 2). When it comes to science fiction, for instance, instantaneous travel to a faraway place might be justified through technological extrapolation. However, in fantasy, it might be attributed to magical means, such as a character using an old boot or an enchanted object to disappear from one location and reappear in another.

“Ontological” as a qualifier emphasizes that fantastic phenomena are viewed as genuine inside the story-world, with a reality that is just as palpable and authoritative as the reference world from which they break (Fowkes, 2010, p. 2). This is what differentiates fantasy from stories that are based on hoaxes, hallucinations, or delusions, in which the unusual is finally shown to be an illusion. There are works in the fantasy that purposefully investigate this divide; nevertheless, in general, the genre discourages purely psychological readings of events, or at the very least, strives to minimise the influence that these interpretations have on the audience’s ability to suspend their disbelief. Supernatural horror is characterised by its deliberate goal to shock viewers by the depiction of parallel worlds or inconceivable happenings. While it shares the sensation of rupture that is characteristic of fantasy, it is characterised by this objective. In light of this, Fowkes (2010) suggests that fantasy is less of a conventional genre and more of a narrative style or mode. This means that fantasy is capable of infiltrating different genres while yet preserving its distinguishing ontological and structural qualities.

According to Williamson (2016), modern fantasy can be seen as an invention that was passed down from the eighteenth century. The period after the Enlightenment, which was characterised by a logical and scientific viewpoint, offered a particular historical and cultural background that had a significant role in shaping both the creation and consumption of fantasy literature. The social and technical transformations that occurred throughout the Industrial Revolution were also incorporated into the genre. These shifts included the proliferation of print culture, the growth of literacy, and the development of leisure time. Shawcross and Coleridge’s (1927, p. 14) idea of the “willing suspension of disbelief” continues to be an essential concept in comprehending the audience's interaction with works of fiction and fantasy. *A Christmas Carol* (1843), written by Charles Dickens, is one of the fundamental works that continue to have an impact. Such work exemplifies how fantasy has traditionally combined creative storytelling with moral and cultural reflection, and it served as a precedent for subsequent advances in both literature and film.

The rationale for include *A Christmas Carol*, especially in this chapter, is that it solidified the association between Christmas and fantasy. Dickens’s work shaped the portrayal of Christmas in 1940s fantasy films, as seen in *Beyond Tomorrow* (1940) and *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946). Although these films use similar themes of redemption and change, they tailor them to their historical context, examining the relationship between fantasy and social reality. Dickens is frequently acknowledged for ‘inventing’ the Victorian Christmas, merging a nostalgic yearning for a colourful yet stable past—where festive customs represented more amicable and uncomplicated social interactions—with concerns regarding the rapidly evolving present, characterised by moral and social dilemmas (Glancy, 1980, pp. 53-72). Parker (2001, p. 4) contends that this amalgamation of past and present constitutes a utopian depiction of Christmas. In spite of this, Ernst Bloch (1959) claims that the spirit of utopia and hope continues to exist exactly inside the realms of fantastical worlds.

He asserted that the “dream of a better life” might be found even inside the cultural narratives that seemed to be the most oppressive (Bloch, 1959, p. 156). This is especially true of supernatural stories and folk tales, which, despite the fact that they often support prevailing cultural beliefs, such as the redeeming power of Christmas in opposition to the greed of capitalists, also have the ability to transcend these ideologies. They provide a gesture towards unrealised ideals and values, which Bloch (1959, p. 154) refers to as the “cultural surplus”, that lies beneath the surface of the narrative. To put it another way, the fantasy that is woven throughout Dickens’s Christmas story acts as a connection between the world as it is and the world as it ought to be. Its relevance rests not merely in the manner in which it places individuals at the centre of the Victorian Christmas, but also in which it continues to influence modern festivity as it has evolved over time.

For all its historical specificity, the Dickensian fantasy of Christmas has evolved into a cultural touchstone that remains influential in modern popular culture (Whiteley, 2008). *A Christmas Carol* has had several adaptations across various mediums. One of the most prominent early Hollywood renditions was Edwin L. Marin’s 1938 MGM film, with Reginald Owen as Ebenezer Scrooge. This adaptation demonstrates how Dickens’s tale of personal redemption and seasonal change was reimagined at an era characterised by economic adversity and societal instability. It foregrounds the themes of regeneration and the curative characteristic of the holiday, while mitigating Dickens’s more sombre societal critique: its idyllic portrayal of London resembles the romanticism of a Christmas card, with joyful children in place of the impoverished street urchins from the original narrative. Miller (1993, p. 12) notes that Franz Waxman’s music enhances this idealised portrayal by interlacing traditional Christmas melodies with tragic orchestral themes, thereby harmonising a celebratory ambiance with the narrative’s supernatural aspects. The 1938 film illustrates that Dickens’ Christmas fantasy was not just retained but transformed in early Hollywood movies to highlight pleasure, romanticism, and spiritual rejuvenation, rather than the grim reality of Victorian socioeconomic circumstances.

The escapist aspect of the 1938 version is merely part of the wider cultural picture; yet, fantasy films from this period should not be seen as being detached from reality or as being timeless. Rather, they are firmly ingrained inside the social practices and ideas of the era in which they were made. Beginning in the 1930s and continuing into the 1940s, Hollywood studios were able to exert an unprecedented level of control over the creation, marketing, and screening of fantasy films. A landmark example is *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), which is widely regarded as one of the most significant demonstrations of special effects achievement in the studio era (Bellin, 2005). The film's adoption of the expensive and laborious Technicolour process, in addition to its innovative cyclone effects, not only represented a technical triumph but also symbolised the technological utopianism of the time period. This utopianism was characterised by the belief that machine technology could be applied to transcend the

harsh realities of the Great Depression and gain access to a realm of abundance and wonder. As Bellin (2005) argues, such spectacles epitomised Hollywood's role as a dream machine, both gratifying public yearning for visual splendour while reflecting anxieties about the social repercussions of modern civilisation, including wealth monopolisation and widespread alienation.

The studio era was also characterised by the emergence of fantasy narratives that were centred on supernatural beings like angels, ghosts and talking animals. This occurred concurrently with the technical utopianism discussed earlier. Cary Grant, Constance Bennett, and Joan Blondell all played attractive ghosts who haunted the mild-mannered protagonist, Topper (Roland Young), in the The Topper film series including Topper film trilogy (*Topper* [1937], *Topper Takes a Trip* [1939], and *Topper Returns* [1941]) (Norden, 1982). Before the American's direct involvement in the Second World War, these kinds of light-hearted supernatural tales were the most popular on screens. In spite of this, there was a discernible difference in tone brought about by the wartime setting. Through the films such as *Between Two Worlds* (1944), which altered the story of *Outward Bound* (1930) to include a World War I sailor who accepts his death as a sacrifice for his family and country, themes of duty, sacrifice, and the moulding impact of cosmic spiritual energies on mortal existence were brought to the forefront. Taken together, these examples suggest that fantasy cinema prior to the war was not a simple vehicle of escapism, but rather a cultural form through which technological optimism, spiritual anxieties, and socio-political realities were simultaneously negotiated and expressed.

Throughout the Second World War, fantasy films often used ghosts, haunting, and supernatural phenomena not as elements of terror, but as beneficent or supporting entities. Movies like *A Guy Named Joe* (1944) illustrate this inclination. The film portrays a deceased pilot, Pete, who, after his sacrifice, returns as a ghost to guide and support his beloved Dorinda, thereby emphasizing the redemptive and comforting power of love and sacrifice beyond death. This treatment of the supernatural as a positive force reflects the wartime cultural climate, in which people sought comfort and reassurance amid the profound emotional and psychological toll of war. Snelson (2014, p. 91) notes that this era saw a surge in public fascination with the supernatural across multiple media platforms, with the press extensively documenting the "popularization of all manner of spiritual and psychic practices and practitioners, including séances, astrology, telepathy, spiritualist mediums, and tea leaf readers." This cultural obsession, he contends was an effort to confront the emotional and spiritual ambiguities produced by wartime circumstances. In contrast to pre-war illusions, wartime performances conveyed a more overtly patriotic message, providing consolation and what Valenti (1979, p. 310) describes as "cultural sustenance" to audiences weary from the battle and its human toll. Valenti (1978, p. 294) used the term film blanc to encapsulate the unique characteristics of wartime fantasy films. In contrast to the darker themes of film noir, film blanc emphasized

positivity, community, and solace, using the supernatural to reinforce belief in love, perseverance, and communal endurance rather than to disrupt reality (Valenti, 1978, p. 294).

Scholars have conducted further investigations on the ideological repercussions that wartime fantasy films convey. Anderegg (1994) agrees with the viewpoint that these films performed a generally consolatory role; nevertheless, he emphasises that the narrative tactics that they applied often supported the denial of death and the suppression of sorrow. In addition to this, Doherty (1999) places World War II fantasy films within a more extensive historical trajectory, establishing a connection between these films and adaptations of World War I as well as diegetic allusions. His observation is that there was a distinct transition from the anti-war consensus that existed before to an ideological attitude that was pro-war, in which imagination was mobilised in favour of the war effort. Similarly, Dixon (2006b) contends that these films not only softened the image of death but also romanticised it, so working as a subtle recruitment tool. From this perspective, it can be argued that fantasy films served as emotional propaganda during the war. Each picture presented spectators with a brief configuration of loss and grief: bitterness in *The Human Comedy* (1943), sadness in *A Guy Named Joe* (1944), and despair in *Between Two Worlds* (1944). Nevertheless, despite their disparities, these films uniformly used supernatural elements and otherworldly settings as manifestations of divine or cosmic power. They redefined sadness from a personal lament to a potential danger to communal morale, channeling human emotional reactions to maintain the wartime social structure and strengthen the ideological mandates of the war effort (Dixon, 2006b, p. 11) .

The immediate post-war era was characterised by an innocent optimism that was swiftly undermined by emerging social concerns and persistent historical problems. Fantasy gradually integrated aspects of reality, signifying a transition from earlier, fairy-tale forms to narratives rooted in quotidian environments but infused with the supernatural. Film researcher James Walters (2011) observes that it was a period in which fantasy functioned inside discernibly real environments, using the extraordinary to subtly disrupt and recontextualise the familiar. This growth coincided with the societal need for moral reassurance and emotional recuperation during and after World War II. Instead of creating wholly new worlds, many fantasy films from the 1940s incorporated supernatural entities into home or urban environments, enabling the fantastic to function as a medium for spiritual contemplation and moral insight within the framework of modern life.

In the meantime, fantasy films became increasingly engaged in addressing pressing social issues, including alcoholism, mental illness, and racial relations. However, as Fowkes (2010, p. 34) points out, the focus of these films switched away from systemic criticisms of institutions such as Big Government and Big Business, as well as from collective battles against them, and instead went towards storylines that emphasised the pain of individuals who were stuck within such situations. The

structural reasons of injustice were often portrayed as being obscure, vague, and resistant to unambiguous articulation. As a result, the narrative centred on the victim rather than the system. The anxieties shown in 1943's *Happy Land*, about the impact of loss on a small town, starkly contrast with the implied postwar endeavour for normality in 1946's *It's a Wonderful Life* and the overt anti-war rhetoric of 1948's *The Boy with Green Hair* (Williamson, 2021). These examples illustrate that fantasy in the immediate postwar period matured into a mode of storytelling that was not only psychologically resonant but also socially and politically relevant.

The end of hostilities in 1945 further offered Hollywood a revitalised sense of freedom of expression and a spirit of innovation. This occurred against the background of the aforementioned circumstances. The development of fantasy films that pushed the frontiers of visual storytelling and narrative imagination was the vehicle through which this newly discovered creative force was channelled. The one or two extraterrestrial entities that were shown in these fantasy films were often the only things that stood out as being significantly different from the norm. They were set in the modern era. When the ghosts and angels were making their entrances and departures and performing their magic, the cinematic special effects, which are often of the utmost significance in fantasy films, were typically restricted to basic fades and super impositions (Fowkes, 2010, p. 22).

According to Fowkes (2010, p. 4), the ornate and fantastical settings of pre-war fantasies like *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and the Busby Berkeley musicals were generally abandoned in favour of settings that were more realistic. This change is completely shown in the films such as *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), which is covered in the first chapter of this thesis. In the scene when George Bailey is experiencing a sense of hopelessness, for instance, Clarence makes his appearance with a soft dissolve effect, which is a visual transition that emphasises his mysterious presence. This limited use of special effects lends a feeling of mystery to the fantastical components, while also being in accordance with the simplicity and emotional depth of post-war filmmaking. This is in contrast to the showy technology demonstrations that were prevalent during this time period. As a result of this modest approach to special effects, the film's themes and emotions are able to take centre stage. This enables the viewer to concentrate on the morals and social reflections that the picture delivers, rather than being distracted by the effects themselves (Fowkes, 2010). In this way, the post-war fantasies were similar to *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) being flipped inside out. The former often portrayed otherworldly entities in the middle of regular settings and characters, but the later offered an ordinary human in the midst of amazing surroundings and weird animals (Norden, 1982, pp. 1-8).

This context explains the reason why Christmas became a predominant motif in post-war fantasy films as it closely fits into social needs and the prevailing emotional climate. While the holiday was shown in pre-war films like *Beyond Tomorrow* (1940), its prominence significantly increased in the aftermath of World War II, coinciding

with the zenith of fantasy filmmaking. Several of the most emblematic fantasy films from this era—such as *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), *The Bishop's Wife* (1947), and *Miracle of 34th Street* (1947). As outlined in Chapter One, *It's a Wonderful Life* and *Miracle on 34th Street* serve as iconic examples. Although often interpreted as family melodramas, their narratives are significantly influenced by the fantasy, with supernatural interventions acting not as mere decorations but as crucial processes that propel the story and its cultural resonance.

2.2 From the Divine to the Mundane: The Intersection of Fantasy, Realism, and Festivity

Having reviewed the broader historical and cultural context of the interaction between Christmas and the fantasy genre, the following section turns to a closer examination of two case studies: *Beyond Tomorrow* (1940) and *The Bishop's Wife* (1947). Released respectively before and after World War II, these films embody the key characteristics of the fantasy genre during this transformative decade. Both films open with a metropolitan Christmas imagery, offering spectators a familiar social environment that establishes the narrative in recognisable rituals and customs, creating a grounding framework for the later entrance of the fantastic. *Beyond Tomorrow* features towering skyscrapers juxtaposed against Christmas trees, with the sound of jingling bells in the air. Then the camera moves to a scene of bustling streets, where a figure of Santa Claus is seen standing among the crowd. There are garlands draped above him, and the word 'Christmas' is boldly displayed among the heaps of presents. This mise-en-scene conjures Christmas as a symbolic space where commercial culture, communal festivity, and spiritual anticipation all come together.

By contrast, *The Bishop's Wife* comes with a group of children listening to Christmas carols played by a violinist in the city. This scene takes place against the backdrop of a busy store decorated with angelic sculptures. After that, the camera follows Dudley (Cary Grant) as he wanders through the sound-stage recreation of holiday shopping crowds replete with soap-flake snow, admiring the spectacular Christmas displays that lined the main urban street, which was where the department shops were situated. In this stage, Dudley is able to disguise his actual identity as an angel, making him look indistinguishable from the humans around him. Dudley's presence displays a form of participatory observation. Instead of acting as a distant observer or promptly presenting blatantly fantastical elements, he first assimilates into the fabric of daily life. On the street, he aids a blind guy and supports a woman with her baby carriage, illustrating that his supernatural abilities are seamlessly integrated into the mortal world. This integration method, as opposed to direct manipulation, enhances the authenticity of character interactions and further humanizes the angelic figure, so successfully blurring the distinction between the divine and the secular (Spottiswoode, 1969, p. 22). It can be seen that the temporal and spatial markers of the holiday season

are employed in both films to construct the modern city as a lived social environment, enhancing the authenticity and credibility of the moral world.

Accompanied by the sound of typing, *Beyond Tomorrow* shifts to the home of three elderly engineers: George Melton (Harry Carey), Allan Chadwick (C. Aubrey Smith), and Michael O'Brien (Charles Winninger). And until now we know the city shown at the beginning of the film is New York, a recognizable, real-world one. Allan and George are seen tirelessly collaborating with a team of workers to finalise a design on Christmas Eve, indicating their professional routines and committed work ethic. The scene displays their concentrated conversations, exact calculations, and attention to detail, effectively immersing the spectator in a genuine social and business context. Conversely, Michael's entrance with several Christmas presents injects a festive and humanising aspect while mitigating the stress in the workplace. Together, these portrayals establish distinct character traits: Allan and George embody diligence, responsibility, and formality, whereas Michael represents warmth, generosity, and emotional attentiveness. This differentiation situates their personalities authentically within the festive atmosphere, enhancing the audience's engagement and investment in their lives.

Another person who is also working during festive holiday is Henry Brougham (David Niven), the bishop in *The Bishop's Wife*. He is busy with fundraising for a new cathedral. His relentless work ethic renders him a veritable Scrooge, a role he effectively shares with the wealthy widow Mrs. Hamilton (Gladys Cooper) (Patten, 2023). When his wife, Julia (Loretta Young) returns home, she finds them still engrossed in a meeting, highlighting the intrusion of professional obligations into the domestic sphere. Drawing on Bakhtin's (1981a) theory, this depiction illustrates that the acceleration of social rhythms compresses domestic space and fragments temporal experience. The home, traditionally a site of private life and personal intimacy, is increasingly shaped by work and commercial pressures, blurring the distinction between public and private realms.

Apart from the demands of social production, the erosion of boundaries in *Beyond Tomorrow* also arises from the expansion and reconfiguration of interpersonal relationships. Initially, the Christmas dinner planned by the three elderly men is disrupted when their invited guests cancel at the last minute. George interprets this as a consequence of his dark past, demonstrating that the expectation of a festive and celebratory space is immediately intertwined with personal history, blending temporal and spatial dimensions into a coherent narrative of crisis (Bakhtin, 1981a). In a transformative response, the three elderly men decide to throw their wallets onto the street and invite strangers who return them to join the dinner. The lost wallets, thus, serve as a symbolic invitation, expanding their private domestic space and reflecting its fluidity and openness.

Later in the film, George's wallet is found by Arlene Terry (Helen Vinson), who carelessly discards it after giving it to her driver. In stark contrast, the wallets of the other two men are returned by individuals who demonstrate genuine consideration: James Houston (Richard Carlson), a Texas cowboy, and Jean Lawrence (Jean Parker), a teacher. These two strangers, whose moral integrity is immediately evident, are welcomed into the domestic space of the elderly men and Madame Tanya (Maria Ouspenskaya), where they form meaningful connections. As their relationship deepens, James and Jean gradually fall in love, much to the delight of everyone around them. This narrative development can be viewed through the lens of Proverbs 12:22, which states, "The Lord detests lying lips, but he delights in people who are trustworthy". The verse underscores the foundational role of honesty and trust in Christian ethics, not merely as personal virtues, but as acts of obedience to God. The actions of James and Jean exemplify this biblical teaching. They are a concrete manifestation of divine conscience and moral integrity, further reinforcing the symbolic significance of Christmas as a moment when the divine is brought into the human realm.

Just as bonds of trust and emotional connection were beginning to form among these new friends, a sudden and tragic event shattered the calm: the three elderly men perished in an air crash. Subsequently, they return to their former home as ghosts, transforming the domestic space into the center of their spiritual dwelling and activity. In this configuration, the home becomes a "parallel space" (Bakhtin, 1981a, p. 72), a supernatural realm that coexists with the real world yet remains separate, allowing the spirits to observe and interact with the living while remaining invisible to most. The presence of the ghosts also disrupts the linear progression of time. Although they belong to the past, their activities unfold in the present, rendering them ontologically figures of repetition (Jackson, 2008, p. 55). In this sense, death paradoxically initiates a new textual beginning: what begins has already happened, and what has occurred is also a death. The maid, Lady Tanya, is the sole character capable of perceiving them. Her unique perceptual ability, coupled with her emotional connection to the men and her foresight prior to their flight, grounds the supernatural occurrences in the narrative's realism, enhancing the authenticity of their ghostly existence. The selective visibility of the ghosts emphasizes the rules and solemnity of the supernatural realm. Their interactions with the mortal world are neither arbitrary nor fully open, establishing boundaries that lend the fantastic a sense of coherence and gravitas.

In the later part of the scene where James performs, the ghosts, Lady Tanya, and Jean all listen from within the mansion at the same time despite James is physically present in a modern recording studio. Much like Dickens (1843) in *A Christmas Carol*, who responded to the technological transformations that reshaped temporal and spatial perception by channeling the energies and anxieties of modernity into a web of re-enchanted potential, the radio broadcast in this scene functions as a medium enabling a novel form of enchantment. Although radio is a product of modern science

and is typically associated with progress and rationality, it is able to facilitate a moment of resonance that cannot be fully explained by science alone. In this instance, the living and the dead, as well as the present and the past, are united in a shared moment of sonic experience (Watt, 1957, p. 14). As a result, this aural simultaneity creates a type of chronotopic arrangement, which in turn disrupts linear concepts of time (Bakhtin, 1981a). In doing so, it poses a challenge to the realistic tradition's depiction of human experience, so continuing the Dickensian question of how human lives are depicted in the context of modern conditions (Watt, 1957, p. 14). From this perspective, this occurrence could be considered as a moment of poetic and mysterious re-enchantment in the lived social world (Benjamin, 1968).

In comparison, Henry in *The Bishop's Wife* prays for divine guidance in his study room to support his endeavor of building a cathedral, and in response, an angel descends to Earth, interrupting the ordinary flow of life (Bakhtin, 1981a). This spatially unbound presence suggests that the angel can perceive and respond to human prayers, moving freely across spaces and dimensions to appear wherever needed. Such mobility endows the angel with an almost omnipresent quality, reinforcing the dynamic interplay between fantasy and reality (Graham, 2011). A similar narrative mechanism is evident in *It's a Wonderful Life* as seen in Chapter 1, where George Bailey's moment of crisis prompts both him and the town's inhabitants to pray for intervention on Christmas Eve. Both films foreground the Christian belief that divine forces respond to human despair and longing, while simultaneously engaging with questions about the nature of the divine. Henry's character illustrates this tension: despite his role as a bishop, his actions reveal an inner conflict and a partial doubt in direct divine intervention. His attempt to resolve spiritual and religious concerns through material or commercial means—exemplified by his efforts to fund the cathedral—underscores the irony of a faith leader struggling under worldly pressures. In this context, the divine functions as an external manifestation of human hopes and expectations, embodying both the longing for transcendence and the limitations of human agency.

Furthermore, Henry's scepticism is a reflection of a deeper anxiety over the transition from the "real" to the "unreal" (Jackson, 2008, p. 11). As Todorov (1973, p. 25) argues, "the fantastic is that which cannot be immediately classified as either real or imaginary; it is the hesitation between the two that creates the essence of the fantastic." This is not merely a personal crisis of faith but also a cultural symptom of anxiety towards shaky ontological limits. Far from dismantling reality, this hesitation, paradoxically strengthens dominant ideas of the real by reproducing them in artistic and narrative forms. To put it another way, the more uncomfortable the disruption of reality seems to be, the more audiences and characters attach themselves to solid notions of reality, which makes them more resistant to reconfiguration or changes.

In both films, a chronotope of the threshold can be identified, particularly through the return of the ghosts and the descent of the angel during the Christmas setting (Bakhtin,

1984). This threshold functions as a transitional juncture between the physical, everyday world and the supernatural or divine realm, delineating a space-time in which conventional boundaries are blurred and the ordinary rules of reality are suspended. The threshold encompasses familiar, yet symbolically charged spaces—the mansion in *Beyond Tomorrow* and the study room in *The Bishop's Wife*—which operate simultaneously as realistic settings and liminal zones. In terms of temporal and spatial dynamics, the ghosts emphasise fixed spaces and the overlap of past and present while the angel highlights spatial mobility and temporal elasticity.

In *The Bishop's Wife*, the angel Dudley not only impacts Bishop Henry but also slowly alters Julia's life. Motivated by him, Julia ultimately purchases the hat she has long coveted from the Christmas store display, despite her prior reluctance stemming from the fear that it would go unappreciated. This action represents her liberation from previous limitations and a revitalised recognition of her own aspirations and feelings. Subsequently, to offset Henry's absence, Dudley takes Julia ice skating, where they seemingly defy gravity, whirling and jumping effortlessly over the ice. The gentle illumination, smooth camera transitions, and harmonious soundtrack create a surreal, almost otherworldly ambiance. This sequence functions as a temporary departure from the ordinary world, offering a liminal space in which characters can reassess relationships, emotions, and personal agency beyond the pressures of daily life. Julia's gradual release from societal and self-imposed constraints demonstrates a rare sense of freedom and self-rediscovery. Even the taxi driver, who had not skated in years, effortlessly joins this fantastical moment, integrating seamlessly into the scene. The slow, repetitive movements extend the perception of time, rendering the moment seemingly infinite. Following Tolkien's (1947, p. 11) insight, this fantastical intervention is not fully removed from reality; rather, it illuminates overlooked or suppressed aspects of life, offering a revelatory lens through which characters—and by extension, the audience—perceive reality anew. The angel's intervention imbues the skating activity with a sense of miracle, yet it feels so natural that it becomes hard to tell whether any divine power is truly at work.

Just like the character of the Bishop, Henry in *The Bishop's Wife*, James becomes ensnared in the capitalist system in *Beyond Tomorrow*. The film employs montage to illustrate his rise to fame—depicting him on stage, surrounded by thunderous applause, stacks of fan letters, newspaper headlines, and dazzling spotlights (Huapaya, 2016, pp. 110-123). This montage serves to condense what is typically a gradual path to success into a few rapid moments, thereby symbolizing the accelerated tempo imposed by capitalist values. In Bakhtinian terms, this sequence functions as a capitalist-driven carnival, where past labor and lived experiences are compressed or obscured. This results in the severing of historical continuity, which in turn creates a fragmented and isolated temporality. The distortion of time and the emphasis on rapid success reflect the inversion of traditional social values associated with capitalism. The film's portrayal of this process is akin to Bakhtin's (1981a) concept of the

carnivalesque, where established hierarchies and social norms are temporarily suspended, making way for a chaotic, accelerated experience of time. Through the character of Michael, a ghost who provides an elevated, transcendent viewpoint, the film connects these fragmented moments. As James becomes increasingly captivated by fame and luxury, he neglects his relationship with Jean (Kaplan, 2012). The spectator experiences James's ethical decline through Michael's perspective, where the ghost functions both as a critique of James's moral failings and as a symbol of the possibility for redemption (Marsh, 2004, p. 12).

The ghosts, as witnesses, occupy a paradoxical position: they are both intimately present and fundamentally distant. Michael can pass through solid objects such as walls and doors, unconstrained by the physical limitations of the material world, moving seamlessly from one character to another, or from one scene to another. He often appears in a translucent form, hovering in mid-air—a visual manifestation of his liminal state between the supernatural and the human realm. For instance, he approaches Jean to encourage her to fight for her fiancé; yet when he stands before her, she cannot see or hear him, only vaguely sensing his presence. This duality underscores a critical narrative and ethical function. While Michael attempts to intervene in James's life, his ghostly state imposes limitations: he cannot act directly or enforce outcomes. As Perez (2000, p. 5) observes, this struggle represents a subtle contest of will and influence between the human and the spectral. However, the inherent passivity of the ghost emphasizes that ultimate agency resides with human characters. James's moral choices—and Jean's responses—cannot be dictated by supernatural forces; rather, they must emerge from personal decision-making and reflection. The ghosts, as supernatural beings, instead serve as a mirror, reflecting and foregrounding human autonomy.

Therefore, death is emphasized as an unavoidable consequence triggered by James's actions, mirroring the lesson imparted by Scrooge's ghosts: a death that arrives as inevitably as Christmas itself. Much of the unsettling yet strangely liberating power of Dickens's tale resides in this equation of Christmas and death, linking moral reckoning with existential finality. In *Beyond Tomorrow*, this lesson is dramatized when James goes away for the weekend with Arlene, only to be ambushed by her ex-husband. Arlene dies instantly, and James is rushed to the hospital for surgery, ultimately dying on the operating table. His ghost then appears to Michael through a double-exposure technique, visualizing the liminal space between life and death. At this moment, a shimmering voice with shimmering lights from above addresses Michael, explaining that his mother will not grant them peace unless he is offered a position at heaven. Michael prays for James to be given a second chance. This scene echoes a previous plot point: before Michael rushes to James and Arlene, he is pulled toward heaven by this booming voice. He pleads to stay longer, citing unfinished work on Earth, but the voice insists that he must come now or risk wandering the world eternally. Michael ultimately sacrifices his own immediate passage to heaven in order to assist his friend. As a result, James is granted the opportunity to return to life,

emphasizing that sacrifice can be meaningful: through Michael's intervention, James recognizes his mistakes and is given an opportunity to make amends.

This moment also conveys a broader philosophical and narrative implication. Life and death are no longer depicted as strictly one-way processes; by breaking the irreversibility of time, characters are allowed to enact change within a new ethical and cosmic order. The divine presence, is portrayed as a powerful and overwhelming force that transcends the spectral realm, highlighting its superior status and authority over the ghosts' fates. It symbolizes a longing for cosmic order and moral governance from a higher perspective. As such, the hierarchical arrangement of ghosts and divine forces emphasizes the causal relationship between human choices and their outcomes. The ghosts, as intermediaries, reveal the process of decision-making and human limitations, guiding and observing without directly enforcing results. The divine, in contrast, represents the ultimate moral authority, embodying the consequences and ethical resolution that follow correct or erroneous choices. Human limitations do not preclude the possibility of moral restoration as good deeds serve as the prerequisite for redemption.

Similarly, in *The Bishop's Wife*, Dudley himself emphasizes that he is "not an important angel," suggesting the existence of higher beings and a larger cosmic hierarchy. Furthermore, he notes that "I am just temporarily assigned to this district," implying that beyond the material world lies a broader, multidimensional realm of time and space, highlighting the limited and one-dimensional nature of human existence within the material realm. Dudley's approachable and down-to-earth character symbolizes humanity's potential liberation from the narrow confines of worldly concerns, guiding individuals toward richer spiritual and ethical nourishment. Therefore, it can be seen that Heaven in both films is depicted as a place of order, hierarchy, and clarity.

However, not everyone is granted a second chance. In *Beyond Tomorrow*, Arlene's posthumous difference from James and Michael signals her moral corruption. Michael explains that she "did not even have a soul left to wander." She not only succumbs entirely to desire and chaos herself, but also draws others into a shared spiral of moral degeneration. This process of seduction positions her as a dangerous 'other', both terrifying and alluring, embodying humanity's subconscious ambivalence toward desire: the simultaneous yearning for release and fear of losing control. This aligns with Jackson's (1981, p. 4) theory that the other in fantasy often externalizes traits that are unacknowledged or repressed within human nature. Arlene, as the other, also serves as a reflection of James' darker self. The fear she evokes is not merely a reaction to her actions, but to the unsettling truth she reveals: that humanity inherently harbors both light and darkness. Existing in a liminal state between life and death, the ghost further symbolizes this gray area, challenging binary distinctions such as good versus evil or right versus wrong. Through the interplay between the dark self and the externalized other, the film suggests that Christmas serves as a temporal and spatial

platform to confront enduring moral dilemmas. In this way, the film presents morality not as a static or universal binary, but as a dynamic, situational negotiation in which choices, consequences, and the potential for redemption coexist.

From this perspective, fantasy is not about inventing an entirely non-human world; it is not transcendental in the traditional sense. Rather, it involves inverting elements of the familiar world, recombining its constitutive features in novel relations to produce something strange, unfamiliar, and seemingly new—absolutely other and distinct. In *The Bishop's Wife*, the angel's divine nature is not entirely detached from human experience. This tension between proximity and distance evokes a human desire for 'otherness', blending the miraculous with the intimately relatable. To help Henry recognize what he has lost and what he truly needs, Dudley temporarily assumes aspects of Henry's position. When Henry sees Dudley sitting in the living room, telling stories to his daughter while other family members gather around, Dudley creates a space for Henry to observe himself externally. As Jackson (1981, p. 4) observes, the fantastic often functions as a mirror to the self, revealing hidden or repressed aspects of the psyche. Through this celestial intervention, Henry is confronted with the familial and emotional life he has long neglected. Furthermore, Dudley accompanies Julia back to the old community church and restores interest in the boys' choir, symbolically preserving and revitalizing communal bonds. In this way, the film illustrates that the fantastic is not only a mechanism for personal insight but also a vehicle for social and communal rejuvenation, highlighting the interdependence of individual morality, relational bonds, and societal harmony.

2.3 A Christmas Tale Across Time: Fantasy, Transformation, and the Spirit of the Past, Present, and Future

Based on the tension and interaction between fantasy and reality, the affective and ideological effect produced by supernatural intervention is not limited to the moment when angels and ghosts first appear; their movements and activities further destabilize the seemingly solid boundaries of the material world. Chronological time is likewise disrupted: past, present, and future no longer follow a linear sequence, tending instead toward a suspension of normal temporal rules. In *Beyond Tomorrow*, the three elderly men who appear as ghosts are able to remain on Earth only for a limited time. This underscores the temporariness of their existence and emphasizes that their spectral interventions are bounded by a definite endpoint. The ghosts confront a fateful crossroads within their own chronotope of the threshold before the human characters face the moral reckoning. George is the first to encounter this limit: a terrifying voice accompanied by thunder and lightning summons him to hell. Despite Allan and Michael's pleas to stay, he steps into the storm, signaling the inevitability of his

departure from the mortal realm. This moment underscores a critical narrative and ethical function: ghosts are not permanent intermediaries. Their temporary presence emphasizes the transitory characteristic of supernatural guidance and the necessity for humans to exercise moral agency during the time they are observed and influenced. The storm and chaotic atmosphere serve as a spatial and symbolic marker of moral and existential intensity. The disruption of chronological time, coupled with the ephemeral characteristic of the ghosts, reinforces the tension between human choice and cosmic order: while supernatural entities can guide, warn, or intervene, they themselves are subject to temporal and metaphysical limits. This narrative structure highlights the precariousness of moral agency and underscores the ethical imperative for humans to act decisively within the constraints of their own finite existences.

In the meantime, George's walk into the storm signifies a transition from the relative freedom of ghostly movement to a more constrained and predetermined space associated with hell. This shift marks a critical moment in the narrative: the ghosts, though temporarily liberated from human limitations, ultimately face boundaries and consequences that even supernatural mobility cannot evade. During this process, George struggles profoundly with navigating the darkness, and Michael ultimately acknowledges that sometimes one must traverse extended periods of darkness to reach the light. Michael's reflection, framed in 1940 on the eve of World War II hostilities, acquires particular historical resonance. The mythic qualities of George's progress evoke parallels with Dante's spiritual pilgrimage, wherein a journey through terrifying, unknown realms serves as a test of courage, moral discernment, and perseverance (Dixon, 2006b, p. 43).

Soon it is Allan's turn. His son David arrives to guide him into Heaven. Allan's imminent departure, framed by the anticipation of reunion with his deceased wife, foregrounds a cyclical conception of time that privileges return, continuity, and renewal. This portrayal directly contrasts with the conventional linear model of time, in which life is a forward-moving sequence culminating in an irreversible end (Bakhtin, 1981a). Allan's narrative reframes death not as annihilation, but as a threshold to restored existence where past joys, relationships, and affections are reanimated. Time, in this sense, becomes reconciled with eternity, situating mortality within a broader framework of spiritual continuity. Seen in contrast with George's damnation, Allan's journey highlights the operation of moral causality: each ghost's fate reflects a metaphysical balancing of past choices with eternal consequence. This alignment dramatizes humanity's existential predicament—navigating a finite lifespan under the weight of infinite moral implications. The divergent outcomes of George and Allan thus serve as allegories for the ethical law of cause and effect. The film complicates this moral symmetry through its conclusion, when George reappears and reveals he has been granted another chance, this time to enter Heaven alongside Michael. This narrative twist softens the rigidity of eternal judgment, introducing the possibility of redemption even beyond the apparent finality of damnation. By offering the dead opportunities to review, repent, and potentially redeem themselves, the film

communicates a distinctly Christian-humanist vision in which salvation remains accessible so long as the desire for transformation persists.

Compared to the ghosts, the intervention of the angel in *The Bishop's Wife*, though also grounded in connections to the past, places a far greater emphasis on the renewal of present life. Dudley takes Julia back to the restaurant where she and Henry had once become engaged. Her memory serves as a bridge between past and present, infusing the festive setting with nostalgia. Julia is struck by the fact that the restaurant's décor remains unchanged. Yet this continuity of the physical space only highlights a painful absence: Henry has not accompanied her there in a long time. This moment reveals a central tension between the permanence of material environments and the transience of human relationships. As Armitt (2005, p. 10) notes, the fantastic often draws attention to precisely such gaps between the idealized past and the imperfect present. In this way, Dudley's role is not to collapse past and present into seamless unity, but to highlight their dissonance in order to catalyze change. Placed together, these two films reveal complementary modes of negotiating the relationship between time and morality. *Beyond Tomorrow* portrays salvation as cyclical closure: the end of life as a moment of final reckoning where eternal order asserts itself. *The Bishop's Wife*, on the other hand, depicts redemption as an open and ongoing process, attainable through attention to the present and the reconfiguration of neglected relationships.

As such, both films engage with women's feelings of uncertainty and loss in the face of men's obsessive pursuit of ambition. James and Henry assume dominant roles in both career and relationships, while Jean and Julia occupy subordinate positions, continually offering emotional and practical support yet remaining overlooked. This imbalance resonates with feminist critiques of patriarchal structures, in which gendered divisions of labor and authority restrict women's opportunities for self-expression and development (Willis, 1997). Within this framework, the introduction of celestial beings functions as a narrative mechanism to grant these women visibility and value otherwise denied to them. In *The Bishop's Wife*, Henry's renewed attentiveness to Julia is triggered not by an organic recognition of her worth but by jealousy and fear of losing her to Dudley. It is only when Dudley's presence threatens to destabilize Henry's authority that he begins to reconsider his relationship with Julia.

A parallel arc unfolds in *Beyond Tomorrow*, where James finally acknowledges Jean's devotion only after witnessing her grief at his death. Both cases demonstrate that women's recognition is catalyzed not by their own agency but by male characters' realizations—suggesting that celestial figures serve as mediators of women's visibility rather than genuine enablers of female autonomy (Kaplan, 1983a; Modleski, 1988). This dynamic underscores that angels and ghosts operate symbolically as reflections on entrenched gender inequality (Armitt, 2005; Dixon, 2006b). By situating these encounters within the chronotope of the threshold, the films open a space for reconfiguring gender relations: the suspension of time allows characters to

revisit the past and envision alternative futures, where relationships between men and women might shift toward greater balance. Yet the ultimate reliance on male awakening to effect change reveals the persistence of patriarchal norms.

Afterwards, in *The Bishop's Wife*, Dudley and Julia visit Professor Wutheridge (Monty Woolley), one of her old friends. Dudley gently reminds the professor of the reason he once fell in love with history, presenting him with a fresh perspective that allows him to break free from intellectual stagnation and rekindle his passion. This moment underscores the possibility of redefining space and re-experiencing time in a cyclical mode, where past enthusiasms are not lost but can be revived to inspire present action. In this way, the encounter illustrates the film's broader theme that spiritual and emotional renewal often emerges not from radical rupture but from rediscovering and reactivating what had once given life meaning. Dudley also playfully turns the professor's sherry into an inexhaustible bottle. Beyond its comic charm, the miracle functions symbolically as a wellspring of creativity, hope, and inspiration that never runs dry. This gesture alludes to the biblical account of Jesus turning water into wine at the wedding at Cana, the first public miracle recorded in the Gospel of John. Dudley's miracle acquires added resonance at Christmas: it evokes the miraculous birth of Christ, a moment that transforms human history through divine intervention.

Despite the angel's role as a divine problem-solver, his presence also generates moments of inadvertent mischief; in other words, Dudley himself becomes a source of tension for the protagonists, albeit in ways that are temporary and ultimately resolvable. As he grows increasingly close to Julia, Dudley seems to contemplate abandoning his celestial responsibilities in favor of human love. His jealousy surfaces most clearly when he uses divine power to immobilize Henry in his chair, preventing him from joining Julia. Such moments introduce an element of moral ambiguity into the narrative (Rovano, 1993, pp. 58-74). Rather than embodying the flawless perfection of a purely supernatural being, Dudley's flaws—his jealousy, longing, and selfish impulses—make him appear strikingly human. In this process, the angel does not simply provide answers or lead the way. It is not superior to humans; instead, they experience these emotional fluctuations alongside humans. This setup reflects the complexity and contradictions humans face when dealing with emotions such as love and desire, while also highlighting their transformative power, which, in any form, transcends the boundaries between humanity and the divine. Ultimately, the process of growth and change is not smooth, nor can it be directly resolved through external knowledge. It is filled with inner struggles and hardships.

Compared to Clarence in *It's a Wonderful Life*, who primarily allows George to experience and understand life on his own, the angel Dudley in *The Bishop's Wife* embodies a more sustained and theologically resonant presence, whose 'descent' closely parallels the Christian concept of the Incarnation. Just as Jesus' nativity represents the first instance of God entering human history in human form—abandoning transcendence to participate directly in the temporal flow of

human life—Christian theology regards this moment as the "zero point" of history (Wright, 2011, p. 34). Yet, like Christ, who ultimately chose self-sacrifice for the sake of redemption (Barth, 1961), Dudley suppresses his personal desires, quietly supporting the union of Julia and Henry. In this way, Dudley's descent amplifies the broader theological motif of Emmanuel—"God with us"—not as a distant observer, but as an intimate participant in human life, bridging spiritual transcendence and embodied experience (Johnston, 2000, pp. 91-94).

Furthermore, Henry's transformation through his interactions with Dudley is mediated, in part, through a struggle over authority and control. Henry, accustomed to occupying a central role in both his professional and personal life, finds his dominance challenged by Dudley's presence. This tension manifests in jealousy and suspicion, culminating in Henry's provocative assertion that Dudley might not be an angel at all, but a demon sent to torment him. When Henry locks the study door and removes the key, this act functions on multiple levels: physically confining Dudley while simultaneously posing a psychological challenge. By demanding that Dudley perform a miracle to prove his angelic identity, Henry attempts to demystify the supernatural presence and reassert his own hierarchical superiority.

The study room, as a confined and private space, mirrors Henry's internal struggle (Bakhtin, 1981a, p. 11). His expectation—that Dudley, summoned in response to his prayers and acting ostensibly as an earthly assistant, should remain subordinate—clashes with Dudley's increasing autonomy. This juxtaposition sets up a critical tension between the desire for control and the fear of uncertainty, reflecting the broader challenges of reconciling personal authority with forces beyond one's comprehension. Henry perceives Dudley as a threat because he is confined within a secular framework, understanding power primarily as the ability to control resources and others' actions in order to achieve external goals—for instance, his ambition to build the cathedral (Polan, 1986, p. 93). By first participating in everyday life and forming personal connections with Henry and those around him, he gradually demonstrates his supernatural powers—organizing files, decorating the Christmas tree, stopping cars—thereby avoiding the blunt authoritarianism of an omnipotent God's-eye view. This approach not only enhances the emotional resonance of the fantastical, but also subtly reconfigures social and interpersonal hierarchies. Resources are redirected from symbolic monumental projects toward ordinary lives. In this way, Dudley's blend of divinity and humanity allows the fantasy to reshape moral and social orders without breaking the logic of the real world. As Dudley himself says, he is not here to give Henry what he wants, but to help him understand what he truly needs. This forces Henry to reassess his values and priorities.

At the film's conclusion, Dudley completes his mission and promises never to return, an arrangement that not only underscores the temporary characteristic of the angel but also emphasizes the narrative's focus on human free will: the future is not predetermined, but shaped by choices and awakenings in the present. The erasure of memory restores the linearity of time, rendering Henry's transformation both genuine

and untainted. His rush upstairs to reunite with Julia symbolizes a compression of time: long-standing emotional conflicts are resolved within a brief moment, producing an almost miraculous sense of instantaneous renewal (Bakhtin, 1981a). This aligns closely with Bakhtin's (1981b, p. 248) concept of the chronotope of the threshold, in which "time is essentially instantaneous; it seems to have no duration and falls out of the normal course of biographical time." This temporal dislocation carries dual significance. On one hand, it destabilizes the linear order of human time: during the angel's intervention, past, present, and future appear unconstrained, allowing conventional causal relations to be temporarily suspended. On the other hand, it reaffirms the linear framework of human experience: after the angel departs, memory fades and life returns to its ordinary course, demonstrating reality's capacity for self-restoration. The film thus resonates with broader social contexts, reflecting the coexistence of fragility and resilience in human experience: external forces—whether divine intervention, catastrophe, or the war—can temporarily disrupt established order, yet underlying continuity and regenerative mechanisms enable personal and societal restoration.

The transformation reaches its culmination on Christmas Eve, when Henry delivers the sermon he believes he has authored. As Dudley notes upon his arrival, angels are everywhere, often blending into the crowd. Now, Dudley embodies this very notion—standing behind the congregation, observing silently as events unfold, unnoticed by any of the human characters. This narrative device creates a closed loop, emphasizing the cyclical nature of time. As Bakhtin (1981a, p. 23) observes, "Time, as it is represented in the chronotope, is always developing, always connected to action and the movement of characters… and it can go back, looping into itself, in order to set the parameters for a new beginning." Here, Dudley's influence demonstrates that transformations persist beyond his visible presence, as the multiple lives he touches converge into a greater, unified process. Those affected continue forward with faith inspired by him, even without conscious memory, illustrating Bakhtin's (1981a, p. 54) notion of the "static and dynamic" coexistence in a polyphonic narrative. Bakhtin developed this concept from his study of Dostoevsky, arguing that in polyphonic texts, different voices and consciousnesses remain independent and dialogic, rather than subordinated to a single narrative authority. Here, static time, represented by Henry's forgotten memories of Dudley, exists in tension with dynamic time, in which the consequences of the angel's intervention unfold subtly yet profoundly. Henry's renewed sermon, performed without recollection of Dudley, exemplifies the invisible yet enduring effects of divine guidance. This conclusion reflects people's desire to transcend the limits of their own understanding and to receive guidance and opportunities for growth.

Just like *A Christmas Carol*, both *The Bishop's Wife* (1947) and *Beyond Tomorrow* (1940) possess a timeless quality, deeply rooted in their exploration of universal themes such as love, redemption, forgiveness, and personal growth. These themes, central to the narrative, are universal human concerns that transcend time, making the holiday season an ideal setting for exploring personal transformation and

reconciliation. This kind of thematic exploration is not confined to fantasy films alone—*A Christmas Carol* exemplifies how these themes are embedded in the narrative structure of all genres such as family melodrama as discussed in Chapter 1. However, what sets *The Bishop's Wife* and *Beyond Tomorrow* apart is their use of fantasy to bring these themes to life. While films in other genres may explore love, forgiveness, and transformation in more grounded, realistic settings, fantasy films—through supernatural interventions—create a space where personal growth becomes a literal and visible transformation. It is through these magical interventions that Christmas becomes a moment where the divine intersects with the human. In this way, influenced by the *Christmas carol,* these supernatural forces elevate the holiday beyond the ordinary, much like ghosts, angels and spirits themselves, transcends time and space. They transform Christmas into a timeless symbol in films, allowing it to resonate across generations and remain a constant presence in modern cultural narratives.

Conclusion

To sum up, this chapter has examined the representation of Christmas in 1940s fantasy films through the case studies of *Beyond Tomorrow* and *The Bishop's Wife*. In these films, ghosts, angels, or devils descend from beyond to earth, temporarily suspending ordinary reality. Through the temporal framework of Christmas and spatial settings such as the mansion, the study room, and the hospital, these interventions establish a chronotope of the threshold—a liminal space where the boundaries between the human and the supernatural blur (Bakhtin, 1984). These films express the idea that, no matter how difficult the reality may be, when the world seems to be collapsing, there is always some higher power at work, controlling and orchestrating these seemingly tragic events, ultimately for the greater good of humanity. Such representations held particular resonance during the turbulent 1940s, reflecting an underlying human desire for guidance amidst helplessness and uncertainty for the future.

As emphasized in the previous chapter, I argue that Christmas functions as a channel through which intimate familial concerns resonate outward, reflecting broader social and historical shifts. These films utilize the domestic sphere to explore collective issues, suggesting that social cohesion begins within the family. The individual's personal journey—decisions, crises, and resolutions—becomes a vehicle through which national identity is imagined, tested, and reaffirmed. In contrast, this chapter examines Christmas as an entry point—a moment inviting divine or supernatural intervention into the lives of ordinary individuals. Through such external intrusion, characters are prompted to confront internal conflicts, make ethical choices, and experience spiritual transformation. Despite differences in genre and structure, both

family melodramas and fantasy films position Christmas as a pivotal moment of reflection, renewal, and emotional intensity. However, their narrative trajectories are fundamentally opposed: the former moves from the private to the collective, while the latter moves from the transcendent to the internal. Compared to family melodramas, which are primarily rooted in everyday realities, fantasy films adopt a more transcendent, holistic perspective, aiming to go beyond reality. This characteristic is central to the genre and is notably exemplified in *It's a Wonderful Life*. In this film, the narrative begins with external fantastical intervention—the arrival of the angel—which prompts George to reflect on his life and moral choices (inward), and this individual awakening subsequently reverberates outward, affecting his family and social relationships. Therefore, while the narrative incorporates fantasy elements, its thematic and emotional core remains closely aligned with that of family melodrama.

It can be argued that Christmas embodies a binary opposition in these films—a tension not only reflected in the contrast between genres, but also plays out internally within fantasy itself. As Rosemary Jackson (1981) argues, fantasy is not to escape from reality, but to challenge and subvert it—dismantling its established structures and imagining new systems. Accordingly, Christmas is endowed with a subversive function to serve the narrative demands of fantasy: by disrupting the routine rhythm of everyday life and introducing miracles and supernatural elements, it opens up a space between reality and the supernatural where fantasy can unfold naturally and gain cultural legitimacy. The narrative structure of such fantasies reflects this ontological instability. The narrator is often no more omniscient than the protagonist; interpretation is withheld, and the status of events—whether they are real, symbolic, or hallucinated—remains unresolved. This echoes Tzvetan Todorov's (1975) definition of the fantastic as a mode of hesitation, in which neither a natural nor supernatural explanation is fully confirmed. In this sense, the fantasy film resists a single coherent worldview, opting instead for an open-ended narrative space where meaning is provisional and constantly negotiated. Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981a) concept of the dialogic is particularly relevant here: fantasy is inherently dialogical in that it rejects monologic, totalizing interpretations and invites a plurality of perspectives. It prompts viewers to question conventional structures of understanding and to engage in active meaning-making. The real becomes not a fixed ontological category, but a site of continuous interrogation. Thus, Christmas functions as a transformative moment of encounter—between the ordinary and the extraordinary, the self and the other, the real and the fantastic.

Both films have dwelt at length on the imagination of a deus ex machina including ghost, angels or demons, as a central structuring mechanism that gives shape to the threshold chronotope. In *Beyond Tomorrow*, the appearance of ghosts immediately constitutes a disruption in the linearity of time. They symbolize unresolved emotional conflicts or unfinished business, representing a past that people cannot escape or forget. Their presence existentially demonstrates William Faulkner's (1951, p. 92) famous claim that "The past is never dead. It is not even past." Faulkner's statement is itself hauntological: the first sentence suggests an eternal past, the existence of which

is positively enunciated by its transcendence of time itself, while the second sentence negates the idea of the past entirely. The meaning of these contradictory statements, lies in the spectral gap which occupies the space between the two: the past, as eternally present and nonexistent is, then, present and absent, dead and alive. By helping others, the ghosts not only resolve the present conflicts but also accomplish the redemption of their past selves.

By contrast, the angel or demon transcends the temporal constraints of human existence, yet their presence also challenges the idea of a fixed future. Angels and demons are two sides of the same coin, depending on how humans perceive them. Their presence is a reminder of a future that is both already here and yet not here—a paradoxical dance of potentiality, ever-present yet always just out of grasp. At one level they are inscrutable; at another they are all too knowable, as we could be looking at our own futures reflected back to us. Dudley's journey down to earth at Christmas is deeply connected to Christian values, linking the holiday to broader traditions. His presence not only reflects a divine operating mechanism, but also embodies the idea that God loves all humanity. The intervention of celestial beings demonstrate that such guidance is not always immediately apparent; rather, it is often embedded in the choices and actions of individuals. The true miracle of life, then, lies in the capacity to positively influence one another through compassion and sacrifice.

The timeless exploration of themes such as life and death, morality and materialism in these films resonates closely with Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. *Beyond Tomorrow* can be understood as a cinematic reorientation of Dickens's narrative, with its depiction of the afterlife imbued with gentle moral undertones that address the human need for reassurance amid grief and loss. Similarly, *The Bishop's Wife* intertwines the bishop's personal reconciliation with his family alongside the revitalization of his broader community, expanding Dickensian themes of redemption and interpersonal connection into a more universal framework. This perspective positions the film both as a continuation of the *Christmas Carol*'s cultural and moral legacy and as a product of its specific historical moment, offering enduring lessons while responding to the pressing social and emotional needs of the 1940s seeking restoration and healing. Compared with the *Christmas Carol*, these two films employ fantastical elements to expand the characters' cognition of their values and behaviours, rather than directly addressing systemic or structural social issues. In fact, they still operate within the same societal framework, seeking transformation and moral insight.

As such, viewers are drawn into an infinite present, poised precariously between past and future—a fleeting, ungraspable moment that resists resolution—and into an indeterminate space suspended between the mortal and the supernatural, at once neither fully material nor entirely metaphysical. In these films, the journey of personal transformation is not rendered as a linear progression but rather as a continual negotiation between what has been, what currently is, and what might yet become. Christmas functions as the crucible of this temporal interweaving, where past, present, and future converge, revealing themselves not as discrete or isolated entities but as

deeply entangled dimensions that ceaselessly shape and reshape one another. Through this intricate interplay of time and space, characters are able to cross a threshold toward an altered, redeemed self. Enabled by the fantasy genre's suspension and disruption of reality, this process gestures toward the possibility of reconstructing a new moral order and reoriented set of priorities.

Chapter 3 The Utopia of Femininity: imagination, gender and festivity in 1940s romantic comedies

Introduction

In the previous two chapters, the representation of Christmas has been closely tied to themes of romance, love, and gender relationships. This chapter develops these ideas via a focus on the ways in which romance and comedy can be understood as fictional modes – that is, as ways of treating the narrative or, more precisely, as particular ways of imagining the diegetic world. As Campbell (1999) states, romantic comedy often relies on a highly ritualized space-time setting to intensify emotional projection, and Christmas is a typical example of such a setting. Elements such as festive decorations, the exchange of gifts, and the gathering around the dinner table all serve as catalysts for romance and laughter. The holiday becomes a signal of 'happily ever after'—a symbolic guarantee that the relationship will last beyond the closing scene (Landay, 1998, p. 5). The romantic union thus acquires a sense of timelessness, suggesting that love can endure across time and social change. However, the social transformations of the 1940s—particularly the trauma and separation caused by the Second World War—confronted playwrights with an ethical dilemma: as Landay (1998, p. 5) suggests, the very possibility of laughter and romantic love within this context seemed not appropriate.

The aim of this chapter is to examine the ways in which Christmas is mobilized within romantic comedies of this period, in order to better understand both the evolution of the Hollywood romantic comedy and the ways in which its generic positioning intersects with the fictional modes through which Christmas is represented. During this era, the romantic comedy genre became increasingly complex, as light-hearted narratives often masked deeper emotional tensions and social contradictions. By focusing on the specific strategies these films employ to integrate Christmas into their narratives, the case studies presented here engage with broader discussions of domesticity, labor, and gender dynamics in Hollywood cinema, as well as their relationship to American culture in the 1940s. This decade also saw romantic comedies marked by ambiguity and contestation surrounding women's social roles, as

female characters navigated the tension between traditional expectations and the pressures of social change. Moreover, the industrial context of the Production Code Administration also plays a part in these ideological negotiations (Greene, 2010). The key argument of this chapter is that the dual contexts of culture and genre create a specific confluence, which becomes particularly evident when analyzing the representational strategies through which Christmas is depicted.

Drawing on case studies of *Remember The Night* (Mitchell Leisen, 1940) and *Christmas In Connecticut* (Peter Godfrey, 1945), I demonstrate the ways in which Christmas is used to facilitate a symbolic transition from the individualized urban chronotope to a pastoral idyll, reinforcing the broader opposition between urban modernity and localised communal belonging explored throughout this thesis. Through close analysis of these films, I argue that the relocation to the pastoral becomes an important mechanism through which the gendered and class tensions of the period could be negotiated. In this regard, I suggest that Christmas, within the context of 1940s romantic comedy functions to provide an idealized temporal and spatial framework as a means of "inventing imaginary or formal 'solutions' to unresolvable social contradictions" (Jameson, 1981, p. 79).

Remember the Night (1940) and *Christmas in Connecticut* (1945) both serve as star vehicles for one of the era's most popular actresses, Barbara Stanwyck. Throughout the 1930s, Barbara Stanwyck was frequently cast as strong-willed women who ultimately paid a high price for challenging social and sexual norms, as in *Forbidden* (1932) and *Stella Dallas* (1937), reflecting what Haskell (1987, p. 12) identifies as the tendency of classical Hollywood cinema to punish female independence and transgressive sexuality. As Gledhill (1987, p. 5) further suggests, such female characters often oscillated between empowerment and containment within domestic and melodramatic structures. *Remember the Night* continues this trajectory while adopting a more subdued and morally reflective tone. Written by Preston Sturges and directed by Mitchell Leisen, the film tells the story of prosecutor Jack Sargent (Fred MacMurray), who bails out female shoplifter Lee Leander (Barbara Stanwyck) just before Christmas. The timing of the crime prompts Jack to prevent Lee from spending the holiday in prison. When they discover a shared connection to Indiana, Jack invites Lee to join him on his car trip home for the holidays. This 'road trip' structure provides the narrative framework for the mismatched couple to spend time together and gradually develop a romantic bond. As with all romantic comedies, the film relies on narrative tensions and character contrasts to drive the story. Here, the central tension lies in the protagonists' opposing social identities—he is a prosecutor, she is a thief. Like earlier films such as *It Happened One Night* (1934), the film uses witty dialogue, the road-trip structure, and a cross-class romance to explore broader social divides. In particular, the way *Remember the Night* encodes the protagonists' distinctive class positions reflects a continuation of 1930s genre conventions, exemplified by films such as *My Man Godfrey* (1936), which negotiated the lingering

effects of the Great Depression and heightened cultural awareness of class and marginality in American society.

In comparison, *Christmas in Connecticut* more clearly emerges from the screwball comedies of the 1930s, evolving from a spectrum of comedic forms ranging from slapstick to sophisticated, and from anarchic to populist. The premise of Stanwyck's writer character, who must maintain a credible façade while deceiving those around her, aligns closely with the screwball comedy tradition. At the same time, the film sustains a lighthearted and humorous tone, incorporating just enough of the holiday atmosphere to remain believable (Beach, 2015). Like earlier films including *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) and *The Lady Eve* (1941), *Christmas in Connecticut* draws upon contemporary cultural discourses surrounding companionate marriage, leisure, and what has been described as "fun morality" (Ruiz Pardos, 2000, p. 153).

Just as my method proceeds from context to text, the structural logic of this chapter moves from the general to the particular—not only from genre to cycle, but also from cycle to individual films and their star couples (Gehring, 1986, p. 21). In order to develop my arguments, I begin by outlining some of the generic, critical, and industrial issues surrounding 1940s romantic comedies, while also describing key genre conventions. This provides the foundation for situating both the genre and my case study films within their broader cultural context, with particular attention to how the development of 1930s romantic comedy—especially the screwball comedy cycle—continued to shape genre conventions and representation in the 1940s. I then argue that the 1940s were a period of consolidation for the romantic comedy genre, during which certain conventions—including the codification of Christmas settings, themes, and narrative structures—became firmly established. This consolidation also involved the theorization of the happy ending, engaging with classical narrative models and ideas of resolution. At the same time, the choices available to romantic couples were constrained by the dominant ideology of heterosexual monogamy. However, such constraints did not necessarily amount to ideological affirmation, as the ideological tensions inherent in Hollywood romantic comedy were rarely resolved in a fully convincing manner.

According to Glitre (2006, p. 25), the shifting historical and ideological circumstances from which romantic comedies develop are reflected in the variations of their themes and styles. Her examination sheds light on the junction of gender and professional identity (Glitre, 2006). The World War II altered the conventional roles of American women as wives and homemakers, necessitating their participation as heads of households, combatants and wage earners on an emerging ideological 'home front'. Within this context, Glitre (2006) places romantic comedies within the context of broader cultural discussions regarding the role that women played in public life both during and after the war. She identifies gender inversion as a recurrent theme, drawing on discourses about gender roles, momism, and popular Freudianism, in which women hold positions of power while males play a submissive role (Glitre,

2006). Nevertheless, instances of such inversion are usually portrayed as 'unnatural' and as a cause of tension or conflict in the films. Building on this theoretical framework, this study examines how romantic comedies of the 1940s engage with discourses of gender and sexuality, while also attending, albeit more briefly, to the ways in which issues of class inform the genre's evolving narratives.

The underlying philosophy that shapes both this thesis as a whole and this chapter in particular resists a teleological view of history in which the goals of feminism are understood as continually moving forward in a linear trajectory. As an alternative, this chapter makes use of the influential idea of 'women's time' that was developed by Julia Kristeva in 1981 as its theoretical foundation. Specifically, Kristeva (1981) introduces three distinct modes of temporal experience: linear time, cyclical time, and a third form that she refers to as monumental or atemporal time. Linear time, which is characterised by historical progression, social accomplishment, and forward motion, is often associated with male-dominated ideologies that prioritise progress and individual advancement (Kristeva, 1981, pp. 13-35). Cyclical time, on the other hand, is related with biological reproduction, caregiving, and domestic life. It represents the repeating rhythms that are given to women under conventional frameworks. These two temporal models create rigid boundaries between male and female identities, so frequently relegating women to responsibilities that are primarily related to family and fertility (Kristeva, 1981, pp. 13-35).

Notably, Kristeva (1981, pp. 13-35) conceptualises a mode of temporal experience that surpasses the traditional dichotomies of linear and cyclical time: monumental time. In contrast to linear time, which emphasises historical advancement and social accomplishments, and cyclical time, which is associated with biological and household patterns, monumental time is characterised by its non-linearity, openness, and resistance to established identities or conventional social positions. This notion of temporality is subjective, expansive and fluid. In this research, Kristeva's (1981) notion of women's time serves as a crucial lens for scrutinising how female characters in 1940s romantic comedies navigate, negotiate, and sometimes defy temporal and identity limitations. It elucidates how they redefine their social responsibilities, showcasing an increasingly intricate, itinerant identity that surpasses traditional constraints.

To further develop this theoretical framework, Bakhtin's (1981a) concept of the chronotope will be brought into dialogue with Kristeva's (1981) notion of women's time as a critical lens through which to examine romantic comedy texts. It explores how different temporal frameworks are culturally and ideologically mapped onto gendered identities. As such, this study contributes to understanding how romantic comedy continuously adjusts its narrative strategies in response to the historical shifts in gender ideology. In these two films, the female protagonists experience a critical shift during Christmas holiday from the individualized, goal-oriented 'historical time' of the modern urban city to the 'cyclical time' of the pastoral idyll (Kristeva, 1981,

pp. 13-35). Therefore, this chapter explores how Christmas serves in the text as a point of convergence between linear and cyclical temporalities, and how it interacts with, negotiates, or generates tension within these chronotopic structures. Building on this, it further focuses on how female characters move between these two temporal frameworks, and in particular, how the temporal rupture offered by the holiday creates opportunities to question, negotiate, or reconfigure gender expectations. Eventually, by comparing the similarities and differences in how gender roles are constructed through the Christmas setting in the two films, this chapter aims to reveal the ways in which the genre has evolved over time and the ways in which these shifts are always occurring in relationship with matters of gender and class.

3.1 Christmas Romance: Exploring Holiday in Historical Dynamics of Romantic Comedy

Given that most romantic comedies have many of the same key components, it might be difficult to categorize a movie as one in certain ways. Comedy and romance may be found in one form or another as a prevalent form of narrative device in many, if not most, genre films. The root of the romantic comedy genre can be traced back to Shakespeare‘s comedies from the late 1590s, with *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* being the most purely romantic; *Much Ado About Nothing* is more akin to a comedy of manners, and *The Merchant of Venice* is more akin to tragicomedy (Mortimer, 2010). Potter (2002, p. 85) comments on how Shakespearian comedies oscillate between comedy and disaster, “balancing on the precarious tightrope between the light and dark side of relationships.” According to Gerald Mast (1979, p. 12), the romcom can be regarded as a hybrid of the romance and comedy genres, featuring a narrative that centres on the progress of a relationship, and, being a comedy, resulting in a happy ending. This genre creates a comic climate through a series of cues to the audience: subject matter is treated as trivial, jokes and physical humor make fun of events, and characters are protected from harm. Even though the drama poses serious problems, such as choosing a life partner, the process appears lighthearted, anticipating a positive resolution. The plot of most romantic comedies could be presented with the earnestness of melodrama, but the humorous tone transforms the experience. It assumes a self-deprecating stance which signals the audience to relax and have fun, for nothing serious will disturb their pleasure. However, this sly pose allows comic artists to influence their audience while the viewers take little notice of the work’s persuasive power.

Emerging in the 1930s, screwball comedy, as a subgenre of romantic comedy, achieved a widespread success during the early sound era (Gehring, 2002). The year 1934, marked by the release of Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night*, signified the emergence of screwball comedy (Glitre, 2006). According to film critic Andrew Sarris (1998, p. 6), the film's success in blending fast-paced dialogue with exaggerated scenarios set a precedent for the genre. Its critical acclaim, including four Academy Awards, cemented its role in establishing this subgenre. While the term 'screwball' was initially coined to describe the eccentric heroine Irene Bullock (Carole Lombard) in *My Man Godfrey* (Gregory LaCava, 1936), it has since come to represent a broader genre that deviates from classical romantic comedy conventions (Glitre, 2006). Gehring (2002, p. 91) distinguishes screwball comedy from traditional romantic comedy by noting that the former "puts the emphasis on a funny spoofing of love," whereas the latter traditionally "accents love".

By the late 1930s, screwball comedy had begun to mature. A significant example from this period is *The Awful Truth* (Leo McCarey, 1937). James Naremore (1988) notes that *The Awful Truth* represents a critical stage in the genre's evolution, with its intricate character dynamics and sophisticated humor reflecting a deeper narrative complexity. The early 1940s saw screwball comedy reach an artistic zenith. *His Girl Friday* (Howard Hawks, 1940) is widely regarded as a pinnacle of the genre (Glitre, 2006). Jonathan Rosenbaum (2023) suggests that Howard Hawks broadened the thematic possibilities of screwball comedy by integrating social commentary, particularly in relation to journalism and gender dynamics. As Bergman (1972, p. 11) notes, screwball comedies used humor to address serious social issues, including class conflict and gender roles, while wrapping these critiques in a light, non-threatening tone that allowed audiences to engage with difficult topics without discomfort. This approach enabled the genre to explore tensions in society, all while offering audiences a means of reconciliation through laughter. Building upon this, my argument is that screwball comedies of this period of time as a historical genre were collectively more progressive than regressive and that this genre used zany humor to both critique society, particularly issues of gender and class, and to imagine an idealized world where gender equality, personal fulfillment, and economic stability could exist.

The empowerment of women and emasculation of men during the Great Depression is further illustrated in the screwball genre of the 1930s and early 1940s (Gehring, 1986). Though the male characters in the screwball cycle are also eccentric and idealistic, it is usually the heroine who drives the convoluted plot and comic misadventures. This gender inversion has sparked considerable scholarly debate. On one hand, Molly Haskell's (1974a, p. 34) interpretation of screwball comedies proposes that these films offer more than a fleeting inversion of gender norms; they engage in a nuanced negotiation of gender roles. She argues that while screwball comedies often feature strong, assertive female protagonists who challenge traditional gender roles, the resolutions of these films should not be seen merely as a return to traditional norms.

Instead, these resolutions reflect a more complex engagement with evolving cultural expectations. Haskell (1974a, p. 34) suggests that these films use comedic devices not only to subvert but also to explore the limitations and possibilities of gender roles within their specific cultural and historical context. For example, in *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), while Susan Vance's unconventional behavior and dominance drive much of the narrative, the film concludes with her marrying David Huxley. This resolution might initially appear to reinforce traditional gender norms. However, the final marriage is not just a return to conventional roles but a recognition of the changing dynamics of gender relationships, where the female character's assertiveness is integrated into a new understanding of partnership.

On the other hand, Robert Sklar (1992, p. 187-8) claims that "screwball comedies were the last refuge of the satire, self-mockery and sexual candor of early 1930s filmmaking, but their iconoclasm was used, overtly at least to support the status quo". They belonged firmly to the tradition of romantic comedies whose purpose was to show how imagination, curiosity, and cleverness—those dangerous levers of social change—could be channeled into support of things as they are. The screwball comedies by and large celebrated the sanctity of marriage, class distinction and the domination of women by men. Other scholars who followed Haskell and Sklar also find the genre regressive for various reasons. Feminist scholars have critiqued (heterosexual) marriage as "a patriarchal institution that reinforced gender inequality, particularly around domestic labor, sexual autonomy, and parenting" (hooks, 2000, p. 78). Yet many feminists do marry, presumably without giving up their goals of gender equality. In her accessible theory book, Feminism is for Everyone, bell hooks (2000, p. 86) writes:

> in future feminist movement we will spend less time critiquing patriarchal marriage bonds and expend more effort showing alternatives, showing the value of peer relationships which are founded on principles of equality, respect, and the belief that mutual satisfaction and growth are needed for partnerships to be fulfilling and lasting.

From my perspective, the heroine's playful performance of the vamp, within a convoluted plot to save her love interest, radically rehabilitated the idea of female sexuality as predatory and unhealthy to something empowering and conducive to a more idealistic, selfless view of love. The film *Why Be Good* (1929) took it a step further with its flapper heroine, whose materialistic desire and flirtatious behavior did not disrupt an ideal of female sexual purity. This movie successfully mediated old ideals of feminine virtue with new modes of acceptable female behavior. Yet the issue of the heroine's lower class, central to the flapper archetype, was easily resolved by marriage to a wealthy man, once she proved herself worthy. While films promote female agency and subjectivity, they also subtly uphold traditional social structures—these two aspects are not mutually exclusive. This tension is precisely

what makes romantic comedy texts so rich for analysis. It reveals both the progressive consciousness of the era and the complexity and compromises inherent in the process of social change.

While not offering a radical solution, screwball comedies like *The Good Fairy* (William Wyler, 1935) prove powerful in their ability to imagine utopian possibilities—filmic worlds temporarily reshaped by women, restoring happiness and creating a sense of equality (Gehring, 1986, p. 51). Despite its fanciful tone and seemingly naïve heroine, *The Good Fairy* playfully parodies romantic ideology while acknowledging that love may function as the only available means of escaping a reality that restricts women's sexual and economic autonomy. Cavell (1981, p. 142) updates earlier genre analysis by proposing that screwball comedies operate as "comedies of remarriage," narratives that respond to modern transformations in the meaning of love and marriage. He argues that the screwball couple achieves resolution by rejecting prevailing social or legal definitions of marriage and creating a private world founded on the reaffirmation of love. However, Cavell's interpretation depends on the couple withdrawing from the world and establishing an alternative space of their own.

I would argue instead that screwball comedies do not depict an escape from the social world but rather a playful reconfiguration of it. The protagonists do not reject society outright; rather, they reorganize its structures to accommodate their desires. This is evident in the final scenes of *The Good Fairy*, where Lu and Max meet in Max's office to unravel the consequences of Lu's well-intentioned lies. The resolution does not remove them from the social order but brings together characters from the working class (Detlaff and Lu), the middle class (Max), and the upper class (Konrad). The figure of "the good fairy" thus enacts a zany, idealistic logic that harmonizes—rather than abandons—the existing class structure.

In this context, Everson (1994, p. 72) reveals the initial objective of the screwball comedy genre, which was to make fun of the wealthy population and portray their problems in a humorous way. Classic examples like *My Man Godfrey* (1936) and *The Lady Eve* (1941) illustrate this, with characters such as Godfrey, a 'forgotten man', forcing the oblivious and frivolous upper-class Bullock family to confront their own absurdities. These films underscore the absurdity of wealth and privilege, using the working-class perspective to critique the blind indulgence of the rich. With films such as these, the screwball comedy genre of this era masterfully utilized humor and satire to highlight the stark differences between the working class and the upper class. However, Gehring (2001) notes that although screwball comedies frequently mocked elite social behaviour, they simultaneously invited audiences to enjoy the glamour and excess associated with upper-class life. While the genre certainly mocked the wealthy, it also explored the interaction between social classes, particularly through class crossovers, as seen in films like *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) and *The Awful Truth* (1937). In these narratives, characters from different social standings—such as a working-class man paired with a wealthy woman—enter into situations that both

highlight class disparities and attempt to challenge or resolve them. This juxtaposition creates comedic tension but also underlines the societal reality that such inequalities are not easily overcome.

These class negotiations also intersected with emerging gender politics. The genre, particularly through its female characters, began to explore the tensions between traditional gender roles and the pressures of social change, as women navigated the shifting expectations surrounding marriage, career, and independence. While films like *The Lady Eve* and *Bringing Up Baby* offer a critique of class, they also reflect how gender politics were negotiated through class interactions. In both films, women like Jean Arthur and Katharine Hepburn not only cross class boundaries but also challenge traditional gender expectations by asserting their autonomy and desire. This blend of class and gender conflict within screwball comedies is key to understanding how these films reflect and respond to the socio-political realities of the society, particularly the increasing visibility of women in the workforce and their evolving role in American society.

Furthermore, Bergman (1972) extends this argument by suggesting that screwball comedies worked toward reconciling class divisions, often featuring storylines where characters from different classes found themselves living or working together. Films like *It Happened One Night* (1934) and *The Philadelphia Story* (1940) exemplify this blending of social classes. Bergman's (1972, p. 52) distinction between the "exploding" films of the early 1930s, which depicted societal breakdowns, and the more "implosive" screwball comedies of the late 1930s highlights how these later films placed their characters within a more stable social order, making class conflicts a source of humor rather than despair. Ultimately, screwball comedies of this era used class conflict as a comedic device, playing up the absurdity of the rich-poor divide. However, the resolution often came through love and romance, suggesting that while society remained divided by class, personal relationships could transcend these barriers. In this way, screwball comedies offered not just satire, but also an optimistic—if idealized—vision of class reconciliation, achieved through laughter and the resolution of misunderstandings. In this regard, and through films such as the case studies chosen for this chapter, we can see how the romantic comedies of the 1940s, retain much of the generic traits from the previous decade. However, it is when we come to look more closely at the ways in which Christmas is constructed and mobilized within the romantic comedy films of the 1940s, that we can get a sense of some of the ways in which the genre is negotiating key cultural and social tensions around class and gender.

Despite the increasingly rich narrative devices utilized in this genre, Christmas was noticeably absent from the 1930s. It was not until the early 1940s that films like *The Shop Around the Corner* (1940) and *Christmas in July* (1940)—as continuations of the 1930s screwball cycle—began to showcase Christmas more prominently. These films represented a shift, as Christmas became a more integral narrative element,

though still secondary to the central romantic and comedic conflicts. Thus, the study of Christmas in 1940s romantic comedies is significant because it prompts a comparison of the genre to its past while also considering the impact of the 1940s context that could lead to such a significant change.

In the early 1940s, Christmas primarily serves as a backdrop for misunderstandings and comedic situations in this genre, as seen in *Christmas in July*, where a mistaken prize win drives the plot, and *The Shop Around the Corner*, where anonymous love letters and workplace tension unfold amidst the festive season (Brill, 2024, p. 76). At the same time, the holiday emerged as an increasingly prominent device used to highlight conflicts surrounding gender and class, while also facilitating reconciliation between characters. In *Christmas in July*, issues of wealth and class are brought to the forefront through the fantasy of sudden financial success. Similarly, In *The Shop Around the Corner*, the impact of hierarchical and gendered tensions within the workplace is similarly softened by the festive atmosphere. In both films, Christmas resolves these structural issues by offering a momentary sense of harmony through humor and sentiment. This dual role enhances the complexity and tension for 1930s screwball cycle, ultimately emphasizing that even in moments of reconciliation, the underlying social contradictions remain ever-present.

With America's entry into the war, it brought a devastating blow to the screwball cycle (Glitre, 2006, p. 4). The classical format, which often thrived on the comedic union of couples, faced significant challenges. The war created a physical and emotional rift, separating men from women, husbands from wives. The reunion of families and the celebration of holidays became increasingly difficult. This dramatic shift in societal dynamics led to a noticeable neglect of Christmas as a thematic element in films during this period. Filmmakers in 1942 sought alternative narratives that would both sustain the popularity of the romantic comedy genre and support the military efforts of the time. By prioritizing themes of separation, sacrifice, and resilience over holiday celebration, these films reflected the realities of wartime life and the profound impact of the conflict on personal relationships (Grindon, 2011). The most popular screwball comedies of the war were based on the pattern offered by the successful 1942 film *The Major and the Minor*, including *The More the Merrier* (1943), *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* (1944), and *Christmas in Connecticut* (1945), the comedy that earned the biggest box-office return during the war years" (Schatz, 1997, p. 229).

For instance, the love interest in *The More the Merrier*, Joe Carter (Joel McCrea), differed from the typical screwball hero. McCrea was no stranger to the genre with his turns in *Sullivan's Travels* (1941) and *The Palm Beach Story* (1942). Yet his character in *The More the Merrier* shows a new type of masculinity in the screwball genre. Unlike Herbert Marshall in *The Good Fairy*, Melvyn Douglas in *Theodora Goes Wild*, McCrea's performance shows no childlike foibles. The war time romantic comedies shifts the focus from social status to the individual contributions for the greater good,

highlighting shared goals and sacrifices over class distinctions. Joe is introduced carrying a plane propeller as he seeks housing. The prop is unique but not out of place given the wartime context. Carter's dialogue with Dingle, with a dry delivery and lack of playful romantic tension, feels more akin to the wit of noir rather than screwball. Their love is imposed in the face of adversity. As screwball transitioned to the 1940s, the genre stopped creating a world in which marriage could equal happiness and fulfillment, and took this tenet as a given, despite evidence to the contrary (Fine, 2003, p. 82).

The More the Merrier was seen to support rather than subvert the clear ideology of WWII-era U.S.A. The social changes that came with the war certainly ended the screwball genre, but not because romance was no longer seen as important. The film presents an idealized scenario of social cooperation, as Joe shares an apartment with Connie (Jean Arthur), who comes from an upper-class background. This arrangement disrupts class boundaries, illustrating how, during the war, characters are compelled to gather together and seek mutual support and security. While such situations may not fully reflect reality, they convey a strong desire for the pressing themes of cooperation and resilience during wartime, emphasizing the film's focus on collective effort over individual class identities. In a 1930s screwball comedy, irrationality is aligned with personal happiness. In a 1940s screwball comedy, irrationality (marrying someone you may never see again) becomes aligned with sadness (Gehring, 2002, p. 71). During the Depression, a return to the status quo was something to be questioned, particularly the logic of capitalism and class. During the war, a return to the status quo was longed for.

Likewise, *The More the Merrier* reconfigures the tropes and tensions of the screwball genre toward a new romantic comedy cycle wherein society shapes a woman's desires, rather than the other way around. The plot's grounding in reality, though farcical, distinguishes it tonally from the more surreal or fantastical films of the 1930s. The conflicts and relationships portrayed, while heightened for comedic effect, are still plausible within the framework of real-world social structures and cultural norms, such as class distinctions and gender roles. This contrasts with many 1930s screwball comedies, where the humor often arises from highly improbable or absurd scenarios that depart from real-world logic, as also seen in films like *Bringing Up Baby* and *The Awful Truth.*

In *The More the Merrier*, when the narrator discusses the "formality and custom" of the city, we see a car full of women picking up a male sailor, clearly reversing "formal and custom" gender roles. In screwball style, this use of irony playfully comments on society's ideals and reality, yet there is a crucial difference from earlier films in the genre. Though the circumstance was real, the reversed gender dynamics are playfully exaggerated, such as in a scene where a line of women clocking into work, aggressively wolf-whistle at a passing man, who begins to walk more quickly as the whistles grow louder. The friendly play-fighting between a couple in the films of the 1930s evolved into antagonistic battle of the sexes (Capel, 2000, pp. 89-103).

While these new opportunities "loosened traditional means of control over [women's] lives" (McEuen, 2011, p. 1), this freedom also made women's sexuality a double-edge sword of danger (as seen in propaganda posters about "venereal disease") and support (as seen in the pin-up girl) (Hegarty, 2008, p. 10). The female trickster who had been sympathetically portrayed in the figure of the golddigger of the pre-code films or the strategically screwy heroine of the later 1930s, no longer represented larger cultural ideals, whether anti or pro-social.

By the end of World War II, the Hollywood romantic comedy was sapped of its wit and energy. As Mast (1985, p. 293) argues "while Hollywood's output of screen comedies continued during the war, the overall quality (and critical accolades) fell sharply after 1942." Whereas the screwball cycle amplified the gender conflict by portraying differences of background or power, the post-war cycle alludes to the war by frequently posing a foreign setting and emphasizing gender division in the clash between Europe and America. For instance, in *A Foreign Affair* (1948), the contrast between the American Congresswoman Phoebe Frost, who represents moral uprightness and traditional American values, and the German singer Erika Von Schluetow, a symbol of Old World corruption, serves to depict class and cultural division. The film ultimately reasserts American moral superiority, with Captain Pringle choosing the wholesome American over the sophisticated but morally compromised European. This dynamic not only emphasizes the cultural clash between Europe and America but also subtly reinforces the idea that traditional, American values, aligned with the middle class, should triumph.

Furthermore, infidelity plots dominated the cycle, taking on a a darker tone than their antecedents in the screwball era. In *The Awful Truth*, *His Girl Friday*, and *The Philadelphia Story*, the couple divorce in the opening episode or even before the film begins and so the focus of the comedy is on the courtship that brings them back together again. By contrast, the post-war films, like *Unfaithfully Yours*, *A Letter to Three Wives*, and *Adam's Rib* spend the bulk of their plot on the rising crisis in the marriage and then quickly engineer reconciliation at the close. As a result, the comedy focuses on the alienation of the man and the woman rather than their mutual attraction. The witty banter that was a courtship rite during the screwball cycle becomes a festering suspicion erupting into conflict during the post-war period (Deleyto, 2009). The grim tone characterizing these romantic comedies has led critics either to see them as a pale extension of the screwball cycle or to overlook the period altogether.

Unlike the wartime neglect of Christmas, the holiday became more visible in postwar romantic comedies such as *Christmas in Connecticut* (1945) and *It Happened on Fifth Avenue* (1947). Both films use the sentimentality and traditionalism of Christmas to critique shifts in domesticity and gender roles in America's changing culture during and after World War Two. Compared to earlier romantic comedies that used Christmas to resolve tensions in a comforting or light-hearted way, the presence of Christmas in post-war films draw attention to what remains unresolved. In *It Happened on Fifth Avenue* (1947), for instance, the film does not offer a real solution

to the characters' housing crisis or their social marginalization. Instead, by portraying the temporary occupation of a wealthy man's mansion, it highlights the ongoing postwar economic and class tensions. Christmas serves merely as a symbolic pause rather than a structural resolution. At the same time, the heroine Trudy, as the daughter of a millionaire, reflects a deeper internal struggle between patriarchal authority and personal autonomy. These films strive to return to prewar styles, attempting to create a more joyful and orderly world, yet they cannot fully conceal the psychological and social instability that defines the postwar period—especially for women. As a result, their endings often feel more tentative or ambiguous, suggesting that personal struggles, particularly those tied to female identity, continue beyond the festive closure.

3.2 Escape from the City: A journey at Christmas to pastoral idyll

After studying the historical background and dominant trends of romantic and screwball comedies from the 1930s to the 1940s, this section shifts from a general to a more specific analysis. Two films, *Remember the Night* (1940) and *Christmas in Connecticut* (1945), are selected as case studies, as they were released during the peak time of the genre before the war and the post-war revival period, respectively, making them significant markers of their time. The main aim is to explore how Christmas as a chronotope in these two films reveals the evolution of the romantic comedy genre during this crucial historical moment, specifically through the lens of women's identity. For *Remember the night*, the festive holiday is employed as an ironic device to contrast associations of family with crime and detachment from home. Viewers are immersed in the nighttime scenery of New York City right after the beginning of the film. Twinkling lights on meticulously arranged window displays clearly convey the current time of year—holiday season. Accompanied by people carrying Christmas gifts, the film maps the crowded and busy streets of the city. The inclusion of environmental sound effects, such as the laughter of people on the streets, Christmas songs playing in stores, and the chiming of bells, highlights the festive and bustling atmosphere. The city progresses forward indifferent to day and night, signifying a lineal-historical sense of time (Bakhtin, 1981a). The Christmas shop windows, showcasing a variety of luxury goods and fashionable items, attract passersby. This image not only reflects the opulence of urban life but also hints at the city dwellers' craving for material pleasures and social stratification as a result, thus underscoring the conflicting emotions tied to the holiday season—celebration and disconnection.

The character of Lee Leander is central to this scene, as she serves as a mirror of the desire-driven, alienating city around her. Against a soundtrack of Christmas carols Lee brushes by the charity collecting Santas without a glance. Instead, she displays a calculating materialism by stealing an expensive bracelet from a Fifth Avenue boutique before attempting to pawn it. The film draws attention to the tensions of Christmas in the modern metropolis: it is both a season filled with charity, compassion, and humanitarian spirit, and a grand celebration of consumerism. It can be observed that single women such as Lee are systematically denied access to social and economic resources, forcing them to survive on the margins of the city. And holiday magnifies such economic disparities, exposing the city as a fertile ground for crime to take root.

On one hand, Lee can be regarded as a 'fallen woman' figure (Allen, 2015, p. 33). Her expressions of material desire are framed as a threat to social order, rendering her subject to moral condemnation. On the other hand, Lee's act of theft can be interpreted as a form of resistance against the prevailing structures of social class. Yet in either case, Lee is ultimately constructed as deviant in relation to the existing social order. The image of the male store clerk fastening the bracelet around her wrist—evocative of a policeman snapping on a handcuff—visually reinforces her entrapment within a patriarchal system. This sense of confinement is further intensified in the later courtroom scene, where Lee is apprehended and brought to trial. The courtroom's temporality is historical and judgmental; its spatial structure is enclosed and rigidly hierarchical. Occupied entirely by men, and Lee, the only woman present, is thus subjected to the disciplinary gaze and marginalized on multiple levels (Sittenfeld, 2024, p. 7). By tracing Lee's struggle via distinct chronotopes, from the urban streets to the legal space of the courtroom, the film reveals the constraints imposed on placed upon female subjectivity within a patriarchal and class-stratified social order.

Like Lee Leander in *Remember the Night*, Elizabeth Lane in *Christmas in Connecticut* is also drawn to luxury. When she buys herself a mink coat for Christmas, she declares, "It's very important to keep promises. You don't know what a mink coat does for a girl's morale." Both films reveal that in the absence of traditional family structures or romantic support, urban single women are left with social alienation and emotional emptiness. However, their means of acquiring luxury differ: Lee resorts to theft, while Elizabeth relies on purchasing power. This contrast not only highlights their moral divergence but also reflects Elizabeth's financial ability, aligning her with the postwar ideal of the modern, self-sufficient woman. The festive holiday, thus functions as a celebration of personal achievement and year-end success.

Different from Lee, whose survival on the margins of urban life exposes her to crime and social censure, Elizabeth occupies a more secure position and a higher social status as a New York-based food writer. Her apartment—small yet furnished with modern conveniences—functions as a symbol of efficiency, enabling her to sustain an active career while embodying the rhythms of urban modernity. The act of typing, in

particular, metaphorically synchronizes her life with the city's forward momentum, highlighting a linear, teleological conception of progress. However, as the camera slowly pans across Elizabeth's apartment—littered with dirty dishes and discarded clothing—it ultimately comes to rest on her small, grimy window, looking out over urban rooftops crisscrossed with clotheslines. In this moment, it becomes evident that nearly every aspect of her identity is fabricated. Her columns, ostensibly dedicated to domestic women, provide recipes, household tips, and accounts of her daily duties, presenting an image of the idealized housewife. But in reality, she does not live in the New England farmhouse she describes, nor does she have a husband or child. As an unmarried woman, she neither performs housework nor possesses the domestic skills typically associated with the female figure she portrays. In truth, she heavily relies on the assistance of her friend Felix Bassenak (S. Z. Sakall), who not only provides the recipes she claims as her own but also takes care of her daily needs. This scene underscores the tension between Elizabeth's private routine and the public persona she maintains. Through the genre's humor and satire, Elizabeth's lifestyle fundamentally challenges the traditional gender norms by maintaining a public image that conforms to those very norms. While her character represents increasing female agency and professional competence of postwar women, her reliance on Felix highlights that autonomy is partial and socially mediated.

Although Elizabeth's supervisor is aware of her concoction, the publisher of the magazine, Alexander Yardley (Sydney Greenstreet) is not and the narrative is set in motion when the traditional Yardley insists that Elizabeth host Christmas, not only for him, but also for a returning war hero, Jefferson Jones (Dennis Morgan) at her (fictitious) family farm in Connecticut (McDonald, 2007). In order to meet this request, Elizabeth has to move out of her New York apartment to the Connecticut farm. As such, this urbanized woman, leaves her metropolitan professional life, from what is depicted as the modern, if also superficially liberating, culture of the big city (Sigler, 2005). She is sent on a nostalgic journey to the small-town America of an idealized agrarian past. When Elizabeth arrives in Connecticut, the camera first captures a wide panoramic shot, showcasing a traditional rural farmhouse surrounded by natural landscapes. During the holiday, the farm is blanketed in white snow, creating a serene and peaceful pastoral idyll. The forest forms the backdrop of the farm, starkly contrasting with the high-rise buildings that Elizabeth would have seen from the narrow window of her apartment. As the camera slowly zooms in on the farmhouse, several horse-drawn open sleigh come into view from the distance. This moment is accompanied by the barking of a dog, adding a sense of liveliness to the scene. These details depict the bustling and natural intimacy of farm life. According to Bakhtin (1981a, p. 65), the rural scenery offers an experience of a "time out of time," where the boundaries of everyday life dissolve, and the past is revisited.

When they get into the farm house, spacious interiors are adorned with traditional holiday decorations such as Christmas tree lights, ornaments, gifts, and holly wreaths, collectively creating a rich festive ambiance (Grindon, 2011). These decorations not

only signify the arrival of the holiday season but also symbolize the annual cycle of time. Unlike the narrowness and modernity of the New York apartment, the farmhouse's holiday is steeped in wilderness, width and custom, evoking a sense of returning to nature and back to old times. Although the farm house exists, it is not the actual home of Elizabeth Lane, only an illusion. Much like Elizabeth herself, this location operates under the guise of an ideal. Her role as faux-housewife therefore extends beyond her manipulation of gendered spaces into her ability to transform an entire domestic habitat. The space is owned by a patriarchal force, John, but serves as a means to fulfill her material desire.

In fact, this holiday dinner was foreshadowed from the very beginning. *Christmas in Connecticut* opens with a brief battle sequence in which Jefferson is left stranded for 18 days. He spends that time dreaming of the comforts of home, and, more importantly, the comforts of a three-course meal. According to Bakhtin (1981a), this scene can be interpreted as the chronotope of the sea. The usual markers of time, such as the days of the week, lose their significance. This detachment from conventional timekeeping creates a sense of time being frozen. The spatial aspect of this chronotope is defined by isolation (Montgomery, 1993). The vast expanse of the sea represents a physical and psychological barrier from the rest of the world. The individuals stranded are cut off from familiar landscapes, social interactions, and the comforts of civilization. According to Cohen (2006), it can be argued that the time and space on the sea achieve their closest fusion, yet simultaneously, this space exists in a state of stasis, detached from conventional notions of time. The sea, as an open and boundless space, contrasts sharply with the confined and constrained environment of a raft enhances the feelings of vulnerability. Jefferson's dream of a grand feast serve as a temporal escape, transporting him mentally from the stark present to a hopeful future or nostalgic past. Meanwhile, this imagination builds a bridge between this desolate space and a more comforting, familiar environment. The narrative eventually transitions to Jefferson participating in the Christmas dinner, creating a striking chronotopic transition. This change is not merely physical but also symbolic, representing a movement from isolation to inclusion, from survival to celebration. The sea chronotope characterized by this juxtaposition, thus, represents Christmas with a transformative power in terms of human connection and communal rituals. Holiday dinner is not only a realized celebration but a mental refuge for Jefferson. As a narrative fulfillment, it is represented with great significance in despair, symbolizing hope and connection.

From this perspective, it can be argued that Jefferson's yearning for the idealized domestic life highlights the psychological impact of World War II on soldiers and their desire for normalcy in the aftermath of conflict (Glitre, 2006). Elizabeth's fictional holiday dinner, with its traditional family setting, symbolizes this societal desire to rebuild within familiar frameworks. Upon Johnson's arrival, Elizabeth found herself immersed in the daily routines depicted in her article about farm life: preparing the breakfast, feeding the baby, and settling the cows down, each task

scheduled at specific times of the day. A pattern begins here that continues throughout their exploration of the domestic spaces. When Jefferson presses her to bath the child in front of him so that he can witness her in her daily life, the postwar hysteria felt by the American nuclear family may best explain Elizabeth's displacement and unfamiliarity with domestic tasks and Jefferson's enactment as guide through them. Although dressed for the part with an apron, Elizabeth has no understanding of how to handle the child. The innate, nurturing brand of femininity is not a part of her. Instead, Jefferson, who claims to have the experience from his sister's children, takes over the bathing responsibility. Every occurrence in this bathing sequence positions her as the foreign figure and him as the natural, completely reversing gender roles (Ellis, 2016).

In comparison, Lee and Jack in *Remember the Night* also left the metropolitan and returned home for Christmas. Jack offers Lee a lift back to her hometown of Eltonville on his way to visit his own family in Wabash. As the scene shifts, Lee's emotions suddenly undergo a change. As she expresses, "I am scared". Upon arriving at Lee's doorstep, she points to a tree and reminisces to Jack about how she fell from its branches when she was a child. This moment exemplifies Bakhtin's (1993, p. 21) notion of 'chronotopic transformation', where past events are recalled within a specific time and space, imbuing the present situation with additional meaning and emotion. This tree, carrying the symbolic significance akin to a Christmas tree, has witnessed the arrival and departure of countless holiday seasons, reflecting the cyclical characteristic of time. As a part of nature, it symbolizes its eternity and continuity. In contrast, human life is relatively short and subject to constant changes. The environment where this tree thrives offers an escape from the hustle and bustle of the city. Here, people can intimately connect with nature and experience inner peace and contentment. This intimate relationship with nature exemplifies the harmonious coexistence found in pastoral idylls, where humans find solace in the tranquility of natural surroundings. As a witness to Lee's childhood, this tree allows her to feel and reminisce about the past in the present moment. It serves as a nostalgic symbol of childhood innocence and a poignant reminder of hometown memories.

When Jack and Lee finally confront Lee's mother, they discover that she did not expect Lee to return. The first words Lee utters are "Merry Christmas," extending holiday greetings to her mother. However, rather than receiving any reciprocation, she is merely beckoned inside. Once inside, Lee's mother shows no joy; instead, she chastises Lee for her thieving behavior. The cinematography and mise-en-scène of the scene underscore this emotional tension. The framing often isolates Lee in medium or wide shots, emphasizing her physical and emotional distance from her mother. Low-key lighting and muted, shadowed interiors create a stark, almost oppressive atmosphere, reinforcing the sense of rejection and emotional coldness. Props and setting—the cluttered, dimly lit living room, the rigid posture of Lee's mother, and the absence of festive decoration inside the house—contrast sharply with Lee's cheerful "Merry Christmas," visually signaling the dissonance between holiday ideals and her

lived reality. These visual and spatial choices work in tandem with the dialogue to underscore the theme that Christmas, for Lee, is a complicated and ambivalent moment, far from the idealized notion of familial warmth and reunion (Sigler, 2005, p. 353).

Her mother's cold 'good riddance' speech and Lee's subsequent remarks in the yard create a hauntingly lonesome festive atmosphere, underscored by a sense of utter rejection (Sigler, 2005, p. 353). This overlaying of past and present, framed through the concept of chronotope, invites a reflection on the ambivalence of memory and experience. For Lee, the expectation of returning to the family essentially symbolizes a return to the past, and such a return would mean being trapped once again in the negative history and identity she has strived to escape. Thus, the festive season highlights Lee's motivation to leave her troubled past behind and seek a new chronotopic setup focused on forward momentum.

By contrast, Jack's family life presents a different scene. Compared to her mother's house which is dark and quiet, Jack's home is adorned with festive decorations, feast, and carols. His whole family and Lee sat around the Christmas tree, listening to Jack play the piano and naturally joining in song. This scene underscores Bakhtin's (1981a, p. 10) concept of "folkloric time", where holidays and family rituals are not merely occasional events but are integral to the fabric of life, preserving cultural and emotional bonds across generations. The communal celebration also epitomizes the "cyclical time" of the pastoral idyll, where moments of joy and togetherness are experienced as a continuous cycle, fostering a deep connection to heritage and community (Bakhtin,1981a, p. 11). The countryside allows Lee to temporarily escape from the isolating and fragmented time-space of the city, returning to a purer form of humanism that is deeply rooted in familial connections.

Within Jack's family, Lee no longer needs to resort to theft to satisfy her material needs; instead, she receives Christmas gifts as a part of the family. Lee regards these simple gifts as exceptionally precious—this can be seen as her undergoing a 'dialogue' that, in Bakhtin's (1981a) sense, allows her to reconnect with her inner goodness. This experience awakens Lee's deep-seated longing for connection and belonging, revealing that her true desires lie not in luxury, but in the warmth of familial love. The domestic space reflects her mental state, embodying acceptance and intimacy that allow her to relax and foster a foundation for moral restoration. Jack's mother further affirms Lee's sense of self-worth, accepting her without judgment and offering unconditional love and understanding. This recognition solidifies Lee's transformation, reinforcing her journey of redemption. Christmas, thus, becomes a turning point as Lee realizes her past mistakes need not define her future. Breaking free from cycles of guilt and shame, she embraces the possibility of a second chance. This transformation offers a hopeful narrative for women, empowering them to pursue personal growth and awakening.

From this perspective, it can be noticed that both films present a relocated holiday. This narrative and ideological trajectory from urban to rural, public to private, and professional to domestic in many ways follows the pattern described by Mark Glancy (2000, p. 70) as a ‘‘Dickens model’’ based on *A Christmas Carol:*

> Lessons are learned as the characters embark on journeys of discovery similar to Scrooge’s own dark journey. . . . Christmas then serves as the occasion and solution for these ills, as humanism overcomes materialism, disunity gives way to unity, and nearly miraculous reunions are granted to separated families or lovers.

In the chapter of family melodrama, films such as *It’s a Wonderful Life* and *Meet Me in St. Louis*, also depict this idyllic chronotope. These narratives portray the hometown as a idyllic community imbued with tradition and familial belonging, yet increasingly under threat from forces of urbanization and capitalist expansion. These films revolve around the transformation of a singular, emotionally charged space. The dramatic tension emerges from the dissonance between the space’s past symbolic meaning, and its current destabilization or threat of loss. What is emphasized, paradoxically, is not rupture but continuity: a longing to restore or preserve the tradition and home. By contrast, romantic comedies reverse this spatial trajectory. They display a narrative movement from the modern city to idyllic pastoral.

Although *Remember the Night* features a return to the protagonist’s hometown, the emotional connection to that place is tenuous. Having long been rooted in the city and detached from traditional domestic life, the characters relate to the hometown more through memory than through lived experience. Similar to the rural space in *Christmas in Connecticut*, this setup functions as a narrative strategy and a response to social expectations—a kind of ‘playing house’ (Rubinfeld, 2001). They center on change and negotiation, particularly in the reconfiguration of gender roles and romantic relationships. These narratives require fluid, provisional spaces—zones of transformation that allow characters to experiment, fail, and evolve. Thus, ‘home’ in romantic comedy is not imagined as a permanent structure, but rather as a temporary, simulated utopia. The idyllic chronotopes in different genre, in turn, reflect broader cultural anxieties and desires of the 1940s: for family melodrama, a longing for stability in the face of loss; for romantic comedy, a hope for possibility amid social constraint.

3.3 An experience of identity fluidity: Navigating Gender and Class Dynamics at Christmas

Aside from concretizing the shift from the individualized 'historical time' of the modern urban city to the 'cyclical time' of the pastoral idyll, Christmas in these two films infuses women's time with social status, class, and power, transforming it into a potent tool for generating tension within the narrative (Montgomery, 1993, p. 72). The tensions highlighted by Christmas are inextricably linked to the tumultuous social landscape of the 1940s. Building on the previous analysis of the chronotope, this section will explore how these social tensions, amplified through Christmas, reveal the evolving complexity of the romantic comedy genre and its adaptation and reflection to social dynamics. As the heroine, Lee is introduced as a thief in *Remember The Night*, placing her in direct opposition to the hero, Jack, an assistant district attorney who embodies the legal and moral order of society. This setup aligns with the romantic comedy convention of pairing mismatched characters who clash in values, temperament, or social position. Such structural opposition not only enhances narrative tension but also provides the internal momentum for their relationship development (McDonald, 2007, p. 44; Neale, 2000, p. 51). The arrival of the festive holiday injects a touch of romance into the film, allowing the interactions between Jack and Lee to deepen. The trial begins just before Christmas, but to avoid facing a jury filled with the holiday atmosphere, Jack has the trial postponed on a technicality. As they sit in the car together, the physical and social barriers between them gradually diminish, bringing them closer. The mise-en-scène reinforces these dynamics. Inside the car, the framing frequently places Lee and Jack in shared medium shots, emphasizing the erosion of social and spatial boundaries between them. Lighting is also used strategically: the warm, diffused glow inside the car contrasts with the harsher, shadowed light of the courtroom, underscoring intimacy and personal connection.

On their journey home, Jack and Lee become lost in the rural Pennsylvania countryside, depicted through wide, open shots that contrast sharply with the confined courtroom space, visually suggesting freedom and the possibility of inverting conventional social roles. At the justice of the peace's office, Jack's awkwardness with deception contrasts with Lee's confident manipulation of the situation, as she creates a small fire in a wastebasket to facilitate their escape. This episode underscores the subversion of gender norms: Lee's resourcefulness and initiative challenge the traditional protector and decision-maker roles typically assigned to men. Through these spatial and visual strategies, the film enacts Lee's embodiment of the "fast-talking dame" archetype identified by DiBattista (2001, p. 3), allowing her intelligence, verbal wit, and assertiveness to structure and dominate the narrative space.

According to Schatz (1999, p. 18), this rebellion against female gender roles is possible in romantic comedy because no matter how transgressive she may be, the unruly heroine's destiny is thoroughly conformist. Lee's experience seems to reflect this pattern as well. When Lee arrives at Jack's home, she helps decorate the Christmas tree and engages in household chores. This act symbolizes her transition from an 'outsider' and rebellious figure to someone gradually merging into the 'inner' family structure. Additionally, the scene where Lee serves Jack breakfast at home carries symbolic significance. This detail seems to emphasize that she is starting to accept and take on a more traditional female role, demonstrating care and attentiveness toward Jack (Kristeva, 1981). His family and their rural lifestyle represent a deeply entrenched, traditional social structure. Therefore, Lee's behaviors can be regarded as a strategic approach to navigating this environment. By embracing these roles, Lee demonstrates her willingness to adapt while maintaining her individuality as she integrates into Jack's family and its traditional structure.

Lee's visit to Jack's home encompasses not only the enjoyment of rural holiday with his family but also participation in an old-fashioned New Year's Eve barn dance of the neighbourhood that symbolically celebrates a return to a cultural past. While Lee initially brings modern slacks to wear to the dance, Jack's Aunt Emmy, dismayed by such 'unfeminine' attire, insists on dressing her in a turn-of-the-century corset and party gown. This moment can be interpreted as a ritual of cultural assimilation, in which Lee is figuratively re-clothed in the values and aesthetic codes of a bygone era. Jack's awestruck reaction—"My word!"—to her transformed appearance reveals his enchantment with her newly fashioned identity as a Victorian-style angel in the house (Walker, 2001, p. 4). Lee's modern slacks symbolize urban womanhood's mobility, gender fluidity, and individual autonomy, posing a direct challenge to fixed and traditional gender roles. However, the moment she replaces her trousers with an elaborate Victorian dress, complete with a tightly laced corset, her body undergoes a conspicuous re-encoding. This transformation constitutes a corporeal enactment of gender discipline, a ritual through which the modern female subject is reinscribed into the norms of traditional femininity.

The corset, in particular, as a hallmark of Victorian women's fashion functioned as a mechanism of bodily correction and suppression. It exemplifies a broader regime of corporeal control that aligns with what Michel Foucault (1980, p. 14) describes as biopolitics—a form of disciplinary power through which the body is regulated in order to manage social identity and functionality. Within the cultural imagination of the Victorian era, weakness, frailty, and even the aesthetics of fainting became markers of feminine allure. The more legible the female body became—through tight-lacing, posture, and visual display—the more easily it was transformed into an object of surveillance, consumption, and possession (of the men). In this sense, the corset not only shaped the female form, but also encoded the gendered politics of visibility and control.

Moreover, this highly impractical yet elegant attire carries strong class connotations. Victorian women's clothing functioned as a form of moral capital, signaling that the wearer was exempt from manual labor and disengaged from public affairs, thereby indicating her 'good breeding' and suitability for marriage. Consequently, when Lee dons this gown, her transformation transcends mere appearance; it signifies a profound shift from a marginalized figure—a petty thief marked by moral ambiguity—to a purified, lovable woman deemed socially acceptable. This sartorial makeover symbolizes her reintegration into mainstream social values and aesthetic-moral orders. Her body becomes a vessel for cultural meanings and a surface onto which class and gender ideologies are projected, embodying the intersection of identity, power, and societal expectation.

When Lee, dressed in this Victorian-style gown, steps into the barn dance with Jack, the moment becomes more than just romantic—it is a performance of femininity deeply embedded in cultural nostalgia and social expectation. As they move together across the dance floor—spinning, stepping, momentarily in sync—the social distance between them begins to dissolve. They are no longer positioned as thief and prosecutor, but appear instead as emotionally equal partners. At this point, Lee enters into a heterosexual romantic relationship, no longer positioned as the isolated, urban woman. In contrast to her earlier participation in domestic labor—where her actions reflect a form of strategic adaptation aimed at emotional integration—Lee's transformation at this stage represents a more subtle form of internalized conformity. Christmas and New Year—moments of cultural circulation and symbolic renewal—play a crucial role in legitimizing this transformation. Within the festive atmosphere, Lee's shift from urban outsider to domestic ideal is not framed as social coercion, but rather as emotional healing and personal redemption. The invocation of a romanticized past—a pure, moral, and structured era—functions ideologically to mask the constraints being reimposed.

This is the genius—and the danger—of nostalgia: it does not demand submission; it makes submission feel like home. The effectiveness of this gendered regime lies in its affective packaging. It offers belonging, love, and social acceptance—but only on the condition that the female subject conforms to a specific, idealized role. Through the holiday's emotional grammar and the generic promises of the romantic comedy, the ideology of traditional femininity is rendered not only palatable but necessary. In this sense, Lee's transformation can be seen as a re-coding of her identity in line with normative cultural expectations—an aesthetic and emotional act of ideological containment. Femininity here is not oppression nor empowerment alone, but a site of unresolved tension—a performance both constrained and cunning, nostalgic and critical. It is a form of power so embedded, so affectively charged, that it becomes invisible—appearing natural, even desirable.

In comparison, Elizabeth's seemingly perfect Connecticut home in *Christmas in Connecticut*, comes complete with a housekeeper—a nod to the ideal housewife, especially among upper-middle-class women, is often supported by invisible domestic

labor. This dynamic exposes class disparities: while wealthier families maintain the illusion of effortless domesticity, they do so by outsourcing the actual work to lower-income laborers whose contributions remain largely unrecognized (Alberti, 2013). John, the architect who owns the farm and orchestrates its idyllic setting for Elizabeth's visit, embodies the role of the upper-middle-class provider. He is positioned as a romantic rival, yet significantly, he shares Elizabeth's social and professional world—an elite sphere populated by publishers, writers, and professionals. Jefferson, by contrast, belongs to a different social stratum. Prior to the holiday gathering, he and Elizabeth have no meaningful interaction, suggesting that class boundaries have long kept them apart. Yet, it is Jefferson whom Elizabeth instantly falls for, despite her ongoing performance of the married housewife. His grounded, unpretentious nature and nurturing capabilities—qualities that contrast sharply with Elizabeth's domestic incompetence—become part of his romantic appeal, just as her clumsiness adds to her quirky charm.

Christmas thus becomes the narrative mechanism through which these class boundaries are temporarily blurred. The holiday gathering allows individuals from disparate walks of life—Elizabeth, the career woman; Jefferson, the sailor; John, the architect; Felix, the chef; and Alexander, the publisher—to share the same space, the same table. The festive season is framed as a moment of collective celebration, a temporary suspension of social divisions, and a symbol of emotional and communal unity. This cross-class interaction reflects what Julia Kristeva (1981) refers to as cyclical time—a temporal structure associated with repetition, inclusion, and ritual. Unlike the linear time of modern capitalist society, which prioritizes production and individual progress, cyclical time opens up space for relationality, renewal, and alternative social experiences. In this context, the holiday becomes a narrative and ideological device that enables the temporary reconciliation of class, gender, and social contradictions—albeit within the safe confines of screwball comedy.

As such, the interaction between Elizabeth and Jefferson—framed by the stylistic and thematic conventions of screwball comedy—unfolds as a narrative of romantic desire embedded within the classic battle-of-the-sexes dynamic (Mortimer, 2010, p. 13). Their chemistry is both immediate and charged with tension, playing out through fast-paced, witty exchanges and physical proximity, all hallmarks of the subgenre. When the characters gather to celebrate the festive holiday, Jefferson's performance at the piano becomes a moment of emotional and erotic significance. Elizabeth watches him intently, her gaze filled with frank sexual interest—a visual cue that signals not only her attraction but also her active participation in the unfolding romance. Unlike more passive representations of femininity, Elizabeth's desire is neither hidden nor shameful; instead, it is expressed openly, challenging the norms of propriety expected of a supposedly married woman.

What renders this sequence particularly provocative is that the romantic exchange takes place under the illusion of adultery. The very assumption that Elizabeth is married to another man heightens the erotic charge of their interaction. Rather than

halting the courtship, her supposed marital status seems to intensify it. Jefferson remarks, “I find it hard to believe you’re married,” to which she replies, “I find it pretty difficult myself.” Their repartee continues: “You don't act as if you were married.”—“I don't feel as if I was married.” These exchanges are laden with innuendo and dramatic irony, presenting the audience with flirtation that borders on transgression. This playful dance around the idea of infidelity becomes a central comedic and ideological device. It introduces risk and taboo into what would otherwise be a conventional romantic trajectory, while also giving Elizabeth a space to explore desire and agency outside the boundaries of domestic expectation. The illusion of adultery functions as a safe narrative disguise that allows both characters—and particularly Elizabeth—to articulate attraction and emotional longing in a way that would be considered socially unacceptable in more literal terms. By placing this erotic tension within the frame of a holiday gathering, the film invokes the festive atmosphere as one of temporary suspension of norms, where the usual moral codes are softened, and new forms of relationality can be imagined. In this way, the screwball elements, combined with the symbolic openness of the holiday, create a permissive space for gender roles and sexual expression to be re-negotiated, albeit playfully and temporarily.

While Jefferson coyly pulls back, feigning shyness, Elizabeth leans in and pointedly asks, “Have you ever kissed a married woman?” When he replies that he has not, her quick retort—“No, you're not the type”—injects a layered commentary on sexual experience and identity. The invocation of "type" here subtly engages with the cultural construction of individuals through their perceived sexual histories and moral behaviors. In this moment, Elizabeth not only exposes Jefferson’s innocence, but also asserts her own sexual confidence, challenging the expectations that a ‘respectable’ woman, especially a married one, should behave. The subversive potential of this exchange is heightened by its placement within the screwball comedy genre—a form known for its rapid dialogue, gendered reversals, and romantic tension masked by humor (Mortimer, 2010, p. 13). Screwball comedy often thrives on moral ambiguity and playful transgression, using comedic distance to question social norms without overtly challenging them. Here, Elizabeth's seemingly flippant question becomes a vehicle for destabilizing patriarchal ideals. By initiating the flirtation and framing marriage as a comedic obstacle rather than a sacred institution, she reclaims agency over both her body and her narrative.

The fact that such a provocative exchange takes place in a screwball comedy, rather than a melodrama or tragedy, is crucial. The comedic framework softens the taboo of adulterous flirtation while simultaneously amplifying its feminist implications. Elizabeth is not punished for her desire; rather, she is celebrated for it. Her wit and forwardness become sources of charm and strength, shifting her role from passive romantic interest to an active player in the courtship. In this way, she aligns with the archetype of the femme fatale, reimagined within a comedic register—as a woman who uses intelligence, humor, and sexual confidence not to destroy men, but to

challenge and equal them. Romance, then, becomes not a capitulation to patriarchal norms, but a space of negotiation and mutual recognition.

Compared to Jefferson, who is positioned as Elizabeth's romantic match, the film's other two male characters—John and Alexander—embody distinct forms of patriarchal control. While the three men are briefly placed in the same narrative space, a visual and thematic distinction quickly emerges. In one scene, as Alexander and John sit at the card table—symbolically reinforcing their alignment with strategic control and traditional masculinity—Jefferson occupies another room, gently playing the piano, while Elizabeth decorates the Christmas tree. The camera pans from the poker players to Jefferson, prompted by Alexander's comment, "Nice voice, that boy." This moment not only signals a tonal shift but visually and narratively separates Jefferson from the other men. He is framed not as a competitor in the masculine economy of domination, but as someone emotionally attuned to Elizabeth's world. Jefferson's musicality and physical distance from the card table underscore his difference: he is not playing games—literally or figuratively—with Elizabeth.

This contrast becomes even more pronounced when Jefferson asks Alexander whether Elizabeth is happy. Rather than acknowledging her emotional state, Alexander responds by listing John's professional and material accomplishments—measuring her presumed satisfaction against patriarchal markers of success such as financial stability and social prestige. In doing so, the film critiques the reduction of female happiness to male status. Both Alexander and John seek to instrumentalize Elizabeth for their own purposes. Alexander, as her boss, views her fabricated identity as a domestic goddess as a convenient marketing tool to boost magazine sales; John, on the other hand, sees marriage to Elizabeth as a logical extension of their class compatibility. Neither of them is genuinely concerned with Elizabeth's agency or desire. While their approaches differ—Alexander is the corporate patriarch, John the benevolent provider—they are united in their assumption that Elizabeth's role is to fit into a pre-existing domestic ideal.

Significantly, Elizabeth subverts both of these masculinities. She uses Alexander's myth of domestic womanhood as a means to advance her professional writing career, consciously manipulating the imagination of domesticity rather than internalizing it. Similarly, she resists John's courtship, not out of disdain, but because it lacks emotional substance; she wants to marry not for survival or status, but for genuine attraction. Her rejection of both men, then, represents a rejection of the patriarchal logic that views women as rewards for male success—a logic explicitly manifested within the public sphere. Jefferson, by contrast, represents the subtler, often unexamined patriarchy of the private sphere, emblematic of postwar desires to re-establish normative family structures. His attentiveness to domestic details and emotional sensitivity toward Elizabeth positions him not as an overtly dominant figure, but as a more palatable form of masculinity. Elizabeth's negotiation with these dual patriarchal forces serves to underscore that her agency is circumscribed, indirectly channeling her back into the domestic domain.

Although *Christmas in Connecticut* shares key narrative formulas with *Remember the Night*—notably the sparring of well-matched contenders and the ideal of "the couple meeting up as equals," fulfilling "their desires of equal standing and of equal motive power," as Deborah Thomas (1998, pp. 58-59) describes—the depiction of Christmas in these films reveals deeper and evolving tensions faced by women. These tensions reflect how the romantic comedy genre adapts and transforms in response to shifting social dynamics. In *Remember the Night*, Lee embodies the modern, independent urban woman whose return to a rural family setting is clearly provisional. The social divide between her and Jack remains palpable and unresolved. This tension is made explicit in Lee's conversation with Jack's mother, who subtly warns her to maintain boundaries so as not to jeopardize Jack's hard-won social standing. This interaction highlights the persistent skepticism and structural limitations imposed on women who challenge conventional roles. Lee's experience exemplifies the gendered double standards and social policing that continue to circumscribe female agency.

Importantly, Lee's ultimate choice to return to the city and face the courtroom—rather than evade punishment with Jack's covert assistance—marks a powerful assertion of autonomy. Her refusal to rely on male privilege or protection to escape consequences subverts traditional narratives that depict women as morally fragile or dependent on men for salvation. Instead, Lee's decision affirms her moral agency and personal integrity, positioning her as a woman who claims responsibility on her own terms. This act transcends the trope of female vulnerability and emphasizes a form of self-respect grounded in accountability rather than dependency. This portrayal reveals a complex negotiation within the genre: while Lee's temporary immersion in the pastoral domestic ideal may suggest a retreat, her ultimate rejection of social and legal leniency signals a radical affirmation of individualism and ethical self-determination. It exposes the contradictions women navigate—between societal expectations of conformity and their own desires for freedom and authenticity. In this way, *Remember the Night* reflects an cinematic engagement with the complexities of female subjectivity, where romantic comedy becomes a space to contest, rather than simply reinforce, dominant moral codes.

The motif of 'moral awakening through love' in this film can be interpreted as both a celebration of individual ethical autonomy and a subtle mechanism for reaffirming the legitimacy of existing social structures (Kupfer, 2012). On the surface, Lee's choice to face legal consequences appears as an act of free will—a testament to her moral integrity. However, this seemingly autonomous decision also exemplifies a form of internalized discipline, wherein the woman is not coerced but willingly reintegrated into the legal and gendered order. This voluntary submission lends the system an aura of emotional warmth and natural legitimacy, making power appear benign and even desirable. Notably, the film avoids the standard romantic comedy formula of "happily ever after" (MacDonald, 2021, p. 134). Instead, it ends with something more tentative—less a conclusion than a conditional possibility. Lee and Jack love one another, but they do not rush into union. Lee insists on serving her sentence, affirming her commitment to justice and personal responsibility. Only if Jack remains faithful

will she consider a future with him. Compared to other life for them, this one suffices. It is probably not a happy ending, but a happy thought; it is romantic comedy's thought of happiness—a posture that both accepts the constraints of reality and seeks to push beyond its boundaries. The structures of law, gender, and class remain intact, but their grip is momentarily loosened. In this liminal space, an extraordinary intimacy becomes possible. As such, it can be argued that the function of the romantic comedy is not to offer a resolution, but to evoke a speculative feeling that allows the audience to rehearse alternative modes of being within the familiar contours.

While *Remember the Night* avoids the conventional romantic resolution, *Christmas in Connecticut* presents a different kind of critique by addressing the tension women face in the post-war struggle of 'having it all'. At the film's outset, Elizabeth presents a seemingly effortless portrayal of a woman who manages to run a farmhouse, care for an eight-month-old baby, cook three meals a day, maintain her appearance for her husband, and, on top of it all, write a continuous series of articles about her perfect family life. This domestic image reflects the societal expectations of the post-war era, which idealized an aspirational femininity that called on women to return to traditional domestic roles as perfect wives and mothers (Kaplan, 1992). However, as the film progresses, Elizabeth's reality reveals the fragility of this ideal. Her life, far from being as effortless as her articles suggest, is a carefully constructed illusion.

When Elizabeth wonders aloud whether she should actually learn to cook, Felix advises against it, warning that doing so would strip away the veneer of ease and reveal that it is "not all easy and fun" as she describes. In fact, just like what Felix said, when Elizabeth learns to make Christmas flapjacks, it does not go well at all. This reflects the conflict faced by post-war women in pursuing professional independence while also shouldering family responsibilities. Due to the changing social gender structure, while there is a common desire to return to pre-war lifestyles, doing so has become increasingly challenging. Elizabeth's real life, however, reveals that 'having it all' is just a glossy illusion.

Although Elizabeth is unwilling and lacks the necessary skills to cook, she is still pressured to perform in front of a group of male onlookers. This moment exposes the tension between female resistance and male dominance in the post-war societal context. The act of making Christmas flapjacks becomes a symbol of Elizabeth's contradictory position as a woman: while she strives for personal independence and career success, she is simultaneously expected to fulfill traditional feminine duties in front of a male audience. The 'misrule' embodied by Elizabeth—who, like the rebellious women of the nineteenth century, inverts or rejects traditional social categories—ultimately remains confined within the boundaries of her rural or small-town home. The power dynamics in play are further mediated by the male characters, particularly through the figure of Alexander Yardley, who takes on the symbolic role of Santa Claus. As McClymer (1986, pp. 379-398) argues, this positioning of male authority figures within a domestic context civilizes Elizabeth's rebellion, effectively neutralizing her challenge to traditional gender norms. The irony

intensifies when Alexander declares, “Millions of women in these United States pattern their daily lives after that feature, and you’re going to live up to their ideals or my name isn’t Alexander Yardley!” His forceful insistence on Elizabeth fulfilling a domesticated ideal is a stark reminder of how, even as women like her sought independence, they were still tethered to the weight of cultural expectations, their personal aspirations often overshadowed by the dominant male vision of what women should be.

In fact, this is not the first time Alexander, as an elite figure, exerts pressure on Elizabeth. He is the one who insists that she host the Christmas dinner for Jefferson, a decision that marks a pivotal moment in the film. This intervention introduces the influence of capitalism, transforming Christmas from a celebratory occasion into a satirical commentary on social and economic dynamics. Alexander’s fast-talking, a hallmark of screwball comedy, effectively silences Elizabeth, leaving her with little space to respond (Milberg, 2013, p. 7). This exchange exemplifies the capitalist hierarchies in which those in positions of power dominate conversations and decision-making processes, often marginalizing subordinate voices. From this perspective, Christmas is redefined not as a personal or familial celebration, but as a strategic move to attract more attention to their publication. The holiday is commodified, turned into a tool for economic gain and professional maneuvering, thus reinforcing the notion that even festive moments are co-opted for capitalist interests.

The Christmas dinner that Elizabeth is forced to host becomes a performative act—an exercise in maintaining appearances and satisfying the expectations of the elite. This initial submission to Alexander’s demands highlights the profound influence of power and class dynamics in shaping Elizabeth's behavior. Alexander’s role underscores how elite men, even in the context of women’s professional achievements, continue to dictate the terms of success and fulfillment. Despite her career success, Elizabeth’s autonomy is contingent upon her conformity to the dominant ideological norms of class, gender, and consumerism. Her ability to succeed professionally is tied to her compliance with the rules of aspirational femininity and capitalist values. Yet, the very system that allows her some degree of economic independence also subjects her to the risk of punishment for failing to genuinely embody these ideals.

This contradiction culminates when Elizabeth, unable to maintain the facade any longer, finally confesses her true feelings. In a moment of fury, Alexander fires her—an act that reveals the harsh consequences of not conforming to the prescribed norms. While the film hints at a more progressive vision of the future, it still caters to socially conservative audiences by offering a ‘happily ever after’ ending that ultimately reassures the return to the status quo. The entire sequence has the high stakes of a false-identity farce, but rather than mocking her career, the laughs arise from the absurdity of the situation itself. This comedic dynamic subtly celebrates female professionalism, independence, and wit—qualities that actively resist the closure that the film’s narrative suggests it achieves.

In fact, the contradictions and unresolved tensions of the film's ending exemplify what Russell Reising (1996, p. 10) terms "loose ends": narrative threads that, due to their historically determined context, cannot be neatly tied up. As Reising (1996, p. 10) notes, these "loose ends" serve to invite viewers to reconsider their assumptions and "problematize" the narrative, often rupturing the story's surface resolution. This ambiguity is especially evident in Elizabeth's character. It is highly questionable whether she would willingly trade her writing pen for a frying pan, especially since she is more concerned with splurging on a mink fur coat than settling down and starting a family. Her resistance to both domesticity and a sexually passive role is not just subtle but forceful, underlining the tension between her personal ambitions and societal expectations. The film offers no resolution regarding how Elizabeth will learn to become a wife or mother; instead, it offers the illusion that soldiers like Jefferson, upon returning from war, will find a home waiting for them and soon resume a normal domestic life. *Christmas in Connecticut* may briefly disrupt the usual narrative of female submission, but it ultimately preserves and reaffirms the gendered norms of its time. Christmas, in this sense, does not serve as a temporary release from societal constraints, as seen in pre-nineteenth-century street celebrations, but rather as a nostalgic dream of pre-war American society—a society with rigid gender norms and clear domestic roles, which is only momentarily suspended during the holiday season (Sigler, 2005, p. 353).

Therefore, it can be argued that both female protagonists ultimately return to the institutional structure. They play out within what Kristeva (1981, p. 16) terms monumental time—a fluid, subjective, and non-linear temporality that allows them to momentarily transcend the constraints of historical and biological time and reimagine identity beyond gender roles. Their transformation is not a complete break from the dominant structure but a rupture within it, demonstrating that structure can also be a space for self-invention. Lee, through a strong sense of moral responsibility, refuses to use romance or marriage as a means to evade punishment and instead willingly re-enters the legal order, affirming a clear and stable form of subjectivity. Elizabeth, by contrast, oscillates between performance and identification, gradually generating a complex subjectivity shaped by misrecognition and normative compliance. Her marriage—and the man who enables it—serve as instruments through which she is reabsorbed into the normative order she had temporarily disrupted. By portraying Christmas with an invented domestic tradition, romantic comedies express the tensions between the personal development and social expectations, offering "inventing imaginary or formal 'solutions' to unresolvable social contradictions'' (Jameson, 1981, p. 81). In this way, these films demonstrate that 1940s romantic comedies evolved into a form of structural complexity that is layered, ambiguous, and marked by unresolved tensions, challenging simplistic narratives of female emancipation and highlighting the multifaceted nature of women's identities under social constraint.

From this perspective, it becomes evident that while romantic comedy shares with family melodrama and fantasy a reliance on Christmas as a narrative device to

mediate gender and sexual relationships, the specific site of transformation varies across genres due to their distinct thematic frameworks. Family melodrama often seeks to restore gender order by restructuring familial or communal bonds, emphasizing the importance of reconnection within a domestic context. In contrast, fantasy narratives tend to center on the reconfiguration of the male subject, allowing male characters to embark on transformative journeys that reassert or redefine their roles within the narrative. Romantic comedy, however, places the female protagonist at the heart of the transformation, using the holiday setting to catalyze her personal growth and emotional journey.

In these genres, Christmas functions as a spatial-temporal structure that interacts dynamically with other chronotopes, allowing characters to momentarily step outside the constraints of ordinary social and narrative orders. Whether it is through stepping into a parallel world, encountering celestial beings, or a cosmopolitan woman relocating to a rural setting, Christmas serves as a transformative space where characters can redefine their identities and values. This temporary deviation from the usual social structure allows for the reworking of relationships, often culminating in a restored or redefined heterosexual relationship. Particularly in the case of romantic comedy, the holiday serves as the ideal backdrop for the female protagonist's journey toward self-actualization, often culminating in a reunion or reconnection with a romantic partner. These narratives frequently repackage systemic gender inequalities as personal challenges, encouraging female characters to resolve deep-seated frustrations not through structural change, but through acts of renunciation such as leaving the city, abandoning career ambitions, or embracing domestic roles. Such concessions are framed not as losses, but as moral or romantic victories, often orchestrated under the aesthetic and emotional cover of the holiday season.

Conclusion

To sum up, within the framework of Bakhtin's (1981a) chronotope and Kristeva's (1981) concept of women's time, Christmas serves as a pivotal space for exploring women's experiences across different temporal and spatial structures in *Remember the Night* and *Christmas in Connecticut*. These films blends festivity with underlying conflict, using humor as a subtle vehicle for social critique. Both films chart a journey set against the backdrop of Christmas, which, through Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope, can be seen as a transition from the individualized, linear 'historical time' of the modern urban city to the more cyclical, regenerative 'time' of the pastoral idyll (Montgomery, 1993). Barbara Stanwyck, playing the female protagonists Lee and Elizabeth, embodies urban women who, during Christmas, return to the countryside to engage in domestic life. This shift in both time and space reflects the tension between the urban and rural, modernity and tradition.

This transition may appear chronologically linear in its dissection of the spaces depicted, but it is designed to illustrate the evolution of women's agency and subjectivity. *Remember the Night* and *Christmas in Connecticut* thus serve as critical texts for understanding the ideological functions of romantic comedy in the 1940s—not as progressive vehicles of female emancipation, but rather as spaces where social contradictions are not resolved, but rather temporarily smoothed over. However, the very act of placing women at the narrative center—foregrounding their dilemmas, tensions, and choices—represents a significant step in the cultural representation of femininity. These films recognize that female identity is neither stable nor linear, nor is it inherently tied to the domestic sphere. As Judith Butler (1990) asserts, gender identity is always marked by a tension between the psychic and the performative—a space where societal expectations, personal aspirations, and the rigid norms of structural power are constantly in negotiation. In this sense, these films illustrate that femininity, as portrayed within the romantic comedy genre, is a dynamic, performative construct that emerges in response to both personal desires and social expectation.

Remember the Night and *Christmas in Connecticut* reimagine the festive holiday as a celebration of middle-class domesticity, shifting the Christmas setting from the public sphere of the street to the intimate confines of the parlor, from the communal to the private realm. These films present Christmas as a symbolic return to an idealized past—a past that is less rooted in history than in myth, constructed through nostalgic imagery and ritualized tradition. The rural farmhouse, the holiday dinner, the snow-covered landscape: these elements serve as ideological devices, building a utopian vision that evokes a sense of timeless belonging and emotional warmth. Christmas is framed as an invented tradition, a cultural construct presented as an ancient or inherited practice, yet carefully designed in response to contemporary historical shifts. These traditions are not organic or inherited; rather, they are deliberately crafted to stabilize identity during periods of cultural and historical change.

Therefore, this return to the pastoral idyll, while sharing certain similarities with the hometown settings in earlier chapter of family melodramas such as *It's a Wonderful Life* and *Meet Me in St. Louis*—for example, the cyclical notion of time and the emphasis on traditional family/community life—differs in a significant way. Family melpdrama highlights a longing for stability, whereas romantic comedy represents an attempt to explore new possibilities. Such a shift can be productively read through Julia Kristeva's (1981) theorization of temporality and feminine subjectivity. Kristeva (1981, p. 16) writes of "another generation of women… situated beyond the conflict between cyclical and linear time, beyond the myth of identity… nomad women who no longer define themselves in relation to any fixed territory—whether physical, biological, or symbolic." The spatial transition in these films reflects the emergence of this third identity—one that resists being bound by the binary logic of home and exile, tradition and progress, or maternal time and historical time. Rather than pursuing who she is, it is more about who she is becoming. In this sense, the films

gesture toward a more postmodern or post-structural understanding of subjectivity, in which the female protagonist is not merely seeking a place within the existing symbolic order but questioning the desirability of belonging at all.

Further compared to the previous two chapters on family melodrama and fantasy, the object of transformation shifts across genres. In family melodramas, the chronotope constructed through Christmas facilitates the transformation of the family unit—its cohesion, values, and emotional dynamics. In fantasy, the transformation is centered on the male protagonist, often through a moral or emotional awakening prompted by magical or otherworldly intervention. By contrast, in romantic comedy, the transformation is significantly gendered toward the female protagonist. Yet, across all three genres, these individual or familial transformations inevitably impact the formation of partnerships, reinforcing the centrality of heteronormative coupling. What is particularly telling is under the festive frame of Christmas, these traditional gender roles are not only restored but celebrated as virtues. This enables gender norms to be naturalized and seamlessly sustained beneath the festive facade.

Thus, through an analysis of *Remember the Night* and *Christmas in Connecticut*, it can be observed that romantic comedies of the 1940s were filled with ambivalence. On one hand, these films offer narratives of femininity that suggest empowerment and the possibility of greater opportunities for women. On the other hand, they remain firmly anchored in traditional paradigms of homemaking, domesticity, and, most significantly, financial dependency on a male partner. These case studies demonstrate that, despite the portrayal of expanded opportunities and choices for women—embodied through the chronotopic structures of Christmas—these films do not fundamentally challenge the existing social order. Rather, they function within a carefully constructed ideological framework that creates the illusion of transformation.

In this regard, Christmas, within the framework of Jameson's (1981, p. 79) theory, serves as a means of "inventing imaginary or formal 'solutions' to unresolvable social contradictions". These "solutions" are "imaginary" because they exist solely within the confines of the narrative and do not translate into material reality. They are "formal" in the sense that they are shaped by genre conventions, tropes, and the emotional closure that defines romantic comedy. While both films maintain the genre's typical structure—where female characters drive the plot forward in pursuit of equal partnerships and elevated status—they still encounter social constraints that limit true liberation. Thus, Jameson's framework encourages a critical reading of seemingly optimistic or romantic narratives as complex negotiations with ideological boundaries. These films, while presenting women's stories that imply progress and autonomy, ultimately reinforce social structures and gender norms under the guise of holiday cheer and romantic resolution.

On one hand, as Eva Illouz (1997) suggests, the emotional regimes of modern love are not autonomous from the rationality of markets and institutions—they are deeply

entangled. In this light, the "thought of happiness" romantic comedy offers is less a subversion than an internalization of normativity (Illouz, 1997, p. 45). Following Laura Mulvey's (1975, pp. 6-18) analysis, even the illusion of female choice often operates within a visual and narrative framework structured by male desire. The woman appears active, yet she acts within scripts that already determine her range of becoming. On the other hand, the utopianism of romantic comedy—its projection of a younger, better generation—springs from this vetting of the couple whose union signifies a triumph over the old guard. Drawing on Nancy Fraser's (1991, pp. 68-69) notion of counter publics, we might see romantic comedy as staging a cultural rehearsal space—one in which normative boundaries are temporarily suspended, and alternative relational imaginaries surface. As Jackie Stacey (1997, pp. 54-76) argues, the importance lies not in overturning the system, but in enabling affective identification and reflective spectatorship. The "happy thought" becomes a quiet, yet potent, form of cultural resistance: a fleeting vision of how things might be otherwise (Illouz, 1997, p. 45). As seen in the conclusion of *Remember the Night*, the final refusal of union between Lee and John disrupts the expected trajectory of romantic resolution. The protagonist's decision to step away from union becomes a gesture toward a different future, one not yet available within the current social system. In this sense, the acknowledgment of limitation in this idealism becomes a mark of progress: by dramatizing the tensions between desire and constraint, such texts cultivate a critical awareness of the systems they inhabit, not as revolution, but as ideological friction, a subtle pressure against the status quo.

By contrast, while Elizabeth in *Christmas in Connecticut*, ostensibly frees herself from the fabricated identity of the perfect homemaker and enters into a romantic relationship with the male lead, the film refrains from clarifying whether she has genuinely achieved autonomy. Her transformation remains tentative, marked more by performative shifts than by a decisive assertion of self-hood. This ambiguity unfolds on two levels. First, Elizabeth constantly oscillates between roles—professional writer, faux-domestic ideal, romantic heroine—making it difficult to locate an authentic or stable identity. Second, although the narrative concludes with the conventional promise of romantic union, it offers no clear resolution as to how, or if, Elizabeth reconciles her public and private selves. The return to romantic comedy convention, rather than affirming empowerment, arguably reinforces the performative demands placed on women within the genre (Shumway, 1991, pp. 7-23). Its self-reflexive play with deception, repetition, and mistaken identity does not resolve but rather prolongs the conflict between agency and conformity. As such, the film's ambiguity becomes its critical strength—it reveals the instability of gendered norms not through rejection, but through the inability to fully affirm them.

Through the 'battle of the sexes' trope, the film illustrates how women express desire, pursue equality, and assert themselves in sexual relationships (Landay, 1998). However, women's success in both career and domesticity does not signify true autonomy, but is instead measured and regulated under the persistent critical gaze and disciplinary power of a patriarchal society. The camera consistently frames her within

the logic of visual pleasure, oscillating between domestic ideal and sexualized object. Even as she demonstrates wit, agency, and professional capability, these are often undermined by her status as an object of desire. The romantic resolution, therefore, does not signal a true shift in power or autonomy, but a return to heteronormative closure in which female agency is contained within acceptable limits. What distinguishes *Christmas in Connecticut* from more straightforward romantic narratives is precisely this frustration of resolution. The film does not fully affirm the transformation of the heroine, nor does it allow for her total subjugation. Instead, it occupies a space of productive contradiction—where the imaginary of romantic and domestic fulfillment is both enacted and interrogated. In this sense, the film operates as a parodic imitation of traditional romantic comedy, subtly exposing the limitations of the genre while still participating in it.

Together, these two films capture the awakening of female consciousness and independence of the time. The female protagonists, confronted with the the demands of urban modern life, is compelled to navigate multiple, overlapping roles prescribed by a patriarchal culture. From this perspective, the comparison between *Remember the Night* and *Christmas in Connecticut* reveals a notable evolution within the romantic comedy genre during the 1940s. It can be argued that the genre becomes increasingly paradoxical and complex as it moves from the pre-war to the post-war period, reflecting the intricate negotiations women were forced to undertake in a rapidly shifting cultural landscape. This very ambiguity, rather than a flaw, signals the genre's capacity to remain open-ended during moments of historical transition and to accommodate competing ideological currents.

Chapter 4 Noir Nights and Christmas Shadows: Representing Festivity and Darkness in 1940s Film Noir

Introduction

Compared with the genres examined in previous chapters, film noir is generally viewed as having little affinity with Christmas. This chapter therefore turns to the unlikely intersection between Christmas and 1940s film noir. Drawing on Sobchack's (1998) notion of lounge time in *Christmas Holiday* (Robert Siodmak, 1944) and Bakhtin's concept of the idyllic chronotope in *Cover Up* (Alfred E. Green, 1949), it conducts a parallel and comparative analysis of the two films to explore how noir participates in the broader "genre work" carried out by Hollywood (Doherty, 1999, p. 222). By examining Christmas as a chronotope, this chapter demonstrates how film noir is both grounded in and reflective of the social, cultural, and political atmosphere of the 1940s.

Within the stylistic and narrative conventions of film noir—shaped by German Expressionism and documentary realism—Christmas emerges as a spatiotemporal framework that stages contradiction and irony. Through stark binary oppositions—light and shadow, festivity and despair, faith and corruption—Christmas reveals the destructive undercurrents that run beneath the surface of social order. At the same time, any attempt to disrupt this order is narratively contained or punished, meaning the festive setting paradoxically reinforces, rather than challenges, dominant social norms. Thus, the function of Christmas in these films is not to offer moral clarity or emotional resolution, but to frame noir's exploration of human desire, failure, anxiety, and existential instability. They function as a reflective surface that Rather than providing direct political rebellion, these films innovate on aesthetic and formal levels, using Christmas as a chronotope that reflects—and compels audiences to confront the moral and emotional gray zones at the heart of human nature.

Film noir, as a generic category, is unique in that it was constructed retrospectively as a critical invention, rather than formally recognized by the film industry at the time of production. The emergence of this darker cinematic mode was clearly articulated when a backlog of Hollywood films—accumulated during the years that European markets were closed off to American imports—was finally released in French cinemas at the end of World War II. Viewed collectively, these films revealed a pervasive sense of gloom, marking a stark departure in tone and perspective from the traditional optimism of the American Dream (Spicer, 2018). It was within this context that the term film noir was coined in 1946 by Nino Frank (1995) to describe this new wave of grim, psychologically complex crime films emerging from Hollywood.

As R. Barton Palmer (1994, p. 45) explains: "Enthusiastic admirers of a cinema they thought more vital and lively than their own." Many French critics were struck by what they perceived as a radical change in American crime films, a loose category encompassing several established genres, including gangster, detective, and police procedural films as well as crime melodrama. Given the pervasiveness of this aesthetic, style, and sensibility across a range of Hollywood films in the 1940s—and the subsequent retrospective grouping of these works under the umbrella term 'film noir'—the category warrants sustained scholarly attention for its unique capacity to reflect and interrogate the cultural, social, and aesthetic dynamics of its era.

Although film noir was never formally codified as a genre by the Hollywood industry, its very liminality is what makes it invaluable to genre study. Noir in the 1940s displays a remarkably coherent constellation of visual motifs, narrative structures, and thematic concerns—precisely the kinds of recurrent patterns that enable genre analysis. More importantly, noir operates across multiple industrial genres, spilling into crime, detective, psychological thriller, and melodrama. This hybridity does not undermine its analytical legitimacy; rather, it provides a rare opportunity to examine how genres function in practice—as flexible cultural systems that can be activated, reshaped, and recombined according to historical pressures. Thus, positioning noir within a genre-studies framework does not require claiming it as a 'genre' in the strict

industrial sense. Instead, it allows us to investigate how the classical Hollywood genre system responded to the social anxiety, aesthetic disruption, and cultural transformations of the 1940s. Noir becomes a key site where these tensions surface: a stylistic and narrative formation that both critiques and reconfigures the conventions of established genres. For this reason, incorporating noir is not a methodological contradiction but a theoretical necessity. It expands our understanding of genre as a dynamic cultural process and deepens our insight into how Hollywood cinema reimagined its narrative and aesthetic boundaries during a decade of profound historical change.

When analyzing film noir within its historical and cultural context, the key challenge lies not only in tracing its stylistic and thematic origins, but also in understanding why the 'genre' felt so necessary and resonant at that age. To address this, this chapter begins with situating film noir within the socio-political conditions of the 1940s. I aim to examine the films' concrete and visible premises—premises that, underpin both the internal logic of the films and the external logic of the culture. These shared foundations, I contend, allow each to become intelligible in terms of the other, and it is precisely through this mutual legibility that we begin to understand how noir both emerges from and reflects its historical moment.

Then this chapter turns to case studies, focusing on two films: *Christmas Holiday* (1944) and *Cover Up* (1949). *Christmas Holiday* is an American film noir crime drama directed by Robert Siodmak, starring Deanna Durbin and Gene Kelly. Adapted from W. Somerset Maugham's 1939 novel of the same name, it tells the story of U.S. Army officer Charlie Mason (Dean Harens), who meets a beautiful hostess named "Jackie"/Abigail Manette (Deanna Durbin) at Maison Lafitte on Christmas Eve in New Orleans. She confides in him about her troubled past. The film's score, composed by Hans J. Salter, was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Musical Score (Parish, 1974). *Cover Up*, directed by Alfred E. Green, is an American film noir mystery starring Dennis O'Keefe, William Bendix, and Barbara Britton. The screenplay, co-written by O'Keefe under the pseudonym Jonathan Rix, centers on a murder investigation set against the backdrop of the Christmas season.

In order to analyse the two cases, this works draws on Bakhtin's (1981a) concept of the idyllic chronotope, which was introduced in previous chapters. Building on this, Sobchack's (1998) chronotropic notion of 'lounge time' offers a theoretical framework for articulating a distinct temporal experience found in film noir. As Montgomery (1993, p. 72) notes, "One of Bakhtin's express purposes in developing the chronotope in the first place is to work past conceptions of genres he perceives as being too limiting, to explore the more fundamental discursive patterns from which artistic works take their shape and which permit them to be understood and analyzed as cultural artifacts." In the context of film noir, Sobchack's (1998) lounge time refers to a specific kind of temporal stasis marked by waiting, ennui, and existential drift. The term lounge evokes spaces in which individuals linger, not simply in idleness but in a state of suspension marked by anticipation, boredom, and quiet anxiety. This

lingering becomes a mode of being, where time seems stretched, unanchored by purpose or progress. Such temporal experience mirrors the overall mood of noir, with its persistent themes of despair, moral ambiguity, and fatalism.

Lounge time is intimately connected to noir's spatial aesthetics—dimly lit lounges, smoky bars, cafes or roadside diners—recurring, grounded settings drawn from the cultural fabric of wartime and postwar America. These material conditions serve as the foundation for noir's narrative logic. When I refer to 'grounds' or 'premises', I mean them in a concrete, phenomenological sense: as the pre-reflective conditions that structure our intuitive understanding of noir as a historical and cultural form. This intuitive reading—widely accepted but rarely unpacked—stems from a mutual legibility between noir's form and its historical moment. In sum, my goal is not to rely on metaphor or allegory, but to return to the material, aesthetic, and affective structures that make noir legible as both cinematic expression and cultural artifact.

To explore the representation of Christmas and the chronotope that emerges around it, this section delves deeper into the recurring narrative themes characteristic and the distinctive stylistic look of these films. It focuses on their visual aesthetic characterised by distorted camera angles, unusual shadow patterns and low-key lighting with chiaroscuro effects. This visual language is intricately connected to an iconography characterised by gloomy urban landscapes and rain-drenched streets at night—elements that reflect the impact of German Expressionism (Crowther, 1988). The narrative structures are further complicated by the use of subjective narration via voice-over and flashback, portraying events in a non-linear chronology. Collectively, these features form a style that conjures the confined and strained atmosphere seen around, and at times juxtaposed to, the holiday within the noir universe.

4.1 The Silver Screen Goes Dark: The Emergence of Film Noir in 1940s Hollywood

Although film noir is often discussed in relation to genre, its status has long been debated. As Michael Walker (1992) notes, the body of 1940s Hollywood films retrospectively labeled 'film noir'; is markedly heterogeneous, prompting critics to search for different principles of coherence. Their efforts span an impressive range: from motif, tone, and mood (McArthur, 1972), to social and cultural influences (Schrader, 1971), to visual style (Place&Peterson, 1974), narrative structures (Nevill&Damico, 1978; Telotte, 1989), ideological representation (Kaplan, 1978), production conditions (Bray&Kerr, 1979), and even paranoia as a defining sensibility (Buchsbaum, 1986). This diversity underscores that noir was never a genre formally

recognized by the industry, but rather a retrospective critical category—a constellation of aesthetic, thematic, and narrative tendencies that recur across a variety of films. Precisely because of this hybridity, noir provides a productive site for examining how Hollywood genres responded to and were reshaped by the social and cultural anxieties of the 1940s.

As Walker (1992, p. 8) observes, opinions on what constitutes the "unifying features" of noir are so varied that the very utility and coherence of the term itself have been questioned. This ambiguity stems partly from the broad and heterogeneous nature of the films commonly categorized under the noir label. Walker (1992, p. 8) further highlights a significant issue: the corpus of films regarded by critics as film noir appears "too diverse" to be comfortably classified within a single generic framework. Surveys of noir literature reveal a strikingly eclectic collection of films, often encompassing works that stretch the boundaries of conventional genre definitions. For instance, entries in standard encyclopedic references on film noir showcase an expansive and sometimes contradictory range.

While 1940s noir is often associated with modern urban settings, some films grouped within this cycle defy these expectations. Hollywood melodramas from the mid-1940s—such as *Gaslight* (1944), *Hangover Square* (1945), and *The Spiral Staircase* (1945)—are set in Victorian or Edwardian periods and are more frequently classified within female gothic or gaslight subgenres rather than noir. Similarly, westerns such as *Duel in the Sun* (1946) and *I Shot Jesse James* (1949), appear in these references, further complicating any singular understanding of noir's boundaries. Even political thrillers like *The Black Book* (Anthony Mann, 1949), which dramatizes Maximilien Robespierre's post-Revolutionary Paris, are occasionally considered within the noir canon. This broad and sometimes inconsistent categorization underscores the ongoing challenge in defining film noir as a genre or cycle. The literature suggests that film noir is better understood not as a fixed category but as a fluid and contested field of study, reflecting diverse thematic, stylistic, and historical influences that resist simple classification.

The phenomenon of film noir first gained recognition through the observations of French film critics, who collectively labeled a group of post-war American films with this term. As Belton (2005, p. 190) notes, "What struck French critics about film noir was its essential difference from earlier American films." Unlike the traditionally optimistic narratives that had characterized Hollywood, film noir unveiled a darker, more complex portrayal of American society—one that echoed the devastation and psychological trauma experienced in Europe during and after World War II. Although the United States did not suffer the same level of physical destruction as Europe, the nation nonetheless grappled with widespread feelings of fear, alienation, and both physical and psychological displacement. These themes found fertile ground in film noir, which mirrored the country's internal turmoil through its visual and narrative style.

The genre's bleak tone, its recurring imagery of entrapment, and the psychological fragmentation of its protagonists all contribute to what may be read as a metaphorical documentation of a nation in crisis. Embedded within its recurring motifs—double and triple crosses, explosive private passions leading to crime, and characters mired in moral compromise—lies an implicit reflection of the political anxieties and social disillusionment of the 1940s. In this sense, film noir can be understood as one of the darkest and most psychologically penetrating of American cinematic movements, and whilst not neatly boundaried by the start and end of the 1940s, one that is seen to encapsulate the complex emotional experiences and legacies of a decade marked by both historical trauma and existential dread. Bookended by the horrors of Nazism and the dawning threat of nuclear annihilation, the 1940s films offered a shadowy reflection of the American psyche—a contemporary apocalypse, in which cultural fears were transmuted into cinematic form.

The noir canon, and particularly its core films, has been widely used as the foundational basis for identifying key features, antecedents, and contextual factors that contribute to the phenomenon. However, as Park (2011, p. 7) argues, this categorization relies heavily on a presumption of unity and coherence encapsulated in the term film noir, rather than a systematic, empirical analysis. The problem lies in the fact that the noir corpus is largely defined by a set of stylistic and aesthetic conventions applied to the mystery and thriller genres. These conventions, through their visual and narrative execution, transform crime films into cathartic allegories for the overwhelming 'Big Crime' of modernity—the Second World War, which serves as the master chronotope of film noir.

This reliance on stylistic elements for defining the genre means that the noir corpus cannot be conclusively verified through reference to contemporary studio documents, reviews, or other inter-textual sources. Instead, it must be established through critical observation and analysis. This challenge is not insurmountable, provided that the nature and status of the term film noir are clearly acknowledged, and that the canon is defined by applying a consistent set of criteria to as broad a range of films as possible (Naremore, 1995, pp. 12-29). A key feature of film noir, particularly in the works of the 1940s, is its deliberate disruption of straightforward narrative perception and action. This disruption, as Naremore (1995) suggests, generates a pervasive sense of anxiety in audiences through delayed narrative resolutions. The audience is drawn into a state of suspense as the mystery unfolds, with the film's ambiguity amplifying the emotional and psychological tension. Noir films often present a lost or missing time, a narrative dimension where critical events are not directly perceived or understood, creating a sense of mysteriousness that makes the narrative itself inherently ambiguous.

This unique narrative structure arises from a visual and stylistic treatment that precludes alternative narrative options. The noir aesthetic dictates the types of characters who inhabit its worlds, the kinds of situations that can unfold in such environments, and the stories that can emerge from the dynamic interrelationships of

characters within these settings. The dark, often oppressive visuals of film noir limit the narrative's possible trajectories, positioning the characters in morally compromised scenarios where their fates are often determined by a sense of inevitability and entrapment. This restriction not only defines the genre's thematic concerns but also reinforces the overarching sense of existential despair and societal disillusionment that characterizes the noir experience. It is in these ambiguities and disruptions of narrative that noir films find their unique voice, offering a space where fear, alienation, and moral complexity can be explored through a series of dark, fractured tales that resonate with the broader socio-political context of the era.

The emergence of film noir can be traced back to its early cinematic innovations, which laid the foundation for the genre's distinctive aesthetic and narrative style. A key starting point in this development is Boris Ingster's 1940 film *Stranger on the Third Floor*, a precursor to more widely recognized noir films such as *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941). Stranger on the Third Floor is particularly notable for its striking central nightmare sequence, which was photographed by Nicholas Musuraca, renowned for his work on *Out of the Past* (Jacques Tourneur, 1947). This sequence, a defining moment in the film, is credited with pioneering a visual style that would become a hallmark of film noir. It is designed with bold, expressionistic sets created by art director Van Nest Polglase, who also worked as the set designer on *Citizen Kane*. The sequence features highly stylized, distorted, and starkly lit renderings of courtrooms, prison cells, and execution chambers (Spicer&Hanson, 2013). In fact, its prevalence has led to the term oneiric (dreamlike) being applied to the overall tone of many of these films. These sequences often blur the boundaries between reality and hallucination. Other early examples of noir films employing similar visual distortions include *Street of Chance* (Jack Hively, 1941) and *Among the Living* (Stuart Heisler, 1941). Both films incorporate visual techniques that manipulate the audience's perception of space and time, further contributing to the unsettling, dreamlike quality that would come to define the genre. This departure from the more conventional flat lighting used in other scenes of the film was a deliberate aesthetic choice meant to provide insight into the tortured, anxious state of the protagonist's mind.

The early classical noir was greatly limited to shooting on studio sets, a practice that contributed to the genre's signature visual style and sense of confinement. This stylistic choice can be observed in key films such as *Scarlet Street* (Fritz Lang, 1945), *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, 1941), and one of the finest examples of the era, *The Blue Dahlia* (George Marshall, 1946). These films frequently dramatized a closed world—a visually claustrophobic environment characterized by tight framing that reinforced the sense of entrapment and limited agency experienced by the protagonists. Often, these worlds were further accentuated through high-angle shots, which amplified the sense of surveillance and helplessness. In *Murder My Sweet* (1944) and *Out of the Past* (1947), variations on this studio-bound pattern emerge. *Murder My Sweet* (1944) employed subjective camerawork to mirror Raymond Chandler's first-person prose, thus immersing the audience directly into the troubled psyche of the protagonist, Philip Marlowe. In contrast, *Out of the Past* (1947), with

cinematography by Nicholas Musuraca, presents a more romantic and non-expressionistic visual style, even incorporating real locations, such as the Sierra Nevada mountains in California. This departure from the studio-bound aesthetic lent *Out of the Past* a more expansive feel, even as it maintained the emotional claustrophobia characteristic of noir.

One of the most memorable sequences in *Murder My Sweet* is the surreal opening scene, where Marlowe, blindfolded as he speaks to the police, evokes the visual absurdity of a Magritte painting (Park, 2011, p. 7). The image of Marlowe, constrained in a position of vulnerability and confusion, effectively sets the tone for the psychological complexities and dark humor that permeate the film. Similarly, the low-budget noir *Detour* (1945) opens its flashback narrative with disturbing visual distortions, notably casting grotesque shadows across the face of Tom Neal in a close-up shot, lit with intense shadows. This disorienting introduction, paired with a voice-over narration, immediately establishes the film's tone of paranoia and fate-driven fatalism. Overall, these early noir films demonstrate the genre's keen use of visual techniques to evoke a sense of entrapment, alienation, and psychological turmoil.

During this period, Christmas appears infrequently and often as a peripheral detail, if not entirely absent from the narrative. This sporadic inclusion can largely be attributed to the constraints imposed by the Hays Code (also known as the Production Code), which restricted the portrayal of themes that might challenge or undermine traditional values, including religious holidays. Since noir films frequently explored contentious subjects such as crime, sexual transgression, and moral ambiguity, setting these often-dark stories during Christmas posed a potential risk of breaching censorship standards. As noted by Sheri Chinen Biesen (2005, p. 16), filmmakers working under the Code were expected to handle controversial material "obliquely, through suggestion rather than confrontation". This requirement likely discouraged filmmakers from placing Christmas at the forefront of their narratives, instead nudging them to either subtly reference the holiday or use it ironically, if at all.

One striking example of noir's use of Christmas is *Christmas Holiday* (1944), a film that subverts audience expectations set by its title. By setting the film during Christmas, director Robert Siodmak creates an ironic juxtaposition, using the holiday to underscore the film's bleak themes of despair and moral decay. This inversion of the holiday's traditional connotations is an effective tool in enhancing the film's noir sensibility. Similarly, in Robert Siodmak's *The Suspect* (1944), Christmas is again employed to emphasize the film's grim tone. In this film, Charles Laughton portrays a sympathetic but morally conflicted character who, on Christmas Eve, murders his overbearing wife. This strategic use of Christmas as a symbolic counterpoint to the genre's prevailing mood of alienation and pessimism is crucial for understanding how noir films navigate the restrictions of the Hays Code. Thus, *Christmas Holiday* stands out as an exemplary case study for this exploration, as it offers a compelling opportunity to question whether Christmas in noir merely contrasts with the darkness

of the genre, or whether, under Siodmak's direction, the holiday itself is co-opted as part of that very darkness.

The social developments during the war had a profound impact on film noir, especially in fostering a shift toward greater realism. One notable consequence was the incorporation of documentary techniques into fictional feature films. At that time, American audiences had grown accustomed to watching extended newsreels and documentaries that supported the war effort, becoming familiar with the strident voice-overs and the unflinching portrayal of wartime violence (McDonnell, 2007, pp. 70-81). These influences encouraged the rise of what is often referred to as the semidocumentary subgenre of classical noir. This subgenre were characterized by a blend of fictional storytelling and documentary-style techniques. These films were often shot on location, further emphasizing their sense of realism and authenticity. The trend began with producer Louis de Rochemont, who had worked on the March of Time newsreels, bringing elements such as voice-over narration, uplifting music, and an emphasis on portraying crime stories as true cases filmed in the very locations where the events supposedly occurred. Notably, this subgenre took off with films such as *The House on 92nd Street* (Henry Hathaway, 1945) and reached its pinnacle with *The Naked City* (Jules Dassin, 1948) (Valente, 2022).

A defining motif of these semi-documentary noirs is the portrayal of the city, especially at night. The urban environment, with its anonymity and moral ambiguity, became emblematic of the genre's themes. Although most noir films are set in large cities like New York, Chicago, San Francisco, or Los Angeles, some noirs also explore smaller towns. Films such as *Boomerang!* (1947) exemplify this contrast, as the story opens in an ordinary Connecticut town during the day before transitioning to a murder scene on the same streets at night. This duality allows for a broader exploration of noir's thematic concerns, shifting the setting from the impersonal vastness of the city to the deceptive familiarity of small-town life.

The narrative function of noir's iconic imagery is often intricately linked to the transitory spaces in which its stories unfold. As Vivian Sobchack (1998, p. 138) puts it, "the cocktail lounges, hotel bars, diners, roadhouses, and motels that spacialize film noir . . . are made for transients and transience." These "quasi-places" substitute perversely for the warm, stable spaces of a proper home, symbolizing impermanence and instability rather than comfort and domesticity (Sobchack, 1984, p. 5). In a wartime culture of temporary accommodation, they are also mirrored in the interior spaces depicted in the paintings of Edward Hopper, whose works, most notably *Nighthawks* (1942), are often seen as a visual corollary to film noir. During the postwar period, the concept of home took on heightened significance, especially for a population in perpetual transit, shaped by the dislocations and disruptions of the war years. In this context, noir's iconography is as revealing for what it shows as for what it omits. As Sobchack (1984, p. 4) suggests, "in noir, homes are given to us only in glimpses—as something lost or something fragile and threatened." I will further explore the representation and role of home in this genre in the subsequent sections.

The postwar period saw a more deliberate, though still restrained, integration of Christmas themes in film noir. Early examples, such as *Lady on a Train* (Charles Henri David, 1945), a noir-inflected mystery comedy, use Christmas as a means to evoke humor and sentimentality. In this film, Deanna Durbin's performance of Silent Night on a snowy Christmas Eve offers a brief moment of emotional respite amidst the film's darker themes. Similarly, *Lady in the Lake* (1946), an adaptation of Raymond Chandler's novel, opens with a montage of Christmas carols and holiday-themed title cards. Yet, despite the festive setting, Christmas remains largely peripheral to the plot, a backdrop against which the narrative unfolds. While In some instances, Christmas contributes to the development of the narrative. In *Kiss of Death* (1947), for example, the Christmas setting quickly evokes sympathy for the protagonist, who commits a robbery on Christmas Eve. The act is framed ironically by the narrator's remark, "This is how Nick went Christmas shopping for his kid." This moment poignantly underscores his desperate situation, revealing the economic pressures that lead him to make a helpless choice. In order to give his child a decent Christmas, he feels forced to turn to crime, highlighting the moral complexities and vulnerabilities that characterize the noir genre.

More notably, several noirs from the late 1940s began to assign Christmas a more sustained thematic role. *I Wouldn't Be in Your Shoes* (1948), a B-noir film, repeatedly emphasizes its Christmas setting, using it as a poignant counterpoint to the grim events that unfold. The protagonist, who is wrongly sentenced to death shortly after the holiday, reflects the bleakness of the genre, with one character confessing, "It's Christmas Eve and I am lonesome and afraid." Here, Christmas becomes a symbol of loss and inevitable doom, reinforcing the film's fatalistic tone. Similarly, *The Reckless Moment* (1949) weaves Christmas more consistently into its narrative fabric, using the holiday to reinforce the central theme of familial disintegration and emotional strain. According to Dickos (2002, p. 45), the Christmas setting in these films serves to highlight the emotional and psychological turmoil of characters who are unable to reconcile their personal lives with the larger social and economic forces that shape their fates. These films represent a shift in the portrayal of Christmas within film noir, from a background motif to a thematic tool that deepens the genre's exploration of moral ambiguity, isolation, and existential crisis.

Overall, one of the most enduring debates surrounding film noir remains whether it reflects, critiques, or subverts prevailing social values. Scholars often interpret the genre's social and cinematic contexts in sharply contrasting ways, reflecting the complexity and multifaceted nature of noir. Some commentators, such as Lawson (1984, p. 24), argue that the "pattern of sex and violence" in noir films evolved into a form of "direct propaganda for war and fascist regimentation", suggesting that the genre served to reinforce rather than critique dominant ideologies. In contrast, Schrader (1971, p. 55) posits that "the disillusionment felt by soldiers, small businessmen, and housewives returning to a peacetime economy was directly mirrored in the grim and sordid urban crime narratives of film noir". This view

underscores noir as a cinematic expression of the psychological and social struggles faced by postwar America.

Durgnat (1970, p. 13) offers a different perspective, arguing that the late 1940s marked a darker Hollywood precisely because audiences, now more secure, no longer sought escapism or reassurance from film. Instead, noir's increasing bleakness reflected the more profound social anxieties of a nation confronting its newfound stability and identity in the postwar period. Others, such as Nachbar (1988, p. 73), argue that noir was a "flipside" to the postwar baby boom and the middle-class migration to the suburbs. This suggests that the genre's focus on urban decay, crime, and moral ambiguity served as a counterpoint to the idyllic vision of suburban life that emerged after World War II. Some scholars have sought to relate the noir phenomenon to more specific factors within the cultural and historical landscape of the postwar era. For example, Telotte (1989, p. 17) views noir as a site for expressing and exploring the communication and representation problems that arose in the wake of the war. He suggests that noir's stylistic and narrative elements were deeply connected to a society struggling to redefine itself in a changing world.

Similarly, Dana Polan (1986, p. 93) argues that film noir's defamiliarizing techniques and its emphasis on heterogeneity reflect a profound crisis in America's socio-cultural authority, particularly when contrasted with the classical narrative conventions of Hollywood cinema. This disruption of narrative and genre norms mirrors the instability and disorientation of postwar American society. Arthur (1985, p. 46) provides a more specific reading, situating noir within the geopolitical context of the early Cold War and interpreting it as a "confrontation of individuals and networks of corporate/collective control", thereby reflecting the heightened politicization of issues surrounding loyalty, allegiance, and betrayal during this period. Within this framework, noir not only reflects the prevailing ideological climate but also functions to critique and subvert social and moral conventions, offering a profoundly dark and penetrating mirror of postwar American life. Building on these theoretical perspectives, this study employs Christmas as a chronotope to examine how film noir engages with, responds to, and potentially reconstructs dominant social orders, thereby deepening our understanding of its ideological significance.

4.2 A Noir Christmas : lounge time and idyllic town

Having outlined the general historical context, this section turns to a more focused examination of the intersection between film noir and Christmas through two case studies: *Christmas Holiday* (1944) and *Cover Up* (1949), released respectively during the wartime and postwar periods. *Christams Holiday* conjure up a dark, urban world of neurotic entrapment leading to delirium. *Cover up* shows a noir universe where ulcerous secrets are smoothly skinned over by patterns of social respectability. The first film opens with Christmas Eve at Camp Davis in North Carolina, echoing its title

and setting the stage. Lieutenant Charlie Mason (Dean Harens) plans to celebrate his graduation by going to San Francisco to marry his fiancé Mona. His plans are short circuited when he receives a "Dear John" telegram telling him that Mona has married another man. Charlie decides to go to San Francisco to confront the newlyweds. Because of bad weather, however, his plane is rerouted and forced to land in New Orleans. The passengers are all bused into New Orleans where the airline puts them up at a hotel. In the hotel lobby, Charles is accosted by Simon Fenimore (Richard Whorf), a reporter who is disappointed by the news that there were no injuries or mishaps during the forced landing. Simon takes Charles to a nightclub filled with Jazz where they meet a stunning yet reserved singer, Jackie Lamont (Deanna Durbin). In order to cheer up Charlie for Christmas, Simon gets Jackie to come over to their table. Christmas, here serves as a moment of loneliness and emotional vulnerability, highlighting the protagonist's need for comfort and human connection.

This scene reflects what Erenberg (1986, pp. 761-778) identifies as a defining feature of the World War II era: the prosperity generated by defense spending and the widespread social dislocation made the war years the golden age of the nightclub. As Erenberg (1986, pp. 761-778) observes, the nightclub had become part of the broader promise of American life. Perhaps this is precisely what Charlie—the soldier in the scene—represents. The wartime nightclub experience marked the first time they were able to enter spaces that had previously excluded them. Charlie, a young man on Christmas holiday, stands in for a wider national phenomenon: ordinary servicemen, uprooted from their homes and temporarily flush with spending money, now had access to the nightlife culture that once belonged only to the upper classes. Their participation in these spaces reflects both the transient sense of belonging and the fleeting prosperity that the war had made possible.

According to Bakhtin's (1981a) concept of the chronotope, the nightclub can be seen as a modern reconfiguration of the 19th-century salon—a socially and narratively charged space where time and space are densely interwoven. Bakhtin identifies the salon as a key chronotopic structure in the novels of Stendhal and Balzac, rooted in the real-life parlors and salons of the French Restoration and July Monarchy. These were spaces where diverse social types—aristocrats, intellectuals, politicians, and artists—converged, allowing for interactions that revealed not only individual psychology but also broader social dynamics. In noir cinema, and particularly in scenes set within nightclubs, we find a similar function at play. Here, soldiers, journalists, and nightclub singers—modern analogues of Bakhtin's (1981b, pp. 246–247) "reporters," "courtesans," and "intriguers"—come together in a single space where "webs of intrigue are spun, denouements occur," and "dialogues happen" that reveal the characters' inner ideas, emotions, and socio-political positions. These interactions do not take place in a vacuum; rather, they reflect and refract the broader forces of the historical moment—wartime dislocation, shifting class boundaries, and the rise of consumer culture.

What Bakhtin (1981b, pp. 246-247) calls the "ultimate power of the new sovereign—money"—is also clearly visible in the nightclub. The setting underscores that wartime prosperity allows new entrants, such as working-class soldiers like Charlie, to temporarily access spaces of luxury, sexuality, and performance that had previously been socially restricted. In this way, the nightclub becomes a symbolic site of both upward mobility and precarious illusion—a space where the social order appears to be in flux, but where deeper structures of inequality and alienation remain intact. Crucially, Bakhtin (1981b, pp. 246–247) emphasizes the fusion of private and public spheres within the salon—a fusion that also defines the noir nightclub. Here, personal dramas unfold in tandem with political undercurrents; romantic entanglements mirror financial manipulation; secrets of the boudoir are inseparable from the movements of state and capital. In the nightclub, historical, biographical, and everyday temporalities are compressed into a single space, where narrative time and social meaning become indistinguishably interwoven. As such, noir's nightclub serves as a chronotopic nexus that crystallizes the contradictions and anxieties of its era.

The choice of New Orleans as the narrative setting is far from incidental; rather, it functions as a richly layered urban chronotope (Bakhtin, 1981a). Shaped by French, Spanish, and African diasporic influences, New Orleans emerges not as a harmonious melting pot, but as a site of unresolved historical tensions and cultural dissonance. It is a liminal space—geographically Southern, culturally hybrid, and morally ambivalent—positioned at the margins of mainstream American identity. David J. Hebert (2012, p. 38) characterizes New Orleans as possessing a Mediterranean culture, racially ambiguous history, Catholic traditions, and distance from its neighboring regions, all of which make it well-suited for questioning the idealized narratives of the Old South. The city resists the sanitized narratives of Southern nostalgia. It is precisely this layered identity that renders it an ideal noir setting—a backdrop against which the genre's themes of disillusionment, decay, and identity crisis can play out.

As Raeburn (2002, pp. 41-52) further claims, the jazz age was viewed by many as immoral, representing a shift toward a new and decadent system of values. The city's association with jazz thus amplifies its role as a site of perceived moral deviation—a space where characters are forced to confront aspects of themselves and society that are normally repressed. In this context, Charlie's accidental detour to New Orleans—rather than his intended destination of San Francisco—takes on more than a logistical function; it signifies a narrative and psychological descent entering what Kyte (2024, p. 144) calls "a hallucinatory landscape of collapsed time and unstable identity." The city becomes a metaphor for dislocation, a space where linear narratives and stable identities break down.

The scene, in which Simon gives Charlie two tickets to Midnight Mass at Saint Louis Cathedral and Jackie eagerly asks to accompany him, is rich in symbolic and visual significance. Midnight Mass—also known as the "Mass of the Shepherds"—is the spiritual centerpiece of Christmas Eve, commemorating the humble shepherds who were the first to receive the news of Christ's birth (Catholic Encyclopedia, 2023).

Traditionally held at the liminal hour between night and day, the Mass symbolizes the arrival of divine light into a world shrouded in darkness. The low-angle shots further position the viewer in the role of a scrutinizing gaze, intensifying the sensation of being watched and judged. This functions not only as a form of visual oppression but also as psychological and moral discipline. Simultaneously, the chiaroscuro lighting emphasizes limited visibility, as the sacred light only illuminates fragments of the space while vast areas remain shrouded in shadow. The light does not offer full clarity or salvation but rather hints that what is deemed sacred might merely veil a deeper, more pervasive darkness. In this way, the scene questions the very nature of spiritual order, revealing it as a potential mechanism of control and exclusion rather than refuge.

The soundscape deepens this ambivalence. The sacred music—Puer Natus in Bethlehem, the Kyrie from Licinio Refice's Missa Choralis, and Adeste Fideles—draws from the deep well of Christian liturgical tradition, evoking themes of spiritual renewal, divine mercy, and the promise of new life (Dyer, 2013, p. 12). Yet in this context, the music is not merely devotional. The acoustics of the cathedral—its cavernous interior and stone surfaces—transform the hymns into something uncanny. The voices echo, disembodied and distant, producing an auditory environment that feels ghostly rather than comforting. The sacred becomes spectral. The cathedral, in effect, becomes a noir cathedral: not a site of clear redemption, but one where ritual is enveloped in psychological darkness.

This tension comes to a peak when Jackie suddenly breaks into tears. Framed in shadows through deep focus and low-key lighting—hallmarks of noir style—she appears both exposed and trapped (Naremore, 1998, p. 9). Her breakdown is a moment of rupture, a crack in the noir surface through which raw emotion briefly surfaces. The scene dramatizes a fundamental noir paradox: the desire for salvation in a world that structurally resists it. The congregation's eyes shift not to her, but to Charlie, whose gesture of covering her with his coat serves more to hide than to comfort. In this moment, the Christmas Mass is not a sanctuary, but a collective performance of moral unity. Jackie's loss of control lays bare the fragility and exclusivity of this order, rendering the holiday ritual deeply ironic.

What lies beneath this emotional rupture is soon disclosed, as the film gradually unearths the truth behind Jackie's identity. In a moment of vulnerability, she reveals that her real name is not Jackie Lamont, but Abigail Manette—the wife of convicted murderer Robert Manette (Gene Kelly), who was sentenced to life in prison for the killing of a bookie, Teddy Jordan, three years prior. This revelation transitions into an extended flashback, narrated by Abigail in voiceover. The sequence functions as both a narrative device and a form of self-interrogation: a retrospective that confronts not only the events of the past, but also the emotional weight of guilt and ambivalence that lingers in the present. Only through this temporal detour can Abigail begin to reclaim a sense of self, allowing "Jackie Lamont" to dissolve and the wounded truth of "Abigail Manette" to reemerge.

As Jackie and Charlie revisit the past, they traverse a series of nearly indistinguishable, sparsely furnished hotel rooms, cocktail lounges, and cafés. These transient sites embody what Vivian Sobchack (1998, pp. 129-170) terms lounge time: spatiotemporal structures and chronotopic units characterized by impermanence, disposability, and emotional detachment. These quasi-domestic settings serve as uncanny surrogates for home. Activities such as sleeping, drinking, and eating—originally embedded in the intimacy and ritual of family life—are here transformed into isolated, mechanical, and survival-driven behaviors. Time is flattened, unstuck from linear progression, and space becomes interchangeable and affectively sterile. This fragmentation mirrors the broader wartime and postwar condition in American culture: a profound sense of dislocation and loss of home.

While the narrative moves through flashbacks, it can be noticed that not only the hotel rooms, cocktail lounges, and cafés lack the qualities of a true home—even the home does appear—fragmented and intermittent—it feels anachronistic, more like a psychological phantasm or a symbol of repression than a lived domestic space. The cold-toned, indirect lighting and ostensibly luxurious yet emotionally sterile furniture amplify the affective detachment of the space. The stark chiaroscuro intensify the sense of psychological unease and internal familial tension. The house is often depicted through static or slowly zooming shots, emphasizing her frozen, hesitant gaze upon domestic memory—her fixation and evasion. The cinematography frequently employs Dutch angles or low-angle shots, creating a sense of spatial instability and portraying the home as a site of anxiety and control. In the frame, Abigail appears diminished—engulfed by the cold vastness of the house, confined to corners or overwhelmed by massive, imposing furniture. Recurring motifs—doors, windows, curtains, mirrors—function as barriers that fragment the spatial experience, reflecting the emotional ruptures and dissonance within the family. Everything appears hollow and unyielding. This visual strategy not only underscores the imbalance of power within the domestic sphere but also highlights what Polan (1986) identifies as a critical historical moment: the dissolution of the home's self-contained, harmonious order. Through this layered spatial and emotional portrayal, the film conveys a profound sense of alienation and the failure of traditional domestic structures to provide refuge or identity. This treatment is emblematic of the convergence between noir aesthetics and wartime cultural anxiety—just as Polan argues, the home is no longer a reality but a structure of memory and feeling, a phantom glimpsed only in retrospect after its loss.

Similarly displaced from home during the Christmas holiday is the insurance investigator Sam Donovan (Dennis O'Keefe) in *Cover Up* (1949). Arriving in a small Midwestern town west of Chicago to investigate the suspicious death of a man named Philip, Sam quickly discovers that beneath the town's seemingly serene holiday façade lies a tangled web of deceit. Initially, Sam suspects little more than suicide, but his first inkling that something is amiss comes from the sheriff's deliberately evasive and glib stonewalling—portrayed with subtle menace by William Bendix. This tension unfolds against the backdrop of Christmas iconography, notably in a scene

where the sheriff is wrapping presents at his desk. As Sam's routine paperwork transforms into a probing interrogation, the sheriff's pretense of casualness masks a deeper intent. His steady gaze rarely meets Sam's; instead, he calmly puffs on his pipe, his sausage-like fingers meticulously sealing the wrapping paper around a small gift. This act of gift-wrapping functions as a potent visual metaphor: while preparing to present the trappings of holiday cheer, the sheriff simultaneously wraps the truth, shrouding the unsettling reality beneath a veneer of festive order.

The spatial arrangement further amplifies the adversarial dynamic. Seated across from each other like chess opponents, the Christmas presents placed between them serve as physical and symbolic barriers—highlighting the rupture of fellowship and mutual trust. Their polite yet antagonistic verbal exchange and mutual refusal to meet each other's eyes underscore this subtle hostility. By the window stands a spindly tabletop Christmas tree, its delicate silhouette echoing more than just seasonal decoration—it functions as a symbolic spatial structure. In one telling moment, Sam drifts toward it and absently fingers a small present lying underneath, as though distracted, mentally probing something he barely wants to acknowledge. The sheriff's remark—"Why don't you forget about it? Go on home, visit your folks for Christmas"—seems, on its surface, a kind, ordinary gesture. Yet in this context it implied to a return to superficial comfort, rather than confronting the disturbing reality that festivity does not guarantee honesty, nor does ritual ensure justice.

Sam's response to the sheriff's suggestion reveals a vulnerability beneath his tough-guy facade: "Sounds great, Sheriff, only I don't have any folks and my home is wherever I happen to hang my hat." This offhand remark, paired with his act of placing the present back under the Christmas tree, symbolizes his sense of rootlessness and refusal to belong. Like Jackie and Charlie in Christmas Holiday, who drift through temporary, quasi-domestic spaces like lounges and hotels, Sam moves through the town's streets as a similarly displaced figure—unanchored and adrift. Subsequently, he buys a compact at the jewelry store—not just a holiday purchase but an opportunity to question the jeweler who found the body. The jeweler and his wife's discomfort during the interrogation reveals an undercurrent of collective anxiety and tacit complicity. Sam's visit to the town undertaker confirms that everyone he encounters is on edge, yet uniformly committed to maintaining the official narrative of suicide. This pervasive tension hints at a broader, systemic conspiracy—sustained by communal silence and institutional collusion—underscoring that the truth becomes a fragile and contested commodity in this closed social environment.

Building on MacCannell's (1999) insights, it is necessary to revisit the earlier discussion of the family melodrama genre, more specifically, *It's a Wonderful Life* as it intersects with an unusual cinematic moment during the wartime and postwar period. This moment literalizes the loss of home and the capacity to find refuge within one's own soul, transforming the mise-en-scène into concrete, specific settings that anchor the noir universe. As Dana Polan (1981, p. 93) argues film noir is not defined by a fixed set of genre conventions, but by the pervasive mood it conveys, what he terms

"negative existentialism". The sense of control, whether over one's fate, moral compass, or social standing, begins to erode, giving way to a pervasive feeling of powerlessness. The breakdown of 'home' functions as a concentrated manifestation of this existential crisis. This kind of emotional landscape explains why noir is capable of moving fluidly across genres such as the family melodrama, where domestic stability is both thematized and destabilized.

However, film noir does not always depict the home as a site of alienation or despair. *Cover Up* (1949) presents a tangible and surprisingly warm portrayal of family life during the festive season. Through the noir-style venetian blinds of the sheriff's office window, Sam catches sight of Anita Weatherby (Barbara Britton) emerging from a shop across the street and tells the sheriff that he now has a reason to stay. While the scene still employs the visual vocabulary of noir—shadows, blinds, and restricted framing—the camera notably refrains from evoking oppression or paranoia. Instead, it adopts a gentle, almost affectionate gaze, signaling a subtle tonal shift within the noir aesthetic. The sheriff assumes Sam is referring to the murder case, but this is only part of the reason. Emotional ties and the quiet pull of domestic life are equally, if not more, compelling.

The narrative introduces Sam and Anita arriving together on a train to her hometown. Anita returns to spend Christmas with her family, and when Sam mentions that he will be staying at the local hotel briefly for business, her father kindly invites him to their home. Later, as Sam visits the Weatherby household, the imagery decisively conveys domestic warmth. He walks toward the house in the bitter December cold, hunched against the wind, only to straighten up and smile upon seeing Anita reading by the window. The transition into the interior space is marked by a slowing of the film's pacing: editing becomes less frequent, camera movements stabilize, and the mise-en-scène opens up to allow the audience to linger within the domestic space. The home is depicted as a warm, lived-in space: a glowing fireplace, parents (played by Helen Spring and Art Baker) relaxing in armchairs, and a large Christmas tree dominating the center of the living room. Sam's earlier purchase—a compact—is revealed to be a gift not for Anita but for her younger sister, a small gesture that signals his integration into the family unit. The familial interaction avoids becoming cloyingly saccharine; instead, it is marked by gentle teasing and mutual affection. Compared to *Chrisrmas Holiday*, *Cover Up* can be seen as participating in a postwar cultural reimagining of the home, shifting from representations of loss and mourning to a restoration of domestic order and longing.

Christmas enters again at a climactic moment, as the town prepares to light an enormous tree in the central square—an annual ritual that embodies communal continuity and collective memory. The mise-en-scène is overtly festive: snow blankets the streets, lights and garlands adorn the storefronts, children laugh as they chase one another, and adults gather in cheerful conversation. The towering Christmas tree, embellished with a medley of ornaments, sparkling baubles, and crowned with a shining star, stands as a visual anchor for seasonal tradition. It is Dr. Gerrow, the

town's beloved physician, who lights the tree each year, reaffirming his symbolic role as a moral and emotional pillar of the community. This year is no different—until it is.

As the townspeople assemble, anticipation grows. Children shout, the crowd murmurs in expectation, and snow begins to fall with almost cinematic precision. But just as the ritual is about to commence, a message arrives: Dr. Gerrow, now retired and living in another town, has died earlier that evening. His death comes as a thematic rupture—what Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1975, p. 5) describes as a confrontation with the "inevitable and universal" dimension of human mortality. In this sense, Gerrow occupies a symbolic position similar to that of George Bailey in *It's a Wonderful Life*: both men are avatars of community cohesion and ethical responsibility in small-town America. Yet unlike Geogre, whose value is confirmed through his continued presence and redemption, Gerrow is irrevocably absent. His death, which occurs precisely on Christmas Eve, casts a long shadow over the ceremony, transforming it from an act of celebration into one of memorialization and reluctant perseverance.

The announcement, delivered over a tinny microphone by Anita's father, momentarily halts the ritual. Shock and quiet grief ripple through the crowd. But the show must go on. "The doctor would have wanted it this way," they say, and the tree is lit regardless. Like the Weatherby house—radiant with morning sunshine and later suffused with the glow of hearth light and electric bulbs—the town is bathed in an artificial warmth that gestures toward emotional stability while concealing the deeper undercurrents of absence and disquiet. Although the film employs a more restrained and realist visual style than classic expressionist noir, it nonetheless inherits noir's fundamental logic: here, light does not reveal truth but obscures it. Surface brightness—whether from Christmas decorations or familial affection—serves to mask the tension, uncertainty, and loss that simmer beneath.

As such, the holiday Midwestern town in this film can be read as the idyllic chronotope, which is spatially grounded in the coherence of the small town: its tight-knit community, cyclical rituals, and shared moral values. Snow-covered streets, festive garlands, glowing lights, and the multigenerational gathering all contribute to a sense of a self-contained world, where time is experienced not as linear progression but as cyclical repetition. Yet this sense of timelessness is ultimately revealed to be illusory. The sudden death of Dr. Gerrow on Christmas Eve disrupts the ritual cycle, exposing the fragility of the tradition it was meant to uphold. What initially appears as an unchanging structure of meaning—secure in its spatial and temporal closure—is, in fact, sustained through loss, substitution, and the quiet inevitability of change. The town's idyllic image thus contains within it the seeds of its own erosion.

In doing so, the film draws on a nostalgic longing for a mythologized, pre-modern time-space in which meaning appears fixed, identities are stable, and collective life is coherent. This longing, as articulated through the idyllic chronotope, echoes similar spatial-temporal structures observed in earlier discussions of the family melodrama

and romantic comedy (Bakhtin, 1981a, p. 11). Across all three genres, the idyllic chronotope emerges as a reparative gesture—a narrative attempt to reassemble meaning in the face of disintegration. It does not merely restore order but stages the very tension between a past that felt whole and a present that feels fractured. Whether these efforts culminate in reconciliation, as in romantic comedy; in tragic ambiguity, as in family melodrama; or in unresolved fatalism, as often seen in noir, the chronotope becomes a shared formal strategy. It allows each genre to explore a common cultural anxiety: the desire to return to a world of continuity and clarity, even as such a world remains forever out of reach.

However, it is precisely this coherence that film noir ultimately destabilizes, suggesting that beneath the festive surface lies a darker truth the idyll cannot contain. As Fredric Jameson (1991, p. 18) argues, such invocations of the past often reflect not genuine memory but "the nostalgia for a past that never existed"—a simulacrum that displaces rather than recovers historical reality. Noir, in contrast to genres like melodrama or romantic comedy, actively interrogates this nostalgic impulse. Its deployment of the idyllic chronotope reveals a profound ambivalence: a cultural longing for coherence paired with the unsettling awareness that such coherence may itself be a fabricated illusion. In noir, remembrance does not function as a site of healing but rather as a terrain of haunting. Pastness becomes spectral, uncanny—its comforting form masking unresolved traumas and buried truths. This tension is crystallized in the perspective of Sam, whose position is at once insider and outsider. Part of him succumbs to the sentimental allure of small-town Christmas rituals; he admits to the sheriff that he has grown to like the town, suggesting a desire for belonging. Yet another part remains sharply alert: he is surrounded by potential suspects, and his growing unease points to an awareness that the town's unity masks deeper fractures. His experience embodies noir's central dilemma: the longing to inhabit the idyll, even while knowing it is structurally compromised.

From this perspective, the lounge time in *Christmas Holiday* can be understood as evoking a parallel yet antinomic universe to the idyllic chronotope described by Bakhtin (1981a, p. 11). While it constitutes a hermetically sealed whole, its internal elements and potential continuities are fragmented and unanchored. Moreover, its spaces are conspicuously unfamilial, unfamiliar, and anonymous. Yet, despite this dissonance, lounge time remains isomorphic with the structures of the idyllic chronotope: it is spatially limited, self-sufficient, and insulated from the outsider world. In line with the fragmentation of domestic coherence and the temporal structuring found in idyllic narratives, the cultural space-time intensified in lounge time radically transforms leisure into something endured rather than enjoyed.

Charlie's stalled wait for a flight to San Francisco in Christmas Holiday manifests this condition concretely—his holiday vocation becomes temporalized as idle restlessness, marked by a lack of occupation and a troublingly public display of unemployment. He waits, lingers, and drifts—making plans that dissipate like torch songs or the smoke of too many stubbed-out cigarettes. Rootless and unmoored, Charlie meets Jackie by

chance; they act impulsively, lacking the social constraints that might otherwise temper their passions and fears. In essence, they embody—and narrativize—the very qualities of the spaces they inhabit: emotionally charged yet devoid of social grounding, fractured by sudden appeals to base desires. Their lifeworlds and identities lack cohesion. Like the bars, hotel rooms, and roadside cafés they frequent, they are both literally and semiotically incoherent—a latent threat to the patriarchal and capitalist culture, even as they remain its perverse byproduct.

Moreover, as characters become disconnected from the forms of labor that traditionally elevate the everyday into meaningful eventfulness, they are reduced to mere petty consumers. As Bakhtin (1981b, p. 227) notes, "in the idyll chronotope, food and drink embody a sense of the social, or more commonly, the familial—multiple generations and age groups gathered together around the table". This symbolism is revived in Christmas in Connecticut, where the protagonists from all walks of the society retreat to a farm and share a holiday meal. The scene goes beyond nostalgia, representing a ritual return to agrarian life, family unity, and seasonal renewal. Eating and drinking here become celebratory acts tied to the rhythms of harvest and rebirth.

By contrast, the lounge time of *Christmas Holiday*—set in bars, nightclubs, and roadside cafés—foregrounds food and drink not as meaningful rituals but as hollow signifiers, devoid of nourishment and social cohesion (Sobchack, 1998). Food and drinks are not functional objects of sustenance, but rather decorative props, displayed yet unconsumed, offered yet unshared. As Sobchack (1998, p. 141) observes, "no 'natural' thirst is quenched". The characters in these spaces rarely eat, and when they drink, it is not in celebration but in desperation—a repetitive, anesthetizing act that gestures toward pleasure while masking alienation and existential malaise. his depiction of holiday consumption is not merely aesthetic but ideological. It reflects the spiritual void of urban modernity and the commodification of leisure, wherein even acts of basic sustenance are drained of symbolic depth. The contrast with the idyll could not be sharper: where the pastoral meal affirms continuity and connection, the urban lounge scene reveals fragmentation and disaffection. In this context, it can be argued that lounge time serves as a metaphor for the loss of social meaning in a world where consumption has supplanted genuine human connection, leaving only a hollow, performative exchange of commodities.

Christmas in this film, thus, functions as a ritualized mechanism of secular temporal suspension—producing a paradoxical state of temporal freezing. As Giorgio Agamben (2005, p. 2) argues, festive time institutes a "state of exception" in which normative laws and structures are suspended, creating a threshold moment of liminality. This temporal vacuum mirrors the inner psychic condition of Jackie and Charlie: a moment of existential crisis wherein meaningful action is foreclosed, and the self retreats inward into a state of emotional and spatial enclosure. Jackie's emotional paralysis—her inability to forge a new identity or sever ties with a

traumatic past—is thus not simply a personal impasse, but a structural one. Time does not move forward for her; rather, it becomes stalled in a perpetual present.

This sense of temporal disorientation is visually and atmospherically reinforced by the incessant rain, which falls regardless of day or night, collapsing diurnal distinctions and evoking a mood of timelessness and eternal darkness. In Jacques Lacan's (1951, p. 90) terms, the subject's temporal identity is always retroactively constituted through symbolic structures; when continuity is disrupted, "a rupture of the real emerges—where the symbolic and imaginary collapse, and psychic coherence destabilizes". What emerges in this temporal suspension is a de-generative chronotope: a regressive spatio-temporal formation in which history no longer progresses but folds in on itself, unmaking the very conditions for renewal, transformation, or futurity (Bakhtin, 1981a). This chronotope reflects a collapse of narrative possibility—it is not just that the future is foreclosed, but that even the past becomes inaccessible except as trauma. *Christmas Holiday* thus stages a profound critique of temporal ideology, revealing that the interruption of normative time can expose the fragility of the self, the instability of meaning, and the collapse of social order under the weight of unresolved desire and historical failure.

The flashback in *Christmas Holiday* can thus be understood as a narrative form that emerges organically from the conditions of lounge time—a temporality constructed through hermetically sealed spaces and cyclical rhythms that suspend the present and block access to the future (Sobchack, 1998, pp. 129-170). As Jackie remains haunted by traumatic memories that she cannot integrate or escape, this narrative strategy arises as a structural consequence of a world in which time no longer moves forward, and the self becomes trapped in a loop of deferred resolution. It mimics the shape of folkloric time but distorts its meaning. This stands in sharp contrast to the function of the flashback in *It's a Wonderful Life*. Although categorized as a family melodrama, the film's use of flashback carries a distinctly fantastical quality, as explored in Chapter One. Both the protagonist and the audience are made aware from the outset that a higher power—embodied by Clarence the angel and, implicitly, God—has already intervened. Whereas noir flashbacks tend to foreclose the future—trapping characters in cycles of guilt, loss, or existential paralysis—the fantasy flashback reopens the future by re-narrating the past as a foundation for moral and emotional renewal.

4.3 Merry and Deadly: A Holiday Encounter with crime

This section examines the intertwined themes of crime and romance in *Christmas Holiday* and *Cover Up*, foregrounding how the female protagonists, set against distinct the temporal and spaital frameworks of Christmas, exert a decisive and often

destabilizing influence over male characters. Through their allure, ambiguity, and manipulative agency, these women draw men into moral and legal jeopardy, setting the stage for an exploration of the films' engagement with gender, desire, and social power. In *Christmas Holiday*, Jackie's transition from a respectable wife to a nightclub singer is marked by key scenes: she flirts provocatively with patrons, manipulates Charlie's emotions through feigned vulnerability, and navigates the nightclub world with calculated independence. These actions visually signal her allure, while her inner motives remain enigmatic. From Charlie's perspective, Jackie's sexuality is intensely visible—lingering close-ups capture her body figure and gaze—yet her psychological state resists interpretation, creating what Mary Ann Doane (1991, p. 19) describes as a "discursive unease." In one memorable sequence, Charlie attempts to assert moral authority by questioning Jackie's choices, only to find himself emotionally ensnared and morally compromised, illustrating that her ambiguous desire destabilizes male subjectivity. Jackie thus embodies, in Doane's (1991, p. 20) terms, "a text that is not read, but misread": a figure onto whom male desire is projected, yet one whose autonomy and opacity ultimately subvert the assumption that visual mastery equates to knowledge.

However, rather than presenting Jackie's descent as a stylized display of noir coolness or a calculated bid for power, the film portrays her fall as emotionally unsettling and ideologically charged. Her transformation unfolds as a fractured process, marked by lingering traces of her earlier identity as Abigail—sincere, radiant, and emotionally transparent. These residual qualities persist beneath her hardened exterior, creating a dissonance that complicates both her characterization and the audience's expectations. Jackie's attempts to project toughness—through guarded gestures, rigid posture, and affectless speech—read less as a convincing metamorphosis than as a strained, almost pitiable performance. In this way, the film denies her the seductive mastery typically associated with the classic femme fatale, instead depicting a woman suspended between roles: caught between archetype and authenticity.

The incongruity between who Jackie once was and who she has become does not romanticize her suffering; rather, it exposes the profound emotional cost of internalized guilt. Her descent into nightclub life following Robert's imprisonment offers, on the surface, a degree of emotional and physical autonomy—especially when juxtaposed with the constraints of her earlier domestic role. In this new environment, her flirtatious and momentarily tender interactions with Charlie suggest a transgressive break from the moral rigidity traditionally associated with femininity. These moments of illicit joy carry the charge of resistance, hinting at the possibility of pleasure beyond patriarchal norms. However, this apparent liberation is ultimately undermined by Jackie's refusal to sever her emotional ties with Robert. Her continued identification with his suffering traps her in a cycle of self-imposed punishment, resembling a penitent's ritualistic self-flagellation. Her confession to Robert—"You were in prison, alive; that is why I had to live, to live like you, to suffer like you"—reveals a deeply internalized logic of mutual imprisonment. This dynamic, speaks to the melodramatic mode's fascination with "guilty pleasure," where pain and

desire become entangled in a structure of affective excess (Place, 1978, pp. 47-68). In Jackie's case, guilt becomes the mechanism through which she sustains emotional continuity, even as it forecloses her capacity for renewal.

Halfway through the film, the audience is finally granted a view of Jackie (then still Abigail) and Robert's first meeting—a moment that, when retrospectively reframed by the knowledge of their eventual downfall, acquires a cruel and ironic resonance. The two sit side by side in the gallery of a concert hall, swept up in the emotional intensity of Wagner's Liebestod from Tristan und Isolde. As foreshadowing goes, the musical choice borders on the overtly symbolic: Wagner's "love-death" aria encapsulates a fusion of ecstasy and annihilation, rendering their budding romance inseparable from its fatal conclusion. Visually and sonically, this is one of the film's most spectacular sequences. Director Robert Siodmak filmed the scene on location at the Philharmonic Theatre in Los Angeles, using live musicians and hundreds of extras to create an immersive atmosphere of cultural and emotional elevation. As the concert ends and the crowd begins to disperse, Robert spontaneously turns to Abigail—then a total stranger—and confesses that music feels transcendent to him. Her response is radiant with recognition and empathy, suggesting an instant, profound emotional connection. The protagonists' first meeting not only continues the film noir motif of the fated encounter, but also—through the deliberate use of Wagner's Liebestod—conjures a sense of the sublime laced with tragic inevitability.

During their wedding, Robert leads Jackie toward the dance floor. The camera pointedly resists a direct cut to the vibrant, celebratory atmosphere of the ballroom. Instead, it lingers on the couple's descent through a series of dimly lit hallways and staircases, drawing the audience into a progressively darker and more enclosed spatial environment. This visual descent serves not merely as a symbolic passage—a kind of corrupted wedding aisle rendered through noir aesthetics. The chiaroscuro lighting, narrowing frames, and increasingly oppressive architecture collectively construct a mood of psychological claustrophobia and impending doom. Metaphorically, this descent marks Jackie's transition from innocence to entrapment, from the archetypal good girl to the figure of the compromised or fallen woman. What should be a moment of romantic promise becomes instead a foreboding ritual of transformation, where marriage is not a promise of unity but a harbinger of duplicity and disillusionment. This interplay between spatial symbolism and narrative trajectory heightens the film's psychological tension, aligning the viewer with Jackie's growing sense of unease.

By contrast, the first meeting between the male and female protagonists in *Cover Up* unfolds through the conventions of romantic comedy, with a classic 'meet-cute' setup that signals a deliberate strategy of genre blending. Anita enters the scene carrying an armful of wrapped Christmas presents—an iconic symbol of holiday celebration—which she repeatedly drops while boarding the train. Sam, who has already noticed her with visible interest, rushes over to help, initiating their first exchange. Christmas provides the occasion for the two characters to meet, while the

meet-cute moment, in turn, adds a touch of romantic warmth to the festive atmosphere. While the narrative presents their meeting as accidental, it is quickly reframed as fated—an instance of desire masquerading as coincidence. As Mladen Dolar (2006, p. 3) notes, "what is called contingency is anything but contingent; the unforeseeable intrusion turns out to be necessary." From the moment Sam sets eyes on Anita, both characters are drawn into a chain of events governed by a deeper narrative determinism.

By contrast, in *Christmas Holiday*, the fluid and graceful movement of the camera—particularly throughout the Mannette home and patio, as well as the beer garden where Robert and Abigail (Jackie) share their first date—creates a visual surface of harmony that masks an underlying, destabilizing force. In this context, love is rendered both tender and perilous. Abigail (Jackie) has loved Robert from the moment they met, and her love endures. She is aware of her husband's emotional instability and his troubling attachment to his mother, yet she remains devoted—"as if you could stop loving because it is shameful to love," she reflects in voice-over. Abigail's world is unraveling around him, and she is powerless to intervene. Through flashbacks, this obsessive love is presented as a continuum from past to present, rather than a point-counterpoint between past and present. When Anita sings Irving Berlin's "Always," she evokes a persistent, melancholic longing that persists even after Robert is imprisoned for murdering his bookie. Even when he confronts her with his disgust at what she has become, she remains enthralled by him. Abigail, as a female character, constructs her emotional world and sense of identity almost entirely in relation to a man—specifically, to Robert and his fate. This underscores the tragic positioning of female characters in film noir and their marginal status within gendered structures of power and narrative.

Abigail (Jackie)'s overwhelming sense of guilt stems not only from her personal entanglement with Robert but also from the systematic evasion of responsibility by both Robert and his mother, Mrs. Manette (Gale Sondergaard). Jackie's masquerade stands in stark contrast to Robert, who presents himself as a decent man with minor flaws while in reality revealing himself as a sociopathic sponger. Robert deflects accountability for his crimes through lies and evasion, whereas Mrs. Manette emerges as the film's most insidious figure of moral corruption, cloaked in a veneer of maternal protection. Her desperate attempts to erase evidence—scrubbing bloodstains, hiding cash, and manipulating Abigail—reveal a profound denial of her son's culpability. Visually, Mrs. Manette is coded as both threatening and predatory. In a pivotal scene, she looms over Abigail from above, with the ceiling lines behind her forming a web-like pattern, evoking the "spider woman" trope—a maternalized extension of the classic femme fatale (McDonnell, 2007, p. 76). Mrs. Manette's menace operates on familial and psychological levels: she ensnares both Robert and Abigail in a network of emotional and moral control, dominating domestic space and manipulating the distribution of guilt. This maternalized spider woman embodies a paradoxical form of power: simultaneously nurturing and constraining, protecting her son while enabling his crimes and projecting responsibility onto Abigail. Her control

of the domestic sphere and manipulation of female desire highlight that noir's moral corruption extends beyond romance or crime into the very structure of the family.

Even after Robert is imprisoned, Mrs. Manette refuses to take responsibility, instead projecting blame onto Abigail, accusing her of causing her son's downfall and portraying her perceived weakness as the true source of ruin. This dynamic echoes Joan Copjec's (2002, p. 131) observation that noir often displaces guilt onto women as a strategy allowing men to deny their own vulnerability and failure. Positioned simultaneously as both victim and disruptor of the domestic structure, Abigail experiences a gradual, affective erosion rooted in her internalized sense of failure as a wife and daughter-in-law. Through its sober and unsettling depiction of a woman who has internalized victim-blaming to the point of accepting her own misery as deserved, the film implicitly critiques the emotional and moral frameworks that sustain patriarchal norms of femininity and culpability, while emphasizing the uniquely insidious role of maternal power in shaping and reinforcing these structures.

Cover Up similarly presents a narrative linking crime and family. When Anita drives Sam around on his errands—such as scouting out the murder scene at Philip's house—Sam mentions that he is searching for a Luger. Innocently and cheerfully, Anita blurts out that her father would lend him his Luger. Sam is immediately anguished at the possibility that he might be tracking her father, and as Anita keeps her eyes on the road, a cold realization slowly appears on her face: she has unwittingly implicated her father in a murder. This psychological shift is intensified by chiaroscuro lighting, which partially casts her face in shadow, reflecting her internal conflict between loyalty and conscience. Framed tightly within the car, Anita appears both physically and emotionally enclosed, visually mirroring her entrapment within a web of familial guilt.

When Anita arrives home, she finds his father's Luger pistol and hides it in her purse. When ferrying Sam on another errand, he asks for a match (he chain smokes throughout the movie), and is comfortable enough in their relationship to reach for her purse, which she grabs defensively, saying she has no matches in there. He knows she is hiding something. She will eventually plead with him to drop the case. The tension between intimacy and secrecy surfaces through a nuanced interplay of gesture and framing. Her sudden, defensive grab of the purse—paired with her evasive response—creates a moment heavy with unspoken revelation. The mise-en-scène tightens here: the confined interior of the car again serves as a metaphorical trap, this time for Sam, who, like many noir protagonists, must now confront the cost of knowing. It is time for him to make a choice between justice and romance. The scene uses soft, low-key lighting, blurring the line between clarity and concealment, while the camera lingers just long enough on his expression to register an internal shift (Hirsch, 1999, p. 98).

When Sam returns to Philip's house, Anita has arrived ahead of him. Even as Anita hides in the shadows behind the door, her presence is still revealed—reflected in a

mirror, partially visible yet obscured. einforcing the genre's tendency to render the female body perpetually available to male vision. However, the mirror offers only a partial reflection—an indirect, fragmented image that refuses full visibility or interpretability. In this way, the man may see the woman, but he cannot truly know or contain her. Combined with the visual barriers of the mise-en-scène—thick doors, angular lines, shadowed corridors—this moment becomes a metaphor for psychological and gendered distance. Noir thus challenges the reliability of the male gaze, revealing that even in moments of visual presence, the female subject may remain unknowable, and the male gaze fundamentally destabilized.

This gender dynamic—where the woman is both central to the man's journey yet denied full narrative agency—also appears in the final moments of *Christmas Holiday*. Robert escapes from prison and seeks out Abigail (Jackie), ultimately confronting her in the nightclub's backroom. This encounter becomes the emotional and visual climax of the film—an eruption of tension that has been simmering beneath the surface. As Jackie lays eyes on Robert, the camera captures a moment of sheer, visceral shock. Her pupils widen, her brow tightens, and a trembling silence falls over the frame, as if the full weight of her past—everything she has repressed—collapses into the present (Krutnik, 1991, p. 135). Visually, the lighting is stark and expressive: her face is split between light and shadow. The scene unfolds almost in slow motion: tears begin to slip down her face, and the camera moves in closer, tightening its focus until the frame feels almost suffocating.

In fact, not only does Anita try to protect her father, but even the family maid, Hilda (Doro Merande), who had welcomed Sam into the family in her own reserved way, lurks unobserved and one step removed in the mirror, overhearing Sam's threats to the family. In a haunting scene, she burns Anita's father's distinctive old beaver coat—a symbolic "holocaust in the snow"—when it appears implicated in the murder due to a false clue planted in the local paper by Sam to flush out the killer. The coat, once a potential symbol of protection, now implicates the upright in crime. All the characters Sam encounters during his investigation become almost impossible to pin down. The family that initially seemed to offer him warmth and stability proves unreliable; their dependability, and at times even their morality, is twisted and tangled by loyalties, fears, or ignorance. Set within the temporal and spatial context of Christmas, the snowy landscape evokes purity and coldness, while the fire symbolizes intensity and destruction—the stark contrast of ice and fire reflects the extremes and tensions of emotion and morality. The seasonal and spatial markers of Christmas further emphasize the relativity of right and wrong, as well as the fragility of familial loyalty and the interpretive uncertainty surrounding the truth in the noir universe.

Thus, it is able to trace the fundamental divergence between film noir and the earlier chapter regarding family melodrama through the representation of domestic dilemma. As discussed before in family melodrama, the family is not just a setting—it is the thematic center, the source of conflict, and the emotional core. The drama emerges from within, projecting outward (Williams, 1998, pp. 42-88). In contrast, film noir

treats the family not as a central subject but the fractured piece of a larger disordered world. In *Cover Up*, the family operates as a noir element, not through internal discord, but as a space of moral compromise. The film presents the family as a unified structure to the invade force, with little attention paid to interpersonal tensions or emotional fractures between its members. It is not the source of moral conflict, but the ground upon which truth is buried for the sake of emotional cohesion. In contrast, *Christmas Holiday* blends the conventions of family melodrama and film noir. On one hand, it dramatizes familial hierarchies and exclusion—particularly the scapegoating of Jackie—echoing melodrama's focus on domestic disorder and emotional trauma. The film centers on how familial dysfunction causes personal suffering. On the other hand, it also embodies noir's darker, existential sensibility: the family is not only broken, but spiritually hollow, a symbol of a world in which meaning, order, and emotional security have collapsed. The home is no longer a source of refuge, but a site of alienation, entrapment, and despair. From this perspective, it can be argued that while family melodrama often emphasizes the preservation of familial stability as a means of upholding social order, film noir challenges or destabilizes the family unit to reflect a broader sense of societal disintegration.

Apart from family, *Cover up* further calls justice into question. From the moment Sam arrives in town, the sheriff appears "coyly uncooperative" regarding the details of the suspicious death, prompting Sam's persistent and resourceful probing to uncover that the victim was shot with a Luger—a rare weapon in a small town, and one that is conspicuously missing. This mystery deepens when the sheriff casually reveals he has a Luger in his desk drawer, a moment that unsettles both the protagonist and the viewer. When Sam jokingly but pointedly asks, "I don't suppose you killed Phillips, did you?", the sheriff gives no direct answer—an omission that only heightens suspicion. This reflects noir ambiguity: the line between guilt and innocence is blurred, and authority is far from trustworthy. The sheriff follows Sam everywhere, emerging "from the shadows," a phrase that is not only literal but metaphorical, positioning him as a spectral force of obstruction rather than a protector of legislation. His persistent efforts to mislead and derail Sam's investigation make him, at least symbolically, the primary suspect. As the official embodiment of legal authority within the town, the sheriff ostensibly represents order and justice. However, his refusal to cooperate, manipulation of information, and possible interference in the investigation expose a more troubling dynamic in which unchecked authority becomes increasingly opaque and potentially dangerous. The film thus critiques the absence of institutional oversight and the vulnerabilities produced by concentrated power. The figure who enforces the law may in fact be detached from justice itself—highlighting the unsettling notion that law does not necessarily equal justice.

In *Christmas Holiday*, the final moments of Robert's life are saturated with operatic melodrama, underscored by the alternating strains of Wagner's Liebestod and Irving Berlin's "Always." As Robert dies in Jackie's arms, he tells her, "You can let go now, Abigail." In a trance-like state, she walks slowly to the window. A close-up captures her tear-streaked face, framed by backlighting that makes her appear at once suffering

and beatific, a secular saint of feminine endurance. Her upward gaze toward the moonlight, as clouds part and Liebestod takes dominance over "Always," closes the film with a symbolic gesture of transcendence. Yet this transcendence is ambiguous. Rather than reclaiming autonomy, Jackie is transformed into an emblem—her subjectivity dissolved into romantic martyrdom.

Robert releases Abigail (Jackie) through his death, seemingly completing an act of redemption—both for her and for himself. In this final gesture, he attempts to cleanse himself of the guilt aroused by his destructive desire and to resolve—through self-sacrifice—the moral impasse she has come to represent in his fractured psyche. However, this framing reveals more about the patriarchal logic of sacrifice than it does about genuine reconciliation. As Stanley Cavell (2002, p. 10) argues in Disowning Knowledge, the true ethical crisis does not emerge from overt malice, but from the compulsive repetition of actions that lead to harm—a repetition rooted in our failure, or refusal, to truly see the other as distinct from ourselves. Robert's final act exemplifies this repetition compulsion: rather than recognizing Jackie's subjectivity or her suffering, he continues to treat her as a vessel for his unresolved guilt and existential despair. His release of her is not an acknowledgment of her autonomy, but a projection of his need for redemption. The film ultimately reinforces a gendered dynamic in which male guilt is absolved through female sacrifice, leaving Jackie visually sanctified but existentially silenced.

Like *Christmas Holiday*, *Cover Up* builds toward an emotional and narrative crescendo near its conclusion—an approach that is emblematic of classic film noir structure. Anita rushes out of the house on Christmas Eve to chase after her father. The heavy snowfall, combined with tense sound effects and suspenseful orchestration, injects a heightened sense of urgency and mystery into what should otherwise be a serene holiday evening (Murphet, 1998, pp. 22-35). When Sam also returns to the scene of the crime, he is once again confronted by the sheriff, the true emblem of systemic obstruction. In the film's denouement, their exchange is coated in polite civility but simmering with quiet hostility. When Sam calmly points out that neither of them holds the upper hand, since both are armed, the sheriff responds with an unnerving yet politically calculated line: "If you shoot me, it's killing a law man. If I get you with my gun… it's just a lot of votes in the next election." The sheriff's statement strips away any illusion of justice as impartial or moral; instead, it is portrayed as a tool of public perception and self-interest.

This confrontation encapsulates *Cover Up*'s noir vision of power: legality and justice are no longer synonymous, and those who are tasked with protecting the law may be the ones distorting it for personal gain. Sam, as the morally centered outsider, stands in stark contrast to the sheriff's manipulative pragmatism. He becomes the audience's surrogate—someone who longs for clarity in a world steeped in shadow, and who tries to uncover truth without becoming corrupted by it. His showdown with the sheriff, staged within the gothic shadows of the murder mansion he had hoped to use

as a trap, becomes emblematic of noir's existential dread: even when the truth is uncovered, it does not necessarily bring justice or resolution.

At this moment, the distinction between what may or may not be genuine is gradually and subtly unveiled through the visual language. The sheriff is bathed in light, symbolizing apparent transparency and authority, while Sam—the relentless seeker of truth—is cast in shadows, adopting a threatening and furtive posture. This deliberate use of chiaroscuro, with shadows progressively enveloping the characters, creates an atmosphere thick with confusion and doubt, mirroring the instability of reality itself. The visual symbolism suggests that Sam is not merely uncovering the darkness already lurking beneath the surface of this seemingly idyllic Christmas setting; he is also, in effect, introducing darkness into it. When Sam ultimately discovers that the murderer is none other than the deceased Dr. Gerrow—a figure embodying institutional authority and social respectability—there is a profound reversal in both the plot and the moral expectations of the story. Anita's father then reveals the critical backstory: he had found Dr. Gerrow just after the latter had snapped, killing the man responsible for decades of suffering in the town. By disarming Dr. Gerrow and persuading him to delay turning himself in until after the holidays, Anita's father sought to protect the fragile social order. His motivation, as Sam incredulously realizes, was to allow the town to have a "Merry Christmas." Here, the holiday is not merely a backdrop—such as the street corner Santa Claus or the sheriff's gift-wrapping—but becomes the very reason for the deliberate concealment of truth.

This concealment extends beyond a simple cover-up; it is a preservation of collective faith and communal harmony that Christmas symbolically represents in this town. Dr. Gerrow's guilt functions as a critique of the institutional structures that claim to safeguard this harmony but may instead perpetuate underlying darkness. Yet, Anita's father chooses to protect this figure, invoking Christmas as a justification. This choice exposes a deeper, more troubling impulse: the desire to uphold comforting beliefs and illusions at the expense of confronting painful truths. While Sam embodies the relentless pursuit of truth, the revelation marks not only the unmasking of a crime but also the destabilization of the community's foundational convictions. The moment the truth surfaces is paradoxically also the moment when the comforting faith in harmony, kindness, and hope—embodied by the holiday—begins to collapse (Toth, 2015, pp. 74-84). Thus, Christmas in this narrative stands as a potent symbol of the fragile faith people cling to, revealing that deeply the need for hope and order can influence moral choices and social dynamics.

Swayed by Anita's father and the sheriff, Sam ultimately decides that preserving Dr. Gerrow's reputation serves the town's best interests. With intentions to settle in the community—and marry Anita—he agrees to bury his company's paperwork trail and arrange for the $20,000 murder indemnity to be quietly donated to charity. As Sam and Anita walk away, watched over by the sheriff and Anita's father, the hymn "O Come, All Ye Faithful" swells, ushering the narrative towards its conclusion. At first glance, Sam's final decision may appear selfish or indicative of resignation, yet it

ultimately reflects a pragmatic desire to achieve a collective good—a Solomonic compromise that aims to satisfy all parties involved. The choice to keep the truth concealed is framed as a necessary sacrifice for communal peace, and the familiar Christmas carol underscores a ritualistic closure.

However, beneath this surface lies a profound and troubling irony. The ending perpetuates a deadly cycle: it is not a true resolution but a temporary fix that sets the stage for inevitable repetition. The hymn's religious symbolism intensifies this tension, producing a deep emotional and ethical dissonance. Originally, "O Come, All Ye Faithful" summons the faithful to worship the newborn Savior, heralding truth, purity, and divine redemption (Batlan, 2019, pp. 658-679). Yet, in this film, the closing scene rests precisely on the suppression of truth, the acceptance of institutional cover-up, and even the sanctification of a murderer's legacy. In this light, *Cover Up* articulates a noir concern: it challenges not only what is right or wrong, but more unsettlingly, for whom—and at what cost—we are willing to be wrong. The moral dilemmas presented refuse clear-cut binaries of good versus evil; instead, they compel the audience to confront the uncomfortable gray zones of human nature.

Therefore, it can be argued that film noir, employs Christmas and the chronotopes constructed around it to depict a world where moral clarity is elusive, institutions are corrupt or impotent, and protagonists are trapped in inescapable ethical and existential dilemmas. Festive holiday is either suffused with darkness or wielded as a mask to hide the lurking shadows underneath. In this world, nonconformity is often punished, yet conformity offers no true salvation. The core function of noir is not to overthrow the prevailing ideology but to expose its internal contradictions—demonstrating that these contradictions are not resolved through justice or moral clarity but through failure, death, or moral compromise. It lays bare the systemic brutality of the order while simultaneously reinforcing its seemingly unassailable authority. In this sense, noir is not a discourse of resistance but one of resigned recognition—the recognition that there is no way out, and that this very impossibility is embedded within the structure itself.

Conclusion

In summary, *Christmas Holiday* (1944) and *Cover Up* (1949) depict a noir universe in which protagonists are drawn into a shadowy, morally ambiguous world of corruption, intrigue, betrayal, and decay. This world is not confined to a criminal underclass; rather, even ordinary, seemingly innocent individuals become entangled in forces beyond their control. These films ultimately reflect a profound disillusionment with

modern society, portraying the American Dream as not only fragile but perhaps entirely illusory (Spicer, 2018, p. 7). Within this context, Christmas is either absorbed into the darkness or instrumentalized to conceal it, transforming the holiday—and the chronotopes it constructs—into mechanisms of entrapment and irony. Any restoration of a lost patriarchal order, or the nation's yearning for stability, is achieved not through justice or clarity, but through silence, concealment, and reluctant complicity.

Christmas Holiday constructs a claustrophobic spatial and temporal logic—what Sobchack (1998, pp. 129-170) terms lounge time—in which trauma is not merely remembered but structurally inscribed into the environment. Spaces such as nightclubs, cocktail lounges, and motels function as active agents, perpetuating the cyclical resurgence of memory and collapsing past and present into an oppressive present. Flashbacks and voice-over narrations operate as symptoms of psychic entrapment, reflecting the fractured temporality inherent in nightmare experience. The holiday setting amplifies this dislocation: social rituals, festive décor, and enforced conformity obscure disruption and reinforce ideological control, transforming spaces that might conventionally signal comfort or leisure into instruments of containment. In this framework, trauma becomes spatialized—embedded in design, repetition, and the performative illusion of festivity—revealing that space is never neutral. Rather, it is ideologically saturated, complicit in sustaining psychological paralysis and social deadlock, and central to noir's interrogation of the intimate, structural conditions under which suffering is reproduced and internalized.

In *Cover Up*, the Christmas small town functions as an idyllic chronotope—a narrative space where time and place converge to create a seemingly harmonious, tightly knit community grounded in tradition and shared memory. As in the family melodramas and romantic comedies discussed earlier, Christmas is represented as an opportunity for characters to return home. Within this chronotope, time is regulated by cyclical holiday rituals—decorating the Christmas tree, lighting ceremonies, and gift exchanges—producing a sense of communal stability and temporal recurrence. Yet this apparent harmony is structured on conventions that reinforce social hierarchies: clearly defined and valorized sexual identities, the gendered division of domestic labor, and the spatially contiguous relation between family and house, which together promise cultural continuity and regeneration. The film exposes that these conventions, embedded within the festive chronotope, simultaneously generate an idealized sense of order and mask underlying tensions, revealing the fragility of the moral and social frameworks that govern both domestic and communal life.

Thus, lounge time in *Christmas Holiday* evokes a parallel but antagonistic universe—an anti-idyllic realm where the very foundations of cultural stability are dismantled. The threat that it poses to the traditional domestic economy dictates that its spatiotemporal boundaries limit and contain its 'loose' women and 'idle' men in what can only be described as a hermetically sealed—quarantined—social space. The dramas temporalized within it and determined by it are not allowed integration with the culture's traditional—by this time, retrospectively mythified—spaces of

domesticity and labor. Events generated by and in lounge time briefly contaminate the spatiotemporal coherence of what is perceived to be and figured as the traditional and idyllic life-world of the (prewar) culture. Hardly seen at all, that idyllic life-world of domestic peace and harmony, of proper occupation for both sexes, is a structuring absence that contributes to the closed off yet unstable spatiotemporal characteristic of lounge time. The baroque qualities of noir's visual style, the particularities of its narrative thematics and structure, emerge as an intensified form of selection, foregrounding, and consequent exaggeration of actual cultural spaces charged with contingent temporal experience.

Death, is not natural in lounge time, but murder is. Marriages are institutions not to be nurtured and revered, but to be gotten out of—through infidelity, separation, divorce, or murder. There are also no stages of growth in lounge time not only because there are no children in its spaces, but also because behavior is compulsive and repetitive and thus becomes cyclical even as it seems initiated by chance and in impulse. It represents both the historical necessity and the historical failure to constitute the world on a new basis, to render it familiar, to humanize it (Flanagan, 2009a, p. 22). Thus, noir's characters are forever fixed in a transitional moment—stabilized negatively in space and time, double-crossed by history. In both films, Christmas functions as a temporal intensifier: it heightens the enclosure of the space, whether to affirm rooted community or to expose its absence, rendering both spaces complete and self-sufficient in their own terms, yet sealed off from the larger world. Its duality allows it to inhabit and intensify both the idyllic and the lounge time, not by flattening their difference, but by exposing the stakes of enclosure—what it protects, and what it conceals.

These two films further illuminate the intersections of masculine trauma and gendered anxieties emerging from the destabilization of domestic and patriarchal structures. Robert's death in *Christmas Holiday* signals not only a failure to recognize the humanity of others but also an inability to confront his own vulnerability, exposing the fragility at the core of normative masculinity. In *Cover Up*, Sam's moral and emotional dilemma—between justice and personal attachment—further illustrates that masculine identity is shaped through negotiation with both women's autonomy and the rigid moral hierarchies imposed by patriarchal culture. Noir, thus, renders male authority as inherently contingent, precarious, and performative, making male vulnerability both a personal crisis and a reflection of wider social instability.

As for the struggles faced by women, Jackie's struggle in *Christmas Holiday* exemplifies what Felski (2007, pp. 327-335) theorizes as a tragic sensibility—one that fundamentally resists the dominant American ideology of self-determinism and limitless optimism. Her fate cannot be explained simply through categories of personal transgression or legal culpability; rather, it is shaped by a patriarchal moral order that operates at a quasi-metaphysical level, dictating the boundaries of femininity, guilt, and redemption. The film exposes how gendered cultural oppositions—innocence versus corruption, domesticity versus desire, virtue versus

shame—produce the very violence that noir claims to reveal. In this sense, the 'dark underside' of noir is not merely a narrative motif but the consequence of a culture that insists on splitting complex human experiences into rigidly policed binaries. By laying bare how these dichotomies generate suffering, misrecognition, and moral distortion, *Christmas Holiday* demonstrates how noir's structural logic can breed a pervasive cynicism that prevents society from confronting its deeper pathologies. Ultimately, Jackie's tragedy illuminates that noir uses the female figure to disclose the ideological costs of these divisions, revealing gender as the site where cultural contradictions become most painfully legible.

In *Cover Up*, the woman's position within the male gaze reveals not the stability of patriarchal authority but its underlying precarity. Her visibility—constructed, framed, and policed by male perception—is intended to secure control by fixing female identity within familiar ideological boundaries. Yet this very act of looking exposes the epistemological limits of the male gaze: to see is not to know, and the gap between visual possession and genuine comprehension becomes the space in which male anxiety emerges. The woman's subjectivity resists full legibility, revealing a surplus that cannot be contained by patriarchal scripts. As a result, the gaze that aims to dominate instead discloses the fragility of the male subject who depends on surveillance to sustain his authority. *Cover Up* thus demonstrates a central paradox of noir: patriarchal power persists not through mastery but through a tense interplay of desire, misrecognition, and blindness. What appears as domination is, in fact, a defensive structure built around the fear of losing interpretive control, revealing gender not as a stable hierarchy but as an unstable field of negotiation and threat.

Through the temporal and spatial framing of Christmas, these two films illuminate the gray zones of human experience. The Christmas setting, rich in contradictions, masks corruption beneath festive harmony while casting shadows on notions of purity, intensifying the tension between appearance and reality. It is a projection of the characters' world onto the characters themselves, who move within that world as they do within their own skin. In this suspended temporal space, morality is revealed as fluid, context-dependent, and inseparable from circumstance, shaped as much by systemic structures and societal expectation as by personal choice. Ultimately, film noir offers a profound ethical inquiry, interrogating not only the nature of good and evil but also the broader social and psychological forces that complicate moral judgment, making it a critical reflection on the ambiguity and contradictions at the heart of human existence.

Compared with the family melodramas, romantic comedies, and fantasies discussed earlier—genres that imagine conformity to social norms as a pathway to redemption, restoration, and moral coherence—film noir offers a deliberately antagonistic vision. In noir, refusal to compromise or assimilate does not open toward alternative futures; instead, it is met with punishment, dissolution, or death. This generic inversion does not simply critique the dominant social order but paradoxically helps stabilize it: noir

exposes the costs of nonconformity so relentlessly that dissent itself becomes narratively foreclosed. Resistance is rendered dangerous, rebellion futile, and autonomy ethically treacherous. What emerges is a world in which moral and existential compromise appears not merely common but structurally inevitable. By staging the collapse of those who deviate, noir reaffirms the very ideological structures it seems to challenge, revealing that survival—however diminished—depends upon a weary accommodation to the social order. In this sense, film noir's bleakness does more than depict the fractures of modernity; it performs an ideological labor of its own, negotiating endurance and agency within the shadowed constraints.

Conclusion

To sum up, this thesis has examined the representation of Christmas in 1940s Hollywood cinema. Approaching the subject through the lens of genre, it has analyzed how Christmas is portrayed within nine case studies across four key cinematic forms of the period: family melodrama, fantasy, romantic comedy, and film noir. Framed through Bakhtin's (1981a) concept of the chronotope, the study has treated Christmas as a distinctive spatiotemporal framework that constructs and interacts with other chronotopes within and across different genres. As a powerful cultural mechanism, Christmas generates a distinctive sense of time and space—a 'mythic holiday temporality'—that enacts the American myth while bridging the temporal ruptures caused by social upheaval. By tracing how Christmas coordinates reshape and are reshaped by each genre, this thesis contributes to a deeper understanding of how popular cinema encodes ideology through temporal and spatial forms. Christmas functions as a site of both display and tension: these films temporarily restore social and moral order within the holiday framework, yet this return is never complete. Instead, it subtly exposes a deeper cultural logic, reflecting broader desires in the transformative period to articulate evolving collective identities and to reconstruct and reaffirm social stability and continuity, while simultaneously managing uncertainty, anxiety, and social disruption.

Rather than functioning as a simple, unidirectional conduit for ideology; Christmas operates as a dynamic site of collision, dialogue, and opposition, where ideological conflicts unfold both within and among different cinematic forms. Characters embark on dark journeys of self-discovery similar to Scrooge's in Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. These journeys not only reveal the inner struggles and transformations of the characters but also symbolize the nation's reflection and reconstruction of its identity and values. Through narratives where humanism overcomes materialism and division gives way to unity, these films emphasize the importance of collective belonging and social harmony. These films negotiate ideological contradictions not by denying them,

but by translating them into emotionally legible and narratively coherent forms. Ultimately, they do not simply affirm dominant ideology through Christmas, nor do they overtly challenge it. Instead, they naturalize it. In this way, the holiday helps produce an ideological framework that seems flexible but in reality remains deeply entrenched. The interplay between individual and national destinies imbues Christmas films with profound social and cultural significance.

The thesis began with an analysis of family melodrama, where Christmas consistently functions as a mechanism for preserving and restoring the nuclear family. In *Meet Me in St. Louis*, the family remains structurally intact but faces imminent displacement. Christmas appears briefly within an idyllic chronotope, where seasonal rhythms and domestic rituals intensify emotional attachments to homeland, nostalgia, and tradition. In *Miracle on 34th Street*, by contrast, Christmas occupies a central role. Set within a commercial urban chronotope—the department store—it foregrounds the tension between materialism and belief. Yet it is precisely within this space of consumerism that Christmas becomes a vehicle for emotional intimacy and familial restoration. In *It's a Wonderful Life*, Christmas marks both a personal crisis and a redemptive resolution, unfolding across two opposing chronotopes: the peaceful, communally oriented Bedford Falls and the dystopian Pottersville. Here, Christmas amplifies the family's role as a site of moral salvation and social coherence. Their narrative structure contribute to the genre's ideological investment in maintaining internal coherence amid external uncertainty—anxiety generated by capitalism, industrialization, and urban displacement. Ultimately, family melodrama deploys the Christmas chronotope as a site where cultural tensions are contained, managed, and symbolically resolved. The stability of the family is seen as the cornerstone of social stability, with Christmas serving as a symbolic moment that not only provides an opportunity for the restoration of familial emotional bonds but also symbolizes the renewal of social morality and cultural values.

In chapter two, fantasy operates as a force that works from the outside in. In *Beyond Tomorrow* and *The Bishop's Wife*, Christmas serves as a catalyst, interacting with the threshold chronotope—where celestial or supernatural beings enter the human world, temporarily suspending the flow of ordinary time and creating a space for narrative transformation. This crossing of boundaries between realms opens up a space for reimagining reality. Through these fantastical interventions, external transcendence leads the characters beyond the limits of their everyday lives, offering them a higher, often spiritual or religious perspective. From this elevated view, characters are encouraged to reassess their lives and reorder their personal priorities in accordance with dominant cultural values such as faith, generosity, and family.

Similar to *The Bishop's Wife*, *It's a Wonderful Life* also introduces a divine perspective through the descent of the angel Clarence. The fantastical sequence in *It's a Wonderful Life*—where George sees the town of Pottersville—introduces a more complex and structurally embedded intervention in time and space. This sequence represents a forward-moving gesture: a narrative mechanism that projects the

repressed, alienated, and uncanny aspects of modernity into a dystopian mirror reality. Pottersville is not merely a fantasy escape; it serves as a symbolic act that allows the narrative to reframe its ideological foundation. As Jameson (1981, p. 3) argues, "the chronotope here is not just a suspension of reality but an act of constructing a new cognitive structure about reality". Clarence's intervention is only the beginning of this cognitive system, and the true cognitive mapping is accomplished through George's shift in consciousness in response to his experience in Pottersville. Similarly, *Miracle on 34th Street* also introduces a fantastical element through the figure of Kris Kringle. It speaks to the transformative power of belief itself. The film suggests that faith, whether in the magical, the divine or the goodness of humanity, holds the potential to restore hope and foster a sense of unity in a society increasingly defined by materialism and doubt. In these films, fantasy, through the vehicle of Christmas, allows the mortal and the divine worlds to converge, creating an entry point for a shift in consciousness. Reality, and ideals merge into a new cognitive structure.

Through the lens of the chronotope, we gain insight into the reason why films like *Beyond Tomorrow* and *The Bishop's Wife*, should be categorized as fantasy films, while *It's a Wonderful Life* and *Miracle on 34th Street*, despite featuring fantastic elements, are placed within the family melodrama. In the realm of fantasy, the fantastic chronotope functions as the primary organizing principle of the text—it generates alternative temporalities, legitimizes the construction of other worlds, and destabilizes conventional moral frameworks (Žižek, 1997, p. 88). This dominance signals a radical shift in symbolic authority, where imagination becomes not just an embellishment, but a generative force capable of reshaping reality. By contrast, in family melodrama, the fantastic chronotope is often instrumentalized—its role is to serve as a narrative device (Williams, 1998, pp. 42-88). Here, fantasy is allowed only to the extent that it facilitates a restorative function, ultimately submitting to the stabilizing rhythms of family life. This subordinated role reveals a deeper ideological containment strategy: the chronotope can gesture toward the otherworldly, but only as a means to reassert the dominant ideology of the film.

What this contrast reveals is not just a difference in narrative priorities but a hierarchical structure of chronotopic governance, in which the very spatial-temporal imagination is regulated. The chronotope does not merely organize story-worlds—it adjudicates the limits of cultural permissibility. It defines the boundary between acceptable deviation and disruptive excess, determining how much of the 'other' or the 'future' can be allowed within a genre before it fractures its social contract. In this way, genre is not a static taxonomy of narrative features but a semiotic system—a protocol of regulation that encodes the ideological function of storytelling (Foucault&Gordon, 1980, p. 16). The chronotope serves as a visible index of this regulatory system, materializing the logic of genre governance.

This dual function of the chronotope—enabling hybridity while ensuring stability—demonstrates the complex relationship between narrative innovation and cultural control. It allows for the infiltration of one generic code into another,

facilitating the creation of hybrid forms, yet simultaneously anchors these hybrid forms within the boundaries of cultural acceptability. At stake here is not simply the narrative function of the fantastic chronotope, but its political ontology: whether it operates as a liberating force of rupture or as a mechanism for ideological reabsorption. The genre system, through its management of chronotopes, regulates the distribution of symbolic capital—determining who gets to imagine new worlds and, more crucially, under what conditions that imagination must fold back into the rhythms of normative time (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 241-258). Thus, the chronotope becomes both a site of creative possibility and a mechanism of ideological containment, balancing the forces of innovation and stability within the cinematic genre system.

In chapter three, the role of Christmas in romantic comedies becomes a site for both physical and symbolic transformation. *Remember the Night* and *Christmas in Connecticut* portray urbanized female protagonists who, in the throes of their metropolitan careers, are sent on journeys that lead them away from the isolating, yet superficially liberating, culture of the 'Big City'. These characters embark on a nostalgic retreat into the rural, idealized landscapes of an agrarian past—a journey that symbolizes a metaphorical return to an imagined simpler, more meaningful way of life. The dichotomy between countryside and city in these narratives often reflects two different, though interrelated, manifestations of the same underlying model. In the pastoral tradition, rural life is imbued with a privileging of qualities like spirituality, transcendence, and community, which are presented as counterpoints to the perceived coldness and rationalism of urban existence. In these films, the rural environment serves as an open, experimental arena, a kind of social laboratory in which characters, particularly women, are invited to explore and renegotiate gender roles and social identities. In this context, the Christmas narrative becomes a self-conscious, celebratory journey—one that engages with the invented tradition of Christmas, a tradition whose meaning is constantly being produced, reconstructed, and celebrated in new ways. While the rituals of Christmas are often presented as timeless or ancient, these films expose their contemporary construction by projecting them as having long-standing roots.

Romantic comedy uses the utopian affect of Christmas not to restore what is lost, but to imagine what could be—a future not only anchored in nostalgia, but in the possibility of alternative affective arrangements. Therefore, it can be argued that these films invoke the cultural logic of Christmas in respect of what Fredric Jameson (1981, p. 53) has called a ''strategy of containment'' symbolically delimiting and defusing the norm-challenging ''misrule'' necessitated by an economy and society mobilizing when women were suddenly called upon to set aside social and sexual norms by entering the workforce in unprecedented numbers. By asserting the invented domesticating traditions of Christmas, these films introduce a means of "inventing imaginary or formal 'solutions' to unresolvable social contradictions" between the accepted female identity defined by domestic ideology and the long-term

consequences of American women's experiences in which they assumed traditionally male roles and responsibilities in both the private and public spheres (Jameson, 1981, p. 79). From this perspective, the same cultural symbol—Christmas—constructs two divergent chronotopic functions across genres. In family melodrama, it sustains ethical closure and reasserts the legitimacy of domestic structures; in romantic comedy, it opens up a space of imaginative freedom, gender inversion, and social reconfiguration. This contrast reveals that different genres encode distinct ideological responses to this transformative era: one seeks stability and return; the other, possibility and imagination.

In chapter four, I undertake a critical examination of film noir. The idyllic chronotope also emerges within this cinematic mode. In *Cover Up*, the deployment of this chronotope serves an ironic function: the film presents a superficially tranquil and orderly small town that masks a deeper layer of moral decay and institutional corruption. In contrast, *Christmas Holiday* presents a different spatial-temporal logic through its depiction of lounge time—an environment in which the setting does not mirror or affirm the character's internal values or identity. Instead, it reveals a radical externality: the environment resists being shaped by individual desire, reflecting the alienation and dislocation central to noir's phenomenology. The lounge time represents both the historical necessity and the historical failure to constitute the world on a new basis, to render it familiar, to humanize it (Sobchack, 1998, pp. 129-170). Iconographically, it stretches from the dark city streets and lurid jazzy bars to the privatized, alienated space of hotel rooms, and down to the close-up level of the cigarette, drink, swanky dress, trench coat and fedora hat; stylistically, from the use of voice-over and flashback to expressionistic lighting and decentred and unstable compositions, in deep space; narratively, it includes a new emphasis on deviant psychological motivation, the deviousness and frustrating confusion of the male protagonist's project or quest, and the outright hostility, suspicion and sexual attraction between the often confused and weary male protagonist and the duplicitous, powerful femme fatale (with a good asexual wife-mother figure optionally dead or waiting in the wings); and thematically, they consist above all in the absurd existential choice of moral behaviour according to their own individual ethical code, in a hopelessly dark universe in which more consensual authorities are ineffectual, irrelevant, or corrupt.

Furthermore, the duality of Christmas is effectively articulated through the parallel and contrasting chronotopes of lounge time and the idyllic small town. In the depiction of lounge time, Christmas appears only in the periphery, mentioned occasionally as a background element with a rather subdued presence. It evokes a sense of alienation and marginalization, symbolizing the internal conflicts of the characters and the indifferent, cold reality around them. Within this chronotope, Christmas is not endowed with substantial social or spiritual value; rather, it functions as a symbolic motif that fails to foster genuine harmony or connection among

individuals, reflecting a fragmented and disjointed lived experience. In contrast, within the idyllic small-town chronotope, Christmas assumes a central and concrete symbolic significance. Here, all crime and corruption are temporarily set aside for the duration of the holiday. Christmas is portrayed as an indispensable event that people must observe, serving as a symbol of social cohesion and the maintenance of communal harmony. Consequently, in film noir, Christmas more often reflects the atmosphere and psychological states of the characters. These chronotopes reveal noir‘s capacity to articulate the gray zones of human morality and to expose the failings of social institutions. Yet, noir does not intent to subvert ideological framework but subtly reinforces it, by portraying compromise as necessary and unavoidable. They are charged with particular temporal meaning for the culture's life world, and their representations on screen foreground a phenomenological expression of that life world's insecurity and unsettledness, its transitional and hence transient status. I would argue that film noir's relation to its historical and social context can be best described not as metaphoric but as synecdochic and hyperbolic. That is, actual spaces and places in American culture are not sublimated on the screen through the substitutions of metaphor (although they may lead to metaphorical thinking), but neither are they quite articulated according to the prevailing conventions of realism.

As for the same chronotopes that features across different types of films, the idyllic chronotope appears in three of them: family melodrama, romantic comedy and film noir, which differ in tone from each other. This chronotope commonly manifests in representations of the small town, the countryside, and the pre-industrial city. Indeed, the quaintness of clothing styles, the relative absence of modern technology, the apparent simplicity of social interactions, and, in particular, the restrained and highly conventional depiction of heterosexual relationships contribute to what is often read as cinematic nostalgia. Together, these elements code the represented time and place as morally ordered, socially coherent, and retrospectively “innocent,” aligning the films with traditional ideals of romance, gender roles, and social behavior. This implication operates at the level of affect rather than analysis. In the absence of a sustained intellectual framework through which pre-industrial rural life might be meaningfully evaluated, producers legitimize this vision by mobilizing emotion and nostalgia as substitutes for critical argument. However, this tendency to associate idyllic chronotope with nostalgia reveals, even in popular discourse, the multiplicity of meanings embedded in the term. Family melodrama, for instance, aligns with the common understanding of nostalgia as a personal longing for or remembrance of the past. Romantic comedy, on the other hand, offers a prettified reconstruction of a past moment. Moreover, film noir employs an ironically stylized aesthetic that reflects an unsatisfiable desire; it is a pathological use of the past to create a false lack that can never be filled because what is perceived as lost is something never possessed in the first place. It can be seen that the idyllic chronotope differs as much from the various Hollywood representations as those representations differ from each other but that has its roots in the long-standing popular notion of the idyllic community.

Furthermore, the idyllic chronotope is characterized by an organic unity of nature, labor, and family. Christmas, as a holiday aligned with the agricultural cycle, functions as a symbolic mechanism that reinforces this internal coherence. The recurring trope of the narrative set during Christmas holiday over-emphasised what was, in reality, a restricted, ritualistic aspect of rural life. The Christian values it embodies align closely with the nostalgic myth of white, middle-American self-sufficiency, industriousness, and neighborliness (Brown, 2010, p. 21). In this manner, Christmas not only serves as a time and spatial framework but also an ideological device that helps naturalize a specific, exclusionary model of American identity under the guise of timeless tradition. As such, this exclusionary tradition, with all its emotional force, defines, for this particular audience at least, the very concept of being American. By invoking a nostalgic and idealized vision of rural, pre-modern America, these films foster a strong sense of national identity and patriotic unity, reinforcing social cohesion amid the uncertainties of the 1940s (Robinson, 2007, p. 33). The reliance on such a reassuring, yet exclusionary, cultural model reveals the significant anxieties about social position and belonging faced by audiences during this turbulent period, emphasizing how deeply intertwined notions of American identity and patriotism were with a selective, idealized past.

Moreover, these films are inflected with nostalgia's original meaning—homesickness. As Emanuel Levy (1991, p. 66) notes, the post-Depression rise of "return to the soil" narratives was central to the emergence of the rural idyll. This nostalgic turn gains further credibility through the temporal dislocation often employed in such narratives, which abstract the past from its historical context. The retreat to rural life was accompanied by a reassertion of a unified, middlebrow vision of the family, reinforcing both spatial and emotional ties between land, home, and domestic identity. Importantly, the centralization of the home is not genre-specific; rather, it emerges as a transversal narrative logic across 1940s Hollywood cinema. The home becomes a unifying chronotopic axis around which disparate generic conventions organize their ideological investments, functioning as the primary locus through which Christmas narratives articulate cultural values. Central to these films is the ongoing dialectic between the public and private spheres inherent in the concept of home. Marketed as entertainment for the entire family, these films physically brought together real world families while simultaneously offering idealized cinematic evocations of familial institutions. Conflicts rooted in the public sphere—such as economic hardship, social injustice, and the trauma of war—are typically conveyed indirectly, often relegated to background settings or secondary characters and subplots. This narrative strategy serves to preserve the idealized stability of the family as a private, intimate space, thereby reinforcing its role as an emotional sanctuary. Situated within the historical context of post-Depression and wartime America, going home during Christmas channel a collective yearning for a return to normalcy—a cultural and ideological restoration of stability, order, and social cohesion amid widespread disruption and uncertainty.

Moreover, gender also functions as a crucial narrative thread that runs across all these genres. The male characters in these Christmas family narratives are usually well-known publicly such as George Bailey in *It's a Wonderful Life,* The Bishop in *The Bishop's Wife,* Jack, the assistant district attorney in R*emember the Night* and Anna's father in *Cover Up*; they are hardworking members of the middle-class, widely respected and admired. This relates to the second dominant trope – the representation of the man as symbolic leader of the household. These cultural representation affirms male authority and conveys that such authority is the foundation of social and familial stability. At the same time, an essential counterpart alongside the intransigent authority figure is a pragmatic, subordinate yet influential housewife. Together, these portrayals reinforce traditional gender roles, with men cast as breadwinners while women are positioned as homemakers within the domesticity. The underlying ideology is that the stability of both the family and society relies on the preservation of these traditional, gendered divisions of power and responsibility.

Although the decade of the 1940s, particularly the critical events of World War II, set in motion developments that challenged traditional social and sexual norms and radically altered American women's lives, resulting in discontinuities with the past, the nostalgic traditions of Christmas helped to mediate. All the genre films present women characters—such as Doris in *Miracle on 34th Street*, Arlene in *Beyond Tomorrow*, Lee in *Remember the Night*, and Jackie in *Christmas Holiday*—who are to some extent deprived of home and family because of the work they do, left alone in the dark, cold, and austere outside during Christmas. What connects these films is their consistent pattern of beginning with transgressions of gender roles and expectations—scenes that dramatize wartime social reversals and recall the carnivalesque traditions of pre-nineteenth-century Christmas, with women's roles at the center of this festive "Miss Rule" (Sigler, 2005, p. 353). They make female desire their object and confront it directly.

Yet, these desires ultimately find expression through two dominant narrative resolutions: either they are recontained within the boundaries of heterosexual romance and domesticity, as seen in *Miracle on 34th Street* and *Remember the Night*; or they are punished, dismissed, or left unresolved, as in the darker tonalities of *Beyond Tomorrow* and *Christmas Holiday*. By weaving feminist themes into these festive narratives, the tensions surrounding female autonomy, desire, and independence are softened by being cloaked in the historical context of Christmas or are rendered more acceptable through comedic elements that strip them of their more radical implications. This narrative technique mirrors the work of nineteenth-century writers like Clement Clarke Moore, who "domesticated the once-unruly, chaotic street Christmases into a more controlled, family-centered version" (Nissenbaum, 1996, p. 84–85). In this way, these films neutralize the potential subversion of gender norms, presenting a version of female subjectivity that adheres to the pragmatic survival

strategies women must navigate within the existing power structures. Rather than challenging the patriarchal framework head-on, these heroines negotiate their self-realization and personal fulfillment within it, embodying a form of agency that is often circumscribed by the very structures they seek to inhabit. The female characters may accept, adapt to, or subtly resist the roles assigned to them, but their ultimate triumph often lies in their ability to reconcile personal desire with the demands of society—suggesting that the dominant structures, though not immutable, are difficult to escape without significant sacrifice or compromise.

By comparison, male characters also undergo varying degrees of transformation in this process, a phenomenon particularly pronounced in Christmas fantasy. This transformation is evident in characters such as James in *Beyond Tomorrow* and the Bishop in *The Bishop's Wife*. The combination between male transformation and fantasy can be understood as granting the male protagonist a transcendent perspective. Male characters gain literal or metaphorical insights into alternate realities, divine judgment, or their social impact—privileges rarely afforded to female characters in the same genres. The fantasy hero's elevation appears destined: they receive cosmic consolation, moral clarity, and a second chance. Their suffering is reframed as a spiritual trial rather than mere failure. In this way, the fantasy genre preserves male centrality, granting men not only narrative agency but also epistemological superiority: they see more, understand more, and are thus forgiven more. This dynamic also reflects an underlying desire to contain feminist challenges without overt repression. The male protagonist in fantasy films achieves a re-stabilization of the symbolic order: his desire, initially structured by lack and misrecognition, is reoriented through the intervention of the 'Name-of-the-Father'—a patriarchal metaphor that restores coherence to the fragmented self. This process reframes gender anxiety as a personal crisis rather than a structural imbalance. In this sense, the male transformation serves to depoliticize gender conflict. By substituting spiritual or metaphysical journeys for material tensions, these films avoid directly engaging with feminist challenges on political terms.

The comparison between the gendered trajectories of transformation in films reveals that the question is not merely who transforms, but who is permitted to transform on their own terms. Male development is often framed as the acquisition of emotional intelligence without the loss of structural power, while female growth is defined by the relinquishment of autonomy in exchange for moral or emotional virtue. These arcs are therefore not symmetrical. Rather, they are part of a gendered system in which the male subject is both the agent and the beneficiary of transformation, while the female subject functions primarily as the vehicle through which that transformation is achieved. This binary logic echoes what feminist theorists such as Joan Scott (1988) and Judith Butler (2004) have long argued: that the concept of progress is not ideologically neutral, but is shaped by cultural scripts that reward behaviors aligned with normative gender expectations. In this sense, cinematic transformation narratives

do not simply depict personal growth—they reproduce and naturalize a deeply gendered economy of subjecthood, agency, and reward.

Although these shifts continue to operate within the framework of traditional gender structures, they nonetheless represent a form of progress, insofar as they compel us to recognize that genuine social transformation cannot be limited to emotional or affective reconfigurations alone, but must also involve structural interventions—especially in terms of the redistribution of power and resources. In this regard, Bakhtin's (1981a) concept of the chronotope offers a powerful analytic through which time and space emerge not merely as narrative scaffolds, but as operative dimensions in the reproduction and potential reorganization of social structures. Through disruptions in temporal rhythms and spatial configurations, the conditions for reimagining gendered relations begin to take shape. Films frequently employ the temporality of Christmas to produce a suspension of normative time-space, enabling the re-encoding of affective and institutional relations. This festive chronotope constructs a sentimental vision of the social world as an affective one, inviting gendered subjects—across lines of race, class, and even time—to perceive their personal, emotional lives as belonging to a larger world, however aesthetically mediated. In such moments, the rigidity of institutional systems is momentarily loosened, allowing for affect to function not merely as sentiment, but as a mode of structural critique and political imagination. They both invites the spectators to engage in the fantasy of heteronormative intimacy portrayed onscreen, while simultaneously prompting them to reflect on the political realities of their own lived experiences.

Beyond questions of gender, these films also engage with class in highly structured and ideologically circumscribed ways. The class tensions they articulate are largely confined to the anxieties and moral responsibilities of the upper middle class, rather than addressing the material realities of poverty or structural inequality. As in Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, social conflict is resolved not through any critique of how wealth is produced or accumulated, but through the moral reformation of the affluent subject, who is called upon to recognize and perform their obligation to give. Within this framework, wealth itself is never problematized; instead, the ethical failure lies solely in the refusal to share it. This logic is embedded within the narrative architecture of these films, which consistently privilege charity over systemic redistribution. Christmas is mobilized as a moral mechanism that personalizes social responsibility and displaces questions of economic structure onto individual acts of generosity. Figures such as the Salvation Army Santa Claus in *Remember the Night* exemplify this tendency, positioning benevolence and seasonal goodwill as sufficient responses to social inequality. Similarly, although Lee is ultimately redeemed and reintegrated into the social order, her initial marginalization remains structurally unexamined, treated as an individual misfortune rather than as a symptom of broader socio-economic conditions. Taken together, these films reveal how Christmas

functions not as a site of radical social critique, but as a cultural framework that stabilizes class hierarchies by translating systemic inequality into problems of individual morality and affective compassion.

It is also important to recognize that critiques of capitalist society are consistently present in these films; however, these critiques are invariably highly contained and carefully regulated. *It's a Wonderful Life* offers perhaps the most incisive examination of capitalism's nature within the genre, notably refusing to grant its antagonist a conventional Scrooge-style redemption. Instead, the film emphasizes the value of community and the communal sharing of wealth. Alternatively, these films also demonstrate what Connelly (2000b, p. 124) describes as "the way in which the distasteful elements of this modern, spending-fest Christmas are assuaged via the analgesic of a caring consumerism," a dynamic vividly illustrated in *Miracle on 34th Street*. This approach contrasts with more typical narratives that resolve tensions through individual transformation alone such as *Remember the Night* and *The Bishop's Wife*. Furthermore, the triumph of consumerist ideals in these films only materializes after these ideals have been subjected to questioning and critique. By framing consumerism in a seemingly balanced and sincere manner, the films ultimately reinforce and perpetuate these ideals, allowing them to endure under the guise of honest reflection.

In this way, I would further argue that Christmas, as depicted in these films, is employed to integrate commercialism into a form of civil religion—one that manifests as a constellation of loosely shared beliefs, rituals, and expressions of faith operating within an otherwise secular society. Despite the juxtaposition between Christianity and materialism, the market-driven celebration of Christmas in films becomes a vehicle for promoting Christian ethics. Through commercial activities and gift-giving, ideals like generosity, charity, and goodwill are widely shared and practiced. Rather than replacing the religious spirit, these material expressions often reinforce its social influence, creating a complex interplay between consumer culture and spiritual faith. Santa Claus, as a full-fledged hedonistic and materialist counterpart to Jesus—offering toys and luxuries, as seen in *Miracle on 34th Street*, in contrast to Jesus's message of healing and essential needs. This complex and often contradictory coexistence reveals the paradox of Christmas. The disjuncture which is a mainstay of these Christmas-related films, relate to how, as debates in implicit religion have shown, it is customary for us to subscribe to multiple commitments concurrently, even ones which are discordant, "unrelated or competitive" (Jespers et al, 2012, p. 536). Precisely because of this seemingly chaotic and overlapping logic, the holiday fosters a distinctive form of narrative and ideological agency. In these films, the excesses of consumer culture—epitomized by frenzied shopping, lavish ornamentation, and emotional exaggeration—generate a state of symbolic disorder that echoes the carnivalesque (Montgomery, 1993, p. 22). As such, the film becomes a dialogic space where divergent voices, ideological positions, and genre conventions do not negate

one another, but rather coexist, negotiate and re-code the meaning of core cultural values such as materialism, love, and faith. The more a film foregrounds spectacle and superficial consumerism, the more prominently and frequently intimacy, emotional authenticity, and human bonds are emphasized and brought to the forefront. In this sense, the greater the chaos, the deeper the longing for order. This structure of symbolic inversion and restoration allows the Christmas films to simultaneously stage disruption and resolve it, offering a form of cultural re-anchoring through dialogic contradiction.

Overall, this research offers a comprehensive and comparative perspective on how Christmas is represented across different film genres in 1940s Hollywood cinema. However, several notable shortages remain. First, the number of films selected for analysis is relatively limited. Although the choices are representative, they may not fully capture the broader spectrum of genre expressions throughout the decade, and may overlook marginal genres or hybrid forms of Christmas narratives. Second, the textual analysis method adopted in this study emphasizes close reading of narrative structures, visual motifs, and spatiotemporal construction within the films. While this approach allows for an in-depth exploration of Christmas as a chronotope and its interactions with others, it engages less with external dimensions such as audience reception, historical context, or industrial production mechanisms. Future research could integrate complementary methods such as film reviews, reception studies, or even digital humanities tools to broaden the analytical scope. Although comparative analysis helps to clarify similarities and differences across genres, genre boundaries themselves are often fluid and contested, making strict categorization both methodologically and conceptually challenging. Furthermore, the theoretical framework is primarily grounded in Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope, which, though productive for examining the interplay of festive temporality and genre conventions, is originally rooted in literary theory and may not fully account for the audiovisual complexity unique to cinema. Finally, this study focuses exclusively on the American context and Hollywood productions. It does not yet address how Christmas is represented in non-Western or transnational cinema traditions, which presents a geographic and cultural limitation that future comparative or global studies may help to redress.

The central contribution of this study lies in its application of Bakhtin's (1981a) concept of the chronotope to the analysis of Christmas, demonstrating how the holiday functions as a distinctive spatiotemporal construct that shapes narrative rhythms and emotional atmospheres across different film genres. Crucially, this analysis foregrounds the flexibility of the Christmas chronotope, particularly in relation to the ambiguity and shifting temporality of the holiday season, which typically unfolds from the period following Thanksgiving through to Christmas Day, rather than being confined to a single calendrical moment. While this temporal span is diffuse and fluid, it is rendered concrete and intensified through specific spatial

relations—such as the home, family gatherings, the workplace, or public ritual spaces—within cinematic narratives. This chronotopic approach is not limited to Christmas but can be extended to other holidays, including Thanksgiving, Easter, Halloween, and Lunar New Year. Each holiday, shaped by distinct cultural, religious, and social functions, produces its own chronotope, characterized by different temporal structures (such as cyclicality, anticipation, or ritual repetition) and spatial configurations (including domestic interiors, communal spaces, or sites of ritual practice). Cinema is especially effective in rendering this spatiotemporal compression, as film form enables abstract and extended temporalities to be materialized through concrete spatial relations, visual repetition, and narrative rhythm.

In addition, longitudinal comparisons across different historical periods also hold great potential. Future studies could examine the Christmas chronotope in films from the 1940s alongside those from the present day, investigating how shifts in social change, cultural values, and media environments transform the spatiotemporal construction of the holiday. Such diachronic analyses can offer a more comprehensive understanding of the evolution of holiday narratives and their reflection of dynamic social psychology and cultural identities. Furthermore, the expression of holiday chronotopes is closely tied to cultural contexts, highlighting the significance of cross-cultural, horizontal comparative research. Future work might focus on how the same holiday's chronotope is constructed differently across diverse cultural settings, revealing how holiday imagery is localized, globalized, or hybridized. For instance, the representation of the Western Christmas chronotope in Asian cinema often incorporates local festive elements, creating a unique hybrid chronotope that enriches the discourse on cultural interaction and exchange in an increasingly globalized world.

In fact, the versatility of the chronotope concept extends far beyond the confines of specific events or holidays. This study has demonstrated its profound potential for understanding the hybridity and fluidity of film genres. Traditional genre studies often treat genres as discrete and static categories, overlooking the intricate interconnections and dynamic interplay between genres, as well as the evolving spatiotemporal dimensions of narratives. As explored in this research, the chronotope offers an effective framework for viewing the blending of time and space as ever-changing, interactive components of film narratives, allowing us to move beyond rigid genre classifications, while more precisely identifying and deconstructing genre hybridity in concrete terms. By applying this perspective to classical Hollywood cinema, my analysis challenges the still-dominant assumption that Hollywood genres during this period were largely pure or homogeneous—an era when genre conventions were being defined.

Instead, I argue that hybridity and fluidity are a constitutive feature of Hollywood filmmaking, one that can be illuminated by tracing the chronotopic logics at work across films. Therefore, the broader intervention of this thesis lies in demonstrating

how the chronotope can enrich genre studies by pushing the boundaries of traditional genre analysis. It not only provides a fresh way to reevaluate genre frameworks in Hollywood cinema but also infuses genre studies with new perspectives, offering valuable insights into the ongoing evolution of film genres and the dynamic relationships that shape them. Through this lens, genre studies can move beyond static categorizations, recognizing the complexity and interconnectivity of genre and narrative, and allowing us to more deeply understand the ways in which film genres adapt to and engage with the world around them.

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A Guy Named Joe (1944). Directed by Victor Fleming. USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM).
A Letter to Three Wives (1949). Directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz. USA: 20th Century Fox.
A Trap for Santa Claus (1909). Directed by Edwin S. Porter. USA: Edison Manufacturing Company.
Adam's Rib (1949). Directed by George Cukor. USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM).
Alice in Wonderland (1931). Directed by Bud Pollard. USA: Independent production, Metropolitan Studios.
Among the Living (1941). Directed by Stuart Heisler. USA: Paramount Pictures.
Babes in Toyland (1934). Directed by Gus Meins and Charley Rogers. USA: Hal Roach Studios.
Between Two Worlds (1944). Directed by Edward A. Blatt. USA: Universal Pictures.
Beyond Tomorrow (1940). Directed by A. Edward Sutherland. USA: RKO Radio Pictures.
Black Christmas (1974). Directed by Bob Clark. Canada: Film Fund of Canada / Cinépix Films.
Boomerang! (1947). Directed by Elia Kazan. USA: 20th Century Fox.
Bringing Up Baby (1938). Directed by Howard Hawks. USA: RKO Radio Pictures.
Christmas Holiday (1944). Directed by Robert Siodmak. USA: Universal Pictures.
Christmas in Connecticut (1945). Directed by Peter Godfrey. USA: Warner Bros.
Christmas in July (1940). Directed by Preston Sturges. USA: Paramount Pictures.
Citizen Kane (1941). Directed by Orson Welles. USA: RKO Radio Pictures.
Cover Up (1949). Directed by Alfred E. Green. USA: Warner Bros.
Detour (1945). Directed by Edgar G. Ulmer. USA: Producers Releasing Corporation.
Duel in the Sun (1946). Directed by King Vidor. USA: Selznick International Pictures.
Gaslight (1944). Directed by George Cukor. USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM).
Hangover Square (1945). Directed by John Brahm. UK: Gainsborough Pictures.
Happy Land (1943). Directed by Irving Pichel. USA: 20th Century Fox.
Holiday Affair (1949). Directed by Don Hartman. USA: RKO Radio Pictures.
Holiday Inn (1942). Directed by Mark Sandrich. USA: Paramount Pictures.
Home Alone (1990). Directed by Chris Columbus. USA: 20th Century Fox.
How Green Was My Valley (1941). Directed by John Ford. USA: 20th Century Fox.
I Shot Jesse James (1949). Directed by Samuel Fuller. USA: Allied Artists Pictures.

I Wouldn't Be in Your Shoes (1948). Directed by William Nigh. USA: Monogram Pictures.
It Happened One Night (1934). Directed by Frank Capra. USA: Columbia Pictures.
It's a Wonderful Life (1946). Directed by Frank Capra. USA: RKO Radio Pictures.
Kiss of Death (1947). Directed by Henry Hathaway. USA: Paramount Pictures.
Lady in the Lake (1946). Directed by Robert Montgomery. USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM).
Lady on a Train (1945). Directed by Charles David. USA: Warner Bros.
Little Women (1949). Directed by Mervyn LeRoy. USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM).
Meet Me in St. Louis (1944). Directed by Vincente Minnelli. USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM).
Miracle on 34th Street (1947). Directed by George Seaton. USA: 20th Century Fox.
Murder, My Sweet (1944). Directed by Edward Dmytryk. USA: RKO Radio Pictures.
My Man Godfrey (1936). Directed by Gregory La Cava. USA: Universal Pictures.
Nighthawks (1942). Directed by Seth Holt. USA: 20th Century Fox.
Out of the Past (1947). Directed by Jacques Tourneur. USA: RKO Radio Pictures.
Out of the Past (1947). Directed by Jacques Tourneur. USA: RKO Radio Pictures.
Remember the Night (1940). Directed by Mitchell Leisen. USA: Paramount Pictures.
Scarlet Street (1945). Directed by Fritz Lang. USA: Columbia Pictures.
Scrooge/Marley's Ghost (1901). Directed by Edwin S. Porter. USA: Edison Manufacturing Company.
Stella Dallas (1937). Directed by King Vidor. USA: MGM (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer).
Stranger on the Third Floor (1940). Directed by Boris Ingster. USA: RKO Radio Pictures.
Street of Chance (1941). Directed by Jack Hively. USA: RKO Radio Pictures.
Sullivan's Travels (1941). Directed by Preston Sturges. USA: Paramount Pictures.
The Awful Truth (1937). Directed by Leo McCarey. USA: Columbia Pictures.
The Bishop's Wife (1947). Directed by Henry Koster. USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM).
The Black Book (1949). Directed by Anthony Mann. USA: Eagle-Lion Films.
The Blue Dahlia (1946). Directed by George Marshall. USA: Paramount Pictures.
The Boy with Green Hair (1948). Directed by Joseph Losey. USA: RKO Radio Pictures.
The Good Fairy (1935). Directed by William Wyler. USA: Universal Pictures.
The Grapes of Wrath (1940). Directed by John Ford. USA: 20th Century Fox.
The Holiday (2006). Directed by Nancy Meyers. USA: Columbia Pictures.
The House on 92nd Street (1945). Directed by Henry Hathaway. USA: 20th Century Fox.
The Lady Eve (1941). Directed by Preston Sturges. USA: Paramount Pictures.
The Major and the Minor (1942). Directed by Billy Wilder. USA: Paramount Pictures.
The Maltese Falcon (1941). Directed by John Huston. USA: Warner Bros.

The Miracle of Morgan's Creek (1944). Directed by Preston Sturges. USA: Paramount Pictures.
The More the Merrier (1943). Directed by George Stevens. USA: Columbia Pictures.
The Naked City (1948). Directed by Jules Dassin. USA: Paramount Pictures.
The Palm Beach Story (1942). Directed by Preston Sturges. USA: Paramount Pictures.
The Philadelphia Story (1940). Directed by George Cukor. USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM).
The Reckless Moment (1949). Directed by Max Ophüls. USA: Paramount Pictures.
The Shop Around the Corner (1940). Directed by Ernst Lubitsch. USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM).
The Spiral Staircase (1945). Directed by Robert Siodmak. USA: Universal Pictures.
The Suspect (1944). Directed by Robert Siodmak. USA: Universal Pictures.
The Wizard of Oz (1939). Directed by Victor Fleming. USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM).
Theodora Goes Wild (1936). Directed by Richard Boleslawski. USA: Columbia Pictures
Unfaithfully Yours (1948). Directed by Preston Sturges. USA: Universal Pictures.
Why Be Good (1929). Directed by William A. Seiter. USA: First National Pictures.

Appendix 1

3 Cheers for the Irish (1940). Directed by Lloyd Bacon. USA: Warner Bros.
A Bill of Divorcement (1940). Directed by John Farrow. USA: RKO Radio Pictures.
Christmas in July (1940). Directed by Preston Sturges. USA: Paramount Pictures.
Remember the Night (1940). Directed by Mitchell Leisen. USA: Paramount Pictures.
Tante Pose (1940). Directed by Leif Sinding. Norway: Merkur Film A/S
The Blue Bird (1940). Directed by Walter Lang. USA: 20th Century Fox.
The Fighting 69th (1940). Directed by William Keighley. USA: Warner Bros.
The Lady in Question (1940). Directed by Charles Vidor. USA: Columbia Pictures.
The Shop Around the Corner (1940). Directed by Ernst Lubitsch. USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

Blossoms in the Dust (1941). Directed by Mervyn LeRoy. USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.
Citizen Kane (1941). Directed by Orson Welles. USA: RKO Radio Pictures.
Meet John Doe (1941). Directed by Frank Capra. USA: Warner Bros.
Penny Serenade (1941). Directed by George Stevens. USA: Columbia Pictures.
Tall, Dark and Handsome (1941). Directed by H. Bruce Humberstone. USA: 20th Century Fox.
The Great Mr. Nobody (1941). Directed by Lambert Hillyer. USA: Monogram Pictures.
Who Killed Santa Claus? (1941). Directed by Christian-Jaque. France: Tobis Film

Alias Boston Blackie (1942). Directed by Lew Landers. USA: Columbia Pictures.
Holiday Inn (1942). Directed by Mark Sandrich. USA: Paramount Pictures.
In Which We Serve (1942). Directed by Noël Coward&David Lean. UK: British Lion Films, United Artists, Eagle-Lion Films
The Magnificent Ambersons (1942). Directed by Orson Welles. USA: RKO Radio Pictures.
The Man Who Came to Dinner (1942). Directed by William Keighley. USA: Warner Bros.
The Moon and Sixpence (1942). Directed by Albert Lewin. USA: United Artists.

Salute to the Marines (1943). Directed by S. Sylvan Simon. USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.
So Proudly We Hail! (1943). Directed by Mark Sandrich. USA: Paramount Pictures.
The Iron Major (1943). Directed by Ray Enright. USA: Warner Bros.

Attack! The Battle of New Britain (1944). Directed by U.S. Army Signal Corps. USA: U.S. Army.
Christmas Holiday (1944). Directed by Robert Siodmak. USA: Universal Pictures.
Going My Way (1944). Directed by Leo McCarey. USA: Paramount Pictures.
Home in Indiana (1944). Directed by Henry Hathaway. USA: 20th Century Fox.

I'll Be Seeing You (1944). Directed by William Dieterle. USA: Selznick International Pictures.
Meet Me in St. Louis (1944). Directed by Vincente Minnelli. USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.
The Impostor (1944). Directed by Julien Duvivier. USA: United Artists.
The Miracle of Morgan's Creek (1944). Directed by Preston Sturges. USA: Paramount Pictures.
The Three Caballeros (1944). Directed by Norman Ferguson et al. USA: Walt Disney Productions.

Christmas in Connecticut (1945). Directed by Peter Godfrey. USA: Warner Bros.
Dead of Night (1945). Directed by Alberto Cavalcanti et al. UK: Ealing Studios.
Frisco Sal (1945). Directed by Robert Florey. USA: Universal Pictures.
Lady on a Train (1945). Directed by Charles David. USA: Universal Pictures.
Roughly Speaking (1945). Directed by Michael Curtiz. USA: Warner Bros.
The Bells of St. Mary's (1945). Directed by Leo McCarey. USA: RKO Radio Pictures.
The Cheaters (1945). Directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz. USA: Republic Pictures.
Youth for the Kingdom (1945). Directed by Hamilton MacFadden. USA: Lutheran Laymen's League.

It's a Wonderful Life (1946). Directed by Frank Capra. USA: RKO Radio Pictures.
Lady in the Lake (1946). Directed by Robert Montgomery. USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.
Never Say Goodbye (1946). Directed by James V. Kern. USA: Warner Bros.
The Bride Wore Boots (1946). Directed by Irving Pichel. USA: Columbia Pictures.
The Man I Love (1946). Directed by Raoul Walsh. USA: Warner Bros.
The Murderers Are Among Us (1946). Directed by Wolfgang Staudte. Germany: DEFA.

A Christmas Carol (1947). Directed by Brian Desmond Hurst. UK: Cineguild.
Bush Christmas (1947). Directed by Ralph Smart. Australia: The Rank Organisation.
Christmas Eve (1947). Directed by Edwin L. Marin. USA: Republic Pictures.
Frieda (1947). Directed by Basil Dearden. UK: General Film Distributors.
It Happened on Fifth Avenue (1947). Directed by Roy Del Ruth. USA: Monogram Pictures.
Miracle on 34th Street (1947). Directed by George Seaton. USA: 20th Century Fox.
Natale al campo 119 (1947). Directed by Pietro Francisci. Italy: Minerva Film
The Bishop's Wife (1947). Directed by Henry Koster. USA: RKO Radio Pictures.

Larceny (1948). Directed by George Sherman. USA: RKO Radio Pictures.
London Belongs to Me (1948). Directed by Sidney Gilliat. UK: General Film Distributors
They Live by Night (1948). Directed by Nicholas Ray. USA: RKO Radio Pictures.
Three Godfathers (1948). Directed by John Ford. USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

Tenth Avenue Angel (1948). Directed by Roy Rowland. USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

An Old-Fashioned Girl (1949). Directed by Richard Thorpe. USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.
Christmas Capers (1949). Directed by George Pal. USA: Eagle-Lion Films.
Cover Up (1949). Directed by Alfred E. Green. USA: United Artists.
Holiday Affair (1949). Directed by Don Hartman. USA: RKO Radio Pictures.
House of Settlement (1949). Directed by Gordon Douglas. USA: Columbia Pictures
In the Good Old Summertime (1949). Directed by Robert Z. Leonard. USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.
Little Women (1949). Directed by Mervyn LeRoy. USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.
Look for the Silver Lining (1949). Directed by David Butler. USA: Warner Bros.
Task Force (1949). Directed by Delmer Daves. USA: Warner Bros.
The Adventures of Ichabod and Mr. Toad (1949). Directed by Clyde Geronimi et al. USA: Walt Disney Productions.
The Reckless Moment (1949). Directed by Max Ophüls. USA: Columbia Pictures.
The Rocking Horse Winner (1949). Directed by Anthony Pelissier. UK: Denham Studios
The Story of Molly X (1949). Directed by Crane Wilbur. USA: Republic Pictures.