

All About Eve

(Mankiewicz, 1950)

Component 1 - Section A: Hollywood film

Core study areas:

- **Contexts**
- **Film form**
- **Meaning and response: aesthetics and representations**

Specialist study areas:

- **Auteur**

Rationale for study: “Fasten your seatbelts, it’s going to be a bumpy night!” - *All About Eve*, is actually all about Margot, an ageing Broadway star and her ambitious young assistant Eve. Their feud is set against the glamorous world of the New York theatre scene. What sets this film apart from other films of the studio era is undoubtedly the powerhouse performance of Bette Davis and the supporting actors.

STARTING POINTS - Useful sequences and timings:

Opening scene: 00:01:00 - 00:07:30

Phoebe and Eve: 2:12:00 - 2:17:00

Addison confronts Eve: 1:56:00 - 2:05:00

CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS: Key elements of film form (micro features)

Cinematography

- The interiors are shot using three-point lighting, allowing for a deep focus and casting shadows for depth and shaping.
- During Eve and Addison’s confrontation, the noir style ‘venetian blind effect’ connotes Eve’s entrapment.

Mise-en-scène

- The locations are primarily interior, claustrophobic, busy, and full of life. The theatre space is confined and claustrophobic.
- We see the ‘backstage’ areas of life, hotel rooms, dressing rooms, and bedrooms. Scenes occur before or after the party or event.
- Eve’s costume mirrors Margot’s, until the awards scene, where she appears more ‘Hollywood’.
- Phoebe in the mirror demonstrates Mankiewicz’s use of *mise-en-scène* as a tool to create meaning, by showing how Phoebe and Eve are reflections of each other. Mirrors are used throughout the film to convey the themes of reflections and characters mirroring each other.



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Editing

- The freeze frame in the opening sequence marks a pivotal moment in all the characters’ stories, and the narrative follows their journey to this moment.
- As the story is told in flashback, the edits are cross dissolves or fades to connote the passing of time and the blurred lines of memory.

Sound

- The voiceover captures the thoughts of the characters regarding Eve, we do not hear her perspective. In the opening, the use of voiceover moves from Addison and Karen, the only two characters who are not ‘the creatives’.
- A traditional musical score implies glamour and romance, then the character’s name ‘Eve’ is introduced.

Performance

- Bette Davis enters the film with a refreshing down to earth nature, with her wig off, removing her makeup. Davis’ characters were known for their sharp and outrageous attitudes. Birdie and Margot’s double act is vibrant, it juxtaposes Eve’s wide-eyed performance.
- Anne Baxter’s performance in the confrontation scene with Addison reveals her true intentions and uses a hint of melodrama that they ironically mention in the scene.

CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS: Meaning and response

Representations

- Rather unusually, this film has a strong sense of the female voice and explores the lives of successful women, as well as women who are driven by success. There is a debate to be had about the positive and negative representations of wives and ‘career’ women.
- Addison declares that Eve ‘belongs’ to him, he is controlling and attempts to shape Eve’s career. This reflects Hollywood studios’ control of actresses with a seven-year contract.
- Eve manages to dupe most of the male characters, the female characters are first to see Eve’s deceptive nature.
- Mankiewicz often depicts complex female characters.
- The film reflects Hollywood’s obsession with age and beauty.

Aesthetics

- The film’s style can be described as theatrical and elegant. At times, the film adopts a noir aesthetic.

CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS – Contexts

Social and political

- Women gained more control during the Second World War, and they control the narrative in *All About Eve*.

Cultural

- The film is set in New York City, which appears to regard itself as superior to Los Angeles.
- One of Marilyn Monroe’s first screen appearances, as an aspiring starlet.
- The film has a LGBTQ+ following and is considered a ‘queer classic’, even though it is heteronormative in its overt messages.

Institutional

- *All About Eve* was a 20th Century Fox film, produced by Darryl Zanuck, one of the founding fathers of the Hollywood system and who had worked with Mack Sennet and Jack Warner.
- Bette Davis famously tried to break her contract with Warner Bros by accepting work in the UK. She was under contract with Warner Brothers until 1949. She was an independent in 1950 when she appeared in *All About Eve*.

SPECIALIST STUDY AREA: Starting points

Auteur

- Mankiewicz wrote and directed *All About Eve*, it was crafted as his vision.
- Mankiewicz’s work spanned a range of genres and styles.
- His films are theatrical, very dialogue heavy and usually set indoors, like a play.
- Mankiewicz also directed *Cleopatra* in 1963, which damaged his career and nearly bankrupted the studio (20th Century Fox).

- The film reflects the *auteur* debate within the narrative. When we are introduced to the theatre, we are privy to an argument between director, writer, and actor for creative control. It can be argued that the true auteur of the film is Bette Davis, as a performer this appears to be ‘her’ film, just like her character.
- *All About Eve* was made at the height of the age of the studio system. 20th Century Fox was one of the vertically integrated ‘big five’ studios.

KEY SEQUENCE ANALYSIS

Opening Scene 00:01:00 - 00:07:30

- Mankiewicz uses film form in an experimental fashion in this scene.
- The opening shot of the award in CU is a reflection of Eve’s obsessive desire for success, the track back to an EST LS of the room establishes the lavish spectacle of the awards show, and the main characters appear small and insignificant in the frame.
- The opening voiceover is an acerbic commentary from Addison DeWitt. He is an ‘outsider’, a journalist observing the event with detachment. The voiceover is a direct mode of address that invites the audience into his confidence and establishes a barbed wit that we associate with the work of Mankiewicz and Davis. The voiceover later transfers to Karen; both Addison and Karen are secondary characters to Eve and Margot, they are observers, just like the audience.
- Music echoes a character’s personality as they are introduced.
- The *mise-en-scène* of the awards ceremony is lavish and gaudy, implying an air of self-congratulation and vanity, stereotypical of ‘the business’.
- It is on second viewing (and repeated at the close of the film) that the audience can re-evaluate the reaction shots and emotional response of the characters we are introduced to in this scene.
- The freeze frame stops time just as Eve reaches for her award, it remains just out of reach.
- The scene ends with a cross dissolve to connote the passing of time and memory.

Phoebe and Eve 2:12:00 - 2:17:00

- Mirrors are a key element of the *mise-en-scène* in this scene, Eve first sees Phoebe in a mirror. Mirrors connote Eve’s duplicitous nature.
- Phoebe multiplies in the mirror, visualising that there are a thousand girls waiting in the wings to replace Eve.
- Phoebe attempts to seduce Addison at the door, in a less subtle approach than Eve used.
- Eve’s life is being packed away, she enters and leaves the story with little.
- The final note of the film is that of backstabbing ambition and vanity in a fame obsessed society.