



Prisoners of Gender: Women in the Films of J. Lee Thompson: A new approach to British cinema of the 1950s

Melanie Williams

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When the director J. Lee Thompson died in 2002, his obituaries gave little indication that he might ever conceivably be regarded as a 'woman's director' - unsurprisingly given his expertise in macho films such as 1961's *The Guns of Navarone* and *Cape Fear*. However, during the first 10 years of his directorial career in Britain, Thompson made a number of striking films which examined a rich variety of female experience. These range from the women's prison films *The Weak and the Wicked* (1954) and *Yield to the Night* (1956), both starring Diana Dors, to the tale of domestic disaster *Woman in a Dressing Gown* (1957); from the war film that finds room for a central female character, *Ice Cold in Alex* (1958) and the depiction of 1930s slum life *No Trees in the Street* (1959), to an optimistic farewell to Britain before departing for Hollywood (as well as Hayley Mills' ebullient debut film) *Tiger Bay* (1959). Melanie Williams makes a case for the significance of these films to British cinema in terms of their unusual representations of femininity, with female protagonists who are 'prisoners of gender' struggling to get free.

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