

## “Harriet Craig”

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cover: Still from *Harriet Craig* (1950), a film starring Joan Crawford and Wendell Corey, directed by Vincent Sherman.

Thanks to Lühring, Augustine and Gorney Bravin Lee galleries, and to Mayer Rus.

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### When a Woman Ascends the Stairs

What's wrong with Harriet Craig? What is her trip?

*Harriet Craig* (1950) is a melodrama starring Joan Crawford in the title role. Harriet is a woman who leaves a successful (unnamed) career to enjoy domestic bliss with electrical engineer Walter Craig in circumstances of postwar, high-bourgeois, proto-Eisenhowerian plenitude. She's one of those women who is going to "have it all"--but in her own special way, regardless of an outward appearance of strict adherence to convention. Harriet will fail. She has a tragic--or at least pathetic--flaw. Obsessed to the point of mania with household management and, by extension, controlling other people's lives, Harriet destroys her seemingly perfect life.

The camp account of Joan Crawford contains the above narrative with almost alarming ease. As we all know from Faye Dunaway's portrayal of Joan in "Mommie Dearest" (1981), Joan Crawford was a lunatic of cleanliness who battered her children to pulps in the pursuit of her deranged needs. This is the Joan of No-Wire-Hangers-Ever. But with metaleptic irony, the film implies that perhaps Christina Crawford simply watched all of her mother's old movies and made up her story out of that. Disregarding the obvious camp value of the movie, I found myself taking Harriet's dilemmas seriously. She, the villainess, I empathized with, intensely. The other

characters were with few exceptions just mulch. Walter (Wendell Corey), the moronically good-guy, wronged husband of Harriet, is the worst. Nevertheless, I felt an unease with respect to my feelings about Harriet? Why is she like that, I asked myself? Am I like that? Harriet Craig offers to some the thrill of a sudden and disquieting identification.

Harriet does terrible things, to her servants, her family, and especially to her husband. But Harriet's actions are secondary to her affect, a tyrannous miasma of punctilio and order. She enforces an ethic of hostility toward ordinary expressions of warmth. A neighboring widow's gift of a basket of the first roses of summer is dismissed by Harriet as the stratagem of a conniving woman determined to introduce this floral virus into the Craig house. She's a paranoid, but not a passive paranoid, cowering in the shadows while waiting for the worst to come.

**Martha Rosler** *First Lady (Pat Nixon)* from the series *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful* 1969-72. Photomontage printed as color photograph. 20 x 24 inches



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Alex Bag

She takes action. Was it not a commonplace of the youth of the sixties to assert that paranoia is simply heightened awareness? One discovers the most unlikely affiliations. There's a certain radicalism sunken inside Harriet--an opaque refusal.

Just as much as Harriet Craig is a movie about marriage and individual psychopathology, it is also profoundly one about interior decoration. The art direction cannot be faulted. The decor of the house is itself a major character, evincing its own craziness. Certain vistas and objets are haunted. The chatelaine has no doubt substantially remade the Craig family manse--oh, retaining many fine old pieces, of course, but enriching it with examples of her own taste. I imagine that Harriet is largely responsible for the

orientalia, given the fetishistic value she invests in the Ming vase filled with rice, the vase that according to legend Chinese wives filled with rice from their wedding feasts as magical protection for their homes. Or the Tang horsemen rewired as lamps. Lavish draperies, lacquered screens. I am also very curious about the art in the Craig household: a Marie Laurencin of a girl with a mandolin, and one of the very most saccharine of Renoir's little-girl paintings. Laurencin's innocent girl recurs in several scenes: staring out of the picture, she's a mute witness to domesticity as terror.

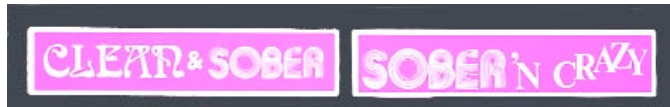
Harriet is a pure example of the divided self. She wants something, she can achieve it, and yet through some deformation of her character she is compelled to annihilate it. Maybe she secretly hates it all anyway. Fassbinder, in his essay on Douglas Sirk, writes: "As a viewer I'm with Douglas Sirk on the trail of human despair. In *Written on the Wind* everything good and "normal" and "beautiful" is always very disgusting, and everything evil, weak, and confused makes you feel sympathy." Could something similar be at work in *Harriet Craig*?

The movie's peripeteia discloses the sources of Harriet's madness, and predictably child-



Chivas Clem still from *Hotel Story* video 1996

hood trauma is at the root: She walks in on a philandering father with liquor on his breath and a cheap vulgar blond in his lap. He abandons Harriet and her mother to a life of drudgery and desperate struggle. "We almost starved." (This is, by the way, the standard Joan Crawford narrative in fiction and in life: an unshakable drive to claw herself out of poverty and anonymity; the drive to find herself ensconced on Flamingo Road.) The almost comically obtuse husband sees his wife clearly for the first time:



John Boskovich *Color Correction Series/AA Bumper Stickers (Diptych): Clean & Sober/ Sober 'N Crazy* 1997 oil on Mahogany panel, Mahogany frame: 4.25" x 26" x 1.5"

"I believe what you say about your father, and I feel sorry for you. You hated your father and you hate me. You hate and distrust everybody. You're at war with the whole world."

Our last close-up image of Joan shows a shaken (a few tears dampen her face) yet resilient Harriet. She straightens her back and ascends the grand staircase which has loomed throughout the movie as a presiding symbol: a fanfare of wealth and grandeur, obviously, but also a spiral of futility. The futility of love and trust and real estate and paintings. She climbs the stairs accompanied by her lengthening shadow. What happens to her when she reaches the head of the stairs? She's got the house. A pyrrhic victory? This could furnish material for another story, another movie.

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Christopher Wool Untitled 1994 Enamel on canvas aluminum 90 x 60 inches

