(1) Fluctuating Femininity: The Evolving Role of Women in American Cinema

Stewey B. Sample

ENG 122: English Composition II

Prof. Martha Washington

July 31, 2014
Characters in film have had a lasting effect on American culture. It is hard to overstate the importance of characters like Charlie Chaplin’s “Tramp,” Gregory Peck’s “Atticus Finch,” or Sidney Poitier’s “John Prentice.” While all of these influential characters are male, many female characters also had a lasting influence on society. An entire generation of women was changed by films like Woody Allen’s 1977 film *Annie Hall*, with the titular character’s irreverent attitude, focus on personal happiness, and unorthodox fashion sense (Lauer, 2014). For many women of the “Boomer” generation, Diane Keaton’s portrayal of Annie Hall represented a new and different type of femininity that redefined and restructured the boundaries between male and female that had marked this era of American cinema; she was just one of many cinematic female characters to do so. The medium of film has allowed countless actresses to use their roles to alter conventional notions of what it means to be a woman. Female characters have always been present in film, and their constantly changing depictions serve to illustrate how notions of femininity have evolved over time in the United States and have become more accurate reflections of real women in the world.

Beginning in the early 1970s, feminist film critique has evolved to become its own subgenre within the broader field of feminist theory. In its earliest incarnations, feminist film critique was often quite reductive. Arising out of the second wave feminist movements of the early 1970s, many feminist critics expressed a belief that filmic depictions of women only presented one dimensional caricatures of what it truly meant to be a woman. In the first sentence of her 1972 essay, “The Image of Women in Film: Some Suggestions for Future Research,” Sharon Smith, one of the earliest contributors to the academic journal *Women in Film*, asserts that,
Women, in any fully human form, have almost completely been left out of film …

...women provide trouble or sexual interludes for male characters, or are not present at all. Even when a woman is the central character, she is generally shown as confused or helpless and in danger, or passive, or as a purely sexual being. (Smith, 1999, p. 15)

Drawing on her own personal analysis of filmic representations of women in the 1920s, Smith’s reductive assertions would lay the interpretive foundation for the whole early history of feminist film analysis. In her view, writers and directors paid little attention to the female characters they created, using women only to arouse sexual desire or to drive the plot forward as helpless damsels in need of a strong male rescuer. While this interpretation did hold true for the roles that women played in some films, its generalizing tone ignored several notable exceptions that would radically complicate her thesis.

One such exception was the complicated role that women played in Fritz Lang’s 1927 science fiction classic, Metropolis. This film explores the relationship between man and machine and suggests that the technologically progressive utopias that were commonly envisioned in the 1920s might actually lead to a more dystopian reality (Pommer & Lang, 1927). Initially, Smith’s interpretation of the role of women in film appears to hold true for Metropolis. The first female characters in the movie, an array of scantily-clad women, are introduced with the line “Which of you ladies shall have the honor of entertaining Master Freder, Jon Fredersen’s son” (as cited in Pommer & Lang, 1927). From here, the titillating young ladies strut before an elegantly dressed male servant who judges their beauty, and makes improvements where he sees fit. This early depiction of women fit entirely into the mold established by Smith. With bare breasts completely visible behind shirts of sheer lace, the first women in this film are little more
than the sexualized playthings for the film’s male protagonist, just as Smith suggests. Interestingly, however, this portrayal of female vapidity and wanton sexuality was a very conscious creation meant to stand in stark contrast to the film’s primary female protagonist, Maria.

(10) From the very moment she appears in the film, Maria challenges the decadence and the promiscuity of the movie’s other female characters. Accidentally walking in on the half-nude revelry of Freder and his female playthings, Maria’s clothes, occupation, and even her demeanor set her apart from the other women in this futuristic dystopia. Her clothes, a long, simple, full coverage dress covered in tiny flowers, are modest and unassuming. She enters the party surrounded by the poor children whom she teaches, forcing the partygoers to focus on the weak and vulnerable lower classes. Even the actress who plays Maria, Brigitte Helm, is the petite and prim picture of feminine innocence that clashes gravely with Freder’s voluptuous playthings (Pommer & Lang, 1927). This contrast, and by extension this character, was a consciously constructed aspect of Fritz Lang’s vision. (11) Perhaps as an attempt to challenge the moral decay that many felt was present in the upper echelons of society in the 1920s, Maria’s modesty, seriousness, and maternal nature all convey a particular ideal of femininity. Maria is meant to be the female character that the audience identifies with, or at the very least cheers for. She seems more real and relatable then the foolish women at the party. (12) Moreover, she receives a great deal more screen time. From the moment he sees her, Freder falls in love with Maria. The rest of the film depicts the story of their love, as well as the way Maria’s image is used to disguise a robot that brings chaos to the Metropolis. In short, this character was consciously created to appeal to the audience and to convey a set of qualities that the director feels an ideal woman should possess.
Clearly the roles that women played, even early on in the history of cinema, were far more consciously constructed than Smith initially suggested. As time progressed, new styles of film critique began to catch up with these changes, and scholars started to explore this conscious and purposeful construction of female characters. Researcher and feminist Mary Ann Doan (1981) analyzed the way that female roles, in what she terms “woman films,” are consciously designed to appeal to the woman as spectator. Doan suggests that such films address “themselves to the illusory female spectator, the ‘women’s films’ are based on the idea of female fantasy which they themselves anticipate and in some sense construct” (as cited in Thornham, 1999, p. 70). Through this statement, Doan demonstrates just how far feminist film critique had come. Instead of interpreting female characters as little more than male diversions, Doan is suggesting that female characters were conscious constructions meant to appeal to and even change the opinions of a female audience. Doan’s work underscored the changes that were already occurring in the way that feminist film critics viewed the role of women in film.

Keeping step with the changes occurring in the world of feminist film critique, female film characters also continued to evolve. By the 1970s, the conservative, maternal female characters like Maria were giving way to more independent female depictions. One example of this new type of female role was Diane Keaton’s quirky portrayal of Annie Hall in Woody Allen’s film by the same name. As stated earlier, *Annie Hall* was an impactful film, and part of that impact came from Keaton’s portrayal of the idiosyncratic Midwestern girl who came to New York City to follow her passions. From the moment the audience is introduced to Annie, she stands out as independent and quirky. Her clothes, Chaplin-esque baggy slacks coupled with a wide necktie, vest, and men’s dress shirt, all break traditional gendered conventions of what men and women wear. Her relationships were never meant to end in marriage, they are merely
transient affairs that allow Annie to have fun and explore herself as a person (Gallo, Greenhut, Joffe & Allen, 1977). Even in her interactions with Alvy Singer, the male lead of the film, she is indulgent to his neuroses while at the same time remains focused on her own personal goals. In one particularly notable scene, Annie has left New York to pursue her singing career in Los Angeles, and as such has ended her relationship with Alvy. Attempting to make a grand romantic gesture, Alvy jumps on a plane to LA, despite the fact that he gets terrible “California nausea.” In classic romantic-comedy fashion, Alvy tries to win back Annie’s affections. Sitting outside a health food restaurant, Annie sticks to her dreams and says that she does not want to continue her relationship Alvy and that she just does not feel affection for him any longer (Gallo, Greenhut, Joffe & Allen, 1977). (16) This scene clearly expresses just how much concepts of femininity had changed since the character of Maria appeared in *Metropolis*. Annie Hall was a free spirit in a way that few other female characters had been up to this point. She lived her life in pursuit of her own goals, and in doing so she encroached on filmic modes of representation that were usually reserved for men. (17) Expressing the social revolutionary spirit of the 1960s and 1970s, Annie Hall was a modern woman who pursued her own desires, regardless of how traditionally male those actions might seem. While she is at times defined by the men she chooses to involve herself with, those same men are easily cast aside if they interfere with her desire to do or be more. She cast aside Alvy because he stifled her desire to become a professional singer, and he refused to break out of his daily, weekly, and monthly routines (Gallo, Greenhut, Joffe & Allen, 1977).

(18) This trend towards independent female characters would continue throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and as time progressed female characters would soon express a physical strength to match their emotional and intellectual evolution. In a 2010 essay, Dr. Katy Gilpatric,
a professor of Sociology at Florida Atlantic University, suggested that the character of Lt. Ripley in the 1979 film *Alien* marked “a sea change of filmic representations of female action characters” (p. 734). Unlike any other female character before, Sigourney Weaver’s depiction of Lt. Ripley, pushed the boundaries of what female characters could do in film. For decades prior to *Alien*’s release, men had served as the lead in almost every major action film. If female characters were involved in action films, they occupied roles that were largely in keeping with Smith’s initial assessment from 1971. Lt. Ripley changed all that. She was a gun toting, monster fighting, female action hero who fought and bled to protect the crew of her commercial towing vessel, the *Nostromo* (Carroll, Giler, Hill, Shusset & Scott, 1979). Like Annie Hall before her, Lt. Ripley encroached on filmic territory that was usually reserved for men, however, Ripley established her independence with a gun not through the way that she handled relationships. This image of a violent female heroine was a radical departure from the status quo of female film characters. These early incarnations, though, were not always as cutting edge as they appeared. While characters like Lt. Ripley did challenge what women could and could not do, Gilpatric herself suggests that perhaps their progression in the area violent action roles was marred by regression in other areas.

While Gilpatric and others believe Lt. Ripley changed the landscape of what kinds of role women could play in film, her own research suggested that many of these violent female action roles are not fully developed characters and are, instead, masquerading behind blood and gore. In reality, these female heroes are still subordinate to male leads and beholden to traditional gender roles. (Gilpatric, 2010) Even when women are powerful action heroes in films, they are still tied to male characters romantically or occupy maternal roles in relation to other characters. To corroborate this claim, Gilpatric presents some rather telling statistics. Having examined a
total 157 violent female action characters, in films ranging from the years 1991 to 2005, Gilpatric (2010) found that 58.6% of the female action heroes occupied roles that were in fact subordinate to the male characters in the film. In this case, subordinate means that these women assisted male heroes, were protected by the male hero, or was in a romantic relationship with the male hero. In more than half of the cases that Gilpatric studied, female characters who established their independence with a gun were not as independent as they might initially appear. In reality, they occupied many of the same traditional gender roles that they always had, just in a more violent way.

(20) This assessment was true even of Lt. Ripley, the female character that in many ways served as the archetype for the female action character. In 1986, Sigourney Weaver reprised the role of Lt. Ripley in *Alien 2: The Return of Alien*, the sequel to the original *Alien*. This film added new characters to the mix, and paired Ripley with boorish space marines sent to save a seemingly abandoned human colony on a distant planetoid. As the aliens on this planet begin to attack the space marines, Ripley maintains her characteristic detachment and violent demeanor. This all changes, however, when they meet Newt, a young colonist who managed to hide from the aliens that killed the rest of the human in the colony. From this point forward, Ripley falls into a nurturing, protective, and motherly role. Preserving Newt’s life becomes Ripley’s primary objective (Carol, Giler, Hill & Cameron, 1986). (21) The drama of this relationship reaches its apex in the film’s final scene. In warehouse-like cargo hold, Lt. Ripley stands before the xenomorph queen clad in a suit of mechanical armor that amplifies her strength to the level that she can engage in hand-to-hand combat with the vicious alien creature. In the corner of the room, trapped behind the Alien queen, is Newt, the little girl for whom Lt. Ripley has become a surrogate mother. With a protective battle cry, Lt. Ripley charges the beast and engages in an ultimately successful battle
to free Newt (Carol, Giler, Hill & Cameron, 1986). This scene depicts Gilpatric’s point perfectly. While she is literally clad in a suit of armor like a futuristic Arthurian knight, Lt. Ripley’s fight is actually one of a surrogate mother figure trying to protect her child. This whole scene, in fact, is actually a clash between two mothers, with the Alien queen simply trying to kill these humans in an effort to feed her young, and find hosts for parasitic larval children. With this battle, even Lt. Ripley becomes fettered to the traditional gender roles that women have been held to for decades. Indeed, these female action heroes seem to embody the tension between newer and older concepts of the proper roles for women. While these violent women demonstrate an ability to do whatever a man can do, directors seemed reticent to unchain them from more traditionally gendered activities. In the 21st century, however, this reticence began to melt away, and gave way to a new breed of female characters that, once again, changed the landscape of what women on screen could do. Little scholarly analysis currently exists for films that have come out in the past two years, however, many of these newer films have continued challenge older concepts of femininity through their use of female heroines. One perfect example of this is Jennifer Lawrence’s portrayal of Katniss Everdeen in the 2012 film The Hunger Games. Throughout this film, Katniss bears the weight of the world on her shoulders. In an effort to protect her sister, Katniss is forced into a tournament to the death with 23 other children. In this tournament, Katniss is forced to commit acts of unspeakable violence while at the same time trying to maintain her own independent moral center (Bissell, Collins, & Rosner, 2012). Rather than dealing in the easy-to-digest female stereotypes that dominated many of the earlier films discussed here, Lawrence’s depiction of Katniss Everdeen is at once powerful and vulnerable, ruthless and understanding. She does not fit into any one particular mold. In one notable scene,
Katniss, who has befriended another young competitor named Rue, leaves her young friend in order to execute a plan to help win the Hunger Games. While she is gone, Rue is killed by a roaming band of other competitors. Katniss comes back in time to witness Rue’s murder and, all within one scene, she kills Rue’s murderers and then wreathes Rue’s body in flowers (Bissell, Collins, & Rosner, 2012). This scene is particularly important because it demonstrates the way that Katniss fits no particular mold. Like Lt. Ripley, Katniss can be hard to her core, deadly and efficient. Also like LT. Ripley, she can at the same time show tenderness. Interestingly, the tenderness of this scene is not born of maternal instinct. Rather, it is born simply from the desire to show respect for a fallen friend and comrade.

Women have always served as role models in American cinema. Their varying portrayals each demonstrate, at least to some extent, what it means to be a woman at any particular time. Scholars like Conrad and Gilpatric demonstrate the way that female characters are consciously constructed to appeal to particular audiences. This fact is clear in the 1927 depiction of Maria in *Metropolis*, with her wholesome motherly appeal. It is clear in *Annie Hall*, with Annie’s irreverent and avant garde style appealing to a youthful populace hungry for change. And it is clear in the way that the female action hero evolves from Lt. Ripley all the way to Katniss Everdeen. All of these characters were designed to appeal to the women of their respective eras and convey to them ideas of what femininity is or could be. This list of films and characters is in no way comprehensive. Indeed, it could be expanded to include hundreds of other films, as well as thousands of characters from books, poems, video games, and short stories. Womanhood and femininity saturate our lives in countless ways, and female characters express these values in almost every type of media. In short, almost every depiction of a female
character demonstrates the evolving roles women have played in society as trend setters and expressions of feminine zeitgeist.

References


Comments (number coded):

(1) The student has made revisions and the title is now more descriptive. Return

(2) In the opening lines of the introduction, the student includes a few pertinent sentences that lead up to his thesis. Return

(3) This thesis statement is properly positioned at the end of the introductory paragraph. Return

(4) This thesis statement forms the basis of the student’s position and will guide his argument to a logical conclusion. The student uses words and syntax that are simple and concrete. Return

(5) The upcoming quote is longer than 40 words; therefore, the student has formatted the text as a block quote. Return

(6) This citation contains the page number because the source has been directly quoted. Return

(7) This topic sentence successfully introduces the subject of the paragraph while also transitioning into a new topic. Return

(8) Notice that both authors are listed by last name and the year of publication is included within this in-text citation. Since the information was paraphrased and not quoted, no page number is required. Return

(9) The student refrains from using long quotes. Long quotes slow down the movement of your paper and work against the effectiveness of your writing. Return
(10) This topic sentence prepares readers for a more detailed analysis of the main point. Return

(11) Here the student speculates to show what he has learned from the contrasting points presented in the previous lines. Return

(12) Transition words are used to show readers how everything is related. Return

(13) The student has reflected back upon previous research and is tying it to new information. Return

(14) The student has effectively introduced Mary Ann Doan to the reader. Her upcoming quote will be read in the context of her expertise. Return

(15) Transitions are used both within and among paragraphs to enhance the clarity of the essay. Return

(16) Each paragraph in the body of the essay addresses a single idea. Each main idea relates back to the thesis statement. Return

(17) Details in the paragraph support the main idea of the paragraph. Return

(18) A claim was stated in the first sentence and evidence was presented in the next sentence. This is an effective way to build a paragraph with a valid argument. Return

(19) A counter-argument is presented, researched, and addressed in this paragraph. Return

(20) This topic sentence helps show connections between ideas and creates a sense of cohesion. Return
(21) The student maintains a certain level of objectivity by presenting factual information and refraining from interjecting his personal opinions. Return

(22) Here the student anticipates what will be said on both sides of the argument. Return

(23) Here the student addresses the current focus of scholarly research and evidence. A well-supported argument is more convincing and resists an easy refute. Return

(24) This sentence shows readers how these examples connect back to the thesis statement. Return

(25) In this conclusion, the student reviews the main ideas of his essay in order to reinforce his prior assertions. Return

(26) The last words of this essay leave the reader with something interesting to consider. Return

(27) Reference list entries are alphabetized by the last name of the first author of each work. Return

(28) The multiple pieces by the same author/producer are listed in chronological order, from earliest to most recent. Return

(29) Hanging indentations are properly formatted. All of the lines after the first line of each entry in the reference list are indented one-half inch from the left margin. Return