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

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Annie Hall was an incredibly influential character for my mother. From the moment she saw this Woody Allen classic in 1977, my mother fell in love with Annie’s irreverent attitude, her focus on personal happiness, and her unorthodox fashion sense. (K. Lauer, Personal Communication, March 18, 2014) To this day it is not uncommon to see my mother pairing a shirt, vest, and necktie with a long, patterned skirt. Interestingly, she is not alone in this. For many women of this generation, Diane Keaton’s portrayal of Annie Hall represented a challenge to the female stereotypes that had marked this era of American cinema. Annie represented a new and different type of femininity; one that redefined and restructured the boundaries between male and female. Nor was she the first female film character to do so. Indeed, 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.

Now this is by no means the first study of the role women have played in film history. 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 (author), Thornham (ed.), 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 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. And 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 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 become more dystopian in nature. (Pommer & Lang, 1927) Initially, Smith’s interpretations of the role of women in film appears to hold true for *Metropolis*. The first female characters from the film, 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.” From here, the titillating young ladies strut before an elegantly dressed male servant who judges their beauty, and makes improvements where he sees fit. (Pommer & Lang, 1927) 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. Interestingly, however, this depiction of
female vapidity and wanton sexuality was a very conscious portrayal. Indeed, the image of these women was created to stand in stark contrast to the film’s primary female protagonist, Maria.

From the very moment she appears in the film, Maria challenges the decadence and the promiscuity of the other women in the film. 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 simple. 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, stands in contrast to the other women in the film. As opposed to all of the other voluptuous women in the film, Maria is petite and prim, a picture of feminine innocence. (Pommer & Lang, 1927) This contrast, and indeed this character, was a consciously constructed aspect of Fritz Lang’s vision. 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. She is grounded, modest, and seems more real and relatable then the foolish women at the party. 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 is 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. This would continue to be the case
as the roles of women in film continued to evolve. As time passed, new styles of film critique began to catch up with these changes, and scholars started to explore the conscious way that women are depicted in film. In her 1981 essay, “Caught and Rebecca: The inscription of Femininity as Absence,” Mary Ann Doan explores the way that women in what she terms “woman films” are consciously designed to appeal to the woman as spectator. She states, “…addressing 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.” (Doan (author), Thornham (ed.), 1999, p. 70) Through this statement, Doan demonstrates just how far feminist film critique had come. Instead of the writing of the roles of women as little more than male diversions, as Smith had, Doan is suggesting that roles for women, and indeed movies for women, were conscious constructions meant to appeal to and even change the opinions of a female audience. This analysis would lay the groundwork for the way that female roles would be examined in the future. (7) (not done with the last two topics yet) (8)

CONCLUSION SO FAR: 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.
(9) References


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