# FROM WOMAN TO CHICK: THE RHETORICAL EVOLUTION OF WOMEN IN AMERICAN FILM

A Thesis

by

DANYA DAY

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2008

Major Subject: Communication

# FROM WOMAN TO CHICK: THE RHETORICAL EVOLUTION OF WOMEN IN AMERICAN FILM

A Thesis

by

DANYA DAY

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Approved by:

| | |
|---|---|
| Chair of Committee, | Leroy G. Dorsey |
| Committee Members, | James Arnt Aune |
| | M. Jimmie Killingsworth |
| Head of Department, | Richard Street |

May 2008

Major Subject: Communication

# ABSTRACT

From Woman to Chick: The Rhetorical Evolution of Women in American Film. (May 2008)

Danya Day, B.A., Texas A&M University
Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. Leroy G. Dorsey

Throughout its history, the American film industry has produced films about women and for women, and three distinct phases may be identified within it: the “woman’s film,” the “new” woman’s film, and the “chick flick.” I assert that the recurring themes and images within the films operate as a mythic framework that intuitively resonates with audiences. In this thesis, I argue that despite seeming progress, women in film remain constrained by traditional mythic archetypes. As mediated images influence the culture, archetypal images of women in film potentially further constrain women’s social progress.

This study explores feminine mythic archetypes in films from each phase and demonstrates that first, the era of the woman’s film presents traditional archetypes such as the Mother and the Wife; second, representation becomes more progressive in the new woman’s film of the 1970s through the influence of the women’s movement; third, representations regressed in the chick flick with the onset of postfeminism in the late 1980s; and finally, through the rhetorical function of myth, the films serve a persuasive and explanatory function for audiences.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to my committee chair, Dr. Leroy Dorsey, who took a genuine interest in this project and guided me every step of the way. Always pushing me to improve, he forced me to become a better writer and scholar in the process. The development of these skills will serve me well in all my future endeavors. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. Jim Aune and Dr. Jimmie Killingsworth, for their many insightful suggestions.

Also, thanks to my parents for their encouragement, and my friends (you know who you are!) for their moral support. Finally, special thanks to my husband for his constant reassurance, his positive outlook, his helpful comments, and his willingness to listen on the countless occasions when I needed to talk.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

ABSTRACT .......... iii

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .......... iv

TABLE OF CONTENTS .......... v

CHAPTER

I INTRODUCTION .......... 1

- Some Things Never Change: Literary Models, Generic Conventions, Reader Response .......... 6
- Film, Myth, and Female Representation .......... 10

II THE WOMAN'S FILM .......... 16

- Women and the Melodrama .......... 18
- The Woman's Film .......... 22
- Mythic Archetypes in the Woman's Film .......... 35

III THE "NEW" WOMAN'S FILM .......... 43

- Pushing Boundaries, 1967-68 .......... 49
- New Twist on an Old Story: The Not-Completely-Romantic Heroine of 1970 .......... 57
- The "New" Woman's Film .......... 63
- As Good As It Gets? The Feminist Heroine of the Mid-1970s .......... 69
- Too Good to Last: *The Turning Point* of 1977 .......... 80
- Conclusion .......... 90

IV THE CHICK FLICK .......... 95

- The Origins of the Chick Flick .......... 102
- *Beaches*: Turning Back the Tide for Progressive Archetypes .......... 109
- *Steel Magnolias*: Stereotypes with a Southern Accent .......... 121
- *Pretty Woman*: Ugly Heroine .......... 125

CHAPTER Page

V CONCLUSION .......... 132

Limitations and Areas for Future Research .......... 141

REFERENCES .......... 145

VITA .......... 161

# CHAPTER I

# INTRODUCTION

Throughout its history, the American film industry has produced films about women and for women. This, however, does not represent an arbitrary decision on the part of studio heads. Women clearly comprise half of the potential film-going audience, a fact not lost on executives even in Hollywood's earliest days. Essentially a shrewd business practice, "women's" films found their intended audience and remain an enduring box office staple. Although the logic behind their existence may be simple, their images, messages, and conventions invite a considered exploration. Thus, to understand this genre requires first an understanding of the roots from which these films arose and more importantly, an understanding of what it means to be a "women's" film.

Contemporary films encompass a number of different genres, some of which emerged from literary counterparts. Women's film genres share this connection and their origins can be traced back to novels from the nineteenth century. During this period, novels written by female authors typically bore the generic descriptor of "sentimental" literature and quickly gained popularity among female readers. As E. Ann Kaplan notes, "The historical relationship between nineteenth-century fiction and twentieth-century film has long been known." She also suggests that the "links are particularly true in relation to women, whose mythic constructs and social roles

---

This thesis follows the style of *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*.

remained uncannily the same from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century."[1] For example, Kaplan argues that women have been identified throughout time primarily as mothers in both social and mythic archetypal senses, and that these identifications appear in both film and literature.

The transition from female-oriented novel to female-oriented film occurred in three key stages. First, women's sentimental literature eventually gave rise to melodramatic stage plays, which frequently derived their plots from successful novels. Then, the film melodrama that followed established itself in the earliest decades of film, from about 1900 through the 1920s. Like the stage play, these films owed much to nineteenth century literature as the relationship has often been mediated by theatrical versions of women's novels.[2] Finally, the melodrama began to fragment and developed into the film genre known to scholars as the "woman's film."[3] By virtue of its broad and generic-sounding label, this genre has been endowed with an incredibly wide range of application. Critics and audiences alike could easily attach this single designation to scores of films. However, the progression does not end here.

There have actually been three distinct phases in the history of films for women: the "woman's film," the "new" woman's film, and the "chick flick." Like any major genre, these women's film genres contain a unique set of themes and images that generally recur within each film. I assert that these themes and images operate as a mythic framework that intuitively resonates with audiences. In this thesis, I argue that despite seeming progress, women in film remain constrained by traditional mythic archetypes. As mediated images influence the culture, archetypal images of women in film potentially further constrain women's social progress. To develop my argument, I explore feminine mythic archetypes in films from each phase to: 1) discover if mythic representations have changed over time, 2) what role, if any, the women's liberation movement played in transforming feminine archetypes, and 3) how those archetypes served a persuasive and explanatory function for audiences of the time, especially women.

---

[1] E. Ann Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* (London: Routledge, 1992), 59.

[2] For a concise description of the Hollywood melodrama, see Robert Lang, *American Film Melodrama: Griffith, Vidor, Minnelli* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 46-51. For further discussion on women's writing and its connection to film, see Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation*, 11-12 and 59-75.

[3] See Lang, *American Film Melodrama*, 6.

Women's film genres merit close examination since they represent a remarkably enduring form of film.[4] These films have experienced a discernible surge in popularity over the past 10-15 years, and thus enjoy extraordinary box office success, while making an indelible mark on popular culture.[5] In the book *Postmodern Chick Flicks: The Return of the Woman's Film*, Roberta Garrett argues that female-oriented films are more popular now than at any time following the classical era of the genre in the 1940s. She claims that beginning in the 1990s, "women's" films found a renewed popularity and experienced a true revival.[6]

---

[4] For example, a number of "women's" movies have been released in 2007, including *Music and Lyrics, License to Wed, Because I Said So, The Nanny Diaries, Georgia Rule, Becoming Jane, Catch and Release, Evening, In the Land of Women*, and *Lucky You*. See comprehensive film databases such as *http://www.firstshowing.net/schedule2007/*, *http://www.film-releases.com*, and *http://www.movieweb.com/movies/releases/week.php* for full results.

[5] For example, films starring "the ultimate chick flick heroine" Julia Roberts, have grossed more than $2.5 billion worldwide. See Kim Adelman, *The Ultimate Guide to Chick Flicks: The Romance, the Glamour, the Tears, and More!* (New York: Broadway Books, 2005), 1. A British film critic declares, "Trend-spotters are proclaiming the death of the action movie and riding shotgun with a growing number of female executives and dynamic new female stars for the coming of 'sisterhood cinema.'" See Rupert Widdicombe, "Sisters Do It for Themselves," *London Sunday Times*, December 10, 1995, sec. "Features." The genre even warranted a television special entitled "50 Best Chick Flicks" which aired on the E! Network on February 12, 2006, and a feature article on the greatest chick flicks of all time in the July 2004 issue of *O Magazine*. See Karen Durbin, "The Mighty Chick Flick," *O, The Oprah Magazine*, July 2004, *http://www.oprah.com/omagazine/200407/omag_200407_chick.jhtml* (accessed October 1, 2007).

A number of different concepts converge to inform this study: the function of myth in popular culture, the role of women in mythology, the historical trajectory of women's genres—from early literature to the film melodrama to the chick flick—and the influence of the women's movement on these genres. Within this study, all of these concepts combine in interesting ways that rhetorical examination can illuminate.
Since I investigate multiple topic areas, this project therefore lends itself to multiple modes of analysis and methodology. For example, film criticism (especially feminist film critique) often employs methods such as psychoanalysis, semiotics, and Marxist criticism.[7] Instead, I employ rhetorical analysis through the lens of mythic archetypes, which I choose as a result of two main factors.

First, myths traditionally deal with gender roles. Mythic stories, especially in the Western world, typically center on the man in a variety of masculine forms: the fabled hero, the great leader, the fearless Frontiersman, the rugged cowboy, and the brave warrior, among others. Janice Hocker Rushing and Thomas Frentz describe the centrality of men in our dominant national mythology: "In America, slaying the enemy is the ritual that defines our identity, for there has been as yet no feminine myth of equal longevity or power, no story that compels our fascination so many different times with so many variations."[8] Women receive a much more limited representation in mythology. They play some significant roles in mythic narratives, however, these roles are confined and repetitive ones. Yet, Rushing has demonstrated the functional importance of women in myth with her work.[9] This study contributes to her scholarship and communication scholarship in general, by further utilizing the rhetorical functions of myth and recognizing the significance of the mythic feminine in rhetorical texts, in this case popular film.

---

[6] See Roberta Garrett, *Postmodern Chick Flicks: The Return of the Woman's Film* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

[7] For examples of these types of methodologies, see Beverley Skeggs, ed., *Feminist Cultural Theory: Process and Production* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1995).

Second, with a few notable exceptions, there has been little work of this type in the field of communication. Perhaps this is due in part to the debate initiated by communication scholar Robert C. Rowland in which he claims that mythic criticism should not be used as an approach for critiquing rhetorical acts. Rowland argues that "a number of critics have stretched the definition of myth far beyond its traditional usage" and that these stretches often "lead to criticism that fundamentally mis-analyzes a given work or obscures simpler explanations for it."[10] I, however, agree with Rowland's respondents (Michael Osborn, Janice Hocker Rushing, and Martha Solomon) who argue to the contrary, particularly in their responses to his intentionally narrow definition of myth. They disagree with the ways in which he defines myth, his application of those definitions, and his limited view on how myth operates, among other things. My approach follows the methodological view of these scholars.

---

[8] Janice Hocker Rushing and Thomas S. Frentz, *Projecting the Shadow: The Cyborg Hero in American Film* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 2.

[9] Rushing's work locates women within established (often male-dominated) myths. See for example, Janice Hocker Rushing, "Evolution of 'The New Frontier' in *Alien* and *Aliens*: Patriarchal Co-Optation of the Feminine Archetype," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 75 (1989): 1-24; Janice Hocker Rushing, "The Rhetoric of the American Western Myth," *Communication Monographs* 50 (1983): 14-32; Thomas S. Frentz and Janice Hocker Rushing, "Mother Isn't Quite Herself Today: Myth and Spectacle in *The Matrix*," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19 (2002): 64-86; and Rushing and Frentz, *Projecting the Shadow*, 171-178 and 203-221.

[10] For a discussion, see the debate that takes place in the special issue of the journal *Communication Studies* 41 (1990).

## Some Things Never Change: Literary Models, Generic Conventions, Reader Response

The "sentimental" novels of the nineteenth century benefited from a large and predominantly female audience, but suffered critical disparagement nonetheless. For example, in "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists," female author George Eliot surveyed mid-Victorian romance fiction to assess this popular reading as pervaded by a "quality of silliness" that includes elements of either "the frothy, the prosy, the pious, or the pedantic."[11] Despite such disapproval, "women's" literature remained popular as time progressed.

In the late twentieth century, the romance novel represented its contemporary incarnation. These novels still met with sharp criticism, especially in light of the woman's comparatively elevated role in society. The old, traditional conventions of the romance narrative seemed dated and trite in juxtaposition with the consciousness-raising efforts of the feminist movement. Harlequin romances particularly flourished in the early 1970s "and coexisted, although antagonistically, with the concurrent proliferation of second-wave manifestos."[12] This literary genre, as well as its film equivalents, would be continually faced with the need to negotiate the tensions between traditional and progressive roles for women.

---

[11] George Eliot, "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists," *Westminster Review* 66 (1856): 442. Available online at *http://library.marist.edu/faculty-web-pages/morreale/sillynovelists.htm* (accessed September 25, 2007). See also Stephanie Harzewski, "Tradition and Displacement in the New Novel of Manners," in *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, ed. Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young (New York: Routledge, 2006), 29.

Janice Radway conducted a thorough and insightful study regarding the romance novel in the 1980s. Interestingly, many of her findings parallel women's film genres in several ways. First, she explains the formulaic nature of the romance genre, which easily applies to the films in my own study. "Category or formulaic literature has been defined most often by its standard reliance on a recipe that dictates the essential ingredients to be included in each new version of the form. Category literature is also characterized by its consistent appeal to a regular audience."[13] This description aligns perfectly with the generic conventions of the films I discuss later in this project.

Next, regarding the heroines of these novels, Radway illustrates their predictable similarity and cites recurring social roles analogous to feminine mythic archetypes. "Although they possess novel personalities and participate in some unprecedented events, women in romances, like mythical deities, are fated to live out a predetermined existence. That existence is circumscribed by a narrative structure that demonstrates that despite idiosyncratic histories, all women inevitably end up associating their female identity with the social roles of lover, wife, and mother."[14] Radway depicts a heroine that bears a remarkable likeness to the heroines I describe in my subsequent analysis.

---

[12] Stephanie Harzewski, "Tradition and Displacement in the New Novel of Manners," in *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, ed. Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young (New York: Routledge, 2006), 37.

[13] Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 29.

[14] Radway, *Reading the Romance*, 207.

Finally, Radway addresses the ideological construction that underlies the romance novel and the purpose it serves for the female reader:

> By perpetuating the exclusive division of the world into the familiar categories of the public and the private, the romance continues to justify the social placement of women that has lead to the very discontent that is the source of their desire to read romances. In continuing to relegate women to the arena of domestic, purely personal relations, the romance fails to pose other, more radical questions. Because the romance finally leaves unchallenged the male right to the public spheres of work, politics, and power, because it refurbishes the institution of marriage by suggesting how it might be viewed continuously as a courtship, because it represents real female needs within the story and then depicts their satisfaction by traditional heterosexual relations, the romance avoids questioning the institutionalized basis of patriarchal control over women even as it serves as a locus of protest against some of its emotional consequences.[15]

Radway suggests that the romance functions on a dual level. In one sense, it serves as a means of “emotional” protest by their readers since the act of reading itself involves a conscious choice to “escape” domestic duties and invest time in the widely-criticized genre.[16] Reading also represents a form of protest since female readers derive great enjoyment from the romance novel despite the disapproval of many husbands. In another sense, the romance operates as a mechanism for reinforcing traditionally accepted social roles and ideals. As this study demonstrates, these characteristics directly correspond to women’s film genres in both the concept of a dual-nature and the responses of women, men, and critics.

---

[15] Radway, *Reading the Romance*, 217.

[16] For a discussion, see Radway, *Reading the Romance*, 88, 104, 213.

In recent years, a new type of women's fiction has emerged to find unprecedented success with a new generation of female readers. These novels, categorized as "chick lit," also "traces its roots back to the sentimental women's novels from the nineteenth century."[17] In 2002, chick lit books earned publishers more than $71 million, prompting the creation of separate imprints dedicated to the genre.[18] And, like both the sentimental and romance novels, chick lit has been met with divided responses. "The discourse surrounding the genre has been polarized between its outright dismissal as trivial fiction and unexamined embrace by fans who claim that it reflects the realities of life for contemporary single women."[19] This modern literary equivalent has a symbiotic relationship with films for women as well. A number of highly successful chick lit novels have been adapted into equally successful films (or chick *flicks*), just as sentimental novels provided the storylines for many melodramas in the previous century. Take for example, *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* (2002), *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* (2004), *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* (2005), and *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006). Clearly, even as times have changed, basic generic conventions and audience responses to these novels and films have not.

---

[17] Joanna Webb Johnson, "Chick Lit Jr.: More Than Glitz and Glamour for Teens and Tweens," in *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, ed. Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young (New York: Routledge, 2006), 143.

[18] Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young, eds., *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 2.

[19] Ferriss and Young, *Chick Lit*, 2.

## Film, Myth, and Female Representation

Powerful and pervasive, as a medium, film plays an integral part in society as a vehicle for the formation and perpetuation of popular culture. As Andy Warhol famously observed, "It's the movies that have really been running things in America ever since they were invented. They show you what to do, how to do it, when to do it, how to feel about it, and how to look how you feel about it."[20] Frederic Jameson calls film "the properly postmodern art" and a product of "the most sophisticated forms of industrial production."[21] Janice Hocker Rushing and Thomas Frentz similarly claim that films represent "a central commodity of the postmodern culture." They also view contemporary film as socially and culturally multi-functional. For Rushing and Frentz, films "reproduce as well as critique our biases, they are instruments of domination as well as visionary art, they both reaffirm and subvert the status quo. Films can reveal that which is odious to consciousness, but they can also repress it."[22] This definition of film is essentially synonymous with the definition of myth.

Thus, the analysis of films as rhetorical texts is an ideal avenue for examining the role that myth plays for audiences. Nina Auerbach suggests that comprehending "the mythos of an era" necessitates an investigation of "its mass culture rather that its canonical forms of art."[23] Myth, expressed in novels and films, allows us to view reality in a form we can understand.[24] Northrop Frye developed his archetypal-mythological approach to criticism based on the notion that fictional narrative connects to recurrent plots and archetypes as sources for the story. His method also stems from the idea that all forms of art and literature have a common base and can be best understood as a continuum.[25] My analysis takes a similar approach in that I treat the films as parts of a larger textual dialogue or "continuum," and view women's genres as having connected thematic and archetypal threads throughout.

---

[20] See Evan Rothman, "What We've Learned at the Movies," *Esquire*, *http://men.msn.com/articlees.aspx?cp-documentid=760905* (accessed October 5, 2007).

[21] Frederic Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), xiii.

[22] Rushing and Frentz, *Projecting the Shadow*, 47.

Mythic archetypes "employ symbolic language" and "reflect a significant cultural experience in the 'timeless past' that is always present in the contemporary manifestation of the myth."[26] Archetypal *patterns* represent categories of particulars, which can be described in the interrelationships within a given text or larger body of texts.[27] My analysis of women's films, in part, discerns these archetypal patterns in a body of texts comprised by the three phases or eras of women's film genres.

---

[23] See Lucy Fischer, *Shot/Countershot: Film Tradition and Women's Cinema* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 32.

[24] William K. Ferrell, *Literature and Film as Modern Mythology* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000), 19.

[25] See Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971). See also Ferrell, *Literature and Film as Modern Mythology,* 26, 188.

[26] Hal Himmelstein, *Television Myth and the American Mind* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994), 3. See also Erich Fromm, *The Forgotten Language: An Introduction to the Understanding of Dreams, Fairy Tales and Myths* (New York: Rinehart and Co., 1951), 156.

[27] Annis Pratt et al., *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), 5.

At this point, it is important to discuss the meaning of myth itself. However, myth represents such a sweeping concept that numerous scholars have defined it in myriad ways. Since a comprehensive review of literature lies outside the scope of this chapter, I instead offer some of the more foundational definitions of myth. Renowned mythology scholar Joseph Campbell believes that myth serves four basic functions: a mystical function, which presents the universe as a place of awe and mystery; a cosmological function, which presents an image of the cosmos through the lens of science; a sociological function, which supports and validates a specific moral order; and a pedagogical function, which teaches people how to live their lives through all stages and phases.[28] Campbell perceives myth as functioning on the universal or cosmic level, whereas other scholars like Roland Barthes, Kenneth Burke, and Claude Levi-Strauss frame myth at an ideological and cultural level.

In his influential work *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes defines myth as "a system of communication…a message,"[29] and demonstrates how it works to depoliticize speech and intentionally camouflage social inequities within a culture. He explains that key functions of myth are to distortion and to naturalize.[30] Barthes suggests that myth operates as the signifier of an ideology.[31] Kenneth Burke also views myth and ideology as interrelated concepts. He describes ideology as linked to ideas, myth as linked to images, and rhetoric as utilizing both of these to heighten its effectiveness.[32] Claude Levi-Strauss offers a model for interpreting myth that allows a specification of the relationship between ideology and cultural texts or artifacts.[33] His interpretive model proposes this analytic principle: "the individual narrative, or the individual formal structure, is to be grasped as the imaginary resolution of a real contradiction."[34] As all these scholars define it, myth represents a public language that addresses ideological complexities, such as the role of women in national culture.

---

[28] Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, ed. Betty Sue Flowers (New York: Anchor Books, 1991), 38-39. "Mythology has been interpreted by the modern intellect as a primitive, fumbling effort to explain the world of nature (Frazer); as a production of poetical fantasy from prehistoric times, misunderstood by succeeding ages (Muller); as a repository of allegorical instruction, to shape the individual to his group (Durkeim); as a group dream, symptomatic of archetypal urges within the depths of the human psyche (Jung); as the traditional vehicle of man's profoundest metaphysical insights (Coomaraswamy); and as God's Revelation to His children (the Church). Mythology is all of these." See Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 382.

[29] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 109.

[30] See Barthes, *Mythologies*, 121-131.

To that end, myth possesses great power within societies and cultures. "Myth is, above all, a discourse about power, about founding and maintaining a way of life, about a fundamental order of being. It diffuses at the outset any oppositional ideology that attempts to posit an alternative world of social relations."[35] Rushing and Frentz speak to the power of myth and its rhetorical functions. "The cultural treatment of a myth responds to historical and political contingencies, and may appropriate archetypal imagery, consciously or unconsciously, for rhetorical means—to further the ends of a particular person or group, to advise a general course of action, to enhance the power of a privileged class."[36]

---

[31] For a full discussion of his views on myth, see Barthes, *Mythologies*, 109-159.

[32] See Kenneth Burke, *On Symbols and Society* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 303-315.

[33] See Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 79.

[34] See Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 77. "We may suggest that from this perspective, ideology is not something which informs or invests symbolic production; rather the aesthetic act is itself ideological, and the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal 'solutions' to unresolvable social contradictions." Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 79. See also Claude Levi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brook Grundfest Schoepf (New York: Basic Books, 1963), 206-211; Alexander Eliot, *The Universal Myths* (New York: Meridian, 1990), 21; and Alan Jenkins, *The Social Theory of Claude Levi-Strauss* (London: Macmillan Press, 1979).

[35] Himmelstein, *Television Myth and the American Mind*, 5-6.

In the case of this study, I explore mythic archetypes regarding women that have been appropriated for "rhetorical means" in popular film. Archetypal mothers, wives, daughters, and sisters, as humans or goddesses, abound in myths.[37] According to Claire Johnston, myth as a form of discourse represents the major means in which women have been used in the cinema.[38]

Therefore, to demonstrate how, regardless of the era, mythic archetypes essentially confine women to traditional spaces, my study proceeds through the following stages. In Chapter II, I describe the melodrama and its development into the genre of the "woman's film," the historical context of its era, and the five predominant archetypes found in these films. Chapter III examines the "new" woman's film of the 1970s, the women's liberation movement, and includes an analysis of five representative films. This sub-genre produces a new archetype and moves somewhat beyond traditional female representations. In Chapter IV, I explore the modern day “chick flick,” the post-feminist era, and examine three representative films. I conclude that these films largely revert back to the old, outdated archetypes of the original woman’s film era. In the conclusion, I summarize the findings of my study, and offer suggestions for future research into this area.

---

[36] Rushing and Frentz, *Projecting the Shadow*, 46. Freud is right that myths are 'the dreams of a nation.' Marxists are right that myths can perpetuate a false consciousness that reaffirms the established social order by preventing change. Woodman defines a myth as 'the soul's journey, told in a universal story.' The archetypal imagery of a myth expresses what Jung calls a universal truth; it is addressed to what Joseph Campbell terms 'ultimate questions'; and it includes, but is not reducible to, a biological drive or a psychological function. A myth's purpose is, rather, the communication of spiritual meaning. See Rushing and Frentz, *Projecting the Shadow*, 45-46.

[37] Bettina L. Knapp, *Women in Myth* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), xx.

[38] Claire Johnston, "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema," in *Feminism and Film,* ed. E. Ann Kaplan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 24. Feminist scholar Teresa de Lauretis argues, "In cinema the stakes for women are especially high. The representation of woman as spectacle, so pervasive in our culture, finds in narrative cinema its most complex expression and widest circulation." Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 4.

# CHAPTER II

# THE WOMAN'S FILM

From an historical perspective, the term "genre" often serves to explain the relationship of texts to their social contexts.[39] For example, one can examine the literature, films, plays, etc. (i.e., the "texts") from a particular time period to discern the social, economic, and political climate (i.e., the "context") of that period. The examination that results, therefore, allows for the placement of a particular text within a larger body of work—a genre—categorized together based upon the shared themes, styles, attitudes, and values found within the texts. In a similar manner, one can examine a film and place it within a particular film genre or cycle.

By their nature, however, genres shift and change, appear and disappear, and sometimes occur in cross-fertilized forms. Consequently, the development of a specific genre or "film cycle" requires a consistently positive audience response to its style and content, its stars, directors, plots, and settings.[40] A favorable audience response generates studio profits, thus resulting in a series of imitations. To meet their primary objective of making money, studios must find and retain as many audiences as possible. Film genres often have gender affiliations based on what issues the films seem to address. This allows studios to target their audiences more specifically. For example, westerns, science fiction, and gangster films typically focus on "masculine" issues and therefore become male-affiliated. Likewise, melodrama and romance focus on the emotions and therefore become "feminine" films.

---

[39] Lea Jacobs, "Censorship and the Fallen Woman Cycle," in *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film,* ed. Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1987), 110.

[40] John Mercer and Martin Shingler, *Melodrama: Genre, Style, Sensibility* (London: Wallflower Press, 2004), 5.

Perceived as "minor" cinema, "women's cinema operates through the major systems of genre, constrained by the possibilities at any given juncture, even as it works to extend these boundaries."[41] In other words, films that appeal to women clearly fall within major film genres, yet these types of films receive relegation to the world of "minor" cinema based on the audience they typically address. Traditionally, women-centered films do not seem as serious or worthwhile as the films addressed to their male counterparts. While this paradox constrains women's cinema, many women work within the industry to effect change for the perception of women's genres. Within the American mainstream, the history of women's cinema represents a history of generic change as well as social change.

This chapter explores these ideas regarding "women's" genres—positive audience response (or profit) that creates them, the relationship to historical/social contexts, and the constraints under which they must operate. Specifically, I look at melodrama and the "woman's film" of Hollywood in the 1930s and 1940s. This period, especially the 1940s, represents the height of the woman's film genre. I begin by discussing the connection between melodrama and the woman's film, and then define the woman's film as a distinct genre. Next, I provide an explanation of its development and reception, summarize its conventions, and identify its archetypal representations through a review of literature. Finally, this chapter illustrates how the woman's film represented women on the mythic level and constructed rhetorical meaning for the audiences of its day.

---

[41] Alison Butler, *Women's Cinema: The Contested Screen* (London: Wallflower Press, 2002), 55.

## Women and the Melodrama

There has long been an interest in formal analysis and in discovering affinities among discourses and traditions in the history of rhetoric. Many rhetorical critics have recognized the need to highlight the relationships among rhetorical acts.[42] Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson define genre as "a complex, an amalgam, a constellation of substantive, situational, and stylistic elements" and explain that generic analysis reveals the conventions and similarities that one work shares with others, and that it uncovers the unique elements in the rhetorical act.[43] In other words, a genre represents a classification of texts based on the "fusion and interrelation of elements" resulting in the creation of a unique rhetorical act.[44] I intend to analyze "women's" genres here with both the rhetorical and filmic concepts in mind.

Melodrama reflects a critical category of films that use the family and the social position of women as their narrative focus.[45] Linda Williams further defines the genre as "a peculiarly democratic and American form that seeks dramatic revelation of moral and irrational truths through a dialectic of pathos and action. It is the foundation of the classical Hollywood movie."[46] Many scholars would agree with the latter statement. Aside from films centering on women and the family, melodrama has also been used as a sweeping term to encompass gangster films, westerns, crime thrillers and others. Its use as a broad descriptor seems plausible since melodrama has been noted for its use of polarities: good and evil, vice and virtue, innocence and villainy. The good heroine or hero in melodrama suffers as a direct consequence of his or her virtue, and may unwittingly fall prey to the evil villain. Those elements could surely describe any number of film plots, regardless of the protagonist's gender.

---

[42] Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, "Form and Genre in Rhetorical Criticism: An Introduction," in *Form and Genre: Shaping Rhetorical Action*, ed. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson (Falls Church, VA: The Speech Communication Association, 1981), 12.

[43] Campbell and Jamieson, "Form and Genre in Rhetorical Criticism," 18.

[44] Campbell and Jamieson, "Form and Genre in Rhetorical Criticism," 25.

[45] Mercer and Shingler, *Melodrama*, 2.

However, one aspect of melodrama aligns it more closely with women: "What counts in melodrama is the feeling of righteousness, achieved through the sufferings of the innocent…In cinema, the mode of melodrama defines a broad category of pictures that move us to pathos for protagonists beset by forces more powerful than they and who are perceived as victims."[47] The concepts of "sufferings" and "victims" receive female association much more frequently than male. Therefore, the perception of melodrama as female-centered has become quite common, whether accurate or not.

Intuitively, melodrama has become allied with the feminine insofar as it represents a genre characteristically concerned with emotional expression. According to film scholar Tania Modleski, "Women in melodrama almost always suffer the pains of love and even death while their husbands, lovers, and children remain partly or totally unaware of their experience. Women carry the burden of feeling for everyone."[48] Melodrama draws the audience into the story through the device of pathos, a means to evoke sympathy from the audience through identification with the experiences of the characters on screen. Therefore, the audience participates in the emotional expressions of the characters, often bringing them to tears. Feminist film scholars regard the "quintessentially feminine emotion of pathos" as a key aspect of women's oppression, whereas anger meant liberation. Tears of pity, though, would not help women in their bid to transcend patriarchal power and control. Feminist scholars claim that pathos, in itself, represented an excess of feeling that threatened to overwhelm the emerging liberated woman.[49]

---

[46] Linda Williams, "Melodrama Revised," in *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory,* ed. Nick Browne (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 42.

[47] Mercer and Shingler, *Melodrama*, 89-90.

Feminist critics repeatedly demonstrate the extent to which patriarchal ideology lies deeply embedded in Hollywood's films for women. Beginning in the late 1970s, Chuck Kleinhans and Laura Mulvey became two of the first scholars to investigate these issues in melodrama, and the domestic/family melodrama specifically. Kleinhans explains the oppressive nature of the family melodrama, a major subset of the genre, for female characters. He describes the family as "a political institution" and as a site of oppression for women. The burden of solving social problems gets placed primarily upon the female characters in these films. In most instances, the woman attempts to solve these problems and maintain the family through the repression of her own desires and other acts of self-sacrifice.[50] Mulvey also writes about the nature of the female-centered melodrama. She identifies melodrama as a means for the patriarchal order to sustain itself through a temporary and fictionalized acknowledgement of its repressive effects on women.[51] Mulvey takes a decidedly negative view of these films and agrees with Kleinhans that they operate as a source of oppression. An interesting and similarly negative distinction separates melodrama from most Hollywood storylines. Namely, most films imply a progression towards an end that looks significantly different from the beginning, whereas melodrama often gives the impression of returning to a prior state.[52] This carries significance because it suggests that the women in this genre do not change, grow or move forward by the end of their story. Perhaps this convention of female representation in melodrama represents the constrained space that women viewers live under as well.

---

[48] Tania Modleski, "Time and Desire in the Woman's Film," in *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1987), 331.

[49] Williams, "Melodrama Revised," 47-48. Aristotle describes pathos as a rhetorical appeal designed to align the emotions of an audience with the speaker's position. See Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg, eds., *The Rhetorical Tradition* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001), 31.

Genre scholar Christine Gledhill notes the largely pejorative use of the term "melodrama" by male film critics. For them, melodrama lacks seriousness and intellectual weight due, perhaps, to its association with mass entertainment, meaning its appeal to the lowest common denominator.[53] Furthermore, the fact that melodrama has such strong connotations as a female-centered genre has not helped to bolster its reputation. This becomes problematic because several critics have taken it one step further and made the term "melodrama" synonymous with the "woman's film," which has since been distinguished as a film genre in its own right. The act of blending the two aids in devaluing the woman's film. Gledhill attributes the connection between melodrama and the woman's film to the historical association of masculinity with realism, and the association of femininity with the realm of feeling. As a result, male-oriented genres have taken on the prestige associated with realism, while the woman's film has become increasingly linked with the pejorative associations of melodrama.[54] Expanding on this overview of melodrama, I now examine its "sister genre," the much-maligned woman's film.

---

[50] See Chuck Kleinhans, "Notes on Melodrama and the Family Under Capitalism," *Film Reader* 3 (1978): 40-47.

[51] See Laura Mulvey, "Notes on Sirk and Melodrama," in *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1987), 75-79.

[52] Modleski, "Time and Desire in the Woman's Film," 330.

[53] Christine Gledhill, "The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation," in *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1987), 5.

## The Woman's Film

The woman's film has been defined in multiple ways by film scholars. One of these definitions, offered by Karen Hollinger, explains that the origins of the woman's film lie in the sentimental melodramas of the 1930s and 1940s. She also identifies three distinguishing characteristics of this film cycle: the films address a specifically female audience, their plots center on the actions and emotions of a female protagonist(s), and they deal with issues of particular interest to women.[55] The woman's film, a category often intersected by other genres, focuses on the presence of a female protagonist and a concern with specifically feminine problems and experiences. These films possess a complex quality which results from the irreconcilability of Hollywood's moral values and conventions with "the provision of escapism entertainment" for women.[56]

---

[54] Gledhill, "The Melodramatic Field," 34-35.

[55] Karen Hollinger, *In the Company of Women: Contemporary Female Friendship Films* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 2.

As Mary Ann Doane observes, these films deal with a female protagonist and allow her significant access to point-of-view structures and the expressive center of the film. She also claims that they address a female audience to treat problems defined as "female," revolving around domestic life, the family, children, self-sacrifice, and the relationship between women and career versus that between women and motherhood.[57] Additionally, Jeanine Basinger suggests another working definition for the woman's film. The woman's film places a female at the center of the universe who tries to deal with the emotional, social, and psychological problems that connect specifically to the fact that she is a woman.[58] Feminist film scholar Maria LaPlace echoes that definition, saying that the woman's film may be distinguished by its female protagonist, female point of view, and its narrative which frequently revolves around the traditional realms of women's experience such as the familial, the domestic, and the romantic. These more emotional realms take precedence over action and events, elements usually reserved for the male characters of a film.[59]

---

[56] Butler, *Women's Cinema*, 27-28.

[57] Mary Anne Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1987), 3.

[58] Jeanine Basinger, *A Woman's View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women, 1930-1960* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), 20.

[59] Maria LaPlace, "Producing and Consuming the Woman's Film: Discursive Struggle in *Now, Voyager*," in *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1987), 139.

Although each definition contains some variation, three common themes emerge. First, the woman's film involves one or more women as the central protagonists. Second, these films deal with issues stereotypically associated with females, particularly emotional issues. Finally, the woman's film typically portrays women through the repressive lens of patriarchal ideology. For the purposes of this paper, these elements constitute my working definition of the woman's film. With a definition established, I trace the development of the woman's film within the studio system, including its formulation, strategies for gaining an audience, restrictions placed upon the films by Hollywood, and the function of the genre for its female viewers.

Despite the views of critics both past and present, Hollywood found a very successful formula in the woman's film. The early studios recognized a need for this type of film and soon filled it aggressively without regard for critical opinion. The woman's film began production in the 1930s when millions of Americans, many of them women, packed theaters to escape the miseries of Depression life.[60] In response to this largely untapped market, studios began producing movies specifically directed toward women.

Unfortunately, the woman's film quickly received the same critical reception as the melodrama often did. Once again, the association of these films with women created the conditions for their patronizing treatment by male critics. According to Andrea S. Walsh, reviewers often treated critically acclaimed woman's films as tokens, transcending their "inferior category," rather than reflecting its strengths. Walsh asserts that the woman's film has been ignored, devalued, misunderstood; and that critical disdain contributed to the general lack of seriousness with which American culture viewed them.[61] Critic Molly Haskell expresses her distaste for the genre and the fact that Hollywood created films that resulted in a deliberate division along gender lines:

---

[60] See Marjorie Rosen, *Popcorn Venus: Women, Movies and the American Dream* (New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, 1973), and Nancy F. Cott, ed., *No Small Courage: A History of Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

> What more damning comment on the relations between men and women in America than the very notion of something called the 'woman's film?' And what more telling sign of critical and sexual priorities than the low caste it has among the highbrows? As a term of critical opprobrium, 'woman's film' carries the implication that women, and therefore women's emotional problems, are of minor significance….To the view that women's concerns, and the films that depict them are of minor significance in the drama of life and art, women themselves have acquiesced, and critics have led the way.[62]

Studio executives of the 1930s conducted gender-differentiated surveys to discover what women wanted to see. Based on the results, they developed a set of criteria for attracting women to the movies. The survey concluded that women preferred to watch female stars, serious dramas, love stories, and musicals. In addition, the results showed that women wanted "good character development" and stories with "human interest." In a sense, it seems the woman's film attempted to cover as much ground as possible and this strategy appears to have been successful. As a production category, the woman's film came to hold an important place in Hollywood by virtue of its immense popularity and profitability.[63]

---

[61] Andrea S. Walsh, *Women's Film and Female Experience, 1940-1950* (New York: Praeger, 1984), 36.

[62] Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 154, 157.

During this period, Hollywood followed a strict code that regulated what could be said and shown on the screen. The Production Code of 1934 affected every film released by a studio, and as the woman's film became more popular, the Code particularly affected them. Prior to the institution of the Production Code, the term "women's pictures" applied to "racy" films with urban storylines, and the Production Code Administration attempted to "clean up" the genre by re-imposing Victorian sexual ideology.[64] Writers and directors had to consciously stay within the prescribed and restrictive mold that the Code set forth, reifying stereotypical attitudes about women. These alterations reflect another in a long line of attempts by the Hollywood patriarchy to change, regulate, and confine female representation to what they deem suitable for American moviegoers.[65]

The suppression of ideas and the regulation of personal expression are not uncommon reactions when faced with fear, uncertainty, and unwelcome changes. Such desperate strategies have occurred throughout history between governments, cultures, and races as well as genders. By the 1940s, American women had experienced some long-deserved changes in their lives. The men in power, however begrudgingly, had permitted women to enter the workplace, earn the right to vote, and gain admission to some male universities. Even with these great strides, women knew changes still had to be made in the social order to achieve real equality. During the 1940s, another positive advance came into the lives of American women. With so many men away fighting World War II, women entered the workforce in large numbers and often filled positions left vacant by male workers. Many women enjoyed their employment outside the home, but unfortunately, these encouraging times were short-lived and dashed the hopes of optimistic women yearning for options aside from their prescribed roles as wife and homemaker.[66]

---

[63] LaPlace, "Producing and Consuming the Woman's Film," 138-139.

[64] Patricia White, *UnInvited* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 20.

[65] Steve Neale argues similarly that the Code's pronouncements on sexuality opposed the modernity of the "New Woman" with nineteenth century values: "Just as the Production Code functioned as a public statement of the ideological principles Hollywood claimed to uphold, so the 'Cult of True Womanhood' remained, in modified form, a point of reference for Hollywood and the woman's film a major site of its exploration." See Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London: Routledge, 2000), 195. See also E. Ann Kaplan, "Mothering, Feminism and Representation: The Maternal Melodrama and the Woman's Film 1910-1940," in *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1987), 116.

Wartime propaganda reflected that America's commitment to the war effort was defined partially in terms of the importance of a woman's position in the home. M. Joyce Baker explains that popular war movies of the years 1941-1945 revealed an ambivalence toward women's roles and status that would continue to permeate American society through the postwar era. According to these films, women could perform the work of men efficiently and competently, but they chose to do so only in a national emergency, for their true commitment was to their husbands, families, and homes.[67] Thus, women received messages from both Hollywood and the government that conflicted with their new roles as autonomous working women.

---

[66] See William H. Chafe, *The American Woman: Her Changing Social, Economic, and Political Roles, 1920-1970* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972); Nancy F. Cott, ed., *No Small Courage: A History of Women in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); and Marjorie Rosen, *Popcorn Venus: Women, Movies and the American Dream* (New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, 1973).

However, women spent little time watching these "war movies" and instead, made the woman's film more popular than ever. With such a large number of women left on the home front and earning their own paychecks, movie theaters stayed crowded and studios continued to produce for this growing audience. The public response and the sheer volume of films produced made this era the height of the woman's film in Hollywood.[68]

Through the Production Code, the studio heads in Hollywood could exercise some control over the way moviegoers saw women, among other things. This allowed the management of female representation to both male and female audiences according to what the men in power deemed acceptable. Molly Haskell, in her important book on female film representation, crystallizes this issue:

> Movies are one of the clearest and most accessible of looking glasses into the past, being both cultural artifacts and mirrors….In the movie business we have had an industry dedicated for the most part to reinforcing a lie. As the propaganda arm of the American Dream machine, Hollywood promoted a romantic fantasy of marital roles….The anomaly that women are the majority of the human race and yet are its servants and romantic slaves was brought home with particular force in the Hollywood film. Through the myths of subjugation

---

[67] M. Joyce Baker, *Images of Women in Film: The War Years, 1941-1945* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1980), 133.

[68] Studios continued producing the woman's film into the 1950s, a decade that saw the films meriting bigger budgets, more stars, and higher production values—all in attempts to rival the immense competition of television. See Mark A. Graves and F. Bruce Engle, *Blockbusters: A Reference Guide to Film Genres* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006), 293. Yet, the woman's film as this chapter defines it, took a different form in the 1950s. For an informative discussion on the subject, see Brandon French, *On the Verge of Revolt: Women in American Films of the Fifties* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1978).

> and sacrifice that were its fictional currency and the machinations of its moguls in the front offices, the film industry maneuvered to keep women in their place; and yet these very myths and this machinery catapulted women into spheres of power beyond the wildest dreams of most of their sex. This is the contradiction that runs through the history of film.[69]

The contradiction that Haskell speaks of constitutes an important part of understanding the woman's film. In large part, the contradictions made them financially successful and popular with female audiences. The woman's film found success because it operated out of a paradox: it held women to social constraints and released them with a dream of freedom. Women engaged with images of what they lacked in their own lives, which reassured them that they led satisfying and proper lives. If Hollywood films served to repress women and sought to teach them acceptable behaviors, then in order to achieve this, the films first had to depict the opposite of their own morality.[70] In other words, if a woman on-screen lacks a socially acceptable lifestyle or violates traditional values, then she will not prosper at the story's end. This strategy proved effective and the studios reproduced it time and time again for more than two decades (and arguably even to the present day).

These films offered female audiences a time of escape and allowed them to live vicariously through the women on the screen, whose characters usually led very different lives than the typical housewife watching the film. The screen women often fell into one of two roles: the glamorous socialite with a seemingly unattainable lifestyle who ultimately finds herself unhappy or the woman who made all the wrong choices (an unwed pregnancy, a bad marriage, choosing not to marry, etc.) and suffers for them. Since heroines of the woman's film endure suffering in some way, audiences can leave feeling satisfied with their own lives in comparison. If not, the unhappy endings may function as a subtle way to chastise women who have made missteps. Jeanine Basinger provides insightful commentary on the essence of the woman's film:

---

[69] Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape*, xviii, 2, 3.

[70] Basinger, *A Woman's View*, 6.

> Of all the genres in Hollywood's history, the woman's film is the most deceptive, as appropriate to the sex that has had to achieve its goals partly through subversion. The truth is that the woman's film is not that easy to define, being something contradictory, elusive, and hypocritical. The woman's film can best be considered under the umbrella of three main purposes: to place a woman at the center of the story universe, to reaffirm in the end the concept that a woman's true job is that of just being a woman, and to provide a temporary visual liberation or some sort, however small.[71]

The women in a woman's film remain on a story treadmill to one place: accepting the constructed relationship between womanhood and love, marriage, men, and motherhood. If not, the consequences include suffering or ostracism from the "normal" world…The presentation of the woman's movie world allows for both an overt indication that women should lead conventional lives and a questionable form of liberation.[72]

Hollywood studios developed and popularized the woman's film over 70 years ago with great success. However, for more than 40 years, the genre remained relatively overlooked by writers and scholars. One might assume the lowly status of the woman's film resulted in its neglect as an area for scholarly analysis. It is important to understand the development of the genre through the critical lens as well as through its historical development. Annette Kuhn identifies the woman's picture as an historically popular narrative form that deserves critical attention. The popularity of these films raises the question of how "sizeable audiences of women relate to these representations and the institutional practices of which they form part."[73] Kuhn observes that such an enduring cultural product that resonates with so many people, in this case women, should not go unnoticed by scholars; fortunately, others share the same viewpoint.

---

[71] Basinger, *A Woman's View*, 7, 13.

[72] Basinger, *A Woman's View*, 505-506.

Beginning in the late 1970s, critical work devoted to the study of the woman's film began to emerge. Seminal work in this area would include Molly Haskell's *From Reverence to Rape*, which discusses women in film from the 1920s to the 1960s and focuses special attention on the woman's film. Her foundational study alludes to critical controversy surrounding this emerging genre and she places the woman's film in categories based on the degree and nature of the heroine's sacrifice. This work also represents the first attempt to counter the dismissal of the woman's film by male critics.[74]

Another important work, Mary Anne Doane's *The Desire to Desire* followed Haskell's appraisal and devotes itself entirely to the woman's film of the 1940s. Doane analyzes films of this era since female audiences were predominant during World War II, and therefore woman's films became more central to the industry. Furthermore, she cites an intensity and aberrant quality to these films which links to an ideological upheaval signaled by a redefinition of sexual roles (i.e., moving women into the wartime workforce). Her book isolates the 1940s woman's film to specifically examine theories of spectatorship, the male gaze, and psychoanalysis.[75]

---

[73] Annette Kuhn, "Women's Genres," in *Feminism and Film*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 437.

[74] See Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974).

Christine Gledhill's comprehensive collection of essays, *Home Is Where the Heart Is,* also has made a significant contribution to this area of study. The collection spans a decade of criticism concerning melodrama and the woman's film. Topics include the maternal melodrama, production and consumption of women's genres, and representation in the woman's film. The first of its kind, the essays attempt to put these genres on the academic map by discussing their history, theoretical background, and critical problems.[76]

The efforts from Haskell, Doane, and Gledhill can be credited with establishing the woman's film as a distinct genre within the academic community and inspiring further study. Following these pioneering efforts, film scholars began constructing a genre that the industry and academia often avoided. According to critic Rick Altman, "Since the late 1980s, the generic status of the category [of the woman's film] has never been in doubt…Indeed, a new generation of introductory texts has begun to treat the woman's film as fully the equal of established genres."[77] The endeavors of scholars like these have attempted not only to establish a distinct genre, but attempted to establish credibility for it as well.

---

[75] See Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

[76] See Christine Gledhill, ed., *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (London: British Film Institute, 1987).

Some international film organizations such as The Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI) and the British Film Institute (BFI) also recognize the woman's film as a separate category for research and preservation. The ACMI is a state-of-the-art facility for the exhibition, promotion, and preservation of Australian and international screen content. The Centre outlines five categories for the woman's picture and melodrama: the romantic tradition, the self-sacrifice theme, the triangle theme, the repressive society theme, and the neurosis/obsession theme.[78] The plight of star-crossed lovers and the message that love conquers all represents the focus of the romantic tradition. *History is Made at Night* (1937) and *When Tomorrow Comes* (1939) represent this first category. Films that contain the theme of self-sacrifice include *Stella Dallas* (1937) and *Mildred Pierce* (1945) that portray women who must make difficult choices at their own expense in order to save others. In the triangle category, a strong element of social determination typically exists; the drama results from making a choice between two men as seen in *Kitty Foyle* (1940). Repressive society films deal explicitly with the external pressures of society on a woman or a couple. While not necessarily divorced from questions of private power, they are centrally concerned with socially determined threats to a couple which ultimately force them apart or strengthen the relationship. Examples in this category include *Carrie* (1952) and *Johnny Guitar* (1954). In the fifth category, neurotic, obsessive, and paranoid behavior links the women in this diverse set of films. This category spans horror-style films to portrayals of twisted passion to intense romantic obsession. *Black Narcissus* (1947) falls into this set, *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948) exemplifies the obsession theme, and *Suspicion* (1941) focuses on the paranoid woman theme.

---

[77] Rick Altman, "Reusable Packaging: Generic Products and the Recycling Process," in *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*, ed. Nick Browne (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 31.

[78] "The Woman's Picture and Family Melodrama," The Australian Centre for the Moving Image, Research Resources, *http://www.acmi.net.au/womanspicture.htm* (accessed September 13, 2006).

The British Film Institute promotes understanding and appreciation of film heritage through its world-renowned archive, publications, festivals, and educational resources. According to the BFI, classic woman's films of the 1930s and 1940s, sometimes called "weepies," include *Stella Dallas* (1937), *Dark Victory* (1939), *Now, Voyager* (1942) and *Mildred Pierce* (1945) among many others.[79] *Stella Dallas* tells the story of a single mother, divorced because of her resistance to self-improvement, who ultimately sacrifices caring for her daughter because Stella feels that she would have a better life without her. *Dark Victory* features a petulant heiress who attempts to redeem herself by becoming a better person after she learns of her imminent death. In *Now, Voyager*, Bette Davis plays a repressed spinster who conquers her introversion only to embark on a doomed love affair. *Mildred Pierce* stars Joan Crawford as a frustrated woman who sets out to make a new life for herself, but can never do enough to win the approval of her spoiled daughter. Each of these early films deal with similar themes:

---

[79] "Melodrama and the Woman's Film," British Film Institute Collections and Archives, *http://www.bfi.org.uk/nftva/catalogues/category/6/634* (accessed February 3, 2006).

love, family, children, and self-sacrifice. They impart lessons to the female viewer that the only means for a happy life is being a submissive wife, devoting yourself only to your children, and having no concern for your own happiness or fulfillment. These Hollywood films provide a template for the archetypal woman.

## Mythic Archetypes in the Woman's Film

Judging by Hollywood's predictable patterns, movies invoke mythic archetypes to engage audiences. Jung defines archetypes as patterns of instinctual behavior. An archetype does not denote an inherited idea, but rather an inherited mode of functioning. "As a 'form without content,' an archetype is only knowable through an archetypal image—the ideas, behaviors, and symbols to which the archetype gives rise."[80] These icons have persuasive power for audiences and reinforce old stereotypes and constrain groups, especially women, to the traditions set forth by patriarchal society. The woman's film contains its own set of mythic archetypes to represent women. A cursory look at the plotlines of woman's films reveals basically five archetypes for women: Mother, Wife, Daughter, Sister, "Fallen Woman" or some combination. Of these archetypes, the Mother, Wife, and Fallen Woman appear predominant, and the Mother archetype occurs most frequently. Given its frequency, the mythic Mother archetype may be the most important as well. I will describe these three archetypes, devoting the greatest attention to the Mother.

---

[80] C. G. Jung, "The Concept of the Collective Unconscious," in *The Portable Jung*, ed. Joseph Campbell, trans. R. F. C. Hull (New York: Viking Press, 1971), 66.

Spanning history and cultures, no role has proved more central in defining womanhood than that of Mother.[81] Mother representations have a long and complex history, shaped in western civilizations by Greek myths and the Old and New Testaments.[82] Many civilizations have a "Mother Goddess" in their folklore. Cultures that did not know each other, separated by geography and time, knew the Mother Goddess. Her name and her story may have differed, but her image and what she represented were remarkably similar across the world. She played an important role in the mythic stories of Asia, Australia, Europe, North America, Polynesia, South America, and practically everywhere else in between.[83]

The oldest and most enduring image of the "mythic feminine" is the goddess as Great Mother. Humans have imagined her as the immensity of cosmic space, as the moon, as the earth and nature itself. She represents the "age-old symbol of the invisible dimension of soul and the instinctive intelligence that informs it."[84] In all early cultures many images existed to describe the Great Mother such as the stone, the moon, the sea, the forest, and certain animals. She took different forms for different peoples, depending on their environment, to help them describe the phenomena that they encountered but could not explain logically.[85]

---

[81] Walsh, *Women's Film and Female Experience*, 90.

[82] Kaplan, "Mothering, Feminism and Representation," 113.

[83] See for example Carolyne Larrington, ed., *The Feminist Companion to Mythology* (London: Pandora Press, 1992).

[84] Andrew Harvey and Anne Baring, *The Divine Feminine: Exploring the Feminine Face of God Around the World* (Berkeley, CA: Godsfield Press, 1996), 14.

[85] See Harvey and Baring, *The Divine Feminine*, 14-21.

In *The Faces of the Goddess*, Lotte Motz writes that the concept of "an all-embracing maternal divinity, a Great Mother, ruling religious life, manifest in the earliest symbolic expressions, and enduring and unfolding through the ages in an infinite variety of forms" has been widely recognized by scholars of various disciplines.[86] Her presence, despite its cultural differentiations, remains ubiquitous and her importance undisputed. Carl Jung makes the unequivocal statement that "the first bearer of the soul-image is always the mother" and confirms that in myth, the mother takes on the archetypal aspects of the Great Mother.[87]

Presumably to explain further the parts of life that had no explanation to early peoples, some of the mother goddesses became quite diversified. For example, she may show herself as virginal or maternal, maiden or mother, life-giving or life-taking.[88] This diversification resulted in new names for the Great Mother goddess, such as Earth Mother and Good Mother, who cares for and protects her young from harm, and the Terrible or Devouring Mother, who refuses to let her children grow up.[89] The new identities given to the Great Mother should clearly reveal the apparent necessity to divide the goddess into two most basic parts—the good and the bad. Such a division seems inevitable since "the good and the bad" or "good vs. evil" constitute the most fundamental ways in which people have always understood their world and the people that inhabit it.  For example, some people define children in terms of good or bad, and as they grow older they often label them as "good girls" or "bad boys" or vice versa.  Many perceive the universe itself as being engaged in a constant battle of good forces vs. evil forces and religious concepts support that dichotomy.  However, the ancient myths did not originally project this split onto the Great Mother.  The people lived in harmony with nature, which did not necessitate any alteration in their perception of the goddess.  The relationship with nature transformed, though, as they began to enter the frontier.

---

[86] Lotte Motz, *The Faces of the Goddess* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 5.

[87] C. G. Jung, *Aspects of the Feminine*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 86.

[88] Motz, *The Faces of the Goddess*, 6.

[89] Rushing and Frentz, *Projecting the Shadow*, 57.

With this change, the masculine ego set itself against nature and the feminine, and the myth changed with it.  Janice Hocker Rushing explains that the hero began to fight the Mother Goddess to assert his will over nature and ensure his existence on the earth.  In order to achieve this, the hero must separate himself from the Great Mother, who because of her maternal instincts would not release him without a battle: "To the heroic impulse, this [maternal] aspect ceases to be nurturing and comfortable and appears as devouring and smothering—the horrible dragon-monster who must be slain so that the hero may be free."[90]  The hero ultimately triumphs and as a result the Great Mother has been divided.  The part of her that has remained intact becomes embodied in the archetype of the Good Mother.  Her negative half forged by the hero, the Terrible or Bad Mother, represents "an absent, unattainable mother against whom aggressive fantasies are directed, and from whom counter aggression is feared…the hampering, forbidding, punishing mother, the mother who would hold to herself the growing child trying to push away."[91]

---

[90] Rushing, "Evolution of 'The New Frontier' in *Alien* and *Aliens*," 5.

The results of the division of the Great Mother goddess remain present in contemporary myths. Society has always perpetuated the virtues of the Good Mother by various rhetorical means. According to E. Ann Kaplan, one of these means came through "the Master Mother Discourse" that dominated the 19th and early 20th centuries. "Motherhood was discussed almost as if it were a fourth branch of the government, a device that ensured social control in the gentlest way possible. 'The Republican Mother' combined domesticity with political values, at once permitting women a kind of 'political' function, but neatly confining it completely within the home."[92] Modern cultural representations of the Good Mother and the Bad Mother feature prominently in film images as well. Films provide another means for reinforcing the importance of motherhood by showing Good Mothers as the ultimate expression of womanhood and the ultimate goal for all women. Conversely, some films portray Bad Mothers in clear opposition to the feminine ideal, someone who typically endures suffering and at times meets an undesirable end, thereby exemplifying what the audience should not do.

The device of sanctifying the institution of motherhood is typical of the woman's film in general and the maternal melodrama in particular. In these films, the mother must sacrifice herself or the connection to her children with remarkable frequency—

---

[91] Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 111.

[92] Kaplan, "Mothering, Feminism and Representation," 115.

either for her or their own good.[93] The maternal melodrama, with its cultural roots in woman's fiction and radio soaps, emerged in the silent and early sound era to become the most popular type of woman's film.[94] The maternal melodrama reached the height of popularity in the 1930s and early 1940s and the Mother archetype has appeared in countless films since.

Often portrayed in combination with the Mother, the archetype of the Wife appears countless times on screen as well. The Wife does not have the same rich, complex, and ancient mythic tradition as the Mother, but viewers know her just as instinctively. Even a casual observation reveals that she typically possesses similar traits regardless of a film's genre, but particularly in the woman's film. The Wife, at her most cinematically idealized, demonstrates goodness, helpfulness, virtue, and submissiveness. Her primary functions are to please her husband, perform domestic duties, care for children if she has them, and try to have them if she does not. Essentially, the role of Wife exists outside the woman herself. Like the Mother, she often exists only to serve the needs of others, in this case the needs of her husband and his household. Naturally, like any other classic archetype, the Wife has undergone some changes with the times. Some films may depict her as a different kind of wife with greater dimension to her character, but nonetheless, she rarely escapes her standard social role.

---

[93] Linda Williams, "Something Else Besides a Mother: *Stella Dallas* and the Maternal Melodrama," in *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: British Film Institute, 1987), 300.

[94] Walsh, *Women's Film and Female Experience*, 90.

The woman's film will sometimes portray the Mother and the Wife as "bad" people, but the archetype of the Fallen Woman serves the sole purpose of portraying the "bad woman." The Fallen Woman appears so often that the films may constitute a sub-genre of the woman's film all their own. As Lea Jacobs explains in her book on the Fallen Woman:

> These films concern a woman who commits a sexual transgression such as adultery or premarital sex, sometimes resulting in an illegitimate child. In traditional versions of the plot, she becomes expelled from the domestic space of the family and undergoes a protracted decline. Alone on the streets, she becomes an outcast, often a prostitute, suffering various humiliations which usually culminate in her death. In other variants of the story, however, the movement away from the family does not lead to a decline in class. Instead, the heroine—a stereotypical "kept woman" or "gold digger"—uses men to become rich.[95]

Therefore, the Fallen Woman follows one of two basic narratives. She either behaves in a socially unacceptable manner, thus inviting her steady downfall and rejection by proper society, or she simply forgoes the traditional route of love and marriage for the lure of a wealthy lifestyle by using men to get it. In both cases, however, she serves as an example of a woman "gone bad" in the view of society.

The stereotype of the Fallen Woman pervaded nineteenth-century popular culture, first appearing in fiction, stage melodrama, opera, and narrative painting in both Europe and America. She remained essentially the same for many years, and then underwent decided transformations in the postwar period of World War I.[96] The traditional Fallen Woman archetype gave way to a more “modern” American girl such as the working-class shopgirl, the flapper, and the glamour-seeking gold digger that better reflected the times. The Fallen Woman-themed movies certainly flourished in the 1930s, but women like her have never completely disappeared from the woman’s film. This look at the archetypal representations of the Mother, the Wife, and the Fallen Woman will act as a springboard for analysis in upcoming chapters by providing a framework for comparison and interpretation.

---

[95] Lea Jacobs, *The Wages of Sin: Censorship and the Fallen Woman Film, 1928-1942* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 2.

[96] Jacobs, *The Wages of Sin*, 6.

Melodrama, a complex generic descriptor, and its sometimes unfortunate connections to the woman’s film, provided the grounding for this chapter. An exploration of the history of these intertwined terms has allowed me to define their conventions and create a working definition for the woman’s film as a separate genre. Additionally, tracing the development of the woman’s film from its infancy in the early 1930s to its peak in the 1940s serves an important function in understanding the genre on a broader level. Although the “woman’s film” disappeared as a term with the Production Code in the 1960s just as second-wave feminism arrived,[97] it will remain a significant concept as I look at films from this subsequent era.

---

[97] Butler, *Women’s Cinema*, 28.

# CHAPTER III

# THE “NEW” WOMAN’S FILM

When America entered the 1960s, it stood on the cusp of cultural and social upheaval. As the decade progressed, the country found itself in the midst of major transformations that stemmed from severe racial strife, an increasingly unpopular war, and a pervasive counter-cultural movement. Although change dominated post-World War II America, complacency, conformity, and comfort reflected the cultural mood at the end of the 1950s. Moreover, with the rampant anti-Communist crusades at the time, many people avoided political activism altogether. In fact, “the mere suggestion of participation in any left-of-center politics could cost people jobs and reputations.”[98] In the 1960s, however, Americans grew weary of these fears and many felt compelled to address some of the contradictions beneath the surface of postwar complacency.

This revolution-minded time provided an ideal environment for the incubation and growth of social movements, such as the anti-war movement and a strengthening civil rights movement. American women also experienced a renewed consciousness-raising and organized the “second wave” of the women’s liberation movement. During the latter part of the decade, the movement began in earnest and gained momentum through the 1970s. According to historian William H. Chafe, “Nothing changed more quickly, or posed so great a challenge to traditional authority and customs, as the ways some women thought of themselves and their role in society."[99] These challenges posed by the women of the day and the re-imagining of themselves took many forms and permeated most facets of society. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the "ferment of the women's movement pervaded every aspect of cultural and social life, including film culture."[100] The feminist movement not only impacted the women in the audiences, but it also affected the representation of women on the screen.

---

[98] Elaine Tyler May, “Pushing the Limits, 1940-1961,” in *No Small Courage: A History of Women in the United States*, ed. Nancy F. Cott (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 523.

The previous chapter surveyed the woman's film and its views of womanhood during the early Hollywood period. During that time, the basic feminine archetypes of Mother, Wife, and Fallen Woman most commonly occurred, with their chief motivation as the giving or seeking of love. This provides a starting point for analysis as I shift the focus to films of the late 1960s and predominately the 1970s. A comparison of the two film eras, especially considering the interplay of the women's liberation movement, reveals the progress—or lack of it—for women in film. Moreover, this chapter defines what some scholars refer to as the "new" woman's film, and I explore the films' archetypal representations to determine if they differ from those of the earlier era. Scholars identify the new woman's film as, generally, a modernized version of the woman's film beginning in the 1970s. Therefore, the new woman's film typically adheres to many traditional elements, but operates within the context of "modern" feminine issues, and represents women as more independent and with their own ambitions. Finally, I investigate how these representations operate on the rhetorical level to teach audiences about the "new woman."

---

[99] William H. Chafe, "The Road to Equality, 1962-Today," in *No Small Courage: A History of Women in the United States*, ed. Nancy F. Cott (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 545.

[100] Butler, *Women's Cinema*, 3.

In this chapter, I analyze three films from the 1970s: *Love Story* (1970), *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1974), and *The Turning Point* (1977). In addition to these films, I also briefly look at *The Valley of the Dolls* (1967) and *Barbarella* (1968) as additional examples. All of these may be classified broadly as woman's films since each feature women as the central character(s) and they deal with issues, plots, and storylines of "female concern" as outlined in the definition of the genre. I focus most of my analysis on 1970s films in order to chart a progression of the changing archetypes over a single decade by examining one film from the beginning of the decade, one from the mid-1970s, and one from the late 1970s. I also include two relevant films from the late 1960s as these coincide with the onset of second wave feminism.

In her landmark book *Prime-Time Feminism*, communication scholar Bonnie J. Dow critically examines feminist representations on television, and she argues that rhetoricians can view television programs as rhetorical texts.[101] Dow's methodology applies equally well to my analysis of film, therefore, I draw from her framework to conduct this study.

Dow explains that patterns occur within each rhetorical text, and each serves a distinctive rhetorical function in defining feminism and women. She calls for interpreting these texts in relation to other texts, which can include other types of discourse such as critical reviews, interviews with actors and directors, etc., as part of the analysis. She places rhetorical texts within a context that provides insight into how they might be understood and argues that television draws from and contributes to the larger cultural conversation about women. Dow also views these texts as products of their time, directed at audiences in their time, and contributing to the cultural conversation about women in their time. Celeste Condit supports this view: "Critical analysis should…at least at times, be rhetorical; it should be tied to the particularity of occasion; [to] specific audiences, with specific codes or knowledges…"[102]

---

[101] See Bonnie J. Dow, *Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women's Movement Since 1970* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 6-8.

Additionally, Dow suggests that conceiving texts as rhetorical entities allows critics to view these as texts that perform particular functions at particular times. In other words, texts possess persuasive functions that work to make some ideas, positions, and alternatives more attractive, accessible, and powerful to audiences than others. Television and film frequently offer contradictory meanings; thus, their persuasive function negotiates the parameters for debate, rather than providing solutions to cultural conflicts.

During the 1950s, although women's groups lacked organization and typically did not serve political functions, discontent began to surface even for those women who presumably lived the American dream. As a result, changes in these groups and their attitudes soon took shape as well. In June 1960, the *New York Times* discussed the plight of the housewife based the results of a study: "All admit to being deeply frustrated at times by the lack of privacy, the physical burden, the routine of family life, the confinement of it. However, none would give up her home and family if she had the choice to make again."[103] That same year, *Redbook* offered a $500 prize for the best account of "Why Young Mothers Feel Trapped" which received more than 24,000 responses.[104] For women in America, these events helped identify a new era.

---

[102] Celeste Condit, "The Rhetorical Limits of Polysemy," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 6 (1989): 115.

A woman named Betty Friedan represented one of these discontented, frustrated housewives. As a result of her experiences she wrote *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, which identified the "problem that has no name" for the stifled wife and mother. She describes this problem vividly and succinctly in the opening paragraph of her book:

> The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night—she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question—"Is this all?"[105]

Friedan urged her peers to pursue careers outside their homes and reject the constraints of postwar domesticity. The book became a galvanizing statement for the feminist movement that would soon erupt in the United States, with Friedan subsequently founding the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966.

To frame my analysis, I first explore the historical context of the feminist movement in the 1960s and discuss how some "woman's films" began to reflect the rhetorical situation. Dow regards the feminist movement as ongoing; however, distinctions exist between different phases of feminist action in the United States.[106] The "first wave" of feminism, represented by the women's rights movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, culminated with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution in 1920. "Second wave" feminism describes the contemporary feminist movement that launched in the late 1960s. Dow dates the start of second wave feminism between 1966 and 1968 as a result of the founding of NOW in 1966, the formation of women's liberation groups in 1967, and the highly visible protest staged against the Miss America pageant in 1968. She also argues, however, that the second wave did not develop significant visibility for the general public until 1970 when it became the focus of extensive media coverage.[107]

---

[103] Phyllis Lee Levin, "Road from Sophocles to Spock Is Often a Bumpy One," *New York Times*, June 28, 1960, 24.

[104] May, "Pushing the Limits," 525.

[105] Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1963), 15.

As the women's movement spread across campuses and cities, by the end of the 1960s, the foundations for altering—or at least seriously questioning—gender roles in America had been established. These women presented issues so numerous and complex that they pervaded cultural and social life in myriad ways. This new climate did not go unnoticed by Hollywood and consequently, some films seemed to reflect the recast social position of the 1960s woman.

---

[106] My own references in this paper will reflect Dow's timeline and specific dates with regard to events and terms such as "first wave feminism," "second wave feminism," "post-feminism," the "women's liberation movement" or the "feminist movement." In addition, I use the terms "women's liberation movement" and "feminist movement" interchangeably henceforth.

[107] Dow, *Prime-Time Feminism*, xxv-xxvi.

## Pushing Boundaries, 1967-68

In 1967, the release of *The Valley of the Dolls* caused some controversy for its portrayal of themes such as drug use, sexuality, and the fact that these portrayals involved female characters. Films like this one helped lay the groundwork for the new woman's film because it features an all-female cast that struggles with "modern" issues and places women outside traditional roles in some way. First, I summarize the main plot points and briefly describe the main characters. Then, I highlight specific dialogue and relevant themes that demonstrate progressive elements, such as gender role issues, objectification, female independence, and self-discovery.

Based on the best-selling novel, the movie tells the story of three ambitious women who enter careers in show business and emerge forever changed, mostly for the worst. These women work in a male-dominated business and find varying levels of success, which suggests a positive path for the characters. However, as a consequence of these successes each woman faces serious trials and none seem truly happy with their lives. Such storylines may have resonated with women who tried to negotiate the conflicts between the public and private spheres at the time.

The character of Ann Welles, who initially takes a job as a secretary, ends the film as a cosmetics spokesmodel. Jennifer North acts in low-budget movies, but work becomes limited because she gets cast solely on the merits of her beautiful face and nice figure. Neely O'Hara rockets to stardom as a singer and actress, commanding huge salaries and winning coveted roles, yet she cannot handle the pressures of fame and struggles with addiction and loneliness.

Neely, played by Patty Duke, has a loyal husband Mel that she treats very badly because she feels so unhappy with herself. She craves the adoration of her devoted fans, but never appreciates the efforts of her husband. The following dialogue between her and Mel illustrates her attitude:

> Neely: You need to start running this house better.[108]
> Mel: I'm not the butler, Neely.
> Neely: You're not the breadwinner either!

Her character conveys both emotional and financial dominance in the relationship, clearly opposing the norm for traditional marriage. As the pressures of celebrity life take their toll, Neely turns to alcohol and pills (the titular *Dolls*) to help her cope. Eventually, her career falters and she slides further into addiction and destructive behaviors. Neely later finds her husband with another woman. She tells him that she needs him. Interestingly, he replies, "Yes, but not as a man." She does not act like the archetypal Wife in any fashion, instead of focusing love and attention on her husband, she gives it all to her work.

Following an unsuccessful comeback Neely yearns for the spotlight and the acceptance of the public. At the end of the movie, the downward spiral of her life leaves her drunk and crying in an alleyway. She has come to regret her fame and the loneliness it brought, and simply wants to someone to love her. In her case, great public success wreaked havoc on her personal life, and she suffers like the movie heroines of the previous generation who did not choose the appropriate feminine path.

---

[108] All subsequent quotations taken from *The Valley of the Dolls*, dir. Mark Robson (USA: 20th Century Fox, 1967).

Jennifer supports her mother with the money she makes as an actress and model. During a phone conversation, she says sadly, “Yes, Mother, I know I don’t have any talent and I’m just a body.” This single response encapsulates the trajectory of her character’s life. Since she must rely on her looks alone, Jennifer finds it increasingly difficult to win desirable film roles. Consequently, she moves to France to work as an actress in “art” films because she needs the income. To her dismay, these films contain minimal dialogue and require her to do little more than remove her clothing. Jennifer returns home as quickly as possible, but things continue to go wrong for her: she finds a malignant lump in her breast and undergoes a mastectomy. She recognizes the irony of the situation: “It’s funny. All I’ve ever had is a body, now I won’t even have that. Let’s face it…All I really know how to do is take off my clothes.” Jennifer finds her misfortunes unbearable, and shortly thereafter, overdoes on pills and dies. Her tragic story deals with female objectification, and instead of positioning beauty as the highest feminine aspiration, reveals its limitations and its dark side. This represents one of the issues that real women would take on at the time.

Among the three main characters, Ann makes the most significant transformation over the course of the film. At the start, she moves away from her New England home and her longtime boyfriend to take a job in New York. Ann portrays the quiet, simple, “good girl” looking for adventure in the big city. She finds work as a secretary for handsome businessman Lyon Burke and the two of them share a telling conversation:

> Ann: You like women, don’t you?
> Lyon: I like career girls. We’re compatible.
> Ann: There’s a rumor they don’t make very good wives.

> Lyon: Well, I'm not looking for a wife. No, some men just don't pull well in a double harness.
> Ann: You're fortunate. You know yourself. I don't know who I am or what I want. I only know I have to find out.

And thus begins her journey. She touches on a timely topic—the perception that working women cannot be suitable wives—that must have echoed an uncertainty many women felt in this atmosphere of change.

Ann has committed to her boyfriend back home, but she eventually sleeps with her boss and ends her other relationship to start a new one with Lyon. As a single woman, she characteristically devotes herself to the pursuit of love. She soon pressures him to marry despite his stance on the issue. After several complications, Ann feels heartbroken, but determined to move forward with her life. She leaves Lyon and moves back home to get away from her troubles. In the end, Lyon comes to get her back:

> Ann: I've prayed for this moment and now that it's here, I don't feel a thing.
> Lyon: Does that mean you won't marry me?
> Ann: It wouldn't work, Lyon.
> Lyon: Isn't there anything I can do to change your mind?
> Ann: No, not now. Perhaps someday, Lyon, I don't know. Goodbye.

With that, she leaves him where he stands to take a walk in the woods, looking satisfied with her decision. The film ends here, with a shot of her and the outdoor surroundings. Of the three women, only Ann remains both alive and on a path to progress by the final scene. She started as an insecure woman who represented the stereotypical female with finding a husband as her foremost desire, but ended as a woman who saw the value in finding herself first. This leaves the viewer with a sense of hope in spite of the bad fortunes that befell her friends.

*The Valley of the Dolls* represents a telling example of a woman's film from the late 60s. Its female characters say and do things that most of their counterparts would not have dreamed of a few years earlier. As a result, new representations start to take shape. A film like this one extends beyond the classic archetypes by offering some variation. For example, Neely portrays a truly selfish, career-obsessed woman. She exists outside the standard Wife archetype because she does not set her marriage as first priority in her life. Neely symbolizes the "liberated woman," however, she ultimately regrets the consequences that her choices bring. Another expansion on traditional representation occurs in the character of Ann. She depicts the traditional romantic figure who begins to question her priorities. Her transition over the course of the film from uncertain, love-seeking female to a woman with a strong sense of self illustrates this depiction. Ann, too, symbolizes the liberated woman when the story ends.

At this point, new or at least varied images of women on screen make an appearance to film audiences. As time moves forward and the feminist movement gains strength and recognition, these images continue to evolve as well. Just one year later, in 1968, a science fiction version of the liberated woman came to theaters. The graphic novel adaptation of *Barbarella: Queen of the Galaxy* stars Jane Fonda in the title role, a woman cruising in her own spaceship in the year 40,000. A "cult classic with hippie leanings," this movie gets dismissed as sub-par by some and "cherished by others for its strong female lead and sex-positive message."[109] *Barbarella* never won any awards or critical acclaim, but it remains popular with many devoted fans, as indicated by the results a simple web search will produce, and the film re-make scheduled for release in 2008. The re-make will be directed by Robert Rodriguez and produced by the film's original producer, Dino De Laurentiis. De Laurentiis says of the character, "Barbarella is the ultimate science-fiction adventure heroine. In our vision, the future is female…" Rodriguez shares the producer's enthusiasm. "I love this iconic character and all that she represents, and I'm truly excited by the challenge of inviting a new audience into her universe," he explains.[110]

---

[109] "Barbarella – The Film," BBC Online, sec. h2g2, *http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A592896* (accessed August 22, 2007).

For all its campiness and timely psychedelic influences, *Barbarella* presents an intriguing fantasy vision of a world where women hold great power and male-oriented concerns like warfare represent an archaic notion. This film also deals with male-female relations in novel ways and frames female sexuality as empowerment rather than a source of shame or ridicule. Thus, its forward-thinking storyline helps bridge the gap between the traditional woman's film and the new woman's film that would soon emerge. I selected the following scenes and dialogue to illustrate this point.

In the opening scene, Barbarella receives a video phone call from the President of Earth. He explains that the evil Durand Durand has invented a weapon to harm the people in the galaxy and someone must stop him. The president tells Barbarella, "You are the girl who must do it. Find Durand Durand and use all your incomparable talents to preserve the security of the stars and our own Mother planet."[111] In short, he needs a woman to go save the world.

---

[110] Borys Kit, "Rodriguez to Direct 'Barbarella'," *Hollywood Reporter*, May 22, 2007, *http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/hr/content_display/news/e3i3e0cd5c8b61cf5dd1910e92c972e7e99* (accessed August 22, 2007).

In her search for Durand Durand, Barbarella lands on a strange planet where she must meet someone called the Great Tyrant who rules it. Barbarella's companion, Pygar, gets captured by the Great Tyrant's minions along the way. She finally meets the Great Tyrant who, to her surprise, is in fact a woman. The Great Tyrant, also known as the Black Queen, holds Pygar captive and Barbarella commands that she release him or "I'll melt your face!" The Great Tyrant replies, "My face—How dare you endanger my face!" as she shields it with her hands. Aside from her duty to save the planet, the film places Barbarella in a dominant role by pairing her with a helpless male sidekick as well.

Thus far, the film presents two major female characters. Barbarella, a conventionally attractive woman who changes into a new space outfit in practically every scene, also has been entrusted with the safety of their galaxy. The Great Tyrant, the female ruler of an entire planet, shows great concern for her own appearance and makes several elaborate costume changes herself. Therefore, viewers remain confronted with conflicting, albeit more positive representations of women, especially with regard to power and status.

Following Barbarella's meeting with the Great Tyrant, she continues to look for Durand Durand. Along the way, Barbarella passes a group of women smoking from what looks like a giant glass bong. One of the women asks Barbarella to "Have a taste of him." The sphere actually contains a man within it and the woman calls it "Essence of Man." A rather surreal scene, but it conveys a statement of feminine power in a number of ways. First, these women lounge about and take part in this leisure activity. On this planet, women seem to have no real work to do in the home or otherwise. Also, they lie freely in the room while the man they "smoke" suffers the confinement of the glass containing him. Perhaps the glass sphere represents the private sphere and glass ceiling that women historically face, but in this case man must instead endure the experience. Lastly, they pass the "essence of man" around from woman to woman, a shared group activity that appears symbolically powerful and possibly as a metaphor for sharing man's hegemonic power among the women of the community.

---

[111] All subsequent quotations taken from *Barbarella: Queen of the Galaxy*, dir. Roger Vadim (USA: Paramount Pictures, 1968).

Barbarella represents neither a Mother nor a Wife. Aside from the emphasis placed on her character's appearance, she embodies several non-traditional feminine attributes. For instance, she moves freely about the universe in a space ship that she controls (unrestricted transportation and movement symbolize hallmarks of American masculinity), she single-handedly completes a vital and dangerous mission, and all the while engages in casual encounters that unmistakably mirror the "free love" sensibility of the times. However outrageous *Barbarella: Queen of the Galaxy* seems, this film clearly extends traditional female roles just as *The Valley of the Dolls* did the previous year.

Within two years, the women's movement began receiving extensive media coverage and women held high hopes for the new decade. In fact, the mainstream media's attention to this new era for women reflects the rapidly changing cultural and social climate. For example, in 1970, entire issues of *Atlantic Monthly* and

*Mademoiselle* magazines dedicated coverage to women's liberation; *Newsweek* ran a "special report" section; and the *New York Times Magazine* published a lengthy article on the subject. Additionally, *Ladies Home Journal* included an insert on "The New Feminism" and NBC and CBS each broadcast a series of stories on the movement in addition to their regular news coverage.[112] Clearly, attention to the women's movement represented a significant departure from previous decades. Woman-centered films pressed on into new territory and even the standard "boy meets girl" romance tale saw some revisions by 1970. The hugely popular tear-jerker *Love Story* stands as evidence of that fact.

### New Twist on an Old Story: The Not-Completely-Romantic Heroine of 1970

*Love Story*, starring Ryan O'Neal and Ali MacGraw found incredible box office success worldwide making it the most profitable Paramount picture up to that time.[113] In addition to its popular success, the film also received seven Oscar nominations, including Best Actor, Best Actress, and Best Picture of 1970.[114] This film lies on the border between the 60s concept of femininity and the new woman's film that would define the remainder of the decade. Fundamentally, *Love Story* depicts the "opposites attract" scenario and the difficulties often associated with it. Ryan O'Neal plays Oliver Barrett, a Harvard student from an affluent New England family and Ali MacGraw portrays Jennifer Cavalleri, an intelligent, but poor Radcliffe student from Rhode Island.

---

[112] Dow, *Prime-Time Feminism*, 27.

[113] Statistic according to film summary taken from *Love Story* DVD. *Love Story*, DVD, directed by Arthur Hiller (1970; USA: Paramount Pictures, 2001).

[114] Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Official Academy Awards Database, *http://www.oscars.org/awardsdatabase/* (accessed April 11, 2007).

Although it relies on classic romantic conventions, *Love Story* moves the hero and heroine somewhat further into progressive gender roles. Jenny, particularly in the first half of the film, depicts a strong and possibly feminist woman. She says exactly what she means and makes no apologies to anyone. Furthermore, she seems to hold a superior attitude toward men and at times portrays typically masculine characteristics. I have chosen specific scenes and dialogue to demonstrate how Jenny embodies a departure from the typical passive, love-seeking romantic heroine, and conversely, how she remains within old stereotypes.

The introductory scenes display Jenny's refusal to place herself in a subservient position in relation to Oliver. First, Jennifer and Oliver first meet in the Radcliffe College library where Oliver tries to get assistance from Jenny who works there as a clerk. Initially, they don't get along particularly well since he finds her difficult and she repeatedly calls him "Preppy."

> Oliver: What makes you so sure I went to prep school?[115]
> Jenny: You look stupid and rich.
> Oliver: Actually, I'm smart and poor.
> Jenny: Uh-uh, *I'm* smart and poor.
> Oliver: What makes you so smart?
> Jenny: I wouldn't go for coffee with you.
> Oliver: Well, I wouldn't ask you.
> Jenny: Well, that's what makes you stupid.

In the next scene, we see the characters in a coffee shop together. During their conversation, Jenny discovers that a building on the Harvard campus had been named after Oliver's great-grandfather. She makes sarcastic remarks about Oliver's legacy at Harvard and the wealth and status of his family. He becomes defensive:

---

[115] All subsequent quotations taken from *Love Story*, dir. Arthur Hiller (USA: Paramount Pictures, 1970).

> Oliver: Hey, if you're so convinced that I'm such a loser, then why did you bulldoze me into buying you coffee?
>
> Jenny: I like your body.

Here, her constant sarcasm and the superficial comment about his body do not suggest an overtly "feminine" personality. Finally, the camera cuts immediately to another conversation between the pair as they walk back to Jenny's dorm:

> Jenny: Listen, Preppy. I know you've got at least a few brains.
> Oliver: Really?
> Jenny: Yeah, you're hung up on me aren't you? (With this, she turns away from him and walks toward her door.)
> Oliver: Jenny! Listen, you conceited Radcliffe bitch. Friday night's the Dartmouth hockey game.
> Jenny: (She appears unfazed by his comment.) So?
> Oliver: So, I want you to come.
> Jenny: So why the hell should I want to go to a lousy hockey game?
> Oliver: Because I'm playing.

Already the film has presented audiences with an uncommon beginning to a great romance. No one has swept the heroine off her feet in the Hollywood tradition and no one has exchanged profound words of love. Both characters appear as equals.

Initially, Jenny dominates this relationship and sets its course with refusals to open up emotionally, as the following scenes demonstrate. After the above exchange, Jenny decides to attend the game, and afterward they take a walk across campus where Oliver kisses her for the first time:

> Jenny: I didn't say you could.
> Oliver: What?

> Jenny: Kiss me.
> Oliver: I was carried away.
> Jenny: I wasn't.
> Oliver: Jenny, I may not call you for a few months.
> Jenny: Why?
> Oliver: Then again I may call you as soon as I'm back at my room.
> Jenny: Bastard!
> Oliver: You can dish it out, but you sure can't take it!

Oliver arrives at his apartment, goes into his bedroom, and indeed calls Jenny right away. The viewer can hear only Oliver's side of the phone call: "Hello, Jenny. What would you say if I told you…I think I'm in love with you?" The next day, Jenny warns Oliver that you should "Never say 'love' if you don't really mean it."

Thus far, neither the man nor the woman follows the standard Hollywood formula. Jenny engages in the kinds of behaviors usually reserved for male characters, such as chastising Oliver for saying that he loves her too quickly. She feels that things have moved too fast and that he has not thoroughly considered his feelings for her. She does not seem comfortable with expressing emotions honestly, and instead puts them under the guise of humor and sarcasm. This concerns Oliver and he soon confronts her about the issue:

> Oliver: Look Cavalleri, I know your game and I'm tired of playing it. You are the supreme Radcliffe smartass…the best. You put down anything in pants. But verbal volleyball is not my idea of a relationship. See, I think you're scared. You put up a big glass wall to keep from getting hurt, but it also keeps you from getting touched. It's a risk isn't it, Jenny? At least I had the guts to admit what I felt. Someday, you're going to have to come up with the courage to admit you care.
> Jenny: (After long pause) I care.

Following this scene, however, their relationship moves forward with both partners participating more equally on an emotional level. The pair seems very happy and their lives run smoothly until Jenny explains to Oliver that she has a music scholarship to study in Paris. He reacts quite negatively to the news. Shocked, Oliver asks Jenny how long she has known about this. She tells him to "wake up" and that they will inevitably go their separate ways after graduation. He completely disagrees and tries to convince her to stay:

> Jenny: What about my scholarship? What about Paris?
> Oliver: What about our marriage?
> Jenny: Who said anything about marriage?
> Oliver: I'm saying it now.
> Jenny: You want to marry me?
> Oliver: Yeah.
> Jenny: Why?
> Oliver: Because.
> Jenny: That's a good reason.

Jenny ultimately decides to give up her scholarship and agrees to marry Oliver.

Conceding to Oliver's demands to stay in Boston and marry instead of accepting the music scholarship demonstrates a decidedly anti-feminist action on her part. After their official engagement, they visit Jenny's father Philip to announce their plans. She explains that they do not wish to get married in a church, which causes some distress for her devoutly Catholic father. Jenny describes the way they have chosen to conduct their wedding ceremony:

> Jenny: The college chaplain presides over it, but the man and woman address each other.
> Philip: You mean the bride speaks, too?
> Jenny: It's a new world, Philip.

Philip: It’s a new world all right.

This brief exchange refers to the “new world” reflected by the start of a new decade and new opportunities for women. Her father reacts with shock to both the idea of a secular wedding ceremony and the idea of the bride having a voice in it. His reaction likely mirrors many other American men during that time who struggle with the notion of female equality.

Jenny and Oliver soon marry, and her character closely resembles the archetypal Wife after this point in the film. Oliver graduates from Harvard and gets a job in a New York law firm. After they relocate, the income from Oliver’s new job allows Jenny to stay home as a housewife. Jenny has relinquished the autonomy and self-sufficiency that once seemed important to her. She seems content in her new role. So much so, that Oliver tells his friend that “I want her to study at Julliard; she wants to have a baby.” In this case, Jenny makes the final decision and knows she wants motherhood. The couple tries unsuccessfully to conceive before a doctor diagnoses Jenny with an advanced terminal illness. Within a short time Oliver must visit Jenny on her deathbed. Moments before she dies, Jenny tells Oliver “I liked it best when I supported you.” The film ends with Oliver sitting in a snowy Central Park grieving her death.

*Love Story* undoubtedly qualifies as a woman’s film by the standards of the genre with its focus on romance and the weepy-style tragic ending. However, the characters often break the stereotypical male and female molds. Ryan O’Neal’s character displays a depth of emotion frequently lacking in a male lead. He falls hard for Jenny, does not conceal his feelings, and proposes marriage very quickly. On the other hand, he practically demands that Jenny forfeit her scholarship opportunity in order to stay with him and get married. Therein lays the conflicting representation of this character. As I have shown, Ali MacGraw's character embodies her own set of contradictions. Her decision to become a housewife rather than continuing her music studies in New York contradicts her original character traits. Although she initially resists, Jenny makes the transition from independent woman to traditional Wife.

Despite these contradictions, *Love Story* definitely gave audiences a fresh take on Hollywood romance and exhibited signs of change for women in the movies. Jenny showed female viewers that they did not have to relinquish their independence the moment a man catches their attention. She also proved women could be witty, smart, and even strong without losing his love. Conversely, the character of Jenny taught women that they still needed to make choices and sacrifices if they wanted that love to last. The "new woman" seemed well on her way, but she had a long way to go. After *Love Story* made its debut in 1970, more women-centered films came to theaters and critics would later recognize this crop as the emergence of a new sub-genre.

## The "New" Woman's Film

According to Mark Graves and F. Bruce Engle, "By the 1970s, some women's roles on screen were clearly keeping up with changes in society at large, combining issues found in the woman's films with a feminist slant and often examining the conflicts or hardships involved in traditional roles as wives, mothers, and helpmates with opportunities for personal fulfillment."[116] Many films that featured women as central characters and portrayed "female" themes did continue to shift their course. Women performed on screen in new and interesting ways to the delight of American women in the early 1970s. The feminist movement and the issues surrounding it garnered more visibility, at the movies and elsewhere.

For example, by 1972, the movement had a famous face in the form of Gloria Steinem. She appeared on the cover of *Newsweek* under the headline "The New Woman" and *McCall's* magazine chose her as "Woman of the Year." During the same year Steinem created *Ms.* magazine that gave the women's movement its own mainstream and widely circulated publication.[117] Within a relatively short time span, thousands of women had effectively organized themselves to make their concerns and discontents known. Such action on the part of women and attention on the part of the media helped the movement make some great strides. As women effected positive change, their identities began to transform as well with further assistance from the media. By now a media buzzword, the "New Woman" became a concept all its own that would spill over into film culture and name a new sub-genre.

While the use of the term "new woman" appeared widely in the 1970s, French socialist Charles Fourier had imagined a "new woman" after coining the word "feminist" in the early nineteenth century. His idea of a new woman would both transform and become transformed by a society based on association and mutuality, rather than on competition and profits. Fourier's views influenced many women and combined self-emancipation with social emancipation.[118] Talk of a new woman existed in the 1920s as well. Perceptions of American females shifted drastically from the previous decade. Women seemed "new" in every way—they earned the right to vote in 1920, they became more publicly visible than their mothers, and even their dress radically evolved from corseted lady into the unconfined skirts and trousers of the new independent woman.[119]

---

[116] Graves and Engle, *Blockbusters*, 298.

[117] Dow, *Prime-Time Feminism*, 29.

History repeated itself in the 1970s as people heralded the new woman once again. This term seemed to serve a rhetorical function in the past; therefore, its popular reemergence likely served as an appropriate response to a new rhetorical challenge. As I mentioned previously, the concept of the new woman reached beyond newspaper headlines and TV talk; it also filled a gap in scholarly work on the woman's film of the period.

Film scholar Karen Hollinger notes that sub-generic divisions of the traditional woman's film transformed in the 1970s into what some critics have called the "new" woman's film. These films considerably altered the contours of the genre by dealing with issues initiated by the growth of the women's movement such as the independent woman and female friendship.[120] Each of these issues appear in a number of 70s films, including *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* and *The Turning Point*, both of which I examine in this chapter. Hollinger also argues that the films look both similar to and significantly different than their predecessors. Like the earlier films, the cycle represents a mixture of progressive and regressive elements.[121] All of the films I have discussed thus far have illustrated this particular point.

---

[118] Sheila Rowbotham, *Women in Movement: Feminism and Social Action* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 8.

[119] Sarah Jane Deutsch, "From Ballots to Breadlines, 1920-1940," in *No Small Courage: A History of Women in the United States*, ed. Nancy F. Cott (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 413-414.

[120] Hollinger, *In the Company of Women*, 2.

Annette Kuhn also suggests that since the mid-1970s the narrative of several films frequently focused on the process of self-discovery and independence for on-screen women. She expresses a view similar to Hollinger's in that the existence of this "new woman's cinema" might be explained in terms of direct determination—it simply reflected the growth and influence of the women's movement. However, Kuhn acknowledges that this explanation seems rather one-dimensional and notes that a simple relationship between social climates and the content of films does not always exist.[122] She makes a valid argument, although a close analysis of films and their historical contexts allows scholars to make at least partial linkages between such phenomena. This paper attempts to contribute to that effort through the same process.

British scholar Charlotte Brunsdon echoes the observations of Hollinger and Kuhn that a new cycle of films came out of the 70s. She claims that in 1971, Jane Fonda's *Klute* initiated the cycle which bears the traces of feminist struggles, even if only in the attempt to capitalize on a discernible new audience—the modern woman. She cites some of the films in the cycle as: *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, *A Woman Under the Influence*, *Julia*, and *The Turning Point*. Each tells a story about women, whether through the device of a central female protagonist, a concentration on relations between women, or narratives that concentrate on the classically feminine spheres of the personal and the familial.

---

[121] Hollinger, *In the Company of Women*, 246.

[122] Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), 135.

Brunsdon holds a decidedly negative view of the new woman's film since she believes Hollywood produced them purely for profit rather than to serve any political or social purpose. She explains that while "some women have given a cautious welcome to these films, arguing that they do indicate shifts in definitions and representations of femininity, others have been particularly angered, feeling that political ideals have been exploited to provide fashionable and profitable entertainment."[123] Brunsdon's skeptical standpoint unfortunately rings true since money represents the primary purpose of the mainstream film industry while artistic or political statements come in at a distant second.

Molly Haskell identifies another problem with this film cycle. Apart from the disputed origins and intentions of the films, she sees the female characters themselves as conflicted. More specifically, Haskell views the heroines of the "neo-woman's films" as "torn between the negative and positive of feminist consciousness."[124] She confirms Karen Hollinger's idea of simultaneous progression and regression for the characters. The "negative and positive of feminist consciousness" refers to the ability to intellectually justify their cause versus the inability to emotionally justify the social consequences of their choices. Haskell's observation reflects a central issue that has already revealed itself in earlier films and will remain a major setback for female characters in many of the new woman's films.

---

[123] Charlotte Brunsdon, ed., *Films for Women* (London: British Film Institute, 1986), 119.

[124] Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape*, 41.

Some critics argue the new woman's film represented positive steps and that Hollywood truly reflected the state of affairs in America. Others deride the direction the films took and label them as a superficial attempt to draw new audiences. Clearly, the genesis and reception of the new woman's film has met with inconsistent viewpoints. Scholars cannot make a definitive claim as to whether these films resulted from historical events or simply an increased public interest in this subject matter. The mixed reception from audiences of the day presents another difficulty for the legacy of the film cycle. Regardless of scholarly disputes, most critics recognize these films as part of an important sub-genre and I treat them as such in my analysis. Aside from the mid-70s bringing these new films to audiences, it also brought continued social changes relating to the feminist movement.

Whether met by success or failure, feminism had registered a powerful impact on American society. One sign of transformation appeared in Gallup Polls taken in 1962 and again in 1974. Both polls asked the same question of women: "Are you satisfied with your life?" In the first poll, two-thirds of the respondents said they felt satisfied and did not desire major change. The subsequent poll revealed exactly the opposite with two-thirds of women feeling dissatisfied and wanting to see significant changes in their lives. The timing of the 1974 poll seemed to correlate directly with an increasingly active feminist movement.[125]

---

[125] Chafe, "The Road to Equality," 562.

## As Good As It Gets? The Feminist Heroine of the Mid-1970s

In a 2004 interview about the 1974 film *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore,* actress Ellen Burstyn discusses her memories of the movie and her experiences as a woman at that time:[126]

> It was 1974. It was just kind of the birth of the women's movement and I had just gone through a divorce and was discovering for myself what it was like not to be an auxiliary person. The idea that a woman could be a person in her own right…this idea that we were primary in our own lives and to ourselves was astonishing and I felt that it [the film] was the right story to explore a woman's point of view. She [the character of Alice] was going through the transformation that so many women were going through. They were finding a sense of self and that there's more to life than planning dinner and doing the dishes afterwards. It was what all of us were involved in during that particular period. It was an awakening.

She further describes the climate of the film industry in that period and the types of work available to an actress: "In 1973-74, Warner Brothers was sending me scripts to read. The scripts that were available…all the women's parts were the wife, the mother or the whore, you know, the three standard roles for women. They were all in relation to the man. It was the man's story and the woman was the assistant."

After receiving the script for *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore,* Burstyn immediately related to the female lead and quickly decided to take on that role. She felt that this character presented a realistic and positive portrayal of a modern woman. Martin Scorsese directed the film, which marked his first (and possibly only) attempt at a "woman's picture." Prior to directing *Alice*, he became best known for the gritty drama

---

[126] Ellen Burstyn played the title role. Quotations taken from "Second Chances," *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* DVD Features. *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, DVD, directed by Martin Scorsese (1974; USA: Warner Brothers, 2004).

*Mean Streets* in 1973. Burstyn remarked that Scorsese's work "exemplified reality," which he achieved with *Alice* by not depicting characters with a sentimentality that would detract from the story.

The film received three Oscar nominations in 1974, including Best Actress, Best Supporting Actress, and Best Writing, although it did not receive a nomination for Best Director.[127] Ellen Burstyn won the Oscar for the role of Alice Hyatt, a housewife with one son who must start anew after the death of her husband. She leaves their home to pursue her long-held dream of a singing career in California. The film chronicles both her literal and emotional journey to begin a new life and support her child. In many ways Alice represents the on-screen "independent woman" described by Hollinger and Kuhn. However, the feminist elements of the film become offset somewhat by the suggestion that a woman's destiny "lies in traditional heterosexual pairing rather than in the attainment of personal success."[128]

Still, the character of Alice presents viewers with a new kind of archetype: the liberated woman. She reaches far beyond traditional bounds for female characters, and rather than ultimately reverting to feminine stereotypes, she struggles and actively engages with life's contradictions. In addition, although she exists very much within the Wife archetype, she practically reinvents the archetypal Mother. Naturally, Alice possesses a deep love for her son, but she portrays a very unconventional mother figure. The interactions between mother and child often look more like the interactions of two friends. She often treats Tommy like an adult and has a fairly unorthodox parenting style. However, my analysis will not focus on the relationship between Alice and Tommy. I will look principally at Alice's role as Wife, and later, love-seeking heroine since the greatest change occurs in this area. Therefore, I have selected scenes and dialogue to reflect her difficult transformation from unfulfilled housewife to a woman with her own identity.

---

[127] Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Official Academy Awards Database, *http://www.oscars.org/awardsdatabase/* (accessed April 11, 2007).

[128] Graves and Engle, *Blockbusters*, 298.

The introductory scenes immediately demonstrate how Alice depicts the traditional Wife and Mother archetypes. In the opening scene, Alice sits at her sewing machine while her son Tommy listens to loud music. Her husband Donald lies in the bedroom reading a newspaper and screams at her to "do something about that kid!"[129] She goes to the bedroom door and says timidly, "I'm sorry, Don" before turning off the stereo. She whispers to her son: "Do you want me to have a fight with him? How are we supposed to have a meaningful family relationship when he's on the verge of killing you half the time?" We see another shot of Donald lying on the bed, this time reading a magazine. Alice tells him: "Dinner will be ready in about 30 minutes." He replies: "Whatever you say. You're the cook." At once, *Alice* places the viewer in the center of an unpleasant, but common domestic scenario. This brief exchange reveals that Alice acts as sole caretaker of the home and family while Donald probably does not participate in household affairs.

---

[129] All subsequent quotations taken from *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, dir. Martin Scorsese (USA: Warner Brothers, 1974).

At one point, Alice's neighbor Bea comes over to visit. The two engage in idle conversation about their day, but the talk soon turns to relationships. Alice reveals some frustration toward her husband and toward men in general:

> Bea: I sure couldn't live without a man around the house.
> Alice: Oh, I could.
> Bea: No you couldn't.
> Alice: I could—easy. I'd be just as happy if I never saw one again, ever.

Ironically, a moment later Alice receives a phone call that her husband has died in an automobile accident. She has been instantly relieved of her role as Wife, and now the central focus falls on Alice as Mother. She feels devastated, but must quickly determine how to care for herself and her son. Since she does not work and the funeral costs proved quite expensive, Alice boldly decides to hold an estate sale and to sell their house. She then packs some of their belongings in the car and drives away from their home in New Mexico toward California. Alice lived in Monterey, California as a youth and longs to return because Monterey represents happiness and familiarity for her. As they set out on their journey, Alice promises Tommy that they will reach Monterey before his birthday and in time to enroll him in school.

The pair arrives in Phoenix where they must stay temporarily until Alice can get work and save some money to continue the trip. She finds a cheap motel room and on the first night there, Tommy questions Alice about his father and their relationship:

> Tommy: Did you love Dad?
> Alice: Of course I did. What a question!
> Tommy: You don't seem unhappy.
> Alice: I'm unhappy. What are you talking about? I'm very unhappy. I don't have to show all my emotions.

At this point, a shift begins to emerge in Alice's behavior, perhaps out of necessity. Now that she does not have a husband and the comforts of a familiar life, she makes the difficult decision to leave that life completely as well as to protect her child by downplaying her own emotions and fears. Her transition to a liberated woman becomes visible from this point forward, and the following scenes place Alice in this archetypal role.

For example, the next morning, Alice buys a new outfit to wear for job interviews. Before she leaves for the day, Tommy worries that she will not find work and that they will never make it to Monterey as she promised.

> Alice: I will get a job! I *will*! I'm out there spending too much money on clothes so I can look under 30, so maybe somebody will hire me. I will get a job and I will get you in school by September. I *will* get you to Monterey before your birthday!

She exhibits total determination and resolve despite the odds she must face. In this case, Alice feels apprehensive about her age and its effect on her marketability as a singer, which presents a legitimate concern for a woman seeking employment.

With her insecurities set aside, Alice walks the streets of Phoenix to look for a place to inquire about a job. She goes into a bar and asks the manager if he would consider hiring a singer.

> Manager: Do you mind turning around for me?
> Alice: Turning around? Why?
> Manager: Well, so I can get a look at ya.
> Alice: You can see my face. I don't sing with my ass. (She walks out.)
> Manager: What's with this broad?

Unfortunately, the manager depicts a stereotypical sexist male who considers her physical assets before her relevant talents and abilities. Undeterred, she walks across the street and enters another bar. The bar owner greets her and she responds by crying uncontrollably. She tells him about her problems, he takes pity on her, and allows her to audition for him. The owner gives her a job singing and playing the piano several nights a week. Alice has quickly gone from determined and secure to helpless and emotional. Briefly, she reverts back to stereotypically feminine modes of behavior when faced with a stressful situation. However, she soon rebounds and takes Tommy to Tucson where she finds a job as a waitress in a local diner. She meets David, one of the diner's regulars, and they quickly begin dating. David owns a ranch and invites Alice and Tommy to spend time there.

One afternoon, Alice talks to David about her past, allowing both her character and the audience to reflect on the way she used to live. She tells him that she wanted to be in show business. He asks why she left it.

> Alice: I got married and Donald wanted to live in his hometown. I wanted to go on singing but he said (imitating his voice): 'No wife of mine's gonna sing in a saloon.' I said, 'Yes master.' I kind of liked that. It was my idea of a man—strong and dominating, you know. (Laughs) I want to go back to Monterey and pick up where I left off.
> David: Which do you want—to go home or to sing?
> Alice: I want to do both. Can't I have everything?

She once again reveals a gradual transformation in herself by acknowledging her former status as archetypal Wife and by articulating her current status as a more liberated woman. She did not question her late husband's decisions about where they would make their home or about her role in it. Alice willingly gave up the pursuit of her dream at his whim.  More importantly, she permitted his actions through her skewed conception of male roles.  The fact that she explains to the new man in her life that she wants "to do both" illustrates a marked change in Alice's thinking.  Also, with the question, "Can't I have everything?" she concisely sums up the central question for women everywhere. Women promptly learned that the struggles of the feminist movement revolved around that very question.  In other words, how could they negotiate the tensions between the home and the workplace, between self-fulfillment and relationships with men, and between being treated like a "lady" and being treated like an equal?  Alice discovers some of these tensions as the film progresses.

For instance, as the following scenes demonstrate, Alice particularly experiences the difficulties of balancing a relationship with personal fulfillment.  Alice and David grow close and she and Tommy spend increasingly more time with him.  Still in Tucson, Tommy's 12th birthday arrives and they celebrate with a party at David's house.  A heated argument takes place that results in David striking Tommy.  David accuses Alice of not knowing how to raise a child and that she cannot make up her mind about anything.  Alice becomes angry and walks out on him as he has attacked her primary role as Mother and attacked her personally as well.

Then, at work the next morning, Alice cries when her co-worker Flo asks her if David planned to come in that day.  She says she does not want to discuss it, but Flo takes her aside to talk it over anyway.  Their conversation reveals much about Alice's state of mind and her struggle to cope with a new life and her redefined roles:

> Alice: Everything is so screwed up.  I have no idea, but I'm trying.  I don't know. I met David and I spent all the money I had saved to get to Monterey for

> Tommy’s birthday present, and I don’t know, I got sidetracked. I was always so scared of Donald. I was always trying to please him. I was so afraid not to please him. And now I’m without him. I mean, it’s like I always felt that he was taking care of me, you know? And now I just don’t know what to do.
> Flo: It’s always nice to have somebody take care of you.
> Alice: But he didn’t. I just felt like he did just because he was there. I don’t know how to live without a man, that’s what it is. I’m so mad at David, I could just kill him. I really could.
> Flo: Sounds to me like you love him.
> Alice: (Bursts into tears again) I do! But it’s my life—*my* life. It’s not some man’s life that I’m going help him out with. I can’t help it; that’s the way I feel.
> Flo: Well, what is it that you want? The first thing you need to do is figure out what you want.
> Alice: You know if David comes back I’m going give him a bust right in the mouth.

Alice’s relationship with David has caused her to lose focus on her original goal of getting to Monterey. Not only does she not get there before Tommy’s birthday as promised, but she spends the money that would allow her to make the trip at all. She begins her stay in Tucson with a set of priorities only to have them shift after David enters the scenario. The more involved that she became with him, the more she lost a sense of self and a sense of purpose for her life as a newly independent woman. Since she has never lived on her own and forced to take care of herself, Alice becomes confused and doubts the course she has set. She feels completely uncertain of how to live outside the archetypal roles of Wife and Mother. However, her willingness to try distinguishes the character of Alice from some of her earlier counterparts.

In the final scenes, her conflicting roles of Liberated Woman and (potentially) Wife find a partial resolution. David does come into the diner that day and Alice waits on his table. He tells her that he wants to see her again and that he thinks he understands her. She turns away and ignores him. He walks to the door to leave, but instead hesitates and shouts across the restaurant at her. The customers in the diner stop eating to witness to the scene:

> David: I know I want you; now what do you want?
> Alice: I want to sing and anything we do has to include that.
> David: That's a big gamble. Are you sure it's worth it?
> Alice: Yes. I am. Definitely. Yes. *Yes*!
> David: What about Monterey?
> Alice: I was happy in Monterey.
> David: You were a little girl in Monterey. You can be happy here.
> Alice: Oh, sure, but I'm not going to let anybody stop me this time.
> David: Who's stopping you? Pack your bags. I'll take you to Monterey myself.
> I don't give a damn about that ranch.

Alice approaches him smiling, and they kiss as the diners applaud. The film cuts to a conversation between Alice and Tommy after work. Alice explains to Tommy that she can sing anywhere. He asks, "You really love him don't you?" "Yes," she replies. The film ends there with mother and son walking down a Tucson street. Just ahead of them in the distance, a sign reads: "Monterey: Dining Room, Banquet Room, Luncheon, Lounge." This makes for a rather ambiguous ending. David's offer to go with Alice to Monterey leads the audience to believe that he loves her enough to support her dreams and that they will be realized after all. But, Alice's words to Tommy in the very next scene give the impression that they might stay in Tucson. As for the mysterious sign, it lends itself to two different interpretations. First, the fact that the Monterey has a lounge makes it probable that Alice could sing at the ironically named establishment. Alternatively, it could be an indicator of things to come—an impending move to California for the three of them.

Alice represents a complex woman: first a put-upon Wife and unconventional Mother, then a love-seeking working woman facing the new challenges of independence. Undoubtedly, her character's circumstances, struggles, and successes resonated with female audiences. I argue that Alice embodies a liberated woman because she gained a healthier perspective on men, learned how to trust herself, and realized the importance of following her own dreams. Yet as in real life, this role inevitably comes with a price. It seems appropriate that this type of woman enters the scene at this particular time. The women's movement had reached a kind of peak and some called *Alice* a "feminist" film for its strong heroine. Social boundaries for women certainly stretched more than ever before, but only as far as a patriarchal society would allow. Women's liberation itself existed under the imposed constraints of men. Therefore, the archetype of the liberated woman exists as well, yet she cannot achieve liberation in its purest sense. The limits of her progression on- and off-screen remain set by the men in power, and as a result, women and their film representations encounter inner conflict regarding their roles.

Challenges such as these, among many others, awaited the feminist movement as the 1970s progressed. Molly Haskell observes that the growing strength and demands of women in real life, spearheaded by women's liberation, soon provoked a backlash in commercial film."[130] She cites *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* as "feminist-inspired" and recalls that such films led women to anticipate, if not a revolution, at least a group of films that would "chart our evolution as emerging feminists."[131] Instead, she suggests that movies did not reflect the lives of women realistically, and that when feminism appeared in a film, the portrayal depicted its negative consequences rather than its victories.

---

[130] Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape*, 323.

[131] Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape*, 375.

Historians give a similar account of public backlash toward women's liberation. According to William Chafe, even as the feminist movement appeared a dominant force in America in the 1970s, counter forces eventually undercut the likelihood of a feminist triumph. The movement created a widespread assault on traditional attitudes and values regarding sex roles, which included diverse issues affecting virtually every aspect of life. The future of the movement seemed to hinge on how different groups of citizens and policymakers responded to feminist messages. It became clear that women had as many varied responses to sex equality as men. Furthermore, many Americans supported conservative political figures like Richard Nixon, Jerry Falwell, and Phyllis Schlafly in their effort to return the country to traditionalist social values. For them, feminism represented a hostile force.[132] Some women experienced a more personal backlash; one within themselves. In their quest to "have it all," it seemed they had lost something important. The ideal of the Perfect Wife/Mother took its place directly opposite the Successful Career Woman. Since striking a healthy balance proved nearly impossible, many felt inadequate on both fronts, while others simply became exhausted from trying. As a result, some of these women rebelled against the very things for which they fought.

---

[132] Chafe, "The Road to Equality," 575-576.

## Too Good to Last: *The Turning Point* of 1977

*The Turning Point* exemplifies one of the films that reflected the complexities and disappointments of the feminist movement. A commercial success, this new woman's film found major success with critics as well. In fact, the movie received 11 Oscar nominations, including Best Supporting Actor, Best Supporting Actress, two in the Best Actress category, and Best Picture.[133] Unfortunately, however, the film did not win any of these accolades. Interestingly, the Academy Awards saw "women's pictures" dominate in 1977, especially in the Best Picture category. Aside from *The Turning Point*, the Best Picture nominees consisted of *Julia*, *The Goodbye Girl*, *Annie Hall*, and *Star Wars* (the only non-woman's film in the group). *Annie Hall*, starring Diane Keaton, won the Oscar that year.

The winless, but critically acclaimed *Turning Point*, places two women at the center of its story. According to a short documentary film, few major starring roles existed for women at that time. The documentary narrator explains:

> Of the thousands of films made in Hollywood and elsewhere during the past decade, the number of pictures containing interesting roles for women could probably be counted on the fingers of one hand. Now, a movie is being made which hopefully will reverse that trend. It is the new 20th Century Fox film *The Turning Point*. *The Turning Point* is about love, ambition, and about that moment in life where a choice must be made. Both Anne Bancroft and Shirley MacLaine [the lead actresses in the film] are hopeful that *The Turning Point* will herald the return of good roles for women in the movies.[134]

---

[133] Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Official Academy Awards Database, *http://www.oscars.org/awardsdatabase/* (accessed April 11, 2007).

[134] Quotations taken from "*The Turning Point* Featurette," *The Turning Point* DVD Features. *The Turning Point*, DVD, directed by Herbert Ross (1977; USA: Anchor Bay, 2004).

In an on-set interview, Anne Bancroft says of the film: “It’s basically about two women who made certain choices to do certain things with their lives and with every choice, of course, comes a price.” Shirley MacLaine comments on her decision to take part: “To read a script that isn’t dumb these days—for women—is enough attraction to do it.” Based on this documentary, it seems that movie roles have not advanced far beyond what Ellen Burstyn described three years earlier.

These well-known actresses portray women whose relationship appears to constantly vacillate between the dearest of friends and the harshest rivals. Bancroft plays Emma, a prima ballerina in the prestigious American Ballet Theatre who must come to terms with aging and the inevitable decline of her career. MacLaine’s character, Deedee, once danced with the company as well, which marks the origins of the friendship between the two women. The primary tension in the story stems from the feeling of competition that exists between Emma and Deedee. Years earlier, both women compete for a part in a new ballet until Deedee became pregnant by Wayne, a fellow member of the ballet company. Emma convinces Deedee that marrying Wayne and raising their child would be the best decision. Of course, that decision meant the end of Deedee’s beloved dancing career. However, she and Wayne did marry, leave the company, and move to Oklahoma City to start their family. In order to satisfy her passion for ballet, Deedee runs a dance school for children where she can teach her craft to others.

Choices and their consequences represent the unmistakable theme in *The Turning Point*. More specifically, the choices that nearly every woman must make during her lifetime and the consequences that come with them. *The Turning Point* can literally mean the point in a woman's life where everything changes based on whether she chooses a career or a family. As a result of the women's movement, women actually had the luxury of a choice for how they would lead their lives. Unfortunately, this still often meant that they could only go one direction, rather than "having it all" as many critics indicate. This film practically illustrates a case study of this issue.

Deedee clearly depicts the archetypal Mother and Wife in this movie. The fact that she constantly questions those roles denotes the essential difference between her archetypal depiction and those archetypes in older films. However, she comes to the realization that she chose correctly, which teaches female audiences that they struggle in vain to live outside the private sphere. Emma represents the liberated woman like viewers saw in *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, but Emma's character exhibits change for this archetype. She lives an independent life, has achieved great career success, and does not feel inadequate for not having a husband or a family—except when she sees her career coming to an end. Unlike Alice, the end of the movie does not give the impression of grand possibilities for Emma. Aside from her relationship with Deedee, she seems truly alone and truly unhappy. The audience ultimately feels sympathy for Emma and learns from her that liberation and independence leads to a bleak future. The following scenes and dialogue have been selected to support these conclusions.

At the beginning of the film, the audience immediately sees Deedee in her wifely and motherly roles. The American Ballet Theater has come to Oklahoma City, and she hurriedly prepares herself as well as her husband and three children for the performance.

After the performance, the family goes backstage to meet all of Deedee and Wayne's old friends, including Emma. This scene provides some insight into her character. Deedee greets Emma with an enthusiastic hug. Emma also greets Wayne, but with a lingering hug and a wistful look in her eye. Wayne introduces the children to her. Their eldest daughter, Emilia, is Emma's godchild whom she has not seen for many years. Emma exclaims, "Look at you!" With a pained expression on her face, she asks, "They don't know how fast time goes, do they?"[135] The audience can gather that she may be a bit lonely and may have once had feelings for Wayne by the way she embraces him and looks at him. Her final comment alludes to a longing for the past and her youth that becomes more pronounced as the film progresses.

Moments later, in a scene that exposes a rift in their relationship, Deedee goes with Emma to her dressing room and looks at old photos of the two of them. Deedee discovers a picture from her wedding day. They remark on their appearances and the clothes they wore.

> Emma: Can you believe how young we looked? He [Wayne] is beautiful. No wonder the whole company wanted him.
> Deedee: Now that's a good thing you had your eye elsewhere.
> Emma: You mean on Michael [the company's choreographer]?
> Deedee: No, I mean on the ball. (A long pause accompanied by uncomfortable looks.) Tell me something Emma. What's it like to be you now?
> Emma: I dance. I take class. I rehearse, I perform. I go home to my hotel. Some cities are better than others. Some nights are better than others.

This exchange reveals an interesting dynamic between the two women. Initially, the audience only sees positive aspects of this relationship; however, in an instant, a negative side becomes visible. Deedee's retort ("No, I mean on the ball") clearly refers to Emma's ambition and eventual career success. This abrupt shift in the conversation, while only temporary, generates immediate tension. Deedee breaks their uncomfortable silence by asking Emma a question. Her response adds to the impression that she leads a lonely life in contrast to Deedee's life with a husband and three children.

---

[135] All subsequent quotations taken from *The Turning Point*, dir. Herbert Ross (USA: 20th Century Fox, 1977).

In the next scene, issues only touched on previously now become more concrete. Deedee and Wayne throw a party at their home for the ballet company after that evening's performance. Later that night as people begin to leave, Deedee and Emma sit outside where they can talk alone.

> Emma: If I were a man I could have had all the children I wanted and still danced.
> Deedee: How many children?
> Emma: Three—like yours.
> Deedee: And a husband like Wayne?
> Emma: Yes. You're a very lucky girl.
> Deedee: You want to change places? No…I can't see you teaching a pack of klutzy kids. You picked the life you wanted, Emma.
> Emma: So did you.
> Deedee: No, not really. You didn't let me.

Already the tension has risen again between them and their past problems begin to materialize. First, Emma suggests that women do not have an equal chance at a career in ballet if they decide to have children. Her statement implies that she achieved success because she has no children, and conversely, since Deedee did, she had no chance at success. Emma possibly feels envious of Deedee for having everything that Emma had to give up. Then, Deedee reveals a source of anger—she holds Emma responsible for the path she took and for the things she missed in life. These few lines foreshadow the impending conflicts that develop in the film.

I would also argue that conflict between women (in this film and possibly other films of this type) serves as a way to undercut women’s power. If female characters gain power (e.g. in the working world or other “masculine” arenas) or exist too far outside accepted boundaries, this offers a potential means to deter or stop their progress. If these women focus their energies fighting with each other over a man, over a job, etc., then they become distracted from more important pursuits. This could also be another reflection of the progressive/regressive nature of the new woman’s film and of women’s struggles in the real world.

Deedee’s daughter Emilia also has a natural talent for dancing, which triggers another layer of resentment between the women. As her godmother, Emma encourages her to go to New York and study with the company. She also convinces Deedee to spend the summer there with them. Emilia’s training progresses very well and she quickly earns a part in an upcoming ballet. Both Deedee and Emma react happily to the news and they lend Emilia lots of support. However, Emilia begins spending much of her time with Emma, who can offer advice as a fellow dancer and represents what Emilia hopes to accomplish in the future. Their newfound closeness causes Deedee to feel a great deal of jealousy. The mother-daughter relationship becomes strained and Deedee grows increasingly resentful of Emma. Deedee feels that Emma truly has everything—a successful, glamorous career, and the admiration of her daughter for something Deedee will never be. Thus, the bitterness she feels toward Emma simply reflects the disappointment she feels for herself.

The following scene depicts the disappointments both women feel as a result of their respective life choices. The night of Emilia's first performance arrives and it results in great success. Emma plays a major part in the ballet and Deedee becomes so consumed with jealousy that she cannot not bear to watch her. Following the ballet, everyone celebrates with a formal dinner party. Emilia enters to a standing ovation from the partygoers while Emma fawns over her. Deedee, disgusted by the display, retreats to the restaurant's bar alone and unnoticed. Then, Emma takes a seat at a table with the choreographer and the company manager. The manager asks Emma to stage a new production in which Emilia will take the lead role. This proposal represents a subtle attempt by the manager to tell Emma that she would not be taking that part. Moreover, it indicates that Emma has passed her prime and may not dance in another ballet with the company. The conversation visibly upsets her and she excuses herself from the table. Emma heads into the bar where she finds Deedee sitting alone. The uncomfortable encounter exhibits how much things have deteriorated between them.

They realize that they must talk about the situation, and the conversation that results brings all of their issues to the forefront:

> Deedee: Why'd you make your best pal doubt herself? Why'd you say to me, 'You'd better have that baby because if you don't you'll never hold on to Wayne.' Why'd you say all that? I'm just curious…I also remember that you said, 'Forget about Michael's ballet, there will be others.' You knew a ballet like that comes along once in a career and you wanted it—real bad. So you lied to make sure you got what you wanted.
> Emma: Deedee, the choice was yours. It's much too late to regret it now.

> Deedee: Same to you, Emma.
> Emma: I don't regret mine.
> Deedee: Then why are you trying to become a mother at your age?
> Emma: I don't want to be anybody's mother. I think of Emilia as a friend. And one reason I tried to help—stupid me—I thought it would make you happy if your daughter became what you wanted to be and never could be.

Deedee finally confronts Emma with everything she has kept inside for so many years. She blames Emma entirely for dropping out of the ballet. She also believes that Emma manipulated her and that they never shared a real friendship. Emma claims that she has no regrets about her life, but Deedee accuses her of trying to act like a mother to Emilia. If so, Deedee might be able to prove that Emma felt dissatisfied with just her career, and that she took advantage of her role as Emilia's godmother to fill a void in her life.

At this point, the two women become very angry with each other and Deedee storms out of the bar. Emma chases after her and stops her by grabbing her arm.

> Emma: I'm sick to death of your jealousy and resentment!
> Deedee: (Crying) So am I! You took away my choice; you never let me find out if I was good enough!
> Emma: You weren't good enough and you knew it. That's why you married Wayne.
> Deedee: I loved Wayne.
> Emma: So much so that you said to hell with your career? You saddled him with a baby and blew his career.
> Deedee: You're over the hill and you know it. You're terrified!

The conversation becomes so heated that they actually come to blows. They continue yelling at each other and fight until their screams turn into laughter. They stop hitting each other and collapse onto a bench to catch their breath.

> Deedee: That jealousy…It's poison, you know? It can make you a monster.

> Emma: Deedee, I really don't remember what I said about having the baby. But, I do know, I would have said anything to make sure I got that ballet. I just had to have it. You were good…good enough to threaten me.
> Deedee: Emma, you don't know how many years I've wanted to hear you say just that.

The two women embrace and forgive each other for the hurtful, but true things they said. At last, Emma admits that Deedee had talent, and Deedee received the validation she needed. After airing their grievances, they feel some contentment and can move forward with their lives. Now that Deedee has accepted that dancing cannot be part of her life, Emma must accept that soon it will not be part of hers. This realization allows them to look to the future and concentrate on Emilia's burgeoning ballet career.

The film's final scenes indicate that Deedee has ultimately accepted her chosen roles and that Emma faces regrets about hers. They also bring the audience full circle by positioning Emilia near that point where choices of her own must be made. She starts training for her lead in the new ballet with opening night fast approaching. After her first performance, Deedee and her family go backstage to congratulate Emilia, but Emma does not come. Deedee finds her on the empty, dark stage staring into the vacant theater. Deedee senses Emma's sadness and knows that she has been reliving past glories in her mind.

> Deedee: Pick a feeling.
> Emma: Envy. Her [Emilia's] life is just beginning. It's not a very long one, Deedee.
> Deedee: Well, as long as it gives her what she wants.
> Emma: Oh, it will. It will.
> Deedee: Oh, Emma. If only she knew everything we know.
> Emma: It wouldn't matter a damn.

The film ends here with images of Emilia dancing across the stage. The viewer leaves with the impression that Deedee and Emma will continue to be friends and with the possibility that things might be better for the next generation of women. Their conversation indicates that Emilia could have love and a career in ballet if she wants. However, on a less hopeful note, they realize she will likely make the same mistakes as they did. Those final statements seem to acknowledge that women will ignore the lessons of the past rather than achieve progress by learning from it.

Karen Hollinger argues that the entire film represents a backwards step. She explains that some new woman's films responded to the evolving historical situation of women, but *The Turning Point* takes a more "regressive approach" to the subject. Specifically, the film "adopts the old formula found in group friendship films of the 1930s and 1940s to investigate women's relationships in the context of their career ambitions. In fact, it maintains so many of the reactionary aspects of earlier woman's films that it represents a throwback to previous negative portrayals of female friendship rather than a progressive rethinking of outdated ideas."[136] Hollinger even feels that *The Turning Point* rehashes clichés concerning the advantages for women who choose family over career.

The film reinforces this notion by portraying Deedee as the character who finds the greatest fulfillment in the end. Emma's admission that Deedee had talent appeases her to the point that she can focus instead on her daughter's career. Emilia's success as a dancer presents Deedee with the opportunity to live vicariously through her child and indirectly relish in her achievements. Additionally, unlike Emma, she still has the happiness of family in her life where she can enjoy her role as wife and mother. In contrast, Emma appears to have nothing left except her friendship with Deedee. As her ballet career nears the end, she seems full of sorrow and "envy" as she told Deedee in the final scene.

---

[136] Hollinger, *In the Company of Women*, 59.

*The Turning Point* features the rare occurrence of two women in starring roles, yet it sends the anti-feminist message that family and career must be mutually exclusive alternatives. Despite this fact, as box office receipts reveal, many women found satisfaction in a major motion picture that focused on two women and on relevant issues.

## Conclusion

This sampling of films from the 1970s reveals that on-screen women looked progressively different over the course of the decade. The "new woman" appeared in a new film cycle to a large female audience eager for better stories and more accurate, positive representations. They got what they wanted to some degree. Feminist scholars such as Molly Haskell criticized the new woman's film for falling short of its potential. In her 1977 study she asked, "But surely the recent pain and struggle of woman's self-exploration has yielded more fruit and taken her farther than those feeble overtures offered by the film industry would have us believe. When will the evidence of women's new power be felt? Where is the mechanism for turning real life into the new myths, the new narrative forms?"[137] Haskell poses valid questions and some of the answers have yet to be found. She obviously feels that the mythic archetypes in the films do not always meet expectations and that the "narrative forms" simply present a re-working of past efforts instead of actually breaking new ground. Calling the new woman's film cycle "feeble overtures offered by the film industry" sounds as though Hollywood produced ("offered") them as a response to consumer demand and not an honest reaction to social events. I would argue that the former represents the true catalyst for the release of many of the films.

---

[137] Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape*, 370.

Charlotte Brunsdon's concept of "recuperation" possesses exceptional explanatory power in this case. Recuperation involves "conceptualizing continual and flexible cultural processes whereby radical and oppositional ideas, images, and movements are taken in by the dominant culture to become part of the culture of domination. Not only do the oppositional ideas and practices lose their bite, but they can function to make it appear as if change has been effected. The relevance of this notion to the analysis of a rash of 1970s films dealing with the 'new woman' is obvious."[138] For example, the events of the women's movement in the 1970s did provoke radical change in many areas of social and cultural life. By the mid-70s, the movement occupied such a prominent place in the media and in American consciousness that it only seemed appropriate for our cultural products to reflect this. Since films represent a major cultural product and a major industry in this country, a few films began to emerge with feminist-inspired themes and feminist characters.

---

[138] Brunsdon, *Films for Women*, 119-120.

While some of these early films may have been sincere attempts to introduce radical or oppositional ideas and images into the dominant culture, the cycle that followed took these ideas and images “to become part of the culture of domination.” This portion of Brunsdon’s definition aligns well with the definition of a film cycle—positive audience response to a film leads to profits, which leads to imitation, which results in a film cycle.[139] Thus, Hollywood releases these imitations that contain similar ideas and images, which “make it appear as if change has been effected” simply by virtue of their increasing presence. Hollywood catered to its newly-defined audience to maximize box office appeal and create the appearance of social consciousness.

Under the assumption that different films address themselves to different audience segments, e.g., the new woman’s film addresses women with some degree of feminist consciousness, then the new woman’s film raises the question of feminism to some extent. However, Annette Kuhn suggests that this only occurs on a superficial level. She claims that “feminism is controversial and it would be problematic for a cinematic institution whose products are directed at a politically heterogeneous audience to overtly take up positions which might alienate certain segments of that audience.” She explains further that films which sustain a degree of polysemy may appeal to a relatively broad-based audience and permit readings that align more or less with a viewer’s prior stance on feminist issues.[140] In other words, the new woman’s film tends to address an audience that regards itself as sympathetic to feminist issues, and regardless of the actual aim of the film or the representation of its characters, a viewer tends to read the film in a way that supports their existing standpoint.  Therefore, many of these films might interest larger audiences since their polysemic nature affords multiple readings, while still retaining audiences with feminist leanings.

---

[139] See Mercer and Shingler, *Melodrama*, 5.

[140] Kuhn, *Women’s Pictures*, 139.

Clearly, the “new” woman’s film represents both a step forward and a step back in comparison to its predecessors in the woman’s film genre.  The new woman’s film appears “new” in two ways.  First, it addresses new issues and timely topics that reflect the social climate of the era to some extent.  For instance, *Alice* portrays a woman struggling with her newfound independence and *The Turning Point* puts famous faces on the inescapable issues of home vs. career that continually plague the feminist movement. Second, the new woman’s film presents new types of female characters that, at least some of the time, portray positive changes in representation.  Some mythic archetypes from the woman’s film (the Mother, the Wife) experience reconfiguration and expansion beyond their traditional depictions (e.g., the liberated woman archetype).  For example, Jenny from *Love Story* depicts a character with definite feminist leanings and she exhibits great confidence, intelligence, and initially, self-sufficiency.  Jenny gives the romantic heroine a new degree of depth.  Also, Ellen Burstyn’s Alice adds dimension to the traditional on-screen mother and wife.  Although her character changes by force of circumstance, she pushes forward to create a better life despite her fears.  Given the chance to follow her own path, Alice pursues her thwarted dreams of singing and having a healthy relationship at the same time.

Unfortunately, vestiges of the old representations never seem too far behind. Jenny relinquishes her scholarship and professional studies in favor of taking on the role of Wife. In *The Turning Point*, Deedee has spent years agonizing over choices she made and blames her friend instead of taking responsibility. Emma made sacrifices in life and found success doing what she loves, but in the end, the demands of her career leave her with little more than memories. Her character represents the loneliness and regret of a woman who made the wrong choice. By the late 1970s, a backlash against feminism began to appear on-screen and off. In the following chapter, I examine a group of films from the postfeminist era that gave us the “chick flick.” I intend to determine whether on-screen women actually liberate themselves at last, and continue on the progressive path they started down in the 1970s, but seemingly failed to sustain.

# CHAPTER IV

# THE CHICK FLICK

The early 1980s did not produce a proliferation of woman's films in any form. On the whole, the first half of the decade greeted audiences primarily with action heroes, wild teenagers, and psychotic killers in popular films such as *Friday the 13th* (1980), *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982), *Porky's* (1982), *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), and *The Terminator* (1984) to name a few.[141] In fact, these three sub-genres—action, teen comedy, and "slasher" film—comprise the bulk of major movie releases at that time.[142] Within these sub-genres, women rarely perform a principal role. For example, she is either altogether absent or serves as an auxiliary player in action films, symbolizes a guy's ultimate prize in teen comedies, and nearly always plays the victim in slasher movies.

Perhaps Hollywood felt that audiences needed a respite from the female heroines that filled the screens in the 1970s. Thus, studios responded by presenting a variety of traditionally-masculine men in lead roles. However, women finally returned to the screen in larger numbers by the late 80s. They appeared as career women, femme fatales, and even witches and space warriors in higher-grossing films like *Aliens* (1986), *Fatal Attraction* (1987), *Baby Boom* (1987), *The Witches of Eastwick* (1987), and *Working Girl* (1988). The female heroine began to appear with more frequency and the woman-centered film once again gained popularity. Hollywood found a winning formula and consistently released "women's pictures" with great success from the latter part of the 1980s through the present day.[143] No longer the "new" woman's film, they would soon be known as "chick flicks." Created for a third generation of female audiences, these films target the daughters of the women who struggled through the second wave.

---

[141] The top-grossing films between the years 1980 and 1985 were: *The Empire Strikes Back*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *E. T. The Extra-Terrestrial*, *Return of the Jedi*, *Beverly Hills Cop*, and *Back to the Future*, respectively. Only seven "woman's films" grossed enough to reach the top 10 of any year between 1980 and 1985: *9 to 5*, *On Golden Pond*, *An Officer and a Gentleman*, *Terms of Endearment*, *Romancing the Stone*, *Out of Africa*, and *The Color Purple*. To put in another way, out of the 60 movies that charted in the top 10 over the course of these six years, only seven fall into the "woman's film" category. See Box Office Mojo, Yearly Box Office chart, *http://boxofficemojo.com/yearly/* for a complete listing. The Dartmouth College Library Film Studies Research Guide lists Box Office Mojo as the "most comprehensive box office tracking available online."

[142] See *http://boxofficemojo.com/yearly/* for a complete listing that reveals such trends. See also *http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1980s_in_film* for a detailed discussion.

In *The Ultimate Guide to Chick Flicks*, author Kim Adelman notes their perennial appeal for women, and thus, their consistently high numbers at the box office: "Chick flicks have such power that we are hesitant to reveal how much we are affected. There's a reason Julia Roberts's movies have racked up more than $2.5 billion worldwide. By definition, these films are specifically created to appeal to females—our emotions, our issues, our fantasies, our fears."[144]

---

[143] For example, *Dirty Dancing* (1987), *Baby Boom* (1987), *Beaches* (1988), *Working Girl* (1988), *Steel Magnolias* (1989), *When Harry Met Sally* (1989), *Pretty Woman* (1990), *Ghost* (1990), *Father of the Bride* (1991), *Prince of Tides* (1991), *A League of Their Own* (1992), *The Bodyguard* (1992), *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993), *The Piano* (1993), *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994), *Legends of the Fall* (1994), *Waiting to Exhale* (1995), *The Bridges of Madison County* (1995), *The English Patient* (1996), *The Truth About Cats and Dogs* (1996), *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997), *Titanic* (1997), *You've Got Mail* (1998), *Hope Floats* (1998), *Runaway Bride* (1999), *Notting Hill* (1999), *Miss Congeniality* (2000), *Chocolat* (2000), *The Wedding Planner* (2001), *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* (2002), *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002), *Under the Tuscan Sun* (2003), *How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days* (2003), *The Notebook* (2004), *Before Sunset* (2004), *In Her Shoes* (2005), *Monster-in-Law* (2005), *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006), *Failure to Launch* (2006), *Music and Lyrics* (2007), and *Becoming Jane* (2007).

[144] Adelman, *The Ultimate Guide to Chick Flicks*, 1.

The preceding chapter explored the new woman's film and its representations of modern womanhood in the late 1960s and the 1970s. While the archetypes of the Mother and the Wife still appear in these films, they occasionally receive positive revisions. Additionally, the liberated woman—in varying degrees—emerges as a new feminine archetype. I argued that these changes occurred both as a result of the powerful influence of the feminist movement and Hollywood's desire to cash in on these attitudes. This chapter applies the same methodology to a new set of films to investigate the effects of post-feminism on the portrayal of women in film. In this case, the time period begins in the late 1980s and the "genre" in question is the chick flick. I identify the origins of the chick flick, define its generic conventions, and through my analyses, examine its mythic and rhetorical functions for teaching new audiences about women. I find that the chick flick essentially represents a seemingly updated, yet rhetorically similar version of the "woman's film" that regresses back to old archetypes.

To accomplish this, I analyze films from the late 1980s and early 1990s: *Beaches* (1988), *Steel Magnolias* (1989), and *Pretty Woman* (1990). Like the films from Chapter III, all of these may be broadly considered as woman's films since they exemplify the elements of that genre. I focus my analysis on films from this limited time period for two reasons. First, post-feminism refers to a phase of the feminist movement that scholars date back to this period, and it represents the era we still live in today. Therefore, any woman's film released during or after the late 80s might serve as an accurate reflection of the era. Secondly, a spate of woman's films came to theaters in the late 80s that coincided with the arrival of post-feminism and this type of film has appeared steadily to date.

During the 1980s, widespread and often impassioned public debate still existed over the social and political changes brought on by the feminist movement. Many Americans seemed willing to explore newfound feminine roles and fully supported female equality. In 1980, a Gallup poll revealed extensive support for women's reproductive freedom and their right to hold political office.[145] With regard to political advancement, this certainly came to fruition. For example, President Ronald Reagan appointed Sandra Day O'Connor as first female Supreme Court Justice in 1981, and in 1983, he appointed Elizabeth Dole as Secretary of Transportation and Margaret Heckler as Secretary of Health and Human Services. The following year, the Democratic Party chose Geraldine Ferraro as its candidate for vice-president. Concerning the family and the home, a 1983 survey found that most respondents believed both spouses should share household chores and childcare as well as financial decision-making. In spite of these public and personal strides, some Americans longed for the idyllic past fabricated by the escapist needs of post-World War II society.[146]

In his book *American Myth, American Reality*, James Oliver Robertson crystallizes these complex feelings:

> Traditional roles are not easily given up, and the realities of mythology are often easier to reinforce than to change. The erosion of the sanctity of the home, for

---

[145] Glenda Riley, *Inventing the American Woman: A Perspective on Women's History* (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1987), 258-259.

[146] Riley, *Inventing the American Woman*, 259.

> example (that is, the blurring of the separation of private and public life), brought a heightened defense of the prime symbol of the home—mother. The gradual loss of a clear distinction between masculine and feminine spheres of influence brought heightened concern about masculinity and femininity, and increased efforts to defend the spheres that remained and extend their sway.[147]

Workplace and household issues, and political agendas, continued to shift and change throughout the decade until the force of the women's movement began to hit the proverbial wall. As a result, the movement transitioned out of second wave feminism and entered a new phase known as post-feminism. Unlike the first two phases of the movement, post-feminism did not begin as a result of female activism. Instead, this phase began as a result of media attention on public attitudes about the movement. Furthermore, post-feminism involves a more complex set of ideas and concerns that have defied simple classification.

According to Bonnie J. Dow, post-feminism "refers to a term used to identify attitudes toward women's liberation that began to emerge in media coverage in the late 1980s."[148] She argues that two basic themes recurred in journalistic efforts to evaluate the progress of women and their attitudes toward the changes it brought. The first theme, signified by the term "post-feminism," claims that the feminist movement had ended and accomplished its major goals. The second theme emerged in press accounts focusing on the fact that some women felt dissatisfied with the aftermath of feminist advances, namely the challenge combining family and work. Dow suggests that the

---

[147] James Oliver Robertson, *American Myth, American Reality* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), 203.

[148] Bonnie J. Dow, "*Murphy Brown* and Postfeminist Politics," in *Mass Politics: The Politics of Popular Culture*, ed. Daniel M. Shea (New York: St. Martin's, 1999), 16.

"rash of post-feminist trend stories" in the 1980s created the impression that women's liberation served as the source of problems for women, rather than their solution.[149]

For example, *Time* magazine's 1989 cover story reads "Is There a Future for Feminism?" and the article asserts that many career women resent feminists for failing to foresee the sacrifices they would have to make. "The bitterest complaints come from the growing ranks of women who have reached 40 and find themselves childless, having put their careers first," the story claims.[150] In a sense, this single article merges both themes that Dow describes. It asks whether a future exists for the movement, hence the term "post-feminism," and it highlights the unforeseen consequences feminism has created.

More than ten years after the *Time* magazine piece, scholar Mollie Gregory expresses similar concerns over the media's negative assessment of the women's movement. She explains, "No one seems to know what post-feminism means but we are definitely in it. But even the term, post-feminism, points to struggles that are won and they're over…and yet it's clear that women are coming to see the essentially repetitive nature of the struggle."[151] Her comments reveal that, over a decade later, women remained engaged with essentially the same issues and concerns. Thus, it seems a widespread "third wave" of the movement has yet to surface. The concept of post-feminism can be problematic because of its versatility and ability to symbolize so many different things. According to feminist scholar Diane Negra, "Indeed the term itself seems to have entered wide usage without necessarily any clear agreement about its meanings…its exhibits a plasticity that enables it to be used in contradictory ways."[152] To illustrate its multiplicity, Sarah Projansky carefully defines five interrelated categories of post-feminist discourse: linear post-feminism, backlash post-feminism, equality and choice post-feminism, (hetero) sex-positive post-feminism, and male post-feminism.[153] This should indicate the extent to which the notion reflects conflicting, confusing, and thus, unproductive meaning for modern women's experience.

---

[149] Dow, "*Murphy Brown* and Postfeminist Politics," 17.

[150] Claudia Wallis, "Onward, Women!" *Time*, December 4, 1989, 82.

[151] Mollie Gregory, *Women Who Run the Show* (New York: St. Martin's, 2002), 375.

Critics Pam Cook and Philip Dodd concisely summarize the dilemma of the post-feminist era with their suggestion that the "notion of post-feminism is nothing if not double-edged: on one hand, a celebration of undeniable victories achieved; on the other, registering the occlusion of women's issues as other political priorities take precedence."[154] Unfortunately, the current outlook that "women's issues" no longer merit the same consideration they received in the 1970s most negatively affects the generation that has since entered womanhood. In 2006, Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young make the following observations regarding the dual nature of the post-feminist phase:

> The generations of women coming of age after the women's movement of the 1960s find themselves in an ambiguous position: they have indubitably benefited from feminism's push for education and access to professions, but they still

---

[152] Diane Negra, "Quality Postfeminism? Sex and the Single Girl on HBO," *Genders* 39 (2004), *http://www.genders.org/g39/g39_negra.html* (accessed September 1, 2007).

[153] See Sarah Projansky, *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Post-Feminism Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2001).

[154] Pam Cook and Philip Dodd, eds., *Women and Film: A Sight and Sound Reader* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), x.

> experience pressures from without and desires from within for romance and family. In short, they are caught between competing demands to be strong and independent while retaining their femininity.[155]

Based on these accounts spanning more than 15 years, it seems apparent that women face the same set of attitudes, challenges, and pressures as they did when the second wave came to an end. Beginning in the late 80s, while the media created and shaped the post-feminist era in which America remains firmly entrenched, many films began to reflect these circumstances. As in the late 1960s, Hollywood once again seemed to respond to the intensive media coverage regarding the modern woman. As a result, another cycle of woman's films began in earnest. The success and ubiquity of this cycle helped produced its now-universal moniker, the "chick flick."

## The Origins of the Chick Flick

The chick flick represents one of those cultural phenomena that most everyone instantly recognizes, but few can precisely recall its origins. The term has gained such common usage that it has become a permanent fixture in public consciousness, as its addition to Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary in 2005 clearly demonstrates.[156] Although it may seem that the chick flick has been ingrained in our collective mind for much longer, the term "chick flick" only emerged in the early 1990s.

Initially, it appeared in other variations before finding its current form. A 1993 interview with Meg Ryan about her starring role in *Sleepless in Seattle* uses the term

---

[155] Ferris and Young, eds., *Chick Lit*, 9.

[156] "How Do You Spell 'Chick Flick'? Look It Up," *MSNBC online*, October 3, 2005, *http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/9579179* (accessed September 1, 2007).

"chick's movie." During this interview with the *Toronto Star*, Ryan recalls her enjoyment of the 1960s romance *Splendor in the Grass*. She comments that "there are definitely movies that women enjoy more than men enjoy. I really do like movies that are more about an internal journey, which is sort of, you know, a female thing." In response, the interviewer suggests that her ideas about film "may arise from the certainty that such a thing as the 'chick's movie' not only exists, but is positively flourishing…"[157]

Within the same month, *Sleepless in Seattle* director Nora Ephron proudly refers to her film as a "chick's flick" in the *Star Tribune*. The article explains that "Most filmmakers try to dodge labels like 'a woman's movie' out of fear that it will limit their potential audience. Ephron has taken a different approach. The romance not only flaunts its identity as a woman's movie—or as she puts it, 'a chick's flick'—it even pokes fun at itself for being one."[158]

Two years later, in 1995, the *Herald Sun* mentions Ephron's version of the term, explaining that movie publicists refer to "movies about women" as chick's flicks.[159] Within a few months, a *Chicago-Sun Times* article cites the phrase in its contemporary form.[160] From this point forward, “chick flick” appeared consistently in national media and gained mainstream conversational usage as well.

---

[157] Craig Macinnis, "There's Always Been Chicks' Flicks and Guys' Pics," *Toronto Star*, June 19, 1993, G1.

[158] Jeff Strickler, "Nora Ephron's 'Sleepless' Conveys Starry-eyed Charm," *Star Tribune*, June 25, 1993, 1E.

[159] A. Bolt, "Moral of the Chick Flicks," *Herald Sun*, May 23, 1995.

The term “chick flick” holds significance apart from its introduction into the American lexicon. Its connotation alone provides insight into the attitudes toward the films and the women who watch them. The word “chick” often carries a derogatory implication, and “flick” is a slang word, which suggests that these movies did not even merit a term that acts as a generic descriptor such as romance, action, film noir, drama, etc. It seems that women were better served in the 1930s when studio executives dubbed female-centered pictures “woman’s films.” I would contend that the chick flick merely represents an updated, yet less desirable version of that term.

Not only does the term chick flick possess negative connotations, it also receives negative treatment as a specific type of film. Just as the woman’s film did two generations ago, the chick flick endures a lowly status in the view of many critics, industry executives, and male viewers. Reviewers have panned chick flicks with such unforgiving descriptors as: vapid, weak, formulaic, clichéd, melodramatic, sappy, tedious, platitude-laden, whiny, predictable, soap operatic, giddy, overly-sentimental…[161]

---

[160] Cindy Pearlman, “Chick Flicks: Emotions! Talking! Big Issues! Even Eating! Hollywood Finds Women,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, November 5, 1995, sec. “Show,” 1.

[161] See Alex Kuczynski, “Women Hanging Together: How Long Must We Watch?” *New York Times*, June 9, 2002, sec. 9, 1; Claudia Puig, “‘Oleander’ Wilts Under a Weak, Formulaic Story,” *USA Today*, October 11, 2002, 6E; Philip Booth, “Soak up the ‘Tuscan Sun,’” *St. Petersburg Times*, September 25, 2003, 10W; and Molly Haskell, “Girls on Film: Why Chick Flicks Have Greater Emotional Integrity than Men’s Movies,” *Guardian*, March 28, 2003, sec. “Friday Review,” 5.

Despite almost universal derision by film critics (and male audiences), the chick flick has proven incredibly popular with a large group of female viewers as the sheer number of “woman’s film” releases should demonstrate. Obviously, poor reviews have never prevented women from seeing a chick flick. In addition to their money-making abilities, numerous films likely classified as chick flicks have garnered the highest praise at the Academy Awards. More than 20 so-called woman’s pictures have received an Oscar for Best Picture since 1931. The most recent winners include *Chicago* (2002) and *Shakespeare in Love* (1998).[162] Of course, most chick flicks would not be considered Oscar-caliber films, because too often they prove to be the fundamentally simplistic and formulaic productions as their detractors claim.

The fact that some actresses choose to distance themselves from the stigma of a chick flick demonstrates how these films pigeonhole actresses into playing a particular type of character throughout their careers. In an interview about the 2003 film *Mona Lisa Smile*, co-stars Julia Roberts and Marcia Gay Harden take care to explain that their film should not be regarded as a chick flick. Harden remarks, “When people say ‘chick flick’ it seems like people are talking about movies about slumber parties and girls in cute little negligees. This [film] is not [about] that. It’s just a movie that may appeal and hopefully will appeal to women, but that does not mean it won’t appeal to men.”

---

[162] Other Best Picture winners include: *The English Patient* (1996), *Driving Miss Daisy* (1989), *Out of Africa* (1985), *Terms of Endearment* (1983), *Ordinary People* (1980), *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979), *Annie Hall* (1977), *The Sound of Music* (1965), *My Fair Lady* (1964), *West Side Story* (1961), *Gigi* (1958), *All About Eve* (1950), *Casablanca* (1943), *Mrs. Miniver* (1942), *How Green Was My Valley* (1941), *Rebecca* (1940), *Gone with the Wind* (1939), *It Happened One Night* (1934), and *Grand Hotel* (1931). See the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Official Academy Awards Database, *http://www.oscars.org/awardsdatabase/*.

Roberts states, “I don’t think we made a chick flick. We just made a movie.”[163] Unfortunately, convincing critics and the public that she “just made a movie” may prove difficult for a star like Julia Roberts who has been effectively typecast as a chick flick heroine. Roberts has appeared in several films that easily garner the chick flick label, including *Mystic Pizza* (1988), *Steel Magnolias* (1989), *Pretty Woman* (1990), *Dying Young* (1991), *Something to Talk About* (1995), *My Best Friend’s Wedding* (1997), *Stepmom* (1998), *Runaway Bride* (1999), *Notting Hill* (1999), and *Mona Lisa Smile* (2003). With her resume, it should come as no surprise that she has been deemed “the ultimate chick flick superstar.”[164]

Other Hollywood women have taken action against the risks of chick flick association by writing, directing, and producing their own films to allow them complete creative control. Demi Moore, who produced the all-female film *Now and Then* in 1995, articulates the viewpoint of some actresses: “Women are fed up with action and guns. Women are [now] more powerful in Hollywood. We’re producing and writing our own pieces.” Actress Annette Bening, who had several projects in development at the time, echoes Moore’s sentiments. “It got to the point where every woman was complaining about the lack of roles, so finally women said ‘Why aren’t we writing them? Why aren’t we getting together with other powerful women? We have a responsibility to find these stories and knock some studio head around and say ‘Look, we’ve got to make this movie.'"[165] All of these women clearly strive to take the image of female-led films into a more positive direction.

---

[163] Sue Zeidler, “Roberts Rejects the Chick-Flick Label,” *New Zealand Herald*, April 22, 2004, *http://www.nzherald.co.nz/section/6/story.cfm?c_id=6&objectid=3556230* (accessed September 4, 2007).

[164] Adelman, *The Ultimate Guide to Chick Flicks*, 44.

At this point, I have established that the chick flick endures as a significant cultural product despite its poor reputation and that many women in Hollywood seek to change its perception. However, I must first establish its definition as a genre to properly analyze the films themselves. Unlike the woman's film and the new woman's film before it, the chick flick has not yet been the subject of serious scholarly attention.[166] There have however, been multiple non-academic books published, usually categorized as guides or reviews. These typically take on a light, humorous tone and offer only semi-serious definitions of the chick flick as a genre.[167] Thus, I have minimal sources from which to draw a working definition.

Molly Haskell, film scholar and author of a seminal work on women in film, provides one of my main points of reference. In 2003, she contributed an article on chick flicks to the *Guardian*, which offers an excellent description and commentary on the genre. Haskell defines a chick flick as "the latter-day term for the 'woman's film'" that shares some “basic elements with its predecessor” such as “a woman-centeredness revolving around the life of the emotions, an arena in which men exist purely as ancillaries to women, and only to be loved.” In other words, these films feature women yearning for the opportunity to love a man, who exists mainly as the object of the woman’s affection. Haskell also argues that although the genre has transformed over time, the chick flick ultimately brings women back to the confines of the traditional woman’s film:

---

[165] Cindy Pearlman, "Chick Flicks," sec. "Show," 1.

[166] Thorough research into scholarly work in the fields of communication, film, and women's studies has yielded no notable results at the time of this writing. I have found only one relevant publication that is scheduled for release on October 22, 2007: Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young, eds., *Chick Flicks: Contemporary Women at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, Forthcoming). This book will contain a collection of essays that, to my knowledge, will be the first to deal specifically with the chick flick in a scholarly manner.

[167] See for example, Kim Adelman, *The Ultimate Guide to Chick Flicks* (New York: Broadway Books, 2005); Jami Bernard, *Chick Flicks: A Movie Lover's Guide to the Movies Women Love* (New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1997); Jo Berry and Angie Errigo, *Chick Flicks: Movies Women Love* (London: Orion, 2004); Samantha Cook, *The Rough Guide to Chick Flicks* (London: Rough Guides, 2006); and Nancy Peske and Beverly West, *Cinematherapy: The Girl's Guide to Movies for Every Mood* (New York: Dell, 1999).

> The genre has morphed as women’s concerns have themselves enlarged. Choices have proliferated; passivity is no longer the default mode. Where the angst of the woman’s film came from a shortage of options, today’s women suffer from ambivalence brought on by a shortage of time and too many choices…thrusting our heroine, in her compulsive need to vent, back into the narrow focus which is the province of the woman’s film.[168]

Her explanation of the women in these films underscores the concerns of many women in real life. The gains of the feminist movement presented women with choices and options previously unavailable to them. Consequently, some women (on screen and off) find this difficult to manage, and thus regress into old modes of behavior.

Another discussion of the chick flick comes from an article by Diane Negra. She defines the chick flick as a reflection of the “social pressure for marriage and childbearing” which emphasizes “the difficulties of female professionalism” and often depicts characters who “unlearn the insights of feminism.” Chick flicks often accomplish this by including an epiphany in which the heroine perceives the futility “having it all” and reprioritizes her life in favor of heterosexual romance and/or motherhood.[169] Negra's definition also seems to place the conventions of the chick flick within the context of post-feminism. She perceives these films as a rejection of the choices that feminism offers to women.

---

[168] Molly Haskell, “Girls on Film,” sec. “Friday Review,” 5.

I will formulate my own working definition of the chick flick based on these scholarly treatments of the genre and on my own analyses of these films. Although Haskell and Negra do not offer identical definitions, some common themes emerge. First, the chick flick always involves one or more women as the central protagonists. Second, these films emphasize the seeking of romantic love, often with marriage as the goal. Finally, and most significantly, the chick flick typically takes a backward step into the world of the woman's film (e.g., most chick flicks do not portray women seizing the multiple options presented by the gains of the women's movement. Instead, the heroines usually stay within the constraints of traditional roles.) For the purposes of this paper, these elements constitute my definition of the chick flick. With a definition established, I now look at the chick flicks themselves.[170]

### *Beaches*: Turning Back the Tide for Progressive Archetypes

The chick flick got one of its biggest hits of 1988 with the release of the movie *Beaches*, ranking 15th in domestic gross for that year.[171] Based on a novel by Iris Rainer Dart, this drama stars Bette Midler and Barbara Hershey in a story about the life-long friendship of two women. Bette Midler portrays CC Bloom, a brash, unsophisticated singer who eventually becomes a Broadway star. Barbara Hershey plays Hillary Whitney, a well-bred girl from a rich family who builds a career as a lawyer. The women represent complete opposites in disposition and viewpoints, a large part of what draws them together initially. Consequently, this causes them to spend most of the movie both attracting and repelling one another.

---

[169] Negra, "Quality Postfeminism?" available online at *http://www.genders.org/g39/g39_negra.html*

[170] The films in my analysis were released before "chick flick" became a widely used term. However, I categorize all of these films as such since they adhere to its generic conventions. Additionally, each has risen to "classic" status among chick flicks according to numerous books, magazine articles, web pages, fan sites, and informal surveys.

[171] See *http://boxofficemojo.com/yearly/chart/?yr=1988&p=.htm* for yearly rankings.

CC represents the liberated woman archetype for the post-feminist era. Her character very much exhibits independence, ambition, even selfishness when it comes to meeting her life's goals. From the beginning, she displays a single-minded determination to succeed as a singer and performer, which she eventually does. Yet, she continually seeks approval and validation from everyone close to her.

In contrast, Hillary represents the Wife and Mother archetypes in the traditional sense. However, she proves to be a more complex character as the film progresses. Reminiscent of Jenny in the beginning of *Love Story*, Hillary seems independent and feminist-inspired as a young woman. But, as she enters adulthood, those aspects of her character slowly diminish until she appears a perfect example of the classic Wife and Mother.

CC and Hillary first meet on the beach in Atlantic City and quickly become friends. CC spent the summer performing in a variety show, and Hillary was on vacation with her father and her Aunt Vesta, who had raised her since her mother died years earlier. The two girls promise to write each other when Hillary's vacation came to an end. They keep their promise and the film recounts their relationship through their letters.

As she prepares to leave for college, Hillary writes a letter to CC that reveals some of the conflicting elements of her character:

> Dear CC,
> I've decided to study law and I'm convinced I'll have some effect on the world, rather than end up in a mindless woman's club like my Aunt Vesta. I ended up choosing Stanford because four generations of Whitneys went there—all men of course. But mainly, I have to confess, because it's co-ed.[172]

She conveys the need to enter a rewarding and challenging profession rather than engaging in "mindless" pursuits like her aunt; though she admits to being largely influenced by the prospect of attending college with men.

However, Hillary soon asserts her independence in a significant way. CC has been living on her own in New York, spending her time looking for work and attending every audition to no avail. In desperation, she accepts a job as a nightclub singer until a better opportunity comes along. Hillary has graduated from college, and one night during a performance, she walks into the club and surprises CC for their first face-to-face encounter since childhood:

> CC: What are you doing here in New York?
> Hillary: I don't know. I just walked out of my life. I've been feeling suffocated for years, but I couldn't take it any more. It's funny how that happens, isn't it? I woke up this morning and I thought, 'This is it!' and I left. My job, my father, my apartment…
> CC: Your money, too.
> Hillary: Yeah, I hadn't really though about it, but I guess my money, too.

---

[172] All subsequent quotations taken from *Beaches*, dir. Garry Marshall (USA: Touchstone Pictures, 1988).

CC invites Hillary to stay with her, and as she shows her around the apartment, Hillary bursts into tears:

> Hillary: I'm happy.  It just hit me that I'm free.  You don't know what it's been like for me.  My father controlled everything I did, even down to the kind of law I practiced.  And now for the first time in my life, I'm doing exactly what I want to do rather than what I've been trained to do.

She explains that she felt "suffocated" by her controlling father and by the life she led, and she took radical action to change it.  Feeling exhilarated by her newfound sense of freedom and possibility, in this moment Hillary exemplifies the liberated woman.  She and CC decide to become roommates, and Hillary begins practicing law with the ACLU while CC struggles to break into show business.  It seems as though these characters could take the female friendship storyline in new, imaginative directions.  Unfortunately, the scenario soon becomes familiar and clichéd.

The introduction of a man into their lives begins to unravel the film's potential to tell a new story of independent, interesting women.  CC meets a director named John Pierce who invites her to audition for his theater company.  He also meets Hillary and feels an immediate attraction to her.  CC gets a small part in one of his plays, and shortly after lands the lead in his new musical.  On opening night, John and Hillary spend time alone together at the cast party, which makes CC quite jealous.  So much so that she gets drunk and stays out all night with her "real friends."  When she returns home the next morning, she confronts Hillary and asks if she slept with John:

> Hillary: Yes, I did.
> CC: What a snake.  So, did the two of you fall in love?
> Hillary: I don't know.  It was incredibly romantic—we went to the Plaza, we

> drank champagne, and I think he's the most attractive man I've ever met in my life.
> CC: You and your feminist principles.
> Hillary: I know how you feel about him. I feel sick about what I've done.
> CC: I'd never do something that heartless to a friend.
> Hillary: I swear I'll never see him again.
> CC: Oh, who are you kidding? Besides, what's the difference? He doesn't even know I'm alive. Looks like he's crazy about you.

His character serves to divide them against one another, undercutting the power of their friendship. Against her better judgment, Hillary betrays her friend and her "feminist principles" as CC sarcastically puts it. She also deals a blow to CC's self esteem in the process. This scene sets a transformation in motion for both women.

First, Hillary goes to San Francisco to take care of her ailing father, and loses her job with the ACLU because of her long absence. Her father dies, then she meets and marries another lawyer named Michael Essex, and so she stays in San Francisco. During this time, John tells CC that she has outgrown the theater company and should move on. She takes his advice and gets offered the lead in a Broadway revue, which becomes a great success. Then, CC and John begin dating, and before long CC suggests that they get married. Approximately two years pass before CC and Hillary see each other again. All of these significant life changes have created changes in both women as well.

The following scene demonstrates Hillary's transformation from liberated woman to archetypal Wife. Hillary and Michael visit New York and attend CC's Broadway show. Following her performance, the two couples go to dinner to catch up. Hillary has stopped working since she and Michael got married. CC asks if she misses being a lawyer:

> Hillary: No, I don't miss practicing law at all.
> CC: But it meant so much to you.
> Michael: Well, it was a little difficult having two lawyers in the same household, you know? Somebody's got to do the entertaining.
> CC: So, what do you do with yourself all day now that you're a housewife? Don't you get bored sitting around the house all day?
> Hillary: No, because I don't sit around the house all day. I keep extremely busy.

She explains that she spends her time volunteering for various charities, boards, and organizations. CC asks if that makes her happy. Hillary becomes defensive and insists that she is indeed *very* happy. She has regressed from the brave person who came to New York for a new life of her own. Now, she lives an unfulfilled and controlled life, except at the hands of her husband instead of her father. Hillary's visit with CC quickly deteriorates and things become very tense between them.

On Hillary's last day in town, they go shopping together at a department store where the conversation that transpires represents the turning point of the entire film. Both CC and Hillary reveal every source of hurt, anger, and resentment they feel toward each other. Moreover, each revelation provides insight into the true nature of these women and perhaps on some level, the true nature of female friendships themselves.

> CC: (Looking at a display of baby clothes.) Oh Hill, look. Isn't this divine?
> Hillary: It's so sweet. I can't wait to have a baby.
> CC: I know what you mean.
> Hillary: You do?
> CC: Of course I do. Why wouldn't I?
> Hillary: I don't know. I just thought someone like you wouldn't care about children. You're so obsessed with your career and all.
> CC: I'm not obsessed. Just because I work doesn't mean *someone like me* doesn't want to have children.
> Hillary: Well, wanting them and caring for them properly are two different things. It's a full-time job.

> CC: For some people.
> Hillary: Yes, the ones who want to take the responsibility and don't just have children to gratify their over-weaning egos.
> CC: What the hell is going on here?
> Hillary: Would you please lower your voice?
> CC: No, I won't. I want to know what's eating you. You have been a total bitch ever since you came to New York.
> Hillary: I could say the same thing about you.
> CC: I was simply reacting to you.
> Hillary: Don't you get it? We've grown apart. It happens to the best of friends, it's happened to us. We might as well face it.
> CC: You're ridiculous.
> Hillary: *I'm* ridiculous?
> CC: We haven't grown apart. You've fallen apart.
> Hillary: I don't think I care to pursue this. So long CC, take care.
> CC: Why you stuck up little witch! When your father died he took the best of you with him. You tried to be an interesting person for a while, but look at you now. You've completely reverted to type. You're nothing but a small-minded, tight ass little snob these days!
> Hillary: How would a pretentious little climber like you know that?
> CC: Experience. And I know what's eating you, too…Plain old-fashioned jealousy.
> Hillary: Jealousy? What am I jealous of? Your insane ambition? No, no it must be your new money. No, I'm jealous of your marriage of convenience. That must be it.
> CC: My what?
> Hillary: Aren't you afraid you got him [John] by default?
> CC: Maybe I am. But at least I belong to myself, which is more than I can say for you. I'm doing what I set out to do, remember? I'm living the life you didn't have the courage for. So don't give me you're not jealous. You're so jealous you can hardly breathe. (She walks away.)

All of this dialogue essentially exposes that even the best of friends often want what the other woman has. Beneath the façade of their friendship lays a deep jealousy and insecurity that eventually damages the relationship. Rather than accepting and celebrating their differences, the actions of these women teach female viewers that such behavior is natural and perhaps inevitable. This incident leaves a huge rift between CC and Hillary. CC feels guilty about the things she said and repeatedly writes Hillary to apologize, but Hillary sends all of her letters back unread for months afterward.

During this time, Hillary leads a boring life at home in San Francisco, marked by her role as archetypal Wife. She starts to feel stifled by the lack of purpose in her life. Michael makes a nice living and employs a maid, so she does not even have household chores to keep her busy. This bit of dialogue between the couple over breakfast demonstrates her uselessness:

> Michael: What are you going to be doing today?
> Hillary: I'm going to my exercise class and I'm going to buy a wrench.
> Michael: Why a wrench?
> Hillary: Because we don't have one.
> Michael: Super. Sounds great. (He kisses her goodbye and leaves for work.)

Hillary has clearly become the embodiment of a rich Wife since she has nothing better to do than go shopping for an item simply because they do not own it. More importantly, she gave up her career at her husband's request only to spend her time on pointless activities.

CC's life takes a turn for the worst, with her problems stemming from her focus on career. Her marriage to John became a lower priority, leading to relationship problems, and eventually she decides to leave him. Thinking she made a mistake, she goes to find him and attempts to talk things over:

> CC: I need you.
> John: What do you need me for? You need an escort; need somebody to hang up your fur coat? Come on, that's not how I want to spend my life. I don't care about success as much as you do, CC.

> CC: We have been fighting about this for so long. What's wrong with success? We're Americans; we're supposed to want to be successful!
> John: I'm glad that you're successful. It makes me happy that you're successful. I just don't want to go where you're going.
> CC: Then I won't go.
> John: You're already gone, Cecelia, long gone.

CC faces a problem entirely opposite from her friend. She is the one working and pursuing her dreams, while her husband does not "want to go" there with her. He explains that he does not want to spend his life in her shadow and agrees they should just stay apart. In true post-feminist fashion, CC strives to have both her husband and her career, but he makes that choice for her. Ironically, her marriage fails because of her career, and now her career begins to fail as well. While working on a Hollywood film, she argues with the director over the character she portrays. The director becomes angry, clears the set, and shares hurtful words with CC:

> Look, it's no secret that I didn't want you on this picture, ok? You're trouble. Your looks are shot. I mean, you have bags under your eyes. Darling you've got enough luggage there to go to Europe. I don't know what you've been doing to get by. Maybe you still think you can dazzle them with your talent. I'm here to tell ya, you're through. You ain't got it any more.

The director portrays a Hollywood stereotype by discriminating against a woman for showing signs of age and predicting the demise of her career because of it.

With the decline of her acting career and the loss of her husband because of her ambition CC represents another liberated woman punished for her choices. Eventually, though, she finds some success as a singer and goes to perform in a San Francisco club. Hillary hears about the appearance and comes to see her at rehearsal. She admits that she was so jealous of CC that she "couldn't see straight. You did everything you said you were going to do." They make up and catch up on each other's lives. Hillary reveals that she is three months pregnant, but Michael does not want the baby because he is having an affair and plans to marry the other woman. CC stays in San Francisco to take care of Hillary during her pregnancy and meets Hillary's doctor while accompanying her to an appointment.

A short time later, CC and Richard start dating, and she seems to have regrets about the path she has chosen. Richard asks if she is anxious to get back to New York. She replies that she might be "sick of the show business life. Maybe I want to have something normal for a change. Maybe I'd like to be a wife and a mother, and have kids, and join the quilting bee, and have a station wagon." Richard responds, "You mean you'd consider giving up your career for marriage?" CC answers, "Oh, God yeah…if I met the right guy. Maybe." Completely out of character, CC considers giving up her entire career for "something normal" like being a wife and a mother. In a radical move, they become engaged almost immediately. However, her change of heart proves very brief when she receives a call from her agent with an offer for a lead role. She returns to New York without delay and leaves an angry Hillary to break the news to Richard. CC's new play becomes a hit and she fulfills a dream by winning a Tony award for her performance.

Toward the end of the film, Hillary has her baby and begins practicing law again since she must provide for her child. Some time later, she develops a sudden illness. The doctors diagnose her with a heart disease that requires her to change her lifestyle and quit her job again. As her condition worsens, Hillary decides to spend her last days at her family's beach house.  She soon dies there with CC and her daughter Victoria Cecelia close by.  After Hillary's funeral, CC explains to Victoria that her mother's will states that CC should be her legal guardian.  She feels awkward around the little girl, but does her best to comfort her:

> CC: If you don't want to come with me, Victoria, I'll understand.  I don't know what kind of mother I'll make.  You wouldn't believe the things that go through my mind sometimes.  And I'm very selfish, too.

CC shows concern for her mothering skills and describes herself as "very selfish."  This characterization leads women to believe that being a career-oriented woman and a good mother must be mutually exclusive.  In an effort to redeem CC and bring her into a more traditional female role, Victoria chooses to live with CC and the viewer gets the impression that they will live happily ever after.

Despite a promising beginning, *Beaches* ultimately presents stale feminine archetypes through its main characters.  In fact, I would argue that it parallels *The Turning Point* with regard to its presentations of female friendship and the consequences of choice.  Like professional ballerina Emma, CC focuses all her energy on becoming a successful performer.  She sacrifices one marriage and breaks off another for the sake of her ambitions.  And, like Emma, she passes her prime and struggles to regain her pride and rebuild her career.  Ultimately, CC claims her "true femininity" after being literally forced into becoming a mother.  Hillary bears some resemblance to Deedee since she becomes a traditional Wife and Mother and she harbors a profound jealousy toward her best friend for everything she has accomplished.  According to *Beaches*, women have advanced very little since 1977.  In effect, they seem to have scarcely progressed beyond the constraints of the traditional woman's film. Karen Hollinger claims that *Beaches* employs plot devices of the woman's film and maternal melodrama, particularly with its sentimentality and the image of woman as passive victim (Hillary), triumphant only through suffering.[173] Such devices form the typical structure of these genres as I discussed in Chapter II.

Woman-centered films the late 80s seemed to mark a noticeable departure from similar films a decade earlier, and reversed some of the headway made by the new woman's film. The *New York Times* identifies this trend with the question "Are Feminist Heroines an Endangered Species?" in 1989. The article describes *Beaches* as "an updated weepie" in the "old tearjerker tradition of 'woman's films.'" Along with *Beaches*, it singles out *Steel Magnolias* and condemns these films for being "retrograde" and "shamelessly manipulative."[174] As valid as these claims may be, both films became quite successful, giving the impression that women did not oppose anti-feminist heroines or shameless manipulation. More realistically, female audiences would not consciously recognize these elements, since the films simply provide entertainment and enjoyment while the myths perform their function of distortion.[175] Only a closer inspection might reveal the rhetorical persuasiveness of their messages—traditional feminine archetypes depict the ideal woman and culturally sanctioned choices still lead to ultimate happiness. I now look at *Steel Magnolias*, another example of this strategy.

---

[173] Hollinger, *In the Company of Women*, 69.

[174] Caryn James, "Are Feminist Heroines an Endangered Species?" *New York Times*, July 19, 1989, sec. 2, 15.

[175] See Barthes, *Mythologies*, 121.

### *Steel Magnolias*: Stereotypes with a Southern Accent

*Steel Magnolias* came to theaters the year after *Beaches* made its debut and ranks as the 14th highest grossing film of 1989.[176] Beginning as an off-Broadway play, Herbert Ross (*The Turning Point*) directed the film version. It features a tight-knit circle of women who congregate in the beauty parlor of a small Louisiana town where they bond over life's issues. Julia Roberts, in one of her earliest major film roles, earned an Oscar nomination for Best Supporting Actress. Roberts portrays Shelby Eatenton, a vivacious young woman dealing with Type 1 diabetes. The movie also stars Sally Field as Shelby's mother M'Lynn, Shirley MacLaine as the cantankerous Ouiser Boudreaux, Olympia Dukakis as wealthy widow Clairee Belcher, Daryl Hannah as shy beautician Annelle Dupuy-Desoto, and Dolly Parton as beauty parlor owner Truvy Jones. *Steel Magnolias* involves the dramatic subjects of sickness, mother/daughter conflict, marriage, children, and tragic death.

Six women comprise the main characters in this film, but I will focus my analysis on the characters of Shelby. The story primarily centers on her and the relationship with her mother. However, since female friendship plays an important role, I start by briefly describing the representations of the other four women in the group. The women basically represent a cross-section of the female population, ranging from young to old and poor to rich, but all of them are white Louisiana natives.

Truvy Jones, proprietor of Truvy's beauty parlor where much of the action takes place, acts mainly as a source of gossip. Annelle, probably the most complex character in the group, progresses through three phases during the course of the film. She first appears as a painfully shy young woman who Truvy hires as an assistant in her shop, then she gains self-confidence and becomes an outgoing, fun-loving girl. Finally, she transforms into a religious fundamentalist, and ends the film as an archetypal Wife and Mother. Ouiser, eccentric and outspoken, most closely represents a stereotypical "spinster" or "old maid." However, she begrudgingly accepts the attention of a suitor at the end of the movie. Clairee holds an important place in the community since she is the mayor's widow and one of the town's wealthiest people. She plays a likeable, humorous character who delivers many of the most memorable lines in the film. Shelby is a young, beautiful girl who has a complicated relationship with her mother, M'Lynn. Like her mother, she embodies the traditional Wife and Mother, motivated solely by self-sacrifice and giving love to others.

---

[176] See *http://www.boxofficemojo.com/yearly/chart/?yr=1989&p=.htm* for yearly rankings.

From the start, the film emphasizes the importance of these two archetypes. The following scenes demonstrate how Shelby depicts both of them. The film begins with the preparations for Shelby's upcoming wedding. As the women get their hair done for the occasion, Truvy asks Shelby if she and her fiancé Jackson had a romantic engagement because that is her "favorite part." Shelby recounts their story and the group discusses her husband-to-be and aspects of their new life together:

> Clairee: You made a very good catch. Louisiana lawyers do well.
> Shelby: The money is nice, but I just like the idea of growing old with somebody. My dream is to sit on the porch covered in grandchildren.
> Clairee: Are you going to quit your nursing job?
> Shelby: Never. I love being around all those babies.

> M’Lynn: Drum [Shelby’s father] and I both feel that she shouldn’t work after she gets married.[177]

This dialogue clearly reflects antiquated notions of marriage roles. Clairee praises Shelby for her good “catch” of a successful husband and Shelby expresses gratefulness that her “dream” of being “covered in grandchildren” may now be realized. Also, she does not intend to quit her traditionally feminine occupation, although she cites the desire to work “around all those babies” as her sole reason. Therefore, Shelby’s response implies that the incentive for keeping her job does not involve professional or financial aspirations, but simply the opportunity to nurture all those children. Immediately, her character depicts a selfless woman without ambitions of her own. In addition, her parents perpetuate the conception of an archetypal Wife by their wish to confine Shelby to the traditional space of the home.

Shelby and Jackson marry and quickly decide to start a family, further reinforcing the Wife and Mother archetypes. To their dismay, her doctor warns that she should not have children since her diabetes may pose major health risks. Despite the potential complications, the couple decides to have a baby nonetheless. When Shelby informs her mother of their decision, M’Lynn becomes angry that she would attempt something so dangerous. Shelby pleads with her mother to understand: “The one thing that would make me happy is to have a baby. I look at having this baby as the opportunity of a lifetime. Please, *please*, I need your support.” This confrontation puts a strain on their relationship, however, the subsequent announcement of Shelby’s pregnancy forces M’Lynn to deal with the situation. Shelby explains that motherhood is

---

[177] All subsequent quotations taken from *Steel Magnolias*, dir. Herbert Ross (USA: TriStar, 1989).

"the one thing" that would bring her happiness in life. The fact that she would risk her own life to have a baby places her squarely within the traditional Mother role. The story does not even present Shelby with any other options; for her character the choices are literally motherhood or death. Extreme limitations like these exist in abundance in the classic woman's film.

Later in the film, Shelby safely delivers her baby, but not without consequences. The physical strain of pregnancy results in damage to her kidneys, which eventually leads to her sudden death. Naturally, M'Lynn has incredible difficulty accepting her daughter's untimely death. The remainder of the film deals with her coping process and the assistance of her female network as a central part of it. As some time has passed, and M'Lynn focuses her energy on her grandson, the film ends with closure for the audience. The viewer has learned that a pregnant Annelle plans to name her baby girl after Shelby. She goes into labor in the final scene, and thus, the circle of life continues.

Shelby's death and her mother's reaction to it represent the key emotional points in *Steel Magnolias*. Its focus on births and children clearly celebrates the importance of motherhood and depicts it as the ultimate experience in a woman's life, exclusive of any other ambitions or desires. Linda Williams categorizes the film as a maternal melodrama as it identifies motherhood with suffering and self-sacrifice at any cost.[178] *Steel Magnolias* resembles *Beaches* in this regard since both films hearken back to the "weepie" woman's film and impose outdated constraints on their female protagonists. Both films involve the element of female friendship and feature the sacrificial death of a young mother for emotional impact.  Furthermore, they belie the post-feminist era in which they appear, since their core messages echo the attitudes of a pre-feminist world. Following her performance as Shelby, Julia Roberts starred in her first leading role in the highly successful film *Pretty Woman*.  Unfortunately, this film also did not herald the return of the feminist heroine.

---

[178] Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," *Film Quarterly* 44 (1991): 8.

### ***Pretty Woman*: Ugly Heroine**

In the year following the release of *Steel Magnolias*, *Pretty Woman* made an exceptional run in theaters, ranking fourth in the list of top grossing movies of 1990.[179] Julia Roberts received a Best Actress nomination for her role as the prostitute Vivian Ward.  Many consider *Pretty Woman* “the ultimate modern-day chick flick,”[180] but like the previous films, a closer examination reveals an unpleasant message under the surface.

This film presents a controversial variation on the classic Cinderella story.  In this case, the princess is a prostitute instead of a handmaiden and the prince is a powerful businessman.  Vivian depicts a “hooker with a heart of gold” who becomes involved in an unlikely relationship with rich, corporate mogul Edward Lewis, played by Richard Gere.  Vivian does not represent the archetypes of Wife or Mother like so many chick flick heroines.  She does represent a liberated woman, but only in terms of her sexuality and not in the positive sense of the archetype.  Therefore, Vivian cannot be solidly connected to any traditional archetypes, except for that of the Whore, since that is her literal occupation.[181] The fact that she exists outside traditional woman's film representations may be perceived as encouraging, but what she does represent overshadows this. Her character signifies the ultimate in regressive steps for women in film.

---

[179] See *http://www.boxofficemojo.com/yearly/chart/?yr=1990&p=.htm* for yearly rankings.

[180] Adelman, *The Ultimate Guide to Chick Flicks*, 73.

The film does not offer a promising beginning, since it basically features a prostitute and a client performing their prescribed roles. The first time viewers see Vivian she lays sleeping in a rundown hotel. Interestingly, the scene begins with an exterior shot of the hotel building and the hotel sign. The letters "TEL" are burned out, spelling only "HO" with the lights left visible. This detail does not appear coincidental. Next, the audience sees Vivian, apparently waking to get ready to go out on the street. The scene consists of several shots of isolated body parts and Vivian in various states of undress, until finally, she emerges from the room and the viewer sees her as a whole. She arrives at her street corner where she meets Edward when he stops to ask for directions to his hotel. After some conversation, Vivian gets into Edward's car and drives him back to the hotel. He invites her to his room and pays her to stay the night with him. Soon, Edward offers to pay her $3000 to spend the week with him during his stay in Los Angeles on business. Vivian eagerly accepts the money and understands that she will be at his "beck and call" for the week, accompanying him to events, etc.[182] She receives a fortunate and highly unusual proposal from a man who does not treat her poorly, nevertheless, the innocent start does not redeem the film’s unsavory and essentially demeaning premise.

---

[181] For a detailed discussion of the Whore archetype, see Cheryl R. Jorgensen-Earp, "The Lady, the Whore, and the Spinster: The Rhetorical Use of Victorian Images of Women," *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 54 (1990): 82-98.

[182] All subsequent quotations taken from *Pretty Woman*, dir. Garry Marshall (USA: Touchstone Pictures, 1990).

However, to develop likeable characters, *Pretty Woman* masks their unappealing aspects with desirable traits. For example, Vivian and Edward’s relationship begins purely as a business arrangement, though this soon changes as they spend more time together. As they become closer, the usually reserved Edward begins to open up and share personal details with Vivian. He reveals that he had a troubled relationship with his father and that he has difficulty forming close bonds with others. Within one week’s time, they begin to fall in love and the good-hearted, free-spirited Vivian slowly transforms Edward into a more feeling man. With her help, Edward works through his issues with his father, changes his hard-nosed business philosophy, and even conquers a fear of heights. Likewise, Edward transforms Vivian into a true “lady” with etiquette lessons, a trip to the opera and a polo match, and a decadent shopping spree on Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills.

Over time, they discover that they share more similarities than one would suspect. Edward suggests that he and Vivian “are similar creatures” as both of them possess a shrewd business sense. His assessment rings true since Vivian represents a sort of “career woman” because she treats prostitution as a business and stays motivated by the money. By portraying their relationship as fun and glamorous, the film simply glosses over the fact that a man uses his money to make a prostitute presentable, and in a sense, makes her his property to manipulate as he chooses.

Again, although the film presents a somewhat positive characterization, her occupation as a prostitute remains an inescapable fact. On their last day together, Edward explains to Vivian that he has finished his business and will be going back to his home in New York the next morning:

> Edward: I'd like to see you again.
> Vivian: (Looking pleased) You would?
> Edward: Yes. I've arranged for you to have an apartment, a car, and a variety of shops to suck up to you anytime you feel like shopping. Everything's done.
> Vivian: What else? Will you leave some money by the bed when you pass through town?
> Edward: Vivian, it wouldn't be like that.
> Vivian: How would it be?
> Edward: Well, for one thing it would get you off the streets.
> Vivian: That's just geography.
> Edward: Vivian, what do you want? What do you see happening between us?
> Vivian: I don't know…

She then recounts a painful childhood memory. As a little girl, her mother would sometimes lock her in the attic as punishment. To comfort herself, Vivian would pretend she was "a princess trapped in a tower by a wicked queen and a knight on a white horse, with colors flying, would come charging up, draw his sword, climb up the tower and rescue me." Edward responds, "This is all I'm capable of right now. It's a very big step for me."

Vivian feels upset that Edward would not be her "knight" and that his offer to provide for her still seemed like a way to retain ownership of her. She made it clear that she wants more; she wants "the fairytale" but knows that Edward cannot provide it. Thus, she decides to leave early and return to her old apartment to resume her normal life. In the final scene, Edward arrives at her building in his limousine, shouting

"Princess Vivian" from the sunroof and waving an umbrella in the air as a makeshift sword. She hears him calling and comes to the window. He climbs the fire escape and meets her at the window, just like her childhood fantasy. Edward declares that he has come to rescue her and the happy scene marks the end of the film.

After looking past the misleading surface of *Pretty Woman*, the "fairytale" ending for the prostitute and the businessman can only appear ridiculous. Incredibly, the DVD video jacket describes *Pretty Woman* as a "timeless rags-to-riches romance," which seems wholly inaccurate except for the possibility that a romance developed after Vivian's "rescue."[183] The glamorization of this relationship and of Vivian's life does not represent progressive strides for the modern woman. In comparison with *Beaches* and *Steel Magnolias*, the heroine in this film meets the best end by far, since Vivian does not suffer or die like Hillary and Shelby. In this case, the lowliest of women reaps all the benefits of female fantasy—beautiful clothes, a life of luxury, a rich and handsome man—and the most revered of women, selfless Mothers like Hillary and Shelby, receive illness and untimely deaths.

These films demonstrate that the classic archetypes of Wife and Mother have never disappeared. In *Beaches* and *Steel Magnolias* particularly, these representations are as strong and vivid as ever before. Not only do these films clearly portray traditional female representations, they also carefully resurrect the generic conventions of the woman's film and maternal melodrama. More positively, the liberated woman archetype from the new woman's film does appear at some level in *Beaches* and *Pretty Woman*.

---

[183] Quotation taken from the *Pretty Woman* Special 10th Anniversary Edition DVD. *Pretty Woman*, DVD, directed by Garry Marshall (1990; USA: Dimension, 2000).

CC depicts this archetype in that she unquestionably embodies an ambitious, career-oriented woman. However, the film's ending downplays this aspect of her character in favor of her new role as a mother. Vivian represents this archetype to the extent that she acts independently and uses men for the money they provide her. She, however, does not represent the liberated woman in a positive or affirming way. Thus, I argue that the liberated woman archetype has diminished since it emerged in new woman's film of the 1970s.

*Beaches*, *Steel Magnolias*, and *Pretty Woman* stand as representatives of a span of three years during which post-feminism became widely recognized, and when the "woman's film" now known as the chick flick, made a strong return to theaters. Since 1990, the chick flick has only become more prevalent and more lucrative for Hollywood studios. For example, the year 2000 produced hits like *Charlie's Angels* and *Miss Congeniality*, which earned $125 million and $106 million respectively. In 2001, *Entertainment Weekly* declared the year "a box office boon for movies toplined by women."[184]

It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyze a representative film sample from 1990 to the present. However, even a cursory examination of articles, reviews, and viewing some of the films themselves reveals that essentially nothing has changed. The vast majority of chick flicks look remarkably similar, both in plot and ending. The heroine and her circumstances may differ from movie to movie, but her motivations, difficulties, and representation receive little variation. As actress Goldie Hawn observed in 1996, “There are three kinds of roles for women in Hollywood: babe, district attorney, and Driving Miss Daisy.”[185] This may be explained by the fact that Hollywood has discovered an eager audience and a formula that works, therefore, studios reproduce that formula until the need arises to change it. Consequently, the chick flick continues to take us backward and acts against any real progression for women. It rhetorically binds them to stereotypical spaces by perpetuating outmoded archetypes and feminine ideals.

---

[184] Gillian Flynn, "Chick Flick Chic," *Entertainment Weekly*, April 20, 2001, 10.

---

[185] John Patterson, “When Women Lost the Lead,” *Guardian*, March 23, 2007, sec. “On Film.”

# CHAPTER V

# CONCLUSION

As Claude Levi-Strauss observes, myth gives man "the illusion that he can understand the universe and that he *does* understand the universe. It is, of course, only an illusion."[186] Nevertheless, like Levi-Strauss, many scholars argue that myth possesses real power within most societies and cultures.[187] Joseph Campbell claims that mythology "shows itself to be as amenable as life itself to the obsessions and requirements of the individual, the race, the age."[188] Such declarations imply that the concept of myth has woven itself into the fabric of social thought and has become so specialized as to serve in any necessary capacity.

Film represents one means to express far-reaching, mythic "illusions." Since its inception, the Hollywood film has been an inarguably popular form of entertainment. However, this medium also operates on a second level; film efficiently communicates underlying messages to the audience. In other words, the depiction of the characters, the narrative of the plot, and the resolution of the story all present viewers—either subtly or overtly—with some meaning, value or ideology. Marjorie Rosen provides a decidedly negative perspective on this function of film. She explains how ideology "works through images to reflect and misrepresent" the sociopolitical world. "Hollywood, as an institution producing dominant representation, endlessly reproduces patriarchal distortions."[189] Myths filter easily through film as a means for conveying or subverting the dominant ideologies and representations of which Rosen speaks.

---

[186] Claude Levi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning* (New York: Schocken Books, 1979), 17.

[187] See for example, Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth* (New York: Anchor Books, 1991); Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973); Alexander Eliot, *The Universal Myths* (New York: Meridian, 1990); Richard J. Golsan, ed., *Rene Girard and Myth* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993); Robert A. Segal, *Jung on Mythology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); Richard T. Hughes, *Myths America Lives By* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003); Janice Hocker Rushing and Thomas S. Frentz, *Projecting the Shadow* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995); and Claude Levi-Strauss, *Mythologiques*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (New York: Harper and Row, 1969).

[188] Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 382.

Films seem an ideal vehicle for perpetuating myths, and I argue that employing mythic archetypes is one of the most successful ways. In this thesis, I focused on the representation of women through these archetypes, since "maleness and femaleness" represent archetypal forces that "constitute different ways of relating to life, to the world, and to the opposite sex."[190] Thus, I examined films addressed specifically to women, known collectively as "women's genres," to discern the prevalent archetypes and their rhetorical function for audiences.

The "woman's film" appeared as the original on-screen genre for women. However, Andrea Walsh notes that the woman's film does not stand alone as a type of female-oriented popular culture:

> It is part of an historical tradition stretching from the sentimental and Gothic novel in the nineteenth century to the radio soap opera in the twentieth. A female-oriented sphere of popular culture emerged in response to the sexual bifurcation of culture and consciousness in industrializing America. As home and workplace became physically separated, and parallel ideologies arose to support 'true womanhood' and 'real masculinity,' men and women desired new

---

[189] Janet McCabe, *Feminist Film Studies: Writing the Woman into Cinema* (London: Wallflower Press, 2004), 113. See also Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics* (London: Virago, 1970).

[190] Edward C. Whitmont, *Return of the Goddess* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 121.

> and different forms of leisure and culture. The woman's film can only be fully understood within this cultural context.[191]

These early forms of entertainment, the novel, the soap opera, and the stage melodrama as well, served as the genesis of the woman's film that emerged in the 1930s. Many of these films included storylines that originated from the sources that preceded them. The woman's film gained popularity during the 30s through clever marketing by industry executives, and relied upon three standard conventions. First, one or more women star as the central protagonists. Second, issues of concern to women, especially emotional ones, play a principal role. Third, the woman's film depicts female characters through the lens of patriarchal ideology. As studios released more of these types of films, they received a profitable reception, and thus continued to produce films with this same basic formulation.

World War II left large numbers of women on the home front while their men fought overseas. This period of time marked the height of the woman's film with a surge in the number of female moviegoers and in the number of films produced to meet the demand. The movies allowed female viewers a place of escape and the opportunity to live vicariously through the women they saw on the screen. The woman's film often presented the audience with contradictions. For example, the characters typically fit into one of two types—a rich, glamorous woman who ends the film unhappy despite her lifestyle or an ordinary woman who made bad choices and ultimately suffers for them. Suffering and hardship play a very important role in the woman's film and they act as cautionary tales to the women in the audience. Most films feature a woman who does not possess commonly held values or simply makes unacceptable choices. These women almost never prosper by the end, and thus, serve a type of teaching function about the consequences of a woman's actions.

---

[191] Walsh, *Women's Film and Female Experience*, 30.

A survey of popular woman's films finds three frequently occurring archetypes to represent women: the Mother, the Wife, and the "Fallen Woman." The Mother archetype appears most often and seems to hold the most importance based on its long and complex history. A vast number of cultures and civilizations have a form of the Mother in their folklore and she retains her significance in modern traditions as well. The contemporary Mother represents a fundamentally sacrificial figure, celebrated for her selfless service to others. The Wife typically exhibits the qualities of helpfulness submissiveness since her chief duties are to please her husband and care for the home and children if she has them. Like the Mother, she merely exists to serve the people around her. The Fallen Woman archetype provides an example of a "bad" woman. She either behaves badly, which brings about her downfall and society's rejection, or she callously uses men to achieve a wealthy and luxurious lifestyle. The Fallen Woman reached her peak in the 1930s and diminished since that time. The Mother and Wife, however, continued to thrive beyond the woman's film era into the 1960s and 70s.

The 1960s brought profound social and cultural changes in America, not the least of which came from the women's liberation movement. The movement launched between 1966 and 1968 with the organization of feminist groups across the country. Their efforts helped to effect positive political, economic, and social changes for women over the next decade. During this time, Hollywood's offerings began to reflect the real world transformation taking place. After breaking new thematic ground in the late 1960s with films such as *The Valley of the Dolls* and *Barbarella*, films for women featured a new and different kind of heroine. *Love Story*'s witty and independent Jennifer Cavalleri represented the new face of an emerging trend. Quickly, a film cycle surfaced during the 1970s known by critics as the "new" woman's film.

The new woman's film contains a combination of elements from its predecessor and new ones as well. Scholars describe it as both progressive and regressive since it still involves a female heroine, emotional themes, and some degree of patriarchal ideology, but also presents women as more independent and touches on "feminist" issues. Myths allow these films to operate in this way, since they have the power to both reaffirm and subvert the status quo.[192] In addition, the presentation of the Mother and Wife undergoes some revision in these films.

*Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* features an independent woman who struggles to make a new life for her and her child. She begins as a stereotypical Wife, but an unexpected event forces her to reevaluate her personal needs and goals. Alice represents a new archetype, the liberated woman, who finds a way to negotiate new challenges and new roles. Of all the films I analyze, she represents the most positive feminine portrayal. This film did not present her character as unrealistic, and did not present her circumstances in an overly sentimental light. Alice seems like a real woman with believable problems.  Although she may falter at times, she ultimately faces life with strength and determination.

---

[192] See Rushing and Frentz, *Projecting the Shadow*, 47.

*Alice* was released in 1974 when the women's movement still carried great momentum.  Unfortunately, as the 1970s wore on, conservative forces began to take hold, which produced a public backlash against feminism in many areas of the country. Political figures such as Richard Nixon and Jerry Falwell viewed feminism as a threat and led the charge toward more traditional values.  As a result, the new woman's film cycle saw a change in its heroines once again.  The films took a turn toward illustrating the consequences and complications of the women's movement rather than the possibilities.

Nevertheless, by 1977, films for women made a strong showing at the box office and at the Academy Awards.  One of these successful films, *The Turning Point*, exemplifies an outstanding example of this shift in tone and focus.  Two well-known actresses headline this film about the results of life choices, in this case, a woman's choice between family and career.  Deedee chooses to forego a ballet career to marry and have a baby.  Conversely, Emma followed her dreams down a lonely career path with the ballet company.

Deedee represents an archetypal Wife and Mother, while Emma portrays the liberated woman archetype.  However, the nearly constant conflict between the two friends and their jealousy of one another seriously undercuts any positive aspects of the archetypes.  In the end, Deedee accepts her past decisions and knows that she leads the better and more fulfilling life.  Emma, however, demonstrates the sad end that befalls women with ambition and implies that independence means a grim future.

From my examination of the new woman’s film, I suggest that Charlotte Brunsdon’s theory of recuperation accounts for the appearance of this film cycle.  At a point during the 1970s, the women’s movement held a foremost position in news coverage and in American consciousness, thus films and other cultural products mirrored the situation.  Some early films may have represented genuine efforts to integrate new ideas and characterizations, but eventually, the cycle appropriated these elements and began to reproduce them.  As a result, the emergence of the film cycle gave the appearance of actual change in perceptions and representations of women.

The feminist backlash continued on into the 1980s as the general absence of strong female characters and the declining popularity of “women’s” movies indicates. The majority of the decade saw the dominance of the male hero and male-centered story once again, with the action, teen comedy, and horror genres leading at the box office. The end of the 80s heralded the era of post-feminism, a new and complicated phase in women’s history.  Post-feminism essentially praises the achievements of the women’s movement while simultaneously deriding their results.  With the onset of this era came a renewed interest in traditional femininity and the released of new films that reflected this.  Similar films have been released up to the present day in a cycle now known as the “chick flick.”

The chick flick signifies a derogatory and demeaning term for women-centered movies.  These films share the generic conventions of the classic woman’s film, and therefore, represent a regression to an earlier generation of female representation. I looked at three examples of this “modern” woman’s film: *Beaches*, *Steel Magnolias,* and *Pretty Woman*.

*Beaches* follows the 30-year friendship of two women and, like *The Turning Point*, focuses on the life choices of each woman. On a positive note, the film presents female friendship as a strong and enduring thing, but that notion gets somewhat weakened by the all the conflict between CC and Hillary. Like Emma, CC represents a liberated woman for her driving career ambition, but she receives redemption through motherhood in the end. The character of Hillary initially seems feminist-inspired, but eventually chooses the role of traditional Wife and Mother before her final suffering and untimely death. This film unquestionably regresses back to the “weepie” woman’s film and maternal melodrama.

Shelby and M’Lynn, the central figures in *Steel Magnolias*, reveal many similarities to these bygone genres as well. M’Lynn depicts the archetypal Mother and has to endure her daughter’s early death. Shelby portrays both the classic Wife and Mother since she has no aspirations beyond the two roles. Motherhood represents her chief desire, for which she literally sacrifices her own life. The other female characters in *Steel Magnolias* serve primarily as support networks for each other and for M’Lynn during her time of need. This chick flick illustrates every generic element of the stereotypical woman’s film.

Finally, the highly successful *Pretty Woman* exemplifies a largely anti-feminist film that effectively masquerades as a chick flick. On the surface, this film retells the classic Cinderella story of a poor girl who finds her rich and handsome prince. However, *Pretty Woman* actually appears worse than the previous films in that Vivian does not even represent the positive aspects of traditional archetypes. She simply portrays a prostitute that has a chance encounter with a wealthy businessman. Edward pays her for her company and the two eventually fall in love. This film basically romanticizes a disreputable relationship and teaches nothing of worth to the female viewer.

In this thesis, I demonstrated the ways in which women's film genres represent the American woman, beginning with the woman's film of the 1930s and 40s and ending with the chick flick in the early 1990s. I conclude that despite seeming progress on and off the screen, women in film remain constrained to stereotypical roles through the use of myth. Popular film achieves this through the use of traditional feminine archetypes and the depiction of themes and issues that appear to change with the times. Perhaps these constraints also limit progress for women in the real world.

These film techniques serve the rhetorical function of persuading audiences to accept a particular female representation at a given time. Myths can operate in this way since they fundamentally represent a public language capable of distorting political ideologies and resolving social contradictions. Unfortunately, a majority of women-centered films have recreated versions of the same women and the same story for three generations of female viewers. Clearly, this does not teach women (or men) anything new about the meaning of womanhood.

## Limitations and Areas for Future Research

This study has a number of limitations in order to maintain a feasible scope and size. First, of the myriad “women’s films” available for analysis, I could only provide a detailed examination to a small number of them. Second, my analysis does not extend beyond the year 1990. Finally, aside from critical review and financial statistics, this study includes minimal consideration for audience response to each of these films.

Nonetheless, these limitations offer several opportunities for further research and analysis. First, several films released during the eras of the woman’s film, the new woman’s film, and the chick flick do not fall neatly within the conventions of their respective genres. For example, films such as *Norma Rae* (1979) starring Sally Field, *Thelma and Louise* (1991) starring Susan Sarandon and Geena Davis, *Erin Brockovich* (2000) starring Julia Roberts, and *North Country* (2005) starring Charlize Theron, all feature women as the main protagonists, offer some treatment or discussion of “women’s issues,” and involve viewers at an emotional level. Still, these films seem to defy categorization because they do not easily “fit in” with the others. In fact, some films like *Thelma and Louise* have been the subjects of heated debate regarding their qualification as “women’s films.” Some critics and reviewers deem it a “feminist film,” thereby creating an entirely new avenue for discussion.[193]

---

[193] See for example Gina Fournier, Thelma and Louise *and Women in Hollywood* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2007); Janice R. Welsch, “Let’s Keep Goin’!: On the Road with Louise and Thelma,” in *Ladies and Gentleman, Boys and Girls*, ed. Murray Pomerance (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 249-265; Barry Keith Grant, “Strange Days: Gender and Ideology in New Genre Films,” in *Ladies and Gentleman, Boys and Girls*, ed. Murray Pomerance (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 188-190; Brenda Cooper, “Chick Flicks as Feminist Texts: The Appropriation of the Male Gaze in Thelma and Louise,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 23 (2000): 277-306; and Hollinger, *In the Company of Women*, 116-125.

A second area for research lies in the limited racial representations in the women's film genres. The vast majority of these films center strictly on white heroines. Aside from the 1995 film *Waiting to Exhale* that features four black women in primary roles, few major films star women of color. It would be interesting to investigate the appearance (or lack) of non-white women in these films and examine their portrayals. Perhaps films could be analyzed based on racial mythic archetypes. In other words, what sorts of archetypes do women of color represent in women's genres and do the traditional archetypes (Mother, Wife, etc.) look different based on the context of race?

Additionally, films for women have a tendency to depict a class stereotype as well. Many films present middle to upper-middle class (white) women as their female leads. If not, she sometimes gains a rise in status through a wealthy boyfriend or husband, like in *Pretty Woman* (1990) and *Maid in Manhattan* (2002) for example. I would presume this relates to the inclination of heroines, especially in the chick flick, to spend time shopping or getting a makeover or going out with friends. Thus, a working class heroine would not have the means for such indulgences, and therefore, the film loses those elements of fun and fantasy. A girl of lower status, however, can often be found in certain types of melodrama and woman's films. Similarly, the women's liberation movement has a history of involving largely white, middle class female activists.[194] Some scholarship already exists in this regard, however, it still presents a fruitful area for research.

---

[194] See Nancy F. Cott, ed., *No Small Courage* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); William H. Chafe, *Women and Equality: Changing Patterns in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); and Sheila Rowbotham, *Women in Movement* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

Another opportunity for analyzing women’s film genres may be found in their focus on young women. Like race and class, age represents another common stereotype of the movie heroine, particularly in the chick flick. On the whole, the women in these films range from approximately 20 to 40 years of age, usually leaning toward the younger end of the spectrum. If one of the women is beyond that age bracket, they typically play a secondary character, like a mother or grandmother to the heroine. There are exceptions, since the new woman’s film gave us over-40 heroines like Alice, Deedee, and Emma, but the modern chick flick tends to place a premium on youth.

Also, the popularity of “junior” chick flicks could offer a potential area for study. Films like *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999), *The Princess Diaries* (2001), *13 Going On 30* (2004), and *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* (2005) seem to follow the same generic conventions as their adult counterparts with the exception of the protagonist’s age. This could involve an investigation into what these films say to and about younger girls.

A subsequent project might focus entirely on the chick flick itself. It could resume the study in 1990 and examine chick flick films up to the present day. This would also involve an in-depth discussion of post-feminism during that period as the historical context for these films. A study of this type could prove relevant since female actresses and audiences still struggle with their roles in contemporary society. As Murray Pomerance writes about films in 2001: “Liberation is everywhere, but only as a garb, and under it is the same old disenfranchisement, the same old inequality, perhaps even more brutal now than ever..."[195]

Finally, looking at women's films from the perspective of the audience would provide another intriguing opportunity for research. This could entail an investigation of audience responses through newspapers, magazine articles, historical accounts, journals, personal interviews, and other relevant literature.

In addition to multiple areas for further research, this thesis has provided a much needed examination of women's representations covering three generations of film. With its integrative approach involving the areas of rhetoric, myth, film, genre, and women's history, I believe this study bridges a disciplinary gap and contributes fresh insight into our understanding of women in film.

---

[195] Murray Pomerance, ed., *Ladies and Gentlemen, Boys and Girls: Gender in Film at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 7.

# REFERENCES

"50 Best Chick Flicks." E! Network, Air date February 12, 2006.

Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Official Academy Awards Database. *http://www.oscars.org/awardsdatabase/* (accessed April 11, 2007).

Adelman, Kim. *The Ultimate Guide to Chick Flicks: The Romance, the Glamour, the Tears, and More!* New York: Broadway Books, 2005.

Altman, Rick. "Reusable Packaging: Generic Products and the Recycling Process." In *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*, edited by Nick Browne. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998, 1-41.

The Australian Centre for the Moving Image, Research Resources. "The Woman's Picture and Family Melodrama." *http://www.acmi.net.au/womanspicture.htm* (accessed September 13, 2006).

Baker, M. Joyce. *Images of Women in Film: The War Years, 1941-1945*. Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1980.

"Barbarella – The Film," BBC Online, sec. h2g2. *http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A592896* (accessed August 17, 2007).

Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Selected and translated by Annette Lavers. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972.

Basinger, Jeanine. *A Woman's View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women, 1930-1960*. Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1993.

Bizzell, Patricia, and Bruce Herzberg, eds. *The Rhetorical Tradition*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001.

Bolt, A. "Moral of the Chick Flicks." *Herald Sun*, May 23, 1995.

Booth, Philip. "Soak up the 'Tuscan Sun.'" *St. Petersburg Times*, September 25, 2003, 10W.

Box Office Mojo, Yearly Box Office charts. *http://boxofficemojo.com/yearly/* (accessed September 3, 2007).

British Film Institute Collections and Archives. "Melodrama and the Woman's Film." *http://www.bfi.org.uk/nftva/catalogues/category/6/634* (accessed February 3, 2006).

Brunsdon, Charlotte, ed. *Films for Women*. London: British Film Institute, 1986.

Burke, Kenneth. *On Symbols and Society*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989.

Butler, Alison. *Women's Cinema: The Contested Screen*. London: Wallflower Press, 2002.

Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972.

_______. *The Power of Myth*. Edited by Betty Sue Flowers. New York: Anchor Books, 1991.

Campbell, Karlyn Kohrs, and Kathleen Hall Jamieson. "Form and Genre in Rhetorical Criticism: An Introduction." In *Form and Genre: Shaping Rhetorical Action,* edited by Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson. Falls Church, VA: The Speech Communication Association, 1981, 9-32.

Chafe, William H. *The American Woman: Her Changing Social, Economic, and Political Roles, 1920-1970*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1972.

_______. *Women and Equality: Changing Patterns in American Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.

_______. "The Road to Equality, 1962-Today." In *No Small Courage: A History of Women in the United States*, edited by Nancy F. Cott. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, 529-586.

Condit, Celeste. "The Rhetorical Limits of Polysemy." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 6 (1989): 103-122.

Cook, Pam, and Philip Dodd, eds. *Women and Film: A Sight and Sound Reader*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993.

Cooper, Brenda. "Chick Flicks as Feminist Texts: The Appropriation of the Male Gaze in *Thelma and Louise*." *Women's Studies in Communication* 23 (2000): 277-306.

Cott, Nancy F., ed. *No Small Courage: A History of Women in the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

de Lauretis, Teresa. *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.

Deutsch, Sarah Jane. “From Ballots to Breadlines, 1920-1940.” In *No Small Courage: A History of Women in the United States*, edited by Nancy F. Cott. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, 413-472.

Doane, Mary Anne. *The Desire to Desire: The Woman’s Film of the 1940s*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1987.

Dow, Bonnie J. “*Murphy Brown* and Postfeminist Politics.” In *Mass Politics: The Politics of Popular Culture*, edited by Daniel M. Shea. New York: St. Martin’s/Worth, 1999, 15-31.

_______. *Prime-Time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women’s Movement Since 1970*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.

Durbin, Karen. “The Mighty Chick Flick.” *O, The Oprah Magazine*, July 2004. *http://www.oprah.com/omagazine/200407/omag_200407_chick.jhtml* (accessed October 1, 2007).

Eliot, Alexander. *The Universal Myths*. New York: Meridian, 1990.

Eliot, George. “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists.” *Westminster Review* 66 (1856): 442-461. *http://library.marist.edu/faculty-web pages/morreale/sillynovelists.htm* (accessed September 25, 2007).

Ferrell, William K. *Literature and Film as Modern Mythology*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000.

Ferriss, Suzanne, and Mallory Young, eds. *Chick Lit: The New Woman’s Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 2006, 1-13.

_______. *Chick Flicks: Contemporary Women at the Movies*. New York: Routledge, 2007.

Film Releases, Release Schedule. *http://www.film-releases.com* (accessed August 7, 2007).

First Showing, Release Schedule. *http://www.firstshowing.net/schedule2007/* (accessed August 7, 2007).

Fisher, Lucy. *Shot/Countershot: Film Tradition and Women’s Cinema*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989.

Flynn, Gillian. “Chick Flick Chic.” *Entertainment Weekly*, April 20, 2001, 10-11.

Fournier, Gina. Thelma and Louise *and Women in Hollywood*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2007.

French, Brandon. *On the Verge of Revolt: Women in American Films of the Fifties*. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1978.

Frentz, Thomas S., and Janice Hocker Rushing, "Mother Isn't Quite Herself Today: Myth and Spectacle in *The Matrix*." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19 (2002): 64-86.

Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1963.

Fromm, Erich. *The Forgotten Language: An Introduction to the Understanding of Dreams, Fairy Tales and Myths*. New York: Rinehart and Co., 1951.

Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971.

Garrett, Roberta. *Postmodern Chick Flicks: The Return of the Woman's Film*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

Gledhill, Christine, ed. *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*. London: British Film Institute, 1987.

_______. "The Melodramatic Field: An Investigation." In *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, edited by Christine Gledhill. London: British Film Institute, 1987, 5-39.

Golsan, Richard J., ed. *Rene Girard and Myth*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1993.

Grant, Barry Keith. "Strange Days: Gender and Ideology in New Genre Films." In *Ladies and Gentleman, Boys and Girls*, edited by Murray Pomerance. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001, 185-199.

Graves, Mark A., and F. Bruce Engle. *Blockbusters: A Reference Guide to Film Genres*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006.

Gregory, Mollie. *Women Who Run the Show*. New York: St. Martin's, 2002.

Harvey, Andrew, and Anne Baring. *The Divine Feminine: Exploring the Feminine Face of God Around the World*. Berkeley, CA: Godsfield Press, 1996.

Harzewski, Stephanie. "Tradition and Displacement in the New Novel of Manners." In *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, edited by Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young. New York: Routledge, 2006, 29-46.

Haskell, Molly. *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987.

_______. “Girls on Film: Why Chick Flicks Have Greater Emotional Integrity than Men’s Movies.” *Guardian*, March 28, 2003, sec. “Friday Review,” 5.

Himmelstein, Hal. *Television Myth and the American Mind*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994.

Hollinger, Karen. *In the Company of Women: Contemporary Female Friendship Films*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

“How Do You Spell ‘Chick Flick’? Look It Up,” *MSNBC online*, October 3, 2005. *http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/9579179* (accessed September 1, 2007).

Hughes, Richard T. *Myths America Lives By*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003.

Jacobs, Lea. “Censorship and the Fallen Woman Cycle.” In *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman’s Film*, edited by Christine Gledhill. London: British Film Institute, 1987, 100-112.

_______. *The Wages of Sin: Censorship and the Fallen Woman Film, 1928-1942*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991.

James, Caryn. “Are Feminist Heroines an Endangered Species?” *New York Times*, July 19, 1989, sec. 2.

Jameson, Frederic. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981.

_______. *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992.

Jenkins, Alan. *The Social Theory of Claude Levi-Strauss*. London: Macmillan Press, 1979.

Johnson, Joanna Webb. “Chick Lit Jr.: More Than Glitz and Glamour for Teens and Tweens.” In *Chick Lit: The New Woman’s Fiction*, edited by Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young. New York: Routledge, 2006, 141-157.

Johnston, Claire. “Women’s Cinema as Counter-Cinema.” In *Feminism and Film*, edited by E. Ann Kaplan. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, 22-33.

Jorgensen-Earp, Cheryl R. “The Lady, the Whore, and the Spinster: The Rhetorical Use of Victorian Images of Women.” *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 54 (1990): 82-98.

Jung, C. G. “The Concept of the Collective Unconscious.” In *The Portable Jung*, edited by Joseph Campbell. Translated by R. F. C. Hull. New York: Viking Press, 1971.

_______. *Aspects of the Feminine*. Translated by R. F. C. Hull. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982.

Kaplan, E. Ann. *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama*. London: Routledge, 1992.

_______. “Mothering, Feminism and Representation: The Maternal Melodrama and the Woman’s Film 1910-1940.” In *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman’s Film*, edited by Christine Gledhill. London: British Film Institute, 113-137.

Kit, Borys. “Rodriguez to Direct ‘Barbarella’.” *Hollywood Reporter*, May 22, 2007. *http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/hr/content_display/news/e3i3e0cd5c8b61cf5d1910e92c972e7e99* (accessed August 22, 2007).

Kleinhans, Chuck. “Notes on Melodrama and the Family Under Capitalism.” *Film Reader* 3 (1978): 40-47.

Knapp, Bettina L. *Women in Myth*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997.

Kuczynski, Alex. “Women Hanging Together: How Long Must We Watch?” *New York Times*, June 9, 2002, sec. 9, 1.

Kuhn, Annette. *Women’s Pictures: Feminism and Cinema*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982.

_______. “Women’s Genres.” In *Feminism and Film*, edited by E. Ann Kaplan. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, 437-449.

Lang, Robert. *American Film Melodrama: Griffith, Vidor, Minnelli*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989.

LaPlace, Maria. “Producing and Consuming the Woman’s Film: Discursive Struggle in *Now, Voyager*.” In *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman’s Film*, edited by Christine Gledhill. London: British Film Institute, 1987, 138-166.

Larrington, Carolyne, ed. *The Feminist Companion to Mythology*. London: Pandora Press, 1992.

Levi-Strauss, Claude. *Structural Anthropology*. Translated by Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf. New York: Basic Books, 1963.

_______. *Mythologiques*. Translated by John and Doreen Weightman. New York: Harper and Row, 1969.

_______. *Myth and Meaning*. New York: Schocken Books, 1979.

Levin, Phyllis Lee. "Road from Sophocles to Spock Is Often a Bumpy One." *New York Times,* June 28, 1960, 24.

*Love Story*, DVD. Directed by Arthur Hiller. USA: Paramount Pictures, 2001.

Macinnis, Craig. "There's Always Been Chicks' Flicks and Guys' Pics." *Toronto Star*, June 19, 1993, G1.

May, Elaine Tyler. "Pushing the Limits, 1940-1961." In *No Small Courage: A History of Women in the United States,* edited by Nancy F. Cott. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, 473-528.

McCabe, Janet. *Feminist Film Studies: Writing the Woman into Cinema*. London: Wallflower Press, 2004.

Mercer, John, and Martin Shingler. *Melodrama: Genre, Style, Sensibility*. London: Wallflower Press, 2004.

Millet, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. London: Virago, 1970.

Modleski, Tania. "Time and Desire in the Woman's Film." In *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film,* edited by Christine Gledhill. London: British Film Institute, 1987, 326-338.

Motz, Lotte. *The Faces of the Goddess*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Movie Web, Theatrical Release Dates by Week. *http://www.movieweb.com/movies/releases/week.php* (accessed August 7, 2007).

Mulvey, Laura. "Notes on Sirk and Melodrama." In *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film,* edited by Christine Gledhill. London: British Film Institute, 1987, 75-79.

Neale, Steve. *Genre and Hollywood*. London: Routledge, 2000.

Negra, Diane. "Quality Postfeminism? Sex and the Single Girl on HBO." *Genders* 39 (2004). *http://www.genders.org/g39/g39_negra.html* (accessed September 1, 2007).

Patterson, John. "When Women Lost the Lead." *Guardian*, March 23, 2007, sec. "On Film."

Pearlman, Cindy. "Chick Flicks: Emotions! Talking! Big Issues! Even Eating! Hollywood Finds Women." *Chicago Sun-Times*, November 5, 1995, sec. "Show," 1.

Peske, Nancy, and Beverly West. *Cinematherapy: The Girl's Guide to Movies for Every Mood*. New York: Dell, 1999.

Pomerance, Murray, ed. *Ladies and Gentlemen, Boys and Girls: Gender in Film at the End of the Twentieth Century*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001, 1-15.

Pratt, Annis, Barbara White, Andrea Lowenstein, and Mary Wyer. *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981.

*Pretty Woman*, special 10th anniversary edition DVD. Directed by Garry Marshall. USA: Dimension, 2000.

Projansky, Sarah. *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Post-Feminism Culture*. New York: NYU Press, 2001.

Puig, Claudia. "'Oleander' Wilts Under a Weak, Formulaic Story." *USA Today*, October 11, 2002, 6E.

Radway, Janice A. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984.

Riley, Glenda. *Inventing the American Woman: A Perspective on Women's History*. Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1987.

Robertson, James Oliver. *American Myth, American Reality*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1980.

Rosen, Marjorie. *Popcorn Venus: Women, Movies and the American Dream*. New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, 1973.

Rothman, Evan. “What We’ve Learned at the Movies.” *Esquire*. *http://men.msn.com/articlees.aspx?cp-documentid=760905* (accessed October 5, 2007).

Rowbotham, Sheila. *Women in Movement: Feminism and Social Action*. New York: Routledge, 1992.

Rushing, Janice Hocker. “The Rhetoric of the American Western Myth.” *Communication Monographs* 50 (1983): 14-32.

_______. “Evolution of ‘The New Frontier’ in *Alien* and *Aliens*: Patriarchal Co-Optation of the Feminine Archetype.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 75 (1989): 1-24.

Rushing, Janice Hocker, and Thomas S. Frentz. *Projecting the Shadow: The Cyborg Hero in American Film*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

“Second Chances.” *Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore*, DVD features. Directed by Martin Scorsese. USA: Warner Brothers, 2004.

Segal, Robert A. *Jung on Mythology*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.

Skeggs, Beverley, ed. *Feminist Cultural Theory: Process and Production*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1995.

Special issue of *Communication Studies* 41 (1990).

Strickler, Jeff. “Nora Ephron’s ‘Sleepless’ Conveys Starry-eyed Charm.” *Star Tribune*, June 25, 1993, 1E.

“*The Turning Point* Featurette.” *The Turning Point*, DVD. Directed by Herbert Ross. USA: Anchor Bay, 2004.

Wallis, Claudia. “Onward, Women! The Superwoman Is Weary, the Young Are Complacent, but Feminism Is Not Dead. And, Baby, There’s Still a Long Way to Go.” *Time*, December 4, 1989, 80-86.

Walsh, Andrea S. *Women’s Film and Female Experience, 1940-1950*. New York: Praeger, 1984.

Welsch, Janice R. “Let’s Keep Goin’!: On the Road with Louise and Thelma.” In *Ladies and Gentleman, Boys and Girls*, edited by Murray Pomerance. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001, 249-265.

White, Patricia. *UnInvited*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999.

Whitmont, Edward C. *Return of the Goddess*. New York: Crossroad, 1982.

Widdicombe, Rupert. "Sisters Do It for Themselves." *London Sunday Times*, December 10, 1995, sec. "Features."

Williams, Linda. "Something Else Besides a Mother: *Stella Dallas* and the Maternal Melodrama." In *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, edited by Christine Gledhill. London: British Film Institute, 1987, 299-325.

_______. "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess." *Film Quarterly* 44 (1991): 2-13.

_______. "Melodrama Revisited." In *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*, edited by Nick Browne. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998, 42-88.

Zeidler, Sue. "Roberts Rejects the Chick-Flick Label." *New Zealand Herald*, April 22, 2004. *http://www.nzherald.co.nz/section/6/story.cfm?c_id=6&objectid=3556230* (accessed September 4, 2007).

## Additional Sources Consulted

Adams, Lauren. "Chick Lit and Chick Flicks: Secret Power or Flat Formula?" *The Horn Book Magazine*. November/December 2004, 669-680.

Bernard, Jami. *Chick Flicks: A Movie Lover's Guide to the Movies Women Love*. New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1997.

Berry, Jo, and Angie Errigo. *Chick Flicks: Movies Women Love*. London: Orion, 2004.

Campbell, Karlyn Kohrs. "The Rhetoric of Women's Liberation: An Oxymoron." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 59 (1973): 74-86.

Cook, Samantha. *The Rough Guide to Chick Flicks*. London: Rough Guides, 2006.

Creed, Barbara. *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge, 1993.

Dow, Bonnie J. "Feminism, Miss America, and Media Mythology." *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 6 (2003): 127-160.

Downing, Christine. *Psyche's Sisters: Reimagining the Meaning of Sisterhood*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988.

Fischer, Lucy. *Cinematernity: Film, Motherhood, Genre*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.

Garcia, Wilma. *Mothers and Others: Myths of the Female in the Works of Melville, Twain, and Hemingway*. New York: P. Lang, 1984.

Gledhill, Christine. "Rethinking Genre." In *Reinventing Film Studies*, edited by Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, 221-243.

Green, Philip. *Cracks in the Pedestal: Ideology and Gender in Hollywood*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998.

Holmlund, Chris. "Postfeminism from A to G." *Cinema Journal* 44 (2005): 116-121.

Jamieson, Kathleen Hall. *Eloquence in an Electronic Age: The Transformation of Political Speechmaking*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Kaplan. E. Ann. "The Case of the Missing Mother: Maternal Issues in Vidor's *Stella Dallas*." In *Feminism and Film*, edited by E. Ann Kaplan. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Kay, Karyn, and Gerald Peary, eds. *Women and the Cinema: A Critical Anthology*. New York: Dutton, 1977.

Killingsworth, M. Jimmie. *Appeals in Modern Rhetoric: An Ordinary Language Approach*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005.

Lies, Betty Bonham. *Earth's Daughters: Stories of Women in Classical Mythology*. Golden, CO: Fulcrum Resources, 1999.

Matthews, Jean V. *The Rise of the New Woman: The Women's Movement in America, 1875-1930*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2003.

Mellencamp, Patricia. *A Fine Romance: Five Ages of Film Feminism*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995.

Mintz, Steven, and Randy Roberts, eds. *Hollywood's America: United States History Through Its Films*. St. James, NY: Brandywine Press, 1999.

Mitchell, Charles P. *Filmography of Social Issues: A Reference Guide*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004.

Mulvey, Laura. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” In *Feminism and Film*, edited by E. Ann Kaplan. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Neumann, Erich. *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype*. Translated by Ralph Manheim. New York: Pantheon Books, 1963.

Perera, Sylvia Brinton. *Descent to the Goddess: A Way of Initiation for Women*. Toronto: Inner City Books, 1981.

Rabuzzi, Kathryn Allen. *Motherself: A Mythic Analysis of Motherhood*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988.

Renov, Michael. *Hollywood’s Wartime Woman: Representation and Ideology*. Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1988.

Roberts, Richard. *From Eden to Eros: Origins of the Put Down of Women*. San Anselmo, CA: Vernal Equinox Press, 1985.

Rosenthal, Naomi Braun. *Spinster Tales and Womanly Possibilities*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002.

Ruppert, Jeanne, ed. *Gender: Literary and Cinematic Representation*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1986.

Spines, Christine. “Hollywood vs. Women.” *Entertainment Weekly*, October 6, 2006, 32-36.

Stewart, Grace. *A New Mythos: The Novel of the Artist as Heroine, 1877-1977*. Montreal: Eden Press, 1981.

Tasker, Yvonne, and Diane Negra, eds. “In Focus: Postfeminism and Contemporary Media Studies.” *Cinema Journal* 44 (2005): 107-110.

Viviani, Christian. “Who Is Without Sin? The Maternal Melodrama in American Film, 1930-39.” In *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman’s Film*, edited by Christine Gledhill. London: British Film Institute, 1987, 83-99.

Weigle, Marta. *Spiders and Spinsters: Women and Mythology*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982.

**Films Referenced**

*9 to 5* (1980)
*10 Things I Hate About You* (1999)
*13 Going On 30* (2004)
*Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1974)
*Aliens* (1986)
*All About Eve* (1950)
*Annie Hall* (1977)
*Baby Boom* (1987)
*Back to the Future* (1985)
*Barbarella: Queen of the Galaxy* (1968)
*Beaches* (1988)
*Because I Said So* (2007)
*Becoming Jane* (2007)
*Before Sunset* (2004)
*Beverly Hills Cop* (1984)
*Black Narcissus* (1947)
*Bodyguard, The* (1992)
*Bridges of Madison County, The* (1995)
*Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001)
*Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* (2004)
*Carrie* (1952)
*Casablanca* (1943)
*Catch and Release* (2007)
*Charlie's Angels* (2000)
*Chicago* (2002)
*Chocolat* (2000)
*Color Purple, The* (1985)
*Dark Victory* (1939)
*Devil Wears Prada, The* (2006)
*Dirty Dancing* (1987)
*Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* (2002)
*Driving Miss Daisy* (1989)
*Dying Young* (1991)
*Empire Strikes Back, The* (1980)
*English Patient, The* (1996)
*Erin Brockovich* (2000)

*E. T. The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982)
*Evening* (2007)
*Failure to Launch* (2006)
*Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982)
*Fatal Attraction* (1987)
*Father of the Bride* (1991)
*Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994)
*Friday the 13th* (1980)
*Georgia Rule* (2007)
*Ghost* (1990)
*Gigi* (1958)
*Gone with the Wind* (1939)
*Goodbye Girl, The* (1977)
*Grand Hotel* (1931)
*History is Made at Night* (1937)
*Hope Floats* (1998)
*How Green Was My Valley* (1941)
*How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days* (2003)
*In Her Shoes* (2005)
*In the Land of Women* (2007)
*It Happened One Night* (1934)
*Johnny Guitar* (1954)
*Julia* (1977)
*Kitty Foyle* (1940)
*Klute* (1971)
*Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979)
*League of Their Own, A* (1992)
*Legends of the Fall* (1994)
*Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948)
*License to Wed* (2007)
*Love Story* (1970)
*Lucky You* (2007)
*Maid in Manhattan* (2002)
*Mean Streets* (1973)
*Mildred Pierce* (1945)
*Miss Congeniality* (2000)
*Mona Lisa Smile* (2003)
*Monster-in-Law* (2005)

*Mrs. Miniver* (1942)
*Music and Lyrics* (2007)
*My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997)
*My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002)
*My Fair Lady* (1964)
*Mystic Pizza* (1988)
*Nanny Diaries, The* (2007)
*Nightmare on Elm Street, A* (1984)
*Norma Rae* (1979)
*North Country* (2005)
*Notebook, The* (2004)
*Notting Hill* (1999)
*Now, Voyager* (1942)
*Now and Then* (1995)
*Officer and a Gentleman, An* (1982)
*On Golden Pond* (1981)
*Ordinary People* (1980)
*Out of Africa* (1985)
*Piano, The* (1993)
*Porky's* (1982)
*Pretty Woman* (1990)
*Prince of Tides, The* (1991)
*Princess Diaries, The* (2001)
*Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981)
*Rebecca* (1940)
*Return of the Jedi* (1983)
*Romancing the Stone* (1984)
*Runaway Bride* (1999)
*Shakespeare in Love* (1998)
*Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants, The* (2005)
*Sleepless in Seattle* (1993)
*Something to Talk About* (1995)
*Sound of Music, The* (1965)
*Splendor in the Grass* (1961)
*Star Wars* (1977)
*Steel Magnolias* (1989)
*Stella Dallas* (1937)
*Stepmom* (1998)

*Suspicion* (1941)
*Terminator, The* (1984)
*Truth About Cats and Dogs, The* (1996)
*Turning Point, The* (1977)
*Valley of the Dolls, The* (1967)
*Wedding Planner, The* (2001)
*Witches of Eastwick, The* (1987)
*Terms of Endearment* (1983)
*Thelma and Louise* (1991)
*Titanic* (1997)
*Under the Tuscan Sun* (2003)
*Waiting to Exhale* (1995)
*West Side Story* (1961)
*When Harry Met Sally* (1989)
*When Tomorrow Comes* (1939)
*Woman Under the Influence, A* (1974)
*Working Girl* (1988)
*You've Got Mail* (1998)

# VITA

Name: Danya Day

Address: Department of Communication
Texas A&M University, 4234 TAMU
College Station, TX 77843

Email Address: danya99@tamu.edu

Education: B.A., Journalism and Speech Communication, Texas A&M University, 1999
M.A., Communication, Texas A&M University, 2008

Conference Papers: “Cultivation Theory: An Overview and Reformulation” (November 2005). Competitively selected paper for presentation at the annual meeting of the National Communication Association, Boston, MA.

“Cultivation Theory: An Overview and Reformulation” (January 2005). Competitively selected paper presented at Paper Development Workshop at the Nuevo Dia Organizational Communication Conference, Tempe, AZ.

“Recapturing Masculinity: The Hyper-Masculine Hero in *Fight Club*” (November 2004). Competitively selected paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Communication Association, Chicago, IL.

“Considering Biological Determinants in Interpersonal Attraction and Relational Development” (November 2004). Competitively selected paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Communication Association, Chicago, IL

“Understanding Personality Traits in Working Groups” (April 2004). Competitively selected paper presented at Paper Development Workshop at the Nuevo Dia Organizational Communication Conference, Austin, TX.