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CAS

22 November 2020

### The Role and Representation of Women in Film

Amidst the transitional shift of film from the 1920s to modern times, the role of various groups has fluctuated as a result of societal standards. Cinema has considerably influenced the masses, crafting an unprecedented lens in which the audience views the world. The Academy Awards, the most coveted film awards in the world, capture millions of audiences per year. The implications of cinema are valued in the influence it has across public ideology and discourse. Due to a transformative change in society's values and beliefs, the role and representation of women in film has been subjected to a massive paradigm shift in the positive direction.

#### **HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

In the 1920s-1950s, countless films portrayed a female narrative that was consistent with the idea of a commercialism and gender-centered struggle. They pictured women as hysterical, helpless, and under constant need for a patriarchal savior to step in. This anecdote paved the way for a new wave of gender inequality. Dominant male ideologies were laced into the plot and characters of many films. This authoritative action contributed to the societal idea that women were not equal to men. The "delicate" mental state of women was a constant theme in older films, revealing the collective idea of diminishing a female to her emotions at the time. Films reflected the misinterpretations of women in society at the time. Various studies and statistics have shown that not much has been done to change this account. According to Jan Rosenberg,

author of *Women's Reflections: The Feminist Film Movement*, before 1969, only a negligible number of films were deemed “feminist” (5). This insight is relevant due to the social climate of the time. The Women's Rights Movement was in full swing as women across the United States protested for greater personal freedom and opportunity. It was widely recognized as a “second wave” of feminism and reignited the conversation of complete gender equality that was present in the 1920s. During the 1920s, women's rights leaders like Alice Paul knew that their work was hardly completed. As decades passed, the shift of the female narrative in film has been one of the largest indications of change. As a society, it is critical to analyze the transition that has occurred within the role of women in film in order to continue working toward complete gender equality and representation.

#### **PAY AND REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN FILM IN OLDER FILMS**

The discriminatory role of women in film can be clearly pictured through the amount of pay and representation in older films. Before the 1930s, the existence of a gender wage gap in film was difficult to recognize. The results of the Top Ten Money Making Stars Poll, a popular source for film earnings that were published in *The New York Morning Telegraph* and *Motion Picture Magazine*, were released for the first time in 1932. The top three earners that year were female and the groundbreaking trend of leading women in film continued throughout the 1930s. Rae Alexandra, a staff writer for KQED Arts & Culture, states that “By 1942, however, the list was dominated by men, with just Betty Grable and Greer Larson scraping into the top ten in the No. 8 and 9 positions. Ten years later, the problem persisted. 1952's list contains only two women -- Doris Day at No. 7 and Susan Hayward at No. 9. By 1957, there wasn't one woman left on the top ten earner's list” (7). This paramount shift reveals the lower role that women were

subjected to in the film industry at the time. This unequivocally speaks to societal values and how women were viewed at the time in the United States. The entire attitude toward women in film during this time period can also be partly attributed to their representation in popular film. Katherine J. Wu, a journalist and senior producer for *Smithsonian Magazine*, states “Over the past century-plus of film, women have made up only a paltry minority of the individuals on screens, behind cameras and in writers’ rooms” (1). The shocking lack of representation of women in films has created a biased impression of the role of women in society. It created a lack of role models for young girls and catered to a male perspective that was demeaning. It was expected for women to fill the “lesser” roles that involved production of films. Minnah Stein from *Women’s Media Center* remarks, “Men increasingly gained power in the film industry and, in doing so, created a new hierarchy of roles in the industry: Most major jobs, like producing and writing, were seen as “male” jobs while others, like editing and production design, still were open to women” (6). The blatant level of sexism was ever-present within this facet of the industry. The visible lack of unequal pay and representation of older films fostered a patriarchal-centered narrative that still persists.

### **SEXUALIZATION AND EXPLOITATION OF WOMEN IN OLDER FILMS**

Along with the economic discrepancy that women were subjected to during this time, the entire depiction of women in film was also a major issue. Classic Hollywood eroticized women and young girls, creating a highly-stigmatized notion surrounding female worth. Women were portrayed as objects for the male gaze, fostering an unhealthy stereotype that girls should exist only to please men. Jessica Freame of the University of Melbourne points out, “Marilyn Monroe was the most popular star of the decade whose vulnerable sexuality and child-like innocence

made her both dangerous and in need of protection. In contrast, Doris Day evoked traditional notions of wholesome femininity as she was consistently transformed from the ideal daughter into the ideal wife. Yet, Monroe and Day were each shaped by the social and political context of the decade and were intrinsically related to the dominant ideologies of 1950s America” (11).

This is relevant due to the fact that 1950s America is often glorified. However, the ideologies of the nation heavily favored the notion of male dominance and superiority. Women in film were type casted to fit the role of a sexual object or some form of homemaker. Through this, the intellect of women was diminished and the societal collective reflects that. Film is often a good indicator of the social climate of the time period because directors create entertainment from the societal climate. The role of females in film was influential because it solidified the preexisting notions of many men in society at the time—the normalized inferiority of women.

### **THE MOTION PICTURE PRODUCTION CODE**

Another way that women’s power was diminished in film can be attributed to the passing of a legislature called “The Motion Picture Production Code,” or “Hay’s Code.” This was a censorship system that dramatically shaped, and suppressed, the limits of American cinema for over thirty years. The Supreme Court opinion concerning the code stated, “It cannot be doubted that motion pictures are a significant medium for the communication of ideas” (Hunt 16). This statement was a direct acknowledgement of the critical influence that films introduce to society. Films draw upon the ideas and values that are present at the moment. The fact that there was such an uproar regarding the shift of women’s roles in film exposes the hidden misogyny. The patriarchy feared the thought of losing their supreme hold over the film industry. The resulting action can only be described as a last-ditch effort to hold on to traditional gender roles and

misogynistic tendencies of the past. Kelsey McKinney, a journalist for *Vox*, states, “Before the Hays Code was passed in 1934, actresses used their fame to take roles that challenged gender norms and didn't conform to feminine expectations. There were even silent Suffragette films. However, after the Hays Code, which determined moral guidelines for the industry, passed, roles with agency for women became few and far between” (17). The constant repression of women challenging the societal normalities was a tactic to limit them to a lesser state of existence. Cinema reflects on the perceptions and beliefs of the society that it influences. In 1968, Hays Code was abolished. The inherent prejudice is illustrated by the reality that there was controversy about the reform in the position of women in the motion picture industry.

#### POST FEMINISM AND CONTEMPORARY HOLLYWOOD

In the 1980s, the term “Post Feminism” emerged as a mode to depict the onslaught of disagreement with second-wave feminist movements. It offers new perspective on various forms of feminist discourse and challenges their distinct ideologies. However, it is an ever-changing concept that is adaptable to suit individualistic demands that are required. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra of *Cinema Journal* state, “Within contemporary popular culture, it is clear that certain kinds of female agency are recognizably and profitably packaged as commodities. Typically, texts of this form are directed at a female audience even while covertly acknowledging male viewers/voyeurs” (107). In modern cinema, women are still being overtly sexualized and exploited. However, it is not as visible as it was in the past. The idea of deception has been brought to light by this movement in various ways. This relates to the modern role of women in cinema and how the film industry has evolved over the decades. Instead of shutting down new ideas, society is being encouraged to determine what is right for themselves. Even

though this idea comes across as a negative facet of feminism, it actually was intended to draw from the original movement with positivity. For example, authors Joel Gwynne and Nadine Miller write, "Postfeminism has been read as offering liberating possibilities to women as a discourse indicative of a post-traditional era characterized by dramatic changes in social relationships and conceptions of agency" (3). This statement shows that this movement is flawed in various ways. Claiming that feminism is no longer necessary because the goal of equality has been "completed" provides a sense of false hope for society. The gender pay gap in Hollywood is still very much alive and is backed up through statistics and studies. The idea of Post Feminism has contributed to the criticism of women's modern role in films in the current age.

#### FEMALE DIVERSITY IN MODERN FILM

Another major issue that revolves around the role and representation of women in film is the shocking lack of diversity. Studies have proven the distinct level of discrimination that different races must undergo in the film industry to this day. Add this on top of being a woman and the situation becomes even more bleak. Stacy L. Smith, USC professor and lead author of a related study, remarks, "We can't just talk about females in film anymore. What our data shows most powerfully this year over any other year is the real epidemic of intersectional invisibility in film," Smith said. "If you cross gender with race and ethnicity, you see that the bottom really drops out for females of color on screen" (Bahr 8). This statement gives evidence to the fact that there is a massive inclusion crisis in Hollywood today. Films that have been directed by people of color typically had better diversity statistics. The hashtag #OscarsSoWhite served as a mass movement and outcry for change within the industry. It is a specific call-to-action that focuses on the refusal to acknowledge more women and people of color. The viral hashtag ignited change

and a conversation on the state of what type of individual is represented in the film category. The Academy even changed the composition of its membership as a result in the effort to be more inclusive. Now that there is a spotlight on the Academy Awards, more diversity is expected for the future. Sometimes, change needs to be brought out with force—the force of opinion and making the voices of individuals heard.

## MODERN FEMINIST FILM THEORY

In analysis of multiple kinds of digital culture like film, contemporary feminist viewpoints remain crucial. The opportunity for women in comparatively-abled roles to support those who exist under genuinely restrictive forms of oppression is most evident now. Now, more women than ever are working in the film industry. However, it is still mostly dominated by men in Hollywood. NYWIFT, or New York Women in Film and Television, points out that “For the first time in over a decade, both the number and percentage of women working as directors on some of Hollywood’s biggest feature films have increased” (3). This information is vital to understanding the paradigm shift of women’s role in film throughout the decades. The industry has evolved to be more inclusive and less-discriminatory.

## CONCLUSION

The implications of this evolution point to more visibility for women in film. There are still countless ways to improve yet progress is moving at an accelerated rate due to outrage. The call for change is loud and clear. As a consequence of social ideals, the function of different classes has oscillated in the transitional shift of filmmaking from the 1920s to contemporary days. Film has manipulated the public significantly, creating an unparalleled prism through which the culture is perceived by the viewer. There is sufficient evidence of a paradigm shift in

regard to this topic, which speaks to the advancements that society has achieved. This is indicative of the willingness and determination of the present generation to accomplish what strong suffragists of the 1920s set into motion a century ago.

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