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Part IV

GENDER AND AMERICAN FILM



INTRODUCTION TO PART IV:

What is Gender?

Preceding chapters of this book have examined how Hollywood films have represented issues of race and class, and how those images have changed over the years in relation to broader social and industrial events. In the next several chapters, we turn to an examination of how American film represents (and has represented) sexual difference – how it depicts what it means to be a man or a woman. As it is a fundamental ideological tenet of **patriarchy** that men and masculinity are privileged over women and femininity, it should come as no surprise that Hollywood films have always privileged men and male roles over women and female roles. This is partly due to the perseverance of **classical Hollywood narrative form**, which has always worked to privilege men as the active and powerful heroes of Hollywood film, while relegating women to the role of love interest waiting to be rescued. The other formal axes of film, including cinematography, editing, and sound design, and especially visual design (costume, makeup, hair, and lighting), construct images of how women and men are supposed to *be*. Indeed, most of the elements employed by Hollywood films to demarcate sex roles are also broad cultural ones, as men and women in our society routinely make themselves up and select costumes for daily life, much as actors and actresses do for the parts they play. Thus, for over 100 years, movies have frequently defined what is beautiful, what is sexy, what is manly, and how men and women should “properly” react in any given situation.

As with other social groups examined in this book, there have been tremendous gains since the early twentieth century for the idea of equality between men and women. Historically, however, there has been a great deal of discrimination based upon sex roles in America, both within the Hollywood industry and in culture-at-large. A division of labor between the sexes was a cultural “norm” of American business life until very recently: women rarely had a chance to advance beyond supporting secretarial jobs, as powerful men promoted other men into more advanced positions. Today, some American women

would probably say they feel they have equal rights and privileges. Thanks to the activism of previous generations, women today can go to college and enter most careers if they choose to do so. There are women executives in Hollywood and most other industries, female politicians, and seemingly no limits on what women can hope to achieve. Yet an actual survey of the country in terms of sex roles still shows great disparities between women's percentage of the population (approximately 51%) and their representation in Hollywood films and in other social institutions. According to some recent surveys, there are still twice as many men on Hollywood screens as there are women. A quick look into the boardrooms and legislative bodies of the United States reveals that women comprise nowhere near half their memberships. Why are women still frequently underrepresented in both the workplace and popular culture?

Part of the answer to that complex question lies in the nature of **hegemonic patriarchy** itself. While women gained the right to vote (in 1920) and have more and more opportunities in all aspects of society, there is still a strong cultural expectation that women should prefer a domestic life – that women should want to stay at home and raise children. In reality, many women in today's economy choose to work outside the home while others need to work to support themselves and/or their families. Today's women are thus often expected to have careers *and* to be fulltime homemakers, a dual demand that has rarely been placed on men (although more and more single-parent men of our era are finding themselves in that situation). Also, because sex roles and the social expectations that go along with them are such an intimate part of our everyday lives, discrimination based on sex may be subtler and harder to "see" than discrimination based on race or class. Such bias is often called sexism, the belief that one sex is inherently superior to the other. Sexism is pervasive in our society, and usually is expressed as the patriarchal assumption that men are more capable or "better" human beings than are women. Sexism, like **racism**, may also work in reverse – there are some women who feel that being a woman is essentially better than being a man. Still, those beliefs are usually formed in response to historical and ongoing discrimination against women and do little to challenge patriarchal assumptions and institutions.

To understand these concepts more clearly, we need to introduce the difference between the terms **sex** and **gender**. The word **sex** can refer to sexual acts (as in "having sex"), but it is also used to describe the biological or chromosomal makeup of human beings. Science tells us that people of the male sex are male because they have an XY chromosome. People of the female sex carry an XX chromosome. (Indeed, every human embryo starts out as female until the Y chromosome "turns on" and helps shape some fetuses into males.) The word **gender**, on the other hand, refers to the social, historical, and cultural roles that we think of as being associated with either the male or female sex. While sex may be defined by the terms "male" or "female," gender is best defined by the terms **masculinity** and **femininity** – how the male and female sexes are characterized culturally. **Femininity** (as defined by patriarchy) is usually associated with being small, quiet, passive, emotional, nurturing, non-aggressive, dependent, and weak. **Masculinity** (as defined by patriarchy) is usually associated with being large, loud, and active, with non-emotional aggression and strong leadership abilities.

For a great part of the twentieth century, most people (including medical professionals) confused sex and gender, assuming that all social differences between men and women were the result of biological hardwiring. Patriarchal discourse still tries to claim that being of the male sex automatically means being of masculine gender, and that being of the

Sex	Gender
Male	Masculinity
Female	Femininity

The first column lists two sex identities, based on biological factors. The second column lists two gender identities, based on social factors.

female sex automatically means being of feminine gender. By equating being female with being feminine (dependent and weak), patriarchal culture is able to discourage women from gaining power of their own. When people believe that gender roles are biologically determined and not **socially constructed**, they are less likely to challenge the status quo, and thus patriarchal interests remain uncontested. While most scholars today believe that there is a biological basis for some differences between the sexes, they also acknowledge that most of the lived, everyday differences between men and women are due to culturally constructed gender roles. In other words, a person's sex is formed by genetics, while a person's gender is *learned*.

Developmental studies with children have shown that by the age of six or so, most human beings have developed an inner sense of themselves as either male or female. This is termed our **gender identity**. (The complexities of gender identity are discussed more fully in Part V: Sexuality and American Film.) We get ideas about what it means to be a boy or a girl from **ideological** institutions such as the family, the schools, other children, and the media. This happens both consciously and unconsciously, and it may begin in the first minutes of life if we are wrapped in either a pink or a blue blanket. From that moment on, girls are expected to like pink, be quiet, and prefer to play with dolls. Boys are taught that "real" boys choose blue colors, engage in rough-and-tumble activities, and play with toy trucks. Of course, not all girls like to play with Barbies and not all boys like to play with Tonkas. Children who do not confirm to expected gender roles may be teased by classmates and shunned by families. Men who are physically weak or emotional have been the butt of jokes, while strong women have often been demonized for being unfeminine. In this way, patriarchal culture insures the continuation of traditional gender roles, and of the sexist hierarchy inherent in them. A good illustration of this hierarchy can be found by comparing sensitive boys and tough girls. While both groups pose problems for patriarchal ideology, a sensitive boy will usually be teased and harassed much more than a girl who likes sports. A girl being masculine is a "step up" in the gender hierarchy, whereas a boy being sensitive is a "step down" to the level of the feminine, and must therefore be more harshly condemned.

Such shaping continues beyond childhood. Popular culture continually reinforces differences between men and women. Same-sex or **homosocial groups** like sports teams, fraternities and sororities, and even some classrooms, work to divide human beings into two camps on the basis of sex and gender expectations. Frequently such groups are overtly based on the assumption that male groups are better than female ones. Some people even go so far as to suggest there is a war between men and women: the common phrase "battle of the sexes" is indicative of that idea. The popular self-help craze of the 1990s, summed up in the title of the book *Men are From Mars, Women are From Venus*, even suggested that men and women were best understood as alien species from separate planets. Partly this binary opposition between our ideas of masculinity and femininity is necessary

because socially and psychologically we tend to define one against the other. Just as we might define whiteness as not being black, or Asian, or Native American, we define masculinity as that which is not feminine. If being masculine is thought to be tough, then being feminine is thought to be tender. If masculinity is active, then femininity must be defined as passive. These binary oppositions that we use to define traditional gender can sometimes be **internalized** and lock us into very narrow roles that may not be good for us. For example, men who are afraid to admit their emotional feelings may silently suffer from depression because they feel they cannot talk about it. Women who want a career may accept being housewives because they feel that is what is expected of them.

Thus, gender is a concept deeply ingrained into our everyday lives and culture. It functions, like most ideologies, in both conscious and unconscious ways. Even the very words we use to communicate carry subtle gender biases. Some languages (such as French or Spanish) have “gendered” nouns, a situation that suggests a large network of meaning about what is masculine and/or feminine for a given culture. In English, we have separate pronouns for male and female (his, her) and a whole slew of words such as *mailman*, *milkman*, *manhole*, and *mankind* that obviously carry a sexist bias. Other aspects of gendered language are more subtle. Referring to men as “men” and women as “girls” (or “honey,” or “baby,” etc.) is another way that language itself can convey ideas about appropriate gender behaviors and the respect afforded to each. In yet another example, ships and cars are often spoken of as female, despite the fact that they are inanimate objects. Is this because they can be possessed by men and add to a man’s prestige, the way some older men use younger women as “trophy” dates or wives? Perhaps you have heard the slogan “real men don’t eat quiche.” As a tiny, singular bit of popular culture, the saying works to define gender in powerful ways. It tells us that in the late twentieth century, quiche was considered a feminine food (perhaps because of its French connotations, or its constituent elements of milk and eggs), and that in order to be thought of as masculine, “real” men had better avoid it. (A big steak, on the other hand, is a meal for a “real” man.) Gender roles and expectations permeate our culture, language, and media in ways both subtle and obvious.

Chapter 10

WOMEN IN CLASSICAL HOLLYWOOD FILMMAKING

As a capitalist industry working within **hegemonic patriarchy**, it should not be surprising that the classical Hollywood **studio system** afforded special privileges to men, both in front of the camera as actors, and behind it as production personnel. **Classical Hollywood narrative form** dictated active and central roles for male characters, while most of the decisions made behind the cameras were also controlled by men. Men were the financial backers of the industry, the heads of studios and studio departments, and almost always the directors and producers of individual films. Before and during Hollywood's classical era (roughly the 1930s–50s), filmmakers often felt that women – *by their very nature* – were unsuited for these types of professional positions. Hollywood was not unique in this division of labor between the sexes; the rest of corporate America also believed that women were better suited to jobs as secretaries and receptionists rather than managers or division heads. Consequently, women who wanted to work in film production were often relegated to “feminine” jobs as secretaries, minor assistants, and “script girls.” (A script girl’s job was to aid the film director by overseeing and maintaining continuity between shots.)

However, a close examination of the history of American cinema before and during its classical era reveals that these **gendered** expectations were not absolute. A few women did become motion picture directors and producers, and there were also women who had successful careers as screenwriters. Of course, female movie stars and actresses were more numerous and better known than those few women working behind the camera. Through the characterizations of those stars and actresses, one can examine the evolving types and meanings of femininity throughout the first half of the twentieth century. For example, what was considered appropriate feminine behavior was often different in one era from that in another: what it meant to be a woman varied from decade to decade (as it still does). These changes, both behind the camera and in front of it, provide ample evidence of how **hegemonic** notions of gender were negotiated and reinforced in American cinema from its inception until the 1950s.

Images of Women in Early Cinema

The images of women in early American cinema were mostly drawn from the gender roles and representational codes of the Victorian era (so named for England's Queen Victoria, who ruled from 1837 to 1901). The "good" or socially approved Victorian middle-class woman was a paragon of virtue. As a young woman, she was childlike, and frequently associated with innocence, purity, and the need to be protected. She was often "put on a pedestal" and worshipped by the men in her life, namely her father and her brothers. When she got to be a certain age, she would be married off to a suitable young man; in many cases, this marriage would be an arranged one between families and not necessarily take into consideration the feelings of either husband or wife. This young woman would then become a wife and mother – her devotion and loyalty would be transferred from her father to her husband. The middle-class Victorian woman's life was tightly controlled by these men. It was expected that she would not work outside the home, and indeed in middle-to-upper-class homes she was expected to have servants who would do the housework for her. Her most important task was to produce and raise children, yet a virtuous Victorian woman's **sexuality** would never be displayed in provocative clothing or words. She would be assumed to be a virgin when she married, and it was taboo even to suggest that she might have sexual interests or desires. Sex for procreation was her duty, not her pleasure. Her lord and master was her husband, and she had little chance of removing herself from that situation should it turn violent or abusive.

If one examines female roles in the earliest American films, one can see that "good" women are – like their Victorian models – usually virginal daughters who, if they work at all, do "women's work" such as sewing and cooking. They are rarely active participants in the narrative, except as victims or prizes. They sit and wait patiently for their husbands to return home to them. Frequently, they are associated with childlike behavior and small animals such as birds and squirrels, an editing trope that seems to suggest that women are naturally cute and defenseless. They need fathers and husbands to protect them from the sexual advances of other men. (If a man does manage to seduce a good woman, she often chooses her own death over such a disgrace.) Actresses such as **Lillian Gish** and **Mary Pickford** frequently embodied this type of Victorian heroine. Lillian Gish's fluttery mannerisms and batting eyelashes suggested she was a delicate flower, constantly in danger and needing the protection of a good man. Similarly, Mary Pickford's screen persona was of a small child-woman. Although many of Mary Pickford's girl-women were scrappy fighters, Hollywood set designers would construct oversize props and chairs for her to sit in to reinforce the idea she was childlike and innocent.

Victorian culture and early cinema also promulgated images of "bad" women, usually defined as such because they were (unlike "good" women) explicitly sexualized. Hundreds of plays, magazine stories, and early films routinely presented "loose" or "fallen" women (who had perhaps had a child out of wedlock) as immoral and tragic. Within these narratives, such women were thrown into the street and ostracized from society. These texts taught severe **ideological** lessons to young women of the era: to be sexual outside of marriage most often led to ruin. In judging women according to their sexual propriety (or its lack), Victorian culture and early film simplistically divided women into two groups. This cultural construct defining women on the basis of their sexuality has been dubbed



the **virgin-whore complex**, and it still exists to various extents in today's contemporary culture. Many men feel that "good" girls should be virginal and that men should not marry a woman too free with her sexuality. Yet American men have also clearly desired the freely sexualized woman and taken advantage of her situation for both sexual pleasure and capitalist profit. The virgin–whore dichotomy of the Victorian era is represented in many early American films and continues to linger within the representational codes of classical and even contemporary Hollywood cinema.

The Industrial Revolution was also having profound effects on women both in real life and on movie screens. As more and more of the nation's population resided in and around big cities, many younger, unmarried women entered the workforce. With electrified machines now doing much of the physical labor, women were increasingly considered capable of performing certain jobs. Women found employment not only as secretaries and store clerks, but also as factory workers. With these new jobs, they ostensibly earned their own income. Often, however, this money was handed over to the head of the household (that is, the father) to help support the entire family. Yet many young women did have more and more discretionary income to go to amusement parks, restaurants, and the movies – sometimes even without a male escort! Many people were bothered by this small surge in women's independence, fearing that it would upset the "natural" balance of female dependence on men. Even more shocking were the people of this era who called for equal rights for women, advancing the cause of **feminism**. One of these activists, Rebecca West, wrote as early as 1913, "I myself have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is: I only know that people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat." Mainstream American society worked to demonize this **first wave** of feminism in many ways, branding some of these pioneering women criminal radicals or madwomen. Some were deported from the country, while others were imprisoned in institutions or silenced in other ways.

The era's moral reformers castigated not only feminist activists but also the less radical working girls who were having fun on their own in the big city. A number of people argued that these women were destroying the foundations of civilization by abandoning traditional gendered behaviors in order to pursue new pleasures. They also warned that these women were placing themselves in physical danger from pimps, kidnappers, and drug pushers – criminals who supposedly thrived in such disreputable places as amusement parks and movie houses. The early **nickelodeons** and movie theaters, as mentioned previously (see chapters 2 and 8), were considered disreputable and unsavory – and thus not a place in which any respectable woman might be found. As if to reinforce those ideas, a number of early feature length films such as *Traffic in Souls* (1913) and *Inside the White Slave Traffic* (1914) warned female moviegoers that their newfound urban independence could easily lead to kidnapping and forced prostitution. The fact that this possible situation was dubbed **white slavery** by the popular culture of the era underscores certain racial and capitalist ideologies: white women (being the "best" type of woman) were allegedly more desirable and thus more valuable as commodities or as victims.



Mary Pickford, affectionately known by her fans as Little Mary, often embodied concepts of Victorian femininity in early Hollywood movies.
Unidentified publicity photo, authors' personal collection.



Theda Bara, whose studio-given name was allegedly devised by mixing up the letters in the phrase "Arab Death," was early Hollywood's most famous vamp. Unidentified publicity photo, authors' personal collection.

Furthermore, the image of a white woman being enslaved to a non-white man (which is what this rhetoric implied) was especially inflammatory, projecting generic male desire onto a non-white (and therefore more bestial) racial group.

White slave films were not the only racially inflected cinematic image used to negotiate women's "proper place" place during the 1910s. For example, the stereotype of the **vamp** was also very common. The vamp was a dark and exotic woman who used her potent sexuality to control white men, often leading them to their doom. ("Good" girls were more likely to be represented as blonde and blue-eyed.) Vamp was short for vampire, a monster that drains the life blood out of his or her victims. Thus the vamp – a sexually active woman often of another **race, ethnicity, or nationality** – was figured as a predatory monster who drained men of their money and morals. In *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), the mulatto character Lydia is figured as evil not only because of her mixed racial status, but because she is intelligent and conniving and can wield sexual power over men. Early Hollywood's most famous vamp was **Theda Bara**, a dark-haired actress born in Ohio under the name Theodosia Goodman. Studio executives allegedly devised her movie name by reversing and scrambling the letters in the phrase "Arab Death," and she was promoted as a dark, exotic, and alluring beauty from another culture. As such, Theda Bara represented white patriarchal America projecting its sexual fantasies and desires upon a non-white or foreign figure, a trope

that we have already seen at work in representations of Arab, African American, Asian, and Hispanic women (see chapters 3, 4, 6, and 7).

In 1920, the fight to gain equal rights for women scored a major success when their Constitutional right to vote, granted in 1918, finally came into force. Among the other successes of first wave feminism was yet another new type of woman – a young, urban, career-oriented woman who quickly became a cultural stereotype known as the **flapper**. The flapper rejected Victorian notions of what a woman was, and developed her own style. She wore shorter bobbed hair, with strands of pearls over plain, shorter dresses that deaccentuated her curves; she smoked and danced in public; and she even had sex outside of wedlock. While this initially seems a radical overthrow of the Victorian image of women, the flapper represents a **hegemonic negotiation** that allows new ideas to come into play but reaffirms concepts basic to keeping patriarchal capitalism in place. For example, a flapper's independence was chiefly defined by her freedom to buy things in order to reconfigure her personal style, and not by any kind of radical political critique: in most novels and films in which she appeared, the flapper was still out to find a husband. (Contemporary capitalism still works in similar ways, taking advantage of feminist sentiment by advertising that women can become liberated by purchasing certain products such as Virginia Slims cigarettes or Nike sports equipment.)

The flapper and the new openness about sexuality that she represented were depicted in many films of the era. Sex comedies such as Cecil B. DeMille's *Male and Female* (1919) and *Don't Change Your Husband* (1919) and Erich von Stroheim's *Foolish Wives* (1922) often

implied that this new sexual morality would only lead to tragedy and death, but the flapper was an instant hit in films because of her vivacious and sexy attitude. Probably the most famous film flapper of the era was **Clara Bow**. In the film *It* (1927), based on a popular book of the same name, she cemented her image as the high-spirited, free-wheeling flapper and even became known as “The IT Girl.” (“IT” was a euphemism for the flapper’s magnetic energy and sexually free spirit.) However, Clara Bow’s career was short-lived. As nasty rumors about her private life began to tarnish her public image, she suffered a series of mental and physical breakdowns. Acknowledging how the Hollywood studio system could actually destroy the lives of those it created and valorized, Bow once remarked that “being a sex symbol is a heavy load to carry, especially when one is tired, hurt, and bewildered.” As for many Hollywood stars before and after her, the demands of playing a bigger-than-life construction of ideal femininity became a difficult chore for Clara Bow. Those demands and expectations, combined with the public’s ever-more conservative leanings during the years of the **Great Depression**, eventually forced “The IT Girl” off the screen at the age of 28.



Clara Bow embodied the image of the 1920s flapper, a young woman who was much more sexually liberated than her Victorian predecessors.
Unidentified publicity photo, authors' personal collection.



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Unidentified publicity photo, authors' personal collection.

Early Female Filmmakers

As noted above, most American business concerns throughout the first woman half of the twentieth century were dominated and controlled by white men. Men were in control of the American film industry practically from its outset, as **Thomas Edison** and his cohorts worked to monopolize the new technology. Women at this time rarely had the economic power to bankroll a film company or indeed produce a single film project, unlike any number of male businessmen who invested in the new medium of motion pictures. Furthermore, traveling the country (or the world) with a camera and a projector, filming events and setting up screenings in new cities and towns, would have been impossible for most women of the era even to attempt. As cinema became a massive industry in the 1910s and 1920s, its potential for wealth and power led to a consolidation of male dominance under the classical Hollywood studio system. Yet, because filmmaking was such a new industry, during its first few decades what constituted a “**masculine**” job versus a “**feminine**” one was not always immediately apparent. Consequently, although it was still plainly a male-dominated environment, the slapdash organization of early filmmaking did afford some opportunities for some women to become filmmakers. Most of the women who did so were white, and in many cases they came from middle-to-upper-class backgrounds, a social position that facilitated their move into motion pictures. Historical evidence indicates that during these years it was much easier for a white woman to move into and excel within institutionalized filmmaking than it was for a man of color.

Film historians credit **Alice Guy-Blache** as the first woman to tell a fictional narrative on film, when, as a secretary at the French film studio Pathé, she was given a chance to use one of the cameras. Remarkably, she was also experimenting with sound film technology as early as 1903. Guy-Blache's success as writer, director, and cinematographer made her one of the most important filmmakers of early international cinema; she eventually moved to the United States and ran her own studio, Solax Pictures, during the 1910s. A number of female stars of that decade (including Mary Pickford and Lillian Gish) also gained enough power to organize their own production companies, and as early as 1912, at least 20 independent film companies were being run by women. These pioneering women in the early film industry worked to make film direction a socially acceptable position for women. They countered the idea that directing a film was necessarily a masculine job (one that needed a powerful leader commanding a mostly male crew) by arguing that a woman's femininity gave her the taste and artistry to create good films. Furthermore, they argued, a woman's motherly instincts made her ideal for getting a cast and crew to work together in harmony. Emphasizing both the all-round talent of these women and the less-regimented structure of early filmmaking, many female filmmakers fulfilled multiple roles in these productions. For example, Helen Gardner, a prominent screen star of the 1910s, produced, directed, wrote, and even designed the costumes for her films. Nell Shipman worked as a writer for Universal, and then produced, directed, and starred in her own independent films.

Lois Weber was probably the most successful and well-known female director of the silent era. Her films frequently dealt with issues of importance to women of the era, such as birth control, which was an important part of the fight for women's sexual and reproductive freedom. Some of Weber's films, such as *Where Are My Children?* (1916), tackled these issues in a straightforward way, arguing for the necessity of the availability of birth

control information. Even making these films was a brave gesture, for at that time, any mention or discussion of birth control was considered obscene in most areas of the United States. People were arrested and sent to prison for distributing literature on the subject. Within a few years, as the Hollywood industry consolidated itself under male control, such issues would be deemed inappropriate and banned from movie screens altogether. Lois Weber also helped the careers of other aspiring female filmmakers, hiring other women to write or perform other jobs within her productions. Throughout the next decade, female filmmakers in Hollywood formed a network of professional friendships that helped them navigate through an increasingly male-dominated domain.

Yet, as the industry streamlined itself into the studio system of production, opportunities began to dwindle for female directors. Women working in film production were increasingly blocked from leadership positions and compartmentalized into traditionally feminine jobs such as secretaries and seamstresses. While makeup and costume design might be considered feminine jobs, the Hollywood makeup and costume departments were run by men. (It was not until the 1950s and 1960s that a woman, Edith Head, would gain fame as a Hollywood costume designer.) Women were able to maintain a presence as film editors, mainly because editing was initially not seen as creative work (but merely cutting and pasting) – although it could also be due to the perception that stitching shots together was similar to sewing. Mostly though, women remained in high demand as screenwriters. As part of the film industry's attempt to gain respectability, a number of studios hired female directors and screenwriters because they were thought to convey higher moral values. Many researchers now estimate that about half of all the films made in the United States during the 1910s and 1920s were written by women. **Anita Loos** is often considered the model of silent film scripting, famous for initiating a romantic yet slang-oriented style referred to as the "rosy-fingered dawn" school (after one of the era's typical title card clichés). Other major female screenwriters of the period include June Mathis, Bess Meredyth, and **Frances Marion**, who became the first person to win two Academy Awards in any field, and the highest-paid screenwriter in Hollywood during the 1930s. Contrary to later suppositions that female writers were only adept at crafting romance films or family melodramas, these women wrote for all genres: **Westerns**, historical epics, swashbucklers, and prison films. Screenwriting had become such a common position for women that a career guide for American women published in the 1920s included a chapter on writing for the cinema.

However, when a revised edition of this career guide was published at the end of the decade, that chapter had been eliminated. The coming of sound technology and the Great Depression was forcing Hollywood studios into economic partnerships with large and powerful banking and communication companies, and filmmaking became less and less an artisanal practice and much more of a corporate business enterprise rooted firmly in patriarchal capitalist ideals. The achievements of women in the industry became more limited. Previously successful women retired or were forced out of the business. Lois Weber was so destitute at the end of her life that her friend Frances Marion had to pay for her funeral. Furthermore, reissues and credit listings of the films of many female directors (such as those by Weber and Shipman) sometimes credited their husbands as director – further erasing these women's accomplishments. Frances Marion herself was dropped from her screenwriting contract at MGM in the mid-1930s, not because her work was of poor quality, but because she had become vice-president of



Film director Dorothy Arzner made many films in classical Hollywood; in order to be accepted by her male co-workers, she often dressed and behaved in a masculine manner.

Unidentified publicity photo, authors' personal collection.

the newly formed Writers Guild. The Guild sought better pay and working conditions for all writers, both female and male, and the capitalist studio bosses tried to crush it.

Probably the most famous female filmmaker of the classical Hollywood era was **Dorothy Arzner**, a woman who made 16 films in 15 years for various major studios. Arzner negotiated the all-male world of **classical Hollywood cinema** production by positioning herself as "one of the boys." She frequently wore tailored suit-dresses, talked tough, and even smoked cigars, in order to gain the respect of the men she worked among (and who worked for her). Arzner's career spanned both silent and sound cinema and she worked in a number of different genres, although she was eventually pegged as a director of the "woman's film" (see below). Arzner had been born into an upper-middle-class family in San Francisco, worked as an ambulance driver during World War I, and entered filmmaking as a typist and then a script girl. Within a few years, she had become an editor, a screenwriter, and then a second unit director (directing minor shots such as crowd scenes, inserts, and special effects). In 1926 she was offered a job directing *Fashions for Women* (1927), and the success of that film

earned Arzner a contract with Paramount Pictures. There she directed Clara Bow in one of her "flapper" pictures, *The Wild Party* (1929).

Arzner is best known for several sound films she made after she left Paramount and became a freelance director in and around Hollywood. *Christopher Strong* (1933) starred a young Katharine Hepburn as a strong-willed flying ace who meets and falls in love with a married man. The subject matter itself (a relationship with a married man) and the strong career-oriented woman played by Hepburn distinguish the film as a rare Hollywood attempt to expand roles for women on screen as well as question patriarchal assumptions. In *Craig's Wife* (1936), Arzner directed a tale about a woman who marries for material wealth rather than love, gently critiquing both capitalism and patriarchy. *Dance, Girl, Dance* (1940) was a melodrama about dancers and show girls. The film celebrates **homosocial bonding** between women and critiques the patriarchal practice of showcasing scantily clad chorus girls. After making a movie about a female spy, *First Comes Courage* (1943), Arzner retired from feature filmmaking, although she remained active making training films for the Women's Army Corps (WAC), directing theater productions, and working in both radio and television. In her later years she taught at the University of Southern California's film school, where she inspired a new generation of filmmakers and film historians who were just beginning to unearth the sketchy history of women in Hollywood.

The only other female filmmaker during Hollywood's classical era to have any success comparable to Dorothy Arzner's was **Ida Lupino**. Lupino, who in 1949 started her own production company, had worked her way into the director's chair by first becoming an accomplished and popular actress. In the first few years of the 1950s, Lupino made low-budget **social problem films** that often tackled subjects such as rape, bigamy, and unmarried motherhood. In the 1960s she directed mostly television shows, but she did direct the popular comedy *The Trouble with Angels* (1966). Like Arzner, Lupino needed to overcome **sexist** bias on her sets. Rather than make herself into one of the boys, as Arzner had done, Lupino encouraged the use of the nickname "Mom" by her coworkers.

In a way reminiscent of arguments made by early female filmmakers, she thus tapped into the respect that most men of the era felt for their mothers (if not for women in general), and used that respect in order to accomplish her vision of a film. While both Lupino and Arzner managed to maneuver through what had become an overwhelmingly male-dominated industry, their accomplishments did not open many doors for other women during this period. Ultimately, the fact that there were only two women film directors of note in Hollywood during its classical period (while there were hundreds if not thousands of men) demonstrates how completely the American film industry was dominated by men.

Images of Women in 1930s Classical Hollywood

Recall that during the first few years of the Great Depression, Hollywood's form and style codified into what is now known as the **classical Hollywood style**. Some of the most famous female movie stars of the twentieth century are associated with this era: Greta Garbo, Mae West, Barbara Stanwyck, Marlene Dietrich, Bette Davis, Joan Crawford, and Katharine Hepburn, just to name a few. Most of these women were considered glamorous beauty queens, which meant that both onscreen and in real life they dressed in designer gowns, wore impeccable hair and makeup, and could be seen frequenting the best and most beautiful homes and nightclubs in America. Because of their popularity with the public, some of these stars were able to maintain a degree of control over their own projects. Katharine Hepburn often battled studio bosses over roles that she felt were demeaning, and Greta Garbo had input in choosing her leading men and cinematographers. Mae West was known for writing all of her own dialog (she had been a playwright and vaudeville star before coming to Hollywood). Like many of the characters these and other actresses played in the early 1930s, West's onscreen persona was gutsy and sexy: she was best known for her racy double entendre jokes that suggested she was a sexual free spirit who was untethered to any one man, be it father or husband. Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo also appeared as strong female characters who frequently challenged the patriarchal status quo. In *Morocco* (1930) for example, Dietrich wears a tuxedo and seduces both men and women. In *Queen Christina* (1933), Garbo's character professes that she would rather "die a bachelor" than marry, and she ends the film alone.

Also recall that Hollywood had adopted its **Production Code** in 1930 (see chapter 2) as an attempt to quell calls for censorship but, until it was enforced in 1934, Hollywood movies actually got a bit racier as failing companies tried to woo Depression-era audiences back into their theaters. The appearance of strong, forward, and sexualized heroines in the early 1930s was thus the result of those economic and industrial factors, as well as of the increasing liberalization of sex roles that had occurred throughout the 1920s. However, there were other people in the country who objected to the sort of forthright sexuality that was the hallmark of many of these **pre-Code films**. They argued that the Great Depression had been brought about by wild, godless licentiousness, including the "scandalous" behavior of independent women and flappers. Demands for federal censorship of the movies by activist groups such as the Catholic **Legion of Decency** eventually forced the industry to censor itself via the **Seal**



Mae West was one of Pre-Code Hollywood's most notorious leading ladies; she wrote most of her provocative dialog herself.

Unidentified publicity photo, authors' personal collection.

of Approval provision (put into effect in 1934). Suddenly, many of the strong female roles that actresses such as Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich had specialized in were curtailed. While most actresses were able to shift into roles thought by the censors to be more appropriate, others suffered badly. Mae West, whose career depended on her racy sexual innuendo, was hobbled by the new Hollywood censors. Her film work after the Production Code was put into effect was sparse and tepid compared to her pre-Code work. Adding insult to injury, during the same period of time the conservative newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst used his newspapers to carry on a "smear campaign" against many of these same actresses. Hearst's newspapers dubbed them "box office poison" and suggested to filmgoers and filmmakers alike that their careers were (or should be) finished.

This is not to say simplistically that pre-Code films had great roles for women and those after 1934 did not. The differences are perhaps rather minor from a twenty-first-century perspective. Hollywood films had always tended to be about men, and to punish sexually active "bad" women while rewarding "good" women with romance and marriage. Most Hollywood genre films of the 1930s, both pre- and post-Code, were still centered on men and tended to simplify female characters into basic types drawn from the virgin-whore dichotomy. The gangster film, for example, focused on guys with guns (on both sides of the law), with women figured either as the gangster's moll (the sexualized whore figure) or as the G-man's wife (the virgin-mother). The Western also dealt predominantly with male

adventure, and women's roles usually were reduced to either the saloon girl (itself a Hollywood euphemism for prostitute) or the good daughter of a rancher (or perhaps a virginal schoolteacher). In the **horror film** or **action-adventure movie**, women were primarily helpless victims waiting to be carried off by monsters or marauding madmen, so that they might be saved by patriarchal heroes. The musical and the romantic comedy initially seem to offer more equity to men and women, as these genres focused on heterosexual courtship, thus giving men and women fairly equal screen time. Yet, even within that format, the gender codes of the day regarding clothing, makeup, courtship, and marriage all work to reinforce traditional gender roles. In Western patriarchal culture, it is the man who asks the woman to dance, pays for dinner, and proposes marriage. Women do not have the option of reversing those gender roles in most 1930s Hollywood films. Also, the musical genre frequently features scantily clad chorus girls, allegedly as a visual treat for men in the audience. (The dynamics of such processes of **objectification** will be explored more fully in the next chapter.)

The one Hollywood genre devoted to women and allegedly to women's issues was comprised of melodramas known as **woman's films**. These films are also sometimes referred to as "soap operas," "weepies," "tearjerkers," and/or "chick flicks." The films in this genre were made (written, directed, produced) largely by men, creating stories that *they* thought would attract a female audience. (One should also note the lack of a matching "man's film" genre – because most of the rest of Hollywood cinema is "man's film.") Consequently, the woman's film usually presents conventional, patriarchal ideas about what it supposedly means to be a woman. Centered on the lead female character's romantic and/or domestic trials and tribulations, woman's films present the family and home environment as the



The woman's film *Imitation of Life* (1934) was remade by Douglas Sirk in 1959. In this first version, Louise Beavers helps Claudette Colbert succeed in business, but she is still treated as a second-class citizen because of her race.

Imitation of Life, copyright © 1934, Universal.

proper sphere for women. Also, as terms like "tearjerker" indicate, these films appeal directly to viewers' emotions, on the assumption that women are more emotional than men. Thus, while the woman's film genre presents a special niche where female characters were front and center, patriarchal notions of gender were continually reinforced.

The types of stories that proliferated in the genre attempted to teach women lessons about their proper function under patriarchy. Women were constantly forced to realize their place as traditional mothers or housewives, and punished in a variety of ways if they ever stepped outside of those sanctioned boundaries. The 1970s feminist film critic Molly Haskell identified four basic themes in these films. The first theme is sacrifice, in which a woman learns to give up her own life and/or personal happiness for someone else's. In *Stella Dallas* (1937), for example, a lower-class mother chooses to absent herself from her daughter's life so that the daughter may marry a wealthy man. The second thematic variation in the woman's film is affliction, a film formula in which a woman contracts a terrible disease, leaving her only a short time to find happiness (that is, a man). In *Dark Victory* (1939), a strong-willed and independent heiress is humbled by a fatal brain tumor, but finds brief happiness submitting herself to the medical and romantic care of her male doctor. A third narrative variation involves a woman having to make a choice, either between her career and a man, or between which man she wants to marry. In the former, she finds happiness in choosing conventional romance, or loneliness and despair in choosing her career. (In comparison, how often are male characters forced to choose a career or romance – as if one cannot have both?) In the latter formulation of the choice narrative, the man who exhibits most strongly the ability to take care of the woman usually wins the day. And finally, some women's films focus on competition between women – again, usually over a man.

As should be apparent, these films might be called "woman's films," but they still almost invariably stress the primacy of male figures and patriarchal structures in women's lives. Even a comedy like *The Women* (1939), written by Clare Booth Luce and starring an all-female cast, does little to foster women's rights or freedoms. Instead, the women fight and claw over men, reinforcing the idea that women must compete and not cooperate, and that finding that right man is the ultimate source of female happiness. All four narrative patterns that Haskell identifies taught women the lessons that patriarchal culture wanted them to learn: how to be submissive to a man, how to be "beautiful" in order to attract a man, and what the terrible cost of not finding a man and raising a family would be. Indeed, women who do not marry in Hollywood films are routinely depicted as neurotic spinsters or bitter, hardened, and unhappy women. One of the more explicit examples of this overt sermonizing occurs in *Lady in the Dark* (1944). In this woman's film with musical numbers, Ginger Rogers plays a magazine publisher who seeks psychotherapy because she is unhappy with her life. She is eventually told by her psychiatrist that she needs a man to "dominate" her. The "happy ending" of the film finds her handing over her successful business to her new husband so that she can settle into her "proper" role as submissive wife. While the moral of *Lady in the Dark* seems absurd to twenty-first-century audiences, it should be remembered that the ideologies it encodes were common, everyday beliefs. And the fact that they were ratified by "medical science" (in this case psychiatry) lent further credence to the notion that biological sex and patriarchal gender constructs were one and the same.

Almost all of the actresses of the early 1930s who had gained stardom playing strong and independent women were playing in women's films by the end of the decade, learning what price had to be paid for such independence. Yet recent feminist film critics have explored how the genre might actually critique patriarchy because it exposes the biases, hardships, and unhappiness that it can create. While ostensibly teaching women how to be good housewives and mothers, the large amount of suffering that goes on in these films also lays bare the enormous burdens women have had to deal with in male-dominated societies. Women who went to these movies for "a good cry" may have been using the genre as an emotional release from their day-to-day pressures under patriarchy. Some of these films might also be potentially subversive of dominant patriarchal ideas, because, like today's television soap opera, they sometimes explored the problems of traditional marital relations. Rather than the usual Hollywood film that ended with heterosexual coupling and a "happily ever after" assumption, many melodramas and women's films focus on what happens when a marriage goes sour, and as such, open up a space for a potential critique of the institutions and ideologies oppressive to women.

World War II and After

The day-to-day experience of Americans during World War II exemplifies how gender roles are formed via processes of social construction rather than a biological inevitability. When America entered the war, a great shift in the nation's conception of femininity was purposely engineered. With men being drafted into the armed services to serve as soldiers, sailors, and marines, the ranks of American factory workers quickly became depleted. In order to fill empty spots on assembly lines, keep production high, and support the overall war effort, American women were increasingly recruited to enter the workforce. This shift from homemaker to bombmaker required a redefinition of gender roles in America, and the federal government specifically set out to promote the idea of a tough, new, working woman. This image of the new woman was best exemplified by *Rosie the Riveter*, a composite propaganda figure that was used in print and media campaigns to promote the idea that women should leave their homes and enter the workforce. As her name and image implied, Rosie was a strong woman who could tie back her hair, roll up her sleeves, and do a "man's job," such as working a rivet gun. Whereas men continued to be valued for their strength, intelligence, and courage, now it was expected that women could and should also exhibit those qualities. The pre-war idea of femininity (soft, passive, weak) had to yield to a new definition of what a woman was and what she could accomplish. Many thousands of women joined the newly formed WAC or WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service), while unprecedented numbers of others entered the workforce in order to build the necessary machinery of warfare.

Hollywood did its part to promote this new image as well. A number of female stars encouraged women to join the workforce by being photographed "on the job" in factories and on assembly lines. A number of films also showed women working at defense plants, and as nurses, WAVES, and WACs. (Granted, while pictured as capable and responsible,

Hollywood heroines continued to be glamorous and alluring rather than strong and sweaty.) Hollywood realized that with men at war, women and children comprised the bulk of the domestic audience, and arguably more women's films got made during this period than any other. Subtle differences in filmmaking formulas and genres can occasionally be found in World War II era films. For example, in the horror movie *Return of the Vampire* (1943), the vampire hunter is not a little old man named Professor Van Helsing, but rather a strong female scientist who defeats the monster when he threatens her family. Even some combat films showed women fighting for victory, such as *So Proudly We Hail* (1943) and *Cry Havoc* (1943).

When the war ended and American men returned from overseas, many women in factory jobs were unceremoniously fired so that returning veterans could be hired in their place. In the place of Rosie the Riveter, there was an attempt to shift the American image of women back to where it had been before the war. Women were bombarded by images in the mass media that told them happiness and fulfillment could be found as a housewife and mother. Magazine ads, radio programs, newspaper columns, and (of course) movies presented new suburban homes as a woman's paradise, complete with automatic clothes washers and dryers, dishwashers, refrigerators, and garbage disposals. Such a rapid shift in gender roles did not happen smoothly, however, and behind these smiling, shiny images of domestic bliss lay no small degree of tension between the sexes. In Hollywood, a type of filmmaking which became known as **film noir** arose in the late 1940s and seemed to reflect directly on these tensions. In film noir, women were not simple-minded heroines waiting to be saved by the hero. Instead they were deadly **femme fatales** – or **black widows** – women who lured men into their sphere of influence and would just as easily murder a man as marry him. In a way, the femme fatale of film noir was an updated version of the vamp. Pictured as the center of the web of evil in these films precisely for pursuing her own desires (sexual and otherwise) instead of passively supporting the male lead, the femme fatale had to be punished severely, usually by death. Being a strong, self-sufficient woman had gone from admirable to reprehensible in a very short time. (Film noir will be dealt with more fully in chapter 12.)

The sexual aggressiveness of the femme fatale mirrored an America that was becoming more open about its sexuality in the postwar years. During the war years, sexual mores became a bit freer – both men and women engaged in pre- and extramarital sex more often, perhaps because of the impending threat of death that hung over the country at that time. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, scientific surveys about American sexual habits were published by the Kinsey Institute, which painted a far different picture of American sexual behavior than did Hollywood movies. Throughout the 1950s, audiences showed a growing interest in foreign films such as *And God Created Woman* (1957) – films that often dealt much more frankly with sex than did Hollywood films. The burgeoning of a burlesque/nudist exploitation cinema further demonstrated to Hollywood that there was a demand for sexually suggestive and revealing films, and the Production Code was weakened (though not overturned) during the 1950s. First, a Supreme Court ruling (*The Miracle Decision*, 1952) said that movies did indeed have the First Amendment right to free speech of any kind. Second, a series of financially successful independent films were released without the Production Code's Seal of Approval. The most famous of these is *The Moon is Blue* (1953), a sophisticated sex comedy which dared to use the word "virgin." Its

success, even without the Seal of Approval, demonstrated that American audiences were ready for a more adult approach to matters of sex and sexuality.

While the 1950s showed a greater acknowledgment of sexual matters, mainstream Hollywood cinema repackaged the highly sexualized female role to great popularity. The threatening sexuality of the femme fatale was replaced by the luscious naïveté of the so-called **blonde bombshell** – embodied in many films by actresses such as Marilyn Monroe, Jayne Mansfield, and Mamie Van Doren. Curvaceous and alluring, the blonde bombshell was never very bright, but she had the ability to stop men cold in their tracks because of her sex appeal. Interestingly, the term itself seems to acknowledge the blonde bombshell's destructive capacity. Yet, unlike the femme fatale, the bombshell never quite understood just how sexy she was: many men in the films and in the audience lustily desired her, but she remained oblivious to their advances. Consequently, while the femme fatale appeared in lurid crime thrillers, the blonde bombshell appeared in comedies, with much of the humor arising over her simple-minded sexual antics.

As blonde bombshells (and their brunette and/or raven-haired counterparts, such as Elizabeth Taylor and Sophia Loren) provided one image of the 1950s woman, a number of actresses also represented the sweet, dependent image of the suburban housewife (or sweet young girl dreaming of such a life). Stars such as Doris Day, Debbie Reynolds, and Sandra Dee were fresh-scrubbed, wholesome girls-next-door. In the increasingly sexualized atmosphere, the virginal characters these actresses played often had to fend off advances from men, but they managed to hold out until the wedding night and the promise of living "happily ever after" in a prefabricated home, vacuuming while wearing high heels and pearls. The endorsement of this domestic lifestyle for women could be found in both comedies and dramas – even blonde bombshells were shown longing for a split-level home with a modern kitchen and a junior executive husband to clean up after.

Woman's films (and other domestic melodramas that were not marketed exclusively to women) continued to illustrate ideas about gender, but the issues raised in these films grew increasingly problematic during the 1950s. While attempting to reinforce traditional ideas about a woman's correct behavior and social sphere, the increased interest in adult themes and treatments complicated the usual moral stances of the genre. The stage works and original screenplays of Tennessee Williams and William Inge were adapted into many steamy melodramas during the 1950s and early 1960s. Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), *Baby Doll* (1956), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1958), and *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone* (1961) featured lust, madness, sexual repression, child brides, and male gigolos. William Inge properties such as *Come Back Little Sheba* (1952), *Picnic* (1955), *Bus Stop* (1956), and *Splendor in the Grass* (1961) also examined sex and sexual repression in more frank and forthright ways. Even less prestigious melodramas seemed to have a hard time in presenting a convincing picture of women finding fulfillment through clean countertops and a whiter wash. Films like *Peyton Place* (1957), *The Best of Everything* (1959), and *A Summer Place* (1959) often exposed the pressures and resentments that were building up in the collective unconscious of American women – before clamping the lid back down on the pot and claiming that everything was fine.

Thus, it might be argued that the film melodramas of the 1950s present a patchwork critique of the era's gender relations. Many of them acknowledge that "something is wrong" with gender relations while trying desperately to maintain traditional values.

Even as the decade saw increasing numbers of women enter the workforce, the dictates of postwar American culture still taught that a woman's place was in the home. Many 1950s melodramas expose this paradox and give voice to the frustration many women felt in trying to be a "happy housewife" when they might have preferred something more free and independent. Told repeatedly by American culture that being a suburban wife should be the ultimate happiness for them, many women could not

Case Study: *All That Heaven Allows* (1955)

Film critics and historians often cite the films directed by Douglas Sirk as among the most interesting melodramas of the era. Working at Universal, Sirk made films that were very popular at the time, winning Academy Awards and making money at the box office. Some of the films he made were remakes of popular woman's films of the 1930s: *Magnificent Obsession* (1954) was originally made in 1935 and *Imitation of Life* (1959) was first filmed in 1934. Redoing these old films would seem merely to repackage and update old ideas and lessons about a woman's proper place in American society. At first glance, and possibly to a majority of the audiences who saw these films in the 1950s, such an assessment might make sense. Hollywood films (and television shows) were mirroring the widespread effort in American society to erase or reduce the gender equity approached during World War II, by placing women back into the home. *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), while not a remake of a 1930s woman's film, seems to illustrate many of these same issues. The film is focused on home life, with most scenes occurring in living rooms, kitchens, and bedrooms. The plot centers on romance and family. Also, the lead female character suffers emotionally through most of the film's running time, mainly for seeming to step outside patriarchal propriety. Yet Sirk's films often contain elements that work against the upholding of the old-fashioned attitudes common to the woman's film genre. While the stories themselves seem to be arguing for traditional ideas about gender, how the stories are told seems actively to critique this idea.

All That Heaven Allows stars Jane Wyman as Carrie, a suburban widow with college-age children, and Rock Hudson as Ron, the gardener with whom she falls in love. The dramatic conflict arises when the rest of the town reacts badly to their relationship: everyone in Carrie's country-club community is scandalized that the upstanding widow of a respected businessman is "consorting" with someone "beneath her station" (that is, a working-class laborer). They also whisper about Ron being younger than Carrie. Both the age disparity and the class disparity imply that Carrie is the dominant one in the relationship, which is inappropriate in a male-dominated society. Her children are distraught that she is disgracing their father's name, and vaguely shocked to

realize their mother may have her own sexual desires. The entire population pressures Carrie to end her relationship with Ron and go back to what they want her to be – a quiet, unassuming widow and mother, keeping her home and her reputation spotless.

The film's visual design works to emphasize how the pressure for Carrie to conform makes her feel as if she is trapped in a cage. Her house is cluttered with furniture and knick-knacks that are reminders of her previous marriage, giving her little room to move. Carrie is often photographed within frames (windows, mirrors, doorways, even a reflection on a TV screen) to emphasize her isolation. Shadows and window frames create a sense of bars, as if Carrie is literally imprisoned in her upper-middle-class home. The color scheme of the house is all black and white, which creates a sense of sterility and lack of life. This stands in contrast to the home that Ron builds for her, refurbishing a deserted mill. The main room is uncluttered and open, with a high beamed ceiling. The colors are warm earth tones (browns, oranges, yellows), and the large picture window he installs creates a sense of openness and freedom, blurring together indoor and outdoor worlds.

In many ways, the film critiques small-town and suburban pettiness, and champions the free-spirited, Thoreau-inspired lifestyle of Ron and his friends. Carrie must learn not to care about social propriety and follow her own heart. In this way, the film makes some sharp observations about how stressful life could be in the 1950s. Yet, in terms of gender politics, the film reinforces many traditional notions. Carrie is being asked to give up structuring her life around one man (her first husband) in order to start structuring her life around another. When Ron asks Carrie to be strong and stand up to her back-stabbing friends, she responds that he wants her to "be a man." He laughs and answers, "Only in this one way." As the film goes on, Ron begins to pressure Carrie almost as much as her children and her friends do. She asks him to wait until the children have become adults before they get married, and he refuses. He fears that if he gives in this one time, he will give in to any number of things, including living in "her" house – implying that he must maintain his masculine power in the relationship. By the end of the film,

understand why they were still so unhappy. Many women considered themselves sick for feeling this way, and psychiatric therapy and prescriptions for tranquilizers and anti-depressants (sometimes nicknamed "mother's little helpers") gained popularity during the 1950s and 1960s. By the 1960s, however, American society could no longer keep a lid on the bubbling pot of women's discontent, and a new hegemonic negotiation of gender would have to begin.



In *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), Jane Wyman as Carrie is surrounded by the artifacts of her former life; here her children confront her for not behaving in a socially acceptable manner.
All That Heaven Allows, copyright © 1955, Universal.

Carrie does give up everything and returns to his bedside (in *his* home) to care for him after a hunting accident.

Such an ending sends conflicting messages. To some viewers, the reunion of Carrie and Ron provides the tearful happy ending to a conventional woman's film. Others, though, may wonder just how "free" Carrie has become by rejecting the country-club set for Ron. While the converted mill is arguably warmer and more open than Carrie's home in town, the visuals often imply that it is not as heavenly as the narrative would have one believe. A number of arguments between Ron and Carrie occur in the mill, and the color scheme invariably turns bluish at these points, suggesting coldness instead of warmth. Also, while the big picture window

seems much more expansive than the windows of Carrie's house, the window is still noticeably latticed. In the final shot of the film, the camera pans from Carrie at Ron's side to the picture window, where a deer romps around outside. Just because the bars are wider here does not mean that Carrie is not still in a cage. According to later interviews given by director Douglas Sirk, these sorts of critical elements were deliberately placed – created subtly through the visual design (props, color, lighting) rather than through explicit dialog. Thus, while it is possible to read this film as a perfect embodiment of the conservative lessons espoused by the Hollywood woman's film, it is also possible to read it as a sly critique of the genre and its ideological imperatives.



In *All That Heaven Allows* (1955), Carrie and Ron (Rock Hudson) stand before the window of the home he builds for her. The window suggests both the expansiveness and the limits of their relationship.
All That Heaven Allows, copyright © 1955, Universal.

Questions for Discussion

- 1 Think about how gender is constructed in your life. What do you do that makes you masculine or feminine? Have you ever been accused (or accused others) of not being "properly" masculine or feminine? What is at stake in these distinctions?
- 2 The woman's film is still a relatively popular genre in Hollywood. Do these more recent examples follow the classical pattern of the

- genre? Do they still uphold patriarchy or do they ever make a case for female independence?
- 3 Does the virgin–whore complex still exist in American culture? Can you find examples from your own experience? From more recent films or TV programs?

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Further Screening

- | | |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| <i>It</i> (1927) | <i>Stella Dallas</i> (1937) |
| <i>The Wild Party</i> (1929) | <i>The Old Maid</i> (1939) |
| <i>Morocco</i> (1930) | <i>The Women</i> (1939) |
| <i>Christopher Strong</i> (1933) | <i>Magnificent Obsession</i> (1954) |
| <i>I'm No Angel</i> (1933) | <i>Peyton Place</i> (1957) |

EXPLORING THE VISUAL PARAMETERS OF WOMEN IN FILM

The previous chapter explored the role of women in early American filmmaking, and surveyed the types of roles and storylines that were available to women during Hollywood's classical period. That chapter focused primarily on issues of **literary design**, but it also touched upon other formal axes (such as lighting, setting, and props) that contribute to the overall cinematic **representation** of women in Hollywood film. This chapter continues to examine issues of **film form** and focuses more directly on how women were specifically filmed and edited in Hollywood movies – how their bodies were presented to the camera and thus to the spectator. In so doing, this chapter will address the differences in the ways mainstream Hollywood films have photographed women and men. Furthermore, many of these basic issues regarding the cinematic representation of **gender** can be modified and adapted into tools with which we might also investigate the cinematic representation of race and **sexuality**. The theoretical models and concepts discussed below have thus had enormous impact on how issues of social difference are understood within film studies. What follows is an introduction to (and to some degree a necessary simplification of) some of those concepts, as well as a consideration of how those same theories may be inadequate or in need of more complex formulations.

Ways of Seeing

Throughout the 1960s, a growing number of people (both women and men) began to question, critique, and rebel against the traditional concepts of womanhood that had pervaded American society in previous decades. By the end of the 1960s, women's liberation had joined the crowd of political movements aimed at overturning the white heterosexual male power structure. Feminist concepts began to affect various academic disciplines. For

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Third Edition. Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin.

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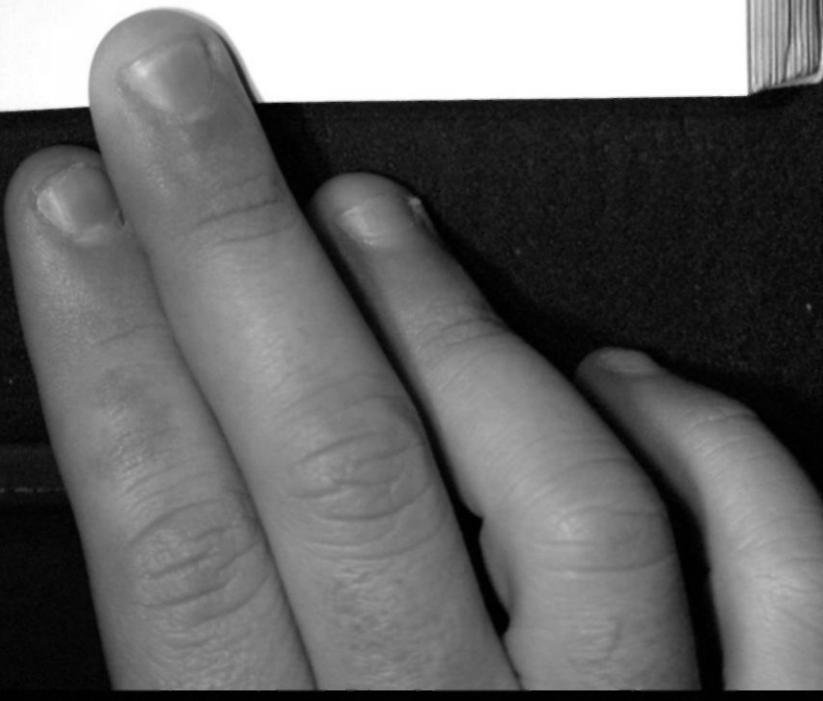


example, historians began to research for the first time in any consistent way the role of women in history and how concepts of femininity have changed over the years. Feminist researchers in the humanities began to reclaim female authors and artists, while feminist scientists criticized and explored sexist concepts within their disciplines. Feminism also profoundly affected the fledgling academic area of film studies. Building upon concepts of cinema as a product and conduit of ideology, film scholars began to examine how films replicated and disseminated patriarchal concepts, helping to maintain a sexist status quo. (As should be obvious, this book continues in this critical tradition.)

Two very important works were published in the early 1970s that shifted the focus of feminist film analysis away from content – what women could and did do within classical Hollywood stories – to the ways and means that Hollywood form represents women regardless of their storylines. These two works differ in their specific subject matter, but contain strong parallels that help reinforce each other's arguments. The first to appear was John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, a survey of visual culture that attempted to map out the ways that Western society literally teaches individuals "how to look" at the world. Berger does this by examining billboards, magazine ads, photographs, and paintings. His book explores how visual culture keeps capitalism stabilized, and how it can promote national pride. In a highly influential section, Berger also analyzed the history of female portraiture in Western painting. Complete with numerous reproductions of actual paintings, *Ways of Seeing* points out a tradition of representing women as properties that belong to men. In earlier periods, of course, women were considered men's property – often handed over from father to husband-to-be as part of a business transaction. These paintings thus often pictured women as part of the "goods" that belonged to a wealthy male, and the paintings themselves were usually commissioned by men as symbols of their material wealth.

Hence, Berger concludes that these paintings do not portray women realistically, as complex and individualistic human beings. Rather, the paintings transform actual women into objects, devoid of individual will or subjectivity. This process, whether it occurs in portraiture, advertising, or the cinema, is called objectification. A strong support for this argument can be found in the tradition of painting nude female subjects with their eyes turned away from the painter. By not looking back directly, the women in the paintings deny their own agency and grant all the "power of the gaze" to the male painter and the man who commissioned the painting. The females represented on the canvas have no control; rather they are on display for the male's enjoyment. Importantly, Berger implicates the style of Western painting in this discussion. During the European Renaissance, painters developed the quattrocento style, which created a sense of perspective and three-dimensionality. The use of quattrocento style constructs a viewing position for whoever gazes at the painting, organizing the world represented on the canvas for that one viewpoint. In other words, the viewer becomes the implied center of the world constructed in the painting. When portraits of women are painted in the quattrocento style, then, the implied male viewer (whether it is the man who actually commissioned the painting or any other man who looks at it) is structured as its center, as the dominant and empowered figure, and thus reinforces patriarchal hegemony.

Berger's work points out that such objectification of women has had a long history. The fundamental concepts that governed female portraiture in earlier centuries can be found in various areas of the mass media today. Because patriarchal capitalism is still the dominant ideology of the Western world, conceiving of women as objects that can be bought

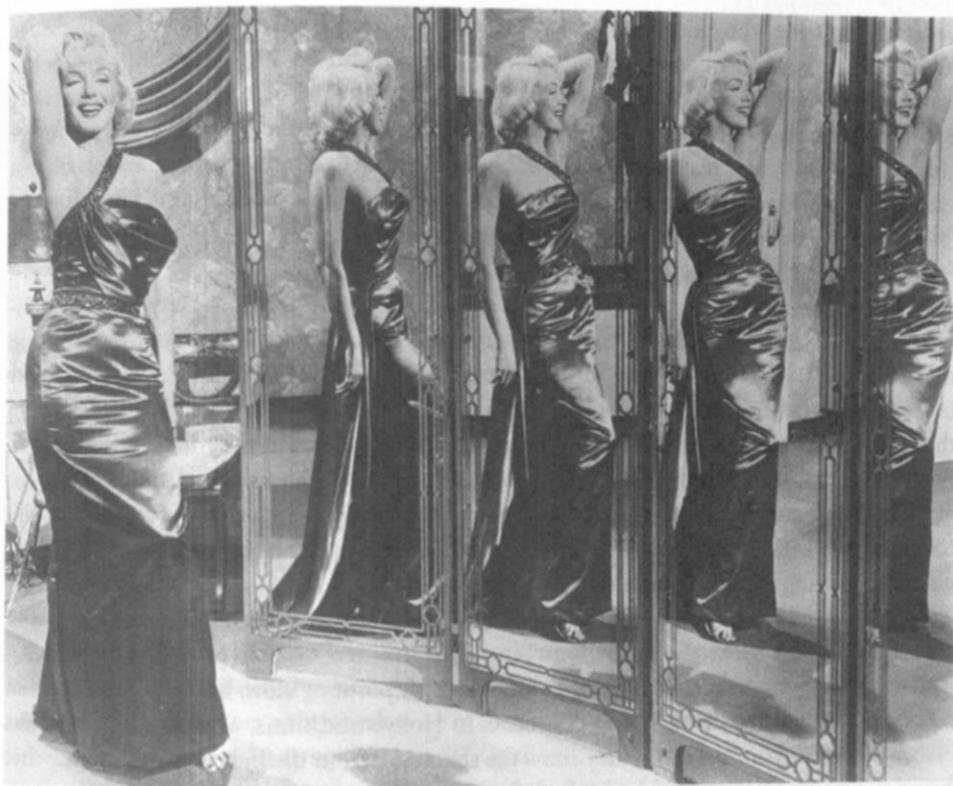


and sold (or used to help sell other products) has become a standardized practice within the advertising industries. Television commercials and magazine advertisements frequently use beautiful women to entice presumably heterosexual male customers, and in so doing, they often make an implicit comparison between the woman's body and the product being sold. Just what is being sold by a bikini-clad woman in a beer ad? The beer itself, or the promise of further sexual excitement that purchasing the product will allegedly provide? This specific formulation of female objectification at times has had a racialized twist, such as in 1990s advertisements for Kahlua & Cream that implicitly compare the café-au-lait-colored liquor to a sexy model of mixed racial heritage. The ads capitalize on the exotic and erotic lure of the model in order to sell Kahlua as likewise exotic and erotic. In so doing, they reduce the image of the woman to an object that can be consumed for pleasure by the male spectator.

Although Western culture has changed a great deal over the past two centuries, because of these "ways of seeing" many contemporary American women still develop a sense of self-worth based primarily on how they look, rather than how talented or intelligent they are – or what they may have accomplished in their lives. As in Hollywood narrative form, men in Western culture are taught that it is their birthright to *do* things (run, jump, desire, look) while women remain relatively immobile in order to be the object of the **male gaze**. The fashion industries, the makeup and cosmetic industries, and even the health and fitness industries constantly bombard women with the message that they are not complete or perfect unless they have the right hairstyle, the right bone structure, the right makeup, the right clothes, the right body, ad infinitum. Advertisements constantly treat women's bodies as objects that can be sculpted and remade into some supposed ideal form. In order to change their bodies, women are encouraged to buy their femininity – through fashion, makeup, diet pills, liposuction, or various forms of plastic surgery. (Of course, the concept of "ideal beauty" is itself ideologically determined, since it has historically been racially constructed in the West as fair-haired whiteness. Although our concepts of beauty are changing in the twenty-first century, some non-white women are still undergoing skin bleaching and plastic surgery in order to attain a Western ideal.) Women are thus encouraged to be complicit in their own objectification. Once they have internalized the ideology that their self-worth is based upon their public image, some women believe that achieving total objectified desirability is the only thing that will give them happiness and fulfillment. In today's social media, digital technologies of photo alteration such as Photoshop, Facetune, or FaceApp are used regularly by individuals to attempt to adhere to a certain standard of beauty. Obviously, women's pursuit of this mythical ideal keeps patriarchal domination in place and supports the ideology and practices of consumer capitalism.

Berger's observations about painting and advertising can be applied to film without much trouble, as cinema is yet another arm of the mass media that creates idealized visual images of women. Film is also an industry that encourages people to buy and consume products. Hence, it is unsurprising to find that women are consistently objectified in mainstream Hollywood movies. The technology of cinema recreates on the film strip the quattrocento perspective, and the Hollywood star system strongly supports the packaging and selling of women's images. Even after her death, for example, Marilyn Monroe's image continues to attract attention. From silent filmmaker Mack Sennett's Bathing Beauties to Jennifer Lopez's revealing awards-show fashion choices at the turn of the millennium, women have consistently been placed on display for the pleasure of a male-dominated society. The emphasis on





Marilyn Monroe epitomized the blonde bombshell in 1950s Hollywood movies. Here her body is made into a spectacular display in *How to Marry a Millionaire* (1953). *How to Marry a Millionaire*, copyright © 1953, 20th Century-Fox.

female surface beauty at media awards ceremonies eventually led to backlash in 2015. Under the social media hashtag #askhermore, interviewers on the red carpet were challenged to stop focusing solely on how women looked (their gowns and jewelry), and to ask them about their nominated work – i.e. the same questions asked to men.

"Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"

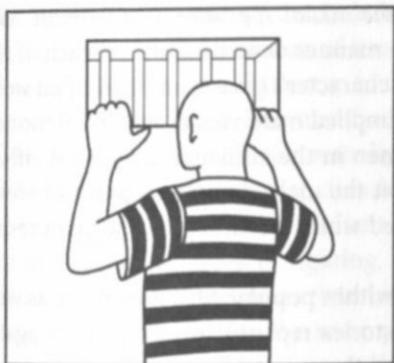
At about the same time as John Berger wrote *Ways of Seeing*, feminist film scholar Laura Mulvey wrote a highly influential essay entitled "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Mulvey's arguments shared much with Berger's, yet she also drew upon existing psychoanalytic frameworks to examine the specific ways that **classical Hollywood cinema** manufactures its images of women. As the title of the article makes clear, Mulvey was interested in understanding how mainstream narrative cinema creates pleasure for viewers. She explored how the psychoanalytic concepts of **narcissism** and **voyeurism** can be used to explain how visual pleasure is generated. **Narcissism**, a pleasure of the self, is created when narrative cinema encourages spectators to identify with characters in the film. With such identification, viewers are able to feel as if they themselves are experiencing great adventures and accomplishing extraordinary deeds. On the other hand, **voyeurism** is a visual pleasure that arises from looking at others in a sexualized way. A common term to

describe someone who enjoys voyeuristic pleasure is a "Peeping Tom." Part of the pleasure derived from voyeurism comes from watching people who are not aware they are being watched (thus giving the watcher a sense of power or control). Since film is fundamentally based on watching, cinema falls easily into the realm of voyeurism. Hollywood narrative cinema, in particular, creates entertainment by presenting to spectators people who do not seem to know their lives are being watched. The convention of actors not "breaking the fourth wall," that is, not acknowledging the camera, therefore helps maintain a voyeuristic framework for Hollywood filmmaking.

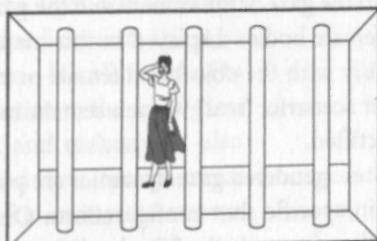
Because classical Hollywood cinema operates within a patriarchal society, Mulvey contends that these two modes of visual pleasure created by narrative cinema must contain male biases. In most Hollywood films, the narcissistic pleasure of identification usually involves identifying with the male characters, the ones who are active and aggressive. On the other hand, the voyeuristic pleasures created by cinema primarily involve looking at the female characters on-screen. Thus, classical Hollywood cinema aims most of its films at a presumed male heterosexual audience member, forcing individuals outside this group to adapt to a male point of view – the so-called "male gaze" that objectifies women – or else risk finding the film unpleasurable. Mulvey supports her contentions by analyzing one of the most basic formal elements of Hollywood narrative cinema: the use of editing techniques to create relationships between subjective and objective points of view. An **objective shot** is one that is not tied to a character's point of view, but rather a shot that most clearly conveys the action of the scene. In Hollywood films, almost all of the shots are objective and omniscient – they show the spectator, from the best possible angle, what he or she needs to see in order to follow the story. The rarer **subjective shot**, however, is tied to a specific character's point of view – a shot that literally shows the spectator exactly what a character is seeing. Imagine a shot of a prison cell where a single prisoner goes to the window and looks out. That shot is an objective one, as we see the prisoner from the camera's perspective alone (there are no other prisoners in the cell to whom the view can be attributed). The very next shot, however, is likely to be a subjective one, as we cut from the objective shot of the prisoner looking out the window to a subjective shot of what he is seeing outside the window. The audience member is thus tied into that character's point of view: spectators are literally placed inside the head of that character and are able to see through his eyes. This sequence of shots thus strongly activates both narcissistic and voyeuristic pleasures. The shared experience of the subjective shot (shared by both character and audience member) allows the spectator to imagine himself as being the character on the screen (narcissistic pleasure), while what that character is looking at activates voyeuristic pleasures.

Linking shots of people looking and shots of what they are looking at is one of the basic building blocks of classical Hollywood storytelling. Mulvey observes that this simple formal trope of Hollywood editing itself carries and encodes powerful gender dynamics. Chiefly in Hollywood films, male characters are the ones doing the looking (subjective shots are assigned to them) while female characters are usually the ones that are being looked at (objectified from the male character's point of view). This configuration also recreates the effect of quattrocento perspective: by cutting from someone looking to what they are looking at, the film places the viewer inside the character's viewpoint, constructing the viewer's place as the center of the world created by the film. Examples of these objective/subjective shot configurations are so numerous that they are impossible to list.





Objective shot – not tied to a character's point of view



Subjective shot – tied to a character's point of view

In classical Hollywood films, objective shots of the male protagonist are often followed by subjective shots of what he is looking at, a formal pattern that directly ties the spectator to the protagonist's point of view.

From the very first silent story films to present-day Hollywood blockbusters, examples abound. One of the earliest films to play with this formal trope, *As Seen through the Telescope* (1903), objectively depicts an elderly gentleman peering through a telescope, followed by a subjective shot of what he is looking at: a female bicyclist's exposed ankle (which was pretty sexy back in 1903). D. W. Griffith, a key figure in the standardization of Hollywood storytelling form, consistently used the type of editing patterns that Mulvey describes. In *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), Griffith continually cuts from Ben Cameron gazing romantically or Silas Lynch gazing threateningly to shots of Elsie Stoneman (who demurely does not return the gaze, as was considered proper etiquette). Even when the objectivity and subjectivity of individual shots are not so clearly demarcated, Hollywood cinema repeatedly thematizes men looking at women: Clark Gable stares lustily at Jean Harlow in *Red Dust* (1932), Humphrey Bogart tells Ingrid Bergman that he is "looking at you, kid" in *Casablanca* (1943), and every male in sight gawks at the voluptuous Jayne Mansfield in *The Girl Can't Help It* (1956). In the blockbuster hit *Titanic* (1997), Jack (Leonardo Di Caprio) asks Rose (Kate Winslet) to pose for him so that he (and the audience) might enjoy the sight of her nearly naked body. Throughout mainstream narrative cinema, men are positioned as the ones in control of the gaze while women are positioned as the objects of that controlling gaze.

Mulvey goes on to point out the multiple ways in which women are placed as the objects of the male gaze. All of the above examples show male *characters* within the film gazing at women. But on another level, the Hollywood film industry itself has been (and continues to be to a large extent) male-dominated. Hence, male directors, producers, writers, and cinematographers all use the camera as an instrument to look at women. From this vantage point, the controlling aspects of the male gaze become even more apparent, as the men behind the camera instruct the woman in front of the camera what to do. The French New Wave filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard, who was a big fan of Hollywood filmmaking, once quipped that "film history was the history of boys photographing girls." Thus, in Mulvey's formulation, the three gazes that comprise cinema in the first place (the gaze of the camera, the gaze of the characters at each other, and the gaze of the spectator toward

the screen) are all inherently male, *even when the actual spectator is a woman*. When objective and subjective shots are arranged in the manner described above, each of those three gazes becomes the same thing. Thus, a male character's gaze at an objectified woman is also the gaze of the camera *and* the gaze of the implied male viewer who paid money to see female bodies displayed in this manner. Women in the audience are forced either to identify with the objectified female or else inhabit the male character's point of view. In either scenario, "real" women remain marginalized while the "image" of women remains objectified.

These gendered gaze dynamics are played out within popular film narratives as well as within specific shot configurations. One of the stories replayed over and over again in popular cinema is the "Cinderella" story, in which the mousy young girl is transformed into a beautiful woman so that she may win the man of her dreams. Probably without exception, every version of this tale includes an example of these editing patterns, as the "Prince Charming" lays eyes on the newly transformed heroine. Reworkings of this story include *Pretty Woman* (1990), wherein Richard Gere becomes speechless as he sees Julia Roberts turn from a prostitute into a high-class beauty, and the teen comedy *She's All That* (1999), with Freddie Prinze, Jr., watching in amazement as his ugly duckling date reveals that she has become a swan. These dynamics can even be found in Hollywood films directed by women. In *The Mirror Has Two Faces* (1996), directed by Barbra Streisand, Jeff Bridges is stunned as Streisand herself is made over from frumpy housewife into a desirable sex kitten.

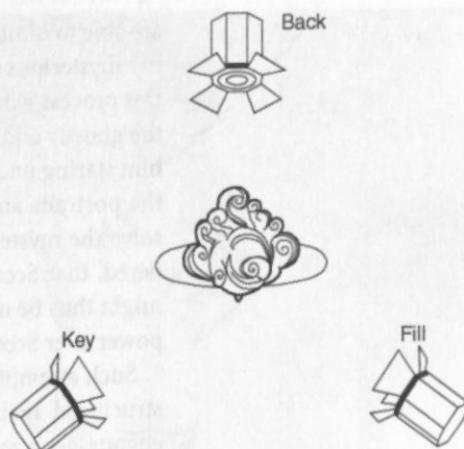
These last few examples also draw attention to another of Mulvey's points: within Hollywood cinema, women are usually carefully prepared to maximize their ability to attract sexualized attention from the heterosexual male spectator. Even when a woman is the hero of the film (as in *Alien* [1979] or *Tomb Raider* [2001]), her sexualized body is still on full display. Filmmakers often find (sometimes very contrived) ways to get female characters out of their work clothes and into bikinis, underwear, or sheer negligees. Hence, every aspect of an actress's bodily appearance receives the utmost attention. Actresses usually spend hours having their hair and makeup prepared before they step onto a movie set. Megan Fox in *Transformers* (2007) may have grease smudges or dirt stains on her face and clothes to reflect the destructive chaos going on around her character, but they have been artfully placed there to enhance rather than detract from her sexual appeal. Their costumes are intricately designed to maximize what are considered their most sexually appealing aspects, and downplay their "problem areas." Various techniques with the camera have also been used to enhance an actress's visual appeal. For example, filters and gels can be used on camera lenses to hide wrinkles, and special lenses can minimize facial features such as a nose deemed too large. Actresses such as Barbra Streisand and Claudette Colbert often preferred a specific side of their face for profile shots, and studio publicists were quick to comply.

Historically, women in Hollywood film have also been carefully lit to make them seem all the more alluring and stellar. By the 1920s, the Hollywood industry had developed a lighting style known as **three-point lighting**, which made stars seem luminescent. This style involved, as the term indicates, three separate light sources. The **key light** was the brightest light, and was usually aimed at the front of the star from above and slightly to the side. The **fill light** was less bright than the key light, and was aimed from above the star on the opposite side to the key light. The fill light helped lighten any shadows possibly caused

by the key light (for example, a dark nose shadow across the side of a star's face). The **back light** was of lesser intensity, and placed behind (and usually slightly above) the star, to create a "halo effect" – a glowing outline around the star's hair and body, as if the light was radiating directly out of them. Such elaborate lighting helped separate the stars from the set, and focus audience attention on them – but also worked to make female stars all the more radiant and attractive to the male gaze. Many of these techniques of lighting, costume, and makeup are also applied to male characters and actors in Hollywood films, though rarely to the same extent and for the same purpose of arousing the viewer. These considerations will be discussed more fully below.

With female characters structured into mainstream narrative cinema as "things to be looked at," Mulvey also notes the distinction between what men are allowed to do in films and what women are allowed to do. Limited to "looking pretty," women must remain relatively passive and somewhat outside the action of the story. In contrast, the men drive the story forward: they chase the bad guys, accomplish great feats, and in the process romance and "win" the girl. In some ways, women are presented as an impediment to the action narrative – a problem that the men must deal with as part of the resolution of the conflict. Sometimes this involves female characters specifically as antagonists, but even "good girls" can cause problems for heroes. For example, it has become a cliché that the sweet young ingénue always tends to trip and fall while the hero is trying to make good their escape. Beyond this, however, Mulvey contends that female characters, simply in their "to-be-looked-at-ness," often tend to bring the narrative to a halt. For example, imagine a scene in which two male characters are having an argument that is central to the conflict that is driving the movie. In the middle of the argument, a beautiful woman walks by. The two men stop talking for a moment, because they have to look at this beautiful creature – and so does the audience. Then, after she has left the room, the argument can recommence, and the story can pick up where it left off. Variations on this idea can be found in countless Hollywood movies – in some comedies, massive fistfights come to a halt while some starlet wanders through the beer hall. Musicals often function in this manner: the story proceeds until everything stops for a musical number that showcases lots of chorus girls in skimpy outfits. One can even find examples in cartoons: Bugs Bunny always knows how to distract Elmer Fudd from his goal of "hunting rabbits" – by dressing up as a beautiful female. In Disney's *Aladdin* (1992), Princess Jasmine distracts the villain by putting herself on display, and when she kisses him, all the characters stop to gape at her action. (The 2019 live-action remake attempts to revise things by emphasizing Jasmine's leadership qualities in addition to her beauty.)

Thus, in Hollywood films, a woman's power is associated with her ability to use her sexual allure to arrest the narrative action. While unable to be active in the way that the male characters are, a woman's ability to draw the male gaze gives her the ability to bring the narrative to a halt. As limited as this power obviously seems to be, Mulvey concludes that even this poses a threat to patriarchal domination, and that Hollywood cinema attempts to contain that threat in one of two ways. The first is a method of **investigation and punishment**. In many films the male characters (and hence the male viewers as well)



Three-point lighting was and is the Hollywood standard; it focuses attention on the star and creates a glamorous look. For an example of the effect, see the photo of Rita Hayworth on p. 255.

are able to diminish, if not totally negate, the female's power by uncovering and unveiling her mysterious allure. Mulvey uses some of director Alfred Hitchcock's films to show how this process works. In *Vertigo* (1958), for example, Scottie (James Stewart) is fascinated by the ghostly and sensual Madeline (Kim Novak). The film is filled with subjective shots of him staring uncomprehendingly and longingly at her (and her not looking back, just as in the portraits analyzed by John Berger). As a detective, Scottie spends the film trying to solve the mystery of Madeline, and it is only at the end of the film, as Madeline is murdered, that Scottie realizes how he has been manipulated by a con job. The entire film might thus be understood as being about the investigation and punishment of Madeline's power over Scottie.

Such attempts to "figure out" and thus control the dangerously beautiful woman have structured many Hollywood movies. This process of investigation often entails and encourages a more intense employment of the male gaze. Men stare harder at these mysterious women in the hope that the power of the male gaze will penetrate the female's beautiful armor. At times, once her shell is cracked by the male gaze, the woman can then be reclaimed by the hero. For example, Humphrey Bogart's character in *The Big Sleep* (1946) spends most of the film trying to determine whether Lauren Bacall's character is trustworthy or not. Once he learns all her secrets, though, she turns into the typical "good girl," supporting his authority rather than potentially challenging it. At other times, however, the female character's power is not sufficiently quelled after the mystery has been solved. Consequently, re-establishing male dominance involves physically punishing the female – either with imprisonment (as happens to Mary Astor's character in the Humphrey Bogart film *The Maltese Falcon* [1941]) or with death (as happens to Lizabeth Scott's character in *Dead Reckoning* [1947]).

According to Mulvey, the other method that Hollywood uses to contain women's on-screen sexual power is **fetishization**. Fetishization in general involves excess emotional or sexual investment in a particular object. For example, most people have heard of the idea of a "foot fetish," in which a person focuses their sexual desires on a specific part of the body, the foot, instead of the entire individual. Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud tied fetishization specifically to male fears of lack of control. He asserted that the male psyche, in attempting to reassert a sense of control and power, might sometimes focus obsessively on one object that *can* be controlled. Tied to the way women are figured under the male gaze, fetishization works further to objectify women in order to make them less of a threat. If they are regarded as objects and not fully capable human beings, then women can be kept in a subordinate position. Throughout the years, American culture has singled out and fetishized certain areas of the female body as the center of male heterosexual attraction. During the 1940s, there was an emphasis on women's legs. Betty Grable, America's top box office movie star during World War II, had her legs insured by Lloyd's of London. By the 1950s, there was a shift to fetishizing women's breasts. Current popular culture fetishizes the posteriors of such celebrities as Kim Kardashian and Nicki Minaj. Music videos and Howard Stern's radio and television shows come quickly to mind as pop culture venues in which the fetishization of women's body parts is not just practiced but actively celebrated.

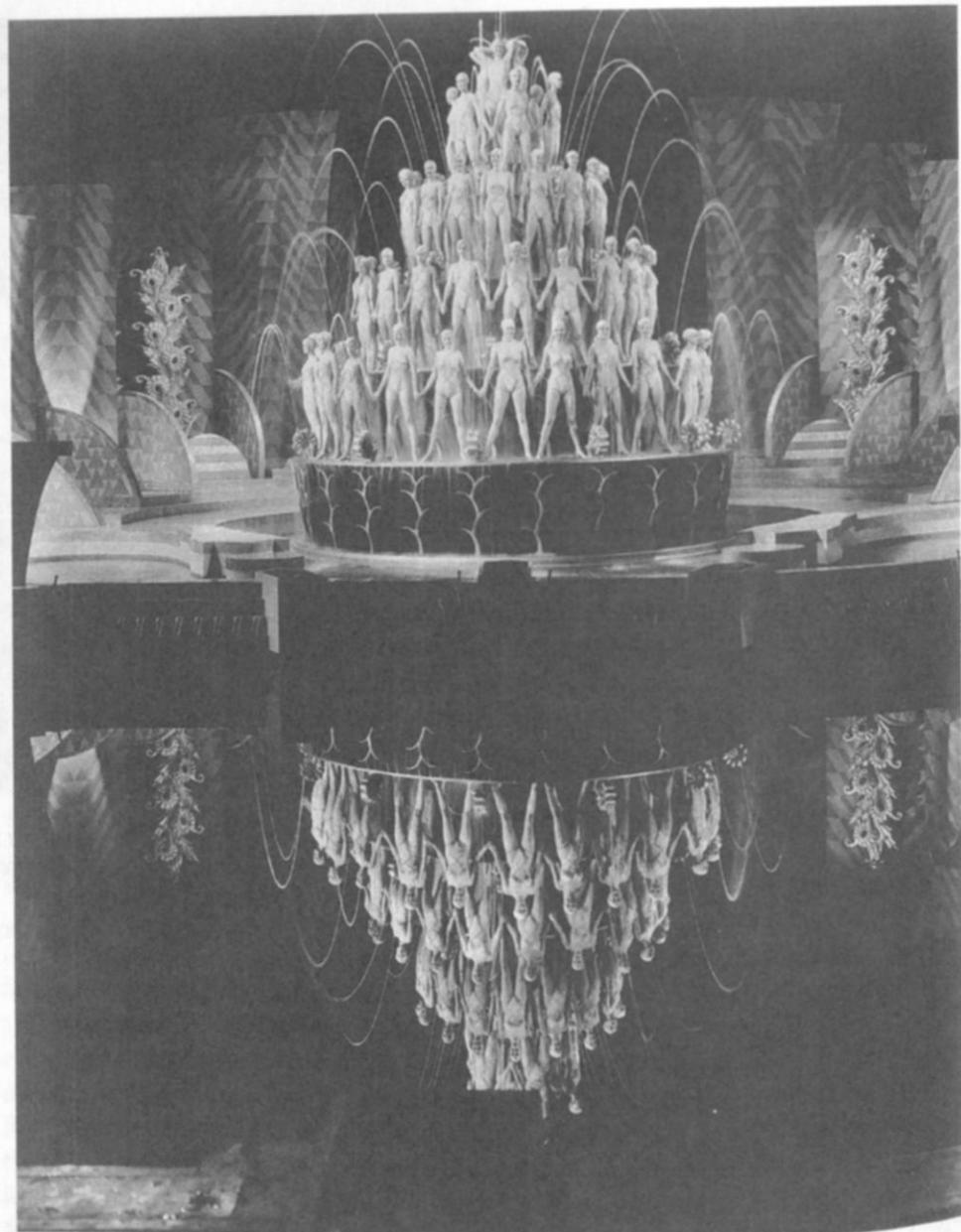
In Hollywood films, fetishization can occur when the female body is broken by the camera and editing patterns into a collection of smaller objectified parts: hands, feet, legs, hair, breasts, etc. Close-ups of women's body parts appear repeatedly in Hollywood films.

Objective and subjective shot configurations function in tandem with this process of fetishization. Shots of various female body parts are often preceded by or followed by shots of men looking at those parts. Many times, women are introduced in movies by only showing a part of their body. Lauren Bacall's character in *Written on the Wind* (1956) is introduced behind a bulletin board, so that all the audience sees is her legs. The first shot of *Pillow Talk* (1959) (after the credits) is of female legs putting on pantyhose, before the camera pulls back to reveal that they belong to Doris Day. A later example would be the introduction of Julia Roberts's character in *Pretty Woman*: a series of individual shots of her legs putting on hose and boots, her midriff as she puts on a halter top, her rear as she adjusts her leather miniskirt, and the back of her head as she straightens her blonde wig, before the film finally shows a full shot of her entire body. By breaking the female body down into individual parts, and valuing certain parts more than the whole, patriarchal culture subtly refuses to recognize women as whole and entire human beings. Women are instead figured as composites of fetishized body parts that are thought to appeal directly to the sexual desires of men.

Good examples of cinematic objectification and fetishization can be found in the musical numbers choreographed and directed by **Busby Berkeley**. Considered one of the greatest geniuses of the Hollywood musical, Berkeley created elaborate numbers that reveled in putting women's bodies on display, invoking the theatrical tradition of **tableaux**. Tableau numbers began on the stage, as producers like Florenz Ziegfeld showcased women in various elaborate headdresses and revealing gowns. In a tableau number, chorus girls do nothing more than take a stately walk across the stage or down a staircase. Audience enjoyment thus derives from the mere act of gazing at these women and not from their singing or dancing abilities. Busby Berkeley's "By a Waterfall" number in *Footlight Parade* (1933) is famous for its inventive parading of chorus girls in various states of undress. After star Dick Powell sings a chorus of the song at some shady glen, he falls asleep and girlfriend Ruby Keeler takes the opportunity to join dozens of chorus girls in a nearly nude bathing sequence. While the women are wearing bathing suits, they are made of skin-toned material, with plastic bathing-cap/wig headgear artfully draped to cover their nipples. The objectification of the chorus girls is also exemplified by their blending into the scenery — they are often photographed as if they were part of the décor. For example, at one point, the chorus girls stand astride various levels of a column which spouts streams of water, creating a "human fountain" (as the preview trailer for the film advertised at the time). All the chorus girls (except for star Keeler) are costumed in the same manner, making it further difficult to distinguish or individualize any of the women. Berkeley presents them as mass-produced items, not individuals.



This famous World War II publicity photograph of Betty Grable is a good example of the way that female bodies are objectified — put on display for the male gaze.
Unidentified publicity photo, authors' personal collection.



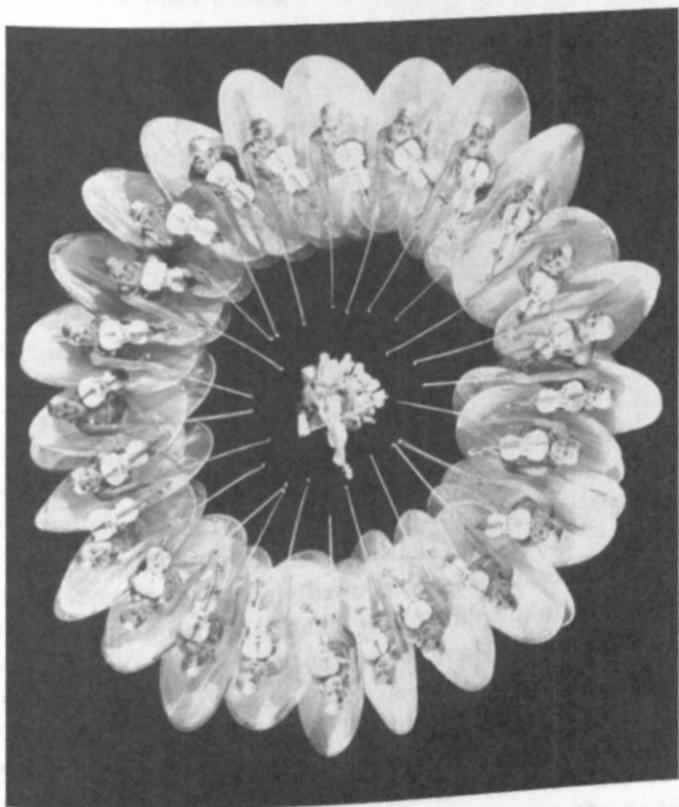
The "human fountain" of chorus girls from *Footlight Parade* (1933), a spectacular Busby Berkeley musical number in which women are positioned as interchangeable and objectified building blocks of a male fantasy.

Footlight Parade, Copyright © 1933, Warner Bros.

Throughout the nine-minute extravaganza, chorus girls are photographed in a variety of erotic and fetishistic ways. One underwater shot looking up at their splayed legs serves as an excellent example of fetishization: the women are represented by rows and rows of individual body parts. Berkeley was also famous for his overhead camera shots of chorus girls creating kaleidoscopic designs. When the women form the "human fountain" described above, Berkeley cuts to an overhead shot as they sit on the fountain and stick their legs out. Within the overhead shot, it appears as if the viewer is watching dozens of

disembodied legs performing tricks. The overhead shots in general make it hard to distinguish among women, and indeed to regard them as women at all. Rather, these geometric patterns can make the women seem to be mere cogs in a machine. Intriguingly, these kaleidoscopic patterns often have a sensual quality of their own. Usually organized in some circular shape, the patterns shift and reconfigure themselves as the chorus girls move in and out of the center, or move their arms and legs up and down. The sense of pulsation and vibrancy in these circular shapes creates a symbolic representation of the ultimate disembodied fetish – a vagina without a body – and the way Berkeley has the camera move forward and pull back from these overhead patterns does seem to create a veiled sense of sexual intercourse. While such a reading of the number may seem scandalous to some readers, the sexual drive of the overall number is consistent with Berkeley's usual style. Indeed, one of his more outrageous musical numbers (from *The Gang's All Here* [1943]) features chorus girls poking giant bananas in and out of a strawberry-strewn female kaleidoscope. While the sexual symbolism of the number was overlooked by many American viewers, the number was understood as a smutty joke by British film censors, who cut it from the film altogether.

Berkeley also had a reputation for working his chorus girls relentlessly, forcing them to submit perfectly to his designs. The "By a Waterfall" number itself also eventually



This typical kaleidoscopic shot from Busby Berkeley's *Gold Diggers of 1933* positions women as abstract cogs in a machine, or petals on a flower.
Gold Diggers of 1933, copyright © 1933, Warner Bros.

Case Study: *Gilda* (1946)

Gilda stands as a powerful example of how women have been represented in classical Hollywood cinema, and exemplifies many of the concepts discussed in this chapter. The film stars Rita Hayworth, one of the biggest “pin-up” girls of the World War II era. As was discussed in chapter 7, Columbia Pictures visually refashioned Hayworth’s image to diminish her Latina heritage. This included dying her hair, and raising her hairline through electrolysis. Hayworth thus personifies how both women and racial minorities were often objectified and even recreated by the white patriarchal media industries of the era. *Gilda* remains one of Hayworth’s best-remembered films, and it capitalizes on the beautiful persona created for the actress by the studio. In the film, she is repeatedly placed on display both for the male characters in the film and for the viewer. She is introduced as her new husband calls out to her and asks, “Are you decent?” The film cuts to inside her bedroom, and Gilda comes up from the bottom of the screen, flipping her long hair back, until she is framed in a close-up and answers slyly, “Who, me?” In this shot, although Gilda is ostensibly still getting ready to go out for the evening, Hayworth’s makeup and hairstyling are both impeccable. Although she flips into the shot, once she comes to rest to say her line, the shot provides a good example of three-point lighting, including the “halo effect” around her hair. The film is marked throughout by such lushly arranged close-ups, in which no hair is out of place, and a back light is perfectly placed on Gilda no matter where she may be.

Gilda’s close-ups are almost always intercut between shots of a man, or a group of men, looking at her. The storyline involves Gilda in a romantic triangle in which she must choose between

two men: she marries a rich casino owner, but then finds that a man from her past has become her husband’s assistant. Both men gaze at Gilda longingly, although the old flame Johnny (Glenn Ford) both desires and distrusts her – a position eventually adopted by the husband as well. The reactions of both men serve as a good example of both the fascination and fear created in classical Hollywood cinema by the representation of such a beautiful woman. *Gilda* is thus also a story of men trying to penetrate and solve the mystery of the dangerously alluring woman. Seemingly aware of the position in which she has been placed by the male characters, Gilda decides not to fight against her objectification but to revel in it. She consistently performs throughout the film: playing the guitar, singing tunes, doing a variety of nightclub acts. As one might expect, the audience for all these performances is shown to be predominantly, if not exclusively, male.

The most famous moment in the film occurs when Gilda performs “Put the Blame on Mame” at the casino’s nightclub. At this point in the story, her husband seems to have died in a plane crash. Johnny has decided to punish Gilda by marrying her, but only to control her and keep her caged. In a secondary plot, the local police are investigating illegal doings at the casino. As the police inspector interrogates Johnny about these dealings, he paces nervously – but he is nervous about Gilda, not the police investigation. The “problem” that she represents as a beautiful, alluring woman is more disturbing to Johnny than his potential arrest. The inspector tells Johnny that he can see that something seems to be bothering him. Johnny tries to laugh it off and says that he will look in a mirror to see if that is

foregrounds that these women are all under the control of one man. While some could argue that the number shows women enjoying a private space of their own while the male character sleeps, their presentation for the camera is definitely fetishized and for the sexual pleasure of the male gaze. Furthermore, the number ends when it is revealed that it has all been the dream of star Dick Powell. (In all sorts of ways, this musical number gives new meaning to the phrase “wet dream.”) Consequently, the male character (and filmmaker, and spectator) have been authoring and directing what has transpired, fetishizing the female body in order to maintain control and power over it. While Berkeley stands as an important historical figure in the fetishization of women in Hollywood cinema, this process remains typical to the present day. Anyone who has ever watched a music video has seen examples of such objectification and fetishization of the female body. Usually, once people have been introduced to how fetishization works in Hollywood cinema, they can easily find examples of it the very next time they go out to the movies or turn on the television set.

actually true. However, before he can do so, music starts to filter in from outside the office and Johnny rushes to the window to look down at the nightclub floor. There, Gilda struts on stage to begin her musical number. This lengthy description points out how the activities of the plot (the intrigue between Johnny and the inspector) are interrupted by the "to-be-looked-at-ness" of Gilda. The conversation also foregrounds Johnny's need to look, and Gilda's number is framed by his gaze out the window at her.

While singing the song, Hayworth as Gilda is carefully manufactured to heighten her allure. Although she repeatedly tosses her head, whenever the film cuts to a new camera angle, her hair is miraculously back in perfect shape. She ostensibly has only a spotlight on her during her nightclub performance, but the filmmakers consistently use a back light for every fetishized close-up of her, no matter where she is on the floor. Her costume also works to accentuate her to-be-looked-at-ness. The tightfitting, strapless black sheath seems to hide nothing of Hayworth's body from view. (Hayworth was actually pregnant when she filmed this sequence, and a carefully placed bow on the bodice of her dress works to shift attention away from the early signs of that pregnancy.) Gilda's number is also a striptease, and she rolls off her gloves and a necklace and throws them to the eager male audience. When the song finishes, the film cuts to men shouting for more. She replies that she would love to, but she has never been good with zippers. Men in the audience (the active lookers and doers, according to Mulvey's model) rush out to undo the zipper on her gown and she (the passive, looked-at object) simply stands there, not even looking at the men who are pawing at her. Indeed, throughout the number, there are shots of Johnny, the inspector, and other men staring directly at her, but Gilda is never shown directly returning a look at anyone; she is merely there to be adored. Yet that is her power – and Gilda was performing this striptease number precisely to shame Johnny. (Even the song itself describes a woman's allure as destructive power. "Put the Blame on Mame" tells how Mame's sensuality allegedly started the great Chicago fire.)

Johnny responds by having the casino bouncer yank her off the stage, where Johnny then slaps her across the face in an attempt to reassert his dominance. By the end of the film, he discovers that Gilda had never actually betrayed him in their earlier relationship, that she was acting like a loose woman in retaliation for the hurt that he had caused her. Her mystery solved, Johnny's masculine privilege is restored and their relationship can end happily.



Rita Hayworth as the overtly sexualized *Gilda* (1946). The narrative will see to it that she is investigated and punished for her sexualized transgressions against the male protagonist. *Gilda*, copyright © 1946, Columbia.

Conclusion: Complicating Mulvey's Arguments

Gilda does seem to exhibit its star Rita Hayworth in perfect concordance with Laura Mulvey's contentions in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Yet the movie also points out issues not addressed by Mulvey's initial article: namely, that representing gender (and analyzing those representations) encompasses more than just women. Representations of

men and masculinity are just as **socially constructed** as are those of women, and need to be explored in a similar manner. For example, *Gilda* begins with Johnny as a down-and-out grifter who is literally seduced by the casino owner into becoming his employee. At the casino owner's urging, Johnny gets new clothes and a new haircut and generally cleans himself up, as he rises in rank at the casino to become the owner's personal assistant. Consequently, Johnny's looks and his body are put on display here for the approving gaze of the casino owner, as well as the spectator. Exactly what happens when a male character is objectified in this manner? How does objectifying men in Hollywood film differ from objectifying women?

It is true that most of classical Hollywood's glamor industry and cinematographic conventions worked to represent women in the ways described above, but male stars in Hollywood were also being carefully costumed, made up, and photographed in objectifying ways. From silent film stars such as **Rudolph Valentino** and Douglas Fairbanks, to Clark Gable and **Rock Hudson**, to Tom Cruise and Brad Pitt, male stars in Hollywood have also been carefully packaged and represented for the voyeuristic pleasure of the viewer. Indeed, this trend has only increased in recent decades as Hollywood has come to recognize that women (and gay men) in the audience might enjoy the spectacle of a man's objectified body. In a blatant example, Daniel Craig's first film as James Bond, *Casino Royale* (2006), replicates a famous moment from the first Bond film, *Dr. No* (1962), of Ursula Andress walking out of the surf in a white bikini – but with *him* on display in a white bathing suit. However, in our culture, the very act of placing the male body on display is often seen as feminizing, precisely because such a procedure is so closely tied to female bodies. Sometimes a highly objectified male star can be the victim of a public backlash: many men of the 1920s considered Rudolph Valentino unmasculine even as their wives and girlfriends were swooning for him. What the opening section of *Gilda* inadvertently shows is that although the on-screen objectification of men is ostensibly for the voyeuristic pleasure of female spectators, a male-male homoerotic effect is created, since *Gilda* and films like it were still directed and photographed by men. In other words, men behind the camera were objectifying men in front of the camera, and men in the audience were being asked to gaze at other men in a voyeuristic way. This situation, which places a male spectator in the position of gazing erotically at another man, can cause discomfort for men for whom **homosexuality** is disturbing. That discomfort may then be another reason why men are far less frequently objectified in classical Hollywood cinema than are women. (The traditional Hollywood objectification of women certainly allows for lesbian gazes between women in the audience and on-screen female characters, but those homoerotic aspects were rarely acknowledged either by the men behind the camera or by those in the audience.)

There are other differences in the way male bodies and female bodies are represented on Hollywood screens. For starters, consider how makeup is used for men versus women. Everyone in the movies wears makeup, but female characters (as in real life) wear makeup that transforms their everyday looks into something man-made. Male characters in Hollywood films wear makeup that makes it seem as though they are *not* wearing makeup at all. Next, consider the context in which male and female bodies are displayed. As Mulvey and others have noted, women get undressed and stand passively before the camera's gaze with the slightest narrative excuse, and in so doing often bring the story to a halt. When men disrobe in Hollywood film, it is frequently part of an action sequence. In

other words, when the male body is on display, it is as an active, powerful, and dangerous (as well as sexy) weapon wielded against other men. One can frequently find this type of objectification of the male body in action movies and Westerns, and it has become something of a cliché that the hero's shirt will be torn open during a particularly rough fight with an opponent. The male body is also sometimes displayed in Hollywood films during or after torture scenes; here the point is again to show how the male hero's body can take brutal punishment but still defeat the bad guys. Action stars from the 1980s and 1990s such as Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone, and Jean-Claude Van Damme often showcased their large, muscled bodies in their films, but almost always while running, fighting, shooting, and generally "kicking ass." Reference is made in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) to Captain America (Chris Evans) having "America's Ass," but the said behind spends most of its time in battle rather than in restful pose. Sometimes these active male bodies are framed from a female character's point of view, again creating a male-male homoerotic feel for male spectators. Another way to sum up these differences would be to examine the phenomenon of the chorus boy in the Hollywood musical. While the chorus boy can be found in some Hollywood films (especially in pre-Code musicals), he is nowhere near as endemic to the genre as is the chorus girl. Busby Berkeley never shot a number objectifying the bodies of 100 chorus boys.

The arguments and ideas discussed in this chapter are not without their detractors. Many find fault with the **essentialist** aspects of Mulvey's contentions – that *all* Hollywood films must *always* objectify women. Her ultimate contentions have provoked outrées because they imply that any female viewer who enjoys mainstream narrative cinema is agreeing to her own oppression. Mulvey also ignores the presence of gay and lesbian spectators for whom the two pleasures of narcissism and voyeurism potentially collapse into one. Her ideas, based as they were on essentialist psychoanalytical models, also fail to take into consideration the historical changes that have occurred in the film industry since Hollywood's classical age. For example, switching the genders of the gazer and the object can be and is done in contemporary Hollywood films, although it is still a relatively rare occurrence. *Thelma and Louise* (1991) is a good example of a later film that flips the genders of the active doers (women) and passive sex objects (men). In one scene, director Ridley Scott inverts the usual Hollywood form and allows Geena Davis's character to erotically objectify Brad Pitt's. Between objective shots of her lustful gazing, the film offers the audience her subjective shot of Pitt's glistening torso. While the scene was probably pleasurable for women and gay men in the audience, it may be another reason why many men hated the film, even to the point of decrying its supposed "man-hating" politics on the op-ed pages of many American newspapers. While the scene may have provoked unwelcome homoerotic tensions for some male viewers, the controversy it (and the entire film) sparked is illustrative of the gendered currents of American film spectatorship. Men who hated the film probably were not identifying with Thelma and Louise, despite the fact that the film's narrative, cinematography, and editing all work to encourage such identification. Many male filmgoers refuse even to attend movies about women and women's issues, and thus never experience female characters' "ways of seeing." Conversely, most female filmgoers have been trained to be quite adept at seeing filmic worlds from a male point of view.

An example such as this also problematizes the very concept of cinematic identification in the first place. Do subjective shots really create an absolute link of identification

between the character and the spectator? Certainly some spectators resist those identifications. Other spectators may identify with different characters during different parts of the movie. Perhaps a spectator identifies with the sensibility of the director behind the camera and with no on-screen character at all. Most likely spectatorship is a far more free-floating and complex process than Mulvey first theorized. Since her influential article was published, many other film scholars have presented counter-theories arguing for a more complex relationship between women and mainstream cinema. However, Mulvey's basic arguments have maintained their strength, and they continue to have a lasting impact on how gender is discussed in film scholarship. Finally, they point out in important ways how the very form of Hollywood cinema (and not just its content) has objectified and continues to objectify bodies – sometimes male bodies, but usually female.

Questions for Discussion

- 1 Think about your own relationship to voyeurism and narcissism. Do you make it a habit of seeing movies that star your favorite sexy actor or actress? Is pretending to be a movie character and vicariously sharing his or her adventures part of your pleasure in moviegoing?
- 2 List some other examples of how women's bodies are objectified in popular culture – advertisements, music videos, film, and TV.

How do women relate to those images, and how do men relate to them?

- 3 What happens to the gendered dynamics of spectatorship when the male body is put on display? Are women in our culture more likely to "accept" sexual objectification than are men?

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Further Screening

- Footlight Parade* (1933)
The Maltese Falcon (1941)
The Girl Can't Help It (1956)
Barbarella (1968)

- Pretty Woman* (1990)
Thelma and Louise (1991)
Tomb Raider (2001)
300 (2006)

Chapter 12

MASCULINITY IN CLASSICAL HOLLYWOOD FILMMAKING

The previous two chapters attest to the fact that most of the critical work on **gender** issues in media (and in society generally) has been devoted to analyzing images of women. Living within **patriarchal** cultures, women have traditionally been less empowered and accorded fewer rights and opportunities than men. Thus, discussion of gender often centers on the ways that women have been discriminated against in the media (and in society generally). This gives women's history and experiences a renewed attention, attention that a male-dominated society has often dismissed or overlooked. Yet discussing gender solely in terms of women's issues may inadvertently make the **social construction** of gender seem to be an idea of importance only to women. Such work may accidentally create a sense that, because "the male" functions as a central or default category in patriarchal society, its "female Other" is the only socially constructed gender category. To rectify that possible misconception, many scholars now recognize the importance of studying not only how **femininity** is constructed within patriarchal cultures, but how **masculinity** is constructed as well. In this way, these broader **gender studies** (as opposed to only women's studies) attempt to denaturalize the **hegemonic** superiority of males, and show that masculinity and femininity are not absolute terms, but are in fact dependent on one another. (Recall that masculinity is often defined as not feminine, and vice versa.) Males are conditioned by **ideology** and cultural standards just as much as females are, and typed into socially learned gender roles. American society teaches and fosters certain types of behaviors in men – the ones commonly thought of as masculine (aggression, strength, leadership, lack of emotion) – in order to maintain and reinforce patriarchal privilege.

Privilege is a key point: while many women struggle against the limitations placed on them by their gender role, men tend to be rewarded for taking on a traditionally masculine gender role. Patriarchal privilege is so endemic that most men are not even aware of the comparative ease with which they move through life (much as "white" individuals are often oblivious to the opportunities they have in comparison to those considered "non-white"). Some men, however, will admit to an unease similar to what women feel about their gender role: the ideals of traditional masculinity are perhaps as hard to actually

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embody as are those of traditional femininity. For example, from a very early age, boys are taught what is appropriate for their gender and what is not. They are taught to suppress their emotions ("boys don't cry") and endure hardship without complaint ("take it like a man"). Patriarchal cultures deem these good traits for men to acquire, but are they really? Some men become so conditioned by those ideals that they are unable to develop intimate relationships. Other men ignore signs of illness and suffer silently, leading to increased mortality rates for men over women. Some men feel tremendous pressure to be "good providers" for wives and families, and they may develop serious doubts about their own self-worth if they are not as wealthy or famous as the next man. Thus men are confined in their own way within American patriarchal culture. They are expected to live up to certain standards of masculine behavior, to constantly prove to themselves and to others that they are indeed "real men," that is to say, not like women.

Patriarchal culture provides a variety of ways for men to encounter, negotiate, and manage their relationships to these masculine ideals. Primarily, boys are expected to emulate their fathers, and other father figures. Boys and men are encouraged to learn masculine behavior through belonging to and participating in **homosocial groups** – all-male spaces or activities such as clubs, athletic teams, fraternities, lodges, and the armed forces (all-male until the latter part of the twentieth century). In these realms, men learn how to embody traditional images of masculinity, through both conscious and unconscious study and imitation (whether of how to sink a three-point shot in basketball or how to dismantle a rifle). These homosocial spaces work not only to instill a sense of masculinity (by quite literally excluding the feminine), but also as spaces for men to grapple with their own doubts about their abilities to succeed as men. The individuals who form an all-male group (team, pledge class, platoon, etc.) often form close bonds based on all of them helping each other "be all that they can be." However, that bonding is usually heavily negotiated through competition and aggression, since the masculine ideal contradicts the "feminine" emotions of love and nurturing that such close relationships might invoke.

Mass media and other organized entertainments also provide the ways and means of acquiring masculinity within American culture. For example, spectator sports have proliferated during the last century as a demonstration of male athletic superiority – most of them endorse a vision of masculinity that the men watching are encouraged to imitate or at least measure themselves by. Advertisements (in print, on billboards, and on television) also present images of masculinity, and usually tell the men watching them that consuming certain products (trucks, beer, razors, cologne) will help the male spectator become like that image. Similarly, television shows and motion pictures present examples of the masculine ideal for boys and men to admire and idolize. However, as the conclusion to the previous chapter pointed out, placing masculinity on display for the **male gaze** is markedly similar to the sexual **objectification** of women in American visual culture. Consequently, mass media representations of men consistently work to represent "real men" as powerful active agents sexually desired by women, and to eradicate or denigrate any possible homoerotic or feminized aspects of masculinity.

Almost from its outset, American film granted primacy to men in the stories that it told. Narrative is driven by action, and if patriarchal ideology asserts that men are the doers (while women are the "done-unto"), then narrative films are inevitably going to focus on men. While women were accorded a special **genre**, the **woman's film**, men had no need for such a ghetto. Everything else that Hollywood produced was automatically a

man's film. Regardless of the genre, images of the masculine ideal remained central. The **Western** revolves around the lone cowboy riding the range, bringing justice and civilization to the frontier with a maximum of male heroics. The **gangster film** focuses on men attempting to gain success and prove their mettle through violent criminal action. The **action-adventure movie** similarly centers on male **protagonists** becoming mythic masculine heroes through amazing journeys or quests. The **war movie** also quite consciously rehearses how to be the right kind of man under the hardships of battle. The centrality of the male in American cinema (and Western culture in general) is implicated in the term most people use to designate the main character of any story: the hero, not the heroine, or the gender-neutral term "protagonist."

As was discussed in chapter 10, the motion picture industry in the United States was dominated by men from its very beginnings, even as the newness and relative decentralization of the medium did enable a few women to become filmmakers. Men founded and controlled the film industry as it became standardized throughout the 1910s and 1920s, and in general, the classical Hollywood **studio system** replicated the patriarchal business practices endemic to its era. Accompanying and justifying this rule by men were assertions that men were, by their very nature, better than women. Producers and directors, so the argument went, needed to be leaders and exhibit a strong powerful will in order to command the cast and crew. People working in various technical areas (cinematographers, set builders, electricians, etc.) needed to have mechanical know-how. Traditional masculine ideals implied that men were better suited for these roles, while traditional feminine ideals excluded women from those roles regardless of their skills. Furthermore, as the classical Hollywood studio system increasingly limited filmmakers to certain specialized fields (a director or a cinematographer, but not both), people moved into those fields through apprenticeships and guilds. Such a system created another all-male space, in which older men taught younger men how to do their job – by and large excluding women (as well as racial and **ethnic** minorities) from their ranks. While unions gained a foothold in the industry to protect the rights of the working class, union organization worked to further entrench male domination in various fields by regularly refusing to grant women membership.

Patriarchal ideology works to naturalize male dominance and superiority so that people often do not even think of gender issues when discussing men. Just as audiences tend to think that stories are about race only when those stories deal with racial minorities, some spectators might only consider a film to be about gender if it deals with women's issues. However, every film ever made is arguably about both masculinity and femininity in some way – because gender permeates our understanding of being human, and because both terms are defined as opposites and not overlapping concepts. When patriarchal ideology is functioning smoothly, most people do not notice how gender is being rehearsed and reinforced in culture. However, when ideological standards of gender are in flux, the construction of gender becomes more apparent. Different images of men and women collide with each other, battling for social legitimacy and acceptance. Just as the previous chapters have shown how cinematic images of women helped both to reveal and to form their era's social construction of female gender roles, this chapter aims to examine how popular moviemaking attempts to naturalize male gender roles. Although patriarchal dominance has been maintained throughout the history of American cinema, the masculine ideal has shifted over time. What constitutes a "real man" has varied throughout film history, as hegemonic standards of gender have evolved and been renegotiated.

Masculinity and Early Cinema

At the time that cinema was invented, American masculinity was undergoing just such a shift. The nation's transformation from a more rural to urban environment was increasingly forcing people to change their means of support from one of independent production (such as running a farm or a trade) to wage labor in urban factories. Whereas early citizens often built their own log cabins, raised their own livestock and produce, and made their own clothes, by the end of the 1800s more and more Americans were performing jobs for wages that they then used to *buy* homes, food, and clothing. This shift had enormous impact on the social understanding of masculinity. Men, who had been previously seen as the sole creator and owner of the home and its goods, were now beholden to other men (factory bosses and owners) in order to survive. In this way, the necessity of factory wage labor diminished a man's capacity to live up to the masculine ideal of previous generations. Furthermore, as discussed in chapter 10, women were also becoming more prominent in the urban workforce at this time, further blurring the lines between male and female labor, social roles, and activities.

As this brief description indicates, this particular shift in masculinity was tied specifically to economic concerns – strongly linking issues of patriarchy to issues of capitalist control. As if to acknowledge (or perhaps mask) the fact that capitalism was forcing traditional masculinity to adapt to less masculine positions, dominant culture began to champion a new and more virile vision of masculinity. President Theodore Roosevelt (a "rough rider" who urged men to "speak softly and carry a big stick") promoted a veritable cult of outdoor male athleticism, asserting that those who were truly manly were closer to nature. However, this resurgent masculinity was also associated with pure brute strength and heavy manual labor, and it therefore was able to reassure many working-class men that they too were part of the masculine ideal, thus keeping them from potentially challenging capitalist ideology. (A similar process has often occurred in the cultures of American racial/ ethnic minorities. Masculinity is sometimes overemphasized in minority cultures in an effort to diffuse the sense of disempowerment that results from racial or ethnic discrimination.)

Film became a popular entertainment among the urban population of this era, and the cult of masculinity found its way into the subject matter of even the earliest motion pictures. A number of the first films made by **Thomas Edison** and his associates were short scenes that celebrated male homosocial spaces: barber shops, cockfights, and card games. Since the earliest films were mainly "photographs come to life," little more was done in these pictures than present the all-male space and the men themselves. Boxing matches became another popular subject for early cinema, especially since some states had banned live fights, but had no laws against showing *films* of fights. One of the more famous male bodies on display in Edison's early films was the sideshow strongman Sandow, who posed and flexed for the camera. The Sandow film presents an insistent performance of vibrant masculinity, but also places the man on sexual display, which may have had unintended effects. Similarly, Edison's filmic recreations of male-exclusive spaces also become problematic for patriarchal culture: is his film of two men dancing meant to be homosocial or **homosexual**?

The shift to narrative filmmaking helped solve this dilemma: by placing masculine figures in stories instead of simply on display, it encouraged individuals to identify

with the male characters instead of admiring them as objects. Two of the most famous early story films made in the United States function in this manner. Edwin S. Porter's *Life of an American Fireman* (1902) shows heroic, action-oriented men taking charge and rescuing a helpless woman and child. Fireman films were quite popular in the early 1900s, illustrating the perils of urban life (when housing and fire codes were substandard or haphazard) as well as a new urban profession that upheld the cult of masculinity. Porter went on to even greater success the following year directing *The Great Train Robbery* (1903). Rather than celebrating modern urban masculinity, this film copied the Western flavor and heroic mythmaking of the dime novel and Wild West show. Although the film has many elements common to the crime and chase film genres, it is considered by many historians to be the first film Western. One of the most prolific of American film genres, the Western promotes a masculine ideal of a strong, unemotional, aggressive hero closely tied to nature and hard manual labor. In this way, urban males who had little contact with the type of outdoor active masculinity championed by Theodore Roosevelt could at least sit in a nickelodeon and fantasize that they were a rugged cowboy hero. For the next few decades, Western cowboy heroes such as William S. Hart and Tom Mix taught men and boys important lessons about masculinity. In the 1930s, John Wayne rose to prominence as the quintessential cowboy hero in a number of Hollywood Westerns, and in the early years of the twenty-first century, his cowboy image is still considered by many to be the epitome of American masculinity.

Masculinity and the Male Movie Star

Just as early narrative filmmaking developed certain genres, so too did it develop recurring character types: the fireman, the cowboy, the sweet young maiden. Certain actors and actresses quickly became associated with these types, and avid moviegoers were soon able to distinguish them from other actors – even though early films did not generally list who the actors were. As the classical Hollywood studio system began to codify, studio executives realized that actors who had a loyal following could help sell product. Thus, the **movie star** was formed not only out of the narrative style of classical Hollywood, but also out of its business structure. Studios groomed promising actors, molding them into popular figures of desire that would then draw audiences to films. Stars functioned then as they do today: as mythic (but manufactured) icons that epitomize for audiences certain aspects of gender, beauty, **sexuality**, and class. As part of the mythmaking, effeminate male actors were taught to swagger and fight, while more masculine actresses were feminized via



The star image of John Wayne, seen here as a cowboy hero in a publicity shot, represented the epitome of American masculinity for decades.

Unidentified publicity photo, authors' personal collection.



etiquette lessons and classes in fashion and makeup. Perhaps unsurprisingly, many of the first movie stars were women – thus equating the “to-be-looked-at-ness” of movie stars with the type of gendered objectification discussed in the previous chapter. Yet movie stars such as **Mary Pickford** and **Theda Bara** were soon matched by various leading men. Hollywood had to negotiate how to encourage a bond between the male viewer and the male star without also creating a sense of sexual attraction; in other words, Hollywood needed to create male stars without implicitly turning them into feminized objects of an erotic gaze.

Such concerns preoccupied Hollywood studios and American society in general as female fans of male stars became a major topic of discussion. Recall that by the 1920s, women were seen as being increasingly independent, with aspirations and sexual desires of their own. The visible growth of women’s culture worried many cultural commentators and further threatened traditional notions about masculinity. Those issues came to a crisis point within the career of **Rudolph Valentino**, an actor of Italian descent famous for his portrayals of sensual **Latin Lovers**. In his films, Valentino’s body was often placed on erotic display for the assumed female spectator. Garbed in exotic or period costumes, Valentino’s star image was thus associated with sensuality rather than rugged adventuring. While multitudes of female fans actively worshipped him, some male moviegoers grew antagonistic toward him, partly because he was competition for their women’s attention, but also because Valentino’s objectified star image was uncomfortably close to the objectified star images of female bodies. He was deemed too pretty. Men weren’t supposed to pose like that! Male newspaper columnists began to smear Valentino’s masculinity by suggesting he was effeminate. They cited his enormous female fandom as an example of how “out of hand” modern women had become. When Valentino died suddenly in 1926,

Rudolph Valentino, seen here as *The Son of the Sheik* (1926), was the embodiment of the 1920s Latin Lover. He was thought too pretty by some (male) commentators. *The Son of the Sheik*, copyright © 1926, Paramount.



thousands of women mobbed his funeral, inducing what reporters described as a general hysteria. The event marks a rising cultural awareness of women's active (and public) sexual desire – and many men's discomfort with that same development. Although Valentino stands as the most famous example of these conflicting gender currents surrounding that era's male stars, many other actors of the period (including John Barrymore, John Gilbert, and Ronald Colman) faced similar hurdles.

In general, male actors since the early twentieth century have constantly had to deal with aspersions on their manhood, since acting has traditionally been looked down upon in American society as a less-than-manly profession. Different actors have created different strategies for managing their relation to masculinity. For example, while Douglas Fairbanks's star image placed his body on display in elaborate costumes similar to Valentino's (as Zorro, Robin Hood, or the Thief of Bagdad), his image also stressed energy, athleticism, and agility. Fairbanks's body could safely be presented as a spectacle as long as it was constantly in motion – in sword fights, bounding up walls, running, leaping, and springing from adventure to adventure. Similarly, the era's cowboy stars were usually represented riding, roping, and fighting, not seductively lounging by the campfire. Displaying the male body through a narrative performance of masculine virility has become a common trope in Hollywood filmmaking, one that helps negotiate the effeminating effect created by objectifying men onscreen.

The performance of virility (or its lack) was central to a number of major comic male stars during the silent period. Slapstick comedians such as **Charlie Chaplin**, **Harold Lloyd**, Buster Keaton, and Harry Langdon created personalities that seemed to mock the masculine ideal. Chaplin and Keaton were small, scrawny figures who seemed overpowered by everyone around them. Harold Lloyd centered his comic persona on his thick, black-rimmed eye-glasses, creating a sweet but weak everyman. Harry Langdon went even further, presenting himself as a pudgy innocent, half-adult, half-baby. While all four of these actors used their lack of masculine attributes for comedic effect, the climaxes of their films usually show them triumphing over the odds and becoming "real men" through heroic feats. In *The General* (1926), for example, Keaton's character is regarded as a coward, but manages to save his beloved and defeat the enemy during the Civil War. In *The Freshman* (1927), Lloyd's puny undergraduate goes on to score the winning points in the biggest football game of the season. In *The Strong Man* (1926), Langdon's soft, childlike character somehow subdues a much larger and aggressive bully who has harassed him throughout the film. Most of these comedians were also exceptionally gifted physical artists, and their films often feature situations in which they can exhibit their acrobatic skills. Thus, while many of the great silent film comedies begin with a problematic image of masculinity, their biggest laughs and pleasures result from the stories they tell: stories of weaklings who rise to the occasion and ultimately affirm their masculinity.

The **Great Depression** created a new crisis in masculinity. With the economic downturn, thousands of men were put out of work, disabling them from their role as family providers. Such figurative emasculation seemed to necessitate an even stronger image of masculine prowess on American movie screens. Films from the era often eschewed the refined leading man image of many 1920s male stars in favor of actors who displayed a rougher, tougher sensibility. (John Gilbert, for example, was allegedly drummed out of the business because his voice was not sufficiently masculine for 1930s audiences.) New sound movie stars like Clark Gable and James Cagney spoke gruffly and tersely, and seemed to

be always spoiling for a fight. Cagney became a star in the gangster film *Public Enemy* (1931), in which he not only shot it out with other urban mugs but showed he could handle a woman by shoving a grapefruit in her face. Gable first came to attention in *A Free Soul* (1932), in which he showed who was boss by giving co-star Norma Shearer some rough treatment. The increased representation of men's violence toward women at this time seems to indicate an insecurity about male dominance – an insecurity that could only be quelled through excessively violent means. Gable and Cagney were accompanied by other similarly rough-hewn male stars, including John Wayne, Gary Cooper, and Humphrey Bogart. Male filmgoers looked to these male stars to learn how to talk, to walk, to handle women, to handle other men – in other words, to learn how to perform masculinity successfully in their own daily lives.

Certain film genres of the classical era made the performance of masculine virility more of a challenge, and the male stars linked to those genres had to create strategies for upholding their masculinity. For example, while the musical genre presents plenty of opportunities for male viewers to witness chorus girls in various stages of undress, the genre has often been considered to be more appealing to women than to men. Part of this perception may be due to the emphasis on song, dance, and romance, which not only enlarges the importance of the lead female character, but also stresses emotionality – a trait that "real men" were not supposed to show. Two of the biggest male stars of the Hollywood musical used different methods for surmounting these problems. Fred Astaire never projected a sense of rugged masculinity – his first screen test famously judged him as having no star potential because of his thin body and unconventional looks. However, his star

In *Public Enemy* (1931), James Cagney played a guy so tough he thought nothing of abusing a woman by shoving a grapefruit in her face.
Public Enemy, copyright © 1931, Warner Bros.



image was one of wealth and class, and he rose to prominence as the debonair musical partner of ultra-feminine Ginger Rogers. Furthermore, Astaire's films were often filled with male supporting characters who were even less conventionally masculine than he was. In comparison to them, Astaire looked more virile. The other famous male dancer of classical Hollywood cinema, Gene Kelly, worked tirelessly throughout his career to assert that his dancing was hard work – that the athletic skills required to perform it were hard-won masculine accomplishments. Even his 1958 television special was entitled *Dancing: A Man's Game*.

Another genre of the classical era that figured male stars in interesting ways was the so-called **screwball comedy**, a sort of combination of slapstick and romantic comedy that worked to negotiate social and sexual tensions between men and women. Screwball comedies deal quite literally with the battle between the sexes, with male and female characters both verbally and physically sparring. For example, in *Nothing Sacred* (1937), Fredric March knocks Carole Lombard unconscious with a punch; however, she later knocks him out as well. The emphasis on competition and combative courtship often meant that women got to win a few rounds of the fight, even though by the end of the films the men have usually reasserted their dominance. Interestingly, the rise of the genre occurred simultaneously with the enforcement of the **Production Code** (adopted in 1930, enforced in 1934), and many film historians today understand the screwball comedy to be a rechanneling of the era's open sexuality (now forbidden by the Code) into a less overt form: a comedic battle between lovers. In this way, censorship efforts may have helped to construct a public notion of sexuality tinged with violence and brutality.

Many of the male stars of screwball comedies were similar to those softer, more romantic, and good-looking stars of the 1920s. Cary Grant, for example, rose to fame in screwball comedies such as *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), *His Girl Friday* (1940), and *The Philadelphia Story* (1940). In them, Grant's suave characters are challenged by strong women who want to do things their own way. Grant uses comedy to negotiate this struggle and to maintain his masculinity, that is, his dominance over women. Intriguingly though, such dominance is often tenuous. While Grant has thoroughly tamed Katharine Hepburn by the end of *The Philadelphia Story*, in *Bringing Up Baby* her character seems only to allow him to *think* that he has won the upper hand. In *His Girl Friday*, Grant's character successfully wins back his wife (Rosalind Russell), but does so in order to keep her working as a reporter for his newspaper and not as a small-town housewife. The film thus appears to give "permission" for a woman to hold what was traditionally a male job, even as it is clear that she will be taking orders from Cary Grant both at home and at work. Just as the male stars of the silent slapstick comedy found humor in negotiating hegemonic masculinity, so did the male stars of screwball comedy. What marks these films as different is that the silent comedies almost always reaffirmed masculinity in their final reels, while screwball comedies often barely returned to patriarchal norms.

A late screwball comedy starring Cary Grant, *I Was a Male War Bride* (1949), pushes the reversal of gender roles just about to the breaking point. Directed by Howard Hawks (who had also made *Bringing Up Baby* and *His Girl Friday*), *I Was a Male War Bride* focuses on a French officer (Grant) who is forced by military bureaucracy to take on a female role when he marries a member of the US armed forces. The climax of the film even has Cary Grant dressed in a skirt and wig, passing himself off as a woman. Although the film ends with all the gender-bending complications settled, the resolution happens in

In the screwball comedy, gender roles are often inverted; in *I Was a Male War Bride* (1949), Cary Grant ends up in a wig and a skirt. *I Was a Male War Bride*, copyright © 1949, 20th Century-Fox.



the final seconds, leaving little time for the viewer to feel reassured that traditional masculinity has indeed triumphed. While the screwball comedy and the male stars who performed in them usually managed to uphold male dominance in the end, the often equivocal sense of that dominance acknowledged that masculinity was still frequently in flux. It was being challenged by the ever-changing shifts in women's roles in American society of the era.

World War II and Film Noir

Arguably, World War II altered gender relations in the United States more than any other event of the twentieth century. As discussed in chapter 10, the wartime economy encouraged a new image of a stronger, more capable American woman. It also necessarily promoted the strength, courage, and power of American men – ideological conditioning that helped to assure everyone that we were indeed “tough enough” to win the war. Thus, while American culture reconceived femininity as stronger and more capable (that is, more “masculine”), it also worked overtime to instill traditional ideals of masculinity in men themselves. Military training drilled into enlisted men the value of aggressive action, suppressed emotion, and leadership under duress. As with most all-male spaces, men helped each other deal with the pressures caused by those expectations, acting as support and encouragement in an arena where the performance of virile masculinity literally meant life or death.



While enacting masculine bravado and heroism, John Agar and John Wayne in *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949) also typify the strong homosocial bonds formed during the war (and in war movies).

Sands of Iwo Jima, copyright © 1949, Republic.

Cinema reinforced the triumphant masculinity of the American male soldier throughout the war. In numerous **war movies**, GIs rose to the occasion and performed their duty with stoic bravery. Many war films told stories of new recruits having to learn how to function in the armed services as part of a team and not as individuals. Consequently, these films (and the military itself) did renegotiate certain aspects of masculinity: men were no longer expected to be strong loners (as in the Western) but were instead expected to become effective members of a unit. For example, James Cagney in *The Fighting 69th* (1940) and John Garfield in *Air Force* (1943) start each film playing within their star personas as cocky, streetwise, and aggressive individuals. The story of each film, however, goes on to show that success in wartime requires working together as a group, suppressing masculine individuality under a chain of male command. Hollywood films of the 1940s also glorified the male bonding of GI buddies in order to further this redirected image of masculinity. Male duos became routine on film screens during the war, and the comedy team of Bud Abbott and Lou Costello shot to the top of the box office in a series of military-related comedies. Bob Hope and Bing Crosby also paired off in a series of buddy/road comedies including *Road to Singapore* (1940) and *Road to Morocco* (1942). Even the classic wartime romance *Casablanca* (1943) ends not with a male–female clinch, but with two men marching off to join the fight. As Humphrey Bogart remarks to Claude Rains in the film's famous last line, "This looks like the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

While wartime propaganda attempted to paint a picture of robust American manhood, the actual fighting of the war had strong effects on men and masculinity. Many strong and able-bodied men died in the war; their masculinity could not overcome mortar shells and bullets. Others suffered from injuries or horrible wartime experiences that left them permanently disabled in body or mind. Combat creates enormous mental stress, and many

men returned from the war with nightmares, flashbacks, crippling anxiety, and/or depression, a constellation of psychological symptoms now known as post-traumatic stress disorder. However, having been conditioned to be stoic and suppress complaints, many American men of the era lived silently with such symptoms. Many felt that no one wanted to know what they had endured. In fact, a documentary made by Hollywood director John Huston, entitled *Let There Be Light* (1945), was suppressed by the military precisely because it presented too vivid a picture of how badly the war had scarred some soldiers mentally. Even those soldiers who did not require major medical attention experienced difficulties readjusting to regular home life, where people had not experienced the horror of war and had no comprehension of what they had been through.

Some of the **social problem films** that were produced during the postwar years attempted to address the difficulties of readjustment that many returning veterans faced. Some of these films dealt with disabled veterans and their attempts to feel like whole men again. *Pride of the Marines* (1945) showed John Garfield's character dealing with returning home blind. *The Men* (1950) focused on wheelchair-bound Marlon Brando coming to grips with his injuries. Other films, such as *Till the End of Time* (1946), attempted to account for the more general sense of dislocation felt by returning veterans. Possibly the most famous social problem film of postwar readjustment was *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946). The film centered on a trio of returning soldiers, each grappling with different problems that compromised their sense of masculine identity. One character (played by Fredric March) returns to an ostensibly happy home and good job, but feels somehow separated from it all and seeks solace in alcohol. Another (played by Dana Andrews) returns a war hero, but comes back to limited working-class options and a social environment that has no use for yesterday's heroes. The third (played by real-life amputee Harold Russell) comes back from the war without his lower arms, and is worried about how his long-time girlfriend will react to his altered body. By the end of the film, all three men find a method of reawakening their confidence and feeling integrated back into society. The film seemed to say much to American society; in dramatizing concerns about postwar masculinity, it became a major box office hit and won multiple Oscars, including Best Picture of the Year.

Men returning from the war faced another, often more personal complication to their sense of masculinity: stronger, independent women. For some men, it seemed as if women had taken over – in jobs, in communities, and even in the home. As if to restore proper patriarchal order, American culture attempted to deny or denigrate the stronger women that wartime conditions had created. Women were unceremoniously fired from their jobs in order to create employment opportunities for returning men. Veterans were granted federal loans to help them obtain higher education, train for better-paying careers, or buy homes – loans that were for the most part unavailable to women. As discussed in chapter 10, postwar representations of women in film and on radio attempted to place women back in the home, refiguring them as happy wives and mothers, not workers in the public sphere. Yet most cultural historians note that many American men still felt vaguely threatened by women. Many women fought to maintain their jobs and their independence. While birth rates did soar after the war, so did divorce rates. Many couples who married quickly during the war discovered they had no substantial relationships when they were reunited. Men and women had had very different experiences of the war, and the two often did not easily mesh.

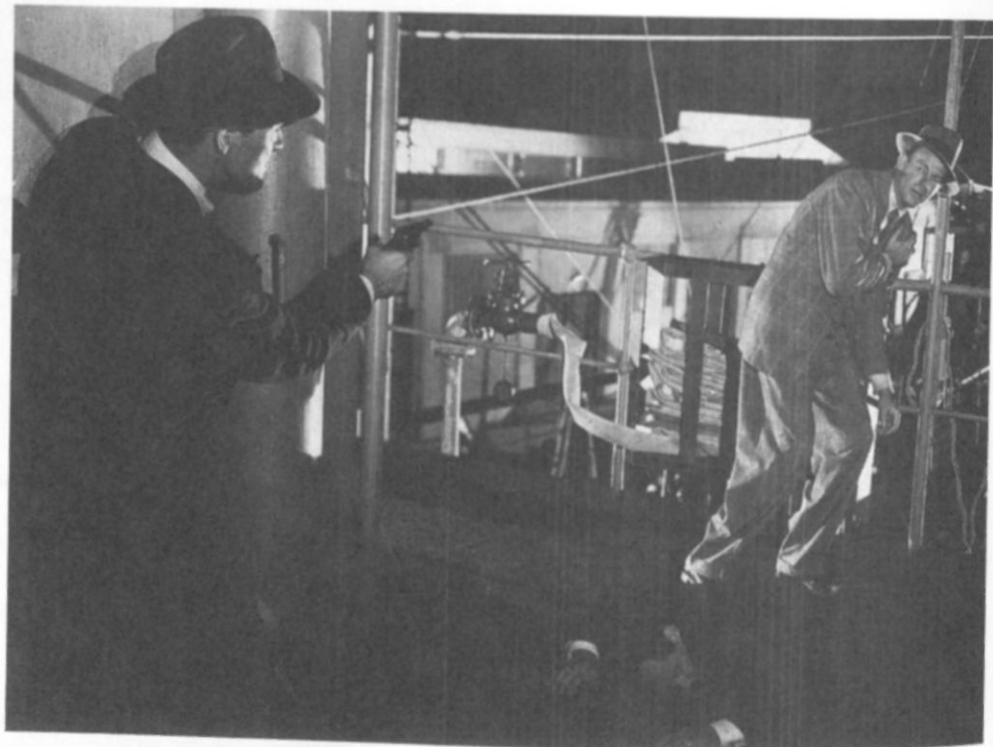


In *Double Indemnity* (1944), Fred MacMurray's character is seduced and then betrayed by a femme fatale played by Barbara Stanwyck, seen here lurking in the shadows behind a door.

Double Indemnity, copyright © 1944, Paramount.

Nowhere are the worries about postwar gender relations more overtly expressed than in a spate of films that would become known as *film noir*, so named because of their dark stories and even darker settings ("noir" is French for black). In these films of nightmarish urban angst, male characters experience a heightened state of masculinity in crisis. Rather than presenting strong, assertive, and confidently victorious heroes, noir films center on men who feel trapped by their social or economic situations. Male characters in films like *Double Indemnity* (1944), *Detour* (1945), *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946), or *The Lady from Shanghai* (1946) are everyday working stiffs, locked into a humdrum life, whose one attempt to escape that confinement inevitably pulls them into a world of crime, murder, and paranoia. The visual look of film noir itself expresses this sense of entrapment. Most of the stories take place at night, as shadows close in around the characters. A variety of objects (horizontal blinds, staircases, ceiling fans, etc.) create more shadows, as if the figures are trapped behind bars or caught in giant spiderwebs. In noir films, the camera often frames the action at out-of-kilter angles, creating a feeling that the world is out of balance and uncontrollable.

The pervasiveness of film noir style infiltrated almost every genre during the postwar period (Westerns, musicals, comedies, the woman's film), but was most connected to the mystery-thriller genre. With stories often drawn from the hardboiled detective fiction of Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett, the mystery genre meshed neatly with the complex visual style of film noir. Detective plots keep the hero (and the audience) figuratively in the dark, lacking confidence about who to trust and what is actually happening. The hero wanders through a narrative maze that may or may not completely resolve itself. Spectator identification with the beleaguered male hero is heightened through formal devices such as flashbacks and voice-over narration, all of which tie the spectator to the



This shot from *T-Men* (1947) exemplifies the dark, twisted, and out-of-kilter mise-en-scène of film noir.

T-Men, copyright © 1947, Eagle-Lion.

protagonists' subjective point of view. The viewer thus experiences the story through the sometimes quite confused mind of the film noir hero, and not from some objective, omniscient point of view. The plots of film noir thrillers also often include multiple double-crosses, in which characters switch sides as various aspects of the mystery are revealed. Good and evil are thus blurred together, and even the hero's morality frequently comes under question. Noir films do not always end happily, either. Sometimes the hero dies in his quest to take control of his life.

One constant method for performing masculinity in these films was (in an accurate use of the word) the manhandling of women. Film noir protagonists treat women roughly – through either dismissive one-liners or actual physical abuse. Such aggression toward women was central to film noir because the key to the intrigue and mystery usually involved a woman. The film noir *femme fatale* encapsulated the threat that women in postwar society seemed to represent to men. In these films, women know secrets that men do not. Women tend to act helpless and needy at the beginning of these films, but they are in fact only performing that pose to hide their ruthless ambitions. They lure humble working men into crime and murder by promising sex, happiness, and escape. And although other men may endanger the hero during the course of the film, it is the femme fatale who sits at the center of the web: she is the ultimate threat. Her intended emasculation of the man must therefore be repudiated through an excessive use of force. The film noir hero physically wrestles the gun from

the femme fatale's hand, slaps her, turns her over to the police, or even kills her himself. Perhaps unsurprisingly, film noir usually resolves its gender tensions in favor of its male protagonists, but the films themselves seem to indicate just how threatened and unsure hegemonic patriarchy was during the postwar years.

Case Study: *Dead Reckoning* (1947)

Humphrey Bogart starred in many films noir, and in *Dead Reckoning* he embodies his usual persona of a weary, disillusioned tough guy determined to solve a dangerous puzzle laid before him. *Dead Reckoning* ties film noir directly to postwar anxieties by casting Bogart as Captain "Rip" Murdock, a soldier returning home with his war buddy, Sergeant Johnny Drake. During a ceremony meant to honor their accomplishments, Johnny mysteriously disappears, and Murdock becomes determined to find his pal. He finds Johnny's charred body in a morgue in Gulf City, and the rest of the film details Murdock's attempt to do right by his friend and bring the murderer to justice. Gulf City, like most film noir environments, is presented as an asphalt jungle, filled with danger, secrets, and double crosses. Much of the action takes place at night, and scenes taking place indoors are often shot with low-key lighting, creating distorted shadows. The film is also partially told in flashback, beginning as Murdock tracks down a Catholic priest in Gulf City (importantly, a priest who was in the trenches with the enlisted men during the war) in order to recount his story. With the flashback comes Murdock's voice-over narration, explaining his deductive reasoning, as well as his emotional attitude toward various events and people. Hence, in a stylized fashion, the film evokes several issues of postwar readjustment for veterans, while Murdock's quest is itself linked to the strong emotional bonds forged between men during the war.

The main person that Murdock investigates is a nightclub singer named Coral (Lizabeth Scott), who was connected with Johnny via a prior murder case. In keeping with the shifting nature of character in film noir, it is revealed that Johnny was a suspect in a murder before escaping the police, changing his name, and enlisting in the army. Coral, as the femme fatale, is introduced by the film much as Rita Hayworth was in *Gilda* (1946; see chapter 11), as a stunning and objectified beauty, but one that cannot be trusted. A carefully coifed and made-up blonde in a slinky black dress, Coral is beautifully packaged, but Murdock suspects that she may be lying about Johnny. Although Murdock investigates other suspicious figures throughout the film, he primarily tries to ascertain whether or not Coral can be trusted.

Murdock's uncertainty toward Coral is mirrored by the film's presentation of her. In certain scenes, she is lit and framed as if she was a predatory menace – shadows partially covering her face (and intentions), and shot from distorted angles. In other scenes, she is presented as a sweet young thing needing Murdock's protection – now shot in plain daylight in a regular medium shot. The shifting nature of her identity is also thematized by the number of names given to her throughout the film. Although her given name is Coral, she also goes by the nickname Dusty, and Murdock gives her another nickname, Mike. Each of the names corresponds to various possible identities. Dusty is used by Murdock when he begins to distrust her (note how the name has unclean connotations), but when he warms to her, he calls her Mike. This use of a male name seems to associate Murdock's possible love of Coral/Dusty/Mike with the intense homosocial bonds he and Johnny shared.

Whatever name he gives her, it is clear that Murdock is attempting to control the femme fatale. Even his act of renaming her is an assertion of his dominance. And throughout the film he tests her, questions her, and tells her what to do, in order to assure himself that he is in charge and that she is not making a fool of him. During one of their ostensibly more relaxed moments (when he thinks she can be trusted), Murdock describes his perfect woman as pocket-sized – one that he can keep in his coat pocket and take out to admire, but too small to cause too much trouble, and susceptible to being put back in the pocket if she starts to act bossy. When Coral/Dusty/Mike tries to object to such blatant sexism, Murdock cuts her off with "Get back in my pocket," and she smiles and shuts up. While the manifest sexism of this speech surprises many viewers today, the film attempts to justify such ideas by ultimately revealing that Coral is indeed untrustworthy. She has not only committed the original murder, but also killed Johnny. During the climactic road trip, she tries to kill Murdock, but he manages to crash the car, killing her but receiving only slight injuries himself. Murdock gets justice for his dead buddy and thwarts the evil machinations of another femme fatale. Masculinity emerges battered, but triumphant.



In *Dead Reckoning* (1947), noir protagonist "Rip" Murdock (Humphrey Bogart) is beaten and battered by thugs. The murder inevitably leads back to a deceitful woman, played by Lizabeth Scott.
Dead Reckoning, copyright © 1947, Columbia.

Masculinity in 1950s American Film

Men continued to be traditionally masculine in many films of the 1950s, although other films began to represent a newer, softer type of masculinity. Still others seemed to suggest that living up to the masculine ideal was a difficult, if not impossible, task. The lingering effects of World War II and the new corporate economics of the 1950s were changing the social understanding of masculinity. Even some stars' personas began to change. For example, James Stewart had risen to popularity in the 1930s and 1940s playing shy, idealistic young men who epitomized the ideal average American "Joe." In the 1950s, however, Stewart increasingly played men with psychological scars, men who were trying a little too hard to pretend that everything was fine and that they were still in control of their lives. In several films directed by Alfred Hitchcock (including *Rear Window* [1954], *The Man Who Knew Too Much* [1956], and *Vertigo* [1958]), Stewart's all-American guy was twisted into an obsessed neurotic. In Westerns directed by Anthony Mann (including *Winchester '73* [1950], *The Naked Spur* [1954], and *The Man from Laramie* [1955]), Stewart's cowboy heroes verged on psychosis in their quest for control and vengeance. Another traditionally heroic Western star, Gary Cooper, acknowledged the strain of performing stoic masculinity

in *High Noon* (1952), playing a sheriff who is plainly frightened by an impending gunfight. Even the iconic image of John Wayne was challenged. In the Western *The Searchers* (1956), it is suggested that Wayne's patriarchal character might be misguided, obsessive, and pathologically racist – a disturbing shading to his usual strong and silent hero role.

These older stars were not the only ones displaying cracks in masculine confidence. A new generation of actors hit the screens in the 1950s, and they were often cast as young men straining under the pressures of being a man. Actors like Marlon Brando, James Dean, Montgomery Clift, and Paul Newman created characters that were introspective, tied in emotional knots, and yearning for a sense of release from the stress of conforming to a set of expectations about traditional masculinity. In their films, these men cried, had emotional outbursts and mental breakdowns. This was a far different image of men than had been promulgated during the previous 30 years of Hollywood cinema. Part of this new image was a result of the **Method School** of acting, in which many of these actors were trained. The Method encouraged actors (both men and women) to create their roles from within, to become the character in the way they thought and felt, rather than mold the part to their own view of the world or pre-existing star persona. For male actors, this often led to getting in touch with the characters' emotions – hence, the Method encouraged less emotional restraint in male performances, and subsequently in the cultural representation of masculinity.

Yet the rise of this new conflicted image of masculinity (whether from young or older actors) was not simply a by-product of a new acting style. Men in American society continued to feel pressure to conform to expected notions of gender, especially as life in the 1950s became increasingly corporate and conformist for many men. While the war had attempted to promote men working as a group, many men felt emasculated by the era's corporate culture – leaving on commuter trains in identical gray-flannel suits, going to interchangeable junior executive white-collar jobs, sitting in rows of desks or similar small offices, but not actually doing any hands-on physical labor. Indeed, a popular novel and film of the era was titled just that: *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1957). In the film, the "man" (played by Gregory Peck) struggles to find meaning in his cookie-cutter lifestyle. Gregory Peck's star image worked to resolve male tensions in many 1950s films. In films like *The Big Country* (1958) and *Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, he has to learn that masculinity comes from within, that it does not need to be constantly exhibited. Quiet, dignified masculinity was also at the core of **Sidney Poitier's** star persona, where it helped negotiate potential racial tensions. Poitier became the nation's first black movie star by embodying a soft-spoken, honorable, and self-assured masculinity.

While a number of Hollywood films acknowledged the strains that some men were feeling, almost all of these films (like most Hollywood movies) nonetheless prop up and support patriarchal ideals by the end of the film. *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), starring James Dean, is a good example of such **hegemonic negotiation** around issues of masculinity. In the film, Dean's troubled teenager desperately searches for a male role model. The film suggests Dean is troubled precisely because his father (Jim Backus) is not traditionally masculine enough. Although his father is a successful businessman with wife and family, he is depicted as hen-pecked and weak – never more so than when his son finds him picking up a spilled tray of food in a frilly woman's apron. The implication is that American men were becoming tragically soft – effeminated – in the postwar years. In fact, a specific 1950s ideology of "Momism," which accused the nation's mothers of turning virile American men into



In the 1950s, James Dean came to represent a new kind of masculinity – more introspective and more emotional.
Unidentified publicity photo, authors' personal collection.



Rock Hudson became a major Hollywood star in the 1950s by embodying traditional masculinity; the fact that he was gay was hidden by his Hollywood bosses. Rock Hudson from *Send Me No Flowers*, copyright © 1964, Universal.

sissies, could be read about in newspaper and magazine columns. By the end of *Rebel Without a Cause*, Dean's teenager has constructed his own family, becoming the responsible, courageous father figure that he himself has not had. The film thus acknowledged changing ideas of masculinity in the 1950s, blamed them on women and weak men, but then restored a newer, arguably more sensitive version of patriarchal dominance.

These last few paragraphs may give the impression that masculinity in the 1950s was characterized primarily by neurosis and hysteria. While a sense of "masculinity in crisis" did pervade many films of the era, many others (especially Westerns and action-adventure movies) went about reinscribing traditional masculine ideals. For example, Howard Hawks told people he made *Rio Bravo* (1959) precisely because of his disgust with the compromised masculinity of *High Noon*. Other films presented their male characters as almost cardboard cutouts of male sturdiness and strength, and some new stars were groomed to embody the traditional image of male power. **Rock Hudson**'s name itself was concocted by the actor's agent to evince a sense of determination and confidence, and Hudson's image through the decade was as a strong, dedicated, and loyal male figure. Hudson was matched at this time by the granite-willed heroics of Charlton Heston in a number of elaborate historical epics such as *The Ten Commandments* (1956), *Ben-Hur* (1959), and *El Cid* (1961). Standing tall and proud, neither Hudson nor Heston seemed worried or insecure about their ability to fulfill their patriarchal responsibilities.

William Holden and Kirk Douglas emerged as major stars in the 1950s as well, and they also seemed to fit into the same general category as Hudson and Heston – broad-shouldered, uncomplicated "man's men." Yet these two stars often bridged the gap between an almost decaying traditional male image and a newer, conflicted, more sensitive one. Both actors frequently played characters who attempted to convince themselves and the people around them of their confidence and bravado, but beneath their solid virile appearances there was often weariness and a lurking insecurity. William Holden (in *Sunset Boulevard* [1950], *Stalag 17* [1953], *Picnic* [1955], and *The Bridge on the River Kwai* [1957]) and Kirk Douglas (in *Champion* [1949], *Detective Story* [1951], and *The Bad and the Beautiful* [1952]) enacted macho men who seemed vaguely aware that their assertions of patriarchal power and privilege were all a sham.

American society in the 1950s worked tirelessly to pretend that the old gender roles were still in force, regarded as natural and inevitable. Yet tensions were beginning to reach a breaking point as the decade ended. Societal mandates had not convincingly induced all women back into the home to be solely wives and mothers. Men were increasingly complaining about the stresses and pressures of trying to live up to traditionally gendered

expectations. These dissatisfactions over traditional gender ideals, coupled with other social concerns about Vietnam and civil rights, would fuel the **countercultural** movement of the 1960s. As hard as Hollywood films and the rest of American culture at that time tried to resolve these problems, the tensions increased, heralding a larger crisis that would necessitate yet another hegemonic renegotiation of gender roles.

Questions for Discussion

- 1 What are some of the most prevalent ways that masculinity is constructed in popular culture? Is it always constructed in opposition to femininity? What are some of the various traits that make a man a "real" man?
- 2 Masculinity, like femininity, has changed over the decades. Can you think of differences in how your own grandfathers, fathers, and male siblings have experienced and continue to experience "being male"?
- 3 Many people today argue that there is a crisis in masculinity – that most violent crime is committed by men and that our culture teaches boys that violence is part of being a man. Do you agree or disagree? What role does popular culture – movies, TV, comic books, video games – play in the construction of violent masculinity?

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Further Screening

- The Sheik* (1921)
The General (1926)
Public Enemy (1931)
Detour (1945)
I Was a Male War Bride (1949)

- The Men* (1950)
Sunset Boulevard (1950)
Rebel Without a Cause (1955)
The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit (1957)

Chapter 13

GENDER IN AMERICAN FILM SINCE THE 1960s

This chapter discusses how Hollywood film has adapted (or not) to the great cultural changes brought by the **feminist** movement of the 1960s and 1970s. It traces the images of women and men in American film from that period to the present day. While many assumptions and expectations about **gender** roles in America have been challenged in recent years, many things about gender and media culture have also stayed relatively constant. Many simple **genre** formulas of the past have been reinscribed and remade into huge box office hits, the so-called **nostalgic Hollywood blockbusters**. Only rarely have those genre formulas been updated to match the changing times in which we now live. Most Hollywood films still center on men – their problems and their adventures – and still tend to **objectify** the image of women as sexualized spectacles. Even though more women produce and direct films in today's Hollywood than ever before, only rarely do their films challenge Hollywood **form** or critique **patriarchal** structures. **Masculinity** and **femininity** are still constructed by the movies in specific ways that promote the separate and unequal status of men and women in America.

Second Wave Feminism and Hollywood

Much of how we think about gender today is due to the feminist movement that began to affect mainstream American culture during the 1960s. This wave of feminist writing, consciousness raising, and activism is sometimes referred to as **second wave feminism**. (Recall that **first wave feminism** had occurred earlier in the century around issues such as contraception and women's suffrage [see chapter 10]. The feminist movement is sometimes divided into first and second "waves" because between the 1920s and the 1960s there was very little organized political activism around women's issues.) Second wave feminism began in response to the pressures placed on American women after World War II to return to the home to be housewives and mothers. One of the first and most influential

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books that addressed the status of American women in the 1950s was Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963. Friedan defined her concept of the "Feminine Mystique" as the culturally constructed image of passive, homebound, uneducated, eroticized, and cosmeticized femininity (as promoted in Hollywood films and network television). Friedan's book explored the fact that many American women were not happy being trapped into these very limited roles – they yearned for more freedoms and choices in their lives. As a solution to the problem, Friedan encouraged her readers to become educated, to become independent both financially and emotionally, and to fight for equal opportunity in all aspects of their lives. Friedan's book and others, such as Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, helped to jump-start the feminist movement of the 1960s.

The feminism of the 1960s was also tied to the other major social trends of the era, including the **civil rights movement** and opposition to the Vietnam war. It was primarily women – mothers and wives in many cases – who helped spur the anti-war movement in the first place. Women were instrumental in many other **countercultural** and civil rights groups as well, but they often still found themselves making the coffee and doing the dishes while the men discussed politics. Many women began to realize that in many civil rights groups fighting for equality and freedom, the focus was solely on equality and freedom *for men*. For example, one African American civil rights leader of the period infamously quipped that the only position for women within his civil rights collective was "prone," a **sexist** joke meaning that women were needed only as sex partners for men within the movement. Statements such as that one outraged women working for equal rights, and as the 1960s progressed, many of them decided to break off from protest groups focused on racial issues or the war and start their own women's rights groups.

The largest and best known of these feminist groups was the **National Organization for Women (NOW)**, which was founded by author Betty Friedan in 1966. NOW has been the mainstream, moderate voice of middle-class American feminism since its inception. But, just as other civil rights groups of the late 1960s became increasingly strident and violent, some feminist groups formed to pursue radical agendas that called for violence against men and the entire patriarchal system of US culture. Radical feminist Valerie Solanas published her *SCUM Manifesto* in 1968. (SCUM stood for the Society for Cutting Up Men.) The *SCUM Manifesto* was a scatological howl of protest meant to shock and scandalize the nation, and prove that women could be as angry and violent as could men. Valerie Solanas later shot pop artist Andy Warhol, whom she saw as a sexist oppressor because of his use of women's images in his work. Warhol survived the attack and Solanas went to jail, and the **independent film** *I Shot Andy Warhol* (1996), directed by Mary Harron, depicts aspects of Solanas's life and some of the feminist issues of the 1960s.

Most feminist groups of the era did not advocate violence of any kind. Violence was understood as stemming from *male* aggression and women's feminist organizing more often took the form of grassroots **consciousness-raising groups**. The slogan "the personal is the political" became a hallmark of the 1960s women's movement. The phrase acknowledged that women's oppression occurred internally through the **ideological state apparatuses** of family life, notions of domesticity and femininity, and the media. The idea of traditional marriage, wherein a woman owed her livelihood and allegiance to her husband, was itself forcefully critiqued. If both husband and wife worked outside the home, why was the woman still expected to prepare dinner every night? Why were women

expected to obey their husbands, even if they turned abusive? Why was access to birth control only available through men? Women's issues of the 1960s crossed all aspects of life, from the tiniest personal details of private relationships to the role of women in the federal government. Feminism therefore quickly became a variety of *feminisms*, with radical, moderate, and conservative feminist groups arguing about the proper way to advance women's equality. Women's lives and issues had become a thriving arena for civil rights struggle.

Hollywood made very little response to 1960s feminism. The industry did little to open its ranks to women filmmakers. As with other political issues of the 1960s (the war in Vietnam, civil rights more generally, etc.), Hollywood was not anxious to court controversy, and there was barely any interest in producing films that might be understood as forthrightly feminist. Instead, Hollywood continued to turn out standardized genre films, few of which featured particularly strong roles for women or acknowledged that any new social movements were underway. Film musicals and comedies such as *Mary Poppins* (1964), *The Unsinkable Molly Brown* (1964), *The Great Race* (1965), and *Thoroughly Modern Millie* (1968) did gently explore issues of female independence. Yet the films are all set in the early part of the century and deal with issues more common to first wave feminism than to second wave feminism. Similarly, Barbra Streisand starred as a strong working woman in the musicals *Funny Girl* (1968) and *Hello Dolly* (1969), but those films were safely set in the 1910s and the 1890s, respectively.

More regularly, the new Hollywood woman was figured as a more overtly sexualized version of the 1950s sex kitten or **blonde bombshell**. Just as Hollywood's reaction to first wave feminism emphasized the sexuality of the **flapper**, so studio films in the 1960s primarily pictured women's liberation as *sexual* liberation. The birth-control pill for women had become available at the start of the decade, and that development allowed many women a more self-controlled sex life. Women could now have the same kind of carefree sexual exploits that men had always enjoyed. A film like *Sex and the Single Girl* (1964), its title drawn from a contemporary sociological study by Helen Gurley Brown, promised to titillate audiences with its updated flapper character (played by Natalie Wood). However, with the **Production Code** still in place, many of those Hollywood films could not deliver on their sexual promises.

As such, an entire independent **sexploitation cinema** arose. Similar to the 1950s burlesque and nudist camp films from which they evolved, 1960s sexploitation cinema offered (mostly) female nudity and simulated sexual encounters for a (mostly) male audience. (Intriguingly, a filmmaker named **Doris Wishman** directed approximately 30 films in the sexploitation genre, making her one of the most prolific female filmmakers ever – at least in terms of the number of films that she completed.) Most sexploitation films played in rundown urban theaters, and their popularity helped to weaken local and state censorship laws. Those legal developments, along with the debut of the **MPAA Ratings System** in 1968, allowed for the creation and circulation of hardcore pornographic X-rated films. For a short time in the early 1970s, attending pornographic movies was even a chic fad, and films like *Deep Throat* (1973) were listed by Hollywood trade papers as being among the top money-making films of those years. Wanting to cash in on some of the profits, Hollywood began incorporating sexploitation tactics and appeal into many of its movies. A famous sexploitation filmmaker, Russ Meyer, was even put under contract (albeit briefly) at 20th Century-Fox.

Many of the most popular films of the late 1960s and early 1970s were male-male **buddy films** such as *The Odd Couple* (1968), *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), *Easy Rider* (1969), *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), and *The Sting* (1973). Unlike the buddy films of the World War II era, however, these new pictures were far from joyous affairs. They often wistfully re-created earlier eras where "men were real men" and/or pessimistically suggested that American culture was coming undone because American masculinity itself was in decline. The fact that the heroes of many of these films often die in the final reel is one indication of this pessimism. Women were usually peripheral to these films, and some critics referred to them as platonic love stories between men, because most of them do posit male **homosocial bonds** as stronger and more important than any other type of relationship, including **heterosexual coupling**. When women do appear in the films they are often there as love (or more regularly sex) objects, a narrative function which serves to let the audience know that despite their love and longing for one another, the buddies are indeed heterosexual. This narrative "use" of women continues to this day in films and cultural institutions that celebrate homosocial bonds between heterosexual men.

The felt threat to masculinity caused by the rise of feminism resulted not only in the revival of the buddy film but also in increased images of aggression and violence against women. The new Ratings System allowed not only greater amounts of gratuitous sex but greater amounts of gratuitous violence to be seen on movie screens. Now it was regular Hollywood practice to show machine guns, knives, and other weapons ripping through flesh in gory detail. Disturbingly, some films of the era feature very graphic visualizations of sexualized violence, including rape. Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) features several scenes in which women are brutally assaulted by the film's charismatic hero; many viewers were outraged because this ironic and complex film eventually turns its rapist into a victim of the state and seemingly ignores or even celebrates his sexual crimes. Sam Peckinpah's *Straw Dogs* (1971) and Alfred Hitchcock's *Frenzy* (1972) also featured extended rape sequences. While most of these scenes were allegedly meant to call attention to the horrific nature of violence (and violence against women), sometimes they were understood by viewers as endorsing such acts. *Klute* (1971) more forthrightly presented the horrific nature of sexual violence but, somewhat problematically, the film explored women's issues by focusing on a prostitute (Jane Fonda, in an Oscar-winning performance). Furthermore, in *Klute* and other films of this era, there is a sense that women are being punished for asserting their independence.

Along with *Klute*, Hollywood films of the late 1960s and 1970s did slowly begin to deal with contemporary issues facing women. *Rachel, Rachel* (1968) starred Joanne Woodward as a small-town schoolteacher facing severely limited options in both her professional and personal life. Other woman's films of the period include *Diary of a Mad Housewife* (1970),



The Sting (1973) was a popular buddy film starring Robert Redford and Paul Newman, the actors who had also starred in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969).

The Sting, copyright © 1973, Universal.

Box: Women and American Television

In many ways, women's roles on American television have mirrored those in mainstream American film, and both have reflected the changing sociocultural constructions of gender throughout the decades. Early television programming of the late 1940s and 1950s also inherited ideas (and sometimes whole shows) from radio. For example, most network executives and advertisers assumed women made up the largest audience, since TV (like radio) was in the home – and most women were supposedly housewives. So cooking shows and soap operas were created and aimed at them, especially during the daytime hours. Such programs often reinforced the idea that a woman's place was in the home. Yet a number of women had important creative positions on these programs (such as soap opera writers Irna Phillips and Agnes Nixon), jobs rarely available to women in the film industry at that time.

Many early prime-time shows also featured housewives, perhaps the most famous being *I Love Lucy* (1951–57), which itself was an adaptation of a radio program called *My Favorite Husband*. The premise of the show was that Lucy (Lucille Ball) would concoct all sorts of madcap schemes (many centered on getting into her husband Ricky's night-club show) that would then lead to comedic situations. While on one level Lucy is a dim-bulb housewife, her comic antics routinely upset Ricky's patriarchal authority, and she was clearly the star of the show. Lucille Ball was also a shrewd businesswoman, having formed the TV production company Desilu with real-life husband Desi Arnaz (who also played her TV husband Ricky).

As early TV was only capable of broadcasting to large urban areas, most programs took place in big cities. Because of that, early TV did feature a somewhat diverse range of female figures, including Jewish and African American women (*The Goldbergs* [1949–55], *Beulah* [1950–53]) and single working women (*Our Miss Brooks* [1952–56], *My Friend Irma* [1952–54], *Private Secretary* [1953–57]). As TV became more available to the rest of the country, though – and as many people moved into newly constructed suburban communities – programming became more homogenized. TV shows like *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (1952–66), *Father Knows Best* (1954–60), *Leave it to Beaver* (1957–63), and *The Donna Reed Show* (1958–66) presented an idealized white life in affluent middle-class suburbs, where Dad worked in a white-collar job, Mom baked cookies, and the kids were always well mannered. Women on TV were now almost exclusively white housewives who seemed inordinately content in this role.

By the mid-1960s, some programs began to – at least obliquely – hint that not all women found ultimate bliss vacuuming the living room wearing high heels and pearls. A spate of series debuted about young women chasing their own desires, much to the dismay of their fathers; these included *The Patty Duke Show* (1963–66), *Gidget* (1965–66), and *That Girl* (1966–71). A few domestic sitcoms even showed adult women negotiating social expectations of meek femininity with their own sense of power. Samantha on *Bewitched* (1964–72) and Jeannie on *I Dream of Jeannie* (1965–70) both had magical powers, but they were also housewives contained within patriarchal marriages, or, in the case of the genie Jeannie, within a magic lamp/bottle owned by her "Master." (Jeannie was also forced to wear skimpy pseudo-Arabian garments for most of the show.) Yet, like Lucy's before them, their magical antics always threatened to upset the patriarchal status quo.

A few shows in the latter half of the 1960s did attempt to integrate women into more action-centered narrative formulas. Dramatic series such as *Honey West* (1965–66), *The Girl from U.N.C.L.E.* (1966–67), *The Mod Squad* (1968–73), and the British import *The Avengers* (1966–69) showed women as private detectives and secret agents. *Star Trek* (1966–69) had a slew of "space bimbos" for Captain Kirk to woo and bed, but it also had several female officers (even if they too were clad in mini-skirts and go-go boots). Interestingly, in the original pilot for *Star Trek*, the spaceship *Enterprise* had a high-ranking officer named Number One, played by series creator Gene Roddenberry's soon-to-be wife, Majel Barrett. Number One was apparently so threatening to network executives that they insisted she be dropped from the cast when the show went into production. Still, Gene Roddenberry was deeply committed to both racial and gender equality, and his shows and movies (especially the later incarnations of *Star Trek*) have always tried to feature diverse casts; *Star Trek: Voyager* (1995–2001) eventually featured a female spaceship captain played by Kate Mulgrew.

Things changed a great deal for women on TV in the 1970s. Trying to reach upscale audiences (that is, those with more disposable income), CBS programmed a number of more urban, socially relevant shows. *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970–77) dealt with a single woman more focused on her career than on romance. Produced by its star's own production company (MTM Enterprises), it gave rise to several other single-female-centered hits including *Rhoda* (1974–78) and *Phyllis* (1975–77).

Maude (1972–78) was a spin off from Norman Lear's groundbreaking *All in the Family*, and centered on an outspoken feminist played by Bea Arthur. Yet the 1970s was not all emancipated women – ABC rose to the top of the ratings game with its "jiggle formula," exemplified by shows like *Charlie's Angels* (1976–81) and *Three's Company* (1977–84). *Charlie's Angels* were three private detectives, but they were always subservient to their boss, and the series writers contrived ways to get them into revealing outfits week after week. To its credit, during these years ABC also aired the popular female buddy sitcom *Laverne and Shirley* (1976–83).

The 1980s saw the rise of more female buddy sitcoms (*Kate & Allie* [1984–89], *The Golden Girls* [1985–92], *Designing Women* [1986–93]), and even a female buddy police detective show, *Cagney & Lacey* (1982–88). TV in the 1980s was also overrun with prime-time soap operas like *Dallas* (1978–91), *Dynasty* (1981–89), and *Falcon Crest* (1981–90), most of which represented women as conniving matriarchs, glamorous scolds, or sexpots. Reflecting the era's return to conservative values, the 1980s also saw the revival of the family sitcom. On shows like *Family Ties* (1982–89), *The Cosby Show* (1984–92), and *Growing Pains* (1985–92), women had careers outside of the home, but were rarely shown at work – they were more often depicted taking care of their husbands and children. *Murphy Brown* (1988–98) countered this trend. Created by Dianne English and starring Candice Bergen, the show focused on Murphy's career as a TV journalist; the show became the center of an intriguing "real-life" controversy when Vice President Dan Quayle claimed that Murphy was a bad role model for wanting to be a single mother. The protagonist of *Roseanne* (1988–97) was not a career woman *per se*, but as a lower-middle-class mother of three, she often worked outside the home (as well as inside it). *Roseanne* has also been championed by some feminist critics for the way in which her body image – big, loud, and unruly – directly opposes the usual patriarchal definitions of quiet, subservient femininity.

The rise of narrowcasting and subscription channels in the 1990s and 2000s provided venues for new images of women on television. The cable channels Oxygen and We are purportedly aimed at women, but mostly feature re-runs of old TV movies and woman's films. HBO had a hit with *Sex and the City* (1998–2004), a popular comedy set in New York City about four working women and the men in their lives. While some decried the show for its seeming endorsement of pre-marital sex, others complained that although the women were in charge of their own work and sexuality, their interests in high-priced fashion and designer shoes represented

yet another way that women were trapped within the larger structures of patriarchal capitalism. Showtime offered *The L Word* (2004–09), a show about lesbian friends living in Los Angeles; the show was initially advertised as a sort of replacement for *Sex and the City*, complete with the promise of sex, fashion, and melodramatic intrigue. (*The L Word* was rebooted in 2019 as *The L Word: Generation Q*.) Similarly, when streaming internet services began offering original programming in the 2010s, they often showcased strong female leads, as in Netflix's *House of Cards* (2013–18) and *Orange Is the New Black* (2013–19), and Hulu's *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017–). In attempting to garner attention in an increasingly overcompetitive market, these programs confronted issues of gender politics in provocative ways rarely expressed on network television.

Mainstream network TV has also continued to diversify its images of women, and a few have even become big players behind the scenes. Oprah Winfrey remains one of the most successful and powerful women in Hollywood today, and the rise of writer-producer Shonda Rhimes has been unprecedented: she was/is the writer and creator behind



African American TV executive Shonda Rhimes rose to fame creating hit shows like *Grey's Anatomy* (2005–), *Scandal* (2012–18), and *How to Get Away with Murder* (2014–).
Photo: DFree/Shutterstock.

Grey's Anatomy (2005–), *Private Practice* (2007–13), *Scandal* (2012–18), and the executive producer of *How to Get Away with Murder* (2014–20). Still, commercial television as an industry has maintained a sexist segregation in terms of programming. Both advertisers and TV executives still aim day-time and night-time soap operas at women, while more action-oriented shows, news, and sports broadcasts continue to be aimed at men. (Recent studies suggest that men may be leaving fictional TV altogether, as they increasingly tune in to all-sports channels such as ESPN.) Despite women's considerable successes as (day-time) talk-show hosts, news anchors, production executives, and all sorts of fictional doctors, lawyers, politicians, and even superheroes,

according to some sources men still outnumber women on TV. This statistic, of course, needs to be further complicated by other factors that this brief overview has only hinted at: scheduling, types of roles, overall screen time, production personnel, race, class, sexuality, ability, etc. Similarly, while women have traditionally found more opportunities behind the camera in television than in film, in 2018 women still only made up 27% of all major creative personnel for network, cable, and streaming programs. Just as in Hollywood filmmaking, women have made tremendous gains both behind the television camera and in front of it, but full equality between the sexes has yet to be reached.

Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore (1974), *Mahogany* (1975), *Julia* (1977), *The Turning Point* (1977), and *An Unmarried Woman* (1978). One of the most popular Hollywood films of the period to address feminist issues was the slapstick comedy *Nine to Five* (1980). In it, three working women (played by Lily Tomlin, Dolly Parton, and Jane Fonda) avenge themselves upon their sexist boss. It also should be noted that all of these films were produced and directed by men, although women did have input into many of the films' stories or screenplays. However, just as in the classical Hollywood period, these woman's films were controlled by male interests. The films are "updated" to the extent that they tentatively celebrate women's independence and touch on other feminist issues, yet most of them still fall back into old melodramatic formulas wherein women are forced to choose between careers and families.

By the late 1970s, Hollywood's tentative feminism had also extended to a new version of masculinity. The **sensitive man** – one who was in touch with his feelings and was nurturing to others – was briefly on display in many of the just-mentioned woman's films and in a small cycle of films that explored male parenting. In *The Champ* (1978), *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979), *Ordinary People* (1980), *Author, Author* (1982), and *Table for Five* (1983), men learned how to become the primary caretakers (the conventional role of mothers) for their children, as opposed to distant bread-winners. However, many of these films celebrate the new man by demonizing the new woman. For example, *Kramer vs. Kramer* begins with a wife abandoning her husband and son, while in *Ordinary People*, a cold and harsh mother is seemingly to blame for a son's attempted suicide and a family's dissolution. The "sensitive man" drama was a brief cycle, and as the 1980s progressed, Hollywood stories of men getting in touch with their feminine sides were more likely to be presented as outright comedies. This trend continued from then until today, in films such as *Tootsie* (1982), *Mr. Mom* (1983), *Three Men and a Baby* (1987), *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993), *Big Momma's House* (2000), and *What Women Want* (2000). The image of the sensitive man is a good example of how **hegemonic patriarchy** is negotiated in Hollywood films. Whether drama or comedy, these films demonstrate that men can surpass women as parents (and even as women). They reinforce traditional gender roles by asking audiences to laugh at the idea of men

"acting" like women. Although the traditional image of masculinity is slightly altered within these films, they still assert patriarchal centrality and importance by being about men in the first place.

Into the 1980s: A Backlash against Women?

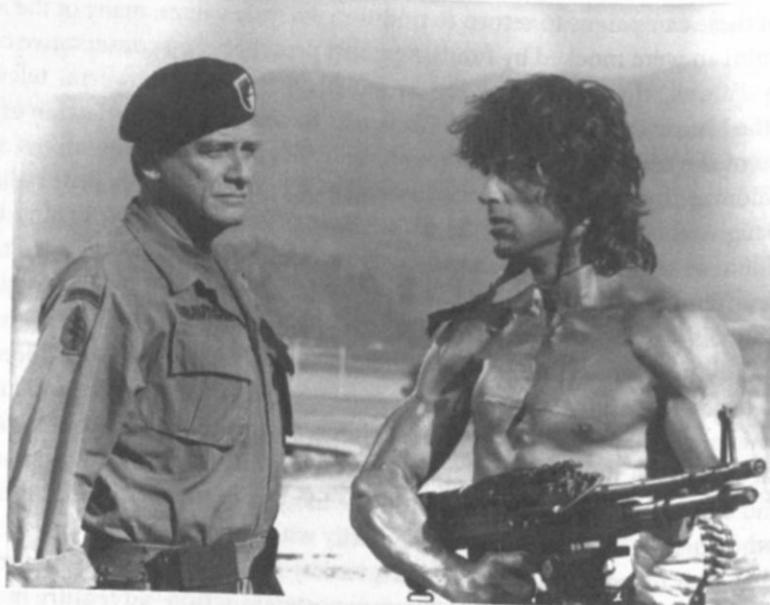
The 1980s have been frequently theorized as an era in which the ideals of second wave feminism experienced a sort of cultural **backlash** – a strong adverse reaction in political and cultural spheres to feminist gains and goals. Much of this backlash to women's growing independence coincided with the presidency of Ronald Reagan (elected twice, in 1980 and 1984). Reagan had aligned himself with fundamentalist Christian groups such as the **Moral Majority** as well as fiscally conservative Republicans, and together they formed a powerful voting bloc that sought to curtail programs and policies (such as child-care programs and school loans) that had benefited American women and children. Ironically, a cornerstone idea of those conservative preachers and politicians was **family values**, a catch phrase that sounded benign but which attempted to define a "real" or "true" family as one wherein a patriarchal father has ultimate authority over a submissive wife and children. Like many of the policies of the Reagan administration (such as reigniting the Cold War), the "family values" platform was **reactionary** – it sought to return the country to the ideas and **ideologies** of an earlier era, in this case the supposedly "better" era and attitudes of the 1950s. Perhaps the most significant blow dealt to the women's movement during the 1980s was the death of the **Equal Rights Amendment (ERA)** in 1982. This Constitutional Amendment would have made it a federal crime to discriminate on the basis of sex.

As part of these campaigns to return to traditional family values, many of the ideas and ideals of feminism were mocked by fundamentalist preachers and conservative commentators. Jerry Falwell, the founder of the Moral Majority and a powerful televangelist, referred to the National Organization of Women as the National Organization of *Witches*. Falwell's use of the term was meant to invoke all of its negative connotations and quite literally demonize the goals of feminism as Satanic. Popular conservative radio pundit Rush Limbaugh railed against what he called *Femi-Nazis*, effectively turning the word "feminism" into an epithet associated with fascism. (Indeed, many people even today still fear the word "feminism.") When asked, most Americans support the idea of equal rights and opportunities for men and women but far fewer will admit to being themselves "feminist.") As part of this sociocultural attack on feminism, masculinity itself also needed to be redefined. There was a newly felt pressure for American men both onscreen and in real life to prove how tough they were. Minor media circuses surrounded politicians who had to prove to the American public that they were not "wimps" or "sissies." President Reagan himself, who entered politics after a career in the movies, often capitalized on his tough-talking cowboy persona to maintain his popularity with voters.

Hollywood film reflected these trends in a variety of ways. The most financially successful type of films made during the 1980s were nostalgic **action-adventure movies**, like *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984), *Rambo* (1985), *Commando* (1985), and *Predator* (1987), each of which gave rise to myriad sequels and imitators. In most of these films, men are strong action heroes and women are princesses and/or passive love interests.

In many ways these films define the anxieties and issues surrounding masculinity in the 1980s. Just as politicians were proving they weren't wimps in the real world, body-builder movie stars like Arnold Schwarzenegger, Jean-Claude Van Damme, and Sylvester Stallone were demonstrating that hypermasculine men could withstand any attack and still save the day, often single-handedly. Even male characters who were not as overtly muscled displayed their full-blooded machismo in action film franchises like *Lethal Weapon* (1987–), and *Die Hard* (1988–2013). Most of these films reinscribed traditional concepts of masculinity and femininity – concepts that second wave feminism had been critiquing in the previous decades. Still, while they ostensibly celebrate traditional masculinity, the exponential outpouring of testosterone in these films seems to suggest cultural anxieties about those gender roles in the first place. Intriguingly, one genre of the era *did* begin to feature female action heroes: science fiction. Most notably, Sigourney Weaver vanquished monsters in the *Alien* films (1979–97) and Linda Hamilton tussled with cyborgs in the *Terminator* films (1984–2019). Perhaps given the "fantastic" nature of science fiction, it was easier for Hollywood executives to imagine women in such roles.

Anxieties about new gender roles were also on display in the few Hollywood films of the era that dealt with women in the workplace. Several films of this type, such as *Baby Boom* (1987), suggested the extreme difficulty if not impossibility of women managing both a career and family. (In fact, more and more women are being called on to do exactly that in today's economy, but Hollywood films rarely address that issue.) *Working Girl* (1988) is another film supposedly about female independence, but that nonetheless reinforces patriarchal ideals in several ways. The film shows that today's career woman (played by Melanie Griffith) *can* work her way up the ladder, although she does so with a little help



Sylvester Stallone, seen here in *Rambo* (1985), was one of several popular hypermasculine Hollywood stars in 1980s action-adventure films.

Rambo, copyright © 1985, Tri-Star. Photo: Ronald Grant Archive/Alamy Stock Photo.

from a corporate Prince Charming (played by Harrison Ford). Even more problematically, while *Working Girl's* heroine comes off as a dewy-eyed ingénue looking for her romantic hero, the film's villain is a conniving female executive (played by Sigourney Weaver). By placing these two female images in opposition to each other, the film encourages the viewer to choose one over the other, and also places the blame for the heroine's hardships in the workplace not on the institutionalized sexism of the corporate workplace, but on *other women*.

The growing backlash against feminism (and the sexual revolution) was also strongly evident in one of the most profitable and disturbing genres of the 1980s: the **slasher film**. A low-budget subgenre of the **horror film**, the slasher film usually features a knife-wielding maniac killing women and teenagers in various gruesome ways. Among the most famous slasher films are *Halloween* (1978), *Friday the Thirteenth* (1980), *Dressed to Kill* (1980), and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), films that gave rise to multiple sequels and imitators. While both men and women are victims in these films, men are usually killed quickly offscreen or in shadows, while women are killed in full view, often in extended sequences of suspense and torture. The murder weapons in these films are obvious phallic symbols (such as knives, chainsaws, spear guns, electric drills, and jack-hammers), usually thought to represent male sexuality and aggression. Slasher films also repeatedly make use of subjective camera shots that put the spectator in the killer's place, as if the viewer is seeing through the killer's eyes as he murders and tortures.

Arguably, Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) might be considered the prototype of the slasher film subgenre but, although there were sporadic instances of the genre throughout the 1960s and 1970s, it did not become highly successful until the period of feminist backlash. Critics and filmgoers alike theorized that these cinematic attacks upon women were indicative of male frustration and rage over feminist gains. Roger Ebert of the *Chicago Sun-Times* was one of the first critics to note the trend and he repeatedly decried the rampant sexism and **misogyny** (hatred of women) that these films seemed to invoke and/or exploit. More recent feminist film scholars have attempted to demonstrate that slasher films are more complicated than simply misogynist, partly because they often feature a strong "Final Girl" hero who is often able to defeat the killer. Yet the "Final Girl" is usually a sweet, virginal character – one who represents an old-fashioned model of proper womanhood – while her sexually independent female friends wind up dead, in yet another reworking of Western patriarchy's **virgin-whore complex**.

A slightly more artsy version of the slasher films' narrative imperative to punish or demonize independent or sexually active women can be found in the era's resurgence of **film noir**. Just as Hollywood was nostalgically recycling and repackaging previous decades' science fiction and action films for 1980s audiences, it also revived the film noir. Recall that this genre or style frequently explores or exploits psychosexual tensions between men and women (see chapter 12). It was first popular in the post-World



Jamie Lee Curtis as the "Final Girl" in *Halloween* (1978), one of the era's most successful slasher films.
Halloween, copyright © 1978, Falcon/Anchor Bay Entertainment.
Photo: PictureLux/The Hollywood Archive/Alamy Stock Photo.

War II era when men were returning from war and had to adjust themselves to the newly independent women they had left behind. Film noir blurred into conspiracy thrillers for a brief period in the early 1970s, but in the nostalgic **neo-noir** of the 1980s and 1990s, just as in classical film noir, suspicion and distrust among men and women lead to murder and mayhem. More often than not, women are figured as **black widow** spiders and conniving cheats. The neo-noir revival began in the early 1980s with a color remake of the Hollywood classic *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1981). Also released that year was *Body Heat* (1981), in which Kathleen Turner played a very fatal **femme fatale**. Throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, films such as *Against All Odds* (1984), *Black Widow* (1986), *Sea of Love* (1989), *Basic Instinct* (1992), and *Body of Evidence* (1993) suggested that women could not be trusted. Once they had lured a man into their bed, these women might just as easily murder him with an ice pick as make love to him. One of the most popular films of the era about a murderous female was *Fatal Attraction* (1987). In that film, a man (Michael Douglas) cheats on his wife with a woman named Alex (Glenn Close), who eventually becomes quite unhinged. Alex harasses the man's family, boils their pet rabbit, and eventually attempts to murder the wife before she is herself shot down. In its representation of a crazy career woman out to destroy the nuclear family, the film is a perfect example of the era's conservative backlash against independent women.

A New Generation of Female Filmmakers

Beginning in the 1980s, more and more women in Hollywood made their way into the director's chair. Just as increasing numbers of African American, Latino, and Asian American men broke into directing Hollywood films, so did women. Most of these women were white, but a few women of color also directed films released by Hollywood companies. The number of women in other aspects of film production also continued to rise. Part of this increase was due to the changing times: women were now understood by most people as being as capable as men in most endeavors. This trend toward gender equity in the film business was also helped by **affirmative action programs** that helped place women (as well as racial minorities) in film schools and training programs. A handful of women became powerful Hollywood figures with the ability to produce and direct their own projects. Dawn Steel and Sherry Lansing even ran major Hollywood studios. However, even though more and more women were now writing, directing, and producing Hollywood films, this does not necessarily mean that those films were feminist, or that they promoted new ideas or understandings about gender. In fact, women filmmakers in Hollywood, if they want to be successful in the mass marketplace, are obliged to work within the same narrative structures and formal codings as are male filmmakers.

One could also see a bias in which women got to make films. Historically, it has been easier for women to enter the director's chair by first succeeding in some other aspect of the entertainment industry. For example, **Penny Marshall** first made a name for herself starring in the television sitcom *Laverne and Shirley*, a show that had been co-created by her brother, television producer Garry Marshall. Marshall parlayed that success to move into directing the Hollywood films *Big* (1988), *Awakenings* (1990), *A League of Their Own* (1992), *Renaissance Man* (1994), *The Preacher's Wife* (1996), and *Riding in Cars*

with Boys (2001). Barbra Streisand, who directed and starred in *Yentl* (1983), *Prince of Tides* (1991), and *The Mirror Has Two Faces* (1996), turned her considerable success as an actress and singer into the opportunity to direct those major motion pictures. Similarly, Oscar-winning actresses Jodie Foster and Diane Keaton directed films, while maintaining their acting careers. Foster directed *Little Man Tate* (1991), *Home for the Holidays* (1995), and *The Beaver* (2011), while Keaton has directed *Hanging Up* (2000) as well as the quirky independent films *Heaven* (1987) and *Unstrung Heroes* (1995). Other actresses, including Goldie Hawn and Demi Moore, entered into film production (though not necessarily film direction). Hawn produced several of her own features, while Moore was a producer on the popular *Austin Powers* movies (1997, 1999, 2002).

Sofia Coppola, daughter of the prolific *Film School Brat* Francis Ford Coppola, became the first American woman to earn a Best Director Oscar nomination, for her direction of the quirky *Lost in Translation* (2003), starring Bill Murray and Scarlet Johansson. Coppola followed that success with *Marie Antoinette* (2006), *Somewhere* (2010), *The Bling Ring* (2013), and *The Beguiled* (2017). Each of these films show young women trying to make sense of a confusing world around them, and the (possibly mistaken) choices they make attempting to gain some control over their lives. Such issues are also at work in her first film, *The Virgin Suicides* (1999), based on a novel by Jeffrey Eugenides. A period film set in the 1970s, *The Virgin Suicides* explores the lives of a strict Catholic family thrown into turmoil when one of its five beautiful daughters commits suicide. Repression – both



Penny Marshall began her show business career as an actress and then became a successful director of Hollywood films. Photo: Album/Alamy Stock Photo.



Writer-director Sofia Coppola was the first American woman to be nominated for a Best Director Oscar, for *Lost in Translation* (2003). *Lost in Translation*, dir. Sofia Coppola, copyright © 2003, Focus Features/Universal.

sexual and emotional – is the major theme of the film, and Coppola's deft direction underscores the plight of the family's remaining daughters; for as much as their parents try to protect them, the girls' isolation eventually leads to tragedy. *The Virgin Suicides* is a complex film, exploring family, religion, gender, and sexuality in thoughtful and moving ways.

Some women managed to shift from working in television into directing theatrical films. Betty Thomas acted in and directed TV shows before taking on films such as *The Brady Bunch Movie* (1995), *Private Parts* (1997), *Doctor Dolittle* (1998), and *28 Days* (2000). Mimi Leder directed for the television series *ER* (1994–2009) and *L.A. Law* (1986–94) before directing the Hollywood blockbusters *The Peacemaker* (1997), *Deep Impact* (1998), *Pay it Forward* (2000), and the recent Ruth Bader Ginsburg biopic, *On the Basis of Sex* (2018). Other women filmmakers entered Hollywood's ranks after making commercially successful independent films. Penelope Spheeris first made a name for herself directing the highly acclaimed rock and roll documentary *The Decline of Western Civilization* (1981), before moving onto the Hollywood films *Wayne's World* (1992), *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1993), and *Black Sheep* (1996). Likewise, Amy Heckerling began her Hollywood career with the low-budget teen comedy *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* (1982) and then directed popular Hollywood hits including *European Vacation* (1985), *Look Who's Talking* (1989), and *Clueless* (1995).

One thing that might be noted about the films just mentioned is that most of them tend to play by Hollywood's rules and formulas. Films such as *Big*, *Awakenings*, *Renaissance Man*, *Little Man Tate*, *Private Parts*, *Doctor Dolittle*, *Wayne's World*, and *Black Sheep* all focus on men and do little to challenge or address patriarchal form and content. (Indeed, the juvenile sexism of Howard Stern that is seemingly celebrated in *Private Parts* might be considered actively anti-feminist.) On the other hand, a few films such as *Yentl* and *A League of their Own* do attempt to address feminist issues. *Yentl* is about a young Jewish girl who must dress as a man in order to get an education, and *A League of their Own* follows the adventures of a female baseball team in the 1940s. *Clueless* is seemingly about young women in charge of their own lives, but the characters are made clownish and obsessed with consumerism and their own objectification. Women writing and directing films for Hollywood have tended to be cautious in making any sustained or serious critique of American patriarchal institutions and practices, both because film texts reinscribing dominant ideology usually sell more tickets than those critiquing it, and because the industry itself is still mostly controlled by (white) men. Thus, if women want to make films in Hollywood, they often find themselves forced to abide by Hollywood's ideological formulas. The structure of classical **Hollywood narrative form** (male heroes, female victims and sex objects, etc.) still often overwhelms any attempt to change it.

Those demands mean that women filmmakers wanting to address feminist concerns (or simply non-Hollywood issues) are usually forced to work in more independent modes. This is not to assert that there was and is no gender bias in the **avant-garde** and independent filmmaking worlds, but rather to acknowledge that historically those types of film practice have been more welcoming of minority filmmakers and subject matters than has Hollywood. For example, Maya Deren made a series of avant-garde films in the 1940s and 1950s that have been hailed as proto-feminist classics. Deren was a film theorist as well as a filmmaker, and she is perhaps the

best-known figure of the so-called Poetic Cinema movement of the 1940s. Deren usually wrote, directed, edited, and starred in her own films. Her most famous film, *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), is still frequently shown in film classes and retrospectives. Shirley Clarke was another important figure in American independent film. From the 1950s through the 1980s, Clarke directed films and videos that focused on the harsh realities of inner-city life. Her film *The Connection* (1961) is about drug addiction, and *Portrait of Jason* (1967) is about an isolated black homosexual. Harsh and uncompromising, Clarke's best work explored topics that the Hollywood industry considered taboo. Sadly, much of her work remains very difficult to see today. Better known is the documentary filmmaker **Barbara Kopple**, who won considerable acclaim and two Oscars for her films *Harlan County, U.S.A.* (1976) and *American Dream* (1990). Although those two films focus on issues of class and unionization rather than on gender *per se*, Kopple also makes films that center on feminist issues, such as *Defending Our Daughters: The Rights of Women in the World* (1998) and *Bearing Witness* (2005). Kopple also directed *Shut Up & Sing* (2006), a film that documented the fallout and backlash that occurred when country music superstars the Dixie Chicks publicly criticized President George W. Bush. Barbara Kopple continues to be a highly regarded and prolific figure in American documentary filmmaking.

Avant-garde cinema in America and Europe became charged with feminist thought around the time of Laura Mulvey's groundbreaking critique of Hollywood, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (see chapter 11). Films such as *Dora* (1979, dir. McCall, Pajaczkowska, Tyndall, and Weinstock), *Thriller* (1979, dir. Sally Potter), *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1976, dir. Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen), and *Daughter Rite* (1978, dir. Michelle Citron) attempted to question cinematic form and create a counter-cinema free of patriarchal assumptions. These difficult films alienated many audience members, including women, because of their radical style and engagement with film theory. More narrative and therefore audience-friendly independent films of the era included *Girlfriends* (1977, dir. Claudia Weill) and *Born in Flames* (1983, dir. Lizzie Borden). Also produced were the lesbian-feminist films of Barbara Hammer. In films such as *Superdyke* (1975) and *Synch Touch* (1981), Hammer playfully and politically celebrated the lesbian-feminist communities of 1970s America. Later films (*Nitrate Kisses* [1992], *Tender Fictions* [1995], *The Female Closet* [1998], and *History Lessons* [2000]) examine the nature of history itself and how different media have represented women throughout the ages. Hammer's work, along with the independent and avant-garde film and video work of filmmakers like Su Friedrich, Sadie Benning, Jan Oxenberg, Andrea Weiss, and Greta Schiller, forms an important link to 1990s New Queer Cinema (discussed more fully in chapter 15).

The growth of independent filmmaking in the 1980s, as well as the establishment of various industry support groups like **Women in Film** and **CineWomen**, nurtured and supported talented new female filmmakers during this era. Directors like Mary Harron, Allison Anders, Tamara Jenkins, Nancy Savoca, Susan Seidelman, Martha Coolidge, Julie Dash, Maggie Greenwald, Julie Taymor, and Kasi Lemmons made films that won considerable critical acclaim, if not always box office success. Working outside of the demands of mainstream Hollywood, their work could address gender issues in a more forthright and complex manner. Yet, finding funding for independent filmmaking became more difficult during the 2000s. Most independent films turned a profit through home video, but that

market shrunk as streaming services began to offer their own original programming—so the number of independent films lessened during the 2010s. Thus, most women filmmakers today work wherever they can: in network and cable television, in music video, in commercials, in streaming media. At times, their success in these endeavors catches the attention of Hollywood studio executives, but institutionalized sexism continues to add a level of hardship for women attempting to build careers in the highly-competitive entertainment industry.

Gender at the Turn of the Century

While independent filmmaking in the 1980s and 1990s enabled some women (and men) to make interesting and important films that address issues of gender and gender inequity, mainstream Hollywood entertainment still negotiated gender in ways that upheld and maintained patriarchal privilege. The nostalgic Hollywood blockbuster formula, with its stalwart male heroes, continued to drive the industry. Women were peripheral (or completely missing sometimes!) in films like *The Fugitive* (1993), *Toy Story* (1995), *Men in Black* (1997), *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), or *Armageddon* (1998). When women were featured, they often still needed to be rescued by men—even if their male champions had an IQ of 75 (*Forrest Gump* [1994]) or were themselves dead (*Ghost* [1990]!). Female characters may have shown some volition—such as Nala in *The Lion King* (1994) or Rose in *Titanic* (1997)—but inevitably deferred leadership to their male counterparts.

Intriguingly, after the success of the *Alien* and *Terminator* franchises, other traditionally male-dominated Hollywood genres were also adapted for female leads. The buddy film,



Thelma and Louise (1991), a feminist reworking of the Hollywood buddy genre, was a major box office hit, even as some male critics accused it of “male bashing.”
Thelma and Louise, copyright © 1991, MGM-Pathé. Photo: United Archives Cinema Collection/AGE Fotostock.

which usually focuses on two men and their adventures, was refashioned in *Thelma and Louise* (1991). The Hollywood sports film was adapted to be about women in *A League of Their Own* and *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), and even the Western was updated with female gunslingers in movies like *Bad Girls* (1994) and *The Quick and the Dead* (1995). The highly acclaimed martial arts film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) featured women as sword-wielding warriors, while the *Tomb Raider* films (2001, 2003) featured a gun-toting, kick-boxing, death-defying female protagonist whose adventures rival those of James Bond or Indiana Jones. Yet the female-centered action movie rarely enjoyed the box office success that male action movies did, a trend that only began to change in the 2010s (see below).

The 1990s also saw the rise of what critics and audiences increasingly called **chick flicks**. Films like *Pretty Woman* (1990), *Sense and Sensibility* (1995), *You've Got Mail* (1998), and *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* (1998) exemplify this trend. The trend continued unabated into the 2000s in films like *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001), *Legally Blonde* (2001), *The Notebook* (2004), and *P.S. I Love You* (2007). While some chick flicks are unabashed tearjerkers like classical Hollywood woman's films, others are more comedic and contemporary. The female characters in these films usually have careers and are more outspoken than their counterparts from previous eras. Yet chick flicks often overtly celebrate other aspects of traditional femininity – particularly shopping and beauty makeovers. Such celebrations of femininity reflect what some have referred to as a **post-feminist** sensibility, a fuzzy term that suggests a move beyond the goals and philosophies of second wave feminism. Post-feminism is sometimes seen as rejecting the idea that women's equality means women behaving like men. Post-feminism rests in an uneasy relationship to **third wave feminism**, the theoretical approach to gender that suggests there is no such thing as essential masculinity or femininity, that all gender roles are equally constructed by culture (and not genetics). Post-feminism supposedly "allows" women the right to choose to be conventionally feminine or not. While the issues that third wave feminism and/or post-feminism raise are provocative, patriarchal conceptions of gender are still reinforced by celebrating a woman for her beauty or her emotionality (whether or not she actively "chooses" to emphasize those facets of herself). And while chick flicks sometimes depict career women with sassy girlfriends, the main component of most chick flicks is still heterosexual romance – finding Mr. Right.

At the same time as chick flicks became a more visible trend, there was a parallel rise of what some critics called **dumb white guy comedies**, movies about young men who fail to live up to patriarchal ideals. *Dumb & Dumber* (1994), written and directed by the Farrelly Brothers, was perhaps the prototype of this new genre. "Dumb white guys" are also at the center of popular teen sex comedies like the *American Pie* films (1999, 2001, 2003), *Dude, Where's My Car* (2000) and *Zoolander* (2001). Although often dismissed by critics, these films arguably represent a new negotiation in **hegemonic** masculinity. On one level, they undermine and satirize masculine prowess as exemplified by films like *Troy* (2004) or *300* (2006) showing that few "normal" men can truly live up to such lofty ideals of gender and sexuality. (Johnny Depp's bumbling Captain Jack Sparrow in the *Pirates of the Caribbean* films [2003–2017] functions in similar ways.) Yet the films also ask audiences to laugh at their nerdish characters' failed masculinity, a process that still upholds those same ideals as natural and desirable. In a way, these new comedies are similar to those made by silent film comedians like Buster Keaton and Harold Lloyd. In many of these films, traditional

masculinity is both mocked and upheld, an excellent example of the **hegemonic negotiation** of contemporary masculinity.

Gender Politics after 9/11

If, as was argued in the previous chapter, American culture has perceived that masculinity was in crisis whenever the nation was in crisis, then the attacks on Sept. 11, 2001 threatened not only the United States but also American manhood. Cinematic depictions of the events of 9/11 (*United 93* [2006], *World Trade Center* [2006]) or the subsequent American military involvement in Afghanistan and Iran (such as *The Hurt Locker* [2008] and *American Sniper* [2014]) often stressed the efforts by the male characters to assert their abilities to survive and succeed against constant threat. 9/11 caused such societal trauma in the U.S., though, that the box office was tepid for many of the films dealing directly with these events. Therefore, how much these films succeeded in bolstering old-fashioned American masculinity is up for debate.

A more successful cinematic reassertion of American masculine strength after 9/11 can be found in **comic book superhero movies**. Superman, Batman, Spiderman, Iron Man, Captain America, and various other male superheroes triumph in the fight for freedom, justice, and “the American Way.” A number of major battle sequences with supervillains take place in downtown urban centers, often invoking memories of the destruction in Manhattan on 9/11—but safely removed into the realm of make-believe, and with the “good guys” winning. Audiences are still turning out in droves for these films. By 2019, five of the top ten all-time box-office champions were post-9/11 superhero films. Concurrently, a number of fantasy film franchises told epic sagas about individuals fighting to save the world from perdition. The *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001, 2002, 2003), *The Hobbit* films (2012, 2013, 2014), and the *Harry Potter* film franchise (2001–11) were all box-office bonanzas, each involving a group coming together to battle evil, but revolving around an unassuming young man (or hobbit) who actually is key to saving the world. *The Avengers* films (2012–19) also feature collective group heroes, some of whom demonstrate traditional forms of male strength (Thor, The Hulk), while others use gadgets and technology to fight the bad guys. Similar to Harry Potter’s spellcasting or Gandalf’s wizardry, diminutive superheroes like Ant Man and Spider-Man rely on the magic of science to thwart villains. As such, smaller, smarter male heroes became prevalent after 9/11, almost the opposite of the hard-bodied action heroes of the 1980s.

The built-in audience for both the comic book superhero movies and the fantasy films are cult fans of the original texts. Marginalized in previous eras as “geeks” or “nerds”—terms that suggested a certain form of failed masculinity—they are now courted by the contemporary entertainment industry, which now turn fan conventions into major publicity events. In a number of ways, “**geek culture**” started to become celebrated rather than maligned. Rather than ridiculed minor characters, geeks were the protagonists in films like *The 40 Year Old Virgin* (2005) and *Superbad* (2007), or TV shows like *The Big Bang Theory* (2007–19) and *Community* (2009–15). While providing gentle humor about their lack of social skills, geeks differ from “dumb white guys” in their intelligence and their capability to solve puzzles and problems. In this way, heroes like Frodo, Harry Potter, and

Spider-Man seem to resemble and/or appeal to many contemporary male media fans, whose masculinity is frequently defined by their relationship to technology more so than brute strength or a gym membership.

“Geek culture” also connects to growing criticisms that the younger generation was prolonging childhood, and overly sheltered by their “helicopter” parents. A number of comedies, such as *Wedding Crashers* (2005), *The 40 Year Old Virgin*, *Knocked Up* (2007), *I Love You, Man* (2009), and *The Hangover* films (2009, 2011, 2013) showcased adult males in various stages of “arrested development,” perhaps suggesting that American men needed to “grow up” to meet the challenges of a post-9/11 society. Judd Apatow, who produced, wrote, and directed *The 40 Year Old Virgin* and *Knocked Up*, also produced a number of other comedies featuring men-acting-like-boys, often as best friends or in homosocial groups: *Anchorman* (2004), *Talladega Nights* (2006), *Superbad*, *Walk Hard* (2007), *Step Brothers* (2008), and *Pineapple Express* (2008). The term **bromance** became popular at this time to describe a close-knit yet non-sexual relationship between two men. While the traditional buddy films showed guys helping each other become men, the “bros” in these pictures often seem to be keeping each other from maturing. Eventually, in most of them, the protagonists eventually trade their bromances for a romantic relationship with a woman, indicating the transition into “proper” manhood. These movies satirize male privilege and self-centeredness, yet they still center on the lives of heterosexual men, and therefore arguably perpetuate the attitudes purportedly being critiqued.

Images of male and female **millennials**, though, can also be shown to cross gender lines. At the end of the 1990s, chick flicks and “dumb white guy” comedies began to merge, in films like *There’s Something About Mary* (1998). Out of this merger, female-centered comedies began to drift away from romantic comedies and towards stories about women having the same problems as men in successfully entering adult responsibility and achievement. Such films include *Baby Mama* (2008), *Bridesmaids* (2011), *Pitch Perfect* (2012), *Sisters* (2015), *Trainwreck* (2015), *Girls Trip* (2017), *Lady Bird* (2018), *Booksmart* (2019), the web-series-turned-TV-series *Broad City* (2010–19), and the TV series *Girls* (2012–17). While showing that women can be as “geeky” as guys, these comedies also strongly celebrate female friendship. The focus on female bonding moves away from suggesting that finding a man is the center of a woman’s happiness. Presenting female characters as disorganized slobs in these comedies also keeps them from falling into traditional forms of objectification. Although “bromances” and female-friendship comedies share a lot in common, more overt all-female “reboots” of originally male-centered movies often do not go over well with male moviegoers. *Ghostbusters* (2016), *Ocean’s 8* (2018), and *The Hustle* (2019, reworking *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* [1988]) all did only middling box-office. Some male fans also complained about the final *Star Wars* trilogy (beginning in 2015 with *The Force Awakens*) because it centered on a female Jedi Knight-in-training and other strong women leaders, but the films did landmark business. And at times, the amount of vitriol espoused on the internet by male fans of the original films can and did reach excessive levels, as when *Ghostbusters* actress Leslie Jones endured severe online harassment from men targeting both her gender and her race. Similarly, internet trolls have attacked the newer *Star Wars* films (2017, 2019) for daring to depict strong female characters. Sadly, online harassment has only gotten worse in subsequent years, with actresses, writers, academics, sports figures, and politicians routinely receiving sexist abuse (even threats of

rape and murder) from men disgruntled by (or fearful of) a new generation of strong, powerful, critical women.

Fears of such antagonism from male audiences may explain the relative reticence of studio executives to green light films centered solely around female superheroes. Thus, while superhero collectives sometimes included female compatriots (such as Jean Grey, Storm, or Black Widow), they were often underutilized in the films in which they appeared—and they rarely got their own stand-alone films as did the men. The box-office success of *The Hunger Games* franchise (2012–15) and its heroine Katniss, though, seemed to refute such fears. George Miller's *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) also placed female action heroes front and center, and was a critical and financial success. DC Comics' *Wonder Woman* (2017) was initially regarded as a gamble by its studio, but it too succeeded enormously with critics and audiences. Marvel responded quickly with another female superhero film, *Captain Marvel* (2019), which also performed well, and more female superhero films are moving into production as a result. Similarly, even Disney princesses in recent films like *Brave* (2012), *Frozen* (2013), and *Moana* (2016) are becoming more action-oriented and independent, living their lives on their own terms—with or without a Prince Charming.

In the new millennium, women have also continued to gain greater and greater access to creative positions within the media industries—as directors, writers, producers, network executives, etc.. In 2009, Kathryn Bigelow became the first woman to win the Oscar for Best

Director (for *The Hurt Locker*). With films like *Point Break* (1991), *Strange Days* (1995), *K-19: The Widowmaker* (2002), *The Hurt Locker*, *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), and *Detroit* (2018), Bigelow has built a career directing action oriented films that alternately uphold yet investigate the cultural discourses of masculine bravado. Rachel Morrison became the first female cinematographer to earn an Academy Award nomination for her work on *Mudbound* (2017), and director/co-writer Dee Rees was the first black woman to get a nomination for Best Screenplay for the same project. Although Judd Apatow has been involved in a number of the female-centered comedies (producing *Bridesmaids*, directing *Trainwreck*), women have been major creative forces in most of these pictures. Kristen Wiig and Annie Mumolo earned Oscar nominations for the screenplay for *Bridesmaids*, as did Greta Gerwig for writing and directing *Lady Bird*. Amy Schumer wrote and starred in *Trainwreck*, and Olivia Wilde directed *Booksmart* from a script written by an all-female writing team.

Nonetheless, unspoken barriers to advancement for women in the industry are still prevalent, as is a deep-rooted culture of sexual harassment in the workplace. Perhaps unsurprisingly, one of Hollywood's first films about sexual harassment in the workplace, *Disclosure* (1994), flipped the more prevalent dynamic by telling the story of a man (Michael Douglas) harassed by his female boss (Demi Moore). The emergence of the #MeToo and "Time's Up" movements in the late 2010s, detailing the prevalence of sexual harassment women experience in the workplace (to be discussed further in Chapter 15), exposed those attitudes and sought to end them. When Frances McDormand accepted her Best Actress Oscar for *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*



Academy Award winning director Kathryn Bigelow, best known for her films *The Hurt Locker* (2008) and *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012). Photo: Tinseltown/Shutterstock.



Actor, screenwriter, and director, Greta Gerwig was nominated for two Oscars for her script and direction of *Lady Bird* (2017). Photo: Denis Makarenko/Shutterstock.

Missouri (2017), she used the live worldwide broadcast to encourage star performers to demand an “**inclusion rider**” in their contracts: an amendment that would require the cast and crew of a project to achieve a certain level of racial and gender diversity. The following year, Regina King used her acceptance speech when she won the Golden Globe for Best Supporting Actress in a Motion Picture for *If Beale Street Could Talk* (2018) to announce that she would commit to working only on projects that employed 50% women.

It is too soon to judge how much of a transition in thought *and deed* will result from these calls to action. Similarly, it is premature to say that representations of women have made a significant shift with the success of female superheroes. Women have become more politically mobilized in the wake of Donald Trump’s ascendancy to the White House, and in reaction to new concerted attempts to roll back landmark achievements in women’s rights. These trends indicate that new forms of hegemonic negotiation are underway, but the fight is not over on many fronts, and the outcomes have yet to be determined.

Case Study: *Wonder Woman* (2017)

Wonder Woman was the first big-budget comic book superhero movie to focus on a female protagonist (played by Gal Gadot). In it, Diana, princess of the Amazons, leaves her protected all-female island civilization to protect humankind with her extraordinary powers, after rescuing downed American pilot Steve Trevor (Chris Pine). The character was first introduced by DC Comics towards the end of 1941, just as the United States was entering World War II. Thus, Wonder Woman blended well with the iconography of Rosie the Riveter, and concerted attempts to present stronger, more

capable America women. Psychologist Dr. William Moulton Marston, the creator of Wonder Woman, was strongly influenced by first-wave feminism, and lived in a three-way relationship with two women, Olive Byrne (niece of pioneer birth control advocate Margaret Sanger) and lawyer Elizabeth Holloway. (Their story is recounted in Jill Lepore’s book *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*, which was the basis of the independent film *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women* [2017], directed by Angela Robinson.) The film moves the origin story further back to the First World War and the era of

first wave feminism, making Diana's independence and power contradict even more strongly the attitudes towards women in Europe and the United States. (Recall that at this time, women were not yet legally permitted to vote.)

Wonder Woman was also the first big-budget comic book superhero movie to be directed by a woman. Patty Jenkins had earlier directed *Monster* (2003), which earned Charlize Theron a Best Actress Oscar for her portrayal of real-life serial killer Aileen Wuornos. (Perhaps unsurprisingly, considering how the industry works, *Monster* was a modestly budgeted independent film.) Most of the cinematic stylistic strategies that are the traditional privilege of men in classical Hollywood cinema are given to Diana. She is the protagonist and does the voiceover narration that film noir male detectives usually get to give. Rather than a damsel needing to be rescued, Diana is consistently the one rescuing Steve. In one memorable sequence, she victoriously traverses the infamous "No Man's Land" battlefield in order to rescue the innocent inhabitants of a French village from decimation. She is also the one looking in shot/reverse shots, and Steve Trevor's objectified naked body is revealed rising slowly from a pool of magic spring water. The film emphasizes this dynamic humorously when Diana initially seems to be looking at (and asking about) his sexual organs, before letting the viewer realize she is interested in his pocket watch.

Arguably, Diana's body becomes objectified when she wears her iconic tight-fitting armor, displaying bare shoulders, some cleavage, and bare arms and legs. (Such fetishization of female action heroes can also be seen when the filmmakers maneuver Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) into her underwear for the climax of *Alien*, or how Lara Croft's body is constantly photographed in skin-tight clothing.) Yet, much like how Arnold Schwarzenegger or Sylvester Stallone's bodies are exhibited, Gal Gadot's is on display in action rather than posing passively. All the women on the island are similarly presented. A sequence where Diana goes shopping for appropriate clothing for women in 1910s London also emphasizes that her potentially skimpier clothing actually is more practical for athletic movement. In a similar vein, the original comic books drew criticism for repeated sadomasochistic depictions of Wonder Woman bound by her antagonists in chains or other restraints. Yet, first wave feminism regularly employed drawings of women breaking the shackles of patriarchal oppression in its literature, so such imagery contains multiple possible interpretations. The film downplays any potential sexual overtones during the final climactic battle by having Ares, the god of war (David Thewlis), wrap the treadplates of a military tank around Diana's midsection rather than leather straps or handcuffs on her wrists and ankles. As with most comic book superhero movies, Diana ultimately frees herself and obliterates the archvillain in spectacular fashion.



Gal Gadot as DC Comics superhero *Wonder Woman* (2017), seen here on a World War I battlefield deflecting bullets with her magical bracelets.

All of this suggests that Wonder Woman is admirable because she inhabits masculine traits, and thus masculinity is still championed. In other words, women's equality is potentially shown as the opportunity to be just as physically violent and brutal as men are allowed to be. Diana as a child is shown female warriors and longs for the imagined glories of combat. Her decision to leave her family and civilization is tied to this yearning to battle Ares, the god of war—and intriguingly much of the symbolism of these desires are phallic in nature: the sword she imagines is powerful enough to defeat Ares, the tower she has to climb in order to retrieve the sword. Yet, multiple characters tell Diana she has much to learn, and the film shows her realizing the horrifying aspects of war, and the masculine attitudes of aggression that perpetuate it. After being thrilled at a London train station where she witnesses typical propaganda images of wartime as adventurous and romantic, she then sees returning soldiers wounded and mutilated as they limp or are carried off. War is not a glorious battlefield, but grey, muddy trenches of despair—and aggression only stokes more aggression. Ares maintains his power by fostering hate and revenge, and it is only when Diana turns away from such anger by refusing to kill the evil female Dr. Maru that the god of war is vanquished. Steve Trevor's ultimate heroic act is not killing anyone, but by flying a plane filled with a lethal gas out of harm's way and exploding it, thus sacrificing his own life in the process.

Also, intriguingly, the story gestures towards critiquing the often simplistic "good vs. evil" dynamic typical to the comic book superhero genre. Diana initially thinks that all will be solved if she can conquer Ares, just as the First

World War was regarded at the time as "the war to end all wars." But, as the viewer knows, this plainly is not so. Gradually, she learns that ethical issues and people are complicated. After initially rescuing Trevor on her island, he tells her that he is "one of the good guys"—but she later discovers from the Native American in her mission team how people like Trevor oppressed his community. When the fighting does not immediately cease after Diana kills the person she thinks is Ares, Steve explains to her that things are not that simple, that "maybe people aren't always good," and he includes himself in that assessment. (Granted, after this moment, the film reverts to generic expectations by revealing Ares, thus giving Diana one clear-cut individual to defeat.)

Lastly, tied to Diana learning about humanity's complexity, the film implies that all individuals blend both masculine and feminine aspects, instead of being simply one or the other. The film in particular provides examples that suggest various types of masculinities are roles to perform rather than innate attributes. Steve Trevor impersonates a German officer at one point, for example, and Ares disguises himself through most of the film as mild-mannered Sir Patrick, a member of the British Parliament. Among the team that accompanies Diana and Steve on their mission is a Scottish sharpshooter who hides his post-traumatic stress disorder behind masculine bravado, and a Persian con artist who once had a career as an actor. Diana herself takes on the persona of Diana Prince as her alter ego. Thus, while following the tried-and-true aspects expected of a comic book superhero movie origin story, *Wonder Woman* demonstrates how gender roles are (and have been) hegemonically negotiated.

Questions for Discussion

- 1 Some post-feminists argue that feminism has accomplished its goals and that women and men are now treated equally in American culture. Do your own personal experiences support that assertion or not?
- 2 Should women working within Hollywood make a more concerted effort to change the formulas and male biases of Hollywood film form? How can the moviegoing public be persuaded to accept such changes? What do you think is the best strategy for creating gender equity on Hollywood movie screens?
- 3 Do Hollywood images of women of color follow the same patterns of representation as do those of white women? Can remnants of older stereotypes – the Latina Lover, the exotic vamp, the Dragon Lady – still be discerned in Hollywood films and television?

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Further Screening

Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore (1974)
Nine to Five (1980)
Tootsie (1982)
Yentl (1983)
Fatal Attraction (1987)
Working Girl (1988)

Thelma and Louise (1991)
The Virgin Suicides (1999)
Songcatcher (2000)
Lady Bird (2017)
Booksmart (2019)

