

Female depiction in cinema essay

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Female Depiction in Cinema The heroine in cinema has come a long way since the origin of the medium. It can be argued that this is a direct reflection of societal change. The performing arts have evolved from not allowing blacks, or women to perform, to having minorities in lead roles where they play everyman/woman characters.

From the villainously empowering days of the Femme fatale, to the current science fiction roles in which women save the world without any male assistance, the female in cinema is on the verge of equal empowerment. This is most apparently true of those female celebrities who have established themselves as capable to play a broad range of roles. Actresses like Angelina Jolie, Demi Moor and Sigourney Weaver have played everything from action adventure heroines to pregnant mothers. These women have contributed to the tradition of expanding societal expectations of women through film. This is a tradition that can be traced as far back as the Femme Fatale archetype.

The 1941 film *The Maltese Falcon*, based on the novel by Dashiell Hammett and directed by John Huston, is heralded as the quintessential film noir picture. Film noir is a cinematic genre known for moral ambiguity and its stylish Hollywood crimes. It maintained popular use between 1940 and 1950.

The Maltese Falcon is considered to be the key film that started the genre. It is the initial film that gained the respect of the public, and it established the genre's archetypes. *The Maltese Falcon* is often credited for such films as, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, *Double Indemnity*, *The Glass Key*, *Mildred Pierce*, *Slightly Scarlet*, *The Big Sleep*, *The Blue Dahlia* and many others.

This is supported by the fact that the 1941 version was officially classified as cultural significant by the Library of Congress (Wikipedia, 2007). This recognition, can most likely be credited to the film's creation of the Femme Fatale archetype. The most significant and recognizable character in this, and most, Film noir pictures is the archetype of the Femme fatale. In *The Maltese Falcon*, this character is played by Brigid O'Shaughnessy.

The term is French for deadly woman, or fatal woman. The main characteristic of a femme fatale is that they are dangerous; they are usually villainous and deceptive in a way that provides them access to power not normally achieved by women. To give a female character this much influence on the plot and importance was a very radical gesture during the 1940's. In one case where the Femme Fatale is a highly empowered woman, it is also largely protested by many contemporary feminist groups who feel that this is a vilifying role. This is very true, but it must be remembered that before the Femme Fatale, there were only male villains in film. The ushering in of the Femme fatale role marks the first time in cinema that a woman played a usually male role. Brigid O'Shaughnessy is immediately identifiable as the femme fatale through the dialogue of the film and in the characters personification. It can be seen in the scene where Spade (Humphrey Bogart) arranges a meeting between her and Cairo.

While engaging in small talk, Cairo tells her, you will do anything to get what you want. This sparks a fight between the two of them, but it is later enforced by the fact that she seduces a man to retrieve the falcon for her who is eventually killed in the process; she kills Spade's partner in order to

frame her husband, and she attempts to seduce Spade as well, most likely to feed this same self satisfying nature. Her seductive and dangerous character is implied on screen through her always smoking cigarettes; she is quick to seduce men despite all the death around her, and she associates herself with shady-shifty-eyed men, and actually turns out to be the one character to be trusted the least.

This archetype of the femme fatal is the key contribution to the theme of moral ambiguity, which is the main driving force of film noir films. The idea that the audience can't even trust the main character and that the femme fatal, who is presented as the most welcoming and comforting figure on the screen is probably the deadliest, it all adds to the genre's creepy unease. This is a thrilling connection with the audience can only be created by a woman. Never the less, the Femme Fatale is not the heroine; and after the decline of Film Noir, very few female roles were star ones.

Most tended to be that of the house wife, or the love interest. Gradually the heroine has gained more appreciation in cinema. This can be seen today in films like Cat Woman, Tomb Raider, G.

I. Jane and Charlie's Angels. But, it is the science fiction genre in which the heroine has truly found a niche in Hollywood cinema, and it is in this genre that women have expanded the boundaries of societal ideals. Joanna Russ is an American Feminist writer. She is the author of many works within the subgenre of feminist science-fiction. Her most influential and recognized work is *The Female Man*.

It chronicles the lives of four women, who all live in alternate universes and encounter prejudice sexism each in their own individual ways. Her views are often described as radical, in the family of feminist politics. She believes that Science Fiction is formulated from observations of life as it is, or has been lived, and as it corresponds with math and science. She feels that most analysis used to measure the aesthetics often fall short in their interpretations of any work in close correlation to the genre. She further argues that science fiction is not fantasy. This idea is grounded in the fact that science fiction, though fictional, is still based on physics and true to life facts.

She connects the genre's ability to interpret real time observations and distribute their moral value to the didactic nature of medieval literature. Russ feels this connection between Christianity and medieval literature is similar with the relation science-fiction has with science. She argues that like good medieval literature must always center around the laws of Christianity, so must science fiction stay true to scientific law (Russ, 1979). She feels that bad science fiction is the product of an author's bias-unawareness of scientific truth, or a lack of Faith in what science fiction fanatics consider to be more than just speculation. Russ has often been noted for condemning those science-fiction writers who she feels don't devoutly believe in the science they use in their books, or films. She is a firm believer that faith in an idea is recognizable in the art.

James Cameron is a prime example of the type of science-fiction artist Russ admires. Every bit of his faith is exemplified in the realistic nature of his

films. In his film *The Terminator*, he is very honest with how he depicts the action, and yet he was revolutionary in his use of the Heroine, Sarah Connor. *The Terminator* launched the career of former body builder and current governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, but more importantly, it is the quintessential science-fiction film. A young woman named Sarah Connor is hunted down by a cybernetic killer, who has traveled back in time from the year 2029. In the future war between the Robots and humans, it is believed Sarah Connor will give birth to the leading general in the fight for the human race. On top of this, Sarah Connor is also heralded as a great military hero in the future. This aspect of Cameron's protagonist can very easily be corresponded to the ideals common in most of Russ's work.

Joanna Russ would like this film because it embodies the ideals inherent in feminist empowerment, while at the same time it maintains Sarah's social status as a female. This is seen in how Sarah Connor is destined to be a great war-hero, but she is also a mother who is to give birth to a son with an even greater destiny. Though Connor is a soldier, she is also a woman who needs to be loved, and by nature she feels the urge to love and mother a child. In the beginning of the film, Sarah Connor appears sensitive and weak. As the film progresses, her character becomes more confident and assertive. There is a scene where Reese, her protector and love interest, teaches her how to make a pipe bomb from household products. This is an example of her learning the war tactics of men, and the point of her initial crossover into the role of the great soldier she is destined to become. Connor in essence is presented as the last hope for the human race.

Even praised Reese, he struggles look past her myth into her humanity, until they first make love. I think, Russ's perception of the triangular relationship between the Terminator, Connor and Reese, would be the main focus of her analysis. Reese initially is sent back to protect Sarah Connor.

Unbeknownst to either of them, he inadvertently becomes the father of the baby he is sent to protect. Reese is still mortal, and continuously reminded of this fact when confronting the Terminator.

Sarah Connor is mortal, but she is also a great war hero fulfilling a prophecy. I believe Russ would feel Sarah Connor's character is empowered in this film and Reese is actually effeminized; by this, I mean that Reese is actually the weaker of the two. In the greatest measure of manliness against the ultimate destroying machine, Connor manages to survive; and in the end, she is the one who kills the Terminator.

While Reese, dead, has failed as a protector and the only purpose he served was to produce offspring. The man and the woman switch roles in this way, and Russ would agree with this theory on a feminist critique of the

film. Like most films, The Terminator originally stems from a novel. Hollywood cinema adheres to much more strict censorship than writers and publishers, but one can only imagine what steps had to be taken to make this story film worthy. It makes a very valuable statement on female societal roles. The original Terminator film is still grazes American societal expectations of women to this day. Even still, there are numerous science fiction novels being produced and expanding these societal lines even

further. A large number of these films are up for movie deals as well, and one may potentially be the next Terminator.

Currently the science fiction novel most likely to make this step into cinema is the book *Oryx and Crake*. Canadian author Margaret Atwood's novel *Oryx and Crake*, is about an anti-utopian society that chronicles the collapse of civilization and corrupt medical practice. The town's morals are highly questionable, in that the majority of the citizens approve of gene splicing, transgenic animals, like mixing a dog's genetic code with a wolf, and transplanting animal organs in human beings. The book poses a question of what is truly ethical in medical practice? This story has an immediate correlation to the island of Dr.

Moreau, by H. G. Wells, in which a mad scientist creates a dysfunctional society of genetically spliced transgenic animals as well. Like *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, Margaret Atwood relies on dialectical elements to persuade characters and the reader to sympathize with the radical ideals of her novel. One main persuasive argument the novel poses, and this is more from a perspective of female empowerment, is the idea of polyandry. It is historically a man's fantasy and an empowering element for the man, while degrading to the woman, for a man to have two wives.

Atwood poses the exact opposing scenario in this novel. On one end the idea of polyandry is implied through the relationships both Snowman and Crake have with Oryx. It is directly inferred to in that the Crakers only breed when they are polyandrous. This like most of the novel is a play on societal norms.

Considering behavior that would incite condemnation by American standards for women, Atwood makes it perfectly natural, and it should be. In contemporary society, it is not uncommon for a woman to have two or more love interests. The nightly media blitz of girls gone wild, and the obsessively covered celebrity scandals of Lindsay Lohan, Paris Hilton, or Anna Nicole have made these women as recognizable, if not more than, women like Princess Diana and Hillary Clinton. Being promiscuous is in, and it has been since the days of Marilyn Monroe. These women have developed major fortunes off of their personas and they very well can be seen as their own individual corporations. They also represent the epitome of what feminists like Russ and Atwood are up-heaving against. Despite this, their snobbish and shallow ideals still represent a significant female archetype in American culture, one that is being depicted in modern cinema, and that is an archetype that has existed since the Victorian era.

The quintessential film that personifies the ideals made popular by Marilyn Monroe and kept up by women like Paris Hilton and Anna Nicole, is the film *Clueless*. Despite many surface differences, Amy Heckerling's film *Clueless* can very easily be proclaimed as a contemporary version of Jane Austen's novel *Emma*. The main characters are both high class snobs who pride themselves in their matchmaking abilities. Emma Woodhouse is a member of a upscale society in nineteenth century England, while Cher Horowitz lives in wealthy, upscale Beverly Hills U. S. A. Both Cher and Emma are among the culturally elite in their societies. Cher's father is a litigation lawyer in the most affluent city in America, and Cher is arguably the most popular girl in her school.

This can directly be connected to Austen's description of Emma in which she describes Emma as, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition (5). The two characters also parallel in the fact that this initial presentation of perfection to the reader turns out to be lacking. The narrative similarity between these two works is undeniable. The stories are virtually identical except for time and setting.

By adapting Emma to a more contemporary setting, Heckerling does Austen justice and in the process becomes acclaimed in her own right. The characters of Cher and Emma make a very conscious sociological statement on the class system in western society. Through Heckerling's adaptation of Austen's novel, she imbedded her film into American 90's pop-culture. With the exception of a few characters excluded from the film, *Clueless* is clearly an update of Jane Austen's *Emma*. Multiple parallels can be made between the story and key characters.

Both Emma and Cher start off as self-indulgent snobs who have no real understanding of life or humility, only to become deserving of the love they pursue. In sum, Heckerling remade Austen's piece to claim the female experience of the past. What was true for women then, is true now, only the times have changed. Both Austen and Heckerling allow their heroines to find redemption, because they except these women as one of their own. They do not condemn them for being snobby or conniving but accept their behavior as a product of societal influence. And, this is the signifier of how far women have come in cinema. Women can play army soldiers, promiscuous teens, mothers, daughters, adventurous heroines, or villainous femme fatales, and

it all falls into the body of roles with which we perceive the woman. This is a very broad and open-minded perception, and it has come a long way since 1940.

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