

Chapter 11 – Feminism and Film

Feminist film criticism and the paradigm shift to formal-social analysis

- Women & Film magazine first posed the question of why women characters in feature films consistently occupied the recurrent, stereotypical roles of
 - Virgin
 - Wife
 - Mother
 - Seductress or whore
- **Sex-gender system**
 - The ways in which the biological male and female sexes turn into a socially constructed and ideologically loaded range of sexual and gender identities, some of which may be treated as normal and others as deviant
- Strong women characters have not fared well in terms of happy endings
- When women strike out on their own, using skills and resources normally associated with men, they tend to forfeit their eligibility for marriage and become expendable
 - *Thelma and Louise* (1991)
 - Hunted down for killing in self-defence

Stereotypic Representations of Women

The Virgin

- Male projection onto women of profound innocence and vulnerability
- Men can then play the role of strong, resourceful protector
- *The New World* (2005) by Terrence Malick
 - Love between the colonist and explorer John Smith and the virgin daughter (Pocahontas) of “the naturals” (local Native Americans)
- *The Lonedale Operator* (1911) by D.W. Griffith
 - Damsel in distress signifies helplessness, purity, and potential victimization
- **Innocence** usually correlates with the **virgin’s vulnerability as potential victim** but can also correspond to the image of the **dumb blonde**, a woman who may not actually be a virgin but whose **innocence combines with obliviousness** regarding her erotic effect on others
 - Marilyn Monroe – sweet, vulnerable, and utterly alluring – often played this role to the hilt as she does in *Monkey Business* (1952) by Howard Hawks
- **Good-bad girl** – stereotype of the vamp who proves to have a heart of gold

The Wife

- Center of the enormously complex social dynamics that fuel family life
- Takes up a subordinate position as support, or impediment to her husband
- Strongly associated with domestic space and family life
- Postwar period, wives and mothers who asserted themselves too forcefully, rather than serving as precursors of the feminist movement, emerged as dangerous, enervating figures who robbed men of their masculinity
 - *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962) by John Frankenheimer

The Mother

- Culturally vital role of mother turns into the be-all and end-all of a woman’s life
- Nurturing, caring

- Compassionate figure giving men the support they need

Seductress, vamp, *femme fatale*

- When a woman's sexual energy condenses into this stereotype it is a projection of male anxieties about autonomy
- Leaves the male blameless for his loss of independence, since he can no longer resist or help himself
- Women whose seductive charms overpower and exploit men
- Ultimate motive of the *femme fatale* proves to be economic gain, revenge, or power, hidden beneath mystery and allure
- Film noir
 - Such women roam the urban landscape of nightclubs and bars
 - They wouldn't dream of staying at home
 - As women of the night, street, and bar, they become alluring but heartless seductresses who, in vivid contrast to loyal wives, draw unsuspecting men into their erotic spiderweb
- Such a character might die or go to jail in the end
- Exert power, fascinate and mesmerize, to control others, to outsmart those who think they can outsmart her, and to use seduction as a weapon of liberation
- Rita Hayworth in *Lady from Shanghai* (1947) by Orson Welles
- *Gilda* (1946) by Charles Vidor
- Jane Greer in *Out of the Past* (1947) by Jacques Tourneur
- Mary Astor in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) by John Huston
- Barbara Stanwyck in *Double Indemnity* (1944) by Billy Wilder

The conflict between mobility and domesticity

Mobility

- Autonomy, freedom, choice, agency
 - Usually associated with the male hero
 - Eg western hero entering and exiting the arena with the woman confined to homestead
- Some of these women embody "masculine" qualities and couple them with dependence, trust, and openness
- Tough-minded, adventurous, mobile, action-oriented female characters

Domesticity

- Often associated with the feminine; traditional female/maternal roles
- Some films can present complex, often unexpected portraits of female characters