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Female Identity: A Historical Memoir of Three Generations of Women and the Movies That Shaped Them

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Female Identity: A Historical Memoir of Three Generations of
Women and the Movies That Shaped Them

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Abstract

Within my honors thesis, I propose that my investigations into both female audience members and female film characters will reveal that as these characters have become more complex, detailed and full of depth since the conception of film, female audience members, who, in their assumed pursuit of personal identity, will utilize and allow these characters to shape them. The definitive thesis statement is as follows: “In the gradual shift away from shallow, transparent and one-dimensional female movie characters that has naturally occurred since the conception of film, women have changed how they watch and consume the female characters in pursuit of finding their own identity.”

In the early stages of cinema, women onscreen were not allowed a lot of intricacy; the woman was a stock character, who would take on simple types such as the villainous temptress or the respected, virginal youth who only wants what all “good girls” want, a home and a husband to care for. However, as ideals and morals have changed dramatically since the conception of film at the end of the 19th century, female characters have been allowed greater meaning and the ability to branch out and take on multiple forms. Women, who have always been complex, thoughtful people often had to hide their true selves in eras where it was not necessarily allowed to be a woman who wanted more out of life than what a patriarchal society dictated that she should want; in turn, women were required to keep silent about their innermost desires. However, as women’s history has evolved more and more into what it is today, female identity is more often exposed and celebrated in all of its forms in many parts of the world. In discussing female identity I will draw on the works of Laura Mulvey, who wrote extensively about film and psychoanalysis, which of course pertains to the concept of identity: “This paper intends to

use psychoanalysis to discover where and how the fascination of film is reinforced by pre-existing patterns of fascination already at work within the individual subject and the social formations that have molded him,” she writes. This is essentially what I’m trying to prove, that women have grown in congruence with film, both maturing as each evolves. Mulvey’s theory of identity has changed since the inception of her idea in 1973, and I plan to explore her theories and how they have evolved. As films have shifted, so have women, and I’m proposing that the two are inextricably linked. As female characters have become more three-dimensional, women have become more perceptive to them, and have taken on their characteristics and allowed them to shape who they are and who they want to be. In going along with Mulvey, I plan to delve a bit deeper into the psychology of how and why cinema can so deeply affect people. This all relates back to the theory of identity, and how deeply one is influenced and affected by cinema, so much so that it transforms their very being.

To support my thesis, I interviewed women of various eras of cinema, who were born in 1932, 1962, and 1996. The search for identity is never-ending; however, as this development that begs the questions of “Who am I?” often begins in one’s early 20s, I will be examining films that these women watched at this time in their lives, from the 1950s, 1980s and modern day, respectively. I plan to focus on multiple films from each era that each woman had an interaction with, and each woman’s thoughts about the female characters and her reactions to and perceptions of them. I want to prove that as cinema has allowed female characters greater depth, women have allowed these characters to inspire them and their identities. The use of interviews within research is invaluable; one gets to talk about the issue with one who was really there, living their life,

trying to make sense of it all in a time period that is often unimaginable for the researcher. These are raw, firsthand accounts of these women's lives; while there are some potential faults in the use of the interview (i.e., the women misremembering), overall it is a helpful way to add a human element to the research. In support of my belief in the importance of oral history, I will be citing Elaine Tyler May, whose book *Tell Me True: Memoir, History, and Writing a Life* (2011) describes how one can utilize memoir whilst also remaining true to the history and the facts; May's theory proves that the mix of memoir and history is not only possible, but extremely supportive to the argument at hand.

My goal in this study is to illuminate the lack of respect that cinema has often had for representation of the woman onscreen, and also to prove that as female characters have become multifaceted that women have recognized that they can pursue anything they want. We often revere the characters onscreen, and there has never been any doubt that media of any kind does not have an impact on its audience; this particular study will show how a positive female image proves to be impactful and even beneficial to women in their search for themselves. I believe that this is an important message to prove; even with all the success of women both on and off-screen thus far, there is still promotion of many superficial, short-sighted female characters that negatively impact the next generations of women, dictating to them that they must either be a virgin or a whore, a hard woman or a soft one, that they must bear children, stay at home and be subservient, to ignore any fruitful endeavors, such as having a career, choosing their own personal identity, or thinking for themselves. It is important that the tradition of complex females onscreen continues, and though there may be many who dislike the image of a strong,

smart, versatile female character it is vital to women that these images remain pervasive, otherwise many more women will simply buy in to the harmful image of woman and allow it to negatively affect them and their burgeoning identity.

All of the women to be interviewed are connected to me; they include my grandmother, my mother and my sister, so there is a memoirist aspect to this proposed work. There will be much discussion of film, history, and analysis of the two, along with the human element of how these women have been shaped by characters onscreen. I plan to organize my thesis into one chapter for each woman along with an introduction and conclusion, so five chapters in all. I want to prove the importance of epic women onscreen, women who fight hard, know what they want, and are also capable of being sympathetic and loved. Movies and their female characters have certainly shaped who I am today as a young woman, and I wish to acknowledge and analyze the trajectories of identity that the women in my life have taken, to acknowledge both the wrongs and the rights that have been done to the female image, and to call for the continuation of a positive female representation onscreen.

Introduction

Women are not simple. Women are complicated, intense, loving, angry, precocious, sentimental, anguished, kind, mean, selfish, giving, intelligent. Historically, film has been unfair to women. Cinema has portrayed women as having a lack of thought, a lack of person, a lack of assertion. But female identity runs the gamut and is anything but simple, anything but trite and passive. A woman's identity cannot be defined because there never was a definition and there never will be; it is always evolving, shifting, growing. The *Merriam-Webster* dictionary defines 'identity' as a "sense of self," as "being one's self," as "remaining the same as one is." Personally, I do not think these definitions really do justice to what identity truly means. I would define identity as fluid, as remaining true to one's self even in the face of oppression, as accepting and loving every single aspect of one's self. The issue I have with the traditional definition of "identity" is that such a definition emphasizes remaining unchanged, but in reality who you are constantly shifts, hitting every extreme. What the dictionary does not imply is that who you are is allowed to evolve; this is why there could never be one single, true definition of identity, because we are always transforming. I want to explore female identity in this thesis because it is rich with history, culture, sexuality, race, class and so many other facets; female identity cannot be defined or restricted to a single form. Too many filmmakers disregard the complexity of female identity, making women not only objects of a patronizing male gaze, but the victims of it.

To this day it is considered normal, acceptable, and even enjoyable to watch a woman being beaten, raped, murdered and objectified on-screen; however, it is still considered unacceptable to watch strong, sexual, complicated and intelligent women enjoy pleasure

on film; audiences might rather watch films such as *The Stepford Wives* (Forbes, 1975) where strong women are wiped out, as opposed to a film where the women are the heroines, the victors. As Molly Haskell writes,

...internalized in the moral code we adopted out of fear as well as out of an instinct for self-preservation. The taboos against sex, encoded in the paralyzing edict that no man would marry a woman who was not a virgin...held fearful sway...It was a morality handed down by our parents, but eagerly embraced by my peer group.

Haskell's ideas continue to be pervasive and prevail in configuring American culture today. The binary of man versus woman, stud versus whore, and thus a woman's identity continues to be defined by her sexuality: "Sex becomes not simply an appetite or a matter of individual taste, but the supreme, defining quality of the self."¹

The female gaze, and thus an individual woman's identity, is completely stigmatized; however a man's point of view when having sex is acceptable and normalized because in today's culture, unlike women, men are allowed to have sex without consequences. Sexuality is part of a woman's identity, her very being; telling women that an essential part of themselves is wrong through the culture they consume is not only iniquitous, but morally negligent and emotionally damaging to women of all ages, color, and size.

Representations of women have changed dramatically since the conception of cinema, evolving with the characters onscreen. In early cinema at the turn of the century, women were typecast into minute roles: they were either the innocent, the ingénue or always sexualized, and always portrayed as evil. Instances of this "Virgin/Whore" complex were seen at the earliest stages of cinema, in films like *Sunrise* (Murnau, 1927), where it was

¹ Haskell, Molly. *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974. Print.

the “Lady from the City” who steals the good, honest woman’s husband by attracting him with sex, liquor and excitement. In *Metropolis* (Lang, 1927), the dichotomy of Maria’s character where the real Maria is an innocent and her robotic self is a sexual being, a dancer, who stands to damage Maria’s chaste reputation. In *The Night of the Hunter* (Laughton, 1955), the (admittedly villainous) husband refuses to consummate his marriage due to his belief that his wife’s body is only meant for bearing children. Clearly the devious female characters taught young women how to behave “properly,” to be chaste and obedient so they would not end up emulating the “Woman from the City” in *Sunrise*.

There is no doubting that media has always been an effective tool. However, *how* it affects people, especially young, impressionable women who are the midst of forming an identity is an entirely different story. Molly Haskell writes about her own experiences with identity creation:

...so, for fear of blighting in the bud that ego that would have little enough chance to survive, we cauterized our sexual responses before they could develop freely. Those of us who were ambitious would use our femininity like Scarlett O’Hara used hers: would flirt, tease, withhold sex, to get what we wanted. It would rarely occur to us to ask outright for a place on the starting line, to enter the ranks of competitive male activities and thereby lose our place on the pedestal and our “preferred” passive position.²

Haskell came of age in the 1950s, around the same era as my own grandmother.

Haskell’s statement proves that women learn from female movie characters how to act, how to subordinate themselves, how to ignore the possibility of true ambition. I know this affected my own grandmother, Irene, who grew up in rural Pennsylvania, the daughter of

² Haskell, Molly. *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974. Print.

Polish immigrants, and was thus the daughter of an archaic, patronizing system. She lived her whole life at the will of men, relying on them, left to form her own identity at their mercy, the only women to learn from being the women onscreen, who were teaching her the way a woman should be: obedient, wifely, chaste.

The women interviewed in the following pages lived through these eras where women were patronized through cinema, following the journeys of Dorothy Gale from *The Wizard of Oz*, Scarlett O'Hara from *Gone With the Wind*, Esther Smith from *Meet Me in St. Louis*, and the like. They were engulfed by the magic of cinema, learned from it, lived from it, and allowed it to rule their desires. However, in the past couple decades the cinema has surprisingly improved on its portrayals of women. There are more and more strong, complicated women onscreen: Charlotte from *Lost in Translation* (Coppola, 2003), Katniss Everdeen from *The Hunger Games* (Ross, 2012), Jordan O'Neill from *G.I. Jane* (Scott, 1997) and Ada McGrath from *The Piano* (Campion, 1994), to name a few. These are the women I have seen growing up, these are the types of women that influence me now; I did not have to deal with the demonization of a business woman in *Fatal Attraction* (Lyne, 1987) or the butchering of girls in *Peeping Tom* (Powell, 1960). These strong women onscreen and off-screen have connected me more and more to film, and to other women. This connectivity is why there should be more women making films. Above I have mentioned both Sofia Coppola and Jane Campion, two of the few working female filmmakers today, along with Kathryn Bigelow, Lisa Cholodenko, and Lena Dunham. I connect with these female directors because I can see pieces of myself within their work. But these are very few women, and there needs to be more. Dr. Martha Lauzen, who writes the "Celluloid Ceiling Analysis," which determines the number of

women working in the film industry, recently stated in January of this year that “The film industry is in a state of what might be called *gender inertia*. There is no evidence to suggest that women's employment in key roles has improved over the last sixteen years.” In my opinion, this is a sham, a mockery of women’s capabilities, of their ability to impact people through their art; it is absolutely essential that there be more women making movies. Female filmmakers and their movies have given me guidance, hope, and clarity; most importantly, they have helped me explore my own burgeoning identity, instead of shutting it down like so many of the films of my foremothers.

The women whose testimonies of cinema they watched when they were coming of age come from very different eras of history; Irene, my grandmother, born in 1932, came of age in an era where women were wives and mothers, subservient to their husbands, a female identity frequently portrayed onscreen and one that she actually lived. Her mother died from tuberculosis when she was two years old, and then she was then brought up in Pennsylvania by a domineering stepmother and a physically abusive father, eventually running away to New York at age seventeen to elope with my grandfather. She worked as a secretary on a military base, and thus had firsthand experience with how men subjugate women in the workplace. Carrie, my mother, born in 1961, watched many films in the 1970s and the 1980s, the latter being a decade historically cruel to women, a society anxious about their budding independence and entrance to careerism, with Phyllis Schlafly on her soapbox. Always a quiet, intellectual woman, she worked to put herself through both community and state college in rural Illinois to become an accountant; along the way she met my biological father and married him, enduring fifteen years of subjugation, harassment and neglect, essentially a single mother since day one. However,

she has worked hard and raised three successful children, not to mention becoming the CFO of her customer feedback analysis company. Finally there is Kellie, my little sister, born in 1996 in Illinois, a young woman who has grown up in a new epoch of cinema, with female directors, writers and comediennes influencing her perspective of culture. Kellie has wanted to become a doctor since she was ten-years-old, and is currently one of the top students in her class: unapologetic and confident. She too has endured at the hands of men; her father is berating, manipulating and infuriating to her; however, she knows that she does not need to take such abuse, and thus deals with it maturely, by exercising her right to ignore it, so much so she decided to attend high school in North Carolina, far away from Illinois. These women are important; they have something to say about the way society inflicts its ideals on women, they are the voices that either were or would have been silenced, and so in this thesis I want to hear what they have to say, to give them the opportunity to speak now. In a way, this thesis is also my own turn to speak; I grew up under the same oppressive father as Kellie, a man who does not believe women need to be educated or treated with respect. I have rebelled against him, cutting such negativity out of my life, becoming an intellectual, a feminist, and choosing to forge my own path. Thus this thesis is somewhat my manifesto, my own personal story of the importance of ridding myself of the supposed rules of identity in order to create myself as an individual.

I believe it is important to intersperse the women's memories as a series of veins within history. The movies discussed herein are each a part of film history, and are simultaneously a part of each woman's identity. Each woman's history will define her

legacy and her identity. Author and historian Elaine May discusses the intersection of memoir and history by saying:

Memoir is generally understood as a highly personal rendering of the past, refracted through private experience, feelings and relationships. History is usually grounded in public life, considered somehow objective and detached from emotion. But is memoir really entirely private...and history completely public and detached? People live public and private lives, often intertwined.³

By making this claim, I align my approach with the idea that oral histories are extremely important; they make the past come alive and truly humanize it. The women interviewed in this thesis reveal how much onscreen female characters impacted their burgeoning identities. Historical facts alone cannot illustrate a single film's emotional or psychological effect on a person; personal testimony, however, can, and thus this is why I employ it as an academic framework within this thesis.

Film is a mirror, an eye, an open window; it is the path to the past, present and future. Film is a lens that shifts our perspective and provides an opportunity. Movies allow us to see ourselves in different situations, times, crises and adventures. Films will always have an effect on its viewers because they are reflective, because we so often see ourselves in the characters through the process of identification. Unfortunately the issue here is that female identity has repeatedly been conflated, abused and misunderstood. The plurality of women is a beautiful thing; female identity is multiplied by location, race, gender, sexuality, class and religion. Without a concept of who one is there is a sense of loss, of failure. An identity is not something that should be produced and consumed; it should be created, nurtured, punctured and healed. Women have always had to fight for their

³ Hampl, Patricia & May, Elaine Tyler. *Tell Me True: Memoir, History and Writing a Life*. St. Paul: Borealis Books, 2008. Print.

identities, for the right to be who they are rather than what someone else wants them to be. Movies will always influence women, with the audience wanting to emulate the female characters' hairstyles, speech, dress, romantic endeavors and ultimately everything about their lives. Unfortunately, even if there were no more negative images of women in the movies the problems for women today would still continue; I am not proposing an ultimate solution, I am proposing an amendment, a piece of hope for women everywhere. It is thus important that we have characters who are admirable, strong, have integrity, smart, mean, hard, soft...ultimately a woman should know that she can be whomever she wants to be, that there is no set structure for a way to live, a way to be one's own self. Women should be accepted by society, and not molded by it.

Irene

“Oh Jamie, that was a hundred years ago,” said my grandmother, Irene, when I asked her what movies she liked to watch when she was young. “I guess I remember loving the men – Dean Martin, Van Johnson.” My grandmother was born in 1932, and got married in 1950 when she was eighteen, an era remembered for its “suburbia/teen gangs, a spirit of conformity... The first era of prosperity and peace since the twenties rippled with undercurrents of anxiety and alienation and rebellion.”⁴ This was a year of movies such as *All About Eve* (Mankiewicz, 1950), *Sunset Boulevard* (Wilder, 1950), and *Annie Get Your Gun* (Berkeley, Sidney, 1950), all films that feature female characters in essential but slightly demeaning roles. One starlet of the era, Marilyn Monroe, influenced men and women alike, and has been immortalized through popular culture for her troubled soul, beautiful face and shapely body. When I asked Irene about Monroe, her response was interesting, and a seemingly different take on what most people think of when they picture Monroe today:

“Monroe was innocent in her own way; she was running around with J.F.K. but no one knew that for sure, it wasn’t bold. It’s nothing like today, where nothing is private.”

Irene did not especially like the starlets, but certainly fell in love with the male stars and their elegant attire: “They dressed so well, they looked like such gentlemen, not like how people dress nowadays with their torn jeans.” My grandmother, despite getting married at a young age, was rather innocent when it came to popular culture. After her mother passed away of tuberculosis when she was only two, Irene was raised by a physically abusive father and mean-spirited stepmother. When Irene was old enough to

⁴ Rosen, Marjorie. *Popcorn Venus*. New York: Avon., 1973. Print.

work (starting around the age of fifteen), every paycheck was confiscated – college was out of the question. Eventually one night, after a particularly brutal beating, my grandmother ran away from her home in Pennsylvania, heading to upstate New York where her brother was stationed at an army base. There she met Ronald, my grandfather, and they quickly wed, and within the next ten years became parents to five children. After my grandfather completed his military service, he went to work at the American Can Company, leaving Irene at home with multiple children, three of whom were a set of triplets. When I asked her what she did for fun during her youth, she said that she made all of her children's clothes and worked part-time at JC Penny. Irene said that she and Ronald rarely went to the movies ("A babysitter was expensive and hard to find"), but she did remember enjoying *Meet Me in St. Louis* and *Singin' in the Rain*, both musicals about love, either of another or of film itself.

"Audrey Hepburn was a beautiful girl, and Katherine Hepburn was such a classy lady. I remember she was always wearing pants. I thought she was cool, something new." My grandmother always was the cool girl, trying to keep up with trends, be fashionable. I have a photograph of my grandparents taken a few months before they were married. My grandfather looks like James Dean, lounging in the grass with a pompadour hairstyle and a charming smile. My grandmother sits next to him on their picnic blanket; she is a beauty, with rich auburn hair curled to perfection and lips painted so dark red they almost look black. She wears a white dress typical of the era, snug around her small waist and fanning out – she could be Rita Hayworth. This image itself proves how influenced Irene was by the culture and society around her. She dressed like the movie stars, trying to emulate their glamour and enjoy her youth, before her "adult" life began, and she knew

she would bear the titles of ‘wife’ and ‘mother’ first, and ‘woman’ last. As Marjorie Rosen put it in *Popcorn Venus*, her classic feminist analysis of images of women in film from 1973:

Not since Grandma starched her bustles had the strains of Mendelsohn been so universally revered, or women so pressured out of the employment market and into conjugal bliss. They married younger than at any previous time during this century, and in 1951 one in three had found a husband by the age of nineteen.⁵

My grandmother was one of these women; as a 21st century feminist, it was difficult hearing aspects of my grandmother’s story of how she lived her life during her marriage. She hardly worked outside the home, led a life that revolved around her children (whom she adored), and made every single meal – dinner was always ready by the time Ronald got home. She did not have much to say when I asked her what she did for fun; she never really went out dancing or bowling very much, she was not an avid reader; she liked to sew, do arts and crafts. While I love my grandmother very much for who she is, I cannot help but wonder if she would have more interests had she attended university, had she waited to get married. But in those days, as is evident through the female characters onscreen, a woman who wrote, painted, traveled and went to university was not seen as a worthy wife – and wives were in high demand, with the movies reflecting this. Marjorie Rosen enumerates the archetypes of women in 1950s cinema in the following way: “Women Fixing to Catch Their Men,” “Women Preparing for the Wedding,” “Slovenly Wives,” “Discontented Wives,” “Divorcing Wives,” “Battling Wives,” and “Romancing Widows.” Even if women were trying to separate themselves,

⁵ Rosen, Marjorie. *Popcorn Venus*. New York: Avon., 1973. Print.

whether physically or emotionally, from their husbands during this decade, they were still defined by their wifely status. There is an example of this in the television series *Mad Men*, in its first season from 2007, episode two, “Ladies Room” where a new woman in the neighborhood, Helen Bishop, is found out to be a divorcee, living with her two children. The other women in the neighborhood reject and judge her without knowing who she is as a person; the fact that she left her husband is enough information for them to know that they do not like her.

The female characters in the films of the 1950s were created by a patriarchal film business. Women no longer carried the movies, no longer held the same autonomy they did in the 1940s, an era where women were encouraged to work while the men were abroad fighting in World War II. In the 1940s women became welders and pilots, working in shipyards and on military bases, becoming so much more than nurses and secretaries. But the return of the men from the war meant the return of men to work, and thus to power, and women were relegated back to a subservient position of wife, homemaker and child-bearer, and the movies mirrored this.⁶ In *An Affair to Remember* (McCarey, 1957) the entire point of the movie is for Cary Grant and Deborah Kerr to have an epic romance. The same is true for *Sabrina* (Wilder, 1954) who, after returning from Paris where she studied cooking (an appropriate, feminine skill) is thus finally a proper woman, ready to marry. Before she left she was rather a free spirit, an awkward girl. But now that

⁶ *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter*. Dir. Connie Field. Perf. Wanita Allen, Gladys Belcher. Clarity Productions, 1980. This film interviews five different women from different parts of the country and from numerous races about their personal experiences in the workforce during and after WWII.

she has followed the formula of how to become a “real” woman, she is suitable for marriage and childbearing.

There is always the lingering question of what could have become of women like Sabrina (Audrey Hepburn), Terry McKay (Deborah Kerr) and Irene; perhaps they might have risen through the ranks, become managers, engineers, scientists. They could have continued on to higher education, realizing dreams beyond the domestic sphere, becoming lawyers, doctors, professors. There is an entire generation of young women whose futures were on the brink of something different, and then history took that potential away, preferring the patriarchy keep its place with the return of the men from war. And thus these women returned to the lives they were always meant to lead, lives dictated by the era, with the focus on falling in love, getting married and having children; they were doomed to serve and protect the household, instead of their burgeoning identities.

Irene emulated the drama of such stories: when she left Pennsylvania, she also left behind a fiancé without even saying goodbye, and the next he heard of her she had married another man. My grandparents’ romance was quick and passionate, and they really did not know each other very well before they decided to get married – “It was just what you did in those days,” Irene said. Irene’s statement echoes the fact that women were still given a specific identity in those days instead of being allowed to choose it for themselves, both onscreen and off. Television shows such as *The Donna Reed Show* (Roberts, 1958 - 1966), *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957) and *The Brady Bunch* (Schwartz, 1969 - 1974) all prove this; the programs show a shining example of the perfect nuclear family, where the wife is second in

command and the man supports the family as the patriarch. And what's more, the dynamic was never truly discussed or questioned (at least until the Women's Movement picked up steam in the 1960s and 1970s).

My grandmother was content with her place within the home, within American society. She did not question whether there was something more; she was a polite, strong, intelligent and fun-loving woman, not someone who wanted to change the way things had always been. She has always said to me, "Youth today is bold; back in my day you would not bring certain things up." She is questioning why young people today question things; as she says, back in her own days of youth you were not supposed to ask questions or deviate from the norm of society, you just took things as they were and lived with them, or you had to suffer the consequences if you chose to deviate from societal norms. Marjorie Rosen writes that in the films *The Old Maid* (Goulding, 1939) and *To Each His Own* (Leisen, 1946), which are stories about women who were "retiring, self-sacrificing masochistic girls who bore illegitimate children after their lovers were killed in the war," the women in the films can perhaps be read as paying for their sins "by voluntary exile from traditional family life."⁷ Essentially if you doubted the status quo, you were expelled from it and from the potential of having a support group that loved and cared for you. However, the women in these instances knew they would not be supported and thus chose a different route, becoming pariahs of society. There were multiple instances of this, directors needing to adjust female characters so that they were perceived as always atoning for their sins or not creating them at all. This was a big problem with the film *That Hamilton Woman* (Korda, 1941), which was a film of great political and historical

⁷ Rosen, Marjorie. *Popcorn Venus*. New York: Avon, 1973. Print.

intricacies, being used as both pro-British propaganda and to bolster support for the ongoing war. However, the Hollywood Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) and the Production Code Administration (PCA) ignored these details and instead focused solely “on the adulterous relationship between Lady Hamilton and Lord Nelson. Implied immorality was an advantage at the box office, although the script would have to conceal or condemn the adultery to the satisfaction of the censors both in Hollywood and London, as well as other parts of the world, including several American states.”⁸ Joseph Breen, then the head of the PCA who worked with director Alexander Korda took particular issue with the depiction of adultery, dictating “that since the story dealt with adultery that it was essential to inject into it what Breen called ‘necessary compensating moral values.’ Breen's four-page letter of 16 September 1940 specified that adultery had to be established as ‘wrong’, that the adulterous situation could not be condoned, nor justified, nor made to appear ‘right and acceptable’ and that the adulterous parties had to be punished. Breen also noted that Emma was not to nurse her illegitimate child at breast, nor dance suggestively or ‘offensively’.”⁹ Women were not allowed to cuckold men onscreen, were not allowed to portray their sexuality in any way shape or form; the Production Code ensured that all facets of a woman’s identity was kept hidden at all times, usually behind a male savior.

The same happened with Irene; when she ran away from an abusive home, the only place she could run to was a life with another man. She could not strike out

⁸ Short, K.R.M. “‘That Hamilton Woman’ (1941): Propaganda, Feminism and the Production Code.” *Historical Journal Of Film, Radio & Television*. 11.1 (1991): 3. *Historical Abstracts with Full Text*. Web. 25 March 2014.

⁹ Short, K.R.M. “‘That Hamilton Woman’ (1941): Propaganda, Feminism and the Production Code.” *Historical Journal Of Film, Radio & Television*. 11.1 (1991): 3. *Historical Abstracts with Full Text*. Web. 25 March 2014.

on her own, go to college or even find a career and work for a living; she ran from her father, to her brother and then to her husband; without some sort of male protector, a woman was often seen as a licentious predator, unable to be trusted. So it was not the custom to stray from standard way of doing things; it was explained through the cinema that women need to grow up and get married, and if they strayed from the patriarchal diction then they would be punished by society's conventions, just like Emma Hamilton (Vivien Leigh) in *That Hamilton Woman*, who was punished for her adultery by losing both her husband and her lover, as directed by the Production Code.

I see a huge problem with this way of thinking, in that it departs from the process of knowledge, and is a complete disavowal of female identity. I firmly believe that women should question everything they are told about how to be a woman, but again this is my present-day thinking wrapped up in first, second and third wave feminism, with the example of a mother who helps run a major company and my own privilege at being able to attend university. It again makes me wonder about what my grandmother could have been, could have done if she did not feel like she needed a man at her side. I do want to incorporate her own context into this; after so many years of being mistreated by the people who were supposed to love her the most, she probably craved love and acceptance as if it were water and she had been wandering in the desert for a year. I know Irene loved films such as *Oklahoma!* (Zinnemann, 1955) and *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (Hawks, 1953), and while they are entertaining and have their own place within film history, it must also be noted that they are all about the pursuit of women, and

that women want to be caught and to live happily ever after; this fairytale was the goal for Irene, it was for many women before her and for many women after her, and not much else existed outside of it. These stories about women were transparent; another way the patriarchy tells women how to be, or how they will be treated if they misbehave.

Despite all of the negative images and concepts projected on to women in the mid-20th century, this was also an era where the tides began to turn; women actually began to gain a little bit of power within the machine of Hollywood. For example, Frances Marion won two Academy Awards for her screenwriting in the 1930s for both *The Big House* (1930) and *The Champ* (1931), and became one of the most prolific and respected screenwriters of the 20th century, inspired by the many women who had helped pave the way before her, such as Alice Guy-Blaché, the very first female film director, Lois Weber, who got her start from Guy-Blaché; Nell Shipman, the inexhaustible actress, writer, producer and director who portrayed many a strong woman onscreen, and Mary Pickford, who personally took an interest in Marion's talent.¹⁰ Dorothy Arzner also directed a number of acclaimed films between the 1920s and 1940s; Ida Lupino was an incredibly respected filmmaker who turned to directing after finding unfulfilling acting roles. Lupino's films *Outrage* (1950) and *Hard, Fast and Beautiful* (1951) are particularly important for their portrayal of multi-dimensional, intense women; the former film examines the aftermath of a young woman's rape, which was a very controversial subject to put onscreen at the time. The latter examines a young

¹⁰ *Without Lying Down: Frances Marion and the Power of Women in Hollywood*. Dir. Bridget Terry. Turner Classic Movies, 2000.

tennis prodigy torn between her love of tennis and the man she loves; ultimately she does what she wants, which gives an important autonomy to female characters of that era. Lucille Ball uses her influence to try her hand at directing and producing her own show— *I Love Lucy* (1951-1957), which must be noted as a program that itself perpetuated traditional gender roles.

Many of the films these filmmakers worked on are injected with a greater meaning concerning women, and include female characters who are strong, clever confident women, such as the independent, career oriented characters of Judy and Bubbles in Arzner's *Dance, Girl, Dance* (1940) and Cynthia Darrington, the protagonist of *Christopher Strong* (Arzner, 1933) who chooses aviation over men. These female filmmakers and characters show the progression of women in cinema, and how women behind the camera can influence the characters in front of it and thus the women sitting in the audience. The stories within these films and of these filmmakers stand to show that women can have more, that there is more than one set type of life out there; unfortunately women behind the camera were not as pervasive as they should have been, and their films were not always as popular as those of Billy Wilder and Howard Hawks. I often think about how Irene would have received these films had she seen them when she was a young woman; would she have become a writer, a pilot, a doctor? Irene is a good example of how popular culture influenced women during an era that was notoriously soul crushing towards females. She lived life the way she thought she ought to, she followed the rules, and she lived a happy life – but there is always the lingering question about what could have been.

Carrie

My mom, Carrie, is the most important person in my life. She is a kind, big-hearted, animal-rescuing strong woman. She has had to face many a tribulation in her life, but she has come out the other side smiling, owing a lot to her attitude and her fierceness of spirit. But my mom was not always this shining, confident example, I am told. Born in 1961, she came of age in the late 1970s, but she was not really into disco or cheerleading. My mom liked sports; tennis especially. She did not really care what she looked like, calling her sixteen-year old self “a nerd” in her class picture. “I had these huge coke-bottle glasses and long stringy hair; all I wanted to do in high school was make the tennis team, and I was really sad when I didn’t.” She watched the television series *The Brady Bunch* (Schwartz, 1969-1974) and *Gilligan’s Island* (Schwartz, 1964 – 1967) on Friday nights instead of going out; she loved movies about great loves and animals, such as *Love Story* (Hiller, 1970) and *Black Beauty* (Lester, 1971). She grew up on movies that reinforced a stereotypical notion of women, in that many of the women represented were focused solely on finding and keeping a man. This could be a reason why my mom mainly watched television; “I loved to watch *Cheers*, *Love Boat* and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*.” While she did enjoy movies, she was a child who grew up in the 1960s, an era where television was the next big thing. This continued on into her teens and twenties, and she was not the only one: “Hollywood’s female audiences had defected to the TV habit and were now tuning in and out of the droning humdrum homilies of the afternoon soaps. Little on-screen related to them...”¹¹ It was hard to find role models in the 1960s and 1970s, because, even though there were strong women available to look up

¹¹ Rosen, Marjorie. *Popcorn Venus*. New York: Avon, 1974. Print.

to – Gloria Steinem, Jane Fonda, and, of course, Linda Carter as *Wonder Woman* – young women were often being told, subtly, through certain movies that a strong woman was wrong, that she should not want an independent lifestyle. It was the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) that was making these films and inserting content in it that dictated how women should be portrayed and the stereotypes they must fit onscreen. “The woman's 'guilt' was to be sealed by either punishment or salvation and the film story is then resolved through the two traditional endings which are made available to women: she must either die (as in e.g. *Psycho* (1960)) or marry (as in e.g. *Marnie* (1964)).”¹² The Production Code Administration mandated that there be differing levels of punishment or success as retribution for a woman’s actions within the film; if she had sinned, then she must die to atone. If she had remained good, then she would win the so-called man of her dreams.

However, the 1970s were also a time of change, and there were characters that, “In a curious way, even when the anger was turned inward, these women were symbols of defiance, of a refusal – or inability – to live by the old rules.”¹³ For example, in the iconic *Stepford Wives*, (Forbes, 1975) the protagonist is a smart, headstrong young woman who takes it upon herself to find out what why the women in town have been mysteriously changing, becoming more stereotypically feminine and subservient. There is also *Annie Hall* (Allen, 1977), where the titular character is a woman with a unique sense of style and wit; she is completely unafraid of being herself and embracing her identity. “I liked *Annie Hall*, though I’m not sure I caught all of the humor. But Annie was fun and goofy;

¹² Smelik, Anneke. "Feminist Film Theory." Pam Cook and Mieke Bernink, (eds), *The Cinema Book*, second edition. London: British Film Institute, 1999, pp 353-365.

¹³ Haskell, Molly. *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974. Page 373. Print.

I would have liked to have had more fun like her,” remarked Carrie. These movies signaled the changing times, perhaps such as the embracing of feminism and more respect for women, as indicated by these films that feature strong, competent and complicated characters. Molly Haskell, feminist film critic and professor of cinema writes that “The trickle of feminist-inspired movies of the mid-seventies – *A Woman under the Influence*, *Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore*, and *An Unmarried Woman* – has led us to anticipate, if not a revolution, at least a gaggle of films that would chart our evolution as emerging feminists.” It was a beginning, if a slow one. My mother grew up in the midst of all of this, trying to make sense of this suddenly new change of opinion of women in society, so very different from her mother, Irene’s generation.

When Carrie was sixteen her family was uprooted from their life in Geneva to move to Crystal Lake, Illinois – a move that did not sit well with Carrie or her fellow triplets, Colleen and Christine. My mother was very isolated by that move; she is not outgoing or particularly sociable, and she missed her friends back home. So, when she was sixteen she got her very first pet, a dog named Toby. This dog went absolutely everywhere with her, adoring my mom, protecting her; “I realized then that animals will love you unconditionally, that they won’t leave you,” Carrie says. This was in 1977, an era known for the rise of classic American horror cinema and film studies as an academic discipline; America had just undergone a losing war and a corrupt president. In a way, the depressions of the age reflected my mother’s personal turmoil. The Women’s Liberation movement was winding down, creeping up into the 1980s, which was a decade that combined the rise of women in the workplace with the anti-woman politics of Phyllis Schlafly and Ronald Reagan. Historically this was a time in American history when

things were changing, and everyone reacted to such change differently. Such changes were reflected in the cinema of the era, with hits like *Jaws* (Spielberg, 1975), *Taxi Driver* (Scorsese, 1976) and *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola, 1979), all of which are films that center on a man's trajectory; the women are either wives, sexual objects or subservient. The Women's Movement, popularly known as the Second Wave of feminism, had done a lot for the women of America, from repealing the ban on abortion with the landmark Supreme Court case *Roe vs. Wade* in 1973¹⁴, to creating a freer lifestyle for women in general. This was the time when my mother was realizing her own conscious identity, and beginning to think about the future.

After high school she went to community college and then Northern Illinois University, studying to be an accountant, though her real passion lay in being a veterinarian. "I worked to put myself through college, and I couldn't afford going to vet school." I think this is a decision that rather haunts my mom to this day; even now she says she would like to become a veterinary technician. Carrie has a lot of unfulfilled dreams that have stayed with her, from not making the tennis team, to moving mid-high school, to not becoming a veterinarian. However, she did get to pursue her dream of travel; when she was twenty, she went on a month-long trip to Europe. It was on this trip that she met my biological father, Chris, which would forever alter her future.

They met, they fell in love, and they married after five years. They were never right for each other: he a loud, boisterous heavy drinker, and she a quiet, introspective wine-sipper. She had not yet learned how to stand up for herself, and she was still under the impression that women had to get married in order to be happy, so when he proposed she

¹⁴ Faux, Marian, and Joanna K Weinberg. *Roe V. Wade: The Untold Story of the Landmark Supreme Court Decision that Made Abortion Legal*. N.p.: 1988. *Women's Studies International*. Web. 25 March 2014.

just figured it was the right thing to do, they had been together long enough; essentially it all fit the “criteria.”

“I remember when I was planning my wedding, Chris’s mother was inviting all of her friends and family, work people, people I didn’t even know. So when I went to confront her on it, gently reminding her it was *my* wedding, she responded with ‘Oh no dear, it’s *my* wedding.’ Chris overheard this and didn’t do or say anything.”

She got married. It was a happy union, I think, for a few years at least. Then I arrived in 1991, shortly followed by my brother in 1993 and then my sister in 1996. Once the kids arrived, the claws came out. Carrie and Chris fought all of the time; he expected her to take care of the kids: getting them ready for school, making lunches, bathing them, etc, and also make sure to have dinner on the table every night – all of this in addition to a full time job and a two hour commute. Chris, meanwhile, often worked from home. He did not appreciate her or his kids; he ignored his wife and focused completely on the children, but when they differed from him in terms of anything, he would manipulate or berate them until they conformed to his idea of what was right.

After fifteen years, my mom had had enough; Carrie was growing stronger. It was Betty Friedan’s “The Problem With No Name” in the mid-1990s. My mother very much intended to define and change this problem in her own way. As Friedan put it in 1963, “We can no longer ignore that voice within women that says: ‘I want something more than my husband and my children and my home.’ For, ideally, in the end, a woman, as a man, has the power to choose and to make her own heaven or hell.”¹⁵ She refused to be treated as a subservient any longer,

¹⁵ Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1963. Print.

and filed for a divorce and met my stepfather, the man I refer to as my real dad, Rand. It was a long, bitter custody battle; my mother was called a whore, a mistress, and an unfit mother in court, berated for wanting to take control of her life. Chris saw it as Carrie trying to take his life away, everything he 'owned', including Carrie herself and the kids. However, my mother's tenacity won out, and she was granted custody. She made another unprecedented step: a move, an hour up north, far away from where we grew up and everything my mother associated with suffocation. She found us better schools, a safer neighborhood, but still she was demonized by Chris and the rest of my paternal family, a sentiment about which they made me keenly aware.

My mother, my quiet, timid, anti-social mother, got mad. She found this strength within herself, tossed her docility out the window and reclaimed her life; for this, I will be forever grateful. She has taught me how to read, how to balance a checkbook, how to handle a bad day. However, the most important thing she has taught me is how to stand up for myself, how to be strong and how to fight back. Because of her I will refuse to let anyone define me, I will find my own identity and run with it. She was the catalyst for my own self-discovery; she made me realize who I wanted to be, namely, anything but a weak woman.

In discussing my own mother, it is important to recognize the concept of mothers and motherhood in the cinema of the 1970s and 1980s. There were many conflicting notions out there of what and who a mother should be, but either way the woman was usually deemed either a Madonna or a whore, a proper woman or an unfit mother. The 1980s

were a time when women were becoming careerists, finally taking hold of their lives, seeing beyond a marriage and children. At the same time, the 1980s was an era known for its backlash against the Women's Movement of the 1960s and 1970s; there was a strong, anti-woman sentiment, and much of society wanted women to settle down and return to the home. "As American society has changed from the liberalism of the 1970s to the conservatism of the 1980s, women's chances of successfully combining career and family have decreased due to a culturally based backlash,"¹⁶ which is evident in films such as *Fatal Attraction* (Lyne, 1987), *Working Girl* (Nichols, 1988) and *Nine to Five* (Higgins, 1980), all films that my mom saw in the 1980s. *Nine to Five* shows women undergoing blatant sexual harassment within the workplace, not to mention being ignored for promotions and having their ideas stolen. *Working Girl* is an interesting film, in that the "evil boss" our heroine works for is a woman; however, this woman in charge is portrayed as a villain, stealing the protagonist's idea and passing it off as her own, basically showing that any woman in a position of power will abuse it and cannot be trusted. *Fatal Attraction* is probably the most famous example of the demonization of the new independent, career woman. At the beginning of the movie, we like Alex Forrest (Glenn Close), a career woman, an editor, not simply a secretary. "I wasn't a huge fan of this film," says Carrie. "It freaked me out, Glenn Close's character was really scary. It could easily be a horror movie." It is easy early on in the film to demonize Dan (Michael Douglas), who chooses to have a weekend affair with Alex while his loving wife and daughter are out of town. We see the instability of Alex when Dan has to return home;

¹⁶ Bromley, Susan and Pamela Hewitt. "Fatal Attraction: The Sinister Side Of Women's Conflict About Career And Family." *Journal of Popular Culture* 26.3 (1992): 17. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 20 Mar. 2014.

she slits her wrists in a suicide attempt, and Dan must return to look after her. After Dan repeatedly tells Alex to leave him alone we can see that she has absolutely no intention of doing so. The movie culminates in the insanity of Alex, who terrorizes Dan's daughter, Ellen, (Ellen Hamilton Latzen) by boiling her pet rabbit on the stove; Alex later kidnaps Ellen and then breaks in and tries to kill Dan's wife, Beth (Anne Archer). Throughout all of this the audience is supposed to hate Alex and feel sympathy for Dan; however, in reality Alex is pregnant with Dan's child and he refuses to support her, telling her to get an abortion. "That was the one part that made me feel sad for Alex; no one should have to go through having a kid by themselves or without support," Carrie remarked. Without Alex's insane stalking, we might actually root for her character, but instead "The phenomenal popularity of *Fatal Attraction* stands as a testament to the antifeminist backlash of the era and provides important insights into the changing social culture."¹⁷ Alex is portrayed as masculine, strong, independent and is even given a man's name, and thus she is threatening to the sanctity of the nuclear family. In terms of filmic formula, Alex "must die" for her transgressions, "Almost uniformly, reviewers have interpreted the filmic message of *Fatal Attraction* to be the vilification of the single career woman and the sanctification of motherhood and the traditional family structure."¹⁸ Alex could never be a proper mother because she lacks everything that Beth has, that Beth is: the tender, sweet, caring mother and forgiving wife; therefore, Alex, in her polar opposition, must have the potential of motherhood taken away from her.

¹⁷ Bromley, Susan and Pamela Hewitt. "Fatal Attraction: The Sinister Side Of Women's Conflict About Career And Family." *Journal of Popular Culture* 26.3 (1992): 17. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 20 Mar. 2014.

¹⁸ Bromley, Susan and Pamela Hewitt. "Fatal Attraction: The Sinister Side Of Women's Conflict About Career And Family." *Journal of Popular Culture* 26.3 (1992): 17. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 20 Mar. 2014.

The society in which my mother came of age, the 1980s, was not one branded as kind to women, either within society or cinema. My mother recognized this, but tried not to let it get under her skin. All the same, she followed the path society wanted her to take, i.e. getting married and having children, and she always put her children first. The examples out there of working women were not particularly endearing, i.e. Alex Forrest. Many women of the 1980s chose to put their family first; “I would define myself as someone who would do anything for her kids,” stated Carrie when I asked her to discuss her personal identity. When I pressed her to delve deeper, it was impossible for her to define herself not in relation to anyone else, whether it be her pets, her kids, her partner or her own parents. When my mother first started working, she was an accountant for a small firm. Now, she is the Chief Financial Officer at a very successful company. It took her almost twenty-five years to reach such a position, and even now she is nervous about giving presentations, going into meetings, and just generally being heard. “I am a hard worker, but I’m not the brightest candle in the room so I have to work really hard to do what I need to do,” she says. There is still low self-esteem, a belief that she is not smart. I know it has a lot to do with how she grew up: “My family was never one to say ‘You can do anything you want to do, or be anything you want to be.’ It was a totally different era back then, it just wasn’t what parents told their kids when they were young.” However, there were also many women who were extremely successful during this time period; i.e., Sandra Day-O’Connor being named the first female justice on the Supreme Court in 1981, Sally Ride becoming the first American woman in space in 1983, and Toni Morrison winning a Pulitzer Prize in 1988 for her novel *Beloved*.¹⁹ Carrie was raised in a

¹⁹ "Decade by Decade: 1980s - Women of the Century." *Decade by Decade: 1980s - Women of the Century* - *DiscoverySchool.com*. N.p., n.d. Web. 28 Mar. 2014

time and place where women were not directed to reflect inward, to determine their identities, or to explore new channels of self, and my mother is a product of it even to this very day. It was a small, traditional community she grew up in, with a mother who was firmly ensconced in convention, all of which contributed to this lack of reflection.

Laura Mulvey, in her classic “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” examines “how the fascination of film is reinforced by pre-existing patterns of fascination already at work within the individual subject and the social formations that have moulded him.” It is true that mother had a family because it was purely what she wanted for herself; at the same time, the nature and forces of the patriarchal society must be considered when examining how filmic messages were treated and received by women of the 1980s. Mulvey reinforces this view with her discussion of “How to fight the unconscious structured like a language...while still caught within the language of the patriarchy...we are still separated by a great gap from important issues for the female unconsciousness...”²⁰ It was hard for women to simply accept what was told to them by either the feminist or antifeminist sides in the 1980s; they were being forced to choose between work and family, but they wanted both, they believed they could have both, but they were being told, by the patriarchy, that they had to choose, and that it was better for them to choose family life. Many women chose very differently; some got married, had children and stayed home, some got married, had kids and went to work, and some decided that the nuclear family was not for them, eschewing childrearing in favor of high-powered, fulfilling careers. It is difficult to account for these differences; distinctions between areas and upbringing may explain it, but they could just as easily

²⁰ Mulvey, Laura. *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. N.p.: n.p., 1975. Print.

not. Ultimately it was most likely up to shifts in dynamics of the day and the women's own identities that contributed to their futures. In reality many people were afraid of the recent gains made by women, as is evidenced by the rise of Phyllis Schlafly and her ardent "protection of the home" and the infamous denial of the Equal Rights Amendment, which was argued against by Reagan himself, and has been reintroduced into Congress every year since 1982 in an attempt to ratify it.

Carrie is the perfect example of someone who was molded by an unjust society and then decided to fight back. She had to endure a lot as an independent woman, the name-calling, the rejection, the lack of progress. "Of course I was rooting for Billie Jean King," Carrie says, referencing the infamous "Battle of the Sexes," the tennis match that many believed would answer the question of who was the stronger sex, male or female: "It drew a line for a lot of people, but the outcome of that match didn't prove anything that I didn't already know." Carrie is a strong woman, and she can recognize this quality in others, and Billie Jean King definitely inspired her to continue on her path of personal strength. Many people tried to bring my mom down, specifically her ex-husband Chris; in an effort to win her back, he wrote a letter to Carrie's father, telling him to "reign in his daughter" and essentially convince her to return to the marriage. By treating my mother as a child, someone who can be told what to do by a "master," Chris ensured the marriage's demise. My mother's anger owes a lot to the women's movement of the 1970s and the conflicting pressures she was brought up with, between work and family life. A lot of people look down on women who are angry; they do not understand a woman's anger, thinking she should be sweet and docile, perhaps wondering "What does a woman have to be mad about?" It is sad that many people continue to think like this, because I

find my mom's anger empowering and motivating. Women need to know that any way they feel, any emotion or sentiment or life decision they must face, that it is always correct. They need to be strong enough, to be self-assured and take control of their lives, much like my mother did. No one thing motivated Carrie to change her life, not the rudeness from her in-laws, not the disrespect from her husband, not the stress of balancing a home and work life; it was all of these things that culminated together in an effort to pitch forth the anger residing deep within Carrie's core. It is this beautiful, empowering anger that allowed her to make her own life, her own choices, and choose her own identity.

Kellie

“Yeah, I’m angry,” Kellie said, when I asked her how she felt about women in film.

“Girls my age are not judged equally to guys my age. Even during my Youth and Government conference I would hear the people around me talking about what the guys were saying, and about what the girls were wearing.”

Kellie Konitzer is seventeen years old and attends the private Cape Fear Academy in Wilmington, North Carolina; she is an honor student, a ballerina, a cheerleader, a volunteer, and a strong young woman. She is my sister, and she wants to be a pediatric oncologist when she grows up. This girl is tough as nails, complex, intense. Kellie has always known what she wanted; she never allowed anyone to stand in her way, and has always had a strong backbone. In my opinion, we need more young women like her; women who are real, with fears and dreams and problems and talents, women who are not afraid, or who are afraid and go after what they want anyways. Kellie is the type of woman a female film character should be modeled on: tough, intelligent, someone who refuses to take no for an answer, but also someone who is very human.

“I like *Django Unchained* (Tarantino, 2012), *Tommy Boy* (Segal, 1995) and *The Princess Bride* (Reiner, 1987),” Kellie replied, when I asked her what her favorite films were.

“I did not even know you saw *Django*,” I said.

My mind immediately went to thoughts of trying to protect my little sister from such a graphic film, and I must admit I was surprised to know that Kellie, my cheerleading ballerina of a sister, thoroughly enjoyed Tarantino’s draconian tale. Again though, this

young woman is teaching me not to typecast or stereotype, and she is portraying firsthand how fluid female identity is.

“I also like *(500) Days of Summer* (Webb, 2009) and *The Hunger Games* (Ross, 2012). I like movies that show women who are not so attached to a guy, who want more besides just finding a man and being a wife. That’s how I want to be, completely detached, because I want to put my career first.”

These types of characters, the poetic, elusive Summer and strong, distant Katniss, both intelligent women, are the ones who are often influencing my sister’s generation of young girls: “It is this strong female character—someone not impressed or obsessed with the whims of fashion or wealth but focused instead on determining an ethical course of action—that draws both female and male viewers of this film to her and serves as a different model for young women from what is often reproduced in media.”²¹ Kellie likes these characters for multiple reasons, the biggest one perhaps being how they do not rely on men for their happiness, and they are autonomous, active characters. My sister has always remained aloof towards boys, never a crazed fan chasing after pop stars or the high school quarterback; she believes that women who focus entirely on chasing a man are never really fulfilled:

“I don’t want to be the girl who’s entire goal in life is to get married and have kids, I want to be independent and not rely on a guy for anything. And I hate when girls in movies make a man or a marriage their target, because it’s stupid; these are not the types of women or characters that I feel or want to be connected to.”

Kellie grew up with many strong women around her, including our grandmother, Irene, who raised five children while a husband was off at work and our mother, Carrie, who is a successful businesswoman in her own right and chose to leave an unhealthy marriage. Kellie never grew up thinking she could not do something because she was a

²¹ Weber, Cynthia. “The Hunger Games.” *Women & Language* 35.2 (2012): 121-122. *Humanities Full Text* (H.W. Wilson). Web. 19 Mar. 2014.

girl, she never grew up believing that all of her ambitions should be directed towards finding a male partner and procreating, she never grew up thinking she would never go to college, or would never have a job. I remember from when she was five years old that she proclaimed she wanted to be a judge; then it was a photographer, and now it is a doctor. No one ever told her she could not be whoever she wanted to be, unlike many women who came before her.

Kellie is preaching against the romantic comedy, the “chick flick,” as it were, wherein the film the female character’s only true goal, only measure of success, is to catch a man and settle down.²² She hates the concept and formula of a woman giving up everything, giving up herself, her identity and her future for a man. She likes movies with action, drama, fear, and she knows that the fairy tale, the “happily ever after” is a big myth, and that true happiness comes when you find yourself and what you love.

“I don’t want to have to lie to make myself seem stronger,” Kellie says, referencing female characters in the pervasive recipe of the hetero-normative, white, upper-middle class romantic comedy. “I don’t want to have to pretend that I don’t like a guy just so I can be taken seriously; girls lie about this a lot, because they think they have to choose between one or the other, themselves or the guy.” Kellie and many of the women in her generation crave real women characters, females who will make them feel validated and correct in any decision they make. While Kellie is not focused on men, it does not mean she wants to be deterred from the option of a significant other; these young girls want to know that they can be whomever they want, whatever they want, and that it is okay to be

²² York, Ashley Elaine. “From Chick Flicks to Millennial Blockbusters: Spinning Female-Driven Narratives into Franchises,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 43.1 (2010): 3-25. *America: History and Life with Full Text*. Web. 18 March 2014.

completely themselves, to fall inside or outside a stereotype as long as it makes them happy.

When I hear Kellie talk like this, it does not make me wonder or worry about whether or not she is going to achieve her goals; it makes me certain that she will. Kellie and I both have a lot of anger towards the events in our lives that we feel we were unjustly exposed to, and in many ways this anger is a good thing; it drives us, it gives us confidence. But I know that I myself am and especially Kellie is distressed by what has transpired; she often tells me how much it hurts her to have a grandmother who was not able to fully live out her dreams, to have a mother who was subjugated for years, and to have a father who does not respect women. Kellie has always had a rocky relationship with our father, much like myself. He has never truly respected women; this we learned via his treatment of our mother. Kellie, an infinitely patient, strong person, has chosen to keep contact with her father; I, on the other hand, have not. Kellie has seen firsthand what it is like to be disrespected by someone who believes he is superior because of his gender. When this treatment comes from one's father, a person who traditionally is supposed to love, care and support you unconditionally, it can be especially traumatizing. I know this treatment has certainly affected Kellie negatively, but on the other hand it has shown her how strong and independent she can be. She has learned to be diplomatic and mature, and has had to work twice as hard to attain her goals, such as gaining the very best education (her father tried to stop her from attending an elite private school, a goal of hers that caused her to lose friends and sleep so that she could study to pass the entrance exams).

Ultimately through this study of Kellie, I want to illuminate how this member of the newest generation of young women is dealing with sexism in films and how that

correlates to her personal life. So far, I like what I see; Kellie refuses to back down, she is intelligent and knows what the media is trying to peddle to her, and she understands the weaknesses of her own father, who is attempting to create a power-play with her based on gender. Kellie is a young woman of character, a young woman who can enjoy both *Django Unchained* and *No Strings Attached* (Reitman, 2011).

“There are not a lot of women in movies these days that I want to be or who I can connect to. I like *No Strings Attached* because Natalie Portman’s character is unattached, willing to put her career before her love interest. In movies we normally see more heroes than heroines, and I think she’s the heroine of this movie.”

While Kellie admits it is a “chick flick” and that Portman’s character eventually gives in and goes for her love interest at the end, Kellie likes the idea of a woman putting herself first. She admires the tenacity of spirit and humor with which the character is portrayed, and I agree that it is good for Portman’s character to be portrayed as both a strong woman and a woman who can accept love.

The case of *Django Unchained* is interesting; there was a time when women would recoil from a movie with such violence and horrifying subject matter. Even today it is considered normal for boys to live action and horror films and for girls to lean towards comedies, romances and dramas.²³ This is another example of Kellie breaking the stereotype of what a young girl is supposed to be, as defined by the patriarchal film industry. She will watch whatever she wants whenever she wants, and she really is not interest in appeasing other people with a notion of who she is supposed to be, as opposed to who she is. Ultimately the story of Kellie is meant to illustrate the level of freedom and control a young woman can

²³ Woodward, Kathleen. “Performing Age, Performing Gender.” *NWSA Journal* 18.1 (2006): 162-189. *America: History and Life with Full Text*. Web. 20 Mar. 2014.

exercise within her own personal identity. These days women are feeling empowered, confident enough to actually enjoy being themselves, instead of hiding who they are and what they enjoy. There are many female characters onscreen nowadays who encourage young women to be themselves, to fight the ever-present tide of oppression and dare to be atypical, creative, scientific, and aloof.

The examples of female characters out there who embody this are innumerable. There is Charlotte (Scarlett Johansson) from *Lost In Translation* (2003, Coppola), Ada (Holly Hunter) from *The Piano* (1993, Campion), and the women of *Thelma and Louise* (Scott, 1991). In the case of Charlotte, she is brave enough to travel to a foreign country essentially by herself (her husband is rather absent) and take the time to go around and visit temples and restaurants, riding trains and spending time with herself to determine who she is and what she wants. Ada has essentially always known what she wanted, or at least what she did not want; she is unhappy that she had essentially been sold by her father into marriage with a perfect stranger. Ada is livid when that stranger denies her her piano, essentially the only vehicle she has to communicate, as she had chosen not to speak since she was a very young child, demonstrating remarkable determination. Ada is not afraid to go after what she wants, which in this film is Baines (Harvey Keitel), a man who can see her for who she really is. Thelma (Geena Davis) and Louise (Susan Sarandon) are hell-raising revenge mongers. These women go on a spree that is replete with independence; they do whatever they want, whenever they want, fueled by their anger at how they have been treated by men. All of

these characters have been important to the upcoming generation of women; they are independent women who know what they want and have a sense of identity, with perhaps the exception of Charlotte, who is on a personal journey to choosing her own path. I know for a fact that these characters influenced me; how I wished to have a romance like the one in *The Piano*, wherein it is enough to merely touch a hole in Ada's stocking for Baines. I would love to take off on a wild road trip rank with revenge like *Thelma and Louise*, or to visit Tokyo and reflect upon my short life like Charlotte in *Lost in Translation*. All of these women, all of these stories helped coax me along to a personal definition of womanhood; I do not know what it means yet to be myself, but these characters and the ones like them make me reexamine who I am and who I want to be. Kellie follows this thought process too, but in a different manner. Instead of watching a lot of movies that reflect her experiences or with which she identifies, she watches movies as if they were a warning. She wanted a lesson, wanted to know what it could have been like if she decided to give up her future as a doctor in favor of the dream guy or the family. This is not a new phenomenon, with people consuming media and interpreting it as a way not to be, but instead is one that is relevant and important to understanding how women are portrayed onscreen. I think there are a lot of examples of this out there now: the neurosis of Hannah (Lena Dunham) on *Girls* (Dunham, 2012), the obsession of Nina (Natalie Portman) in *Black Swan* (Aronofsky, 2010) and even the *Twilight* series, a movie collection that has famously gotten people to call out the protagonist as needy and dependent on a male, as afraid of or unable to get to know herself. There is an expanding

consciousness out there about how women are portrayed onscreen, and the example of Kellie illustrates this. She is not just watching mindlessly, accepting what she is told; she is actively questioning every aspect of every frame. This is an experience with cinema that rings true for the current and upcoming generations, and even within the past forty years or so, since women's studies became an academic discipline and people began really analyzing and thinking critically about women behind and in front of the camera.²⁴ This is different from earlier generations; for example, during Irene's time female audiences would focus solely on the well-dressed men and women onscreen, wanting to be the women and be *with* the men. The audience did not necessarily want to analyze the film, especially in terms of sexism, so they largely concentrated on the surface elements of the cinema. Popular cinema was a way to dictate to people what is the right and wrong way to do things, but not anymore, at least not for the majority. Now we have entire classes devoted to the study of women in film, we are questioning why there are not more women accepting awards at the Oscars, the Golden Globes. When Kathryn Bigelow became the very first female filmmaker to win the Oscar for Best Director the world was ecstatic; there was a sentiment of "Maybe things are changing..."; there was such a huge support system, a huge backing for Bigelow. Also, it was lost on no one that Bigelow had won against her ex-husband, James Cameron, who was up for best director for helming the highest grossing movie off all time (Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker's* budget was

²⁴ "Women's Studies." : *A Brief History of the Field*. Appalachian State University, n.d. Web. 30 Mar. 2014.

only \$15,000,000, and Cameron's *Avatar* budget was around 230,000,000).²⁵ It was such a huge moment in film history for women; but then the next year at the Academy Awards, the lack of diversity onstage was striking. Men, especially white men, won almost every single category. The film that won Best Picture, *The King's Speech* (Hooper, 2010) was a film focused solely on a man, where the only women in the film were the supportive wife or the manipulative mistress.

"I want to focus on representations of women who aren't being related to stereotypes," says Kellie. "I want to watch movies where women aren't belittled." It is so very easy to categorize female characters today: the virgin, the whore, the ditz, the angry woman. The problem is that none of these characteristics can intersect; the whore cannot also be a mother, or someone whose sexuality is celebrated – then it would be condoning women having sex freely. The virgin, also cannot have a sexuality of any kind; she must be mute and plain, innocent; she cannot be multi-dimensional. The angry woman cannot also be soft and kind; the audience should not sympathize with her predicament, otherwise it would be acceptable for women to be mad, and society wants their women docile and sweet, never violent.²⁶

In general, things for women onscreen are changing. They are garnering more respect, more attention. Now we have studies such as The Bechdel Test, which rates a movie based on three elements: "It has to have at least two [named] women in it, who talk to

²⁵ Block, Alex Ben. "Why Oscar Chose *Hurt Locker* over *Avatar*." *Reuters*. Thomson Reuters: 2010. Web. 21 March 2014.

²⁶ Neroni, Hilary. *The Violent Woman: Femininity, Narrative, And Violence in Contemporary American Cinema*. N.p.:2005. *Women's Studies International*. Wed. 19 Mar. 2014.

each other, about something besides a man.”²⁷ We have Cate Blanchett accepting her Oscar for Best Actress, telling people that "For so bravely and intelligently distributing the film and to the audiences who went to see it and perhaps those of us in the industry who are still foolishly clinging to the idea that female films with women at the center are niche experiences. They are not. Audiences want to see them and, in fact, they earn money. The world is round, people.”²⁸ Things can only continue to get better for women in film, both in front of and behind the camera. There is still a long way to go, but if we continue to have conscious filmgoers, such as Kellie, to call out the inaccuracies and sexism within films, then perhaps the industry will heed the call for change.

²⁷ Schonfeld, Sara. "Failing the Bechdel Test." *The Daily Pennsylvanian*. Web. 19 March 2014.

²⁸ Selby, Jen. "Cate Blanchett's Best Actress Oscars 2014 Acceptance Speech." *The Independent*. Independent Digital News and Media. Web. 18 March 2014.

Conclusion

Laura Mulvey stated: “Woman, then stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command, by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning not maker of meaning.” This thesis stands in no way to demonize men; however, it must recognize that many women onscreen are created in order to please a stereotypical ideal created by men. The evolution of the female characters onscreen is varied and indefinite; there is no single justification or meaning behind them, and generalizations must be avoided. All the same, mainstream cinema must be acknowledged as male-made, male accepted and male pleasing. Men themselves are subjected to marginalization and pressure onscreen, but it is the women onscreen and within my own life that have informed my consciousness of female identity. I want to be enveloped by, ensconce myself in the infinite beings of these women’s identities, which reach wide and far into the depths of others and themselves and that which surrounds them in order to define their true meaning. Identity is a fluid term; female identity even more so. It cannot and should not be defined, but learned from and expressed.

The backbone of this work is feminine identity, who we are, where we come from and where we are going that informs who we are going to be, what we love and what we hate. The issue I am addressing is the patriarchal need to define a woman’s identity, a need that exists within one’s own sense of lack of control. Power, might, seeing, conforming... all of these facets of creating and defining are replete with false adjudications and ideals of womanhood, what a woman should want and how a woman should be. I want to stop this

nonsense, call into question that which society believes it knows about women and make people see from a different stance, one they perhaps have not considered before. I want them to recognize their psychology, their turmoil and their own identities and how reliant they are on the molding of identities of others.

Being one's self is all we own in this world. This is a metaphysical, mystical and ambiguous statement, especially if we do not believe we know or own our own selves. In *Lost in Translation*, Charlotte laments, "I just don't know what I'm supposed to be." This existential crisis, this problem of self particularly exists at the moment when we realize we are required to choose our identity. Society wants to put pressure on the surface, believing that by choosing a career, a *métier*, a tangible path therefore you are choosing who you are. It all goes much deeper than that; a woman who chooses to become a housewife does not abandon who she is at the kitchen table, in the delivery room, or whilst ironing. A businesswoman does not become herself through stocks and bonds. We discover ourselves through what we do, yes, but also how we think, what we believe in, through our creative efforts, through our values. It is cinema, amongst other things, that wants to show us how to be, and unfortunately cinema is ripe with sexism, ageism, misogyny...all of these things women must endure, both behind, in front of and on the screen. Women everywhere consume these messages, believing that their sexuality is wrong, they are contemptible for not looking a certain way or wanting certain things. There is the other side of this, too, where women feel validated based on the female characters onscreen; I personally have aligned myself with everyone from Meryl Streep's strength to Mindy Kaling's humor. This is the beautiful part of cinema, the bit that tells you it is okay to be yourself.

In early cinema, women were classified into different groupings, defined by their sexuality or virginity. As time went on, this changed: women were still defined within these types, but were also branching out into characters that had opposing traits, that were binaries within themselves, elastic and ambidextrous, accomplished, wrong, smart and stupid. It is becoming, in my opinion, increasingly easier to be one's self, to make mistakes and lose control whilst also keeping one's autonomy and intellect intact. This is the hardest beam to balance; allowing all the different, opposing facets of one's identity to come together and sing in harmony, to be all right if they do not. This is female identity; accepting yourself for who you are, for not bowing to the pressure to deny one's self, and loving the giant messes you have made and the successes you have grasped. Nothing is ever perfect, nothing ever will be perfect; there will always be false stereotypes onscreen, women who are the devil or the angel, the epitome of the unrealistic, ideal woman. The point is to recognize and embrace all sorts of women, not to ask them to renounce themselves and their developing identities. Female identity onscreen is evolving; it is growing, being quashed and then the spring comes, and with it, a rebirth. The representation of women onscreen will never be definite, will never be absolute, and this is a good thing, because it is representative of how female identity is indefinable. Evolution of female characters will continue to be both rational and unfair, coarse and stunning. It is up to the audience, to the female viewer to recognize who is the character onscreen worthy of emulation, whose identity rings true enough to stir something within, to make a woman feel most like herself.

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