

Portrayals of Gender and Sexuality in American Cinema

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Portrayals of Race and Gender in Film

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Cinema has a profound affect on a society's culture. Simultaneously, cinema reflects the attitudes of a society. One aspect in which this is evident is in the gender constructs of a culture. When watching film, the viewer identifies varying portrayals of people, from differing ethnicities to differing gender identities. These images have much to say, not just about the filmmaker but the culture in which the filmmaker works (Miller, 18). For instance, a reliance on stereotypes to communicate with the audience is not a lack of imagination on the part of the writer or director, but a sign of the collective understanding held by the culture in regards to the typed group. Also, the more a stereotype is repeated the more widely accepted it can be believed to be accepted by a culture. In addition, shifting attitudes in a culture will be reflected on the screen, to the point that selections from cinema throughout the existence of the medium will display the social evolution of a group. It can also show how fluid gender constructions truly are. For instance, do the gender constructs of the silent film era mirror those of today? The 1950s?

Stereotypes are created out of varying sources, including those that are backed up by "allegedly *scientific* theories," and tend to be conservative (Benshoff, 47; Miller, 16). In cinema, the potentially offensive use of types is put to work by filmmakers to ensure their meaning is the clearest it can be, and thus ensure a broader appeal with the potential audience (Miller, 15, 17). This use is not intentionally meant to be controversial or hurtful to the viewer, but is understood as a means to create meaning, "*cognitive consistency*" as Thomas Cripps describes in his article "*The Dark Spot in the Kaleidoscope: Black Images in American Film*" (Miller, 15-17, 100). In this way, stereotypes are used as "literary conventions lacking in conscious political intent and surviving only so long as they serve the popular artist's purpose" (Miller, 17).

My assertion that film drives culture and is simultaneously driven by culture is not held by everyone who studies the field. For example, Daniel J. Leab writes in his article

“*Deutschland, USA: German Images in American Film*” that “social scientists, and others concerned with the impact of film on public opinion are sharply divided as to whether movies influence an audience, or whether they mirror its ideas” (Miller, 161). It appears that the social scientists that Leab is invoking have forgotten about the very powerful propaganda campaigns waged by both Allied and Axis powers during the Second World War. These campaigns were successful because they mirrored and ideal the cultures wished to achieve, but they were also showing the cultures as they were. This creates what Sharon Willis terms the “politics of representation” (Willis, 156).

Gender is also created out of a *politics of representation*. In *America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies*, the authors, Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin, write that the “American cinema for the most part functions under the dominant ideology of White Patriarchal Capitalism” (Benshoff, 78). This focus is evident in the films created in the United States. The majority of films center on the white male and his struggles or joys (Benshoff, 278). To maintain white male patriarchy in American film, legal institutions were put in place. Yvonne Tasker states that “changing patterns of censorship and regulation, leading up to and since the adoption of a US rating system in 1968, have been shaped by different forces and have in turn produced different effects within the post-classical cinema” (Tasker, 11). Tasker’s statement infers an active effort to control what films were made and the images and messages they contained. These constructions were politically framed.

Benshoff and Griffin’s assertion that images on film are based on a white male patriarchal ideology should not infer that men are exempt from gender role stereotypes. They are quick to remind their readers that “men are conditioned by ideology and cultural standards just as much as females” (Benshoff, 257). For example, the statements “boys don’t cry” and “take it like

a man,” the belief that a man should be a good provider, and the specifications that can be ticked off to define what makes a *real man* are all constructs of ideological gender roles (Benshoff, 258). Within the white male patriarchy, “mass media and other organized entertainments ...endorse a vision of masculinity that the men watching are encouraged to imitate or at least measure themselves by” (Benshoff, 258).

At the outset of cinema, the common male hero was a take charge, rescuer (Benshoff, 261). It seemed that the hero had something to prove, and perhaps they did. “In general, male actors since the early twentieth century have constantly had to deal with aspersions on their manhood,” as the profession was deemed unmanly by American society (Benshoff, 263). This is one example of several pressures placed on men to adhere to the ideal of *manhood*. During the period of the Great Depression, film brought the image of a “rougher, tougher sensibility” and “violence toward women” to deal with male “insecurity about male dominance” in the face of economic hardship and joblessness (Benshoff, 264). The slapstick romance genre of Screwball Comedy played with these anxieties (Benshoff, 266). For instance the clumsy and indecisive Cary Grant, who is strung along by the clever and assertive Susan in *Bringing Up Baby* (1938). A few short years later, cinema of World War II pushed cooperation and male bonding over the previously promoted ideas of individualism to both “celebrate the soldier” and mobilize the right attitude to win the war (Benshoff, 267). In the post war years, the new genre of Film Noir “expressed postwar anxieties and gender relations,” in brooding, moody stories and images (Benshoff, 270). Noir exemplified the “heightened state of masculinity in crisis” (Benshoff, 270). This genre reflected the world weary attitudes of men cynical in the face of a world that had produced the likes of Hitler and saw women take up their jobs with little or no difficulty. Despite the reality of the post war world, film noir “resolve[d] its gender tensions in favor of its male

protagonists, but the films themselves seem to indicate just how threatened and unsure hegemonic patriarchy was during the postwar years” (Benshoff, 273). From this, it can be inferred that the ideology regarding men in this period was facing a crisis.

In the late 1940s, social problem films “began to tackle the issues of returning war veterans...alcoholism and mental illness” (Benshoff, 85). This period of film revealed the doubts men felt toward the gender construction they had lived under up to this point. It also suggested that men had a breaking point, and that they could only function as *men* so long as their psyche was not assaulted or damaged by hardship and horror, as evidenced in the returning soldier. Unlike today, the diagnosis for PTSD was *shellshock* and those suffering from it were marginalized. Breaking down mentally was considered unmanly, thus questioning their masculinity and leaving such men in a gender limbo where they might experience homosexual panic (anxiety that a gender identified heterosexual has when his/her gender comes into question making him/her identify as a homosexual) (Benshoff, 336). Masculinity at this time was very rigidly and specifically constructed, with no comfortable place for those who fell outside the parameters.

Despite these very real concerns, social problem films waned in the 1950s. This shift in subject matter was due to the rise of the Red Scare. In the face of communism, America and its capitalistic society could not be portrayed as “less than perfect” (Benshoff, 86). The fear of communism helped to produce interesting new beliefs surrounding the construction of masculinity. The early Cold War era saw the rise of a “newer softer type of masculinity,” and the admission that “living up to the masculine ideal was a difficult task, if not altogether impossible” (274). This latter aspect helped to address the issues of the previous decade brought on by the war. It drew on the teachings of the Method School of acting, where actors became the character

they portrayed before the camera. Method acting is intrinsically emotional and placed men in a position where they had to express emotion instead of repress it (Benshoff, 274). For a group unused to such expression, it made for frequent attacks of panic, manifested in a need to control the social consensus.

The 1950s were a period of wavering confidence, stressed by emotional conflicts and the hardships of conformity (274). In the private sphere life had also “become increasingly corporate and conformist” (Benshoff, 275). Commuter trains, suits, interchangeable jobs, were all subjects film addressed in response to the culture (Benshoff, 275). Though some “acknowledged the strains that some men were feeling, almost all of these films...prop up and support patriarchal ideals by the end of the film” (Benshoff, 275). Despite actors being able to flex their emotions on screen, it was simply not acceptable in the private or public sphere outside of film. In other words, boys still did not cry unless they had a mental ailment to excuse them, and even then it was something to be severely ashamed of and hidden. 1950s film busily examined all kinds of neurosis and hysteria, preoccupied with the science of psychology to justify social controls (Benshoff, 276). Ideology of the time reflected a suspicion that “the nation’s mothers [were] turning virile American men into sissies” (Benshoff, 275). In response to the emasculation, the following decades saw a backlash against the feminizing of men which culminated in the 1980s action and slasher films (Benshoff, 276, 283-289). The result was a recycling of old film tropes such as the reemergence of the stereotypical grizzled and confident *warrior* character role (Benshoff, 276). The old tropes were sometimes updated to show the hero as a worn out aging man with lurking insecurities (Benshoff, 276).

An interesting comparison in male gender roles can be found in the film *Psycho* (1960) between Norman and the private investigator Arbogast. Norman and Arbogast are polar

opposites and represent the late 1950s ideology surrounding male behavior. The private investigator is hypermasculine, so much so that Norman appears boyish beside him, if not weak and foolish. It could be said that Norman murders Arbogast in a move to reassert his power. However, he completes this murder in the guise of his mother. This move reinforces the suspicion that men are under the yoke of their mothers and don't wield the real power. For making her boy look foolish, for daring to question her son, Mother Bates kills Arbogast to rescue him, thus completing the polar opposition between Norman and Arbogast. However, Norman's weakness and disappearance into his mother's personality mark him for destruction. He has no place in society, because as a male he does not conform to the gender role laid out for him. His adoption of a female persona is completely unacceptable. Norman's non-conformity also increases the tension of the film. It ensures the audience will not feel pity for him and thus reinforces conformity to expected roles.

The standard gender role for men was not necessarily accepted without question by all men. The images in *Psycho* very well can and do question conformity to the ideologies of the late 1950s mainstream culture, behind the mask of enforcing expectations. If this were not the case, there would not have been a social crisis in the post war era, or a backlash against women in the decades after. Benshoff and Griffin assert that there was "dissatisfaction over traditional gender ideals" that helped to "fuel [the] countercultural movement of the 1960s" (Benshoff, 276). Popular features of the late 1960s reflected the new "male-male buddy film" formula, such as *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969) (Benshoff, 281). In these features, women were kept on the periphery and the heroes died by the end. "Homosocial bonds...[were] more important than any other type of relationship" (Benshoff, 281). Women were basically present to reinforce heterosexual ideals due to the prominence of homosocial bonding that could be

interpreted as homosexual love affairs (Benshoff, 281). Buddy films of the period also displayed a depressed or despondent sentiment, perhaps indicating loss or a sense of missing something. “Far from joyous affairs...they often wistfully recreated earlier eras...and/or pessimistically suggested that American culture was coming undone because American masculinity itself was in decline” (Benshoff, 281). The characteristic of these films is the male gender role in flux, as it struggles with old identifiers and modifies itself to new meanings. During this period there was also an increase in “images of violence against women...sexualized violence...graphic violence... extended rape sequences” (Benshoff, 281). It may have been a psychological exercise to reclaim power, as it was evident that women were being punished for asserting their independence (Benshoff, 282). Female independence put the traditional heterosexual male gender into question, making their purpose as *protector* and *head of the family* a weaker construction in the face of equality. This is important to understand, because masculinity was defined not just by what it was, but also in comparison to what it wasn’t—female. With the sexes drawing toward equality, definitions based on opposition were in crisis.

Out of the flux and crisis of the previous decade, the 1970s gave rise to “the sensitive man” (Benshoff, 283). Benshoff and Griffin state that this was due to “Hollywood’s tentative feminism” which redefined the traditional heterosexual male gender role (Benshoff, 283). In the cinema of the 1970s, men were now shown as “primary caretakers...for their children” and generally more in touch with their sensitive side (Benshoff, 283). Themes of these films were: “

Men can surpass women as parents...reinforce[ment] of traditional gender roles...although slightly altered...still assert patriarchal centrality and importance by being men in the first place. (Benshoff, 283)



This *sensitivity* was not to last. Film of the 1980s rebelled against such notions and “seem to suggest cultural anxieties about” both male and female gender roles, (Benshoff, 287). As the male and female gender continued to move closer to equality, homophobia or homosexual panic saw gender definitions shift to extremes. For instance, hypermasculinity was the ethos of the 1980s hero who would “save the day, often single-handedly” (Benshoff, 287). This hero was marked by mistrust for both men and women, but was someone men respected and women threw themselves at. As for the sensitive male of the previous decade, sensitivity was dealt with as comedy. The 1980s are “theorized as an era in which the ideals of second wave feminism experienced a sort of cultural backlash” (Benshoff, 283). It “coincided with the presidency of Ronald Reagan” who “aligned with fundamentalist Christian groups...[who] sought to curtail programs and policies as child-care programs and school loans” (Benshoff, 283). These groups “ironically hid behind family values” and tried to reinforce patriarchy, (Benshoff, 286). They were reactionary, based on ideology of an imagined 1950s as the “better era” (Benshoff, 286). To the present, “most Hollywood films still center on men—their problems and their adventures and still tend to objectify the image of women” even if she is placed in the leading role (Benshoff, 278). For instance, the film *Working Girl* (1988) is centered around Tess, but she is objectified in several of the scenes. For instance, when Tess dances around topless as she vacuums, or when she stands before the mirror in the lingerie Nick bought her for her birthday.

*Working Girl* also provides the viewers with more than one version of the male heterosexual gender role. Through the characters of Nick and Jack, the viewer can make note of the differences between working class men and white collar men. The gender expectations between classes hold a few similarities, but have varying meanings that begin with outward

appearance and then encompass behaviors and attitudes. This suggests the inference that gender is a learned trait, mimicked from others in our surroundings.

Gender expectations are challenged and examined in Kimberly Peirce's *Boys Don't Cry* (1999). The story is of Brandon Teena a transgender teen. The title of the film infers the persistent gender expectations for the heterosexual male gender. Scenes touch on what it means to be male and how Brandon navigates his anatomy and gender in interactions with others. Thus, it describes the social construct that gender is, instead of the persevering belief that it is anatomically based.

Examples of the male gender construct include the way Brandon physically carries himself (the man stance), his ardent pursuit of several women, and how he behaves with his cousin Lonny. Brandon dresses himself, stuffs a sock in his pants, cuts his hair short and also hides a prosthetic to make his gender thoroughly believable should he be faced with an intimate encounter. Brandon exhibits aspects of hypermasculinity, speeding in the opening scene and engaging in bar fights and dangerous stunts with his friends. Other gender constructs are reflected through the perceptions of the other characters. While Brandon does his level best to portray the gender role as he perceives, his gender is called into question on several occasions. For example, the *tiny hands* comment by John after the bar fight over Candace or when they refer to him as a *wuss*.

The film challenges the ideology that gender roles are specific and rigid, and that proving you're tough and strong, can hold your liquor, or live hard does not make you a man. How Brandon sees himself is what makes him male, because right beside him, you see the women living just as hard. In this way, Brandon passes for male with little suspicion because gender constructs are not based on anatomy, but on carefully orchestrated social behaviors. What

complicates matters for Brandon is his ability to treat women better than the non-transgender males. In his weaker and boyish appearance, he challenges the rougher hewn males, calling their masculinity into question. It is up to these other males to prove conformity to old gender roles, by stealing back power through raping and killing Brandon. However, instead of viewing their actions as the proper reaction, both John and Tom are clearly depicted as criminal. This is the ultimate challenge of the film, that violent adherence to conformity is the truly immoral conduct.

The film *Big Fish* (2003) takes the viewer through the life of a dying man via the safe genre crossing of the dramedy (drama-comedy). Through his embellished stories, Edward shares his travels through the 1950s, 60s and 70s. The central thrust of the film is the father son relationship and what is commonly referred to as a fish story. Of his father, William says, “we were like strangers who knew each other very well.” He feels betrayed by his father, Edward, believing that he told only lies about his life. His expectation was that his father should not embellish his history, but instead tell the truth. This is because William felt that his gender model, which he built on his father, was also fabricated. William is left wondering what kind of father he will be to his unborn child, if he has no *true* stories to tell him/her of their grandfather, thus reinforcing his own perception of male heterosexual gender.

When William returns home to spend time with his dying father, both men confront their rocky history. He starts to find out that not everything his father says in his stories is lies. The disillusionment William feels for life as he matured made his father appear foolish and weak. However, that was not his father’s intention but a construct of William’s own doubt. In the end, William comes to understand that both manhood and immortality can be reached through the legacy of the stories we tell.

Big Fish uses a light drama and comedy combination to confront the emotions men feel when facing ambiguous gender identity, as men struggle for meaning in the face of death. Edward and William are both updated versions of the sensitive heterosexual male. The displays of quiet strength and muted confrontation show the ambivalence that the gender still feels toward their emotions. The fish story may even be construed as an allegory for the tale that men weave around their gender constructions, much like the way that *Boys Don't Cry* proves that gender is a dynamic manufactured set of behaviors.

Just as constructed is the traditional heterosexual female gender role. Female gender role expectations are often built from the inverse of male gender expectations (Benshoff, 257-276). Also, stereotypes of women were “drawn from the gender roles and representational codes of the Victorian Era’s...paragon of virtue” (Benshoff, 218). Cinema reflected the culture and society’s expectations of women. Willis states that “women are constructed as both subjects and objects of fetishism” in the gaze of the camera (Willis, 150). Tasker concurs with this assertion writing, cinema has “an interest in the eroticized portrayal of the female body” (Tasker, 12). The interpretation is that the camera is situated only in the male heterosexual gaze. Subsequently, the objectification of women came into fashion through images like the “scantly clad chorus girls” as a “treat for men” (Benshoff, 228). Also, “in developing roles for women as fighters, action and crime movies have made use of stereotypes and images including the *butch* type, the tomboy and the *feisty heroine*, alongside the conventionally glamorous and/or sexual action women who continue to populate the drama” (Tasker, 68). Roles for women have been based on male heterosexual fantasy, and often highly limited to the range of prostitute or nun (Tasker, 3). The shades between these extremes included the *femme fatale* (Tasker,5), the good virgin vs. the bad whore, faithful wives and well behaved daughters vs. “explicitly sexualized” unfaithful women

and the deadly vamp. Even the flapper is a “hegemonic negotiation” (Benshoff, 218-219, 221-222). Though a young independent woman, who rejects stale Victorian roles and engages in sex out of wedlock, the flapper is still out to find a husband. In addition, women enjoyed greater job roles behind the scenes of the filmmaking process than usually attributed to them. However, these positions were limited to the ideology of what constituted woman’s work, such as screenwriting and editing to name a few (Benshoff, 223-226). As the studio system rose, the parameters film was made under shifted from “artisanal” to “corporate” and women’s options declined, (Benshoff, 225). Women who wanted to work in traditionally male roles (producing or directing) were forced to set aside femininity and negotiate their positions by “becoming one of the boys” or mom (Benshoff, 225-226). “Many of the strong female roles...were curtailed” and “smear campaigns” were waged to put pre-code actresses like Mae West out of work (Benshoff, 228).

In response to the limited mobility women experienced under the construction, feminism was created. Feminism is the idea that women are equal to men and that any deficiency lauded as proof otherwise is a fabrication of societal expectations and stereotypes. Because of this association, the feminist movement (often described as waves) has historically been tied to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s (Benshoff, 279). However, despite the common cause, women found “that in the many civil rights groups fighting for equality and freedom, the focus was entirely on equality and freedom for men” (Benshoff, 279). This was due to the tradition of feminism being “*demonized* in the mainstream” for the destruction of civilization (Benshoff, 220). It also developed out of how “women’s oppression occurred internally” through the ingestion of “ideological state apparatuses of family life, notions of domesticity, and femininity”

(Benshoff, 280). In other words, women were conditioned by media and other outlets to mold themselves to a gender construct predetermined for them.

The feminist movement brought the indoctrination of women against their will to the fore of politics. Feminists organized themselves into political action groups, hoping to have greater sway over sexual politics. One of these groups was The National Organization for Women (NOW), which was formed by middleclass moderates (Benshoff, 279). Other groups “formed to pursue radical agendas” that were “violent against men and the entire patriarchal system” (Benshoff, 279). However, the majority of feminist groups were simply “conscious raising groups,” seeking the exposure of the woman’s plight in inequality (Benshoff, 279).

Opponents of each wave of the feminist movement cited women’s independence as the single cause of the breakdown of the nuclear family, which would directly result in the crumbling of society. They also cited social Darwinist theories and science that proved that women were the *weaker sex* and not at all the equal of *men*. The long standing conservative opposition to the feminist movement culminated in the death of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) in 1982 which made it a crime to discriminate on the basis of sex, (Benshoff, 286). During this period, conservatives openly mocked the “ideals of feminism,” coining such terms as *feminazi* and altering the acronym NOW to mean the National Organization of Witches (Benshoff, 286-287). In addition, they painted all feminists as ugly, man-hating-witch-lesbians. These descriptors have long been treated as negative labels in American culture. This succeeded in causing fear of being labeled a feminist, a fear that persists to today (Benshoff, 287). These attacks can be blamed on the conservative desire to cling to male gender ideology in the 1980s, which caused a renewal in the “pressure to prove how tough” men were, instead of examining how the inequality of the sexes adversely affected them as well (Benshoff, 287).

Reviewing cinema over the decades of its existence can reveal how female gender roles were actively and carefully constructed like their male counterparts. For example, melodramas were labeled as women's film, although they were created by men who could only assume what a woman would want to see in a film. The melodrama film-story centered on "family and home environment as the proper sphere for women" and provided lessons on a woman's experience through images of sacrifice and affliction. The melodrama also imagined women's afflictions based on the foolish competition between women, which was thought to be an evil of femininity. The genre also faced its female protagonist with a choice between a man and a career (Benshoff, 228-230). The proper woman could not attain both and truly be happy. In translation, these films suggested that "finding that right man is the ultimate source of female happiness," and, to assure this exact message was received, spinsters were depicted "as unhappy, bitter, [and] hardened" women regretful of their choices (Benshoff, 230).

A further exhibit of how gender is constructed came during World War II. Benshoff and Griffin explain that "when America entered the war, a great shift in the nation's conception of femininity was purposely engineered" (Benshoff, 231). Men went off to war, leaving no one to work in the factories. Companies and the economy required a new workforce. As such, all of the social constructions regarding women to this point had to be undermined to make women want to go to work at the posts their men vacated, (Benshoff, 232). However, this construction was not without its consequences. Women were now aware, via experience, of their abilities and independence. The end of the war came with a reversal of 1940s female gender construction, symbolized by *Rosie the Riveter*. To convince women of that their place was actually back at home, the late 1940s and 1950s created the *feminine mystique* (Corber, 196-197). Benshoff and Griffin describe the reimagined gender role as a "culturally constructed image of passive,

homebound, uneducated, eroticized and cosmeticized femininity” (Benshoff, 279). The good woman who knew her place was often placed in opposition to the femme fatale, a major construct of post war film (Tasker, 120-121).

The negative portrayal of women in the femme fatale role did not always have the result that was intended. Instead, feminists regard her as a far more complex characterization of woman:

The appeal of the femme fatale for feminism may lie in...a tradition of representation in which women are mysteriously seductive but evil...a transgressive figure who misleads the hero and who is punished for her pains...her potentially transgressive refusal of patriarchal values. (Tasker, 120)

The Production code had laxed some by the 1950s, so that films “while attempting to reinforce traditional ideas about a woman’s correct behavior and social sphere” began to show an “increased interest in adult themes and treatments,” offering a more sexualized *good girl* to counter the femme fatale of the previous decade (Benshoff, 233). A few filmmakers were now able to critique marriage, the very institution that the female gender was constructed around (Benshoff, 280). One of the most common critiques of marriage was aimed at the American mother: the overbearing mother who made sons into sissies (Benshoff, 275-276). The Cold War era carried on with this construction into the 1960s until the counter culture challenged social beliefs on many levels.

The 1960s witnessed what was termed the second wave of feminism (Benshoff, 278). American society’s ideas of gender were called into question through the activism they witnessed in the previous decades, and a growing awareness through their collective experiences of the rigid and often harsh roles placed on individuals (Benshoff, 278). Despite this movement,



1960s Hollywood “did little to open ranks to women,” because the studios were “not anxious to court controversy” (Benshoff, 280). Instead, the “new Hollywood woman was figured as a more overtly sexualized version of the 1950s sex kitten,” aided by less stringent production codes which had all but faded into disuse (Benshoff, 280). Because of this, “women’s liberation” has been remembered more as a “sexual liberation” (Benshoff, 280). With the Production Code long demised, a new form of censorship was called for by groups fearful of the explicit language and images. The Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) ratings system was put into effect in 1968 (Benshoff, 281).

Sexual liberation came to all genders in different ways during the 1970s. Out of this liberation arose the “Sexploitation cinema” (Benshoff, 280). This genre of film was marked by increased “female nudity and simulated sexual encounters” (280). The popularity of this type of film further “weakened local and state censorship laws” and promoted “the creation and circulation of hard core pornographic X-rated films” (Benshoff, 281). The huge amounts of money pornographic film made inspired Hollywood to “incorporate sexploitation tactics and appeal,” hoping for the same box office results (Benshoff, 281). The shift in thinking during the 1960s and 1970s, most likely influenced by the second wave of feminism, resulted in better roles for women and more job opportunities for her behind the scenes (Benshoff, 238-239). This is not to say that inequality was resolved or gender roles had been perfected. After all, the gaze of the camera still objectified the female figure (clearly evident in the nature of pornographic film) and women’s “power [was] still linked to her ability to use her sexuality” (Benshoff, 244-245).

The subsequent decades have been an extension of this form of thinking with few alterations. During the 1980s and 1990s, women in the workplace became a popular theme (Benshoff, 287). These films exposed the hardship faced by women in their working lives, from

competition among women à la melodrama based sensibilities and sexual harassment by bosses who had no legal bounds to bar them from such abuse. For example, some films tried reinforcing patriarchy while blaming women for other women's suffering: *Working Girl* (1988), *Disclosure* (1994) and the slasher films of the period can be considered incarnations of this type of cinema (Benshoff, 288-289).

*Working Girl* is an odd mixture of pro-feminist sentiment marked by patriarchal ideology. Tess is continually sexualized, while fighting that sexualization. For example, when Tess's male boss sends her to meet with someone who may be hiring in a higher department than theirs. The intention is that Tess will prostitute herself for promotion. Instead, she puts him in his place and leaves. Also, each decision Tess makes is riddled with punishment from the society that surrounds her, once symbolized in her being left on a median in the highway in a rainstorm, another time in having to take other positions in the firm because of her male bosses' expectations and her failure to fulfill them. Furthermore, Tess is unable to get her foot in the door without the help of a man. If she did not call on Jack to assist her in the buyout of a radio station for their client, she would not have gotten the ending the film plays out to. Instead, her boss would have accepted the accolades for herself and Tess would still be a struggling secretary.

The film *Disclosure* imagines women of success as bad people. In this aspect, the film is about a woman who has "overstepped [her] bounds and needs to be put back in [her] place" (Benshoff, 288). Sexual harassment, though a serious abuse, becomes a means to punish a successful woman, demonizing her like the vamps of a near century before. It places men in the role of victim to women's manipulations. A resurgence of film noir, termed neo-noir, came in both the 80s and 90s. *Disclosure* could be categorized as one of these films, evidenced in its dark lighting, sinister overtones and the threat to male superiority. Typical characterizations of women

in neo-noir are still the role of black widow or the femme fatale, (Benshoff, 289). However, the energy of the film casts “suspicion and distrust among men and women” both (Benshoff, 289).

Other than roles as the secretary with a heart of gold or the demonic boss, women saw “sporadic integration...into the action cinema.” However,

the majority of big-budget action movies continue to focus primarily on male protagonists and to position women in supportive, often romantic...[and] sidekick/romantic roles, though diverse, indicate the place of the female character” as second to the traditional heterosexual male. (Tasker, 6)

It is true that “the increased inclusion of women in action roles has both contributed to and been part of the ways in which the genre has evolved in recent years” (Tasker, 68). The image of woman in such roles challenges accepted “gendered binaries through her very existence” (Tasker, 69). The portrayal of this female on the screen gives new examples of gender definitions, despite its ability to also label such a woman as *unfeminine* (Tasker, 69). Women in action films are often defined by the men their role supports, (Tasker, 74). But what happens when there is no male role to support, as is the case in the more recent *Resident Evil* (2002, 2004, 2010, 2012) series? Alice, played by Mila Jovovich, is often on her own with men in supporting roles to her. The series shows improvements in gender constructions, but Alice is still highly sexualized in her many costumes. I would argue that, in answer to the call for equality from feminists, men are now being sexualized by the camera as well. Part of the reason for this is the disparity in gender behind the scenes. Women may have some input today, but most films are directed and written by men and still center on male issues and reinforcement of the patriarchal ideology, (Benshoff, 283). However, without a “new era of female filmmakers” the *Resident Evil*

series would not be possible as it is currently imagined. Despite its foundations being built in the hypermasculine world of videogames, this series is proof that gender equity is improving. We can also cite the relationship between the director and the star, as they are engaged and this may have caused the director to be more open to improved representations. This supports the idea that ideas of gender are based on experience with individuals and not derivative of anatomical specifications.

There is also proof in gender equality improvements to be found in the founding and adherence to affirmative action laws (Benshoff, 291). Unfortunately, the film industry (as well as other industries) is slow to catch up with the culture out of fear of losing money. Therefore, “to be successful in the mass marketplace, [women] are obliged to work within the same narrative structures and formal codings as are male filmmakers” (Benshoff, 291). In addition to this restriction, women often “enter the director’s chair by first succeeding in some other aspect of the entertainment industry,” such as writing, acting, television and independent filmmaking (Benshoff, 291). This experience can condition them to the procedures already in place. Those who still wish “to address feminist concerns...are usually forced to work in more independent modes,” struggling for funding and exposure of their work (Benshoff, 293). Sadly there is “no real organized movement of independent feminist filmmaking in America at this time,” perhaps a result of the feminist demonization of the 1980s (Benshoff, 294). Despite this disparity, more women are choosing to work behind the scenes and “challenge Hollywood form or critique patriarchal structures” (Benshoff, 278).

Gender expectations reach beyond traditional male and female societal expectations. Gender can be described as a class construction and even a racial construction. For example, Tasker describes prostitution as a “way of figuring class as labor for women within a cinema

wary of invoking class explicitly” (Tasker, 5). This is because prostitution allows women into the places and ranks other women are barred from. Tasker also states, the prostitute makes “women’s work...a kind of sexual performance” and that “her visibility suggests the lack of any other place to go” (Tasker, 4-5). Due to the nature of cinema, and its location in the patriarchal gaze, women in film are “already defined in terms of the body and performance,” turning her sexuality on the screen into exchange (Tasker 6). The idea of “sexuality as exchange” is implied through the reception of the viewer, who comes to the cinema with various experience and psychology (Tasker, 3). The viewer is often not aware of the signs and symbols, yet the implication is understood because the association is automatic. Women occupy a lower class than their male counterparts because of their sexualized image, and this is evident in popular cinema where sexual exchange “function[s] as...both symbol and symptom of a gendered classed and raced hierarchy” (Tasker, 3).

Gendered class is also constructed in dress codes. Tasker explains the importance:

the separation of gendered dress codes (and their transgression) from discourses of class, race, ethnicity and sexuality produces only a partial understanding of cross-dressing and its cultural significance. (Tasker, 21)

In other words, “cross-dressing isn’t only an issue of gender, but one of class” and the issues are ultimately inseparable (Tasker, 21). Marlene Dietrich’s performance in *Morocco* would be one example of the interconnected discourses. Dietrich kisses a woman before turning her attentions on a man. Her behavior is excused because her state of dress. In her tuxedo costume and in the setting of the performance, Dietrich bears the signs and status of maleness, giving her exclusion from the expectations of the audience that she be only a heterosexual woman. The implication is that the upper class is excused from every-day social mores, wrapped up in a dismissive air of

“it’s just for fun” playboy attitudes (Tasker, 23). Critics also review the gendered aspects of cross-dressing in such films as *The Crying Game* (1992). However, they forget the cross-class or cross-culture dressing also involved (Tasker, 22).

In films like *The Crying Game*, *Boys Don’t Cry* and *Working Girl*, “cross-dressing is almost always about status” (Tasker, 26). This is because the construction of the female gender is also the construction of a class rank, and is also “one from which many women are excluded” (Tasker, 26). Because the viewer often defines ideas by their opposite, these images often give insight into the gender in which they contrast. For instance, Tasker says, “narratives of female-to-male cross-dressing are about gaining status, then those which involve men putting on women’s clothes are to do with accepting rules and limits” (Tasker, 33). In addition, when people put on the costume of another class, say the blue collar worker who puts on the outfits of a white collar worker, or vice versa, they also are accepting the rules and limits of that class construction. Also, there is “cultural cross-dressing” by which individuals of one group adopt the customs, actions and costumes of another group (Tasker, 21). This is often described as *passing*, which is simply defined as pretending believably to be part of one group when the individual belongs to another (Tasker, 28). Traditionally, passing is a racial idea. Benshoff and Griffin define it as “people of color deny their racial or ethnic backgrounds in order to be accepted as white” (Benshoff, 55). It can be successfully modified to include gender and class ideas of a similar intention.

Cross-dressing of any kind is not about having fun or playing *dress-up*. In the case of either *The Crying Game*, *Boys Don’t Cry* or *Working Girl* “*passing*...is also bound up with pain, associated as it is with fear of discovery and exposure, but also with a loss of identity” (Tasker, 28). In the first two films, “gendered cross-dressing seems both challenging to and predicated on

a notion of *essence*” (Tasker, 32). Both Dil and Brandon fear exposure, as they have based their identity on the person they portray, not who they were born as. The pain associated with this is having to conform to social expectations that do not make sense to them, because both characters understand identity is a social construction we constantly build, and not something born into us. Dil and Brandon are successful at questioning society and its construction of rules and limits. Both of these portrayals are associated with stereotypical lower class diversions, such as bars and brawls, labor and poverty. Neither Dil nor Brandon are seeking to escape the class they have constructed themselves into, but rather they seek a way to remain. In *Working Girl*, Tess also challenges rules and limits, but to escape the class construction she feels imprisoned by. Tasker writes that Tess’s experience is typical of female roles in cinema (Tasker, 35).

In all three of these films, the working class people are defined by stereotyped traits. Tess’s fellow clerical staff, Brandon’s group of friends, and Fergus’s sphere of acquaintances are less educated, of gaudy tastes, and owning a vernacular (dialogue or accent) that points to both. In each film, the cross-dressing characters are preoccupied by expectations of landing a spouse and laboring in small opportunity jobs. It’s not just about putting on clothes to be a man or woman. Dil and Brandon are far more complicated than that. For instance, Dil is a hairdresser, which firmly places her in the labor class. She also experiences very typical labor/middleclass experiences, such as being physically abused and dominated by a boyfriend, the death of a boyfriend who is a soldier, the penal system, and the lower class entertainments of the Metro bar and karaoke. Brandon also suffers abuses at the hands of men, when they find out he is anatomically a woman. He too finds fun in lower class entertainments at bars, including karaoke. Though Brandon doesn’t have a job, he is associated with the labor and working classes through Lana and her friends, and the common experience of arrests and prison terms associated with the

lower classes. Tess sums up the frustration all three of the cross-dressing characters feel: “I’m not gonna spend the rest of my life working my ass off and getting nowhere just because I followed rules I had nothing to do with setting up.” Dil and Brandon would agree with her, though for somewhat different reasons.

Another character who might agree with Tess is Marion. In *Psycho*, we are introduced to Marion as a single woman also working in a clerical position. When the Texan waves his stack of money in her face, peppering his story about his spoiled daughter with sexual advances, it becomes evident that the limitations of her gender and class become unbearable. Marion decides to steal the money, to better her situation and also to make a statement against the society that set the rules and men like the Texan who abuse them. It’s not overtly clear how Marion views the money as a way to “buy off her unhappiness” in light of its theft being a crime that will make more misery for her. However, the advances of the Texan and his story about his daughter fan the flames of her unhappiness, pushing her to make the vengeful move anyway. This shows that she has identified money as the real means and symbol of class construction; that which gives the upper classes their freedom and opportunities and that which she needs to escape her status.

The relationship between Dil and Fergus in *The Crying Game* is doubly complicated by the fact that Dil is black and Fergus is white. Fergus’s cohort in the IRA, Judy, makes light of this racial mixing. Ethnicity, race and gender are all political constructions controlled by a white patriarchal society, mirrored and enforced by western cinema. To better understand these constructions, it is best to define them clearly. Ethnicity, according to Benshoff and Griffin is “a social grouping based upon shared culture and custom” (Benshoff, 47). Race is traditional separation of human beings into categories, usually defined on skin tones and physical attributes. Thus, racism is the “belief that human beings can be meaningful categorized into racial groups



and designated as superior and inferior on the basis of those characteristics” (Benshoff, 47). Included in these constructs are “political boundaries” of nationality and the breakdown of sexual barriers through “the sexual or romantic mixing of races” known as miscegenation (Benshoff, 47, 79).

The breaking down of barriers or the deliberate breaching of such barriers is often treated as taboo. For instance, the representation “of vexed social relations...[and] discussions about interracial sex” often raise controversy in the viewing public (Willis, 158). A common taboo topic is the depiction of how “white men struggle with black men over white women” (Willis, 138). This gendered racial construction often examines the fear of social expectations breaking down and proving that white men are no better or inferior to other races, thus calling the entire system into question. For those who have bought into the white patriarchal system, it can be a jarring subject. To temper controversy, the framing of “social problems in identities not in political struggles” diffuses and misconstrues the root in the response not the cause. For example, “these discussions propose that feminism—not sexism—and race—not racism—are the central issues for debate” (Willis, 160). Additionally, the presentation of film (the camera’s perspective and the dark room of the cinematic experience itself), lends a note of truth to such framings through the use of voyeuristic positioning of the viewer, “as if we were eavesdropping on a private moment where things can be spoken that would not be spoken *publicly* in a more heterogeneous space” (Willis, 184). In this way, white patriarchal constructions are enforced. Challenges to the social order have come in numerous incarnations, such as the films discussed above. In these films, the violence of keeping the order paints that order *black* instead of *white*, blurring separations and dissolving them. Unfortunately, these are not as frequent as they could be.

Gendered racism is an often unseen force in political discourses, and especially in film. Victims of it are often categorized as being victims of one or the other, but not both, sexism and racism. For instance, are African-American families portrayed as dysfunctional in cinema because they are generally female headed—in direct opposition to white male patriarchy? This is a good question because “focus on the *problematic* black family...characterizes [it] as fatherless and female-headed” (Willis, 162). Kimberle Crenshaw states that “the place where African-American women live is a political vacuum of erasure and contradiction...whose very nature resists telling” (Willis, 185). How is one to bring together divergent ideas of black womanhood, where one telling relates her as strong and the other telling depicts her as weak? Where one claims her lower class and ignorant and the other places her as a queen and wise? These contradictions serve “popular cinema’s constant framing” and reframing “of women in terms of sexuality...modified by discourses of *race*” (Tasker, 4). Likewise, as Willis argues that black women are marginalized in black film, how is it possible to contradict such a statement from within her ethnic group? (Willis, 161-163). Because of these ambiguities, black women are forced to hover between or betray their race or gender in speaking (Willis, 186).

Gender violence is another aspect in which accepted or expected roles may be challenged. For instance, Willis suggests that “a spectator who feels assailed by the film’s vicious images may not read them as empty and may instead question the ideological function of such forcefully violent acts” (Willis, 141). The rape of Brandon in *Boys Don’t Cry* provides the audience, even if they’re uncomfortable with what they see, a means to question the ideology of the men committing the rape. Likewise, in the repeated abuse Brandon endures from hypermasculine, heterosexual-conformist, male gender identified individuals throughout the film (when they chase him through the trailer park to punish him for dating and corrupting their

sisters, cousin Lonny's verbal abuse, and his parent's rejection). Against this violence, meant to ensure Brandon's conformity to anatomy and assumptions of its meaning, Brandon fights back by enduring despite them. It is Brandon's anatomy that decides how he will ultimately be dealt with by society for his failure to conform. Willis explains, "women are bound to body and therefore to a menace that needs to be sadistically mastered, punished, and contained" (Willis, 149). Brandon, being anatomically a woman, threatens the men he surpasses in occupying the male gender role, proving it is not an anatomical inheritance nor so rigidly definable as they believe.

In the beginning of *Psycho*, Marion has stepped out of the construct of the acceptable female gender role. "I hate what she's become...I hate the illness," Norman says of his mother in such a way as to foreshadow the exact sentiment he will feel toward Marion when he commits her murder. Norman is disgusted by Marion's lies and her body, just as he was disgusted with his mother's taking a lover and his subsequent murder of her for it. From their short conversation in the back of the hotel office, he determines that she must be punished for her refusal to conform. Norman's violence against his mother was unmanly and an affront to his gender, which is supposed to be designated as the protector of the weaker constructed woman. Ironically, the mother is constructed as the protector of her child. These competing discourses may be at the root of Norman's confusion and inability to construct his own identity successfully. Thus, he becomes his dead mother to masculinize her and protect himself as he saw she should have in her role toward him. It constructs his masculine identity as protector, keeping it safe from being constructed as a murderer. As his mother, Norman feels he must protect himself from women like Marion by getting rid of them. The construct of Norman's confusion takes on new levels when the Sheriff and his wife reveal that Norman's mother had been involved with a married

man, and poisoned him and herself over the discovery. The viewer eventually finds out that Norman killed his mother and her lover, placing him as the keeper of morality. He does not take any apparent sexual satisfaction in his killing of Marion. Even when he spies on her, there is only a slight titillation, but on the part of the audience. Norman is simply verifying Marion as his target and that she does need to be punished. Her black lingerie is the symbol of that assurance, as contrasted with the white lingerie from the opening scene. She is no longer *innocent*, but an impure non-conformist who needs to be punished before she spreads her *disease* of ideas. I say this because, in order to ensure consensus on gender roles, there must be consequences for breaking out of them.

Violence is gendered in other ways, such as the weapon itself. Horror films, or slasher films, can be analyzed to view the weapon of the murderer (who is almost always male) as a phallic symbol, (Benshoff, 289). They are marked by “subjective camera shots, male aggression and sexuality” (Benshoff, 289). The use of camera angles communicates an unspoken language the audience must interpret, a perspective based on the male gaze (Willis 136). *The Crying Game* is less violent in its reception to dealing with non-conformity, but makes use of odd, quick angles to show Fergus’s reaction to finding out that Dil is anatomically male. Fergus’s discovery is allegorical of current heterosexual society’s response to a lifestyle that does not flush with the consensus. Fergus becomes agitated, slaps Dil across the face and proceeds to get physically ill. However, Fergus begins to move beyond this reaction and attempts to redefine his attraction and other emotions toward Dil. He is still assertive toward Dil, trying to maintain dominance and his male role which is now in question.

Dil’s reaction to nearly losing Fergus is to get drunk, tie him to the bed and then when Judy comes for him to kill her. Killing Judy was about avenging Jody, but also securing Fergus

from her grasp. Dil's act of violence puts Fergus in jail as the latter takes the fall for the killing of Judy. In prison, Fergus still does not like to be called pet names, but he has been secured by Dil away from women and put into a position that he cannot leave her. In this way, violence becomes a means to reinforce intentions regardless of social expectations.

A far more violent film, *Boys Don't Cry* uses John and Tom's rape of Brandon as a lesson to transgressing gender expectations and non-conformity. The act is nothing but brutality, meant to assert dominance of the male heterosexual role through anatomy. Brandon is reminded throughout the sequence of his female body and their male body. In addition, they make Brandon promise to keep the secret of what they have done under threat of being killed if he decides to talk about it. Unsurprisingly, Brandon blames himself to soothe them and speak to the expectations of the viewer. John and Tom kill Brandon and Candace for their roles in the social transgression the film covers. When they shoot, Brandon it is to secure expected roles and silence him from any further challenges. They end by violating him once more through stabbing, the knife is a phallic symbol asserting their dominance and silencing challenges to the meaning of manhood.

To this point, it has become evident that gender is tightly defined with sexuality. It has also become evident that cinema is complicit in creating the expectations of social decorum while also challenging those expectations. Benshoff and Griffin write that "American film works ideologically to shape the way that both individuals and the nation as a whole make sense of sexuality in general" (Benshoff, 310). In addition to film, science and the medical profession were used to construct *proof* and theory to back up ideology regarding sexuality. For instance, "when the term *heterosexuality* was first coined...it was used to describe a condition of disease" (as was *homosexuality*) and meant "someone who had sexual relations with someone of the

opposite sex outside the bonds of marriage” (Benshoff, 311). Under such construction, this term was at first “used to demonize racial/ethnic minorities and members of the lower classes” (Benshoff, 311). Throughout much of early Hollywood even until recently, Homosexuality was considered “predatory, pedophilic, decadent and monstrous” (Benshoff, 322). By the above explorations, it is evident that those understandings have created a long lasting fear of non-conformist sexualities.

Ironically, at the beginning of cinema, “Hollywood found itself in a paradox when it came to sexuality (Benshoff, 311). In an effort to make more money through larger audiences, “films regularly included some sort of sexual titillation” (Benshoff, 311). The belief that Hollywood was a bastion of decadence has also been long held:

By the 1920s, the American film industry was growing at an amazing pace and its dizzying success created a slightly more open atmosphere for people to experiment with all sorts of untraditional behaviors, (313)

behind the scenes and off set. This is to say that in the beginning, Hollywood gained a stereotypical reputation for being “highly populated by homosexuals” and the newly moneyed and immoral elite (Benshoff, 313). This may have been a self-fulfilling reputation, attracting homosexuals to the film industry. With their addition to the filmmaking process, homosexuals used the medium to “undermine the primacy of heterosexuality” (Benshoff, 313). However, sexuality was censored in all aspects during the Classical Hollywood Era, due to the “hedonistic vision of Hollywood heterosexuality” and the immoral perversion of other sexual constructions (Benshoff, 314).

Despite the vigilance of reform groups and censorship laws, the public remained interested in taboo subjects, such as engaging with *the other* through attending black nightclubs,

gay bars and drag shows (Benshoff, 315). “Lesbian chic” became a popular “facet of the period” (Benshoff, 315). “By the 1920s almost every Hollywood film contained a romantic plot or subplot,” which attempted “to unite a male-female couple” and was “presented as the only sexual orientation” (Benshoff, 309). This is heterosexism. “Individuals who did not maintain traditional gender expectation” were most likely not seen as gay or lesbian even if they embraced or kiss, because of heterosexism (Benshoff, 312). No one believed there was any such thing, as it had been marginalized and made invisible. The invisibility of alternative sexualities left homosexuals to be read as “homosocial comrades not homosexual lovers” (Benshoff, 312). Thus, homosexuals were required to be depicted on screen as “conspicuously different...[and] often defined by their sexuality alone” (Benshoff, 310). This gave filmmakers quite a challenge as “sexual orientation does not always manifest itself as highly visible social markers...characters must perform sexuality” (Benshoff, 310). The performance of homosexuality led to “images of effeminate men or mannish women,” and also the creation of other “visual gender codes” such as the “pansy character” to be clearly understood (Benshoff, 310, 312). However, early cinema “never depicted homosexual embraces or kisses” and “homosexuality was rarely acknowledged in early American cinema” (Benshoff, 311). Despite this unspoken ban on non-heterosexual-conformist depictions or implications, “many silent film comedians...cross-dressed in their films for comic effect” (Benshoff, 312). It can be suggested that these films and images created the impression that homosexuals “were men that acted like women,” and that homosexuality was a matter of gender confusion or inversion (Benshoff, 312).

To regulate film and ensure its cooperation in molding societal mores and expectations, Hollywood developed the “Production Code, [and] State and Federal obscenity laws.” These controls were used to “regulate onscreen heterosexuality” and turn any other sexuality invisible

(Benshoff, 311). Will Hays, director of the Hays office, was charged with creating and implementing the Hollywood Production Code in about 1930 (Benshoff, 314). The code “forbade the depiction of any forms of explicit heterosexual display, or *sex perversion*” (homosexuality), but was not fully enforced until 1934 with the Seal of Approval provisions, which assigned a number to each film reviewed and accepted by code enforcers (Benshoff, 314). It must be understood that “enforcement of the Production Code...did not mean that sex completely disappeared,” but instead became muted and disguised, requiring the viewer to be a bit more clever in their interpretation of the screen images and dialogue (Benshoff, 316). Film employed “connotative homosexuality” to “represent gay and lesbian characters for the next 30 years” (Benshoff, 316). Because of this, the “sexual freedoms of the 1920s evaporated after the Code was enforced in 1934,” retreating to the closet and behind closed doors, effectively making them all but invisible (Benshoff, 317, 331).

Fearing persecution, Homosexuals engaged in “marriages of convenience” to hide their sexuality. As such, “most gay and lesbian people in American were forced to lead double-lives” (Benshoff, 317-18). If their true sexual identity was brought to light, they could suffer greatly. Homosexuals were “regularly fired from jobs, thrown out of leases and social groups and arrested and harassed, beaten and murdered” (Benshoff, 317). Novels and other adapted artistic pieces were “watered-down” and some enforced conformity by preaching “the heterosexist myth that a good woman can cure a gay man with her sexual charms” (Benshoff, 322). This gave rise to other myths such as conversion therapy and the use of harsh stereotypes (Benshoff, 322).

However, not all homosexuals were willing to hide their sexuality. The director George Cukor, was pegged by the industry as a “woman’s director” because of his open homosexuality, but still enjoyed steady work and an open lifestyle, though limited by industry standards of



invisibility (Benshoff, 318). Cukor's example shows that "while it was possible to be queer and have a career in Hollywood during the 1930s, one's life and livelihood were hampered to a greater or lesser degree by constraints of the closet" (Benshoff, 319). In addition, "early European cinema had more sophisticated take on human sexuality," but was unfortunately "censored or re-edited for American audiences" (Benshoff, 312). Within the borders of the United States, "American avant-garde films [contained] not only overt representations of [homosexuality], but also a critique of Hollywood's representation of sexuality itself," challenging the reform groups and the Hays Office's authority (Benshoff, 324). Such challenges remained on the fringe of cinema and well out of the mainstream. "Camp and the Underground Cinema" became methods and tools of some homosexual filmmakers who fought for a voice in the filmmaking industry (Benshoff, 324). Camp is defined as "highly stylized approach to decoding Hollywood film," associated with a homosexual-urban gay male reading strategy (Benshoff, 324). Camp was critical, "often using disparaging humor," the idolization of specific female stars, and had an "onscreen attitude of phoniness" (Benshoff, 325). The underground cinema "allowed members of fledgling gay communities to meet and organize their status as art" (Benshoff, 325). This "helped to legitimate camp and other aspects of homosexual culture" (Benshoff, 325).

It seems that the general public was ahead of perceived cultural mores in a few aspects. For example, "by the 1940s sex was a topic that was being increasingly discussed in various venues" (Benshoff, 319). In previous years, such as the 1920s, people regularly engaged in experimentation (which I mentioned before), so this is not surprising. With the coming of the Second World War, carefully constructed definitions of sexuality and gender began to crumble. Benshoff and Griffin state, "under conditions of war the American populace was predominantly

segregated by gender...many gay and lesbian people met others like themselves for the first time...realizing they were not alone, they began to form groups and subcultures” (Benshoff, 320).

Dr. Alfred Kinsey helped change the belief that homosexuality was a mental illness. The Kinsey study saw “human sexuality was a fluid concept based upon social conditions” and “forced a reconception of heterosexuality” (Benshoff, 320-321). Homophobia still pervades, and is defined as “not showing affection to members of the same sex,” presenting itself as the fear that affection toward members of the same sex will bring about homosexual encounters or strengthen latent homosexual desires (Benshoff, 321). Dr. Kinsey’s and other “psychiatric and psychoanalytic concepts were also being absorbed into mainstream culture,” giving the general public a “scientific vocabulary with which to discuss sex and sexuality” (Benshoff, 320). During the war, psychiatrists used this vocabulary and the new theories to “identify and weed out homosexuals from the armed services” believing that such individuals “would weaken the fighting caliber of their units” (Benshoff, 320). Sexuality “was still mostly understood as an either/or binary, reducing diversity of human sexuality to simplified concepts of gay and/or straight,” reducing the population of people who did not conform to one of the definitions to invisibility or into an ostracized class (Benshoff, 339). Examples of the several human sexualities as they are understood now are as follows: homosexual, heterosexual, bi-sexual, cross-sexual, disabled sexualities, sado-homosexual or heterosexual, and straight queer (Benshoff, 339). It is only in recent years that consideration of people identifying with such sexualities has been opened up.

In the post war period, the film industry was again brought into the labor of building a national consensus in the Western nations of the world. Thus the period saw that, “Homosexuals

were considered second only to communist sympathizers as the largest national security threat” (Benshoff, 321). Communist and Homosexual “witch-hunts” were engaged in by authorities on a large scale, mostly to enforce conformity to the new consumer based ideology they wanted to create in response to the spread of communism (Benshoff, 321). Thus homosexuality was effectively linked to communism (Benshoff, 321). According to authorities, homosexuals were security risks due to their vulnerability to black-mail by subversive parties.

In line with the new consensus, “queer gender-bending touches were also used in Hollywood films to demarcate people who were villainous or criminal,” for example the Alfred Hitchcock film *Psycho*, which equates a gay sexuality with criminal mentality (Benshoff, 316). There is extensive use of psychological typing in Norman, both through his portrayal on the screen and in the Doctor’s explanation of his actions at the end of the film. Norman’s taxidermy hobby takes on sinister implications when shown in light of his many murders. This is because in well-known profiling of serial killers, it has been shown that their history includes a period of animal abuse and trophy keeping. Hitchcock frames Anthony Perkins in a shot with the owls and other birds of prey positioned in the shadowy office as if about to descend on Marion at his call.

In addition, Norman stammers and appears uncomfortable with Marion. Their brief conversation in the hotel office reveals his easily triggered volatile nature. In all his other interactions with people who come to the hotel, he behaves in a shy boyish manner and stutters nervously when pressed. These scenes imply a stunted development, exemplified in him still sleeping in his boyhood room surrounded by toys and childish things. In order to commit the murders, he must adopt another persona. The psychiatrist blames the mother’s clinging unbearable mothering which was a key point of anti-communist arguments, and also why boys became gay. Their relationship became symbolically incestuous. These were signs of latent

homosexuality, as understood in the 1950s. However, Norman's cross-dressing isn't especially homosexual. It is connected more with his split personality disorder than a result of impeded sexual development. However, in the Cold War era where homosexual's were demonized as subversives, and all cross-dressing was considered most definitely homosexual, it was a clear symbol of homosexuality to most viewers, despite Hitchcock's challenge to that understanding. Yet, there are some questions left after viewing *Psycho*. Norman cross-dresses as his mother; could this act be to cleanse his spoiled memory of her? Is it to turn her from the betrayer of his trust (symbolically having cuckolded him) into an angel of punishment for wayward immoral people? Did Norman kill her because she had gone astray from the accepted consensus, committing adultery with a married man?

*Psycho* arrived at a time when the cinema was experiencing a waning in popularity. Blame for the reduction of box office receipts was placed on the advent of television and the paramount consent decrees (which gave theater owners the choice of what films they would show). In addition, independent films heard their audiences' requests for racier themes, and with improved reach to more venues, they could provide the subject matter moviegoers were after. In response, mainstream filmmakers began producing pieces that "dramatized dysfunctional heterosexual relationships and dealt with issues such as lust, desire, impotency, rape and sexual repression (albeit in still heavily coded ways)" (Benshoff, 321). This period corresponded with and took place during the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. The opening scene of *Psycho* is an example of the lax restrictions on depictions of heterosexuality.

The Sexual Revolution brought multiple cultural changes, intertwining with the counterculture the period was known for (Benshoff, 329). "Cultural, scientific and industrial developments aided and abetted the sexual revolution throughout the 1960s" (Benshoff, 330).

Some of the changes included a more accepting view of homosexuals. This change was brought about by the fact that “throughout the 1960s, many lesbians and gays joined the struggle for civil rights” (Benshoff, 324). Homosexual rights groups, such as the Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis, which were created in the post war era, had previously met in secret, often using aliases as they feared for their personal safety and livelihoods (Benshoff, 320). Their publications were persecuted under obscenity laws, but today they provide modern researchers with the insight into the writer’s sense of themselves and the times. The contributors could be said to think of themselves as mentally ill, sometimes looking for a cure, a struggle to conform to the ideology of the time period, (Benshoff, 320). Groups such as the Gay Activist Alliance and the Gay Liberation Front formed, along with festivals and parades to give solidarity to the people who identified with them. Representations of gays and lesbians on film began to increase after the end of the 1960s, but only with sporadic realistic images among the usual negative tropes (Benshoff, 332). Overall, the movement rejected middle-class values and the sexual hypocrisy of earlier decades (Benshoff, 330). It also saw “America’s political problems [caused by] repression, greed and hypocrisy” (Benshoff, 330). During the Civil Rights movement, “In 1961, the Production Code was amended to allow for the depiction and discussion of homosexuality, as long as it was done with *care, discretion, and restraint*” (Benshoff, 323). Still, movies “linked [homosexuality] to violence, crime, shame and, more often than not, suicide,” firmly keeping it as a symptom of mental illness, (Benshoff, 323).

A key event of the Gay Rights Movement was the Stonewall Riots, of June 29, 1969. The details of the riots were that “patrons of the Stonewall Inn fought back, tired of police raiding their bar” (Benshoff, 331). What ensued was three nights of riots, out of which they gained minority status and were at last able to demand equal treatment, (Benshoff, 331). Despite these

gains, and perhaps because of the inherent violence of the period, “until the rise of gay and lesbian independent filmmaking in the mid-1980s, the image of the lesbian vampire was arguably the most common representation of lesbians on American movie screens” (Benshoff, 317). This may have be resultant of the movement, because of the violence from both sides, and a long tradition of demonization, homosexuality was still painted negatively. Through independent film beginning in the 1980s, the more realistic films explored issues that homosexuals actually faced and cared about, such as romance, the closet, blackmail, job loss, internalized homophobia, and the underground culture in the cities, (Benshoff, 333). In 1970, *Myra Breckinridge* was released to audiences, depicting a heroic transsexual avenger. An outcry rose against the film from all areas of society, forcing Hollywood to avoid transgender themes until recently (Benshoff, 333-334). Similar backlashes in the 1970s, like the “Disco Sucks” attitude of white male adolescents, were attributed to the style’s connection with gays and blacks (Benshoff, 334). In addition, the late 1970s saw Conservative Christian groups form and frame the gay civil rights movement as a moral issue (Benshoff, 334). Despite them, in 1974, homosexuality was “removed from the American Psychiatric Association book as a mental disorder” (Benshoff, 331). In response to broader acceptance of non-conformist lifestyles, groups called the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition pushed the “family values” movement on the American society of the early 1980s. They were able to inspire a series of homophobic films, but this time efforts against homosexuality were met with protest, attesting to the changes the Sexual Revolution and Civil Rights had gained (Benshoff, 334). Thus, Hollywood has since responded with films that are increasingly more sympathetic to homosexuality.

Despite advances, homophobia continues to keep a hold on many members of American society and comes in varying forms. For instance, “America’s relative discomfort in seeing two

men in sexual relations as opposed to two women reminds one of how the *visual culture* in America often expects women to be objectified for the pleasure of a male gaze” (Benshoff, 335). Examined in such a light, it becomes evident that homophobia is based on a sexual identity crisis or panic, against the backdrop of a long period of heterosexist consensus building. In the early 1980s, it appeared the United States was ready for a real conversation, but the AIDS crisis created a deep panic throughout society when it hit, erasing most of the ground gained in the previous decades (Benshoff, 336). This first images of the crisis gave the “perception that only social undesirables such as homosexuals and intravenous drug users” contracted the disease (Benshoff, 336). Hysteria about homosexuals was renewed through hate groups and prejudice that used fear to deliver their message (Benshoff, 337). So successful were these groups that Congress even blocked funding for AIDS education to circumvent voter reaction at the polls when they were up for reelection (Benshoff, 338).

Fearful of a loss of progress in the face of the AIDS epidemic and the information blockade by politicians and hate groups, activists formed the groups ACT-UP, Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), and the Lesbian Avengers (Benshoff, 339). In addition, “television did an arguably better job in responding to AIDS than did the Hollywood film industry” (Benshoff, 338). Television networks funded several public service campaigns and mainstream media presented information to their viewers to help educate them on the crisis and get beyond the reactionary. Hollywood did attempt a response through the limited “social problem film format” where they “downplayed politics in favor of melodrama” and ignored racial and economic aspects of the disease,” failing to expose the disease in all of its dynamics (Benshoff, 338).

In the 1990s, the New Queer Cinema brought gay and lesbian film out of the closet and made it “more overtly political” (Benshoff, 343). This film form “challenged notions of tastes, form and ideology, as well as race, class, gender and sexuality” (Benshoff, 343). It also, “questioned models of essentialist identity formation and frequently challenged supposedly objective social constructs such as history itself” (Benshoff, 344). However, it can be argued that such film is “charged with snobbery and elitism” (Benshoff, 344). The Hollywood response to this new formula was to create a series of near misses and update the buddy film with the girl and her gay friend pairing (Benshoff, 348). There still exists an industry wide “fear that the public cannot accept a gay man or lesbian in a hetero-role,” and as such they are denied such roles in a discriminatory way, (Benshoff, 351).

Despite elitism and the recycling of old film formulas, there are some films that break through the cracks and present a message that challenges the consensus in such a way that they help to advance the discourses around their subjects. Two such films are *The Crying Game* and *Boys Don't Cry*. *The Crying Game* portrays gender as ambiguous and fluid, in the spirit of the Kinsey study. However, the film does depict Dil as a stereotypical, over-emotional, and desperate person. It can be argued that the filmmakers did this to open up a discourse on the feminine gender identity. For instance, Dil immerses her sexuality and being into what Fergus wants of her, attempting to make that sacrifice an act of love. It is hard to say that this show of absolute loyalty is actually a show of weakness or love, obsession or affection. It is not difficult to identify the root of the problem belonging to the construct of feminine gender ideals. If the female gender were not classed as second, or determined as requiring guidance due to weak wills and intellect, Dil would have had no issue asserting herself before the end of the film. In addition, the character of Fergus provides the audience a perspective on which to suture their



personality. Though Fergus reacts negatively to Dil's anatomical reality, he comes around more and more, much like society has come around to the reality of more than one sexuality. The film attempts to breach the wall that society has built to compel individuals to conformity in their private lives. It says that humans do not decide who they love based on anatomy as much as personality, as Fergus is still drawn to Dil after he found out she was a man.

*Boys Don't Cry* attempts to assert a similar message. As stated before, people have come to define sexuality in simplistic binaries. The reality is that things are not so simple. When Brandon's cousins demands he admit he's a lesbian, Brandon replies that he is not. For an outsider to this gender identity, the premise can be confusing, having only a few definitions to frame Brandon inside of. However, this scene asserts that there is a gender identity that falls outside the gay/straight dichotomy. Brandon identifies as a heterosexual male and feels trapped in his female body. He laments not having the money to obtain a transgender surgery and fears being an old man before he can raise money to do it. The difficulty of finding ways to come to terms with a limited understanding can manifest itself in violent ways. For instance, Brandon's own behavior is wild and dangerous. Those he comes into contact with, Lana's mother, John and Tom, the teenagers in the trailer park, all deal with Brandon's struggle through violence against Brandon. When Lana's mother says, you "exposed my daughter to your sickness," and "I don't want *it* in my house," she is revealing the attitudes that have stood for over a century in American society. Referring to Brandon as *it*, also reveals the lack of understanding surrounding these identities. Lana's mother also doesn't know who to side with when she finds out John and Tom have raped Brandon. As a woman, she is horrified by their actions. As a mother of the girl who is in love with Brandon, she is concerned over the pain this will cause her daughter. Placing Lana's mother in this situation gives the audience a means to view Brandon sympathetically.

Brandon's relationships also give the viewer a means to access empathy and understanding by helping them to define what they don't understand. Thus, John and Tom are more easily seen as hypermasculine, homophobic, heterosexist males. It is John's jealousy over Lana's affection that drives his reaction. He uses Tom's homophobia to win him to his side, and make him help in Brandon's assault. Encompassing this is a fear of sexual inadequacy, amplified by the threat from a less than *masculine* source.

The sexual revolution had an effect on sexuality of all types. During the 1970s, "pornographic films played alongside Hollywood films at malls and drive-ins" over a few short years until complaints evicted them to restricted showings in seamy venues (Benshoff, 330). Despite reform groups calling for censorship, exploitation film took in substantial money. They became direct competition for mainstream movies, "to compete, Hollywood began to address formerly taboo subjects" (330). At the same time, this was also a period when the system "fell back into formulas," through the rise of the "Film School Brats" or educated filmmakers who began to fill the ranks, after studying the Hollywood film in colleges and universities (Benshoff, 331). In addition, "over the last century, there have been tremendous gains in gender equality in many spheres of American life, but probably very few commentators would say the playing field is now level" (Benshoff, 296). This is because "mainstream Hollywood entertainment still negotiates gender in ways that uphold patriarchal privilege" (Benshoff, 297). In other words, Hollywood film continues to marginalize women and women's "issues while both subtly and forthrightly privileging men and masculinity" (Benshoff, 301).

It is wise to keep in mind that actors can only do so much through the portrayal of their characters, because "to step outside the perimeters of familiar character... weakens the power of the stereotype, and discredits the burden of its political message" (Miller, 18). Stereotypes are

made use of because they make the most easily identifiable characterization. Not every member of the audience will pick up on every clue, but the overall characterization will be successful as long as it works with visible identifiers (Willis, 177).

Cinema makes it evident that the vast majority of non-heterosexual people are still closeted (Benshoff, 351). Also, “mainstream Hollywood film...remains resolutely heterosexist” privileging a male gaze in almost all stories (Benshoff, 351). Sadly, it appears that it will take another generation, at least, before the audience understands that all “sexualities in contemporary American Cinema...[are] raced, classed, gendered, as well as shaped by notions of (dis)ability” (Benshoff, 352). In the last seventy-five years, cinema has both worked for and against social advancement, but in light of the last thirty years, there is a growing promise of moving beyond the consensus that has created limited opportunities and freedoms for all genders. As this history has proven in the past, advancement and understanding will eventually be reached.

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