

VAMPS, STRAIGHT GIRLS AND DUMB BLONDS – ABOUT FEMININE STEREOTYPES IN HOLLYWOOD CINEMA

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Hollywood cinema has become a target of many feminist attacks. According to feminists, Hollywood is the most classic example of men's domination cinema, through which women are objectified and trapped in conventions and stereotypes.

Feminists' statements are full of reproaches about sexism and lopsided portrayals of female characters. These reproaches pertain especially to the period in which Hollywood was dominated by the Star System. The process of 'making' film stars, especially female stars, was compared to the moulding of a product in order to sell it well. Moreover, this 'moulding' was executed according to the male concept of the female. In other words, women were portrayed as men desired to see them. According to feminists, this was the reason why female characters were stereotyped onscreen. This appeared at the beginning of the cinema and endured with few modifications for decades.

Especially significant for the debate on female stereotypes was Erwin Panofsky's text entitled *Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures*, in which he claims that Hollywood portrayed women in two ways: as "the Vamp" or as "the Straight Girl." These in Panofsky's view, "were modern equivalents of the medieval personifications of the Vices and Virtues."¹

Although in the same essay Panofsky also enumerates male stereotypes, such as the Family Man and the Villain, feminists delight in dwelling on the dichotomy of female stereotypes, claiming that: "As the cinema developed, the stereotyping of man was increasingly interpreted as contravening the realization of the notion of 'character': in the case of women, this was not the case."²

Panofsky gives practical reasons for typecasting, which was characteristic of the first films. He says that the speechless action of the movies was hard to understand for the first viewers, who were not familiar with the language of film. The fixed iconography was supposed to make the understanding of the plot easier for the viewers. Conventions and stereotypes allowed for infallible recognition of the personalities of onscreen characters.

Leaving aside all the emotions stirred by feminist discourse, the fact is that Hollywood and its Star System played an important role in the creation of the female

¹ E. Panofsky, "Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures." *Film Theory and Criticism*, eds. G. Mast, M. Cohen, L. Braudy, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1992, p. 240.

² C. Johnston, "Women's Cinema as Counter – Cinema." *Movies and Methods*, ed. B. Nichols, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press 1976, p. 209.

image. "It delivered varied models of behavior, helping in this way the process of forming the relations among people in a society, which culture was not mature enough."³

In multiethnic American society Hollywood cinema became a unifying bond which helped construct the culture and morality of Americans. And although feminists are right in saying that only the external description of female stereotypes underwent some changes, the essence of the division between Vamps and Straight Girls remained intact for years. This is why in the years of the Star System there were two kinds of women onscreen: the perverse and sophisticated ones who lured men to destruction and the virtuous ones, chaste and with angelic faces, who healed wounds with their kindness.

Marjorie Rosen is also right when she says in her excellent book *Popcorn Venus* that almost every decade had its own model of femininity more than once escaping the Vamp – Straight Girl schema. Rosen even notices a certain regularity: In the periods of more intensive emancipatory activity that is in the 1920s and 1940s, when women themselves persuaded the media to reflect their interests and tastes, we observe a scarcity of stereotypical portraits of women onscreen. However, in the periods of stagnation that is in the 1930s and 1950s, when social and economic factors confined women to their roles as homemakers, the media defined female style and beauty through the use of well-established stereotypes.

The first star of American cinema was Mary Pickford, whose appearance recalled Raphael's cherubs. Her childlike face enchanted the first moviegoers. Alexander Walker, in his famous book *The Celluloid Sacrifice*, attributes Mary Pickford's popularity to the fact that her appearance matched popular Victorian sentimentality and her admirers belonged to the nineteenth century middle class steeped in Puritan ideals. While Mary Pickford was a virtuous imp, Lillian Gish, who belonged to the same *emploi* of the Straight Girl, was the embodiment of Virtue and Innocence; she was a girl, who, when confronted with lecherous seducers, preferred to "die rather than lose her virginity."

Almost at the same time there appeared a type of star, who heralded the end of Victorian morality. On 7 May 1914 US Congress established Mother's Day. The following month the General Federation of Women's Club banned tango as too suggestive dance. In 1915 *A Fool There Was* was released with the lead role played by Theda Bara – the first *femme fatale* in the history of Hollywood. She was portrayed as "a demon of evil, sin and death". She was perverse and unchaste, beautiful and seductive. She impressed with a pale complexion, enormous demonic eyes, a flat chest and a plunging neckline adorned with a string of pearls. In all her films Theda lured into destruction a decent man, often a family man, who, obsessed with her sensuality, destroyed everything around him. Her vampire image on the screen went hand in hand with the off –screen legend of her Arabic descent, mysterious childhood and peculiar education. Hollywood publicity was so effective that when people saw Theda in the street, they fled in panic, believing that the onscreen illusion matched the reality.

³ S. Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, London, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press 1960, p. 233.

When the war was over the jazz era arrived. Cars were in common use as well as radio and the popular press. The younger generation wanted to give up the old lifestyle; there was a change in attitudes towards sex and morality. Women became more liberated, as the war had taught them independence. Mini skirts and short haircuts were the attributes of courageous and energetic women. A number of fit, self-confident and frivolous young women passed the screen those days. Coming from so-called good homes, they did not tempt or captivate men, yet they knew exactly what they wanted. It is difficult to determine to which stereotype the characters played by Louis Brooks belong; she impersonated nothing else but a typical, liberated and self-assured woman of the 1920s.

Greta Garbo was another mysterious stranger who was to become the next incarnation of the *femme fatale*. Her interpretation of the vamp was much more subtle and portrayed a much more complex personality. While Theda Bara was evil itself, Greta was full of unceasing, deeply touching sadness. Her villainy and fall as a *femme fatale* were not products of her corrupted soul but of an unfortunate coincidence. The audience who watched Greta Garbo's films did not condemn her deeds. They demanded happy endings, saying that such a beautiful woman cannot be damned, punished by death or left by her lover only because she made a mistake. Her later roles escape clear-cut interpretations as well as the vamp schema. Garbo was an excellent actress; she was able to provide her characters with deep a psychological dimension demonstrated by the wealth of emotional reactions and subtlety of dramatic gesture. Garbo played great female personalities such as Anna Karenina, Sara Bernard, Mata Hari, and Walewska.

These roles most certainly do not fit the standards described by Panofsky; they are not stereotypes, which can be classified easily. They are autonomous, unique artistic creations, which refute, if only partially, feminist arguments about the objectification of women in Hollywood.

The 1930s brought about further changes. These were the years of the Great Depression, which also affected Hollywood. The crisis brought about changes in morality and lifestyle. Women lost their self-confidence and independence; hard times and unemployment meant that they had to stay at home fulfilling traditional female roles. The cinema in the 1930s revived the frivolous and perverse vamp. The mysterious femininity of Garbo was replaced by 'fallen angels': subtle but perverse Marlene Dietrich, promiscuous and vulgar Mae West, and calculating and cynical Jean Harlow. Marlene and Mae were 'women with a past', experienced in the matter of relationships with men. Marlene, however was the only one capable of real emotions and sincere passions. She had plenty of European subtlety and delicacy. Her male outfit, together with a cigarette and a low voice became a symbol of feminine independence.

Mae West was an ultra-American vamp, devoid of subtlety and mystery. She was vulgar; her sexual experience was spiced with a pinch of sarcasm and the derision of American hypocrisy and prudery.

She started her film career at the age of forty with a great degree of both artistic and personal experience. In her films she portrayed an experienced 'cocotte' with enormous sexuality and a very sharp tongue. Americans quoted her piquant *bon mots* with pleasure. But even in her case the stereotyped image is only partly true. Joan Mellen writes:

"But there are two sides to Mae West. In most of her films she reduces herself to a sexual object in quest of economic security while she is, simultaneously, defiant and self-sufficient, seeking mastery over her life. It is the latter aspect of the West personality that is revolutionary. It projects a uniquely free image of woman rare for Hollywood during the 1930's, or now."⁴

Jean Harlow was also quite a vampish character. Although she played ordinary American girls, her soul was hideous. She was insolent, cynical and corrupt.

All these independent women who were regarded as the embodiment of the vamp of the 30s were a reflection of women's longings for strong and independent role models, which demonstrated a way of survival in the cruel and aggressive reality of the Depression.

Because depravity and promiscuity were so ostentatiously presented onscreen for the satisfaction of the part of American society that pursued hedonistic pleasures, the audience devoted to Puritan ideals had to find something for themselves. Hence, to restore the balance, a bevy of self-assured, sweet and funny child starlets appeared following in the tradition of Mary Pickford, who embodied innocence and virtue. The most famous of them was Shirley Temple, an angel with golden curls, who made 31 films in 4 years, giving a huge boost not only to the movie industry but also to merchandising industries, which made millions on books, toys and clothes.

The 1940s were the years of the war and the separation of families, which meant that a woman was once again supposed to be independent and resourceful. While the men fought, the women had to support their families, and remain wise and sensible. Such emancipated, educated and sensible women were portrayed by Katherine Hepburn. But *film noir*, which was well-liked then, found a new context for *femme fatale*, exemplified most interestingly by Rita Hayworth and her trademark wasp waist and wavy red hair. The film *Gilda*, by Charles Vidor, which created Rita, was also dethronement of the vamp; the slap in the face which Gilda received from her lover is a sign that a woman should stand by her man's side.

In the 1940s the audience demanded a new type of femininity. Everyone had had enough of the dangerous, tragic, mysterious and intellectually complicated vamp. Simultaneously, the Straight Girl type had become too boring and, needless to say, anachronistic. The movie industry had to find a different solution.

In the beginning of the 1950s the dichotomy described by Panofsky seemed to have become obsolete.

At the turn of the 1940s and 1950s an increased attention to beauty was evident among women. On the one hand, as Rosen claims, this was an effect of the abundance of free time enjoyed by women.

American statistics unequivocally showed that around 20 million perfectly fit and healthy women stayed out of work. On the other hand, this was an effect of the tremendous emphasis on womanhood in fashion; wasp waists emphasized by New Look by Dior or very tight strapless dresses were not functional or comfortable, but stylish and full of sex appeal.

Undoubtedly, this escape from the independent character of the 1940s was caused by "battle fatigue, the emotional strain of wartime separation and denial,

⁴ J. Mellen, "The Mae West Nobody Knows." *Film Theory and Criticism*, eds. G. Mast, M. Cohen, L. Braudy, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1992, p. 646.

accounted for both sexes eagerly embracing traditional social roles.”⁵ This is why in the 1950s women deliberately returned to traditional values such as a house and a husband. Pursuit of a husband in particular became a real obsession in the fifties, for the first time in US history women constituted the majority of population. In fear of spinsterhood, one in three American women got married before the age of nineteen. As a result of inactivity and the emptiness and dissatisfaction ensuing from it, women once again, as in the 1930s, became susceptible to the medium's influence. Social and economic barriers forced women back into homes, and the cinema, using female needs, created and fostered new canons of beauty. What was needed was not a vamp, however, but a type of a woman that would satisfy all the requirements of American society in the 1950s.

This type was the bad / good girl embodied by Marilyn Monroe. Marilyn descended from the tradition of dumb blondes, started already in the 1940s by Betty Grable. The word 'dumb' in English means both *stupid* and also *not able to speak*. A dumb blonde is a woman who is so stupid that she had better not speak at all. This grotesque woman, whose key attribute is her sexy body, was created by the president of Twentieth Century Fox Derryl Zanuck who, according to his biographer, would always start the launching of film stars and starlets in his own bedroom. Quite important in the whole process were 'pin – up girls', whose images (usually, as Andre Bazin claims, showing their top halves) were hung above the beds of soldiers separated from their wives and girlfriends.

Marilyn Monroe, with her widely known bodily attributes, childish naivete, and a subtle promiscuity met the tastes of the American public in the 1950s. She was a cross between Mary Pickford's innocence and Mae West's sexuality.

With her baby-doll image, she was completely different from the vampish and demanding beauties of the previous years. The characters played by Marilyn were beautiful, but silly. In comparison to them every man felt intelligent and every woman, even the most hideous one, more sensible. This is precisely what the creators of the dumb blonde model were counting on.

Dumb blondes played by Marilyn had something more, though. They did not charm solely through their bodies and silliness, but also through their wit. They amused and disarmed; they were comic characters, and their common sense and original sense of humor ruled out the one-sided interpretation.

Marilyn Monroe and the institution of dumb blonde in general became a topic for feminist debates in the 1970s. They quoted Marilyn's example as an illustration of how cinema objectifies women, portraying them as sweet and silly and as products to be used and exploited. What is overlooked are serious roles in which Marilyn exposed all her sensitivity, as in *The Bus Stop* or *The Misfits*.

Finally, we should determine whether Hollywood really forced unjust and harmful stereotypes upon women. This indeed was the case because stereotypes are always harmful, but it is worth pointing out that male characters were also conceived stereotypically, such as the Latin Lover, the Villain or the Good and Bad guys in westerns. The cinema has always been full of stereotypes.

⁵ M. Rosen, *Popcorn Venus. Women, Movies and the American Dream*, London, New York 1973, p. 260.

When the Star System died simply by becoming obsolete and when the author's cinema was born and started to present more complicated personality types, both male and female stereotypes survived in some cinema genres and in a very popular TV genre – the soap opera. Here the old distinction between black and white, angels and vamps survived, as well as the opposition of the good and the evil ones, and although all of that is unreal and conventional, it is much easier to comprehend than the reality.

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