



Women in Film: What are They Telling Us?

Curriculum Unit 95.02.04
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Introduction

I have chosen to write this curriculum unit on the topic "Women in Film: What Are They Telling Us?" for the following reasons:

(1) Lack of materials. In teaching high-school American history (from 1865–present) in New Haven, I have a dearth of materials the core textbook is particularly lacking about women.

(2) Serving the student population. My school, Career High School, has a preponderance of female students.

(3) Making school relevant. My students understand periods and movements in American history more readily through anecdotes, personal accounts and popular culture.

(4) Breaking down the walls between subjects. I also teach English at Career High, often to the same students who take one of my American history classes. Furthermore, I am encouraged both by my own convictions and experience and by district policy to develop units that are interdisciplinary. This unit, therefore, will be designed from the outset for that purpose. Film also lends itself very easily to an interdisciplinary approach.

(5) Going with the flow. Students learn well, believe in, and are certainly accustomed to films. To

my students, the visual image is credible.

(6) Teaching *how* and *why* as well as *when* , *where* and *who* . Teaching in a magnet high school for the medical and computer sciences and for business, I find many of my students while adept at learning bones, muscles and numbers lacking in two critical areas: an appreciation for the liberal arts/humanities, and experience in dealing with more abstract concepts. Film provides an excellent vehicle to fill this void in an easy, natural manner: A film is, at the same time, a narrative, a series of pictures, a social commentary, a technical achievement and an indicator of cultural values.

(7) Engaging students to be more rigorous in their viewing. At the same time, my students' familiarity with film generally disguises a lack of appreciation for the components, structure and design of films. This unit will be designed to move the students in the direction of being more rigorous and, hopefully, more participative in their watching of films.

(8) Increasing students' awareness of how information can be manipulated and how society's values are relativistic. Students are not generally aware that their ideas of good and bad for behavior or appearances, especially concerning women have been deliberately determined; that they have changed through time; that they reveal the prejudices of a particular period; and that they are subject to different interpretations.

Outline of the Unit

This unit is designed to cover a four-week (twenty-day) period, as follows:

Week One: Women and Themselves

- Their self-image
- Their identity and stereotypes
- "Good girl" vs. "bad girl"
- Love, career and maternal desires

Week Two: Viewing and discussion of Imitation of Life (1959 version)

Week Three: Women and Men

- Women, their age and men
- Men "dominating" women
- Viewing and discussion of *Tootsie* (1982)

Week Four: Black/white

- "Whiteness" as protection
- "Blackness" and sexuality
- The "tragic" mulatto
- "Blackness" as nurturing
- Viewing and discussion of the PBS video, *A Question of Color* (1992)

The Power of Film

Film is a medium that engages its audience primarily as spectators. Obviously images are very powerful. Consider the mathematics. If one picture is worth a thousand words, then a two-hour movie with twenty-four frames/second would be the "equivalent" of a book of $24 \times 60 \times 120 \times 1000 = 172,800,000$ words!

More seriously, the image is senior to the word in that the referencing of the former, in most cases (philosophy, perhaps, and related cerebral studies excepted) is more immediate, more primal and as politicians and advertisers have always known more influential.

And consider the environment of the movie theater itself: larger-than-life images; a darkened, magical room; often the proximity of a "significant other" who is sharing the experience. An influential place, indeed, particularly for planting mental seeds, and especially to a young woman seeds that could bear fruit years later. As Haskell observes:

It is fashionable to claim to have misspent one's adolescence in a movie theater, in escape from the horrors of dating-and-mating rituals, studies, and other impositions of an insensitive society... Many of the divisive forces whose consequences we are only now [in 1973] beginning to feel took hold behind that impassive facade. ¹

And if the environment of the movie theater was not sufficient in itself to impress the impressionable, there was the added "effectivity of the cultural imperialism of Hollywood" ² – the full power of the dream machine to change our lives. When Clark Gable takes off his shirt revealing a naked chest, sales of men's undershirts plummet. When Sean Connery drives the little-known Aston Martin DB-5 in *Goldfinger*, sales of that exotic British sports car take off. Like my students, we believe what we see, and we believe it is important.

Week One: Women and Themselves

1. Their Self Image

So, given all these powerful stimulants, given all the care, expense and manipulation that have gone into creating images of giant flawless female bodies, what's the effect these images have on the "typical" woman spectator? Is it the same, for example, as that for a man?

To Doane, there is a great difference. "The woman's relation to the camera and its scopic regime," she suggests, "is quite different from that of the male." ³ For the female spectator (a phrase, as we shall soon see, that Freud would consider oxymoronic) "there is a certain overpresence of the image she is [italics not added] the image." ⁴ Thus, the distance a man, by definition, might enjoy in viewing the woman on the screen which is the "essential precondition for voyeurism" is lacking, turning the process for the woman into a "kind of narcissism." ⁵

What, then, happens to the spectator if there is no distance between the image and herself? Does she just disappear? Perhaps. To the Victorian male, the problem of having a woman behave like a man whether she was a "spectator" or an "offender" was easily resolved: the woman was defined out of existence. Thus we have Freud's statement on the absence of the female spectator: "...to those of you who are women this will not apply you are yourselves the problem." ⁶ Women, in any capacity apart from that of reactive vessel as a mother perhaps, or a model of beauty or behavior were not really women at all. Lombrosco, for example, could argue that a female criminal could not really be a woman at all, that a female marked by an absence of maternal affection "...belongs more to the male than the female sex." ⁷

And if the non-existent female, perhaps seeking her relevance or her identity or maybe just some companionship had the courage in a film to pair up with another allegedly non-existent female, she was doomed to a tragic end. Consider *Beaches*. One of the women had to die. Or consider *Thelma and Louise*. Having taken a stand for their independence in a male-dominated landscape, the two women are destined, literally, to fall into a hole. Even as they desperately seek their freedom, fleeing from their vacant, male-defined former lives in Texas into the literal void of the Grand Canyon, their movement is contained within a "locus of absence." ⁸

So if movement in the outside world were impossible, severely restricted or doomed, what was left to the woman on the screen but movement within herself? This movement within defines the central question of love we see in the "woman's film." As Linda West points out:

It becomes imperative for [a] woman to reinvent herself, to create an identity that...will eventually enable her to go beyond herself to the world at large, to an interest in its history which she at last will have a hand in shaping. ⁹

To the outside world the woman was egoless, confined to a life without ambition, or at least without the worldly competition that made a man a man. The male, on the other hand, was not only permitted an ego, but his ego was held as "sacred." On the screen the woman's ego was "presumed to be nonexistent." (Ironically,

though, in real life, or at least in the film industry, a female star became a star precisely because she herself was "a woman supremely driven to survive, a barely clothed ego on display for all the world to see." ¹⁰) Conversely, the man on the screen was encouraged to be ambitious, to exercise that vaunted ego. And even if he went "too far" and crossed the line into criminality (as a spy, perhaps, or a criminal) he could still become a hero. On the other hand, if a woman went "too far" in the pursuit of the one career that same society allowed her that of being a beautiful image and crossed the line into vanity, she would quickly become "a figure of contempt, a laughingstock." ¹¹

Questions for Class Discussion

1. What are some of the differences in the way males and females perceive the world? Themselves? Actors of their same sex in movies? Actors of the opposite sex? Give specific examples from your life experience.
2. Who are some of the actors with whom you most closely identify? Do they in fact look like you? Act like you? If not, what are some of the reasons you identify with them?
3. For females students: Have you ever identified with a male character in a movie? For male students: How you ever identified with a female character in a movie?
4. It is said that women prefer films about relationships and that men prefer films about action. Do you think that is true? If so, how much of that preference do you think is socially (rather than biologically) determined?
5. Would you tend to judge a woman who has "gone too far" more harshly than you would a man who has "gone too far"?

2. Their Identity and Stereotypes

Far more than men, women were used as the vessels of fantasy for both sexes. To the man, the woman on the screen acted out certain stereotypical roles: the broad, the prude, the love goddess, the she-devil, the vamp, the virgin, the spinster and the sex kitten. For women, the female star served as a model: she *made* fashion. Housewives, store clerks and secretaries lived out their fantasies through her. Her clothes, her hair style, even the shape of her body was able to influence popular culture in a way that no literary heroine ever could. But this power held a trap. As with every public figure whose esteem is based primarily on image, there was always the danger of becoming sacrificed in a role, of "...repeating the public's favorite 'act' until the free agent, the unpredictable human being, disappeared behind the image." ¹² And for women more dependent than men on the whim of both fashion and their male bosses and afraid of losing the "few good years" allocated to an image that danger was greatly increased.

Questions for Class Discussion

1. List on the board the following roles. Ask each student in the class to decide for each role whether it is F = female, M = male, or B = both. Then tally the results for the class as a whole, write them on the board, and ask: To what extent did your answers reflect stereotypes?

- | | |
|--------------------------|------------------------------|
| ___ 1. Prostitute | ___ 11. Professional athlete |
| ___ 2. Police officer | ___ 12. Professional dancer |
| ___ 3. Mayor | ___ 13. Social worker |
| ___ 4. Lawyer | ___ 14. Sales manager |
| ___ 5. Nurse | ___ 15. Secretary |
| ___ 6. College professor | ___ 16. Auto mechanic |
| ___ 7. Minister | ___ 17. Model |
| ___ 8. Brain surgeon | ___ 18. Laborer |
| ___ 9. Soldier | ___ 19. Race car driver |
| ___ 10. Schoolteacher | ___ 20. Cook |

2. Are women more concerned than men with body image and fashion? With their age?
3. Aside from the money, would you really like to be famous?

3. "Good Girl" vs. "Bad Girl"

For those "few good years," however, her image might be in demand, and she could exist as an image, even as a "bad" image. But that "badness" was allowed (progress having been made from the days of Lombroso and his impossible female offender) only within a rigid dichotomy. The female, unlike the more complicated male, had to be either good or bad: "There were only two kinds of women in the world bad and good." ¹³ Yet even this artificial construct wasn't enough to comfort the worried male. After all, there was always the secret fear that an "apparently good woman might, at any unexpected moment, turn out to be bad." ¹⁴

The good girl/bad girl polarity is not always so blatantly depicted. The "bad girl" could take many forms. She could be a tease, or narcissistic, or, well, just too beautiful for anybody's good. For example, The *Breakfast*

Club (1985) presents us with five standard high-school stereotypes, all together for an unusual Saturday morning detention. Molly Ringwald plays one of them, the pretty prom queen. Michael Hall, in the role of the high-school intellectual stereotype, says it for all the kids at his school (and for all the audience too) when he tells her: "You're just so full of yourself, Claire." Yet another version of the "bad girl" in the film the loner/compulsive liar is played by Ally Sheedy.

The poles of all good and all bad are, by definition, mutually exclusive. This rule of exclusion could jump from the screen into real life, as in the case of three characters from the film *The Woman in Red*. In the movie Gene Wilder pursued Le Brock, the woman of the title sumptuous and unattainable. But in real life, he married Brock's movie opposite the ordinary and very attainable Gilda Radner.

The man's fear of (and attraction to) the non-marrying kind of woman was literally codified and vigorously enforced in the Production Code, the standard that equated the "precarious edifice of civilization [with] ... the holy institution of matrimony."¹⁵

Questions for Class Discussion

1. Is a male today more inclined than a female to judge a member of the opposite sex as *either good or bad* ?
2. Consider Madonna. She has prospered by fashioning, and marketing, a public image of herself as a "bad girl." To what extent is the distinction between "good girl" and "bad girl" an accurate reflection of our society? To what extent is it an artificial creation to market personalities?
3. Aside from "good/bad," what are some other commonly accepted social dichotomies?

4. Love, Career and Maternal Desires

Ironically, however, the conservative Production Code aided the cause of the working woman, in yet another instance of the woman on the screen leaping out of the theater into real life:

Under threats from the Hays office, women were no longer able to languish in satin on a chaise lounge and subsist on passion; they were forced to do something, and a whole generation of working women came into being.¹⁶

After a while the good girl/bad girl dichotomy was transformed into the motherhood/career dichotomy. This conflict between a woman's worldly urges (for career or for men) and her maternal duties would be played out repeatedly. In *Imitation of Life* (1959) the director Sirk constantly draws parallels between the "good" black mother (Annie) and the "bad" white mother (Lora) in both the way they related to their daughters and to their

work. Once again according to Lombrosco and other backward-thinking men a woman is not really a woman if she is neither good nor maternal. In *Imitation of Life* a particularly late 1950's version of the dichotomy goodness, badness, motherhood and career (and, as we shall soon see, blackness and whiteness as well) are all blended together in the "maternal melodrama which tends to pit the concept of the 'good mother' against the concept of the 'bad mother.'" ¹⁷ Let us jump ahead twenty years to *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979). There has been some progress. The man in this film (Dustin Hoffman) *does* learn how to suppress his ego drives, and he *does* learn how to be a nurturing and patient father. But the man is allowed to be a parent *and* have a career, whereas for the woman (Meryl Streep), it's still one thing or the other. The urge for female self-fulfillment, in this case through a career, is opposed to, outweighs and in fact precludes mother love.

A few years later, though, in 1987, Diane Keaton can have both and stick it to her former [male] boss, as well in *Baby Boom* . But the vestiges of the old pattern remain: She still needs an understanding man (a college professor, of course). And her knees still shake when she confronts her ex-boss in the board room. And, before she is transformed by the baby and Vermont, while pursuing her career aggressively in New York, like Faye Dunaway in *Network* , she can only have sex "quickly, like a man."

Let's return for a moment to the fifties and look at *Lucy Gallant* (1955). In this film Jane Wyman, playing the woman of the title, agrees to marry Charlton Heston. At the same time, however, she "sounds like a man," both in her ambition to make her shop bigger and better and in her reason for doing so: "I'm going to give them [the local women] an opportunity to celebrate the way they like to, buying clothes." When Heston asks Wyman who's going to run the store after they get married, this exchange follows:

Wyman: I am.

Heston: I thought being married is a full-time job. What about kids? How are you going to manage that? Move the maternity ward into the store?

Later, when the store burns down Heston lends her the money she needs to pay off her bank note. Older now and wiser, recognizing the need of being rescued by the man, Wyman finally tells Heston she wants to get married. This exchange follows:

Heston: Who'll mind the store?

Wyman: What store?

(Kiss.)

(End of movie.)

Questions for Class Discussion

1. Is a woman wrong for choosing a career over motherhood? Are the two mutually exclusive? Does a woman who works necessarily make a less effective mother?
2. What do you think of Charlton Heston's comment in *Lucy Gallant* : "I thought being married is a full-time job [for a woman]"?
3. Is a mother better able to raise a child than a father? Would you think a man is "less of a man" if he were a full-time househusband with a working wife?

Week Two: Viewing and Discussion of *Imitation of Life* (1959 Version)

Questions for Class Discussion

1. Neither Annie nor Lora have husbands. Who is bothered more by being single?
2. Both Annie and Lora have conflicts with their daughters. What is the nature of these conflicts? Who is primarily responsible for creating them? How are they resolved?

Week Three: Women and Men

1. Women, Their Age and Men

What choice (otherwise she faces death, disease, disgrace, loneliness and spinsterhood) does the woman have but to attract a man? If that's the case, then she must be considered attractive to men. And in the movies, where image is everything, being attractive generally means *being young* . Anita Loos sums it up in relating Irving Thalberg's advice to the young screenwriter:

When you write a love scene, think of our heroine as a little puppy dog, cuddling up to her master, wagging an imaginary tail, and gazing up at him as if he were God. ¹⁸

Is this another instance of the image affecting, rather than reflecting, the culture? After all, in former times, when stories were read or heard rather than seen in Moliere, for example, or in Chaucer the "older husband" was doomed to lose the girl to a man of her own age. "Older" women were considered in their prime. (To Plato the ideal combination was an 18-year-old male and a 35-year-old female.) Occasionally the idea of a relationship between a young man and an older and/or less attractive woman is held as intrinsically worthy (as in *Harold and Maude* with Ruth Gordon and Bud Cort). Generally, though, even when the older woman is treated sympathetically,

...she is never conceived of as being more than a passing interlude, a course in the hero's self-education. The older man-younger women arrangement, on the other hand, is viewed as something solid and normal. This is truer today [1973] in movies, and presumably in life as well.

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Questions for Class Discussion

1. What do you consider the ideal age difference between a husband and wife?
2. Do you agree that movies with their emphasis on the physical image have favored younger actresses?
3. What do you think of Plato's "ideal" couple a 35-year-old woman and an 18-year-old man?
4. In *Harold and Maude* Ruth Gordon (in her seventies) and Bud Cort (in his early twenties) are in bed together. Does that image repulse you? Would it be the same if their ages were reversed?

2. Men "Dominating" Women

Although women, as beautiful images and more, have been central to film as an industry, the closer women started coming to achieving independence in the real world, the more forcefully films reminded us that in the arenas of *real* power it's still a man's world. When in *Godfather II* Al Pacino becomes the new godfather and is confronted with [his wife] Diane Keaton's exercise of her right of personal choice in her desperate attempt to break the cycle of masculine violence/counter-violence his response is to close the door on her and isolate himself from any further communication between them.

In the acknowledgment of the natural leadership abilities of women and the need for men to appreciate and

learn from them film, expensive, conservative, always with a large audience in mind, has lagged behind other forms of cultural expression. For example, in *The Disappearance* (written in the same 1950's that feared Lucy Gallant on screen choosing a dress shop over having babies), Phillip Wylie postulated a situation in which men and women lived separately from each other in parallel but simultaneous worlds. The men of course started fighting right away, with disastrous results. The Soviet and American women leaders, on the other hand, met for tea and soon worked out their differences amicably, lovingly.

But this emphasis on "love," especially between same-sex peers in a non-sexual situation, so central to the "woman's film," was still held by many critics as an unsuitable subject for a great film. As Haskell asks in this context: "what could be more important than love anyway?"²⁰

Just as Lucy Gallant's struggling business needed the approving money from her male rescuer to stave off the bank, the reconciliation of sparring females is often made authentic only under the approving gaze of the authoritative (and white) male, as in the final scene of *Imitation of Life*, when

inside the car at the funeral, Sarah Jane lays her head on Lora's shoulder, Lora grasps Susie's hand, and all three are locked into the paternalistic approving gaze of [Steve] Archer. With the return of the white male, the family regains its tenuous composure and the authority of his gaze lends meaning to the scene.²¹

Occasionally a man will understand that, in order to complete himself, he needs to understand the woman both outside of him and inside of him. In some cases the quickest path to this understanding is for him to become a woman in disguise. We see this with Don Juan in the series of books by Carlos Casteneda about the development of a Yaqui Indian spiritual warrior. A young man with much potential but a limiting misogynistic view, Don Juan is tricked by his spiritual teacher into hiding out for several months as a young woman. That step becomes crucial in his learning process. We see a similar evolution of enlightened male consciousness in the popular *Tootsie* (1983). When Michael Dorsey (Dustin Hoffman) realizes his best shot at a steady acting job (in a soap opera) comes about by pretending to be a woman, Dorothy, he tries to sell his agent who doubts he can pull it off on the idea:

I *do* know what it's like to be a woman. I've been an unemployed actor for years, sitting by the phone with no power. Then when I do get a part, it's a man who has all the power.²¹

As Michael/Dorothy comes to know what it's like to be condescended to, he starts caring about people in a new, more nurturing way. He even comes to realize surprise! that "Dorothy" is smarter than he (just as Mrs. Doubtfire, in the movie of the same name, is a better father than Robin Williams). Michael tell us, "I was strong enough to be a woman, that best part of me." And, ironically, through being a woman, Michael/Dorothy is able to get the girl, Julie (Jessica Lang). After revealing his true identity, he tells her that having been a woman for a while has prepared him for their future relationship: "I was a better man with you as a woman than I ever was as a man with a woman.... The bad part's over. We were already friends."²²

Questions for Class Discussion

1. What would happen if men and women would switch bodies for a week?
2. Would society be better , worse or the same if women were in most of the positions of public power?
3. In *Tootsie* why was Michael better able to have a relationship with Julie after he had pretended to be a woman?
4. In *Mrs. Doubtfire* Robin Williams plays a female housekeeper in order to be closer to his children after he and his wife separate. Why was he a better father as a "woman" than he was as a man?

Week Four: Black / White

1.' Whiteness' as Protection

In addition to the male/female axis there is the black/white axis. Frequently, in the nineteenth century, the male was linked with the white, the female with the black. Hazel Carby, speaking of the nineteenth century, affirms this alignment: "White women who felt that caste was their protection aligned their interests with the patriarchal power that ultimately confined them." ²³ The male/female and black/white axes became further linked through the related Victorian obsession with colonialism (Daily accounts of colonial wars in the newspapers were read with the same interest given football scores.) "the white man's burden" and repressed [female] sexuality. Thus, in his essay on "Feminism," as Doane points out, Freud repeatedly makes this link, using the term "dark continent" to signify female sexuality:

The dark continent trope is hence invoked in the context of a return to the motifs of castration, lack, and envy. A metonymic chain is constructed which links infantile sexuality, female sexuality, and racial otherness. For the adjective "dark" in dark continent signifies not only unknowability but blackness in its racial connotations. Africa is "dark" because its inhabitants are "dark." ²⁴

Since a "proper" white woman could not be interested in sex, nineteenth-century "anthropology" made the link between the black woman and sex. The female Hotentot, highly sexed because of her biological aberrations her "enlarged buttocks" and her "distended labia" couldn't help herself. ²⁵ Nor could the similarly equipped white prostitute, although, curiously, as a "female offender" lacking "proper maternal instincts," she was actually more a man than a woman!

This general link between whiteness and purity turns white skin into a mask of protection, a "moral aspect" in which "the ghosts are driven out." ²⁶ Richard Dyer writes about the glorious brilliance yet unattainability of the ideal white woman. Whiteness becomes identified with bright ideas, good deeds, true beliefs, honest motives, honest women, pure feelings, or any of the other virtues which "ennobled the conquests, glories, triumphs and spoils of the Christian mission." This lofty perch of whiteness defined the white woman as the "apotheosis of desirability, all that a man would want." Of course, something so desirable, so noble, was something that could not be had. Nor, in fact, was it "anything that [a] woman can be." ²⁷

Questions for Class Discussion

Whiteness is frequently associated with bright ideas, good deeds, etc. Blackness, on the other hand, is frequently associated with negative images. Make two lists, In the first, list positive connotations of white and negative connotations of black. For example:

BLACK

funerals (in our society)

a "black" mood

WHITE

wedding (in our society)

the "white light" of enlightenment

Now, reverse the process. For example:

BLACK

formality (evening dress)

black belt in the martial arts

WHITE

funerals (in Chinese society)

white belt in the martial arts

2. "Blackness" and Sexuality

According to the rule of screen polarity, if we have whiteness and femaleness linked to purity, their opposites black and male must be highly sexed and dangerous. We begin to see blacks, particularly black males "persistently attributed with a hypersexuality." ²⁸ In fact, we have all these themes conquering unknown lands, the colonialist's notion of "blackness," the unattainable white woman, the uncontrollable black male sexual giant coming together, in a film about a man making a film in *King Kong* .

Questions for Class Discussion

The myth of the "dangerous" and powerful black male becoming sexually involved with a white woman may well have contributed to the incredible fascination this country has with the O.J. Simpson trial. Would the trial be getting as much attention if the races of the defendant and victims were reversed?

3. The "Tragic" Mulatto

If film tried to reconcile the male/female polarity through the metaphor of one person embodying the union of opposites in *Tootsie* (and in other popular cross-dressing films from *Some Like It Hot* to *Victor, Victoria* to *Mrs. Doubtfire*), how can film attempt to reconcile the black/white polarity? We need to examine the recurring

theme in film of the "tragic mulatto."

The tragic mulatto (or mulatta in films we will discuss) is "tragic" precisely because she is irresolvably caught between two different cultures. The tragic mulatta appears in film as early as *The Debt* (1912). In the Old South, a white man has a white son (from his white wife the "good woman") and a mulatta daughter (from his black mistress the "bad woman") at the same time. Needless to say, the son and the daughter fall in love, only to have their relationship revealed to them. Their lives are ruined because of their bloodlines not just because they are half-siblings but because of the inescapability of the daughter's black blood.

The white-seeming daughter's life being "ruined" by her dark-skinned mother is a theme that was to be repeated throughout the century. In *Imitation of Life* (1959) the confusion of the daughter her dogged determination to be white is dramatically revealed in the scene in which the mulatta daughter is asked to serve hors d'oeuvres to a visiting Italian movie director. Here we see a white actress (Susan Kohmer) playing a black (the daughter Sarah Jane) pretending to be a white (the object of her determination) pretending to be a black (with an exaggerated accent).²⁹

To Sarah Jane the contrast between her black and white halves is blatant and irreconcilable. The visual power of film clearly demonstrates this contrast in the scene at Sarah Jane's school. Doane describes the scene and its relation to the black/white axis:

In one of the earliest and most "melodramatic" instances of Sarah Jane's denial of her mother, Annie's discovery that Sarah Jane is passing at school, the placement of objects and colors calls attention to the depth of the image as sign, to the gap between foreground and background. As Annie climbs the steps to the school, a large red fire hydrant dominates the left front section of the frame, its color made more startling by the wet snow falling heavily. When Sarah Jane, traumatized by the sudden revelation of her racial identity, runs outside and is stopped by her mother, an imposing Christmas tree sign in bright red forms the backdrop as Annie gives Sarah Jane her red rubbers and helps her on with her coat.

Without the extreme polarization and hierarchization of whiteness in relation to blackness, passing would have no affective valence.³⁰

In the popular culture of this country the mulatta is a particularly powerful emblem. She is, after all, the innocent woman poised in the center of this country's most powerful, most historically significant cultural division, the innocent woman who literally embodies both the fear of this division and the hope of its resolution. As this emblem denies her own mother, she divorces herself as well from her own identity. Thus, in *Flashdance* (1983) Jennifer Beals is totally, and intentionally, separated from her roots. We never know where she comes from, although the film "shrewdly graces her with a white mother surrogate."³¹

Questions for Class Discussion

1. In the United States census form one is asked to choose one's race from a list of limited

possibilities, such as black, white, Hispanic, Asian, native American, etc. There is no provision either for selecting more than one category or for selecting one called "mixed race." Is this right? Is this fair? What would be the consequences if these possibilities were added?

4. "Blackness" as Nurturing

The themes of black/white and motherhood/career are united in *Imitation of Life* by the parallel pretenses of Sarah Jane and Lora. The former's denial of her own mother is paralleled by Lora's refusal of her own motherhood, choosing instead a career which, curiously enough, involves pretense. The only "whole" female in the film is Annie, in the tradition of the mammy, the nurturing black woman. She is the opposite of the selfish, materialistic and (professionally) pretentious white non-mother. In the original *Imitation of Life* (1934) Louise Beavers's Delilah tells her daughter Peola:

Bow your head. You got to learn to take it. Your pappy kept beating his fists against life all his days until it eat him through. ³²

The comforting black woman (or comforting older i.e., not sexually threatening black man) has traditionally made it easy for white children to be comfortable around their black elders. Even with Shirley Temple outspoken and bossy around white grown-ups there was always a sense of easy equality and community when she was around "these black low-lifers." ³³

Questions for Class Discussion

1. To what extent has the alleged virtue of Christian stoicism for the oppressed black worker been hurtful to the causes of racial and economic equality?
2. Is it more "Christian" to suffer in silence or to rise up in protest?

5. Viewing and Discussion of PBS Video, A Question of Color (1992)

Questions for Class Discussion

1. Would Kathe Sandler have made this video documentary if she were not light-skinned?
2. Mention is made at the very beginning of the video, and several times thereafter, about the practice among African-Americans of choosing a mate on the basis of his/her skin color in order to control the skin color of the children. How prevalent would you say this practice is today?
3. In the documentary, women far more than men are held as "objects to be desired." Is this distinction still as strong today?

Conclusion

In recent years, however, spurred on by politicians, there has been a move towards the myth of anti-mammy, a return to the alleged hypersexuality of the Victorian Hottentot, in which African-American motherhood is associated with illegitimacy and "loose wombs." ³⁴ Without a male presence, the woman while not defined away as she might have been a hundred years ago is yet rendered the enemy of decency and the American family. In Dan Quayle's famous attack on Murphy Brown's decision for single motherhood this connection was made explicitly and deliberately. Joined in a conspiracy against mainstream "family values," both white single mothers and African-American single mothers are accused of mocking the importance of fathers and undercutting the importance of true motherhood.

So what has really changed since Lombroso denied the possibility of a woman being both a woman and an "offender"? An offender against whom, or what? Are men still voyeurs and women still vain? Or were they ever? After all, these assumptions of the past, and from the past, are true only if we believe they are. As Barbara Fields aptly points out, "An ideology must be constantly created and verified...; if it is not, it dies." ³⁵ That stereotypical thinking invariably leads to a "form of intellectual apartheid." ³⁶ As teachers, we need first to gauge the extent to which our own students continue the long, unfortunate tradition of sexual stereotyping of intellectual apartheid and then to show them there is another way.

Specifically, for purposes of this unit, we need to guide our students in their awareness of how films play a role in encouraging, if not outright creating, sexual stereotyping. And then we can, hopefully, accompany them down the path of clearer, deeper, more responsible thinking.

Endnotes

1. Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape* , 36.
2. Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatale: Feminism , Film Theory , Psychoanalysis* , 226.
3. Doane, 19.
4. Doane, 22.
5. Doane, 1.
6. Sigmund Freud, "Femininity," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* , vol. 22, ed. James Strachey, London: Hogarth and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1964, 113.
7. Caesar Lombroso, *The Female Offender* , New York, D. Appleton and Co., 1895, 153.
8. Linda Hart, *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression* , 78.
9. Hart, 368.
10. Haskell, 5.
11. Haskell, 29.
12. Haskell, 10.
13. Ann Jones, *Women Who Kill* , New York, Fawcett Columbine, 1980, 6.
14. Jones, 6.
15. Haskell, 21.

16. Haskell, 30-1.
17. Doane, 236.
18. Anita Loos, *Kiss Hollywood Good-Bye* , as quoted in Marianne Sinclair, *Hollywood Lolita: The Nymphet Syndrome in the Movies* , 5.
19. Haskell, 15.
20. Haskell, 13.
21. Doane, 243-4.
22. Marsha McCreadie, *The Casting Couch and Other Front Row Seats: Women in Films of the 1970s and 1980s* , 12.
23. Hazel V. Carby, "White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood." In *The Empire Strikes Back: Race Carby, Hazeland Racism in 70s Britain* , London, Hutchinson and the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham, 1982, 115.
24. Doane, 210-11.
25. Sander L. Gilman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine, and Literature." In *Critical Inquiry* 12.1 (Autumn 1985).
26. James Hillman, "Notes on White Supremacy: Essaying an Archetypal Account of Historical Events." In *Spring* 1986, 38-9.
27. Richard Dyer, "White" in *Screen* vol. 29 no. 4 (1988), 64.
28. Doane, 217.
29. The "fears of excessive white female sexuality which are particularly characteristic of [the] 1950s" (Doane, 238) is responsible for the change in Sarah Jane's choice of occupation to establish her financial autonomy: In the 1934 version (her name in that film is Peola and the role is played by Fredi Washington, a real life mulatta) she's a shop clerk; in the 1959 version she's an exotic dancer.
30. Doane, 240-1.
31. Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks: An Interpretive History Blacks in American Films* , 291.
32. Bogel, 59.
33. Bogel, 46-7.
34. Patricia J. William, "Attack of the 50-Ft. First Lady: The Demonization of Hillary Clinton," in *The Village Voice* , Jan. 26, 1993, 37.
35. Barbara Fields, "Slavery, Race and Ideology in the United States of America." In *New Left Review* no. 181 (June 1990), 112.
36. Fields, 116.

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Bordwell, David and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction* . New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993. An excellent introduction to the study of film. Provides useful bibliographical material.

Diawara, Manthia, " *Noir by Noirs* : Towards a New Realism in Black Cinema." In *African American Review* , 27.4 Winter 1993. A study of black rage as *film noir* , with an emphasis on *A Rage in Harlem* .

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Gallerstein, Carolyn L., *Working Women on the Hollywood Screen: A Filmography* . New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1989. A listing of women in film and the careers they depicted (from 1930-1989), categorized by occupation.

Hart, Lynda, *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression* . Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994. Essays on lesbianism, homophobia, the female buddy film and Victorian male hypocrisy.

Haskell, Molly, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* . New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973. The image of women in film from the 20's to the 70's from a feminist perspective.

McCreadie, Marsha, *The Casting Couch and Other Front Row Seats: Women in Films of the 1970s and 1980 s*. New York: Praeger, 1990. Several paragraphs on each of seventy-five important films of the 70's and 80's, plus interviews with many of the female stars.

Monaco, James, *How To Read a Film: The Art, Technology, Language, History and Theory of Film and Media* . New York: Oxford University Press, 1981. A general and comprehensive introduction to the study of film, including a guide to some aspects of the teaching of film.

Sinclair, Marianne, *Hollywood Lolita: The Nymphet Syndrome in the Movies* . London: Plexus, 1988. The popularity and exploitation of girls on the screen in mainstream films. Written in an informal manner with lots of pictures.

Reading List for Students

Bogle, Donald, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* . New York: Continuum, 1989. Covers American feature films, Uncle Tom's Cabin to the 1980s. Excludes foreign films, documentaries and television programs.

Bisbort, Alan, "How Hollywood Speaks to Women." In *The New Haven Advocate* , July 13, 1995. A short article on how film scholar Jeanine Basinger of Wesleyan University believes Hollywood has "abandoned women." References to her new book, *American Cinema: 100 Years of Filmmaking* , Rizzoli International Publications, 1994, and the television series "A Woman's View" on Ted Turner's Classic Movies cable network.

Sinclair, Marianne, *Hollywood Lolita: The Nymphet Syndrome in the Movies* . London: Plexus, 1988. The popularity and exploitation of girls on the screen in mainstream films. Written in an informal manner with lots of pictures.

Materials for Classroom Use

1. Film: *Imitation of Life* (1959).
2. PBS documentary, *A Question of Color* (1992).
3. Film: *Tootsie* (1982).

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