Classical Hollywood cinema and feminist film theory

Classical Hollywood cinema has contributed to the formation and development of Feminist Film Theory (FFT) more than any other filmic form or movement. In the 1970s and the 1980s, feminist scholars dissected the semiotic and psychoanalytic paradigms of Hollywood cinema in order to uncover the “patriarchal and capitalist ways of seeing” women, and to show “the reasons why women occupy the place they do in the world of the film” (Kaplan 1976: 7). In the process, they established FFT as an approach for studying filmic images and texts, as well as the relation between cinema and female spectators. If we wanted to encapsulate in a single concept the aims of FFT, perhaps we could say that its main aspiration was to study the mise-en-scène of female desire and how this in turn triggered for women in the audience a process of identification with the film’s psychic scenarios. In other words, FFT devised a set of paradigms for studying how subjectivity is “constituted in the relation of narrative, meaning, and desire; so that the very work of narration is the engagement of the subject in certain positionalities of meaning and desire” (de Lauretis 1984: 106). But beyond this common scope, feminists engaged with classical cinema in different ways, offering competing interpretations of its representation of women and gender relations.

As is well known, in her seminal essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975) Laura Mulvey argued that Hollywood cinema followed à la lettre patriarchal standards, and that female desire and sexuality could only be expressed in terms of passivity—what Freud had termed “normal femininity.” But in those same years, Claire Johnston and Pam Cook offered a quite different perspective on American cinema. In their view, the classical text was more “open” than Mulvey would allow, since Hollywood was not totally complicit with patriarchy. Johnston and Cook investigated the possibility of a counter-cinema within Hollywood in relation to sexual/gender politics by refashioning the theory of the “progressive text” (Johnston 1979). While “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” has long been considered the founding episode of FFT, it is important to recall that in the 1970s and the 1980s the notion of progressive text was as important and influential as Mulvey’s intervention. In fact, most feminist readings of Hollywood were, in one way or another, “progressive,” as scholars tried to uncover the instances of female agency.
FFT reached its apogee at the end of the 1980s, when several book-length studies investigated the relation between female desire and film aesthetics by considering specific genres and/or authors. One may think to Mary Ann Doane’s *The Desire to Desire* (1987), Gaylyn Studlar’s *In the Realm of Pleasure* (1988), and Tania Modleski’s *The Women Who Knew Too Much* (1988). Other important “feminist classics” including large sections on Hollywood cinema are E. Ann Kaplan’s *Women and Cinema* (1983) and Kaja Silverman’s *The Acoustic Mirror* (1988). At the time that such feminist classics were appearing, some started to question their semiotic-psychoanalytic model for its supposed ahistorical attitude, while others launched a renewed interest in historical forms of spectatorship. The paradigm shift from theory to history also brought a change with regard to the object of study. If classical Hollywood cinema had been the primary focus of FFT, for feminist historians, early and silent cinema became the key period to investigate. The turn to history did not necessarily mean that theoretical concerns were erased. But regardless of method, it is undeniable that, as feminists became more and more involved with early cinema, their interest in classical Hollywood declined. For this and other reasons—such as the influence of critical race theory and transnational paradigms—in the last 20 years or so Hollywood has been rather marginal in feminist film studies (and film studies as a whole), at least compared to its centrality in the previous two decades.

My take on Hollywood starts from the assumption that today one should study such a legendary era in movie history by engaging both theoretical assumptions and historical frameworks. The notion of the mode of representation is a key aspect for defining such changes. I define a mode of representation as the convergence of the cinematic imaginary (Bertetto 2003) and a film style. From the late 1920s to 1960, such a convergence changes repeatedly to the extent that even the very notion of classical cinema becomes untenable for this stretch of time (Pravadelli 2015). In looking at the cinematic imaginary, one can ask what the figures, the images, and the narrative trajectories that cinema repeatedly presents onscreen are? Moreover, what are the social and collective desires and how are they articulated differently for women and men? Undoubtedly, cinema was the period’s most popular form of entertainment and thus simultaneously reflected and interpreted the contradictory cultural arenas of modernity, the New Deal, the war, and postwar period. But at any particular moment, the stakes were dramatically different for women and men. Feminist historian Joan W. Scott has argued that too often the theory of “sexual antagonism” between males and females “projects a certain timeless quality” (Scott 1999: 39). She invites scholars to overturn their perspective and investigate the “historical specificity and variability” of gender relations (ibid.). My work on Hollywood cinema hopes to make a contribution along this line by probing the changes in the representation of gender dynamics throughout the studio era.

Besides the cinematic imaginary, narrative technique and mise-en-scène also go through impressive transformations in the same period. Working on the convergence of cultural and formal paradigms, one can historicize Hollywood’s modes of representation and better describe its participation in the production and dissemination of ideas, values, and desires in American culture.

In the short space of this essay, it is not possible to give an overview of the entire studio era. For a broader investigation both in relation to the issues addressed here and to larger historical scenarios, see my *Classic Hollywood: Lifestyles and Film Styles of American Cinema, 1930–1960* (2015). In this essay, I focus on the 1930s, as this period is traversed by two different phases or modes, which make clearly visible the necessity for a historical reorientation in the interpretation of Hollywood cinema. Another reason for choosing the 1930s
is the fact that previous feminist work has more often chosen the 1940s and the 1950s—and
genres like noir, melodrama, and the woman’s film. Finally, in 1930s cinema the repre-
sentation of gender is closely connected to class to the extent that “being a woman”
depends on specific (i.e. historical) connotations of the relation between gender and class.

Gender, style, aesthetics in 1930s Hollywood

American cinema of the 1930s presents two modes of representation. The first arises with
the advent of sound and ebbs around 1933–4. The second develops in the years immediately
following and continues to the end of the decade. Such delineation marks the rise and fall of
dominant trends, which almost certainly overlapped, but the differences are remarkable.

Robert Sklar has identified two Golden Ages within 1930s Hollywood. On the one hand,
what he calls the “Age of Turbulence” during the Great Depression represents one of the
more significant challenges to traditional values in the history of American media. On the
other, the “Age of Order,” a Rooseveltian countercurrent that emerged during the 1933–4
season, reemphasized traditional American values, patriotism, national unity, and family
(Sklar 1994: 175–94). A stronger implementation of the Production Code is also respon-
sible for such a change. As Richard Maltby has argued “the imposition of a ‘new deal’ in
regulation, with its emphasis on the reestablishment of an explicitly patriarchal moral order,
coincided with the start of Roosevelt’s presidency” (Maltby 1995: 57).

The dominant configurations of desire and subjectivity are notably different in the two
periods, particularly in relation to women. Feminist historians have shown that modernity
changed women’s lives much more than men’s (Peiss 1986). This scenario also explains
Hollywood’s craze for stories of female emancipation and images of the New Woman. In
fact, between the end of the 1920s and the early 1930s, American cinema continued to
focus on the image of the young, self-assertive, and sexy woman, thus perpetuating the cult
of New Womanhood that emerged in the early years of the century. This tendency would
wane as the decade progressed. From about the mid-1930s, after the Production Code
became more strictly enforced, the dominant narrative of female desire was tuned to the
formation of the heteronormative couple and to marriage, while the figure of the eman-
cipated woman became marginal. This shift in the representation of gender identity was
matched by a concomitant transformation in film style. In the early 1930s, Hollywood
 cinema extended the use of visual techniques developed during the silent period that we
may consider in light of the “cinema of attractions” (Gunning 1990). Around 1934, the
classical mode of representation—namely, a rational and motivated mode of storytelling
based on action, analytic editing, and dialogue—became dominant, while visual attractions
and techniques tended to disappear.

In the transition years from silent film to sound, cinema was (still) the most effective
form for representing modernity and urban life, as well as women’s desire to emancipate.
Surveys of the period and contemporary investigations in audience studies reveal that, in
the 1920s and the early 1930s, women represented the majority of moviegoers (Stokes
1999). In those years, Hollywood produced a vast number of films centered on women, often
written by women scriptwriters. Women, of course, loved to see images of the New Woman,
exemplified by such divas as Gloria Swanson, Clara Bow, Louise Brooks, and Joan Crawford.
As Mary Ryan has pointed out, “the new movie woman exuded above all a sense of physical
freedom – unrestrained movement … abounding energy – the antithesis of the controlled,
quiet, tight-kneed poses of Griffith’s heroines” and moved with “dashing spontaneity” into
social, work, and higher education spheres (Ryan 1976: 369–70).
In the 1920s, the flapper represented the most important image of the modern woman, and consequently the flapper film became a production staple in all studios (Ross 2000). As this image waned, the figures of the working girl and of the performer (in her different guises as singer, chorus girl, comedian, etc.) became the most popular. If illicit sex was often a fundamental element of plot and character, women were defined, first and foremost by their position in the working sphere. What is also interesting was cinema’s perspective in relation to social class. In many cases, rich women were represented as uninteresting partners, or worse, as boring. Aristocrats and rich men, engaged or married to women of their class, frequently were shown to fall in love with women of a lower class, who were livelier and funnier than their official partners. Coming from a poor background, these women embodied quite literally the modern impulse toward change and transformation. And their desire for a better economic condition led them away from home in search of a job. In a vast number of films, the heroine leaves her birthplace—a village or small town—and arrives in the big city to look for work, as in An American Tragedy (J. Von Sternberg, 1931), Night Nurse (W. Wellman, 1931) and Baby Face (A. E. Green, 1933) among many. The urban working-class girl is both independent and cheerful, sexually active, and fun. Therefore, upper-class men might find her more interesting than women of their own class, as the latter often tend to follow protocols and etiquettes and overall seem less alert in embracing the attractions of modernity.

The modern metropolis as the site of change and transformation is beautifully exemplified in those films in which young women tried to improve their status through work or sex—or both. The heroine’s social rise did not simply involve a linear plot in the tradition of classical narratives based on cause and effect, however. Through formal devices drawn from the silent period, in the transition years to sound, American cinema expressed the New Woman’s condition through visual spectacles that represented cinematically the ideas of movement and metamorphosis as well as the experience of excessive visual sensations typical of modernity.

Cinema’s mode of representation relied on a convergence between classical style and visual attractions—that is, between plots of emancipation and spectacular imagery. Tom Gunning has suggested that when the narrative form won out, the cinema of attractions did not disappear but went “underground, both into certain avant-garde practices and as a component of narrative films, more evident in some genres (e.g. the musical) than in others” (Gunning 1990: 57). If we accept that the cinema of attractions represented an aesthetic solution to the condition of modernity, we must then historicize that concept and evaluate carefully the changing relation between attraction and narration. The cinema of the early 1930s is a fundamental episode in this trajectory, since it calls for a gendered reading of the aesthetic concept of attraction. In the woman-centered films of the period, visual attractions rely on the image of the female body, while narratives focus on stories of female emancipation. The convergence between form and content around the woman’s body is a very peculiar solution that deserves consideration.

The relation between woman and modernity was expressed in particular by two types of visual attractions: the “urban dissolve” and the exhibitionist display of the female body. The urban dissolve is a specific code of silent cinema, a rhetorical strategy developed in particular by the city symphony documentary. It is an extended dissolve, a series of superimpositions of images of urban life which amplifies “cinematically” the city’s dynamism. Shot in the most bustling areas of the metropolis, it shows masses of people walking or waiting, fast-moving lines of cars and trolleys, and other energized moments of everyday urban life. Our perceptual experience registers endless movement and change as the main condition of city life.
Dissolves and visual polyphonies are often gendered—that is, related to the female body. Because they effectively exemplify the idea of metamorphosis, they are particularly fit for representing the modern woman’s narrative of transformation. Urban dissolves can be brief interludes between scenes or extended segments usually placed at the beginning of the film. The first type is the most common and recurs frequently in films narrating a performer’s rise to success. The apex of the protagonist’s career is usually conveyed by dissolves fusing images of the artist’s face or body with urban topoi and icons like neon lights and signs, skylines and buildings, etc. Notable examples include the depiction of Marlene Dietrich’s success as singer Helen Faraday (a.k.a. Helen Jones) in *Blonde Venus* (J. Von Sternberg, 1932) (Figure 34.1), and Constance Bennett’s rise to stardom as Hollywood actress Mary Evans in *What Price Hollywood?* (G. Cukor, 1932). Extended dissolves usually focus on the relation between women and the metropolis by linking and juxtaposing images of women and urban scenarios or scenes of urban life. When positioned at the beginning of the film, they may suggest a narrative texture as well as create a whole atmosphere directly relating woman to modernity. This second type is formally more complex and spectacular. It is also much less common than the first type. I would like to recall two rather stunning examples in *Glorifying the American Girl* (M. Webb, 1929) and *Three on a Match* (M. LeRoy, 1932).

_Glorifying the American Girl_ starts with a prologue about four minutes long, made up of urban dissolves. It begins with a shot of a map of the United States, with long serpentines of women superimposed on top and moving across the map toward big cities. The image then transforms itself into a woman putting on a pantsuit, and then a woman dressed like a Ziegfeld girl. Images of women are then superimposed on shots of moving trains, automobiles, and congested areas of the city (Figures 34.2 and 34.3). The whole prologue thus develops the theme of “women and the metropolis” without narration. The rhetoric of dissolves visualizes the transformation of bodies and/in spaces, and is thus directly linked to the plot of social mobility recounted by the film. _Glorifying the American Girl_ tells the story of a girl working in a New York department store, but dreaming of a career in the Follies. After working as a traveling performer, she will become an overnight success on Broadway. While the story of a young woman’s rise to the heights of Broadway is not original, the use of the aesthetics of attraction is quite stunning and accounts for the film’s anti-classical mode.
Besides the dazzling dissolves of the prologue, the sequences in Technicolor are essential to the spectacular component of the film.  

*Three on a Match* also starts with a sensational prologue, thanks to the use of dissolves and parallel editing. The theme of female upward mobility has peculiar connotations since the plot concentrates on the trajectories of three young girls coming from different social backgrounds. Therefore, the relation between gender and class identity is essential to the film’s message. As young girls Mary, Vivian, and Ruth attended the same public school in New York City. After losing track of one another, they meet again as adults. From this moment on their lives will be woven together. The film’s strength resides in its rhetorical strategies, particularly in the opening episode. Here shots of the three girls are intertwined with superimpositions and dissolves of newspaper titles, city streets, sports events, and other

![Figure 34.2 Glorifying the American Girl (Millard Webb, 1929).](image1)
*Source: Glorifying the American Girl, (Millard Webb, 1929).*

![Figure 34.3 Glorifying the American Girl (Millard Webb, 1929).](image2)
*Source: Glorifying the American Girl (Millard Webb, 1929).*
episodes of urban modernity. The story of the three girls growing up in New York is framed within the context of modernity, from 1919 to 1930, through the use, once again, of the most modern filmic device, the urban dissolve.

A second strategy of attraction employed in the films of the period is the brazen exhibition of the female body. It is my contention that such a strategy is actively pursued by female characters, and that it is part of a process of transformation and emancipation. Contrary to FFT’s argument that the spectacle of a woman ontologically objectifies her, I argue that one must interpret this topos historically. Compared to the Victorian ethos of purity, piousness, and subordination to the man, the exhibition of the female body and woman’s free sexuality can be loci of empowerment. This scenario is often deployed in the context of live performance in front of a diegetic audience. Radical examples include Marlene Dietrich’s numbers as a cabaret singer in Blonde Venus (and several of her other films), and Mae West’s performance in I’m No Angel (W. Ruggles, 1933). In the “Hot Voodoo” sequence, Dietrich wears a monkey costume and sings to the sound of drums played by a band of “savages.” As she reveals her identity, stripping out of her excessively sexual and racially coded costume, the audience is caught by surprise and shocked by her outrageous performance. It is Dietrich that elicits the audience’s gaze. Such a strategy is repeated when she performs in Paris. Dietrich appears on stage dressed in a white tuxedo, like a mannish lesbian. The episode is structured around female agency, as her body and performance control both the audience’s gaze and camerawork. In I’m No Angel, Mae West’s performance is choreographed in a similar fashion. Tira is a sensational attraction as a lion tamer. When she concludes the dangerous number by putting her head inside the animal’s mouth, the audience is both greatly entertained and excited. Like Dietrich, West controls the gaze and the reaction of the paying customers. In a curious reenactment of early cinema’s strategy of attractions, the New York socialites who have watched the show thank her because she has given them “a thrill”—enabled them to experience a sensational emotion.

Notwithstanding their different personalities and acting styles, Marlene Dietrich and Mae West are among the most radical examples of female bodily display of the period. Patrice Petro has noted that Tom Gunning “says very little about the way in which the female body functions as a main ‘attraction’ in the cinema of attraction” (Petro 2002: 171). Indeed, like the cinema of attractions, Dietrich and West’s bodies “directly solicit spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle” (Gunning 1990: 58). To conclude, the dynamic impulse of the (urban) dissolve and the exhibitionist display of the body are the most effective aesthetic and stylistic devices for narrating the transformation of the modern working woman.

Sometime around 1933—1934 the dominant mode of female representation veers toward the convergence of normative forms of desire and strong narrative structures dominated by action and dialogue. While visual attractions tend to disappear, linearity and causality further a rational mode of storytelling which, in turn, supports traditional forms of identity and lifestyle, especially for women. This new mode of representation dominates Hollywood until the end of the decade. This periodization is in tune with the transformations of censorship as 1934 is “a turning point in the administration of industry self-regulation” (Jacobs 1997: xi). In my mind, the notion of classical cinema only applies to this specific filmic form. While the figure of the New Woman was relegated to the margins, a renewed trust in masculinity emerges in the cinema of the period. Hollywood’s ideological project in the “Age of Order” implies a reversal vis-à-vis the gender discourse of the previous years. Transgressive sexual attitudes were no longer supported and women’s working careers were
similarly thwarted. Women’s experience was now mainly framed within marriage and the home. Emancipatory plots often had a negative outcome, and the formation of the heterosexual couple became the main target. In contrast to the earlier period, as well as to post–World War II cinema, classical cinema focused on plots of integration and comedy provided the main framework for narrating the integration of the heteronormative couple into the social order. While it is true that the screwball heroine usually enjoys sexual freedom, the narrative nevertheless develops within the precincts of marriage or remarriage. Moreover, the genre’s progressive stance toward female sexuality is limited to upper-class women. The relation between gender and class is thus reversed in comparison to the previous years. While in the early 1930s women had dominated the industry at all levels, now the values of masculinity and family came back with a vengeance. For instance, an analysis of late 1930s box-office returns clearly shows a renewed interest in images of order, normalcy, and masculinity. Likewise, the public adored adventure films (a typically male genre) and costume dramas, while another male genre—the biopic—was highly praised by critics and a favorite at the Oscars. Such genres were not only adequate to address the classical thrust for linear structures, but they all focused on male agency and assigned women only marginal roles.

In this scenario, it is not surprising that, outside of the screwball comedy, female independence is typically frustrated. In 1930s cinema, strong women were often depicted as “bad,” so that they could rightfully be punished. Bette Davis, for example, was the prototype of the “Hollywood Bitch.” It is enough to think of Of Human Bondage (J. Cromwell, 1934), Jezebel (W. Wyler, 1938), The Letter (W. Wyler, 1940), and The Little Foxes (W. Wyler, 1941) (Fisher 2011). But perhaps the best example of the dynamics described here is Dark Victory (E. Goulding, 1939), in which a rich and pampered Davis concerns herself with anything but marriage. In the habit of passing her days at horse races and parties, she suddenly discovers that an incurable disease will cut her life short. After marrying her doctor, she leaves the city—a place of cultured entertainment and diversion—for the countryside in Vermont. There, she learns to be a good wife and lead a simple life. She will die alone in her bedroom while her husband is away. One can easily speculate that her early death is the effect of her modern lifestyle: had she spent less time in having fun and paid more attention to her symptoms, perhaps she could still be alive.

The shift in the representation of female desire and its connection to modernity is further evident if we look at Barbara Stanwyck’s career throughout the decade. Alongside Joan Crawford, she embodied the role of a poor girl aspiring to glamour and riches better than anybody else. In the early 1930s, both actresses played key roles as young women attempting to raise their social status through hard work and/or sex. They played working-class women who moved to the big city in search of a job, as well as a variety of fallen and/or redeemed women. We can think to Stanwyck’s roles in Ladies of Leisure (F. Capra, 1930), Night Nurse, Forbidden (F. Capra, 1932), Shopworn (N. Grinde, 1932), and the more famous Baby Face. In the intervening years, Stanwyck continued to play working-class characters struggling for upward mobility. But then her desire would be repeatedly unfulfilled as in The Bride Walks Out (L. Jason, 1936) and Stella Dallas (K. Vidor, 1937).

Frank Capra’s It Happened One Night (1934) is a key text for testing the relationship between formal order and subjective normativity. The film shows that behind the freshness and independence of Claudette Colbert’s flapper lurks a strong desire for marriage, and for the male protection/domination that goes along with it. Capra’s film is a perfect example of classical style, since its core structure is founded on a correspondence between narrative and formal logic which relies “on notions of decorum, proportion, formal harmony, respect for
tradition, mimesis, self-effacing craftsmanship, and cool control of the perceiver’s response” (Bordwell 1985: 3–4). These strategies are essential components of a broader paradigm, since classical cinema represents the world as a system of oppositions. Formal and narrative dialectics are so central to classical style that any interpretation of its textual configuration cannot do without structural analysis (Bellour 2000). Informing the classical text at all levels, these differences systematically converge most effectively in the comedy's traditional male–female opposition. In *It Happened One Night*, such a mechanism is activated in the first two sequences or “movements,” which introduce female and male protagonists, respectively. In tune with classical procedures, Ellie Andrews and Peter Warne are compared and juxtaposed at the same time. They are opposites of each other in social standards—Ellie a pampered heiress, Peter a penniless, but morally grounded, journalist—but also similar, since they are both introduced in the act of rebelling against a paternal authority figure. This analogy formally anticipates Ellie and Peter’s eventual union.

The film’s narrative trajectory focuses on the couple’s evolving relationship, from their initial mutual disdain to their affection for one another. The quick rhythm of shots and precise connections between them ensure invisible style. There are also no moments of visual spectacle, which in turn draws attention only to the film’s plot. The story can therefore unfold according to the principles of motivated action and causality. Thus, Ellie’s desire to marry Westley also affords Peter the chance to regain his job, because of their coincidental meeting. Different from the sophisticated comedies of Hawks, Cukor, and McCarey, Capra’s film maintains a traditional vision of sexuality and male–female relationships in line with a “return to order” rooted in the New Deal.

Historian Christina Simmons has argued that, in the 1920s and 1930s, the image of the flapper became the ideal positive female figure since she “both embodied the popular notion of the free woman and retained a softness that did not threaten men” (Simmons 1993: 31). As such, she was the ideal companion of the “healthy male,” or an analogously positive image of the normative masculinity of the period. Sensitive and at the same time decisive, he assumed the function of a guide toward matrimony, as the flapper gladly ceded him command (ibid. 24–7). This description fits the couple in *It Happened One Night*. Despite her autonomy, Ellie needs Peter’s help at every moment. Moreover, not only is the sanctity of marriage reestablished, but also that of family and parent–child relationships. Ellie’s father allies with Peter in the literal implementation of the symbolic process described by Lévi-Strauss, in which men exchange their women to preserve social order.

Classical cinema’s turn to masculinity is also evident in biopics and adventure dramas, as both genres are dominated by a male world (Pravadelli 2015: 56–68). In contrast to these genres, women had a leading role in screwball comedies. While from the mid-1930s the demise of the New Woman was undeniable, the genre of screwball comedy represented a partial exception. If comedy’s main ideological project aims at integrating the couple within the existing social structure through marriage, several comedies of the period presented progressive forms of sexual interaction and female desire. While endorsing marriage, films such as *Sylvia Scarlett* (G. Cukor, 1935), *The Awful Truth* (L. McCarey, 1937), *Bringing Up Baby* (H. Hawks, 1938), *The Women* (G. Cukor, 1939), *My Favorite Wife* (G. Kanin, 1940), *His Girl Friday* (H. Hawks, 1940), and *The Philadelphia Story* (G. Cukor, 1940), represented the male–female relation as explicitly sexual.

In the screwball comedy, the dynamics between male and female protagonists subtends a clear equality of the sexes in line with the model of “companionate marriage” that emerged in urban areas in the 1920s, in which the sexual “satisfaction of both partners [are] principal measures of marital harmony” and social order (Cott 1987: 156–7). The comedies of the
second half of the 1930s presented the most advanced model of gender relations of the period. However, the convergence of gender and class identity had strikingly changed in relation to the earlier years. In the classical era, only rich and aristocratic heroines could enjoy sexual freedom. While in 1940 the genre produced some of its best examples, that same year a film like *Kitty Foyle* (S. Wood, 1940) depicted the demise of the model of the New Woman for working girls. In that film, Kitty (Ginger Rogers) must choose between two men, and her choice is articulated along the lines of class difference (Doane 1987: 105). She will eventually choose a poor but idealistic doctor and refuse her aristocratic suitor. If, in the early 1930s, class difference could be overcome and women’s upward mobility (and sexual freedom) was one of Hollywood’s favorite topics, in the intervening years, working-class women were denied social mobility while spoiled aristocrats enjoyed romantic and sexual freedom. In the second half of the 1930s the change in the representation of female identity and desire vis-à-vis the earlier period is radical. While broad social, cultural, and industrial dynamics might explain Hollywood’s transformation from the early sound period to the classical era, probing such changes in the iconography of woman is essential if we want to assess the gendered politics of modernity, as well as cinema’s role in promoting values and desires of the modern woman.

**Related topics**

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**Bibliography**


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