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OPPRESSION?:  
VIOLENCE AGAINST  
WOMEN IN LEADING  
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## **Introduction**

Unlike porn where all is explicit, at the heart of mainstream cinematic representations of male sexual violence towards women, there is this gap and silence. But this ellipsis, by its very nature, provides a space for the invisible to be made visible and the mute to be given voice.

*Jane Mills (1995 pp 38-40)*

What is this hidden gap, buried by this silence? Author and filmmaker Jane Mills, who writes extensively on women in film, calls for the invisible to be made visible. The gap Mills' speaks of is examined in this paper to see if there are popular film representations of women in leading roles where they are subject to male violence. What are the portrayals of women's roles regarding abuse and abusive behaviour, and why is discussing it so important? Studying abuse in film is warranted for two reasons. First, studies have shown that viewing rape and other violent behaviour can desensitise the spectator to abuse of women and in some cases increase aggressive behaviour toward women (see Donnerstein & Linz, 1984 pp 14-15). Second, study of abuse of women in film has been sparse and calls for a thorough examination.

Questions regarding the possible abuse of women in film are based on a previous content analysis that revealed some interesting results regarding the amount of violence against women in leading roles. This 1996 unpublished pilot study (Wales, 1996) used content analysis to examine women's roles from 1990-95. In the study, 60 films were chosen randomly from each year –

1990 to 95 – viewed and coded.<sup>1</sup> Results indicated that leading women in these early 1990s films were mainly Caucasian white-collar women. In most cases, the lead character in each film was struggling with some form of mistreatment from a man in her life. In addition, there was approximately the same number of roles for women in 1995 as in 1990 even though the number of total films released per year had increased. In 58 out of 60 films, the lead female suffered from some form of physical or emotional abuse. Women in these films had been lied to, cheated on, beaten, or abandoned.

The early 1990s is a particularly useful period for this subject. One of the major reasons is the period saw increased emphasis on the issue of violence against women. The United States Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) – an Act that provided funding for programs for abused women, funding for police intervention and altering of some laws – showed governmental awareness and public recognition (Department of Justice National Crime Survey, 1995). Public scandals such as the Hill/Thomas hearings and the Tailhook scandal brought a form of violence against women sexual harassment to the forefront of the American news along with a new awareness in the workplace.<sup>2</sup>

According to Monica Eng (1997), women in contemporary film have been portrayed as “debased and abused” (p D13). She claims that women tend to be presented as fallen and usually punished in some way, as in Elizabeth Shue’s character in Leaving Las Vegas (1995) and Mira Sorvino’s role in Mighty Aphrodite (1995) where both women portray prostitutes. Eng states, “It’s almost as if these would-be artists have to drag themselves through this kind of degrading and punishing role in order to gain any sort of legitimacy or real stature in Hollywood” (1997 p 13). Eng also states that while celebrated roles for men portray heroes that are bold and intelligent, women’s roles show women as prostitutes or abused and not smart enough to get into a healthy relationship.

Possible reasons for the existence of this violence come from author Susan Faludi whose book, Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women (1991), posits that just when women get into positions of power, there

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<sup>1</sup> The films were watched and certain variables were recorded, such as: the leading role’s demographics, statistical information about the film, and instances of abuse.

<sup>2</sup> Though sexual harassment in this case was emotional, and not physical, the impact of the event is important to the level of awareness in society for all offenses against women.

occurs a backlash that attempts to oppress them into powerlessness. She claims that this backlash has occurred in other periods of history when women have made progress and then find themselves in crisis. She states,

These so-called female crises have had their origins not in the actual conditions of women's lives but rather in a closed system that starts and ends in the media, popular culture, and advertising – an endless feedback loop that perpetuates and exaggerates its own false images of womanhood (Faludi, 1991 p xv).

## **Women's Roles and Film – Leading Ladies**

In mainstream Hollywood film, certain actors and actresses are cast according to box office appeal. Actors who bring in high box office are often cast in leading roles. A lead role is a designation that results in the character/actress receiving top billing for the film, having her name listed as first in the opening and closing credits and serving as the central figure in the story.

### *Feminist Film Theory and the Object of the Male Gaze*

The theoretical perspective that influenced the present study started with Laura Mulvey's object of the male gaze. In applying the male gaze to motion pictures, Mulvey's theory, which is both feminist and psychoanalytic, reads film as texts. In reference to cinema, Mulvey claims that film is a system of representation that raises questions of how the unconscious structures ways of seeing. In this theory, woman is represented as fetishised and stereotypical. Mulvey takes the word fetish from Freud who defined the concept as the act of attributing excessive value to objects, which are generally considered valueless by society.

Mulvey also states that the woman exists in the patriarchal structure as a signifier<sup>3</sup> of the male "other." She lives in a stereotypical world where men's fantasies impose images on women that are silent and make her the bearer, not maker of meaning. The frustration in this phallogentric order brings women closer to their oppression. In other words, realising that woman (as a character in film) bears the meaning in this system helps women in society, or the audience, to understand their oppression. The particular cinema that Mulvey discusses is strictly Hollywood, which she says is the most skilled at manipulating visual pleasure.

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<sup>3</sup> Here signifier means that woman is a sign of male fantasy developed by the male psyche.

Mulvey talks about one particular form of pleasure, scopophilia, which is defined as taking pleasure in looking. She takes Freud's definition here stating that he associated scopophilia with making other people objects, "subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze" (p 16). This gaze becomes the basis for erotic pleasure. The pleasure is found in looking at another as an object. Mulvey states that objectifying can be taken to the extreme in the case of an obsessive voyeur, who gains satisfaction from this controlling gaze. The voyeuristic capability is also supported by the venue of cinema. The dark theatre and seating pattern promote voyeurism. Even though the look is pleasurable, its content can still be threatening. It is the representation of the woman that is in the middle of this.

One aspect of Mulvey's theory that is not fully developed is an examination of the female protagonist in mainstream dramatic roles. A new approach is warranted that addresses leading roles for women and how she is gazed upon. She may be gazed upon as Mulvey describes it and becomes objectified. In terms of 1990s film, though, there is a new phenomenon: she becomes abused. This new idea, being contextual, also needs to look at leading roles for women in a certain time to see how women's roles in society reflect or are reflected by the cinema.

## **Representation and Abuse in the 1990s**

As men in patriarchal society have set women up on pedestals, and thereby constructed them as oppressive and restrictive figures, they have developed a strong desire to knock them down again.

*Robin Wood (1983 p 62)*

### **The Film Industry**

The financial structure of the industry and how women's roles have generally been portrayed within this ever-changing system is significant. Balio finds that one of the most important phenomena in 1990s film is the industries' market globalisation. Markets have expanded horizontally, tapping into international dollars more than had been ever done before. Foreign markets now have better theatres and extensive marketing campaigns. This globalisation has resulted in a need for more product. One might think that desire for more films would increase the variety of opportunities for women's

roles. This is partly the case. While roles that are more diverse are arising, women may still be abused in these roles.

Film scholar Hilary Radner finds that women's roles at this time produced what she calls the "psychofemme." These are traditional femme fatales who now refuse the violence of men as in films like Terminator 2 (1991) and Alien 3 (1992). Women in these movies now have an ethical imperative, such as Sarah O'Connor's fight to save humankind and Lieutenant Ripley's struggle to rid the universe of the alien. It appears that women's roles, in a general sense, have changed but only slightly in the 1990s. Women are still needing to be rescued by their men and still may be abused; otherwise, these psychofemmes would have nothing from which to fight back.

### **The Abused Woman**

What is the connection between portrayal of women's roles in the 1990s and abuse of women in society?

The literature on abuse of women discusses issues such as why women are abused, how they are abused, how much they are abused and how abuse is handled in society. Much of the literature supports a connection between abuse of women and patriarchal oppression. The same connection is used here to question possible incidents of violence against women in film as linked to patriarchal oppression.

One perspective on why women are abused comes from Susan Basow. She claims that gender stereotypes have, in some cases, allowed for violence against women. She states, "although males, in general, do seem to have a greater disposition toward aggression, aggressive behaviour is definitely learned" (1992 p 276). What she means is that while men already have it in them to be aggressive they also are taught and sometimes encouraged more than girls how to display that aggression. Basow cites that the masculine mystique in America is where these attitudes are learned. In one study, she found that males with traditional attitudes<sup>4</sup> toward women have turned out to be more aggressive than males with non-traditional attitudes. Non-aggressive behaviour has always been associated with being feminine. For instance, boys could be teased for not fighting or being called a sissy, which

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<sup>4</sup> By traditional, she refers to the view that women primarily exist to be domestic, or "barefoot and pregnant."

is usually seen as feminine. Therefore, aggressive behaviour is associated positively with males.

Basow also found a study that stated that three-quarters of college-aged men find rape sexually arousing. Therefore, aggression, dominance, and misogyny can be sexually stimulating for males. These attributes appear to be true across the male gender as a whole. Basow states, "men who commit rape are psychologically indistinguishable from other men in terms of general personality factors" (1992 p 279). In other words, harking back to Freud's biological determinism, all males would be capable of violence against women. There needs to be added an important assumption: while they may all be capable, not all men will act on these inherent impulses. This is an important distinction. However, a patriarchal system encourages some men and they will be more likely to act on it. The system tends to promote it.

How women are handling violence against them appears to be changing. Women are no longer tolerant to be victims. According to the National Crime Victimization Survey of 1994, "three out of four female victims of violence resisted the actions of the offender either physically or verbally" (US Dept of Justice, 1995 p 3). It appears that women are fighting back. The definition of violence here was rape, robbery, aggravated assault, or simple assault.

### **Physical Abuse Defined**

Before discussing how abuse of women is portrayed, one must define what in the 1990s is meant by the terms, abuse and violence. For the purpose of this paper, only one form of abuse will be discussed: physical. The other form, psychological, is not examined in detail for two reasons. First, proper attention to the amount of literature on psychological abuse lies outside the scope of this particular study. Second, physical abuse is more appropriate for motion picture analysis because it can be quantified visually.

There are many definitions of physical abuse. Psychologists B. L. Sherman and J. R. Dominick's definition is used here. They define abuse in terms of visual images, as "the overt expression of physical force with or without a weapon, against the self or another person and compelling action against one's will on pain of being hurt or killed or actually killing or hurting" (p 45). What they are emphasising here is that there is always some form of visual threat. In other words when the abuse is shown it is obvious. Since cinema deals with images on a movie screen, physical abuse can be found, when it is

seen, as an overt expression of physical force that is against a woman's will, using a weapon or not, and forcing someone to do something against her will.

Therefore, the following characteristics are used to define violence against women in film.

- An expression of force by a man against a woman's will.
- An expression of force by a man with a weapon against a woman.
- An action by a man toward a woman that is against her will.
- The threat of being hurt or killed by a man.
- Actual killing or hurting of a woman by a man.
- Existence of characteristics by a woman that are representative of an abused woman.

## **Abuse of Women in the Media**

According to Marian Meyers, "One of the primary blocks to justice for all women is the serious distortion of our experience which comes to us from many directions, but particularly comes to us through the media" (1994 p 49). The media may present situations of abuse that can be accurate or distorted. How all this awareness is reflected in the media becomes important to this discussion because there are possible effects of portraying violence against women on screen. According to film scholar Paul Rodecki, one in eight Hollywood films has a rape in it. As feminist author Molly Haskell states, "Movies are one of the clearest and most accessible of looking glasses into the past being both cultural artifacts and mirrors" (p 68). If films are a mirror and what filmmakers are showing is repeated male violence against women, then filmmakers are saying that it is okay to see women as abused despite negative effects. These effects of viewing this type of material cannot be neglected.

Edward Donnerstein and Daniel Linz have conducted much of the scientific work in this area. In 1984 they described violence against women in the media as, "the possibility of habituation to sex and violence has significant social consequences... If people become inured to violence from seeing too much of it, they may be less likely to respond to real violence" (p 14). In 1989, Linz, Donnerstein and Adams looked at female victims of violence. They

found that male and female subjects exposed to sexually violent visual material had a lower heart rate when watching violence than subjects watching non-violent material, with no negative mood increase. They also found that males had even less sympathy for a female victim of assault 48 hours after exposure to the event. They state that their findings supported their hypothesis that viewing violence against women results in desensitisation toward women in these situations.

## **The Female Protagonist**

There are great roles for young women in films, but usually they are hookers who are sodomized.

*Interview with Meryl Streep (1997 p D13)*

Meryl Streep, with a note of sarcasm evident in her words, reveals her frustration with the condition of women's roles. This frustration comes through the observation that so many roles portray women as prostitutes like Julia Roberts in Pretty Woman, Elizabeth Shue in Leaving Las Vegas or Mira Sorvino in Mighty Aphrodite. Bell hooks expresses the same type of frustration in Black Looks. In this significant publication, hooks examines the black woman's experience in society and cinema. She asks the reader to focus not on her resistance (in her case to black oppression), but rather see her pain – this paper takes the same perspective – see not only the resistance of women claiming violence as a form of oppression, but more importantly, understand the pain these representations perpetuate.

## **Actresses in Leading Roles**

The 1990s in film gave us a number of interesting performances. The films in this study were chosen based on a combination of critical acclaim and gross box office success.<sup>5</sup> Some pertinent questions to ask at this point are: How are instances of abuse responded to by the film community, or, does the spectator support certain kinds of roles for women? There is a combination of factors involved here. Clearly, screenwriters are writing these roles, filmmakers are creating these roles on screen, the film community is applauding some of these roles, and audiences are going to see these films.

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<sup>5</sup> Gross box office is the amount of money taken in for the movie in ticket sales, before distribution and exhibition costs are subtracted.

One could look only at critical acclaim in these roles and discuss how and why the performance garnered prominence in a male-dominated industry. One could also only look at box office success in order to gauge spectator support and get a very different list of films with women in lead roles.

There is something more complex happening here. Combining box office success with critical acclaim suggests that not only are the roles being lauded by the film industry, but also the public is giving tacit approval by going to see these films.

All the films chosen for analysis here, had a combination of high box office success combined with one or more nominations or awards for the actress in the film. High box office success means here that the film grossed \$40 million or more. For that same film, critical acclaim refers to any awards the actress was either nominated for or won for that role. The type of awards include the Academy Award (Oscar),<sup>6</sup> the Golden Globe award,<sup>7</sup> the MTV movie award,<sup>8</sup> the Blockbuster award,<sup>9</sup> the Genie Award,<sup>10</sup> the Image Award,<sup>11</sup> the Screen Actor's Guild Award<sup>12</sup> and the Golden Palm.<sup>13</sup> These are the most respected, prominent, or high profile awards for the industry. Results revealed the following films, Postcards From the Edge (1990), Death Becomes Her (1992), Thelma and Louise (1991), The Client (1993), The Silence of the Lambs (1991), The Piano (1993), and What's Love Got To Do With It (1993).

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<sup>6</sup> The Academy Award for Best Actress is voted on by all actresses in the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

<sup>7</sup> The Golden Globe is voted on by members of the Foreign Press Association.

<sup>8</sup> The MTV movie awards are chosen through a national poll of MTV viewers. The winners are determined by MTV viewers, who can cast their votes via a special number that appears on air, on MTV Online or at any participating Blockbuster Video location nationwide.

<sup>9</sup> The Blockbuster Award is based solely on box office receipts.

<sup>10</sup> The Genie is the Canadian equivalent of the American Academy Award.

<sup>11</sup> The Image Awards are given by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and honor the achievements of colored people in the field of entertainment in general. Entries are submitted and considered for nomination. From these entries, a special committee of 300 industry professionals and NAACP leaders from across the country select and vote on nominees in each of 41 categories.

<sup>12</sup> The guild's 95,000 active members who vote in five film categories and eight television categories determine SAG's awards. Their producer, agent, manager may submit actors for nomination, or press representative with the actor's permission and actors may submit themselves. These are the only awards honoring actors, which are voted entirely by their peers.

<sup>13</sup> The Golden Palm is the main festival award given at the Cannes Film Festival.

### *Postcards From the Edge (1990)*

For Postcards, Meryl Streep was nominated for an Oscar and a Golden Globe. The film did well financially too. It grossed approximately forty million dollars, not including video sales.<sup>14</sup> The film is about Streep's character, Suzanne Vale. Vale is a Hollywood actress who, at the beginning of the film, is making a movie. She blunders her lines and the audience soon finds out she has a drug problem. She almost overdoses after a night with a stranger and ends up in a detoxification centre. To ensure no more drug problems the next film company employing her demands that she live with her mother while filming.

Some of the abuse in this film is non-violent, such as when Vale meets up with Jack Faulkner (Dennis Quaid) who turns out to be the man she spent the night with when she almost overdosed. He romances her and the two begin a sexual relationship. Further, he seems to actually be falling in love with Vale. Vale comes to find out that Faulkner is romancing her and other women as well and using the same love phrases as he used with Vale. He lies to her, manipulates her, and cheats on her. As the course of the film continues Vale learns to reconcile with her mother, get off drugs, get her inner strength back, and generally get her life together.

The physical abuse in this film comes in the opening scene where Streep is pulled from a crowd, taken in front of a military official and struck across the face, sending her to the ground. Though this is the only instance of physical abuse in the film, it raises an important point that it is not just a volume of violence that needs to be examined. In this case, even though it is only one scene, it is significant because it exists at all. It clearly displays how movie violence is taken for granted.

### *Death Becomes Her (1992)*

In 1992, Streep paired up with Goldie Hawn for a black comedy directed by Bob Zemeckis. For this film, Streep was nominated for a Golden Globe. The box office for the film was approximately \$60 million plus over \$30 million in video rentals.<sup>15</sup> Streep plays Madeline Ashton, an aging actress who, in the backstory, steals her best friend's boyfriend, Ernest (Bruce Willis). Hawn

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<sup>14</sup> The Internet Movie Database, Oct. 23, 1998. Including video sales would place the gross for the film much higher; however, these statistics are unavailable for this film.

plays Helen Sharp, the best friend who hates Madeline for stealing Ernest years ago. Helen becomes an obese, lazy failure, until she, one day, discovers a secret potion that restores youthful beauty. Madeline also tries the potion and they soon find out that the potion also keeps them from dying. Madeline and Ernest's marriage has been rocky for a while and the animosity between them escalates in a fight at their mansion. In the meantime Ernest and Helen have been plotting to get rid of Madeline. Madeline and Ernest get involved in an argument where he begins to strangle her, first dangling her over a balcony railing, and then strangling her while holding her backwards over a flight of stairs. Ernest eventually lets go and Madeline begins to fall backward down the stairs. He struggles with helping her or letting her fall. He pushes her down the large stairway and she lands in a heap at the bottom. However, she is not dead. In a few minutes she gets up and proceeds to walk, even though her head is twisted around to the back. She soon understands that she cannot die. Madeline and Helen eventually befriend each other and use Ernest, now a mortician, who concocts paint mixtures that the women use to keep their skin from falling off and peeling as they age. Years later Ernest dies and they are left, literally, in pieces at his funeral.

Death was criticised for being misogynist. According to cultural critic Jonathan Romney, "That [the film's] misogyny lies not so much in the violent transformations of Streep's and Hawn's bodies... what's more traditionally disturbing is the equation of women and mortality... you could read the title literally: death becomes her; is feminized" (1995 p 32). In this film Streep is dumped by her lover, pushed down a flight of stairs and verbally abused by her husband.

### *Thelma and Louise (1991)*

Thelma and Louise was released in the summer of 1991 and attracted considerable media attention. According to Brandon Willis, the film raised debates that it was everything from a complex feminist statement to simple male bashing. Sarandon once stated in an interview:

I was surprised that the film struck such a primal nerve. I knew when we were filming that it would be different, unusual and hopefully entertaining.

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<sup>15</sup> The Internet Movie Database, Oct. 23, 1998.

But shocking? I guess giving women the option of violence was hard for a lot of people to accept. (p 2)

The story begins when Thelma (Susan Sarandon) and Louise (Geena Davis) are planning for a roadtrip. Louise is the street-smart waitress. Thelma is the meek housewife who has to ask her husband for permission to go out of town. The two stop at a bar for drinks and Thelma proceeds to get inebriated. Hamlin, a guy at the bar, dances with Thelma and then takes her outside for air. He attempts to molest her, and when she tells him no he slaps her. When she slaps him back, he proceeds to beat her and rape her. This is the first instance of abuse. Louise interrupts them with a gun pointed straight at Hamlin's head. She states, "In the future when a woman is cryin' like that, she's not having any fun." He replies with, "I should have gone ahead and --." Louise shoots him dead. This event causes the women to go on a cross-country roadtrip eluding police.

Next, the two run into a young Brad Pitt who catches Thelma's eye. She has sex with him and he steals all their money. In the meantime Louise visits with her boyfriend Jimmy (Michael Madsen). She will not tell him what is going on and his first reaction is to start throwing items around the room. When Louise responds with, "I'm outta here," he apologises. Thelma and Louise begin to brandish their own form of violence by robbing a country market and blowing up an eighteen-wheeler after the driver makes obscene gestures to them while on the road. In the course of their trip Louise reveals that she was raped in Texas.

There is a theme of cause and effect argued in this film. In another scene a policeman in the middle of the desert stops the two. They proceed to lock him in a trunk at gunpoint. When he pleads with them for his life Thelma states, "be sweet to your wife, my husband wasn't sweet to me and look how I turned out." The implication here, presented as dark humour, is that it is only in response to bad treatment from a man that a woman resorts to violence.

The course of Louise and Thelma's trip reveals the growth of their characters. Thelma claims that she's wide-awake now, that she could never go back to her former life. The one man in the film who tries to help her is Hal Slocumb (Harvey Keitel). He is the detective searching for them. The sympathetic perspective on women comes from his character. At one point when the police have cornered the two and want to advance on them, Slocumb tries to stop the police by exclaiming, "How many times do these women have to be

fucked over?” With their car facing the edge of a cliff, Thelma says, “Let’s keep going.” The two hold hands triumphantly and hit the gas, hurling the car over the cliff.

### *The Client (1993)*

Susan Sarandon’s other film, *The Client*, is about a young boy, Mark Sway (Brad Renfro), who accidentally comes upon a Mafia lawyer trying to commit suicide by asphyxiating himself in his car. The boy tries to prevent the suicide by pulling the rag out of the tailpipe. The lawyer catches the boy and tells him the secret of where a body--one that the Mafia has killed--is buried. The US Attorney’s office run by Roy Foltrigg (Tommy Lee Jones) is after the boy to testify. In order to protect himself the boy hires Reggie Love (Susan Sarandon), a lawyer with a criminal past. Love proceeds to protect the boy to the dismay of the attorney’s office. Eventually Sway reveals to her the whereabouts of the body and the two uncover the body. The film concludes when Love manages to get the boy, along with his family, into a witness protection program. Susan Sarandon in this film is abused many times. She’s called a “bitch” by more than one character, is threatened and humiliated by the FBI, attacked by a gangster and held at gunpoint. There is also an important backstory whereby Sarandon’s children were taken away from her by her ex-husband. This happened because her husband at the time left her for a younger woman, which caused Sarandon to start drinking. Eventually her husband had her declared an unfit mother. The point is made in this film that a successful woman is not good enough. The older, experienced Sarandon is thrown aside for a younger woman. This is a familiar scenario. The commentary is made here that sometimes men only find younger women attractive and worthy of love. Furthermore, the shame is Sarandon’s in this backstory because she lost her children due to her drinking. Once again, the female character’s struggle is a result of mistreatment from a man.

### **Jodie Foster, Angela Bassett, and Holly Hunter**

The next films feature three award-winning performances by Jodie Foster, Angela Bassett and Holly Hunter in three very different films. There is an FBI agent, a rock star and a wife. In all cases, the women suffer abuse, and do overcome it. However, there is also a feeling of “just getting out of harm’s

way.” In other words, there is either a constant reminder of their pain that they must live with, or a very real threat that will still exist in the world, as the film ends.

### *The Silence of the Lambs (1991)*

One of the biggest box office successes of the 1990s was The Silence of the Lambs. It grossed over one hundred and thirty million dollars in the United States alone, with almost sixty million dollars in video rentals.<sup>16</sup> The star of the film, Jodie Foster won the Academy Award and the Golden Globe for her performance.

The film begins with the lead character Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster), running through the woods, a strong athletic woman. She’s smart, in the top quarter of her class at the FBI training program. The differences encountered, being a woman in the program is expressed in two instances, one where she gets in an elevator and is obviously dwarfed by the six burly cadets that surround her.

The other instance is when some male cadets running in the other direction leer at her and another female cadet. Clarice is given an assignment to question a known murderer, Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins). The interrogation of Lecter is meant to help find leads to another murderer who is kidnapping overweight teenage girls. This other criminal then starves the girls so that their skin may be more easily removed. This allows him more elasticity with the human skin covering he is sewing together in order to become a woman. Eventually Clarice tracks down the killer and is engaged in a chase through the darkness before she shoots him dead and saves the kidnapped girl.

According to Collins, “the character of Clarice Starling played by Jodie Foster was a positive image of a woman working in a patriarchal society, and thus empowering for women viewers” (1993 p 142). He sees Foster’s role as a “two hour spectacle of woman solving the perverse riddles of patriarchy - all by herself” (p 149). However, film critic Karen Mann states “despite such unconventionality, this woman is still ‘placed’ within the structure of the film through her relationships to three men” (p 589). She claims that both Starlings’ boss, Jack Crawford (Scott Glenn) and Hannibal Lecter (Anthony

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<sup>16</sup> The Internet Movie Database, Oct. 23, 1998.

Hopkins) put her at risk and use her unashamedly. Film critic John Simon agrees that Starling is abused and states, “this demonic superman cajoles, humiliates, insults with gross sexual innuendo, compliments, and bullies her almost irresistibly” (p 55).

Clarice is abused. The physical abuse occurs in Clarice’s visits to Lechter and the positions she is put in throughout the investigation.” The threat that looms over Clarice during the course of the film is abuse that qualifies under Sherman and Dominick’s definition. The threat of being hurt is apparent throughout the film from Lechter and Buffalo Bill. According to literature scholar David Sundleson, “Instead of men who desire women, we get men who hate and envy them” (1993 p 14). Buffalo Bill goes after Clarice in a dark basement, not only going after her with a gun, which would be a logical plot progression, but he also at one point reaches out (unbeknownst to her) to caress her hair, making the threat more than just murderer to cop, now it is male to female, and sexual. This film shows, more strongly than the others do the oppressiveness that the threat of violence can have on a woman, guiding her very actions and ways of communication. Another film with not only the threat, but also the execution of violence comes in the true story of the life of Tina and Ike Turner.

### *What’s Love Got to Do With It ?(1993)*

Angela Bassett was nominated for an Image and Academy Award for the lead role playing superstar Tina Turner in What’s Love Got To do With It? She also won the Golden Globe for this performance. The film grossed almost forty million dollars not including video sales.<sup>17</sup>

The film is based on the biography I Tina written by Tina Turner and Kurt Loder. Tina Turner considered playing the role herself but turned it down stating that living through it once was enough. The film tells the story of Turner’s life from childhood to superstardom. During her rise to fame Turner met and married Ike Turner in what turned out to be an abusive relationship.

The abuse began early with Ike exercising control over Turner’s every move including changing her name (her original name was Anna May Bullock), pulling her out of the hospital in an anaemic state in order to perform, commanding that she bleach her hair white, verbal assaults, and smashing

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<sup>17</sup> The Internet Movie Database, Oct. 23, 1998.

her face with cake. The abuse continues as he starts to cheat on her, and give her regular beatings. A subsequent beating in the film turns different. Turner fights back this time, causing as much damage to Ike as he does to her. Minutes later when Ike falls asleep, Turner leaves, and this time for good. The following scenes of the film show the subsequent divorce where she fights for nothing of their assets except her name, the one she created, the star that is Tina Turner. In the final scenes of the film Ike threatens her one more time, this time with a gun. Turner barely blinks an eye, shows no fear, walks out on him and proceeds to go on stage and perform triumphantly.

Tasker examines a discussion of the kind of abusive behaviour exhibited in this film in such films as Aliens (1986) and Terminator 2 (1991). Tasker admits that some films that are violent usually present women's physical vulnerability through rape or images of bodily penetration. The reason for this may be attributed to myths about women and rape. One common myth is that women "ask for it" or secretly fantasise about being raped. According to Haskell, "for a woman to fantasise rape in the correct sense of the term would be to fantasise not love or lust but mutilation, and no sane women – and very few insane ones – express such a desire, even unconsciously" (p 128). Haskell believes this myth is based on the false assumption that women are basically masochistic and that no usually means yes in sexual situations.

If nothing puts that myth to rest, this film should. The beatings are brutal. According to author or Ebony, Aldore Collier, the film deleted even more of the cruelty that took place over almost twenty years of Ike and Tina's marriage. Collier also mentions that Ike is portrayed as a "musical visionary, plagued by deep-seated feelings of insecurity that exploded in acts of violence" (p 110). In an interview Ike once said, "Each time I hit her it was because of her attitude... She was always looking sad, and I cannot stand people looking sad... so I'd slap the shit out of her." (Corliss, 1993 p 65). Ike harkens back to Mulvey's Hollywood-constructed man, struck with the fear of castration that develops contempt toward his object. In this case that contempt was replicated on screen for real life abuse. Sometimes the abuse may be replicated on screen in a more symbolic form of abuse, as in the next film, The Piano.

### *The Piano (1993)*

Jane Campion received many nominations and awards for The Piano including one nomination for Best Director and winning for Best Screenplay at the Academy Awards. The film's star, Holly Hunter won an Oscar, the Golden Palm, and a Golden Globe for this performance. The film grossed approximately forty million dollars, not including video sales. With a budget of only seven million dollars, it can be considered a financial success.

The film is about Ada, a single mother who finds herself in an arranged marriage to a man in New Zealand, Stewart (Sam Neill). Ada travels with her daughter and her beloved piano, landing on the beach. Her new husband will not take the piano and instead leaves it on the beach. Enter George Baines who works for Stewart. Baines gets the piano and swaps piano lessons from Ada in return for sexual favours. They agree that each encounter is worth one black piano key and that when all the keys are done, the piano will be returned to her. Eventually Ada falls in love with Baines. Stewart finds out about the affair, locks her in their home and tries to rape her. Ada eventually survives, goes off with Baines and finds happiness.

The abuse in this film occurs from both males, one whom she actually falls in love with. First, Ada is blackmailed into getting her piano back. It is made clear from the beginning of the film that the piano is her life. While Ada consents to the sexual duties, she does so feeling that she has no choice. This is shown in the scenes where she is clearly reluctant to let Baines grope her, but lets him because she knows it will mean the return of her precious piano. The control Baines exercises over her is why there is abuse. Second, she is lied to by Baines when he tells her he only wishes to lie down on the bed with her and then proceeds to make advances. Abuse happens again to her, but this time from her husband. After Stewart catches Baines and Ada making love, he forces himself on Ada dragging her through the mud in an attempt to rape her. She gets away, but then he locks her, literally, in their house by boarding up the windows and putting locks on the outside of the doors. The obvious abuse here is when he later chops off her finger.

The triumphant end here for Ada is not like *Thelma and Louise's*. In one of the final scenes she decides to send the piano over a boat down into the bottom of the ocean. As the piano falls, she places her foot in the rope the piano is attached to, sending her into the water with it. As she is descending

in the water she changes her mind stating, "What a surprise, my will has chosen life." Her triumphant road to freedom results in life, not death. Interestingly, it also results in a man.

## **Film Analysis**

### **The Male Glare**

The male glare becomes part of a feminist theory that sees texts as sites of ideological contention. That is, the values of the filmmakers and whether they choose to portray women as abused or not, play out on screen, exposing their ideology. Educating women about how they are oppressed through violent images is one step and it works. Freedom cannot be fully achieved without also educating (and not attacking) men. Some forms of male behaviour become the external forces that allow men to oppress women. Making men aware of this conduct can allow both genders to obtain freedom--one from ignorance and one from being abused.

Furthermore, adding the male glare to film theory enables it to do what Devereaux claims all feminist theories should do, "to make the unnoticed noticed" (1990 p 343). It attempts to show what has not been noticed, that women in leading roles in cinema are presented as abused in the 1990s. By factoring in a social-influence approach this element is further identified as not being universal among men. Some men in the 1990s see women as equal, while others do not. This new element addresses those who still deny that women are oppressed and suffering – in other words, abused in the psychoanalytic definition of the term.

### **The Glare and the Female Protagonist**

The glare could also be applied to other female characters in supporting and minor roles. However, part of the glare is further based on Faludi's concept of the backlash. In other words, when women appear as leading ladies, advancing the narrative and central to the action, and in positions of power, they are torn down again through roles depicting women as abused. These images can also, admittedly, be directed at men. The distinguishing factor here is that women, as leading ladies, are in a position of greater power. They have power over the narrative as well as, truly, power over others

because she receives top billing and is most likely better paid than the other men in that particular film. Furthermore, this system exists within a patriarchal order where men are primarily in a position of dominance over women. Therefore, with more power for the woman come the backlash and more abuse.

Male violence against women becomes significant in the chosen films because it appears that suffering abuse from a man is the only life experience women must go through. Though they do triumph over the abuse, these are practically the only stories being written for leading ladies. They are not saving the world; they are struggling with male relationships. This lack of autonomy from men limits women's roles from achieving any more substance than being tied to a man. Not that a relationship to a man cannot have a substantive story, but when this is the only story being told, the complexity of the female experience is being denied.

As stated, the male glare occurs when violent images of women are portrayed on screen. Within the glare of the camera, the filmmaker consciously uses acts of violence against women as plot devices to supposedly advance and create conflict in the story. However, the preponderance of these images represents an unconscious desire to punish the female. The female protagonist is in a position of power now, advancing the story. This behaviour is supported in the abuse literature by Meyers, who states studies have shown that, "battering is a form of male control and domination within a social hierarchy" (1994 p 49). Thus a male glare is appropriated to the female protagonist as a means to control her.

This control can also be accomplished by watching. In Death, when Streep and Hawn fight each other, the scene cuts back and forth between them and Willis' character as he watches the battle. The camera reinforces this point of view through the shots of him. It is almost as if he is watching a drama put on for his own benefit.

The glare is enacted in Death when Ernest attempts to control Madeline through violence. In the scene of their argument Madeline is chastising Ernest for being a has-been surgeon. Ernest responds by grabbing her by the neck and bending her back over the railing of the balcony. The shots are from Ernest's point-of-view as the viewer sees Madeline gasping for air. The scene cuts again to Ernest's point-of-view as he now chokes her as she

dangles over the top step of the stairs, calling her a “vicious, loathsome bitch.” When Madeline cries, “Please, please” Ernest has a moment of clarity and lets go saying he is so sorry. Madeline teeters backwards crying, “Help me.” Ernest contemplates, but is slow. The cartoonish style of the film takes over as Madeline continues to teeter longer than a real human being could. Madeline finally cries, “Hurry up, you wimp!” and Ernest responds by poking her in the chest, which pushes her backwards, sending her down the stairs. Her flight down the stairs is punctuated in 13 successive shots of her falling, hitting each step, with bones cracking and limbs banging until she lands literally--in a twisted heap at the bottom. The male glare resides in Ernest’s attempt to control Madeline and his eruptive attempt to kill her, punctuated by the many shots of her receiving injury as she falls down the stairs.

Interestingly, it is in Postcards’ film-within-a-film that Meryl Streep’s character is physically abused. The film opens with Streep, as Vale, and a friend arriving in an unknown foreign country. After presenting their passports, Streep and a friend are told to follow a guard into an office. There, another uniformed guard, presumably the one in charge, approaches Vale and punches her square on the jaw, sending her to the ground with a bloody lip. The shot is particularly disturbing because there is no warning. There is no sense of physical threat. The medium shot of Vale is severely interrupted as the expression of force comes from off-screen suddenly, sending her down. After Vale gets up off the floor she stands defiantly up to her abuser and begins to fight back verbally, only to confuse her speech and begin laughing. It is then that the audience finds out that Vale is playing the role of an actress within a film. The male glare exists here because of the filmmaker’s choice to present Vale in a situation where she is abused. Streep’s character could have been shooting any film with any plot. That she is immediately struck down in such an abrupt assault is evidence of the male glare. The filmmaker probably does not set out to purposely strike her down. Nevertheless, the unconscious fear erupts into contempt, knocking down one of the most successful women in Hollywood.

Other examples of the glare come from Thelma and Louise. In the first act of the film Thelma is assaulted and almost raped. In a later scene, Louise and Thelma stop on the road and have a conversation about why they cannot drive through Texas to evade police. In earlier scenes Louise points out that Texas has the death penalty and that is why they cannot go that way.

However, in this scene Thelma guesses and Louise does not deny that she was raped in Texas, which results in part of her motivation to shoot Harlan, the man who attacks Louise in the beginning of the film.

More examples include the verbal abuse Thelma suffers from her husband, as he talks condescendingly to her, yelling at her to come home. In another scene, both Thelma and Louise suffer crude gestures from a passing trucker, who wags his tongue at them and exclaims, "Hey, you want a big dick." All of these events in the story drive Thelma and Louise into a deeper life of crime. Men are clearly punishing these women. So far this discussion has been about the glare in terms of the camera, but what of the other gazes?

### **The Glare of the Spectator**

The second gaze, under Mulvey, is that of the spectator. There are two spectators to examine, the male and the female. The male spectator deals with the female protagonist the same way the filmmaker does, but with an additional result. The male glare (now from the spectator) to the female protagonist operates as voyeur receiving scopophilic pleasure that becomes sadistic. Abusive behaviour reinforces the male's position of power that is threatened by seeing a woman in a position of power as the lead in the film. One prime example of this power relationship is in Silence of the Lambs. Jodie Foster's character (Clarice Starling) is at the top of her graduating FBI class, and handpicked for a dangerous assignment. Her job is to go see Hannibal Lecter to glean insight into finding Buffalo Bill (the serial killer on the loose).

Clarice first meets Dr. Frederick Chilton, the chief administrator of the prison hospital, who promptly asks Clarice out on a date. Already Clarice is not left autonomous, a human being doing her job, but an object to be sexualised, though ultimately Chilton is punished through the final scene where Lecter unknowingly follows him as they walk into the sunset. Dr. Chilton takes Clarice into the basement wing where Lecter is kept. It is a long dark hallway with other inmate's cells. One guard assures Clarice that he can see her and will be watching to ensure her safety. She proceeds down the hallway slowly. The camera takes her point of view (POV) as she passes by each cell. The men inside the cells groan and are lit so that they appear in pools of light and dark shadows so the spectator cannot fully see what they are doing.

The film cuts back and forth between the POV's of these men and that of Clarice. The shots of Clarice show her fighting to not be afraid. As Clarice walks past the last cell before Lechter's, one prisoner approaches the cell bars and says, "I can smell your cunt." The next shot of Clarice shows her stunned as semen is splashed on her face. Clarice attempts not to show her revulsion and continues down the hallway to Lechter's cell. The male glare exists here for the spectator because he is given moments of voyeuristic pleasure seeing the growing fear in Clarice as she proceeds down the hallway. Lechter does retaliate for her by somehow (it is not clear in the film) getting the offender to swallow his own tongue.

Lambs was one of the most successful films of the category. This is not to say that people came to see a woman abused. The story is compelling and there is an Oscar-winning performance by Anthony Hopkins playing Hannibal Lechter. In this film Foster does triumph, killing the kidnapper, Buffalo Bill. However, her triumph is not complete; she does not catch Lechter. The threat is still out there. The point is made that Lechter would never go after Starling because he feels the world is a much more interesting place with her in it. However, who can trust a man who eats human liver with some fava beans and a nice Chianti? Men and women came in high numbers to see this film, but in applying the male glare some of these spectators may receive pleasure from seeing women under the threat of violence.

The glare occurs in The Client when Sarandon and the boy uncover the body of the man the Mafia killed. Sarandon and the boy are being chased through some bushes by the murderer. In one shot Sarandon is tackled to the ground. In the fight, the murderer's gun is thrown free. Next, there is a two-shot of the murderer and Sarandon as he smashes her head into the ground two times. He then straddles her body, pulls a knife out, places it at her throat and says, "You're gonna die, bitch." By now the boy had retrieved the gun and tells the murderer to let her go, which he does. Eventually Sarandon takes the gun from the boy and shoots out a neighbour's alarm system, causing havoc and allowing her and the boy to escape. It could be argued that having Sarandon's face smashed into the ground is part of a plot device, a normal murderer to lawyer event. However, in this film, supported by the earlier verbal abuse and harassment, the violence becomes sexualised and part of the male glare. The reason is that he refers to her as the bitch. In an earlier scene the mobsters refer to Sarandon and her mother as "the bitches."

The male glare is enabled here because Sarandon is attacked in a manner that is framed by the sexualisation of Sarandon that is laced throughout the film.

It is interesting to note that these instances of abuse do not appear in the original novel by John Grisham. For instance, in Mark's first contact with Reggie in the lawyer's office, he is surprised that the man he first meets is the assistant and that Reggie is the lawyer, but he does not verbalise any doubt in her abilities because she is a woman. In neither of the Roy Foltrigg scenes does sexual harassment take place. Instead, in the book Foltrigg greets her as an opponent, but without having to resort to sexual comments. Finally, in the climax of the story, when Reggie and Mark go to find the dead body, what happens in the book is that they sit in the bushes, and are never chased at all by the murderers. Therefore, the physical abuse, as when Reggie gets her head smashed twice into the ground, is a result of the filmmaker's choice.

### **The Glare with the Female Spectator and the Female Protagonist**

According to film theorist Barbara Creed, the female spectator can identify with multiple subject positions, male or female. According to film analyst Vicky Lebeau, woman's "looked-at-ness is felt as a form of occupation which alienates the female spectator from her 'self'" (p 54). When women look at women it is emotional and bonding, it is not as visual as the male look. According to Warlaumont, the traditional view of women looking at other women represents a form of narcissism: "the women find pleasure in self-adoration, the need to gauge their own beauty by assessing the beauty of others--and identifying with the image" (p 36). This is what Warlaumont calls a visual grammar that women have become accustomed to.

In Thelma and Louise, Thelma is assaulted and raped. In one shot, Harlan hits her and throws her down on her stomach, over the hood of a car. The next shot is a medium close-up of Thelma's buttocks as Harlan fumbles with undoing his pants. Thelma is crying, "Don't hurt me, don't hurt me." The scene cuts back to Harlan, continuing to try to get his pants down, then cuts back to Thelma, crying and saying no. The female spectator, as in Mulvey's gaze, is thus confronted with an image and is suppressed by it. She bonds emotionally to the female on the screen. In the male glare, the female spectator becomes helpless to stop the onslaught of violent images as it

assaults the eyes. She is forced to watch the male, glaring at her from behind the image. She receives this glare through identification with the abused female protagonist. What is the ego ideal in the male protagonist in Mulvey's gaze, becomes the ego ideal abused in the female protagonist.

## **The Glare with the Subject/Object and the Female Protagonist**

The role of subject and object in this new element is in line with Devereaux and Mulvey who assert that movies promote the position with man as subject and woman as object. According to Lacan, to objectify is to take as an object or aesthetic contemplation. According to Devereaux, men are uncomfortable as objects so they tend to place women in the role of objects while the male characters run the narrative. In the male glare a woman is still the object, and runs the narrative as a goal-oriented protagonist. She remains the object because she is still fetishised by violence.

What's Love is a classic case of the battered woman. Clearly Tina was objectified and fetishised by Ike. His first exposure to her is seeing her sing on stage and he is intrigued by the way the crowd responds. On their first outing, he tells her he can make her a star. As her career progresses he cares more about getting her on stage than caring for her and her health. As her career flourishes, she gets more exhausted from the pace of being on the road so he orders her to take drugs to keep her going. The more successful she gets, the more demanding and jealous he gets. Because he is losing control of her and she is becoming more successful than him, his anxiety increases and the violence increases.

In one particularly brutal scene Tina mentions that all of his songs sound the same. Ike does not strike out at her immediately. He tells her to get in the sound booth and start singing. She does so, only to suffer him banging on the booth glass, cutting her off and telling her to do it again, and better. His interruptions increase and he forces his way into the booth. Tina pleads with Ike, but he persists in slapping her and forces himself inside her as she cries. After it is over, he walks down the hall saying, "I don't know why you make me hurt you." For Ike, Tina is an object he can no longer control, so she is fetishised by violence. Ike has lost control of his object because deep down

he knows he would never make it without her. The only recourse he has is to try and destroy her.

The male glare exists in the prolonged rape of Tina. The event is fact, not fiction, and is horrifying. Not only does the filmmaker choose to show Tina being beaten by Ike in this scene, but the camera holds on a two-shot of them as Tina cries and Ike repeatedly thrusts into her. Is this just a plot device, meant to advance the plot, or create conflict? No, again, it is the male glare witnessing an overt expression of force. The scene could have cut as soon as it was suggested that Ike is raping her, but the male glare is activated through the sustaining shots of the rape.

In The Piano, Ada is a woman married to a man she has not met. Already she is an object. She is chosen, not based on her intellect, personality, etc. She is chosen to be a wife. Immediately upon her arrival, Stewart, her new husband, remarks on how small she is. Her appearance is made fun of by the island natives. A few times Stewart remarks to a friend that he hopes soon she will become affectionate. He does not say anything about getting to know her, only that she provide him with physical pleasure. Ada is also objectified by Baines. His deal with her to trade piano keys for sexual encounters places her as an object to his demands.

In one degrading scene Baines asks Ada to play the piano. He proceeds to crawl under the piano. Baines slowly lifts her skirt and looks at her thigh. The scene cuts back and forth showing Ada's shame, but she continues to play, knowing this is part of the deal she is forced into. Baines then finds a hole in her stocking and caresses it. As Berger states, the woman becomes in herself the surveyed female. Ada is resolved to this life of being used by men for their own gain. Why any woman would fall in love with an overweight slovenly man who likes to look up skirts, is beyond this author, but the point is that some women, in this situation and upbringing, have unfortunately been only considered as objects and therefore, can only see themselves that way.

In another scene, Ada is walking through the New Zealand woods. She stops as she sees Stewart coming toward her. She turns around and begins to walk the other way. Stewart walks quickly after her. He catches up to her and pulls her to him. Ada tries to push him away. They struggle and end up on the muddy ground. Ada, on her stomach, claws through the mud, trying to get away. Stewart almost on top of her claws at her, trying to pull him toward

her. The entire scene takes place in silence, which only emphasises the humiliation Ada must go through, suffering this kind of attack. It is at this point in the film that Stewart knows he has lost control of Ada. Again the question is asked: Is this event just a plot device, used to advance the story or create conflict? This scene neither advances the story nor creates further conflict. In an earlier scene Stewart had locked Ada up in their house, after finding out about her relations with Baines. The point had been made that Stewart was punishing her. However, in the male-dominated glare he turns Ada into an object and fetishises her through violence.

One final instance of abuse in this film comes at the climax. Ada's daughter gives a piano key to Stewart that was intended for Baines. Stewart realises he has lost complete control over Ada. He comes upon Ada and drags her over to a tree stump. Ada fights him, but to no avail. He places her hand on the tree stump, holding it down. The scene cuts to Ada's face as she feels her finger being chopped off. She does not cry out, but only gets up and silently walks away, then stops and sinks into the mud. Stewart echoes Ike's words from What's Love, when he says, "Why did you make me hurt you." Here, the male character practically admits his sadistic reaction in verbal form. Clearly the male glare is activated and expressed here as Ada is fetishised by violence.

This film is a prime example of what this study is about, how women are abused and that is why the images are there. That may be the case. It is important that the script was written by a woman, who brings about another important element of the male glare: the response.

Something amazing happens in this film as well as in the others. Women in the 1990s triumph over the oppression and violence. Louise begins the film with her hair in a tight bun, generous makeup, rings, necklace, earrings, and all the trappings of womanhood. Through the course of the film her hair comes down, lipstick is thrown away and jewelry is traded for an old man's cowboy hat. Louise begins to overcome her oppressive husband by becoming more herself. It is only when she and Thelma rid themselves of their oppressive lives that they finally feel free. When confronted with a final showdown, literally forced to the edge of a cliff, they choose freedom, knowing they could never go back to the men and way of life they had been existing in.

What can or should anything be done about the male glare? Is there any way to portray women as triumphant, without having been abused? Surely there are other struggles women can overcome without them being about men. Some possible solutions are discussed in the concluding chapter.

## **The Latter Half of the 1990s**

Leading roles for women after 1995 feature some of the same actresses that dominate the first half of the 1990s: Meryl Streep, Susan Sarandon and Jodie Foster. Some newcomers to the successful leading role for women category include Frances McDormand and Helen Hunt.

Susan Sarandon had much box office success with her role in Stepmom (1998), which grossed \$90 million. However, Sarandon was overlooked for any awards for this role. Helen Hunt, a long-time television actress gained much respect in Hollywood when she received a Golden Globe and Oscar for her performance in As Good As It Gets (1997). The film also grossed over \$147 million. However, Hunt's role in the film was not the lead role in that she did not receive top billing; that went to Jack Nicholson.

Jodie Foster did have another film that fit into the category with Contact (1997). The film grossed over \$100 million. Though she did not receive Academy recognition, Foster was nominated for The Blockbuster Award and a Golden Globe for her performance. Foster plays Ellie Arroway, a radio astronomer who has devoted her life to finding proof of extra-terrestrial life. Throughout the film Ellie suffers no physical abuse from a man. Her struggle in the film is with men, but it is not sexual. For instance, Ellie is overlooked for the mission into outer space by David Drumlin (Tom Skerritt), a one-time boss of hers. After Ellie discovers the radio signal from space, Drumlin steps in to take the glory. He is punished later in the film being blown up in an explosion by a fanatic. The tension and conflict between Ellie and Drumlin is on a professional level, not sexual. Ellie does have a love interest, Palmer Voss (Matthew McConaughey). In one scene he comes to visit her before her mission. In a pleasant gender twist, he gives her a memento (a compass) and tells her he does not want to lose her, and to find her way back home. Here, the female hero is sent off by her male love, not the other way around. Foster manages a successful role without being abused. The male glare is not activated in this film. Another role that received even higher critical acclaim and is worthy of deeper analysis is Marge Gunderson in Fargo.

### Fargo, the Story

Fargo opens with a title card stating that the movie was based on a true story. Joel Coen stated in an interview with journalist Jeff Streckler, "We felt the audience would have certain expectations if they were told it was a true story that would allow us to do things that we wouldn't be allowed to do if they thought it was fiction... I didn't think we'd get away with it as long as we did" (1997 p O5B). The story begins in the dead of winter in Fargo, North Dakota, where a car sales executive, Lundegard, hires two men to kidnap his wife, so he can embezzle half the ransom. In the process, the kidnappers kill a cop and two witnesses. Enter Marge Gunderson who begins to unravel the murders, tracing them back to Lundegard.

Marge is not your typical leading role cop. First, Marge's physicality, being very pregnant, provides an interesting, sometimes comical, sometimes serious tone to her character. One might think this rotund woman would be "delicate." However, Marge exists as a taste of a true-to-life woman, juggling her husband, career and future child. She may waddle when she walks, but she also displays intelligence, wit and appropriate serious behaviour for a murder investigation when needed. All of Marge was skilfully written, and skilfully portrayed by Frances McDormand.

McDormand was highly critically acclaimed for this role through awards and by critics. For instance, Roger Ebert called McDormand's performance, "true in every individual moment, and yet slyly, quietly, over the top in its cumulative effect" (p 2). Individuality is a trademark with McDormand. She is not interested in glamorous roles, or fame. She once stated in an interview with Blake Green, "The only control I have is to choose to do the work I want to do" (p BO3). She considers herself a character actress and plans to continue choosing her roles, rather than doing them because she has to. McDormand also admits that she read the script for Fargo and was definitely interested in Marge Gunderson, which had been written by her husband and his brother with her in mind. According to journalist Merle Ginsberg, "Marge never takes off her clothes, commits adultery, becomes a serial killer, does a courtroom scene, gets a terminal illness, or has a nervous breakdown" (p O1F). Ginsberg is correct; there is nothing overtly sexual or typical about Marge.

Film critic Devin McKinney states that Marge, “is the rarest of birds in the Coen aviary” (p 32). What he means is that here is a woman in a lead role, pregnant, nonetheless, and single-handedly solves the murder and, she solves the crime autonomously. She has support from male characters in the film, but finds answers and leads without their help, completely based on her own intelligence.

Marge is also human. In one scene she vomits, not because of the grisly murder victims sprawled out in blood on the snow, but because she has morning sickness. According to film critic Thomas Doherty, “Throughout the investigation, she maintains both equilibrium (waddling slightly) and a Promethean appetite (eating for two)” (p 47). He goes on to state that her character does this with “no cynicism, no witticism, no eroticism” (p 2). Marge is the true measure of a complex woman who can walk into her office, retrieve her messages from work, order skin-so-soft from a co-worker and present her husband with a bag of nightcrawlers, all in one breath.

What is most important about Marge is that she is not abused, not even in the final scene when she catches the murderer stuffing his last victim into a wood chipper. She raises her gun, very cop-like, and tells him to freeze. He attempts to run off and she deftly shoots him, only wounding him. The scene cuts to her having him in the back seat of the patrol car. We never see any struggle of getting him in the car, wounded as he was. But, it is okay. We believe that Marge can do anything because she is smart and she is Marge.

The male glare does not exist for Marge Gunderson. She is not seen erotically through shot choice, or by the wardrobe she wears. The camera never uses her as an object for contemplation, or for sustaining violence, because none is given to her. Yet, this is a successful role. McDormand did receive and win awards for the role, and the film received over \$40 million in ticket and video sales.

In conclusion, this is not to say that the Coen brothers know any more than other filmmakers, but they choose to represent what most others do not, that is, a successful non-abused lead role for a woman. Furthermore, she is a complex woman, neither sexualised, nor dependent on any man.

## **Conclusion**

In the final analysis, the male glare has been shown to exist in films of the early to mid 1990s. Leading roles for women at that time presented characters that, though in positions of power in the narrative, still had to suffer some form of male violence. This violence came in different forms: sexual, comical, oppressive, and symbolic. Whatever the form, these characters are also overcoming the violence. By the end of each film, the women triumphed, each in different ways. While these victories are positive, the situation remains that most leading roles for women have them tied to a struggle of some sort with a man. There is hope. A brief examination of the same category of films in the latter half of the 1990s reveals promise for subjecting women to violence. If more Marge Gundersons can be written, then the fuller extent of women's experience could be realised on screen.

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