THE WOMAN’S PERSPECTIVE – REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMALE DESIRE IN NICHOLS’S THE GRADUATE, WORKING GIRL AND CLOSER

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION 6

CHAPTER 2: LOOKING BACK 8

The Domestic Trap 8

A New Generation 12

Like Mother, Like Daughter 16

The Liberated Woman? 20

CHAPTER 3: LOOKING DIFFERENTLY 23

The Emergence of Feminist Film Theory and ‘The Gaze’ 23

Feminist Countercinema and its Failure to Engage 26

Constructed Versus Deconstructed Realities 30

CHAPTER 4: RE: LOOKING 36

*The Graduate* (1967) 36

*Working Girl* (1988) 38

*Closer* (2004) 40

The Woman’s Perspective 42

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION 52
WITH THANKS TO THE STAFF OF THE ARTS FACULTY IN DBS, ESPECIALLY MATTHEW NOLAN, PAUL HOLLYWOOD, MICHAEL KANE AND PIOTR SADOWSKI AND TO MY FELLOW STUDENTS FOR ALL THEIR DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 – Mrs Robinson gazes at Ben 45
Figure 2 – Signalling intent 45
Figure 3 – Increased stature 45
Figure 4 – Reasserting dominance 45
Figure 5 – Lost control 45
Figure 6 – Tess looks up to Katherine 47
Figure 7 – Tess and Jack as equals 47
Figure 8 – Seeing ‘eye to eye’ 47
Figure 9 – From both angles 47
Figure 10 – Jack as the ‘object’ 47
Figure 11 – Alice gazes at Dan 49
Figure 12 – Anna gazes at Dan 49
Figure 13 – Larry gazes at two Alice’s 49
Figure 14 – Larry in fragments 49
Figure 15 – Larry is gazed at by Alice 49
Figure 16 – Larry in the ‘eye’ of the gaze 49
The aim of this thesis is to show how director Mike Nichols documents the changing role of women in western society over three successive generations through representations of female desire in the films *The Graduate*, *Working Girl* and *Closer*. By placing these films within their historical context it intends to illustrate how the female characters in them undermine the dominant Hollywood representations of women within each period and thereby contribute to feminist discourse. First, by looking briefly at traditional representations of women in film and drawing comparisons with Nichols’s contemporaries it will examine the changing landscape and recurring themes of female characterisation in dominant cinema. Next, in looking at feminist film theory and practices it will examine their aims and intentions and the efficacy of a marginalised film practice versus the polysemy and widely circulated images and texts of mainstream cinema. Finally, in analysing the narratives of these films and looking at the cinematic grammar employed within them, it will address how they foreground, both textually and visually, conflicts for the characters which are representative of the internal and external conflicts for women regarding their desires and their perceived roles in society within each period. In particular, it will examine how female spectators can locate a gaze within the construction of the *mise-en-scene* of these films. In conclusion, by establishing continuity between these conflicts, it will illustrate how the move from the domestic sphere to the working world is reflected in the progression of agency for these characters resulting in increased subjectivity in representations of female desire.
Elaine, it’s too late.
Not for me.

*The Graduate (1967)*

…we simply don’t have any more time for fairy tales.

*Working Girl (1988)*

Lying is the most fun a girl can have without taking her clothes off… but it’s better if you do.

*Closer (2004)*
CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

In the wake of the success his first film *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966), with its examination of the relationships between men and women, Mike Nichols’s *The Graduate* was released the following year to critical acclaim and even greater box office success. Although not his directorial debut as intended, it nevertheless marked a new voice that would have a presence in mainstream filmmaking for the next four decades. While his films do not deal exclusively with the woman’s perspective, nor would he be considered a ‘woman’s’ director in the way that George Cukor would have been in the 1930’s and 1940’s, he has managed to create some of the most enduring and iconic images of women on film which have entered the public consciousness. The term Mrs Robinson has become synonymous with an older woman/younger man relationship and the film appeared at a time when the social and sexual taboos of previous generations were breaking down. Elaine Robinson’s fleeing bride is an image that has been repeated and mimicked in popular culture, as is that of Tess McGill in *Working Girl* travelling to work in the city in her ‘suit and sneakers’ epitomising the rise of the 1980’s businesswoman both on screen and off.

Considerable social changes in the status of women occurred between the release of these two films; the rise and fall of second wave feminism altered women’s social, domestic and working lives. In neither of these films does Nichols address these issues directly, and as studio releases within the mainstream they certainly were not marketed at women as empowering stories. *The Graduate* was made for, and received successfully by, the new younger audiences that reflected the growth of youth culture and was particularly successful around college campuses. *Working Girl*, a romantic comedy, was promoted as
a modern day Cinderella story and appeared in a dramatically altered landscape and more reactionary period for women. Nevertheless, embedded within these films are images of women that are representative of the consequences of these social changes and the relationship between social and personal identity. By the time Closer appeared in 2004, the landscape had changed even further, both on screen and off, and yet in many ways the representations of women in mainstream film had not really progressed a great deal. Like Whose Afraid of Virginia Woolf? and his 1971 film Carnal Knowledge, Closer addressed the relationships between men and women. However, unlike both of these films, and many of the contemporary representations of women released in the early 2000’s, it showed a strong female character actively pursuing her own desires rather than allowing herself to be simply constructed by, or for, the male characters. While this film did not have the level of financial success of The Graduate or Working Girl, its critical success ensured that the images contained within remain widely circulated. Consequently, these three films can be examined in terms of the progression of female representations of desire in mainstream film, particularly when placed in the historical context of their reception, and against the background of recurring images of women throughout film history that present female desire attached to the same social spaces.
CHAPTER 2 – LOOKING BACK

The Domestic Trap
Domesticity, as a way of regulating consumption in the 18th and 19th centuries, became enshrined within the marriage contract as a feminine virtue. Thus an “ideology in its most powerful form”\(^1\) was created and gave rise to the self-regulating domestic woman. As a result, textual representations of female desire became tied to the ideology of domesticity which in cinematic terms meant female characters were usually contained within texts that centred on the domestic sphere, if not in location, then in terms of narrative resolution. Marriage, family, children, home and a place in the community became the acceptable representations of expressed female desire. Where this was transgressed in terms of desire for career over family, or for freedom over the confines of marriage, the result was rarely, if ever, satisfactory for the woman. The prevailing message was that female desire when not tied to domesticity became dangerous and unstable, usually resulting in a punitive resolution.

As one of a group of films belonging to the pre-Hays Code era which exemplified a more progressive attitude towards women, Dorothy Arzner’s *Christopher Strong* (1933) presented Katherine Hepburn’s aviator as a woman who lives as she pleases, forgoing the traditional routes of marriage and children in pursuit of her own desires. Nevertheless her story ends in tragedy as after having broken the record for altitude she is despatched to her death, pregnant with her married lover’s child. Films made in the subsequent period became even more restrictive as any pretence towards an expressed female sexuality had to be covered up. The feted vamps of the 1920’s and early 1930’s segued into “woman as

man hating fatal temptress”, the femme fatale of the 1940’s and 1950’s who embodied the female threat to male power structures brought about by the influx of women to the workforce, a result of the Great Depression and the Second World War. Often outshining her nurturing and domesticated sister, the “rejuvenating redeemer”, with her unbridled sexuality in the battle for the duped hero’s affections, once her corrupt influence had been neutralised he was free to return to the quiet simple girl who inhabited the domestic sphere, as can be seen in Jacques Tourneur’s Out of the Past (1947).

By the 1950’s the femme fatale, although still in existence, had had her day and gave way to the pneumatic pin-up who as the decade progressed became less of a threat, epitomised in the roles of Marilyn Monroe who went from the adulteress siren of Niagara (1953) to the baby doll of Some Like It Hot (1959). Her counterpart, the professional virgin in the guise of Doris Day was almost a caricature of female domesticity. In the same year that Monroe’s character met her fatal end in Niagara, Day appeared in Calamity Jane as a gunslinger who needed to be tamed and returned to domesticity by a wild frontier man. At the end of the decade as Monroe gave us the breathless Sugar Kane, a woman who if not saved by marriage was likely to do herself an injury, Day appeared opposite Rock Hudson in Pillow Talk as a career woman who needed the right man to entice her away to the world of domesticity (although as an interior decorator, the transition from professional to domestic homemaker was less of a leap.) In each of these cases the woman is rescued and returned to her rightful domain.

However, while the domestic sphere was represented as the ideal destination for woman, it did not always live up to its promise. This is particularly apparent in the woman’s film

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prevalent in the 1930’s and 1940’s (although in existence through the 1950’s and into the early 1960’s, particularly in the work of Douglas Sirk and John Stahl) with the “constantly recurring figures of the unwed mother, the waiting wife, the abandoned mistress, the frightened newlywed or the anguished mother.”⁴ In Possessed (1931), Back Street (1932) (remade both in the 1941 and 1961 due to its popularity), Stella Dallas (1937), Dark Victory (1939), Now Voyager (1942), Mildred Pierce (1945), To Each His Own (1946) and Letter from an Unknown Woman (1948) we are shown the frustrations of the heroines in their desires and, more often than not, failure to achieve the virtue of domesticity as a narrative resolution. In fact it was this failure that earned these films their epithet ‘the weepies’ as they followed narratives that were expressed through the recurring and often overlapping tropes of “sacrifice, affliction, choice, competition.”⁵ In these cases, even when marriage was achieved, the children or another woman or a physical or psychological illness became the source of problems. Where choice was offered it was the choice of two alternate domestic futures with two different kinds of man, one suitable and one not, making it imperative that the woman choose correctly. It was also only available to the upper and middle-class woman for whom the regulatory aspects of domesticity were a reality rather than an aspiration. When women, ordinary women, did escape from the domestic trap they were given a choice to return or suffer the consequences, usually economic hardship. The net result was that they “would rather be stuck than sorry.”⁶

In an analysis of the woman’s film of the 1940’s, Mary Ann Doane focuses on a similar but varying organising principle that she calls the “the uncanniness [sic] of the

⁴ Mary Ann Doane, The Desire to Desire: The Woman’s Film of the 1940s (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 3.
⁶ Ibid., 161.
domestic." Here femininity and domesticity are pathologised into a range of physical and psychological symptoms that are demonstrated in what she identifies as the paranoid woman’s film. In Rebecca (1940), Suspicion (1941), Gaslight (1944), Dragonwyck (1946) and Possessed (1947) (a different story from the 1931 film but also starring Joan Crawford) the “paradigmatic woman’s space – the home – is yoked to dread, and a crisis of vision.” According to Doane it is the latter, expressed in the mise-en-scene, that turns the domestic space uncanny, where violence or the threat of violence “is rationalised as the effect of an overly hasty marriage.” This, she attributes, to a process of ‘despecularization’ [sic] that occurs when the largely female spectatorship fails to identify with the female protagonists as ‘object’ of the gaze. As a result, the domestic space becomes the object of this displaced look, de-famil iarising it and transforming it into a domain of paranoia, rather than one of security.

The later woman’s film, such as those of Douglas Sirk, further emphasised this uncanny aspect of the domestic space through the mise-en-scene. Rather than the paranoid aspects, it focuses on the imprisonment of the woman in the luxury and materiality of the domestic world. Through the characteristic use of mirrors and glass to reflect the inner states of his heroines, and framing devices to illustrate their external states, in films such as Magnificent Obsession (1954), All That Heaven Allows (1955) and Imitation of Life (1959), Sirk showed us that by the end of the 1950’s, rather than progressing, the woman on film was firmly caught in the domestic trap.

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7 Doane, The Desire to Desire, 125.
8 Ibid., 134.
9 Ibid., 123.
A New Generation

The 1960’s failed to deliver any substantial changes in the representation of women on film. In a comprehensive survey of films made in Europe and the US during the 1960’s and 1970’s, Molly Haskell draws the conclusion that despite a number of good female performances the period is largely devoid of adequate positive female representations. The decline of the studio system meant the departure of women’s narratives to the sphere of television where they were downgraded from melodrama to soap opera. It also meant that studio outputs were more limited in number. Studio made ‘B’ movies all but disappeared (to be replaced by independents such as Roger Corman) as efforts were concentrated on ten or twelve big budget films per year. Coupled with the relaxation of the Production Code and its eventual abolition in 1968, this paved the way for the rise of the auteur director. Influenced by modernist European cinema, he was primarily male, middle-class and drawn to reflecting the counter-culture through the alienated anti-hero.

The anti-hero was an extension of the 1950’s rebel epitomised by the likes of James Dean and Marlon Brando whose physical beauty and feminine features made them just as much the object of the gaze as their female co-stars. This led the way for the feminised counterculture hero of the late 1960’s and early 1970’s in such male buddy films as Midnight Cowboy (1969) and Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid (1969) which resulted in “the substitution of violence (or sexuality) for romance”\(^\text{10}\). Women’s roles were primarily window dressing, such as that of Katherine Ross in the latter, and functioned as a decoy for the homoerotic sub-text where the romance is centred on the relationship between its leading men. Where the domestic woman had at least limited power within her own domain and the status afforded to it, the girlfriend of the anti-hero was as likely

\(^\text{10}\) Haskell, From Reverence to Rape, 323.
to be despatched unceremoniously or forgotten while he focuses on the loss or potential loss of the real love of his life, his male companion.

Sexual liberation translated as female nudity as women became more entrenched than ever into a marginalised position. The new female stars *photogenie* appeared to be based on how well they wore a bikini: Ursula Andress in *Dr. No* (1962) and Raquel Welch in *One Million Years BC* (1966). In fact, women’s roles were largely absent in the many new and androcentric narratives that the New Hollywood *auteurs* delivered such as the revisionist western; Sam Peckinpah’s *The Wild Bunch* (1969); the male revenge movie; John Boorman’s *Point Blank* (1967) and most of Stanley Kubrick’s output with the exception of *Lolita* (1962) in which neither Sue Lyons nor Shelley Winters roles presented anything other than a projection of male fantasy or disgust. Films that tackled social issues or taboo subjects such as the racism of *In the Heat of the Night* (1968) and *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?* (1968) were focused almost exclusively on the male experience, and as a couple in the grip of alcoholism Lee Remick fared far worse than on-screen husband Jack Lemmon in *Days of Wine and Roses* (1962). Even films that had central female characters or focused on women’s experiences such as *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (1961), *The Group* (1966) and *Barefoot in the Park* (1967) still rested on domesticity as a resolution. More positive was Fred Coe’s *Me, Natalie* (1969), for which Patty Duke won a Golden Globe in the role of the gawky young New York girl who decides to venture out on her own into the world, and which offered a female coming of age that focused on the intergenerational conflict that had made Nichols’s *The Graduate* so successful with younger audiences two years previously. While *The Graduate* focused primarily on the alienated young male protagonist’s journey towards independence, it nevertheless raised issues regarding the potential domestic resolution of the character of
Elaine Robinson, played out through the triangular relationship between Ben, Elaine and her mother.

Haskell categorises the character of Mrs Robinson, a sexually predatory middle-aged female, as one of a series of grotesque representations of women within this period (although this seems an unfair assessment of a 35 year old actress made-up to look 45). When not in supporting roles, or tied to domesticity, images of repressed, unattractive and malevolent females flourished. Bette Davis and Joan Crawford’s turns in *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962) were a critical lesson in what happens when women choose career over domesticity. As an extension of the paranoid women’s film, Audrey Hepburn fared better as a middle-aged blind woman in *Wait Until Dark* (1967) than Catherine Deneuve’s beautiful, young and deceptively deranged character in *Repulsion* (1965), Roman Polanski’s first English language film released to critical acclaim in America. *Valley of the Dolls* (1967), while not peopled by grotesques, was yet another cautionary tale about female ambition. Despite having delivered not one, but two, of the few positive female roles of the decade in *The Miracle Worker* (1962), the fate of Faye Dunaway’s Bonnie in Arthur Penn’s biopic of *Bonnie and Clyde* (1968) was dictated to an extent by the subject matter, although the violent display with which she met her end was to be symptomatic of female representations on film in the 1970’s.

Haskell also argues that the 1970’s was marked by the absence of women from films, with the exception of a few offerings that attempted to foreground women’s issues, grouped under the nomenclature New Women’s Cinema. Amongst these, Martin Scorsese’s *Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore* (1974) and Paul Mazursky’s *An Unmarried Woman* (1978), while resonant with female audiences, dwelt largely on the frustrations of
women with their domestic status. While they offered a glimmer of hope and at least were a departure from the previous decade (and from the earlier woman’s film) in that they attempted to articulate women’s desire for an alternate social structure, they were the exception rather than the rule and still wedded to the presence or absence of domesticity. More positive within this group were the female buddy films such as Julia, The Turning Point (both made in 1977) and Girlfriends (1978). They were however less radical than John Cassavetes’s A Woman Under The Influence (1974) and Opening Night (1977) in which women’s desires were seen as more complex than simply resting on a domestic resolution. The science fiction horror The Stepford Wives (1975), a reworked version of the paranoid woman’s film to fit with the feminist agenda of the times, is overlooked in Haskell’s survey. Instead she sees a decade that was largely dominated by “violent male-centred melodramas”\(^{11}\) such as William Friedkin’s The French Connection (1971), Boorman’s Deliverance (1972), Francis Ford Coppola’s The Godfather (1972) and Apocalypse Now (1979), Scorsese’s Mean Streets (1974) and Taxi Driver (1976) and Michael Cimino’s, The Deer Hunter (1978); the successors to the counterculture’s anti-hero mixed in with anti-Vietnam War sentiment. In Peckinpah’s Cross of Iron (1977) one of the leading characters articulates the male desire to live in a world of violence, “A world without women.”\(^{12}\)

What was more disturbing was the preponderance of films in which women suffered ultra-violent fates when they articulated sexual desire. Peckinpah’s Straw Dogs (1971), Kubrick’s A Clockwork Orange (1971) and Brook’s Looking for Mister Goodbar (1977) all show female characters being punished by rape or murder or both for displaying their sexuality. Whether this was as a backlash to second wave feminism or the misguided

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11 Haskell, From Reverence to Rape, 377.
male adolescent reaction to the abolition of the Production Code on the part of the directors, the result was a wholly negative representation of the desiring female subject where female sexuality was conflated with violence. It also paved the way for the recurring trope of young female virgins of the horror genre who meet their fate, often in a house or other domestic setting, as result of their sexual awakening. The fate of the *femme fatale* or the unmarried mother in comparison seemed relatively mild.

The most progressive female representation of the decade however came at its end with Sigourney Weaver’s role as the asexual Ellen Ripley in Ridley Scott’s science fiction horror *Alien* (1979). In a film that was concerned with male fears of the “monstrous feminine,” RIPLEY’s survival over the male characters against the Alien Queen freed the woman for the first time from the uncanny domestic space and marked a new kind of female heroine whose story arc would continue into the next two decades.

**Like Mother, Like Daughter**

After the violent images in cinema which accompanied the radicalism of the 1970’s, the shift to the political conservatism of the 1980’s produced a number of reactionary representations of women on film. Following the brief appearance of the New Women’s Cinema in Hollywood in the late 1970’s, the following decade “served up an endlessly expanding category of neurotics, murderers, *femme fatales*, vamps, punks, misfits, and free floating loonies whose very existence was an affront … to the upbeat rhetoric of the women’s movement.” These women can be found in the neo-noir thrillers *Body Heat* (1981) and *Black Widow* (1987), comedy dramas, *After Hours* (1985) and *Something Wild* (1987) and the modern morality tale *Fatal Attraction* (1987). In a period where more

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14 Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape*, 373.
women than ever entered the workforce on a permanent footing as an alternative to the
domestic world and started to progress to positions of authority, representations on film
seemed designed to discredit their autonomy. Whether a sociopath (Black Widow, Fatal
Attraction, Body Heat) or a good girl that has been corrupted and needs redemption by
conforming to the conventional world of the protagonist (Something Wild) she is
invariably neutralised, often at the hands of another woman (Black Widow, Fatal
Attraction) or remains isolated in triumph (Body Heat).

At the other end of the scale, parenting comedies made light of the changes in women’s
domestic status particularly the male oriented gender swap variety such as Mr. Mom
(1983) and Three Men and a Baby (1987) where the existence of the stay-at-home male
was depicted as temporary and carnivalesque. By the end of these films the status quo
was usually restored as both male and female returned to their rightful domains with some
concessions to the woman’s desire to work outside of the home and the man taking on
slightly more responsibility. In these cases however, it was the male’s experience of
domesticity that was usually the focus resulting in an increased understanding of the still
predominantly female domestic world, without effecting any real change. Where women
were the focus of the parenting, it was the choice set up between the working world and
that of the home with the neat but unrealistic proposition that women “shouldn’t have
to”\textsuperscript{15}, choose, the implication being that the pull of motherhood always wins out as

The pull of motherhood was the focus of probably the most extreme and reactionary
version of the trope of the working woman versus the domestic woman during the 1980’s.

Adrian Lyne’s *Fatal Attraction* was damning in its assessment of what happens to the modern working woman as a result of her failing to achieve domesticity “framed as a morality tale in which the ‘good mother’ wins and the independent woman gets punished”\(^{16}\). Like the other male-oriented morality tale made that year, Oliver Stone’s *Wall Street*, the protagonist is given the opportunity to redeem himself for giving into his desires. However, in *Fatal Attraction* the implicit jeopardy in which he has placed his domestic life through his extra-marital affair is externalised by the other woman’s obsessive insanity and invasion of the domestic space. By having the wife kill off this woman in protection of that space, not only is the protagonist redeemed and returned to his family, the threat of the independent career woman to the survival of the traditional domestic role is neutralised. Thus, in a reversal of the earlier women’s films of the 1940’s, it is the space external to the home that becomes ‘uncanny’, personified by the modern career woman’s lack of domesticity and her overwhelming desire to have a child.

There were a number of other films in which the problems facing the working woman were presented in a less extreme fashion. Nichols’s *Working Girl* offered the proposition that female competitiveness could exist outside of the domestic sphere, even if that competition involved an element of romance. However, like *The Graduate* before it, the romance becomes the site of the struggle for increased agency for women rather than the end goal.

Like the two decades that preceded it, the majority of the films that broke new ground belonged to the latter half of the 1980’s. Economic conservatism within the studio system meant a holding pattern of output from early in the decade onwards was repeated as the tried and tested formulae of teen oriented films, family films, conservative melodramas,

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comedies which pandered to stereotypes, horror sequels, male buddy films (of the adolescent and adult variety) and action films with high production values dominated; none of which made any real concession to the changing role of women. By the middle of the decade however newer representations started to filter through. The films that emerged in the middle of the decade exploring the effects of the Vietnam War by their nature tended to exclude or marginalise women’s experiences, although James Cameron’s 1986 sequel to Ridley Scott’s *Alien* took that militaristic pre-occupation with machismo and pitted it against Ripley’s new warrior mother role in her protection of the child Newt. Even though she had become pre-occupied with mothering, the depiction at the end of the film of this new family unit was not based on traditional domestic models.

Fred Schepisi’s adaptation of David Hare’s play *Plenty* (1985) was different from other English based period dramas of the time in that it focused on the experiences of a woman during the 1950’s who failed to settle into the required domestic role following her career as a field operative in France during World War II. Steven Spielberg’s *The Color Purple* (1985) marked a change in direction from his family oriented films to more serious issues in a story which not only charted the changing role of women over the twentieth century but went where the socially conscious films of the 1960’s and 1970’s failed to go in addressing exclusively the experiences of black women in America. Spike Lee’s directorial debut the following year, *She’s Gotta Have It*, also had as its protagonist a black woman but was a contemporary story set in New York that dealt with a young woman’s struggles with sexual freedom. *The Witches of Eastwick* (1987), an adaptation of John Updike’s novel, was a darkly comic look at what happened when women whose domestic status had been tarnished by the loss of their husbands through “death,
desertion, divorce” took matters into their own hands and decided to conjure up a man who would tend to their desires. Susan Seidelman’s *Making Mr. Right* the same year covered similar territory in a reworking of Pygmalion where a woman hired to train a robot in the art of humanity becomes the object of his affections. Jonathan Kaplan’s *The Accused* (1988) and Kathryn Bigelow’s *Blue Steel* (1989) covered more serious ground in terms of dealing with the fallout of changes in women’s status in that they both examined the struggles women encountered outside of the domestic sphere through the patriarchal system of the law from without and within. *Blue Steel*, in particular, like *Me, Natalie* and *Alien* before it, belonged more to the following decade and marked the rise of the tough girl roles that would increase in subsequent years.

**The Liberated Woman?**

The 1990’s saw the rise to prominence of two new female representations on screen, the tough girl and the modern career woman. Despite the decade starting promisingly with Ridley Scott’s feminist buddy movie *Thelma and Louise* (1991) in which two women forced to escape from their domesticated existence into a lawless one, find liberation in rejecting the patriarchal institutions that had dominated their lives, this did not translate into further on screen representations of women redefining the physical and emotional spaces they inhabited. Instead the lawless woman became the “female warrior …a distant cousin of the *femme fatale*…”the archetypal Hollywood figure of female violence.” In films such as *Terminator II* (1991), *Alien* (1992), *Tank Girl* (1995), *G.I. Jane* (1997), *The Matrix* (1999), *Charlie’s Angels* (2000) and *Tomb Raider* (2001) along with the many female sidekicks that appeared in male action films, the female warrior regressed through

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the decade and into the new millennium to the point where it was noted that: “If her stunning beauty doesn’t bring you to your knees, her deadly drop kick will.”\textsuperscript{19} While this kind of tough girl opened up the possibility of other gender orientations she still fundamentally pandered to the gaze as even though she was now the subject, she remained objectified and to some extent a fetish.

Besides the warrior female other kinds of tough girl gained prominence in film during the 1990’s particularly those for whom their toughness was a prerequisite or determinant of their usually still marginal position within the patriarchal worlds of law and law enforcement or medicine and science. Jodie Foster’s FBI Agent Clarice Starling in \textit{The Silence of the Lambs} (1991) led the way for similar representations throughout the decade. Other recurring tropes that fall within this category are the female attorney and the “babe scientist”\textsuperscript{20}, largely supporting roles which, like the female warrior, tended to recycle earlier images. If the latter was an extension of the \textit{femme fatale}, the law enforcer or babe scientist was the extension of the rejuvenating redeemer, allied to the patriarchal institutions that ultimately rested on gender divisions.

In contrast to the male-centred epics which gained prominence: \textit{Dances With Wolves} (1990), \textit{Unforgiven} (1992), \textit{Braveheart} (1995) and \textit{Gladiator} (2000); the 1990’s and early 2000’s saw the return of the romantic comedy and the melodrama in the guise of the newly christened ‘chick flick’. While the term came into use in the mid-to late 1990’s as a way to denote films that were likely to draw a largely female audience, it has expanded to encompass earlier melodramas, musicals and comedies that tend to have either a romance,\textsuperscript{19} Wendy Arons, quoted in Martha McCaughey (ed.), \textit{Reel Knockouts: Violent Women in the Movies}, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 27.\textsuperscript{20} Holly Hassell, “The “babe scientist” phenomenon: The illusion of inclusion in 1990s American action films”, *In [Ferriss & Young] [1991], op.cit., pp. [190-203]*.
domesticity or female friendship at their core. Thus studio films with a feminist undercurrent such as *Thelma and Louise* or *Boys on the Side* (1995) tend to be categorised with romantic comedies such as *Pretty Woman* (1990) whereby a hooker is rescued and transformed so that she could pass in the domestic world. However, as the decade progressed the chick-flick segued into denoting primarily romantic comedies that extended the problematic dilemma of the notionally (i.e. economically) independent woman who is nonetheless dependent on heterosexual romantic fulfilment in order to satisfy her desires. Occasionally they focused on female friendships but in these often the friendship is a temporary substitute, as in *Romy and Michele’s High School Reunion* (1997), or consolation, *The First Wives Club* (1996), for heterosexual romance. In *My Best Friend’s Wedding* (1997), a platonic friendship with a male homosexual is the substitute for a heterosexual romance, repeated in several subsequent films.

By the early part of the 21st Century the chick-flick had become entirely formulaic and such a staple of studio output that it constituted at least one major studio release a year. Films such as *What Women Want* (2000), *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (2001), *The Wedding Planner* (2001), *Legally Blonde* (2001), *Sweet Home Alabama* (2002) and *How to Lose a Guy in Ten Days* (2003), amongst many others, solidified the genre in which the career/romance quandary is played out with more gratification than the women’s films of the 1930’s and 1940’s but in which domesticity of some form is always implied in the resolution. In contrast to this, Nichols’s *Closer* offers a different perspective on the young woman’s story towards independence and like *The Graduate* and *Working Girl* before it, foregrounds female desire as existing outside of the designated spaces within mainstream cinema.
CHAPTER 3 – LOOKING DIFFERENTLY

The Emergence of Feminist Film Theory and ‘The Gaze’

“The main object of most early feminist criticism was, and continues to be, dominant mainstream cinema.” As a product of second wave feminism from the late 1960’s onwards, feminist film theory began to appear in the early 1970’s. In the USA, Haskell’s *From Reverence to Rape*, along with Marjorie Rosen’s *Popcorn Venus* (1973) looked at the sociological implications of historical female representations in Hollywood. Around the same time a collection edited by Claire Johnston, *Notes on Women’s Cinema*, was published in the UK following the appearance of the journal *Women & Film* the previous year. Critical of their American counterparts, British feminist theorists such as Johnston and Pam Cook drew largely on psychoanalysis and structuralism, as well as semiotics, as a way of analysing female representations on screen. Johnston, in particular, in her essay ‘Women’s Cinema as Counter-Cinema’ argued that the American approach did not question how, nor interrogate “why film narratives repeatedly represented woman as the object of male desire.”

In her influential article ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ (published in the British journal *Screen* in 1975) Laura Mulvey asked and answered both of these questions with the theory of spectatorship and the male gaze. In an argument derived from the Freudian concept of scopophilia, Mulvey suggests that cinema is essentially a voyeuristic experience for the spectator in that it involves “taking other people as objects, [and] subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze.” In addition, she argues that the

22 Ibid., 3.
narcissistic pleasure derived from this aligns the spectator (male or female) with the male character on screen as ‘subject’ or ‘bearer’ of the look in his active role as hero or protagonist while the female, through passive display and coding of the body, becomes the ‘object’ or ‘recipient’ of the look both on and off screen. She further argues that this split influenced both the historical construction of *mise-en-scene* and narrative structure as the usually male protagonist tends to drive the narrative forward towards resolution. (It is worth noting that even in women’s films or those with a female protagonist it is still largely the acceptance or rejection of the woman by the male into the domestic realm that signifies narrative closure.) Finally, in drawing on the work of Jacques Lacan and the symbolic order/law of the father, she argues that even the pleasurable aspects of woman as recipient of the male gaze through sexual difference creates castration anxiety in the male spectator. Barbara Creed points out that this results in either a punitive resolution for the woman (as in the existence of the *femme fatale*) or the overvaluation of the woman in the form of a fetish, either in the guise of the film star or a substitution object.

Psychoanalysis and relations of looking though arguably the cornerstone of most modern feminist film theory were not the only methods employed by feminist theorists in its early days: others included semiology; the theory of exchange, derived from the work of French Anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss and Roland Barthes’ use of myth. According to Barbara Creed “semiological analysis is concerned with all the possible layers of meaning in a film text and how these are constructed through a range of codes.”

While this includes codes relating to theories of looking it also takes into account codes that may derive from the narrative, location, naming, dress and other representations as a way of identifying ruptures in the text which may uncover the woman’s voice hidden from view.

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The theory of exchange looks at kinship as a signifying system in primitive societies. Applied to feminism by such theorists as Juliet Mitchell it examines the way in which these structures are applied to modern societies through for example the patriarchal institution of marriage. Johnston and Cook applied this signifying system to female representations on film whereby they fall into a series of signs “(‘prostitute’, ‘virgin’, ‘spinster’) that … [are] exchanged by men as a means by which they define/label women and specify her place (as object) and their place (as subject).”25 Roland Barthes work on myth (the transformation from denotative to connotative sign to create a new signified) was used by Christine Gledhill to denote what the sign ‘woman’ had come to signify within patriarchal discourse when derived of its material function whereby it “has come to signify a meaning that is immediately apparent, fixed, conventional.”26 Thus mainstream cinema bolsters patriarchal ideology “through the way in which it constructs the categories of sexual difference.”27

One of the problems however associated with these theories is that they fall into the anti-essentialism camp of feminist theory. That is they are concerned with the way in which femininity and female sexuality is constructed through patriarchal discourse rather than being an essential biological difference. In focusing on the visual aspects of this construction through the voyeurism of looking and the codification of the female body on film, a position is created whereby the female body “must be refused”28 in order to reject that essential construction. However, in applying psychoanalytic arguments such as Lacan’s theories of the symbolic order, the body itself becomes a construct as sexual difference is only symbolic. A situation is then created whereby the female body becomes

26 Ibid., 18.
27 Ibid., 10.
merely a prop to signify female sexuality; a ‘tabula rasa’ onto which meaning is inscribed. For Doane, this results in a situation where any attempts to film the female body result in the “equivalent to a terrorist attack” with the logical conclusion of the anti-essentialist argument to be “the absolute exclusion of the female body” from cinematic representation.

With this in mind, feminist filmmakers chose to work on deconstructing the standard modes of representation by drawing attention to them. In films such as Thriller (1979) and Jeanne Dielman, 32 Quai du Commerce-1080 Bruxelles (1975) filmmakers such as Sally Potter and Chantal Akerman attempted to defamiliarise traditional representations by “exposing the habitual meanings/values attached to femininity as cultural constructions.” In these two films in particular the traditional function of suspense in the narrative is delayed and disrupted so that it does not offer the standard phallogocentric climax seen in mainstream cinema. In addition, the self-reflexivity of shot construction and placement of the woman in the mise-en-scene re-codifies the body in a way that draws attention to the voyeurism inherent in the spectator’s position. In doing so, these films attempted to create the kind of counter-cinema that Johnston was arguing for.

**Feminist Countercinema and its Failure to Engage**

“As textual practice, countercinemas attempt to challenge and subvert the operations of dominant cinema.” Like other forms of countercinema, third cinema, art cinema and the avant-garde, feminist countercinema is predicated on the Brechtian theory of ‘verfrumdengseffekt’ or distanciation derived from Epic theatre, whereby audience

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29 Ibid., 216.
30 Ibid., 225.
31 Ibid., 217.
identification with the characters or events is deliberately disrupted to create a critical distance that allows for reflection on the subject matter. The form that this takes in feminist countercinema is to work at breaking the illusion inherent in the mainstream created through the cinematic apparatus that functions ideologically to conceal processes of signification and positions the spectator as fixed and unitary. However, modes of viewing designed to support that illusion, such as the “passive receptivity characteristic of spectator-text relations in dominant cinema” were not perceived as conducive to messages designed to counter it. In discussing the constructed nature of reality in literature, Catherine Belsey proposes that the “object of deconstructing the text is to examine the process of its production” as it serves to reveal the ideologies at work across all discourses. The feminist countercinema that emerged in the 1970’s and 1980’s attempted to address these problems by examining all of the processes of its production to include distribution and exhibition.

As already briefly discussed, textual production in feminist countercinema involved breaking with the formal system of narrative. Narrative is defined as “a chain of events in cause and effect relationships occurring in time and space”. Fundamental to this system is the concept of plot, the organising system for these temporal and spatial relations. As plot is a masculine construction which articulates a “discourse of desire as separation and mastery” then breaking the causal relationship between time and space is necessary in order to alter the narrative structure. In films such as *Thriller, Jeannie Dielman*, Mulvey’s

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33 Ibid., 191.
own work with Peter Wollen *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977) and Babette Mangolte’s *The Camera: Je: La Camera: I* (1977) various means are employed to break this causal relationship including the use of stills, the eradication of ellipses to signify temporal shifts, characters speaking directly to camera and the repetition of images to create non-linear and open ended narratives. In addition, the way in which these narratives are disrupted through the altering of the cinematic codes of shot construction and continuity editing serves to undermine the illusion of reality thus creating distance between the viewer and events on screen. Production however is not confined to just the construction or deconstruction of images and feminist countercinema was not only concerned with what was presented on screen but also *how* it was presented.

As by its definition countercinema exists outside the mainstream then both the material conditions and relations of production will have a bearing on the kinds of films produced. Kuhn points out that for the former “feminists have in general drawn on funding sources, techniques and technologies common to all oppositional or independent film practices”\(^\text{37}\) with the latter “informed by a more specifically feminist politics.”\(^\text{38}\) What this meant in practice was that funding opportunities were limited and therefore had an effect on both the quantity and style of output. The cost effectiveness and accessibility of shooting on 16mm film rather than 35mm meant that low budget features tended towards documentary or a mixture of documentary and social realism and therefore were stylistically influenced by direct cinema. Feminist politics of the 1970’s and 1980’s rooted in collectivism was informed by its commitment to transform relations of production and highlight areas of discrimination for women. This meant that the content was often didactic, self-reflexive and therefore inaccessible to many which made feminist

\(^{37}\) Kuhn, *Women’s Pictures*, 181.

\(^{38}\) Ibid., 181.
filmmakers attempts “to build oppositional institutions independently of dominant cinema”\footnote{Ibid., 181.} a difficult task. This was even more the case when it came to the practices of distribution and exhibition.

Like all forms of independent cinema, feminist countercinema needed to find a way in which to reach its audience. Traditional avenues of distribution and exhibition are part of the wider industry of mainstream filmmaking and as such are market driven. Not only does this make them inaccessible to films for which profit is not a key factor, the processes themselves are antithetical to the idea of challenging the ideological structures at work. A film’s audience will depend as much on its location and the information presented about it in the form of publicity, as it will in terms of actual subject matter. For example, Catherine Breillat’s *Une vraie jeune fille* (1976) with its graphic depiction of a young woman’s sexual awakening while not part of the canon of countercinema would nevertheless have found an audience through the women’s filmmaking collectives. The audience that a screening by a feminist collective would attract would vary considerably from that of even an arthouse cinema and would therefore be an influential factor in the reception of the film. However, in grounding themselves in the collectivism of feminist politics, the artisanal approach of feminist filmmakers managed to retain control of the circulation of images only “at a cost of cultural marginality.”\footnote{Ibid., 185.} This made feminist film discourse problematic given that these films were only available to a limited audience. From an ideological perspective this is antithetical to the Marxist politics on which the notion of collectivism is based in that it accessible to only a minority. Additional problems in relation to the ideological foundations of feminist politics occur when reception is made prescriptive as while it appears to undermine the privileging of
individual spectator-text relations, it is impossible to determine how an individual will receive information and is in danger of fixing the spectator in a different position. Thus, the prescription inherent in the production, distribution and exhibition of feminist countercinema not only led to problems in terms of the circulation of images but undermined its contribution to feminist discourse. The result of this was that it failed to widely engage with female audiences and spoke mainly to a small minority.

In addition, the epistemological changes in feminism and feminist perspectives in the Eighties and Nineties and the growth of gender theory meant that a “unified female subject”\[41\] position became more tenuous. In terms of filmmaking the effect was to open up the gaze to other subject positions which no longer exclusively belonged to ‘woman’, but women of all different ethnic and social backgrounds. Filmmakers such as Julie Dash and Trinh T. Minh-ha began to show how the experiences of being both woman and of ethnic origin differed dramatically from those for whom patriarchy was the only dominant ideology to be addressed. Further, as popular mainstream cinema began to address feminist issues and more women directors started to come to the fore it became less of an imperative to have a film-making practice that worked outside of the ideological apparatus.

**Constructed versus Deconstructed Realities**

While feminist countercinema attempted to redress traditional representations of women on screen by highlighting how the cinematic apparatus obscures the constructed nature of its reality, mainstream cinema began to address some of these issues through narratives in

\[41\] Cora Kaplan “Pandora’s Box: Subjectivity, Class and Sexuality in Socialist Feminist Criticism” In [Robyn R. Warhol & Diane Price Herndl] [1991], *op.cit.*, pp. [857-877].
which “the central characters are women, and … frequently organised around the process of a woman’s self-discovery and growing independence.” As already mentioned in Chapter 2, these films, often described as New Women’s Cinema, were Hollywood’s attempt at articulating the effects of second wave feminism. In an examination of *Julia*, Annette Kuhn points out that while it offers a reconfiguring of the standard spectator-text relations in that it offers the female spectator a potential positive identification with the subject, its built in ambiguity (a feature of New Hollywood Cinema in general) merely “reworks rather than destroys the textual operations of dominant cinema.” She argues that while: “Films whose success sustains a degree of polysemy – which open up rather than restrict potential readings … may appeal to a broadly-based audience”, the consequent ambiguity acts “to buttress the textual and institutional operations of dominant cinema” and therefore cannot address feminist issues in any real way. However, this fails to take into account a number of issues in relation to feminist film theory, feminist filmmaking and feminist discourse in general.

(1), that feminist film theory in taking dominant mainstream films as its object of enquiry neglected to acknowledge the contributions made by independent film and the avant-garde in contemporaneous time periods as the films examined. For example, Cook, Johnston and Mulvey all separately analysed the work of Dorothy Arzner yet Maya Deren was largely ignored despite the fact that her 1946 work “*Meshes of the Afternoon* is reputedly the most widely shown experimental film in American cinema” and displays many of the techniques proposed and used by feminist filmmakers. Its dreamlike quality:

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42 Ibid., 135.
43 Ibid., 139.
44 Ibid., 139.
45 Ibid., 140.
spatial and temporal disruption, psychological interrogation and presentation of the
uncanny through the doubling of the female protagonist (Deren herself) within the
domestic space; all show the break with the formal organising structure of classical
narrative. In addition, its “loose affinity with both film noir and domestic melodrama,
make Meshes an ideal film for posing questions of film form and social meaning.” As
arguably a pre-existing form of feminist countercinema, its capacity to effect change was
not acknowledged by those suggesting the need for such films to counter dominant
representations.

(2), in her analysis of the work of Arzner, Cook’s use of semiology to identify ruptures,
ironic images and hidden meanings at work in the texts builds ambiguity into the reading
of the films in order to expose the dominant ideology. In addition, the polysemy identified
by Kuhn is analogous to the polyvocal written text where “Characters represent social,
ideological, and stratified voices, voices which are not univocally the author’s but which
compete with and foreground the prevailing codes in the society which the author opens
up as topics of discourse.” While in the case of Arzner it is done to examine the entire
body of work of one director, it nevertheless would allow for a feminist discourse across
the body of New Women’s Cinema and New Hollywood if taken as a whole, where that
ambiguity is already a defining feature.

(3), Walter Benjamin identified in cinema’s mode of consumption - a relaxed, passive
state of reception - its potential to create an oppositional response to the dominant
ideology from within along with its capacity to reach a mass audience. The constructed
reality of dominant cinema: that is the “operation of the specific cinematic codes

associated with fictional realism … [that] serves to reinforce the spectator’s identification with a credible fictional world⁴⁹, creates the conditions that make that subversion from within more accessible. This is particularly the case for an audience that may not readily identify with ideas or agendas that have a political bias such as feminism. Thus in presenting an accessible alternate social structure, mainstream cinema has the potential to reach both a wider audience and, more importantly, engage those whom it would ordinarily fail to reach through a marginalised cinema aimed at an audience already receptive to the messages contained within.

(4), the psychoanalytic approaches that underpin spectator theory focus exclusively on the cinematic apparatus which produces a fixed unitary position for the female spectator. This fails to take into account the historical context of a film’s reception. As a consequence, “once the object of Feminist criticism is defined solely in terms of the cinematic production of meaning, we lose the ability to deal with its relationship to women as defined by society.”⁵⁰ The implications for this are made clearer once the changes in feminist epistemology that took place in the 1980’s are examined.

The relationship between Marxism and feminism, often described as an ‘unhappy marriage’ meant that most early feminist theory derived from the notion of binary power relations where women were deemed a subordinate class - the unified female subject - was rooted in the androcentric discourse it attempted to counter. In addition, the idea of a unified subordinate position based entirely on gender relations continued to support the patriarchal institutions it opposed in creating a series of further positions based on race, ethnicity, religion and alternate gender orientations that themselves are subordinated to

⁴⁹ Kuhn, Women’s Pictures, 132.
the unified ‘female’ subject thus perpetuating the problem. Under the critique of those who felt marginalised by the ‘unitary’ feminist approach, feminist theory began to examine and re-define itself. Multiple subjects along with intersectional models began to appear, particularly under the influence of the growth of post-colonial theory which gave rise to “a tangle of distinct and variable relations of power and points of resistance.”

Feminist theory started to become part of the ever-expanding category of theory, influenced by postmodernism and post-structuralism, in particular Michel Foucault’s work on the historical construction of sexuality. This in turn influenced the growth of gender theory and the theories of Judith Butler and Monica Wittig, whose work on the linguistic construction of gender destabilised the idea of fixed gender categories. Butler deemed ‘woman’ to be “a term in process” and therefore as a subject “no longer understood in stable or abiding terms.”

The effect of poststructuralist thought on feminist theory also caused schisms related to the concepts of essentialism and anti-essentialism. For some the cultural subdivisions of the various new subject positions were seen as being rooted in essentialism in that they attempted to fix differences and were incompatible with the social and historical construction of woman. In this case post-structuralism was seen as the antidote. For others, this kind of polarisation was the result of the social and historical constructions and a contributory factor in “a developing theory of the female-embodied social subject … based on its specific, emergent, and conflictual history” of which post-structuralism was only one facet. In either case however post-structuralism destabilised the idea of

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53 Ibid., 43.
‘woman’ as object and focused on the idea of subjective self-construction. The implications for feminist film theory of all these changes were that not only did the gaze proliferate to take into account the different emerging subject positions of multiple ethnic and gender orientations, it was no longer fixed by the cinematic apparatus as different readings were possible given the individual history of the spectator and their location in any given historical moment. It therefore became no longer exclusively male, nor wedded to the dominant ideology of patriarchal discourse.

In arguing that Mike Nichols’s female representations belong within the realm of feminist film discourse over the body of his work, rather than looking at the “silences, absences and ‘repressions’”55 of early feminist film theory, we can see how “‘social climates’ [are] translated into cinematic signifieds”56 through textual analysis and the construction of mise-en-scene as: “Knowledge is socially situated, not timeless and unchanging. Subjects are … embedded in cultural and social circumstances that constitute them.”57 By looking at films produced at three different historical junctures we can examine how these contribute to the ongoing process of female self-construction where female desire is portrayed as moving away from the domestic realm and all that entails to “the imaging of new social spaces.”58

56 Ibid., 135.
CHAPTER 4 – RE: LOOKING

The Graduate (1967)

As one of a group of films released in 1967 that marked the arrival of New Hollywood, The Graduate offered a glimpse into “the American psyche as reflected in its popular culture.”59 Nichols’s second feature addressed in the main the disaffected youth of its hero Ben Braddock, a college graduate on the cusp of adulthood caught up between the material aspirations of his parent’s generation and his own uncertainties about the future. This struggle is played out through the relationship he has with the wife of his father’s business partner, Mrs Robinson, and his subsequent relationship with her daughter Elaine. While this triangle becomes the focus of Ben’s burgeoning independence, it also marks out the intergenerational struggle between the two women in their conflicting desires for Elaine’s future.

In the character of Mrs Robinson we are shown the standard representation of the domestic self-regulating woman. However while, like in many of the representations before her, this domestic status is presented as a trap it is not one she is eager to escape. Rather, she is firmly wedded to her role as controller of Elaine’s economy of desire in ensuring that Elaine is taken care of and will become the same kind of self-regulating woman. Nevertheless, her frustrations at her lack of agency outside of the domestic sphere are played out through her transgressing that status by initiating and entering into an affair with a much younger man. Mrs Robinson’s relationship with Ben however is not predicated on anything other than her own desires as the traditional conflation of romantic/domestic resolution is not one that she either seeks or is open to her as she is

59 Mark Harris, Scenes from a Revolution (London: Canongate, 2008), 1.
already caught in the domestic trap. It is the transgression that this relationship offers her that is in fact the focus of her desire. Not only does this show us a subjective experience of female desire, it subverts the dominant ideology as in the process she subordinates the young, white middle-class male underpinning the patriarchal structure. Further, she actually uses her domestic status in order to do this. In asking Ben to drive her home and accompany her into the house, she is merely following the social codes that grant her license to do so, regardless of her motive. Ben’s compliance with her request is also a part of those same social codes, however, once in the house she upsets the dynamic by transgressing and appropriating those codes to her own ends. Elaine’s appearance, both figuratively through their conversations at first and then literally as she becomes involved with Ben, serves to remind her mother of her own domestic confinement and of her associated duties to ensure Elaine achieves the required domestic resolution. The ensuing struggle over Elaine’s future, set-up between the man her parents want her to marry and Ben, becomes one of degrees of domesticity where Mrs Robinson articulates the desire for a different kind of domestic structure but Elaine acts on it. This is exemplified in the exchange between the two women in the church at the film’s climax after Elaine has already married Carl “It’s too late/Not for me.”

In terms of her mother’s frustrations, Elaine’s departure acts as a mirror reflecting back Mrs Robinson’s containment as she fails in the role which offers her the only agency she has. While the film’s open ending fails to provide any conclusion and the implications are that Elaine will settle into an alternate domestic role than the one her mother had envisaged for her, in fleeing from the domestic trap laid by Mrs Robinson Elaine indicates the increased agency available to women at that time.

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Working Girl (1988)

Although having subsequently made the films Silkwood (1983) and Heartburn (1986) which showed respectively the agency that women could have outside of the home and also the problems inherent within it, it was with Working Girl that Nichols again drew attention to the changing status of women. As mentioned in Chapter 2, female representations on film in the 1980’s were preoccupied with the rise of the modern working woman and the effect this had on both her traditional domestic role and on the patriarchal structures that her presence began to undermine. It also highlighted the problems for feminism at that time of the unified female subject in that it pitched two women in competition for the same status within the corporate world where class was the differential. While the competitive element was extended within the narrative to a romantic triangle involving a male colleague, the romantic aspect was subordinated to the working out of the different subject positions for women within the workplace.

As a caricature of the modern working woman Katherine Parker represents the unified subject position of the economically independent woman who is nevertheless wedded to the patriarchal structures of the financial institution that she belongs to. It is made clear from early on that her new secretary Tess McGill, while the same age and with the same qualifications, does not have the same privileged access that has allowed Katherine to progress to her position of authority. In addition, despite indications of assistance from Katherine in Tess’s attempts to progress from her subordinate position to one further up the corporate ladder, it becomes apparent that she in fact undermines any opportunity for her advancement. Tess is therefore put in a position where she has to ‘bend’ the rules in order to progress. She does this by masquerading as a colleague of Katherine’s, rather than her subordinate, and in the process unwittingly becomes involved with Katherine’s
boyfriend Jack. It is this aspect of the narrative that again subverts the dominant ideology from within. As a romantic comedy set in the workplace, it would be more usual for Tess’s love interest to be her boss as the “eroticization of a problematic work world signifies a desire for a “different social structure … [where there is] an end to the division between the domestic world of love and sentiment and the public world of work”.”

However, the characterisation divests the power relation between the female subordinate and her superior of the sexual element by making her boss female. Jack, though technically her superior in the world of work, is not aware of this due to her masquerade, therefore she is on equal footing with him for the majority of the film until the point where through her own actions she is granted that equality of status. Tess therefore earns her equality by the end of the film by acting as agent of her own desires. Further, she demonstrates that she is a worthy recipient of this change in status in the film’s resolution when she takes her place in the higher ranks and is confronted with a female subordinate who she chooses to treat with respect. In this way she embodies female desire as a subjective concept both in terms of herself and her recognition of it in others. However, it becomes clear from the film’s final shot that Tess is just one of many people climbing the corporate ladder and that she will have more obstacles to face. Thus while the film gives us the resolution of her immediate dilemma in moving her from a subordinate position to one of authority, it is clear that it is only the first of many steps she will have to take in which desire may not be a sufficient motivator if it means compromising her principles. She therefore signifies the ongoing struggle for women to construct their own social spaces.

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**Closer (2004)**

If *Working Girl* undermined the notion of a unified female subject, *Closer* illustrated the multiplicity of female subject positions through the idea of a self-constructed female subject. Adapted from Patrick Marber’s stage play, this story of two couples and the configurations of their relationships with one another addressed the various differences and similarities in male and female desire. We enter and exit the story with Alice, a self-described young American ‘waif’ who arrives in London, literally (and it appears figuratively) without baggage whereupon she meets Dan. Approximately eighteen months later, Dan meets Anna who is photographing him for the cover of a book he has written based on Alice’s life. Anna’s refusal to become involved with Dan despite her attraction to him eventually brings Larry into the equation through a series of misunderstandings. The rotation of partners that ensues becomes symptomatic of the struggle for dominance of each individual’s desires, although it is Alice who triumphs at the film’s closing.

Unlike her contemporaries the chick-flick heroines with their notional independence, Alice is entirely freed from a potential domestic resolution. Despite the fact that she works as both a stripper and a waitress, these roles do not appear to define her or her existence. Nor are they a means to an end, something that appears lost on the other three characters as they question her choices; Anna’s middle-class professional woman naturally assumes that Alice’s job as a waitress is temporary; Dan’s interpretation of ‘the usual’ when he asks her what she was doing in New York is that she was a student and Larry confuses Alice’s independence with a need to rescue her from her job in the strip club to which she responds “I don’t need looking after.”

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in. However, it is her submission to her construction at the hands of the other characters that in fact marks her out as truly independent. Initially she is constructed by Dan in the book he writes based on her life. Subsequently she is constructed as an object of desire both by another woman, Anna in the photograph she takes of her which is widely circulated through exhibition and reproduction, and by a man, Anna’s husband Larry when he comes across her in the strip club, after their respective partners have left them for each other. In each of these instances Alice functions as a ‘tabula rasa’, a blank slate onto which the others project their own desires and emotions, however in the final scenes of the movie it becomes apparent that the character of Alice for the duration of her three year relationship with Dan was a fiction created by another woman named Jane Jones about whom we know nothing except her name. Alice/Jane’s masquerade throws new light on the film’s narrative in retrospect and in particular in her exchange with Larry in the Paradise Suite of the strip club. In response to Larry’s request to tell him something true, she responds that “Lying is the most fun a girl can have without taking her clothes off, but its better if you do.” What appears to be voyeuristic behaviour on the part of the other characters is shown as Jane’s voyeuristic and controlling look at them from her position of power granted by the knowledge that Alice is a fiction, a constructed object, of which she is the author. Jane/Alice’s self-construction destabilises the notion of an objective or essential female sexuality and draws attention to the constructed natures of gender and sexuality both on screen and off it. The agency that this grants Alice is illustrated at the film’s close where she returns to New York and appears as another re-invented but unknown version of herself, in contrast with the play’s original ending in which her character is killed in an accident. It is this final scene where she is seen walking

63 Ibid.
free down the street, anonymous and untied to any definition that is critical to presenting the re-imagined woman’s social space.

In tracing the development of Nichols’s female characters from *The Graduate* to *Closer* we can see how at each stage of cultural history what defines these women is their subversion of the standard definitions both off and on screen. The dyad of Mrs Robinson/Elaine expresses women’s dissatisfaction with the domestic resolution; Katherine/Tess illustrates the problem of the unified female position once the move away from domesticity has been culturally absorbed and Anna/Alice the options available and conflicts that arise once the multiplicity of female subject positions has taken root. In each of these cases we can see how the desire to move away from the positions that these women find themselves in, as well as being foregrounded in the narrative structure, finds expression in the construction of the *mise-en-scene*.

**The Woman’s Perspective**

One of the key points of Mulvey’s argument is that the gaze is set up with woman as object of the look and man as bearer of the look. The cinematic grammar employed by classical Hollywood filmmaking in terms of staging, shot construction and the spatial and temporal unity provided by continuity editing created images that lent themselves to such analysis. From the late 1960’s onwards New Hollywood directors like Nichols, influenced by the work of their European contemporaries, began to incorporate different techniques into shooting and editing which led to a more stylised form of storytelling. The use of freeze frame endings, canted camera angles and increased depth of field along with a greater mobility of camera equipment and editing techniques that disrupted spatial and temporal unity played with the classical narrative structure. While most of these
techniques already existed and had been used before, it was the way in which they became interpolated into the storytelling that effected these changes. As a result these directors opened up new perspectives and altered the standard construction of *mise-en-scene* on which Mulvey’s argument rests.

In the party scene at the Braddock’s house at the beginning of *The Graduate*, it is Ben who is the focus of attention. The discomfort with which he moves through this scene is part of the films overall project to convey “the disaffection of young people for an environment they don’t seem to be in synch with.” As a consequence we barely notice Mrs Robinson sitting in a chair watching him (Figure 1) until she makes her subsequent appearance in his bedroom and asks him to drive her home. Not only is Ben the object of the viewer’s gaze in this scene, he is also the object of Mrs Robinson’s gaze as ‘bearer’ of the look. Once she has coerced Ben into the house she brings him down into the living room at the back of the house “full of shiny black surfaces and sensual curves, a nighttime lair for predatory animals.” The preponderance of glass and reflective surfaces in the film was deliberate in order to illustrate Ben’s alienation from his surroundings; here it serves a further purpose by showing his entrapment in Mrs Robinson’s lair with its “glassed-in, overgrown garden off the living room.”

At the start of her argument in *From Reverence to Rape*, Haskell quotes Virginia Woolf’s assertion that “Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size.” However the shot of Ben through Mrs Robinson’s legs in what has become an iconic

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64 Buck Henry quoted in Harris, *Scenes from a Revolution*, 314.
65 Harris, *Scenes from a Revolution*, 313.
66 Ibid., 313.
67 Haskell *From Reverence to Rape*, 1.
image in film history has the opposite effect. In the moments leading up to this shot she raises her leg onto the stool to signify her intent (Figure 2). As Ben utters the words “Mrs. Robinson, you’re trying to seduce me“ he is viewed as trapped, both figuratively and literally, within the ‘paradigmatic woman’s space’ (Figure 3). This use of perspective reduces him to a tiny figure dwarfed by this giant woman, highlighting her desire for an increase in stature within the world. That this is expressed through her sexual desire for Ben is emphasised by the point of view from which the look emanates, framed by an opening made by her body at waist level. Thus sexual desire and desire for a different social structure are conflated into a position of dominance, countering traditional representations at that point in time. This use of perspective is further exploited in later scenes. In the Taft hotel bedroom where Ben and Mrs Robinson argue about his potential meeting with Elaine, when Ben starts to leave but ends up remaining defeated he is viewed from the door with Mrs Robinson’s stockinged leg in the foreground of the shot, again the image of her leg dominates the frame while he appears smaller in the background (Figure 4). In a later scene within the house, when Elaine has discovered that her mother and Ben had been having an affair, this use of perspective is reversed. At this point in the narrative Mrs Robinson has lost control of Ben as his affections have been transferred to Elaine; Ben is placed in the foreground as the camera zooms out to show Mrs Robinson looking small and defeated (Figure 5). While this shows Mrs Robinson’s dominance of Ben to be only temporary it nonetheless highlights the ongoing struggle for stature of the domestic woman and marks a shift in the way in which women had been represented on screen up until that point.

68 The Graduate, op. cit.
The Graduate – Analysis of Scenes

Figure 1 – Mrs Robinson gazes at Ben

Figure 2 – Signalling intent

Figure 3 – Increased stature

Figure 4 – Reasserting dominance

Figure 5 – Lost control
In *Working Girl*, Tess’s struggle for stature within the business world is highlighted through her interactions with Katherine. Katherine’s dominance is shown through her suggestions as to how Tess should dress, along with placing her in a physically subordinate position in a number of scenes. In one in particular, Tess is seen literally at Katherine’s feet emphasising the different spaces they inhabit within the workplace (Figure 6). This is in marked contrast to Tess’s interactions with Jack with whom she is almost always placed at eye level. Although the spaces Tess inhabits with Jack are fictitious at first, in a scene towards the end of the film where her masquerade has been revealed and she is again physically placed on the ground in front of Katherine retrieving papers, Jack bends down to signify his allegiance to her returning them to eye level in contrast with Katherine’s dominant stature (Figure 7). At this point, Tess no longer needs to wear the uniform of the business suit in order to keep up her masquerade in contrast to earlier in the film and is shown in casual unglamorous clothing. Nevertheless it is in this attire that she proves her worth and earns her place in the higher ranks.

The notion of dress and uniform in relation to female identity within the workplace is pivotal to Tess’s masquerade but is also used to differentiate her from the other female characters. In the scene where she meets Jack for the first time, masquerading as an executive in Katherine’s clothes, she has chosen a cocktail dress inappropriate for the reception hosted by his company. However, this becomes the very thing that draws her to his attention. This choice of dress is earlier explained by Tess to her friend Cynthia as deliberate in order to emphasise the fact that she is “not afraid to be noticed.”69 While Jack’s interest in the way she is dressed is not the kind she was looking for and her only concern is that she appears to belong at the reception, neither is she threatened by it as she

Working Girl – Analysis of Scenes

Figure 6 – Tess looks up to Katherine

Figure 7 – Tess and Jack as equals

Figure 8 – Seeing ‘eye to eye’

Figure 9 – From both angles

Figure 10 – Jack as the ‘object’
tells him she “has a head for business and bod for sin”\textsuperscript{70}; throughout this interaction they remain at eye level and are given equal screen time (Figures 8 & 9). In dressing this way, Tess has deliberately subjected herself to the gaze and appropriated it to her own ends but her reaction has also made it clear that, unlike Katherine and the other female executives present at the reception, she delineates between the uniform position of the working woman and her own personal identity of which her sexuality is a part. Further, Jack’s physical attractiveness is deliberately subjected to the female gaze on screen in several subsequent scenes, most notably in one where he changes clothes in his office to the applause of his female colleagues while on the phone to Tess (Figure 10). It even becomes part of the narrative as he acts as Tess’s decoy at a wedding they have gate crashed in order to meet the father of the bride whom they hope to impress with their business proposal. Jack lures away a young bridesmaid dancing with this man in order to allow Tess access to him and does so by playing on his charms, having already been noted by the other women guests at the wedding. The result of this is that throughout the film Jack and Tess are visually presented as equals in terms of how they relate to one another, how they view the world and how they are viewed by others.

In \textit{Closer}, like \textit{The Graduate} and \textit{Working Girl} before it, we see clear instances of the woman gazing at the man. In addition, the looking that occurs has a causal chain of events that is tied to the narrative and begins and ends with Alice. In the film’s opening scenes Alice and Dan catch each other’s attention. As they walk towards one another each gazes directly at the other, by looking directly into camera (Figure 11) until Alice is hit by a taxi causing them to meet. In the subsequent scene with Anna in her studio, both Dan and Alice are subject to her gaze through the camera lens (Figure 12). Anna’s gazing at Dan

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid.
Closer – Analysis of Scenes

Figure 11 – Alice gazes at Dan

Figure 12 – Anna gazes at Dan

Figure 13 – Larry gazes at two Alice’s

Figure 14 – Larry in fragments

Figure 15 – Larry is gazed at by Alice

Figure 16 – Larry in the ‘eye’ of the gaze
roused his interest in her which results in his introduction of Larry into their lives. At Anna’s exhibition, Larry comes across Alice looking at her own portrait and gazes with her at it so that when he later encounters her in the strip club she already exists in multiple forms, making it impossible for him to view her voyeuristically as a fixed image of fantasy as “beauty or sexuality is desirable exactly to the extent that it is idealised and unattainable”71 (Figure 13). As a consequence in the scene in the Paradise Suite where Larry engages Alice for a lap dance, his pleasure is constantly disrupted by his knowledge of her existence outside of this space and undermines his capacity to gaze at her. This disruption of his masculine role as bearer of the look is foreshadowed on his entrance into the club as his image is fragmented by the multiple mirrors that line the walls to the stairwell (Figure 14).

Once in the Paradise Suite, Larry’s position is further undermined by Alice’s compliance in acting out her fantasy role. Each time he attempts to transgress the formal rules of the relationship between dancer and patron, he is reminded that her compliance is governed by those rules and that she is the one who is controlling the situation. This is made explicit when he asks her to open her legs and “show” him. As she pulls her underwear to one side and he gazes at her, we are shown, like in The Graduate, a point of view shot framed by an opening made by her body, in this case her hand resting on her waist (Figure 15). Like Mrs Robinson’s look at Ben this point of view originates from her position of sexual power and is voyeuristic and controlling as Larry is placed in a subordinate position both physically on his knees and psychologically through being prevented from touching her. This is further emphasised by his query as to what would happen if he were to touch her to which she responds that he would be removed as she

points out the security cameras in the ceiling. We are then shown an aerial shot of the Paradise Suite as Larry looks up and is seen from the point of view of the security cameras (Figure 16). The shape of this space, the Paradise Suite, is Yonic in nature and symbolic of the female space that Alice inhabits. Thus Larry is caught in the ‘eye’ of both Alice’s gaze and the gaze of the cameras which function to protect her. This neutralises his gaze as “the voyeur’s pleasure depends on the object of this look being unable to see him.” Further, Alice’s gaze is shown to be the truly voyeuristic one as Larry’s inability to see her for who she tells him she is, Jane, places her in the position of power.

The visual aspects of the storytelling in these films, in which a desiring female perspective is embedded, serve to draw the female spectator into identification with the female characters as bearer of the look, if not in equal measure to the male characters than at least in part. The progression in terms of the agency of the gaze granted to Mrs Robinson, Tess and Alice shows both the development of the desiring female subject as a cinematic representation as well as being reflective of the changes in women’s status over nearly four decades. As such, these films enunciate the dissatisfactions and desires of women within each historical moment as well as acting as paradigms for re-imagined social spaces for women thereby contributing to feminist discourse.

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72 Ibid., 28.
CHAPTER 5 – CONCLUSION

In examining the progression of the desiring female subject over four decades in these films we can see how the female body is used to express the woman’s desire to move away from the confines of the ‘paradigmatic’ women’s spaces; at first the domestic, subsequently the ‘unified’ position of woman and finally as the object of male desire. Rather than the coded female bodies constructed as those objects of desire that belong to both traditional and more recent dominant mainstream cinematic representations, the images presented in this argument re-code and re-appropriate the female body as a way of expressing female desire to escape these spaces and move into new ones. That the female body itself is used to construct a gaze, of which the man becomes the object, helps to create those new spaces and provides a point of identification for the female spectator.

Nevertheless, this is not without problems in terms of feminist discourse. Firstly, despite the changes in the status of women in the years between the arrivals of Mrs Robinson and Alice, it is unlikely that Mrs Robinson or any second (or third) wave feminist would consider Alice’s position as a stripper as anything other than exploitative, and certainly not indicative of the kind of new social spaces that they were arguing for. In addition, the destabilisation of the term ‘woman’ and the growth in gender theory begs the question is it even valid to suggest that a ‘woman’s’ perspective exists? The tentative answer to this would be to see these characters as themselves representations of woman as a ‘term in process’ with Alice being one further step in the direction away from the ‘unified female subject’ she is pitted against in the form of Anna the ‘professional’ woman, and a development of Tess’s refusal to ally herself entirely with the patriarchal structures to which she belongs in the corporate world. It is made clear that as an attractive young
woman Alice’s job is one which is lucrative and makes her independent so that in a sense she has attained the stature that Mrs Robinson expressed a desire for. As such, she has moved away from the need to define herself in terms of others and is free to explore the possibilities available to her as an independent female for whom desire is a choice rather than an expression of a wish to escape.
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