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# **A Leg Up For Women?**

Stereotypes of Female Sexuality in American Culture through  
an Analysis of Iconic Film Stills of Women's Legs

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Spring 2013

Perhaps the most celebrated scene from the iconic 1967 film *The Graduate* centers on the shot of Mrs. Robinson's leg. Her leg is propped up on the bar and the camera frames Benjamin beneath the triangular arch her leg has created. It is in this famous shot that Benjamin utters the legendary line: "Mrs. Robinson, you're trying to seduce me. Aren't you?" Benjamin understands that this overt sexual gesture of Mrs. Robinson's leg is clearly an invitation. Her legs are synonymous with her will and sexuality in this scene. The iconic nature of the scene could be attributed to the fantastic cinematography and framing, or maybe Benjamin's famous line that starts this forbidden relationship. The answer is probably a combination of the two. It is clear though that this scene establishes Mrs. Robinson as one of the truly iconic older women characters in American film, and it foreshadows a scandalous affair that rocked 1960s popular culture.

The use of Mrs. Robinson's leg in *The Graduate* as a symbol to express women's sexuality was not a new film innovation. The tactic had been used before, and it would be used again. Indeed, women's legs have often been the body part most commonly associated with female sexuality in film. Beyond their own intrinsic appeal, legs also hint at what lies between them. Legs are a gateway to female sexuality and for that they have been consistently been salivated over by men for centuries. The female leg is at its most sexual when it is exposed in all its flesh and glory. The conscious exposure by women of their legs shows their active intent to be sexual. Mrs. Robinson does this by showing off her legs to Benjamin. By using them, she gains power over him.

This project examines the depictions of women's sexuality in 20th century American film through four iconic films – and more specifically, four iconic leg shots within those films. Through these case studies, this project will investigate the public perception of female sexuality. Women's presentation as sexual beings throughout different eras of Hollywood films illustrate the popular sentiment towards female sexuality in a given time period. Sexually liberated women have tended to be relegated to stereotypical roles on film. This investigation will consider whether this stereotyping of female sexual characters accurately reflects popular sentiment of the time towards female sexuality. Depictions of female sex on film are abundant; male sexual voyeurism has made female sexuality virtually omnipresent on film. These iconic legs are easily representative of that. Even more than just being proxies of sexuality for these female characters, these legs reveal the roles that women on film have been relegated to. Women are either sexual objects for men or they are dangerous because of their brazen sexual nature.

American film, most notably Hollywood film, is representative of the American identity and the forces at work trying to shape this identity. These films are “aesthetic objects [of history] because of what they reveal about the society that produces them.”<sup>1</sup> Even when Hollywood films attempt to subvert society, the inherent sociological conceptions within these films make them “valuable as a primary source”<sup>2</sup> of the time period from which they came. The widespread proliferation of Hollywood films makes them especially powerful as cultural artifacts and more influential than other forms of popular media. These movies have the ability to connect with large national diverse audiences almost immediately and therefore have the power to influence a great sector of American society. Hollywood films are also produced by a specific group of Americans, those who have the means to become directors and producers. This group tended to

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<sup>1</sup> Powers, Stephen, David J. Rothman, and Stanley Rothman. *Hollywood's America: Social and Political Themes in Motion Pictures*. 1996. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Jarvie, I. C. *Movies as Social Criticism: Aspects of Their Social Psychology*. 1978. 138.

be more conservative, as “Hollywood films are the product of a highly educated, affluent, and powerful leadership group”<sup>3</sup> that is competing to have a stronger influence with other established traditional cultural groups in America. Their morals are reflected in mainstream society through their influence on films. Hollywood film creators “seek to persuade Americans to create the kind of society that they regard as just and/or good.”<sup>4</sup> This paternal role of Hollywood on society was made more concrete with the introduction of film censorship in the 1930s. Censorship is how these elite men, the rulers of American society, wielded their influence to create a traditional society on film.

Since Hollywood producers and directors have tended to be men, it is natural that the popular portrayals of women on film have often come from a male perspective. The American male-dominated society has historically forced women to be submissive and objectified. The reification of these opinions through film has created certain tenants forced upon women and their on screen counterparts. Firstly, women are depicted as dependent beings. Living as a woman “without a guy is to be alone.”<sup>5</sup> Women are reliant and need the power and comfort of men in order to live. This is perhaps why so many films and fairy tales “stop after the prince”<sup>6</sup> and after the wedding. These classic tales don’t reveal what is included in the “happily ever after” for women. This leads to my second point: women’s happiness is equated with finding a husband. Third and finally, Hollywood films have historically reduced women to be represented by just their bodies. Women overwhelmingly have been taught to believe that “I am my body,”<sup>7</sup> and that their sexuality and beauty is all they have to offer. To men, sexual servants are the simplest and most ideal form a woman can take and this role has been historically forced upon

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<sup>3</sup> Powers, Rothman, Rothman 2.

<sup>4</sup> Powers, Rothman, Rothman 3.

<sup>5</sup> Mellencamp, Patricia. *A Fine Romance: Five Ages of Film Feminism*. 1995. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Mellencamp 8.

<sup>7</sup> Mellencamp 2.

women in society.

Female sexuality has been relegated to certain standards created by a male dominant society where a woman's sexuality is meant to be used only by men. Hollywood films have been used as "both a medium and a commodity reproducing the sexual oppression and exploitation of women"<sup>8</sup> Female sexuality is acceptable when it is meant for male voyeurism. This is why female sexuality on film is so ubiquitous. Yet when sexuality is used by women for power, it is a problem. In American society little girls have been taught that "sex was a sin."<sup>9</sup> Even the physical connotations of female sexuality in psychology have always been negative. Psychologists such as Jane Ussher see the "female body as impure, corrupt, the site of discharges, bleedings, dangerous to masculinity, a source of moral and physical contamination."<sup>10</sup> A woman's sexuality was not to be expressed or acted on for herself because it was tainted. Sexuality should be reserved for male pleasure. Female sexual agency is contrary to these societal norms and should therefore be condemned. Because of this, female sexuality is stereotyped into either being purely for male enjoyment or as dangerous when used for personal female gain. Portrayals of women on film often became one-dimensional stock characters, based on their sexuality or lack thereof. Sexual women were dangerous and virginal women were worshipped.<sup>11</sup> Women on film were never meant to be dynamic and have depth like real women. As film historian J.W. Whitehead states, they could never be "both victim and villain, both male and female, mother and whore, master and slave."<sup>12</sup> Female sexual agency is so dangerous and threatening to this male society that women have been forced to believe that it is inappropriate

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<sup>8</sup> Jordan, Jessica Hope. *The Sex Goddess in American Film: 1930-1965: Jean Harlow, Mae West, Lana Turner, and Jayne Mansfield*. 2010. 7.

<sup>9</sup> Mellencamp 2.

<sup>10</sup> Ussher, Jane M. *The Psychology of the Female Body*. 1989. 15.

<sup>11</sup> Siann 154.

<sup>12</sup> Whitehead, J. W. *Appraising The Graduate: The Mike Nichols Classic and Its Impact in Hollywood*. 2011. 106.

and unthinkable through film.

The element of women most often used as a proxy for female sexuality is the leg. The quintessential sexual woman in society has always been the “tall, thin, leggy and young”<sup>13</sup> woman. Legs are considered to be one of the most sexualized elements of a woman’s body for their erogenous nature, where “inside of the upper leg has the most sensitive and delicate skin.”<sup>14</sup> The essence of women’s bodies is considered to lie between their legs. This is their power and what genders them. Legs are the entrance to female femininity and in terms of anatomy are physical extensions of it. The exposed leg is inherently more sexual because it reveals skin and hints at the exposed female genitals. In terms of sexual psychology, “the concealed is so exciting,”<sup>15</sup> and the revealing of female body parts typically covered is sexually arousing to men. Society has historically expected women to be covered, especially their legs, in order to subdue this sexuality and the sexual desires men may feel. Philosopher Thomas Nagel argues, “that concealment is an essential component of decorum and that the exercise of restraint, particularly with regard to a person’s clothing, is central to civilized interaction among men and women.”<sup>16</sup> Excessive female sexuality (including revealing legs) diminishes the male-female relationship in society to sexual fetishism. When the sexualized leg is consciously exposed, it represents an active assertion of sexuality by the woman. In doing this, she may be able to use her legs as a source of power and tool to manipulate men, but she is also, in turn, allowing herself to become a sexual object under the male gaze.

While female sexuality has been exploited on film to attract male voyeurs, it is only as a sexual object of male desires that female sexuality is acceptable. If a woman were to take

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<sup>13</sup> Mellencamp 224.

<sup>14</sup> Glynn, Prudence. *Skin to Skin: Eroticism in Dress*. 1982. 42.

<sup>15</sup> Glynn 41.

<sup>16</sup> Smith, Graham. "The Subway Grate Scene in *The Seven Year Itch*: "The Staging of an Appearance-As-Disappearance." *Cinemas: Journal of Film Studies*. 2004. 218.

advantage of her own sexuality, this would challenge the traditional patriarchal order of American society. Female sexuality used actively by women therefore, must be seen and portrayed as negative, dangerous and antagonistic. Overtly sexual women have historically been condemned and ostracized from mainstream society. Official Hollywood censorship enforced this notion that a sexual woman was not appropriate. To avoid this censorship, films excused female sexuality by correcting it in male dominated ways or making it accidental and innocent. Since the fall of institutionalized censorship, female sexuality and sexually liberated women have run rampant on film. These women however, are still portrayed negatively. Their sexual power is for their own gain and it therefore challenges mainstream social values. Female sexuality on film will always be present because it satisfies male desires, but it will consistently relegate women to either being inert sexual objects or rogue sexual temptresses.

The films I look at illustrate the timeless principle that female sexuality is stereotyped as bad when it is for feminine power, yet acceptable when it is for male voyeurism. *It Happened One Night* and similar films of the 1930s, portray sexuality to be excusable if it was shown as a character flaw and the woman were corrected in the end. The most typical way this would happen is to have the female character married off at the end of the film, where she could be the subject of a dominant husband. The 1950s and *The Seven Year Itch* saw a decade of films that excused rampant sexuality by making it appear innocent or accidental. These films however, were masquerades to show gratuitous sex to male audiences.

After this time period however, film censorship in institutional forms largely disappeared. Films were free to make radical female characters that acknowledged their sexuality and used it as power. Yet the lack of institutional censorship in these later decades created the need for societal norms to moderate how sexualized women were portrayed. Films themselves depicted



sexual female characters as evil, condemning them in a way that appealed to audiences and perpetuated traditional notions of female sexuality as dangerous and antagonistic to traditional values. The supposedly sexually liberating 1960s condemned Mrs. Robinson in *The Graduate* as a cruel obstacle to a traditional love story in seeking her own sexual pleasure. Sharon Stone's sexual powerhouse in the 1992's *Basic Instinct* was likewise shown to be an evil and murderous woman whose sexuality could only lead to trouble. Hollywood films, regardless of the time period, show women as sexual objects for male pleasure. When female characters try to take their sexuality into their own hands, this challenges the social order and must be fixed or stopped. This investigation of Hollywood films illustrates how this form of popular media has solidified such sexual stereotypes of women for decades.

It is important to note that this investigation will focus almost exclusively on white women from conventional upper and middle classes of American society. The majority of ruling elites and Hollywood filmmakers have historically come from these ethnic and social backgrounds. The America they have portrayed on film is reflective of their own white culture and their conception of white America. Because of this, filmmakers tended not to stray from their own cultural group and social background when creating characters. In an effort to isolate dominating social trends, this selection has been limited to those portrayals of women that fall within this class and ethnic group. White female characters on screen are representative of white American society at large and unconscious societal norms because they are the main demographic to which these films were targeted. Women of color on film were already held to popular preconceived notions and stereotypes. An analysis of these other groups of female characters on film would deal with a far greater host of racial and class stereotypes and fears that are outside of mainstream society and therefore fall beyond the scope of this investigation.

### **The 1930s and the Restriction of Female Sexuality - *It Happened One Night***

Frank Capra's 1934, *It Happened One Night*, is an iconic film with an undeniable legacy. In its time, it was so influential that Clark Gable's one scene without an undershirt was said to have hurt undershirt sales nationwide. The film achieved critical success and set a record for winning all five of the major Academy Awards (Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor, Best Actress, Best Screenplay) which has only been accomplished by two other films in history (*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* in 1975 and *The Silence of the Lambs* in 1991.) Today, *It Happened One Night* is seen as the definitive screwball comedy, a light and happy film intended to entertain the masses. Behind this façade however, is a film caught in the earliest stages of film censorship. Female sexuality, which was rampant on film in the early 1930s, was now left on the cutting room floor under the regulations of the Hollywood Production Code. This film's main character, Ellie Andrews, is portrayed as exhibiting an infantile and rebellious type of sexuality, with her immaturity as an excuse for inappropriate sexuality. The iconic hitchhiking scene where Andrews' flashes her leg is the epitome of this. Andrews' character over time learns that her sexuality is not actually gaining her power or autonomy, but is instead turning her into a child or sexual object. The Production Code's rigid moral values force this character to realize that sexual promiscuity leads nowhere and only maturity and prudence amongst women will win out. Women were dependent beings and if they used sexuality for their own betterment it would challenge a male dominated society. The ideal ending in this film, and many films of the era, is therefore marriage. A husband would control and correct any sexual notions that women have. This film is one of the earliest examples of a social transition from a rather radical opinion of women's sexuality on film in the early 1930s, to prudence under the Production Code in the following decades.

The Great Depression may have left the American economy in ruins but it created a golden era on the silver screen, filled with sexually sophisticated women and scandalous themes. In the grips of the depression, “people flocked to the nation's air conditioned movie theaters”<sup>17</sup> for an opportunity to look at the rich and beautiful. The films of this era featured edgy and remarkable heroines. Some of the female characters of the early 1930s would be seen as risqué and radical even by today's standards. These women played strong female characters that often expressed and acted on their natural sexual desires. The motivation for these characters was a cultural response to the autonomy women experienced in the heyday of the 1920s. Women were more accepted in the work place and their sexuality was more openly expressed with fashions like shorter skirts and haircuts. This changed in the Depression, when the few jobs available were reserved for hardworking men and women were forced back into the home. But this was not the picture that worn-down, Depression-era Americans paid to see. The free-spirited days of 1920s were much more appealing to cinema goers and “strong women in risqué situations became the winning box-office formula at every studio.”<sup>18</sup> The sexuality of female characters was not chastised but instead spotlighted for the audience's pleasure. One such film was *Queen Christina* in 1933 featuring Greta Garbo as a bisexual 17<sup>th</sup> century Swedish Queen. Female characters expressing their sexuality were not only permitted in the early 1930s; they were the stars.

This celebration of female character's sexuality was quickly condemned and banned from Hollywood as portrayals of female sexuality instead became stereotyped. The Motion Picture Production Code gained a new enforcer in 1934 in the form of Joseph Breen. It was in “July 1934, when the dread and draconian Production Code became the law of Hollywoodland.”<sup>19</sup> This code regulated what was morally acceptable and appropriate to be shown on screen and had the

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<sup>17</sup> *Sex, Censorship, and the Silver Screen: From the Depression to WWII. Films on Demand.* 2008.

<sup>18</sup> LaSalle, Mick. *Complicated Women: Sex and Power in Pre-code Hollywood.* 2000. 12.

<sup>19</sup> LaSalle 1.

power to cut and edit films before their release. The sudden need for a moral value system in Hollywood could be seen as a response to the end of prohibition on December 5, 1933. With the return of legalized alcohol, there was a growing fear that society and film would “lapse into the old, loose ways,”<sup>20</sup> according to Senator Henry L. Myers. Film censorship was needed to assure that themes and content that would be “damaging to society”<sup>21</sup> were not being distributed to the public en masse. The conservative nature of the Great Depression was being taken out in force on the revolutionary film industry. Film historian Marjorie Rosen notes that “the women’s movement had sputtered and ground to a halt with the Depression,”<sup>22</sup> and this was most readily seen in women on film. Women were the social group whose roles were most stunted during the Depression and this was reflected on film.

The Production Code, which was intolerant of female sexuality, enforced conservative social roles on film that female characters were forced to fit based on their sexual nature. These roles became the new standard for Hollywood heroines for decades to come. Characters were either made to be sexual temptresses or innocent virgins, but never anything in between. Film historian Mick LaSalle sees female characters under the Production Code as being “confined to one-dimensional roles straight out of the nineteenth century. A woman of sexual power was evil...a nice woman stayed virtuous.”<sup>23</sup> Sexuality was portrayed as a sin in these female characters and the Production Code assured that these characters met appropriate ends based on their sexuality. If a female character was sexual, she was relegated to being evil and ended up a loser in the film. This followed the “the fundamental principle of the Production Code law of compensating

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<sup>20</sup> *The Silver Screen. Depression to WWII.*

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Rosen, Marjorie. *Popcorn Venus*. 1974. 168.

<sup>23</sup> LaSalle 4.

values: if you sin, you pay.”<sup>24</sup> The characters meant to be loved and associated with never trifled with sexuality. LaSalle notes that a “leading lady must start out good, stay good, and be whitewashed for the finish.”<sup>25</sup> Female sexuality was in no way to be seen as tolerable under the Production Code of Hollywood.

The portrayal of female sexuality was a surefire way to profit at the box office but this had to be approached very subtly under the new strict moral rules of the Production Code. The early films under this code had to try to navigate these opposing views of female sexuality. Audiences still wanted to see the sexy female characters they had grown to love and admire on the screen, but these would no longer get the approval of the Production Code. Films tried to portray female characters as moderately sexual, while still creating the right moral message through their characters personalities and conclusions.

Female autonomy under the Production Code also fell to a growingly male-dominated society and film industry. Hollywood tried to make strong-willed women on screen but most of their attempts came up half-baked. One example of this was the popular role of the reporter gal. This character would be savvy and might reject moral conventions, but in the end she would still fit into the moral scheme created by the Production Code. These supposedly self-supporting female characters accomplished the “paradoxical feat of showing vigorous working gals whose independence was a ruse, a passage to traditional marriage and social success.”<sup>26</sup> Films created some intrigue with spitfire characters and the suggestion of sexuality in order to be successful. But for these films to gain the Production Code’s approval, these characters had to end up in the traditional role for women: the wife. Female autonomy on film was minimalized and instead replaced with tradition male strength and domination. This can be seen in films throughout this

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<sup>24</sup> *The Silver Screen. Depression to WWII.*

<sup>25</sup> LaSalle 208.

<sup>26</sup> Rosen 146.

period, where “effeminate romantic heroes like Valentino, Roman Novarro, and Richard Barthelmess were shunted aside for the craggy masculinity of Gable.”<sup>27</sup> *It Happened One Night* is a perfect example of these attempts to create an individual female character but in the end her fate is to be the wife to her dominant husband.

*It Happened One Night* illustrates how women were expected to behave under the new Hollywood Production Code. This film was one of the first to show how female roles would be created on film for years to come. Considered “the first example of Hollywood's new found modesty,”<sup>28</sup> the film was a success for the new Production Code in proving that “a clean story can be funnier than a dirty one.”<sup>29</sup> Caught between a need to sell sex and follow new moral standards in filmmaking, Hollywood tried to give audiences sex as subtly as possible and create appropriate traditional endings for female characters in line with the Production Code. This film shows how the slightest bit of sex can go a long way in the iconic hitchhiking scene where Claudette Colbert expertly hails a car by flashing her leg. This display of sexuality is only permitted however, because the character grows out of her childish sexual ways and ends up getting married to the brawny Clark Gable.

The film shows a young rich girl and her transition to maturity through real world experiences. *It Happened One Night* follows Ellie Andrews, a spoiled heiress, who has been kidnapped by her father hoping to prevent the consummation of her marriage to a wealthy, but inappropriate, suitor. Andrews escapes and runs away from her father in the first defiant and independent act of her life. She, along with stranger news reporter Peter Warne, travel up the coast from Miami to New York. This story portrays the coming of age for Andrews in the form of a romantic comedy. By putting a spoiled girl and a no nonsense reporter together, drama and

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<sup>27</sup> Rosen 133.

<sup>28</sup> *The Silver Screen. Depression to WWII.*

<sup>29</sup> Variety Staff. "It Happened One Night." Rev. of *It Happened One Night*. *Variety*. 1934.

disdain between them lead to comedy.

The cross-class relationship between these characters made it a major hit in the Depression. The young rich Andrews is forced to find her own way to survive and travel, putting her for the first time “dependent on the hospitality and good will of strangers.”<sup>30</sup> Over the course of the film, Andrews experiences what it is like to not be from the privileged class. Film historians Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark see that when Andrews “flees the oppression of her wealthy class background, she finds her liberation in the ‘normality’ of the people she meets on the road, most notably her unexpected companion.”<sup>31</sup> The upper class lifestyle had isolated her from mainstream society and treated her “as a child.”<sup>32</sup> This adventure on the road is a real world awakening for Andrews and results in her personal growth. The experience of interacting with a different class gives Andrews a life lesson and forces her to mature. Andrews’ growth is not only shown through her ability to interact with a different class of people but also through her growth into sexual maturity. The beginning of the film shows Andrew’s childish use of sexuality. Her character’s later prudence and eventual decision to marry Warne before committing adultery fit more into the social mores of the Production Code and excuse her character’s earlier sexual indiscretions.

The film’s iconic legacy comes from the scene where Andrews most exhibits her early and immature infantile and rebellious sexual nature. This bit has transcended the film and become iconic Hollywood imagery, being alluded to in films for decades to come. The setting for the scene is the side of a highway with Warne trying to hitchhike a ride with his expert thumb techniques. He is so confident of his skills that he claims he could write a book on the subject. Warne is asserting his dominance over Andrews in trying to teach her. Yet Andrews claims that

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<sup>30</sup> Cohan, Steven, and Ina Rae Hark. *The Road Movie Book*. 1997. 6.

<sup>31</sup> Cohan, Hark 5.

<sup>32</sup> Cavell, Stanley. "Knowledge as Transgression: Mostly a Reading of "It Happened One Night."" 1980. 156.



Figure 1. Colbert exposes her leg in her own version of hitchhiking as Gable looks on in shock.

she has “her own system”<sup>33</sup> to try to hail a car. Andrews walks up to the side of the road and lifts her long skirt to reveal “one of the shapeliest limbs in movies”<sup>34</sup> (the scene was almost done with a leg double because it was too sexual but Colbert claimed to have a better leg for the part.) Andrews proves to Warne that “her limb is

stronger than his thumb,”<sup>35</sup> and her sexual nature can trump his wit.

The visual presentation of this scene (as seen in Figure 1) is important in showing the power relationship between these characters. Warne sits on the fence in the background, looking in rather dumpy shape for being the handsome Clark Gable. He is seated with one of his legs raised high and crossed over the other at his knee. He appears to be in a diamond or trapezoidal shape. In contrast, Andrews at the foreground is straight up and down. She has bent over as little as possible to pick up the bottom of her skirt and her legs are sharp and well defined. She has become a detailed beautiful figure. The scene is focused completely on Andrews’ leg. The background is a rather dull, light gray, which Warne easily disappears into. Andrews’ costume however is full of dark lines. Her chevron sweater actually points straight down to her femininity and her exposed limb. Her black skirt contrasts her light stockinged leg showing the sexy

<sup>33</sup> Dick, Bernard F. *Claudette Colbert: She Walked in Beauty*. 2008. 55.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Gottlieb, Sidney. "From Heroine To Brat: Frank Capra's Adaptation Of Night Bus (It Happened One Night)." 1988. 132.



contours. Interestingly, when Andrews's leg is the most exposed, the film cuts to a close up, cutting the rest of Andrews out of the shot (as seen in Figure 2.) This technique is used to visually and mentally separate the character from the sexual act, making the sexuality seem weaker and more removed. Yet Andrews has clearly used her sexuality as an advantage over



*Figure 2.* A close-up of Colbert's leg at its most sexual. The visual separation from the rest of her body detaches the character from this too sexual act.

Warne, claiming power. The disapproval from Warne and her progression after this scene are what fulfill the moral requirements of the Production Code.

This scene encompasses Andrews' nature at the beginning of the film and her spoiled infantile approach to sexuality. The trajectory and the moral story of the film however, is her maturity and growth out of this phase. Being in such a destitute state on the road is the first time Andrews has been removed from the privileged bubble that was her life. This sexual gesture of flashing her leg was the first opportunity for her to make her own decisions and flaunt her sexuality. For Andrews, she thinks she gains power over Warne by using her sexuality. In reality, this scene is only proof of the timeless tenant that sex sells. Andrews "shows that she possesses a certain amount of power but only as a sexual object."<sup>36</sup> The car only stopped for Andrews because of her sexuality, not her power. The film shows that sexuality is not as liberating as Andrews thought. Warne judges her for this outlandish sexual display. He gives her

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<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*

a look that is “an expression of anger at the spectacle she has made of herself,”<sup>37</sup> as interpreted by film reviewer Stanly Cavell. Andrews succeeded in making Warne jealous and judgmental. Warne interprets her act as infantile, believing her similar to “a child to be carried and spanked.”<sup>38</sup>

Early in the film we see another instance of Andrews’ desire to be sexually recognized by Warne as a woman. On their first night in a camp together, Warne famously erects “The Walls of Jericho,” (Figure 3) a blanket along a clothesline providing a privacy barrier between the two. Andrews is technically married at this point, yet she crosses the barrier regardless in a very subtle attempt to seduce Warne. The Production Code was her saving grace, with script edits being made to have her character be rejected by Warne. Any intimacy between them at this time

would “morally taint their eventual union, for in crossing the barrier, Ellie shows a willingness to transgress the prohibition on adultery.”<sup>39</sup> Warne, as a man, is the voice of reason in this situation and sends her back to her side of the wall. Rosen claims he is the “fortress of strength, charm and romance fighting her infantilism.”<sup>40</sup> This sexual



Figure 3. Gable and a covered-up Colbert on opposites sides of “The Walls of Jericho”

advance made by Andrews is only acceptable because she is young and wild at this point and the film eventually transforms her into a mature, demure woman seeking a traditional and appropriate love story.

<sup>37</sup> Cavell 171.

<sup>38</sup> Gottlieb 134.

<sup>39</sup> Wartenberg, Thomas E. “It Happened One Night: An Education in Humility.” *Unlikely Couples: Movie Romance as Social Criticism*. 1999. 62.

<sup>40</sup> Rosen 169.

The remainder of the film is remarkably chaste, showing that as Andrews learns how to behave maturely on the road she tones down her sexuality. Her sexual naïveté is emphasized through the second half of the film. Colbert Biographer, Bernard Dick, notes that throughout the film Andrews makes it clear that she is a “novice when it comes to sex on the run.”<sup>41</sup> She is portrayed as a very innocent girl who has had no contact with sex whatsoever so that her sexual actions are shown to be from innocence as opposed to experience. The couple remains especially prudent with one another, not even kissing in the hay fields at night when the audience desperately desires it. The repressed sexual tension between these characters drives the film, creating what Dick describes as “undercurrents of desire that kept circulating.”<sup>42</sup> The romance of the films keeps the audience interested but in true Production Code fashion, no satisfaction is given until after a wedding. Warne and Andrews marry and give the audience a “fairytale ending.”<sup>43</sup> At this point, the “Walls of Jericho” come down and the characters are free to embrace each other (minimally on camera of course.) The growth and trajectory of Andrews’s character can be traced as a progression away from attempts at sexuality and towards prudence. Because a sexual relationship between the two was postponed until this marriage, morals of purity have been instilled to both Andrews and the audience.

The 1930s represented a sharp turn in the depiction of female sexuality on film. Female characters that expressed their sexuality were condemned for being immoral and unladylike. These characters were shunned from mainstream society according to the rules of the Production Code in 1934. Prior to this, female characters had expressed the true nature of their sexuality and autonomy on screen. The conservative morals of the Depression and the Production Code eradicated these characters from Hollywood history and in their place left stereotypes that all

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<sup>41</sup> Dick 84.

<sup>42</sup> Dick 83.

<sup>43</sup> Dick 102.

future female roles would be forced to fulfill. Women on screen since the beginning of the Production Code followed antiquated standards about sexuality and what was acceptable. If a woman was open about her sexuality, she was punished in stories and never seen as a heroine. Only if a woman were reformed or consistently pure would she have a happy ending. These endings almost always contain a traditional marriage and enforce the “need for wives to obey husbands”<sup>44</sup> and women to obey men. The sexual repression of women on film reinforces the conservative need for the “acceptance of the authority of the male and a rejection of the women’s economic independence.”<sup>45</sup> This tone set in the 1930s would continue throughout films into the 1950s.

### Another Dumb Blonde? – Marilyn

#### Monroe in *The Seven Year Itch*

Marilyn Monroe and her voluptuous curves are synonymous with the sexy 1950s. Her iconic sexual nature was cemented and flaunted in *The Seven Year Itch* by director Billy Wilder in 1955. This film is centered on Monroe’s sexuality, but

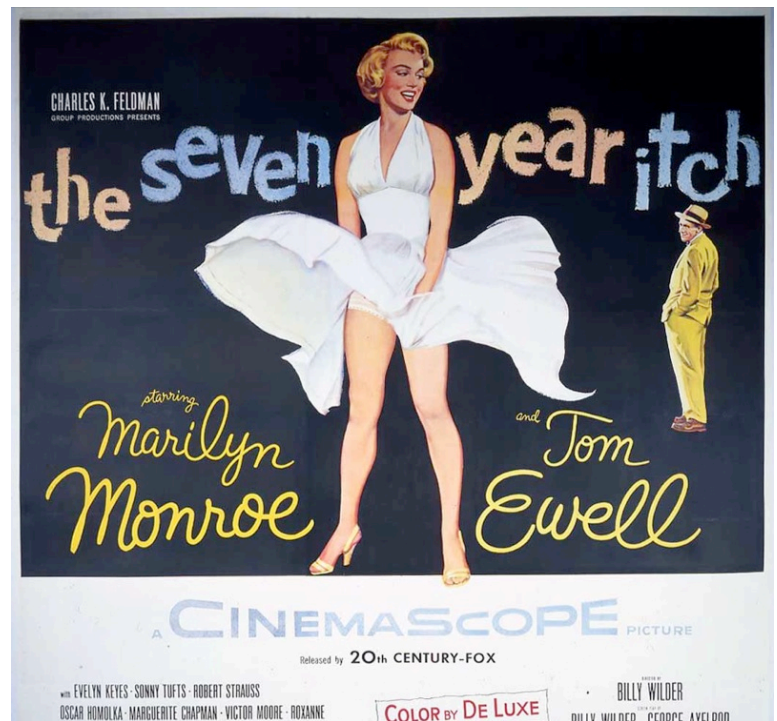


Figure 4. A poster for *The Seven Year Itch*. This poster depicts a stylized version of Monroe taken from the subway grate scene. The prominent position of Monroe’s sexually revealing dress over Ewell, the film’s main character, epitomizes the nature of this film as a façade for male sexual voyeurism.

a type of sexuality specific to this era. Innocent sexuality was the only kind of sexuality morally allowed by the Production Code. If a female character had an overtly sexual appearance, she had to be unaware of it or else she would be condemned as a sexual sinner. Meanwhile, the

<sup>44</sup> Gottlieb 133.

<sup>45</sup> Wartenburg 48.

overexposure of female sexuality was necessary in this era to keep the film industry alive over the growing alternative of television. Sexuality was a huge draw for moviegoers, especially for male audiences. The male voyeurism of Monroe in this film is its main purpose; to attract audiences with the promise of watching Monroe as a sexual object. Any semblance of a character that Monroe has, which is insultingly minimal in this film, is just to pass this overly sexual character by the moral standards of the Production Code. Female sexuality in this film and in this era was meant for the voyeurism and entertainment of men. The 1950s were a decade meant to bolster and cater to male interests, with this film fitting perfectly into the socially dominant gender roles.

The 1950s are known for being focused on female sexuality, through iconic pin-up girls and the famous physique of Marilyn Monroe. In the '50s, "Marilyn Monroe was a national institution, as American as baseball."<sup>46</sup> Her sexuality marked the decade and any investigation into female sexuality must take a serious look at her film characters and public image. *The Seven Year Itch* is a perfect example of one of the typical roles portrayed by Monroe: a variation of the popular blonde bombshell character. Film historian Jessica Jordan cites Monroe as possibly the "quintessential American sex goddess."<sup>47</sup> She defined female sexuality in the 1950s both on and off screen, yet the majority of her image came from the "grotesque parodies of femininity [she] often had to embody."<sup>48</sup> These ultra-feminine, hypersexual characters Monroe portrayed inspired others of the decade and her portrayal is a lasting testament to the reception of female sexuality in the 1950s.

Women were relegated back to the home after the war, as the 1950s became a time of prosperity for men and war veterans. Their wives were sent home to clean their Levittown

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<sup>46</sup> *Sex, Censorship, and the Silver Screen: The 1950s and '60s*. Films on Demand. 2008.

<sup>47</sup> Jordan 1.

<sup>48</sup> Lasalle 238.

kitchens in crinoline skirts. It became clear that “one of the few constants during the decade was the direction women were heading: backward.”<sup>49</sup> Women who had worked for the war effort were “pressured out of the employment market and into conjugal bliss”<sup>50</sup> to make room for men returning from war. Women who did attempt to maintain some economic independence or autonomy were quite limited in their options. Careers available to women were often limited to housewives or “positions as low-wage workers.”<sup>51</sup> This left a historic number of women at home all day with relatively little to do.

Women often did not enjoy this forced role of domesticity brought on in the 1950s and turned to mass consumption and popular culture as an escape. They grew frustrated or bored and “all that idleness and dissatisfaction had created a group particularly susceptible to the media.”<sup>52</sup> Advertisers for beauty products and fabulous clothing targeted women, and the female appearance became the main concern for women in the country. When pressure was on for young unmarried women to “catch their men”<sup>53</sup> soon, they did everything possible to draw attention to their beauty and feminine figures. As appearances became more popular, society became more interested in sex appeal. Women wanted to be beautiful sexual creatures and “beneath the ironclad girdles and calf-length skirts, beneath the pleated trousers and loose-fitting sport coats was an America that yearned to cast off the rigid sexual bonds of the early 1950s.”<sup>54</sup> Men echoed this desire for sexuality, many of whom had passed time in the trenches with posters of classic pin-up girls to keep them company. The goody two-shoes nature of married life in the suburbs wasn’t cutting it for men either. Sex was the new hot topic on everyone’s minds, but this

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<sup>49</sup> Rosen 245.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Jordan 14.

<sup>52</sup> Rosen 268.

<sup>53</sup> Rosen 246.

<sup>54</sup> Leff, Leonard J., and Jerold Simmons. *The Dame in the Kimono: Hollywood, Censorship, and the Production Code from the 1920s to the 1960s*. 1990. 206.

trend faced obstacles in conservative Hollywood.

Luckily for Hollywood at this time, the hardedge of the Production Code, Joseph Breen, stepped down in 1953, allowing for a sizzling decade of sex and fantasy in film. The Production Code was still in effect but it was less enforced; now there was room for experimentation. The mid and late 1950s fell under “a new standard of motion picture morality.”<sup>55</sup> Sex became more popular culturally and it was during a rather unsteady time in the motion picture industry.

With the onset of television, fewer and fewer people headed to the cinemas. The crisis in Hollywood became how to attract people back to the theatre. “Something was needed to lure the public out of its living room. Cinerama, CinemaScope, 3D, even Smell-O-Vision were tried.”<sup>56</sup> These tactics were short-lived. Hollywood came to realization that nothing worked so well to bring audiences in as sex.

Hollywood gave the public the sex it desired in their increasingly dull cookie-cutter lifestyles in droves. Rosen observes that “sex appeal as sold by the movies caught on with revolutionary and brutal rapidity.”<sup>57</sup> Sex came in the visual physical form of “enormous white breasts peering from daring décolletage, breathy little-girl voices, and vacant stares.”<sup>58</sup> Even though the real sexiness of screen bombshells was running rampant, the Production Code still had marginal control over the industry, especially in controlling the sexual themes of films. One film that clashed with the Production Code over sexual themes was 1953’s *From Here to Eternity*. The film takes place in World War II, Hawaii and deals with a couple’s affair drenched in infidelity. The Production Code issued a statement regarding the film, claiming: “We feel the adulterous

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<sup>55</sup> *The Silver Screen: The 1950s and ‘60s*.

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Rosen 269.

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*

relationship is handled without any recognition of its immorality.”<sup>59</sup> If a film were going to deal with such risqué themes, there needed to be punishment or guilt. This thematic sexual control was the major force of the Production Code in the 1950s as walking sexpots grew to be the most common persona on the silver screen.

Into this sexy scheme was exactly where Marilyn Monroe made a name for herself. It was becoming clear that the 1950s were “the era of the sex symbol” with Marilyn Monroe being “the very definition of the term.”<sup>60</sup> Her dyed blonde hair and curves alone sent cinema attendance through the roof into a new era of motion picture sexiness and success.

Many of Monroe’s characters are indistinguishable from one another because she became typecast in the image of the “delicious dumb blonde.”<sup>61</sup> *The Seven Year Itch* is no exception, as Monroe is depicted similarly as is in her other films, with “long, shapely legs...fitting or revealing costumes, usually composed of long, white, flowing satin or diaphanous silk gowns.”<sup>62</sup> Monroe’s sexuality could easily be seen as too provocative (she posed nude for Playboy twice,) and so to keep her in the favor of the Production Code and morally conscious moviegoers, her sexuality needed to seem accidental and sweet. Monroe became the “sweet angel of sex”<sup>63</sup> in American cinema. The concept of Monroe was that she couldn’t help that she was born so sexual. Monroe was a “wholesome, erotic, little girl lost in a woman’s body.”<sup>64</sup> The naiveté of her characters made her a sex object to viewers and an easily manipulated sex puppet to production companies and the men in her personal life.

In *The Seven Year Itch*, Monroe reprises this sex angel stereotype in a role that waters down

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<sup>59</sup> *The Silver Screen: The 1950s and ‘60s*.

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Rosen 271.

<sup>62</sup> Jordan 3.

<sup>63</sup> Harvey, James. "Marilyn Reconsidered." *The Threepenny Review*. 1994. 36.

<sup>64</sup> *The Silver Screen: The 1950s and ‘60s*.



her character to the point of becoming just an object for sexual fantasy with no narrative whatsoever. This film, based on a “sizzling sex farce”<sup>65</sup> of a play, was brought to the screen almost specifically for Monroe. The plot is based around a man named Richard Sherman, played by Tom Ewell, who is living in an apartment in the city for the summer while his wife and son are on vacation. The title refers to Sherman’s urge to have an affair after seven years of marriage. Monroe is the girl who lives upstairs from Sherman who doesn’t have air conditioning and is in perpetual summer heat. She is the sexual fantasy object for Sherman, known only as “the Girl” for the entirety of the film.

This lack of name and narrative make Monroe’s character a type or a sexual object as opposed to a real woman. Her character “has practically no identity, neither a history it seems, nor a personal life.”<sup>66</sup> She is not supposed to be a real person, only the embodiment of sexual fantasy. This type of character greatly appealed to the voyeuristic audience; reviews called her “baby-dollish as the dumb-but-sweet number upstairs.”<sup>67</sup> The lack of realistic characteristics in *The Girl* takes this character further than Monroe’s other characters have gone in creating an empty shell of a sexual body. The character may have been “Monroe’s most insulting role yet. And it was her biggest hit.”<sup>68</sup> The audience loved this soulless sex body. Her role as a sex object according to Rosen was a “parody of [a] woman’s body as isolated from her mind, emotion, soul and all other functions that would make her truly human and desirable.”<sup>69</sup> This persona pervaded not just Monroe’s on screen characters, but her national public image.

Monroe’s character in this film is clearly a vehicle for the sexuality of both the main character’s fantasies as well as the audience’s voyeurism. The Girl’s lack of personality makes

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<sup>65</sup> Phillips, Gene D. *Some like It Wilder: The Life and Controversial Films of Billy Wilder*. 2010. 174.

<sup>66</sup> Harvey 36.

<sup>67</sup> Variety Staff. “The Seven Year Itch.” Rev. of *The Seven Year Itch*. *Variety*. 1954.

<sup>68</sup> Harvey 36.

<sup>69</sup> Rosen 270.

her just “a fantasy object, both in [Sherman’s] head and in the film.”<sup>70</sup> The movie revolves around her oozing sex appeal; reviews declared that she is so sexual she even “keeps her underwear in the Frigidaire!”<sup>71</sup> Wendy Lesser, in her history of Marilyn Monroe under the direction of Billy Wilder, describes Monroe’s sexuality in this film as being targeted towards the viewers as a sexual display for the eager male audience.<sup>72</sup> The film is based on Sherman’s attraction to *The Girl* and his voyeurism of her sexual habits, but probably a more important element is the audience’s voyeurism of Monroe’s on screen sexuality. The character is given the task of enticing both her on screen interest as well as each individual man in the audience. Yet Monroe is unattainable to the audience, just as *The Girl* is to Sherman; she is a “nameless ethereal goddess who seems just beyond his reach.”<sup>73</sup> This sexual voyeurism is what made the film appeal to audiences and the limited depth of Monroe’s character strongly indicated that this voyeurism was her sole purpose.

Yet this blatant exposure of sexuality, which hints at adultery between the two main characters, however, should have been considered too scandalous for the Production Code. How was the blatant sexual nature of Monroe’s *Girl* accepted without her character being condemned as a sinful vixen? The innocence of the sexpot character of the 1950s was its saving grace. Monroe’s *Girl* is permitted to be sexual because she is unaware of her sexuality. She was born with her sexuality and like a similar Jayne Mansfield film of the era chants “*The Girl Can’t Help It.*” *The Girl* does not flaunt her sexuality, she remains innocent and her sexuality is often accidental. This is true for many of Monroe’s characters. June Sochen, film historian, calls her

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<sup>70</sup> Harvey 36.

<sup>71</sup> Phillips 164.

<sup>72</sup> Lesser, Wendy. “The Wilder Marilyn.” *The Threepenny Review*. 1989. 33.

<sup>73</sup> Phillips 166.

the “virgin-temptress of American movies.”<sup>74</sup> Monroe’s characters were consistently the epitome of “hyper-feminine blonde sexuality couched in a sweet innocence.”<sup>75</sup> Her character’s sexuality became innocent because of her unawareness of it. The Girl is consistently shown to be in “bewilderment at her own attractiveness.”<sup>76</sup> She never uses her sexuality to her advantage because she is so unaware of it. If The Girl was aware of her sexuality and took advantage of it, she would be considered a sinner or a temptress and would be condemned by the Production Code. James Harvey, a biographer of Monroe, sees her as “sex without shadows – the antithesis of the noir heroines.”<sup>77</sup> The Girl is all smiles and laughs as she exudes sexuality, “like a Disney version of a sex goddess.”<sup>78</sup> Her naiveté about her sexuality is what keeps her from being denounced by the Production Code.

This oblivious sexual nature leads us to the film’s iconic scene. The scene is of Monroe standing above a subway grate, her white dress billowing up around her in the steam. This scene was originally shot on location in New York in the middle of the night. But such a crowd had gathered to witness Monroe that the footage was unusable and the scene had to be reshot at the studio in Hollywood. The paparazzi photo from this on location shoot (Figure 5) is the iconic shot that this project will analyze. The scene in the film is of The Girl walking along the New York sidewalk when she “finds the heat too much for her.”<sup>79</sup> She decides to stand above a subway grate and a gush of air “sends the Girl’s skirt fluttering to reveal her gorgeous legs.”<sup>80</sup> A pure accident, this highly sexual image is only excused because it is such. After the Girl realizes what is going on, “laughingly, she struggles – but not too hard, to keep it down as Richard looks

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<sup>74</sup> Sochen, June. “Mildred Pierce and Women in Film.” *American Quarterly*. 1978. 15.

<sup>75</sup> Jordan 157.

<sup>76</sup> Sochen 15.

<sup>77</sup> Harvey 36.

<sup>78</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> Phillips 168.

<sup>80</sup> *ibid.*

on, his mouth hanging open like a hound dog's."<sup>81</sup> She revels in this sexual act without being aware of its sexuality.

Visually, this shot shows the innocence and simultaneous sexuality of *The Girl*. Monroe is wearing a white dress to emphasize her purity and lack of a sexual intent. This dress came from Dior's *Carolle Line* and was meant to resemble "the petals of a flower, typically forming a whorl enclosing [appropriately] the sexual organs."<sup>82</sup> This mirrors the innocence and femininity of Monroe's sexual act. Her figure is hunched together in reaction to the gust of wind, leaving her arms, chest, face, waist and dress all clustered almost into a blob. Had the bottom half of this picture been cropped out, it would hardly be considered



*Figure 5.* A paparazzi photograph taken from the on location subway grate shoot. This shot was considered too sexual for the film. Monroe's acknowledgment and enjoyment of male voyeurism at her sexual pose was inappropriate for the character. This image was instead used as promotional purposes, drawing audiences to Monroe's famed sexuality.

attractive. Yet below her dress, Monroe's legs are perfectly exposed with contours highlighted by the light coming in from the left. Much more of her leg is shown than was traditionally allowed to be on film. This accidental exposure of her sexual nature allows *The Girl* to be characterized as innocent. Her sexuality is something she is unaware of; any revealing of it is purely an accident.

<sup>81</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> Smith 216.

As mentioned, this image was not the one included in the film because of the sexual nature surrounding the shoot and the apparent joy at this male voyeurism by Monroe. The paparazzi photo from the on location filming was used for promotion of the film, but the footage in the film (Figure 6) is greatly different. The promotional billboards of this image “gave the film a frisson of explicit sexuality that was beyond the reach of the Hayes Office,”<sup>83</sup> and assured prospective audiences that the film was indeed about sex with Marilyn Monroe. Wilder used an alternative shot in the film to create the distinction between Monroe’s sexuality in the public’s image and



Figure 6. Actual footage from *The Seven Year Itch* featuring only the lower half of Monroe’s body, visually dissociating the character from this sexually suggestive act.

The Girl on film, in order to pass Production Code standards. By using a different shot that the viewing audience would be unfamiliar with, “the overtly sexual character of the location shots is neutralized.”<sup>84</sup> To use this

scene would have been too sexual for both the audience and the character of The Girl.

The film instead chose to include only a shot of her legs from her waist down. Smith Graham in his analysis of this scene believes that this creates the effect that Monroe’s “legs...are detached from her person and become abstracted and disembodied.”<sup>85</sup> The sexuality that comes with exposing so much leg (and even a hint of underwear) would compromise the innocence of The Girl’s character. By creating a visual distinction between the sexual act and the character, she is less directly attached to its sexual nature. This shot appeased the Production Code and

<sup>83</sup> Smith 218.

<sup>84</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> *ibid.*

what they valued as being morally appropriate for sexuality in female characters, but it is the more sexual promotional image that the film and Monroe are remembered for.

To anyone who sees the film or any reference to the image, the shot of Monroe with her skirt blown up is familiar and iconic. The image has acquired such cultural solubility due to multiple recreations in films and other popular culture in the decades since its inception. Films, television, art and commercial products have recreated this image extensively, yet it is “noteworthy that all these films recall the billboard images and posters for *The Seven Year Itch* rather than the film itself.”<sup>86</sup> The actual scene from the film is never referenced and frankly, forgotten in the American memory. The film and the story are completely lost in history, secondary to the story of Monroe and her sexuality. The sexuality of the promotional image and the filming itself have come to be iconic of Monroe rather than the film. Her sexuality became known nationwide after this film and iconic still. It was clearly too risqué for the film, and even while filming on location “Monroe’s abandon and the public’s voyeurism both overstepped contemporary standards of decorum.”<sup>87</sup> This sexual image bled into Monroe’s private life and “may also have contributed to the breakdown of [her] marriage [with] Joe DiMaggio.”<sup>88</sup> The iconic nature of this image is more focused and rooted in the sexuality of Monroe as a celebrity and less about the film. This legacy reveals what the films producers already knew, that the sexual nature of the film was the main purpose for its creation. Monroe’s character was only developed enough to make her sexuality permissible to the Production Code.

The reality of this film is that its sole purpose was to emphasize and exhibit Monroe’s sexuality. The innocence of her character was just added to meet the approval of the Production Code. This film was primarily an opportunity for male voyeurism. The sexuality of women was

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<sup>86</sup> Smith 220.

<sup>87</sup> Smith 218.

<sup>88</sup> *ibid.*

not meant to be liberating for women but instead to be about male pleasure. The theme of sexuality in the decade was the “fifties fiction, the lie that a woman has no sexual needs, that she is there to cater to, or enhance, a man’s needs.”<sup>89</sup> The voyeurism of Monroe’s sexuality from both the audience and Sherman’s character is what is remembered and emphasized in this film. The only way this sexuality and character were acceptable under the standards of the Production Code was because the Girl’s sexuality remained an “entirely innocent provocativeness.”<sup>90</sup> The film also had to be dramatically altered from its original stage plot to meet the approval of the Production Code. Since “adultery must never be the subject of comedy or laughter,”<sup>91</sup> according to the Code, these parts had to be removed. Reviews commented on this variation in adaptation, noting that “the screen adaptation concerns only the fantasies, and omits the acts, of the summer bachelor, who remains totally, if unbelievably, chaste. Morality wins if honesty loses.”<sup>92</sup> The chaste nature of these characters is what saves this film from being seen by the Production Code for what it was, an opportunity for corporate profit and male voyeurism of the iconic feminine sexuality of Marilyn Monroe.

### **Sexual Awakenings (or Lack Thereof) – Mrs. Robinson in *The Graduate***

*The Graduate* is a Hollywood film done in 1967 by director Mike Nichols. It is iconic of its era and was contemporarily called “the first movie about today’s youth to tell it like it is.”<sup>93</sup> The film shows the backwards norms of the post-war era for the modern youth of the late 1960s. Yet the most iconic figure from this film is not Benjamin, the troubled youth protagonist, but Mrs. Robinson, an older temptress trying to subvert social norms in her own way. Mrs. Robinson sees the sexual social conventions, which keep her in an unhappy marriage, and takes her sexual

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<sup>89</sup> McCreadie, Marsha. *Women on Film: The Critical Eye*. 1983. 55.

<sup>90</sup> Harvey 36.

<sup>91</sup> McNally, Karen. *Billy Wilder, Movie-maker: Critical Essays on the Films*. 2011. 153.

<sup>92</sup> Variety. The Seven Year Itch.

<sup>93</sup> Farber, Stephen, and Estelle Changas. "The Graduate." Rev. of *The Graduate*. *Film Quarterly*. 1968. 37.

pleasure into her own hands. Her seduction of Benjamin shows her as powerful and forthright about her own happiness. Yet the film quickly turns on her and casts her as villain. Mrs. Robinson's active pleasure seeking and sexual manipulation is condemned because it competes with male control of female sexuality. Because of her out of control sexual urges, Mrs. Robinson becomes an obstacle to Benjamin and her daughter, Elaine's, conventional love affair. The film instead focuses on Benjamin's coming of age and breaking out of the harpy clutches of Mrs. Robinson's lust. The imagery of the film depicts this as such, with Mrs. Robinson's legs being used to illustrate her sexual will and Benjamin's eventual overcoming of this immoral tryst

(Figure 7.) The progressive era of the 1960s hangs Mrs. Robinson out to dry instead of allowing her to be a relatable dynamic character.

The 1960s can easily be identified as the era of sexual liberation and growing power for women. The sexual revolution and the invention of birth control led women to seek their own sexual pleasure and free lifestyle without having to conform to the conservative social norms

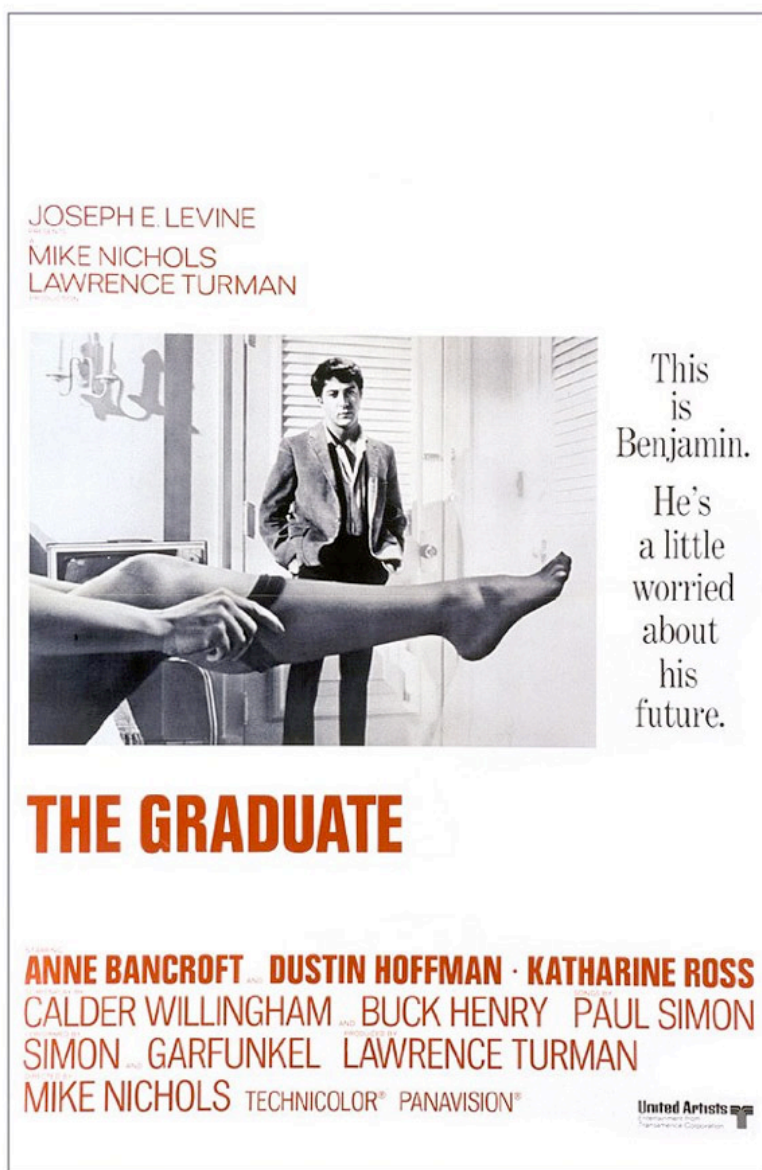


Figure 7. A poster for *The Graduate*, showing one of its iconic scenes between Benjamin and Mrs. Robinson. The poster shows the sexual relationship between the characters as well as hints at male voyeurism. Here the film is shown as focused on sex and the relegation of Mrs. Robinson to a sexual object.



from previous decades. This allowed for a completely new sexual lifestyle for women, an alternative to marrying young and living a cookie cutter suburban lifestyle. The sexual revolution also brought to light the concept “that women might enjoy sex themselves.”<sup>94</sup> Feminism “began to transform sex from sin to liberation,”<sup>95</sup> and weakened the social taboo that surrounded female sexuality. Instead these changes in women’s control over their sexuality signaled a big step in the progression of women’s equality. This era of female liberation spilled over into popular culture and media, creating an era of unprecedented exhibitionism and sexual promiscuity on film. Society demanded change and progress, especially for women and minorities. *The Graduate* and the character of Mrs. Robinson were of the first embodiments of this new radical liberal movement and sexual revolution.

Film censorship in this period was dramatically different than in previous eras. The National Legion of Decency, a Christian organization that approved films based on moral content, was outdated and was eventually forced to close its doors. In the absence of the Legion to enforce morality on films, the Production Code was the only remaining censorship for Hollywood films. The Production Code itself, without Joseph Breen, had been established in 1934 and was widely considered to need updating. On September 20, 1966, a new Production Code was developed under Jack Valenti that was “inspired by the principles of self-discipline and creative discretion.”<sup>96</sup> Under these loose provisions, official censorship was almost eradicated. Avant-garde and foreign films began to push the envelope of sex and nudity and “increasingly bold filmmakers brought to America's movie theaters an uninhibited era of motion picture sexuality.”<sup>97</sup> The sex now available to the public in the cinema created the first prosperous film

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<sup>94</sup> Rosen 322.

<sup>95</sup> Mellencamp 2.

<sup>96</sup> *Sex, Censorship, and the Silver Screen: The Late 1960s to the '90s. Films on Demand.* 2008.

<sup>97</sup> *ibid.*

era since 1946. Films became dedicated to being as sexy as possible and a shocking majority of films in the time period were marked for “mature audiences.”

Hollywood films however, severely lagged behind these more independent films promoting the sexual revolution in its true themes. When Hollywood finally started to relate to the sexually liberated woman of the era, it was “with embarrassing limitations.”<sup>98</sup> These sexual women were portrayed as “sex objects, [and] in the industry’s puritanical view, [they] could not really be free. And hardly human.”<sup>99</sup> While script editing, scene cutting and kiss timing might have been censorship tools of the past, a strong sense of moral sexuality was still persistent in Hollywood.

*The Graduate* arrived in 1967 on the cusp of this new era of sexual liberation and on screen promiscuity. The baby boomers were coming of age and realizing the simple, wholesome lives their parents had lived felt confining instead of liberating. The youth of the nation felt “victimized by all of those nasty, aging country clubbers,”<sup>100</sup> and desperately sought rebellion. *The Graduate* came to define the struggles of this generation and it was the ultimate “depiction of aimless youths” and “a generation at odds with the established view of the world.”<sup>101</sup> The film conflicted with standard Hollywood stories and today can still be seen as radical in its content. *The Graduate’s* iconic influence is omnipresent in popular culture. The character of Mrs. Robinson, portrayed by Anne Bancroft, has become synonymous with older sexual women and inspired copycats as notable as Stiffler’s Mom in 1999’s *American Pie*. The soundtrack of the film by Simon and Garfunkel is equally as iconic as the film, capturing the troubling mindset of such a transitional era.

This film is the story of a young man, Benjamin, played by Dustin Hoffman, and his return

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<sup>98</sup> Rosen 322.

<sup>99</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> Farber, Changas. 38.

<sup>101</sup> *The Silver Screen: Late 1960s to the ‘90s.*

home after graduating from college. He is troubled and unsure of what he is going to do with his future, but it is clear that he does not want to conform to the elite suburban lifestyle of his parents. The pressure to follow in their footsteps is obvious, as his parent's friend, Mr. Robinson, tries to give him sure business advice: "Plastics" is all he says. Benjamin is reluctant to act on this advice or make any kind of firm commitment. He soon falls into a sexual affair with his parent's friend, Mrs. Robinson. The sexual awakening of Benjamin in this affair is the film's major narrative and legacy. This young "male's search for sexual freedom and identity become a dominant theme with Mrs. Robinson as the classic Eve initiating Benjamin – Adam into the joys of sex in *The Graduate*."<sup>102</sup> His sexual awakening turns into a full-on maturing process, with Benjamin beginning to take control over his life and power in his affair with Mrs. Robinson. Benjamin chooses to end this affair and instead falls in love with Mrs. Robinson's daughter, Elaine. Mrs. Robinson strongly disapproves of the match and in a defiant and rebellious action, Benjamin and Elaine run away together.

The legacy of the film is undeniable and it is most remembered for two distinct iconic scenes featuring Mrs. Robinson's legs that illustrate the relationship and its evolution between Benjamin and Mrs. Robinson. The first shot in which we see Mrs. Robinson's legs (Figure 8) is in her sunroom after a party at the Braddock's, where she establishes her initial sexual dominance over Benjamin. It is clear from the context that this move by Mrs. Robinson is intended to seduce Benjamin. The exact moment of this shot is when Benjamin himself utters the line "Mrs. Robinson, you're trying to seduce me. Aren't you?" Mrs. Robinson "takes calm delight in exposing her legs, while he ejaculates moral misgivings"<sup>103</sup> Earlier in the scene the audience is already invited to see a "panorama of Mrs. Robinson's thighs while [Benjamin is] accusing her

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<sup>102</sup> Sochen 16.

<sup>103</sup> Farber, Changas 38.



*Figure 8.* Mrs. Robinson first privately converses with Ben and he accuses her of trying to seduce him. Benjamin is visually trapped within the triangle of Mrs. Robinson's sexual desires.

of 'opening up' about her 'private life.'"<sup>104</sup> These puns and innuendos add to the bluntness of this seduction. Mrs. Robinson's legs represent to Benjamin and the audience her sexuality and power. In the shot in question, Benjamin's entire figure is miniscule beneath the large foreground frame of Mrs. Robinson's leg. Benjamin is in the background while Mrs. Robinson's leg takes up nearly 60% of the frame. This overpowering shot of Benjamin shows his subordinate status to Mrs. Robinson, and because it is her sexual leg used to stifle him, his subordinate sexual nature. Whitehead illustrates that the "visual dominance" of Mrs. Robinson in this scene parallels her real world power over him, as she is physically and visually "trapping Benjamin in a pyramid of illicit desire."<sup>105</sup>

This first scene establishes the power relationship and the sexual dominance of Mrs. Robinson over Benjamin. Mrs. Robinson's legs are an "exercise of power"<sup>106</sup> and an active extension of her sexuality. Her power over Benjamin physically is obvious as she forces him through doors and gives him drinks without asking. Through these actions she establishes control

<sup>104</sup> Whitehead 88.

<sup>105</sup> Whitehead 78.

<sup>106</sup> Whitehead 84.

over Benjamin and he submits to her will. Her aggressive power becomes more prominent when she throws his keys into the fish tank in an aggressively physical act. However, she is “arguably at her most lethal as she takes Benjamin’s virginity.”<sup>107</sup> This aggressive sexual power forces him into a submissive role, one he is accustomed to. “All this feminine power serves to project Benjamin’s continued infantilism,”<sup>108</sup> immaturity and subordination.

Mrs. Robinson’s power over Benjamin is just not in a physical sexual form, but also in a maternal elder form. He acts as “a young man [who] must politely obey his elders.”<sup>109</sup> Benjamin never calls Mrs. Robinson by her first name, instead only referring to her by her married name as one of his parent’s friends. By only referring to her as a superior with a title, Benjamin relinquishes any power or equality he might be able to gain from this sexual relationship. Benjamin not only sees Mrs. Robinson as his parent’s friend, but as essentially a second mother. The beginning of Benjamin’s relationship with Mrs. Robinson is considered by Whitehead as “the sexualized return to the mother.”<sup>110</sup> Benjamin has just been released into the real world with no direction, and so he returns to his childhood home. Here, in his boyhood bedroom, is where the first interaction between these two characters takes place. Mr. Robinson thinks of him “as though you were my own son.”<sup>111</sup> Benjamin is a child, innocent and immature to Mrs. Robinson’s maternal dominating character.

Over the course of this film, however, we see a transition in this relationship, with Benjamin assuming power over Mrs. Robinson. This shift between the characters is depicted in the second scene that emphasizes Mrs. Robinson’s legs (Figure 9.) This scene is reused as the cover and poster image for the film and has its own iconic legacy. The visual dominance of Mrs.

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<sup>107</sup> Whitehead 110.

<sup>108</sup> Whitehead 79.

<sup>109</sup> Whitehead 89.

<sup>110</sup> Whitehead 86.

<sup>111</sup> *ibid.*



*Figure 9.* Benjamin severs his relationship with Mrs. Robinson in this scene and his visual dominance over her sexualized leg establishes the transition in power in this relationship.

Robinson's legs is repeated "after [her and Benjamin's] failed conversation [with her legs] serving as a barrier in their room at the Taft Hotel, as she resignedly pulls on her stockings."<sup>112</sup> This scene, like the first one, features Mrs. Robinson's legs and excludes the rest of her body. Benjamin has a more prominent position in this shot; he takes up nearly as much of the frame as Mrs. Robinson's legs. This reflects a transition within Benjamin as well as his growing power in this relationship. The leg still shows Mrs. Robinson's own sexual power as she visual separates herself from Benjamin in an emotionally distancing action. But Benjamin now stands above her exposed leg. He is not trapped within the sexual power of Mrs. Robinson and is capable of making his own decisions about their affair and his maturing life.

The transition between these two characters depicted in the second leg shot occurs in the scene that directly precedes it. Benjamin attempts to have a deep conversation with Mrs. Robinson, asking her to reveal personal information about herself. She reveals that in college she

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<sup>112</sup> Whitehead 78.

was an art major and in her attitude about this we are privy to a different side of Mrs. Robinson we have yet to see. The audience gets a look into her “bitterness, her deep pool of sadness”<sup>113</sup> and sees that she is truly unhappy in how her life has panned out. But instead of Benjamin relating to Mrs. Robinson or opening up about himself, he rejects her. His abandonment of their relationship in this scene is a “pretty ugly, unfeeling response,”<sup>114</sup> while Mrs. Robinson is exposed and vulnerable.

This scene represents a complete shift in the treatment of these characters, especially Mrs. Robinson. There is a “sudden presentation of Mrs. Robinson as a ‘villainess’ midway through the film and after the seduction of Benjamin has taken place.”<sup>115</sup> This characterization is unfounded. This shift in character has been critiqued by Stephen Farber and Estelle Chngas in their review of the film as ridiculous, arguing that Nichols “treats her characterization with no respect; after this scene he turns her into a hideous witch, an evil Furie maniacally insisting on keeping Ben and her daughter apart.”<sup>116</sup> Nothing in this scene or in the beginning of the film constitutes such a malicious shift in character. The film is meant to be groundbreaking and present alternatives to social conceptions of sexuality. By turning on Mrs. Robinson however, the film is instead conforming to negative portrayals of sexual women. The unfounded transition of this radically new film character to an archetype of evil temptress is seen as one of the major faults of the film.

To some in the era of the 1960s, a time of sexual freedom and rebellion, Mrs. Robinson has been considered a role model. It is obvious that “Mrs. Robinson is cool and calculating, seeking sex for power instead of love.”<sup>117</sup> The motives of her sexuality are clear and to many they are

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<sup>113</sup> Kashner, Sam. "Here's To You, Mr. Nichols: The Making Of The Graduate." *Vanity Fair*. 2008.

<sup>114</sup> Farber, Chngas. 39.

<sup>115</sup> McCreadie 73.

<sup>116</sup> Farber, Chngas. 39.

<sup>117</sup> Neumann, Rebecca. "Predator, Prisoner, and Role Model: The Evolving Figure of Mrs. Robinson." *Berkeley Undergraduate Journal*. 2011. 3.

interpreted quite positively. She is a woman “at once supremely confident of her sexual power and mercilessly casual in the face of Ben’s adolescent fear of her.”<sup>118</sup> Sex is effortless and powerful for Mrs. Robinson; she uses it to fulfill her needs. Mrs. Robinson also is highly regarded for her accurate portrayal of serious feminist issues of the era. She “resents that her husband possesses the freedom and power she craves solely by virtue of his gender.”<sup>119</sup> Mrs. Robinson is aware of this social injustice and acts against it. She desires to break with and challenge social conventions that keep her in place. Her sexual freedom and affair with Benjamin are how Mrs. Robinson takes control of her own body, needs and situation. It can even be said that she is the origin of today’s “cougar” persona and she acted as a role model for future women who take control of their sexual pleasure. Mrs. Robinson’s powerful actions and the realistic way she approached feminist issues of the time have made her a groundbreaking character for many looking to advance the sexual liberation of women.

A greater consensus however, is that Mrs. Robinson is condemned in the film for her sexuality, much in the same way it would have been under the Production Code of years past. Mrs. Robinson is considered to be wicked for her sexual advances.<sup>120</sup> Her sexuality is seen as sinful and aggressive. Whitehead believes that this sexual villainy has prompted many viewers to “condemn [Mrs. Robinson] for her audacity.”<sup>121</sup> Critics have even gone so far as to claim she “carries the banner of womanhood to the nearest mudhole.”<sup>122</sup> A distinct dichotomy is created between Benjamin and Mrs. Robinson based on their sexual nature. “Mrs. Robinson is repulsive because she is sexual and Benjamin loveable because he is not.”<sup>123</sup> Benjamin is strongly seen as

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<sup>118</sup> Farber, Changas. 38.

<sup>119</sup> Neumann 4.

<sup>120</sup> Farber, Changas. 38.

<sup>121</sup> Whitehead 91.

<sup>122</sup> Whitehead 92.

<sup>123</sup> Farber, Changas. 38.



being morally superior to the sexual acts of Mrs. Robinson, even though they were consensual. Benjamin is characterized to viewers as having been reluctant in this affair and forced by Mrs. Robinson. Her sexuality is actively evil and manipulative, but Benjamin's is excusable. "What seems an astonishing blindness to Mrs. Robinson's very real sexiness is to be taken as a moral victory"<sup>124</sup> for Benjamin. The distinction is clear: Mrs. Robinson's sexual desires are characterized by sin but Benjamin's lack of sexual desire makes him the moral holdout to these sexual advances.

Like many sexual female characters on film before her, Mrs. Robinson is a sexual object of male voyeurism. Her sexuality is not even her own, but used to satisfy the male audience and Benjamin. The concept of an older sexual woman like Mrs. Robinson is "a young man's deliciously provocative sexual fantasy come to life,"<sup>125</sup> both in the film and for much of the audience. Her sexuality becomes her defining characteristic. This is emphasized in the iconic shots of Mrs. Robinson, which feature only her legs, none of the rest of her body. Benjamin and the audience consider Mrs. Robinson a pair of legs in these scenes and think of her only in terms of a sexual relationship. Her sexual power is robbed from her by this characterization as only a sexual object and a pair of legs.

While Mrs. Robinson is supposed to be a modern and revolutionary character for women, she is not socially allowed to be sexually liberated and accepted for it. Her sexual prowess and openness are condemned on film and by viewers. She becomes the evil obstacle to Benjamin and Elaine's love story. The dynamism of her character and true depth are too much for the audience and Benjamin to process. After Mrs. Robinson reveals personal details, her character becomes hollowed out. This is because female roles are meant to be static and one-dimensional. The easy

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<sup>124</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> *ibid.*

categorization of women based on sex is a classic Hollywood convention. The fact that Mrs. Robinson's sexuality is used for her own pleasure, for power, and to subordinate and infantilize Benjamin is too multi-faceted and aggressive to be acceptable.

Yet the Production Code of archaic moral values was gone, no one was imposing these rigid moral standards on contemporary Hollywood. Society is supposedly progressing, especially for the lives of women, but this film shows that popular representations of women have not kept up with modern societal movements. Women on film were not meant to be radicals, but meant to entertain and conform to traditional standards to please audiences. These standards were that female sexuality was only meant to be the subject of male voyeurism and not used for female personal gain. Films needed to adhere to this basic, familiar, male-dominated structure that audiences could enjoy and relate to. The first half of *The Graduate* is rather radical and progressive, but the remainder of the film is really a traditional love story. The sex of the first half is contrasted with the moral purity of the second. In this way, the "movie is rather offensively prudish in splitting sex and love, implying that sexual relationships are sick and perverted, but that in a healthful Young Love relationship – why, sex is the furthest thing from the kids minds."<sup>126</sup> Mrs. Robinson's character, because she breaks from such standard societal norms, becomes a villain and an obstacle to this unoriginal Hollywood love story. No sexual liberation or awakening is happening in this film for women because it challenges the patriarchal society. Sexuality used for power by Mrs. Robinson is immoral and because of this she is stereotyped into a villain, just as Hollywood had made openly sexual women be for decades.

### **The Modern *Femme fatale* – *Basic Instinct***

*Basic Instinct*, the 1992 erotic thriller from director Paul Verhoeven reinvents the *femme fatale* as an archetype for sexual women. The main character, Catherine Tramell, is a suspect in a

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<sup>126</sup> Farber, Changas. 40.

murder investigation for which is it later revealed she is the perpetrator. This film is strongly rooted in a cultural fear in the 1990s of AIDS and casual sex by proxy. Tramell's character is shown to be not just a mysterious classical *femme fatale*, but also a modern vicious one. Tramell's first discretion is the fact that she openly utilizes her sexuality to gain power. This is clearly seen in the film's iconic scene in an interrogation room, where Tramell exposes her legs and flashes the room full of male detectives. She is highly aware of her sex appeal and the affect it has on voyeuristic males. For her brazen sexual nature and open

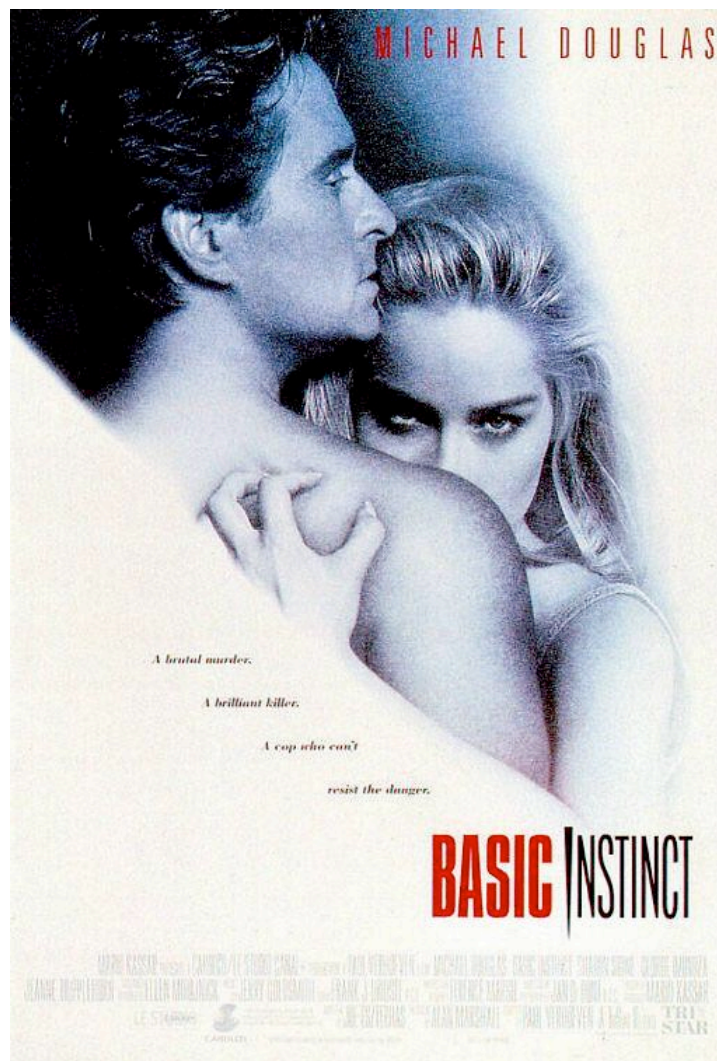


Figure 10. A promotional poster for *Basic Instinct*. Sharon Stone is the villain of this film as shown in the malicious nature of her hands and eyes reveals this. The dark insidious nature of her image cuts through a pristine white background, just as her homicidal nature destroys lives and traditional morals.

declaration as bisexual, she has been favored as a role model for post-feminists. They see her sexual dominance as progressive for the female cause. Yet in reality, Tramell a character is not accepted by society as she uses her sexuality for her own gain. She is aware that men are entranced by her and see her as a sexual object, and she subverts this to her own personal gain and to avoid detection. Yet she is a murderer and in this depiction, condemns both sexually liberated women and lesbians. The cover of this film (Figure 10) depicts Tramell of a sexually

subversive and maniacal woman. The modern era of the 1990s still holds to archaic conventions in this film that any woman who falls outside the traditional conservative norms of sexuality is dangerous and insane.

The 1990s were in many ways a modern era, but coming after the Reagan years, the 1990s were also dominated by conservative values. One thing had certainly changed since the radical spirit of the 1960s and '70s: the social perception of sex. The topic of sex had a strong presence in the culture of the 1990s, but not in a good way. The conservative backlash of the 1990s saw casual sex as negative and "the message was everywhere. Sex was no longer safe."<sup>127</sup> The danger of sex in popular culture was prominent and "the new mood favored cinema with a 'sex is dangerous' slant."<sup>128</sup> The popular sexual thriller films of the late '80s and early '90s were easily seen as "a thinly veiled metaphor of life in the age of AIDS."<sup>129</sup> Sex was dangerous and therefore popular media became more focused on abstinence. The 1980s had seen casual sexuality disappear from popular culture and "in its place came celibacy, phone sex, and Madonna."<sup>130</sup> Voyeurism replaced sexual promiscuity and with this, dangerous sex on film became a commodity. But how did censorship of the time reflect the new social fears of sex?

The 1990s saw no rigid standards of censorship. Instead, the modern day rating system measured film content and often created social controversy around films similar to those that had been condemned by the Production Code in the past. A recent change in this rating system was the creation of the NC-17 film instead of the X rating. X-rated films had come to be considered sex films, broaching on pornography. The change to an NC-17 rating was intended to encourage mature sexual films, but the transition between these two ratings was not enough to distinguish

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<sup>127</sup> *The Silver Screen: Late 1960s to the '90s*.

<sup>128</sup> Andrews, David. "Sex Is Dangerous, So Satisfy Your Wife: The Softcore Thriller in Its Contexts." *Cinema Journal*. 2006. 63.

<sup>129</sup> *The Silver Screen: Late 1960s to the '90s*.

<sup>130</sup> *ibid.*

them to the public. There was still strong backlash against NC-17 films with media refusing to promote these films and video stores boycotting them.<sup>131</sup> There was little way to get around the connotation of this rating as just gratuitous sex, as it had come to be in the 1970s with foreign avant-garde sex films and later, mainstream pornography.

The negative meaning behind the NC-17 rating “would come to a head over a movie that has since become synonymous with motion picture sexuality – *Basic Instinct*.”<sup>132</sup> *Basic Instinct* broached this line of making a mature film that was sexual but still based in a narrative structure. Rating it was complicated, and “the last thing the ratings board wanted to see was this movie”<sup>133</sup> because it challenged the social notions associated with the rating system. Upon first rating, *Basic Instinct* received an NC-17 rating which would prove difficult to market around. “Hollywood's bottom line has always been the box office, and the picture's Director, Paul Verhoeven, was forced to re-edit the thriller”<sup>134</sup> in order to draw audiences, promoters and profits. This type of censorship, self-censorship, promulgated the role of traditional values in an era that was supposedly free of Production Codes and forced script edits. The *Los Angeles Times* saw this and noted that “distributors are still scared to death that they can't market an adults only movie in the United States. And by refusing to try, they have simply replaced institutionalized censorship with an imaginary one of their own.”<sup>135</sup> Censorship as it had been known in the past was gone; instead a censorship coming from society and audiences themselves remained.

*Basic Instinct* is a controversial film that is a modern and erotic take on the classic film noir and *femme fatale*. The plot revolves around a sexual relationship between a sexually liberated female author, who is a suspect in a murder case, and the lead detective of the case. Eventually,

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<sup>131</sup> *The Silver Screen: Late 1960s to the '90s*.

<sup>132</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>134</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>135</sup> *ibid.*

the murderer in question is revealed to be the female protagonist, Catherine Tramell, portrayed by Sharon Stone. This film strongly deals with the forward sexuality of Tramell and her portrayal as a sexual object. The plot of the murder mystery is used only as a narrative device; the real central story is the featured sexual relationship and the portrayal of this sexual character.



*Figure 11.* Tramell clothed in white. She is clearly revealing as much of her body as possible to arouse her male voyeurs. The white would indicate that she is innocent of this crime but the ominous lighting hints that there is more to be revealed.

The most iconic scene of the film is near the beginning in which Tramell has been called in for questioning regarding the murder. This scene (Figure 11) occurs when Tramell is being interrogated by a group of male detectives and is the object of their voyeuristic stares. She is seated in a chair in the middle of the room, opposite all the male figures that are interrogating her. She has become the spotlight, the attention, and the object of desire. Her body takes up almost the entire frame. Her stark white apparel and her tan skin set her apart from the dark, cold background. She has refused to stop smoking in the interrogation room,

her first exercise of power. But moreover, her blatant use of sex appeal for power is clear in this shot. Almost half of her visible figure is her legs. They are crossed extremely high up to reveal the maximum amount of thigh. Also, by turning her lower body almost ninety degrees away from where she is facing, there is a larger amount of leg skin exposed. The short length of her

dress is particularly emphasized by this positioning. All of these measures together ensure that the maximum amount of leg can be seen in this shot. In this scene, Tramell's legs are her weapons. The fact that they are crossed shows that she is a lady, respectable and refined. Yet her genital flash when uncrossing her legs says that she is her own sexual woman and willing to break norms to get what she wants.

The lighting of the scene also plays a significant role in Tramell's characterization. Such a bright wash on her white coat emphasizes her immaculate cleanliness and purity, yet the grated light cover over the whole scene foreshadows that not everything is as it seems. These decisions indicate Tramell's true character and the eventual revelation that she is the murderer. This scene is at the beginning of the film however, and therefore is the ideal time to emphasize her most dominant trait: her sexuality. The featuring of her legs lets us know what kind of woman she is and it is this character element that is so iconic to the film.

This blatant display of sexuality by Tramell is used to gain power in the context of an audience of male-gazers. She is playing into the voyeurism and sexual desires of the men she encounters, particularly in this scene. She is "surrounded by the male gaze – a semicircle of policemen,"<sup>136</sup> in this interrogation room and plays this situation to her sexual advantage. By using her femininity and sexuality to incite sexual desires in these men, she has become an unattainable object, which all these men hunger for. Tramell's "'flash' in the interrogation scene, a genital show [offers] a glimpse of the secrets of the female body."<sup>137</sup> By offering up some of her secrets to these male voyeurs, she has avoided them getting to her real secrets: that she is the suspect they are looking for.

While Tramell uses her sexuality for her own gains, her overt sexual nature makes her a

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<sup>136</sup> Mellencamp 145.

<sup>137</sup> Stokes, Melvyn, and Richard Maltby. *Identifying Hollywood's Audiences: Cultural Identity and the Movies*. 1999. 150.

sexual object by the men in her interrogation room. These men do not see her character, but instead they “position her largely as an erotic object.”<sup>138</sup> In doing so, they deny her “narrative agency.”<sup>139</sup> The sexual male sees Tramell’s sexuality and powerful nature and “reduces [it] in the everyday language of heterosexual males to body parts such as a ‘great leg.’”<sup>140</sup> Just as men reduce Tramell’s persona to a body part, the film does the same. Almost her entire personality and motivations can be seen in this one scene, with the simple uncrossing and crossing of a pair of legs.

The specific cinematography of Tramell’s genital flash is also significant to showing the duality of her powerful sexual nature and her objectification by her male voyeurs.



The first shot (Figure 12) to show Tramell’s flash is a full body shot.

*Figure 12.* A large shot of Tramell as she flashes her genitals to a room of male detectives. By including her full body in this shot, it is clear that this sexual act was intentional and is indicative of her character.

It is clear that she is knowingly and actively revealing this part of her body and this is part of her character. The camera then cuts to her voyeurs and when it refocuses on her, it is as a close-up of her legs and crotch. Rather than a close-up being the only portrayal of this action, as perhaps films would do in the past to separate the character from an overtly sexual act, the full shot emphasizes that Tramell is being overtly sexual and inappropriate. The close-up (Figure 13), following the shot of a male character’s face, is representative of the male voyeurs visual perspective. He sees her not as a full human being, but as an assemblage of sexualized body parts to be objectified by his voyeurism.

<sup>138</sup> Stokes, Maltby 14.

<sup>139</sup> Stokes, Maltby 153.

<sup>140</sup> Stokes, Maltby 151.





Figure 13. Trammel recrosses her legs in a close-up. This camera angle represents the gaze of a detective on her genital flash. To male voyeurs, she is just an assemblage of parts with sexual meaning and no agency.

The voyeurism of the male characters towards Trammel's figure also points to a similar voyeurism of her character by the audience. The blatant sexuality and exhibitionism of Trammel is used as a commercial draw for the film. The

sexuality of this film had such economic potential that at the time of its production, this film had the most expensive screenplay ever bought. The profitability of this film's sexual character is similar to that of pornography. Just as Trammel uses sex to her "political advantage," the film's sexual "intimacy has been turned inside out for profit."<sup>141</sup> Male audiences flocked to see the seductive sexuality of Sharon Stone on screen.

While the blatant sexual nature of the film is a general attraction to male voyeuristic audiences, the sexual appeal of the genre of erotic thriller delves further into mystery, both sexual and narrative. Film analyst David Andrew says of the genre that the "economic potential lies in its combination of sexual mystification and conservatism."<sup>142</sup> The mystery behind a sexual woman is attractive and alluring, especially for a male audience. Trammel's character is extremely open about her sexuality, yet the mysteries and secrets behind her motivations and character increase the character's appeal. The element of conservatism in the erotic thriller genre is what distinguishes it from pornography. The covered being uncovered is more erotic than pure exhibitionism. Trammel's character clearly understands this as her genital flash is more sexually charged because it was done as if she was revealing a secret as opposed to an overt and obvious action. The choice of women to be open about their sexuality has been taken advantage of in this

<sup>141</sup> Boozer, Jack. "The Lethal *Femme fatale* in the Noir Tradition." *Journal of Film and Video*. 1999. 30.

<sup>142</sup> Andrews 59.

genre of erotic thriller. It is “post-feminist sexual consumerism,”<sup>143</sup> that is the driving force behind this film. Male characters long to see what Trammel has decided to physically reveal just as the audience desires to see what the director has decided to reveal, both in sexuality and the mysteries of the plot.

Regardless of the commercialism and voyeurism of female sexuality in this film, Trammel’s character is highly respected by proponents of women’s sexual liberation. She breaks norms that posit females as objects of men’s sexual desires. This is evident in the “legendary crotch-flash scene...where Catherine turns the tables on the visual dynamic inherent in most movies of this type, where the woman is the passive object of the male gaze.”<sup>144</sup> Trammel uses her sexuality as her own power as opposed to being a subject of male sexual desire. The 1990s were marked by the “‘girl power’ third wave of feminism,”<sup>145</sup> which encouraged women to continue to seek equality in social and professional realms. This era of feminism was much more “tolerant of female sexuality”<sup>146</sup> than in the past and Trammel’s forward nature about her sexuality and seeking personal sexual pleasure exemplified the female sexual liberation that feminists demanded.

Sexual liberation also pushed for the greater acceptance of lesbianism and bisexuality. Tramell’s character was a “celebration of women’s liberated self-determining sexuality.”<sup>147</sup> Her character broke the lesbian taboo of masculine women and showed a female confident in her sexuality and actively seeking her own sexual pleasure regardless of gender roles.

Just as Trammel takes control in her pleasure seeking as a woman, she also takes power with her sexuality. The film is full of “visualizations of the sexually liberated [Tramell], who is

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<sup>143</sup> Andrews 60.

<sup>144</sup> Mainon, Dominique, and James Ursini. *Femme fatale: Cinema's Most Unforgettable Lethal Ladies*. 2009. 276.

<sup>145</sup> Mainon, Ursini 273.

<sup>146</sup> Andrews 60.

<sup>147</sup> Green, Philip. *Cracks in the Pedestal: Ideology and Gender in Hollywood*. 1998. 197.

unapologetic about her often aggressive pursuit of her desire.”<sup>148</sup> Trammel takes on many male traits in her sexuality, including a dominating position in violent sex. Her sexual openness in public and her aggressive private sexual nature show her “determination to seize masculine power.”<sup>149</sup> Trammel uses her “femininity to seductively do down the men [she] encounters”<sup>150</sup> and in doing so strip them of their power and evade detection as a murderer. The control that Trammel’s character exhibits throughout the film makes the movie “a narrative of female desire and agency.”<sup>151</sup> Her sexual freedom, masculine power and manipulation of the plot and fellow characters makes her the ideal role model for women seeking popular examples of female sexual liberation.

While Trammel’s character seems a role model for her strides in making sexual freedom for women acceptable, in reality her character condemns a sexual woman as fatal and dangerous. The power of Trammel’s sexuality is real, but it is a negative power. She is “cold, inscrutable, cruel and amused, and so powerful in her magnetism that all she had to do was uncross her legs and men fell apart.”<sup>152</sup> But her controlling nature makes her responsible for multiple deaths. The film presents a “stylized equation of sex and death: unlike more liberationist forms, its ‘sexiness’ is contingent on the taboos that it promises to subvert.”<sup>153</sup> Such a sexy film promises to be liberating to its central character, yet instead condemns her as a murderer. In associating this sexual female character with death and danger, the film is “exploiting a general ‘sex fear’ lent by AIDS and feminism”<sup>154</sup> remaining in the 1990s after the conservatism of the 1980s.

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<sup>148</sup> Hanson, Helen. *Hollywood Heroines: Women in Film Noir and the Female Gothic Film*. 2007. 169.

<sup>149</sup> Hanson 182.

<sup>150</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>151</sup> Stokes, Maltby 14.

<sup>152</sup> Lasalle 233.

<sup>153</sup> Andrews 63.

<sup>154</sup> Andrews 64.

Tramell's "fatal femininity"<sup>155</sup> marks her as not a freethinking modern woman, but as a conventional Hollywood sexual sinner and villain. This played into the social fears of sex at the time and continued with the historical tradition of portraying sexual women as dangerous women. The film is guilty of the "basic code violation of presenting the heroine as an immoral woman,"<sup>156</sup> and for that that she is condemned.

The total revelation of Tramell's nature continues Hollywood stereotypes that a sexual woman is always negative. Only a virginal woman can be viewed positively. The fact that in this scene, Tramell wears all white, also contradicts this. She is in no way virginal or pure, and this subversion of female roles can only end negatively. Film historian Jack Boozer sees "Catherine's image as the negative extreme of the liberated woman."<sup>157</sup> She does not represent the liberated and free sexual woman of modernist feminist's dreams, but instead a vile murdering sexual temptress.

The film does not only condemn this display of female sexual liberation but also sexual determinism, lesbianism and bisexuality as a whole. Tramell is a negative portrayal of a woman that exhibits bisexuality, as is her lesbian partner, Roxy. For a film that seeks to show feminine sexuality in a modern way, it instead continues the traditional conventions of sexuality on film as it has been for decades. Just as female sexuality has been the subject of male desires and voyeurism, in this film "lesbianism is portrayed as an attraction, a lure, a titillation."<sup>158</sup> Amongst gay rights activists the film is "reviled because of its representation of lesbians as serial killers."<sup>159</sup> Lesbians and gays at this time had a tentative and relatively unsure standing in society. This film added to the conception that lesbians lived outside the typical norms of

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<sup>155</sup> Hanson 142.

<sup>156</sup> Lasalle 207.

<sup>157</sup> Boozer 29.

<sup>158</sup> Mellencamp 143.

<sup>159</sup> *ibid.*

accepted society. Overtly sexual women and lesbians were dangerous and in the case of this film, deadly. This conception played strongly into the social and sexual fears of the era, notably the fear of gay culture and its connotation with AIDS. “The viewer need only recognize the degree of Catherine’s bloodthirstiness to complete the metonymy of her gay threat to society”<sup>160</sup> in this film and in mainstream America. Advocates of women’s sexual liberation and gay rights easily see this as “a homophobic film,”<sup>161</sup> afraid of gays and especially the less acceptable lesbians. It is a condemnation of not only female sexuality but also lesbianism and female sexual determinism as dangerous and lethal to a moral and safe society.

The portrayal of Tramell in this film is a modern version of the classic *femme fatale*, more subversive evil than a mysterious victim. Sharon Stone’s Tramell has had “more influence in shaping the image of the post-1990s *femme fatale* than any other single actress.”<sup>162</sup> This modern *femme fatale* has different attributes and connotations than the character typically associated with 1940s film noir. Some elements of the archetype still remain, such as “the woman who sleeps her way to the top.”<sup>163</sup> The mystery and danger of these characters incited “male paranoia with the opposite sex in classic noir.”<sup>164</sup> Classic noir *femme fatales* however were not evil or villains, they were heroines and love interests, damsels in distress. But modern *femme fatales* are “among the most frightening *femme fatales* in the history of movies – chiefly because they are viewed without the constraints of old-fashioned censorship and without the mollifying romanticism of Hollywood in the 1940s.”<sup>165</sup> Tramell is in the same vein of *femme fatales* as these classic women because she is the sexual mystery in a modern film noir. Her character embodies classic elements

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<sup>160</sup> Boozer 29.

<sup>161</sup> Mellencamp 143.

<sup>162</sup> Mainon, Ursini 273.

<sup>163</sup> Boozer 29.

<sup>164</sup> Boozer 32.

<sup>165</sup> Andrews 64.

of this archetype, by using her sexuality to manipulate men and gain power. But beyond these elements, her character is revolutionarily different.

Tramell is not the classic *femme fatale* victim; instead she is the perpetrator of a string of murders. “Compared to earlier incarnations of the *femme fatale*, the contemporary versions sexually tainted avarice is more deviant and perverse as a focus for blame.”<sup>166</sup> The danger of modern *femme fatales* is now within the character itself, not attached to the character as if she is being followed. The modern *femme fatale* archetype is condemning sexually mysterious women as dangerous. This is regressive from the era of the 1940s and sexual censorship. Without censorship it is clear that society views sexual women as dangerous and approves of this stereotype by recreating this character in many similar variations during this time period. Sexual women can no longer be tamed and silenced with a wholesome marriage; they are deranged and dangerous and can only be handled by their removal from society.

This film and the sexual taboos of the 1990s promulgated terrible stereotypes of gendered sexuality. Sexual women were shown to be dangerous in popular culture. Society used Hollywood films especially as “vehicles in which misogyny is a function of a persistent linkage of aggressive women and sexual danger.”<sup>167</sup> By showing female sexuality exclusively as dangerous, these films “frame gender as an adjunct of sexuality and thus as a potential danger in itself.”<sup>168</sup> Women as a gender are shown to be dangerous, not just sexualized women. This sentiment against femininity is “evidence of backlash against feminism.”<sup>169</sup> The feminist film historian Callie Khouri believes that “Hollywood is trying to resexualize its women back into

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<sup>166</sup> Boozer 29.

<sup>167</sup> Andrews 60.

<sup>168</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>169</sup> Andrews 64.

submission.”<sup>170</sup> Feminists claim that modern Hollywood sexual women are actually beneficial to the female cause, because it shows that these “women are powerful because they’re sexy.”<sup>171</sup> Khouri sees this as “a crock, [because] Sex isn’t power. Money is power.”<sup>172</sup>

Hollywood’s sexualization of women instead is rooted back in male voyeurism. “The women who did it best,” who appealed to male audiences and were sexual and popular in the mainstream “are complacent...in the role of sexual commodity, be it Madonna, Julia Roberts or Sharon Stone.”<sup>173</sup> These women understood the role of the sexual commodity and fit into it. Women were still not being accepted as sexual for their own purposes and gains. Voyeurism in this era is the main vehicle for female sexuality. Sexual women were only acceptable in the context that they were for male voyeurism and desires. Women couldn’t take control of their sexuality for their own pleasure and gain. If women do try to be sexual for their own good, they are considered dangerous and lethal. These are the lessons on female sexuality that this film perpetuates. Feminists should not be proud of Stone’s character; they should see this film as the “most appalling possible document of misogyny, homophobia, and antifeminism.”<sup>174</sup>

## Conclusion

Hollywood films in the past century have been the major method for the proliferation of culture in America. The entertainment value and the escapist nature of film made it the most popular form of media and it reached the greatest possible audiences. Hollywood films were meant to entertain and tell stories but within them they contained momentary glimpses of contemporary American culture. “Hollywood movies reveal important truths about how America

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<sup>170</sup> Mellencamp 143.

<sup>171</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>172</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>173</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>174</sup> Green 197.

is changing,”<sup>175</sup> and reflect what is socially acceptable or not for the time. Censorship, in the form of a strict moral production code and later film ratings, epitomize the ability of films to determine what is appropriate for the American masses. Looking at the history of American film, it is easy to see the social changes that have occurred.

One can analyze the social evolution of many themes through American film, but the history of the progression and regression of depictions of female sexuality on film is fascinating to see. These portrayals are largely controlled by the elite male producers of Hollywood and “to control women is to define women’s moral worth, that is, their goodness or badness.”<sup>176</sup> This censorship has shaped the depiction of women on film, especially their sexual depictions. What female sexuality is allowed to be represented as reflects on the female characters themselves as well as society’s opinion towards them.

Hollywood and American society at large are male-dominated. Female sexuality therefore must fit within this scheme. Male sexual desires and voyeurism yearn for female sexuality in abundance. Yet when a woman uses sexuality to her own personal advantage, this combats a male-dominated society. This gender divide challenges the basic foundations of traditional American society and is therefore shunned and condemned for its radical nature. Sexual women must be purely for male use and if they are not, they must be stopped. This dichotomy has created a slew of static female sexual stereotypes on film.

Women were often relegated to specific roles and stereotypes to explain their sexuality. The roles create polarized sexual and asexual women: the vamp or the victim, the mother or the whore, the virgin or the sinner. Women were not allowed to be dynamic or realistic; “if Hollywood showed well-adjusted, witty, fun-loving and serious women professionals who also

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<sup>175</sup> Powers, Rothman, Rothman 3.

<sup>176</sup> Hanson 142.



happen to be wives and mothers today, they might be accused of advocating women's liberation."<sup>177</sup> Sexuality in a woman could only represent one thing: immorality. The evolution of sexual women on film shows how this tenant has been tweaked and hidden yet is still prominent in Hollywood films for decades.

In the early 1930s, female sexuality and censorship wasn't a problem for filmmakers or society. Sex was the main source of entertainment on film. But in 1934 with the introduction of the Production Code during the Great Depression, Hollywood censorship was introduced. As women were forced back into the home, their freedom of sexuality on screen became extremely censored and regulated. Visual sexuality on screen became prudent and plots and scripts were rewritten to show sexuality as sinful. Even the great Mae West, the image of spitfire sexuality, was forced to play sweet and give in to a male dominated world by getting married in her later films. *It Happened One Night* was one of the first films to feel the power of this Production Code. The film's iconic scene shows the sexuality of Claudette Colbert's character, but covers it up by insisting that she is a naïve young girl who upon maturity realizes that using sex for power is inappropriate. She progresses from playing into male desires as a sexual object to a moral woman who gets a happy and traditional ending, a wedding, and thus her sexuality is cured.

The 1950s were an era on film that emphasized female sexuality for male voyeurism and female inspiration. At this point, film censorship and the Production Code were more focused on creating moral storylines on film in regards to female sexuality rather than covering up visual sexuality. Sex was needed to attract American audiences back to the theatres after the creation of television when the film industry was severely struggling. While allowing some necessary sexiness to make it on screen, censorship made sure sexual characters were kept pure. This is the case in *The Seven Year Itch*. Marilyn Monroe's character was bursting with sexual innuendos but

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<sup>177</sup> Sochen 17.

was completely unaware of it. Similar to many of her other famous characters, she was “typecast as the sexy but dumb blonde.”<sup>178</sup> Her character was meant to be so dumb and one-dimensional that she did not realize the sexual vibe she created through her actions or body. The epitome of this is in the iconic scene of Monroe above a subway grate, supposedly enjoying the cool wind of a passing train, unaware of how much her skirt billows up. Because Monroe was never involved in a sexual act in the film, and the main character did not act on his desires and commit adultery, the sexuality was approved. This film is a thin veil for male sexual voyeurism. Just as the main character obsesses over Monroe’s character, male audiences obsess over Monroe. The legacy of the film itself is often lost, more likely remembered for this one scene and Monroe’s exposure. This in itself is deceptive, as the iconic image of the film is actually a promotional poster and not a film still. The reality of the film is that it is purely a vehicle of male voyeurism, just as its image was one of Monroe playing into the sexual fantasies of her fans on location in New York. Sexuality was allowed to appeal to audiences, primarily male (just like majority of Hollywood film producers) as long as it did not violate traditional moral standards seen as appropriate for mainstream society.

The 1960s society saw a revolution of many traditional societal norms. The movements of the ‘60s sought to break sexual taboos and bring females to a place where sexual liberation was acceptable. The year 1967 brought about more radical changes than had been felt in decades in American society. Mrs. Robinson’s character in *The Graduate* was the embodiment of this movement of female sexual liberation. She was an aging woman stuck in the suburban gender roles established in post-war America. To try and free herself from this unsatisfying lifestyle, Mrs. Robinson takes advantage of her sexual assets and goes about finding her own pleasure. She uses her sexuality as a way to gain power over Benjamin and fulfill her needs. Her character

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<sup>178</sup> Sochen 15.

is seen as a role model for many who advocate for female sexual liberation and yet she is an “excessive, even ironic, figure for feminism.”<sup>179</sup> Mrs. Robinson midway through the film is unfairly turned into an evil temptress villain. She is desperate to break up the young, traditional love story of Benjamin and Elaine. The conclusion of the film leaves her as the antagonist, her sexual power being an obstacle to true happiness for the main character and the established sexual order of society. These supposedly radical ideas that Mrs. Robinson embodies are actually condemned through her character’s transformation.

The 1990s were supposed to be a modern and post-feminist era in which women were sexually free and considered men’s equals. The reality however, is that the era existed in a huge conservative backlash against sex and homosexuality for fear of AIDS. Free and casual sex was equated with danger and death. The erotic thriller *Basic Instinct* capitalizes on this sexual paranoia. Sharon Stone’s Catherine Tramell is a sexualized *femme fatale* who uses her body and open opinion of sex to manipulate the men around her. Her alluring sexual mystery and lesbianism is a favorite subject for male voyeurism and is the commercial driving force for this film. Many theorists and filmgoers see her as a good example of the modern sexually liberated woman, yet in reality her character is marked by a series of taboos and dangerous traits. Tramell is a crazed murderer with a propensity for violent sex. The film depicts this sexually free woman as dangerous and deadly, condemning her to the audience. The message is clear, women who use sex for power are dangerous, a theme that has been conveyed for decades up to this point.

Historically, sexual women have been condemned or relegated to certain stereotypes to fit into a male dominated dichotomy of sexuality. The films analyzed here exhibit the sexuality of their female characters but always in negative or objectified and socially acceptable ways. They are all iconic however, in their displays of feminine sexuality. These iconic scenes have

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<sup>179</sup> Lasalle 191.

significant legacies that overshadow the films themselves. The sexuality is what the films are remembered for and what made them commercially profitable in the first place. Female sexuality has always been a lure for elite Hollywood producers and their male voyeuristic audiences. The sexiness of these scenes lies in the sexuality of the female character's legs. Legs represent the femininity and power of women. Legs are sexually feminine most notably because what lies between them is the biological and basic definition of woman. The power of legs lies in the power of women's ability to reveal what is typically hidden. A nice long leg exposed beneath a skirt is a conscious decision by a woman to attract men to her sexual identity. Yet this sexual power and manipulation has been repeatedly condemned in Hollywood films. The girl in the miniskirt is not going to be the virginal girl next door. These are the lessons that Hollywood has instilled in its viewers through film and American society by extension. Sexual women are to be for male pleasure or nothing. Those who use sexuality for their own gains are taught lessons or ostracized from mainstream society. While social acceptance for women's sexual liberation has appeared to progress over decades and generations, the same taboos and stereotypes of female sexuality have persisted on film and have unconsciously embedded themselves in the American voyeuristic psyche.

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### Image Citations

**Figure 1.** *Claudette Colbert in It Happened One Night*. Digital image. *Wikimedia Commons*. Wikipedia.

**Figure 2.** *It Happened One Night*. Dir. Frank Capra. Perf. Claudette Colbert, Clark Gable. Columbia Pictures, 1934. Still.

**Figure 3.** Sandhu, Sukhdev. *It Happened One Night*. Digital image. *It Happened One Night, Review*. The Telegraph, 28 Oct. 2010.

**Figure 4.** *The Seven Year Itch*. Digital image. *Kirby McDaniel Movie Art*. Movieart.net.

**Figure 5.** *American Masters: Marilyn Monroe: Still Life*. Digital image. *KPBS*. San Diego State University.

**Figure 6.** Monroe in *The Seven Year Itch*. Digital image. *The Movie Titles Stills Collection*. Annyas.com.

**Figure 7.** *The Graduate Poster*. Digital image. *Trailer Addict*.

**Figure 8.** *The Graduate*. Digital image. *Ryan and the Movies*. Blogspot.com, 11 June 2011.

**Figure 9.** Mrs. Robinson Still. Digital image. *I've Never Done That*. Blogfiles.com, 19 June 2011.

**Figure 10.** *Basic Instinct* Poster. Digital image. *Sharon Stone.net*.

**Figure 11.** Takeda, Allison. *Sharon Stone in "Basic Instinct"* Digital image. *US Weekly*. US Magazine, 21 Mar. 2013.

**Figure 12.** *Basic Instinct*. Dir. Paul Verhoeven. Perf. Sharon Stone. Carolco Pictures, 1992. Still.

**Figure 13.** Bjorkman, James. *Sharon Stone Recrossing Her Legs*. Digital image. *Movie Lovers Reviews*. Blogspot, 25 Jan. 2013.